The Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast
Séagh Kehoe
Transcribed by www.premiertyping.com, alison.mcpherson@premiertyping.com

Interviewer – Italics

Interviewee – Normal

[?/word] – denotes audio inaudible/unclear

Thank you for tuning in to the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast, brought to you by a student-staff partnership at the University of Westminster. This is a platform for students and educators to exchange knowledge and encourage discussion about the current challenges facing higher education. I'm your host, Kyra, and, for this episode, I'll be in conversation with Dr Seagh Kehoe, a lecturer in Chinese Studies in the School of Humanities at Westminster. In this interview, we discuss Seagh's academic journey and the focus of their PhD. We also unpack Chinese media representations and the impact they have on both people and politics, and, towards the end, Seagh shares some of their ideas and methods for decolonising the Humanities classroom.

Hi Seagh, thank you so much for joining me on this episode of the podcast. It's so nice to finally meet you. How are you doing?

Yeah, pretty good – [tired today], Week 11, so pretty good.

So, I thought we could begin with talking just a bit more about yourself. So, first things first, where are you from?

I'm from Ireland, from the very South-East corner, in County Wexford – that's where I was born and brought up.

Amazing. And looking back to you as a child, would you say your perception of race has changed drastically?

Yeah [laughing]! Yeah, yeah, definitely, definitely. I think…I guess, growing up in that part of Ireland during the late-1980s and the 1990s, it was very homogenous in so many ways, and unwelcoming as well – not like naturally homogenous but it was an unwelcoming place if you weren't, for example, if you weren't white, if you weren't, I suspect, a native speaker of English, and I think if you weren't Catholic as well, you know, during that time, in small kind of rural Ireland. So, it was…yeah, it was quite limited, quite limited to even see, em, walking around the village, who you'd go to school with. I mean, the most, you know… I remember a kid who was Protestant coming to my primary school, which, you know, I had six people in my class I think, so quite a small group, and, you know, that felt like a radical like [laughing]…that felt like something radical. So, you know, I think that…that probably, yeah, gives you a sense of how…what I kind of…yeah, very kind of…I guess like a kind of tightly controlled space in terms of like who could be there and who was welcome, yeah.

Yeah. So, you say how the time you grew up was quite homogenous. Do you still feel like you had access to like good representations of people that…not necessarily look like you, I suppose you did, but maybe people that you could relate to and kind of like identify with?

Yeah, in some ways. I think it was…it's a really interesting one. I think Ireland sits at a really strange place when it comes to media representation. You know, most of the media content I would have seen when I was a kid was from the US, or from the UK, so like cartoons, for example – they weren't produced in Ireland. We didn't hear our…I didn't hear my accent on TV or in films, and if Ireland was mentioned, it was really problematic, like it was…you know, the way Ireland and Irish people were

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represented, and continue to be in lots of ways, was really like kind of, you know, stereotyped and essentialist, and like the accent was always kind of something that was mocked and ridiculed and seen as like foolish, kind of stupid and backward and so on. So, there was really a sense of like, you know, when Ireland was represented in US and UK media, it was always like the butt of the jokes, so… And, yeah, I think that's changed a lot now. I think, you know, Irish animation seems to be really having a moment, at the moment, and that's, yeah, that's really nice. I don't really know much about what's happening in it, other than it's a thing, but I think, yeah, Ireland's still got a really long way to go with media representation of people of colour, for example. I don't think that's still particularly examined in any great depth, in soap operas, for example, or film, so it's…yeah, there's a lot of work to happen.

So what kind of sparked your interest in Chinese Studies – was that through like media or…? I'm really intrigued to know!

