Thesis Title -

Online International Students' Interaction Experience in Higher Education from a Post-/Decolonial Perspective: A Case Study of Online Chinese International Students

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Abstract

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, online distance education (ODE) has expanded rapidly, with an increasing number of universities offering international ODE programmes and a large number of international students taking part. In this context, ODE has raised critical debates around the colonial tendencies, power dynamics, and injustices embedded in it, especially in online Western classrooms which affect international students' online learning experiences and reinforce the essentialism and prejudices against them. Therefore, exploring online international students' experiences is demanded. This qualitative thesis engages with Chinese international students who chose to stay in China to attend full-time online distance courses provided by English-speaking universities as a case to present international students' ODE experience. The thesis aims to examine the diversity of online international student groups and uncover the injustices they experience, thereby critically reflecting on the underlying power hierarchy of epistemology, knowledge, and structures within international ODE.

Building on critical theory, the thesis uses types of interaction (ToI) as a descriptive lens and post-/decolonial theory as an analytical lens to locate online international students in complicated sociocultural contexts, in order to explore their interaction experience and perceptions of injustices. Viewed as agentic learners, the international students actively navigate across different temporal and spatial contexts and strategically resist injustices, ultimately constructing their meaningful learning journey based on their aspirations. The thesis challenges assumptions about international students and reconceptualises ToI in ODE. It argues that the internationalisation and decolonial practices in ODE remain insufficient. While online international students contribute to diversity in ODE and actively negotiate different settings, challenges, and injustices, it is argued that internationalisation and decolonial practices should not solely rely upon individuals' efforts or superficial internationalised courses. Instead, they require a more critical reflection on epistemology and the broader structure; and based on this, the thesis accordingly provides theoretical and practical recommendations.

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Author's declaration: I declare that the thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere. Some parts of this thesis may bear resemblance to publications produced during my doctoral studies, which are listed below and have been properly cited throughout the thesis.

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Signature .....Yiyi Mao.....

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background Context

1.1.1 Distance education and its internationalisation

Online distance education (ODE), with a long history, has played an important role in the landscape of higher education (HE) despite being frequently undervalued. The emergence of ODE widens HE participation, improving its accessibility and inclusiveness. The history of ODE can be traced back to the late 1820s to the early 1930s, when it began as correspondence courses and its predecessor was distance education (DE) (Bozkurt, 2019). Its original purpose was to promote social justice by transforming previous male-dominated and elitist education, thereby expanding HE beneficiaries (Saykılı, 2018). Therefore, DE has been seen as a more democratic form of education, which promotes the accessibility and inclusiveness of HE (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004). Nevertheless, its quality and effectiveness have been seen as inferior to campus-based traditional education (Saykılı, 2018).

The development of technologies improves the quality and effectiveness of DE and enables DE to reach a wider audience, thus further promoting the openness of HE. In this context, DE gradually evolved into ODE. The broadcast technologies of radio and television contributed to the establishment of open universities, turning open courses from non-credit to credit courses, thereby improving the quality standards (Moore, 2023). The rise of the World Wide Web and the internet expanded the audience of DE, thereby facilitating the diversity of HE. Relying on the network, the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) and Open Educational Resources (OER) movement, motivated by social responsibility, aim to provide equitable and universal access to knowledge, transferring it to be a public good and sharing it globally (Saykılı, 2018). Consequently, individuals, particularly those unable to travel abroad due to geographical or financial constraints, can sit in their homes without geographical mobility to engage in HE programmes and access resources provided by universities in different countries through online delivery. In this way, ODE serves as the internationalisation of HE.

As ODE is more affordable, flexible, and convenient than traditional study abroad programmes that require travel to the destination country (Zaki, 2022), it has become a popular choice for students seeking to experience intercultural learning. Many universities are increasing their investment in online international education programmes. In the UK, for example, the EdTech sector was valued at approximately £3.2 billion in 2021 (UK EdTech, 2021), with a 15% increase in international student enrolment in 2020 (University Business, 2024). In this context, ODE has been regarded as an effective mechanism to achieve institutional and national agendas for HE internationalisation (Lee, 2022). Rye (2014) further highlights the potential for ODE's internationalisation and notes that although students encounter geographical inconveniences and potential risks of coloniality which impact their engagement, the virtual space of the ODE offers more possibilities for intercultural exchange and broadening perspectives for students. Nevertheless, ODE is still considered less valuable than campus-based traditional education (Moreira, 2016).

The status of ODE grew during the COVID-19 pandemic. Concerned about public health, countries implemented lockdown policies and international travel restrictions. This led to the closure of numerous universities with a shift from on-campus classes to online distance learning. This shift posed many challenges for students with limited experience in ODE. Research has found that these challenges primarily involved interaction, self-regulation, and struggles with adapting to technology (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023; Azman et al., 2023; Hermanto, 2021). Nonetheless, this large-scale shift in human history transformed ODE from a supplement to campus-based traditional education, to being a mainstream part of HE. As the pandemic faded, universities gradually returned to traditional face-to-face teaching. Nevertheless, ODE became 'the new normal' in HE, and universities selected to adopt blended learning combined with online distance courses and on-campus courses in the post-pandemic era. With the rise of intelligent technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR), ODE presents a promising future, particularly for internationalising HE.

In this context, ODE is an integral part of the internationalisation of HE, and is now becoming a focus of academic research. The existing research primarily focuses on two aspects. Firstly, there are a number of studies discussing the concepts of ODE internationalisation and they analyse its potential impact on the transformation of traditional HE. Ramanau (2016) proposes the concept of internationalisation at distance (IaD), and Mittelmeier et al. (2021) further developed the concept, which will be further detailed in Section 2.1. Lee (2022) analyses the benefits, weaknesses and potential risks associated with the development of ODE internationalisation. Steyn and Gunter (2023) discuss the impact of the breakdown of geographical boundaries on international student identity within the context of ODE internationalisation, highlighting the need to redefine the concept of 'international students'.

Other studies focus on the specific ODE teaching practices, particularly online international curriculum design. Thampi and Metzger (2022) report their experiences with developing online cross-cultural curriculum, in which they integrate the Eastern and Western psychological teaching approaches, and report students' positive responses to the international perspective introduced within the online course. However, the diverse teaching approach and perspectives does not necessarily imply diversity in knowledge itself. Many scholars, such as Lee (2022), Mittelmeier (2023), and Öztok (2019), criticise the lack of diversity in the ODE curriculum design, and point out that the course content remains predominantly centred on Western knowledge, with insufficient delivery and inclusion of non-Western knowledge. Consequently, while technology goes beyond geographical barriers, it simultaneously perpetuates and reinforces colonialism on the knowledge scale.

Furthermore, differences in teachers' understandings of cultural diversity significantly influence diversity in knowledge delivery. Kumi-Yeboah et al. (2020) discovered that the majority of teachers perceive cultural diversity as students' cultural differences, the ability of the instructors to integrate multicultural content into the curriculum, or the use of diverse teaching strategies to meet the needs of students from different cultural backgrounds in online environments. Kumi-Yeboah et al. (2020) also observed that teachers' perceptions of cultural

diversity are affected by their teaching discipline in the online setting. Specifically, the teachers in education, social science and engineering generally perceived the importance of fostering cultural diversity within online learning environments, but those in physics demonstrated insufficient awareness and lacked effective pedagogical strategies to support learning experiences of students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020). Therefore, there is a demand to listen to the students' voices and explore their authentic experiences to better understand diversity and inclusion in the context of ODE internationalisation (Lomer & Anthony-Okeke, 2022).

However, there remains a limited amount of research to explore ODE internationalisation from a student-centred perspective. Mittelmeier (2023) and Yemini and Sagie (2016) points out that there is a lack of systematic data that focuses on online international students, with existing research largely focusing on the Global North, and insufficient attention paid to the experiences of students from the Global South, particularly those from China. This situation is also closely related to China's unique ODE policy and practices, which will be discussed below. As a result, there is a clear gap in knowledge with regards to online distance learning experiences of Chinese international students.

1.1.2 Chinese distance education and its policy

As illustrated above, China's unique ODE policies and practices contribute to the limited research on online Chinese international students. Therefore, it is necessary to review the historical development and policy context of ODE in China to better understand the institutional factors underlying the requisite research gap.

Although the development of ODE in China was interrupted by the Cultural Revolution[1], its development process is similar to that of countries pioneering ODE from the late 1820s to the early 1930s, which has gone through three

[1] The Cultural Revolution refers to a sociopolitical movement in China from 1966 to 1976, launched by Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong to eliminate counter-revolutionaries. However, it resulted in severe consequences, including the persecution of intellectuals, the closure of schools, and the disruption of scientific research institutions.

phases - from correspondence-based distance education to radio-and TV-based distance education, and then to e-learning or online distance education (Zhang & Li, 2019). The primary objective of Chinese DE is to advance social justice, exactly as in the case of early countries offering DE. This objective is not only reflected in the practices of DE, but also in relevant national policies, given that each phase of China's DE development is intertwined and complemented by national policies.

The Chinese Reform and Opening-up Policy accelerated economic development, creating a surging demand for skilled labour, especially for those with HE qualifications. At that time, however, the literacy rate of the nation was low, which led to a shortage of professionals with such qualifications (Yang, 2011). The traditional campus-based HE could not meet its growing demands. Therefore, in 1978, the Chinese Vice Premier, Deng Xiaoping, decided to adopt DE to address the need after meeting with Edward Heath, former British Prime Minister, who championed the successes of the UK Open University (Ge, 2012). In this context, the radio and television universities were set up. In 1979, the Central Radio & Television University (CRTVU) and 28 provincial radio and television universities were established (Wei, 2015). The first cohort of distance learners was workers, school teachers, and urban youths, of whom the majority had not been able to access HE due to the ten-year Cultural Revolution (Zhang & Li, 2019).

Subsequently, driven by national policies, the boundary between traditional campus-based HE and DE has been blurred. Consequently, distance learners have expanded, covering more populations. In 1995, the State Council put forward the goal of socialist modernisation and deployed the strategy of developing the country through science and education (Ministry of Science and Technology [MOST], 1996). To implement this strategy, in 1999 the State Council issued the Action Plan for Education Rejuvenation for the 21st Century, which aimed to achieve the goals of literacy and education popularisation by improving the overall quality of the entire nation (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 1998). The Plan also highlighted the essential role of DE in education popularisation and lifelong learning, with a

focus on its function in supporting education in rural and underdeveloped areas. With the implementation of the Plan, in addition to RTVU, many universities, including Tsinghua University and Zhejiang University, established ODE programmes to facilitate the equitable distribution of learning resources beyond the temporal and spatial barriers (MOE, 2006). These programmes were mainly targeted at farmers, disabled persons, soldiers, and ethnic minorities. Accordingly, the openness of DE was promoted, and the accessibility and inclusiveness of HE were enhanced.

In the meantime, ODE in China faced an inadequate information infrastructure, resulting in a digital divide and intensifying the regional disparity in educational resources (Chen et al., 2022), which did not align with ODE's original mission of improving social justice. To address this issue, the 2006-2020 National Informatisation Development Strategy proposed to advance the development of ODE in rural areas by actively promoting education informatisation (Central people's government of the People's Republic of China, 2006). This aimed to share quality educational resources to rural areas, and narrow the gap between urban and rural education by enhancing information and communications technology (ICT) to bridge the digital divide.

Driven by the wave of global MOOC in 2012, China launched its own MOOC platform in 2013, with initial attempts to internationalise ODE. In response to the Belt and Road Initiative[2], XuetangX, the first MOOC platforms in China established by Tsinghua University in 2013, provides online courses for Chinese and global users, thereby achieving global knowledge sharing. At the initial launch, the platform attracted more than 13,000 participants, with 10,088 users from 151 countries and regions. This far exceeded the total number of students who had attended Tsinghua University's offline courses in the previous twenty years (XuetangX, 2013).

With the development of China's MOOC platforms, the focus of ODE policy shifted from broadening participation to the improvement of quality. Opinions on

[2] The Belt and Road Initiative was announced in 2013 by President Xi Jinping. This is a Chinese infrastructure development strategy that aims to connect Asia, Africa, and Europe through land and sea routes.

‘Strengthening the Construction, Application, and Management of Online Open Courses in Higher Education Institutions’, issued by MOE in 2015, proposed to improve the teaching quality and develop high-quality ODE programmes (MOE, 2015). The opinions also encouraged Chinese universities to provide high-quality online courses to the international community. Driven by the Opinions, the Ministry of Education selected and released the first batch of 490 national-level online courses, 70.2% of which were provided by the top Chinese universities (MOE, 2016). These courses targeted not only Chinese university students and non-traditional students but also students outside China. For example, Chinese for Beginners, offered by Peking University, reached 450,000 overseas students (MOE, 2016).

Although these policies and practices involved initial attempts at the internationalisation of ODE, their focus was on the development of Chinese domestic ODE, and ODE remained a supplement to traditional HE. This is not an isolated case and the similar attitude can be observed in other countries such as India. In India, the legitimacy and social recognition of ODE are not equivalent to traditional on-campus education. For one thing, the Indian public tends to attend literature-based on-campus learning and they lack trust in network-based knowledge sharing (Santosh & Panda, 2016). For another, the University Grants Commission (UGC), the higher education regulator in India, has expressed concerns about the quality of ODE and has prohibited M. Phil, and Ph.D. programmes via ODE (Santosh & Panda, 2016). However, not all countries hold the similar attitude. For example, in the UK, ODE is widely recognised by government bodies and employers, and the qualifications awarded typically do not specify the mode of study (Qayyum & Zawacki-Richter, 2018).

In addition, the attempts for the internationalisation of ODE in China exposed the limitations of its development path. The attempts mainly focus on exporting Chinese online courses to the international community and attracting overseas students to participate in local online courses. However, policies and practices adopt a conservative, cautious attitude towards domestic Chinese students’ engagement in ODE programmes offered by HE institutions outside China. This

is not an exceptional case; some countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, also hold similar attitudes. In Saudi Arabia, online degrees from overseas are not recognised (NARIC, 2020). In Qatar, recognition of online overseas degrees is restricted to specific countries and disciplines. Specifically, only online degrees awarded by selected universities in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the UK and the US are recognised, and degrees obtained through ODE programmes in applied disciplines, such as engineering, medical fields and the sciences, are not recognised in Qatar (NARIC, 2020). Nevertheless, this is not the case in all countries. For example, in South Africa, it offers ODE programmes to other countries and also acknowledges that other countries can provide their ODE programmes to South African students. It also issues regulations to ensure credit transfer, the recognition of qualifications, and quality assurance for South African students engaging in overseas ODE programmes (DHET, 2017).

The turning point in Chinese ODE came with the COVID-19 pandemic. ODE is no longer a supplement but is now an integrated part of HE, standing alongside traditional HE practices. During the pandemic, the Chinese government, similar to other countries, employed the lockdown policy for public safety and pioneered large-scale online distance learning to mitigate the disruption of the pandemic to students. According to a MOE investigation (MOE, 2020), as of May 2020 a total of 1,454 Chinese universities had conducted online classes, with 17.75 million students involved. During this period, Chinese students with limited experience of full-time ODE faced challenges, including interaction and network issues (Bao, 2020), similar to students in other countries. Nonetheless, this large-scale ODE practice accelerated the transformation of Chinese HE, transitioning from a focus on campus-based, face-to-face teaching and learning, to include online instruction and interaction. The status of ODE has significantly grown and become the ‘new normal’ in traditional HE in China in the post-pandemic era. For example, MOE (2024a) lauds Nanchang University for integrating online and offline modes in chemistry classes to effectively facilitate students’ comprehension of knowledge.

At the same time, the internationalisation of Chinese ODE has shifted from a unidirectional model to a bidirectional attempt. Due to international travel restrictions during the pandemic, the MOE, for the first time, allowed Chinese international students to stay within China to complete their degrees through online distance courses provided by universities in their destination country and officially accredited their degrees from April 2020 (Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange [CSCSE], 2020). Notably, this prerequisite was that the educational programme the students enrolled in was originally designed as face-to-face courses but converted to full-time online courses due to the pandemic (CSCSE, 2022). That is to say, if the programme itself were a cross-border online programme, the degree awarded would not be accredited by MOE. This policy attracted a large number of Chinese international students to stay in China to participate in full-time online distance courses provided by their overseas universities. Statistics (Vision Overseas, 2022) show that approximately 60% of Chinese international students opted to stay in China to obtain an overseas HE degree through online delivery by early 2022. This was a significant exploration in the internationalisation of Chinese ODE, as it began by enabling Chinese international students to stay in China to engage in full-time online study abroad programmes, even though these programmes were initially intended to be delivered in person. Unlike earlier approaches that focused solely on exporting Chinese online courses to the international community or encouraging student engagement with overseas MOOCs, this shift laid the foundation for a transition from a unidirectional to bi-directional internationalisation.

However, certain overseas unaccredited institutions took advantage of this opportunity to sell degrees through online distance learning programmes, which disrupted the higher education and international education market. For example, CSCSE (2021a) announced a suspension of the accreditation of Masters in Management at North Borneo University College, Malaysia, on 13 August 2021, because the programme targeted the Chinese education market to sell degrees and export a large number of low-quality online courses to Chinese international students during the pandemic. Subsequently, the CSCSE issued

several notices regarding the increased scrutiny of degrees awarded by overseas HE institutions to alert Chinese students to be cautious of diploma mills (CSCSE, 2021b, 2021c). The phenomenon and a lack of an effective regulatory mechanism for large-scale online study abroad programmes heavily impacted the fairness and stability of higher education and the international education market. To protect the rights of Chinese international students, therefore, the MOE announced the cessation of this temporary policy on 28 January 2023 (CSCSE, 2023a). Chinese international students are not allowed to stay in China to engage in full-time online distance courses provided by overseas universities, except those affected by the Russia-Ukraine war (CSCSE, 2023b). Nevertheless, the temporary policy provides inspiration and possibilities for the bi-directional internationalisation of Chinese ODE in the future. For example, Tsinghua University launched the ‘Global Hybrid Classroom’ in 2021, which not only attracts international students to participate in online courses offered by Tsinghua University but also encourages domestic Chinese students to enrol in online distance courses provided by partner overseas universities (Tsinghua University, n.d.).

In addition, the focus of policy is gradually turning to the internationalisation of ODE. MOE (2024b) highlighted the important role of ODE in internationalising HE and advocated improved mechanisms for the transfer and recognition of online distance course credits with overseas universities. MOE (2024c) also announced the launch of the academic journal Frontiers of Digital Education, in collaboration with Springer Nature, Germany. The journal aims to encourage policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to explore the concepts, trends, and practices of ODE through international collaboration, providing theoretical and practical support for the internationalisation of Chinese ODE strategy and advancing the development of global ODE. These manifest China's efforts and determination to develop the internationalisation of ODE and its ambition to expand its influence in the global ODE community.

Overall, the development of Chinese ODE is intertwined with policies, with increasing depth and openness over time. The status of ODE is rising, from initially serving as a supplement to traditional HE to its prevalence during the

pandemic and gradually being normalised in HE in the post-pandemic period. At the policy level, ODE policies have evolved from focusing on social justice to improving quality and including the internationalisation of ODE. By constantly optimising policies and practices, ODE in China improves quality and standardisation, and demonstrates its potential in internationalising HE. Moving forward, as policies and practices progress, China is expected to develop high-quality, multilateral, internationalised ODE programmes, promoting international collaboration and global resource sharing. In this context, it is a timely effort to explore the Chinese international students' ODE experience. Reviewing the students' experiences contributes to policymakers and ODE practitioners being able to better understand Chinese international students for the internationalisation of ODE, thereby providing valuable references for the development of future policies and practices. Thus, this thesis unpacks the ODE experiences of Chinese international students who stayed in China to take full-time online distance courses provided by English-speaking universities during the pandemic, attempting to provide suggestions for the future development of relevant policies and practices.

1.1.3 Online Chinese distance students and the myths surrounding them

Literature on online Chinese distance students

Before introducing this thesis, it is necessary to review the relevant studies on online Chinese distance students, as they provide support for the thesis's rationale. Research on students' online distance learning experiences is not rare, particularly given the large-scale provision of ODE programmes during the pandemic and the rapid development of intelligent educational technologies in the post-pandemic era. Consequently, there is a growing interest in exploring students' ODE experiences. Based on bibliometric analysis, Zhang et al. (2022) provided a holistic view of published ODE research in HE during the COVID-19. Zhang et al. (2022) reported that the 1,061 documents on ODE cover a wide range of research topics, including the application of various technologies and strategies, curriculum design, student perceptions and the psychological impacts of the emergency remote teaching. However, among this large body of

studies, there has been less research conducted on online Chinese distance students due to the traditional devaluation of ODE and the limited acceptance of ODE in HE prior to the pandemic.

As the increased Chinese policies have supported popularising the ODE programmes and the status of ODE has improved in the post-pandemic period, online Chinese distance students' experiences have indeed attracted scholarly attention. Nevertheless, the number of relevant studies is still limited, and the focused study population is imbalanced. The systematic review by Mao and Lee (2024) found that only 34 published journal articles are related to online Chinese distance students' experiences, with a minority of research having been conducted on the experiences of online Chinese international students. The authors observed that this phenomenon can be attributed to the Chinese government's cautious policy towards internationalisation and Chinese society's limited and conservative acceptance of online overseas degrees before the pandemic, which has led to the limited presence of online Chinese international students in studies.

Even though the body of literature focusing on online Chinese distance students' experiences is not large, there is a comprehensive perspective on this topic, ranging from the students' attitudes to the use of online tools and assessing the influence of traditional culture on Chinese students' online distance learning. The studies, whether targeted at local or international Chinese students, primarily concentrate on their attitudes toward ODE. In general, Chinese distance learning students show a positive attitude towards studying online. Marjerison et al. (2020) surveyed 156 Chinese college students attending remote emergency learning during the pandemic. They report that Chinese students' attitudes toward ODE are generally positive and imply that, given this positive attitude, the likelihood of Chinese students engaging in ODE in the future is very strong. This conclusion is supported by Agyeiwaah et al. (2022) and Zhu et al. (2020), who reveal that Chinese students' attitudes toward ODE became increasingly positive as their online course progressed, and they expressed a continuous intention to study online after completing their current courses.

Nevertheless, studying fully online for Chinese students who are more familiar with in-person classes remains a gradual process, and their satisfaction as well as experiences are affected by various factors, including interaction quality (Su & Guo, 2021), internet connectivity (Tanjun & Utomo, 2021), and their economic backgrounds (Yeung & Yau, 2021). Among these, interaction is considered to be an integral role in online Chinese students' learning. Scholars, such as Liu et al. (2022) and Xue et al. (2021), point out that while Chinese ODE pedagogy has, to some extent, been characterised by lecture-based approaches, student-centred approaches have gradually been emphasised in recent years, with increasing attention paid to the design of interaction.

In Chinese ODE pedagogy, interaction is organised into three stages: pre-class preview, in-class teaching, and post-class review (Liu et al., 2022; Xue et al., 2021). During this process, interaction is conducted through locally developed digital platforms, including Rain Classroom, Tencent Voov, and QQ. In the pre-class stage, interaction primarily involves students' interaction with the content. Before the online classes, instructors upload structured learning materials, such as handouts and textbooks, and assign preview learning tasks through QQ class groups and Rain Classroom. Students are required to independently complete these tasks before class, fostering their independent learning and thinking (Liu et al., 2022). Instructors then adjust their instruction based on students' performance.

In the in-class stage, various interactive activities are embedded in lectures and delivered through Tencent Voov and Rain Classroom. The interactive activities include incentive-driven questioning, in-class quizzes, and group discussions. Although using marks as an incentive has motivated student interaction, this approach has been questioned, with some students preferring interaction based on teacher-student relationships or intrinsic motivation (He & Wei, 2021). After online classes, teachers assign learning tasks and provide supplementary materials, such as recorded lectures and videos, through Rain Classroom and QQ class groups to support students' interaction with the learning content.

At the same time, students can seek clarification via voice calls on QQ to contact their instructors promptly. During the post-pandemic period, Chinese universities have refined their own learning management systems (LMS), supported by the Chinese government's structured teaching mechanism, to promote interaction in online classes (He & Wei, 2021). In this context, students can participate in interaction not only through digital platforms but also through LMS. Interactive activities have become more diverse, including online discussion forums.

Therefore, interaction become a pivotal factor influencing online Chinese students' effectiveness and acceptance of ODE. Some studies (Chen et al., 2020; Li & Zhang, 2021; Miao et al., 2022) have shown that different interaction types and interactive activities in online distance learning environments have affected Chinese students' perceptions of social presence, their cognitive patterns, knowledge acquisition, and learning motivation. Increased interactions in online classrooms facilitate the students' development of academic self-efficacy, which improves their ability to handle online tasks, enhances their learning engagement, and ultimately contributes to their satisfaction with ODE (She et al., 2021). A lack of interaction is shown to slow down the adaptation of Chinese students, especially Chinese international students, to full-time online distance learning (Tsai, 2019).

Kung (2017) criticises that, due to language limitations, the lack of interaction among Chinese international students leaves them in an environment where they feel more isolated and alienated in their online distance learning than their domestic counterparts. Mikal et al. (2015) confirm that a lack of interaction in the online environment exacerbates online Chinese international acculturative stress, leading some to abandon initial cultural integration and further isolate them from the unfamiliar intercultural learning environment. This point is supported by research on large-scale online distance learning of Chinese students during the pandemic (e.g., Mok et al., 2021; Yong, 2021). Although these statements are flawed and potentially stigmatise online Chinese students, as will be detailed below, they highlight the importance of interaction in online Chinese students' experiences, which is closely related to the students'

performance and their acceptance of ODE. Therefore, it is necessary to explore Chinese students' interaction experiences.

In some cases, researchers analyse Chinese students' responses to the use of online technologies and tools. During the post-pandemic period, blended learning, combining online and offline modes, has been increasingly adopted in Chinese universities, and a wider range of digital technologies has been integrated into the classroom. Recently, there has been a growing trend in research on perceptions of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. For example, Chan and Hu (2023) and Shahzad et al. (2024) investigate Chinese university students' perception of the use of generative AI (GenAI) technologies in teaching and learning. The studies point out that students have perceived the potential of AI technologies to support their learning, particularly in improving analysis capabilities and assisting brainstorming and writing; however, the students have expressed concerns about ethical issues and accuracy. Other online learning tools are discussed in research, including internet search engines, social networking tools, and learning management systems. For example, Fu and Karan (2015) explore the search engine preferences of 257 Chinese students studying in China and abroad, finding that Baidu is more popular due to its advantages in language and localisation, and Google is exceptional in providing high-quality academic resources and contributing to international insights. Fu and Karan (2015) also find that the longer students study abroad and the higher their level of education, the more likely they are to choose Google over Baidu.

Scholars hold conflicting views on the use of these online tools by Chinese students, especially Chinese international students. Forbush and Foucault-Welles (2016) suggest that these tools may lead online Chinese international students to be more reliant on an insular, home-ethnic network, potentially limiting their cultural adaptation in the cross-cultural context. Further scholars (Hou, 2020; Turnbull et al., 2021) however, refute that the tools help to improve students' academic performance and, in most cases, help online Chinese international students adapt to a cross-cultural environment by delivering valuable academic and cultural Information.

A small number of studies have evaluated the influence of traditional culture on online Chinese students' learning behaviours. For example, Zhang (2013) indicates that Chinese students' online learning behaviours are strongly dominated by the impact of Chinese traditional culture. Zhang (2013) explains that online Chinese students tend to adopt a collaborative approach to learning under the influence of collectivism; meanwhile, a perceived power distance in traditional Chinese culture scares Chinese students away from consulting their teachers for support. However, these statements are problematic, as they ignore the diversity of Chinese culture and Chinese students. This can be related to historical colonialism, which will be illustrated below.

The myths surrounding online Chinese distance students

The persistence of colonialism and the imbalance of power between the West and the Orient have led to the devaluation of Oriental cultures and education (Said,1978). This has invariably created epistemic injustices toward students from the Orient (Fricker, 2007), and this is embodied in the misconceptions of traditional Chinese culture and stereotypes towards online Chinese students in academic discourse.

Although Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are considered the three main cultures shaping education in East Asia (Lin et al., 2021), traditional Chinese culture is normally simplified to Confucianism in research, which is misunderstood as having a negative impact on Chinese education and students' learning behaviours. For example, memorisation in Confucianism is an effective approach to cultivating students' creativity, intelligence, and independence through reviewing and studying classical texts, and this is often misinterpreted as rote learning of textbook content (Yu, 2017). Humility in Confucianism, a strategy to foster mutually beneficial competition, is misunderstood as a strategy to avoid competition, or alternatively a sign of a student's confidence (You & Rud, 2024). Yu (2017) also argues that the benefits of Confucianism for learning are devalued in Western-dominated academic discourse, particularly its encouragement for critical thinking and maintaining an open and inclusive attitude towards different knowledge learning.

These examples reflect the hegemony and colonialism of the West toward the Orient. In this context, Chinese education's focus on the interconnectedness of knowledge, contextualised learning, and experiential learning is overlooked (You, 2020). Indeed, it is stereotyped as authoritative (Nield, 2004), teacher-led (Windsor, 2021), and achievement-focused (Commander et al., 2016). In contrast, Western pedagogy is considered to be a panacea that is superior to Chinese (or non-Western) pedagogy (You, 2020).

In such a climate, it is not surprising that the personal traits of Chinese students and their online distance learning behaviours are viewed as primarily negative, and students are being stigmatised as silent, face-saving, and passive learners (Law et al., 2013; Windsor, 2021). Although some terms carry positive meanings themselves, they are often framed negatively to describe online Chinese students in the literature (Mao & Lee, 2024). For example, harmony, in Zhang's (2013) study on Chinese students' ODE experiences, is interpreted as an avoidance of conflict rather than a desirable outcome achieved through negotiation. Online international Chinese students are also considered passive agents and are in a fragile position when it comes to cultural adaptation. For example, some studies (Kung, 2017; Mikal et al., 2015) indicate that online Chinese international students experience difficulties with integrating into online Western learning classrooms. Thus, there is a need for greater pastoral solicitude among Chinese overseas students in ODE (Yong, 2021).

These descriptions disregard the diversity of Chinese student populations and their cultural backgrounds. Lee and Bligh (2019) question how these scholars were able to verify that the investigated Chinese students were from the same cultural background. They criticised that these deficient narratives failed to provide online educators with a balanced and sophisticated perspective about different races and/or nationalities. The descriptions also regard classroom integration and cultural adaptation as the sole indicators of international students' success in their online distance learning, which neglects other possibilities in their ODE experiences (Astolfo & Allsopp, 2023; Mittelmeier, 2025; Saharso, 2019; Yao, 2015). For example, non-integration may be a strategic choice selected by the Chinese students. Although these studies claim

to adopt a student-centred approach, they reflect a top-down research perspective and fail to treat the Chinese students as equal knowledge co-constructors. Furthermore, these studies are grounded in false or a take-for-grounded presumption on Chinese students' cultural and educational backgrounds and thus view their experiences through a stereotypical lens. This contributes to the perpetuation of Western colonialism towards the Oriental, entrenching epistemic injustices against students from the Orient and thus labelling international students from the Orient as 'Othering' (Moosavi, 2022).

Of greater concern, is that a number of Chinese scholars are affected by potential colonialism stigmatising online Chinese students, further contributing to injustices and othering. In the context of neoliberalism, online students are considered as tools and their voices are arguably silenced, preventing them from effectively expressing their needs and positions (Reyes & Segal, 2019). Therefore, this is a timely effort to explore the online international students' experience. As Reyes and Segal (2019) stated，

> In this neoliberal era...it is time to carefully analyse whose voice is being cultivated through the delivery of online education to ensure the reflection and representation of the students' culturally and historically specific human experience. Such personalisation will allow for active participation in coursework and the integration of concepts into the student learner's expertise. Without the student voice being secured as central, online higher education could be on the brink of appearing to cultivate Western thought and institutions as dominant in online delivery in a manner more reflective of colonisation.

Therefore, this thesis takes online Chinese international students as a case to take a student-centred perspective to unpack international students' experiences, especially those involved in ODE programmes provided by English-speaking countries. By doing so, this study listens to online international students' voices, and identifies their perception of injustices.

1.2 Research rationale

1.2.1 Research gaps

Two main research gaps drive this thesis. Firstly, there is a practice gap. As illustrated in Section 1.1.2, the Chinese temporary policy during the pandemic

led a large number of Chinese international students to remain in China while participating in full-time online courses offered by overseas universities. This was not legitimised before the pandemic, and consequently, finding Chinese international students in ODE was a challenge, especially for those who stayed in China to take full-time online cross-border courses. This unprecedented phenomenon during the pandemic presents a valuable opportunity to explore online intercultural distance learning experiences of Chinese international students. Unfortunately, due to the temporary cessation of the policy, the online Chinese international unique experiences have hitherto not been well-documented in existing research. As Chinese ODE policies about internationalisation progressively expand, exploring online Chinese international students' experiences holds significant practical importance. Therefore, this thesis bridges the practical gap and provides empirical support for future ODE internationalisation policy and practices by unpacking the unique online learning experience of Chinese international students who stayed in China to take full-time online courses offered by overseas universities.

Secondly, a knowledge and understanding gap exists in research on online Chinese international students. As indicated in the Section 1.1.3, affected by the persistent colonialism and the power imbalance between the West and the Orient, online international students, particularly those from the non-Western countries, are subject to stereotypes and marginalisation in academic discourse and there is a lack of an understanding of their diverse experiences. This, in turn, has contributed to epistemic injustice toward them. In particular, in the context of the neoliberal era, online international students are considered as profit-generating tools for the HE market or as 'others' in the process of internationalising HE institutions, rather than as learners with complex experiences. Consequently, this contributes to a knowledge gap in understanding online international students' experiences and their voices. Thus, using online Chinese international students as a case study, the thesis explores their diverse and complex ODE experiences, attempting to fill the knowledge gap in understanding of online international students.

1.2.2 Personal experiences

The thesis is informed by my lived experience as an international student participating in full-time online distance courses during postgraduate and doctoral studies. In October 2019, I began my Master's degree in the UK. It was my first time studying abroad, and I had no prior any intercultural learning experiences. Having not fully engaged in cross-cultural experiences, I encountered the COVID-19 pandemic during my second term. As the pandemic rapidly spread, the university had to close, and all courses andsupervision moved to the online format, which fundamentally changed my learning experience.

Due to strict travel restrictions and the high cost of flight tickets, after thoughtful deliberation, I decided to stay in the UK to attend full-time online distance courses. During this period, I encountered challenges. As a student who initially engaged in full-time online distance learning, I experienced technical challenges when using the online platforms. Although I had engaged in MOOCs in China, the structure and requirements of online courses were different, not to mention my unfamiliarity with the online learning platforms used in the UK. When I first joined online sessions via Zoom or Teams, I was unable to fully engage in real-time interactions due to difficulties logging in and using my microphone. Over time, I became more familiar with these platforms, and more confident in using them, which enabled me to participate more effectively. In addition, the shift to online learning mode disrupted my intercultural experience. The planned in-person intercultural communication activities were cancelled, and the interactions among peers from different countries were more distant in the online setting. In this context, I tried to connect my peers and fostered communication and support by using social media such as WhatsApp and Facebook.

Affected by media discourses and geopolitical tensions, I also experienced and witnessed stigmatisation and prejudice against Chinese international students in the UK. For example, some of my Chinese peers and I were accused by racists of being the spreaders of the virus and, in some cases, were publicly

called the ‘China virus’. The unpleasant experiences gave me a sense of being othered. Such experiences are not isolated. Yao and Mwangi (2022) note that Asian international students, particularly Chinese international students, were constructed as ‘scapegoats’ or ‘political pawns’ in media and political discourses during the pandemic, which made them targets of racialisation and discrimination, thereby undermining their well-being in HE. Such representations can be attributed to Orientalism (Said, 1978) and the ‘Yellow Peril’ (Lyman, 2000), which have historically positioned East Asia and China as the ‘other’ and a threat to Western societies (Yao & Mwangi, 2022).

Furthermore, frequent relocation and concerns about health disrupted my daily routine. Instead of placing myself as a victim, I viewed these challenges as valuable opportunities for personal growth. Supported by the university and instructors, I actively negotiated my rights and managed my study and life through various measures such as self-regulation and self-care. Ultimately, I successfully completed all my coursework and earned a degree with Merit.

This experience improved my resilience and motivated my academic interest in ODE. With the support of my Masters supervisor Professor Alan Felstead, I completed my thesis on the attitudes of Chinese domestic students towards emergency remote learning and their challenges during the pandemic. Consistent with the findings of current research on online Chinese students (Chen et al., 2020; Li & Zhang, 2021; Miao et al., 2022), the thesis found that despite Chinese university students' overall satisfaction with emergency remote learning during the pandemic, they faced challenges, particularly with interaction. Therefore, the challenges, particularly those related to interaction, needed to be addressed if online distance learning was to continue in the long term. This drove me to focus on students’ interaction experiences within this present doctoral thesis.

To explore the issue more deeply, I decided to pursue a PhD degree. While completing my Master’s thesis, I was attracted by the influential research of my current PhD supervisor, Professor Kyungmee Lee. As an ODE expert, her critical perspective on ODE inspired me to rethink online students’ experience.

Therefore, I decided to apply to be her PhD student and, fortunately, I was successful. Subsequently, I began studying abroad to pursue my PhD, and became an online international student for the second time, as the pandemic continued.

Working with my supervisor on a systematic literature review about online Chinese students' learning experiences (see Mao & Lee, 2024), I further realised the epistemic injustices experienced by Chinese international students in education practice and academic research. This issue remains significant in the post-pandemic period. Yu et al. (2023) find that Chinese international students continue to experience microaggressions and stereotypes in the post-pandemic period, with some internalising and normalising racism. This, in turn, compels the students to adopt strategies of self-isolation during their learning and further reinforces their invisibility in HE. It is particularly pronounced among online Chinese international students. Affected by China's ODE policies, this group has received limited attention, which has made their online distance learning experiences difficult to articulate (Mao & Lee, 2024). As an online international student who has experienced visible and invisible biases, I decided to focus on the post-/decolonial theories as my research lens.

In general, from my Masters to my PhD study, ODE has accidentally been a part of my academic journey, which is identical to the experiences of my research participants. My personal intercultural experiences motivated this academic interest. Driven by my ODE experiences, I have produced this thesis to explore the interaction experiences of online international students, especially Chinese international students, providing a deeper insight into the development of ODE in the future.

1.3 Research Overview

1.3.1 Research objectives

Based on the case study of online Chinese international students,the main aim of this thesis was to provide a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of online international students' diverse interaction experiences in ODE, thereby

bridging the research gap concerning online international students. To achieve this aim, the following specific objectives have been developed for the thesis. Unlike some previous research that focuses solely on online international students' cultural adaptation or learning challenges, the thesis adopts a holistic and inclusive approach to develop a diverse perspective on online Chinese international students' experiences,exploring the complexities of their experiences. Specifically, the thesis rejects presumptions regarding online international students' backgrounds and cultures, and refuses to regard online Chinese international students as a homogeneous group. In the thesis, the differences and uniqueness of individual students' ODE experiences are valued.

Secondly, the thesis no longer considers cultural adaptation or classroom integration as the sole indicator for measuring online international students' academic performance. That is to say, the thesis avoids adopting a dichotomous, or top-down perspective to judge the online international students' experiences, and resists simplistically categorising the students' experiences as either successful or unsuccessful. The thesis focuses on exploring the mechanisms underlying the online international students' experiences and understanding the reasons behind their choices.

Finally, the thesis challenges the prevailing perspective that regards online international students as vulnerable and passive learners. The thesis positions online international students as active agents and knowledge co-constructors. Online international students are part of the ODE community, and they actively contribute to ODE internationalisation, rather than being mere participants. Therefore, listening to their voices and understanding their authentic experiences is crucial for the future development of ODE internationalisation.

1.3.2 Theoretical framework

As indicated in Section 1.1, interaction plays an important role in online students' experiences, which affects students' overall engagement and acceptance of ODE. Thus, the main theory in the thesis is Moore's (1989) three types of interaction (ToI), which provides a core framework for understanding

and analysing students' interaction experiences in ODE. Building on this, other extended interaction types, such as learner-interface interaction, learner-self interaction, and learner-environment interaction, are also included. In the thesis, ToI will serve as a descriptive lens to understand how the specific geographical location and the distinctive socio-cultural context of Chinese students who engage in full-time cross-cultural online distance learning while residing in China shape their interaction and learning experiences. As highlighted in Section 1.1.3, the potential colonialism negatively affects the knowledge production of online international students, particularly non-Western students, which results in injustices at the practical and epistemic levels. Therefore, a post-/decolonial theory is used as an analytical lens through which to critically examine the online international students' interaction experience. During the process, the thesis will also explore how power dynamics affect online international students' experiences. These will be discussed in detail in the theoretical chapter.

1.3.3 Research questions

Based on the theoretical framework, three research questions are proposed below:

RQ 1. What is the interaction experience of Chinese international students who attended full-time online distance courses provided by English-speaking countries while residing in China?

RQ 2. How do the international students perceive epistemic injustice and navigate or reproduce it in their interaction experiences?

RQ 3. To what extent do the students' experiences with epistemic injustice reflect the internationalisation and decolonial practices in ODE?

Although the research questions are informed by a critical perspective, the study does not focus solely on the students' experiences of injustice. It also recognises the complexity of the students' interaction experiences and highlights their agency. In this sense, the first research question explores the

students' interaction experiences from a broad perspective to reveal the complexity of their experiences. Subsequently, the second question centres on students' perceptions of epistemic injustices from a post-/decolonial perspective. In particular, the study focuses on how students exercise agency to respond to and navigate such experiences, thereby making sense of their online distance learning. Building on the first and second research questions, the third question seeks to reflect on internationalisation and decolonial practices in ODE by exploring students' interaction experiences, thereby providing implications for pedagogy, institutional practices, and relevant policy.

1.3.4 Methodological approach

Based on critical theory, the qualitative case study is comprised of nineteen Chinese international students who attended full-time online distance courses provided by English-speaking universities while residing in mainland China. Guided by the theoretical framework, an interview protocol was developed to capture the relevant and crucial segments of participants' statements. Subsequently, an online semi-structured interview was conducted with the targeted participants, who were initially recruited through purposive sampling, followed by snowball sampling via Chinese social media, including Xiaohongshu and WeChat. Supported by NVivo 14, a qualitative analysis software, the thematic analysis followed the six-step framework identified by Braun and Clarke (2006), and this was employed to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns of meaning/themes around interview data (Clarke et al., 2015). To ensure the rigour and trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation and member checking were used, in which the iterative analysis was shared with participants for amendments or clarifications to ensure the accuracy of the interpretations of their statements and viewpoints. All participants were included in this process. In addition, the entire data collection process was conducted in strict accordance with the ethical requirements of Lancaster University. These will be illustrated in detail in the methodological chapter.

1.4 The potential contributions of the study

1.4.1 Theoretical contributions

The theoretical contributions of the thesis are two-fold. Firstly, the thesis reconceptualises ToI, extending its application in different contexts, particularly in cross-cultural contexts, to bridge the gap in the existing research. As discussed in the following literature review, previous studies on ToI have predominantly focused on online domestic students' experience. However, the experiences of international students attending online distance courses offered by English-speaking universities while remaining in their home countries, have received less attention in the relevant research. Such staying at home country to attend online intercultural distance courses complicates international students' interaction experiences. Therefore, by examining the experiences of online Chinese international students who participate in such courses, this study extends ToI into a specific cross-cultural context, aiming to uncover the complexity and dynamics of students' interaction experiences.

In addition, the thesis introduces the post-/decolonial theory as an analytical framework to critically examine the international students' perceptions of injustice in their interaction experience. As indicated in the following literature review, the existing research on ODE students' interaction experiences tends to portray the students as isolated, vulnerable learners or those lacking a sense of belonging, overlooking their diverse experiences and their potential as active agents. Under the influence of potential colonial discourses, online international students are stigmatised, with their interaction experiences misinterpreted in the limited research, resulting in epistemic injustices. However, the power dynamics are less discussed in previous limited research concerning online international students' interaction experiences. Therefore, the thesis employs a post-/decolonial perspective to examine how the power dynamics shape online international students' interaction experiences, thereby challenging the deficient discourses and presumptions about international ODE students in prior research. Based on this, the thesis further examines the the effectiveness of the internationalisation and decolonial practices in ODE.

