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Rethinking Internationalisation at a Distance from the Perspectives of International Students: Critical Reflection Towards Epistemic Justice

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Rethinking Internationalisation at a Distance from the Perspectives of International Students: Critical Reflection Towards Epistemic Justice

Abstract

This qualitative case study examines the concept of "internationalisation at a distance (IaD)" by investigating the learning and academic socialising experiences of international students in online higher education (HE). Amidst the evolving landscape of global HE, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the adoption of distance education, creating a unique context for internationalising HE at a distance. The number of international students joining foreign universities from their home countries through the medium of online learning has continued to grow. To better understand IaD from the vantage point of international students, not of universities or domestic students, the present authors listen to online international students, shedding light on the complex nature of being international students in such social and cultural contexts. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with 19 international students of Chinese ethnicity residing in China while studying and pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate degrees offered by universities in English-speaking countries. Our findings reveal that despite the institutional rhetoric which promotes diversity and inclusivity, especially during student recruitment and induction, online international students experience that their unique cultural perspectives and pedagogical knowledge are usually not accepted, accommodated, and welcomed by their programmes, tutors, and peers. Nevertheless, like their domestic counterparts, international students are proactive in navigating and shaping their online learning environments and relationships to effectively serve their own learning needs and interests. The outcomes challenge stereotypical narratives of international students prevailing in HE literature and create much more realistic discourses of the democratising potential of international online HE beyond the diversity rhetoric. The findings have been analysed using the theoretical framework of epistemic injustice, hoping to contribute to the IaD research and practices by challenging and re-shaping the often uncritical and colonial perspectives on international online students.

Structured Practitioner Notes
What is already known about this topic
• Internationalisation in higher education is typically categorised into internationalisation abroad (IA), internationalisation at home (IaH) and internationalisation at a distance (IaD). These concepts have been widely used and interpreted from the perspective of universities as the main actors in internationalisation efforts.

• IaD is defined as internationalisation that occurs within a technology-mediated environment where students, teachers, and institutions are located in different locations. It transcends the geographical distinction between IA and IaH and emphasises the virtual mobility of knowledge.

• IaD raises a series of discussions about the identification of international students,

especially due to the ambiguous line between 'international' and 'home' categorisations.

What this paper adds

• This paper reconceptualises IaD from international students' perspective, using "home", "hosts", and "guests" as metaphors to investigate the students' lived experiences of IaD.

• This paper reveals the unequal power relationships and epistemic injustices embedded in and constructing international students' IaD experiences.

• This paper demonstrates the diversity within the international student population, showing them as active agents to employ different strategies to navigate epistemic injustices and challenges in the IaD contexts.

Implications for practice and/or policy

• Institutions should re-examine their internationalisation strategies (abroad, at home or at a distance) to achieve diversity and inclusivity principles beyond superficial and numeric measures, avoiding viewing international students merely as tools or resources for internationalisation.

• There is a pressing need to rethink the concept of IaD from the student's perspective and better conceptualise the notion of international students in IaD research and practice.

• Diversity among international students should be taken more seriously in educational practices, and stereotypes and prejudice against specific groups of international students should be addressed further.

Introduction

Imagine that you are starting your postgraduate study abroad next week. Typically, you would have already moved to the country of the university, having gone through the massive hassle of obtaining permission to study and stay in that other people's country. You would have left your families, friends, and colleagues in your home country, and maybe relocated your immediate family with you. You would have been busy setting up a new living space, opening a bank account, activating a SIM card, and exploring the campus. It is such a dramatic change, but at least there is some clarity in your mind and consistency between your symbolic status as an international student and your physical surroundings. From your perspective, this scenario may be called "*internationalisation abroad*".

On the other hand, that rupture caused by geographical relocation is unnecessary if your registered programme is offered entirely online. Upon acceptance, you will receive several emails explaining the programme structure, schedules, and requirements. On your first day on the programme, you may feel nothing special, "just another day". You may watch a welcome video recorded by a tutor team, skim through a module handbook, explore a Moodle site, and introduce yourself to other students in the cohort, all sitting in your home office. Suppose you have a hectic week at work. In that case, you may say, "Let's wait till the weekend." Despite your symbolic status newly obtained by the acceptance to the foreign university, your physical surroundings would not have changed

much. There is an incongruity between your study and your stay, which may be called "*internationalisation at home*", again, from your perspective.

The opening scenario effectively represents the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation in this article: internationalisation at a distance. Corresponding to the first case in the opening scenario, international students who are both academically and geographically encountering the new higher education (HE) environment tend to undergo holistic changes during the adaptation period. At the early stage of their adaptation, they may experience academic difficulties, cultural disorientations, linguistic barriers, social isolation, and homesickness, subsequently finding their kind and flocking together (Albeshir, 2022; Chen & Zhou, 2019). However, the adaptation experiences of online international students, like the second case, can radically differ as they are geographically still "home" but only partially or virtually chipping in the new HE environment at a distance. Without urgent needs to undergo the full adaptation process to the new culture, they may find it easier, *at least at first*, to begin their international learning journey. Nevertheless, the uniqueness of "internationalisation at a distance" experiences has not been fully explored, and the authentic perspectives of international students are often lacking in the related literature.

