Research Article

Becoming Artificially Intelligent: Student Perspectives on AI-enabled Success and *Guanxi* in Higher Education

*1Michael James Day

About Article

About Author

1 Associate Professor of Higher Education, University of Greenwich, UK

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Chinese postgraduate students navigate academic success in the context of artificial intelligence (AI), with particular attention to the role of *guanxi*, the cultural logic of relational advantage, in shaping AI use. Set within a Sino-British university, the research explores how students engage with AI technologies for idea generation, learning support, and academic writing, and how these practices reflect broader social values and concerns. A mixed-methods design was employed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from 103 Chinese postgraduate students. Data collection involved structured surveys, focus group seminars, ethnographic classroom observations, and an online discussion forum. Thematic analysis, guided by grounded theory principles, enabled an inductive reading of students' perspectives, while triangulation across data sources enhanced validity. Findings reveal that students express ambivalence toward subtler AI uses, including planning, paraphrasing, and polishing text. Many acknowledged that AI could lead to superficial indicators of success and raised concerns about an emerging "illusion of competence". Yet, few connected these practices to long-term academic growth or career trajectories. Notably, some students framed AI as a relational tool, an extension of digital *guanxi*, leveraged to maintain competitiveness in a high-pressure academic environment. The study argues that universities should shift from narrow, compliance-driven responses to AI towards more culturally informed, dialogic approaches. Promoting responsible and reflective student–AI partnerships may better prepare learners for ethical engagement in an AI-mediated academic and professional landscape.

Contact @ Michael James Day
m.j.day@greenwich.ac.uk

1. INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed academic achievement and student conduct in Higher Education (HE). Since the birth of the discipline during the 1956 Dartmouth Conference (Moor, 2006), AI has evolved to become large language models (LLMs) (Baber *et al.*, 2024). Generative AI (GAI) has enabled students to produce text with passable similarity to human-mediated responses. AI technologies are, therefore, increasingly incorporated in teaching and learning environments. So, the increased application of AI in HE has been tied to academic integrity concerns. Universities within the United Kingdom (UK), for example, have reported increases in cheating, peer-to-peer plagiarism, and use of AI-based essay mills (Grove, 2024; Bonate, 2024). AI assignments can be written competently, and with relative objectivity, but lack cohesion and depth (Creedon, 2024). Yet, student learning and grading can also be made more authentic through AI tools. Meanwhile, cultural context also contributes to the complexity; historically, using technologies to personal advantage is rooted in culture. The Chinese imperial examination system, for instance, was notorious for being awash with abuses and mechanisms of personal advantage (Lang, 2013). Contemporary Chinese literature, and current studies continue to discover ongoing issues of winning using personal advantage in learning, rather than merit (Rea, 2015; Chen & Macfarlane, 2024). Any such behaviors are shaped by systemic pressures, hierarchical structures, and the fear of loss of face (Waters & Day, 2022a).

The expansion of transnational education, particularly through Sino-British joint venture universities, further highlights tensions, as both countries have varying interpretations of what constitutes legitimate assistance versus academic malpractice (Waters & Day, 2022b; Day, 2024). In China, for example, knowledge is regarded as communal property, with uncredited information sharing and the adaptation of material for personal objectives being both common and culturally accepted, even when explicit attribution is absent. The practice of *guanxi*, which describes the cultivation of networks and reciprocal relationships, further reflects a cultural emphasis on mutual exchange and favour. So, positioning personal connections as central to academic and professional success. Such practices are shown, within the data presented in this paper, to be increasingly digitally mediated. This can blur the boundaries between collaboration and misconduct (Callard, 2024).

Digital technologies and social media have further expanded opportunities for both academic collaboration and misconduct (Madden *et al.*, 2018). This has evolved into what scholars' term as "digital *guanxi*" where social media and online platforms serve as new spaces for relationship-building, exchange of information, and mutual support. Digital *guanxi* extends traditional norms of reciprocity and trust-building across virtual environments. This enables individuals to expand their networks beyond physical-social boundaries. The rise of digital *guanxi* has been described as making social connections more fluid, thereby dissolving geographical and institutional barriers and creating a digital agora, so a new intermediary space balancing public and private obligations (Au, 2023). Within Chinese academic contexts, therefore, digital *guanxi* can facilitate both legitimate collaboration and practices that may

be perceived as misconduct in Western settings.

Scholars describe *guanxi* as involving different levels of closeness: qinren (close family), *shuren* (acquaintances), and *shengren* (strangers) (Chen & Peng, 2008; Yang, 1994). It can, as a result, also be seen in three main forms: affective, instrumental, and mixed, however as framed above, discussion has also positioned a fourth form, so that which is digital (Chen *et al.*, 2013; Hwang, 1987). Affective *guanxi* is based on emotional bonds and a sense of belonging, while instrumental *guanxi* is about exchanging resources to help each other succeed. Mixed *guanxi* combines both emotional and practical exchanges, often outside the family. In workplaces, *guanxi* usually takes the form of *shuren* ties, blending both emotional support and practical help. All can be said to have become increasingly digtialised, though there has yet to be overt discussion directed to viewing AI chatbots and tools as agents capable of facilitating a sense of 'AI-*guanxi*' amongst students. This helps forge tentative research questions (RQs) that guided the analysis of data presented here:

-RQ1: How do Chinese postgraduate students perceive responsible use of AI-assisted technologies in their academic work, and in what ways do these practices reflect or challenge traditional *guanxi* relationships within educational settings?

-RQ2: In what ways do Chinese postgraduate students relate the use of AI to contract cheating and academic outsourcing, and how are these perceptions shaped by cultural understandings of assistance, reciprocity, and *guanxi*?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The complex interplay between cultural traditions, institutional expectations, and emerging technologies in shaping academic assistance practices among Chinese students, particularly in HE contexts, can be traced to historical antecedents that determine contemporary challenges. These provide the basis for how students in Chinese HE sense make within the evolving landscape of AI.

