

Studies in Higher Education

ISSN: 0307-5079 (Print) 1470-174X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cshe20

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To cite this article: Mei Lai & Jisun Jung (2025) Internationalisation with Chinese characteristics: exploring the paradox in students' experiences at Sino-foreign cooperative universities, Studies in Higher Education, 50:7, 1514-1527, DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2024.2386409

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2386409

Published online: 06 Aug 2024.

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STUDIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION
2025, VOL. 50, NO. 7, 1514–1527
https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2386409

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Internationalisation with Chinese characteristics: exploring the paradox in students' experiences at Sino-foreign cooperative universities

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ABSTRACT

Although previous research has explored the impact of global and local forces on transnational higher education (TNHE) at a macro level, limited attention has been paid to students' lived experiences navigating the mixed influences. To address the research gap, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 35 Chinese undergraduates enrolled in two Sino-foreign cooperative universities (SFCUs). From the theoretical lens of paradox, this study revealed the inherent tensions in the dynamic and hybrid educational practices at SFCUs, arising from the internationalisation of higher education with Chinese characteristics. The overlapping values of cosmopolitanism, nationalism, neoliberalism, and authoritarianism have repercussions on the programme structure, academic discourse, and university management. The findings indicate that students negotiated the tensions in various manners, including following the prevailing discourse, challenging the global imagery, and recognising the complexity of situation. The presence of conflicting influences led some students to develop hierarchical binary thinking towards knowledge and elicit ambivalent emotions towards institutions, while others achieved a wholeness of self through self-reflection. This study contributes to a new scholarly perspective on exploring students' unique experiences in TNHE.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 5 April 2024
Accepted 25 July 2024

KEYWORDS
Transnational higher education; paradox; internationalisation; Chinese characteristics; student experiences

Introduction

The discourse of globalisation has driven higher education institutions to actively embrace internationalisation regarding teaching-learning, governance, and academic community engagement (Knight 2008). Over the past two decades, there has been a global emergence of different types of transnational higher education (TNHE), such as international branch campuses (IBCs) and joint degree programmes (Dai, Mok, and Li 2023; Wilkins 2021). This development characterised by the cross-border mobility of educational providers is prominent in China, especially after the policy of opening-up education to the outside world (Hannum et al. 2008). Many Chinese universities operate TNHE as an approach to enhancing its educational quality and global competitiveness. With state-backed policies, the number of transnational undergraduate programmes has increased from 30 in 2003 to 885 in 2023 (Huang 2024). Notably, TNHE provides a modern model of experiencing 'internationalisation at home' without the requirement of physical relocation for students (Xie, Li, and Jung 2024). For example, students at IBCs, such as New York

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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University Shanghai and University of Nottingham Ningbo, have the option to complete their entire programme in China. This educational path differentiates them from traditional international students.

Pursuing global excellence and transnationalism has given rise to educational hybridity in China – a unique coexistence of different educational systems, practices, and values (Hawkins 2013). While such educational innovations and reforms contribute to mutual understanding and development, they also introduce tensions during the hybridisation process. For example, partnerships between Chinese and foreign universities operate on the principles of 'competition-collaboration' and 'differentiation-integration' (Cockayne, Gao, and Lim 2020; Montgomery 2016). According to Chan (2013), 'The more internationalisation a university pursues, the greater the paradox it faces' (46). TNHE blends not only different epistemic traditions but also a broader range of stakeholders with complex power dynamics and self-interested motivations, leading to inherent paradoxes within the institution itself (Tran et al. 2020).

In addition, the past few years have witnessed the promotion of Chinese characteristics under President Xi Jinping's regime, which may further complicate the process of internationalising higher education (Lo and Pan 2021). While universities in Anglophile countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom play significant roles in the mechanism of TNHE with Chinese institutions, the notion of 'Chinese characteristics' connotes a tendency to maintain national norms, beliefs, and practices (Yu 2023). A mixture of different spatial practices might cause a dysfunctional system, affecting students' lived experiences as they navigate their transnational educational journey. Previous studies in this field have examined the structural pressure for global integration and local relevance at the institutional level (Edward et al. 2014). However, they detached from the students' perspective. Students, as primary players in the interaction with competing influences, their experiences are critical for reflecting and assessing the quality of TNHE. Exploring how direct recipients perceive and reconcile tensions embedded in a higher education institution with dual systems is essential.

