TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF THIRD CULTURE UNIVERSITIES: LATOURIAN COSMOPOLITICS IN TRANSNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

DAY, M. J.[1*] – ZHANG, T.[1]

[1] *Centre for Workforce Development, University of Greenwich, London, United Kingdom.*

[2] *Department of Educational Studies, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Wuzhong District, China.*

**Corresponding author*
e-mail: m.j.day[at]greenwich.ac.uk

(Received 20th March 2025; revised 22nd June 2025; accepted 03rd July 2025)

Abstract. Sino-British Higher Education (HE) partnership creates a 'joint' venture university. This article proposes Third Culture Universities (TCUs), drawing on Bruno Latour's 'cosmopolitical networks' and a postmodern lens we argue that these ventures reflect neither Chineseness nor Britishness. Alternatively, they shift transactional agendas from traditional paradigms to foster hybrid educational communities. Localised curricula, co-governance structures, and metacultural leadership strategies emerge that are unique in TCUs, featuring non-Western and non-Eastern ontologies. Consequently, actors renegotiate multicultural philosophies, translingual pedagogies, and institutionalised practices moment-by-moment. Therefore, we position TCUs as dynamic spaces where different paradigms are co-constructed through network reassembly. Localised human and nonhuman actors, therefore, reconfigure partnerships to suit their own interpretation of learning. In doing so, they reassemble networks to privilege their own economic pursuits and epistemic equity. By deconstructing cosmopolitical potentials and tensions, this article aims to move us towards understanding there is little 'joint' about ventures not merely international, rather intercultural.
Keywords: *Third Culture Universities (TCUs), cosmopolitical networks, global higher education, epistemic equity, translingual pedagogies*

Introduction

Sino-British 'joint' venture universities represent a milestone in the internationalisation of higher education (HE). Since the 1990s, China's Ministry of Education (MoE) has promoted Transnational Education (TNE), partnering with Western universities. Their blueprint seeks to provide high-quality education by exporting Western curricula and distance-awarded degrees. Meanwhile, they aim to prepare Chinese students for entering global workforce markets while meeting China's economic demands for postgraduate training (Day, 2024a). However, such ventures reinforce Eurocentric hierarchies. They do so by emphasising that Western HE standards are the epitome of quality and degree assurance. The underpinned neoliberal business arrangement raises critical questions about the potential for these ventures to transcend traditional paradigms. After all, partnership-centred international ventures are inherently intercultural, differing from TNE, which leans more on exporting curricula from one nation to another (Waters and Day, 2022a). Consequently, this cultural nuance motivates us to explore 'joint' ventures from a sociological perspective of relational epistemologies and knowledge co-creation across cultural boundaries. There is, undoubtedly, a need to critically explore the emergent partnerships shaping globally

transforming universities, and consider the extent to which they form authentic, cohesive and integrated systems of learning.

From third culture kid to joint venture universities

We suggest that 'joint' venture universities become, after initial partnership, Third Culture Universities (TCUs). This idea is inspired by Third Culture Kids (TCKs), so individuals whose cognitive developmental years are significantly spent in those cultural settings different from their parents' or countries of nationality. TCKs were first discussed in the context of studying expatriate communities and their identity formation in India (Pollock et al., 2010; Useem and Downie, 1976). They build relationships across multiple cultures but often lack full ownership of any single culture. As such, exposure to diverse languages, and worldviews, cultivates cross-cultural adaptability. However, such diversity can create educational complexity. Also, it can introduce challenges around identity loss, cultural shock, and belonging (Cockburn, 2002; Barringer, 2000). TCKs struggle with identity formation, as their relationships are built through social interactions. Traditionally, young people build identity through geographic social heritages or educational ancestries (Jones et al., 2022; Pollock et al., 2010). Most discussion about them ceases upon their early adulthood. This coincides with some TCKs leaving home and attending university, drawn to campuses with international cultures (Waters and Day, 2022b). They may seek out such universities by previously developing learning patterns different from those of their traditionally educated peers (Low et al., 2020; Walters and Auton-Cuff, 2009). Focusing on adjustment, not belonging, TCKs tend to be less ethnocentric and more tolerant than monocultural individuals (Pollock et al., 2010). Their adaptability shapes a more globalised mindset. Additionally, growing up in diverse cultural settings equips them with cultural sensitivity.