2.1. Historical and cultural roots of academic assistance in china

Seeking AI academic assistance, or more human alternatives such getting others to give preferential insight to ensure advantageous learning outcomes, has deep roots in China; it dates back to the imperial examination (keju) system of the Tang Dynasty, where the practice of qiangti, hiring others to take exams, became widespread (Xiong *et al.*, 2023). Despite severe penalties, since phased out in contemporary educational society, including exile and execution, seeking help from others to pass exams persisted throughout centuries, reflecting a generational habituation to believe such behaviours are necessary to succeed in highly competitive educational environments (Low *et al.*, 2020). This shapes modern attitudes toward academic practice. Such practice is inherently changed by how digital technologies now facilitate alternative advantages in study other than merit-based learning, such as having AI identify and address mechanisms to make it far easier to complete assignments. Xiong *et al.* (2023) note, for example, that the shift to online education during the COVID-19 exacerbated 'contract cheating'. This is the act of academic outsourcing to another, which now

can be supplemented by AI tools. It is possible because HE assessment can be gamified, such as essay writing or quizzes, as such activities follow a standard, and sometimes even annually repeated, format (Waters & Day, 2022a). Likewise, such practices can be encouraged by setting. For example, Chinese students studying in anglophone universities. Such students often face language barriers and academic pressures that drive them to seek digital shortcuts (Day, 2025a).

2.2. Institutional expectations and academic integrity in sino-british higher education

Psychological Contracts Theory (PCT), therefore, suggests students' sense of obligation and behaviour is shaped by their institutional expectations (Kahar *et al.*, 2024). In Sino-British HE contexts, for example, Chinese students must adapt to studying in English and to assessment formats that emphasise critical thinking, rather than rote memorisation. This transition is challenging, as many students are accustomed to traditional mechanisms such as the gaokao, a high-stakes, memorisation-based entrance exam to determine university admissions. Hence, the expansion of international joint-venture universities and foreign-awarded degrees in China, which offers students alternatives to the rigidities of the domestic system, with more flexible admissions but differing pedagogical expectations (Day, 2024). Likewise, the absence of direct academic supervision. For example, analysis of Weibo posts during COVID-19 revealed a surge in discussions about how to engage others for academic ghost writing (Xiong *et al.*, 2023). The limited emphasis on academic integrity education and supervision of research practices in Chinese universities further contributes to this trend, with studies indicating that nearly half of Chinese international students dismissed from overseas universities are removed due to academic dishonesty (Hogan, 2023).

2.3. The role of *guanxi*, digital technologies, and socioeconomic pressures

These dynamics are closely linked to cultural concepts such as *guanxi*, where relationships and reciprocal assistance are seen as central to navigating educational challenges. The use of AI and digital technologies can be seen as an extension of *guanxi*. Therefore, understanding how Chinese postgraduate students interpret AI-assisted technologies, contract cheating, and cultural reciprocity is critical for developing strategies to promote responsible AI use. Intense competition for university admissions and academic success, often intensified by parental expectations, exerts pressure on students from an early age (Day, 2023). Economic inequality further compounds this, as students from less privileged backgrounds may resort to cybercrime to compensate for limited resources (Day, 2025a). Cultural attitudes also play a role; in some regions, academic dishonesty is viewed as a necessary survival tactic, a form of flattery or a 'culture of appropriation' (Waters & Day, 2022b). By enabling students to delegate learning and outsource work, AI can hinder their cognitive development and ability to think critically (Low *et al.*, 2020). Wach *et al.* (2023) caution that over-reliance on AI can limit students' competency, while Mann *et al.* (2024) propose ethical guidelines for integrating AI in academic writing, emphasising the importance of human oversight.

This suggests a pro-human approach to teaching AI may help ensure academic transparency, a challenge that extends well beyond China (MIT, 2024). Knowledge censorship in China, however, is enforced through strict government control of educational content and resources. Rooted in Confucian values and hierarchical authority, the Chinese system can restrict critical expression and fosters self-surveillance among students (Ahlers & Stichweh, 2019; Waters & Day, 2022b; Foucault, 2008).

2.4. AI, *guanxi,* and the changing nature of academic relationships

This outcome-driven environment, shaped by bureaucracy and academic capitalism, normalises seeking digital *guanxi* advantage as students prioritise results (Graeber, 2007; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Day, 2024). Chinese face culture and the pursuit of social capital through prestigious degrees may further reinforce these behaviours (Day, 2023). Yet, students use of AI and GAI to 'survive' their learning processes can be understood through the lens of *guanxi*, because, as a practice, AI-mediated *guanxi* can be seen as social assistance that involves different levels of closeness and the formation of a mutually beneficial relationship, as in traditional *guanxi*. For example, qinren (close family), can emerge from AI bots becoming increasingly personalised and humanised, seen through AI avatars and intimacy platforms using AI tools, *shuren* (acquaintances), through a particular platform becoming a staple of student teaching and learning (Chen & Peng, 2008; Yang, 1994). For some users, AI tools may, of course, only function as *shengren*, so distant and transactional, used only for basic information or simple tasks, much like interacting with a stranger. For others, personalised use of AI could resemble *shuren* ties, where the technology becomes a reliable acquaintance, because it is offering practical assistance and tailored support. If users develop a strong attachment or reliance on AI, they may treat it as qinren by integrating it deeply into their daily academic routines. Similarly, AI interactions can be said to reflect the three main forms of *guanxi*: affective, instrumental, and mixed (Chen *et al.*, 2013; Hwang, 1987).

