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How do they become globally high achieving? Trajectories, struggles, and achievements of ethnic Chinese humanities and social sciences scholars

Lili Yang ¹ 

On the world stage of the humanities and social sciences (HSS), ethnic Chinese scholars and their scholarship as a whole are arguably not yet considered mainstream. However, a growing number of ethnic Chinese HSS scholars have become internationally recognized in their respective fields, producing scholarship of global and lasting influence. These scholars are referred to in this study as globally high-achieving scholars. Enquiring into how certain ethnic Chinese HSS scholars become globally high achieving, this study aims to unravel the trajectories, struggles, and achievements of these scholars; contribute to the literature on scholars' academic development and on Chinese scholars; and provide recommendations for scholarly training in higher education in and beyond Greater China. It uses a narrative research design to explore the life and academic trajectories of globally high-achieving scholars, and reveals reasons associated with their achievements. In particular, the article highlights the scholars' possession of strong resilience, engagement with Chinese traditional cultures and knowledges, development of multiple lenses, and realization of the state of 'zide (自得)', meaning staying true to oneself. This study is one of the first empirical attempts to explore this topic, and it makes both conceptual and practical contributions to the field.

¹Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong SAR, China. ✉email: liliyang@hku.hk

Introduction

In 2005, Chinese scientist Qian Xuesen asked the important and perhaps still relevant question, ‘why can’t our [Chinese] universities cultivate outstandingly original and innovative talents?’ (Shi 2012) Although Qian’s question was primarily about talents in the sciences and engineering, a similar question can be asked about the humanities and social sciences (HSS), which have, however, received less scholarly attention. In 1995, archaeologist Chang Kwang-chih remarked,

‘It is undeniable that China’s humanities and social sciences¹ are not part of the global mainstream in the 20th century. ... [China] has great potential to play a more important role for the capacity of its people and its rich traditions and materials. ... But Chinese scholars ...[are] being left outside the mainstream on the world stage of the humanities and social sciences.’ (Chang 1996, pp. 68-69)

Has the situation changed in the 21st century? In other words, have ethnic Chinese HSS² scholars become part of the ‘global mainstream’ in the 21st century? Although it may be some time before this question can be answered, a tenable tentative answer so far is not yet, especially if we consider the broad role of ethnic Chinese HSS scholars in global research agenda-setting; the global academic influence of the concepts, theories, and discourses proposed by them; or the overall quantity and citation numbers of their research output (Xu 2020; Yang et al. 2019). Notably, although the question reflects the *de facto* global academic influence of ethnic Chinese HSS scholars, it needs to be reflexively revisited from a perspective that critically questions the so-called ‘global mainstream’ and its underlying inequalities. For example, what is the ‘global mainstream’ and who decides it? Fricker (2019) argues that the global academia is characterized with epistemic injustice. Certain scholars are ‘ingenuously downgraded and/or disadvantaged in respect of their status as epistemic subject’ (Fricker 2019, p. 53). According to the world system theory, the global academia is a center-periphery continuum, consisting of central, semi-peripheral, and peripheral systems (Wallerstein 2004; Marginson and Xu 2023). (Semi-)peripheral systems, largely referring to non-Euro-American one, depend on the Euro-American systems for their provision of ideas and theories, research assistance and training, expertise, and academic recognition (Alatas 2022). These persisting inequalities urge efforts into challenging the so-called ‘global mainstream’ and promoting global epistemic pluriversality (Mignolo 2018). This study belongs to this line of inquiry, with a special focus on HSS scholars’ efforts into pursuing a global academic career and producing globally and lastingly impactful scholarship.

Meanwhile, it is important to acknowledge the significant progress that has been made by ethnic Chinese HSS scholars in the past decades (Marginson 2022). A growing number of globally high-achieving ethnic Chinese scholars in HSS now work in and beyond Greater China. They are well established and well recognized in their respective fields; they hold or have held full professorships at global research-intensive universities; they play or have played important roles in the academic communities of their fields; and they have produced scholarship with global importance and lasting influence. At the same time, an increasing number of early- and mid-career ethnic Chinese HSS scholars have shown the potential to become globally high-achieving in the future. Amidst these problems and achievements, there emerges an important but under-studied question: how do certain ethnic Chinese HSS scholars become globally high achieving, and what can the higher education system and other scholars learn from them? This is the question to which this study aims to respond. Notably, this study *does not* intend to provide a final answer to this question. Rather, it hopes to contribute to the

collective efforts to answering the question by exploring the experiences and insights of certain globally high-achieving scholars.

HSS international academia is a highly unequal yet dynamic space. On the one hand, it is characterized by inequalities and power struggles. Marked by colonial and imperial history, the former imperial and colonial powers of the nineteenth century—mostly Euro-American countries—continue to play dominant and even hegemonic roles in HSS knowledge production and sharing (Connell 2007; Collyer et al. 2019). Whiteness as futurity colonizes or orients scholars’ and researchers’ ‘imaginaries and reinforces the asymmetrical movements [and] networks’ (Shah-jahan and Edwards 2022, p. 747). In this context, ethnic Chinese HSS scholars face considerable challenges and hurdles that hinder their production and dissemination of knowledge and their pursuit of international careers. They confront epistemic injustice in research, struggle with epistemological exclusions and discontinuities of Chinese indigenous knowledges, and encounter structural constraints in research and academic development. (Connell 2007; Yang et al. 2019)