The description of TCKs above, then, echoes the history of Sino-British HE partnerships, one of the most complex international collaborations. A 'joint' venture university represents a distinctive form of TNE by joining two cultures on a single campus in China, the host country. Such enterprises emerged in the early 2000s (Mao, 2020; Lu, 2018). Interestingly, their international makeup is primarily influenced by local contexts, as offshore campuses are often located in China's new 'first-tier' cities. Here, regional policies emphasise economic success. Providing land allowances, prioritising Chinese-approved graduate curriculums, and access to domestic research funding opportunities underpin initial business agreements (Hayhoe and Pan, 2015; Lu, 2018). Notably, these ventures operate as independent local entities heavily influenced by domestic political and pedagogical agendas, yet degree curricula must align with degree-awarding parents' quality assurance standards, for example delivery in English Medium Instruction (EMI). The internationalisation of HE bloomed in China in the early 2000s, catalysed by its successful economic growth and relationships with the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Establishing foreign educational partnerships accelerates globally competitive workforces and domestic education innovations (Mao, 2020). Traditionally, Chinese degree education is tied to a rigorous high-school examination, GaoKao, which dominates university admissions (Lu, 2018). However, 'joint' venture universities diversify HE opportunities by attracting regionally positioned students who underperform in Gaokao, and those seeking genuine international experience (China Daily, 2022; Hayhoe and Pan, 2015). These ventures play an essential role in domestic economic strategies and promote Chinese academic

reputation with the 'help' of British brand-name universities to improve international relationships. Yet, Chinese and British HE systems are divergent, even diametrically opposed, in pedagogical, social and cultural practices. Moreover, the Chinese MoE requires these ventures to maintain domestic educational sovereignty by following local political agendas, such as adjusting degree content and even books in libraries. Such practices amplify academic poverty to students and disempower them, to a certain extent, as does the impact of Internet censorship (Day, 2025).

Multicultural mosaics or melting pots? Sino-British cultural divergences

We argue that 'joint' venture universities therefore straddle intersections of academic inconsistencies. Alternatively, they offer a sociological vantage for a nuanced case-specific multicultural exploration of pedagogy, academic practices, and educational experience. For example, Day (2024b) debated the authenticity of such ventures in terms of their degree-awarding experience for students. Indeed, students in international campuses may not truly embrace or adapt to different learning and teaching styles. Instead, some are reported as clustering together in their national communities, replicating home practices and networks resistant to multiculturalism, and cultural melting (Waters and Day, 2022a). Yet, by exporting 'Britishness' in China, these ventures embody unique national identity and cultural practices of both partners' geographical and educational boundaries. Intriguingly, we have never seen any importation or establishment of a Chinese university in the United Kingdom (UK). China's authoritarian education traditions and conservative culture partly explain why such partnerships inevitably began with Western unidirectionality. Thus, any bidirectional or omnidirectional emphasis is only formed inside campuses in local sites. As we will discuss, to borrow from the celebrated sociologist Bruno Latour, this ensures that localised actors shape their own interpretations of learning, teaching, research, and management. Sino-British 'joint' venture universities can be a perfect neoliberal encapsulation, garnering capitalist benefits for both partners and countries. However, research has shown that conflicts between students and staff occur on these campuses (Day, 2025). Expecting such ventures to embrace both value sets, whilst honouring UK degree-awarding power, is paradoxical. Simply put, this is akin to shedding domestic educational identities to favour a dominant culture led by an external nation. Waters and Day (2022a) used 'multicultural mosaic' as a metaphor to describe a society where diverse cultural groups coexist while maintaining their unique identities. Unfortunately, joint ventures begin with a culture melting pot model, opposing the 'mosaic' model, which each 'tile' adds diversity and intercultural scope. If managed with an assimilationist tendency, then, which such partnerships seem to begin as in their core business model, these ventures might erode unique cultural traditions, languages, and customs. The problem, therefore, is that integrating British and Chinese HE is inherently incohesive as there are incompatible values in social, political and pedagogical practices (Berry, 2011). More importantly, universities exist as a vehicle embodying these cultural divergences. Hence, based on Berry (2011) and our own interpretation, we can summarise this in (*Table 1*).