Instrumental AI-*guanxi* is most apparent, as students and academics can use AI to access resources, generate ideas, or solve problems, thereby supporting personal achievement. However, as users grow accustomed to AI and GAI, there may also be elements of affective AI-*guanxi*, such as a sense of reassurance or belonging when AI consistently offers helpful feedback or guidance. Mixed AI-*guanxi* emerges when users experience both practical benefits and a sense of emotional support from their interactions with AI, particularly when these technologies are integrated into collaborative or supportive learning environments, which might emerge from when students begin to gain advantage and benefit from using the tools well, so begin to 'like' and identify with them personally. In professional and educational settings, AI most often occupies the role of a *shuren* tie, because it grants both practical help and, increasingly, a form of digital companionship that blends emotional and instrumental value. AI-generated content threatens learning legitimacy, however, by producing texts that often lack accuracy and reliable references, spreading misinformation and undermining trust in universities (Hicks

et al., 2024; Roe & Perkins, 2024). Much like using strangers to help success, AI risk long-term damage to both institutional reputation and personal integrity, whilst also potentially producing low-quality help (Sevnarayan & Potter, 2024), while also diverting people from fostering critical thinking (Whitsed et al., 2024). Consolidation of these themes is described in Figure 1, which integrates this discussion into a theoretical framework:
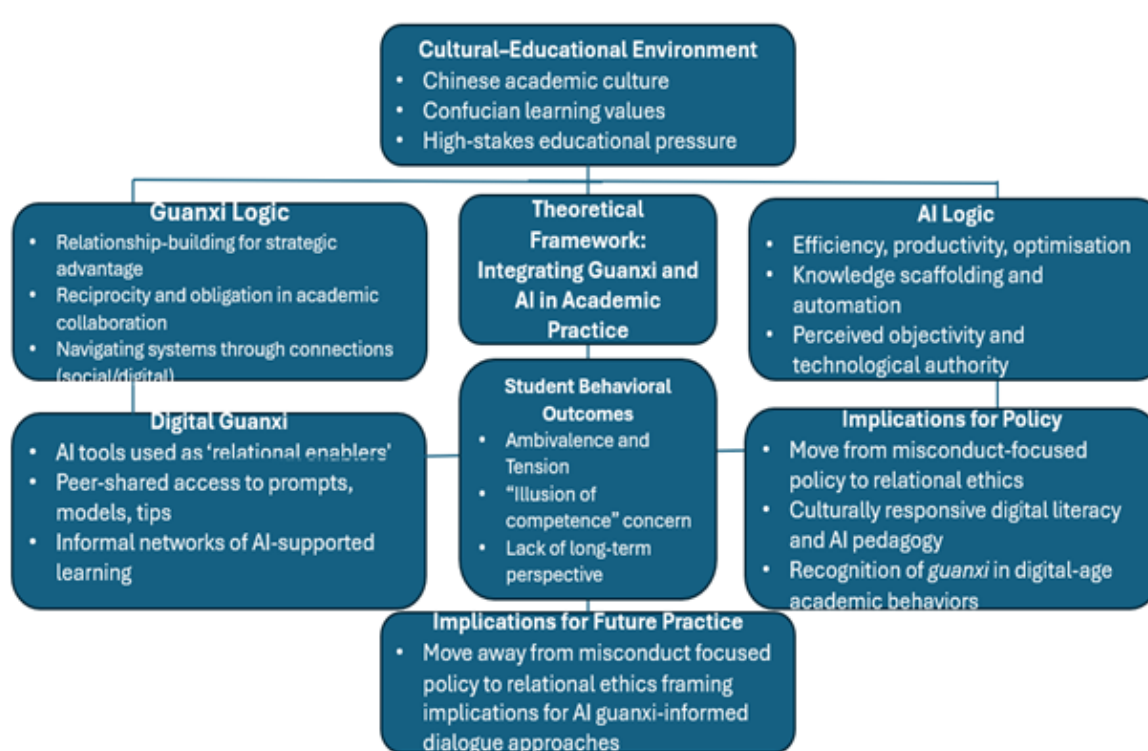

Figure 1. Theoretical framework of integrating *guanxi* and AI into academic practice

2.5. Global perspectives, policy challenges, and the future of AI in education

AI-assistance may undermine the UN Sustainable Development Goals for educational quality (Reimers, 2024; Packer, 2024); the agency and power of AI tools, which seem to embody the idea of nonhumans with agency, drive the need for ethical norms and responsible mechanisms for teaching students how to integrate and use AI-mediated perspectives responsibly and the extent that such AI tools now have power over the very process of learning, hence agency themselves (Lemm & Ercole, 2023; Law, 2008; Han, 2023; Garcia-Arias et al., 2024). Cultural differences, in global HE, blur things further as Chinese traditions of collective learning and less stringent regulation of plagiarism contrast with Western values of critical engagement and originality (Liu et al., 2021; Yafei et al., 2022; Dreamson, 2023; Ho et al., 2023; Zhang, 2021; Foo, 2023). Addressing these issues requires fostering awareness at an institutional policy level. Yet, policies may not carry across geographical boundaries (George et al., 2024; Testoni et al., 2023; Lafferty et al., 2024; Kopnina, 2020; Halmai, 2023).

3. METHODOLOGY

With this in mind, this study sought to understand views of AI trends and in-depth insights, supporting our understanding of the roles of AI-assisted technologies and *guanxi* in academic practices.

3.1. Research design

To accomplish this, the study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between AI-assisted technologies and the influence of *guanxi* on academic integrity among Chinese postgraduate students (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The mixed-methods approach is particularly suitable for complex educational phenomena, as it enables the triangulation of data sources and the development of richer insights (Johnson et al., 2007).