1.4.2 Pedagogical contributions

By unpacking online international students' interaction experiences, the thesis will offer practical implications for the development of ODE pedagogy and international programmes. Firstly, the thesis will provide implications for educational practice in ODE. By delving into the diverse learning experiences of online individual international students, the thesis will help online distance educators in better understanding the students with different cultural and educational backgrounds in the context of globalisation, identifying the students' different demands in the online intercultural distance learning. This will further contribute to the personalised learning in ODE. In addition, the thesis regards online international students as active agents rather than passive recipients of knowledge or a group requiring special care. Based on this, the thesis will encourage online instructors to apply inclusive and open teaching strategies, empowering online international students with greater opportunities for expression and engagement. The thesis also encourages online instructors to consider different teaching strategies to stimulate students' potential, fostering a more equitable teacher-student relationship.

Secondly, the thesis will provide insights for the development of the future internationalisation ODE programmes. Although online international students are regarded as carriers with diverse cultures, the diversity in the curriculum does not arise spontaneously but requires intentional design (Gemmell et al., 2015). Therefore, the voices of diverse student groups hold significant importance for enhancing course diversity and internationalisation in ODE programmes. By emphasising the importance of listening to the voices of different student groups in the thesis, the thesis will encourage to foster teacher-student collaboration and calls upon programme designers to integrate more diverse perspectives during the process of the ODE curriculum. This will further support more equitable and inclusive internationalisation practices within ODE.

1.4.3 Policy contributions

The policy contribution of the thesis lies in providing empirical data and theoretical support for the development of ODE internationalisation policies at both the institutional and national levels. Firstly, by understanding online international students' experiences and listening to their voices, the thesis will provide HE policymakers with crucial insights into the needs of online international students. By identifying epistemic injustices experienced by non-Western international students within ODE environments, the thesis critically examines the limitations of existing internationalisation policies, particularly those adopted by Western HE institutions. The thesis will also attempt to bridge the gap between ODE educational practice and policy-making, contributing to the development of a more equitable and inclusive framework for ODE internationalisation in HE.

Secondly, the thesis will contribute to ODE internationalisation policies at national levels. As stated in the Section 1.1.2, China's temporary policy opened a small window for Chinese international students to stay in China to attend full-time online distance courses provided by overseas universities during the pandemic, but the policy was ultimately discontinued in the post-pandemic due to concerns about the quality of these online courses and a lack of relevant data as well as theoretical support. This does not imply that the temporary policy is worthless. Inspired by the temporary policy, Chinese universities have begun exploring bilateral ODE internationalisation practices in the post-pandemic. As exemplified in the Section 1.1.2, some Chinese universities, such as Tsinghua University, have adopted a partnership model to collaborate with overseas universities to establish international ODE programmes. The universities are not limited to promotion of local ODE programmes to partner overseas institutions or to attract overseas learners, but encourage Chinese domestic students to participate in ODE programmes provided by the partner overseas institutions with the guidance of Chinese domestic instructors. The policies related to ODE internationalisation have also become more open.

Nevertheless, the current policy regarding the participation of Chinese international students in full-time online programmes provided by other countries remain cautious and conservative due to a lack of empirical research. Therefore, this thesis will provide Chinese policymakers with empirical evidence on the effectiveness of temporary policies implemented during the pandemic, and offer practical implications for developing ODE internationalisation policies in broader contexts by reviewing and analysing the experience of online Chinese international students during the pandemic.

1.5 Thesis structure

The thesis started with an introduction of the research context, followed by a review of previous research on ODE. In the literature review, the thesis systematically reviews the studies concerning online international students and critically examines the relevant literature on students' interaction experiences, especially online international students. On this basis, the thesis further reveals the epistemic injustice and stigmatisation towards international students within academic discourses. Subsequently, the thesis introduces the theoretical framework to explore the historical roots underlying these deficient academic discourses. In the theoretical framework, different types of interaction will also be detailed. Then, the thesis outlines the specific research design and methods, encompassing data collection, analytical processes, and the researcher's reflectivity and philosophical stance. The findings section presents a reconceptualisation of ToI and reveals the diverse forms of injustice experienced by online international students during their interaction experiences. In the discussion section, the thesis compares the research findings with the existing literature, challenging previous studies' deficient discourses of online international students. Finally, the thesis summaries key findings and proposes theoretical and practical implications. Building on upon a critical reflection on its limitations, the thesis provides suggestions for future research regarding the internationalisation of ODE.

1.6 Terminology in this study

Term	Definition
Agency	In this thesis, agency is understood as online international students' capacity to make choices and take actions within interactions, enabling them to affect the learning environment and ultimately construct meaningful ODE experiences based on their aspirations.
Coloniality	Coloniality refers to the power structures, racial hierarchies and Eurocentric knowledge systems inherited from colonial legacies, which continue to shape knowledge production in HE and students' learning experiences.
Distance Education (DE)	This refers to a form of education where students and teachers are geographically separated, and teaching and learning activities are conducted through various communication methods, including postal mail, telephone, and radio broadcasts.
Diversity	This refers to the variety of the student body and their experiences. Such diversity exists across students from different countries, as well as amongst students of the same nationality.
English-speaking countries/universities	Universities or countries where English is the primary language. Although not all English-speaking countries or universities are situated within Western contexts, the term is used in this thesis to refer mainly to Western countries and universities.

Epistemic injustices	Epistemic injustice refers to the systemic injustices experienced by online international students due to race, cultural backgrounds, gender, or social identities. This results in them being devalued, marginalised, or finding it difficult to articulate their experiences, hindering their engagement in interaction.
Homogeneous	This refers to viewing students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds as a uniform group, assuming they share the same cultural understandings, demands, and capabilities, which oversimplifies the complexity of their experiences.
Interaction experience	This refers to the different types of interaction experienced by students. The interaction occurs within the learning environment and beyond the classrooms, which ultimately affect students' learning.
Intercultural/cross-cultural context	A context in which students from different cultural backgrounds engage in a shared learning environment. In this environment, students are able to exchange knowledge, values, and cultural understandings through various learning activities. The environment can take place online or on campus.
Marginalisation	This refers to the process whereby certain student groups are systematically excluded from mainstream discourse and resource allocation in HE structures. In the context of ODE internationalisation, this manifests as the neglect of international students' experiences and the silencing of their voices. This is not always accidental, but rather a structural and institutional outcome.
Online Chinese International Students	In this thesis, it refers to the Chinese students who remain in China while taking full-time online distance courses provided by an English-speaking university. In this context, their identities are complex and cannot be simply categorised by visa

	status or geographical location.
Online Distance Education (ODE)	A subcategory of distance education wherein all learning activities are conducted via the internet.
Othering	This refers to a certain student group being perceived as an outsider in interaction due to differences in language, culture, and previous experiences, which leads to them facing exclusion and rejection by the mainstream group.
Stigmatisation	This refers to the negative or stereotypical labels imposed upon a particular student group. Such labels are often based on false assumptions or prejudices towards the group, thereby placing them in a position of being devalued and discriminated against.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The historical development and internationalisation process of ODE was reviewed in the previous chapter. This chapter extends that discussion by synthesising the relevant literature on this topic. Firstly, it provides a general overview of the scholarship on ODE internationalisation. Secondly, it critically examines the role of online international students within this body of research. Given that the interaction is regarded as an important solution to address the challenges of ODE, this chapter also reviews research on interaction, particularly that concerning the experiences of online international students. It is noted that while the scope of the studies selected in this chapter is mainly focused on the past decade (i.e., 2015 to 2025), a small number of earlier studies are included in order to present a more comprehensive picture of scholarship related to ODE internationalisation, given the continuity of coloniality and the historical context of ODE development. By critically analysing these previous studies, this chapter highlights the research gaps in the existing studies, which proves the rationale for this study.

2.1 Internationalisation in ODE

Internationalisation in traditional HE is generally categorised into two groups, that is, internationalisation abroad (IA) and internationalisation at home (IaH) (Knight, 2004). IA involves geographical mobility, relocating educational institutions and academic programmes, or teaching and administrative staff overseas (Knight, 2008). In the context of universities, the primary IA activities comprise setting up campuses abroad or acting as sending partners to conduct academic programmes (Knight, 2020). These activities entail the universities dispatching their staff, normally faculty members or students, to their overseas campus or to partner universities in other countries for a range of purposes such as training, visiting and collaborative projects. In contrast to IA, which requires relocating campuses and staff, IaH attempts to move beyond mobility and involves universities remaining in their static locations (Wächter, 2003). In the context of IaH, universities achieve their internationalisation goals by integrating international and intercultural dimensions into the curriculum and

inviting international staff and students to engage in formal or informal learning activities on domestic campuses (Crowther et al., 2000; Wächter, 2003). Universities also act as host institutions, establishing international programmes that allow them to internationalise without needing a geographical presence abroad. This scheme therefore enables universities to achieve their internationalisation goals within their respective home countries (Crowther et al., 2000).

Advancements in technology and the rapid development of ODE have increasingly blurred the geographical distinction in the internationalisation of traditional HE. As stated in Section 1.1.1, supported by technology, individuals could sit at home or reside in a third country to attend educational programmes provided by a university located in another country through online delivery. In this context, the traditional paradigm of IA and IaH, which hinges on the geographical relocation of universities and staff, is not directly applicable. Instead, internationalisation occurs within a virtual, technology-supported environment, where geographical boundaries are transcended (Mittelmeier, 2022). That is, internationalisation no longer relies solely on the geographical mobility of individuals and HE institutions, but takes place in the ODE context. In this context, Ramanau (2016) challenges the conventional geographical understanding of IA and IaH, and proposes the concept of internationalisation at a distance (IaD) to designate internationalisation in the context of ODE. Consequently, IaD is considered to be the third category of internationalisation in HE. Mittelmeier et al. (2019) further conceptualise the concept of IaD, the third space within the existing dichotomous model of IA and IaH. IaD is clearly defined as ‘all forms of education across borders where students, their respective staff, and institutional provisions are separated by geographical distance and supported by technology’ (Mittelmeier et al., 2019, p 2).

This definition of internationalisation in ODE highlights the mobility of knowledge rather than individuals (Mittelmeier et al., 2019; Yue et al., 2023), as the emphasis shifts from geographical mobility to virtual connectivity. In other words, global knowledge is shared and achieved within a virtual, technology-supported environment without the necessity for geographical mobility of

individuals (Yue et al., 2023). In this sense, ODE seems to be a significant means to promote social justice. Indeed, the sharing of global knowledge and internationalisation in ODE have historically been applauded for promoting equality, inclusiveness, and diversity, and consequently, ODE has been considered as an alternative to traditional HE, as noted in the Section 1.1.1. However, scholars have raised critical perspectives on the assumption in recent years.

The equality, inclusiveness, and diversity in ODE internationalisation are being questioned. Lee (2020) critiques that although ODE is championed to widen access to HE internationalisation through lower costs, such claim overlooks the financial disparities among different student groups. In other words, ODE does not necessarily mean an affordable option for all learners. Lee (2022) uses the example of online students' tuition fees to illustrate that the cost of online intercultural distance courses are not invariably cheaper than that of campus-based courses. Lee (2022) explains that online international students should pay tuition fees two to three times higher than their domestic counterparts. Although the online international students are exempt from travel or visa expenses compared to students studying abroad, they still experience considerable financial burden. Thus, the so-called 'low-cost' narrative of ODE masks underlying structural inequalities. For students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, online international education remains financially inaccessible, as inequitable tuition structures continue to limit their full participation in online intercultural programmes. Furthermore, the digital divide and disparities in regional as well as national development can hinder the equitable distribution of global educational resources, thereby placing students from disadvantaged backgrounds at a greater disadvantage in internationalised online HE (Azıonya & Nhedzı, 2021; Glass et al., 2021; Lebeničnik et al., 2020)

Other scholars provide evidence for this argument in their empirical research, highlighting the underlying inequality in ODE. From Black and critical feminist perspectives, Cin et al. (2025) conduct interviews with online international students at a South African university and discuss the concept of homeplace in ODE internationalisation, highlighting 'home' as a political and gender practice

that reinforces the existing unequal marginalisation of female international students in ODE. Through the lens of two North African online female international doctoral students, Abdelghaffar and Eid (2025) also report on challenges considered to be commonly present in ODE, but more acute for students from the Global South, including having different time zones, a lack of effective social interaction, poor technological infrastructure and limited as well as expensive access to online learning resources, which significantly impact international students' ODE engagement. The challenges confirm that ODE internationalisation is not a panacea for increasing access to international HE in the mainstream discourse, and it perpetuates structural inequalities, particularly for international students from less developed regions or countries (Abdelghaffar & Eid, 2025).

Similarly, Kumi-Yeboah et al. (2025), Çalıkoğlu et al.(2025) and Ngalomba et al.(2025) challenge the prevailing statements about the equality in ODE internationalisation by exploring the ODE internationalisation experience of students and faculty staff in Ghana, Turkish, and Tanzania HE institutions, respectively. These studies reveal that international students perceive ODE internationalisation as a transformative and meaningful learning experience, which improves academic development and enhances professional and cross-cultural affordances. Nevertheless, these studies identify that students face various challenges, such as unequal access to technology, inadequate essential infrastructure, and insufficient institutional support in ODE internationalisation. This is in line with the findings of Abdelghaffar and Eid (2025). Although the students and faculty members exercise agency to address these challenges, the structural challenges restrict students' full engagement in ODE internationalisation, especially for online international students. These clearly run counter to aspirations for accessibility and inclusiveness in ODE. While ODE appears to widen participation in international HE education, thereby promoting accessibility, inclusiveness, and diversity of HE, the actual benefits reflected in practice are not as equitable as envisioned (Lee, 2020).

In this sense, the assumption that internationalisation of ODE is a completely equitable substitute for traditional internationalised HE is being questioned.

Huang and Mittelmeier (2025) compare the learning experiences of students studying abroad and online and identify the differences in their learning ecologies, indicating that internationalisation of ODE cannot simply be regarded as an alternative to traditional HE. Huang and Mittelmeier (2025) explain that IaD students primarily learn online, but their experience is not entirely virtualised. IaD students' geographical and social environments play a significant role in shaping their learning process. Therefore, equating ODE with traditional higher education or viewing online and offline learning as dualism is an oversimplified understanding. Mittelmeier et al. (2025) argue that the key point is to explore whether universities could provide meaningful intercultural learning experiences for online students, especially interaction experiences traditionally assumed to require geographical mobility, rather than evaluating ODE solely as a substitute for mobility. The provision of such experiences not only reflects on curriculum design, but also depends on how HE institutions position online students, specifically whether the universities genuinely regard the students as equal members of an international learning community.

Unfortunately, the attitudes of HE institutions toward online students, especially online international students, have been criticised for reinforcing the inequality in the internationalisation of ODE. Although the international programmes of ODE offered by universities give an opportunity for students who are unable to travel abroad due to external constraints to participate in international education, some initiatives are primarily designed from the perspective of the institutions and do not fully take into account the actual needs of online international students. Furthermore, universities always need non-domestic participants, labelled as 'others', to constitute international components essential for their internationalisation goals in ODE. In this sense, universities function as pivotal actors in the HE landscape, but international students are regarded as resources, tools, or others for achieving institutions' internationalisation goals (Lee, 2022). Consequently, this 'top-down' perspective contributes either to the neglect of online international students or to their stigmatisation, where they are frequently perceived as deficient and passive learners (Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022). Although studies have now started to focus on the voices and

experiences of online international students, such research needs more dynamics. Therefore, it is necessary to further explore the voices and experiences of online international students. Before doing so, it is essential to critically review the position of international students in past and current ODE research to better justify the need for such an inquiry.

2.2 International students in ODE research

In this section, the portrayal of international students in the ODE research will be critically reviewed, drawing on the structure of Lee & Bligh's (2019) research. The studies on online international students are divided into four groups. Firstly, the research that portrays online international students in vague ways is highlighted, which homogenises the online international student group. Secondly, the studies that describe online international students as education resources and tools are criticised, which marginalise the students' voices and actual demands. The homogenisation and marginalisation contribute to a discourse portraying online international students as deficient. Therefore, the following section will elaborate on how previous research constructs the deficit narratives and images of online international students. These deficit insights in studies further highlight the rationale of adopting the post-/decolonial perspectives to explore the experiences of international students. Some recent developments in ODE internationalisation research that consider online international students as active agents and co-constructors of knowledge have also been applauded. These studies underscore the necessity of further exploring international students' experiences and voices in the internationalisation of ODE.

2.2.1 Ambiguous portrayal of online international students

Although international students are mentioned in some ODE studies, these studies tend to describe the students from a grand perspective. Furthermore, online international students are placed in an ambiguous position in these studies, describing a homogenised group and positing them as having limited

resources. This is evidence in Gemmell et al.'s (2015) research on the internationalisation of ODE.

Conducting an online survey, Gemmell et al. (2015) use 73 students pursuing the online Master of Public Health degree at Manchester University, UK as a case to explore the students' perceptions and experiences of studying with peers from different countries within the online distance learning environment. The investigated population consists of 47 students from the UK or EU and 26 students from other countries in the study. The authors use the tuition fee as the criterion for categorising students. Those paying the 'home fee' are indicated as domestic students, while those paying higher 'international' fees are classified as international students, with a detailed demographic table of international students' background provided.

Regrettably, these detailed categorisations are little utilised in the subsequent analysis. The study's conclusion is rather generalised, stating that the majority of online domestic students believe that studying with peers from other countries has a positive influence. The research conducted by Gemmell et al. (2015) focuses on the contributions of ODE internationalisation and lists the diversified components of online students. However, during the analytical process, these students from diverse cultural backgrounds are ultimately simplified into a homogeneous category of 'international students', thereby becoming a vague backdrop and primarily existing as a comparative tool for domestic students.

In addition, the uncritical classification based on tuition fees in the research reinforces the dualism and structural inequalities between international and domestic students. As argued by Lee (2022) and Raghuram et al. (2020), international students are often perceived as a privileged group perpetuating their status through international education, but the statement overlooks the fact that some students choose online international programmes partly because they cannot afford in-person classes due to financial constraints. In other words, not all international students are rich and privileged (Raghuram et al., 2020). In international education, such differences in tuition fees are often taken for

granted. However, as long as international students continue to pay higher fees than domestic students, the accessibility and fairness of ODE is questionable (Lee, 2022). Thus, these mean that the research's attention to the ODE internationalisation remains superficial and indicates that online international students are used simply as a tool for research and the internationalisation of HE institutions

A similar case is also reflected in the research of Milman et al. (2015), Ramanau (2016), and Chen (2023). Milman et al. (2015) note the quantitative findings from their exploratory mixed methods study of first- and second-year students pursuing online postgraduate master's degrees at a university in the United States. In the methodological section of the study, the specific nationality of students is reported. However, during the analysis process, the students are simplified into White and non-White groups, ultimately yielding general conclusions and recommendations. The study draws a general conclusion that there is a difference between White and non-White students in terms of career and counseling services, with White students considering these services 'unimportant'; in online distance learning, and non-White students viewing them to be 'very important'. Based on this, the authors suggest that online instructors should consider students' diverse demands.

As illustrated in Section 2.1, Ramanau's (2016) study of part-time students' perceptions of their online intercultural management course contributes to the concept of IaD. However, in the first example from Ramanau's (2016) study, international students are presented in a vague way and are treated as a homogenised group, with little attention paid to individual differences. Ramanau (2016) firstly employs an online survey to explore the students' views and presents the students' diverse demographic information through statistics and percentages. Similar to the research of Gemmell et al. (2015), Ramanau (2016) reclassifies the online international students as a similar group in the subsequent quantitative analysis. Based on the quantitative analysis, Ramanau (2016) claims that the curriculum should cater to the diverse international student groups. However, the diversity of online international students'

experiences is presented rather ambiguously in the quantitative results, leading the recommendations to be broad and unspecific.

Chen (2023) also adopts an online survey to explore the experience of students, particularly international students, who engaged in emergency remote learning at a Canadian university during the pandemic. The study population comprises 450 students, including 196 domestic students and 252 international students. Similar to the research of Gemmell et al. (2015) and Milman et al. (2015), Chen (2023) draws a very general conclusion, stating that international students are more likely to accept emergency remote learning than domestic students, and international students tend to favour asynchronous courses due to the issues of time zone and internet connection.

Clearly, these studies provide a very vague picture of online students, particularly international students. Although they provide statistics on students' diverse backgrounds, the diverse experiences of the students are overlooked in the analysis and conclusions, and are simplified into a homogenised group labelled 'international students' or 'domestic students'. In other words, the study population in these studies is diverse in constitution, but the online students' experiences are not presented as diverse. Furthermore, these studies, such as that conducted by Ramanau (2016), indicate that online international students are a group from a country or region with limited resources, and are having to engage in online courses provided by Western universities with rich resources and more advanced societies (Lee & Bligh, 2019). The implication tends to frame online international students as deficient learners and carries a tone of superiority, positioning international students as others who are distant from the authors or their institutions in both geography and identity (Lee & Bligh, 2019).

One of the key reasons for the ambiguity and homogeneity among online students' experiences is that the majority of such studies employ the quantitative approach. Although this helps reveal overarching trends and provides generalisable insights through large samples, it tends to neglect the diversity within groups, thereby contributing to the ambiguous image of online international students. Therefore, a qualitative approach is essential in order to

understand the diverse experiences within the international student population. In addition, the epistemic injustices experienced by online international students, especially non-Western international students, contribute to the othering of them within studies, which will be elaborated upon in the Section 3.2.3..

In general, while these studies champion ODE internationalisation and provide knowledge contributions to the field to some extent, the portrayal and experiences of online international students are reflected in a rather vague and homogenised way, thereby enhancing the othering of the students. This has resulted in their recommendations on the ODE internationalisation practices being unspecific and less effective. In addition, such description tends to indicate that online international students are considered as educational resources and tools, thus contributing to the deficient discourses about online international students. This will be discussed in the following section.

2.2.2 Online international students are educational resources.

As outlined above, the ambiguous portrayals of online international students place them in the backdrop in the studies and suggest that the students are viewed as the educational resources to promote the internationalisation of domestic students and local HE institutions. In the study by Gemmell et al. (2015) mentioned above, they write in the conclusion:

> Students on an online distance learning programme benefit from learning alongside international students through learning about the experiences of health professionals and health systems in other countries and through an appreciation of other perspectives and the importance of the context of public health issues (Gemmell et al., 2015, p.145).

From this statement, it can be seen that while the research claims that it focuses on the online distance learning experiences of students from different countries, its starting point is grounded in the perspective of online domestic students, championing the benefits of ODE internationalisation for domestic students rather than international students.

The portrayal of online international students as the educational resources or internationalisation instruments, is also shown in other research, including that conducted by Oberhelman and Dunn (2019), Woodley et al. (2023), and Strickland et al. (2013). Oberhelman and Dunn (2019) investigate the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds engaging in an online intercultural learning programme launched by the College of Liberal Arts at Texas A&M University. This online programme is modelled on the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) originally initiated by the State University of New York. In the research, the study population is diverse, including students with such nationalities as American, Italian, and Australian, and the instruments adopted are diverse, including the Global Perspective Inventory (GPI) survey, email threads, and a reflection journal. Disappointingly, the conclusion in the study centred only on domestic students (i.e., American students) in the article. It claims that online intercultural collaborative learning enables American students to study with students from other countries at a lower financial cost, thereby gaining academic, cultural, and future vocational benefits. Students from other countries, however, are merely mentioned at the end of the research, and presented as functional entities. As Oberhelman and Dunn (2019, p.10) put it, 'three weeks in, say, Athens or Barcelona can offer American students academic, cultural, and career benefits, but so can three weeks of collaborative online work with Catalan or Hellenic students'.

Woodley et al. (2023) and Strickland et al. (2013) examine nursing students' experiences of participating in online collaborative international learning programmes provided by HE institutions in the Global North. Similar to the study of Oberhelman and Dunn (2019), Woodley et al. (2023), and Strickland et al. (2013) use diverse methods, such as surveys and interviews, and assert that their studies include diverse research groups. The studies of Woodley et al. (2023) and Strickland et al. (2013) disappointingly conclude that online collaborative learning is a feasible and cost-effective way for their domestic counterpart to experience international study. A common characteristic of these studies is that their methodology sections emphasise the participation of online international students, but their conclusions marginalise the international

student group, which is similar with the studies criticised in Section 2.2.1. However, the studies in this section are explicitly regarded the online international students as resources serving the learning needs of domestic students from the Global North. Furthermore, these studies focus on how ODE programmes could utilise the diverse backgrounds of international students to provide domestic students with an opportunity for international learning and intercultural experiences at a lower economic cost and without leaving their home country.

Noticeably, the tendency to regard international students as tools and resources is not only observed in research concerning the internationalisation of ODE in the Global North, but can also be found in a few studies focusing on that in the Global South. Adopting the mixed method, Vajargah and Khoshnoodifar (2013) explore the perception of faculty members, domestic students, and international students on the internationalisation of ODE in five universities in Iran. Similar to previous studies on ODE internationalisation in the Global North, the research of Vajargah and Khoshnoodifar (2013) on the Global South situates international students as tools to reveal the benefits of ODE internationalisation for Iranian domestic students. Vajargah and Khoshnoodifar (2013) provide some suggestions about online international students in the conclusion:

> ...there are some strategies: developing subjects in international language for non-native students, having bilingual course content, teaching in the international language, introducing resources and books in international language, availability of different language options for content study, removing difficult rules for teaching in a language except Farsi (p.356).

However, the core of these measures serves to the internationalisation of domestic HE institutions in Iran and online intercultural learning opportunities for local students by recruiting more online international students, as highlighted subsequently ‘to be successful in internationalisation of higher education of Iran’ (Vajargah & Khoshnoodifar, 2013, p.357).

One of the important reasons for this tendency is that these studies are generally grounded in the economic perspective to explore the internationalisation of ODE. For example, Gemmell et al. (2015) and Vajargah and Khoshnoodifar (2013) illustrate the significant financial benefits that international students bring to their domestic HE institutions in the introduction. In this context, online international students are regarded as cash cows and are treated as resources to increase the educational and economic value for local HE institutions and students (Lee, 2022). As a result, it is no wonder that the experiences of online international students are marginalised and they appear as a backdrop within such studies.

In general, while these studies reveal the benefits of ODE internationalisation and its feasibility, they demonstrate that online international students can be regarded as resources or tools. Most worryingly, these studies in listing the benefits of ODE internationalisation are based on the idealised assumptions that domestic and international students already have intercultural communication ability and language skills before entering the online international learning environment. This neglects the diversity of individuals' capabilities and the potential risks behind ODE internationalisation. Therefore, such research is more of a propaganda in terms of the economic, educational, and cultural benefits offered by ODE than an in-depth exploration of its complexities. The ambiguous portrayal of online international students and the tendency to view them as educational resources reinforce their homogenisation and marginalisation, which contributes to the deficient description of them in the research.

2.2.3 Online international students are deficient learners.

The deficit portrayals of online international students, particularly non-Western students, can be found in a number of studies concerning ODE internationalisation. Online international students are depicted as deficient learners through their culture or capability. Firstly, the research tends to consider the online international students as a homogeneous group sharing similar cultural backgrounds and characteristics, implying that their cultural

characteristics are deficient and impede their online intercultural learning. The tendency is evident in some studies that uncritically apply cultural frameworks to analyse the experiences of online international students. Based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions and activity theory, Gómez-Rey et al. (2016) and Stoten et al. (2018) compare the online learning experiences of different student groups. Here, the authors attempt to use the theories critically, and indeed criticise them for simplifying the concept of culture as nation and viewing culture as static rather than dynamic. The authors also admit the theories' risk of homogenising the online student groups. Disappointingly, the findings of the two studies still reflect the limitations of cultural theories, not to mention that the studies attempt to rationalise these limitations in their arguments.

Gómez-Rey et al. (2016) report that the learner autonomy of Chinese and Mexican students from collectivist contexts is lower than that of American and Spanish students from individualistic contexts. Gómez-Rey et al. (2016) also note that Chinese and Mexican students tend to accept a hierarchical structure, and they display lower learning motivation due to high power distance in their cultures, but American and Spanish students have higher motivation and engage in learning and interaction more positively due to low power distance. Furthermore, Gómez-Rey et al. (2016, p.227) attempt to justify the problematic conclusion, claiming that 'country is the major contributor in explaining the cultural orientation'.

Stoten et al. (2018) draw a similar conclusion that Asian students (predominantly Chinese students) are more likely to view themselves as part of an online community and are more positive about engaging in discussion boards than African students, who challenge the benefits of the community. Stoten et al. (2018) illustrate that online Asian and British students hold a more positive attitude towards using the discussion board than European students, most of whom are from Bulgaria and Romania. Drawing on the findings, Stoten et al. (2018) rationalise the limitations of Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2001), arguing that 'this exploration of individualistic and collectivist cultures is of relevance in this research, as behaviour is conditioned by cultural norms and associated value systems' (Stoten et al., 2018, p.15). The validity of

the findings and argument is questionable; largely, the study fails to provide detailed descriptions of specific cultural norms about the four regions and assumes that readers have prior knowledge about the four regions. As a result, the conclusions are ambiguous and less persuasive. If assuming that African and Asian students are from collectivism and European and British students are from individualism based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2001), the authors' findings and argument are contradictory. The findings clearly show the diversity within the collectivist group and individualist group, but the argument neglects the diversity and rigidly homogenises the student group.

In comparison, the study of Tlili et al. (2023) is much stronger, demonstrating a more critical and rigorous application of cultural theories to explore online student groups. Drawing on Hofstede's National Cultural Dimensions (Hofstede, 1983), Tlili et al. (2023) investigate the learning experiences and behaviour patterns of 262 students from three cultural backgrounds participating in an online intercultural six-week course. In the study, the student group remains homogenised, with Chinese students from Confucianism, Tunisian students from Arab culture, and Serbian students from Serbian culture.

Nevertheless, Tlili et al. (2023) reveal that students' learning methods and motivation are partially affected by culture, and thus, students from similar cultural backgrounds do not necessarily show similar learning behaviours. The authors prove that Chinese students, Tunisian students, and Serbian students from a similar cultural background characterised by high power distance and low individualism show different learning patterns, where Chinese and Tunisian students engage in online forums and interaction more frequently than their Serbian counterparts. The authors also discovered that the students' online learning behaviours are affected by other factors, such as pedagogy. Based on the findings, Tlili et al. (2023, p. 3,964) argue that 'culture should not be taken as a generic concept, and should be investigated deeply to see other associated dimensions that may affect students' online behaviours'. Undeniably, Tlili et al. (2023) still fail to capture the diversity in individual students, oversimplify cultural categorisation, and ignore the cultural components' variations of a nation. However, their research reveals that online students'

learning is not entirely determined by cultural factors, and there exist differences among students who are grouped as sharing similar cultural backgrounds.

Although some studies do not use cultural theories as the analytic framework, they also homogenise the online international students' backgrounds when demonstrating the students' experiences. This can be observed in the ODE research that provides vague descriptions of online international students and considers them as resources, as discussed in Sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2. For example, the study populations of Milman et al. (2015) and Woodley et al. (2023) comprise students from different regions or races, such as Asian students, American Indian students, and Black students. However, the analysis of the studies fails to reveal the diverse experiences of different cultural groups and individual students sharing the same region or race. A similar case is also evident in other research, especially those examining the experiences of online Asian students. In the studies (Du et al., 2016; Kung, 2017; Windsor, 2021) exploring Chinese students' online learning experiences, the labels, such as Confucianism, collectivism, authority, harmony, and teacher-centred learning, are recurrent and firmly bound to the online Chinese student groups.

While these labels indeed reflect some features of Chinese culture and education, the labels used in these studies build on the homogenised assumption of online Chinese students, viewing them as representatives of collectivism or Confucianism. However, the culture of East Asia, including Chinese culture, embraces diverse traditions such as Buddhism and Taoism (Lin et al., 2021), as illustrated in the Introduction at 1.1.3; not to mention that there are 56 different ethnic groups in China, which share similarities and exhibit differences with the Chinese mainstream culture. In addition, sharing a similar cultural background does not necessarily mean that students and their peers have the same cultural understandings (Stewart, 2017). Lacković and Olteanu (2023) criticise the reductive approach to international students' culture and identity construction and proposed the concept of 'identity +', arguing that identity is dynamic, relational and multimodal. Therefore, such homogenised assumptions mask the complexity of online students' experiences, especially

considering that they are based on the faint contextual information provided by those authors (Lee & Bligh, 2019; Mittelmeier,2023).

Most worryingly, the homogenisation regards the backgrounds and cultures of online international students, particularly non-Western students, as barriers to their engagement in intercultural learning (mostly in Western contexts), which results in describing them as incapable of language proficiency, intercultural interaction, learning ability, and navigating challenges (Van Rompay-Bartels & Watkins, 2025). The description further constructs the deficient other and is used to mirror the superiority of their counterparts, the online Western students. This description can be traced from earlier studies to recent research, and ironically, some of the scholars in such studies are from non-Western backgrounds. Several studies (Commander et al., 2016; Law et al., 2013; Xiao & Hurd, 2010; Zhang, 2013) explore Chinese students' online distance learning in the Chinese context or in an intercultural context. In these studies, Chinese education is described as spoon-fed, achievement-focused, and teacher-centred.

Under this cultural and contextual labeling with negative meaning, it is not surprising that online Chinese students are described as lacking creativity, being face-saving, afraid of authority, and silent and passive learners in these studies. Similarly, Fenton-O'Creevy and Mourik (2016) investigate the experience of Japanese students in an online MBA programme provided by the Open University in the UK. The authors point out that Japanese students lack the ability of critical thinking due to their culture, and face more challenges, including a language barrier, than British students, and thus they need more help and support in their learning.

A similar case is also presented in other recent studies. By comparing the learning behaviours and attitudes of Chinese and Australian students in online intercultural contexts, Chen et al. (2022) and Turnbull et al. (2021) assert that Chinese students often face challenges in adapting to online intercultural learning as well as the use of technology, and they are passive in online interaction and unwilling to engage with others due to cultural differences and a

lack of previous cross-cultural learning experiences. Chen et al. (2022) and Turnbull et al. (2021) point out that Australian students with prior learning experience of an English-speaking environment perform better than Chinese students in their academic work, regardless of local or international student status. Therefore, Chen et al. (2022) and Turnbull et al. (2021) claim that online Chinese students need more support. Abramov et al. (2021) examine international students' experiences of participating in online distance learning programmes at Russian universities. Abramov et al. (2021) assert that online international students are more fragile than Russian students, and thus the students tend to prefer in-person and blended learning to acquire the relevant required support.

These kinds of studies manifest an arrogant and patronising tone, homogenising student groups as well as their experiences, and devaluing international students as well as their cultures. The online international students are described as passive, fragile, deficient, and incapable learners who are inferior to their domestic counterparts. Admittedly, every culture and educational system has its limitations, and online international students face challenges that are similar or different from their domestic counterparts during their studies. However, these challenges and experiences cannot be simplistically attributed to the broad label of culture. In other words, exploring online international students' experiences and their challenges should not focus on the superficial descriptions or solely on the challenges or experiences themselves.

The multiple factors behind the students' experiences and challenges, such as the background of individual students and specific sociocultural contexts, are also considered and connected. In particular, student agency should be included, as 'there is much to be gained by learning from the agency, resourcefulness and ingenuity displayed by IaD staff and students across contexts for making things work' (Mittelmeier et al., 2025, p.758). Though these studies fail to explore the complexity of online international students' experiences and overlook the diversity within a culture, other studies, including recent developments, have critiqued these deficient portrayals and displayed

the diversity of online international students' experiences, viewing the students as active agents and enablers. This will be demonstrated in the following section.

2.2.4 Online international students are active agents.

In research concerning the internationalisation of ODE, not all studies portray international students as ambiguous, educational resources, or deficient learners. There have been a number of studies that critique these deficient portrayals of online international students, regarding the students as active agents and exploring their experiences from a student-centred perspective. Through a critical review of the literature on the role of international students in ODE, researchers including Lee and Bligh (2019), Mao and Lee (2024), and Stewart (2019) further identify the deficient descriptions of the students in existing academic knowledge.

Lee and Bligh (2019) provide the more nuanced four categorisations of international students' roles in ODE, that is, (1) unspecified others with a rapid increase in their numbers, (2) specific others with deficits, (3) specific others as pedagogical resources, and (4) active participants within international learning communities. Lee and Bligh (2019) evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each categorisation, which also forms the basis of the analytical framework of Section 2.2 within this thesis. Similarly, Stewart (2019) reviews the literature on transnational online distance learners. Stewart (2019) stresses that the online international students' experiences are diverse and complicated, but their voices are underrepresented in existing studies. As stated in the Introduction at 1.1.3, Mao and Lee (2024) focus on online Chinese students and emphasise the prevalence of deficit discourses and economic-oriented tendency in the ODE internationalisation. Mao and Lee (2024) also identify that there is a knowledge gap in research on online Chinese international students due to Chinese ODE policy and historical attitudes towards ODE.

Furthermore, Mittelmeier (2025) criticises the practice of using 'integration' or 'adaptation' as a benchmark for international students' academic success. In

the view of Mittelmeier (2025), the concept of integration or adaptation inherently follow othering that international students are naturally outsiders and should be assimilated into superior local HE institutions. In response, Mittelmeier (2025) suggests that research should attempt to avoid using integration or adaptation as the criterion for evaluating international students' experiences. This argument is supported by other scholars (e.g., Astolfo & Allsopp, 2023; Saharso, 2019; Yao, 2015). These scholars argue that the concept of integration positions international students as outsiders who must adapt to dominant norms (Astolfo & Allsopp, 2023) and shift the responsibility onto them (Saharso, 2019; Yao, 2015).

In this context, students' success or failure is often attributed to individual capability, rather than questioning institutional practices (Yao, 2015). Consequently, the deficient discourse of international students has persisted, and critical discussion of their interaction experience has been limited, thereby reproducing power dynamics in HE (Astolfo & Allsopp, 2023). Therefore, some scholars, such as Yao (2015) and Jindal-Snape (2023), advocate using 'a sense of belonging' or 'transition' to understand international students' interaction experiences, highlighting the relational and dynamic nature of their experiences.

Against this backdrop, a small number of empirical studies make an effort to present the diversity of online international students and view them as active agents. Such efforts can be glimpsed in the sporadic earlier research. Applying a qualitative approach, Harrison et al. (2018) conducted semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of international students (mostly non-EU students) who engaged in an online Master's in Public Health programme at the University of Manchester, UK. Differing from the deficient descriptions of online international students in the studies indicated above, Harrison et al. (2018) provide a more delicate and subtle perspective to articulate the students' online experiences. Without simplistically categorising the international students by their nationality, such as Chinese students and Japanese students, Harrison et al. (2018) provide a more detailed contextual information by grouping the

students into students from low- and middle-income countries or high-income countries.

In this context, online international students may have similar and different learning experiences in their studies. Harrison et al. (2018) highlight that curriculum design should consider online students' diverse backgrounds and cultures, and they suggest that academic staff enhance their cultural sensitivity and pay attention to the practical needs of students from different backgrounds to promote more knowledge delivery and application. Admittedly, the categorisation of student groups based on economic development remains problematic (Ngalomba et al., 2025), and the starting point for the research is still focused on the financial and educational benefits brought by online international students to domestic HE institutions and thus the agency of online international students is not fully captured. Nonetheless, the specific contextualised information provided reduces the simplistic and vague comparisons among different student groups but reveals the diversity of students' experiences.

It is encouraging to observe the emergence of the latest studies that consider international students as active participants and co-constructors of knowledge in online learning communities, demonstrating the diversity of the students' experiences and their agency during their online distance learning. As elaborated in Section 2.1, the research of Abdelghaffar and Eid (2025) explores two international PhD students' online distance learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic by applying a qualitative approach. Despite the small sample size, Abdelghaffar and Eid (2025) provide a detailed picture of the diverse experiences of online international students from similar cultural backgrounds, and also mention the challenges faced by online international students. Unlike placing the students in a vulnerable position or overemphasising such challenges, the study views them as a natural stage in the online learning process and considers the students as active agents in addressing these challenges by employing a number of different strategies. Based on epistemic injustices, Lee and Mao (2025) discuss the injustices faced by online international students. In this study, the students are not viewed as

victims under the unequal structures, but rather are portrayed as active agents who apply strategies, including silence, to resist or negotiate the injustices to meet their own demands.

Albeit limited in number, these kinds of studies genuinely centre on online international students, critiquing the tendencies to other and marginalise the students, highlighting their diverse experiences, and viewing the students as active agents and enablers. Firstly, such studies do not make assumptions about the students' cultural backgrounds based on their nationality. Even when these studies categorise the students based on nationality, they do not assume that the student group has the same cultural understandings. These studies reveal that individual students may have diverse backgrounds or cultural understandings, regardless of whether they and their peers are from similar or different countries. Secondly, these studies focus on the specific sociocultural contexts of the students. These students present a rich picture of their experiences and explain the rationale for their perceptions and behaviours by integrating individual and environmental factors which helps to reveal the complexity of their experiences. Furthermore, these studies regard challenges as a natural process in the students' learning, and thus, challenges faced by both international and local students are understood as a normal phenomenon. This does not align with previous research that exaggerates the challenges faced by international students and stresses the differences between them and their domestic counterparts. Most importantly, these studies consider the students as positive agents and enablers, thereby challenging the discourse in previous research that places the international students as deficient learners who are inferior to their domestic counterparts.

In general, there is a great deal of research that marginalises online international students or views them as instruments in the existing literature. Even though some studies target online international students, they produce deficient discourses and othering of the students, especially non-Western students. Most concerning, this can be observed from earlier studies to the recent research, and some researchers are from the same regions as their study population, therefore exhibiting self-othering. Excessive reliance on a

quantitative approach contributes to this situation, and it is worth noting that the underlying cause of the situation lies in historical inequalities in knowledge production. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce a post-/decolonial perspective to understand the origins of the deficient discourses and explore how they are reproduced in the present, which will be illustrated in the Theoretical Framework. Reassuringly, recent research has focused on these deficient descriptions and attempted to reshape the cognitive framework around online students, viewing them as equal participants and knowledge co-constructors. However, such efforts are limited and need more dynamics. In this context, this thesis will use post-/decolonial theory to explore online international students and present their diversity by viewing them as active agents. Before moving on to the Theoretical Framework, the concept of interaction will be discussed in the following section, given the core of interaction in students' ODE experiences.

2.3 Interaction and international students in ODE

Interaction plays a vital role in students' learning, particularly within ODE environments where time and space are separated (Moore, 1993). Unlike student engagement, a controversial and broader concept that is prone to being an institutional tool to access student behaviours and potentially overlook their agency (Macfarlane & Tomlinson, 2017; Zepke, 2018), interaction focuses more on specific teaching and learning practices in ODE. In ODE, teaching and learning are mediated by the Internet, without physical presence (Moore, 1993). As such, effective learning is enacted through interaction, as learning is essentially a socially mediated process (Vygotsky, 1978). Interaction is therefore central to the design and delivery of online courses, with different types of interaction affecting students' learning. Therefore, the thesis focuses on students' interaction experiences. In this session, the discussion begins with a series of studies on interaction, exploring its role in students' ODE experiences. Then, the session critically examines the literature regarding online international students' interaction experiences.

2.3.1 Interaction

Interaction in the field of education is defined as the reciprocal events involving at least two objects and/or two actions (Wagner, 1994). In other words, interaction occurs when objects and events have mutual influences. Simpson and Galbo (1986) state that interaction in pedagogical practices includes verbal and non-verbal, conscious and unconscious, as well as ongoing and incidental behaviours and communications, and these interactions work on both students and teachers, thereby producing a profound influence on teaching and learning.

Interaction has been valued in ODE practices. Firstly, interaction is considered to foster students' sense of community and reduce the isolation students experience during online distance learning due to geographical and temporal separation. Applying social exchange theory, Luo et al. (2017) conducted an online survey to examine 163 Chinese domestic students' interaction experiences in online distance learning. The study finds that interaction has a positive influence on Chinese students' sense of community, which in turn enhances their stickiness with the e-learning system. More specifically, learner-instructor interaction and learner-learner interaction are fundamental to students acquiring a sense of community in e-learning systems, and learner-content interaction serves as a mediating factor (Luo et al., 2017). Using a quantitative approach, Chatterjee and Correia (2020) also examine the relationship between interaction and students' sense of community by investigating 396 students who participated in fully online distance courses at a Midwestern research university in the US. The study shows that there is a positive correlation between interaction in the form of collaboration and the dimension of the sense of community, including membership, integration, fulfillment of needs, and emotional connection, which improves students' learning satisfaction and academic performance.