***Table 1**. Sino-British cultural divergences as relevant to higher education partnerships.*

Feature	United Kingdom (UK)	China (CN)
Social model	A multicultural mosaic of embracing diverse cultures co-existence.	Cultural melting of merging elements into the nation.
Assimilation attitude	Encouraging soft social and cultural	Strong emphasis on social power via assimilation

	integration, while welcoming retention of cultural identities.	into *Han* ethnic culture, with little recognition of minority traditions.
Identity attitude	Maintained and celebrated, especially in urban areas that promote heterogeneity.	Often diminished, despite minority cultures being recognised, but are expected to integrate into the mainstream.
Societal outcome	Diversity and inclusivity through acknowledging differences, challenges in fostering cohesion.	Relative homogeneity through assimilation, ongoing tensions in some marginalised minority regions.
Example social policy	Official multiculturalism, anti-discrimination laws, promotion of intercultural languages, accents and school curricula.	Mandarin as lingua franca under 'unity in diversity' (*hé ér bù tóng*), minority cultures are promoted in limited contexts and linguistic absolutism.
Immigration attitude	Multiple legal routes to achieving dual citizenship, the right to remain process, and refugee status opening in crisis situations.	Strict regulatory oversight for visitors and guests, working visas moderated to industry need, and a singular citizenship.
Academic freedom	Celebrated free speech on campus, reduced state oversight.	State-regulated online and physical textbooks, often presented in strong commanding tones.
Pedagogical culture	Socratic debate, critical thinking, and essay driving personal reflections.	Confucian hierarchical generalisation, rote memorisation, and examination credentialism.

As Sino-British 'joint' venture universities expand speedily, we must stop viewing them as 'joint' post-establishment. TCUs, the authors contend, are an alternative way to encapsulate institutions formed through cross-border partnerships (i.e., universities, governments, and corporations). Notably, not driven by parent universities but local actors taking power, they synthesise HE frameworks into a hybrid. Consequently, TCUs merge their parents' resources, governance models, and curricula by paying dividends from private profit in return. Activities are less pedagogical, but commercial, foreshadowing the neoliberal arrangements for exporting Western degree education into localised knowledge systems. This business model may initiate in genuine hopes of a dual identity formation, allowing institutions to retain ties to their parents. However, practices often transcend national boundaries, cultural identities and educational traditions by interpreting their own academic ecosystems. A relational 'third culture' thus emerges. However, TCUs face challenges balancing the autonomy in recruiting international faculty, integrating domestic principles, managing identity tension, and allocating local resources.

Defining third culture universities: Latourian lens and cosmopolitical networks

To define our TCUs, we seek to construct a new perspective afforded by Bruni and Teli (2007) insights on organisational sociology. His Actor-Network Theory (ANT) offers an epistemological vantage to understand TCUs beyond transnational 'joint' ventures. ANT examines 'network assemblages' by tracing 'socio-technical entanglements' built into complex power dynamics. In those campuses, discursive frameworks emerge from locally governed actors reframing power relations in heterogeneous networks. In-situ actors, human (i.e., students, staff, administrators, party members assigned as governors internally) and nonhuman (i.e., curricula, COVIDs, digital platforms, political governances, censorship), negotiate cultural legitimacy and epistemic authority. 'Joint' ventures thus become hybrid spaces because power flows not from fixed hierarchies, such as by parent universities, but through dynamic associations between stakeholders, accreditation standards, technologies, and cultural artefacts. For instance, a UK university has reputational degree-awarding power, a cultural capital rooted in quality assurance bodies, to enrol and direct other actors, local government, students, faculty, and digital infrastructures, into TCUs' networks. Yet, this parent university is still far away, and bases much of its assurance on sampling protocols and processes via a small representation of the wider educational habitus of activity occurring within the TCU itself.

