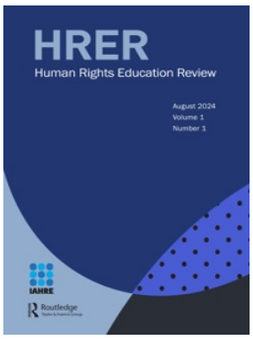

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Patriotic global citizenship? Reinterpreting insights from university EFL teachers in China

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how Chinese university English as a Foreign Language teachers conceptualise global citizenship in the context of global polycrisis and China's rising international prominence. Drawing on phenomenological interviews with 25 educators across multiple institutions, this research identifies a new and distinct orientation, termed patriotic global citizenship. This orientation reframes global citizenship through a state-centric lens, aligning global engagement with national priorities and grounding global responsibility in national identity. Teachers viewed the development of students' global competence as a strategic means of advancing China's international presence. Rather than adapting existing Western models, this orientation constitutes a reinterpretation of global citizenship itself. This study contributes by broadening typologies of global citizenship education and showing how national political agendas can reshape its meaning and enactment. Crucially, it raises concerns about the marginalisation of human rights education and the narrowing of space for democratic, critical, justice-oriented engagement in globally themed pedagogies.

KEYWORDS

Global citizenship education; patriotic education; English as a foreign language; teacher perspectives; China

Introduction

In recent years, the ideal of a globally interconnected and mutually beneficial world has been increasingly challenged. The pandemic, the Russia – Ukraine war, intensifying US – China tensions, and the retreat from multilateralism have collectively contributed to what some describe as a 'global polycrisis' – a convergence of multiple, interrelated crises that reveal the fragility of international systems (Lawrence et al., 2024, p. 1). Nationalist discourses and protectionist policies have regained momentum, further weakening international cooperation on pressing transnational issues such as climate change, migration, and global health (Butzbach et al., 2020; Jenne, 2021). These developments have problematised the normative foundations of global citizenship education (GCE), which traditionally rests on an assumed commitment to human rights, intercultural dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving (Goren & Yemini, 2017; Tarozzi, 2023). In this shifting global context, the meaning, purpose, and pedagogical enactment of global citizenship are undergoing significant re-evaluation and redefinition.

Alongside these global shifts, China's rise has profoundly reshaped the geopolitical landscape. Over the past two decades, the country has emerged not only as the world's second-largest economy, but also as a more assertive actor in global governance and international development. Flagship initiatives, notably the Belt and Road Initiative, together with official rhetoric on building 'a community with a shared future for mankind', reflect a distinctly Chinese vision of global order (Xi, 2017). Within the sphere of higher education, this geopolitical repositioning has been accompanied by targeted efforts to enhance national competitiveness, cultivate globally minded graduates, and extend China's soft power through international collaboration. As Li (2020) notes, China's world-class universities are increasingly committed to producing innovative talents with strong global competence, equipped to contribute to both national development and international engagement.

This study is situated precisely within this complex and evolving context. It investigates how university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in China conceptualise global citizenship. Rather than treating

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global citizenship as a universal model imported from the West, this study emphasises how the concept is actively negotiated and reinterpreted through national political discourse, global positioning, and pedagogical practice. In doing so, it offers a nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of global citizenship as it is interpreted and enacted within a non-Western, specifically Chinese, educational context.

Understanding global citizenship: three existing theoretical orientations

Rather than referring to a formal legal status, global citizenship denotes a sense of belonging and responsibility that transcends national borders. As defined by UNESCO (2015, p. 14), it is 'a sense of belonging to a broader community and common humanity'. Despite its increasing prominence in policy discourse and academic scholarship, the concept remains broad and contested (Lilley et al., 2017; Sant et al., 2018). Drawing on recent conceptual and empirical work (e.g., Goren & Yemini, 2017; Oxley & Morris, 2013; Pashby et al., 2020), three dominant orientations are commonly identified: the neoliberal, the liberal-humanist, and the critical. These perspectives reflect divergent value commitments and educational aims in relation to global citizenship.

Neoliberal orientation

The neoliberal orientation constructs the global citizen as a globally competitive individual, with an emphasis on developing students' employability and adaptability within the global market economy. Stein (2015, p. 244), for instance, argues that in the context of U.S. higher education, this model is primarily realised through efforts to foster students' economic competence and entrepreneurial disposition, thereby attracting employers and 'ensuring the United States' continued economic prosperity'. Similarly, Oxley and Morris (2013) describe this orientation as a variation of human capital theory, adapted to the demands of globalisation. In educational practice, the neoliberal perspective is most evident in the promotion of so-called 'global competencies', such as English language proficiency, intercultural communication skills, and the ability to navigate diverse cultural settings (Jooste & Heleta, 2017, p. 46). These attributes are widely seen as essential for securing a competitive advantage in the global labour market.

However, the neoliberal orientation has attracted substantial criticism, particularly for its instrumentalist logic. As Pashby et al. (2020, p. 151) observe, 'learning about and engaging with the world is valued as a line on one's CV'. Within this framing, global citizenship is reduced to a credential or commodity, valued primarily for its utility in advancing individual career trajectories. Moreover, this perspective tends to presume a level playing field, in which all students are equally positioned to access and benefit from global opportunities. In practice, however, such assumptions obscure enduring structural inequalities shaped by geopolitics and economic disparities. Students from the Global South, for example, often face significantly more restricted access to international mobility schemes and language learning resources than their counterparts in the Global North (Jooste & Heleta, 2017).