Applying a quantitative approach, Kaufmann and Vallade (2022) and Li (2022) explore students' perceptions of interaction in an online intercultural graduate programme, and Chinese domestic students' online distance learning during the pandemic, respectively. The two studies discovered that interaction,

particularly learner-instructor interaction, helps build rapport and facilitates students' social presence, thereby decreasing students' loneliness in ODE, especially within a context requiring high social distance. This therefore leads to an improvement in students' learning outcomes.

Secondly, interaction is considered to enhance students' knowledge construction. Through an online survey, Stephens (2016) discusses the influence of interaction in the form of learning blogging on students' online learning outcomes. The study concludes that interaction, especially learner-instructor interaction, enhances students' learning productivity and competence and fosters reflective learning. Using a quantitative approach, Nungu et al. (2023) investigate the online collaborative learning experiences of students learning at an East African university. The research shows that interaction through small group discussion develops students' disciplinary knowledge, their higher-order thinking skills, and social and meta-cognitive levels. In addition to promoting the construction of disciplinary knowledge, interaction is found to be effective in supporting the development of language proficiency among second language learners. Based on the interactionist framework, Muñoz-Basols et al. (2023) apply the quantitative approach to analyse students' interaction experiences in online Spanish language coursework provided by the Open University in the UK. Muñoz-Basols et al. (2023) discovered that students could receive feedback through interacting with their instructors, which helps them correct errors in their language and improve their abilities. Muñoz-Basols et al. (2023) also find that the higher the frequency of interaction, the greater the students' language proficiency.

These studies help to prove the effectiveness of interaction on students' sense of belonging and enhancing knowledge construction in ODE. However, this is not the absolute case; for example Baber (2022) found that social interaction plays an important role in students' learning achievement and in reducing students' sense of isolation. Nevertheless, its effectiveness is decreased, and students tend to reduce such interactions to safeguard their health and continue their study when maintaining strict social distance is required. By examining the role of interaction in the form of online discussion in students' learning, Kent et

al. (2016) also argue that a large number of superficial postings contribute little to students' knowledge construction, but those presenting a deeper understanding of the content effectively deepen students' cognitive development, and thus, the key to interaction is quality.

There are several factors influencing interaction in ODE. Self-regulation plays a crucial role in students' interactions. Zimmerman (2000) defines self-regulation as thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and strategies generated by students to achieve their learning objectives. Zimmerman (2002) proposes that self-regulation is a stronger predictor of students' performance in the complex learning environment. In ODE, students' self-regulation affects their interaction quality and knowledge construction. Broadbent and Poon (2015) reveal that self-regulation improves students' learning success and reduces the retention in ODE, and it also affects students' interaction experiences. The quantitative studies, such as Cho and Cho (2017) and Hamdan et al. (2021), show that self-regulation is a mediated factor in students' interaction. More specifically, students' interaction with learning contents and their instructors is dependent on their self-regulation, which in turn improves students' self-efficacy and learning satisfaction (Cho & Cho, 2017; Hamdan et al., 2021).

Technology also affects students' interactions. For example, Sevnarayan (2023) examines Moodle as a tool to enhance students' interaction, which decreases students' psychological distance when interacting with instructors and peers. Pedagogy also has an influence on students' interactions. For example, Strauß and Rummel (2020) stress that teachers' intervention facilitates interaction among students, enabling students to actively engage in interactive knowledge construction. Wang and Liu (2020) also prove that teachers' organisation plays a positive role in facilitating student interaction, particularly for students engaging in online learning for the first time. Furthermore, teachers' design of interaction activities and the frequency of interaction significantly affect students' interaction (Wang & Liu, 2020). However, the study admits that excessive direct instruction or teacher-centred interaction actually hinders students' interaction and knowledge construction. Nevertheless, the aspects of environment and power relations are less likely to be mentioned in the relevant research.

Knowledge construction is a process of collective thinking with a personal and social nature, and students' interaction experiences activate multiple elements of their identities, which in turn affect their collaboration and communication in ODE (Öztok, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to explore the influence of power relations and students' backgrounds on their interaction.

In general, this section reviews the literature focusing on students' interaction, emphasising the significance of, and introducing the influencing factors on interaction. These studies have contributed to exploring students' interaction experiences, however, the studies produce deficient discourses and portrayals of student groups, including those of international students and domestic students, which is similar to that noted in Section 2.2. Indeed, the separation nature of ODE may leave some students feeling lonely and demand a higher learner autonomy. Nevertheless, these studies often exaggerate the prevalence of isolation and presuppose that all students in ODE inevitably feel lonely, requiring more interpersonal interaction and assistance, and neglecting the students' agency. This is evident in Kaufmann and Vallade's (2022) study, which repeatedly asserts the loneliness of the ODE journey. Albeit capturing the genuine experience of some students and offering targeted suggestions, such a statement tends to overlook the diversity of students' interaction experiences.

Furthermore, these studies (mostly employing a quantitative approach) implicitly assume that the key to interaction is frequency and quantity. The research of Baber (2022) and Kent et al. (2016) refutes this point. Moore (1993), in his theory of transactional distance, also contends that learners with higher autonomy may enjoy the so-called 'isolation', and that the excessive interpersonal interaction may become a barrier their learning. Therefore, interaction should not be measured by its quantity, rather, it should be designed according to the nature of learners and place an emphasis on the quality of interaction (Moore, 1993).

Additionally, these studies are grounded in Moore's (1989) three types of interaction when exploring students' interaction experiences, which also constitute one of the theoretical frameworks, which will be illustrated in the

Section 3.1. The studies also examine specific influencing factors on students' interaction. Nonetheless, such studies neglect the role of students' diverse backgrounds as well as the historical power relations that shape students' interaction experiences. The majority of the studies have focused primarily on their domestic students' ODE experiences, with limited attention placed on online international students. Hence, adopting a qualitative approach and using the post-/decolonial lens is much needed in order to explore the influence of power relations on international students and highlight their agency and diversity in their experiences, thus filling this urgent gap in knowledge.

2.3.2 Online international students in interaction

Given the historical marginalisation and othering of online international students as observed in the literature, the number of research studies that targets their interaction experiences is limited. Similar to the previous research on international students' general experiences in ODE, the interaction experiences of international students in ODE are largely ambiguous or serve as a backdrop to demonstrate the diversity of the study population. For example, the study of Kaufmann and Vallade (2022) mentioned above reflects the diversity in the composition of participants, and the international student population is behind the vague statement that 'the majority of participants identified as White' (p.1,798). Furthermore, the reliance on the quantitative approach in the study simplifies the diverse interaction experience of students to mere numerical representations.

Other studies targeting international students' interaction experience also have a similar case, in which they tend to measure and demonstrate the experiences through numbers and statistics. Employing quantitative methods, studies such as those conducted by Wang et al.(2023) and Zhang and Zhang (2024) explore the online international students' interaction experience in Chinese universities. Wang et al. (2023) reveal that online international students' expectations affect their satisfaction with online interaction, thereby influencing the quality of their interaction. Zhang and Zhang (2024) report that positive interaction behaviours enhance online international students' learning engagement and interests,

ensuring that the students are not merely passive outsiders in online classrooms. Through an online questionnaire, Zhou et al. (2023) compare the online interaction experiences of students from different years and countries in an undergraduate programme in the Netherlands. Zhou et al. (2023) point out that second-year students tend to interact with peers from similar backgrounds, including domestic or international backgrounds, and international students are more likely to interact with other international students or peers from the same country.

While these quantitative studies are helpful in identifying the international students' general interaction patterns and the findings are generalisable, they simplify the students' experiences to a series of numbers, failing to capture the diversity. In this sense, such research tends to focus more on interaction itself rather than on students' lived experiences. In comparison, Jaber and Kennedy (2020) and Parmar et al. (2025) provide more diverse insights into students' interaction experiences. Based on the qualitative approach, Jaber and Kennedy (2020) investigate the interaction experience of students from diverse backgrounds, and argue that international students have different roles in interaction and that their sense of identity is challenged at different stages of interaction.

In addition, in describing the interaction experiences of international students, some studies tend to portray the students, particularly those from non-Western backgrounds, as passive participants in interaction. This is evident in the case of Chinese students, who are generally depicted as reluctant to interact (Young, 2021), having language barriers (Angelova & Zhao, 2016), being silent (Zhu et al., 2009), preferring to stay within co-national network circles, and finding difficulty in integrating into different circles (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016). Even the notion of harmony, which is usually considered positive, is labelled as a negative aspect, implying that Chinese students respond to conflicts in interactions with avoidance and helplessness (Cheng and Ding, 2021). Research such as that conducted by Zhu et al. (2009) and Young (2021), frequently attributes the Chinese students' limited participation in interaction to Confucian culture. Indeed, these claims may accurately reflect specific cases,

but they fail to probe the underlying mechanism behind so-called passive interaction behaviours and rarely account for the individual situations in which interactions occur. They also neglect the students' agency and consider the students' interaction as static and fixed. In fact, some passive interaction behaviours, such as silence, can be an active strategy in certain situations according to Tang et al. (2020).

In general, the deficient discourses also manifest in descriptions of international students' online interaction experiences, which may result in their marginalisation in online classroom interaction. Considering the significance of interaction for students' knowledge construction and sense of belonging, it is important to explore the underlying mechanism behind such deficient descriptions through the post-/decolonial lens. In addition, a qualitative approach is needed to explore the diverse interaction experiences of online international students in specific situations, and place focus on their agency in the process of interaction.

2.4 Summary: Addressing the research gap

In conclusion, this section has provided a general overview of the literature on online international students and their interaction experiences, and critically examines the role of the students in these studies. In the research on ODE internationalisation and interaction, online international students - especially non-Western students - either appear ambiguously or are presented through deficient statements. This is evident in research concerning international students' interaction experiences. In this context, online international students are mostly marginalised, othered, or stigmatised in their interactions. In addition, some studies targeting online international students' experiences tend to consider the online international students as a homogenised group, assuming that the students from similar educational backgrounds have the same cultural (mis)understandings. This results in the diversity of individual students and their interaction experiences being overlooked.

On the surface, such deficient portrayals stem from imbalanced methodologies or research perspectives, such as the excessive use of quantitative studies and economic viewpoints. The deeper reasons are historically imbalanced knowledge production and epistemic injustices towards international students and their cultures, particularly those from non-Western backgrounds. Therefore, it is imperative to review the cultural and historical origins of deficient statements through the post-/decolonial lenses. It is encouraging that scholars have critiqued the deficient statements about online international students and their experiences. The recent research increasingly stresses the diversity and agency of the international students, viewing them as equal participants, active agents, and knowledge co-constructors, yet such studies remain limited and require more dynamics. Therefore, this thesis applies the post-/decolonial lens to explore students' experiences, which will be elaborated upon in the following section. Given the significance of interaction for students' knowledge construction and sense of belonging, and considering that international students - particularly Chinese students - often encounter stigmatisation within such online interactions, this thesis adopts the post-/decolonial lens to target the diverse interaction experiences of Chinese students and views them instead as active agents. It also attempts to reconceptualise their interaction experiences, which will be illustrated in the following section.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

There are three main elements comprising the theoretical framework in this dissertation. As highlighted in the Section 2.3, interaction plays a crucial role in ODE, which reduces online students' sense of isolation and facilitates knowledge construction. When exploring students' interaction experience, Moore's (1989) three types of interaction (ToI) are widely used as the theoretical grounding in studies. Therefore, ToI has been decided upon as the main theory of this thesis, which frames the data generation and serves as descriptive lens. Nevertheless, as will be illustrated later in the chapter, ToI neglects international students' experiences, and the injustices students face in interaction. Therefore, the post-/decolonial theory serves as the analytic lens to

critically reinterpret ToI and examine online international students' intricate and diverse interactions experiences in English-speaking universities.

3.1 Types of interaction

As interaction is a core concept in ODE (Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016), developing consensus on its sub-meanings is crucial for shared understanding and effective evaluation of students' interaction experiences (Moore, 1989). This section introduces the main theory of the thesis, which focuses on the different types of interaction. The study begins with Moore's three types of interaction and then introduces additional types which have been extended upon by other scholars.

3.1.1 Moore's three types of interaction

In an editorial released in 1989, Moore proposed three types of interactions to clearly define the sub-meanings of interaction. The three types of interactions are learner-content interaction (LCI), learner-instructor interaction (LII) and learner-learner interaction (LLI). While the three types of interaction are proposed in a pre-digital context, they are widely used in the pedagogy and research of ODE. The following section elaborates upon each interaction type by engaging with the empirical literature.

3.1.1.1 Learner-content interaction

The first type of interaction is LCI, which refers to the interaction that occurs between the learner and the learning materials or subject contents. This type of interaction is considered to be particularly important in ODE, as distance learners mostly study on their own (Moore, 1993). While Anderson's (2003) equivalency theorem considers that deep and meaningful learning is achieved as long as one of the three types of interaction remains at a high level, the majority of the LII and LLI occurs based on learner-content interaction (Padilla Rodriguez & Armellini, 2014). Moore (1989, p.1) views LCI as 'a defining characteristic of education'. He further elaborates that without this type of interaction, it cannot be called education, 'since it is the process of intellectually

interacting with content that results in changes in the learner's understanding, the learner's perspective, or the cognitive structures of the learner's mind' (Moore, 1989, p.1).

In this interaction, learners construct knowledge by engaging in texts, recorded lectures, or being exposed to other sources of information (Jonassen et al., 1995). This is a self-directed process, characterised primarily by one-way communication between the learner and the subject expert or sometimes assisted by an instructional designer, aiming to help the distance learner construct discipline knowledge (Moore, 1989). Therefore, in the absence of face-to-face instruction, learners require a higher degree of autonomy in this type of interaction. In the meantime, LCI further fosters students to conduct more independent learning (Al Mamun, 2022).

While LCI is a fundamental type, this has received less attention in empirical studies compared with LII and LLI (Xiao, 2017). Firstly, the existing studies related to LCI explore various instructional strategies to enhance such interaction. Research such as that conducted by Al Mamun and Lawrie (2023), Al Mamun et al. (2022) and Mamun (2022), explores the effectiveness of embedded pedagogy such as scaffolding support on students' interaction with content. They have found that while embedded guidance helps students develop higher levels of cognition in their interaction with content, students may still produce misconceptions about learning concepts. They also identify that students' individual differences affect their engagement and understanding of content, in which students with prior knowledge in relevant disciplines are more able to effectively select and integrate information in order to construct deeper understanding.

Other studies examine students' experience in LCI and its influencing factors. In the study conducted by Wang et al. (2022), they discover that students feel more engaged and less bored during elaboration and reflection on learning content. Kumar et al. (2021) found that students' interaction with high quality learning content enhances their satisfaction with ODE. Cho and Cho (2017) demonstrated that students with high self-regulation tend to be more engaged

with the content, and thus are more likely to develop higher self-efficacy and satisfaction with their courses. Adapting cluster analysis, Ozturk and Kumtepe (2023) explore the influencing of students' different profiles, including age, academic performance and access frequency on their interaction with learning content. They revealed that mature students tend to perform well in interaction with content and achieve higher marks. They also state that students who spend more time engaging in different learning materials are more likely to achieve better academic outcomes. Regrettably, the study of Ozturk and Kumtepe (2023) does not explicitly state the influencing of students' cultural backgrounds on their interaction with content. As an increasing number of international students attend ODE, there is a demand to explore how students from different cultures interact with learning materials. Although these research projects mention the quality of learning content broadly, they neglect the influencing of latent culture and ideology embedded in content on LCI. More specifically, the process of knowledge production and content delivery is not completely neutral but may indeed reflect power dynamics, which will be illustrated in Section 3.2.2.1. Therefore, adopting post-/decolonial theories is important for understanding the experiences of international students' interaction with course content.

3.1.1.2 Learner-instructor interaction

As illustrated in Section 3.1.1.1, LCI is the fundamental part in the types of interaction and triggers LII and LLI. However, if there is only LCI, it is difficult to assess whether students truly understand the subject knowledge and it is more likely to lead to a sense of isolation. Therefore, LII, the second type suggested by Moore (1989), is crucial in DE pedagogy, and it is the interaction that the majority of students most desire. This is also the guided didactic conversation (Holmberg, 2005), and in this type of interaction, instructors play a number of various roles. Firstly, they are considered knowledge facilitators, delivering learning content to students, demonstrating skills, providing guidance and assessing students' learning processes (Glazer et al., 2013). In parallel, instructors are course designers, and they attempt to simulate and maintain students' motivation by designing written and recorded materials and organising

class activities (Moore, 1989). Instructors also act as emotional supporters, especially within online learning environments, and they provide emotional support to students to help mitigate feelings of isolation and pressure (Ragusa, 2017).

Moore (1989) considers that in this type of interaction, the frequency and intensity of the instructor's influence on students is much greater than when it is only the learner who interacts with the content. Nevertheless, this does not mean that students do not require autonomy in this type of interaction. Benefit is achieved from the technological development that allows teachers to provide feedback to individual students and acquires feedback from them to improve teaching and instructions, but in addition the overall teaching process remains generalised rather than entirely personalised (Moore, 1989). Therefore, students still require autonomy in LII to make their own decisions about whether or not to discuss challenges and demands with their instructors. It is also important to note that LII is not 'one size fits all'. More specifically, some students may benefit from interactions with their teacher, but other students may misinterpret the teacher's feedback or tend to prefer to study independently (Moore, 1993). Therefore, it is important to note that individual student responses to interaction with instructors do vary.

There are also various factors affecting different students' interaction with their instructors. The studies, such as those conducted by Dunaway and Kumi (2021), Recker and Lee (2016), and Seo et al. (2021) mainly focus on the role of technologies including collaboration software, learning management system (LMS), and artificial intelligence (AI) on LII. They reflect that there are some concerns about instructors' responsibility, students' autonomy, and surveillance issues in LII, though the technologies contribute to improving the quantity and quality of LII and providing personalised support for LII. Dong et al. (2020) examine the influencing of cognitive load and prior knowledge on LII. They prove that the students with less prior knowledge and higher cognitive load are less able to engage in interaction with instructors, which results in lower learning engagement. Xie et al. (2023) argue that the contribution of LII

instructional models is based on interaction mechanism, students' behaviours and technology on enhancing learning engagement and academic outcome.

In the study conducted by Alamri and Tyler-Wood (2017) on disabilities-instructor interaction, they reveal that teaching and social presences improve disabled students' learning outcome and satisfaction but excessive social interaction in LII may reduce the learning achievement and satisfaction perceived by some disabled students. By exploring LII in graduate courses, Hoey (2017) considers that the quality of LII such that the instructors' instructional feedback arguably improves students' satisfaction with courses, together with improving academic performance. Although these studies have examined various influencing factors such as technology and prior knowledge, together with the experiences of different student populations in LII, they have largely overlooked complicated power relations between students and instructors (Fajar & Nadhillah, 2023). The exploration of power dynamics is significant in the online international classroom, as teachers and students come from different cultural and education backgrounds. Therefore, this requires a more nuanced examination of the power dynamics embedded in international students' interaction with instructors.

3.1.1.3 Learner-learner interaction

The final type of interaction to discuss is that of LLI, which is a new dimension of distance education, emerging with the development of technology. This type of interaction is the interaction that occurs among learners, individually or in a group setting, with or without the teachers' presence (Moore, 1989). LLI has been proven to facilitate students' deep learning in the process of knowledge construction, as students need to explain their understanding of concepts and compare perspectives with their peers (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019). Lam et al. (2019) suggest that students share their ideas and develop collaborative thinking in LLI, which enhances their motivation and enables them to cognitively engage in learning tasks. Cole et al. (2021) also point out that through peer interaction, students compare prior knowledge and experiences with new information, thereby deepening their understanding of knowledge. In this

process their cognitive, comprehension and values are enhanced, and in addition, LLI is considered to provide emotional support, thereby enhancing students' social presence, their learning motivation and interest. This is of particular importance in ODE, where feelings of isolation are more likely to occur. Further research (MacLeod et al., 2019; Oyarzun et al., 2018; Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012) demonstrates that LLI contributes to students' sense of belonging and fosters their sense of community awareness, thereby enhancing engagement in online classrooms and improving satisfaction.

Nevertheless, not all learners desire to interact with their peers, depending largely on the learner's age, experience, level of autonomy, and specific pedagogical situation. Moore (1989) notes that for younger online distance learners, peer interaction is important for them to complete their learning tasks and maintain learning motivation. For mature and advanced learners who tend to be self-motivated, peer interaction is not particularly important, though this type of interaction facilitates consolidating and deepening their understanding of knowledge in certain pedagogical contexts such as assessing learning progress and acquiring new knowledge (Moore, 1989). LLI is also affected by the form. Collaborative learning including online discussion and group work, is considered an effective way to promote peer interaction. Klisc et al. (2017) and Kurucay and Inan (2017) suggest that online discussion and group work promote students' critical thinking and improve their learning outcomes because knowledge is socially constructed within the exchange. However, collaborative learning is not effective in all cases and is affected by various factors.

By investigating ten white female students' group discussions in the online classroom, Samuels-Peretz (2014) claims that students in collaborative learning are treated equitably, with participation focused more on content than the peer's popularity. She asserts that students are normally not excluded in LLI, with the exception of failure to contribute new ideas. The arguments of Samuels-Peretz (2014) are questionable. Firstly, the research focuses on one single race and gender, ignoring the underlying injustices related to different genders and nationalities in LLI, not to mention that those participants are white females and are often considered to be a relatively privileged group. Secondly, the research

attributes the fact that students are neglected in LLI to their failure to contribute new ideas simply, which rationalises the marginalisation of certain students and ignores deeper factors rooted in exclusion within LLI.

In comparison, Phirangee (2016) identifies seven patterns that cause students' feeling of isolation and disconnection in LLI. These include 'the inner, lack of meaningful dialogue, selective listening, lack of attribution, going on tangents, editing notes, and cultural exclusion' (Phirangee, 2016, p.26). Among these, cultural exclusion is salient in online international classrooms. Phirangee (2016) also points out that when students are unable to comfortably share their relevant cultural experiences, their contributions are silenced as it suggests that some experiences are more valued than others which undermines students' participation in LLI. International students' negative peer interaction triggers negative emotions and increases the risk of failure and withdrawal (Moore, 2014). Therefore, it is arguable that a post-/decolonial perspective is certainly required in LLI.

3.1.2 Beyond the three types of interaction

In addition to Moore's three types of interaction primarily comprising DE pedagogy, there are other types of interactions. These go beyond the online classroom setting but have an equal influence on students' ODE experiences which will be introduced in this section.

3.1.2.1 Learner-technology interaction

While Moore (1989) mentions the technological factor in proposing the three types of interaction, this was inferred within the pre-digital context. With the development of digital technology, learner-technology interaction (LTI) has however gradually received more attention. The interaction between students and technology was originally proposed by Hillman et al. (1994) and this type of interaction is specific to DE. Hillman et al. (1994) point out that DE pedagogy is not only largely affected by LCI, LII and LLI, but also by the learner's capacity to interact effectively with technology used in online courses. In ODE, interaction

and learning assignments are largely completed with the medium of technology, and this requires learners to acquire advanced digital skills to receive information and effectively interact with instructors and peers online (Zhang, 2003). Therefore, LTI becomes the fourth construct of ToI in DE pedagogy.

Researchers have focused on the interaction between the different technologies used in online courses by students. Combined with Moore's transactional distance (TD) theory, Zhang (2003) proposes learner-interface interaction. She develops a scale to measure TD in Moore's (1989) three types of interaction and student-interface interaction. However, the effectiveness of this combination is challenged as it conflates the distinction between dialogue and interaction in TD (Xiao, 2025). Based on an online survey, Cho (2009) claims that learner-interface interaction has the least influence on students' overall satisfaction. However, the research is questionable because the deficiency of research design including response bias and the use of the monolithic quantitative approach fails to acquire deeper understandings of the matter in hand. By using the Likert scale and open-ended questionnaires, Danesh et al. (2015) affirm that learner-interface interaction contributes to improving the quality of LLI and LII, thereby improving students' learning outcomes.

Other studies focus on the students' interaction with specific technologies. Researchers, such as Alshammari (2024), Kittur et al. (2022), and Le et al. (2022) examine the interaction between the learning management system (LMS) and students in online distance learning. They prove that there is a positive correlation between students' learning outcomes and their use of technology, with students who perform well in their studies tending to use the LMS to access resources more frequently than those who have lower academic performance. They also reveal that instructors' instructional strategies and students' digital literacy improve students' interaction with interface. Song et al. (2019) explore students' interaction with a conversational virtual agent and indicate that LMS-oriented interaction contributes to students' learning performance. Kim and Cho (2023) and Kim and Lee (2023) explore students' interaction with AI technology. They find that AI enriches pedagogy,

enhances emotional support for students and stimulates students' creativity, thus enabling students to complete learning tasks more efficiently.

Nevertheless, LTI has been sceptical. Haythornthwaite and Andrews (2011) argue that learners should not be distracted by the complexities of technological operation but should focus on learning content itself, and thus, technology should be an invisible medium in the ideal context. Paul et al. (2015) agree with this view and consider that LTI is not relevant given the popularity of students' digital skills and the development of new technologies which are making interaction online much easier.

Considering the contribution of technology on students' online study and online instructors' pedagogy, LTI should however not be disregarded. Karaoglan-Yilmaz (2017) and Weidlich and Bastiaens (2018) point out that LTI not only contributes to students' academic performance and their satisfaction with learning experiences but also improves students' retention in ODE. Alshammari (2024) also argues that instructors could acquire valuable insights into student learning behaviours, enabling instructors to improve course designs and optimise students' online distance learning experiences, with the support of technologies such as LMS and log data. Technology also facilitates connections between students and teachers from different countries and cultures, contributing to the diversity of online classrooms. In this context, this thesis will include LTI as the fourth type of interaction. Given scholars such as Ouyang et al. (2022) and Zhuang et al. (2025) raise concerns about the underlying colonial structures in technology, a post-/decolonial perspective is very much needed.

3.1.2.2 Learner-environment interaction

In addition to student-technology interaction, few scholars have focused on learner-environment interaction (LEI). According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, learning is embedded in social and cultural environments. In ODE, students' environment plays an important role in affecting their learning

experiences, as the students engage in online courses within their own physical, social and cultural settings.

Unfortunately, the relevant research is limited and the majority focus on students' interaction within a formal learning environment. Karaoglan-Yilmaz (2017) and Yılmaz and Keser (2017) discuss the interaction between students and different learning settings in ODE and they found that LEI facilitates students' knowledge sharing and enhances students' ODE experiences, with synchronous learning settings providing an interactive experience similar to face-to-face interaction, and asynchronous learning settings allowing students to learn at their own pace.

In addition to the interaction between students and the formal learning environment, Watson (2015) proposes student-life context interaction, which affects students' online distance learning experiences. This view echoes the notion of learningscapes, where individuals' learning is closely related to the environment, especially biophysical and sociocultural settings, and learning occurs through social interaction with family, friends or colleagues in different life contexts, such as at home and in the workplace (Gould et al., 2019). Watson (2015) points out that online distance learners' interaction with others such as their family members, friends and colleagues in their living environment facilitates the practical application of their knowledge and provides emotional support, thereby optimising the learning experience and reducing isolation. In cross-cultural online courses, LEI is particularly important because online international students need to navigate different cultural settings between their online classrooms and their offline life.

3.1.2.3 Learner-self interaction

Learner-self interaction (LSI) refers to students' internalised dialogue (Holmberg, 1995), which includes the meta-cognitive and self-regulation skills required for online distance students to conduct self-directed learning (Northrup, 2002). In this type of interaction, the students engage in self-talk and internal reflection on the learning content and process (Katsarou & Chatzipanagiotou, 2021).

There is scant research which focuses on LSI. In the investigation on LCI, LII, LLI, and LTI, Chou (2009) mentions LSI and points out the lack of sufficient research in this type of interaction. Stapleford (2021) also raise the issue of LSI in her doctoral dissertation and criticises the overemphasis on students' interactions with others, such as teachers and peers, but less attention is given to reflective interactions between students and one and other. She argues that this type of interaction is an integral part of students' online distance learning, which contributes to their metacognitive development and knowledge internalisation. Therefore, this type of interaction deserves more attention and should be considered as a separate type of interaction.

3.1.3 Summary

In general, the existing research on ToI has largely focused on online classrooms, which ignores the influencing of students' sociocultural backgrounds on their interaction experiences. With the development of digital technology, an increasing number of students from different cultural backgrounds attend online classrooms. Although international students enhance the diversity of online classrooms, interaction and its various types become more complex. The traditional typology of interaction is based on its function and objects, yet this categorisation oversimplifies students' interaction experiences because it ignores the sociocultural contexts that shape students' interaction. Especially in the context of intercultural online classrooms, the power dynamics and unequal knowledge production in the Global North and Global South affect international students' participation in interaction, thereby impacting their knowledge construction. Technology bridges the geographical distance and enables students from different countries to engage in online classroom, but it does not address the injustices in interaction that domestic and international students face. Therefore, a post-/decolonial perspective is required to reconceptualise the different types of interaction.

3.2 Post-/decolonial perspectives in HE

3.2.1 Colonisation, postcolonial theory and decolonisation

Before introducing the post-/decolonial perspective, I will briefly outline the relationship and distinction among colonisation, postcolonial theory and decolonisation, where the former provides a historical basis for the latter two. The terms of colonisation, postcolonialism and decolonisation are entangled in post-/decolonial studies. Colonisation refers to the physical act of occupying a previously independent territory, involving the colonisers' control over the land and resources and the establishment of legal, economic and political systems within the colony to reinforce the dominance of the colonial regime (Young, 2004). The process of colonisation is not merely a physical or geographical subjugation but is accompanied by an ideological penetration. This process refers to coloniality.

Coloniality indicates the power dynamics that persist in cultural, epistemology, and social structures. It is closely related to European colonisation and affects the colonised people's ways of thinking, knowing, feeling, being, and their identity (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Mignolo, 2021). Following the declaration of independence from imperial powers by colonised countries, these geographies typically entered a historical phase referred to as the postcolonial period (Young, 2004). Nevertheless, coloniality did not disappear and remains deeply entrenched in the ideology and social structures of these countries. With the development of globalisation, countries such as China, which have not competely been geographically colonised, continue to be shaped by coloniality (Mignolo, 2021). Thus, the influence of coloniality is embedded in global political, economic, knowledge, and cultural systems and continues to shape contemporary societies.

The influence also extends to the HE landscape. HE has historically been identified as an important field for the reproduction of coloniality (Stein, 2020), and it sustains the racial formations and Eurocentric epistemologies of the past through its institutional mechanisms (Stein, 2020). Many scholars such as de Sousa Santos (2019) and Stein (2019) argue that HE will remain entangled with

colonial discourses and continue to perpetuate inequality in knowledge production unless these mechanisms are dismantled. This is a rather radical view, which seems to overlook the potential for negotiation and reform in such mechanisms. Nonetheless, it highlights a demand to identify the coloniality and conduct the decolonial actions in HE. In this context, postcolonial theory comes into being.

Postcolonial theory is not a specific theory, nor does it have a unified theoretical framework in a strict sense. Postcolonial theory is 'the deduction, based on several axioms, of an abstract model applicable to an indefinite number of empirical descriptions' and it includes the development of a set of conceptual resources (Foucault, 1972, as cited in Young, 2004, p.64). Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens for examining the continuing influence of coloniality on value, culture, knowledge, and ideology in contemporary societies, especially in the field of international HE. Postcolonial theory mainly examines the assumption of the universality of Western knowledge frameworks and the Eurocentric structure of the academic system. It also discusses how these assumptions and underlying power dynamics contribute to cultural hegemony, Western-centric pedagogical approaches, and knowledge production, all of which shape the interaction experiences of non-Western international students (Öztok, 2024). Supported by digital technologies, ODE has expanded access to HE for a broader range of individuals. Nevertheless, the coloniality exists in ODE such as the Western-centric curriculum (Adam, 2019; Öztok, 2024). This has not only reinforced inequality in knowledge production but also contributed to the othering of non-Western international students in the online learning context, which is illustrated in Section 3.2.3.1. Therefore, a postcolonial perspective in this thesis has been used to explore how colonial legacies in knowledge production and academic structures affect international students' online interaction experiences in English-speaking universities.

A decolonial perspective has also gained considerable attention. Decoloniality is an epistemological and political movement, aiming to recover the indigenous culture, history, linguistics and knowledge lost during colonisation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). In the field of HE, decoloniality emphasises a process of

decentering Western knowledge and deconstructing the colonial structure, embracing the diverse epistemic traditions (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). While postcolonial theory and the decolonial perspective have subtle differences in geographical and historical origin, they share many commonalities. Both perspectives analyse the inequality in knowledge production and critique the Eurocentric and/or Western-dominated knowledge systems in HE, advocating for resistance against the imbalance of power relations and embracing a pluriversal epistemology. Therefore, I use both perspectives to analyse how Western-dominated knowledge systems shape non-Western international students' online learning experiences, and how online students exercise their agency to resist, navigate, and negotiate the imbalanced power relations in their interactions.

3.2.2 Colonial Legacies in HE

From a postcolonial perspective, I will start to elaborate how coloniality shapes inequality in knowledge production in HE. Next, I will explain how the inequality in knowledge production constructs epistemic injustice, which in turn maintains inequality in the knowledge production.

3.2.2.1 Inequality in knowledge production

The knowledge production process is not equal and is entangled with power. Within the colonial framework, Western countries have dominated knowledge production and dissemination, affecting the voices of non-Western scholars and shaping the global knowledge system. Postcolonial scholar Edward W. Said (1978) in his book Orientalism analyses this unequal knowledge-power relationship under a colonial framework, and particularly how the West constructs the Orient through knowledge production and incorporates the Orient into its power structure through the construction of an Occident (known as the Global North) and Orient (known as the Global South) dichotomy. Said (1978) describes this process as Orientalism and conceptualises Orientalism as (1) a discipline; (2) a way of thinking; and (3) a power mechanism used to control the Orient. In this context, the West is portrayed as modern, scientific, civilised,

rational and progressive, while the Orient is constructed as exotic, mysterious, barbaric and inferior, thus legitimising and perpetuating the colonial enterprise in knowledge production (Said, 1978).

A number of scholars have discussed unequal knowledge production existing in the field of HE and its impact on the individuals or social groups, particularly on those from non-Western backgrounds. Firstly, global university rankings as the metrics of knowledge production have been criticised for reproducing colonial frameworks. Scholars (Brunner, 2021; Mills, 2022; Shahjahan et al., 2017, 2022; Zembylas, 2024) analyse how global university rankings construct, reinforce, and legitimise Western academic standards and Anglo-American discourse through various metrics. Shahjahan et al. (2017, 2022) discovered that global university rankings utilise affective economies to manipulate public perceptions, portraying Western universities as the 'good' universities and reinforcing the notion that Western knowledge and the English language are inherently valuable and dominant in the global marketplace. In this context, HE institutions worldwide are compelled to conform to Western academic standards and frameworks in pursuit of higher rankings and greater academic prestige, thereby winning in the global market competition (Mills, 2022; Zembylas, 2024). This neglects educational quality, and leads to unequal knowledge production by constructing a scholarly 'imperial being' (Grosfoguel, 2013). Ultimately, this perpetuates the colonial structures and exacerbates power imbalances in HE institutions (Brunner, 2021).

Unequal knowledge production is also presented in academic publications. Research has criticised the marginalised role of non-Western knowledge and academic frameworks in the process of global knowledge production. Yang (2018) criticises the over-reliance on Western theoretical frameworks in English-mediated academic publications without critically engaging with these theories, especially when using them in East Asian HE settings. Xu (2020) examines Chinese scholars' perceptions of incentives for international academic publications in international humanities and social sciences (HSS) publications. He notes that the internationalisation strategies in academic publication encourages Chinese scholars' knowledge exchange, but the over-

reliance on international publication standards and English-language outputs may neglect Chinese domestic knowledge production. Therefore, this leads to the marginalisation of non-Western knowledge production.

In addition, unequal knowledge production and delivery is rooted in curriculum design. Western-centrism or white supremacy in university curriculum design, particularly in English-speaking universities, has been widely criticised. Bennett et al. (2023) and Peters (2018) critique the dominance of the Western white worldview in curriculum design within UK and Australian universities respectively, arguing that this perpetuates epistemic violence by failing to provide Indigenous and marginalised groups (especially students of colour) with the space to interpret and understand the world from their own perspectives. The lack of diversity in curriculum design also hinders white students from better understanding global differences, and in particular preventing them from contextualising these differences within their own backgrounds (Dozono, 2020).

Worryingly, the dominance of Western knowledge in curriculum design is not confined to English-speaking universities but extends to non-Western universities. Xu (2023) explores how the classrooms of Western international branch campuses (IBCs) in China perpetuate colonial hierarchy and marginalise local students and indigenous knowledge by suggesting the superiority of the English language, Western knowledge and Western degrees. Xu (2023) conceptualises “Whiteness as aspiration”, “Whiteness as investment”, and “Whiteness as malleability” to illustrate how Chinese students are imbued with the colonial discourses that suggest the superiority of Western education over non-Western education. While the initial goal is to promote HE internationalisation, Chinese local universities have also reproduced the colonial framework in this process. By offering bilingual courses in English, introducing Western curricula, and hiring international faculty members, Chinese universities subconsciously regard Western knowledge and academic resources as superior, implying a connection between Western education and success, thereby reinforcing colonial discourses (Zha et al., 2019). This not only invalidates non-Western Indigenous knowledge but also neglects class differentiation in non-Western HE contexts, reproducing structural inequality (Xu,

2023). Unprivileged students are excluded and placed as “subalterns”, with their voices, demands and experiences marginalised and silenced in the colonial hierarchy (Spivak, 2023).

Although ODE is considered to transcend geographical boundaries and facilitate the exchange of global knowledge, as discussed in the Introduction chapter, the ‘invisible wall’ in culture, communication and epistemology between the West and the East persists. Inequality in knowledge production is also evident in the curriculum design of ODE. Investigating international students’ learning experiences in online Western classrooms, several scholars (Lee & Mao, 2024; Mao & Lee, 2024; Öztok, 2019) point out that while ODE has contributed to the population diversity in the online learning community, it fails to enhance the diversity in curriculum design so that online course contents are still Western-centric. Therefore, despite the endeavours of ODE to promote the internationalisation of HE and the exchange of global knowledge, this contribution remains superficial, focusing predominantly on demographic or numerical diversity rather than intellectual or qualitative diversity, as recommended by Lee (2022).

Overall, the colonial framework still exists in HE and operates in subtle and complicated ways. The imbalance of power relations between the West and the East affects the knowledge production process, devaluing and marginalising non-Western knowledge. This leads to non-Western international individuals suffering from various forms of epistemic inequality, ultimately resulting in their experience of othering. In particular, for international students, their social identity as students further complicates their experiences. The othering experiences lead to the stigmatisation of international students, thereby perpetuating a colonial framework in knowledge production and continuing epistemic inequality. This will be discussed below.

3.2.2.2 Epistemic injustice

The inequality in the process of knowledge production leads to epistemic injustices towards international scholars and students, which in turn reinforces

epistemic violence and perpetuates the imbalanced power dynamics in HE. Epistemic injustice refers to the injustice committed against individuals and/or social groups in their capacity as knowers due to their social identity such as race, gender, or class (Fricker, 2007). This concept echoes Spivak's (2023, p.35) epistemic violence that is defined as 'the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other'. Epistemic injustice reinforces existing imbalanced power relationships and the unequal nature of knowledge production, leading to the exclusion and marginalisation of these individuals and/or social groups, along with the knowledge they possess, from dominant discourses and epistemic practices.

There are two forms of epistemic injustice introduced by Fricker (2007), that is, testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. When a speaker's testimony is not given proper credibility due to the listener's intentional or unintentional prejudice against the speaker towards their race, gender or class, testimonial injustice occurs. In other words, testimonial injustice is a form of prejudice or a direct discrimination, where the speaker is mistreated, disregarded or considered as incapable due to their gender or cultural background (Fricker, 2017). The injustice negatively affects how speakers are perceived and treated both epistemically and non-epistemically (Fricker, 2017). Fricker (2007) takes an example from To Kill a Mockingbird to explain the testimonial injustices. In the novel, Tom Robinson, a young black man, is accused of raping a white girl, Mayella Ewell. Despite the fact that there is evidence to prove his innocence, the testimony of Tom Robinson in court is devalued and ignored by the white jury simply due to his identity as a black man. Therefore, the statement of Tom Robinson is considered to not be credible and his capacity as a knower is devalued.

Fricker (2007) argues that prejudicial dysfunction in testimonial practices results in either credibility excess or credibility deficit for the speaker. Fricker uses the speaker's accent as an example to illustrate how prejudices lead to a hearer's judgement of credibility. One's accent is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also carries social implications and reflects the speaker's identity such as their educational background and class, which unconsciously affects the hearer's

judgement of the speaker's credibility. This is not to say that the speaker's accent inevitably leads to a credibility excess or credibility deficit because the majority of hearers make a judgement based on the speaker's statement, and as such the circumstance may only occur in the case of strong prejudices or in particular contexts. Here, Fricker (2007) highlights that the prejudices normally enhance or undermine the speaker's credibility in a subtle way, which may cause the hearer to miss out a piece of knowledge or information. Generally, credibility deficit is more disadvantaged than credibility excess. Although credibility excess causes miscommunication or misperception, a credibility deficit undermines the speaker's capacity as the knower. Therefore, the primary characteristic of testimonial injustice is a credibility deficit. It is noted that not every form of credibility deficit is through testimonial injustices. If the hearer makes a misjudgement of the speaker's credibility not out of immoral hatefulness or epistemic carelessness, it could just be an innocent mistake. The credibility deficit in testimonial injustices occurs only if it is from the judgement based on prejudices and is ethically and epistemically culpable.

Hermeneutical injustice refers to certain social groups encountering difficulties in articulating and interpreting their experiences due to an absence of valid language or conceptual frameworks recognised by the dominant discourses and society, which results in their voices and experiences being marginalised, devalued, or dismissed. Hermeneutical injustice is an indirect discrimination and it is caused by the lack of hermeneutical opportunities in particular fields and social experiences (Fricker, 2017). This leads to a disadvantage in explaining or making others understand the areas and experiences. Fricker (2007) uses sexual harassment as an example to explain hermeneutical injustice. Before the concept of sexual harassment developed, women experienced unwanted sexual attention in the workplace. However, they could not explain the experiences to others until the behaviour was named as sexual harassment. According to Fricker, hermeneutical injustice is related to social power. The powerful group tend to find it easier to express their experiences. However, social groups with less power are more likely to experience hermeneutical injustices, and they may find themselves struggling to use

suitable discourses or statements to describe their experiences. Consequently, less powerful groups in society are unintentionally or intentionally excluded from accessing and expressing knowledge, especially when attempting to communicate their experiences to more privileged groups. At the same time, powerful groups in society may resist the emergence of certain concepts, especially those that reveal their privileged status, such as ‘white privilege’ (see Mills, 2007).

When unequal hermeneutical participation happens, the disadvantaged group is hermeneutically marginalised. In this context, the disadvantaged group is involuntarily excluded by the dominant discourses or society. Hermeneutical marginalisation is socially coerced and a form of powerlessness, whether structural or contingent. The hermeneutical marginalisation is not fixed. Given individuals’ complex social identity, one may encounter hermeneutical marginalisation in a situation but may not do so in other experiences. In general, the epistemic injustices, regardless of testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice, are inherently the unequal distribution of epistemic goods including education or information (Coady, 2010). Epistemic injustice has been found in many fields, ranging from healthcare and governmental policy, to language and education (Dotson, 2011). When certain social groups are considered to be less credible and their capability as the knower is devalued, their experiences are silenced and their voices ignored. In the HE landscape, international students and faculty members may experience epistemic injustice, especially in online distance learning environments, not to mention that research on online international students is very limited, as outlined in the Introduction and Literature Review. Therefore, this results in the missing voices of international scholars or students, especially those studying online, and has made it difficult for them to illustrate the epistemic injustice they experience.

While their experiences remain underrepresented, some studies have started to report the epistemic injustices experienced by international scholars and students, and most of them are based on campus. Firstly, epistemic injustices faced by international scholars are reported. International scholars have suffered from testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice in academia.