On the other hand, with the advancement of technology, growing global mobility and improved connectivity, international academia is becoming increasingly diverse and equal (Marginson and Xu 2023). This phenomenon is largely a result of the agitative actions and efforts of various agents in international academia, including scholars and institutions. This has further opened up spaces for scholars across the world, especially those from non-Euro-American societies, to develop an international career, produce and share knowledge on a more equal ground, and promote epistemic diversity and justice. Against this background, many ethnic Chinese HSS scholars have established themselves in international academia and become globally high achieving. A few of these names include Chang Kwang-chih in the field of archaeology, Hsu Cho-yun and Xu Guoqi in history, Zhang Longxi in literature, Tu Wei-ming and Cheng Chung-ying in philosophy, Xiang Biao in sociology, and Yang Rui in education. These scholars grew up in different times and in different parts of Greater China, and their life and career trajectories vary significantly. Many of them grew up and received education during historical periods of turbulence (i.e., during war or the Cultural Revolution). Yet, all of them are or were globally high achieving, having made outstanding career achievements as scholars and having produced scholarships with global and lasting influence.

However, while we may be familiar with the life and career stories of certain high-achieving ethnic Chinese HSS scholars, we have made little progress in conceptually understanding how they became globally high achieving. Amidst their varying backgrounds and life and career trajectories, what essential elements contributed to their achievements? The lack of relevant research pertaining to this topic calls for studies to fill this gap.

This study thus asks the research question, *how have certain ethnic Chinese HSS scholars become globally high achieving?* In particular, it pays special attention to the tensions and opportunities these scholars have encountered in engaging with Chinese and Western cultures and knowledges and in developing an international career. It uses a narrative approach to collect data from semi-structured narrative interviews with ten such scholars, their research projects and scholarship, published biographies, and texts of public interviews with them (see more in the Methods and Data section below). Informed by the existing literature on academic development of scholars, this study employs a rather holistic approach that considers the scholars’ personal and academic life and the temporal dimension of their trajectories, and underlines their active agency in personal and academic development.

Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature and has practical implications in two important ways. First, in the context of the changing landscape of higher education (e.g., present geopolitical tensions), intensifying ‘wars’ for attracting global talents in academia, and the imperative to make international academia more equal and diverse (Harvey 2014; Santos 2014), this study reveals the dynamics of international academia and what these dynamics mean for ethnic Chinese HSS scholars in terms of their academic development and research. This contributes to our understanding of international academia in HSS and its interactions with individual scholars, particularly when most of the relevant extant research focuses on sciences and engineering fields (see for example, Marini and Yang 2021; Wagner and Leydesdorff 2005). Second, the achievements and struggles of the high-achieving scholars will contribute to the understanding of the major questions and remarks discussed at the beginning of this article. This also has implications for HSS scholarly training in higher education and for individual HSS scholars, especially early career scholars, from Greater China and beyond.

Academic development of scholars

Scholars’ academic development is a research topic that has attracted much attention. Most of the relevant research on this topic focuses on academic career development and the agency-structure interaction in scholars’ academic development.

Career development is an important theme in the research on scholars’ academic development. Studies that explore this theme tend to focus on the working conditions and resources, the career aspirations and career stages of academics, academics’ individual characteristics, and factors influencing their pursuit of career success (Brauch and Hall 2004). Through a systematic review of relevant research, Zacher and colleagues (2019) identify major subjective and objective career success outcomes. Subjective outcomes include individually perceived career success, and objective ones include grants success, publications, awards, and academic positions. While there exists research calling for reflexivity in defining what is ‘success’ (Gunz and Heslin 2005), most of the studies explore the question of how to achieve ‘success outcomes’ and highlight publishing strategies (Hauptman 2005), productivity in terms of quantifiable metrics (Wright-Mair and Museum 2023), and the accumulation of social and academic capital (Ha 2016). Zacher et al. (2019) also stress mentoring programmes and gender inequalities in the context of developing an academic career. However, compared with gender inequalities, other factors that may influence scholars’ career development, including ethnic and cultural backgrounds and personal epistemologies, receive little attention in research. Specific research on HSS scholars is particularly lacking.

The interaction between agency and structure is another common theme in the research on scholars’ academic development. In the social sciences, agency is typically understood as an individual’s capacity to independently determine what they hope to achieve and work towards their goals (Sen 1999, p. 288). It has been theorized in different ways, depending on ‘the extent to which social structure is believed to facilitate or constrain that capacity’ (Inouye 2023, p. 1146). Many studies have worked on revealing individual and structural conditions that play important roles in scholars’ academic development (see e.g., Archer 2008; McAlpine 2012). Factors that are frequently emphasized include personal characteristics, individual values and beliefs, research foci, teaching/research/service responsibilities, (inter-)disciplines, community values, contexts, institutional cultures and positioning, and the structure of universities and faculties.

Amidst structural changes in higher education, many studies explore scholars’ academic development in the midst of

contextual changes and institutional reforms including neoliberal reforms in higher education, the growing precarity in the academic labor market, and geopolitical tensions. For example, Billot (2010) investigates academics’ reactions, changing mindsets, and behaviors in response to government-driven policy and funding directives. Focusing on Chinese academics, Li (2021) looks into the changes of their academic activities and identities in the context of the global rise of neo-nationalism and new managerialist reforms. Xie (2018) discusses the changing academic life of Chinese social scientists in the context of higher education internationalization, which has led to both benefits and costs. She finds that in attempting to enhance their competitiveness in both the national and international spheres, these social scientists’ research activities become more mechanical, causing negative influence on the free inquiry of knowledge and the global academic influence of their scholarship.