This study was conducted at two IBCs, which are commonly referred to as Sino-foreign cooperative universities within the context of China. As a typical manifestation of TNHE providers, they are well-suited for investigation. The interviews with 35 students revolved around the following research questions:

1. What tensions do students perceive in the operation of TNHE?
2. How do the embedded tensions influence students' experiences during TNHE study?

This study uses the paradox as a theoretical lens to examine how students perceive and respond to tensions arising from the multiplicity and hybridity at SFCUs. It revealed that the simultaneous pursuit of internationalism and Chinese characteristics can be orchestrated to foster a sense of wholeness in the educational process, while contradictions disempowering students also happen. The findings of this study have a theoretical and practical contribution. Theoretically, the study suggests a new scholarly perspective that broadens understanding of TNHE students' interactions amidst competing educational forces. Practically, this study makes implications for TNHE practitioners to cultivate students' awareness of complexity and contradictions to manage tensions in their learning journey.

Understanding hybrid value systems in TNHE institutions

When examining the strategy of IBCs, Shams and Huisman (2016) introduced the concept of dual institutional embeddedness from the literature on multinational enterprises. Specifically, while the institutional embeddedness provides organisations 'legitimacy, clarity, relationships with their stakeholders', their 'structures, procedures, and routines' are subject to and changed by social, cultural and political demands of the embedded environment (Beerkens 2007, 250–1). Following this

perspective, they indicated that IBCs face two isomorphic pressures from maintaining the equivalence with foreign partner's model, at same time, conforming to the local culture, values, and educational standards (Shams and Huisman 2016). This implies the cognitive, normative, and regulative component inside may not always align, thus leaving space for the discussion of discursive conflicts (Guimón and Narula 2020).

The introduction of TNHE epitomises the rhetoric circulation of neoliberalism in education, which reconfigures educational activities and operating mechanism into market logic (Han 2023). The conception of neoliberalism places itself in opposition to the interference of authoritarian approach and centralised mode on education (Choi 2021). At the individual level, neoliberal values accentuate the pursuit of self-interests and stress individual competition and responsibilities of life trajectories, thereby constructing students as rational customers and enterprising subjects (Keddie 2016). This new moral system permeates students' consciousness and shapes their framework for thinking and behaving.

In addition, the idea of cosmopolitanism has found form in TNHE that employs English as a medium of instruction, internationally oriented curriculums, and establishes cross-cultural academic communities (Knight 2016). Cosmopolitanism, as a progressive value, transcends traditional analysis unit of nation state and espouses openness to foreign knowledge, cultures and capabilities, not only national attachment (Beardsmore 2022). In education, this concept is often associated with Kant's call for cultivating moral virtues, global learning, developing critically-minded and engaged citizens (Beardsmore 2022). Recent research has revealed that engaging in TNHE facilitates students' cosmopolitan 'ways of being' at the dispositional level and fosters cosmopolitan 'ways of doing' in their social interactions (Yu 2023).

Notably, the rapid expansion of TNHE institutions in China is not spontaneous but a deliberate creation by the state for capacity building of higher education (Mok 2021). Unlike other host countries, China requires foreign higher education institutions to collaborate with domestic counterparts when delivering educational programmes within the country (State Council 2003). The pursuit of educational internationalisation does not signify a departure from the guidance of the Communist Party on its institutional structure and internal practices. To retain state control over the TNHE system, party networks are integrated with its administrative authorities (Li et al. 2023). In recent years, China has increasingly underscored the inclusion of political and cultural courses to cultivate ideological correctness and patriotic sentiments among young adults (Ministry of Education 2017). To ensure moral legitimacy, TNHE institutions are no exception in incorporating related knowledge and activities as mandatory components of the programme. Indeed, the central government holds the power to determine the extent to which foreign educational practices, norms, and criteria are adopted and modified.