Liberal-humanist orientation

The liberal-humanist orientation is grounded in a belief in shared humanity and universal values. It promotes an ethic of cosmopolitanism, encouraging students to develop a sense of moral responsibility towards all human beings, irrespective of national affiliation (Starkey, 2023). This perspective aims to transcend national boundaries by fostering commitment to global principles such as peace, justice, and, centrally, human rights. Within this framework, global citizenship and human rights are often seen as closely interconnected. As Rapoport (2021, p. 114) asserts, 'global citizenship and human rights are rooted in the respect for human nature and a belief in human beings'. The liberal-humanist view thus emphasises the intrinsic worth of every individual and the importance of intercultural understanding. As Stein (2015) notes, this orientation typically calls on students to cultivate appreciation for diversity. Education informed by this perspective frequently encourages learners to empathise with those affected by humanitarian crises (Pashby et al., 2020).

However, the liberal-humanist orientation has also attracted criticism, particularly for its tendency to prioritise interpersonal understanding while neglecting the structural dimensions of global injustice. Critics contend that its emphasis on universal values is often rooted in Western liberal traditions (Davies, 2006;

Jooste & Heleta, 2017; Oxley & Morris, 2013). This uncritical embrace of universality can give rise to a form of normative cosmopolitanism that reinforces 'the supremacy of Western ways of knowing and being', rather than challenging the power asymmetries embedded in global history and contemporary geopolitics (Stein, 2015, p. 245). In educational settings, this may lead students to perceive themselves as morally enlightened actors, positioned to 'help' or 'save' others, without critically reflecting on how global hierarchies of privilege and marginalisation are sustained.

Critical orientation

The critical orientation has largely emerged in response to the limitations of both the neoliberal and liberal-humanist perspectives. It centres on questioning existing power structures and addressing systemic global injustices (Oxley & Morris, 2013; Stein, 2021). Unlike the other two approaches, it does not rely on a predetermined set of universal values (Pashby et al., 2020). Instead, it encourages learners to interrogate the imperial and colonial legacies embedded within globalisation, to amplify the voices of marginalised communities, and to work towards transformative change. For instance, Stein (2015, p. 246) proposes the 'anti-oppressive position' as a variant of this orientation. This approach challenges Eurocentric forms of cosmopolitanism by recognising 'how colonial, racialised, and gendered flows of power, wealth, and knowledge operate to the advantage of the Global North' (Stein, 2015, p. 246). Rather than focusing solely on appreciating difference or displaying moral concern, the critical perspective seeks to empower students to reflect critically on their own positionality and potential complicity in sustaining global inequalities.

Nonetheless, the critical orientation faces two significant and interconnected limitations that constrain its practical implementation. First, its strong emphasis on epistemology often comes at the expense of methodological clarity, offering teachers limited guidance on how to translate critical principles into pedagogical practice (Davies, 2006; Stein, 2015). By contrast, neoliberal and liberal-humanist approaches typically provide more specific behavioural or curricular frameworks, making them more applicable in classroom settings. Second, the critical orientation has seen limited uptake in everyday educational contexts. Ferguson's (2024) comparative study of three International Baccalaureate schools in Finland, the Netherlands, and Australia found that critical aims were frequently diluted during implementation. Teachers often equated global citizenship with surface-level intercultural exchange, rather than engaging in structural critique or political analysis. As a result, the transformative potential of the critical orientation is often undermined, reducing global citizenship to a celebration of diversity that fails to confront underlying inequalities.

While the neoliberal, liberal-humanist, and critical orientations offer valuable conceptual frameworks for understanding global citizenship, they remain largely grounded in Western epistemologies and policy environments. Yet global citizenship is not a fixed or universally agreed construct; its meaning and enactment are shaped by the sociopolitical, cultural, and historical contexts in which it is embedded (Pashby et al., 2020; Tarozzi, 2023). Recognising this contextual variability is essential for understanding how global citizenship is interpreted, negotiated, and practised across different national settings. The following section examines how GCE has been conceptualised and implemented in the Chinese context.

Contextualising GCE in the Chinese context

Despite the growing attention to GCE in international scholarship, contributions from mainland China remain comparatively limited. At the theoretical level, existing literature has largely focused on introducing and interpreting Western frameworks of GCE in China. For example, scholars have examined GCE practices in contexts such as Canada (C. Zhang, 2020), Scotland (Rao, 2020), and Spain (Gao & Zhang, 2020), often highlighting curricular strategies and presenting them as potentially instructive for Chinese educational reform. Others, such as Li and Liu (2019), provide overviews of key debates in the Western literature, particularly concerning the aims, values, and pedagogical approaches associated with GCE. These contributions have broadened Chinese educators' exposure to global discourse. However, they are largely descriptive and seldom critically examine either the limitations of these models in their original contexts or their implications within China's distinct educational and political landscape.