Meanwhile, agency of scholars is widely recognized in research (see e.g., Huang et al. 2018; Marginson and Xu 2023; Inouye 2023; Yang et al. 2023). A distinctive example is the identity-trajectory theory, which highlights scholars’ active agency while recognizing the influence of structural conditions on them (McAlpine et al. 2014; McAlpine and Amundsen 2016). According to McAlpine and Amundsen, agency ‘provides a means to understand not just investment at work but also how work is embedded within [researchers’] life aspirations including personal goals, challenges, relationships, and responsibilities’ (McAlpine and Amundsen 2016, p. 17). This theory underlines a biographical focus, emphasizing three core elements in studying a scholar’s academic development. The first is the inclusion of a temporal dimension that pays attention to the past–present–future transitions of individual scholars. The inclusion of this temporal dimension stresses that in addition to the present structural conditions, scholars’ present decisions are also influenced by their past trajectories, and their goals and plans for the future. The word ‘trajectory’ reflects a developmental perspective that emphasizes humans’ natural feature of learning from experience. The second element is scholars’ individual agency, the emphasis on which aligns with Archer’s view that people are not ‘puppets of structures’ (Archer 2000, p. 71). In the face of both constraints and enablers, scholars strive to be intentional, to plan, and to find a way forward. The third element is the situation of academic work within the personal realm. This emphasizes that scholars’ work and career are embedded within personal goals, relationships, and responsibilities. For example, emotional support from and responsibilities towards the family can affect scholars’ academic development.

The design of this study is partly informed by the identity-trajectory theory for it pointing out the need to have a well-rounded approach to studying scholars’ academic development. This well-rounded approach considers their life experiences over time, academic work, academic careers, and their active exercise of agency in interacting with the structure. By taking this approach, elements that are associated with these scholars’ achievements can be revealed.

Ethnic Chinese HSS scholars

The existing research on ethnic Chinese HSS scholars can be divided into two broad groups. One focuses on these scholars’ academic development and activities, and the other pays attention to their roles in the broader academic, cultural, and social development.

An increasing number of studies now focus on the academic development and academic activities of ethnic Chinese HSS scholars. Publishing behaviors are an important focus of this line of research. Feng et al. (2013) and Xu (2020) investigate how

national and institutional policies impact HSS scholars' publishing strategies. Zheng and Gao (2016) study the language choices of Chinese HSS scholars in international scholarly publishing and find that Chinese HSS scholars have limited multilingual abilities for scholarly publication, as most of their publications are either in Chinese or English. Other topics include the academic life of ethnic Chinese scholars (Xie 2018), women scholars' career development (Tang and Horta 2021), and performance reviews and scholars' research (Yang et al. 2023).

Another line of research views ethnic Chinese HSS scholars as intellectuals to highlight that they are not confined to the higher education milieu and play important roles in the public domain (see e.g., Hayhoe 1990; Xu 2014; Huang 2016; Xu 2018). These studies center around ethnic Chinese HSS scholars' engagement with cultures and their contributions to the development of Greater China. They particularly highlight these scholars' feeling of 'torn' between cultures, knowledges, and research positions.

In *The Honour of the Wise: Intellectuals and the Modern Culture*, Xu (1991) explores dilemmas faced by Chinese intellectuals in dealing with Chinese traditional and modern Western cultures, and stresses the cultural mission they bear in the modernization of China and its cultures. Similar studies include those by Ye (1984), which explores intellectuals' interactions with society and culture; Chen (1996), which looks at the relationship between Chinese intellectuals' cultural identities and new cultural traditions; and Wen and Yang (2019), which focuses on ethnic Chinese education scholars' experience of being torn between Chinese and Western cultures and knowledges. This feeling of being 'torn', which is manifested in various ways, can be both an intellectual gift and a burden. Turning to the ethnic Chinese HSS academic diaspora, Ding and Li (2022) find that these diaspora scholars often use experiences and lenses from multiple contexts, and have made significant contributions to 'bridging' China and the world. At the same time, they face identity dilemmas and cultural and epistemological tensions, such as whether to focus on Chinese issues in their research; whether to view themselves as insiders or outsiders when studying China; and whether to publish in English, Chinese or both languages. All of these studies indicate the difficulty of reconciling the differences between Chinese and Western cultures and traditions. Such tensions are the essential sources of pain felt by ethnic HSS scholars in developing themselves, producing scholarship, contributing to knowledge, and undertaking public responsibilities. It should also be noted that these relevant experiences are not unique to ethnic Chinese scholars, but are generally felt by non-Western scholars amidst global knowledge asymmetries and the dominance of Western discourses (Connell 2007).

Meanwhile, many studies situate ethnic Chinese HSS scholars in the overall map of HSS development in Greater China. This research trajectory raises the question of how to develop an independent HSS knowledge system in Greater China, especially by confronting the dependency on Western theories, concepts, and discourses. For example, to delineate a historical picture of the Sinicization of sociology in China, Xiao (2018) explores the academic lives and scholarship of a few Chinese sociologists, focusing especially on how they engage with Chinese traditional and Western knowledges. Zhou (2011) uses the example of sociologist Fei Xiaotong and philosopher Zhao Tingyang, highlighting how they have managed to overcome dependent mind-sets and produce globally valued and influential scholarship. According to Zhou, Fei Xiaotong's achievements are related to his being a Confucian literatus, his deep appreciation of Chinese cultures, and his research into Chinese issues from a grassroots and cultural perspective, whereas Zhao Tingyang's achievement in developing *tianxia* (all under heaven) philosophy benefits from his rich discussion that connects Chinese traditional ideas with

relevant Western ideas. Similarly, Shen and colleagues (2023) investigate Fei Xiaotong's personal life trajectory and scholarship to explore how Fei realizes the integration of Chinese and Western cultures and knowledges in research. The authors identify three core elements, including the attitude of cultural appreciation, the engagement with multiple knowledges, and the implementation of culturally oriented research agendas.