The concepts of internationalisation abroad (IA), internationalisation at home (IaH), and internationalisation at a distance (IaD) (Knight, 2004; Mittelmeier et al., 2021; Wächter, 2003) are commonly used and explained from the perspectives of universities as the main actors of internationalising efforts, normally to internationalise themselves (Lee, 2022). International (or internationalised) subjects such as overseas students and staff are often the key elements of such actions, and those subjects are subordinately used and instrumentalised by the actors. Whether it happens abroad, at home, or at a distance, internationalising HE needs *something international* in opposition to non-international (or domestic). That is, othering—a theoretical concept describing a cultural or political process by which individuals or groups categorise and treat people as fundamentally different or alien to their own identity group (Said, 1978)—is the pre-condition of internationalisation. We argue that this othering subsequently creates epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) to those othered by creating divisions between "us" and "them" and reinforcing the perceived superiority of one group while marginalising the "other": international students. International students' experiences of othering, or more precisely, being the subject of othering, have been documented by previous scholars (Brown & Jones, 2023; Huang, 2022; Laufer & Gorup, 2019; Tavares, 2021); however, their experiences have often simply or unproblematically been conceptualised as cultural adaptation in the new social and academic environments to which they have just moved (Krsmanovic, 2020; Lai et al., 2023; Mao et al., 2023)

We have previously pointed out that online programmes often serve universities rather than overseas students by providing an effective means to create additional revenues, as universities can now reach out to populations they previously could not (Lee, 2017; 2022). Those "othered" students who strongly aspire to obtain foreign educational experiences despite the circumstances that may not allow them to geographically relocate to the

destination of the international HE can easily be exploited by the universities. While the universities increase revenues, they often do not adequately accommodate their online international students' unique needs and circumstances. For the past decade, there has been a noticeable growth in the number of online programmes offered, and students without geographical boundaries have enrolled in those programmes (Zawacki-Richter & Jung, 2023). The adoption of remote distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has further expanded opportunities for international students to enrol in programmes offered remotely by universities worldwide, contributing to the overall growth in international student numbers (ICEF Monitor, 2021). Given the increased numbers of international students engaging with online HE and the improved status of online HE as a mainstream educational provision after the mass, this qualitative case study is a timely effort to understand what it means to be an international student in online HE.

We are particularly concerned about the lived IaD experiences of international students studying at foreign universities, especially those in English-speaking countries while staying in their home country of China, where English is not an official language. Unlike previous studies on international students, however, we are not interested in developing similar deficit narratives by narrowly focusing on their difficulties adjusting to the new learning environment (Lee & Bligh, 2019). Instead, we aim to examine how Chinese international students experience "othering" in online HE and, subsequently, deal with and respond to such experiences. Therefore, this critical inquiry will answer the following questions:

• What are the IaD experiences of Chinese international students, being othered in online HE?
• How do Chinese international students make sense of and respond to such "othering" experiences in online HE?

Theoretical Framework
Before discussing the epistemic gap in understanding international students in the previous literature, a theoretical framework will be presented in this section to provide scaffolding for this paper. The present research employs a theoretical concept of "Epistemic Injustice" (Fricker, 2007) to achieve its aim: to bring international students' perspectives and experiences of IaD, which have often been neglected in online HE, to the scholarly conversation. The concept prominently emerged from the critical awareness of the unfair nature of knowledge production processes, through which some knowledge becomes legitimated and valued, and some are perceived as invalid and, thus, undervalued. The unequal power relationships in the societies manifest and reproduce the epistemic injustice in knowledge and knowledge production in academia, where a certain group's perspectives are inevitably marginalised, although not necessarily internationally.

There are two primary forms of epistemic injustice experienced by marginalised social groups: *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice* (Fricker, 2007). The former happens on the occasion when a speaker from a marginalised background is not believed

and listened to due to prejudice and bias towards their social identity, such as race, gender, or class. This form of injustice undermines the speaker's credibility and, thus, the validity of their testimony, distorting the social reception of their perspectives. The latter, hermeneutical injustice, pertains to situations where individuals from less privileged backgrounds experience a deficit in knowledge exchange and communication as they do not share and understand the interpretive framework and/or knowledge mechanism dominating the given society. These situations result in their experiences and perspectives being systematically overlooked, disregarded, and often misunderstood and misjudged, preventing the marginalised group from fully participating in knowledge-creating and -sharing processes.

Dotson (2011) explores the consequences of epistemic injustice in multiple domains, including academic institutions, healthcare settings, and public discourse. Dotson shows how epistemic injustices in both forms of testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice perpetuate and exacerbate social inequalities; by doing so, she advocates for transformative epistemic practices that recognise and include diverse perspectives. In a similar vein, Medina (2011), building Fricker's (2007) notion of hermeneutical injustice, further demonstrates how dominant social norms and cultural understandings silence and marginalise certain cultural groups by making their experiences and perspectives unintelligible and unacceptable within the mainstream discourse. Haslanger (2012) also problematises the traditional epistemological approaches to knowledge for their inherently biased and exclusive nature, advocating for the integration of insights from feminist theory and critical race theory: a critical social epistemology.

By challenging the common assumptions of neutral and objective knowledge production in academia, critical social epistemology enables the present authors to see different aspects of epistemic injustices deeply embedded in our scholarly conversations on international students, especially those who come from less privileged contexts. Therefore, grounded in critical social epistemology, we employed epistemic injustice theory to identify the injustice experiences of Chinese international students and listen to their authentic voices, particularly in the context of IaD. Based on this theoretical framework, the following section will elaborate on the epistemic gap in the IaD literature to further understand the othering and epistemic injustice towards international students.