In terms of empirical research, existing studies, such as Wang (2023) and Wu and Tse (2023), have tended to describe GCE in China as a form of contextual adaptation shaped by local political and cultural values. For instance, Wang (2023) conducted interviews with six teachers from schools in Beijing and Shanghai to explore how they conceptualised the development of global citizens within the national citizenship curriculum. The study argued that the curriculum's emphasis on building 'a community with a shared future for mankind' reflects a 'moral global citizenship tendency', aligning broadly with the liberal-humanist orientation but localised through China's 'deep-rooted collective identity' (p. 655). However, by framing China's GCE primarily as a cultural or moral variation of Western models, such studies risk underestimating the state's active role in reshaping the discourse to serve national interests. This localisation perspective may also obscure the fact that global citizenship is shaped not only by local values but also by broader ideological agendas.

A further limitation of studies such as Wang (2023) and Wu and Tse (2023) lies in their narrow focus on the national citizenship curriculum, which neglects the contribution of other subjects to GCE. In China, English, particularly at the university level, is widely understood not only as a tool of communication but also as a conduit for accessing global knowledge and engaging with international perspectives (Pan, 2014). As a global lingua franca, English fosters both transnational mobility and intercultural understanding (Baker & Fang, 2021; Galloway et al., 2020; Lütge et al., 2023). University English courses frequently expose students to texts and ideas that transcend national boundaries, positioning the EFL classroom as a space for exploring global interdependence and reflecting on one's place in the world (Dong & Adamson, 2022; Y. Liu et al., 2022). In this sense, EFL education represents a vital, yet often overlooked, entry point into GCE beyond the formal scope of citizenship education.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of such initiatives ultimately depends on how educators interpret and enact global citizenship in their everyday teaching. Teachers are not passive transmitters of knowledge; rather, they actively mediate values, select teaching materials, and construct classroom environments that shape how students engage with global issues (Ferguson, 2024; Pan, 2014). Their beliefs, priorities, and pedagogical choices play a pivotal role in shaping how global citizenship is conceptualised and experienced by learners. It is therefore crucial to investigate how university EFL teachers in China understand and give meaning to global citizenship.

Methodology

This article forms part of a larger research project examining how university EFL teachers in China understand and enact the concept of global citizenship. The study adopts an interpretative phenomenological qualitative approach, prioritising teachers' lived experiences and investigating how they perceive, interpret, and make sense of global citizenship within their everyday teaching contexts. Rooted in the interpretivist tradition, this approach assumes that individuals' understandings are shaped by their social and cultural contexts, and that meaning is constructed through reflective engagement with lived experience (Smith et al., 2021). It is particularly well suited to this study's aims, as it facilitates rich, contextualised insights into the meanings and practices that emerge from educators' narratives.

A total of 25 university EFL teachers participated in the study, representing three types of institutions within China's higher education system: centrally administered universities, provincial-level public universities, and private universities. This sampling strategy was designed to reflect the structural diversity of China's higher education landscape (Guo et al., 2021; X. Liu, 2020; Song, 2018). Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Initially, the research team identified teachers with experience or demonstrated interest in global citizenship themes. Additional participants were recruited through recommendations by earlier interviewees, enabling access to information-rich cases. Further details about the participants are presented in Table 1.

Data collection

All interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2023. As this period overlapped with the pandemic, interviews took place online via Microsoft Teams. While the virtual format posed certain limitations, the research team took deliberate steps to uphold the rigour of phenomenological inquiry, particularly the

Table 1. Basic information of participants.

School Type	Pseudonym	Teaching Experience	Gender
Centrally Administered University	Emily	0–5 years	Female
Centrally Administered University	Qing	5–10 years	Male
Centrally Administered University	Xiao	5–10 years	Female
Centrally Administered University	Grace	10+ years	Female
Centrally Administered University	Hui	10+ years	Female
Centrally Administered University	Zhen	10+ years	Female
Centrally Administered University	Ting	10+ years	Female
Centrally Administered University	Rong	10+ years	Female
Centrally Administered University	Tao	10+ years	Male
Provincial-level Public University	Lan	0–5 years	Female
Provincial-level Public University	Jun	0–5 years	Male
Provincial-level Public University	Xin	0–5 years	Female
Provincial-level Public University	Fang	5–10 years	Female
Provincial-level Public University	Na	5–10 years	Female
Provincial-level Public University	Qian	5–10 years	Female
Provincial-level Public University	Yuan	5–10 years	Female
Provincial-level Public University	Ming	10+ years	Male
Provincial-level Public University	Lily	10+ years	Female
Private University	David	0–5 years	Male
Private University	Anna	0–5 years	Female
Private University	Jessica	0–5 years	Female
Private University	Hao	0–5 years	Male
Private University	Olivia	5–10 years	Female
Private University	Bao	5–10 years	Male
Private University	Sophie	10+ years	Female

emphasis on trust-building, attentiveness to lived experience, and eliciting rich, descriptive narratives (Miller et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2021). Prior to the interviews, researchers established rapport with participants through multiple rounds of email or instant messaging communication. During the interviews, open-ended prompts were used to encourage teachers to reflect on and interpret their own experiences, allowing their subjective interpretations and emotional engagements with global citizenship to emerge.