Overall, the above two sections indicate two essential elements in ethnic Chinese HSS scholars' academic development. One is related to their academic development: they teach, research, render public service, and develop their academic careers. In the process, they encounter challenges and opportunities commonly shared by HSS scholars worldwide. The other is related to their cultural and epistemological backgrounds and positions. In conducting research and self-development, these scholars may feel torn between Chinese traditional and Western cultures and knowledges. Nevertheless, if managed well, this tension can also be a gift, contributing to their formation of biculturality or even multi-culturality in Yang's (2023) sense and their making of new knowledge. However, most existing studies only focus on one of the two elements, which are inseparable in ethnic Chinese HSS scholars' development. There is also a paucity of research focused on high-achieving scholars whose experiences may help uncover possible approaches to dealing with the tension, which will have important implications for non-Western scholars in general. This study pays attention to both of the elements.

Methods and data

In light of the existing literature, a narrative research design was developed for this study to collect data about certain globally high-achieving ethnic Chinese HSS scholars' life stories and scholarship. Data from ten scholars falling under the category of 'globally high-achieving ethnic Chinese HSS scholars' were collected and analyzed. At the time of data collection, all of these scholars held full professorships in HSS at global leading research-intensive universities, were widely recognized by their peers as world-leading scholars in their fields, and were working at universities that used English as the medium of instruction and work (including universities in Hong Kong SAR, the United States, and Australia). All of these scholars received at least compulsory and undergraduate education in Greater China. Table 1 contains detailed information about the ten scholars. This study received ethical approval from the author's institution.

Various types of data were collected and analyzed, including data from semi-structured narrative interviews with the ten scholars, their research outputs, blog posts and newspaper pieces, reflective pieces written specifically for this study, published biographies, and texts of public interviews with these scholars. The interviews consisted of two parts: a biographical part for which the participants gave comprehensive and detailed impromptu narratives and reflections on their life stories without interruption, and a semi-structured interview part to elicit additional comments and clarifications on themed questions (Kazmierska 2004, p. 157). The semi-structured part included some common questions, but all of these questions were tailored to each participants' personal background and scholarship. Each of the interviews lasted around 180 min. Interviews in Hong Kong SAR were conducted in person, whereas the other interviews were conducted via Zoom, all in 2022. The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006).

It is acknowledged that there exist limitations related to the sampling procedures. Although the sample size is comparatively small, the robustness and depth of the interview data, together with the multiplicity of the data sources, provide rich and in-depth insights into the research question. However, the

Table 1 Table of participants.

No	Age Group	Research Field	Current location	Gender	Types of data collected and analyzed	An anonymized vignette of their academic journey
P1	1930s	History	The United States	Male	Interview data, research outputs, published biographies, texts of public interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Born into an intellectual family in mainland China, and received family education until high school. Experienced wars before moving to Taiwan. Attended university in Taiwan, studying literature first and then moved to history from the second year of the undergraduate study. Then moved to the US for a PhD degree in history. Working at universities in Taiwan and the US after the PhD. Born into a 'Confucian family (儒家家庭)' in mainland China. Experienced wars before moving to Taiwan. Attended university in Taiwan, studying philosophy. Then moved to the US for master's and PhD degrees in philosophy. Working at universities in the US after the PhD. Visiting and temporarily teaching in mainland China and Taiwan.
P2	1935s	Philosophy	The United States	Male	Interview data, research outputs, reflective piece written for this study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moved to Hong Kong from mainland China at a young age. Studied at multiple schools before attending university in Hong Kong. Received a bachelor's degree in mathematics and a master's degree in education in Hong Kong (HK). Worked at multiple schools in Hong Kong as an educator. Moved to the UK for a PhD in education, and moved back to HK after the PhD. Working at a HK university, while holding visiting professorships at multiple universities across the world. Dropped out from school after high school because of the Cultural Revolution. Worked at rural areas and local factories for ten years. Attended university in mainland China for a master's degree in literature after the Cultural Revolution, skipping undergraduate study. Taught at the university for two years after receiving the master's degree. Then moved to the US for a PhD in literature, and continued to work at a US university after the PhD for a few years. Moved to HK after working in the US for years and working at a HK university. Attended university in mainland China, studying sociology (the first undergraduate cohort in sociology since 1957 in mainland China) Worked at the same university after the undergraduate study, and then moved to the US for master's and PhD degrees. Working at universities in the US after the PhD. Visiting and temporarily teaching at multiple mainland Chinese universities. Received a bachelor's and master's degree in mainland China in literature. Though she grew up during the Cultural Revolution, this seems to have had little influence on her academic journey as it was not brought up during the interview. Moved to the US for a PhD in psychology. Working at a HK university after receiving the PhD. Home educated during the Cultural Revolution. Attended university in mainland China after the Cultural Revolution to study literature. Received a master's degree in mainland China and then worked at multiple universities in mainland China. Then moved to Australia for a PhD in education and worked at universities there for many years, before moving to HK.
P3	1940s	Education	Hong Kong	Male	Interview data, research outputs, blog posts and newspaper pieces, texts of public interviews	
P4	1945s	Literature	Hong Kong	Male	Interview data, research outputs, texts of public interviews	
P5	1950s	Sociology	The United States	Male	Interview data, research outputs	
P6	1960s	Psychology	Hong Kong	Female	Interview data, research outputs	
P7	1960s	Culture and cultural studies	Hong Kong	Male	Interview data, research outputs, blog posts and newspaper pieces	