3.2. Research sites and participants

The research was conducted at a Sino-British university, engaging a cohort of 103 Chinese postgraduate students. Participants were recruited from a single academic program to ensure contextual consistency. Demographic data indicated that the majority of participants were female, aged between 22 and 25, and all held Chinese nationality. The homogeneity of the cohort allowed for focused exploration of cultural and contextual factors relevant to academic integrity (Patton, 2015).

3.3. Instruments

Multiple data collection instruments were used to capture both breadth and depth of perspectives:
   • *Surveys:* Structured questionnaires were administered to all participants to capture individual attitudes and experiences regarding AI, contract cheating, and *guanxi* (Bryman, 2016).

• *Focus Groups:* Hour-long seminars facilitated focus group discussions, enabling in-depth exploration of collective views and group dynamics (Morgan, 1997).

• *Ethnographic observation:* Classroom-based observations were conducted during a 90-minute lecture on generative AI, followed by seminars, to capture naturalistic interactions and behaviors (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

• *Online forum:* A digital forum was established to extend discussions beyond the classroom, providing data for digital ethnography and capturing asynchronous student reflections (Kozinets, 2020).

3.4. Data collection procedure

Data collection was implemented in several stages:

• *Classroom engagement:* The process began with a 90-minute lecture introducing generative AI and its societal implications, followed by seminars designed for open dialogue.

• *Focus groups and ethnography:* Seminars provided a platform for focus group discussions and ethnographic observation, allowing for the collection of qualitative data in a naturalistic setting.

• *Survey administration:* Surveys were distributed to all 103 students, with an 85% response rate (88/103).

• *Digital forum participation:* Following seminars, students were invited to post follow-up comments in an online forum, with 76 participants contributing, thereby enriching the qualitative dataset.

All procedures were conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines, with Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and informed consent obtained from all participants, with IRB outlining the process acknowledged below (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018).

3.5. Data analysis, coding and triangulation

Data analysis, within this paper, is drawn and reported from the survey administration and digital forum (VLE) participation, which generated significant insight and points of discussion. To make sense of this, the research was guided by inductive coding through thematic analysis, underpinned by principles of grounded theory methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Charmaz, 2014). Inductive coding involved a data-driven approach, where codes and themes were not imposed a priori but developed organically through close engagement with the data. The process began with familiarisation; reading and re-reading transcripts and written responses to identify recurring ideas and patterns. Initial codes were then generated by systematically highlighting and annotating meaningful units of data, which were continually refined through constant comparison. These codes were collated into potential themes that captured significant conceptual categories relevant to the research questions. Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data from focus groups, digital forums, and classroom observations, enabling themes to emerge directly from participants' language and experiences. This inductive process allowed the research to remain grounded in the data rather than being led by pre-existing theoretical constructs. Grounded theory principles further supported the iterative nature of the analysis, encouraging ongoing engagement with the data through memo-writing, axial coding, and the re-evaluation of themes as new insights emerged. As categories developed, they were tested and refined across different datasets, allowing theoretical insights to evolve in response to empirical patterns. Triangulation was achieved by comparing and integrating findings from multiple sources, including surveys, focus groups, ethnographic observations, and online forum discussions. This multi-method triangulation enhanced the study's validity and reliability by cross-verifying interpretations and ensuring that emerging themes were not artefacts of a single data source or method (Denzin, 2012). The combination of inductive coding, thematic analysis, and grounded theory strategies ensured a rich, nuanced understanding of the data, sensitive to both participant meaning and broader contextual patterns.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Drawing on findings from a related study in the same Sino-British university context and using a comparable methodology, [Table 1] shows that a clear majority (58%) of Chinese students agreed or strongly agreed that generative AI tools like ChatGPT will become widely used for editing and writing coursework, taking online tests, or composing application letters. This indicates a strong expectation that AI will be integrated into student work. Only a small minority (9%) disagreed, suggesting limited skepticism about AI's prevalence or usefulness among this cohort. This willingness to use AI mirrors established patterns in Chinese HE, where students commonly seek external help to secure academic success. When asked about personal knowledge of students paying for coursework editing or essay/test completion, responses were more mixed: 44% knew someone who had paid for editing, and 55% knew of students who had paid for essay writing or online test-taking. However, a notable portion (25% and 34% respectively) disagreed, reflecting some uncertainty or reluctance to acknowledge these practices. Notably, 80% agreed that AI is a tool and that students should be taught to use it responsibly within university studies, with only 1% in disagreement, suggesting awareness that students thought it could be easily abused and might be engaged with that perspective. This consensus highlights a pragmatic attitude: students seemed to recognise both the opportunities and ethical challenges posed by AI and strongly support integrating AI literacy and responsible use into the curriculum of their university. The data, then, suggests that while familiarity with both AI and paid academic helping services is high, there is support for initiatives promoting/teaching ethical use of these technologies.

Table 1. Chinese postgraduate students views on technological mediated assistance in teaching and learning

Total Respondents N = 88 Scale: Strongly Disagree/Disagree/Neutral/Agree/Strongly Agree

Question/Statement	Sg-Dis.	Dis.	N.	Agr.	Sg-Agr.
I believe ChatGPT will be used by many Chinese students to edit and write coursework, take online tests or written letters of application.	2 (2%)	6 (7%)	29 (33%)	29 (33%)	22 (25%)
I know personally of a student who has paid for editing help to pass their coursework.	22 (25%)	13 (15%)	15 (17%)	26 (30%)	12 (14%)
I know personally of a student who has who has paid someone to write their essays or take tests online.	17 (19%)	13 (15%)	10 (11%)	29 (33%)	19 (22%)
I know personally of a student who has paid someone to write their university admission application.	13 (15%)	11 (13%)	12 (14%)	23 (26%)	29 (33%)
Artificial Intelligence is a tool, so students need to be taught how to use it responsibly and acceptably within their studies at university.	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	17 (19%)	26 (30%)	44 (50%)