One-to-one semi-structured interviews were selected to facilitate detailed, context-sensitive engagement with each participant's beliefs, practices and meaning-making. This format was especially well-suited to the study's interpretative phenomenological orientation, which seeks to uncover the nuanced ways individuals make sense of complex social concepts (Ferguson, 2024; Smith et al., 2021). The one-to-one setting also provided a confidential space in which participants could speak openly about potentially sensitive topics such as nationalism, patriotism, and ambivalence towards global discourses, without the social pressures often encountered in group contexts (P. Zhang, 2025). The semi-structured format balanced thematic consistency with conversational openness, allowing participants to introduce unanticipated insights and elaborate on personal reflections. Each interview, conducted in Mandarin and lasting approximately 60 minutes, created a dialogic space in which participants could articulate their experiences fluently and authentically in their first language.

The interview outline was organised around three core thematic areas. The first explored how teachers conceptualised global citizenship and whether they believed university students should develop the associated awareness and dispositions. The second focused on pedagogical enactment, including how teachers integrated global topics into their teaching, the specific strategies and resources employed, and any institutional or curricular constraints they encountered, such as exam-driven priorities or ideological sensitivities. The third theme addressed teachers' reflections on the perceived impact of their teaching, particularly whether they believed their work contributed meaningfully to nurturing globally minded graduates. For the purposes of this article, data analysis and quotations are drawn exclusively from the first thematic area: teachers' conceptualisations of global citizenship and their perspectives on the relevance of such awareness for Chinese university students.

With informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and automatically transcribed using Microsoft Teams. Each transcript was manually reviewed and corrected by the research team to ensure semantic accuracy and to support more rigorous analytical engagement. Transcripts were stored securely in an encrypted OneDrive folder, accessible only to the research team. To safeguard

Table 2. Overview of themes, characteristics and codes.

Themes	Characteristics	Example Codes
Global Citizenship as Skills and Competence	Global citizenship is framed as a set of practical skills and moral qualities that enable students to navigate an increasingly complex global environment.	Raising global awareness Developing practical skills Cultivating moral qualities
Global Citizenship as Patriotic Mission	Global citizenship is framed as a patriotic duty, in which students are expected to integrate their global competence with loyalty to the nation.	Upholding China's position Promoting China's voice
Global Citizenship as Great Power Consciousness	Global citizenship is framed as a form of great power consciousness, where students are encouraged to challenge Western dominance and help reshape international norms.	Challenging Western models Reshaping international norms

participant anonymity, all identifying details were removed, and participants selected their own pseudonyms, often reflecting cultural or personal identity. As interviews were conducted in Mandarin, transcripts were translated into English by the researchers. Participants were subsequently invited to review and confirm that the translated excerpts accurately conveyed their intended meaning, tone, and nuance.

Data analysis

This study employed thematic analysis to systematically interpret the interview data. As a method for identifying and analysing patterns of meaning within qualitative material, thematic analysis is particularly well suited to investigating complex and contextually embedded concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Ferguson, 2024). Its methodological flexibility enables both the representation of participants' lived experiences and the development of conceptual insights, making it especially appropriate in contexts where theoretical foundations remain underdeveloped. Global citizenship exemplifies such a concept, as it remains semantically fluid and politically contested. Its articulation within Chinese higher education, particularly within EFL education, has yet to be fully theorised. Thematic analysis thus functioned not only as a tool for organising data but also as a generative strategy for developing a context-sensitive interpretative framework grounded in the voices of Chinese university EFL teachers.

To ensure analytical rigour and conceptual clarity, the research team followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase approach. First, they familiarised themselves with the data through repeated readings and detailed note-taking. Semantic-level coding was then applied to identify meaningful patterns in teachers' understandings of global citizenship. Codes were compared, refined, and clustered into candidate themes, which were subsequently reviewed for internal coherence and conceptual distinctiveness. Final themes were then clearly defined, named, and organised into a coherent analytical narrative, supported by illustrative quotations. Table 2 provides an overview of the final themes, their interpretative descriptions, and the indicative codes from which they were derived.

Findings

This section presents Chinese university EFL teachers' understandings and reflections on global citizenship. Drawing on phenomenological interviews, three interrelated themes emerged: *Global Citizenship as Skills and Competence, Global Citizenship as Patriotic Mission, and Global Citizenship as Great Power Consciousness*. Collectively, these themes reveal a progressive trajectory – from an initial focus on individual capacities, to a nationally anchored sense of moral and civic responsibility, and finally to a broader geopolitical mindset shaped by China's rising position in global affairs.

Global citizenship as skills and competence

While recent years have seen a rise in unilateralism and even signs of deglobalisation in international politics, many participants, including Ming, Fang and Qian, acknowledged these shifts but did not view them as grounds for disengagement. On the contrary, all the teachers interviewed strongly affirmed the importance of encouraging students to become global citizens. For these educators, global awareness is seen as even more essential in a world characterised by growing complexity and uncertainty. As Hao explained,

> It is precisely because the world is in crisis that our students need to become global citizens and develop global awareness. . . to understand what is happening beyond our borders. If they only focus on China, they will not be able to deal with transnational issues like pandemics or climate change. . . None of the defining challenges of our time can be solved by any single country alone.