Yeah, it was a strange one. So, when I was growing up, you know, and I guess it speaks to that particular background as well that was kind of like inward-looking and homogenous in lots of different ways, so China didn't feature in any part of my upbringing really. I can't remember China being mentioned in any like great depth either in like primary school or in secondary school. So, it was [sighing]…kind of like accidental I guess, in lots of ways. In my first degree, I was studying Maths and Sociology, a very strange combination – that kind of blew up in my face when I got to second year and I thought this doesn't work, I don't like it, and so it was at that point that I kind of started to think, okay, what else could I do, and I had done this kind of like teaching English as a foreign language course, and the first interesting looking job that came up happened to be in China and I thought, okay, I'll go to China. Like there was really…you know, I was like 19 and I was…yeah, really naïve about the world, but, you know, I just happened to be a native speaker, just happened to be a native speaker, and that was attractive enough to hire a 19-year-old to teach English. So, that's kind of where it started.

I went to China, didn't know much, but, very quickly, I had to, you know, just start learning the learning the language and start learning a little bit about how to be in the classroom and, you know, how the classroom works, I guess, in a very different context. And I ended up staying for…for about five years, and moved around a little bit here and there. I think…I mean, the main kind of point of why I left when I did was because visa…visa requirements were starting to tighten up quite a lot, so it became really important actually that you had a first degree. So, I had this idea that like, oh, I'll just nip back to Ireland and finish that degree, and, oh, lo and behold, my university was then offering Chinese Studies, and I thought, well, that'll be easy – I already speak quite a bit of Mandarin and I'm sure I can like breeze through. So, I kind of started like that, but actually, when I got back to Ireland and I started doing Chinese Studies as my degree, I was really, you know, it was a very different kind of engagement with China then, the kind of day-to-day interactions and learning that I had done when I was there. So, things like History and Politics and Economics and Literature, Drama, Film, Theatre, like such an amazing degree programme, and I loved it, I really, really liked it, and I wanted to keep going with it, and so that's kind of what happened – I just got carried away [laughing]!

No, that's amazing! And on the topic of your academic kind of background, so, obviously, you did a degree in Chinese Studies. Could you give us a breakdown of kind of like the rest of your academic background, so from your undergrad to now?

Yeah. So, the undergrad, yeah, Chinese Studies… I think a really…a really important part of this whole story actually is like, you know, where fees, tuition fees, fit into the story. So, at that time in Ireland, tuition fees were really, really low so I could do that, you know, I could go back, I could jump in and not worry. It was still tight enough, in ways – covering rent was an important thing, and like, you know, food and all of that stuff, but I was relatively lucky that tuition fees were very, very low at that time, like only a couple of hundred…a few hundred Euros.

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So, when I was looking to Master's programmes, Chinese Studies in Ireland is quite a young area, so there's not really a lot of Master's programmes – it might be different now. But I was kind of starting to look abroad, and I looked at the UK and I was terrified by the tuition fees – I mean, they're frightful and just getting worse and worse – and I ended up going to the Netherlands because…mainly because it was…it's a good programme, but also because it was affordable. So, that was a really kind of big part of my decision to go study in the Netherlands for a year. And, again, it was a really good programme, really, yeah, really kind of pushed me to think about China, and how knowledge about China is produced in very, very different ways, so that was a really great education.

And after that, I went to Nottingham in the UK to do my PhD, and, again, it was like very…again, it was a good programme, but it was also very motivated by the funding, like I was just lucky to get funding for the programme and so that's, you know, that's what took me to Nottingham. And I guess, you know, beyond Cork and Leiden and Nottingham, yeah, I've been really fortunate to study at like Chinese universities as well – I got to do a year abroad during my BA. So, I returned from China, and then did a year when they sent me back to China again, so hopping around a lot, but that was a great experience. I got to study in the Far West, in the [Sichuan] Province, and during my – I'd also studied in various different capacities in China. I studied at universities in China, like different language courses, and also studied with like kind of an underground church collective as well – they just happened to have a really good collection of Chinese language teachers [laughing] so that was really interesting too. And I also got to go to…I was lucky to get funding to go to Nepal and study Tibetan as well during my PhD. So, yeah, it's…yeah, really privileged – I've managed to study in lots of different places and move around quite a bit and get experiences of, yeah, how higher education works in lots of different countries.