This narrative aligns with Cosmopolitics, which Latour (2004) suggested any 'common world' subsequently "...assembled has got to be constructed from scratch." Based on constructivism, a postmodern ideology, he suggested 'build' a plusiverse rather than 'believe' it has already existed or can be inherited, for example from parent universities. In other words, a common world is ultimately co-constructed by embracing all humans, nonhumans, and networks existing on the ground, in the moment of a phenomena. Within TCUs' networks, then, actors elaborate on inclusive internal deliberation and determine behaviours to benefit those most central, not external, to the network. Bruni and Teli (2007) highlighted socio-technical nonhuman actors (i.e., transnational agreements, laptops, webcams, firewalls, censorship, party values, ideology) have power in co-shaping partnership dynamics. Interestingly, technical entities facilitate human agency in operating such ventures and their networks. For example, online digital platforms enable quality assurance boards and moderation of distance learning and degree delivery between host countries and degree awarding parent universities. Such phenomena thus show how TCUs can exist in the first place because of technology, and how technology can be used to shape what parent universities see, hear and think-which may be different on the ground, so in the relational centre of the network.

Latourian cosmopolitics places less emphasis on what 'right' or 'wrong' pedagogy and academic agency should be in those spaces. Instead, it neutrally views any act decided by focal actors as having power in the moment of network reassembly (Bruni and Teli, 2007). This lens moves beyond single cultural dominance, unfolding the cosmopolitical potential of TCUs. By emphasising global experience and multicultural alignment, TCUs demonstrate why they are not merely 'joint'. Actors shape educational heterogeneous networks built upon socio-technical phenomena that are either 'reassembled' or temporarily stable. 'Cosmopolitical networks', therefore, denote a 'third culture' determined by power, proximity, and focality, transcending any 'joint' cultural binaries. For Latour, staff and students in those ventures become inherently embodied in a 'third culture' from the point of negotiation and assembly (i.e., during university admission or recruitment). Leadership of such ventures is equally complex. Western democratic management would challenge Chinese entrenched hierarchies and 'face' culture, given that TCUs governance is often Chinese dominated on the ground (Day, 2023). As such, Latour provides the rationale for why TCUs should seek 'metacultural' strategies that prioritise reintermediation: what unfolds is neither Britishness nor Chineseness (Gruenfelder et al., 2024). Rather, TCUs exemplify the tension between power reproduction and identity reconfiguration of 'joint' ventures. By utilising Latour's relational epistemologies, TCUs can be understood as a mediator that creates a space of hybridity. Power dynamics within their networks are neither 'global' nor 'domestic' but renegotiated 'locally' by which we mean through socio-technical and cultural network entanglements. Actor-networks within TCUs, and TCUs as a network themselves, are punctuated by relational agency, focalisation, and proximity, which are asymmetric.

TCUs transfer, then, what works from the archetype of Sino-British 'joint' venture universities, then displaces what doesn't in favour of locally governing cultures that seek to melt everything to suit their own view. Such a process manifests the Latourian Sociology of Translation, which describes how a network of relationships is built through four iterative stages (Callon, 1984). 'Problematisation' is the motivational stage where all partners associate to establish a 'joint' venture. 'Interessement' is the

stabilising stage whereby actors negotiate educational roles and expectations to reach a shared goal. 'Enrolment' is the defining stage where socio-technical actors coordinate and recruit others into their networks. 'Mobilisation' is the materialising stage whereby these ventures begin operation, evolve, renegotiate, and eventually might result in 'dissidence'. For example, lacking UK-aligned staff wanting to teach or lead in a setting dominated by Chinese politics reassembles the network configuration into something locally preferable to the instability of higher global staff turnover-so, recruiting domestic candidates. Yet, such domestic faculty quickly become externalized to their own public university system, because TCUs are, again, not inherently Chinese either. Indeed, even the evolution of their languages and pedagogies emerge as reshaped by the process of interculturalities that determine new forms of communication, practice and performance (Low et al., 2022).