To summarise, the authoritarian and nationalist principles coexist with rationales of neoliberalism and cosmopolitanism in the TNHE context. Facing discursive conflict between market demand for educational internationalisation and state confinement of infiltered foreign values, TNHE-related policies employ 'ambiguous' expressions to maintain flexibility in the implementation and negotiations (Han 2024). Although the imbrication of Chinese characteristics with foreign educational values does not appear contested, it might embroil students in an academic environment filled with contradictions. Emerging research (e.g. Wright, Ma, and Auld 2022; Zhuang and Kong 2023) has explored the collective effect of diverse value systems, where the global gaze intersects with traditional norms, on students' personal worldviews. Yuan, Li, and Yu (2019) examined Chinese students' experiences in a university influenced by internationalisation agenda, indicating they encountered identity paradoxes (e.g. global citizens vs. proud Chinese, team player vs. independent fighter) in their learning process. However, little research has been conducted at SFCUs which differ from regular Chinese universities and international universities. Furthermore, there is also a gap in understanding how seemingly competing discourses in education affect students' experiences.

The complex experiences in TNHE: acculturation, in-betweenness, or else

While TNHE represents a niche market within the broader landscape of Chinese higher education, it has become a 'new favourite' among affluent families (Lai 2024). Enrolled students perceive the expensive tuition fees as a strategic investment to gain positional advantages. Despite small scale in current scholarship, the growing population of TNHE students has garnered researchers' attention to explore their expectations, encountered challenges, and personal transformation (e.g. Dai, Lingard, and Musofer 2020; Yang et al. 2020). Apparently, the academic or contextual differences have essential repercussions on individual learning processes and integration experiences (Hou and McDowell 2014). Scholars employ various theoretical tools to examine intercultural learning. One is from acculturation perspective and theorised international student experiences in new contexts as a process of stress, coping, and cultural learning (Gill 2007; Ward, Bochner, and Furnham 2001). Following this perspective, Wang and Bai (2021) argued that pre-departure study at host campus should adequately prepare TNHE students for the academic culture of home campus to ensure a smooth transition. They compared students' experiences at each campus under one joint programme, highlighting the improvements in terms of tutorial models, teaching methods, and assessment formats.

However, Dai and Garcia (2019) found that acculturation theory fails to fully capture how students navigate cross-system contradictions. A less linear approach is needed as transnational learning is not simply about adjustment or adaptation, but a process of activating their sense of agency and engaging in critical self-reflection through constant negotiations with the structure to achieve their desired goals (Dai, Matthews, and Renshaw 2020). Specifically, Dai (2020) shared his personal experience of a sense of in-betweenness during the China-Australia 2 + 2 learning journey, where he continuously shifted between familiar and unfamiliar contexts. This resonates with Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of in-betweenness, which expounds the negotiation in intercultural contact when different domains overlap during the transitions of cultural hybridity. Combining these two theoretical positions, Zhang and Hang (2023) found mobile students at SFCUs underwent 'double transitions', including 'academic acculturation' across time and 'sociocultural in-betweenness' across space as they moved from China to the UK.

The existing research on TNHE students has yielded valuable insights into their engagement with diverse cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical contexts. Nevertheless, the focus of these studies primarily revolves around students' transitioning movement, particularly their experiences of studying abroad. The type of TNHE students examined in this study differs in terms of their educational path, as they are immobile throughout the entire programme at SFCUs. This particular group is under-researched within the context of delivering international programmes at home. Their experiences and perceptions merit investigation for a nuanced understanding of TNHE practices in China.

Analytical framework: from paradoxical perspective

This study draws on the paradox theory, a holistic perspective that shifts from 'either/or' to 'both/and', to explore the experiences and perceptions of Chinese undergraduate in hybrid universities (Lewis and Smith 2014). In much scholarship on the internationalisation of higher education, one prevailing perspective often employs the dichotomies of East and West to understand institutional operation (Chan 2013). The essentialist approach tends to magnify potential differences as stark opposition, disregarding the cultural fluidity under the trend of globalisation (Volet and Jones 2012). In saying so, it does not imply a constant unity between culturally rooted educational ideas and foreign borrowed educational systems. Tensions arise in the pursuit of synergies between distinctive institutional strategies and cultural beliefs across borders, ultimately influencing the students inside it (Tran et al. 2020). The paradoxical lens is appropriate to the SFCU as it encompasses a dual partnership that simultaneously asserts its internationalism and 'Chinese characteristics' as soft power (Mok and Ong 2013).