Table 1 (continued)

No	Age Group	Research Field	Current location	Gender	Types of data collected and analyzed	An anonymized vignette of their academic journey
P8	1960s	History	Hong Kong	Male	Interview data, research outputs, published biographies, texts of public interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Received pre-university education during the Cultural Revolution. Attended university in mainland China after the Cultural Revolution to study history, and received a bachelor's and master's degree. Worked at a university in mainland China for a few years before moving to the US to complete a PhD in history. After the PhD, worked at a US university for many years before moving to HK. Working at a HK university and holding visiting professorships at multiple universities across the world.
P9	1965s	Criminology	Hong Kong	Male	Interview data, research outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grew up in HK and received all degrees in HK. Working at a HK university since the PhD, while holding visiting professorships at multiple universities across the world.
P10	1970s	Linguistics	Australia	Male	Interview data, research outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Received education in mainland China until the completion of undergraduate study. Worked for multiple companies after the undergraduate study. Moved to Europe for two master's degrees. Then to HK for a PhD in linguistics. Worked at a HK university for a few years, before moving to Australia to take up professorship at an Australian university.

constitution of the sample is unbalanced considering the gender and geographical locations of the participants. It may be fruitful for future research to pay more attention to the sample balance and further explore the relevant topics from gender, geographical, or other perspectives.

Findings

The high-achieving participants have demonstrated many commonalities. For example, they all possess strong agency, high levels of independence, and deep reflexivity in being intentional, making plans, and working towards the plans. They all have received tremendous support from family, mentors, and colleagues along the way, whom they often referred to as ‘*guiren* (贵人)’. They have received various kinds of constraints but could still follow their research interests and the pure pursuit of knowledge rather than being mechanical or instrumental, reflecting the Daoist idea of ‘*wei er bu you* (为而不有)’ (see more in Liang 2021, pp. 190–214).

Nonetheless, this section primarily reports four elements that are arguably most saliently associated with the participants’ academic achievements. They are the participants’ possession of strong resilience, engagement with Chinese traditional cultures and knowledges, development of multiple lenses, and realization of the state of ‘*zide* (自得)’—staying true to oneself. In order to engage with the participants’ stories in a rather deep manner, this section uses typical stories from the participants to elaborate on these elements. It should be emphasized that the four elements and the elements in the previous paragraph have been observed among most of the participants, although only typical stories could be presented here.

Strong resilience. Possessing strong resilience is perhaps the most salient common element shared by these globally high-achieving participants. They all demonstrated a high level of resilience, together with strong agency, independence, and deep reflexivity, in adverse situations. The resilience could be well illustrated using the story of P4.

A cameo of P4: P4 lost his father at the age of 11 and his mother at the age of 13, basically grew up by himself, had to drop out of school when the Cultural Revolution started, and farmed in the countryside for three years and worked at factories for another five years during the Cultural Revolution. Unlike most of his peers who stopped studying in those days, P4 never stopped reading and thinking. So, when *Gaokao* (the college entrance examination) was resumed in 1977, he sat in the exam for universities and was admitted to a top university in mainland China for a master’s degree in literature, getting a top score among the whole cohort of the year. At that time, he had never been to university so had no bachelor’s degree, but was still accepted by this top university’s master’s program. Later on, he continued to excel – received a PhD in literature from a global top university in the US, continuously developed his academic career, and became a globally high-achieving scholar in his field.

The story of P4 is an excellent illustration of resilience, understood as the capacity to deal with unanticipated challenges and adversities of life and learn to bounce back (Manyena 2006). As the above story implies, P4 did not grow up sitting in classrooms, being taught by teachers. Rather, he had to make a living at a young age, had few resources and was discouraged to study during the Cultural Revolution, and encountered considerable difficulties and challenges of various kinds. Yet, his strong

resilience enabled him to overcome all of these and prepared himself for his later achievements. He shared that, ‘Although the Cultural Revolution period was chaotic, life was hard, and the conditions were poor, I was lucky enough to still have books to read’. (P4) The reading and engagement with knowledge during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution laid a solid foundation for the later scholarship and development of P4.

Indeed, strong resilience was observed among most of the participants. Grew up and received basic and secondary education during the Cultural Revolution period, P7 and P8 demonstrated strong agency and resilience too. Realizing the poor teaching quality at school, P7 convinced his father to self-educate at home and eventually excelled at *Gaokao*. P8 bluntly put that ‘my generation had few opportunities in the past, so we take every opportunity as much as we can. ... I often joke that people like us, unless you stamp us into the ground forever, as soon as you lift your foot, we will run away and move forward’.

Engagement with Chinese traditional cultures and knowledges.

All these participants are globally high-achieving, and familiar with the English academic genres in their fields. Nonetheless, many of them emphasized how Chinese traditional cultures and knowledges have influenced them as a scholar and their incorporation of such cultures and knowledges in research. A distinctive example is the story and scholarship of P2.