Literature Review
IaD and its potential risks
With the rapid development of technology and the rise of online HE, the geographical boundaries of internationalised HE are gradually blurred. Unlike traditional forms of internationalisation—IA, which requires students and faculty to travel abroad, and IaH, which integrates international elements into local curricula and campuses—IaD, supported by technologies, highlights the virtual mobility of knowledge globally (Yue et al., 2023). Consequently, students can now reside in their home countries and attend educational programmes provided by a university in another country through online delivery. Similarly, staff can provide educational services remotely from their home offices facilitated by

technologies. In this sense, IaD provides a viable alternative for students to engage in intercultural learning and acquire global knowledge, particularly for those from less privileged backgrounds who face geographic or financial constraints in accessing traditional IA opportunities (Reyes & Segal, 2019).

While IaD appears to widen participation in international HE education, promoting accessibility, inclusiveness and diversity of HE, the actual benefits reflected in practice are not as equitable as envisioned (Lee, 2020). The digital divide, structural inequalities and disparities in regional and national development hinder the equitable distribution of global educational resources, placing students from disadvantaged backgrounds at a greater disadvantage in internationalised HE online (Azıonya & Nhedzı, 2021; Glass et al., 2021; Lebeničnik et al., 2020). This clearly runs counter to aspirations for accessibility and inclusiveness in IaD.

Such inequalities are evident not only in resource allocation but also in broader frameworks of knowledge dissemination and power dynamics. While IaD removes geographical barriers, epistemological constraints persist, contributing to the principles of inclusiveness and diversity in IaD. International students from and remaining in less privileged cultural and linguistic contexts are often impeded from fully engaging in and contributing to the global academic community in online HE. This is salient in English-dominant university curricula, which have been criticised for marginalising different cultures and devaluing the contributions of non-English knowledge systems (Page, 2022). This phenomenon not only perpetuates existing hierarchical relationships between English and other languages but also contributes to the othering of international students, particularly those from non-English speaking backgrounds, leading to epistemic injustice, as outlined in the following sections.

Othering in the IaD

Deeper in the phenomenon of internationalising HE, there are always underlying hierarchical power dynamics. Othering as an instrument of power has been used by Western academic institutions to define, control and devalue the Oriental to maintain their position of superiority and dominance (Said, 1978). This has resulted in a binary distinction between us and them, domestic and international, entrenched in universities' internationalisation dual goals. While strategically embracing international students to enhance institutions' internationalisation, universities, as pivotal actors in the HE landscape, often treat these students as resources or tools (Lee, 2022). This top-down perspective results in international students, particularly those from the Orient, being perceived as outsiders and subjected to rigorous scrutiny. This is evident in the rigorous screening of international students before access to Western HE. Affected by geopolitics, universities have considered certain international students as potential intruders and threats, revealing a latent, inherent institutional exclusion and reinforcing these students' othering (see Cassidy, 2024).

IaD complicates such existential matters. Despite its conceptual usefulness, IaD (similar to

IA and IaH) is often exclusively interpreted from the vantage point of institutions, that is, universities. Furthermore, IaD raises subsequent questions about international students' identity in the broader context of the internationalising effort by creating a grey area between "international" and "home" categorisations (Mittelmeier, 2023). The traditional international students' identity, typically based on geographic mobility or visa status, dramatically shifts as online international students are technically at home (see Mittelmeier et al., 2022). Consequently, international students' identities remain ambiguous in online HE and are often simplified into others far away from their university, even though every student is more and less away geographically. Thus, inevitably, students are more easily categorised based on their geographical locations in this scenario, further reinforcing Western and Oriental categorisation. Assumed "Western" as countries or cultures from Western Europe, such categorisation perpetuates a historical colonial framework and imperialist discourse that distinguishes Western white students as superior to others (Cousin, 2011). In this context, the diversity among international students and the integration of educational practices from different regions are overlooked, leading to epistemic injustice towards international students, particularly those labelled as "oriental", as discussed below.

Epistemic injustice among international students
Previous studies suggest that international students experience testimonial and hermeneutic injustices in Western academic institutions. Regarding testimonial injustice, domestic students are commonly portrayed as active agents and thus superior, while international students unfamiliar with Western ways of "being a student" are constructed as passive agents and thus inferior, with their academic and cultural contributions overlooked or devalued (Moosavi, 2020). This injustice has led to international students' academic and intercultural challenges being misinterpreted as their intrinsic cultural deficits rather than temporal moments of the normal adjustment process. For example, while all students naturally seek familiar social circles in a new environment, international students are accused of avoiding intercultural engagement (Ruble & Zhang, 2013).

International students from less privileged cultural backgrounds are more likely to encounter heightened scrutiny and stereotyping, perceived as fragile and lacking agency in addressing academic and intercultural challenges (Moosavi, 2022). This is exacerbated in IaD setting where temporal and spatial separations amplify misunderstandings (Fabian et al., 2022; Wang, 2022). Cultural characteristics among international students are overstated as deficiencies that impede their learning, thereby reinforcing epistemic injustice and the othering of their experiences (Heng, 2018; Lee & Bligh, 2019). Worryingly, some international scholars, influenced by colonial and othering perspectives, cater to and reinforce these stereotypes through self-othering, perpetuating certain groups of international students' othering and epistemic injustice experiences (Mao & Lee, 2024). Thus, a more nuanced, inclusive, and student-centred approach is needed in research and practice to better understand the diverse experiences of international students.