Originated from organisational and managerial perspective, paradoxes referred to 'contradictory yet interrelated elements – elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously' (Lewis 2000, 760). This theory elucidates how ambiguous messages and systematic contradictions cause the underlying tensions, and how actors interpret and cope with conflicting pressures intertwined in the dynamic structure (Park 2020). In response to tensions, individuals may split the opposing forces and defensively choose one side to align with their preferences. Such behaviour traps them in a vicious cycle associated with negative and ambivalent emotions. Conversely, the interplay of opposing forces can be integrated into a cohesive state. Critical reflection on polarised frames and recognition of the relatedness open up opportunities to manage tensions. Additionally, Lewis (2000), Lüscher and Lewis (2008) classified paradox into four types, including learning paradoxes, organising paradoxes, belonging paradoxes, and performing paradoxes. Potential tensions exist both between and within these categories; they cascade across different levels, as exemplified by the complex phenomena at the macro level generating new challenges at the micro level (Smith and Lewis 2011).

Specific to the operation of SFCUs, this study assumes that the mixture of competing forces adds complexity to educational practice across various dimensions. By acknowledging the paradox, the study not only investigates the conflicts encountered by immobile students in navigating TNHE, but also their attitudes towards reconciliations with the multiplicity and hybridity in their learning journey. Figure 1 presents the analytical framework created by authors to guide the research.

Methods

This qualitative research employs semi-structured interviews that allow an in-depth understanding of individuals' lived experiences and their meaning-making (Rubin and Rubin 2011). Data for this study were drawn from a larger research project that investigates the academic and professional aspirations of TNHE students after graduation. The interviews were conducted at a Sino-US cooperative university (University W) and a Sino-British cooperative university (University X). Two universities were selected after careful consideration of institutional history, foreign partners, geographic location, and feasibility for the access. The case universities may not fully represent the entire group, but they promote international tendencies as other TNHE institutions in China. In addition, they have made efforts to cultivate students' national characters and identities. Responding to the Ministry of Education's (2017) directives on enhancing Party-building in TNHE, SFCUs have increased the credit weightage and content of ideological and political education courses as well as established the Party branches on campus. According to official websites, two universities have established a dedicated centre in charge of designing and delivering Chinese courses tailored to the TNHE context. More specifically, University W deems cultivating patriotism as one of the learning objectives within its Chinese curriculum and University X regards it as part of valuable social science education. Graduates who complete both the Chinese and foreign curriculum are eligible to obtain a double degree.

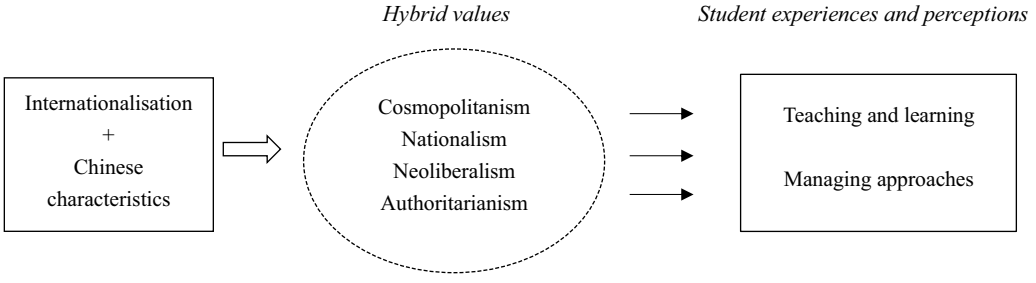


Figure 1. Analytical framework.

Data collection began after obtaining ethical approval from the authors' universities. A total of 35 students (19 from University W and 16 from University X) participated in the interviews, which took place between May 2022 and July 2023. Following the principle of maximum variation (Noy 2008), this study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques to select students from different genders (12 male and 23 female) and majors (e.g. Economics, English, Filmmaking, Marketing, Psychology, Urban Planning). Among them, 32 students were enrolled in the 4 + 0 mode (four year at SFCUs), while three students in the 2 + 2 mode were chosen for data triangulation. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, their native language, to ensure effortless reflection and expression. Each conversation lasted approximately an hour, with the shortest being 40 min and the longest being 1 h and 53 min. While face-to-face interviews were the primary mode, 10 interviews were conducted online (via WeChat and Tencent Meeting) due to the COVID-19 pandemic and participants' preferences. Admittedly, the first author as a former student of a SFCU provides an insider perspective that facilitates smooth conversation, while the newly implemented measures in the university development grant an outsider role observing system changes.