Crucially, the teachers' orientation towards global citizenship was closely intertwined with their professional identity as EFL educators. Many attributed their global outlook to the nature of their subject, which they perceived as inherently transnational and deeply rooted in intercultural exchange. As Rong explained,

> I have been teaching English for over fifteen years, and in my experience, this subject [English] has an intrinsic link to the wider world. . .Teaching English is never just about grammar. . . Our textbooks and classroom discussions are always connected to something beyond China. For us [EFL educators], then, nurturing global citizenship feels like a natural extension of what we already do.

Rong's perspective illustrates how global citizenship is deeply embedded in the everyday practice of EFL teaching. For her, as for many others, the classroom is not a space where global awareness is merely appended; rather, it forms a foundational element of language education from the outset. This framing of global citizenship as an intrinsic extension of EFL teaching aligns with the approach described by Lütge et al. (2023), and helps to explain why EFL teachers continue to promote global citizenship even in the face of growing political uncertainty.

When discussing how students become global citizens, most teachers emphasised the importance of developing both practical skills and moral dispositions. Practical and transferable skills, such as language proficiency, intercultural communication, and adaptability, were frequently described as essential components of global competence. Xin and David, for example, framed these abilities as vital for enhancing students' employability and enabling meaningful participation in international contexts. Alongside these, many teachers also underscored the importance of cultivating moral qualities, including emotional resilience, collaboration, and openness to difference. These attributes were viewed as equally important in preparing students to engage with a culturally diverse and ethically complex world. As Yuan put it,

> Being a global citizen is not just about speaking fluent English. It is about staying curious, showing respect for others, and being confident in unfamiliar environments. It is about being the kind of person who builds bridges rather than walls.

Yuan's comment reflects a broader understanding of global citizenship as a moral and relational practice, rather than merely a cognitive skillset. By emphasising empathy, curiosity, and respect, teachers encouraged students to view global engagement not only as a pathway to professional development but also as a form of ethical participation. However, as the interviews unfolded, it became increasingly evident that many educators saw global citizenship as more than individual growth. It was framed as a collective responsibility, closely intertwined with national identity. This more ideological dimension is examined in the next theme.

Global citizenship as patriotic mission

While teachers strongly supported the cultivation of global competence, many were equally insistent that global citizenship must be grounded in a firm sense of national identity. A strong attachment to the nation was widely viewed not as a constraint, but as a necessary foundation for meaningful global engagement. Several participants, including Xiao, Hui, and Ting, emphasised that global citizenship should align with China's national priorities and contribute to its development goals and international reputation. The notion of a de-nationalised global citizen, as often promoted in liberal-humanist models, was explicitly rejected.

Instead, teachers consistently articulated the view that students should uphold China's position in global affairs and participate globally from a distinctly Chinese perspective. As Ting explained:

> Global citizenship does not mean being stateless. One must first understand where they come from before engaging with the world. If our students do not grasp China's position and responsibilities, they risk becoming lost in global debates.

This emphasis on national identity also shaped how teachers conceptualised the link between individual development and national interests. Many articulated a sovereignty-oriented view of global citizenship, framing global competence not as a pathway to personal autonomy, but as a means of advancing national goals. Anna's account vividly illustrates this patriotic framing of global competence. As she recalled:

> When we discussed global competence, I told my students: it is not just about getting a good job overseas. Being a global citizen, for us, really means being a *Chinese* global citizen. That means using your skills to support national development… The ultimate goal of becoming globally competent is to help China engage with the world confidently and purposefully.

In this view, being a global citizen is not about shedding national identity, but about affirming and enacting it. Anna's account reflects a broader consensus among teachers that global citizenship should consolidate, rather than weaken, students' national allegiance. Here, global competence is framed not as a set of neutral, transferable skills, but as a strategic capacity to engage internationally while advancing China's interests and global positioning. International knowledge and experiences are valued as they contribute to national development and align with China's self-defined role in global affairs.

Central to this vision is the imperative to promote China's voice. Many teachers identified 'telling China's story well' and 'speaking for China on the global stage' as key responsibilities of globally competent graduates. These expectations reflect a belief that students should not only participate in global exchanges, but also actively represent and communicate Chinese perspectives, values, and achievements. David, a teacher at a private university where many students prepare for overseas study, explained:

> I always remind my students that when they go overseas, they carry more than just their suitcases … they carry the responsibility of representing China's image. That's why I emphasise that fluency in English is not enough … they must also be able to express our values, culture, and way of thinking. That, to me, is what it truly means to tell China's story well.

While this perspective was dominant in interviews, it was not without critique. Some participants, including Sophie, Olivia and Jessica, raised concerns that patriotic expectations could risk conflating civic responsibility with political instrumentalisation. In their view, students were sometimes positioned less as critical thinkers and more as symbolic representatives of national soft power. Jessica, for instance, recounted a class discussion on global governance in which a student hesitated to raise the issue of China's subtle neo-colonial influence in Africa, fearing it might be perceived as unpatriotic.

> He said to me afterwards, 'I was not sure if I was allowed to say that in class. It might sound unpatriotic'. That worried me. It is one thing to speak for your country; it is another to feel like you cannot question it… If global citizenship turns into loyalty instead of inquiry, then the openness we have always valued in English education loses its meaning.

Jessica's reflection highlights a key tension within the patriotic framing of global citizenship. While many teachers aimed to foster national pride and confidence, these efforts could unintentionally constrain open discussion and critical reflection. Such concerns point to the ideological boundaries of the patriotic model, where civic engagement risks being equated with political conformity.