In addition, international students experience hermeneutic injustice, manifesting in their

struggles to effectively express their viewpoints and integrate into Western classrooms. Zhu and O'Sullivan (2022) reveal that when initially enrolling in online HE, international students struggle to connect their prior learning experiences and Western courses due to unfamiliarity with Western norms and forms of academic knowledge and expression. Consequently, the students' contributions and voices are not sufficiently acknowledged and appreciated, leading to misunderstandings and labelling as silent learners, thereby accentuating their marginalisation. While limited research has recently started to critique othering and epistemic injustice towards international students (e.g. Page & Chahboun, 2019; Phirangee & Malec, 2020; Qu & Song, 2024), this attention in online HE remains insufficient. Therefore, this paper centres on international students of Chinese nationality to explore their unique and authentic perspectives on IaD.

As Medina (2011) argues, this research aims to address such an epistemic gap in our current understanding of international students and their lived IaD experiences; by doing so as to achieve more inclusive and equitable accounts of IaD from student perspectives. By
addressing testimonial and hermeneutical injustices, we seek not only to address past wrong-doings but also to cultivate more "just" epistemic practices and habits that empower *all* international students to contribute fully and meaningfully to our collective knowledge about IaD.

Research Methods

This study is grounded in a critical social epistemology that acknowledges and attempts to address the epistemic injustice in our academic knowledge (Fricker, 2007; Haslanger, 2012). To realise the political aim of the study, a qualitative case study methodology has been employed, following the popular: "The single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case" (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). The case in this study is, thus, defined as the IaD experiences of non-Western students enrolled in online programmes offered by Western universities. The study satisfied the three conditions that Yin (2018) proposes to contemplate the methodological fitness for purpose: i) the research question asks "how" or "why", ii) control over behavioural events is not required, and iii) the focus is on contemporary events. To remain focused during our exploration of this complex phenomenon of IaD from the historically less privileged perspectives, we have set the boundaries of the case by limiting potential participants to international students of Chinese ethnicity residing in China experiencing online HE for the first time in their lives during the study (Stake, 1995).

Research participants and Data collection

A semi-structured interview was conducted with 19 Chinese students aged 20-30 recruited through purposive sampling strategies. The researchers targeted potential participants who fall within the case boundaries set in the study, specifically those with geographical locations in mainland China and initial engagement in Western online HE. Participants were recruited via a Chinese social media platform, Xiaohongshu (so-called Chinese Instagram), which has over 200 million users and is widely used by Chinese international

students to record their academic and social lives (Beard, 2022). Those interested were asked to contact the researchers directly via email. To secure a good number of participants to develop an in-depth understanding of the case, we invited undergraduate and postgraduate students for the interviews as long as they were studying at Western universities located in Australia, the UK, and the US. All participants resided in China. In addition, we employed snowball sampling strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to locate more potential participants. Before concluding the interviews, participants were asked if they would refer the study to their friends who may also be interested in participating. The participants' demographic information is shown in Table 1.

The interview protocol focused on participants' backgrounds, prior learning experiences, and IaD experiences, which led to othering experiences and their perceptions of those experiences. Although the participants were at different stages of their programmes during the interviews, their IaD experiences from the initial stage of their programmes were also covered in the protocol. Each interview lasted 45 to 85 minutes and was recorded and transcribed; the guiding interview questions include:
• How did you feel about your initial online learning experiences?
• How have your feelings and experiences changed over time?
• How did you deal with such experiences, and why?

Table 1. Participant Information

No.	Pseudonyms	Country of University	Degree	Discipline	Stage	Gender
1	An	Australia	MA	Applied Linguistics	10 weeks	Female
2	Bai	Australia	MSc	Professional Accounting	10 weeks	Female
3	Chen	UK	MSc	Human Resource Management	10 weeks	Female
4	Deng	Australia	MA	Applied Linguistics	10 weeks	Female
5	Gu	UK	MSc	Human-Computer Interaction	10 weeks	Female
6	He	UK	MA	International Education	7 months	Female
7	Liu	Australia	MA	Applied Linguistics	10 months	Female
8	Ma	Australia	MA	Applied Linguistics	6 months	Female
9	Qi	Australia	MA	Applied Linguistics	10 months	Female
10	Su	Australia	MSc	Computer Science	13 weeks	Male
11	Tang	Australia	MA	Applied Linguistics	6 months	Male
12	Zhang	US	MBA	Marketing	2 years	Male
13	Ke	UK	BSc	Finance	2 years	Female
14	Huang	Australia	BA	Sociology	1 year	Male
15	Yu	Australia	BCom	Finance	2 years	Female
16	Zhao	UK	BA	Business and Management	7 weeks	Male
17	Dong	UK	BSc	Accounting and finance	2 years	Female
18	Xia	UK	BA	Business and Management	3 years	Female
19	Gao	UK	BSc	Accounting and Finance	2 years	Female