Several scholars (Arday, 2018; Catala, 2022; Gatwiri & Udah, 2024) discuss the epistemic injustices or racial microaggressions experienced by international scholars, especially those of colour, in Western universities. Arday (2018) and Gatwiri and Udah (2024) reflect on the testimonial injustices suffered by international scholars and observe that their academic capacities and professional expertise are often regarded as deficient due to their race, colour, or class. In this context, international scholars are viewed as outsiders or of being out of place in academia, and their knowledge and contributions are marginalised. Discussing the hermeneutical injustice faced by non-Western academic immigrants, Catala (2022) argues that international scholars often encounter systemic exclusion from the mainstream academic community due to language and cultural differences, with their language and cultural backgrounds frequently not being accepted by so-called dominant academic discourse. Therefore, epistemic injustices deny international scholars' status as knowers, dismissing non-Western knowledge in the knowledge production process.

International students also encounter epistemic injustices. Hayes et al. (2024) and Mohebali and Jangjou (2024) explore testimonial injustices towards international students, noting that international students' capabilities are often perceived as deficient in meeting the academic standards of English-speaking universities due to biases related to their race, social identity, and financial circumstances. Additionally, the scholars identify hermeneutical injustices, wherein international students' epistemological frameworks are prone to being overshadowed by university lecturers (Hayes et al., 2024; Mohebali & Jangjou, 2024). Consequently, the epistemic injustices silence international students as knowers. This is also reflected in online international students' experiences, especially online non-Western international students. Lee and Mao (2024) explicitly state the various forms of epistemic injustices experienced by online non-Western international students and reveal that online international students' distinctive cultural perspectives and knowledge are neither accommodated nor accepted in their online learning community despite the institutions' superficial commitment to diversity and inclusion. In this context, the invisible wall in culture, knowledge and epistemology remains in ODE, despite

technology removing the physical wall and enabling an increasing number of students to engage in so-called international online classrooms. This causes othering, homogenisation and stigmatisation of international students, which will be outlined below.

3.2.3 Othering, homogenisation and stigmatisation

In this section, I discuss the concept of othering and explore the othering experiences of the international student group, especially non-Western international students in the existing research. Next, I explain how othering experiences of international students produce the homogenisation and stigmatisation of them in studies, which in turn persists the epistemic injustice towards them and inequality in knowledge production.

3.2.3.1 Othering of International Students

Othering (or otherness) is a dialectical concept involving a distinction between the self (us) and the other (them). Through the construction of differentiation between the self and the other, individuals (or groups) devalue, exoticise, objectify, or simplify the other to construct the self, thereby affirming their identity and dominant position (Woodward, 2018). However, the relationship between the self and the other is not always negative. From a semiotic perspective, the self is an open, continuous, expansive, and dialogical one that is constituted through its relations with the other, language, technology, and the environment (Lacković & Olteanu, 2023; Petrilli, 2013). In this sense, the other can be understood as a constitutive condition for the identity formation and, furthermore, as the basis for ethical responsibility (Petrilli, 2013). Nevertheless, from a postcolonial perspective, the relationship between the self and the other is often shaped by power dynamics within the colonial framework.

Said (1978) argues that the West maintains its dominant position in the global power structure by constructing the East as “the inferior other”, which reflects the underlying inferiority complex and insecurity within the West. Spivak (1999) agrees with Said’s argument for othering and develops the concept of othering from a cultural perspective. Spivak (1999) points out that one culture divides

other cultures through unbalanced power discourses, thus categorising other cultures as “alien”. This process shapes a cultural hierarchy, viewing other cultures as inferior. In turn, the cultural groups that differ from the so-called dominant culture are excluded and their significance and existence are devalued. The construction process of the dualism of the self (us) and the other (them) is a process of reinforcing power hierarchy (Brons, 2015). In this process, the other is regarded as inferior and alien. Consequently, this dualism between the self and the other legitimises the social exclusion and discrimination against the other, thereby producing the homogenisation and stigmatisation of the other.

The classroom could be seen as a mirror of the power hierarchy. As a sociocultural interaction field, the classroom, including physical and virtual space, is not simply a space enclosed by four walls. Rather, the classroom is an extension of the sociocultural realities of society, in which individuals are more likely to be constructed as the other (Moncada Linares, 2016). In this context, the hierarchical division of dominance leads to the marginalisation, exclusion and discrimination of certain student groups, thereby fostering an enabling environment for students, teachers, and administrators to reinforce stereotypes and prejudices against specific student groups, including both international and domestic students (Moncada Linares, 2016).

Research has explored the different forms of othering that occur in virtual or physical classrooms in HE. By exploring the online distance learning experiences of domestic students and international students at two universities in Canada, Phirangee and Malec (2020) identify the other as the professional, the academic, and the ethnic other. Specifically, the professional other refers to students being othered based on the conflict between their full-time or part-time work obligations and academic obligations. The students feel othered because they do not receive proper support from their peers, instructors or HE institutions while attempting to balance their work and academic commitments. The academic other is defined as students being othered because their academic expectations, understanding, learning approaches and engagement requirements with learning contents differ from their peers. The ethnic other, as explained by Phirangee and Malec (2020), refers to students being othered due

to their race, educational background and shared personal experiences differing from the majority of their peers. The othering experiences strengthen students' sense of isolation and disconnection in online distance learning, and undermine the goals of ODE to widen HE participation and promote social justice by excluding various types of learners (Phirangee & Malec, 2020). Similarly, Bardhan and Zhang (2017) discuss the racial and cultural other. They observe that international students experience racial othering when they enter white settler society for the first time and are labelled as 'non-white' or 'ethnic minority' based on Western colonial race categories. Due to cultural and racial differences, the international students are generally seen as outsiders, therefore leading to othering.

As mentioned previously, Spivak (2023) analyses class differentiation within colonial structures. This is also reflected in Crozier et al.'s (2016) study which explores the HE experiences of international students, working-class white students and middle-class white students, demonstrating othering in social class (Bourdieu 2018; Holt & Griffin 2005; Skeggs 2004). Built on stigmatisation and a deficit logic, the middle class construct their superior selves and seek to distance themselves from others through a process of othering (Bourdieu 2018; Holt & Griffin 2005; Skeggs 2004). Crozier et al. (2016) argue that despite the success of widening participation policies and practices in university admissions, students from the working class and non-Western backgrounds are positioned as outsiders. Crozier et al. observe that these students' positions as knowers are devalued and they are constructed as a lack of awareness and understanding of the university's explicit (or implicit) norms and rules. Affected by the neoliberal market, white middle-class students perceive working-class and international students as a threat to academic standards, being concerned that the students may disrupt the symbolic and exchange value associated with their HE capital (Crozier et al., 2016). In this context, students from working-class and/or international backgrounds are considered to be exotic or disturbing, and are subjected to persistent scrutiny and surveillance by their White middle-class peers (Crozier et al., 2016). Through claiming 'White norms', White middle class students construct white working-class students and non-White

international students as ‘Others’ to shape the superiority of the self, while working-class students and non-White international students face pressure to adapt, assimilate and be marginalised (Crozier et al., 2016).

Most worryingly, in this process, the non-White international students and White working-class students may shape self-othering (i.e. othering the self). The Other is the mirror of the self, that is, the self always requires seeing the other and differentiating itself from the other to confirm its own identity (Hegel, 1977). When marginalised groups are continually under the gaze and surveillance of dominant groups, the subjectivity of the marginalised groups may be undermined, leading to a tendency towards objectifying the self. At this point, members of marginalised groups may perceive themselves as ‘the other’, resulting in self-othering. Self-othering is a psycho-discursive practice in which marginalised groups compare themselves to the idealised identities shaped by the dominant groups in society and devalue or ignore those aspects of the self that do not fit this ideal image (Chowdhury, 2022).

From a postcolonial perspective, self-othering means that the oppressed groups view themselves through the eyes of those in power, consequently internalising oppression (Chowdhury, 2022). Fanon (2008) in his book Black Skin, White Masks explicitly states this self-othering by analysing how Black people experience the dismantling of subjectivity when they enter White society for the first time. To integrate, adapt and be accepted by White society, Black people may conform to the dominant White norms and internalise racialised power discourses in the White society where Black people are ‘the symbol of sin’ and ‘the black man is the colour of evil’ (Fanon, 2008, p.153). In this process, Black people produce an identity crisis regarding their blackness and select themselves as ‘an object capable of carrying the burden of original sin’ (Fanon, 2008, p.148). Consequently, Black people may other themselves and internalise racism, reproducing colonial oppression and structure as argued by Fanon, ‘after having been the slave of the white man, he enslaves himself’ (Fanon, 2008, p.148).

Self-othering is also presented in international student groups, especially by non-White students who enter Western classrooms for the first time. Bardhan and Zhang (2017) observe that international students often experience a sense of fractured selfhood when they study in the US for the first time and attempt to locate themselves in American racial ideologies. This disorientation is related to their interactions with cultural and racial Others, and international students perceive their identities as inferior to those of others. In the same vein, Phirangee and Malec (2020) perceive that international students feel othered by their peers and therefore other themselves. They observe that international students may feel hesitant or uncomfortable sharing their experiences related to their ethnicity because of cultural differences from their peers. While international students attempt to navigate, negotiate and resist in the process of self-othering in these studies, self-othering leads to ambiguity and conflicts about their identity and persist the colonial structures in a subtle way.

In general, colonial structures continue to persist through processes of othering and self-othering in the HE field. The othering and self-othering experiences of student groups, particularly international students, leads to the homogenisation and stigmatisation of them. This homogenisation and stigmatisation, in turn, affects the epistemic inequality in knowledge production, reinforcing perpetuating imbalanced power relations, which ultimately form the cycle of colonial structures. These will be illustrated below.

3.2.3.2 Homogenisation and stigmatisation of international students

When exploring students' experiences in a cross-cultural context, the student groups are frequently categorised by their nationality, visa status or geographical location, such as Chinese and British students, home students and international students, online students and on-campus students. While these labels contribute to exploring the unique experiences of different student groups in a cross-cultural setting and emphasise the actual problems faced by particular student groups, they pose a risk of homogenisation and oversimplifying the experiences of the student groups (Lee & Bligh, 2019).

From a postcolonial perspective, this categorisation reflects a kind of essentialism, particularly in the case of international student groups.

While the concept of othering highlights differentiation construction, the differentiation is ironically framed as a form of between-group dualism and neglects in-group heterogeneity, producing essentialist accounts for students, especially for international students. Huang (2022) argues that the essentialist account based on an untested assumption recognises that all students develop intercultural experiences in similar or identical ways as long as they have the same nationality and/or immigration status. This neglects the differences in individual students and the unique nuances that shape their personal and cross-cultural learning experiences.

By critically reviewing relevant academic narratives on online international students, Lee and Bligh (2019) note that international students in the existing studies are frequently perceived as a collective, single, uniformed cultural entity, neglecting the diversity and complexities of an international student group. Similarly, building on descriptions of Chinese international students in the existing literature, Mittelmeier (2023) critiques the homogeneous portrayal of Chinese students. She considers the descriptions' failure to identify that China has 55 officially recognised ethnic minority groups and numerous regional language varieties, and thus, there is of course differentiation in individual Chinese students. She expresses concern about such descriptions neglecting the diverse backgrounds of individual students, especially of international student groups. The study of Huang (2022) echoes this view, and she investigates how international students from the same country discover differences in religious practices among their co-national peers, which emphasises the diverse backgrounds of individual students. Therefore, Lee and Bligh (2019) and Mittelmeier (2023) question how some scholars make an untested assumption that international students from the same country share the same cultural background and linguistics.

In addition, homogenisation occurs with home students, such as the counter-essentialisation of international students for UK students. Huang (2022)

identifies that the international students in her study tend to perceive the home students as a collective Other in intercultural interaction and understand the culture in the destination country from an essentialist perspective. This produces the counter-stereotypes such as the perception that British students are hard to interact with their international peers. Consequently, the essentialist categorisation reinforces the self-marginalisation of international students in the process of building connections with home students and other students from different countries. It can be seen that the homogenised assumptions about student groups lead to their stigmatisation, thereby producing stereotypes of international students and counter-stereotypes of home students.

On the one hand, international students in academic discourse are typically depicted as agents with deficient capabilities, undermining their position as knowers and enablers. One of the most evident examples can be found in discussions about non-Western international students. Here, non-Western international students are considered deficient in language proficiency and their ignorance of Western culture, knowledge and academic norms (e.g., Zhang, 2013). The classroom behaviour of these non-Western international students, whether online or offline, is perceived as silent and passive, and they are considered to be lacking the advanced analytical and thinking skills for obtaining a Western HE degree due to their deficiencies in language proficiency and Western academic knowledge (see section 1.1.3). Furthermore, the specific cultural and educational backgrounds of these students are viewed as a major barrier to their learning (see section 1.1.3). In this context, international students, especially non-Western students, are stigmatised as being at risk of failing in their learning (Lee & Bligh, 2019). The students' image is either that of victim or vulnerability, stigmatising that they are powerless in the cross-cultural environment and are passive recipients, as stated by Bamford (2008), who suggests that international students' lives are full of 'difficulties', 'challenges' and 'problems'.

On the other hand, international students are shaped as carriers of internationalisation and diversity, thus producing positive stereotypes. As discussed in section 3.1.1.3, international students are othered in their

experiences due to their differences. In the context of university admissions and recruitment, the difference of international students is considered as a resource and/or a tool, that is, the university always requires international beings to achieve its goal of enhancing internationalisation and diversity (Lee & Mao, 2024). While the contribution of international students to internationalisation, such as bringing with diverse cultures, is acknowledged and appreciated, and this recognition comes mainly from the perspective of HE institutions or the home student. In other words, the beneficiaries are the HE institutions and the home students, while the international student is dehumanised as a tool for internationalisation and a pedagogical resource. In this context, international students are still viewed as others. In addition, home students also face counter-stereotypes, where they are shaped as being unwilling to participate in intercultural interaction (see Huang, 2022).

Most worryingly, in this context, some non-Western scholars uncritically accept, and internalise these deficient academic discourses and hold a false assumption about non-Western students, engaging in the stigmatisation of these international students (see Mao & Lee, 2024). This not only maintains the othering of non-Western students but also reinforces the inequality in knowledge production, perpetuating the colonial framework and imbalanced power dynamics. Therefore, I argue that international students, especially non-Western international students, face a triple othering process in this context. On one aspect, non-Western international students are othered in Western universities, by scholars or students. On another aspect, these students are othered by non-Western scholars. In this context, non-Western international students may accept and internalise stigmatising labels, producing self-othering. The self-othering, in turn, affects these students' classroom behaviour and learning performance, along with researchers' judgement in the investigation, thus contributing to the inequality in knowledge production. Consequently, the colonial structures and power dynamics are perpetuated. However, it might be overly pessimistic to claim that the colonial framework in HE is immutable and the oppressed are entirely powerless against imbalanced power dynamics. The following section explores the agency in the colonial structure of HE.

3.3 Agency

3.3.1 The concept of agency

While individuals and their behaviour are affected by their environment, they are not entirely constrained by it. Dewey (1960) argues that individuals are not just influenced by their environment but that they affect and shape the environment through their actions. Therefore, individuals, their behaviours and the environment are in a state of constant interaction and reciprocal influence (Dewey, 1960). Bandura's (1989) concept of agency echoes Dewey's (1960) argument, in that Bandura highlights the relationship between individuals, their behaviours and the environment. Human agency refers to individuals' capability to act independently and make choices and through these actions, to affect their functioning and the course of events operating in a system of triadic reciprocal causation (Bandura, 1989). Agency is not simply about individuals acting autonomously or responding mechanically to their environment, but it also involves a complex interplay between individuals, behaviours and their environments (Bandura, 1989). In other words, personal factors, such as cognitive, affective, and biological factors, behavioural factors (i.e. actions taken by the individuals), and environmental factors including external social and physical environments, are intertwined with each other and affect each other bidirectionally, implying that changes in one may lead to changes in the other(s) (Bandura, 1989). Therefore, individuals are not just affected by their environment, but they shape the environment through their actions. Even when individuals are in a restricted environment, they are not just entirely constrained by the environment, but they have the capability to improve, change or reshape the environment through their actions.

Student agency is a core concept in pedagogy that views students as enablers, highlighting the active and self-directed role they play in the learning process and in shaping their own learning experiences (Klemenčič, 2015). In other words, student agency acknowledges students' capabilities to navigate, affect, and take responsibility for their learning experiences and learning environments (Klemenčič, 2023). In the intercultural learning environment, agency is

particularly important for international students, as they generally confront more sophisticated situations, including education and cultural differences, language, and nuanced power dynamics. In this context, student agency informs how the students act and express their voices in classrooms, and affects their learning outcomes as well as overall experiences (Stenalt & Lassesen, 2022).

The existing literature has shown that the international students exercise various forms of agency to help them navigate, negotiate and balance the complicated situations they face, thereby reshaping their intercultural learning interaction and environment. Through an investigation of international students' on-campus experience in Australian universities, Tran and Vu (2018) propose four forms of agency exercised by international students, that is, agency for becoming, needs-response agency, agency as struggle and resistance and collective agency for contestation. Agency for becoming demonstrates international students' capacity to exercise their agency to achieve their self-formation and make positive actions to shape their learning environment and the wider community. Needs-response agency reflects the role of international students as active learners and co-constructors of knowledge in interaction with their peers and teachers. Agency as struggle and resistance reveals students' capacity for resilience, resistance, and reconstruction when facing challenges including academic, cultural and interpersonal challenges. The collective agency for contestation refers to international students collectively resisting inequality and othering in the intercultural learning environment with the purpose of reclaiming their rights (Tran & Vu, 2018). Huang (2022) also identifies an active epistemic agency of international students in making sense of and navigating the complexities of their intercultural learning experiences, in which the students exercise their epistemic agency to negotiate the epistemic injustices, and to transcend their essentialist perceptions of local students as well as other international students, ultimately making deep interaction with their peers and shaping their unique intercultural experiences. Therefore, agency is an integral part of students' learning in HE, affecting their interaction experiences.

3.3.2 Agency and ToI

Due to the nature of separation in ODE, learner autonomy is a core part (Moore, 1972). In this sense, student agency is the key element of ToI. Students' participation in different types of interaction is closely tied to their agency, as agency enables them to initiate, sustain, and act in interaction. Klemenčič (2023) argues that while students' backgrounds, HE structures, and pedagogy affect the students' interaction experiences, the students are not involved in interactions passively, and they engage through their own agency. Furthermore, agency affects the quality and outcomes of interaction (Klemenčič, 2023). In this sense, agency helps explain why students from similar backgrounds who engage in the same type of interaction may exhibit different interaction behaviours and outcomes.

Effective participation in ToI requires students to draw on a range of agentic capabilities. As Klemenčič (2023) suggests, student agency is constituted through a set of capabilities, including self-regulation and self-efficacy, which guide students' interaction and affect their overall learning experiences. Cho and Cho (2017) explore the role of self-regulation in ToI. Specifically, self-regulation enables students to plan and monitor their learning progress, as well as reflect on learning content in LCI. It also encourages the students to initiate LII and seeks clarifications based on gaps in their understanding. In LLI, it is reflected in the students' active efforts to seek feedback and assistance from peers. Therefore, self-regulation supports deeper interaction and enhances the students' self-efficacy and their overall ODE experiences.

Some scholars, such as Lu and Tian (2024) and Wei and Chou (2020), explore the influence of self-efficacy on students' engagement in ToI. Lu and Tian (2024) find that international students with higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to overcome learning challenges in ODE, engage more actively in ToI, and maintain persistence in their learning, which enables them to successfully complete learning tasks and supports their academic development. Wei and Chou (2020) also reveal that students' internet self-efficacy helps them cope

with technological challenges in ODE and enables them to participate more effectively in online discussions, thereby affecting their academic performance.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that agency can be understood as an individual attribute, and ToI also affects students' agency. As Klemenčič (2023) and Stenalt (2021) argue, student agency is constructed socially and rationally, and thus it develops through interaction within ODE environments. Stenalt (2021) examines the influence of LII and LLI on student agency, demonstrating that the instructors' professional competence and credibility affect students' self-efficacy, and peers' academic abilities affect students' intention to engage in deeper knowledge exchange in LLI, ultimately affecting their learning outcomes. Hashmi et al. (2026) also prove that effective LLI and LTI facilitate students' collaboration ability and task planning, supporting their self-regulated learning. Do and Lai (2023) highlight the influence of LEI on students' agency. They identity that a well-designed learning environment enhances students' self-efficacy, which promotes the students' self-regulated learning.

Furthermore, there is a reciprocal relationship between student agency and ToI. Students engage in ODE environment with the existing agency shaped by their previous education experiences, and further develop their agentic capacities through ToI. Gebresilase et al. (2025) illustrate the reciprocal relationship between student agency and ToI. They point out that students' self-efficacy enables them to actively engage in LII, and in turn, such interaction enhances their persistence and investment in online distance learning, ultimately contributing to academic success. Zhao et al. (2024) also demonstrate that LII enhances students' academic self-efficacy, and in turn motivates them to engage more actively in LCI, contributing to improving their academic performance. Thus, this thesis places agency at the centre of analysis when exploring online international students' interaction experiences, focusing on how they exercise their agency to engage in different types of interactions, and how ToI affects the enactment of their agency.

3.3.3 Agency and Post-/Decolonial Approach

Agency is also closely connect to post-decolonial approach. One of the criticisms targeted at some postcolonial scholars, such as the criticism of Said (1978), is that whilst criticising the West's construction of the Oriental as passive agents, scholars also neglect the agency in colonial structure within their work (Bamberger & Morris, 2024). In fact, the colonial structure is not completely stable and members of oppressed social groups in colonised territories are not entirely shaped and affected by the colonial framework and do not fully accept colonial discourses. The postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha (2021) proposes a concept of mimicry, and he notices that colonised people unconsciously or consciously mimic the coloniser including their language, behaviour and lifestyle, to gain acceptance by the dominant group. The mimicry is 'almost the same but not quite' (Bhabha, 2021, p.130). Nevertheless, mimicry discloses the instability of colonial discourses, as it reveals the replicability of the subjectivity constructed by the colonisers and undermines the authority of the colonial structure. Therefore, colonial structure is not always fixed and not unchallengeable.

Through various actions, the oppressed individuals and groups exercise agency to resist, change or reshape the colonial environment, and their behaviour in turn influences the colonisers. Building on Said's (1978) Orientalism, Bhabha (1994) discusses the agency of the Orient in the process of being constructed by the West. Bhabha argues that the Orient is not a passive agent or simply constructed by the West, but exercises agency to strategically respond to the colonial process and affect the West in its own way. The West in this process is also full of complexity. The colonial process is not a unidirectional ideological penetration, but is rather the interplay of the strategical acceptance and resistance to the colonial discourse, thus shaping complicated cultural interaction networks.

Based on this proposition, Bhabha (1994) suggests the concept of 'hybridity'. Hybridity is commonly used in biology, which refers to the crossbreeding between two different species or two members of the same species and

produces a hybrid organism with mixed genes. Bhabha's hybridity emphasises that the culture and identities in the interaction between the oppressed groups and the coloniser are not fixed but are fluid, hybrid and reconstructed in a new situation (i.e. the third space). In this process, the oppressed groups reshape their environment by strategically accepting and/or resisting the colonial discourses, and the coloniser is affected by the indigenous culture and knowledge of the oppressed groups, thereby producing cultural and knowledge integration. Consequently, the authority of colonial discourse is dismantled and the power dynamic in the colonial framework is challenged.

However, Bhabha's (1994) concept of "hybridity" is in fact criticised for its failure to identify class differentiation and its applicability is questioned (Ahmad, 1995; Dirlik, 2018). Hutnyk (2005) criticises the hybridity, and points out that the concept is based on the assumption of a pre-existing cultural purity which overlooks the complexity of cultural development. Similar to Spivak's (1999) statements about pure consciousness, cultural development is not entirely pure in nature. This is not to say that pure consciousness and culture do not exist. In the ideological sphere, there may be pure consciousness and culture. However, in practice, it is hard to find purity in consciousness and culture. This is because the process of consciousness output and cultural development is complex and inevitably influenced by many factors such as language processing, integration, tension as well as borrowing among different cultures. Therefore, it is hard to display pure culture or consciousness.

Nevertheless, Bhabha presents the agency in the colonial framework, especially the agency of the oppressed groups, as he states that:

> Hybrid agencies find their voice in a dialectic that does not seek cultural supremacy or sovereignty. They deploy partial culture from which they emerge to construct visions of community and versions of historic memory that give narrative form to the positions they occupy; the outside of the inside: the part in the whole. (Bhabha, 1996, as cited in Crozier et al., 2019, p. 933)

Based on this, Crozier et al. (2019) frame the concept of cultural hybridity as a form of agency through which white working-class and international students strategically negotiate class differences, racial inequalities, and prejudices against their identities in HE contexts. Crozier et al.(2019) identify that these students not only seek to adapt to new social and academic settings but also to challenge and resist power dynamics by engaging in the 'third space'. In the space, these students sift and appropriate experiences, insights, and ways of being to integrate these with their "habitus of origin", and their identities are constantly changed, deconstructed or reconstructed in this process (Crozier et al., 2019). Consequently, the students claim their voices and rights and achieve self-formation through the hybrid agency in the third space (Crozier et al., 2019).

In addition, agency is also manifested in broader processes of decolonisation in knowledge production and educational practice, where students and scholars actively exercise agency. One of the main aims of decolonial practices is to decolonise the minds and restore indigenous cultures and knowledge, thereby creating a space where a plurality of voices, experiences, epistemologies and knowledge can be legitimised and embraced (Adam, 2019). However, it would be oversimplifying to understand decolonial practices solely as an embrace of multiracialism and multiculturalism. The essence of decolonial practices is the dismantling of power structures and privileges to achieve epistemic liberation and social justice (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). In this process, education plays an integral role. Fanon (1990, p.196) considers that education enables individuals to 'open their minds, awaken them and allow the birth of their intelligence'. Freire (1970, p.35) describes this as the development of a 'critical consciousness'.The critical consciousness, in turn, promotes decolonial practices in education, especially in the HE field.

One of the decolonial practices in HE is the decolonisation of the curriculum. The moment 'Why is my curriculum white' initiated by students in University College London serves as the starting point for the decolonisation of the curriculum and leads to a rethinking of university curriculum design. The movement questions white male-dominated curriculum design and knowledge production, arguing that colonial structure marginalises the knowledge

contributions of other races and women (Peters, 2015). The student-led movement has been echoed by scholars and teachers, triggering decolonial practices in curriculum designs.

Educators also engage in specific decolonial practices. Based on the reflections on the inequality structure of English-speaking universities, scholars (e.g., Breaden et al., 2023; Hall et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2022) apply a student-as-partners approach to redesigning the curriculum in collaboration with students, including international students, unprivileged students and local students, ensuring students are seen as key stakeholders in curriculum design and developing diversity and inclusion in the curriculum. Song (2023) focuses on the decolonial practices in a non-Western university by exploring the pedagogical practices of teachers and international students in courses relating to Chinese philosophy. The research criticises English language as an academic hegemony that marginalises non-Western knowledge and non-English materials and reveals that students and teachers exercise their agency to transcend the Western-centred paradigm and co-create a 'third space' where they critically integrate Western knowledge and non-Western knowledge, promoting epistemic justice. The research's critical perspective on the English language also echoes some scholars' (e.g., Temple & Young, 2004) discussions of the coloniality of English, providing a more nuanced perspective and calling for multilingual application in academic publication.

Nevertheless, English is considered as a tool of resistance and some scholars are using English to challenge the colonial framework and discourses from epistemological perspectives. For example, an increasing number of scholars (e.g., Huang, 2022; Lee & Mao, 2024; Moon et al., 2020) explore the diversity of international students and demonstrate their agency in their English journal articles, challenging the view on the homogenisation and stigmatisation of international students and critically responding to previous research on the topic (Moosavi, 2022). Some Western scholars (see Le Bourdon, 2022, etc) reflect on their privileged identity, promoting decolonial practices.

However, the post/decolonial approach raises concerns about dualism, Oriental imperialism and de-Westernisation. Bhabha (1994) argues that a simplistic dichotomy between the West and the Oriental neglects the existence of the 'third space' or 'grey area'. Therefore, he recommends using the concept of hybridity in an attempt to deconstruct the dichotomy between the West and the Orient. Nevertheless, it might be idealistic or unrealistic to completely transcend dualism. Bhabha (1994) claims that the concept of hybridity transcends dualism. However, the concept is based on the assumption of cultural purity in colonial countries and colonised regions, and the reality is more complicated (Moore-Gilbert, 1997). Therefore, Bhabha's (1994) hybridity does not completely go beyond dualism.

In this thesis, I strategically use the terms 'Western/local/home students' and 'international/foreign students'. This is not to agree with dualism but to provide a clear discussion about the online interaction experience of international students and their peers from different countries. It is worth noting that the use of the terms 'Western/home students' and 'international students' does not imply that these groups are internally homogeneous or fixed. That is to say, students vary in terms of prior educational background, gender, socio-economic status, and personal characteristics, all of which may shape their interaction experiences. However, the thesis does not aim to systematically analyse or compare the effects of these underlying factors on students' interaction. It focuses on how online international students, approached as a shared identity, interpret and make sense of their interaction experiences in different ways.

Additionally, Bamberger and Morris (2024) criticise post/decolonial perspectives that ignore the imperial ambitions of the Orient. However, this claim can be questioned, as it is challenging to definitively categorise actions from the Orient as either imperialist expansion or resistance to Western colonialism. Given that power structures and knowledge systems in HE are still dominated by English-speaking countries, the research focus of the thesis is upon the experiences of Eastern international students engaging in online distance courses provided by English-speaking countries. This is not to dismiss the power dynamics in other regions, but the colonial framework is '...only accidentally [dominated by] White',

as stated by Fanon (2008, p.157). One should be acknowledged that there are variations in pedagogical practices across English-speaking countries. Nonetheless, ‘English-speaking countries or universities’ are considered as a shared context, characterised by certain similarities across online international classrooms, and thus serve as a basis for analysing online international students’ interaction experiences.

Bamberger and Morris (2024) also criticise post-/decolonial perspectives that are potentially misunderstood as a complete rejection of Western knowledge, leading to a transition from ‘de-centring Western’ to ‘de-Westernisation’. This critique has its rationale, as the essence of colonial structure is imbalanced power relations. In this sense, the core of decolonial practices is to deconstruct the power dynamics and attempt to build a more balanced, inclusive and diverse knowledge system. However, a complete balance of power relations may be idealistic and naïve. If decolonial practices are understood as de-Westernisation and a rejection of the legitimacy of Western knowledge, the decolonial practices lose their original intentions, turning into another form of colonisation or dualism. In other words, if Western knowledge is completely marginalised and the superiority of Oriental knowledge is emphasised, the power relations are displaced. Here, the West becomes the new Oriental (i.e., the less powerful party) and the Oriental becomes the new West (i.e., the more powerful party). The imbalanced power relations are not deconstructed but rather, persist. The colonial structure is not dismissed but is perpetuated. That is to say, the core of decolonial practices is not to create new dualism, but to shape more inclusive and equal system and achieve negotiation as well as coexistence in differences by deconstructing colonial structures and criticising the injustice in the current structures. Therefore, a complete rejection of Western theory or the exclusive use of Eastern theory is not recommended from a post-/decolonial perspective. Instead, it is necessary to critically utilise both and provide a space for marginalised groups to express themselves.

3.4 Summary

In summary, I started to illustrate ToI in this chapter. ToI served as the main theory of this thesis, guiding data collection and providing a descriptive lens for the initial data analysis. I first introduced Moore's three types of interaction, which is the core of ToI. Then I discussed other interaction types developed in the existing studies. ToI contributes to understanding students' interaction experiences but they mainly focus on students' interaction in classroom and ignore the influencing of broader sociocultural context on students' experiences. With the development of internationalisation in ODE, interaction is situated in broader global and historical contexts, where language, cultural differences and power dynamics are embedded, and these affect online international students' experience and knowledge construction. Therefore, a post-/decolonial perspective is very much needed.

I introduced the post-/decolonial perspective as an analytical lens to explore online international students' perceptions and negotiation in relation to the injustices in their interaction experiences, attempting to re-conceptualise ToI. In this section, I reviewed the influencing of colonial legacies on knowledge and epistemology. In this context, I examine how international students are self-othering, othered, homogenised and stigmatised in research and practices.

Given that the thesis regards students as active agents, the role of agency in ToI and post-/deconial approach is demonstrated. Specifically, agency affects students' engagement in ToI and activities as well as power relations in ToI affect the enactment of agency. In this context, students exercise agency to negotiate power dynamics in ToI, constructing more meaningful ODE experiences. However, limited attention has been paid to how students experience power dynamics in ToI, particularly among online international students. Therefore, listening to the voices of online international student groups is important. Before presenting the findings, I outline the philosophical stance, researcher's position, ethics and methods used, which inform this study. This will be presented in next chapter.

Chapter 4: Methodology

In this chapter, I introduce myself and my position as a researcher, which informs my philosophical stance. Next, I elaborate on the research paradigm adopted in this thesis. Following this, I present the specific research design, data collection and data analysis. Subsequently, I discuss several strategies employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the research. This chapter also addresses the ethical considerations and limitations of the research. Finally, I provide a summary of this chapter.

4.1 Researcher positionality and problematisation

4.1.1 Locating the researcher

Researchers' lived experiences shape their positionality as both an insider and an outsider (Hsieh, 2018). Therefore, I first introduce my personal experiences in this section, and then I explain how my experiences inform my positionality in the research. I was born in the late 1990s and grew up in a region dominated by ethnic minority groups in China. As a member of the Han group, I witnessed the differences, conflicts and integration among different cultures in the region, which initially inspired my understanding of heterogeneity within the same nationality. While the region is relatively underdeveloped, I come from a middle-class family, where my parents did their best to provide me with better educational resources in a limited environment. While I benefited from the privilege of access to technology and education, I also witnessed the inequality of educational resources, which drives me to struggle with my privileged identity and critically reflect on my privileged status.

In my educational experiences, the importance of English was highlighted, which was considered a dominant tool for accessing a better future. In my family, English-speaking countries were also regarded as the representatives of modernity and advancement. Therefore, choosing to pursue further education and gaining a more valuable degree in an English-speaking country was a rational decision for me after completing my undergraduate studies in China.

Similar to my participants' learning experiences, my initial intercultural learning experience was disrupted by the pandemic, and I was forced to be an online distance learner in the UK, as mentioned in the Introduction at 1.2.2. During this process, I experienced struggles and injustices as an online international student. These experiences shaped my researcher positionality and have inspired me to critically reflect on international students' experiences of online distance learning as a researcher, which will be further illustrated below.

4.1.2 Researcher's positionality

Based on my personal experiences and the similarities and differences between myself and the study participants, I situated myself in this study as occupying an in-between position (Jimenez et al., 2022), acknowledging the fluid and dynamic nature of my identity as both insider and outsider (Milligan, 2016). On the surface, I was an insider, as I shared identities, experiences, and social classes with my participants.

Firstly, my shared identity as an online Chinese international student with my participants helps me establish rapport and cultural credibility. Adu-Ampong and Adams (2020) argue that the researcher fosters a sense of belonging among the participants by demonstrating an understanding of the participants' culture, thereby facilitating a deeper connection with the participants and contributing to the researcher's insider position. As international students from the East studying in the West, my participants and I navigate the Western academic system, during which we become aware of the underlying power imbalance between the Orient and the West, including epistemic injustices, stigmatisation and/or marginalisation related to our learning experiences (Huang, 2022). The power imbalance was further amplified by technology, particularly in the online distance learning settings, where the distance in both time and space was accentuated (Wang et al., 2022). As online international students, we perceive a lack of understanding regarding our online distance learning experiences. This contributes to perpetuating the power dynamics, which in turn raises our awareness of the importance of making our voices heard. The shared experiences and awareness not only

provide a crucial foundation for me to understand online international students' learning experiences but also enable me to establish credibility with the participants, ensuring they perceive the research as valuable and worthy of their time (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020).

In addition, my age and educational background are very close to those of my participants, which helped me establish a closer relationship with them and mitigated power dynamics to some extent within the research settings. The similarity in age and generation means that the majority of us have comparable educational experiences. The majority of us come from middle-class families where English and Western 'advanced' degrees are highlighted during our growth experiences. Most of us experienced the traditional Chinese education system and opted to further study in an English-speaking university affected by social discourses. This enabled me to understand my participants' perceptions and experiences of different educational systems from an insider's perspective. While power dynamics between researchers and participants are affected by social identities, having a similar age group helps reduce imbalances. Here, my participants are more likely to view me as a peer rather than a teacher or an authority, which encouraged them to speak more openly and freely.

While my insider roles offer a sense of shared identities and experiences with the participants, they were simultaneously nuanced by differences that introduced an outsider perspective. While both my participants and I are online international students, we did not know each other before the study, and our experiences are slightly different, thus contributing to an outsider's perspective. My participants enrolled in these courses while residing in China, whereas I participated in online distance learning while living in English-speaking countries. In addition, my participants established their relationships with their instructors and peers when they started to engage in online distance courses. In other words, participants have never interacted with their instructors and peers in person. In contrast, I have interacted with my instructors and peers in person during in-class sessions, and thus, I was already familiar with them when I started my online distance learning journey. While similar online distance learning experiences led me to perceive myself as an insider, these

differences may have led the participants to consider me as an outsider (Yip, 2024).

While I shared insider status with my participants, as someone deeply familiar with mainstream traditional Chinese culture and the Chinese educational system, my unique regional background has made me aware of the complexity of culture and experiences. This allowed me to approach the participants' experiences with inclusive, diverse, and dynamic perspectives, avoiding assumptions of homogeneity. In this sense, I was an insider in terms of professional knowledge, yet simultaneously an outsider culturally (Yip, 2024). The dual and fluid positionality enabled me to perceive the nuanced differences in their experiences and mitigate the risk of being blinded by familiar culture (Hertz, 1997).

As a PhD student, I demonstrate professional academic credibility (Adu-Ampong & Adams, 2020) and bring an outsider perspective shaped by my professional knowledge, complementing the diverse insights of my participants, who were undergraduates or masters students. However, this requires careful attention to recognising potential hierarchical dynamics and fostering an equitable and collaborative environment. While my shared generation reduces the power dynamic to some extent and participants view me as a peer most of the time, I noticed that participants sometimes unconsciously perceived me as a figure of imagined authority or someone in a higher academic position, shaped by my role as a doctoral researcher. This perception influences their behaviour in different ways. Some participants initially appeared hesitant, particularly when discussing biases or revealing their behaviours in online classrooms that aligned with stereotypes, fearing judgment. At times, they would pause to check my reactions or attempt to tailor their responses to what they assumed I wanted to hear. Conversely, a few participants sought to assert their expertise or control the conversation. When I asked a participant about his reason for selecting the online learning mode, the participant did not directly answer the question but instead mentioned having conducted similar survey-based research and explained the results in detail. Another participant shared her internship experience with data analysis, emphasising its practical nature in

contrast to my academic approach. These examples highlight the complex power dynamics during the interactions, requiring me to remain attentive to fostering an open and balanced dialogue.

As I reflect further on the intersections of my insider and outsider roles, I increasingly recognise the complexities and tensions that arise from the positions which have placed me in an in-between status (Jimenez et al., 2022). This deeper level of reflection allows me to critically examine how my personal experiences, particularly my experiences as an international student from the East, have shaped my research practices and affected knowledge production, thereby enabling me to navigate the tensions arising from these roles. As mentioned above, my participants and I as Asian international students share similar experiences navigating the Western academic system. This insider perspective allows me to perceive the othering experiences of international students and identify the underlying power imbalances between the Orient and the West, which has driven me to conduct this study and challenge the epistemic injustices embedded in the power dynamics.

However, this insider perspective has caused me to be blinded by my familiar culture, while potentially exposing me to being ‘culture blind’ when examining students' learning experiences within Western education systems (Hertz, 1997). Although I identify significant experiences of othering and marginalisation among Eastern international students such as the stigmatisation of their online classroom participation and the neglect of Eastern knowledge in Western curricula, I realise, upon reflection, that my insider perspective, shaped by my familiarity with Eastern culture and my education experiences, sometimes may blind me to the deeper injustices imposed by Western colonial perspectives. As an insider, familiarity may have led me to unconsciously accept certain critiques of it. These critiques, while seemingly originating from within the Eastern culture or education, may have been affected by Western colonial ideologies, leading me to internalise unfair perspectives on Eastern international students, which, in turn, influences my perception of their online learning experiences. For example, I unintentionally accepted some of the negative comments that participants had of their peers from the same nationality, which inadvertently

contributed to self-othering (Lee & Mao, 2024). Similar to some scholars (e.g., Cao et al., 2021; Lai et al., 2023; Ma et al.,2020), at the beginning of my data analysis, I unconsciously considered Chinese international students' adaptation to Western social and academic environments as a key indicator of their success in online distance learning and overemphasised their challenges, shaping them as victims and neglecting their agency in the process.

Upon realising this, I fall into another form of essentialism, that is, the counter-stereotypes of Western culture and education (Huang, 2022). Initially, I oversimplified English as a tool of colonialism and considered participants' emphasis on English as an acceptance of colonialism. I was overly critical of online Western distance education practices, such as the lack of textbook guidance, the heavy reading load, and the lack of diversity in the curriculum, believing that these practices forced Eastern students to accept Western knowledge, thereby perpetuating colonialism. However, in these critiques, I overlooked the intersubjectivity in this context and ignored individuals' agency within the colonial structure (Fataar, 2024).

Overall, I critically examined the tensions and intersections of my multiple social identities and fluid positionality, which affected my perspectives in the study and led me to navigate between insider and outsider, ultimately positioning myself as an in-betweener. Through the reflective process, I realised the complexities and limitations of my positionality and gained a deeper understanding of the persistent power dynamics and underlying inequalities in ODE practices. This drove me to adopt a more critical philosophical stance in my research.

4.1.3 Strategies

Before illustrating my philosophical stance, I introduce the strategies used to address challenges related to my positionality as a researcher, especially in terms of power dynamics and internalised biases. To minimise power imbalances, I have employed various strategies to encourage open and honest sharing. Before, during, and after the interviews, I emphasised repeatedly that the discussions were judgment-free and assured participants that their thoughts

and experiences would be respected. To ensure this principle, I adopted the strategy of critical accommodation, where the researcher applies silence and self-regulation to avoid critique, thereby facilitating the data collection process (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017). When a male participant expressed the view that women were not skilled in technology, I recognised this as a gender-biased perspective and, as a female researcher felt discomfort. Rather than expressing outright disagreement, I chose silence, which is not literal silence but rather a strategy aimed at better understanding the mechanisms by which gender bias and racial structures are reinforced and confronted (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017). Through this strategy, I navigated the discomfort and continued the conversation, asking follow-up questions, such as ‘what led you to think this way?’ to further understand his reasoning. By doing so, I deepened the dialogue and subtly challenged the bias by inviting further reflection.

Acceptable incompetence is used to navigate power dynamics between the researcher and participants, allowing the participants to function as knowledge holders and producers (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017). When participants discussed their interaction with the LMS, I refrained from demonstrating my familiarity with its functions and instead asked, ‘Could you share with me how you use it and what activities you engage with on it?’. By intentionally appearing somewhat ‘uninformed’, I thereby encouraged participants to provide more detailed explanations of what might otherwise be taken-for-granted practices and attitudes, thus prompting them to share more comprehensive accounts of their experiences (Mayorga-Gallo & Hordge-Freeman, 2017). These strategies help participants feel comfortable sharing their genuine thoughts rather than providing the ‘standard answers’ they might have assumed I would expect.

In terms of identifying the potential researcher’s biases, I adopted reflective memos and ongoing critical conversations with my supervisor and partners, both in China and the UK, to recognise internalised bias against Chinese culture and education. Through member checking, I became aware of the counter-stereotypes of Western culture and the classroom. In the process of

member checking, my participants expressed that they were not passively accepting English and Western knowledge. Instead, the students were using English as a tool to express and defend their cultural perspectives within Western online classrooms, thus resisting structural injustices. Beyond colonialism, English changes the participants' way of thinking and develops their cognitive processes. The bilingual use of both English and Chinese further shapes the participants' open-minded and diverse perspectives. Despite the challenges posed by the absence of textbooks in Western online classrooms, participants clarified that extensive reading expanded their knowledge and contributed to the development of their knowledge systems, transforming them from passive knowledge recipients to active knowledge creators. Through the reflection, I ultimately gained what I perceive to be a balanced critical perspective on Chinese students' online distance learning experiences.