Yeah. No, that's really interesting. You're definitely well-travelled!

[Laughter]

So, what made you choose "Online Politics: A Representation Surrounding Tibetan Modernity" as the focus of your PhD? Could you talk us a little bit through that?

Yeah. It's em…yeah, it's a really good question…to kind of think about how it was… I mean, when I lived in China, I didn't live in any Tibetan areas. I had travelled to Tibet a few times, but like that was it – and I'd travelled to lots of places, so, you know, the idea of Tibet sticking, it's not clear why that would happen. But what really…I think…I think one of the kind of turning points for me was that, when I went back to Ireland and I told people I'd just lived in China for five years, like one of the first things that people often said, or one of the first questions they had, or one of the first ways they reacted, was like…it was kind of like, "Oh, what do you think of Tibet?" And I was really struck by that, and I think maybe, you know, there's something…I think there's something kind of generational about that. Like, during the 1990s, Tibet was really prominent in popular media, like there was 'Seven Years in Tibet', Brad Pitt was in that, and there was also 'Kundun', Martin Scorsese film, so Tibet was really big in the popular imagination during the 1990s, and it's really kind of fallen out of it now. So, for people I guess who…who I would have met after I returned to Ireland after staying in China, they were kind of of the same generation – like Tibet had been on their mind and they knew that there was something… something's happening…between Tibet and China, something's….yeah, there's like human rights abuses, I think was like the first thing on people's minds. So, that came up really, really quickly in all conversations, and I found myself kind of being confronted with…like an idea about Tibet by many people in Ireland of like it's kind of this like…oh, I don't know, like Tibetans are so like, you know, non-materialistic and kind of super-enlightened, and really detached actually from like the world as it exists, kind of outside of modernity. That really struck me as like, well, that's…that's problematic, like Tibetans are…have the same concerns as most people in the world [laughing], but it didn't…it didn't quite seem to connect. And so, there was that, and I had really – you know, I knew what the Chinese State media representation looked like, as like Tibetans are very, very happy being part of China and, you know, want to sing and dance all the time, and it was a wonderful place to be, and it felt like, wow, this kind of…yeah, these kind of politics of representation, they both seem really problematic and

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really kind of, I don't know, binary in lots of ways, and I thought it would be interesting to think a little bit more about where those representations come from. Why does Tibet…why is it represented in those ways, and where do Tibetans fit in in that – what do Tibetans have to say about how it's represented? So, I think it all kind of…it started from a point like that.

And I guess it was also, you know, somewhere in all of that as well, to kind of link back to the point about how Irish people, I'd noticed how Irish people were represented in the media, there was something that kind of related to that too. There was like a sensitivity maybe to particular kinds of representations of particular groups, and who those representations served. They often feel like kind of a plaything for more powerful groups to kind of throw around and… So, I was kind of…yeah, I think there was something about that too, that kind of thinking from,…for a long time, about how certain groups [audio cuts]…

Yeah, no, thank you, and it's nice to hear how…you know, it's funny that you said at the beginning like you don't know how it kind of fell into your lap, but you can see now how it's kind of like really been, how it is close to you, and how, you know, it's come out of like those sensitivities that you also identify with.

Yeah.

So, yeah, thank you. Going back to kind of like Chinese Studies I guess more generally, we've spoken about your interest, as well as some of the research you've done surrounding, obviously, Tibet, but I thought it might be nice to have a discussion about kind of Chinese media representations and then perhaps get into some of the ideas and concepts that get addressed on the Contemporary China Centre blog that you are an editor for.

Yes.

So, first things first, what characteristics of Chinese media do you feel like make it a kind of colonial force or tool?