Global citizenship as great power consciousness

While many teachers acknowledged that the concept of global citizenship has its roots in Western discourse, they were not merely importing Western models. Instead, they stressed the importance of reinterpreting the idea through a distinctly Chinese lens. Several participants expressed concern about uncritically endorsing Western values under the guise of universalism. Jun articulated this clearly:

> Becoming a global citizen does not mean agreeing with everything the West says. We teach our students to speak up for their own culture. When discussing values like democracy and human rights, I always ask my students: who defines these values? Why are some voices considered 'global', while others are not?

This call to reclaim discursive authority was closely tied to China's perceived emergence as a global power. For many participants, global citizenship was not only about engaging with international affairs but about influencing their direction. Teachers highlighted China's development path, political system, and cultural heritage as important contributions to global governance. Rong, who had participated in a state-sponsored teaching programme in Cambodia, reflected on how that experience reshaped her understanding of global citizenship:

> I brought this experience back to my classroom to show my students that China is no longer just learning from the world. As a great power, we are now offering alternative models of development and governance. That is why I encourage my students to cultivate a sense of great power consciousness. Global citizenship means not only engaging with others, but also contributing to the reshaping of global norms through our own experiences and values.

Rong's narrative signals an important shift: global citizenship is no longer seen as a passive adoption of international norms, but as an assertive process of reimagining global order through a national lens. In this framing, 'great power consciousness' denotes not only awareness of global interdependence, but also the responsibility to advance China's soft power and normative influence. Global citizenship thus becomes a state-aligned project.

However, this narrative of *great power consciousness* also raised important concerns. Several teachers acknowledged the risk that resisting Western dominance could give rise to reverse exceptionalism. When global citizenship is framed primarily as an extension of national ambition, its dialogic and reciprocal dimensions may be undermined. The widely endorsed discourse of cultural confidence at times slid into cultural assertion, where diversity was welcomed only insofar as it reinforced national goals. Olivia, who led an intercultural exchange programme, shared a telling moment:

> We had a programme where our students met with peers from the UK and South Africa. After one session, one of my students said, 'I realised I was trying to convince them why China's way is better'. I asked why she didn't simply share her views. She replied, 'Because that's what we're told. We need to promote our story and correct misunderstandings'. That moment stayed with me. . .I realised we are sometimes pushing our students to argue, rather than to listen.

Olivia's reflection illustrates how cultural confidence can, in practice, shift towards a logic of persuasion. When global citizenship is enacted as a platform for advocating the Chinese model, the relational core of intercultural exchange is weakened. Rather than fostering mutual understanding, students may come to see global engagement as a performance of national loyalty. In this framing, global citizenship becomes less a practice of open dialogue and more a strategic assertion, ultimately limiting students' capacity to engage with cultural difference in truly transformative ways.

'Patriotic' global citizenship: a new interpretive orientation

This study identified a distinctive understanding of global citizenship among Chinese university EFL teachers, which we term *patriotic global citizenship*. In essence, this perspective posits that national identity is not a barrier to global responsibility but rather its foundation and driving force. Teachers consistently maintained that participation in global affairs should not require the erosion of national identity. On the contrary, students were encouraged to engage internationally from a position of rootedness and national self-definition. In this framing, to be a global citizen is first and foremost to be a Chinese citizen.

Patriotic global citizenship embodies a dual commitment: developing an outward-looking global perspective while affirming national identity. Students were expected to recognise global interdependence and engage with shared challenges such as climate change and public health. At the same time, they were encouraged to understand China's global role and align their international engagement with national priorities. Key global competencies, language proficiency, intercultural sensitivity, and adaptability, were highly valued, but consistently framed as tools to enhance China's visibility and influence on the world stage.

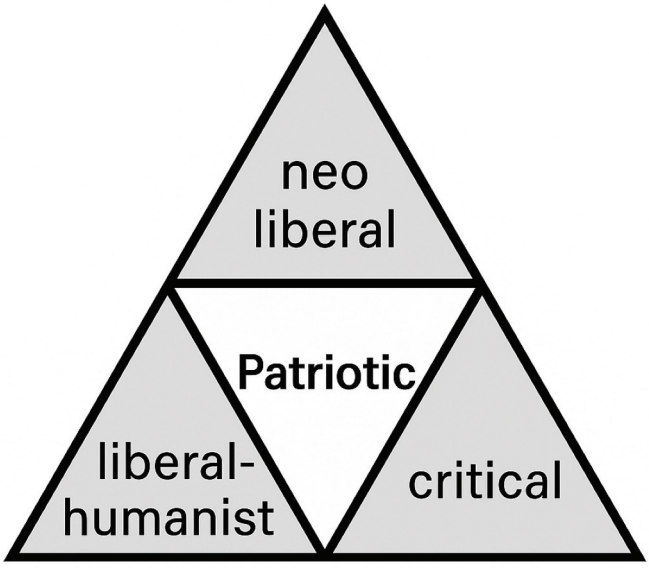

Figure 1. Repositioning the patriotic orientation within GCE. Adapted from Pashby et al. (2020, p. 146).