The interview began after the participants had signed the informed consent form. In addition to collecting basic information such as their grade, major, and place of origin, each student was asked about their pre-enrollment expectations, encountered challenges in the educational process, and perceptions of the internal cultures, practices, and university administration. Data triangulation was achieved by collecting information on programme structures, leader profiles, and institutional missions from official websites.

All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. This study used Nvivo 10 to analyse the interview data based on a reflexive thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019). Such an interpretative approach takes into account the researchers' reflexivity in identifying and conceptualising the data (Braun and Clarke 2022). After being familiar with the collected data, the author conducted open coding, highlighting and coding key phrases, sentences, and paragraphs in relation to the research question. These codes were then grouped into categories and constantly compared across the overarching framework. This iterative process allows for broader discoveries beyond the initial analytical scope (Thomas 2013). Subsequently, these codes were condensed into themes, guiding the structure for the research findings. The most relevant interview excerpts were translated into English for presentation. Since the participants are proficient in reading English, the translated content was returned to them to ensure consistency of meaning. In presenting the research results, each student was assigned an ID number to protect their identities.

Findings

This section presents the key findings in response to two research questions. Drawing from participants' narratives, this study identified paradoxical tensions embedded in operating SFCUs, and have been manifested in programme structure, academic value, and university management. In terms of students' reactions, three distinct manners emerged from the interviews: adhering to the dominant construct, challenging the education imaginary, and reflecting on becoming a whole self.

Perceived tensions in the operation of SFCUs

The first tension is marked by the mission to adopt a cosmopolitan educational model while infusing a sense of nationalistic feeling in this transnational social space. The crafted portrayal in promotional materials, such as 'international opportunities and connections', 'globally recognised credentials', shines the programme and creates a 'global imaginary' (Stein and de Andrepotti 2016). It raises students' expectation for an innovative academic culture and pedagogy different from their previous experiences in the local education system. Speaking of motivations, many students shared that they were attracted to SFCUs by these cosmopolitan features, apart from their scores in national college entrance examination meeting the admission benchmark.

Generally, students expressed satisfaction with SFCUs by appreciating the 'exposure to global issues and perspectives' and 'a highly open and dynamic learning environment'. At the same time, certain institutional components with Chinese characteristics persist in curricular and non-curricular aspects, undermining their expected integrity of the international learning experience. For example, one participant was taken aback by the university's adaption to local practices.

> In my imagination, it would be more akin to the foreign university life. Upon the arrival, I found we still have some activities similar to what you would find in typical Chinese universities, such as military training. We are also required to take patriotic, ideological and political education courses, like *Mao Zedong* Thought. (ID 16-University X)

In line with the principles of IBCs, SFCUs incorporate the promotion of individual subjectivity, critical thinking, and respect for diversity as essential components of the university mission. The internationalised approach placed greater attention on academic freedom in designing and delivering education. Many students acknowledged its effective implementation, narrating how the international and spacious academic community emancipated them from the hegemonic knowledge. They developed new frames of reference through interactions with multiple perspectives.

However, several students acutely identified the hidden restrictions on academic discussions that cast the university and authority in a negative light. Such awareness is more prominent among those in the field related to liberal arts, where the influx of creative ideas and dissenting discourses may challenge conformity to certain national values. For example, one student observed the presence of ideological boundaries in a filmmaking course.

> My [course] teachers graduated from British universities and spent a lot of time in both UK and USA. They have assimilated themselves to a great extent, not in a negative way, but they are very accepting open-minded thinking. They really recommend and support us, no matter what culture or theme we want to write about. But it is not the same case in Chinese side. It is definitely not allowed if we filmed scenes that were deemed too avant-garde or deviated from the accepted norms. The university would first approach the department head and teacher, and then the teacher would have a conversation with you. (ID 2-University X)

The extract instantiates a couple of students who faced tensions between being encouraged to embrace intellectual flexibility, but at the same time, feeling constrained by the ideological straightjacket.