The survey data demonstrates that Chinese postgraduate students possess an understanding of the role of responsible AI-assistance, directly addressing both research questions. A majority (58%) anticipated that generative AI tools like ChatGPT will become widely used for coursework, tests, and applications, suggesting an explicit expectation that AI will be deeply embedded in future academic practices (RQ1). When comparing anticipated AI use to more traditional behaviours described in the review, the data reveals a connection to academic outsourcing, which are often facilitated through *guanxi* networks, thereby overlapping with digital practices. While 44% know someone who has paid for editing help and 55% know of peers who have outsourced essay writing or test-taking, even more (59%) are aware of students paying for help with university applications. This progression suggests that outsourcing, whether through personal connections or digital means, is increasingly normalised in China and likely be further enabled by AI (RQ2).

Crucially, this may, given the context of the survey, be the reason that 80% of respondents agree that AI should be taught as a tool for responsible and acceptable use in university studies. Yet, students are shown not to be indifferent or unaware of the disadvantages of using AI to assist them. Instead, they recognised the need for guidance, supporting institutional efforts to promote responsible use. Table 1 provides a tentative snapshot that indicates Chinese postgraduate students may view AI as a natural extension of existing *guanxi*-based assistance practices, expect its use to become mainstream, and support educational initiatives that clarify how they might use AI. This intersection not only highlights how technological adoption is shaped by longstanding cultural norms but also sets the stage for a exploration of how Chinese postgraduate students navigate the ethical boundaries of AI-*guanxi* in the changing educational landscape.

For example, Student A remarked, "When studying, students have many tasks to complete. But some students will pay to find other people to help them finish their homework or papers because of the heavy study load… as a student, your job is to learn." Whilst Student B felt that AI tools "…can help me read reflection papers analyse them automatically, tell me the main idea of them and help me search useful materials." This student drew parallels to how AI-mediation is now widely used to help people do their jobs, and hence also felt that being a student was a job that should be equally able to use AI, asserting "Some commanding system in military has already combined the AI to aid decision making. And there some aviation software which are designed to automatically control the plane with more accurate manoeuvre than pilots". There seemed, then, amongst students a sense that AI-mediated tools facilitated personal advantage in terms of career, echoing many aspects of *guanxi.* Meanwhile, Student C, a working professional engaged in postgraduate study, identified: "As a teacher in a primary school, I rely on AI tools very much because it has played a great role in collecting and analyzing students' English audio homework. In the past, I have to listen to the same materials for almost a hundred times and figure out whether students have pronunciation problems, but now AI did help a lot because it helped me to assess students' work." The points raised by the students, then, indicate that Chinese postgraduates recognised both the opportunities and ethical challenges of AI-assisted technologies, with many advocating for responsible use and explicit guidance, demonstrating a clear, though varied, understanding of academic usage of AI (RQ1). At the same time, students' acceptance of AI as a tool for personal and professional advantage, often paralleling *guanxi*-based assistance, reveals how cultural norms influence the normalisation of using AI in daily life (RQ2). Indeed, Student D seemed to echo this, noting that "…a positive mentality and correct recognition of using AI tools to facilitate people's life is vital in the long run. Technology is like Satan, and it has two sides. As a global citizen, students needs to be instructed and taught to be responsible for being part of human society and be careful in playing the role among their surroundings…"

However, Student E recognised a cultural view of AI, suggesting restriction of how people used AI put everyone at a disadvantage if the wider sector began using the tools unmonitored, so as normal, in academic study. They remarked that "As a Chinese saying goes, better to loosen a restriction than to tighten it. We educators are responsible for guiding students how to cope with AI tools and equip them with abilities to survive in

the age of AI." Moreover, Student F seemed to agree with E, noting "In my opinion, AI software that adheres to academic integrity and fairness can be applied. For example, software that helps non native speakers detect grammatical and lexical errors, and translation software can be used. However, software that involves infringement and integrity issues or disputes should not be used. This type of software violates basic ethical standards and can lead to poor guidance for students."

These perspectives reinforce that Chinese postgraduates generally recognised the complex nature of AI, advocating for responsible use and the need for explicit instruction to navigate ethical boundaries. This suggests they already had an emerging, culturally informed understanding of academic responsible usage of AI (RQ1). At the same time, students highlight the importance of guidance over restriction, reflecting a pragmatic approach rooted in *guanxi* values, whereby leveraging new technologies is seen as both inevitable and necessary for academic and professional survival. Indeed, their views of how this integrates within Chinese practice, as exemplified above by Student E (RQ2), demonstrates AI adoption is not just determined by digital competency, but by cultural mediation. Student G, however, felt more aligned to traditional and personal modes of connection within learning: "Although artificial intelligence is powerful, it is still just a tool, we need more learning to adapt to it. Because it is still a virtual world and space, we should guide everyone to pay more attention to the development of humanities and mental health problems... do not lack of human communication in the reality..."

Evident across student dialogue was discussion of how the stress of being a student might provoke learners towards seeking AI-*guanxi* mediated advantage. For example, Student H noted uptake of AI to help success was likely because they knew "...personally of a student who has paid for editing help to pass their coursework. Studying is not an easy task, the study load is very heavy and the deadline is very intensive, some students will pay for someone to complete their assignments or papers for them online. I often see that students from foreign or domestic universities are looking for someone to write their assignments for them." There appeared, then, different levels of AI-*guanxi* being proposed by students. Student I indicated "I already rely on artificial intelligence tools and applications for studying in EMI. In the studying process, I sometimes use the translation app to scan the unknown English word and get its meaning. Also, when I am checking my paper, I use a grammar checking website to help me to find my grammar issues. Both the translating and grammar checking apps are Artificial intelligence in helping with study. I would say I still can continue with my work without them but they do make my studying process better and more convenient."