Data analysis and ethical considerations

All interview transcripts were analysed to investigate and interpret the IaD experiences from the perspectives of international students. The thematic analysis method was employed to identify shared patterns and meanings across the qualitative data without losing the richness of participants' experiences (the six-phrase framework in Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was primarily conducted by the second author under the supervision of the first author. First, the authors read and re-read the transcripts and field notes to gain a thorough understanding of the data (familiarised with data). Second, focusing on the research questions, initial codes were generated systematically to identify meaningful patterns across the data (generating initial codes). The initial codes included "unfamiliar with the new environment", "initially feel nervous and shy", "appreciate inclusive and diverse atmosphere", "high economic costs and investment", "subsequently feel struggling and neglected", "perceived inequality", "a lack of voice", "desire for the voice", "benefits from reading assignments", and "initiate open discussions".Third, codes were selected and collated into potential themes by grouping relevant data extracts together (searching for themes). The initial themes were drafted as "initial perceptions", "transition", "contradictory and conflicts", and "reflection and strategies". Fourth, draft themes were reviewed for coherence and relevance to the research questions and objectives (reviewing themes). Fifth, themes were refined and named to accurately reflect the essence of the data (defining and naming themes). Here, the initial theme of "reflection and strategies" was refined as "agency". Subsequently, the themes were named "welcome", "navigation", "question", and "negotiation" to effectively express students' voices and their perceptions of the lived IaD experiences. Last, the final analysis was documented, including illustrative quotations to support each theme (producing the report).

Several strategies were employed to ensure the rigour and trustworthiness of the findings. This included member checking, in which preliminary analysis results were shared with participants through email to validate the interpretations of their statements and viewpoints. All participants were included in this process. The received feedback confirmed the validation of the findings. The feedback also led to minor adjustments in the interpretation, particularly in participants' reflections on teaching and learning approaches in Western online HE, where some benefits were newly acknowledged. Additionally, we have ongoing conversations with our critical friends who have different perspectives and experiences of IaD. In particular, given that both authors strongly held a critical social epistemology largely due to their own academic and research experiences as researchers with minority ethnic backgrounds, we have continued conversing with our domestic counterparts with UK ethnicity.

Ethical approval was obtained from the FASS ethics committee at Lancaster University prior to commencing the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. To protect their privacy, all participants used pseudonyms during the

interviews and their personal information, such as their university name, was also collected anonymously.

Limitations

This qualitative case study focuses on a specific group: online Chinese international students. Thus, our findings are not necessarily generalisable and applicable to a broader group of online international student populations. Despite the small number of participants, their interview data offers in-depth descriptions of their lived IaD experiences and critical insights into the othering mechanism in online HE. As the data were collected at a specific time during the COVID-19 pandemic, students' living and learning conditions were inevitably affected by broader social and political contexts. When we conducted interviews, we tried to discern the specific impacts of the pandemic to ensure that the insights from the present case study would still be meaningful in the post-pandemic contexts. Despite the limitations, we argue that this study was timely, filling an important gap in the literature, especially given the Chinese government's restrictions on full-time enrolment in distance education programmes before the pandemic (Ministry of Education, 2020), which had resulted in a lack of understanding of Chinese international students' experiences in online HE.

Findings and Discussions

In this section, we will explore IaD through the lens of Chinese international students, focusing on their definitions of "home", "hosts", and "guests", highlighting perceived injustices and examining how students use agency to cope and actively engage in internationalisation. To keep the vividity and authenticity of student voices in our academic discussions, we will simultaneously present and discuss the findings based on the framework of epistemic injustice in this section.

Welcoming: "Make yourself at home"

Chinese international students approached their first-time online learning with enthusiasm and high expectations for being part of a diverse community. The welcoming and friendly atmosphere fostered by tutors and programme staff created a sense of "home" within the community, raising the students' expectations. An experienced the transition from being overly polite as a "guest" to feeling at home as one of the "hosts" under the cheering voices of tutors: "Do not hesitate to speak up... you can freely discuss anything". The rather clear "house rules" set up by An's tutors, encouraging everyone to contribute topics of their interests and needs, effectively relieved An's initial shyness, quickly fostering a sense of comfort.

Diversity, inclusiveness and accessibility were explicitly and repeatedly stressed, which shaped the first impressions the students had of this new home. This also reflects their initial, predominantly positive, perception of "internationalising myself at a distance". Similar to the IaD process of institutions, the IaD of international students is characterised by such diversity, exemplified by "peers from diverse backgrounds" (Bai, Chen) and "global experiences" (He).

Participants seem to naturally constitute diversity by being part of the community, and from their shared perspectives, their new home is inherently diverse and cross-cultural—no need to do othering. It is rather divergent from the institutional perspective on the need for the external components of others to achieve their IaD goal. Almost all participants, *at least at first*, perceive everyone in the community as "hosts" collectively constituting and contributing to the diversity. In this respect, they seek not only to highlight the uniqueness of one another but to develop a sense of ownership in their own internationalised learning experiences.

The majority of participants perceive that IaD is accessible, which is one of the fundamental characteristics of online HE. Despite the contesting nature of the accessibility of online HE (Lee, 2017), more than half of the participants highly appreciated the opportunity to study abroad and gain international learning experiences without geographical relocation. Some participants mentioned that they believed that online HE had removed a range of geographical and socio-economic barriers in their lives that would have stopped them from having the opportunity to be part of the international learning community (Reyes & Segal, 2019). For example, Bai could not benefit from her university's IA efforts as her visa application was rejected due to Australia's tightening visa rules for international students (Cassidy, 2024). Initially frustrated, Bai was inspired by the warm welcome from the university, tutors, and peers of diverse backgrounds. Despite being at home (in China), this experience convinced her that she could internationalise herself "at a distance".