Apart from the conflicting elements observed in teaching and learning practices, tensions also surfaced in the management of SFCUs. As mentioned earlier, the neoliberal ideas that prioritise the satisfaction of 'student-consumers' permeate the entire campus (Bolsmann and Miller 2008). This is evident not only in the provision of supportive sociomaterials, but also in the adoption of a student-centred approach when designing academic activities, rather than enforcing collective performance through institutional regulations. In the reflection, most participants used the comparative adjectives, such as 'relatively relaxed', 'more hands-off' to distinguish the overall management of SFCUs from that of mainstream Chinese universities. The institutional emphasis on inclusion and respect alleviated their sense of constraint in their daily lives and downplayed the hierarchical culture on campus.

However, it does not mean the absence of centralised interventions. Beyond formal academic policies, a set of initiatives guided by local governance conventions impact the social behaviours of young individuals. One student provided a compelling example of how the university monitored his campus life under the pretext of safeguarding security.

> Many of the restrictions are related to university logistics and various administrative matters. At the entrance and exit of the campus, there is a facial recognition machine installed by the security. I feel like I am constantly being watched, as they would know the exact time we left. If we come back late at night, the university staff would question us about where we have been. (ID 16-University W)

The specific practices of campus management vary between the two SFCUs. When interviewing students from University X, few of them mentioned this particular issue. Only one student who has participated in the 2 + 2 mode raised this concern. He discerned the university's interference taking on a subtler form (e.g. dorm inspection) after learning in two campuses with different rules on student conduct.

Due to the regional embeddedness (Shams and Huisman 2016), the broader social and political impact can intensify the tension in university governance. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the local authority dictated the management approach that SFCUs should adopt, which often put individual interests on the backburner. One student's account vividly illustrated the multifaceted authoritarian will 'operates at a multiplicity of points in different forms' (Ball 2012, 32).

> The university has implemented access control, and we need all sorts of permissions to step out the campus. Additionally, if you are a non-local student planning to spend the night off-campus, you even have to inform your parents. These measures make me feel less freedom as pronounced in this university. (ID 6-University W)

Negotiation with conflicting pressures: different reactions and attitudes

Following the dominant construct

As the majority of students envisioned their future on a global scale, they positioned acquiring cosmopolitan abilities and capital as the core of their learning experience. Despite that, the inclusion of national history and culture courses within international education programmes does not provoke any opposition. They perceived it as an embodiment of Chinese characteristics. To fulfil the requirements for obtaining a Chinese degree, they tactically allocated their time and endeavours to studying these contents. As one student expressed,

> I have not yet completed all Chinese courses, and I intend to postpone them until my final year. These course workloads are quite demanding, but we still have to push through and complete them, as well as participate in group discussions, just to aim for a passing grade or a B. In terms of my mindset, my priority is to ensure that these courses do not affect my GPA, and they do not occupy much time and effort that could be dedicated to my major courses. (ID 15-University W)

The 'coping mindset and manner' contrasted sharply with students' stronger commitment to the foreign curriculum. In compartmenting the entire programme, their inclination to prioritise internationalised activities over learning national knowledge comes at the expense of 'mutual understanding' (de Wit and Jones 2022).

In the daily operation of SFCUs, there is disharmony from the clash between foreign-introduced institutionalised systems and the informal restrictions imposed by local reliance. Most participants were raised in an orderly environment with authoritarian influence, they have internalised certain norms through their cumulative and extensive learning experiences. With an obedient mindset, it was common for them to comply with 'right behaviours' regulated by the university, even when those practices were unreasonable or contradicted the pledged mission. This disposition is evident in one student's account.

> I believe that the university has its own rationale for leaning towards a particular approach to decision-making and management. Honestly, I do not really contemplate much about university governance. It does not have a major impact on me or cause me much stress. (ID 7-University X)

It is intriguing to note that some participants perceived freedom as a potential catalyst for problematic behaviours, especially for those lacking self-discipline. They rarely questioned the legitimacy of campus surveillance and control, accepting them as essential measures for promoting positive personal development.