Unlike prior studies that describe GCE in China as a contextual adaptation of Western models (e.g., Wang, 2023; Wu & Tse, 2023), this study argues that the patriotic orientation constitutes a reinterpretation of global citizenship itself. Rather than inserting Chinese values into existing global frameworks, it reframes global awareness within a nationally defined structure, infused with pride, responsibility, and strategic intent. This conceptual shift marks a significant departure from dominant paradigms of global citizenship, and therefore merits further comparison with existing theoretical orientations, which the following section will explore.

Positioning patriotic global citizenship within existing orientations

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual relationship between the patriotic orientation and three established approaches to GCE: neoliberal, liberal-humanist, and critical. Positioned at the intersection of these models, the patriotic orientation shares selected features with each, while simultaneously forming a distinct interpretive space.

From the neoliberal perspective, the patriotic orientation draws on a focus on global competencies, such as language proficiency, intercultural communication, and adaptability, that are deemed essential for success in competitive international environments (Lilley et al., 2017). From the liberal-humanist orientation, it adopts an emphasis on mutual understanding, global cooperation, and shared humanity (Starkey, 2023). From the critical perspective, it reflects concerns about the dominance of Western epistemologies, advocating for greater recognition of non-Western contributions to global discourse (Pashby et al., 2020).

However, despite these affinities, patriotic global citizenship remains fundamentally distinct in its underlying rationale. Anchored in national interest and political loyalty, it reinterprets these shared features through a statist lens. Global competence is framed as a form of service to the nation; intercultural awareness becomes a tool for promoting China's global image; and critical thinking is directed outward, towards challenging Western hegemony, rather than inward, towards interrogating domestic injustices.

Accordingly, as depicted in Figure 1, the patriotic orientation shares boundaries with neoliberal, liberal-humanist, and critical models, yet occupies a unique conceptual space enclosed by these borders. It represents not a hybrid, but a reframing of global citizenship-one that aligns outward engagement with inward allegiance.

To further clarify how the patriotic orientation diverges from the three established models, Table 3 offers a systematic comparison across six key dimensions: educational purpose, conceptualisation of globalisation, learner positioning, global competences, attitudes towards politics, and relations to the West. These dimensions were selected because they collectively capture the core conceptual foundations through which GCE is

Table 3. Differences between the patriotic global citizenship and existing orientations.

Dimensions	Neoliberal	Liberal-Humanist	Critical	Patriotic
Educational Purpose	Employability, competitiveness	Moral development, peace and empathy	Social justice, decolonisation	National development, international image
Conceptualisation of globalisation	Opportunity to be navigated	Interdependence of humanity	Inequity to be critiqued	Strategic context for asserting national identity
Learner Positioning	Individual actor in global market	Ethical individual in global society	Critical agent challenging injustice	National representative promoting soft power
Global Competences	Language, adaptability, intercultural skills	Empathy, communication, cultural awareness	Critical consciousness, reflexivity	Skills for national service and international advocacy
Attitudes towards Politics	Depoliticised	Universal ethics	Politicised, anti-hegemony	Politicised, nation-oriented
Relations to the West	Aspiration to compete	Cooperation and shared values	Critique and resistance	Defensive correction and cultural promotion

understood, enacted, and experienced. This framework allows for a meaningful, multi-dimensional comparison that illuminates both the ideological assumptions and practical implications of each approach.

In terms of educational purpose, the neoliberal orientation prioritises employability and global competitiveness (Jooste & Heleta, 2017; Stein, 2015). Education is positioned as an investment in human capital, preparing individuals to succeed in knowledge-based, market-driven economies. The liberal-humanist tradition, by contrast, foregrounds moral development, empathy, and intercultural understanding (Oxley & Morris, 2013), positioning education as a tool for ethical growth and peaceful coexistence. Critical approaches seek to transform unjust structures and decolonise knowledge systems, framing education as a space for resistance and collective action against hegemonic power (Pashby et al., 2020). The patriotic orientation, however, centres on national development goals and the promotion of China's international image. It encourages students to embrace global responsibilities while aligning their personal growth with the nation's strategic interests, thereby positioning global citizenship as a duty to advance the country's global ambitions.

Second, each orientation offers a distinct conceptualisation of globalisation. Neoliberal models regard it as an economic opportunity to be navigated, casting individuals as competitive actors within global markets and encouraging adaptability to shifting international demands (Lilley et al., 2017). Liberal-humanist perspectives, by contrast, frame globalisation as an expression of shared human interdependence, placing mutual understanding and intercultural empathy at the centre of peaceful coexistence (Ferguson, 2024; Goren & Yemini, 2017; Tarozzi, 2023). Critical approaches present globalisation as a structure of inequity that must be resisted, drawing attention to the ways in which global processes perpetuate colonial legacies and power imbalances (Oxley & Morris, 2013; Pashby et al., 2020). The patriotic model, however, views globalisation as a strategic space for asserting national identity and promoting soft power. Rather than passively conforming to global norms, teachers stressed the importance of 'telling China's story well' and reshaping international perceptions to align with national narratives.