These students, then, show that while Chinese postgraduates value the practical benefits of AI for language support and efficiency, there remains a strong appreciation for traditional, personal connections and real-world human interaction in learning, whether for legitimate reasons, such as mental health, or assistance to cope with study (RQ1). At the same time, students acknowledge that heavy workloads can drive reliance on both AI tools and *guanxi*-mediated academic AI-assistance (RQ2)Several students pointed out inherent contradictions within academia and 'ethical' decision-making practices, suggesting that universities on the made admissions and learning inherently competitive and, thus, drove students to do whatever was necessary to succeed. Likewise, they also marketed new AI courses and learning, capitalising on market popularity, hence profiting from it. To these students, then, they saw little issue with using AI-mediated assistance or AI-*guanxi* and presented this as akin to those practices already being demonstrated by their universities. For example, Student J remarked students take:

...submitting an admission application very seriously because it is a matter of their future academic life. So, even though some people who are good at it choose to use the Internet or artificial intelligence to correct their applications. With the advancement of technology, people will think that they can improve their correctness with the help of some software. Even native speakers need scientific guidance to submit their applications, and they will give it to some professionals to help optimize it. These professionals will also use technology to ensure that their corrections are correct, after all, admission is a very important matter.

Likewise, Student K suggested the responsibility was not just on the student, but the university, and that their neoliberal focus on course expansion around AI needed to come side-by-side with investing in staff training and professional development:

Artificial intelligence, the Internet, and technology are becoming more and more advanced, and people can find not only entertainment resources but also educational resources. It is inevitable that we will use artificial intelligence as a tool to save time and money. Schools are now offering AI majors, and in some liberal arts majors we need expertise to help students use AI properly, rather than using the tool as a cheat. So universities also need professionals to guide students to learn the system, including translation or writing.

Put another way, student perspectives in the study revealed a perceived contradiction in HE. They noted universities foster intense competition to drive their market-based reputations as the 'best' universities and also market AI-driven courses for profit, yet expect students to maintain strict AI-mediated learning standards, often without investing in mechanisms to guide them, whilst also knowing that now all students come from an equal background, nor can necessarily afford legitimate, additional help, such as private tutoring to encourage success. Therefore, many students see little issue with using AI for academic assistance, viewing such practices as pragmatic responses to institutional pressures and the realities of modern academic life (RQ1, RQ2). However, Student L identified that due to digital repression in China, it could not be assumed that students would be able to use globally available, westernised LLMs to benefit their study. They pointed out "...because we have certain restrictions on the Internet, so in China, ghost writers is more convenient." This point, then, was echoed by Student M, who remarked "...actually, paying others to complete coursework is not rare in university... it is also a usual and convenient way for students to pay for some institutions to write admission applications." Because of this, the student felt that for as long as AI tools were available and free to use in basic function "...it will invite more people who do these by themselves to begin to ask for AI's help." This was seen in

Student N situating that "Like the Chinese saying goes, "Shang you zheng ce, Xia you dui ce", which means when there is a policy, people will have the strategy to reflect on the policy." Yet, despite these points, several other students emphasised for responsible AI-education to be embedded within universities to prevent students from adopting AI-mediated *guanxi* practices. For example, Student O stated:

In the digital age, artificial intelligence has been applied to various scenes. In the field of education, artificial intelligence is changing the learning mode. Furthermore, artificial intelligence can lower the threshold for learners to learn knowledge and broaden the channels for acquiring knowledge. However, as learners, we should be aware that artificial intelligence is just a technology, and its role is to assist rather than replace it. Therefore, students need to learn how to use it responsibly in university study.

Hence, these student responses highlight how digital restrictions in China may discourage using AI tools being used in learning, promoting traditional forms of academic outsourcing as more convenient than globally available AI platforms. For example, Student P recognised that "There are many study abroad agencies in China that do (ghostwriting), and students can get admissions applications written by famous teachers for a fee. This also greatly increases the chances of these students being accepted. But I think this also creates a degree of educational inequity. This is because in many countries there are still many poor people who cannot afford to pay for ghostwriting." This was echoed by Student R, who remarked "To be honest, hiring others to write their own university admission application is quite common. But not all students will act like this. And there has been a complete industrial chain, which is called study abroad agencies. Those agencies will take full responsibility to write all the documents once they are paid.". So, some viewed AI-mediated *guanxi* as a natural adaptation to policy and technological constraints, yet others felt there needed to be a strong call for universities to embed responsible AI education, ensuring students understand that AI should support, not substitute, genuine learning (RQ1, RQ2). Student Q pragmatically suggested that "I think it is important for students to learn how to use AI within an acceptable range in their university studies. Artificial intelligence can assist students in many ways. For example, AI can provide analysis of difficult theories to help students understand them, or provide rich perspectives on a topic to help inspire students. At the same time, universities need to set up inspectorates to monitor student cheating and propose a set of corresponding penalty mechanisms...".