Breaking the global imaginary

In some interview cases, discrepancies in the transfer of curricular activities between the home campus and host institution have undermined students' trust. When asked about their opinions on the educational philosophy of TNHE, they displayed a distinct contrast with the majority who appreciated its potency. For example, one participant challenged the feasibility of delivering truly liberal education and academic autonomy by using the metaphor, 'it is difficult for the flower of freedom to bloom in the soil of China'. Similarly, another student chose to isolate himself from his university community, as he

doubted that institutional missions of preparing them for global engagement and intercultural leadership were merely 'rhetoric', lacking the potency to facilitate his personal growth.

Admittedly, the previous exposure to more liberal and democratic values at SFCUs has heightened students' sensitivity to individual rights and free will. Several students shared instances where they voiced their opinions and proposed suggestions to university leaders regarding programme design, course timetable, and infrastructure service. By doing so, they asserted their subjectivity rather than simply conforming to authoritative frames.

Meanwhile, some students experienced emotional dynamics that fluctuated between enjoyment and frustration in their TNHE learning. The coexistence of empowerment and disempowerment in academic study and sociocultural life posed them with a tug-of-war of tensions. For example, one senior's statement exudes the feeling of being torn by the divergence in structural forces. His stereotype on the differences between Chinese and American educational approaches further reinforced the perceived tension.

> The student autonomy and self-accountability follow the expected [principles] of American university, but the administrative management approach adopts Chinese style. The policies recently introduced lean more towards bureaucratic manner. So now, it feels like our university is neither Chinese nor American. (ID 19-University W)

This excerpt sheds light on the understandings of young people who struggled to navigate and reconcile local, national and global practices. The resulting tension even led to a deterioration in the university-student relationship. For example, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the strict control triggered widespread discontent and frustration among the student population. As this participant put it bluntly,

> To be honest, I do not really like W University. More specifically, I appreciate the teachers and fellow students here, but I do not have a fondness for the institution itself. (ID 19-University W)

Recognising the complexity of situation

A few interviewees learned to accommodate seemingly opposite values within the hybrid systems and recognised the benefits of simultaneous cultivation. This is mainly represented in their discussion regarding the development of personal epistemology and self-identity. Accompanied by the transmission of diverse ideologies through internationalised academic curriculums, the open and critical dialogue facilitated in the student-centered class subverted one-dimensional thinking. For instance, one participant shared how she experienced cognitive growth in the learning process that transcends the concept of 'seeking a standard answer'.

> Back in Chinese high school, there was always one right answer to our studies. But here, they do not teach us the correct truth, more just a sort of saying what are other sources that we can look. They have this different approach to education, where they want us to conceive of knowledge as multiple. (ID 5-University X)

By navigating the multicultural academic community, students can cultivate an integrative mentality that connects their Chinese self with global self, resulting in a sense of 'wholeness' (Xu, Tran, and Xie 2023). One student, through self-reflection, transformed her previous either/or mindset to become more comfortable with complicated interpretations.

> I believe that recognising these differences is a win-win situation for me. It allows me to understand not only people within my home country and why they criticise foreigners regarding certain matters. At the same time, I can also understand why people from abroad make certain choices. All of these aspects have become comprehensible to me. (ID 10-University X)

Discussion

This study examined different tensions perceived by Chinese students at SFCUs, and how they negotiated the hybridity in their learning process. To address the research questions, the paradox theory as a new trial provides an explanatory power in understanding the varied reactions and experiences

of the participants. First, the operation of SFCUs is ripe with many competing influences stemming from higher education internationalisation with Chinese characteristics. Previous literature on the integration process of TNHE students illuminated the challenges they encountered in terms of language, culture and pedagogy (Hou and McDowell 2014). However, this study has added new insights into the conflicting pressures on programme structure, academic discourse, and university management, brought by the inherent complexities of delivering TNHE in China. Echoing with Dai, Wilkins, and Zhang (2023) research on IBCs, educational practices and policies are continuously shaped by the interplay of global, national, and local contextual factors.