Yeah. Yeah, it's a really…it's a really good question. I think…and I think, you know, first of all, thank you for using the word "colonial" in your question because I feel like, in Chinese Studies sometimes, there's a lot of discomfort, like it's often…you often see Tibet talked about as "incorporated" into China, and it's like, wow, that's [laughing]…that obscures a lot when you say "incorporated". So, "colonial force" I think is…is really important language.

I think…so it's quite…I think, you know, a good thing about Chinese Studies is that there's a lot of attention to the way that Chinese media represents kind of so-called ethnic minorities in China – it's kind of a problematic term, but kind of the basic idea is that, in China, about 90% of the population are Han Chinese, and that kind of further 10% are the ethnic minorities – and 55 ethnic minority groups. And the ethnic minority, em, you know the title of that can be really problematic because it also feels like that obscures how people came to be part of China. They're not – you know, "colonial", for example, seems to go out the window with that. So, there's a lot of work in Chinese Studies about how ethnic minorities, for want of a better term [laughing], how they are represented, and it kind of tends to go like this: you know, Han Chinese are represented as, you know, the kind of the modern people, and the non-Han or the ethnic minority population then are represented as backward, as kind of of primitive, as like forever catching up but not quite getting there, and always in need of help to modernise. And, again, that "modernity" is very much defined along Han Chinese lines as well, so it's not like non-Han Chinese get to determine what their own modernity might look like.

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But there's a lot of othering, there's a lot of essentialising, kind of exoticising as well, and even infantilising of ethnic minority peoples across China. And so, what that looks like in practice is a really kind of strange focus - perhaps not so strange – like a really heavy emphasis on dancing and singing, those kind of like childlike qualities, and like really close to nature and really happy, and kind of a simplistic, childlike state.

The other part of the problem is that there's also a lot of censorship. So, things like the not so happy aspects of life are not seen, and that's a big problem – like the kind of grievances of Tibetans, for example, or Uighurs. It's very, very difficult for Tibetans themselves, or for Uighers themselves, or for any other ethnic minority group to talk about what's not okay, and, em, historically, what's not okay, the different kinds of discrimination and prejudice that they encounter. That gets wiped very, very quickly off the internet, and, if it doesn't, I feel like the kind of, you know, people…maybe, you know, often Han Chinese people who read those accounts will kind of belittle and dismiss it in some way, like kind of silence it and say, oh, you know, like, you know, "You're making a big deal out of this" or… And like one I see quite a lot is the "Oh, there's good people and bad people everywhere – like let's just get along," and it's like, well, that's…that doesn't help open up the conversation of what these grievances are about and what the source of conflict is here and how to address it – it just shuts it down.

So, I think for…for ethnic minorities who want to challenge some of those State media discourses, it's really, really difficult, and so what you're left with, as a result of this kind of censorship and this silencing, is this really one-dimensional and like really singular narrative, without any kind of space for critique. And so, it's…yeah, there's not really any space actually to kind of open it up and think about, well, why do ethnic relations in China look the way the do? That kind of critical space is really difficult to carve out.

My next question was going to be, actually, why do you think some of these representations are accepted by the Chinese public, but then I guess it has a lot to do with the censorship and the fact that any resistance is kind of like wiped off the face of the earth. So where do you see…? Like if I was looking to do research on some of these topics, and I was going research on like the resistance against these kind of representations, where would I find that?