Although participants in the IaD context largely appreciate geographical accessibility (Reyes & Segal, 2019), this does not mean that they perceive the situation as being "just" to everyone in the same sense. Despite the "welcoming" gestures, students can penetrate the fundamental profit-oriented nature of the accessibility of IaD. Many students, including Su and Zhang, shared a similar point:

> It is like studying at a transnational university in China [IA], except for the tuition fees [being much higher][1]. (Su)

> I am charged international student fees, which are ridiculously expensive. Well… at least I save on my student visa, travel and "some" of my rent[2]. (Zhang)

The students' statements indicate the "otherness" of their international student status reflected in their international tuition fees. The unequal and hierarchical power relationships between the "original" universities on their home campuses and transnational

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[1] Tuition fees for transnational universities in China are lower than those for studying abroad, with an average annual tuition fee of approximately RMB 25,000. In contrast, the average annual tuition fee for self-funded study in English-speaking countries such as the US, the UK and Canada is around RMB 90,000 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2024).

[2] Due to the course schedule often occurring late at night, Zhang had to rent an apartment away from home to avoid disturbing his family and to better concentrate on his online study.

universities on international campuses were also evident in China. Compared to domestic students who were "already and always at home", international students, to enter the new home (even virtually), had to invest a lot more financial and cultural capital, including tuition fees and other fees, time, and labour, in proving their academic credentials and language abilities. Bai's experience of visa rejection also highlights the injustice done to international students by treating them as others—or potential invaders. Institutions, on the other hand, consider IaD as a critical means to secure and increase their revenues: creating a welcoming atmosphere and meeting international student needs are important "marketing" and "profit-generating" strategies (Lee, 2022). Our participants, while appreciating such efforts, are aware of the economic rules of the "zero-sum game" and, in turn, the compromised justice in their online HE experiences.

Additionally, the institutions have the ultimate power to decide who (which international student) is allowed to enter the home and who is not. Our participants' testimonies also suggest that even upon their virtual entrance to the home, they felt that they needed to seek the permission of the "original" hosts (i.e. tutors, staff, and domestic students) to be legitimately entitled as "co-hosts".

Without permission, most participants believe that they would remain as "guests". While the institutions welcome their international students to "make themselves at home" on the surface, the rooted epistemic injustice exists at multiple levels, othering and devaluing international students. This seems to contradict international students' initial perceptions of IaD, and the conflict is exacerbated as the students develop a deeper understanding of how their programmes (should) work.

Navigating: "Do it our way"
As the programmes continued, the students gradually realised that their initial impression of "being at home" was naïve. Shortly after the programme started, a number of participants faced challenges arising from cultural and academic differences between their original home and the new home, making them feel rather uncomfortable at home. For example, Qi struggled to navigate reading assignments without the structured guidance of textbooks, while Gu, unfamiliar with essay-based exams, was "required" to submit an essay shortly after the course started, without acquiring sufficient time to get over her "jet lag".

Once they became aware that differences were at the heart of the diversity of their learning community, the majority of the participants tried to grasp the differences to reduce the uncertainty of what was expected from them by the tutors and peers. However, it is not always straightforward for them without previous cross-cultural learning experiences to fully understand how the new home is different from their old home. Geographically being at a distance from their new home (i.e., universities, tutors, and peers) was not necessarily helpful but made the problem worse. While the increased accessibility of online HE is fundamentally conditioned by the geographic separation between tutors and students; a portion of participants found it challenging to access and adapt to the new "ideal learning methods" and "habits" in their Western learning contexts. The increased discomfort was

manifested in their changed perceptions towards peer interaction—a core pedagogical component of most online HE programmes. Especially after a couple of attempts to reach out to their peers for help, An concluded:

> While online learning offers flexibility regarding time management, the same cannot be said for the [actual] availability of team members [laugh].

Although these challenges during the transition period are gradually addressed, these challenging IaD experiences left "an emotional scar" on the students. At the root of the scar and unsettled feelings was a recognition of the hidden power inequalities in their programme, or more broadly, in their universities. In Gu's case above, she voiced her unfamiliarity with new academic norms during the *Welcome Orientation* but did not receive any appreciation, which made her wonder why they always say such things as "Do not hesitate to speak up" (An). Su also encountered the "Follow Roman law in Rome" incident when he raised an issue with the "old-fashioned" guidance for his assignments and tried to introduce a new (more recent) approach. As "no one really paid attention to my suggestion, [I had to] do it their way." These experiences resonated with a substantial number of participants. Despite many participants' efforts to question established rules and navigate power imbalances, institutions often exert explicit control over international students through the grading system, leading them to temporarily acknowledge the prevailing message: "This is the way we do, so you just do it our way."

These examples clearly demonstrate both forms of epistemic injustice—testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007). While the universities claim to accommodate students' needs, in international students' experiences, there is a lack of appreciation for their prior knowledge and experiences. It is worth mentioning that these feelings of being controlled and neglected are not necessarily a unique problem for international students, as domestic students could also find learning at a distance challenging (Stapleford & Lee, 2023). Nevertheless, it can certainly be a more serious and critical issue for international students who have just entered their new homes.