4.2 Research paradigm

Based on critical reflection on my own experiences and positionality, I realise that reality is not entirely neutral but is affected by subjective factors and social contexts. Therefore, I use a nominalist ontology that 'stresses the importance of the subjective experience of individuals in the creation of the social world' (Cohen et al., 2017, p.6). Individual experiences are seen as subjective and affected by specific contexts. Therefore, each individual's experience is unique, which aligns with the aim of my research to explore the diverse experiences of online international students. Based on this, I adopted a qualitative case study to identify the diversity, which will be illustrated in Section 4.3.1. However, anti-foundationalism believes that reality is fluid and continuously reconstructed (Grix, 2010). This highlights one of the limitations of the study, which only provides a snapshot of online international students' experiences during the pandemic, which will be explored in Section 4.5.

It is noted that subjectivity and objectivity are not completely dualistic (Cohen et al., 2017). While the world has a certain objective existence, people's understanding of it is subjective. Therefore, the focus of this present study is on

how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. Based on this, I adopted an interpretive epistemological standpoint, where knowledge, as the organised remembrance of these experiences, is constructed through interactions among specific populations (i.e., online Chinese international students in this thesis) within particular contexts (i.e., cross-cultural online classrooms) (Lincoln & Guba, 2016). Given that interaction between the knower and the knowable (to-be-known) is highly person-specific and context-dependent, the process of knowledge construction is inherently subjective and shaped by various factors such as the knower's prior experiences, existing knowledge, identity, gender, race, class, nationality, cultural values, and how the knower interprets or constructs their surroundings (Lincoln & Guba, 2016). In this view, knowledge is 'created' and positional.

Given that knowledge and reality are subjective and socially constructed, I also employ critical theory as the research paradigm in this thesis. Critical theory assumes that knowledge is not only situated in sociocultural contexts but is also affected by power dynamics (Cohen et al., 2017). Critical theory uncovers the inequality and imbalanced power relations in knowledge production and seeks to critique and transform oppressive structures, to achieve ideological emancipation and pursue social justice. As discussed in the Introduction at Section 1.1.3 and the Theoretical Framework at Section 3.2.2, international students, particularly those from non-Western backgrounds, do experience othering. Their voices are silenced, and their experiences have been stigmatised as highlighted in previous research (e.g., Gemmell et al., 2015; Windsor, 2021; Zhang, 2013). These are closely related to imbalanced power relations and structural inequality. In this context, technology is not a neutral tool but reinforces existing injustices, which undermine the original goal of ODE, namely, to promote social justice. My critical reflection on ODE experiences as an international student further highlights the underlying injustices in the internationalisation of ODE, as stated in Section 4.1.2. Therefore, building on critical theory, I seek to critically examine online international students' interaction experience, with a particular focus on how they perceive and navigate injustices in their journey.

4.3 Research design

4.3.1 Research settings

Guided by philosophical assumptions, a qualitative case study methodology is adopted in this thesis, as it not only explores the diversity of the online international student group but also enables an in-depth inquiry into a phenomenon within sociocultural contexts (Thomas, 2021). Yin (2018) argues that a case study approach is used when (1) the research question is a 'how' or 'why' question; (2) the researcher has little control over behavioural events; and (3) the focus is on contemporary or historical phenomena. Considering the complexity of the contemporary ODE internationalisation and the historical disadvantages faced by non-Western groups, this thesis adopts the case study, focusing on online Chinese international students. Merriam (1998) notes that the most defining feature of case study research lies in clearly delimiting the case itself. Therefore, the case in the thesis is defined based on (1) demographic boundary (i.e., international students with Chinese nationality); (2) geographical boundary (i.e., residing in China); (3) contextual boundary (i.e., attending full-time online distance courses provided by an English-speaking university), and (4) temporal boundary (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic). Therefore, the case targeted Chinese international students who engaged in full-time online distance courses provided by English-speaking countries while they stayed in China during the pandemic.

There are several rationales for selecting this case. Firstly, due to Chinese ODE policy, there is a knowledge gap in understanding the experiences of Chinese international students who stayed in China to participate in full-time online cross-border courses. As illustrated in the Introduction at 1.1.2, staying in China to take full-time cross-border online courses was not a legitimate option prior to the pandemic. In this context, previous studies on Chinese students' online intercultural learning experiences mainly focused on Chinese international students' online learning experiences in their destination countries (e.g., Kung, 2017) or Chinese students' involvement in online cross-cultural courses through supplementary platforms such as MOOCs (e.g., Ma, 2018). Therefore, the

experiences of Chinese international students staying in China to engage in full-time online distance courses remain under-researched, with little data being hitherto available (Mao & Lee, 2024). Although the temporary policy was ceased in the post-pandemic, it is necessary to focus on the unique experiences of Chinese international students staying in China to engage in full-time online cross-border courses, shaped by the specific policy and sociocultural contexts, which bridges the knowledge gap in understanding them and offers insights for the future practices of Chinese ODE internationalisation. Therefore, my study targets Chinese international students staying in China to take full-time online cross-border courses.

Secondly, my focus on Chinese international students participating in online distance courses provided by English-speaking countries, rather than the courses offered by non-Western (or Eastern countries, such as Malaysia or Russia) is based on several reasons outlined below. As stated in the Theoretical framework chapter at Section 3.2, under the legacy of colonialism, there is a persistent power imbalance between the West and the East, producing epistemic injustices such as stigmatisation and stereotypes toward Eastern students and their cultures (Fricker, 2007; Said, 1977). Worrying, the epistemic injustices have been unconsciously internalised by the Eastern countries and students from these regions, forming self-othering (Lee & Mao, 2024). Consequently, Western education is granted a position of superiority over Eastern education (You, 2020). Therefore, I locate the case as Chinese international students engaging in online distance courses offered by Western universities to explore how the power dynamics shape their learning experiences and how they exercise agency to detect, negotiate, and navigate the power imbalance and epistemic injustices in the structure.

In addition, the advantages of Western education itself and the personal forces of international students from Eastern countries drive the majority of them to select education programmes provided by English-speaking universities. Several key factors affect Chinese students' choice of education programmes provided by English-speaking universities. Firstly, the continuous strong reputation and prestige of English-speaking universities, as a form of symbolic

capital, attract a large number of Chinese students (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2023). Different social and cultural offerings, English language proficiency, entry requirements, and education programme duration also play an important role in Chinese students' decisions (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2023; Zhai et al., 2019).

For self-formation (Marginson, 2014), Chinese students opt to engage in education programmes provided by English-speaking countries to broaden their horizons and enhance their competitiveness. With China's rapid economic development and active interactions with the rest of the world, intercultural communication competence has become increasingly valuable in Chinese society, leading Chinese students to believe that participating in educational programmes offered by Western countries, which differ from those in Eastern countries, can help them work effectively in multicultural environments (Yu et al., 2023).

In this context, although Chinese students' interest in studying in other Asian countries such as Japan, Singapore, and Malaysia has grown due to proximity, affordability, and the increasing number of top-ranked universities, English-speaking countries remain the most popular option for Chinese students (ICEF Monitor, 2024). According to statistics (ICEF Monitor, 2024), the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom continue to be the top destinations for Chinese students to study, with 289,530 students in the US (2022/23, 0% growth), 166,420 in Australia (2023, +6.5% growth), and 151,675 in the UK (2021/22, +56% growth). Thus, these reasons drive me to locate my study participants as Chinese international students involved in online distance courses offered by English-speaking countries as a typical case to provide deep insights into online international students' interaction experiences.

4.3.2 Recruitment and Sampling

Participants were recruited via a Chinese social media platform, Xiaohongshu (the so-called Chinese Instagram). This platform has over 200 million users and is widely used by Chinese international students to record their academic and

social lives (Beard, 2022). A poster for a recruitment advertisement, featuring a brief introduction to the study and my university email address, was placed on the platform.

During this process, two sampling strategies were applied. Firstly, purposive sampling is employed to target the online Chinese international student population with specific characteristics that meet the criteria relevant to my research focus (Bryman, 2016), including (a) Chinese nationality; (b) participation in full-time online distance courses provided by English-speaking countries; and (c) residence in China during their online study. Although the sample collected through purposive sampling may not be representative or generalisable due to its relatively small size, the nature of this study sought to acquire an in-depth understanding of the students' diverse experiences, in contrast to the breadth of understanding (Campbell et al., 2020; Cohen et al., 2017; Palinkas et al., 2015).

Subsequently, snowball sampling was used to secure more potential participants. At the end of the interviews, participants were asked if they would be comfortable referring the study to others they thought might be interested in participating. With the participants' consent, I provided them with a description of the study along with my university email address. During this process, some participants actively introduced my study to their peers, and those who expressed interest then contacted me directly via the university email address. Other participants invited me to join their online Chinese international students' group chats on WeChat (a Chinese social media platform similar to WhatsApp), where I shared the recruitment poster with my university email address for further contact.

In doing so, the participants act as informants to identify others who are eligible and willing to participate, and to put me in touch with those who qualify for inclusion; in turn, these identify others, ultimately developing a 'chain-referral' process (Cohen et al., 2017). While existing concerns about potential sampling bias (Leighton et al., 2021), snowball sampling helped me access the targeted population that was hard to reach until the Chinese government

implemented the temporary ODE policy during the pandemic, and invariably reduced the imbalanced power relation between me and participants. Cohen et al. (2017) explain that snowball sampling relies on interpersonal relationships, and participant referrals are based on trust in the researcher, which requires the researcher to build rapport with participants to gain their trust to refer others. Through snowball sampling, participants bridge the researcher to other potential participants and dominate the sampling process, which mitigated asymmetrical power relations between the researcher and participants (Cohen et al., 2017). The participants also act as gatekeepers of contact to other online Chinese international students, in that the participants could protect their friends by not referring them to me, thereby ensuring their friends' privacy or avoiding excessive self-exposure (Browne, 2005 as cited in Cohen et al., 2017, p. 222).

Regarding the potential sampling bias, this could have led to homogenisation as referred participants may share similar attributes or learning characteristics with their referrers (Cohen et al., 2017). However, I conducted two measures to ensure the diversity of the sample to some extent. Although the participants were Chinese international students who engaged in online distance courses provided by English-speaking countries, I used purposive sampling to locate participants from different English-speaking regions such as the UK and the USA, which provided a starting point for the diversity of the sample. During the snowball sampling process, I specifically asked the referrers to recommend individuals who may have different characteristics, such as personality traits, or having different views on online distance learning experiences, though similarity remained inevitable due to the nature of snowball sampling (Cohen et al., 2017). Through these efforts, I was able to include students with different characteristics and ensure the diversity of the sample to some extent, despite the diversity still being limited.Ultimately, nineteen online Chinese international students aged 20-30 who resided in China to take full-time online distance courses provided by Australian, American, or British universities were involved in this study, with twelve masters students and seven undergraduate students. To protect participants' privacy and consider the risk of whistleblowers, all participants used pseudonyms, and their identifiable information was

collected anonymously. The participants' demographic information is shown below.

ID	Country of Uni	Field of Study	Stage	First-time ODE	Previous edu exp[3]	Nature of previous edu institution[4]	Undergraduate discipline	Place of origin[5]	Gender
An	Australia	MA Applied Linguistics	10 weeks	Y	CU	Second-tier uni	BA English	Second-tier cities	F
Bai	Australia	MSc Professional Accounting	10 weeks	Y	CU	Project 211	BSc Accounting and Finance	First-tier cities	F
Chen	UK	MSc Human Resource Management	10 weeks	Y	CU	First-tier uni	BA French	Second-tier cities	F
Deng	Australia	MA Applied Linguistics	10 weeks	Y	CU	First-tier uni	BA English	Fourth-tier cities	F
Gu	UK	MSc Human-Computer Interaction	10 weeks	Y	CU	Second-tier uni	BSc Urban and Rural Planning	Third-tier cities	F
He	UK	MA International Education	7 months	Y	CU	Not specific	BA Education	First-tier cities	F
Liu	Australia	MA Applied Linguistics	10 months	Y	CU	Second-tier uni	BA English	Fifth-tier cities	F
Ma	Australia	MA Applied Linguistics	6 months	Y	CU	First-tier uni	BA Business English	Second-tier cities	F
Qi	Australia	MA Applied Linguistics	10 months	Y	CU	First-tier uni	BA TCSOL[6]	Second-tier cities	F

[3] CU means Chinese universities and TU means transnational universities. CH refers to senior high school in China.

[4] In China, universities have generally been divided into different batches. The first batch is Project 211 and/or Project 985 universities. These universities are regarded as elite universities, aiming to be world-class universities and focusing on cutting-edge research. Thus, these universities provide outstanding teaching quality and rich academic resources. The second batch is the first-tier universities that are not part of the 211 and 985 projects. These universities offer high-quality teaching and good academic resources, despite having less resource allocation than elite universities. The third batch is second-tier or third-tier universities that start recruiting students after elite and first-tier universities have completed their admissions. While some of these universities are academically strong, they are generally perceived by the public as less prestigious and valuable than elite and first-tier universities that receive more funding, academic resources, and policy support. In recent years, this classification has gradually been weakened to avoid discrimination based on educational background. In this thesis, this classification is used to reflect the diversity of participants' educational backgrounds.

[5] In China, regions include urban and rural areas. Within urban areas, cities are typically divided into different tiers based on various factors, including economic development, resource distribution, and population size. Generally, the higher the city tier, the higher the level of development and the greater the advantages in terms of educational and living resource.

[6] TCSOL is the abbreviation of Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages

Su	Australia	MSc Computer Science	13 weeks	Y	TU	Project 211	BSc Information Management and Information Systems	First-tier cities	M
Tang	Australia	MA Applied Linguistics	6 months	Y	TU	Project 211	BA English	Second-tier cities	M
Zhang	US	MBA Marketing	2 years	N	USA	U.S. News top 50	BSc Marketing	Third-tier cities	M
Ke	UK	BSc Finance	2 years	Y	Canada	Not specific	N/A	First-tier cities	F
Huang	Australia	BA Sociology	1 year	Y	CH	International high school	N/A	Not specific	M
Yu	Australia	BCom Finance	2 years	Y	CH	General high school	N/A	First-tier cities	F
Zhao	UK	BA Business and Management	7 weeks	Y	CH	General high school	N/A	Second-tier cities	M
Dong	UK	BSc Accounting and finance	2 years	Y	CH	General high school	N/A	Second-tier cities	F
Xia	UK	BA Business and Management	3 years	Y	CH	General high school	N/A	Second-tier cities	F
Gao	UK	BSc Accounting and Finance	2 years	Y	CH	General high school	N/A	Third-tier cities	F

Table 4.1 Participants' information

Here, participants' information is presented in a nuanced manner, including their previous educational experiences, disciplinary backgrounds, and regions. These characteristics reflect similarities and differences among participants. Although all participants are from China, their backgrounds are not homogeneous. During the interviews, some participants attribute their behaviours to their backgrounds, indicating that the influence of these factors on their interaction experiences. However, this study does not regard these background characteristics as independent variables for systematic comparison or causal analysis. They are considered as one of the perspectives through which participants interpret their experiences, as the study centres on how students construct their experiences in different ways. Accordingly, although participants were enrolled in online distance courses provided by different English-speaking countries, this does not imply that the online pedagogical practices in the countries are homogeneous. Nonetheless, such differences are not the primary focus of this study. In the study, these countries and universities are considered as a shared context with certain similar features, providing a

basis for analysing the students' experiences. In addition, it should be noted that although participants came from cities at different tiers in China, they generally belonged to relatively advantaged socio-economic groups. This is because all participants were self-funded, and the online distance programmes they attended were converted from existing on-campus courses due to the pandemic, with the tuition fees largely unchanged.

4.4 Data collection

4.4.1 Interview protocol and pilot study

An interview schedule was developed based on the main theory in this study, which is ToI. I also drew upon the research experience from my master's dissertation, which provided useful insights for designing the interview protocol. In my master's dissertation, I employed a mixed-methods approach that included online surveys and online semi-structured interviews to explore Chinese domestic students' online distance learning experiences at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The empirical results were drawn from 135 Chinese students' responses to an online questionnaire and the audio from semi-structured interviews with eight students and three teachers. From the results, I found that interaction, especially interpersonal interaction, played an important role in students' online distance learning experiences, which affected students' academic performance and their satisfaction with ODE. This finding drove me to initially focus the interview questions on Moore's three types of interaction (Moore, 1989). During the investigation of my master's dissertation, I noticed that students' living environments and technology also affected their online distance learning experiences, which led me to incorporate LEI and LTI into consideration in the interview protocol for my doctoral study.

To further ensure the effectiveness and validity of the interview protocol in my doctoral thesis, I conducted a small-scale pilot study in December 2022 after obtaining ethical approval from Lancaster University. Three Chinese international students who were staying in China to engage in full-time online distance courses provided by British universities contacted me via my university

email provided in the recruitment advertisement on Xiaohongshu to express their interest in the study and willingness to participate in the pilot study. The three participants comprised of two female students - one undergraduate, one master's student - and one male undergraduate student. Their disciplines were BSc Finance, MSc Human-Computer Interaction, and BA Business and Management. In the interviews, all participants were selected to answer questions in their native language, Mandarin, because it allowed them to express themselves more fully. This was also reflected in the formal interviews. Due to the dispersed nature of the participants and health concerns during the pandemic, the interviews were conducted on a digital platform selected by the participants. Although the three participants initially selected WeChat to accept interviews and share their views as they frequently used it and were familiar with its functions, the male undergraduate student suggested that providing a more diverse range of interview platforms, such as Teams and Zoom, would potentially enhance the overall interview experience and ensure a more stable connection for the interview. This suggestion was adopted in the formal interviews.

The three one-to-one audio interviews lasted nearly an hour each in length. This length of time had proved to be appropriate, which allows participants to sufficiently share their online learning experiences without making them feel exhausted. After the pilot study, the participants expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to share their online distance learning experiences and offered constructive feedback on the interview questions. For example, when the female master' s participant responded the initial question in LTI, 'How do the device, systems and technologies used contribute to your online learning?', she pointed out that the term 'systems and technologies' were too broad. This led to an amendment of the interview questions, with a more specific focus on students' interactions with the learning management system (i.e. Moodle). After revising, the question was 'how does LMS contribute to your study?'. When discussing students' interaction with their instructors and their peers, one of the initial questions was 'What kind of teacher do you think is a good teacher? and 'What kind of student do you think is a good student?'. This question was found

to be impossible for the participants to answer because they could not define 'good' or 'bad', and it could cause embarrassment, so the question was removed. Although the interview protocol was revised, the participants' viewpoints in the pilot study remained effective and valuable, and thus the data from the pilot study was included in the further analysis.

Based on the pilot study, I refined the interview protocol, and it was scrutinised by my supervisor to better align with the study focus, acquiring an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of online Chinese international students' learning experiences. The final interview protocol started with general questions such as ‘Could you tell me a little about your course?’. Then, the interview questions were categorised based on the different types of interaction, including LLI, LII, LCI, LSI, LTI and LEI. For example, the question ‘How do you describe your relationship with your teachers and peers?’ is asked in LLI and LII, and the question ‘How do the different education practices affect your current study?’ is presented in LEI. Nevertheless, the sequence of the interview questions is not fixed but depends on participants’ responses during the interviews. Finally, the interview questions end with open-ended or closed-ended questions, such as ‘How do you feel about being an online international student?’, and ‘Are there any other issues that you consider important to discuss that we have not yet covered in the interview?’ The detailed interview protocol is included at Appendix One. Based on the interview protocol, I began to conduct formal interviews between January and March 2023, which is elaborated upon below.

4.4.2 Interview process and strategies

All data was collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The interviews were held on online platforms preferred by the participants, with most of them conducted on Teams, a few on WeChat, and one participant selecting Zoom. Similar to the participants in the pilot study, all participants were selected to use Mandarin to respond to the interview questions. The interviews lasted around one hour, with the shortest lasting around 40 minutes and the longest lasting up to an hour and a half. In the approximately 24 hours of audio data generated from the nineteen interviews, participants provided rich descriptions

of their learning experiences and perceptions, which were more than sufficient for this study's in-depth analysis. Due to interviews being conducted on different virtual platforms and considering potential data security risks, I did not use the built-in recording features of these platforms. Instead, I used an independent recorder to collect interview data. Next, the interviews were transcribed through an interpretivist standpoint, where transcription is considered a process of contextualised negotiation and sense-making construction, and thus, this requires processing texts through an understanding of the specific context, rather than simply verbatim (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999).

Several strategies were used in the interviews. I applied the techniques of emotional support, prompts, and follow-up questions, creating an open and inclusive atmosphere and contributing to delving deeper into participants' views. At the beginning of interviews, I used opening questions to ease participants' nervousness and actively sought common interests with them to build rapport. For example, when I asked a participant why he selected the online courses provided by the UK, he mentioned that it was partly due to the Harry Potter series. I responded by saying that I was also a Harry Potter fan. This moment of resonance fosters emotional connection and contributes to a more open conversation. When a participant mentioned the influence of her physical condition on her online learning, my first reaction was to carefully express my sympathy. Then I gave her a virtual hug by using the chat box in Teams to comfort her and asked if she wanted to take a break from the interview.

Prompts and follow-up questions were also frequently used in the interviews. When I asked participants how they perceived their role in LLI and LII, several participants initially appeared confused. In such a case, I used prompts, such as 'Are you the initiator or the respondent of a topic?', to guide their thinking and encourage them to articulate their roles more clearly. When a few participants hesitated to tell me that they were silent Chinese students, I first reassured them that it was okay, and then used follow-up questions, such as 'What causes you to be silent in online class?', to trigger them to think more deeply. These strategies help me build rapport with the participants and

motivate a gradual deepening of the interviews, allowing for richer insights into participants' perceptions and experiences.

4.5 Data Analysis

4.5.1 Thematic analysis

As a PhD student with limited research experience, I used thematic analysis to identify, analyse and interpret patterns of meaning or themes around my interview data (Clarke et al., 2015). Braun and Clarke (2012) state that thematic analysis provides an entry into qualitative research that not only teaches researchers the mechanisms of coding and analysing qualitative data systematically but also allows researchers to integrate the analysis with broader theoretical or conceptual issues. Therefore, the flexibility and accessibility of thematic analysis drove me to select this method, contributing to reflecting students' actual experiences and uncovering the surface of the experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the process of thematic analysis, I combined the inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) approaches and attempted to capture explicit and latent meaning in my participants' statements (Clarke & Braun, 2017). I began to analyse my interview transcripts through inductive thematic analysis. Cohen et al. (2017) point out that although theory is effective in exploring the mechanism and identifying causality behind the data, it limits the scope of analysis, especially when investigating complex and multi-dimensional phenomena. Therefore, I adopted the inductive approach to analyse the interview transcripts in the initial stage, which enabled me to transcend the limited scope of the theory and acquire a more multi-faceted explanation of the participants' experiences, though the theory is useful in developing the interview protocol and conducting subsequent analysis. In this process, I identified the post-/decolonial perspectives from my data. Therefore, I included post-decolonial theory in my data analysis. Based on ToI and the post-/decolonial theory, I used a deductive approach to deepen the interpretation of the data. The combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis

provides an in-depth interpretation of the interview data and produced thick and rich descriptions of the findings.

4.5.2 Coding and theme development

I employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework to guide my data coding. First, I immersed myself in the interview transcripts and noted down my initial thoughts (familiarising myself with the data); secondly, I identified descriptive and interpretive codes to systematically generate meaningful patterns across the data (generating initial codes); thirdly, I gathered and collated codes into potential themes (searching for themes); fourth, I reviewed the draft themes to ensure the coherence and relevance to the research questions and objectives (reviewing themes); fifth, I refined and named themes to accurately reflect the essence of the data (defining and naming themes); sixth, the final analysis was documented, including illustrative quotations to support each theme (producing the report). Ultimately, a thematic map was generated (see Table 4.2 below). In this iterative process, I used NVivo, a qualitative software to support the data analysis, which is shown below.

Theme	Description	Subtheme	Codes	Sub-code	Example
Situated interactions	This theme describes students' interaction with their living environment and learning environment, including the influence of sociocultural context on their motivation and their initial impression of the ESC classroom etc.	Sociocultural interactions	Aspirations and selection of ESC	Discourse, realistic factors, personal factors	I have heard that the learning pressure is high in the British university (Tang)
			Aspirations and selection of ODE	Discourse, realistic factors, agency	If it weren't due to the pandemic, I would not have chosen online distance courses (Su)
		Enabling learning environment interactions	Initial perceptions, environmental support	perceptions, transition, agency	I always need some time to warm up (Chen)
Self-empowering interactions	This theme refers to students' agency in ODE. Here, the theme explores how	Self-regulation interactions	Learning management strategies	Challenge, navigation, agency	I am like a freelancer (Qi)
		Autonomy in	Learning	Differences	I have learnt to take

Theme	Description	Subtheme	Codes	Sub-code	Example
	students manage their study on their own. By self-management process, the students feel empowered in knowledge construction.	knowledge construction	strategies	in educational practices, agency, knowledge internalisation, cognitive development	ownership of my study (Gao)
Nurturing interactions	This theme refers to students' perception of being supported in interpersonal interactions. With this support, they feel nurtured and are encouraged to give back to the learning community, thereby promoting situational learning.	Supportive interpersonal interactions	Nurturing LII	Role, teaching presence	My lecturers are very professional (Bai)
			Nurturing LLI	Role, social presence	Without the interaction with my foreign peers, I think my view is very limited. (Gu)
			Other supportive interpersonal interaction	Role, emotional support	My friends help me (Huang)
		Collaborative knowledge construction	Collaborative learning	Autonomy, building connection	I feel happy now because I'm not studying alone anymore (Qi)
		Situated learning practices	Situated learning	Knowledge application, contextualise	I have several internships during online study (Bai)
Perceived injustices in interaction	This theme refers to the injustices perceived by students in their interactions. In navigating these injustices, they remove their initial idealised aspiration on ESC and develop a more balanced view of different educational practices.	Disconnection in knowledge	Localisation, reconstruction, injustices	A lack of diversity, agency, hybridity	...it's not fair! (Dong)
		Conflicts in interpersonal interaction	Disconnection	Tension, negotiation, positioning	...having everything under control (An)
		Distance in structure, environment and culture	Epistemic injustices, power dynamics	Power dynamics, navigation, A lack of authentic experiences	Rules are rigid, but people are flexible (Su)

Table 4.2. Thematic map

4.6 Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to ensure the credibility and rigourousness of the findings. Firstly, I consistently reflected on my positionality as a researcher, which contributed to taking a more critical and rigorous perspective in analysing and interpreting interview data, avoiding potential biases (see Section 4.1.2). In addition, I used member checking to ensure the reliability of the findings. After completing the initial analysis of individual cases, I shared a summary of the preliminary analysis findings with each participant to validate that my interpretation accurately reflected their experiences and meanings. The feedback received was generally positive, with minor clarifications and adjustments required. For example, Qi and An clarified their previous criticisms of Western pedagogy and supplemented the views by acknowledging some benefits. Yu noticed that her specific discipline was finance rather than the broader field of business studies as I had originally described.

Cormier (2018) points out that the language used by participants and researchers and its translation has a great influence on data validity and quality, especially in cross-cultural research. Due to the cultural concepts and power dynamics embedded in different languages, translation should be handled with particular care. While writing up the findings, I invited participants to review or edit my translations of their quotations in the dissertation, to ensure the accuracy of translations and avoiding potential bias. For example, when describing the interaction with their instructors, participants often used the Chinese word ‘权威’. which could easily be translated as ‘authority’. In education research, authority generally contains a negative or provocative connotation, implying that teachers exert control over students (Pace & Hemmings, 2007). However, some participants used Chinese words to express their respect and admiration for their teachers' expertise. In this context, it was inappropriate to translate it to authority. This required me to be very careful in discerning the semantic nuance of the Chinese word and in handling its translation. Therefore, I engaged in contextual translation and confirmed the intended meaning with all participants who used the word. Consequently, a few participants considered that translating the word ‘authority’ was appropriate, as

it reflected their perceived power dynamics in interaction with their instructors. Others agreed to translate it as ‘professional’ to describe their respect and appreciation for their instructor's professional knowledge and effective guidance.

Furthermore, I constantly engaged in the triangulation of my findings with the theoretical framework and literature to avoid a unitary lens and develop the depth of my analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Through conference presentations, I received peer feedback on my preliminary analysis findings from partners with similar backgrounds and non-Asian counterparts, which contributed to avoiding overly critical perspectives, especially when my academic and research experiences as an Asian PhD student may influence my interpretation of online Chinese international students’ experiences in English-speaking universities. I attended the University of Warwick’s 10th annual education studies conference and the 4th COER doctoral colloquium in 2023. I also presented at the Eden conference in 2023 and the Network Learning conference in 2024.

4.7 Ethical consideration

Before the interviews, I strictly followed the ethical process and acquired ethical approval from Lancaster University (see Appendix Two). Even though a brief introduction to my study was provided in the recruitment advertisement, a participant information sheet with detailed descriptions of the investigation (see Appendix Three) and a consent form were given to participants to reaffirm that they were fully informed (see Appendix Four) and voluntarily agreed to participate before the pilot study and the formal interview. In this process, some participants express their concerns about the risk of whistleblowers and privacy protection. I provided detailed explanations to address their concerns. For example, I reiterated that all data would be strictly anonymised and assured them that there was no identifiable information in the thesis, including the specific name of their university and their name anonymised. These ensure that participants’ rights were respected and their concerns taken seriously. Finally, informed consent was obtained from all participants. In addition, I did not use the built-in voice recorder on the digital platforms that were used to conduct the

interviews. Instead, I used a separate and portable voice recorder to further minimise the risks of breaching the participants' privacy (Khan & MacEachen, 2022). All recordings and data were anonymised and stored in encrypted form on my password-protected and encrypted laptop.

However, ethical consideration is not limited to following standardised approval and data protection processes. In interviews, I always view research as a collaborative process based on trust and respect, rather than a one-way information exchange. Therefore, I emphasised the participants' feelings during the interviews. Despite its usefulness in building relationships with participants (see Section 4.1.2), online audio interviews have raised doubts and concerns about the potential lack of emotional support and data security risks (Carter et al., 2021; Khan & MacEachen, 2022). Carter et al. (2021) criticise online interviews, especially audio interviews, for losing the specific care behaviours embodied with in-person research, such as handing a tissue to a distressed participant and providing them with a beverage.

While all participants expressed that they considered my study interesting and engaging and were happy to be part of it after finishing the interview, a few participants made brief self-disclosures about personal situations, such as complex family relationships and difficult personal experiences during the interview. While these disclosures were not detailed and were shared voluntarily, I was careful and sensitive in treating the disclosures, without investigating further. I provided emotional support, including empathetic listening and expressing care through words and emoticons in the context of audio interviews, clearly lacking visible body language and facial expressions. I also asked them if they needed any support. In addition, I prepared a variety of alternatives, including taking a break or rescheduling the interview, in case unforeseen interruptions occurred or participants felt tired due to the length of the interview. This did not occur with most participants, except for one participant requesting a brief pause to deal with an unscheduled personal matter.

4.8 Limitations

There are two limitations in this present study. 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 conducting interviews, I tried to discern the specific impacts of the pandemic to ensure that the insights from the present study would still be meaningful in post-pandemic contexts. Despite the limitations, I argue that this study is timely, filling an important gap in the literature, especially given the Chinese government's restrictions on full-time enrolment in cross-border ODE programmes before the pandemic, which resulted in a lack of understanding of online Chinese international students' experiences.

The second is related to my positionality. As stated in Section 4.1, my participants and I benefited from the privilege of access to technology and education, which facilitated the research process and shaped insider perspectives. However, this limited the scope of the study, especially in reaching underprivileged students with less tech-proficient or restricted access to technology, affecting knowledge production (Irani, 2019). My participants and I coincidentally engaged in online distance courses provided by English-speaking universities due to external factors. However, we were part of the privileged class, similar to most international students who travel abroad for their studies (e.g., Liu et al., 2023). In other words, we possessed sufficient economic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 2018), which would have allowed us to afford the costs of traditional study-abroad programmes and travel to target countries (Boudon, 1974, 2003), had it not been for these external factors.

Although some participants mentioned choosing the online distance learning mode to save money or highlighted social structural inequality, the nature of this decision was to effectively and 'cost-efficiently' pursue a HE degree from an overseas university, which is often considered more valuable than a local degree in the Chinese labour market (Chen, 2022; Liu et al., 2022), thereby converting the degree into future economic and social capital and maintaining our positional advantage in society (Boudon, 1974, 2003; Liu et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023). Therefore, I must acknowledge that my research scope does not fully

capture the voices of underprivileged students, whose experiences and perspectives may differ from those of the more privileged participants included in this study.

Nevertheless, this does not imply that my study is meaningless. My study highlights a crucial paradox: while ODE, mediated by technology, is applauded for promoting social justice (Reyes & Segal, 2019), and most ODE resources are held by privileged groups. Furthermore, technology conceals the underlying injustices and makes them harder to detect and address, particularly in the context of HE internationalisation (Lee, 2022). This paradox is also reflected in the underlying tensions between Chinese ODE practices and policies. As illustrated in the Introduction at 1.1.2, although the Chinese government decided to suspend the temporary policy that allowed Chinese international students to stay in China and engage in full-time online distance courses provided by overseas universities during the pandemic, for the purpose of preventing diploma mills and ensuring the quality and equity of international HE, this decision may have inadvertently contributed to educational divides and inequality, where study-abroad remains dominated by the privileged groups.

Although my study failed to include the underprivileged students' online distance learning experiences, the limitation itself revealed the intricate nature of promoting social justice in ODE practices and highlighted the underlying and persistent structural inequalities, which provided a critical lens for future research. Le Bourdon's (2022, p.7) research states,

> Poverty, discrimination, and injustice occur on different scales in every crux of our world, and more importantly, we are all implicit and responsible for addressing them. Personally, this shift has made me centre myself in the field, to reflect on how my thoughts and actions impact, contribute or challenge the pursuits of development...as Bilgen et al. (2021, p.13) state; …becoming aware of our positionalities requires the willingness to encounter discomfort and the courage to reflect this in the words we write down as academic contributions… having such an awareness (about the self) is an essential step towards reconceptualising research as a 'co-construction' of knowledge as well as conducting research 'with', rather

than ‘on’ or ‘about’ a group or area of interest.

Therefore, as a PhD researcher with a privileged background, I was deeply aware of the constraints of my identity and continuously engaged with the discomfort of it. That is not to say that I have to give up or am unqualified to conduct research related to ODE. Rather, I should continue to practice self-reflection to acknowledge my privileges and act to address inequalities within ODE practices.

4.9 Summary

Based on my critical reflection on my social identity and experiences, I adopted a nominalist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, with the supplement of critical theory. Drawing on my philosophical assumptions, I employed a qualitative case study to explore the diversity of the online international student group and their experiences. Using purposive sampling and snowball sampling, nineteen Chinese students who attended full-time online distance courses provided by English-speaking universities while remaining in China were involved in the research. Based on my pilot study, an interview protocol was revised and used in formal semi-structured interviews. The interviews lasted around one hour, and the participants provided rich descriptions of their learning experiences and perceptions, which were more than sufficient for my in-depth analysis. Thematic analysis was employed and four themes were produced, including situated interaction, self-empowering interaction, nurturing interaction and imbalanced interaction, which are illustrated in the following chapter. To ensure the credibility and rigour of the findings, several strategies, including reflective memos, member checking and triangulation, were used. Ethical consideration is considered a continuous and integral part of the research. In addition to ethical procedure, participants’ emotions and feelings are highlighted. Despite the limitations posed by time constraints and the researcher’s privileged positionality, the thesis contributes to addressing the existing research gap in terms of online international Chinese students and highlighting the paradoxes in terms of social justice in ODE. In the following chapter, I elaborate on the findings around the four themes.

Chapter 5: Findings

Through a post-/decolonial and TOI theoretical lens, this thesis offers an alternative perspective on understanding international students' interaction experiences. The main themes are situated interactions, self-empowering interactions, nurturing interactions and perceived injustices in interaction. These themes deconstruct the traditional typologies of interaction (i.e., Moore's three types of interaction and other types of interactions) and situate them within broader sociocultural, political, and epistemic structures. Here, international students' interaction experiences are intertwined with multiple factors, including their agency, environment and power dynamics, which present complicated online distance learning experiences. Although students experience epistemic injustices in this process, the thesis does not simply describe these injustices. Instead, it centres on how students exercise agency to navigate and transform such experiences. More specifically, international students are not portrayed as passive recipients or adapters of the injustices or Western-centric pedagogies, but as active agents who strategically utilise, construct, or resist prevailing norms and injustices. Consequently, they construct their own meaningful learning experiences aligned with their own aspirations and future career pathways, which challenge dominant assumptions around what constitutes a 'successful' and 'ideal' intercultural online distance learning journey.

5.1 Situated interactions

While students' interactions are typically considered as occurring within the virtual or physical classroom, their interaction behaviours and experiences are neither solely shaped by instructional activities nor entirely their autonomous choices. They are rooted in a broader sociocultural context. This is evident in intercultural online distance learning environments, where the online international students stay in their home country and participate in courses provided by a foreign HE institution. This requires the students to navigate across different time zones, cultures and spaces. Thus, their interaction is intertwined with their learning and living environment, constituting situated interaction. In this section, I start with sociocultural interaction where

students' selections of the English-speaking university and ODE are driven by their personal motivation and sociocultural contexts. Next, I present students' interaction with their learning environment. Here, I first introduce the students' response to the new intercultural online learning environment, followed by their perceptions.

5.1.1 'That's why I make this decision': sociocultural interactions prior to online distance learning

Selection and aspiration of the English-speaking university

The Chinese international students selected the English-speaking country and university based on several factors: (1) language; (2) the advantage of an English-speaking university and personal development; (3) different culture and education experiences; (4) previous education experience; (5) family support; and (6) social discourse. Firstly, language proficiency, particularly in English, is considered by participants to be a key tool to access international education and intercultural communication.

'Being familiar with the English language' and 'having a good knowledge of English' are the primary reasons mentioned by almost all participants for opting to study in an English-speaking country. The familiarity with English is shaped by various factors, including personal interest, school education and family environment. Before engaging in online distance courses offered by English-speaking universities, Xia had been studying in China, where she received systematic English learning in school. Her family also fostered her interest in English through summer camps and travel in English-speaking countries. These experiences enhanced her English proficiency and contributed to an understanding that English is an international language. In this context, her familiarity with English afforded her greater flexibility in choosing universities, compared to students studying other languages. These led her to select to study in English-speaking countries. Similar experiences were observed among other participants. Bai noticed that there were limited opportunities to learn second languages other than English within school education. Gao highlighted

the prevalence of English globally. These cases imply English hegemony in second language learning in non-Western countries and international education, which unconsciously maintains the dominant role of an English-speaking university.

The second most commonly applied code is students' perceptions on the advantages of attending an English-speaking university. The advantage of the English-speaking university in the rankings promotes students to make the decision. For the majority of participants, the standard they use to assess the educational quality of a university is their global ranking, especially the ranks of QS and U.S. News. For example, An viewed QS rankings as an important indicator of university quality.As An stated, 'the rank of Australian universities is very high in QS, and they are influential. Thus, I believe that studying here would be beneficial for my academic development and future career'. This statement shows that the global rankings, dominated by English-speaking universities affects students' perceptions on Western universities. Here, Western universities with high rankings are perceived as 'better' universities able to provide a 'higher quality' of education.

Other advantages of the English-speaking university are also motivation for students, including 'shorter study duration' (He), 'relatively flexible entry requirements' (An), and 'high recognition of qualifications' (Gao). These are closely related to the respondents' personal development. In the context of increasingly competitive college and postgraduate entrance exams and rising employment pressures in China, English-speaking universities are an alternative to access a better university for students. After failing the Chinese postgraduate entrance exam, Bai decided to pursue a master's degree in Australia, believing that it would help her earn a graduate degree more efficiently, and enhance her competitiveness in the future workplace. Huang, who was studying at an international high school in China, did not take the Chinese college entrance examination, but instead applied to an English-speaking university. At the same time, Gao observed that a degree from an English-speaking university is more highly esteemed than other languages and non-Western universities in foreign enterprise in China. While the perceived

advantages of English-speaking universities are seen as beneficial for the participants' academic and career development, these cases reveal the dominance of the Western degree in the global job market, thus reinforcing the privileged position of Western education.

'Experiencing different cultures and education' is one of the popular reasons for students to select English-speaking countries to study in. For participants, the difference between the West and the East is highlighted and is used as a 'hook' to attract them, but the cultural similarities and connections are neglected. Xia was attracted to the UK's rich cultural heritage and historical depth, viewing these as unique features that affect her decision. As Xia states,

> I think the UK is a very special country including its British Prime Minister and Queen, history and cultural background. Anyway, everything is unique. I like its festivals such as the Hot Air Balloon Festival, which is really cool! Shakespearean literature atmosphere is super good in the UK. I think it is quite different that everyone has religious freedom in the UK. I am also interested in the languages in the UK. In addition to the official language English, they also have Scottish Gaelic in Scotland and Welsh in northern Wales. All of these are so special and attractive.

A similar perception was evident among Chen and Gao, who noted that Asian countries have 'too many similarities in culture'. Despite being highly acclaimed, the West is constructed by the students as an 'exotic other' here. This reflects the students' counter-counter-stereotype or positive stereotypes on different culture and education.

The students' previous education experiences play an important role in decision-making. For example, Ma who studied English as an undergraduate in China and chose linguistics as her postgraduate discipline. From her perspective, 'standard English' primarily associated with English-speaking countries, including the UK, the USA, Australia, Canada. Therefore, she selected to study in Australia, expecting to receive more professional linguistic training and acquire more 'authentic' language environment. Similar views were also expressed by Liu and Deng, who considered these English-speaking

countries to be the most suitable destinations for students majoring in English. While this selection has its rationale as the English origin from these countries, it reflects that English in these countries is considered as more 'orthodox', thereby ignoring the legitimacy and diversity of English used and developed in other non-Western countries.

Family support contributes to Chinese international students' selection and aspiration on different English-speaking universities. The participants were self-funded international students, typically receiving financial support from their families. In addition to financial support, some participants' families offered suggestions on selecting English-speaking universities. Gao took into account her parents' advice when making her final decision. Gao' parents consider that the British education system was better and safer than that of the US, especially when they frequently saw news report about public safety issues over there. As a result, Gao chose a university in the UK. Huang also followed his father's suggestion of giving up an offer from a UK university because his father had learned from the news about an outbreak of monkeypox in the UK. It is clear that family support plays an important role in international students' choices and shapes their initial perceptions of different English-speaking countries, such as the US being deemed unsafe and the UK being safe. It is worth noting that these perceptions are also related to social discourse.

In terms of social discourse, the most notable case is its influence on students' evaluation on different English-speaking universities. As she had no prior overseas experiences, Gao relied primarily on online resources to develop an initial understanding of the UK universities. Through Internet search, she found that British universities have an idealised academic atmosphere. As she stated, 'I feel the learning atmosphere is better in UK universities, unless you particularly like going out and having fun'. This shaped her initial impression of studying in the UK. A similar experience was evident in Chen. She stated,

> In Chinese fixed perception, Australia is rustic...in other words, its degree is less valuable in China. Of course, I didn't really know much about it at that time, but everyone said so. Thus, I would feel the same way. I didn't want

to get a Mickey Mouse degree and therefore, I selected the UK university.

This also is reflected in Su's statement that 'according to the discourse in China, the highest recognition of overseas degrees is the degree from the UK, US, Australia and Singapore...and the majority of courses in these countries are taught in English. Thus I didn't consider any other options'. Tang chose Australia partly because he had heard that universities there offer a more relaxed learning environment.Social discourse also shapes the students' cultural aspirations. Zhao's initial understanding of the UK was shaped by cultural products, such as the Harry Potter series. This book left him with the impression of the UK as a country with rich culture and imagination. This, in turn, drove him to select a British university. Worryingly, colonised discourses also affect students' perception. For example, Dong drew on expressions 'the empire on which the sun never sets' and 'free America' to articulate her appreciation of the UK's long history and robust institutions, as well as her concerns about safety in the USA. These perceptions ultimately affected her decision to select the UK. This indicates that social discourse shape Chinese international students' aspiration on different English-speaking universities and the country in both positive and negative ways.