Yeah. It's...em…it's a good question, and I think it's…it's kind of, you know, it's kind of one of the big questions that I was looking at in my PhD, was like, okay, this is what the State media discourse is, obviously very, very difficult to push back against that, and yet, you know, people can find ways to do it. I think a lot has changed since I started my PhD. I think it has become more and more difficult to voice, em, like I guess counter-stories are what I talk about, kind of like, you know, if the State says this, Tibetans might say, well, actually, like this is another way of looking at it. So, it might not necessarily directly critique State media, but it offers like a different story and an alternative account. And so, I think there's lots of those, like Tibetan literature, Tibetan film… That's quite popular in China as well, and I guess it all comes down to how it's interpreted and what kind of frames of analysis there are for doing that, but I think film and literature are a really important way to do that. And of course, there's kind of a…there's a particular kind of privilege I guess that comes with…the people who could do that work, right, people who'll have their work published or can make the film, like have, you know, the enormous kind of budget and like access to education and so on to do all of that work. [***Note: audio cuts out several times through next sentences, so it's my "guess" at what was said in parts.]***   But yeah, I think it…it does happen. I think it's getting harder and harder. It's still a really vibrant place, where those counter stories were happening.

And, you know, I think there have been some really kind of positive examples too of allyship, of like kind of Han Chinese allyship, but…like I've seen a little bit of on…on like social media platforms, like WeChat and WeiboChat – those were the big ones when I was doing my PhD. And it's really tricky… it's really tricky for Han Chinese to do that work too because…it can put them in danger too, so it's a

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really tricky spot. It's not…you know, I guess it's easy to kind of paint the kind of "good guy/bad guy" situation, but it can be really, really difficult to…firstly, to have that conversation, especially when media and education all your life has like told you that this is how…this is like the natural state of affairs, like Han are just modern, and ethnic minorities are otherwise. So, allyship does happen, I guess, but, yeah, the space for that and the space for those counter stories are…

Thank you. And what are some of the implications of these kind of media representations on the political system, or kind of what…how do they function within the political system maybe?

Yeah. They're so important. I think…it's funny sometimes, like for…em…yeah, like…what you come up against, I guess, when you talk about media representations or like social media discourse. There's almost a sense of "Oh, it's just social media discourse", "It's just something that's happening online", and it's like, wow, like […] but it's really important, especially if it's what you're confronted with every day, that that's like how people are talking about you. It's…it really matters, that kind of representation really, really matters and it's important to pay attention to. And it serves a purpose. There's a reason why the Chinese State bangs on relentlessly about how happy Tibetans are. It's not just for…I don't know, it's not just because they're bored and they're looking for media content, like it serves a very important political purpose, and I think it really helps to sustain and legitimise Chinese rule in Tibet. It sustains Han domination in Tibet, makes it looks kind of inevitable, makes it look natural and normal that, you know, that Chinese economics and politics and media are all Han-centric, like that's just the way of the world. So, I feel like, all of these media representations, they just kind of…you know, the reproduce that particular ideology that like Han are modern, Han are rightfully in places of power in China, and ethnic minorities are there to be educated about how to modernise – like it kind of sustains that system and it makes people think, well, why would it be any other way, of course it's going to be like that, this is the rightful way. So, I feel like it's really, really important.

And of course, it also, again, it kind of shuts down that space for questioning. It shuts down the space for thinking of and reckoning with China as a colonial state, and it also shuts down the possibilities for re-imagining what…what China might be, and what maybe, you know, an independent Tibet might look like, for example, or how could – yeah, all of these kind of questions about alternative… alternative worlds [get put down] and it makes them seen…it kind of dismisses them as relevant questions or even important questions to bother asking in the first place.

So, just linking back to the Contemporary China Centre blog, how did that kind of like come into being? Was it created to kind of be like a response to some of the tensions and things that go on in China that, you know, that may not necessarily be discussed by like a lot of Western…like a Western audience, or may not be seen by a Western audience? What was kind of the inspiration behind that?