Some participants experienced being othered not only by the authority but also by other students who were supposed to be equal to them in power relationships. For example, An's views on Chinglish in a virtual seminar received no appreciation from her peers and instructors—just silence—which led her to lose her motivation to contribute further. A subset of participants expressed that they have less power than their counterparts—when participating in collaborative learning processes, they often felt that their peers are "controlling" (An, Gao) and "talkative" (Chen, Su). That is, the experiences of international students from less privileged linguistic backgrounds during the transition period left them feeling uncomfortable about staying at "home". From these experiences, students see, realise, and gradually penetrate the power inequality and epistemic injustice, and they become disoriented and re-visit their initial naïve impression and enthusiasm. Subsequently, they start to question the meaning of home.

Questioning: "Whose home is this?"

Initially, Chinese international students rather naively believed that they were fully embraced in the international learning community as legitimate members and that their unique cultural and educational backgrounds were equally appreciated and respected by other members. The essence of this imagined community is diversity. Such beliefs were repetitively stated, circulated, and reinforced by universities, tutors, and peers at multiple points of the early stage of participants' IaD process, constituting a dominant discourse in their community. In practice, however, students' experiences quickly diverged from such discursive-rhetorical promises and their initial expectations. At their new home, they saw themselves as co-hosts of the international learning events. Thus, at first, they diligently and eagerly tried to share and bring their unique knowledge, skills, and experiences into the community; however, unexpectedly, other members did not value and reciprocate their efforts and contributions. Certain participants shared their encounters with such epistemic injustice in IaD, which made them suddenly feel an absence of their space in their home (or Western curriculum in Page, 2022).

> The lecturer's question about the pedagogical strategies to teach English to French students was difficult for us [Asian students] without relevant experience to answer. (An)

> Hopefully, my lecturer can use more global cases, not just the US and the UK ones. (Zhang)

Chinese international students' experiences of othering or being othered continue and worsen when interacting with their domestic counterparts. The identification of their otherness is usually not an explicit process: that is, no one is "openly racist" in their community. Instead, the process is often natural, surreptitious, and unintentional, and even those domestic students who are accused of othering their international peers are likely to be unconscious of their behaviours and the negative impact of those behaviours on international students, often attributed to linguistic challenges and the deficiencies of Oriental culture (Said,1978).

Ironically, it is ultimately Chinese international students themselves who execute and complete the identification process, namely, identifying themselves as others or "outsiders" of the community—they are othering the self. Such a process is facilitated by the reiterative and dichotomous discourses, including "us" (international students) and "them" (Western members of the community), as well as the phenomenon of self-labelling. In the interviews, a great number of participants unconsciously used the statements "Chinese students or Chinese people are..." followed by negative adjectives such as "silent" (Ke, Tang), "inactive" (Chen, Huang), or "slow to open up"(Yu). Even neutral terms, such as "introverted"(Dong, Xia), were perceived negatively in this context. This self-othering is worrying as it reveals that stereotypes are not only imposed by some scholars but internalised by the students themselves. This internalisation negatively influences researchers' perspectives, reinforcing the epistemic injustices in their research. This explains why the epistemic injustices persist and are reinforced in academic discourses.

Having faced initial challenges with understanding and adjusting to the new home in their online community and subsequently, yet superficially, realised and perceived existing unequal power relationships within it, participants are now asking a serious question: "Whose home is this?" By reviewing this process, the students develop a deeper understanding of injustice strongly embedded in their IaD experiences. In an attempt to concretise and theorise this rather subtle process, international students undergo the following three steps in this stage of questioning. The *first* step is realising that they do not have a legitimate membership in the community or a designated room at their new home, especially when their contributions yield no responses from other family members.

The *second* step is to sense that it is not their academic contribution that their universities want from them but their presence, often in numeric formats, either as simple numbers of international students in the programmes or as financial figures of annual incomes collected through international students' tuition fees. That is, it is the clarification of the genuine meaning of diversity that they are supposed to enact through their participation in the home community—diversity needs to always be symbolised and idealised rather than materialised and realised. Upon that realisation, the *final* step is for students to declare and admit that it is not their home. They are not hosts but guests. Ultimately, international students develop a critical awareness of being othered by the institution's IaD ambitions and implementations.

It is clear that the institutions fail to keep their promises; nevertheless, it does not necessarily mean that international students become victimised or patronised by the failure. Instead, they select to exercise their agency to resist the articulated epistemic injustice and strive to take ownership of their own home back for their own sake. They still actively participate in the IaD process, not by adapting others' ways (Western ways) but by creating and pursuing their own ways of doing and being.

Negotiating: "I do my way"
After penetrating the epistemic injustice in their new home, international students accepted that they were not hosts and that their position was marginal. It seems a simple give-up on the surface but more like resistance underneath. Participants reached a consensus that they just decided to "do things my way" as a coping mechanism. Su realised that "rules are rigid, but people are flexible". He ended up deciding to use his [Chinese] approach, proving its effectiveness through extra effort, and finally earning acknowledgement with a good mark. International students tend to prefer democratic and indirect negotiation over radical and direct confrontation with their tutors and programmes. The student union is often regarded as a vital component of democratic development in HE (Li & Zhao, 2020), and some participants (e.g. Dong, Huang and Yu) actively participated in it to include specific voices of international students.

Regarding interaction with tutors, participants employ different strategies, such as writing comments (Huang, Zhang). An is a relatively rare case in which she has directly expressed

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her concern that using "only" European examples may pose comprehension challenges for those from non-European cultural backgrounds. She believed this had prompted a critical awareness among her tutors and peers of the importance of international curriculum and learning beyond the programme and people.