Students viewed AI as likely to become integrated into the classroom pedagogical practices anyway, and hence they viewed their use of it, whether acceptable or otherwise, as part of an inevitable shift. For example, Student R remarked that "In the future, AI will definitely change the way students learn in universities. Artificial intelligence may play an important role in the process of teaching and learning. For instance, each student will be assigned an AI assistant, which can make unique learning plan. Also, teaching plans and contents will be entered into AI assistant system, no matter when students have problems, AI assistant will give the advice..." Meanwhile, Student S recognised that "By using AI-powered tools such as

learning analytics, universities can track student progress and identify areas where students are struggling. This information can be used to provide personalized feedback and support, which can greatly enhance student learning outcomes." Student T also identified that "The power of (AI) tool in promoting personalized learning and student self-regulation. Personalized instruction means optimizing learning progressions and teaching methods based on the needs of each learner. Learning objectives, teaching methods, and content can all vary according to the needs of the learner. Relying on this tool helps us to help students personalize their learning." However, Student U recognised that this might have both advantages and disadvantages:

Yes, in fact, I think people's study and life will be affected by artificial intelligence, which seems to be an unchangeable thing. As long as you live in this era of big data, your words and deeds are regulated, and sometimes even your own choices may be controlled. For students, On the one hand, we should thank artificial intelligence for providing richer learning resources and the learning efficiency is improved. Different from the traditional learning methods, we have significantly improved the timeliness of acquiring knowledge. On the other hand, it seems that our own thinking discrimination ability may also decline unconsciously, and sometimes the data may know ourselves better than we do.

Consequently, there was debate amongst students as to whether the advantages of AI-assistance outweighed the disadvantages. Student V remarked that they would suggest that using AI to help write essays and paragraphs was "...different from paying someone to write their homework or take online tests for students, because it is not considered cheating and the student's personal documents are authentic. Paying is paying for information gap." Likewise, Student W felt that "...artificial intelligence is a tool. It makes our lives more convenient, such as using artificial intelligence to make automatic payments. It helps us to be more efficient and so on. Should students learn how to make better use of AI in college, instead of relying on it in life." Hence, it was felt that, in so far as the view of Student X, "...integration of artificial intelligence and education will greatly optimize the leading role of teachers and provide big data endorsement and robust science for the physical teachers. The blessing of real teachers also provides more "human flavor" for the relatively rigid AI, making users (parents and students) look more comfortable and acceptable. In my opinion, students are the main body of learning." Student discussions, therefore, revealed ongoing debate about whether the benefits of AI assistance in learning outweigh the drawbacks.

Some students distinguished between using AI for support and seeing that as acceptable, such as generating ideas or improving efficiency, and others felt that this differed from being unethical because it helped bridge information gaps and complements traditional learning. Put another way, AI simply made their words better, and was prompted based on their ideas. The students in particular highlighted especially the role of being guided by educators, and suggested their presence was needed in shaping the parameters of students AI usage. For example, as Student Y remarked "...at the undergraduate level, although no students use AI to cheat, I know some students who pay others to write essays or take online tests. From this, we can see

that the Internet not only makes learning more convenient but also provides students with another way to cheat. But there is no way to completely resist the development of AI." Therefore, for Student Z, they felt it was a tricky line to walk for students because "...on the one hand, AI can help learners to learn knowledge and search for information easier and faster. On the other hand, AI can be a tool for a few students to cheat. Thus, how to supervise and instruct students to use AI correctly is the big question for schools should consider firstly."

This echoed Student AA, who felt that, in "...the current digital age, the presence of AI as a tool in schools is only going to become more common. As teachers, we should be guiding students on how to regulate the use of such tools to aid their own learning, rather than prohibiting them from doing so." Student BB, however, felt that ultimately the discussion of AI and its mediated potential is "...related to the trend of modern teaching towards results, with students only focusing on the last academic research paper at the end of their studies. This has virtually promoted the supervision of plagiarism, but in fact, it is an issue that cannot be completely resolved." Subsequently, across the responses a sense that the results-driven culture of modern education intensifies the need for AI, making issues related to it persistent; the system was 'set up' to benefit those who could use tools and technologies best to satisfy an inherently credential and essay-based system of learning. This implies the discussion is not one of AI misuse, but rather whether AI has cast light on fundamental issues in the way we design, accredit and award learning. So, by using AI-*guanxi* and engaging with AI-mediated help, students saw themselves as becoming artificially intelligent.

Chinese postgraduate students are shown, then, to understand and negotiate the responsible use of AI (RQ1) and how these technologies interact with covert assistance practices and *guanxi*-driven academic behaviours (RQ2). With respect to understanding their views of responsible AI usage and RQ1, a central theme emerging from the data is students' recognition of both the opportunities and ethical challenges presented by AI. Many students see AI as an inevitable thing they needed to use to succeed, hence increasingly integral. Indeed, they indicated that if it wasn't used, this would put them at a disadvantage. For instance, Student R predicted that AI would fundamentally change university learning, with personalised assistants supporting students' individual learning; those without the ability, or permission, to use such tools would struggle in an inherently competitive landscape. Similarly, Student S and Student T highlighted how AI-powered analytics in instruction could enhance learning outcomes and self-regulation, suggesting a pragmatic embrace of AI's potential to improve educational efficiency and asynchronous learning effectiveness.

However, students also expressed concerns about the possible downsides of pervasive AI use. Student U, for example, cautioned that while AI improves access to knowledge and learning efficiency, it may also erode critical thinking and personal autonomy, as students become increasingly addicted to what, in the view of the student, was ultimately algorithmic guidance that lacked the depth of a human educator. Student G echoed this, emphasising the enduring value of human

connection in educational experiences, suggesting that the tools could be better used in supporting mental health, rather than in the classroom. Interestingly no comments were raised about if not using it would be detriment to their future graduate careers. Instead, students appreciated AI's practical benefits but were mindful of the need for balance, advocating for guidance and support to ensure that AI remains a tool for learning rather than a substitute for genuine engagement. This is further underscored by the strong consensus (80% agreement in survey responses) that universities should provide explicit instruction on the ethical and responsible use of AI, rather than simply restricting access.