A cameo of P2: P2 was born into a Confucian family. His father was an important litterateur of Chinese classics of the day. Influenced by his father, P2 was trained to read Chinese classics, started to learn Chinese traditional philosophies, and engaged with Chinese traditional values and cultures from a young age. Experiencing and witnessing wars in mainland China in the 1930s and 40s, he set up a life goal – to ‘rejuvenate Chinese cultures, integrate the good of the West into Chinese cultures ... in order to address the question of how humanity can co-exist peacefully, prosper with each other, and develop sustainably’. This is indeed the goal he has been pursuing throughout his whole life until today. An important question he asks is how to traverse Chinese and Western knowledges and integrate Chinese and Western philosophies. He believes that there are many things that Chinese and Western knowledges and cultures could and need to learn from each other.

The story of P2 is distinctive in the sense that Chinese traditional cultures and knowledges are not only an essential part of his research but also have influenced his life pursuit and fundamental values. At the same time, his story is not unique. Many other participants (P1, P4, P5, P8) have similar engagement. As P5 noted, ‘the influence of Chinese traditional knowledges...is now deeply embedded in the way I look at things. It is not possible to disentangle it as it has become part of my body’.

Unlike P1, P2, P4, P5, and P8 who started to engage with Chinese traditional cultures and knowledges from a young age, a few other participants (P3, P6, P7, P9, P10) only started later in their careers, primarily due to two reasons. First, they did not receive solid training in Chinese classics and traditional knowledges at a young age. Second, they all realized a relatively low explanatory power of Western-developed theories in Chinese societies and then turned to Chinese traditional cultures and knowledges for explanations. For example, P9 shared his puzzlement when he was a research postgraduate student conducting research in Hong Kong local communities – ‘I was puzzled that basically ... the theories were all from the West, and

they were not applicable to deal with our daily problems. ... We took some actions, ...trying to identify methods for integrating practice and theory’. A similar experience was shared by P3 who conducted research on education in mainland China. In P3’s words, ‘one day, I had my “eureka” moment (顿悟): the mismatch between our hypotheses and realities was all because of culture! Our hypotheses came from Western theories. How could they work well in Chinese societies?’ Chinese traditional cultures constitute a core element of their research.

Developing multiple lenses. During the interviews and in their scholarly works or biographies, the participants all underlined their development of multiple lenses, which enhanced their reflexivity and provided them with new perspectives to understand the world and conduct research. The multiple lenses could be in various dimensions such as cultural lenses and insider and outsider lenses.

P3 used a metaphor to highlight the importance of having multiple lenses – ‘it is important to observe from the outside. That different lens and framework is like a mirror, enabling us to better understand others’ and our own cultures’. For him, developing multiple cultural lenses requires three things. First, the acknowledgement of the existence of different cultures. Second, when cultural differences are observed, to avoid a prejudiced attitude and try to deeply understand the differences. Third, to jump out of the box of one’s own culture to study other cultures and try to traverse the multiple cultures. The three points echo Fei Xiaotong’s tenets of cultural self-awareness and how he successfully integrated Chinese and Western knowledges in research (Shen et al. 2023). According to the sharing of P3, his development of multiple cultural lenses was largely a result of growing up in a multi-culture society Hong Kong and having the experience of studying and working in various countries and with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

On why having multiple lenses is essential to understanding the selves and others and to research, P5 provided an incisive comment:

‘How did I notice it [a specific research problem]? This was because it was something missed in my own culture. When I came “outside” and found that something we used to ignore was actually important, I saw the contrast. The contrast could not be observed by someone who has been in only one “position” and takes things for granted. We Chinese have a poem, “You don’t know the true face of Mount Lu just because you are in this mountain. Looking at it from the side, it looks like ridges and peaks, and the heights are different from near to far”. You have to go outside the mountain, stay way way back, contact, collide, and rebel with others, and you will see the strengths and weaknesses of both sides. Then you can traverse and integrate them’. (P5)

Similar arguments could be found from all participants. For example, P8 averred, ‘you must go outside, which is not only what I did, but also what masters including Wang Guowei and Chen Yinke did. Why have they possessed and produced great knowledge? It is because there is an “other” living inside them’. As ethnic Chinese scholars develop academic careers in international academia, the multiple lenses and constantly contrasting views from different positions are essential to their achievements.

In general, two major ways of developing multiple lenses emerged from the participants’ stories. The first was global mobility which could enable scholars to observe and feel differences in person. In describing how they developed multiple lenses, all of the participants talked about their experience of

meeting people with diverse backgrounds and observing different lifestyles and cultures in global mobility. Immediate contrast of cultures and ideas in real life could be powerful and inspire reflections. As the above long quote from P5 shows, going outside, staying back, and mingling with others are effective ways to develop multiple lenses. The second way was mastering other languages which could enable scholars to engage with the knowledge and culture of others through reading and communicating. This could be especially important for scholars as reading and communicating allows in-depth engagement with knowledge and wisdom in the past and present. P4 insightfully commented that ‘I think learning other languages can open a new window for us to look at the outside and to broaden our own minds and thinking’.

The state of ‘zide’—staying true to oneself. The discussed literature above shows that struggles and the feeling of ‘torn’ are widely observed among ethnic Chinese HSS scholars. The struggles and the torn feeling could be related to cultural identities, engagement with multiple cultures and knowledges, and personal academic interest and structural constraints, among others. However, what many of the participants in this study show is the state of *zide* after having experienced various kinds of tensions and struggles.