Yeah…oh, it's a really good question! I think….yeah, the blog…I think, [to be honest], since my PhD, I've been doing a lot of…I had my like personal blog, and I also ran like a queer feminist blog as well, so like queer feminist activism in China, and I really loved kind of the way that you could get people to write short pieces, like 800 words or 1,000 words, about their research, so something that they might have published as a journal article but might not be so accessible for lots of people, maybe just too long, and kind of jargony in some cases as well, so, instead, you kind of like boil it down to what… what could be…you know, something that's more accessible to everyone. It might be an informed reader, but not necessarily who knows…who's studied like Chinese history and politics and so on – you don't have to have a degree in it to read the blog. So, I loved that idea and I felt like it was really…I felt like it was a really effective way to kind of…communicate, to talk about, to share, and to kind of enter into dialogue with people about China in lots of different ways, and so, when I came to Westminster, I was kind of hoping to start something like that up as well. Yeah, and then kind of…I guess it kind of…took off from there.

We have like this collection of posters as well at the University, Chinese propaganda posters from the 1940s to the 1980s, and so we were also trying to think of a way to really like publicise that and let

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people know that, hey, we've got like a really impressive collection of Chinese propaganda posters and like a really interesting history of Chinese Studies at the University too.

So, the blog was aimed at kind of doing all of that: on the one hand, like talking about…yeah, talking about China in a way that was…that really spoke to the kind of Chinese Studies that we do at the University of Westminster, which is really like Cultural Studies based, and so it was a way of kind of highlighting that work that's taking place in Chinese Studies, and also kind of boosting our posters, getting people around the world to write about you use these posters in the classroom, for example, or what like…you know, kind of thinking of, you know, politics of representation within our posters as well and what we can learn from different historical eras based on the posters. So, it all kind of came together in that way. Yeah, it's all about that kind of informed and accessible commentary about the Chinese, and also kind of trying to broaden it out as well so it's not just China but also kind of sinophones, so thinking about Hong Kong and Taiwan and other Chinese or sinophone speakers, cultural practices and so on, around the world.

Amazing – thank you , Seagh. It's really great to hear that like a platform like this like exists at the University, and obviously, like you said, it's completely open access, so you don't need to be just from Westminster to read these mini-articles and kind of like opinion pieces, yeah, on really like interesting and thought-provoking topics. So, thank you. I definitely recommend everyone give that blog a read. I'll have the links in the description.

For the last segment of this episode, I thought we might touch on what it means to decolonise Chinese Studies curricula or even kind of the Humanities as a whole. What forms of coloniality have you noticed in kind of Chinese Studies specifically – like what areas really stand out to you?

Yeah, it's a question I've been thinking about…I've been thinking about a lot, but I feel like it's really in process. I guess one example that I've mentioned so far is like the way that Tibet gets talked about as like "incorporated into" rather than like, you know, colonised. I think there's a…yeah, there's a strange, perhaps not so strange, tendency to think of colonialism and empire as Western practices and like they get defined along Western lines. So, you hear sometimes that people will say, "Well, China couldn't colonise" or "China couldn't be an empire" and it feels like it misses out such an important way of thinking about why the Chinese State works the way it is or what kind of practices it exercises when it comes to Tibet, for example, or to the Uighur region, [to] different parts, and [Eastern/using] kind of like neo-colonial practices as well. So, I think, yeah, there's a reluctance sometimes to engage with that. But I think things are moving that way. I know there's really great conversations happening, increasing, in Chinese Studies.

There's also – like I kind of think China…China is like…like most post-colonial states, it's a kind of post-colonial colonial state. Like there often seems to be an interplay in many post-colonial states with colonising and being colonised, and so there's something like that as well. I feel like there's…there's something to grapple with in how we think about China's relationship with…with Tibet, for example, but also different parts of the world, that we really need to kind of think about the post-colonial and the colonial state together.

So, I think that's…yeah, that's something where there's a reluctance, I think, in some ways, and, in other ways, it's really productive. There's also like a broader question of how China is represented. Like China often gets talked about as like "the China threat", like China's rise is a danger to the rest of the world, and it's kind of like thrown out there as a given, and it's so loaded! It's so loaded. Like, historically, China's been talked about as like "the Red Scare" and like "the Yellow Peril", like these discourses about China are…and "the China threat" – it's not…it's new. It's kind of the latest iteration, and it's like historically informed by all of these other Orientalist ways that China's been talked about, as something kind of unknowable and [misty] and dangerous and so on. So, I feel like that's…it's really important to be kind of honest about where this "China threat" language is coming from because that is kind of a…kind of coloniality as well in the West when it comes to talking about China.