Students such as Student AA and Student W, for example, argued that the role of educators should be to help students regulate their use of AI, equipping them with the skills to use these tools effectively and hence universities needed to do a lot more, if they wanted to prevent AI being used for covert advantage and as a form of AI-mediated *guanxi* (RQ2). Concerning this, the relationship between AI and *guanxi* was felt as a complex and culturally embedded issue. Many students drew parallels between AI-mediated assistance and traditional forms of academic outsourcing, which are often facilitated through *guanxi*. This reinforced that social networks and reciprocal relationships that play a significant role in Chinese society and educational advantage, and AI would become a digital component of that. For example, Student H and Student M described how paying for editing or even full assignment completion is a common practice, especially given the pressures of workloads and deadlines. Student L meanwhile noted that digital restrictions in China sometimes make traditional outsourcing (such as hiring ghostwriters) more accessible than global AI platforms, reinforcing the continued relevance of traditional *guanxi*-based solutions.

At the same time, students recognised that the increasing availability and sophistication of AI tools likely meant they needed to form a relationship with AI-mediated tools to 'survive'. Student N for example referenced the Chinese saying "Shang you zheng ce, Xia you dui ce" reflecting a cultural pragmatism in adapting to new policies and technologies to gain personal advantage. Students acknowledged that as long as AI tools remain accessible, more students may turn to them for academic support, blurring the lines and re-negotiating in the moment between legitimate assistance and unfair assistance. Hence, Student J and Student K suggested that the responsibility for promoting academic integrity should be shared between students and institutions. This implies that responsible AI use and the management of academic life around it requires not only individual student ethical awareness but also institutional commitment to education, support, and culturally sensitive policy development.

4.1. Study Limitations
There are several limitations inherent to the study. First, the largely interpretive nature and potential for researcher bias. So, a qualitative, interpretive design that relies on thematic analysis inherently involves the researcher's perspective in data interpretation. While reflexivity and transparency were maintained throughout, the potential for researcher bias

and subjectivity possibly shaped both the coding process and the framing of conclusions. Second, the relatively small and homogenous sample, which was primarily female, aged 22–25, and all Chinese nationals, undoubtedly limits the generalisability of the findings. The experiences and attitudes captured may not reflect those of students from different cultural, educational, or demographic backgrounds, nor those in other types of HE institutions, either within China or internationally. The focus on a single Sino-British university also further narrows the context, potentially excluding institutional or regional variations in AI adoption and *guanxi* practices. Meanwhile, data was collected through self-reported, classroom-based activities, which may be influenced by social desirability bias. Participants might have responded in ways they believed would be viewed favourably by peers or the researcher, who was also their teacher.

The study is also set during a period of rapid technological change. Attitudes toward AI and its integration into academic practices are shifting quickly as new tools emerge and institutional policies evolve, which mean that the findings are case specific and therefore may not capture longer-term trends or adaptations. As the research involved Chinese students at an English-medium institution, there may have been nuances or things lost in translation or in the participants' expression of their views in a second language that were not captured. This also could have affected the depth and accuracy of the data collected. While the study explores the intersection of AI and *guanxi*, it does not systematically examine other potentially relevant cultural, social, or economic factors that might influence AI adoption and academic behaviours. Nor does it address faculty perspectives, which could provide a more holistic understanding of institutional dynamics and would have served to offset limitations in data triangulation. Put another way, reliance on a single data source (student self-reporting ideas in a classroom) means the findings are not triangulated with other forms of evidence, which could strengthen the robustness and credibility of the conclusions. Student views are likewise influenced by specific ethical and policy frameworks of their university, which may differ from those in other contexts. This may affect the transferability of recommendations to other institutions or countries, or may lead to students under or overreporting what they perceive as sector-wide issues that are, in fact, institutionally specific.

4.2. Closing Remarks

Ongoing professional development for educators is, then, crucial, equipping them to guide students responsibly in their use of AI. Assessment methods are shown, in the discussion, to be especially vulnerable to AI misuse, in the view of students, and so should be adapted to move away from repetitive, year-on-year tasks and instead emphasise dynamic, student-specific learning experiences. Meanwhile, digital inequalities prevail in the context of AI, thus ensuring equitable access to AI resources for all students is vital for universities. Finally, policies and support systems must be regularly reviewed and updated to keep pace with technological advancements and evolving student behaviors, which suggests a need for student partnership regarding AI policy. Through following

these recommendations, universities and policy makers can help students harness AI. By embedding responsible AI education, the study findings have shown, alongside clear ethical standards within the curriculum, universities and policy makers can ensure that AI becomes a tool used foremost for equitable opportunity.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Chinese postgraduates at a Sino-British university are navigating a rapidly evolving academic landscape shaped by the integration of AI technologies and longstanding cultural practices such as *guanxi*. Students largely view AI as an inevitable and beneficial addition to their studies. However, they also express concerns about the potential for over-reliance, diminished critical thinking, and increased impact of academic misconduct. Hence, reflecting *guanxi*, AI-mediated help enabled access to information, academic opportunities, and personal advantage in ways that mirror the mutual obligations and resource-sharing central to traditional *guanxi*. Importantly, repeated across the sample, there is strong agreement that universities must move beyond simple prohibition and instead provide clear guidance, practical support, and explicit instruction on ethical AI use to students in the classroom. Universities and policy makers, therefore, must ensure that students and staff are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and ethical frameworks necessary to navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by AI. To effectively support students through AI-mediated assistance, institutions, therefore, should establish clear guidelines that define acceptable uses of AI in academic work, ensuring these standards are transparently communicated. Integrating AI and digital literacy into the curriculum is also essential, so students receive instruction on the ethical and effective use of AI tools as part of their learning processes. Too much focus, it seems, is placed on discussing AI in terms of academic integrity, when students are shown, in the study above, to already be able to foster self-aware open discussions about the ethical use of technology. Rather, better consideration would be directed, with sensitivity, to how AI relates to cultural factors such as *guanxi* or other culturally mediated influences on AI usage (Hong *et al.*, 2023).

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