Zide is an important Confucian concept describing the state of persons’ staying true to themselves and following their heart. As Confucius says, ‘at seventy I stay true to myself without overstepping the bounds of propriety.’³ *Zide* is not a state that comes naturally to a person but requires constant efforts into pursuing it. In the case of Confucius, it was until his seventieth when he viewed himself realizing the state of *zide*. In this study, the participants’ realization of the academic *zide* state involved a process of constant self-reflexivity, growth, and empowerment amidst feeling torn and going through struggles. *Zide* highlighted the participants’ state of staying true to their own positions, following their own hearts, leaving behind mechanical objectives, seeing light of structural constraints, going beyond the distinction between Chinese *versus* Western cultures and knowledges and returning to the core of the research questions, and the pure pursuit of knowledge. The story of P8 vividly shows his state of *zide* in terms of his cultural and academic positions.

A cameo of P8: P8 grew up in a small village in mainland China, went to universities for his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in history in mainland China and a PhD in history in the US. Ever since his moving to the US, he has been working outside mainland China in various places, though he has been keeping close contact with and visiting mainland China regularly. In his biography, he raised a central question to himself – ‘who am I?’ The answer he provided was ‘a marginalized person’. This answer highlighted his marginalized position in different parts of the world because of various reasons. He shared that his research approach, which was global and transnational, was not widely embraced in mainland China, resulting in his scholarship being somewhat marginalized there. Meanwhile, as an ethnic Chinese history scholar, though his scholarship was not marginalized, it was hard to win ‘trust’ from colleagues in the US and fully integrate into the academia there. In retrospect, he commented that there was a long time when he was uncomfortable with the ‘marginalized position’, struggled with it, and felt torn. However, he now fully accepts and appreciates this position and feels proud of it because being ‘marginalized’ enables him to ‘has one foot each in Eastern and Western cultures’.

To quote P8’s own words to demonstrate his views of being a marginalized scholar.

‘The feeling of being marginalized often comes from the inexplicable feeling of being excluded. ... [However,] I personally believe that as an intellectual, [we] need to work towards the “marginalized” position, being independent of the system and not limited to our own culture and “one-third of an ace (一亩三分地)”’. Only then can we have multiple perspectives and positions. ...After all, the real intellectuals are those who think otherwise and willingly stay on the “edge”. This is what Mr Chen Yinke appeals for – “having free thought and independent spirit (自由之思想, 独立之精神)”’. (P8)

As the above cameo and quote show, the feeling of being marginalized and torn between Chinese and Western cultures was a key struggle for P8 for a long time. However, he now has passed that stage and realized the state of *zide* – feeling comfortable and proud of the position and staying true to his own interests and passions. Similar passages were observed among many other participants, although their struggles and tensions could be different. For example, P5 and P6 talked about their experience of getting tenure promotions especially their strategies in response to institutional constraints; P7 shared the tension between Chinese and Western knowledges and global knowledge asymmetries; P9 mentioned his lacking self-confidence as a scholar from Hong Kong – ‘I felt like Hong Kong was kind of sub-standard. Hong Kong is small. How can you make any scholarship that can shake the world?’ (P9). Despite the various kinds of struggles and tensions, these participants have overcome them and entered into the state of *zide*, at least academic-wise. However, while their realization of the *zide* state is evident, it remains less clear how they achieved this state, especially their psychological development in this process. Future research may look into this topic further.

Discussion: elements associated with their achievements and the remaining challenges

The trajectories of academic development among these globally high-achieving ethnic Chinese HSS scholars varied in many ways. Yet, they shared many commonalities, reflecting the possible reasons for their achievements and the common challenges they encountered.

Three groups of reasons account for their achievements. The first group is related to these scholars’ personal characteristics, which is consistent with the findings of Huang et al. (2018) and Zacher et al. (2019). The participants’ strong resilience, agency, interests and passion for their research, and being forward-looking and intentional were key to their life and academic achievements. Given the turbulent times they lived through and the constraints they encountered, they could not have reached their current standing without these characteristics. While it is true, as Archer (2000) and Sen (1999) argue, that all human beings have agency, the stories of the participants in this study highlights their possession of *strong* resilience and agency. The second group is related to the education and training they received, a finding that could have implications for scholarly training in higher education. Some of the key factors pinpointed by the participants include academic attitudes, especially the pure pursuit of knowledge, (English) language proficiency, the multiple lenses developed from global mobility and engagement with multiple cultures and knowledges, and solid research skills. Moreover, for HSS scholars, training in Chinese classics and Chinese traditional knowledges and a deep understanding of

Chinese cultures are particularly important to the production of high-quality scholarships. This finding resonates with Yang's (2023) appeals for biculturality among scholars and universities in Greater China. The third group belongs to the structural conditions and opportunities. Certain conditions are related to the social and institutional environment, a finding that resonating with Xie (2018) and Xu (2020).

There exist two broad categories of challenges these scholars have encountered in their academic development. While the first category of challenges are generally faced by scholars globally regardless of their backgrounds, the second category are particular to ethnic Chinese scholars and probably felt by many other non-Western scholars. The first category emerges from the structural conditions in which the scholars are embedded throughout their academic development. As many studies suggest, scholars interact with various structural factors in developing their careers, including material and institutional factors, ideational factors, and social relations factors (Marginson and Xu 2023; Yang et al. 2023). Partly depending on how scholars agentically view these factors, certain factors can pose challenges on them. For example, the growing competition, geopolitical tensions, neoliberal reforms, and global knowledge asymmetries in higher education (Huang et al. 2018; Li 2021; Yang et al. 2019). However, compared with findings in the existing literature, the participants in this study seemed to talk less about the changing structural conditions in academia. Indeed, during the interviews and in their biographies, the participants tended to downplay the structural challenges and constraints they had encountered. Only two participants (P5 and P6) shared their experiences of tenure and promotion. This may be because that these scholars' career development had mostly taken place before the neoliberal changes in academia. It could also be a result of their state of *zide* and seeing light of the structural conditions to a certain extent. Arguably, because of *zide*, they could follow their own interests and passion, and pursue knowledge without many mechanical considerations. This points to important implications for the academic development of scholars in their early- and mid-career stages.