Rather, they may be focalised by actors from China who can equally reject their own pedagogies and practices also because TCUs are not governed by one, or the other, and thus, in the middle, renegotiation happens. 'Joint' ventures, therefore, begin by establishing an Obligation Passage Point (OPP) where Western and Chinese HE must converge to do business (Callon, 1984). For instance, UK-China partnerships frame 'globalisation' as a shared problem requiring British critical pedagogy and Chinese scholarship (xuéshù) traditions. They are allied by nonhuman actors such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), English language competency, and the Internet graduate skills development (Wang and Zhang, 2021). This 'problematisation' stage inevitably privileges Western epistemic norms as normalised solutions, marginalising other knowledge systems. However, such a rationalisation process potentially influences network formation and stability (Gruenfelder et al., 2024). In the second stage, actors employ strategies to lock others into roles supporting their vision for competition, unfolding power relations. UK parent universities, for example, use degree-awarding 'status' to offer accreditation, creating a favourable power balance. Their Chinese counterparts are dictated by business operation terms, who in turn gain profit, thus reinforcing their partnership towards network stability (Wang and Zhang, 2021).

Therefore, Western benchmarks act as 'interessement' devices, positioning British HE standards as prerequisites for global recognition to some extent. Simultaneously, Chinese partners leverage digital learning platforms and local contextualised knowledge systems to stabilise this network presence (Fenwick and Edwards, 2014). By asserting technological sovereignty, these ventures create counter-networks that challenge Western epistemic dominance. In the third stage, multilateral negotiations and hybrid practices happen through actor 'enrolment', such as recruited students and staff, thus creating blended pedagogies. Yet, networks are still inevitably fraught with tensions to remain stable loosely. For example, in curriculum design, combining UK student-as-partner methods with Chinese teacher-centred discussion (tǎolùn) inevitably conflicts (Zhao et al., 2014). It only works when Chinese students use AI tools to translate English to fully understand the instructions and thus access the learning itself. Meanwhile, assessment models create conflicts, as curricula must blend British critical-thinking portfolios and reflective writing with Chinese rote-memorisation, quiz-based exams, and essay formats (lùnwén) (Handler-Spitz, 2010). The governance structure is equally problematic in creating truly bilateral QAA protocols to validate transcultural pedagogy. It is very challenging to shape an organisational culture in China without deferring to cultural hierarchy, local power plays, and political malefice (Tsui et al., 2006). Striking these agreements can stabilise networks and lead to the 'mobilisation'

stage. However, doing so does little to change the inherent power imbalance because UK degree-awarding bodies and parent universities inevitably act as focal actor in the validation process (Bruni and Teli, 2007). Nonhuman gatekeepers such as global ranking metrics, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) still privilege Western paradigms, as Chinese HE systems reject their dominance, creating fragile engagements with these academic standards (Day, 2024a; 2024b).

Notably, Latour's (2004) cosmopolitics emphasises that the number of mediations influences network stability. Simply put, the more mediators, the more real a network will feel or seem. For example, TCUs work hard to 'brand' their universities with western names, to add mediated legitimacy. Yet, beneath the surface, fragile networks threaten sustainability when tensions erupt, leading to the last point of 'dissidence' (Callon, 1984). Because rebellion and betrayal inevitably emerge at the 'mobilisation' stage, driven by the most focal actors (i.e., local staff resist Western curricula by teaching in Chinese). Therefore, TCUs can be seen as a reformation of the initial network, which is 'overthrown' by local-situated actors to diminish the parent universities' roles. This process unfolds the counter-enrolment restarted in TCUs as those actors seek to rebalance the presence of 'allies'. For example, these ventures develop parallel Chinese-only accreditation systems to act 'more like' public universities' 'Double First-Class Construction' scheme. Or actors preferentially use nonhuman 'local' tools (i.e., WeChat) for inter-staff dialogue, work allocation, academic sharing, or knowledge exchange outside the classroom as material resistance. For example, TCUs use the COVID-19 lockdown to justify hiring predominantly domestic staff, adding power and proximity to Chinese actors who prefer domestic empowerment to alignment with global networks (Day, 2024b; 2024c).