When international students were confronted with epistemic injustices that had been unconsciously created by their peers, they commonly initiated "open discussions" (Gu, Qi, Xia) to seek resonance and connection. For example, some participants have experienced power inequalities, particularly in collaborative learning situations. Su developed strategies to fight and "secure his place" in group work by quickly volunteering the tasks he wanted to assume or could do well instead of waiting until he was assigned a random task that did not fall into his interest by other members. Another example is Qi's reading challenges. Despite initially struggling with a heavy workload and feeling a lack of structured guidance, Qi eventually realised the benefits of extensive reading of her choice, which encouraged her to exert her autonomy and further enhanced her comprehension of the disciplinary knowledge. An also admitted that textbooks may limit her way of thinking while textbooks provide structured guidance. Additionally, the literature-based approach also promoted collaborative learning in which An proactively organised reading groups to complete reading assignments, thereby motivating peer interactions.

Such examples demonstrate that international students have the capacity to utilise their agency in navigating unfamiliar academic and cultural environments in which their IaD experiences are situated to make the best out of these experiences [their tuition fees and other sacrifices]. However, it is also worthwhile to note that most of our participants have chosen not to do anything actively to change the fundamental structures of their online HE, creating epistemic injustice. Such decisions are still strategic from the vantage point of those students whose ultimate purpose of IaD is to obtain a foreign degree with much better value than their domestic degree. Once their goal is achieved, many will not mind spending fewer resources, including financial, social, and cognitive investment. Thus, this also represents one type of "I do my way".

Conclusion
This qualitative case study has collected the authentic voices of 19 Chinese international students in
online HE programmes offered by foreign universities in English-speaking contexts, seeking to develop a solid understanding of their experiences and perceptions of IaD. Although IaD requires the joint efforts of universities, staff, and students, the concept has limitedly been articulated and discussed from the university perspective. In contrast, international student identity and diversity in IaD contexts have largely remained unconsulted (Lee, 2022). Consequently, online international students are often described as passive recipients of universities' IaD services who are incapable of actively participating in and contributing to the programmes (Lee & Bligh, 2019). Such deficit narratives have further contributed to othering international students, devaluing and dismissing their unique voices and cultural perspectives.

Unfortunately, our findings also demonstrate that online international students notice unequal power relationships between themselves and their domestic counterparts in online programmes and further experience different forms of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). The unequal us-and-them division was arbitrarily drawn from the host institutional perspectives, manifested in the valid and legitimate norms and forms of learning and being in online learning environments as rightly conceptualised as the hidden curriculum of online learning in Öztok (2020). Such epistemic injustice operated through the hidden curriculum is rather subtly leading to international students from less privileged cultural and linguistic backgrounds being othered and marginalised in their learning communities. Despite the initial feeling of being welcomed and entitled to be co-hosts of "their" collective IaD experiences, which dissolved rather quickly, Chinese international students in this study were pressured to follow the unfamiliar rules and norms of the "real" hosts, which are often unspoken explicitly (as a form of hermeneutical injustice, see Medina, 2011). Evidently, their cultural perspectives and pedagogical knowledge were unwelcome and dismissed by the real hosts and their immediate guests from the dominant culture (as a form of testimonial injustice, see Dotson, 2011)

Without noticing such othering mechanisms, taking essentialist and normal, thus problematic and unjust categorisations to understand students' intercultural experiences can reinforce prejudice and segregation towards particular international students (Huang, 2022; Laufer & Gorup, 2019). That is, the exclusive focus on and normalised view of international students who must adapt to new social and academic cultures and norms in foreign universities can exacerbate the epistemic injustice in HE. Particularly in the IaD context, where all participants—both international and domestic students—are literally at home, geographically distant from their universities, a much more sophisticated understanding of adaption is required (Krsmanovic, 2020; Lai et al., 2023; Mao et al., 2023). It is important to remember that achieving accessibility and diversity in online HE is more than letting students from diverse backgrounds, including those who may not have the opportunity to get in otherwise (Lee, 2017).

It may be hugely mistaken, however, if we assume that international students are simply victimised by unjust IaD practices. Online international students in this study (also in Huang, 2022) have very strategically utilised their agency to ignore, cope with, and often address the injustices and subsequent challenges in their IaD experiences. Unlike what the previous literature suggests, which tends to view international students as passive recipients (Ruble & Zhang, 2013), they are proactive in navigating and shaping their online learning environments and relationships to effectively serve their learning needs and interests. Many consciously decide not to follow the institution's or tutor's norms that do not suit their learning habits and interests but remain authentic to the self. They also negotiate with the institution and assert their rights as a critical contributor to realising their university's IaD ambition. The outcomes challenge the academic and institutional bias towards online international students (Lee & Bligh, 2019) while supporting previous attempts to develop more nuanced and complex accounts for those othered in academic contexts. For instance, a

series of empirical studies on "silence" in Asian students (Harumi, 2011; Wang et al., 2022) have previously argued that Western educators often misinterpret silence as a lack of participation or comprehension; but its complexity needs to be recognised as an active form of learning (or resistance in some cases).

We hope this article helps online educators and institutions create more just and realistic narratives of their international students, by doing so, increase the democratising potential of IaD beyond the making diversity rhetoric. We also call for more IaD studies that work towards challenging and re-shaping the often uncritical and colonial perspectives of international online students.

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