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There's one other…one other example I was thinking about, and something I've been working on with two colleagues in Chinese Studies at Westminster, and it's about language teaching. We've been really like digging deep into our language, Chinese language, textbooks. And textbooks are such like…ah! I mean, they're always really problematic, like whether it's French, Spanish or Japanese – like they promote really kind of strange [laughing]…strange kind of depictions of how the world works, and who's who, and who likes what. So, we've been doing that with our Chinese language textbooks, and we've just written a chapter for a book that's coming out, I think next year, on language pedagogies, language teaching, language learning pedagogies. So, we've been looking at the Chinese language textbooks that we learn…that we use at Westminster, and, you know, the way ethnic minorities in China are represented, for example, it's actually a lot of the same stuff that I'm talking about, like they're always singing and dancing, they never live in cities, they're always kind of, you know, really close to nature and like pure and… It's in the language textbook, and that's really scary because…I think, when people are studying language textbooks, they're focusing on the language, they're focusing on the grammar, they're focusing on the vocab – they're not thinking about the ideology that's like flowing through the textbook. So, it's like really obvious, and, at the same time, it's not, so it's…it's good to make it really like visible and to like tear it apart and think about why it works. And even like the way China is represented – China is like this, and the West is like this – it's all really like fixed and quite oppressive discourses. All of it fuels division and kind of the binary thinking, rather than thinking about connections and like transnational histories, colonial legacies, shifting power dynamics. It all feels so static and fixed in time. So, I think that's…yeah, it's another kind of coloniality that gets reproduced in the curricula as well.

Yeah. Thank you. And I guess this is more of a general question, but do you think it's possible to kind of decolonise our curricula when the systems in wider society continue to kind of reinforce like colonial and racist ideologies and practices?

Yeah, it's a really good question. I think no [laughing]. I think it's a really firm no from me. It's…it's funny, you know…I think when some of our students, for example, come through the door, and I think Westminster is not unique in this at all, like people already have a lot of ideas about China, more than they…more than they are aware of, and I think…and I think I've…you know, that's something that I'm still kind of working through myself – like, you know, I can feel like ideas about China coming up […] that's coming from, and it's all of that kind of, you know, it's that kind of insidious racism of society that you're not even aware of until like, you know, you kind of…I don't know, this thought just comes to mind, like, "Wow, that's really toxic stuff – where did that come from?" It's so pervasive, I think. It's so, so pervasive, and, you know, you just have to think about like, you know, Covid-19, like in March last year, and the way China was represented. It didn't come out of nowhere, you know, it was there, it was just…it was sitting there and a lot of people were already experiencing it in really violent ways, but Covid-19 just like elevated that to another level. So, that was in the media, in really…it just seemed to be everywhere. It really seemed to be everywhere. So, if that's the kind of broader social… kind of political, historical context as well, I think it's really, yeah, it's really tricky to kind of think of the classroom as isolated from all of that or as existing in a vacuum from all of that because it's…it's all connected. It's all really, really connected, so it's…yeah, I think decolonising the curricula, it needs to connect with decolonising projects outside the university as well – we can't just decolonise from the classroom outwards. I think we can do a lot of great things in the classroom, but we've got to be kind of connecting with what's going on outside too.

Well, speaking of the great things that we can do in the classroom, what do you feel like lecturers can do to kind of decolonise their pedagogy and practice? Do you have any specific methods of your own that you can share?