In terms of learner positioning, neoliberal approaches depict students as autonomous actors in a competitive global economy, responsible for their own success through skills acquisition, flexibility, and self-management (Stein, 2015). Liberal-humanist perspectives, in contrast, highlight students' role as ethical participants in a shared global community, fostering empathy, cultural sensitivity, and civic responsibility (Lütge et al., 2023; Oxley & Morris, 2013). Critical orientations conceive of learners as agents of change who engage in critical reflection and take action to address structural injustice and global inequalities (Pashby et al., 2020; Stein, 2021). The patriotic model, however, positions students as representatives of the nation, tasked with projecting a positive image of China and contributing to the enhancement of its international influence.

When it comes to global competences each orientation foregrounds a distinct set of skills. Neoliberal approaches prioritise practical capabilities such as language proficiency, adaptability, and intercultural communication, typically geared towards enhancing students' employability within competitive global markets (Pashby et al., 2020). Liberal-humanist models place emphasis on interpersonal and ethical capacities, including empathy, dialogue, and cultural sensitivity, which support meaningful and harmonious intercultural engagement (Ferguson, 2024; Oxley & Morris, 2013). Critical perspectives highlight reflexivity, critical thinking, and political consciousness as essential tools for interrogating structural inequalities and

promoting social justice (Davies, 2006; Lilley et al., 2017; Stein, 2015). The patriotic orientation reinterprets these competences as instruments of national service. Students are encouraged to 'go out into the world as Chinese' (Lily), acting as representatives of the nation and engaging in international cooperation with the strategic aim of advancing China's global position.

Concerning attitudes towards politics, the neoliberal stance tends to be depoliticised, treating global engagement primarily as a technical or economic endeavour with limited attention to power relations or ideological positioning (Oxley & Morris, 2013; Wang, 2023). Liberal-humanist education, in contrast, is grounded in universal ethical principles, such as human rights, peace, and cooperation, but often assumes a consensus-based model that overlooks structural conflict and contestation (Goren & Yemini, 2017; Starkey, 2023). Critical approaches are overtly politicised, aiming to expose and challenge dominant power structures, and promoting transformative justice through education (Lütge et al., 2023; Pashby et al., 2020). The patriotic model is likewise politicised but operates within the framework of state-defined values. Rather than encouraging critique of hegemonic systems, it promotes political loyalty, national identity, and the defence of national interests. In this sense, global citizenship is deployed as a mechanism for consolidating domestic political agendas rather than unsettling them.

Finally, each orientation adopts a distinct stance towards the West. Neoliberal education aspires to meet or surpass Western standards, positioning students for success within existing global hierarchies (Stein, 2015). Liberal-humanist models emphasise cooperation and mutual understanding, viewing Western nations as equal partners in addressing shared global challenges (Pashby et al., 2020; Starkey, 2023). Critical perspectives, by contrast, interrogate and resist Western dominance, aiming to decentre Eurocentric narratives and expose structural inequities (Oxley & Morris, 2013; Stein, 2021). The patriotic orientation takes a dual approach: on the one hand, it seeks to challenge perceived Western misrepresentations of China; on the other, it aims to promote Chinese culture and political values on the global stage. While this model foregrounds national pride and international advocacy, it may inadvertently constrain the openness and reciprocity necessary for genuine intercultural dialogue.

Taken together, the patriotic orientation reflects a state-centric reconfiguration of global citizenship that risks limiting the transformative potential of GCE. While it promotes international engagement, it sidelines critical and diverse perspectives, particularly those concerned with the domestic realisation of universal values. This helps explain the notable absence of topics such as human rights in teacher interviews, echoing P. Zhang and Guo's (2024) observation that such silences reflect the deliberate depoliticisation of global discourse in China's English curriculum. In this context, global citizenship is reframed as a national obligation rather than a site of critical engagement. The result is a narrowing of students' civic imagination: instead of cultivating global citizens as empowered agents of change, the patriotic model mobilises them as emissaries of national legitimacy and soft power.

Conclusion

In an era defined by global polycrisis and China's rising international prominence, this study has explored how university EFL teachers in China conceptualise and reflect upon the notion of global citizenship. Drawing on phenomenological interviews, the research finds that teachers frequently align global responsibility with national loyalty, positioning global competence as a means of contributing to China's development and advancing its international image. This perspective is conceptualised here as patriotic global citizenship. While it incorporates elements of the neoliberal emphasis on skills, the liberal-humanist concern for shared humanity, and the critical stance against Western dominance, it ultimately diverges from all three in its core values and intended aims. Rooted in a strong sense of national identity, it reframes global responsibility as inseparable from national interests, casting students as 'great power citizens' tasked with representing Chinese culture and perspectives on the global stage. This orientation's close entanglement with state discourse raises important tensions, most notably the marginalisation of critical inquiry and the limited engagement with politically sensitive global issues.

Theoretically, this study offers a novel contribution by empirically identifying and articulating a distinctive Chinese conception of global citizenship, thus extending existing typologies that have been largely

developed in Western contexts. The findings underscore how national political agendas and developmental priorities can generate alternative imaginaries of global citizenship that challenge dominant frameworks. Practically, the research calls upon educators, both within and beyond China, to critically examine the discursive foundations of GCE in their own contexts. This involves navigating the tension between nationally driven imperatives and broader ethical commitments. Crucially, GCE should aim not only to serve national interests, but also to foster intercultural understanding, ethical responsibility, and a sustained commitment to human rights and global justice.

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