The second category of challenges is closely associated with the feeling of 'torn' between the Chinese and Western cultures and knowledges. Compared to the first category, this category are particular to non-Western including ethnic Chinese scholars. Interestingly, for many of the participants, the interview data alone do not indicate their struggles with the tension between Chinese and Western cultures and knowledges, as reflected by the state of *zide*. However, their scholarship and biographies demonstrate that most of them have experienced this tension. A distinguishing characteristic of many of these high-achieving scholars is the process they have made in dealing with the challenge across decades of thinking and reflection, and the ability they have developed to traverse the East and West to a certain extent, even as the challenge may still persist. P3 and P7 bluntly admitted that they have not found a way to best manage the tension between Chinese and Western cultures. Intertwined with the extraverted mindset in China's higher education and the existing global center-periphery higher education system, the torn may lead to more challenges. Specifically, the feeling of torn may come from the fact that 'China's modern education system has been based almost exclusively on Western learning' (Yang et al. 2019, p. 816), and have been reinforced by the global knowledge asymmetries and epistemic unjust practices (Alatas 2022; Fricker 2019). Results of these are scholars' lack of academic confidence; intellectual extraversion practices (Hountondji 1990; Connell 2007); questions posed by Western scholars such as, 'Does China have a philosophy?'; the exclusion of Chinese traditional knowledges in the global knowledge system (Yang, et al. 2019); and being marginalized in various academic communities (Fricker 2019). Nevertheless, despite all

these challenges, for the studied scholars, the feeling of 'torn' has become less of a burden, but more of a gift, again reflecting the state of *zide*. A distinctive example is the story of P8, who is now proud of being a 'marginalized scholar', 'having one foot each in Eastern and Western cultures'.

Final words

This article has revealed the trajectories, struggles, and achievements of certain globally high-achieving ethnic Chinese HSS scholars, and common reasons associated with their achievements. Among the many commonalities of these scholars, four elements deserve special attention: possessing strong resilience, engaging with Chinese traditional cultures and knowledges, developing multiple lenses, and striving for the state of *zide*. The findings not only contribute to the question of 'how they become globally high achieving' but also have important implications for scholarly training and scholars' personal academic development in and beyond Greater China.

Worldwide HSS scholars face considerable challenges in their academic development. The structural conditioning of their academic development, characterized with neoliberal mindsets, increasing competition, decreasing public financial investment, and the downplay of HSS disciplines compared with STEM ones, poses challenges commonly shared by HSS scholars regardless of their backgrounds and geographical locations. Meanwhile, scholars in and from non-Euro-American systems may encounter extra challenges, which are associated with their linguistic, cultural and epistemological backgrounds and the global knowledge asymmetries. The experience and academic trajectories of the participants in this study reveal possible approaches to confronting these challenges and supporting (non-Euro-American) HSS scholars' academic development. In particular, non-Euro-American education systems will benefit from incorporating their own cultures and knowledges, supporting their students and people in finding their cultural and epistemological roots, and avoiding uncritically implanting Euro-American systems on their own land. Scholarly training needs to emphasize foreign language learning, especially English learning, support global mobility, encourage scholarly debates from multiple perspectives, and support scholars' development of a deep understanding of various cultures and knowledges. Individual HSS scholars may need to stay highly resilient in the changing (academic) environment, develop deep understandings of multiple cultures and knowledges, develop multiple lenses and even bi-/multi-culturality, and work towards the state of *zide* through constant self-reflexivity, growth and empowerment.

To conclude, this article does *not* intend to provide a final word on this topic. Rather, it hopes to invite more research to explore this important theme. Future research may pay more attention to the sample balance, detailed experience and (psychological) process of scholars' realization of *zide*, and the lasting influence of Chinese and Western cultures and knowledges on scholars. Furthermore, while the article have alluded to challenges particularly faced by non-Western HSS scholars, the challenges of such scholars with various backgrounds may not be the same. It is thus important and revealing to explore the academic development of HSS scholars with other cultural and epistemological backgrounds and unpack the similarities and differences of the career trajectories, structural conditioning, and challenges faced among them.

Data availability

All data analyzed are contained in the paper.

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Notes

- 1 In Chang's work, 'China's humanities and social sciences' here refer to the HSS scholarship produced by scholars based in Greater China and by all ethnic Chinese scholars across the world. In this article, 'China' is also used in this broad way.
- 2 In this study, ethnic Chinese scholars refer to those who grew up and received at least their basic, secondary, and undergraduate education in Greater China, regardless of their current nationalities and locations.
- 3 *Weizheng, Analects* ("七十而从心所欲，不逾矩。").

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Author contributions

This is a single authored paper. L. Yang contributed to all aspects of this study, including research design, data collection and analysis, and the manuscript preparation and revisions.

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at The University of Hong Kong. The reference number is EA220332.

Informed consent

Verbal consent to participate was sought from the scholar participants before or at the beginning of the interviews.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Lili Yang.

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