In summary, participants' decisions about studying abroad are complicated processes shaped by the interplay of language, personal experiences, realistic considerations, family and social discourses. The selection is both the participants' agentic outcome and shaped by a broader sociocultural context. At the same time, the broader sociocultural context affects students' positive or negative aspirations and initial perceptions of the English language, Western education, and culture via discourse. Firstly, the constructed and perceived difference serves as a 'hook' to promote students' decision to study in an English-speaking university. Here, the Western countries are constructed as exotic others. In addition, the counter-stereotypes of the Western countries are noted in students' perceptions such as safe UK and dangerous US. Nevertheless, the students generally consider that Western universities are equated with top universities and the international community, which are the ideal study destinations. The English language is also constructed as the *de*

facto international language. In this context, students with Utopian and idealised aspirations of a Western university prepare to fly to their destination to start their studies. However, unforeseen circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and visa issues, disrupted their plans, creating initial challenges.

Selection and perceptions of ODE

Bandura (1999) considers that people's lives are full of a fortuitous constellation of events that connect them with others or with certain possibilities, causing a reciprocal interplay of influence that shapes people's life courses. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was one such fortuitous event that shaped the distinctive online distance learning experiences of Chinese international students. The international students, regardless of whether they planned to fly to their destination country or were already abroad, had to confront a series of changes brought about by the pandemic.

There are two factors driving students to select ODE. ‘Pandemic’ is one of the driving forces. The pandemic and safety concerns were mentioned by all participants as reasons for staying in or returning to China to attend online courses offered by their English-speaking university. The loose pandemic prevention and control measures implemented by some English-speaking countries were viewed by the students and their family members as a disregard for public health and safety. This undermines the reliability of these countries, which had once been valued for their perceived safety. At the same time, strict pandemic prevention and control measures implemented by the Chinese government, including flight suspension, rapid vaccination and lockdown polices, enhance students’ sense of stability, convincing them that the domestic environment is more controllable, despite the inconvenience caused by travel restrictions, as evidenced by the following statements.

> The main reason is the pandemic. My family feel that the control measure in China is safer. Therefore, I selected to study online. (Zhao)

> My university allows me to select either online study or offline study. I definitely selected to study online, as it is safer in China. (Dong)

Some students selected ODE due to visa issues under the pandemic. For example, Bai's visa application was rejected due to Australia's tightening visa rules for international students (Cassidy, 2024), which is her first experience of exclusion from the destination country. Huang also perceived visa restrictions during the pandemic, as suggested by her, ‘when I am applying for the visa, there are certain restrictions regarding visa applications due to the pandemic situation in China’. The political tensions among different countries during the pandemic affected students’ selection.

The students’ initial perception of ODE is negative. For the majority of participants, full-time cross-cultural online distance learning was a compromising alternative during the exceptional periods, as expressed by Su: 'If it weren't due to the pandemic, I would not have chosen online distance courses’. This perception is affected by social discourse in Chinese society. As mentioned in the Introduction at 1.1.2, under the influence of prevailing social discourses and the policy positioning of ODE in China prior to the pandemic, many students initially viewed ODE as a supplement to traditional campus-based education, rather than a learning format with equivalent value. Therefore, the students remained skeptical about the quality of ODE. For example, Zhang honestly disclosed that he selected online distance courses provided by his university because ‘online exams might be easier to pass’. This is understandable, given that his initial goal was ‘just to get a valuable postgraduate degree’, rather than to pursue further academic development and personal growth.

In this context, some students doubted whether this learning format could achieve their academic and cultural aspirations, and thus, they initially felt frustrated and concerned about their upcoming online intercultural courses. Qi expressed,

> For online distance learning, I am initially pessimistic, even though it is my own decision [to take it]. This feeling arises from the fact that I am unable to go to Australia, and I could not acquire ‘real’ international learning experiences in an immersive and situated manner. Now I am learning

> online, staying in my flat, and being alone with myself. Once I realised that I cannot meet 'real' teachers and my peers, I felt anxious and frustrated.

This does not mean that the Chinese international students can only passively accept the choices. Bandura (1998) argues that agency allows people to utilise fortuity and turn it into development opportunity. Bai's experience illustrates her agentic response to the challenging circumstances. Following her earlier failure in the Chinese postgraduate entrance examination, Bai decided to purse study abroad. However, she was unable to travel and had to take online distance courses instead due to the pandemic and visa rejection. Rather than remaining in frustration and discouragement, she reframed the situation as an opportunity to seek internship experience. As a result, Bai engaged in online distance study and internship simultaneously, which ultimately enhanced her employability, and reshaped her perception of ODE. As she stated, 'ODE allows me to acquire a valuable degree from a Western university and make my CV look beautiful'. Bai's case demonstrates how the students take advantage of different time zones and spaces as well as seizing opportunities within their sociocultural contexts in the limited circumstances.

A similar experience was also observed in Qi, who, despite initial frustration, actively sought internship opportunities and made efforts to create a more meaningful ODE experience. The cases demonstrate how students, despite constrained circumstances, actively take advantage of different time zones and spaces while seeking opportunities within their socio-cultural contexts. In doing so, the students are able to make their online learning experiences more meaningful, which contributes to knowledge understanding and employability, particularly for those planning to return to China after graduating from English-speaking universities.

At the same time, many students attempted to change their attitudes, viewing ODE from a more positive perspective, as suggested by the following statements.

> This is my first time attending online courses. Well...to be honest, I am not sure whether it would meet my expectations before the courses start.

> However, I am still curious about this learning format...so I think I may acquire unique experiences. (Gu)
>
> Online classes could also allow me to experience the learning atmosphere in English-speaking universities and different cultures, similar to in-person learning. I mean...my peers may be from different countries. (Yu)
>
> I still have to pay expensive international student fees...however, at least I save on my visa fees and part of my living costs. (Gao)
>
> This might be a good opportunity to spend time with family, especially for someone like me who is more prone to getting homesick [laughs]. (Ke)

In general, while the pandemic, as a fortuitous event, disrupted the students' original plans to study abroad and cause some concerns, the international students take advantage of the opportunities arising from the pandemic to make preparations for meaningful online distance learning experiences in a limited environment.

5.1.2 'This is what I want': initial interactions in the ODE environment

Response to the new intercultural online learning environment

Having feelings of nervousness, excitement, and anxiety, the students with their distinctive cultural and educational backgrounds began to engage in their first-time online intercultural learning. When facing a formal online intercultural learning environment, the participants' responses are different. This relates to their previous education experience.

For participants with prior learning experiences in English-speaking countries, participating in online Western classrooms in China does not necessarily create a sense of unfamiliarity. For example, Ke had studies in Canada since senior high school. This sustained exposure enabled her to confidently use English to express herself, and she was familiar with common learning activities and assessment methods in English-speaking classrooms, such as group discussion and oral presentation. Therefore, she could smoothly transition and

adapt to the online pedagogy and the pace of the online course, despite this being her first experience of HE in the UK. For her, there was little difference between online and face-to-face learning in intercultural contexts because 'the rules are basically the same'. She even preferred online distance learning because it provided her with 'a sense of comfort' by allowing her to move fluidly between her intercultural learning environment and her local life and providing a relative balance between academic engagement and emotional belonging.

For participants who graduated from international high schools in China or obtained a bachelor's degree through Sino-foreign cooperative education programmes, they perceive the difference between Western classrooms set up in China and ‘real’ Western classrooms in the English-speaking university, especially in terms of pedagogy and learning activities. Su and Huang observed that although the international education programmes they participated in China were taught in English and provided some opportunities for interaction, the pedagogy remained teacher centred. The student-centred pedagogy in Western classrooms provided them with more opportunities to express themselves, and the learning atmosphere seemed to be more open and freer. Although the frequent interaction opportunities posed challenges for their English proficiency, they generally held a positive attitude towards the freer and more interactive classroom in the English-speaking university, believing that this is precisely the ‘real university’ they had always desired.

For most students who studied within China's conventional education system, they mainly exhibit two types of responses to the online Western classroom. A very small number of participants present an open attitude and positively engaged in the intercultural environment at the beginning. As a newcomer to this environment, Gu found everything interesting and appealing, including learning activities and assessment methods she had never experienced before. Upon testing that she was able to effectively communicate with her instructors and peers using fluent English, she became more confident and engaged in the environment.

Other students are more careful in the new intercultural environment. Similar to

Gu's prior educational background, An had been studied in the conventional education system in China, and had no prior overseas experiences. When selecting universities, An valued QS rankings and viewed them as an indicator of education quality. Therefore, she initially felt nervous about studying in a highly ranked Western university through online study. An used 'Granny Liu first visits the Grand View gardens'[7] (刘姥姥逛大观园), a Chinese allegorical saying, to describe her mixed feelings of admiration, nervousness, disorientation, and inferiority when she engaged in the unfamiliar and 'elite' learning environment. In this context, she adopted an observational and silent approach to avoid unintentionally offending others and making mistakes that might lead to negative judgment.

The similar approach is adopted by other students. He and Gao viewed teachers as 'authority'. From their perspectives, the classroom was a space where the power relationship between teachers and students was maintained, and thus expressing opinions without careful consideration might be seen as disrespectful. Chen also posited that her (Chinese) personality led her to adopt a cautious approach in the unfamiliar learning environment. Chen stated, 'I am an introverted person, and...well, I think Chinese people are introverted and conservative. Therefore, I always need some time to warm up [in the new environment]' . Consequently, these students tended to keep silent to learn the 'rules' in a new 'home' (i.e., the intercultural learning environment). As can be shown, LEI is affected by the international students' previous educational experiences and their cultural backgrounds.

[7] Granny Liu's first visit to the Grand View gardens is a Chinese allegorical saying. It originates from a classical novel of Chinese literature, *The Dream of the Red Chamber (1791).* This describes a scene in which a rustic, poor, and elderly woman from the countryside, Granny Liu, visits the aristocratic Jia household for the first time, and she is astonished and impressed by the luxury of the noble family. It is used to metaphorically describe someone feeling out of place, inferior, curious, and amazed when they enter an unfamiliar, luxurious place that is often different from or superior to their own living environment.

Perceived support in the learning environment

Students' instructors and peers play an important role in LEI. Gu, who had no prior experience of ODE in an English-speaking university, initially found the learning environment novel and engaged actively. This active engagement was further reinforced by the positive feedback from her peers and instructors. Initially feeling nervous, An became more at ease, as tutors clarified the 'house rules' and encouraged her to participate in co-constructing classroom norms, which contributed to a greater sense of comfort. Other participants also promoted the role of instructors and peers as supporters of helping their interaction within the new formal online learning environment. Chen pointed out that the 'sincere, enthusiastic, and extrovert foreign teachers' and peers' encouraged her to embrace the intercultural online learning community and give her a sense of belonging. Therefore, the encouragement and positive feedback from instructors and peers provided students' with a sense of support and contributed to LEI.

The learning management system (LMS) provided by English-speaking universities gives international students a sense of being supported in the online learning environment. When entering the new intercultural learning environment, the students are impressed by the functions in the LMS, believing that it could better support them to their learning and connect with the academic community. In addition to basic functions such as course schedules, programme introduction, handbook and learning material downloads, students identified that the LMS integrates information on online campus activities, psychological counselling, and contact details of the different student orginalisation, which enhanced their 'sense of being supported' (Tang) and contributed to establishing their 'sense of connection to the Western academic community' (Chen), especially in the context of staying in China to attend the courses. LMS is also regarded as an institutionalised medium that provides students with structural safeguards through functions such as contact information for the department administrators, introduction to course coordinators, and module feedback submission, which gives them 'a sense of security' (Yu). In this context, LMS has been used as the medium for emotional

support and learning resources, contributing to international students' learning and connecting them with others. This reduces students' sense of isolation in online distance learning.

In the international students' interaction with their formal intercultural learning environment, some of them perceived support from their family and close friends. For example, the parents of Dong and Gu created a living environment for them by taking care of their daily needs and respecting their schedules to better support them to engage in the formal learning environment. Although Zhang's parents cannot provide him with suggestions about his future career or professional knowledge, they attempted to take care of his emotions and created a relaxed family atmosphere by casual chats, thereby alleviating academic pressure produced in the formal learning environment. Ke received encouragement from her friends when she faced uncertainty due to the pandemic and the learning environment. However, not all participants received support from their family. During the lockdown, staying at home for a long time and the anxiety caused by the uncertainty of the pandemic exacerbated existing family conflicts. After several quarrels with her parents, Qi decided to move out to 'take a breather' and acquire 'a quiet living environment' to support her learning.

In general, the international students' initial discomfort in the unfamiliar online learning environment was mitigated with the support of instructors, peers, technology and family. Here, the students felt encouraged and supported in the environment, which was exactly what they expected.

Perceived enabled in the learning environment

Under the encouraging, welcoming and supportive environment, students felt more motivated in their studies. Firstly, some students' learning attitudes were positively influenced by the learning environment. The typical case is Liu. Initially, Liu was passive and unwilling to engage in the online learning environment, which she attributed to the habitus she had inherited from her undergraduate studies at a less prestigious university in China. As she

explained:

> I attended a second-tier university with limited academic reputation, poor teaching quality, and a demotivating learning environment during my undergraduate studies. In this environment, my peers were passive, especially when it came to working on learning tasks and group discussion, which led me to become a procrastinator and a silent and passive student. Therefore,...when entering the new online learning environment,...I am still in a passive role at the beginning.

However, affected by her peers' active participation and the vibrant academic atmosphere in her top English-speaking university, Liu realised that this was a learning environment different from her past HE experiences and that she did not necessarily rely on her previous coping strategies. Liu expressed her feelings:

> ...When I notice that everyone is actively and openly expressing their opinions and asking questions [in this online classroom], I realised that this is totally different from the atmosphere in my Chinese university [with a relatively modest reputation]. Since everyone is engaged and passionate in the online environment of the top university, why would I still act like a student in the Chinese classroom who does not share opinions, does not want to make eye contact with the teacher, and is reluctant to interact with peers?

Ultimately, Liu decided to redefine her role in the online classrooms and actively engaged in the environment. In addition, the students appreciate the availability of academic search engines in the online Western learning environment, which provides them with a sense of enabling in knowledge. In the interview, Gu emphasised the difference between Chinese and Western academic search engines, and expressed her highly appreciation of the Western academic search engine, as per the following statement.

> ...Before engaging in the Western classroom, I used a Chinese academic search engine such as Baidu Scholar, and I felt it’s okay at that time. When I use the Western academic search engine, such as Google Scholar,

> however, I felt that the academic search engine used in China is terrible with many low-quality articles, and it ruins my study. Currently, I am willing to explore new disciplinary knowledge using the Western academic search engine with high-quality articles but not using the domestic one.

Nevertheless, there is a contrasting case, arguing that the Western academic search engines negatively affect the students' sense of enabling in knowledge. Despite appreciating the Western academic search engine, Zhao pointed out that access to many Western academic resources relied on subscription services by the Western academic search engine. Due to a lack of prior experience, Zhao also found these databases less convenient to use compared to Chinese platforms, especially without proper guidance.

The initial LEI provides students' a sense of enabling in knowledge, and confirms their positive expectation of the Western learning environment. At the same time, international students compare the Western learning environment with their domestic environment. Here, the Western learning environment is considered to be the learning environment that the students want. It is described as 'inclusive' (Dong), 'diverse and international' (Yu) with 'a vivid academic culture and flexibility' (Gao) and 'a relaxed learning atmosphere' (Gao). However, the Chinese learning environment is portrayed as 'serious' (Gao) and 'less interaction' (Su), which students do not want.

In general, the international students' expectations of the online Western classroom are largely met through their initial interactions with the environment. Here, the majority of international students' concerns and anxiety are eased with the support of instructors, peers, technology and family. The inclusive and diverse environment gives international students a sense of being embraced and enabled, creating academic belonging. This is exactly what the students want. In this context, the international students' aspirations on the Western classroom are partially proved in the environment. This motivates the students' subsequent self-empowering interactions. It is worth noting that this strong identification with the Western classroom implies the students' implicit criticism of the Chinese learning environment they had experienced.

5.2 Self-empowering interactions

After experiencing the enabling learning environment initially, the international students start to seek out opportunities to take control of their own learning, rather than passively adapting. By adopting various learning strategies such as integrating resources, adjusting learning pace, and setting learning goals, the students attempted to develop a sense of ownership over the learning process. In this process, some international students sought not only to construct knowledge independently, but also to be ‘a good student in the Western classroom’ of their imagination, that being an independent and active learner.

5.2.1 ‘I can keep my studies on track’: self-regulation interactions

As the programme progresses, some students gradually discover the increased benefits of ODE, such as ‘flexibility in scheduling’ (Gu), ‘flexibility in classroom participation’ (Zhao), and ‘a cozier living and learning environment’ (Dong). However, the flexible, free, and comfortable environment posed challenges for the international students, especially in terms of concentration and motivation to study, which requires a higher level of self-regulated strategies in their learning. Dong explains, ’when you study at home, you have your phone, you have the internet, and you have the bed. Anyway,... you have everything that makes you comfortable, but not the right things for studying’ [laughs]. The comfort of the physical space and a lack of explicit monitoring mechanisms in the online distance learning environment leave students more easily distracted. For example, the majority of participants’ online classrooms allow the students to keep their cameras off and place no requirement for interaction, which poses a challenge to the students' concentration. Gao elaborates,

> Honestly,...in terms of online distance learning...I find it hard to concentrate, especially at home. In such a comfortable and relaxing environment, with no external pressure, my brain could not keep up with the lecture sometimes. [laughs] Therefore, my learning efficiency is relatively low, except for more interaction opportunities in an online classroom.

In addition, the flexibility in online course scheduling disrupts the fixed pacing

and external constraints in the traditional face-to-face classroom, such as the requirement of mandatory participation, which contributes to procrastination and diminishes learning motivation. For example, Dong observed that the requirement of learning autonomy and the increased discretionary time in online classrooms caused her to use her mobile phone for entertainment more frequently, which led to procrastination in her studies.

In response to the distraction and lack of learning motivation, the international students exercised different self-regulation strategies to maintain their control over their learning. Firstly, some students chose to change their learning environment to help them improve learning efficiency. Huang employed a unique strategy, combining travelling with studying to enhance motivation. Due to China's international flight suspension policy, Huang, who was a passionate traveller, was unable to travel abroad during the pandemic. Therefore, he decided to pursue a travel plan within China while maintaining his academic progress and completing coursework during the journey. According to Huang, 'it is a remarkable opportunity to experience Western education and visit the landscapes as well as cultural heritage of the motherland [China]'. He frequently conducted his online studies in hotels in different cities and used the planning of his next trip as a reward for achieving a learning goal or completing a learning task. This strategy improved his learning efficiency and reduced the sense of isolation brought about by ODE, enabling him to build a positive connection between the online learning space and his living space. Chen adopted a different strategy and she made use of local resources.Despite not being able to sit in the library at their UK university, Chen actively sought an alternative to moving the place of study from her flat to the public library in her city in China to maintain a daily study routine and immerse herself in the environment with a stronger learning atmosphere.

Secondly, some students improved their time management efficiency by adjusting their course schedules and daily routines, or by planning the pace of learning tasks. As a night owl, Dong was less efficient when studying in the morning. She observed that she was more easily distracted by mobile phone use during the daytime, particularly within the home environment. Therefore,

Dong decided to arrange her internship in the morning and work on her coursework in the evening. This arrangement optimised her time management and provided an opportunity to apply knowledge in practice, accumulating internship experience and contributing to her knowledge understanding. An employed a similar strategy. As a morning person, An intentionally scheduled her lectures in the morning (China time) to encourage herself to get up early and maintain a productive daily routine.

Qi's strategy was slightly different. Differing from the students mentioned above who view the flexibility of ODE as a challenge, Qi appreciated the additional time provided by ODE, considering that it gave her more opportunities to plan and engage with her studies. She metaphorically describes herself as a 'freelancer' to express the flexibility and autonomy she felt in scheduling her learning progress during online learning. Living in her flat, Qi structured her learning plans around the deadlines set by instructors, dividing her coursework into manageable segments and working on a small part of the task daily to maintain steady progress. This strategy enabled Qi to maintain a sense of control over her learning and reduced learning pressure. Consequently, Qi gradually shifted from initial feelings of frustration to an appreciation for ODE.

Other students used time management software or LMS to help them manage time and keep their studies on track. For example, Chen used a Pomodoro timer app on her laptop, which rewarded her with a tomato icon after completing a learning task. This helped Chen manage time more effectively and improved her learning motivation. Chen connects the sense of achievement of 'earning a tomato' in the app with her past study habit of collecting used pen refills. The similar experiences of achievement enabled Chen to maintain learning motivation in the new learning environment. Zhao monitored his learning progress and adjusted learning strategies by utilising LMS. As Zhao elaborated,

> The function I use most frequently is the study log, which monitors my learning hours and provides feedback. I think this is very helpful for my study. If I find from the study log that I have spent a lot of time on a course but the result is not as good as I expected, I will analyse this situation,

reflecting on my learning status during this period, and adjusting my learning strategies.

In a few cases, students improved their attention and energy levels by modifying their diet. Gao realised that her lack of concentration was related to excessive carbohydrate intake. Therefore, she adjusted her diet by replacing carbohydrate-rich foods with protein-rich meals before studying. The dietary adjustment enabled her to stay focused for a longer period. After completing her daily study schedule, Gao rewarded herself with her favorite carbohydrate-rich dish. Overall, the students developed their self-regulated strategies in the online learning and living environment to keep their studies on track. In this process, they acquired a sense of control over their studies and life.

5.2.2 'I take ownership of my study': autonomy interaction with knowledge

The international students pursued the ownership of their knowledge construction rather than simply completing learning tasks. The students viewed autonomous and independent learning as the expectation of 'a good (international) student' in Western classrooms. Therefore, the majority of students responded to learning challenges on their own and used different strategies to organise and develop knowledge.

The primary challenge faced by the majority of international students in formal online classrooms was the difference in Chinese and Western education practices. For the majority of participants who previously studied in China, differences in learning materials were one of the challenges mentioned frequently. The participants reported that their interaction with learning content was conducted through a range of course materials in the online Western classroom. These included multimedia resources, such as synchronous and asynchronous lectures, as well as text-based resources, such as e-books and journal articles, provided through online reading lists. These course materials were typically delivered via the Moodle site. Here, understanding the learning content through extensive reading or completing assigned reading tasks is a key requirement.

In the majority of Chinese classrooms, on the other hand, textbooks with clear structure and instructional content are used as the core teaching and learning material. The textbooks explicitly cover exam content and the key points of knowledge, enabling students to meet course expectations. Although extensive reading is encouraged in China, it is regarded as an extension of students' learning and is not compulsory in pedagogical practices. This difference created a challenge for some Chinese international students when they initially engage in an online Western classroom, as expressed by Deng:

> I have no idea what I'm supposed to learn, or what I've learned. [stress] If I had a textbook, I would know what I had learned from it, because it has a table of contents and explains each topic clearly. Of course, some of my lecturers here [online Western classroom] also recommend relevant books or provide textbooks, but these books are normally considered as a starting point. In other words, if you want to fully grasp a specific term or concept, it is not enough to read these books provided by the Western classroom or assigned materials, and you must read additional academic literature.

‘Hard to capture the key points’ was the recurrent code when participants face a lack of textbooks. Being exposed to sporadic learning content, the students found it challenging to organise and/or construct a knowledge system.

The difference between Chinese and Western assessment also brought challenges for students. Compared with exam-based assessment, the assessments in online classrooms were ‘diverse’ (An) and ‘flexible’ (Su). For example, An had previously studied in a Chinese university, where assessment was largely exam-based. After attending online Western classes, she encountered a new form of assessment, namely producing podcasts. Although she found this task interesting, An felt disoriented, and thus had to invest considerable effort in learning how to approach it. Another case was that of Gu. Having never written an essay before, Gu was asked to submit an essay during mid-term, which made her feel overwhelmed.

It is worth noting that not all Chinese international students viewed the

differences in education practices as a challenge. In Su's case, he expressed appreciation for literature-based learning and diverse assessments in the Western classroom. Although Su had studied in a transnational university, teaching was largely textbook-based, with limited supplementary materials, and assessment relied on closed-book examinations. As a result, he found these approaches unengaging. After being introduced to literature-based learning in the online Western classroom, Su immediately liked this approach and considered the experience of understanding and expanding knowledge through reading excessively to be 'fulfilling' and 'empowering'. He also viewed assessments in the Western classroom as an enriching experience to deepen his understanding of the disciplinary knowledge and foster academic development. Su stated,

> The [Chinese] assessments required me to memorise knowledge points using English during my undergraduate study. However, during my postgraduate study, I am allowed to refer to my notes and take open-book exams. Such assessments do not test your memory but more on your understanding and application of knowledge [...] Therefore, for students like me, who are not very good at memorising knowledge, I am more comfortable with postgraduate study in Australia.

In addition to different educational practices, the increasing complexity of learning content challenged students' ability to comprehend the material as the course advances. Liu uses the Chinese expression '吃力', which means a struggle to keep up and demands great efforts beyond one's comfort zone, to describe her feelings. This is particularly challenging for students who lack prior knowledge of their discipline, which reduced their motivation to learn. In Gu's case, she completed her undergraduate studies in urban and rural planning in China before transitioning to postgraduate study in human-computer interaction in the UK. Therefore, she struggled to engage with unfamiliar discipinary knowledge, such as *Python.* This negatively affected her motivation to learn.

Although the majority of students passed standardised language tests such as IELTS or TOEFL with high scores, they gradually realised that such test-

oriented language proficiency was insufficient for adapting to academic study in the Western classroom. This challenge in language was particularly evident among students, who lacked the relevant academic backgrounds. They considered the jargon as ‘unfamiliar’ (Huang, Qi), ‘abstract’ (Gu), and ‘obscure’ (Gu, Ke), which barriered their interaction with the learning content.

In this context, the international students employed different strategies. When coping with the different educational practices, note-taking, as a familiar learning strategy, was frequently used by participants to organise the fragmented content into the ‘knowledge network’. By drawing on note-taking strategies acquired in previous Chinese educational experiences, the students strategically constructed their own ‘textbooks’ in online Western classrooms to better understand the overall structure of the learning content. Gu, who changed her field of study and struggled with unfamiliar disciplinary knowledge as well as diverse assessments, adopted this strategy to better understand knowledge and develop coherent arguments in her essays. Initially, Gu used to take notes by hand. However, this approach was less efficient in online distance learning, particularly when it came to writing essays. Therefore, Gu developed ‘a hybrid approach’. She used handwritten notes to record ideas and create mind maps, while she adopted digital notes to mark the key concepts and document important information from academic readings. This approach helped her organise knowledge systematically and organise the arguments in her essays more effectively, establishing her knowledge network.

When facing challenges in understanding the new knowledge, another common strategy used by the participants was to review the recorded lectures, which they regarded as a major advantage of ODE. Compared to traditional face-to-face courses, recorded lectures provide the opportunity for students to pause and replay content, facilitating deeper understanding of critical concepts. The students also used supplementary materials, including academic literature, course slides, and instructional videos, to bridge gaps in their knowledge and understanding. For example, Chen completed her undergraduate studies in French in China before transitioning to postgraduate study in human resource management in the UK. Initially, Chen struggled with the unfamiliar disciplinary

knowledge and terminology. Thus, she had to invest considerable time in keeping up with the courses. To support her learning, Chen made use of recorded lectures, reviewing them after each class to fill knowledge gaps. As a result, Chen developed a clearer understanding of her current disciplinary knowledge.Notably, the majority of students utilise strategically Chinese and Western resources based on their learning demands, which enabled them to understand complex concepts efficiently and extend their knowledge. When developing an in-depth understanding of disciplinary knowledge, Su supplemented his learning with academic lectures delivered by other English-speaking universities on YouTube, which he considered to be ‘the bible of his field’ and ‘widely acknowledged classic courses’. As he put it, ‘If I want to pursue a long-term development in this field, this is the only way’. In Su's view, these courses were ‘sufficiently challenging’, and could ‘effectively enhance [his] abilities’. When preparing for exams, Su turned to attend the Chinese tutorials to ‘go through the key points rapidly’ and ‘master exam techniques’.

Ke utilised the free and high-quality online learning resources provided by Chinese MOOC platforms such as XuetangX to supplement her study in an online Western classroom during the pandemic. The majority of these online courses were developed by top Chinese universities and were used as a part of national efforts to support students’ learning during the nationwide lockdown. For Ke, such resources enabled her to deepen her understanding of core concepts and expand her knowledge systematically. Similarly, An and Dong read posts or watched videos on Chinese social media such as Zhihu, Xiaohongshu, and bilibili to access learning strategies shared by other Chinese students and scholars when encountering a new topic.

When facing academic language challenges in LLI, the Chinese international students presented diverse strategies. Some students chose to directly confront the language challenges. For example, Liu understood the use of academic language by accumulating and practicing English academic vocabulary and terminological expressions persistently in the Western learning environment. In her views, ‘while the language barrier hinders [her] understanding of learning content, it is a motivation to learn’. Liu adds,

> I think...one should not be stopped by the challenges of their study field, including language barrier, or rely solely on translating the content into Chinese to get by in the intercultural learning environment. This is not good for professional learning. Therefore, I consider the language barrier a motivation to facilitate my study.

Other students adopted a flexible or pragmatic approach, viewing English language proficiency as a tool rather than an end in itself. For the students, the understanding of disciplinary knowledge was more important than the language itself. As Tang notes, ‘after all, I come here to learn my disciplinary knowledge, not to learn English’. For this reason, the students chose to use translation tools to assist with the comprehension of learning content. It is worth noting that these students did not entirely rely on machine translation, but rather they used it strategically. For example, Su opted to read the original English text first, and then used a dictionary to check unfamiliar terms. Subsequently, Su returned to the original English text to understand the terms in context. Through this process, he constantly shifted among different ways of thinking, thereby generating new perspectives and deeper comprehension of learning content. As he explained, ‘each time I change a language, I change my way of thinking’.

Here, to become so-called ‘ideal (international) students’ in Western classrooms, the international students adopt strategies to develop autonomous learning and position themselves as independent and self-directed learners. It is also notable that not all students’ motivation to learn independently arises from a desire to meet perceived Western HE expectations. The students, such as Ke and Liu, had already developed a preference for independent learning through their previous Chinese education experiences and thus naturally adapted to the similar expectations of the Western classroom. In some cases, students attributed this transition to their cultural backgrounds. As ‘the Chinese mindset is to be afraid of troubling others’ (Chen), the students tended to cope with challenges independently.

In a few cases, students who relied heavily on teachers’ guidance were ‘forced’ to become independent learners because they were unable to receive timely

guidance from their instructors due to geographic distance and time differences in ODE. He was a student who relied heavily on teacher guidance. She tended to ask instructors directly when encountering learning challenges. She also kept her study pace under the instructors' supervision. Therefore, interaction with instructors is the primary learning resource for her. However, in the context of ODE, she was unable to interact with instructors regularly and promptly. Therefore, she had to develop independent learning practices by managing her study schedule and seeking learning resources on her own to keep her studies in pace and address challenges. Consequently, she learned to take ownership of her study.In summary, for students who perceived a lack of space for independent learning in their previous learning environment, the opportunity to engage in self-directed learning in ODE is a welcome change despite having challenges in the initial stages of online intercultural learning. In these international students' perceptions, the initial experience in online English-speaking classes aligned with their aspirations and corresponds to their understanding of 'a good (international) student'. Therefore, some international students considered that they found the 'nourishing ground' they had been seeking in the online Western classroom. As independent learning became normalised, the international students started to recognise its limitations and actively explored opportunities for interpersonal connections in online distance learning, where they not only support others but also acquire support from others.

5.3 Nurturing interactions

Gradually, the international students perceived a sense of isolation caused by ODE and the limitations of independent learning. As Liu expressed, 'studying alone sometimes results in a narrow perspective'. Thus, the students actively sought the connection with others and attempted to construct knowledge collectively through interaction. In this process, the students received support and gave back to others, ultimately creating a supportive and collaborative learning community. Subsequently, international students are not limited to acquiring knowledge in the online learning community but rather attempt to

apply knowledge to their sociocultural context, thereby attempting to apply knowledge into practice.

5.3.1 ‘They are incredible’: Supportive interpersonal interactions

While there is a geographical and temporal distance in ODE, the majority of international students highly appreciated interpersonal interactions in online distance learning. In the early stages of their online study, the Chinese international students mostly perceived interpersonal interaction in the online classroom to be ‘incredible’ (Liu, Qi, Zhang), especially in their interactions with their foreign (and/or Western) teachers and peers.

Nurturing learner-instructor interaction

The majority of the students identified their Western teachers as ‘ideal types of teachers’ and considered that these teachers were more encouraging, approachable, and supportive, though a small number of the students claimed that Chinese teachers have similar qualities. Bai, who completed her undergraduate studies in a Chinese university and subsequently enrolled in online distance courses provided by an Australian university, shared her views on LII in different contexts. From her perspective, teachers, regardless of the Chinese or Western classroom setting, provided her with substantial support and caring in academic and life. Thus, she believed that there was little difference in teacher-student relationships, and she experienced a nurturing, equal, and friendly LII in both contexts. Furthermore, Bai expressed a preference for offline interaction with teachers. Thus,she missed the formal and informal interactions she had with her Chinese teachers offline before the pandemic, contributing to the emotional connection and knowledge understanding. In contrast, the ODE environment, constrained by spatial and temporal distance, limited such connection in LII. While academic interactions remained possible in LII, the emotional connection with teachers was perceived by Bai to be weaker, contributing to a sense of distance in online Western classrooms.

Nevertheless, the majority of students attributed the sense of distance in

teacher-student relationship to cultural factors. Zhao had studied in a general high school in China, and this was his first time attending online courses provided by a UK university. He used the term ‘honouring teachers and respecting rules’[8] (尊师重道) to describe the traditional Chinese teacher-student relationship. In Zhao's view, a teacher's primary role was to ‘impart knowledge, teach skills, and resolve doubts’[9] (传道授业解惑), and thus the students needed to have high esteem or awe of their teachers. Unless the teacher was young and approachable, it was a challenge to establish a deep emotional connection in a traditional Chinese classroom. This perceived power distance in the teacher-student relationship led Zhao to consider his teachers as unapproachable authorities. Consequently, Zhao carried this relatively distant pattern of teacher-student interaction when he initially entered an online Western classroom. However, the ‘warmth, approachability, and patience’ of the Western teachers impressed Zhao and gave him a feeling that teachers and students are equal dialog partners in an online Western classroom, which enabled him to actively engage in knowledge construction in classes. Zhao used a Chinese expression ‘亦师亦友[10]’ (translated as ‘both an instructor and a

[8] This term means to honour the person who delivers knowledge and to respect the universal principles. It embodies a traditional Chinese virtue and moral expectation that teachers are not only responsible for delivering knowledge but also for conveying the truths and moral principles of the world to students. Therefore, students are expected to deeply appreciate their teachers' contributions. While the term is normally given a positive connotation, the participant here uses it to describe the perceived hierarchical relationship of Chinese teacher-student relationships, in which emotional closeness is limited.

[9] The participant quotes the classical definition of teachers from Han Yu, a Chinese writer and scholar of the Tang Dynasty, in his article *On Teachers* (师说) (801-802). In this text, Han Yu defines the teachers’ role as ones who deliver knowledge, teach techniques, and resolve doubts. While this definition generally highlights the teachers’ responsibility as facilitators, the participant uses it to describe his Chinese teachers as authoritative knowledge providers rather than equal dialogue partners.

[10] This Chinese expression means the role of teachers is not only that of instructors but also as trusted friends, providing students with learning and caring support. The expression reflects a type of teacher-student relationship existing in Chinese classrooms, highlighting mutual respect, emotional connection,

friend') to describe his close relationship with their Western teachers. Zhao identified the Western teachers as both knowledge facilitators and emotional supporters in LII.

For students, emotional connection was closely related to instructional interaction, especially in the context of online cross-cultural learning environments. A close teacher-student relationship helps international students ease their tension in the unfamiliar cross-cultural classroom, promote learning motivation, and contribute to students' cognitive development. In An's case, she was used to considering teachers as an authority and viewing the contents delivered in classes as 'standard answers' during her undergraduate studies in China, which caused her to rarely express different views. With the encouragement and delicate guidance from Western teachers, An developed critical thinking and positively engaged in knowledge inquiry.

It is worth noting that while fostering critical thinking is commonly perceived by participants as the mission of Western teachers, several interviewees noted that such pedagogical practices could also be found in Chinese classrooms. Bai pointed out that her Chinese teachers encouraged independent thinking and critical engagement with knowledge, and this training helped her adapt to the instructional approach and build an interactive connection with the teachers more easily when entering the Western classroom. In general, emotional connection in LII is a prerequisite for effective learning, especially for online international students. Having a sense of warmth and belonging to their online 'home', the international students fully engaged in meaningful learning, enabling them to develop a deeper understanding and construction of knowledge through LII.

In addition, teachers' professionalism and pedagogical approach are important factors in facilitating LII. The international students appreciated the professionalism of their teachers during their online study, in which these teachers provide delicate academic guidance to respond to their queries and

and equal dialogue in LII.

facilitate their knowledge understanding more deeply through recommending additional academic literature. Several international students expressed their appreciation for the creative ways in which their online instructors facilitated interaction. For example, An and Gu mentioned that their teachers designed interactive games and created a virtual interactive space through technology, which enhanced their motivation to engage in online LII.

In general, the international students' initial perception of Western teachers was 'enlightening' (Ma), and 'humorous' (Zhao). At the same time, they identified the Chinese teachers as 'serious' (Su), 'dogmatic and emotional' (He). In this context, the students considered LII in the Western classroom as the 'ideal and nurturing interaction' that they expected. It is worth noting that the majority of international students' appreciation of LII in online Western classrooms implicitly involved a critique or devaluation of the LII in Chinese classrooms.

Supportive learner-leaner interaction

Similar to LII, the international students expressed appreciation for interaction with their peers, especially those from outside China. Initially, some students held a conservative attitude towards interacting with their peers from outside China due to cultural differences and a lack of confidence in their English proficiency. In the interview, Liu expressed her concerns about unintentional offenses due to her limited knowledge of other international peers' cultural backgrounds, such as religious and cultural norms. As Liu stated, 'I am afraid that I may offend the other due to my lack of knowledge about their religion and customs'. For Gao, she was concerned that her English accent was judged by her foreign peers or caused misunderstanding in LLI.

Nevertheless, these students changed their assumptions in the process of actual interaction with their foreign peers. Liu found that everyone held an open and respectful attitude when talking about different cultural customs and religion. Gao received encouragement and attentive listening from her peers, which improved their confidence and enabled them to engage more actively in interaction with their peers. These positive experiences challenged the

international students' assumptions about Western peers and encouraged them to more actively engage in interactions with their peers.

In the process, the Chinese international students expressed high appreciation for the academic abilities of their peers, especially for those from outside China. This can be seen in the following quotes.

> Some of my peers who are from different countries, have travelled to many places. They have a lot of interesting experiences, which enables their opinions and perspectives to be unique and insightful. Their views provide me with a lot of inspiration and give me a moment of enlightenment. (Liu)
>
> Without the interaction with my foreign peers, I think my view is very limited. (Gu)
>
> In terms of my foreign peers, their way of thinking is advanced. (Qi)
>
> The academic ability of my foreign peers is far beyond mine. (Dong)
>
> My foreign peers, such as the British and Indian peers, work very hard. They could complete almost all reading tasks assigned by instructors before classes, and thus they could respond to the topics diversely and comprehensively. In comparison, I'm not as good as they are. [sigh] (Chen)
>
> The views of my foreign peers are creative, and their arguments are persuasive. However, the majority of my Chinese peers are limited in their way of thinking. (Yu)

Here, the Chinese students perceived their foreign peers as learners with creativity, high academic ability, and diligence. The students' interactions with these peers are considered to be inspiring, enabling them to enrich and expand their knowledge. It is noted that the Chinese students' appreciation for their foreign peers was generally accompanied by a subtle devaluation of their Chinese peers and themselves. This was evident in Gao's case. After experiencing anxious about interaction with peers from outside China, Gao actively engaged in LLI with the support of her peers. Through this process, she developed different views of interacting with peers from different countries. She

used the Chinese idiom '天马行空[11]' (translated as unbridled creativity here) to describe the originality and creativity of her foreign peers' views, admiring their powerful and unconstrained way of thinking. In comparison, due to 'similar cultures, educational experiences, and values', Gao perceived the views of her Chinese peers as less creative, as she put it, 'my Chinese peers come up with the ideas that I can think of or predict. These are not new and I think they are not important'.

Interestingly, despite devaluing the academic abilities of their co-national (Chinese) peers, these students prioritised seeking help from them when facing academic challenges. Although Gao appreciated interactions with peers from outside China, she tended to seek support from co-national peers when encountering challenges. Interestingly, the shared background, previously perceived as a limitation, became an advantage in this context, as it enabled greater mutual understanding and provided a sense of security. Qi expressed the similar view. She explained, 'As we are all Chinese, there are not many differences among us. Thus, my Chinese peers can better understand the academic challenges I am facing'. Other students attributed their preference to several factors, including 'shared social media platforms' (Bai), the 'same time zone' (Tang), and 'without language barriers' (Zhang).

It is observed that the participants subconsciously divided their peers into two groups, namely, 'Chinese or co-national peers (us)' and 'foreign or non-Chinese peers (them)' in LLI. The Chinese international students presented self-othering. On the one hand, the foreign is identified by the Chinese international students as a knowledge facilitator with positive labels, such as creative peers and high-

[11] 天马行空 is a Chinese idiom that literally means 'a heavenly steed soars across the sky'. It carries two underlying meanings. The first is positive and is generally translated as 'unbridled creativity', referring to a powerful, unconstrained, and creative way of thinking, speaking, or writing. The second is negative and is generally translated as 'head in the clouds', suggesting that someone's views are unstructured, illogical, and unrealistic. The connotation depends heavily on context. In Gao's case, she uses the term in a positive sense.

achieving peers. On the other hand, the co-national peers are devalued by Chinese international students. Due to a similar cultural background, the students' co-national peers are associated with negative labels, such as a lack of originality, having a narrow perspective and less contribution in LLI. In such comparisons, Chinese peers are identified as inferior to non-Chinese peers in LLI. Nevertheless, when facing learning challenges, the Chinese students still seek support from their co-national peers rather than non-Chinese peers with higher academic ability to acquire a sense of security and belonging. At this point, the Chinese peers are more likely to be an important resource for the Chinese students to navigate and survive in the intercultural environment due to their shared cultural background.

Other supportive interpersonal interaction

In addition to LII and LLI, the Chinese international students were nourished by other interpersonal interactions. The lockdown during the pandemic left some students with a stronger sense of isolation. Under the circumstances, Tang and Gao sought support from an online psychological counsellor through LMS, which helped them recover their emotional balance and get their studies back on track. Through LMS, Chen, Deng, and Gu also engaged in online collective activities such as language discussion groups and career services provided by their universities. In these settings, they practiced spoken English, improved their academic writing, and acquired guidance on their future career pathway through interactions with other students from different disciplines and institutional advisers.

International students benefited from interaction outside their university. Gao shared her class notes with friends or family members and explained to them about her learning content, which helped her test her knowledge and enabled her to acquire a new perspective through inviting feedback from friends and family as outsiders. In parallel, Zhang was inspired by interaction with his friends and family, which prompted him to rethink his studies and life. Subsequently, Zhang set a clearer goal for his personal development that moved beyond simply earning a degree. Another case is Huang, whose friends

shared their intercultural interaction experiences in Western classrooms, helping him feel more prepared.

Summary

In summary, international students gained nourishment from their interactions with different groups both inside and outside the online classroom. These interpersonal interactions provided emotional support and helped to develop the students' disciplinary knowledge and cognition. The Chinese students commonly expressed their high appreciation for their interactions with Western faculty and foreign peers, perceiving these interaction experiences as meaningful engagement in knowledge. Here, the Western teachers were described as approachable and instructive, with positive labels. Similarly, the peers from outside China were perceived as learners with creativity and high academic ability, enabling them to inspire others. It is noted that such appreciation is implicit in the criticism and devaluation of Chinese teachers and their co-national peers, who were perceived as distant, conservative, and less original. Interestingly, despite their admiration for this more creative and open interaction with their foreign teachers and peers, the Chinese students tended to seek support from their co-national peers when encountering academic challenges and navigating intercultural learning contexts. In addition, interactions with institutional staff as well as family and friends played a vital role in supporting the international students to maintain emotional balance. In this context, the Chinese international students started to seek a collaborative knowledge construction and attempted to make an ongoing contribution to their learning and living communities.