Global re-localisation: A sociology of third culture universities

At face value, these acts are elaborated to reclaim a sense of 'localised' power via China-specific closed-loop systems (Fenwick and Edwards, 2014). They might be about creating counter-power to the 'Western' presence in building a new cultural identity. Though initially emphasising education diplomacy, joint' ventures do reinforce Eurocentric hierarchies under the guise of internationalisation. Consequently, joint' venture universities are far from 'global' HE partnerships. Yet, these acts may also be human-nonhuman heterogeneous assemblages to reproduce TCUs. 'Third cultures' emerge through tensions as an inevitable push-back to prioritise relational epistemologies. TCUs thus reassemble sustained local interaction between students, faculty, and organisational practices beyond predefined national, business, and cultural boundaries. This network transformation mirrors cosmopolitical pluriverse; focal actors given power will strive to compose their common world (Latour, 2004). 'Cosmopolitical networks' persist in reconciling Chinese state-led education governance with Western decentralised management. In practice, *Figure 1* provides a conceptual model to visualise a TCU network replication. Within *Figure 1*, ANT is applied into a visual model showing the engagement of human and nonhuman beings, so actors, in the continuous process of networks caused, supported, and changed. TCUs, as actor-networks, are not like static objects but rather dynamically operating entities, still being made, destroyed, and created in the moment. This never-ending reassembly is thus quite essential to grasp how TCUs get new features and develop in places where cultural, institutional, and material variety dominates. At a TCU, an assemblage is the one that

refers to students, faculty, decision-making, digital facilities, building spaces, cultural norms, and those technologies that support educational practices. Each actor, whether a person, a policy, or a piece of technology, contributes its own type of agency to the network, thus changing its structure and the results it generates as new pressures and priorities emerge. Hence, reassembly as a process in actor-networks is an expression of a number of cooccurring mechanisms that can reshape the complex phenomena that take shape. A process here is translation, where actors decide what will be the meaning of roles and relationships as they engage with one another. For example, Western education models are not only to be carried into a Chinese context, but also rather they are to be adapted and reinterpreted with a local flavour, mixed with resistance. Networks likewise necessitate incessant conduct. They are not static entities but must be incessantly performed by their components. If these performances decline, so if actors remove themselves, change their roles, or new actors come into influence, the network can disappear or be deeply changed (Latour, 2004). Furthermore, in the case of the TCU's representation of the constantly negotiated governance models, curriculum content, and everyday interactions among a wide variety of stakeholders. The network's continuance rests on the actors' readiness and capability to carry these performances forward for a long period of time, or lack therein commitment to do so.

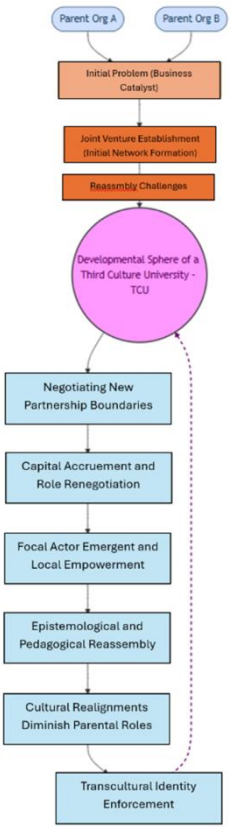

Figure 1. *Model representing Actor-Network transformation in a third culture university reassembly.*