I kind of think, like first and foremost, it's really good to think about what decolonisation is and what decolonising pedagogy and practice is. I think…and I know I'm far from the first to bring it up [laughing], but I think it gets kind of mixed up and confused with ideas of like diversity and inclusion and EDI kind of stuff, and that's, yeah, it's not what it is, right? That's something very, very different. So, I think it's really useful to kind of go back to basics sometimes and think about what

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decolonisation is and what it isn't. And I think, from there, you know, you can really…I feel like there's a real…oh, like a tendency to like hear the word "decolonisation" and say, "Okay, let's go and decolonise everything!" and it's like, well, you know, [and] such a big part [I think] is the unlearning, right, unlearning all of the colonial stuff, all the coloniality in the curricula. So, I feel like, you know, it's really important to sit down and look at the curricula and really like bear witness to what exactly is going on here, what have we been teaching, because I think, unless you kind of identify all of the colonial violence that's happening in the curricula, then…like it's…it's a dangerous move to skip that step and go straight to kind of thinking about, "Okay, so what are we going to do?" – like you've got to be aware of the problems, and the consequences of those problems too, like what harm have they done, and that feels like a really important step. And I think that's a good one for students and staff to work together on as well, to kind of collaborate in that kind of unlearning process.

Yeah, and I think, you know, imagining alternatives I think is a really good thing for students and staff to do together as well, what needs to be there and, you know, what kind of materials do we need to develop, how should teaching happen, how might assessments happen, kind of…all of it, like learning…learning to be uncomfortable as well, and learning to listen. And…yeah, and being really honest as well about the…you know, like what we were talking about in the last question, being really honest that like university doesn't happen in a vacuum, that university is absolutely plugged into the broader context. So, you know, racism and all kinds of subjugation and oppression and control that's like flowing through the classroom and we've got to be really, really honest about that, because if we don't stop and identify it, then I…yeah, I feel like…I feel like decolonisation can't begin until we actually start to identify, yeah, what the problem is.

Thank you, Seagh – those are some really important points. Unfortunately, we're coming to the end of this interview, but, as a question that I like to end on, what would you like to see happen or develop within higher education in the next 10 years?

Mm…yeah…oh god, it's really…it's so hard to know where to start with this one, but I guess like the recent UCU strikes are…I feel like they're…yeah, I feel like their demands are…are really a concrete place to begin. I think, yeah, I think higher education is in such a…such a sad and dreadful place at the moment. There needs to be some really serious reckoning with how academia works. Working conditions need to improve. There need to be…there needs to be better and fairer pay and pensions. We need to stop ASAP casualisation, and make jobs more secure. There needs to be equality as well. There's kind of…pay-gaps…wherever they can be, they seem to be, in the most like intense ways, so these kind of equality pay-gaps need to be dealt with.

Fees need to go, right? They're so exclusionary and it's…it's terrifying, like the amount of student debt that people have to carry around. It's…that just shouldn't happen. Yeah, and there needs to be more support in all kinds of ways: more financial support to let those who want to go to university and want to study, let them study, with all the support that they can have.

And I'd say, as well, you know, a real grappling with the history of higher education, like the institutions, like the University of Westminster. How did Westminster get set up? How was it funded? Where did that money come from? And how has the University benefited from the legacy of the…you know, again, what kind of…what kind of violence have we been implicated in, and how do we continue to fund ourselves as well – where's the money coming from? I feel like that's a really important question. And, as always, like who's at the table when big decisions are being made about how the University works, who gets to make those decisions, and who is always shut out in one way or another?

So, yeah, it's…there are a long list of things that need to change, urgently.

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you, Seagh. I just want to thank you again for joining me on this episode of the podcast. It's been really nice just getting to know a little bit more about yourself, and obviously having the opportunity to discuss the great work you're doing at the University, and obviously your take on decolonisation in Chinese Studies. And I also look really forward to reading your book chapter that comes out next year, so definitely keep us updated!

Thank you, and thank you so much for having me on the Pedagogies for Social Justice podcast as well – it's a really excellent initiative, and, yeah, looking forward to more episodes.

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