5.3.2 'Let's work together': collaborative learning interactions

The enabling learning environment and nurturing interpersonal interactions provided the prerequisites for students to construct knowledge collectively and changed some students' perceptions who originally had a negative attitude towards collaborative learning, encouraging them to become more engaged. Gu's case reflected the influence of counter-stereotypes about Western

students on collaborative knowledge construction. Although Gu actively engaged in online interactions with instructors and peers from the beginning, she expressed concerns about collaborating with peers from outside China on group projects. Having heard about her friends' negative experience of collaborating with the Western students, she held a skeptical attitude towards the responsibility of the Western peers, and thus hesitated to collaborate with them. After direct interaction, Gu expressed her appreciation for the strong sense of responsibility demonstrated by her Western peers in group work, as stated by her, 'I am so lucky! The foreign peers I've met are super nice'. Su also detailed his change in the interviews.

> During my undergraduate studies, group work was my least favourite assignment due to my Chinese peers' lack of responsibility. If I wanted to earn a high mark in group work, I had to complete most of the group tasks by myself at that time. However, it isn't the case during my graduate studies. My peers are all nice and responsible, regardless of whether they are Chinese or non-Chinese. Surprisingly, each person's tasks and responsibilities are clearly defined in group work. Therefore, I have started to enjoy collaborative learning.

In regard to the collaborative knowledge construction during students' online study, there are two categories, including collective knowledge construction embedded in the instructional design and collective knowledge construction organised independently by students. Through the interactive interface, collaborative learning becomes an important part of ODE. LMS contains a virtual collaboration space, which allows teachers to assign group tasks to students and enables students to engage in knowledge discussion and sharing. For example, Yu's lecturer posted her questions in the discussion board and invited her peers to respond, which enabled her to acquire different perspectives and contribute to a deeper understanding of the knowledge. The lecturers of Ma and Tang framed the collaborative knowledge construction as part of the marking criteria, requiring students to post their views about learning content on the online forum and to respond to their peers' opinions. Other students, such as Chen and Dong, were required to work collectively on a

learning project. Through the co-constructed knowledge, the students improved their understanding of knowledge and cultivated collaborative ability.

Nevertheless, not all students benefitted from it. Ke had studied in Canada since senior high school and subsequently enrolled in online courses provided by a UK university. For her, collaborative learning in online classrooms was not unfamiliar, given her prior exposure to similar practices. Although she was able to contribute her views as expected, she tended to develop understanding through self-dialogue and interaction with learning content. Therefore, the co-constructed knowledge required by instructors was considered to be more of ‘an obligation’ than a strategy to motivate learning for her.

In addition, some students created their online study groups through interactive tools such as Teams and Zoom to construct knowledge collectively. Initially, Qi was frustrated with online distance learning due to a lack of ‘real’ intercultural experiences and the sense of isolation. She did not remain discouraged for long. In response, she proactively initiated an online study group on Teams to build her online learning community. Qi and her peers collectively constructed ideas through brainstorming or discussed learning content, which improved learning efficiency and removed Qi's initial feelings of isolation and disconnection. As Qi stated, ‘I feel happy now because I’m not studying alone anymore. I have a team behind me’. Ma also built an online study room on Zoom, where she and her peers studied together with the camera on, creating an atmosphere ‘like sitting in the university library’. Obviously, regardless of collective knowledge construction led by instructors or initiated by students, the students improved their knowledge and enhanced an interpersonal interaction in this process, which relieved the isolation and disconnection in ODE. In this nurturing learning community and interpersonal interaction, students were not limited to acquiring knowledge but sought opportunities to apply their knowledge into practice.

As illustrated in Section 5.1.1, the majority of the Chinese international students seized an internship opportunity during the pandemic, applying the knowledge gained in online Western classrooms to their home settings. For example, Qi and Ma attempted to apply their linguistic knowledge and pedagogical

approaches they acquired from online Western classrooms, such as group work and English-medium, student-led discussions, to their English teaching practices in Chinese classrooms. Qi and Ma attempted to enhance their students' engagement through replicating the 'Western pedagogical approach' that they perceived to be more effective and interactive. Bai also applied the accounting knowledge to her internships at different financial companies. In this process, Bai engaged in critical discussions with her lecturers about the differences between Chinese and Australian accounting practices and principles, thereby deepening her understanding of different accounting systems. Through the situated learning practices, the Chinese international students deepened their knowledge understanding and improved their competitiveness in employment. Concurrently, the students built the connection with their local communities, which reduced their sense of isolation.

As the learning and practice progressed, however, the students perceived unbalanced interaction, which included imbalanced interaction between disciplinary knowledge and its application. This further encouraged the students to re-examine and rethink the knowledge conveyed in Western classrooms and critically reflect on Western education and Chinese education. This will be illustrated below.

5.4 Perceived injustices in interaction

5.4.1 Disconnection in knowledge, knowledge localisation and reconstruction

With deeper exposure to practical application in knowledge, the students realised the tension between Western knowledge and the reality of Chinese society. When concluding their situated learning in the interview, the participants mostly mentioned that 'what I have learned is rarely applicable in practice'. The knowledge in Western classrooms is not entirely compatible with Chinese reality. Ma initially attempted to apply the Socratic and student-centred approach directly to online classrooms in a Chinese university and a high school where she was interning. Then, however, she found that this

pedagogical approach did not work well with students in early grades and with weak foundational knowledge. For her students, relying solely on discussion and interaction caused superficial dialogue and was not conducive to building a solid knowledge base for them. Qi shared a similar perception. In Qi's view, many of the theories and concepts acquired in Western classrooms were easier to practice, test, and implement in the Western setting. Therefore, she expressed regret about not having the chance to apply the concepts she learnt in the online Western classroom in an English-speaking context.

Another perceived disconnection in LCI is that the knowledge the students acquired in the classroom was theoretical, making it difficult to directly apply it in real-life scenarios. For Qi, the difficulty of applying Western knowledge in the Chinese context was not only due to a lack of contextual alignment but also to the theoretical nature of the course content. She illustrated that the programme she was pursuing was overly focused on conceptual knowledge, making it more suited for academic research. As she claimed, 'If I had another chance, I would select a programme that is more pragmatic and focuses on skill training, rather than my current theory-based programme'. Zhao described some of his courses in Western classrooms:

> ...It's very much like, um, Chinese curriculum...Well, I think the curriculum in every country may have a similar problem to a certain extent, especially for those theoretical courses. [...] I feel that the content in these theoretical courses are superficial, overblown, and hollow, which I cannot put into practice. [...] Using the course *Introduction to Economics* as an example, I think that the content is too general and boring. It is not related to reality...thus, it would be more helpful if the content could be more down-to-earth, such as combining the concepts with the current state of economic situation in developing countries.

Gu shared her experience to demonstrate the disconnect between learning content and her internship.

> Well, I think the application of the theoretical knowledge in reality is relatively shallow...Specifically, my internship is a technical, entry-level

> position that requires me to efficiently solve specific problems, demanding practical techniques and speedy outputs. However, the theoretical knowledge I have learned mainly aims at exploring the underlying mechanisms behind the specific problems and tends to academic research, which is not required by my current role.

Paradoxically, the nature of the programmes selected by these Chinese international postgraduate students were postgraduate taught (PGT), which are designed to prioritise employability, rather than solely focusing on theoretical or research-driven practice.

In addition, the Chinese international students' perceived disconnection in LCI manifest in knowledge delivery in the classroom setting. After a period of learning, some students expressed dissatisfaction with knowledge delivery, describing it as 'loss of expectation' (He) and 'feeling disappointed' (Dong). This can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the students came to realise that the mechanistic pedagogical approach was not unique to Chinese classrooms but could be found in Western classrooms. For example, Chen reported that one of her lecturers overly relied on past slides and simply read from them when delivering content, which gave her the impression of the lecturer being perfunctory and disengaged. Chen questioned that she could not understand why some lecturers expected students to avoid reading directly from slides during presentations, yet often relied on doing so themselves in the process of delivering content. In this context, the knowledge delivery in the online classroom seems to have lost its purpose.

A similar case is that of Dong. Dong reported that when knowledge and policies about accounting had already been updated, the relevant learning content remained rooted in the past, and not to mention that the lecturer's explanations failed to keep pace with the latest developments and practice. This left her feeling that the content was 'outdated', 'a lack of fresh insights', and 'boring', making it difficult to maintain learning motivation. Dong further expressed her dissatisfaction in the interview:

> ...and I think, as an international student, I have to pay much higher tuition

> fees than local students. In this context, I do not receive what I am supposed to. For me, the content and the lecturer's explanation are just going through the motions, repeating some outdated knowledge. So...well, I have to say it is perfunctory...and seriously, it's not fair!

A lack of diversity in content delivery and curriculum setting also leads to students' sense of disconnection. In the interviews, 'a lack of sufficient international case support and the cases being overly limited to Anglo-American or European contexts in the curriculum' were criticised by some international students. For example, Zhang pointed out that while there is a rich history and experience of business research and practice in the US and the UK, the cases in the curriculum overly focused on these countries and excluded practices from other countries and regions. This restricted students' expansion of knowledge and hindered their cognitive development.

In Zhao's case, he reported that his lecturer required students to use only English-language literature unless an official English translation was available in the course *Economics of Developing Countries*. While this requirement was originally intended to avoid academic misconduct, it limited the non-Western knowledge delivery to some extent, especially the course that was designed to focus on non-Western contexts. This made Zhao wonder if he and other students in this classroom truly gained a deep understanding of the economy of developing countries when the majority of these countries are non-Western and their official language is mostly non-English, despite some of the English-language literature being written by non-Western scholars. Zhao also observed that the library and database resources offered by the university were largely limited to English-language materials, making it challenging to access research conducted in other languages or other non-Western contexts. In parallel, An mentioned that her lecturer posed questions such as 'what pedagogical approach should be used to teach European students?' or 'how to design a language course suitable for European students' in the course *Second Language Teaching*, which was 'confusing and disorienting' for her and the other non-Western students with limited intercultural teaching and learning experiences. These cases reflects the marginalisation of non-Western

knowledge in the Western curriculum and content delivery.

A small number of students reported that the content of the lectures was superficial and lacked academic challenge, which provided them a sense of disconnection in LCI. As Su stated, ‘it feels like I am being taught the ABC’, describing his perception of the content as overly simplistic and basic. In his view, while the challenging learning content was overwhelming, it was due to these challenges that improved his learning and competence. Su and He also identified a disconnection between the learning content delivered by lecturers and the assessment. From the perspective of them, the content delivered in the online classroom was superficial, but the assessments were inappropriately challenging, with a lack of connection between them. Consequently, They challenged the purpose of lecture setting when most of the actual learning had to be supplemented and expanded through independent study, making lectures feel more like a formality than a meaningful part of the learning process.

Exercising agency, the international students attempted to localise the ‘Western knowledge’ and reconstruct it. In response to the incompatibility of knowledge in different sociocultural settings, Ma adjusted her teaching strategy in the internship. For low-grade students with an insufficient knowledge base and weaker foundations, Ma integrated the pedagogical approaches that combined elements of both Chinese and Western education. For one aspect, Ma adopted textbook-based instruction to help students build a systematic knowledge framework and grasp key concepts. For another aspect, Ma drew upon Western education practices by introducing relevant academic texts and assigning reading tasks to extend the students' knowledge and deepen their understanding. Once the students established a foundational level of knowledge, Ma then introduced Socratic inquiry and group discussion. In doing so, Ma could assess her students' knowledge and understanding while also enabling dialogue as a way to foster the students' deeper class engagement and cognitive development.

In terms of a lack of diversity in curriculum and content delivery, the students adopted different strategies. Zhang’s was one of the few cases where the lack

of diversity was written in the course feedback. Zhang hoped that the students' feedback could completely resolve the issue. The majority of students opted to increase the diversity on their own. In Zhao's case, he utilised Chinese databases to supplement the available resources, thereby extending his knowledge base. An had to draw upon her own cultural and educational background to supplement the discussion with non-Western knowledge and experience. While these students' strategies certainly made a contribution to enriching learning content delivered in the classroom, the delivery of intercultural and diverse knowledge should be an integral part of curriculum design, rather than relying primarily on international students, especially in the classrooms that claim to be 'international' in nature.

When facing mechanical pedagogy and disconnection between lecture content and assessment, the students still selected to solve the problem themselves. As He said, 'I cannot control or decide my lecturers' behaviours and teaching approach'. To respond, Su and He invested a great amount of time after online classes to engage independently in more challenging and in-depth content to deepen their knowledge and understanding.

In summary, with deeper exposure to the programme, the Chinese international students came to deconstruct their original impression of the progressiveness and superiority of Western knowledge. The international students pointed out that the marginalisation of non-Western knowledge in the classroom limited the development of diverse understanding and cognition and led to a challenge when applying knowledge in the Western classroom to their local contexts. In response, students did not passively accept it but actively localised and reconstructed their knowledge framework. On the one hand, the students combined local and Western knowledge in social practices, exploring ways to make learning more relevant to their sociocultural context. On the other hand, the Chinese international students integrated their own cultural background and educational experience into classroom discussions to supplement and enrich the understanding of non-Western knowledge. Nevertheless, it is argued that this pluralistic knowledge construction should not rely solely on the efforts of international students themselves, especially in a programme which is labelled

as ‘international’.

5.4.2 Conflicts in interpersonal interaction, negotiation and strategic positioning

Tension and strategies in LLI

After experiencing initial nourishment and inspirations in LLI, the Chinese students came to change their perception and realised that ‘everyone is the same’. Firstly, the international students faced conflicts in group collaboration. With the increasing academic workload, the group task distribution became less harmonious than it was at the beginning. At that moment, some group members tended to pick the tasks that they found easiest or most familiar. In this context, conflicts appeared. Dong complained that she and her Chinese peers had arguments over the task allocation during the collaboration many times. In Dong’s view, these arguments were unnecessary and time-consuming, reducing the collaborative learning efficiency and wasting energy.

In Qi’s case, she mentioned that the cultural differences caused tensions during group task distribution. While Qi's group members are from Asian countries, she felt confused about her Japanese peer’s overemphasis on quantification in task allocation. Qi observed,

> ...For example, in our group of four, the Japanese peer insists that everyone should do 25% of the whole workload. This is unrealistic because you cannot quantify the workload when producing a collaborative essay...When I collaborate with my Chinese peers, I have never encountered this situation. We are all assigned according to the part of the paper. Anyway, I really can't understand his behaviour.

While Qi appreciated her Japanese peer’s knowledge contribution to group work, she felt disturbed by this peer’s calculating approach to task division. Qi further used a Chinese idiom, being ‘overly fixated on minor details’[12] (吹毛求

[12] The Chinese phrase literally refers to ‘blow on hair to look for flaws’ and is used to describe someone who is unnecessarily critical or fault-finding.

疵), to express her dissatisfaction. From Qi's perspective, it could have been more productive if the Japanese peer had focused on the overall quality of the work rather than insisting on a perfectly balanced task division.

As the collaboration progressed, the sense of responsibility initially admired by the students towards their peers, especially their foreign peers mentioned in Section 5.3.2, began to change. At this point, the international students realised that 'the availability of peers' does not depend on any particular nationality but by the individual. Several students, such as An, Dong, Qi, and Su, reported a situation where some of their group members, regardless of whether they were Chinese or non-Chinese peers, postponed the tasks assigned, and suddenly become unreachable, or even completely abandoned group tasks. The international students attempted to understand their team members, and attributed this to 'different time zones' (Xia), 'low learning motivation caused by ODE' (Tang), or the fact that their 'peers have their private matters to deal with and are maybe under pressure, especially in the context of the pandemic' (Liu). Nevertheless, the international students were annoyed by the behaviour of their team members, especially when such absences could directly affect their marks.

Interestingly, the Chinese international students' appreciation of the different way of thinking of their foreign peers in Section 5.3.1 became a barrier in LLI. In section 5.3.1, the Chinese idiom '天马行空' (translated as head in the clouds here), used by Gao to applaud the creativity and originality of their foreign peers, was labelled negatively by Tang and Su in the task-oriented collaborative context. Tang and Su used the Chinese idiom to describe their foreign peers' ideas as 'dispersed, impractical, trivial, unfocused, and off-topic', which undermines the collaborative knowledge construction and the efficiency of the group collaboration. The foreign peers' 'advanced way of thinking' and 'high academic ability' appreciated by Chinese international students previously also caused the Chinese students to be othered in interaction, as stated by Qi,

> One of my Australian peers has been teaching for five or six years, and thus, he could easily understand the learning materials. I feel...there is an understanding gap between him and other Chinese peers like me [without

> teaching experience]. Hmm...it is like pupils talking to Albert Einstein. Einstein is talking about his sophisticated theories, but the pupils couldn't understand him. In this moment, I am not confident to express my thoughts in the group, even if they may be unique. I am afraid he will think my ideas are shallow, especially when I observe he seems to prefer interacting with other non-Chinese foreign peers. [...] After all, he is here to learn as well, and he probably wants to interact with someone having higher academic ability.

Language, especially English speaking ability, also hinders students interaction with their peers to a certain extent. While some students, such as Deng and Xia, were confident in expressing themselves in English, the majority of Chinese international students expressed a lack of confidence in their English speaking skills. As Ma states, 'I have always been less confident in my spoken English, unless I can speak English like a native speaker'. Zhang was a special case. He grew up in a third-tier city in China and later studied in the US since senior higher school, where he also completed his undergraduate degree and was enrolled in postgraduate study. Despite this prolonged exposure to the English-speaking environment, he did not develop strong confidence in his English proficiency. He attributed this to his upbringing. While Zhang appreciated his parents for supporting him to study abroad since senior high school, growing up in the city with fewer educational resources in China made his transition into a full-English academic environment particularly challenging. He perceived a gap between himself and native English speakers, as well as peers from resource-rich urban backgrounds in China. He elaborated,

> If you observe the Chinese international students from the first-tier cities in China, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong, they are very confident and outgoing. These students can speak fluent English like native speakers...quickly accept different cultures, [and] introduce Chinese culture to foreign students. [Therefore], they are very popular among the Chinese and foreign student groups. However, the popularity of students like me from non-top cities or public schools gradually decreases.

Under such perceived peer pressure, Zhang gradually lost confidence. Zhang

also attributed this lack of confidence to his lack of effort and motivation. However, this attribution concealed his past and current efforts in language improvement. During the interview, Zhang mentioned that he was remembering and was familiar with some English words to improve his English proficiency. As a result, he became increasingly reluctant to participate in interaction with peers.

Accent also contributes to marginalisation in LLI. Here, the Chinese international students marginalised other foreign peers and were othered by their foreign peers due to their accent. Tang struggled to interact with some of his non-Chinese peers who did not have ‘standard English pronunciation’. Heexemplified that one of his Australian peers pronounced data as /’dætə/, which differs from the ‘standard English pronunciation’ he had learned from his textbooks in China. This phonetic difference leads to misunderstandings in LII. Interestingly, Tang was also complained about by his non-Chinese peers for his accent, being told, ‘I cannot understand your English’ in his presentation feedback. Tang was angry about this and insisted that his English pronunciation was standard. Tang believed that this should be the problem of his non-Chinese foreign peers because other Chinese peers could indeed understand his English and presentation. Nevertheless, this discouraged Tang from interacting with his peers from other countries, and he tended to interact with his peers from other countries.

Furthermore, native speakers often use culturally specific slang and speak at a fast pace, which further marginalised the international students and impeded their engagement in knowledge collaboration. For example, Gu mentioned that her British peers often spoke rapidly and used a lot of slang when facing challenges or expressing their opinions in group discussion. As an ‘international student’, Gu found it challenging to understand her British peers and had fewer opportunities to engage in group discussion, especially in the context of online classes where few students turned on their cameras and thus nonverbal cues are lacking. This situation became more significant when there were disagreement or conflicts within the group. At this point, Gu’s British peers became ‘more talkative’ with ‘the faster speaking pace and it is difficult to interrupt’, ultimately squeezing out Gu’s time and her power to express her

views in group discussion.

In addition, some students expressed dissatisfaction with the limited opportunities to connect with their peers after class, especially with foreign peers. They considered this a significant drawback of ODE. Due to geographical and time distance, the international students found it difficult to establish emotional connection with foreign peers outside the virtual classroom. As Deng mentioned, ‘if the course is held in person, [she] would have already been able to interact with her peers outside of class’. This lack of emotional connection led to a loss of valuable learning resources for the international students. For example, Gu believed that the decreased interaction opportunities outside the classroom caused her to miss out on many important resources related to her discipline and future employment. Consequently, she had to seek support from other peers in related fields, which, as she pointed out, ‘could have been more efficient’.

In response, the international students adopted different strategies depending on their personalities and strengths. When facing the conflicts in task allocation in LLI, the international students selectively positioned themselves and made choices. Bai considered that she was excellent at organising, communicating, and coordinating. Therefore, she proactively took the role of group leader to assign group tasks and resolve group conflicts. For students who ‘struggle with decision-making’ (Zhao), or ‘prefer to avoid conflicts to ensure group efficiency’ (Su), taking up the role of group leader was not a choice that was conducive to their interests. In this situation, they selected a more passive approach. Given the confidence in their academic abilities, Su and Zhao waited for tasks to be assigned. They believed that they would handle any assigned parts successfully, and thus, did not need to ‘rush to pick tasks early’ (Su). Tang was more selective about whom he was willing to follow. Here, Tang tended to be led by peers with strong academic ability. From Tang’s perspective, such a group leader would be reliable, and enable him to seek academic support and build a network.

The majority of students consider that ‘everyone is equal’ (He). Thus, they

opted to negotiate with their peers and adopt collective decision-making to acquire equal task distribution. For example, Dong drew upon online tools, such as online voting or digital spinning wheels to ensure fairness and objectivity in task distribution. Dong expressed that her favorite online tool was spinning wheels because ‘the task allocation is decided by fate and no one can blame anyone [laugh]’. From Dong’s perspective, this approach reduced the tension within group members caused by task allocation. When more than one member wanted to take the same task, Qi selected to invite a third party to mediate.

When facing team members who delayed tasks or became unreachable, the students presented more diverse strategies. An positioned herself as ‘the leader’ in groups, closely monitoring each member’s progress and sending reminders to her team members frequently to prevent them from falling behind. An enjoyed ‘having everything under control’, making her feel more secure and confident in group work. Qi and Dong initially took a negotiation strategy, offering gentle reminders. When the situation persisted, however, their coping strategies became different. Qi tended to take a straightforward stance, explicitly informing this member that she would not collaborate with him/her again in the future. Interestingly, Dong’s response depended on the nationality of her team members. In the case of Chinese peers, Dong opted to accommodate and complete the task on their behalf, due to a sense of shared national identity. As Dong state, ‘since we are all Chinese, I don’t want to make things awkward...so, well, I just forgive them [in this situation]’. In the case of foreign peers, however, Dong tended to be more impartial, reporting the non-participation situation to the instructor and asserting that this person should not be given the appropriate mark for the work he/she does not contribute to, for the purpose of preventing ‘free-riding’.

Differing from others who opted to hold the accountability of their team members, Su took a more compromising approach. As a student whose goal is to earn high marks, he prioritised overall efficiency over spending extra time urging a team member who lacks motivation or has no intention of achieving good marks. From Su’s perspective, such an effort is simply meaningless. Therefore, Su commonly chose to take over the work from his unreachable

team member rather than seeking accountability. Su even attempted to adopt an optimistic attitude, saying that 'doing a bit more may help me understand the knowledge better'.

When facing conflicts caused by the differences in LLI, the Chinese international students made different decisions on their networking circles. For Su, the tight course schedule left little room to bridge the differences among the peers from different countries. Su used 'without a single halt[13]' (马不停蹄) to describe his academic routine, in which completing one task was immediately followed by the next and having little time to pause. Consequently, Su emphasised efficiency in collaboration, and thus, he prioritised choosing his Chinese peers to collaborate with, 'unless [his] foreign peers can improve the group's productivity'.

The majority of Chinese international students attempted to bridge the differences, as stated by Qi, 'the difference is not a problem and the key point is how to treat it'. Despite conflicts and tensions arising from the different ways of thinking in group work, Qi admitted that everyone has their unique strengths, and even differences sometimes are valuable for the teamwork. Qi considered that the key point is how to effectively transform the tensions in difference into a driving force for collaboration. Therefore, Qi drew upon a strategy of Chinese diplomacy known as 'seeking common ground while preserving differences'[14] (求同存异) to effectively use the strengths of each student to enhance collaboration. In this process, Qi and her peers learned from each other and

[13] This Chinese idiom literally means that a horse runs without stopping its hooves. It is used as a metaphor for being hectic, without a single halt.

[14] The phrase 'seek common ground while reserving differences' (求同存异) originally comes from the Confucian classic book *the Book of Rites*, meaning to seek shared ideas while negotiating differing opinions. Subsequently, this concept has become a guiding principle in Chinese diplomacy. It was first formally proposed by Premier Zhou Enlai at the 1955 Bandung Conference, advocating for seeking consensus amid differences to achieve common interests and promote cooperation.

ultimately received a satisfactory outcome in the group project.

When dealing with the marginalisation caused by language differences, the international students tended to attribute it to their ‘non-native’ English proficiency. In this context, Gu took great efforts to engage in LLI. After obtaining permission from her group members, Gu recorded every discussion and reviewed it again until she understood her peers’ points. Gu sustained an optimistic attitude, believing that her strength allowed her to play an important role in the group tasks, though she could not contribute much verbally during discussions. As Gu confidently stated, ‘I am very good at design, so when it comes to that part, no matter how fast they [British peers] talk, they need to stop and ask my opinion. I am still an integral part of this group’.

In general, the international students face various conflicts caused by unequal distribution, differences among peers from various cultural backgrounds and language. Here, the international students othered their non-Chinese nationality and were othered by their peers. Based on their personalities and goals, the international students used different strategies to cope with the conflicts, bridge the difference and strive for a voice in LLI. According to the selective positioning, a minority of students chose to strategically bypass these tensions to achieve more efficient collaboration. However, the majority of students attempted to negotiate conflicts and bridge these differences. In this process, the international students realised that everyone is both similar and different, regardless of co-national peers or foreign peers, and the key point is ‘how to treat these differences’.

Tension and strategies in LII

Surprisingly, the majority of Chinese international students considered that interaction with their instructors made less of a contribution to knowledge than interaction with their peers. The international students attributed this to fewer interaction opportunities, language issues, instructors’ attitudes, and implicit power dynamics in the teacher-student relationship. Firstly, the international students acquired fewer opportunities to interact with their instructors due to

geographical distance, different time zone and programme structure in ODE, which resulted in students' lack of timely emotional connection and knowledge support from their instructors, as illustrated by the following statements.

> If the classes were held in person, I could simply go to the teacher's office to ask my questions, which is timely....but now, everything is online, [sigh] I have to wait for my teachers' email reply, and we are in different time zones, which is not as convenient as communication in person, anyway. (Bai)

> Uh...in fact, I think the greatest contribution to my capabilities, such as coding and logic capability, is in completing the assignments. Although these assignments are challenging, I think they are a very important part of enhancing my capabilities, rather than interacting with the teacher. (Su)

> Due to different time zones, well...though not a large one...it always gives me a sense of delay. For example, it's 10pm in China and 2am in Australia. Then, when the teachers reply to my question, I've already solved it by myself or sought support from my peers in China...so I feel that there's no real difference between asking the teachers and not asking. (Tang)

While the limited interaction with instructors contributed to He's autonomy, it created a sense of distance between He and her teachers. As she reflected,

> If the majority of my study relies on self-directed learning and the lecturers' role is mainly to explain content through pre-recorded videos, I sometimes find myself questioning the sense of presence or connection with the instructors. This is one thing that I couldn't understand and don't particularly agree with in Western education.

Secondly, the implicit power dynamics limit LII. Although Zhao described his Western teachers as 'both instructors and friends' in Section 5.3.1, this 'friendship' was still somewhat unequal, especially when it came to the marking. Gu complained that her supervisor's guidance was often unclear and sometimes contradictory. After revising her work based on the supervisor's feedback, the supervisor's feedback in the next round contradicted the previous one. Although Gu did notalways agree with the suggestions, she had to follow

her supervisor's suggestion because the supervisor was 'the one who decides the marks'. The similar case was that of Dong, she discovered that her teacher's assessment and feedback sometimes lack clarity and justification.

A few cases illustrated the neglect of international students' contributions and teachers' unequal treatment. In An's case, she shared her experience where she expressed her opinions on Chinglish in an intercultural communication course. However, her contribution was not appreciated by her instructors. An felt embarrassed and othered. As a Chinese international student, she believed her views on Chinglish were very insightful. As a result, An sometimes felt hesitant when sharing opinions related to her own culture. Gao shared her observation in her online classroom of how Asian students were treated unfairly by their teachers. Gao noticed that her Asian teacher seemed to be stricter with students who are also Asian or 'having Asian faces'. When some students engaged in casual talk during the group discussion to wait for other groups to complete their tasks, Gao and her Asian peers often received immediate reminders from the teacher not to deviate from the topic. However, non-Asian peers chatting under similar circumstances did not receive the same prompts. While the teacher's behaviour might be subconscious, this distinction creates a sense of potential unequal treatment and othering.

Similarly, in the case of Tang, he experienced an invisible bias from his favourite teacher. Due to the appreciation of the teacher's teaching style, Tang actively engaged in interaction with the teacher just like his Arab and Japanese peers. However, in the absence of the Arab and Japanese peers and with a class of mostly Chinese international students, Tang felt a significant decrease in the teacher's motivation for interaction, though he and some of his Chinese peers were still actively engaging with the teacher. As Tang described, 'the teacher seemed to assume that all Chinese students are silent'. Tang also perceived that the questions asked by the teacher were 'very formalised and superficial'. Even when the teacher sometimes paused to wait for responses, 'it seemed like completing a teaching task' rather than a genuine expectation for student engagement. Interestingly, Tang attributed the teacher's attitude change to the silence of the other Chinese students in the online classroom. Tang believed

that these Chinese students confirmed the teacher's potential bias, even though he observed other non-Chinese students who were also silent in the interaction.

Interestingly, the international students felt othered in LII, but they were othering their teachers at the same time. A phenomenon was observed during the interviews, where some international students tended to categorise their teachers into Western and non-Western teachers when talking about certain (usually undesirable) situations in LII. At this point, non-Western teachers were generally labelled negatively. This is evident in the teachers' accents. For example, Tang mentioned that one of the reasons for the disconnection between him and his teacher was due to the teacher's accent, especially those from a non-Western background. Tang shared his interaction with a Japanese teacher. Due to the Japanese teacher's 'poor English pronunciation' and 'the trivial learning tasks assigned', Tang did not enjoy the lecturers taught by this particular teacher. As Tang expressed, 'hearing her speak English gives me a headache. I have no idea what she's talking about'. Tang even avoided choosing their classes in the subsequent course schedule. Tang's case reflected the testimonial injustice where the teacher's credibility was detrimental due to the student's prejudice against a bad or difficult to understand English accent. Dong's was one of the few cases that provided positive feedback on non-Western teachers. However, the feedback suggested a positive stereotype. In Dong's case, she mentioned the difference between Chinese teachers and other Western teachers in terms of replying to emails. Dong noticed that Chinese teachers usually replied to emails quicker, though the Chinese teachers remained in the UK during the pandemic. As Dong stated, 'after all, we are Chinese and Asian people are hardworking'. Nevertheless, Dong showed a higher level of tolerance for her Western teachers, as stated by her, 'after all, they are British'.

The international students used various strategies to cope with the tension in LII. In terms of there being less LII opportunities in ODE, some students opted to create more opportunities to interact with their instructors during online classes. For example, Dong seized opportunities to ask questions and actively engaged in discussions around key concepts during class. In Dong's view, such

interactions helped to bridge the perceived disconnection in LII, thereby building emotional connection. This increased LLI contributions to her knowledge and understanding. As Dong stated, ‘opportunities have to be earned and created by myself’. Other students selectively engaged in interactions with their teachers. For example, Tang initially opted to assess the level of the problems when facing learning challenges. If he felt that he could solve it by himself or get support from his peers, he would not ask the teacher. If he had enough time and the problems could not be solved by himself, he would ask their teachers.

When the students faced implicit power dynamics in LII, their selected options were different. Dong is a rare case who challenged the power relations directly. When Dong perceived that her teacher was marking unfairly, she took the initiative to schedule an online meeting with the teacher, voiced her concerns directly, and eventually succeeded in negotiating a more reasonable mark. The majority of students selected to strategically resist. In Gu’ case, she followed her supervisor’s suggestion on the surface. However, when she had a clear judgement on certain issues and was confident that her understanding was reasonable, she sticked to her choice and would not follow her supervisor’s guidance, even if the final mark was not ideal.

When facing invisible bias and unequal treatment, the students also made different choices. In response to the label ‘silent Chinese students’, Tang chose to prove the diversity of the Chinese student group by his behaviour. In his online class comprised of mostly Chinese students, Tang was more actively involved in the interaction with the teachers, to prove that ‘Chinese students are not silent’, instead of simply participating out of genuine interest in the knowledge inquiry as he did at the beginning. When facing Asian teachers’ unequal treatments, Gao mentioned this in her feedback and wrote an email to the university. Gao wished that the teacher and the university could see this behaviour.

In general, the factors including interaction opportunities, implicit power dynamics and othering impact LII, especially in the international ODE programmes. In this context, international students negotiate and strategically

resist using various strategies such as writing feedback. Subsequently, students realised that power dynamics are not only reflected in interpersonal interaction but also in the broader structure. In addition, the disconnection appears in cultural interaction. This encouraged students challenge the nature of 'internationalisation' in online intercultural programmes.

5.4.3 Distance in structure, environment and culture, and strategic resistance

As mentioned above, the students used various strategies when they face disconnection in knowledge and injustices in interpersonal interaction. One of the strategies used by some students is to attempt to adjust the structure itself. For example, Gao reported the unfair behaviour of her teacher to the university via submitting feedback and writing an email. Facing a lack of diversity in the curriculum, Zhang also opted to submit feedback. In addition, when facing ambiguous requirements related to academic performance in the handbook, Su emailed the university to ask for clarification. Unfortunately, it appears most of the efforts of international students are not appreciated by their universities.

At this point, international students realised that some of these issues may originate from the broader structure (i.e. HE institutions). Nevertheless, international students also appreciated the efforts made by university staff and their institution toward diversity and inclusiveness. Although the deeper epistemological and knowledge structure remained dominated by Western paradigms, additional modules related to non-Western knowledge were added into the curriculum such as Zhao's course *Economics of Developing Countries* and An's course *Intercultural Communication*. Admittedly, these changes reflect Western HE institution's partial efforts in decolonising education, though these are superficial and provided in a limited scope.

The international students also experienced distance in the learning environment and technology. Ke perceives that her learning environment tended to favour extroverted learners. Specifically, students who preferred to interact with others were more popular with the teachers. In terms of technology,

a minority of students faced challenges related to interface design and navigation. For example, Gu and Zhao mentioned that LMS functions are dispersed and some features are hidden under the broad menu headings, requiring them to open multiple pages to locate learning materials, which sometimes leads to error clicks. This affected the efficiency of accessing learning resources. In addition, since the students stayed in China to take courses, and therefore required the use of a VPN to access foreign websites, this further complicated their ability to efficiently obtain resources, introducing additional technical barriers.

A common theme among the Chinese international students was their regret over the lack of authentic intercultural learning experiences through ODE. This was one of the reasons that most international students remained hesitant to adopt ODE as a long-term mode for intercultural learning. The majority of students considered that interaction in online settings is limited, being usually limited to academic matters. Due to a lack of deeper emotional connections, interpersonal interaction is superficial in terms of academic matters. Dong mentioned that if she were in a face-to-face environment, she would have more time to interact with her foreign peers, which would improve her language ability and contribute to a deeper dialogue in LLI including cultural study and knowledge exchange. However, Dong's statement was doubtful. Based on Zhang's prior experience studying in-person in an English-speaking country, he did not develop deeper interaction with his peers from different countries due to factors such as the selection of social circles, lack of confidence, and language barriers. Nevertheless, the majority of students expressed regret over the absence of authentic cross-cultural experiences. Zhao expresses his regret below.

> To be honest, it's hard to get a real sense of different cultures just through a screen. For example, Queen Elizabeth II passed away recently, and my friends in the UK joined in mourning for the Queen. It feels...well..this should be an experience I could have genuinely felt in person. [voice raised] But now I can only know and experience this event by some fragmented descriptions and several photos. What a pity! If I had gone to

> the UK this year, I would have been able to engage in mourning for such a great and respectful woman. [in a low voice] I feel regretful, and really regretful. [stress]

From the students' perspectives, if international online courses merely convey cultural exposure through curriculum content and online interactions, it is difficult to perceive these programmes as truly international. International learning includes not only cognitive development but also cultural intelligence training.

Facing the structural injustices and cultural distance in ODE, international students strategically resisted the injustices and bridged the distance. Due to the imbalanced power relations between universities and students, along with the high financial investment in obtaining a valuable degree, international students mostly responded to injustices and distance mildly, rather than engaging in direct confrontation. During member checking, Gao provided further information regarding the outcome of her attempt to reveal the teacher's unjust behaviour to her university. After receiving no response to her initial feedback, Gao collaborated with her peers who also perceived the teacher's unfair behaviour, to send an email to the university. They merely received a reply stating that this issue would be addressed and unfortunately, there was no further follow-up on this matter. Nevertheless, Gao did not give up and was very supportive of the inclusion of this case in her thesis because she is also an active participant in another body of research on race and injustice in her university. Through academic participation, Gao wished to deliver the voices of international students and to strategically challenge the injustices they have experienced.

When the institution failed to provide clear clarification on certain ambiguous requirements, Su opted to navigate the grey areas of the system. Su believed that 'rules are rigid, but people are flexible[15] (规则是死的，人是活的)'.

[15] The phrase is a Chinese idiom, which shares similarities with the English idiom 'rules are made to be broken'. The Chinese idiom sometimes carries a negation connotation, implying a disregard for norms and the disruption of fairness. However, the idiom has a positive connotation, implying the need for flexibility in

Therefore, when facing an outdated and ambiguous requirement in the assignment guidelines, Su no longer sought official clarification. Instead, Su directly applied a more updated and pragmatic approach in his work. Ultimately, Su's approach was appreciated, and he received a satisfactory mark. As a student who just wanted to obtain a degree, Zhang chose to obey the rules when there was no response to his feedback.

As an introverted learner, Ke developed a strategy based on her prior study-abroad experience, enabling her to navigate the distance by flexibly switching between conforming to the Western environmental expectations on extroverted learners and maintaining her comfort. For example, Ke selectively engaged in online discussion, interacting only when meaningful and maintaining autonomous study based on her judgment. Here, Ke navigated between being an extrovert and being an introvert. Gradually, Ke developed a mode of engagement that enabled effective integration without requiring high levels of extroversion. In addition, the online classroom without the requirement to turn on the camera further facilitated her psychological comfort.

In terms of technology issues, the students sought support from their university's technology department or their Chinese peers with high technological capability. With regards to cultural distance, a few students, such as Xia and Bai, attempted to bridge the distance of intercultural experience by interacting with teachers and peers from different countries. Nevertheless, the distance still existed. Therefore, when designing online courses, it is imperative to go beyond academic content and find effective ways to integrate cultural interaction into the learning process.

5.5 Summary

In summary, affected by dominant sociocultural discourses, the Chinese international students initially held an idealised perception of Western education,

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the face of rigid rules. Based on the context in the interview, Su used it here not to disrupt the institutional rules but rather to emphasise a strategic response to rigid and ambiguous regulations.

perceiving it as advanced, open and worth pursuing. Accordingly, such appreciation implicitly included the dissatisfaction and devaluation of Eastern education. The international students' initial positive experiences in online Western classrooms further reinforced such a perception. As the programme progressed, the international students faced various challenges, such as disconnection and injustices toward knowledge, technology and interpersonal interaction. These issues further highlighted the deeper structural injustices toward online international students. In response, international students exercised their agency to bridge the distance and strategically resist the injustices. In this process, international students critically engaged with Western education and developed a more balanced view. Ultimately, international students found their own position in the complicated intercultural learning environments and constructed their own meaningful online distance learning experience.

Furthermore, the students were no longer simply categorised as 'good', 'successful', or 'adaptive' and 'under-performing student' or 'less-adaptive students'. Instead, the international students were perceived as a diverse group where they demonstrated diverse interaction selections and online learning practices. For example, some students demonstrate a tendency to interact with their teachers and peers, viewing them as valuable learning resources.Others prefer self-directed learning, constructing knowledge through interaction with the course materials, such as recorded videos and assigned readings via the Moodle site. Yet these tendencies are not set in stone. As the programme progresses, some students shift from focusing primarily on interpersonal interactions to engaging more with the learning content. Others who initially prioritised self-directed learning gradually begin to seek more interpersonal interactions. Therefore, international students did not passively conform to certain 'standardised' learning paradigms or 'idealised' intercultural learners. Based on their aspirations, personal traits, and learning situations, the students flexibly selected their ways of interaction, identity, and position in the online intercultural learning environment. Consequently, the students refined the identity of 'international students'. Online students were no longer 'international

students' in the sense of traditional and institutional definition, but were 'inter-national students' who navigated across different times, spaces, cultures, nations, and systems, challenging the fixed identities and structural limitations that the label implies.

Chapter 6: Discussion

The findings chapter has presented a whole picture of online international students' interactions, addressing the first and the second research questions concerning international students' overall interaction experiences and perceived injustices through their interactions. Building on the previous findings and adopting post-/decolonial perspectives, this chapter connects with previous studies and the theoretical framework to address the third research question, namely, to what extent the students' experiences with epistemic injustice reflect the internationalisation and decolonial practices in ODE.

6.1 The diversity of online international students: challenging epistemic injustice in the literature

The findings of this study challenge the epistemic injustices towards online international student groups and their interaction experiences in previous literature by identifying the diversity of this group and the complexity of their experiences. Although not all existing studies reproduce such injustices, a substantial body of literature of ODE internationalisation tends to construct international students either as unspecified others or specific others with deficits or education tools (Lee & Bligh, 2019). Such representations has led to testimonial injustice and hermeneutic injustice by marginalising international students as knowers and limiting the interpretive frameworks through which their interaction experiences are understood (Huang, 2022; Lee & Bligh, 2019; Mittelmeier, 2023). Building on these critiques, this thesis provides alternative insights of understanding online international student groups and their interaction experiences by highlighting their positions as knowers and enablers and demonstrating the heterogeneity.

Firstly, the findings of the study emphasise the positioning of international students as epistemic subjects. ODE internationalisation is not simply a process of cultural and knowledge exchange. Instead, it is a process through which knowledge are co-constructed through interaction, thereby contributing to alternative understandings. In the existing studies, international students are generally understood as carriers and transmitters of culture or knowledge (e.g., Gemmell et al., 2015; Vajargah & Khoshnoodifar, 2013). While such statements acknowledge the contributions of online international students, they tend to confine the students to relatively limited roles, without fully recognising their capacity as knowledge producers.

The findings reveal that the online students carrying their own knowledge and culture actively reinterpret and reconstruct knowledge through interaction. For example, the participants engaged with different forms of knowledge, and in negotiating the applicability across contexts, contributing to an alternative understanding of learning contents. Therefore, the reinterpretation and shaping of knowledge is not solely undertaken by institutions and instructors, but also by the students. Failing to recognise the role of international students as knowledge constructors may result in ODE internationalisation practices remaining at superficial cultural representation, rather than achieving meaningful knowledge delivery. This suggests the need to move beyond interpretative frameworks centred on knowledge transmission, and to pay closer attention to how online international students engage in knowledge construction through interaction.

Secondly, the findings exhibit the diversity of online international student groups. Unlike previous studies focusing on differences among international students from different countries (e.g., Gómez-Rey et al., 2016; Stoten et al., 2018; Tlili et al.,2023), this study explores the heterogeneity within students from the same country. The heterogeneity is reflected in students' diverse understandings of their culture and learning practices, which supports previous arguments that students from similar national backgrounds do not necessarily share homogeneous viewpoints (Stewart, 2017). For instance, the participants exhibit different understandings of the teacher's role in interaction. The

heterogeneity is also reflected in students' diverse interaction experiences and strategies. For example, some participants demonstrated a strong need for social interaction, and they actively engaged in the learning community, which aligns with the findings from previous research (Chatterjee & Correia, 2020; Kaufmann & Vallade, 2022; Li, 2022). Different from these research, the study proves that not all students benefit from such interaction. For some participants who presented greater learning independence, excessive interpersonal interaction may be perceived as a potential barrier and hinder their learning progress in certain contexts (Moore, 1989).