Actors do not act alone (Latour, 2004). Rather, their actions are always dependent and intertwined with the network in which they are situated. The reassembly of the actor-network is a key concept and it explains process of change and transformation, and for TCUs we conceptualise this in *Figure 1*. This happens when new actors enter

the network, and those present alter, or the connections between the actors are reconfigured due to shifts in policy or technology, or outbreaks of cultural tension. The same is true for the fast-changing HE field of international expansion, where TCUs must keep on adjusting to new challenges and openings. A key feature of reassembly is the redistribution of power and agency. ANT challenges hierarchical assumptions about who or what holds influence within a network, emphasising instead that agency is distributed across all actors; human and nonhuman alike. In the context of TCUs, this means that not only institutional leaders or faculty, nor do parent universities hold absolute control. Rather, a mixture of people alongside digital infrastructures, accreditation standards, and even the physical layout of campus buildings can shape how the university operates and evolves. The network's heterogeneity ensures that reassembly is often contentious, involving negotiation, compromise, and sometimes outright contestation among actors with differing interests and logics. Actor-network reassembly is not only structural but also epistemological. It is concerned with the relational production of knowledge, identifying that knowledge or legitimate practice is always contingent on the given actor configuration and their relationships. In TCUs, this relationship generates what we summarise as the basis of 'third culture' hybrid epistemologies and pedagogical practices that transcend anticipated national, business, or cultural frontiers. Consequently, *Figure 1* describes that because of the unique setting, iterated cycles of translation, performance, and transmutation occur. So, these universities are actor-networks that continually remake themselves anew, redistributing agency and power and establishing new relational patterns and knowledge. This emergent, hybrid network is always in the making, reflected and constituting in new ways of mixing culture, pedagogy and practice in joint venture partnerships, if indeed they could even be termed joint at all. Indeed, we suggest that they should instead be seen as emergent third culture institutions instead.

However, we must consider whether TCUs actualise cosmopolitical ethos on purpose, or simply as a by-product of power asymmetries in accreditation, funding, and cultural capital that must recentre Western paradigms? There are pre-existing power imbalances when such partnerships were first formed by inviting Western HE frameworks and EMI into China. The push and pull of Eurocentric epistemic norms replicate curricula without integrating local professional structures (Zhao, 2020). More importantly, we question what implications TCUs have for authentic student experience, if something 'global' inevitably becomes local? Latourian cosmopolitical potentials potentially echo Chinese Taoism, which asserts "Three gives birth to everything..." (Law and Lin, 2018). Indeed, third cultures transcend parental oversight to reframe cultural conflicts as negotiable network interactions rather than irreconcilable binaries. However, differing actors in local network reassemblies, so rise and fall of those with power, may also trigger vicious cycles of renegotiation (Bruni and Teli, 2007).

Conclusion

It is paramount for Sino-British HE partnerships to promote not 'joint' but blended knowledge systems. Meanwhile, existing accounts are limited in capturing how educational practices co-evolve with technological infrastructures in joint ventures (Fenwick and Edwards, 2014). To this end, this article describes a new way of interpreting the nature/culture binary in 'joint' ventures by introducing the idea of TCUs. Latourian neutrality helps us position these ventures only as temporary equilibria

through the initial assemblage of socio-technical actors and, importantly, one away from both parents (Bruni and Teli, 2007). In their most stable stage, TCUs could provide a tangible space for transcultural curricula to redefine learning through educational 'boundary objects' (Lagesen, 2010). This process can maintain distinct cultural identities across networks while enabling educational collaboration. It also rejects the 'value-added' model of suggesting British HE brings something 'better' to joint international partnerships, which side-steps cultivating epistemic interpenetration (Gruenfelder et al., 2024). To illustrate, an English history module could juxtapose British postcolonial theory with Chinese literature, using digital annotation to map conceptual overlaps, alongside embedding translation tools into explicit curriculum design. TCUs pose an interesting future issue for a new empowerment strategy to manage these ventures successfully. This is not easy as Chinese centralised governance clashes with British distributed leadership. However, 'cosmopolitical networks' help us recognise that policy frameworks are inevitably mutable, which forge their inter-institutional alliances. Essentially, they form counter-networks towards self-governance rather than be governed by both parents (Banivanua-Mar, 2016). Therefore, remote degree accreditation becomes a branch of relational network that is assumed to regulate, yet is not focal to, a dense sociopolitical actor-network fabricated of TCUs (Tsui et al., 2006). For example, British universities introduce pedagogical systems in China that favour teaching in a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, we can reimagine a transcultural contact zone by recognising the 'third cultures' that inherently emerges in that classroom. A sociology of TCUs is needed, we contend, to critically explore the unique phenomena taking shape, in which focal actors reassemble socio-technical actor-networks to locally satisfy their own economic pursuits and epistemic equity. This is needed to better understand what form of education, shaping and systems of thought are created within them. This article contends such thought is neither Chinese, nor British, and deconstructs cosmopolitical potentials and tensions within 'joint' venture universities to dispute their presupposed partnership. It moves our thinking towards understanding TCUs not merely as international spaces but intercultural networks.