Secondly, the hybrid nature of TNHE requires students to coexist with different values, which affects their academic engagement and cognitive approach. It is found that students prioritised foreign courses and activities, relegating nation-related education to a peripheral role. The dichotomous thinking extended to their attitudes towards different approaches to campus management. The hierarchical binary implies the repercussions of neocolonialism that backfire on the original intention of balancing Western practices through nationalist efforts (Moufahim and Lim 2015). On the other hand, several students neither actively engaged in new community nor maintained connections with their previous learning approaches, occupying a detached zone. This is inconsistent with the findings of Zhang and Hang (2023), who observed that students experienced a state of 'acculturation' and 'in-betweenness' in 2 + 2 learning mode. While interviewees' subjective views may have played a role, this study reflects the unique experiences of immobile students differ from those who traverse the border at SFCUs.

As illustrated in students' narratives, some have learned universal values, accumulated cosmopolitan capital, and developed a sense of wholeness in the frame of internationalising higher education. This contradicts the findings of Bamberger, Morris, and Yemini (2019), who argued that Chinese approach is oriented toward the nation's economic development, deviating from the progressive values and humanitarian goals of higher education internationalisation. Despite the influence of state-centered neoliberalism in driving the construction of TNHE in China, where political agenda can dominate the operating principles, it is noteworthy that the cultivation of cosmopolitanism and diversity is concurrently advanced within its framework.

A number of implications have emerged from this study. First, prospective TNHE students should notice competing or even conflicting cultural, political, and ethical issues within the mixed system. 'Learning to live together' is essential amidst the complex terrain of global, local, and national influences (Jackson 2019). TNHE practitioners should not assume that the organic synthesis of Chinese and foreign education will naturally occur within students' interaction. It is important to foster students' reflexive and paradoxical thinking that interprets opposing viewpoints as two sides of the same coin rather than mutually exclusive. Third, SFCUs, as a prototype of an international university in China, aim to prepare students to become global citizens. The study suggests a flexible approach in designing, implementing, and governing TNHE, seeking dynamic balance to avoid pitfall of extreme tendencies or polarised sides. Drawing upon the insights from this study, IBCs in other countries should develop a more nuanced and contextually-sensitive understanding of paradoxical educational practices and its possible impact on students' learning journey.

Last, internationalisation is operated differently across political and sociocultural contexts. The development landscape of SFCUs aligns with China's historical approach towards the West since the nineteenth century (Gao and Zheng 2020). That is, Chinese Learning as Substance, Western Learning for application (中学为体, 西学为用). Having said that, the 'reining in international' by localisation is not exclusive to the Chinese context (Wu and Koh 2023). Currently, the dynamic shifts in the geopolitical order and global governance of higher education further complicate the definition and portrayal of 'international universities'. The conventional understanding of its framework and practices, which evolves over time, needs to be reevaluated. This raises another thought-provoking question – how to secure open ideas and cultural core of international universities amidst the sweeping wave of 'neo-nationalism' (Douglass 2021). The paradigm employed in this study

provides a new trial to interpret the institutional hybridity, as the complexity, dynamics, and uncertainty intensify in the internationalisation of higher education.

Conclusion

This article shows that the concurrence of international educational mode and Chinese forces introduces the complexity at SFCUs. It manifests in three aspects: the programme structure that fosters a cosmopolitan outlook while also infusing ethno-nationalism; divergent academic values that simultaneously promote academic freedom and impose constrained discourse; and university management, which advocates for individual responsibility and exerts collective control. Additionally, the mix of competing or even conflicting forces affected students' learning experiences in different manners. References to the negotiation with these tensions were peppered throughout the participants' reflections. The embedded tensions can either empower or disturb their learning attitude and campus life. While some students achieved holistic growth by abstracting coherent worldviews from apparent contradictions, others struggled in the educational process and developed ambivalent sentiments towards the institutions.

The application of paradox theory contributes to the literature on the intricate dynamics of transnational frameworks – by highlighting the tensions nested in students' experiences at SFCUs. Yet, limitations in this research are inevitable. The possible sampling bias may restrict the generalisability of the findings to other contexts. To address this, future research could recruit a larger pool of participants from different TNHE programmes and institutions. In addition, the direct learning impact on students is contingent on their subjective experiences. Other stakeholders' perspectives, such as teachers and administrative staff, could be explored to enhance understanding of the entangled forces and paradoxes in the internationalisation of higher education. Future research could delve into this issue that falls outside the scope of this study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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