These findings challenge the taken-for-granted use of 'international students' as a homogeneous analytical category. As suggested in Mittelmeier (2023), the categorisation based on nationality, visa status, or geographical location, is not insufficient to reflect the diversity of the student group and their interaction experiences. In other words, while the label 'international students' may serve as a starting point for analysis, it does not automatically account for the diversity of the students' group and their interaction experiences. Previous studies highlighting cross-national differences has challenged the homogenisation of online international students in some extent (e.g., Gómez-Rey et al., 2016; Stoten et al., 2018), but it may reproduce another form of homogenisation by attributing fixed cultural and identity characteristics to international students from the same country. This indicates the importance of focusing on intra-group heterogeneity to develop a more nuanced understanding of international student populations and their experiences.

In addition, the findings reveal the complexity of online international students' interaction experiences, which are rational and dynamic. Previous research has tended to simplify online international students' interaction experiences by attributing their experiences to a single causal factors or by categorising them into discrete types of interaction (e.g.,Cole et al., 2021; Mamun, 2022). Such a reductionist approach obscures the multifaceted nature of students' interaction, contributing to the reproduction of stereotypical assumptions. The study shows that students' interactions are shaped by multiple factors, including previous experiences, individual agency, teaching approach, environments, and power

dynamics. These factors do not operate independently, and they interact in complex ways, producing diverse and evolving interaction patterns. This raises questions about the adequacy of ToI, as such frameworks may risk oversimplifying the very complexity they aim to describe.

Building on the statements above, the study further questions the use of integration or adaption as a primary indicator of online international students' success. As suggested by some scholars (Astolfo & Allsopp, 2023; Mittelmeier, 2025; Saharso, 2019), the notion of integration positions international students as other, and marginalises their experiences by evaluating them against predefined expectations. Most worryingly, it shifts institutions' responsibility to online international students, which obscures underlying structural issues and reinforces the injustices (Mittelmeier, 2025; Saharso, 2019). The notion of integration also neglects students' role as epistemic subjects, as it implies that students are passive participants. Students in this study demonstrate agency, by strategically navigating their interaction experiences. This shows that they are the co-constructors of the knowledge and environment. Furthermore, it fails to account for the diversity and complexity of students' experiences. As the findings show, the students adopt different strategies and made adjustments according to their aspirations and specific situations. This suggests that a binary distinction between 'integration' and 'non-integration' oversimplifies the diverse ways in which students engage in interaction. Thus, a shift towards a more nuanced and holistic approach is needed to understand international students' interaction experiences.

In this context, the students continue to face epistemic injustices and complicated power dynamics in their ODE practices, which constrains their agency. As a result, their experiences with injustices affect internationalised and decolonial practices in ODE. The following section provides details of the epistemic injustices experienced by online international students in ODE practices and how they have exercised their agency to respond to these injustices.

6.2 Revealing power dynamics and injustices in ODE practices

While international students perceived a sense of empowerment in their interaction during study online, they perceived subtle power imbalances and epistemic injustices, which limited their engagement in interaction. The online international students also reproduced these injustices during their interactions, further impacting internationalised ODE participation and decolonial practices. In this section, I reveal the power dynamics and epistemic injustices experienced by online international students in ODE practices through the post-/decolonial lens and discuss how students exercised their agency to navigate and balance such power dynamics.

6.2.1 The potential colonality, discourse and field prior to formal classes

The study finds that Chinese international students' aspirations and perceptions of Western classrooms' have been shaped by their personal interests, sociocultural contexts and family field, which provides a foundation for their interactions in online distance learning. Furthermore, students' selection of English-speaking countries has been driven by their preference on the surface, but the preference is informed by broader social discourse and fields in some extents.

It is reflected in students' perceptions of the English language and of English-speaking universities' degrees. The study observes that English was the dominant second language in participants' school education. Although English as a second foreign language is taught in schools with the aim of promoting international communication, this emphasis inadvertently reinforces English's dominant and privileged position in the global marketplace (Shahjahan et al. 2022). During this process, the students' family also strengthen this tendency. The students' families regarded English language and overseas degrees as valuable resources for maintaining and reproducing social status by fostering their children's interest in English and sending them abroad (Bourdieu 2018).

In this context, it is not surprising that degrees from English-speaking countries are highly valued at individual and social levels. The study notes that participants place great importance on university rankings, especially those

stated by QS and US News. The focus is partly shaped by social discourses. For example, participants cite reliance on QS and US News rankings and high recognition of degrees from English-speaking universities in the Chinese job market. This is also highlighted by Shahjahan et al. (2017, 2022), who found that global university rankings manipulate public perception through the affective economy and construct Western universities as ‘good’ and ‘ideal’ learning places, reinforcing the notion that Western knowledge and the English language have intrinsic value in the global market. Consequently, students gradually internalise the privileged position of the English language and English-speaking universities.

The study finds that students reproduce the dualism between the West and the East through language, and simplify the complexity of education practices, echoing Fanon’s (2008) view that language is a medium through which power operates and reproduces itself. In participants' discourse, it can be observed that they frequently used positive labels to describe their aspirations and perceptions of Western education, but used negative implications to describe non-Western (Eastern) education. Interestingly, participants use Chinese idioms to reinforce these contrasting evaluations, assigning positive meanings to Western Education and negative ones to Chinese education. This reflects Said’s (1978) concept of Orientalism, where the West is constructed as superior and modern and the Orient is constructed as inferior. Nevertheless, such binary evaluation is not fixed, as some participants make distinctions within Western education.

These findings above echo Xu’s (2023) concepts of 'Whiteness as aspiration', 'Whiteness as investment', and 'Whiteness as malleability' in the Chinese context. While the initial aim is to encourage students’ development of international insights, the colonial framework is replicated in this process, which English and Western university degrees can be understood as access to privileged society and knowledge structures (Zha et al., 2019). Affected by coloniality, students tend to regard the Western classrooms as superiority and consider Chinese classrooms as inferior other, which affect their initial interaction in formal online distance learning. Though this is not the case for all

students, some display a sense of inferiority, which hinders their participation in interactions in online classrooms. Therefore, classroom interaction is shaped by students' previous experiences.

This finding extends the existing research on students' interaction. Previous studies tend to explore students' interaction within classrooms or focus students' interaction with environments after they enter the classroom (Karaoglan-Yilmaz, 2017; Yılmaz & Keser, 2017). However, there is less attention to precursor factors affecting these interaction experiences. This is particular important in online international learning contexts, as international students have already accumulated interaction experiences before entering the classroom and they are separated with their HE institutions during the ODE. Viewing interaction as an isolated pedagogical phenomenon may lead to misunderstand of international students' experiences. This indicates that online international students' interaction should be understood as a continuous and rational process.

6.2.2 Self-othering, othering and epistemic injustices in classroom interactions

As outlined above, some Chinese international students generate an implicit sense of inferiority under the influence of coloniality in their society. This contributes to self-othering in online classroom interaction, in which the students tend to gaze upon themselves through an Orientalist lens (Chowdhury, 2022). Though it is common for students to seek positive feedback from instructors and peers when entering an unfamiliar learning environment, some participants internalise hierarchical structures and rely on others to position themselves in initial interactions. In An's case, she stressed a need for discretion in her interaction with peers and instructors due to fear of being ridiculed at the beginning of her online journey. The sense of inferiority and insecurity made An particularly sensitive to the teacher's encouragement, perceiving it as a symbol of 'inclusion'.

This is consistent with findings in Bardhan and Zhang (2017), which demonstrate that international students, especially non-White students, engage in self-othering and experience disorientation when first entering an intercultural learning environment, as they attempt to locate themselves within the framework of racial ideology and in relation to others. Consequently, under the influence of coloniality, some students tend to impose implicit rules on themselves at the beginning, which limits their participation in interaction. For example, Ma regarded native-like English proficiency as a prerequisite for engaging confidently in interaction. Notably, not all Chinese international students experience self-othering, and their self-positioning is dynamic. For example, the cases of Bai and Ke exhibited their subjectivity, engaging in interactions based on their own expectations and aspirations. An also moved from a lack of confidence in interaction to make contributions in discussions as the online course progressed.

The study finds that students' self-othering also evident in their perceptions of their co-national peers. For example, some participants internalised prejudices against Chinese students and devalued their co-national peers' academic ability, thereby undermining their credibility to some extent in interaction (Fricker, 2007). This resonates with the observation of Fanon (2008) that non-Western students attempt to imitate and act like the Whites and gaze at their Chinese counterparts through the lens of the White to assimilate White society. However, unlike the Black people described by Fanon (2008) who seek proximity to white society through a rejection of their own kind and internalisation of racism, online Chinese international students tend to be more contradictory and complex.

On the one hand, some students perceived non-Chinese peers as more academically capable, and devalued their Chinese counterparts. On the other hand, some students prioritised their domestic counterparts when seeking support. This can be attributed to various factors, including geographical separation, time zone differences, the need for academic resources and emotional support. This implies a tension between students' perceptions and their actual practices in LLI. However, it is important to note that this tendency

did not universal, and some students were able to engage more flexibly across different cultural groups.

In addition, the study uncovers the international students' experiences of being othered or subjected to microaggressions during interactions. Consistent with the findings of Phirangee and Malec (2020), online international students in this thesis experienced the ethnic and academic othering, which led to their marginalisation in LLI. For example, Gu's case about her British peers' speech pace shows that native students in English-speaking countries gain dominance and discourse power in group activities by implying international students' deficiency in English language. Qi's metaphor about Einstein illustrates the privileged position experienced students hold in interactions, which inadvertently marginalises students without a prior academic background and leads them to become passive listeners.

The study notices that a small number of students experienced othering due to differences in social class (Spivak, 2023). For instance, Zhang's case indicates the influence of different educational resources in urban background on students' interaction, with those from the first-tier cities being more welcomed in Western and domestic peers than those from non-first-tier cities. This is in line with the study of Crozier et al.(2016), though in this case, class distinctions appear to be more nuanced, suggesting internal differentiation. Othering and self-othering are not fixed. Tang's case about silent students exposes the dynamic between othering and self-othering. Tang initially engages in interaction based on his aspirations. Affected by the instructor's bias towards Chinese students and being othered by the teacher, Tang starts to other himself and ultimately falls into a self-justification trap.

During this process, the study discovers that some students contributed to the process of othering. In line with the findings of Huang (2022), online Chinese international students considered Western students as a collective Other and understood Western cultures through an essentialist lens during interaction. For example, Gu considered Western students as lacking responsibility at the beginning of collaboration with her peers. This perception reinforces the issue

of international students' self-othering, leading to their marginalisation during interactions.

Furthermore, non-Western knowledge is subtly othered and marginalised in interaction. Firstly, the study reveals that online international students have limited space to interpret knowledge through their own lenses in the classrooms and curriculum, and their contributions are not appreciated by their Western counterparts, such as An's case about Chinglish. As argued by Phirangee (2016), students' knowledge contributions are silenced when they cannot comfortably share their cultural experiences, as it creates a hierarchy where some experiences are more valued than others. As a result, online international students' interaction is limited.

The study also proves the lack of diversity in the curriculum, which aligns with criticisms raised by previous studies (Bennett et al., 2023; Peters, 2018). For example, Su's case about Bibles in his discipline suggests the dominance of Western knowledge in a certain industry. Although the requirement to use English-language materials is initially intended to prevent plagiarism in Zhao's case, it subtly marginalises non-English scholarship and limits students' ability to introduce non-Western perspectives. The requirement is particularly ironic when interpreting the economies of developing countries in Zhao's case. Employing English-mediated literature does not mean the adoption of Western theories. Nonetheless, the over-reliance on English-language materials reflects the persistent marginalisation of non-English literature in academic publication, which neglects knowledge from non-English-speaking contexts and marginalises non-Western knowledge (Yang, 2018). Despite the growing scholarly efforts to develop diversified and decolonised curricula (e.g., Breaden et al., 2023; Hall et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2022), evidence from students suggests that such efforts need more dynamic.

Furthermore, diversity in curriculum and online classrooms in HE institutions largely relies on international students' input, rather than manifesting in the delivery of the learning content. In such circumstances, online international students are othered, and their self-othering is enhanced. At the same time,

White students struggle to comprehend knowledge from diverse perspectives, as they heavily rely on international students' contributions to engage with non-Western knowledge (Dozono, 2020). As a result, the ‘invisible wall’ among students from different backgrounds has grown thicker.

The experiences of online Chinese international students expose epistemic injustice and their reproduction of such injustice. First, the students experienced testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007). In Tang's case about the perception of silent Chinese students, it can be observed how some instructors understand students from different cultural backgrounds through stereotypical and homogenised lenses. The negative labels render the online international students as non-participating in interaction, which undermines the credibility of students in online classrooms (Fricker, 2007). Moreover, Tang mentioned non-Chinese peers’ judgment of his accent, which exposed the prejudicial dysfunction in testimonial practices described by Fricker (2007). Due to his accent, Tang's comments and views in interaction were perceived as ‘untrustworthy’, thereby undermining his credibility. This supports the findings of Hayes et al. (2024) and Mohebali and Jangjou (2024), illustrating that international students’ academic and language capabilities are generally regarded as deficient due to racial bias.

Hermeneutical injustice is embedded in international students’ experiences more subtly (Fricker, 2007). In the case of Ke, Dong and Zhang about feedback on curriculum and teaching practices, their voices and demands are neither taken seriously nor properly acknowledged. This confirms the research of Hayes et al.(2024) and Mohebali and Jangjou (2024), illustrating that the role of international students as knowers is obscured by institutional frameworks. Although the universities claimed that they support and embrace international students, the students’ efforts were not appreciated and valued when they attempted to express their thoughts and assert their rights (Lee & Mao, 2025). As such, it is understandable that He expresses her disappointment in the experience, because international students' benefits are not being properly recognised or safeguarded, even as ‘clients’ in the global HE market.

The study reveals that online international students reproduced epistemic injustices during their interaction, which is different from previous studies focusing on how students experience epistemic injustices (e.g., Hayes et al., 2024; Lee & Mao, 2025; Mohebali & Jangjou, 2024). In Dong's case, she exhibited a tolerant attitude towards Western teachers, regarding their delayed email responses as 'only to be expected' and attributing them to Western culture. Non-Western instructors, particularly those from Asia, were expected to demonstrate exceptional diligence to gain recognition. From Tang's case about accent mentioned above, he experienced testimonial injustice but replicated the injustice in interaction with his instructors. Tang's case of Japanese teachers suggests that academic credibility and knower position of the teacher is undermined due to accent (Fricker, 2007). This extends previous research on the epistemic injustice faced by non-Western teachers (Arday, 2018; Catala, 2022; Gatwiri & Udah, 2024), in which they are treated as outsiders and their professional expertise is often perceived as deficient by both their fellows and students due to their race, colour, class or cultural backgrounds. This suggests that the international scholars' legitimacy as knowers may be undermined across their roles as educators and researchers.

In general, international students' experiences reveal how they encounter self-othering, othering, and epistemic injustices from their peers, instructors and institutions. In this process, international students reproduce epistemic injustice towards their instructors from different cultural backgrounds. These experiences undermine students' legitimacy as knowers in interaction. This does not mean that the students are completely helpless. The next section discusses how the students exercised epistemic agency to navigate injustices and differences, thereby reclaiming their subjectivity and rights.

6.2.3 Students' agency as strategic responses to injustices

As argued by Bandura (1989) and Dewey (1960), although individuals are affected by the environment, they are able to strategically affect the environment and reshape it. When confronting injustices and conflicts in

interaction, online Chinese international students used different strategies to balance, negotiate, navigate and resist, presenting various forms of agency.

Firstly, the online Chinese international students demonstrated epistemic agency in interactions. For example, some students have gradually realised that Western knowledge is not a panacea and may not suit non-Western contexts. Non-Western education is not without advantages however, and has its unique value. Other students developed a more critical perspective on their peers and instructors during online study. Specifically, the students changed their perceptions from initial essentialist perspectives, such as irresponsible foreign students and Chinese students with less academic ability, to understanding that responsibility and academic ability are individual differences, and these are not related to nationality. The epistemic agency is also evident in students' discourses, wherein they demonstrate a more dynamic perspective on understanding differences. For example, the same Chinese phrase '天马行空' (translated as unbridled creativity or head in the clouds) in the cases of Gao, Tang and Su was used equally to commend their peers' creativity or to criticise fragmented thinking. Ultimately, the students realised that the differences themselves are not problematic, but what truly matters is how to understand and manage them. The students' epistemic agency prompted them to critically reflect on their position as well as received knowledge, and challenge their prior essentialist understanding, contributing to identity reconstruction, knowledge construction, and meaningful intercultural communication (Huang, 2022).

Building upon epistemic agency, students demonstrated individual agency in practice (Bandura, 1989). Through mimic and hybridity of knowledge (Bhabha,1994), international students developed their own insights and produced individual knowledge. For instance, Ma's case integrated Chinese pedagogical practices with Western teaching methods and flexibly applied them based on her students' performance during her internship. Bai's case integrated the knowledge of Chinese accounting with that of Australian accounting, establishing a distinctive knowledge system. This echoes Crozier et al. (2019), who conceptualise cultural hybridity as a form of agency, and further illustrates that knowledge is reconstructed in this process.

The study also identifies that students exercise their agency as resistance in interaction, which resonates with the conceptualisation of Tran and Vu (2018). When facing rigid regulations and policies, Su strategically created his own rules and obtained the teachers' approval, which mitigated the dominant position of the institutional system to a certain extent. When facing marginalisation due to language, Gu earned opportunities to express her voice and improve her sense of self-efficacy through solid disciplinary knowledge. Certainly, Tang opted for silence or compromise when confronting conflicts in interaction. However, silence or compromise is a strategic choice made to enhance learning efficiency and secure better academic results, rather than passive submission. This finding challenges the statement in previous studies to interpret student silence as a deficiency (Tang et al. 2020). The students also presented collective agency (Bandura, 1989; Tran & Vu, 2018). The students sought common ground and respect, and utilised differences to foster collective knowledge construction in interaction. When dealing with injustices in interaction, students strategically resisted injustice by offering feedback.

Unlike previous studies underscoring students' agency in learning processes and in response to injustice (e.g., Abdelghaffar & Eid, 2025), this study further suggests that the institutional power continues to constrain the exercise of their agency. This is reflected in institutions' limited response to students' feedback. Particularly within the online distance learning environment, spatial and temporal separation between international students and their institutions poses a greater challenge to students' claims for their rights and voices, enhancing their sense of disconnection from their institutions (Lee & Mao, 2025). Thus, despite students demonstrating diverse forms of agency to express their voices and rights, their agency and potential are diminished under the unequal institutional mechanisms (de Sousa Santos, 2019; Stein, 2019; Stein, 2020).

6.3 Summary: Rethinking online international students' interaction experiences

In summary, the thesis has revealed the complexity, diversity and dynamics of online international students' interaction experiences. As highlighted in the

thesis, the international students' interactions, whether in LLI, LCI, LII or other types, are not an isolated and is entangled with sociocultural contexts, technology and power dynamics.

Firstly, the study finds that online international students classrooms interactions are affected by their sociocultural contexts, previous experiences and personal motivation. Thus, the students have diverse responses to interactions at the beginning of their online intercultural courses.This is not to suggest that students' interactional practices can be solely attributed to their previous experiences. The findings further identify that even among online students with similar educational backgrounds, they have diverse interaction patterns and strategies. For example, some students keep silent and others actively negotiate to deal with the conflicts in interaction, though their shared objective is to enhance learning efficiency and improve learning performance. Online international students underscore a range of additional factors affecting their interaction experiences, including personality, learning habits, and teaching approaches. This suggests that online international students' interaction experiences are diverse and shaped by multiple factors, challenging the homogenised view of these experiences found in some previous studies (e.g., Tlili et al., 2023). The findings also highlight that the online international students' interaction experiences are dynamic. This challenges the perspective in prior literature that views students' interaction experiences as fixed (Baber, 2022).

In addition, the findings uncover the complexity of online international students' interaction experiences, in which they inevitably experience various forms of injustices, self-othering and othering. Affected by coloniality, some online Chinese international students tend to self-othering, and are othered by their peers or instructors due to accent, race or culture. Simultaneously, the students reproduce othering and epistemic injustice towards their peers and instructors. This is not to say that students are passive victims and they exercise various forms of agency to navigate, negotiate and strategically resist the injustices and gradually develop critical thinking to view different knowledge and localise knowledge construction. In this process, the influence of coloniality is mitigated

to some extent. As such, the thesis challenges the portrayal of online international students in prior literature as vulnerable victims who need help (Chen et al., 2022; Turnbull et al., 2021).

From these, online international students' interaction is a relational and dynamic process, shaped by students' sociocultural backgrounds, ODE environment, power dynamics and individual factors, thereby presenting the diversity. Thus, ToI is challenged as an interpretive framework for online international students' interaction experiences. While ToI is useful in analysing the units of students' interaction, it overemphasises interaction within the learning environment, overlooking the influence of factors beyond the classroom on students' interaction. It also tends to view interaction as a relatively static process. This makes it difficult to fully capture the cross-contextual, dynamic, and relational nature of online international students' interactional practices. In the context of ODE internationalisation, international students enroll in online distance courses while being located in different geographical and sociocultural environments from their HE institutions, which renders their identities and experiences more complex (Mittelmeier, 2023). In this sense, the study argues that there is a need to rethink online international students' interaction experiences as a dynamic and relational practice. Furthermore, students' classroom interactions should be understood in relation to broader sociocultural contexts and power dynamics, and conceptualised as a holistic process that unfolds across contexts. Such a perspective contributes to challenging the simplified and monolithic understandings of online international students' identities and interaction experiences. In addition, the online international students' interaction experiences also expose how institutional structures limits students' agency. As a result, the decolonial practices and internationalisation in ODE remain superficial in practice. Therefore, the thesis will propose relevant suggestions on pedagogy, knowledge and policy, which will be elaborated upon in the next and final chapter.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This chapter summarise the key findings of the thesis, which align with the original aims and objectives. Based on the key findings, it underscores the thesis's original contributions in terms of knowledge and HE practices. The limitations of the thesis will be acknowledged, and potential directions for future research are suggested to facilitate more in-depth exploration built upon this work.

7.1 Summary of key findings

Drawing on the case of online Chinese international students, this thesis reveals that their interaction experiences are complex, in that they are constantly evolving and shaped by the relationships in which they are embedded. During this process, online Chinese international students exercise their active agency to navigate, creating meaningful ODE experiences. This challenges the previous assumptions that regard online international students and their experiences as homogenisation and consider them as passive agents (Lee & Bligh, 2019; Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022).

Firstly, the thesis addresses the first research question by presenting the diversity of online Chinese international students' interaction experiences. From this thesis, although the online international students investigated are based in China and enrolled in online distance courses provided by HE institutions in English-speaking countries, their previous educational experiences, cultural understandings, and personal motivations differ, which shape their diverse interactions and ODE experiences. Other factors, such as online teaching approaches, power dynamics and learning habits, also contribute to students' diverse experiences and strategies. For example, non-participation can be understood as an effective interaction strategy in some cases. These factors are interconnected and students' strategies are constantly changing. In this sense, viewing integration as a standard for evaluating students' interaction is challenged. Furthermore, the crucial point lies in whether these experiences align with the students' own aspirations. Even if certain learning trajectories or behaviours are deemed 'failures' in some existing literature (Mittelmeier, 2025), they remain meaningful if they meet the students' personal goals or

expectations. Beyond the binary the traditional binary categorisation, a diverse and dynamic perspective is need to understand online international students' interaction experiences.

Additionally, the study addresses the second research question by employing post-/decolonial theories as an analytical lens to identify injustices experienced by the online Chinese international students. The findings show that online Chinese international students experience various forms of epistemic injustices, self-othering, and othering, which undermine their ODE experiences. Differing to previous studies implying that international students are unilaterally affected by power dynamics (e.g., Phirangee & Malec, 2020; Xu, 2023), this thesis shows that students reproduce epistemic injustices and engage in othering of knowledge, instructors, and peers from the same or different countries. These experiences deepen the invisible wall between Chinese international students and members of their online distance learning community.

It would be overly simplistic to assume that students are powerless in this process.Students demonstrate active agency and resilience in navigating ODE journey.Firstly, exploring online Chinese international students' experiences during the crisis period of the COVID-19 pandemic highlights their resilience. Unlike students' online study in normal times, Chinese international students face more external challenges, including the challenges of global health crisis, lockdown measures, flight suspensions, and visa issues. In contrast to the majority of students who volunteer to attend online distance courses, the Chinese international students in the present thesis are compelled to participate in online courses under exceptional circumstances. For the majority of these students, it is their initial experience with full-time online distance courses and intercultural learning. Nevertheless, the students do not become victims of the circumstances. The students fully utilised existing resources, actively navigated and negotiated their living as well as learning environments, changing their perceptions of ODE as well as peers and instructors from the same or different countries. As a result, they construct a meaningful online distance learning journey.

In parallel, students and institutional staff actively balance the power dynamic during intercultural online distance learning and bridge the invisible wall through various measures, such as localising knowledge, integrating different cultural insights into the classroom, and assisting students in flexibly modifying regulations. There is no denying that these measures mitigate coloniality in HE as well as its curriculum, and improve the diversity to some extent. Nevertheless, such decolonial and internationalised practices remain constrained by institutional structure from the perspective of the students. Even when universities make attempts to conduct decolonised practices by enhancing the diversity of the curriculum, these efforts are largely superficial, and they still rely on the diversity of the student group and staff's background knowledge. The overall knowledge system is predominantly Western-centric and interpreted through a singular lens, which prevents the students' diverse insights and diverse knowledge from being fully integrated into the curriculum. In other words, solely relying on individuals' efforts struggles to genuinely transcend the limitations of the institutional framework.

These address the third research question in the thesis and form the central argument. Despite the efforts of teachers, students, and institutions in decolonising and internationalising ODE practices, these efforts remain constrained by the broader power structures, which result in these practices being superficial in nature. To promote deeper decolonised and internationalised practices, it is essential not only to listen to the individual voices but also to engage in a more critical reflection and adjustment of epistemology and the broader structure. In other words, both individual practices and institutional reforms should operate in parallel to fundamentally dismantle structural inequalities. Based on this, the thesis proposes relevant theoretical and practical implications, which are discussed below.

7.2 Theoretical contributions

This thesis transcends traditional typologies of interaction by reconceptualising student online interaction as a dynamic and relational practice. The thesis situates online Chinese international students' interaction experiences within

broader social contexts and power relations, framing the pedagogical interaction as intertwined with multiple factors. This challenges the assumption in ToI that considers interaction as an isolated pedagogical segment. Here, students' interaction is conceptualised as a dynamic and relational practice, embedded in relationships with the self, others, space, pedagogy, power, technology and the environment, and continuously evolving, ultimately leading to the heterogeneity of individual students' interaction experiences. Thus, there is a need to adopt the dynamic and relational approach to explore online students' interaction.

Building on this, the study specifically examines the influences of colonial power dynamics in HE on online Chinese international students' interaction from a post-/decolonial perspective. The study points out that the colonial power dynamics undermines the students' interaction experiences, thereby impacting decolonised and internationalised practices in the ODE field. Furthermore, technology enables students from different countries to meet a shared virtual classroom and exchange knowledge across borders, which promotes internationalisation to some extent. However, it makes coloniality become more covert and intricate, affecting students' intercultural interaction. In this setting, online international students are affected by this latent coloniality, which they are othered and develop counter-stereotypes, thereby deepening the invisible wall in intercultural interaction.

Existing research has largely focused on the influence of pedagogy or culture on online international students' interaction, with limited attention to the power dynamics. In addition, post-/decolonial studies in HE have predominantly focused on international students in an offline setting and centred on former colonial regions, with relatively little engagement with students from semi-colonial or non-colonial contexts. These gaps are particularly significant in ODE environments, where online international students' interaction is relational and dynamic, occurring across different spaces. Hence, the study suggests that there is a need to play closer attention to how unequal power relations shape online international students' interaction experiences.

7.3 Practical contributions

In this section, I discuss the practical contributions of the thesis from a micro, meso, and macro perspective. Firstly, I start with the implications from a micro perspective, focusing on specific pedagogical practices in ODE. The following section will provide implications from a meso perspective, focusing on ODE curriculum design and programme development. The implications for institutional and national policy will be offered from a macro perspective.

7.3.1 Implications for educational practices in ODE

Although the thesis highlights online Chinese international students' agency, this does not imply that they do not need external supports. Teachers' teaching strategies play a crucial role. Instead of viewing online international students as vulnerable individuals and victims, the educators should consider how to maximise students' agency and potential through appropriate supports. Furthermore, educators should not solely 'content themselves with attempts to bridge the gap between learner and instructor, more fruitful efforts can be guided towards allowing a rich and harmonious synergistic transaction which enables the learner to approach their learning on their own terms and from their socio-cultural grounding' (Stapleford, 2021, p. 216). Therefore, this requires educators to embed the new understanding of agency in teaching designs, thereby providing online international students with greater room to exercise their agency.

More specifically, as highlighted in the thesis, the internationalisation of ODE and the diversification of knowledge should not be undertaken solely by the international student body. Although online international students do not always expect to learn theories and knowledge the same as they learn in heir home countries, they are more willing to find diverse interpretations about their learning content in the classrooms. In other words, online international students do not entirely refuse Western knowledge, but they expect teachers to incorporate non-Western traditions into their classrooms to achieve more inclusive learning. This demands that teachers are equipped with diverse

knowledge bases and take responsibility for promoting knowledge diversity in their teaching practices, rather than relying on online international students themselves to supplement the diversity.

Similarly, diverse teaching strategies are important to improve students' online intercultural distance learning experiences. The thesis indicates that online Chinese international students develop intercultural communication skills to some extent through navigating their ODE experiences. Nevertheless, this is not to say that fostering the sense of authenticity and belonging can be neglected in ODE. In addition to applying diverse technological tools to enhance intercultural interaction and improve the sense of authenticity, the educators could organise informal virtual social events, such as online coffee chats, to support students' networking and strengthen their sense of belonging within the ODE community.

In addition, some students in the thesis express their dissatisfaction with the outdated knowledge delivery in online courses and show the disconnection between learning content and practical application, which undermines their overall ODE experiences. Not only in the ODE field, the issue is criticised in other fields in HE, especially for taught postgraduate programmes (see Pantano et al., 2020). The learning contents acquired in classrooms should not only stay in 'the ivory tower', but they should also be able to create meaning and develop through practical application. While the students in the thesis attempt to bridge the gap by themselves, educators should reflect on how to connect learning content with practice. This needs educators to constantly update their teaching content and knowledge base, and avoid a one-size-fits-all approach in teaching design to adapt to changing educational contexts and job markets. Inviting industry experts to participate in the teaching process through collaboration between educational institutions and enterprises may also provide an effective way for integrating knowledge with practical application (e.g., Henry, 2023).

Some students in the thesis also reported that their teachers exhibited epistemic injustices towards them in teaching practices, which limited the teachers' understanding of students with different backgrounds and undermined

the effectiveness and quality of teaching. To cope with the issue, educators should enhance their cultural sensitivity and attempt to change their cognition through regularly reflecting on their teaching practices. Further, the educators should stay mindful of the binary distinction between domestic and international students, viewing the student group as individuals with shared characteristics and differences, and listen to the voices of the group. On this basis, the educators can provide more targeted and equitable support, therefore enhancing educational equality and inclusiveness.

7.3.2 Implications for online international programmes

Consistent with critiques of ODE curricula outlined in the existing studies (Öztok, 2019), the thesis identifies a lack of diversity in curriculum design. While the students' experiences in the thesis reflect that institutions and teaching staff attempt to respond to the issue by introducing cross-cultural courses, such efforts remain superficial. The diversity of the curriculum should not solely be reflected in the cross-cultural courses, and it should be integrated into all courses. The courses should provide greater room for students to express their diverse opinions rather than limiting the students' voices in the specific cross-cultural modules. Therefore, there is a need that the curricula themselves should be capable of accommodating diverse perspectives and avoiding a singular or dualistic lens based on the West or the East. The international curriculum should be founded upon the diversity of knowledge rather than cultural labelling.

Furthermore, the curriculum design should include more voices from online international students and other marginalised groups, by inviting them to participate in course assessments, setting teaching and learning objectives, and recommending teaching materials. The existing research has proposed the students as partners (SaP) approach to balance the power dynamics in ODE. Breaden et al. (2023) argue for the potential of the SaP approach in the ODE internationalisation. The research shows that SaP is a win-win choice and it fosters equitable and reciprocal partnerships by including students from different backgrounds in curriculum design and redefining the role of students

and teachers in online classrooms. Hence, viewing the students from diverse backgrounds as equal partners and including their experiences and insights in curriculum design helps reduce the power imbalances and enables curricula to better serve the needs of diverse student groups.

Finally, while the development of technology provides opportunities to include students from different countries in an online classroom, it should be mindful of the potential coloniality introduced by the technology. Technology is not neutral, particularly within the context of AI development, where the knowledge conveyed may be biased through technology. Thus, future curriculum design should provide technical guidance for teachers and students to enhance their digital literacy. The curriculum designs should also consider how to utilise the technology to support individual students' diverse learning demands.

7.3.3 Implications for institutional and national policy

The study finds that online Chinese international students' interactions and agency are constrained by the HE institutional structure, which impacts their overall learning experience. This underscores the need of higher education institutions' (HEIs) paradigm shift, moving away from standardised and normative approaches towards student-centred, flexible, and critically reflective approaches. Furthermore, the inclusiveness, accessibility, and diversity in online HEIs' internationalisation should not at the level of rhetoric and performative practice. Online international students should be recognised as legitimate participants and co-constructors of knowledge, rather than being displayed as numerical indicators (Lee, 2022).

This requires HEIs to adopt a critical reflective approach to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions and fixed labels, including acknowledging the complexity of online international student identities and the differences in their prior knowledge frameworks and interaction approaches. Based on this, HEIs should adopt a student-centred approach to genuinely understand online international students' diverse experiences. Instead of presuming the online international students' capabilities and demands based on local student norms, HEIs should

rethink institutional standards and provide more responsive support based on the online international students' actual classroom practices. In the process of establishing institutional standards, HEIs should make tacit rules visible and maintain flexibility, enabling the students to complete assessments on their own way after negotiating with instructors. In addition, HEIs should critically examine the role of technology in teaching and learning practices in an online intercultural environment.

The paradigm shift further calls for HEIs to place greater emphasis on pluralistic epistemologies. Institutions should not use a one-size-fits-all approach to mask the tension and inequalities in ODE internationalisation, and they should confront its inherent complexities. Through student-centred, flexible, and critically reflective approaches, HEIs should construct a framework that embraces diverse learning experiences for students from different backgrounds, thereby ensuring that the original commitments of inclusiveness, accessibility, and diversity in ODE internationalisation are achieved in practice.

In addition, the thesis has examined ODE internationalisation practices using online international Chinese students as a case study. As noted in the thesis, research concerning Chinese international students in full-time intercultural online distance learning remains relatively limited, which may cause their ODE experiences to be inadequately understood. This is due to China's national policies. The Ministry of Education in China has implemented various incentives to support disadvantaged groups in pursuing overseas studies in person (MOE, 2008) and introduced the full-time cross-cultural ODE policy as a temporary measure during the pandemic (CSCSE, 2020). Nonetheless, the closure of the temporary ODE policy may potentially exclude some students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are not able to go to the destination country to study due to financial constraints or other reality factors from fully attending intercultural learning. Furthermore, even with scholarships in place, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are still underrepresented in study abroad programmes, which continue to be more accessible to those from middle-class families (Liu et al., 2023).

In this context, the Chinese ODE policy could consider normalising full-time cross-cultural ODE programmes and assessing their feasibility as well as fairness. In this process, policymakers should be mindful of potential risks from the full-time intercultural ODE programmes, such as preventing diploma mills and exploring mechanisms for online credit transfer among different countries to facilitate the recognition and accreditation of international ODE degrees. At present, several practices in China have demonstrated the potential for full-time cross-cultural ODE programmes. For example, Tsinghua University's 'Global Hybrid Classroom' offers valuable insights into the future full-time intercultural ODE programmes (Tsinghua University, n.d.). Nevertheless, the internationalisation of ODE in China requires a shift towards more open practices.

7.4 Limitations and future research

There are several limitations of the thesis. Firstly, as admitted in the methodological chapter, the thesis mainly focuses on online distance learning experiences of Chinese international students from relatively privileged backgrounds, thus failing to adequately include the voices of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The absence of the student group is mainly due to Chinese ODE policy. As a result, there is limited availability of data on them. Secondly, the thesis was conducted during the pandemic crisis, which may not be generalisable to other contexts. Nevertheless, it is precisely this unforeseen situation that reveals international students' resilience within the uncertain and constrained environments. Similar to other qualitative studies, the sample size of the thesis is not large, which also limits the generalisability of its findings. Nevertheless, the thesis provides more nuanced and in-depth insights into the online intercultural distance learning experiences of individual students, which captures the complexity and diversity of their learning journeys.

There are several implications for future research. Firstly, in the existing data and research on ODE, the focus on the online international student population is limited, which leads to their voices being marginalised and their experiences being inadequately understood. Therefore, there is a need to uncover the

complex experiences of online international students, particularly those with disadvantaged backgrounds. Secondly, the study reveals that the online students from the same country have diverse learning experience. This informs future research that should focus on the heterogeneity within the student group and avoid essentialising them based on cultural assumptions. In other words, research, whether qualitative, mixed-methods, or quantitative research, should caution against the risk of oversimplifying the ODE experiences of students from the similar backgrounds. Finally, the thesis indicates that online international students' interaction experiences are related to various factors, including their sociocultural contexts, power dynamics, pedagogy and structure. This suggests that future research should adopt a dynamic and relational approach to understand online international students' interaction experiences.

Appendix One: Interview Protocol

General questions

Could you tell me a litter about your course? (subject, year group, the place of university, etc.)

Why did you select to study your course through the online learning mode?

Why did you select the online course offered by the UK, Australia, etc.?

Learner-Instructor Interaction

How would you describe your relationship with your instructors?

Could you talk about your interactions with your instructors? How often? When? Where? In what ways? What? Why?

How do you feel about these interactions? (friendly, helpful, easy, timely, difficult, meaningless, etc.) Why do you think so?

What role do you think you play in these interactions? (passive, active, initiating, responding, etc.)

How do these interactions contribute to your learning?

Learner-Learner Interaction

How would you describe your relationship with your peers?

Could you talk about your interactions with your peers? How often? When? Where? In what ways? What? Why?

How do you feel about these interactions? (friendly, helpful, easy, timely, difficult, meaningless, etc.) Why do you think so?

What role do you think you play in these interactions? (passive, active, initiating, responding, etc.)

How do these interactions contribute to your learning?

Learner-Content Interaction

Could you talk about the materials and resources you use in your online learning? What? What format? How? Why? Where? When? Who?

How much time do you spend on these materials?

How do you feel about using these materials? (difficult, understandable, etc.)

Do they meet your learning demands?

How do they contribute to your learning?

Learner-Self Interaction

Do you think you are an independent learner during studying online? Why?

To what extent do you think you can control your learning?

What strategies do you use to manage your study?

Who/What do you think largely affects your control over your learning? How? In what way? Why?

Learner-Interface Interaction

Could you talk a little bit about your learning management system/Moodle site?

What do you do in your learning management system?

Is it easily accessible?

How does it contribute to your study?

Learner-environment Interaction

Could you describe the differences between your current study and your study in your country regarding the course organisation, interactions, learning materials and the extent of your control over your learning?

How do these differences affect your current learning? What challenges do they bring to your learning?

How do you deal with these differences/challenges? Has there been any change in the way you handled them from the beginning to now?

How do you feel about being an online international student?

Closing questions

Preamble: I am very grateful to you for talking with me today.

May I ask whether there are any other issues you feel are important to talk about that we have not covered in the interview so far, please?

Thank you very much for talking to me today and sharing your experience and thoughts. We will ensure you are informed about the research findings of the study.

Appendix Two: Ethics Approval

Educational Research | Lancaster University

02/12/2022

Dear Yiyi Mao,

Thank you for submitting your ethics application for *'Chinese overseas students' online learning experiences: A qualitative study'.*

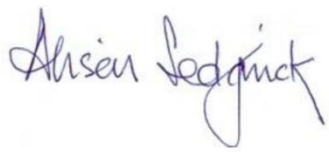
The information you provided has been reviewed by Dr Richard Budd and Dr Kyungmee Lee. I can confirm that approval has been granted for this project.

As principal investigator your responsibilities include:

- ensuring that (where applicable) all the necessary legal and regulatory requirements in order to conduct the research are met, and the necessary licenses and approvals have been obtained;
- reporting any ethics-related issues that occur during the course of the research or arising from the research (e.g. unforeseen ethical issues, complaints about the conduct of the research, adverse reactions such as extreme distress) to the Research Ethics Officer (Dr Richard Budd and Dr Jonathan Vincent).
- submitting details of proposed substantive amendments to the protocol to Dr Kyungmee Lee (spvr) for approval.

Please do not hesitate to contact your supervisor if you require further information about this.

Kind regards,



Alison Sedgwick

Programme Administrator

Appendix Three: PIC

Participant information sheet

Title: Chinese overseas students' online learning experiences

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage: www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

My name is Yiyi Mao. I am a PhD student at Lancaster University and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about: Chinese overseas students' online learning experiences.

Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the study about?
This project will explore Chinese international students' online learning experiences. It aims to provide a holistic and in-depth understanding of online international students and to offer implications for online higher education.

Why have I been invited?
I have approached you because you are a Chinese student who is pursuing a higher education degree through full-time online distance courses offered by an English-speaking university while in China. I am very interested in your online distance learning experiences. Your active engagement would be invaluable to my project. I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?
If you decided to take part, this would involve the following: an online one-to-one semi-structured interview (approximately 30 minutes) where I would ask a few questions about your online distance learning experiences. The interview will be conducted using a telecommunication device of your choice, such as Zoom, and you are free to answer questions in English or Chinese. I would record the audio of the interview (for use in my own research).

What are the possible benefits from taking part?
If you take part in this study, your insights will contribute to our understanding of the demands of online international students, especially non-Western students. Meanwhile, the research will provide you with an opportunity to review and assess your online study, enabling you to better engage in your online distance learning in the future. If you are interested in engaging in master's or doctoral studies, I will share my own doctoral and master's study and application experiences in return for your time spent on research.

Do I have to take part?
No. It's completely up to you to decide whether or not you take part. Your participation is voluntary.

What if I change my mind?

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If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information (=data) you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 2 weeks after taking part in the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
It is unlikely that there will be any major disadvantages to taking part.

Will my data be identifiable?
After the interview, only I, the researcher conducting this study and my supervisor Dr Kyungmee Lee, will have access to the ideas you share with me. I will keep all personal information about you (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project. At the end of the project, the data will be destroyed.

How will we use the information you have shared with us and what will happen to the results of the research study?
I will use the information you have shared with me for research purposes only. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications such as academic journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences.

When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotes (e.g. from my interview with you), so that although I will use your exact words, all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in our publications.

How my data will be stored
Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher will be able to access them) and on password-protected computers. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic).In accordance with University guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

What if I have a question or concern?
If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please contact myself: y.mao11@lancaster.ac.uk or alternatively: my supervisor: Dr Kyungmee Lee Lancaster University. Email address: k.lee23@lancaster.ac.uk Tel: +44 (0)1524595158 Postal address: County South, Lancaster, Lancashire LA1 4YD

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact: Professor Paul Ashwin Email address: paul.ashwin@lancaster.ac.uk Tel: +44 (0)1524 594443 Postal address: County South, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YL, UK

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project.

v19-09-19

Appendix Four: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Chinese overseas students' online learning experiences
Name of Researchers: Yiyi Mao
Email: y.mao11@lancaster.ac.uk
Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 2 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason.	☐
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher/s, but my personal information will not be included and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project. Anonymised data will be deposited in Pure, Lancaster University's institutional data repository, and made freely available with an appropriate data license.	☐
4. I understand that my name/my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	☐
5. I understand that any interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed and that data will be protected on encrypted devices and kept secure.	☐
6. I understand that data will be kept according to University guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

_____ _____ _____
Name of Participant Date Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____ **Date** _____ Day/month/year

One copy of this form will be given to the participant and the original kept in the files of the researcher at Lancaster University

V18-9-19

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