Acknowledgement

The research is self-funded.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) disclose no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The author(s) disclose they have not received any funding for this manuscript. The authors list the following contributions: MJD provided the majority contribution in all aspects of the paper, and TZ contributed to conceptualisation, analysis and discussion.

REFERENCES

[1] Banivanua-Mar, T. (2016): Decolonisation and the Pacific: Indigenous globalisation and the ends of empire. – Cambridge University Press 265p.
[2] Barringer, C.F. (2000): Counseling third culture kids. – Annual Conference of the American Counseling Association, San Antonio, TX 20p.

[3] Berry, J.W. (2011): Integration and multiculturalism: Ways towards social solidarity. – Papers on Social Representations 20(1): 1-21.
[4] Bruni, A., Teli, M. (2007): Reassembling the social-An introduction to actor network theory. – Management Learning 38(1): 121-125.
[5] Callon, M. (1984): Some elements of a sociology of translation: Domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay. – The Sociological Review 32(1): 196-233.
[6] China Daily (2022): Sino-British College celebrates 16 years of excellence in Shanghai. – China Daily Web Portal 2p.
[7] Cockburn, L. (2002): Children and young people living in changing worlds: The process of assessing and understanding the 'third culture kid'. – School Psychology International 23(4): 475-485.
[8] Day, M.J. (2025): Digital piracy in higher education: Exploring social media users and Chinese postgraduate students motivations for supporting'academic cybercrime'by shelving ebooks from Z-library. – Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice 22(1): 1-20.
[9] Day, M.J. (2024a): Digital divides in Chinese HE: Leveraging AI as student's partner (AIASSP) to reduce piracy. – Quantum Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities 5(1): 165-183.
[10] Day, M. (2024b): Reimagining library learning spaces, or risking digital piracy in universities: Students views on spatial boundaries, time, and self-study modalities in the post-digital era of AI. – Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching 17(1): 65-81.
[11] Day, M.J. (2024c): Censorship and digital defiance in Higher Education: exploring barriers to studying degrees in China's joint venture international universities. – Global Journal of Research in Humanities & Cultural Studies (GJRHCS) 4(5): 21-30.
[12] Day, M.J. (2023): Towards ethical artificial intelligence in universities: ChatGPT, culture, and mental health stigmas in Asian higher education post COVID-19. – Journal of Technology in Counselor Education and Supervision 4(1): 42-55.
[13] Fenwick, T., Edwards, R. (2014): Networks of knowledge, matters of learning, and criticality in higher education. – Higher Education 67(1): 35-50.
[14] Gruenfelder, T., Montecinos, J.B., Smith, H., Schwengber, J.G. (2024): Transcultural education: A framework for supporting students to develop commonalities in cultural complexity. – In D. K. Deardorff & M. Tatebayashi (Eds.), Current Perspectives on Intercultural and Global Contexts, Star Scholars Press 23p.
[15] Handler-Spitz, R. (2010): Short prose forms in a global sixteenth-century context: The Western essay and the Chinese xiaopin, sanwen, and suibi. – Prose Studies 32(2): 110-121.
[16] Hayhoe, R., Pan, J. (2015): Joint-venture universities in China: Shanghai and Shenzhen comparisons. – International Higher Education 81: 25-26.
[17] Jones, E.M., Reed, M., Gaab, J., Ooi, Y.P. (2022): Adjustment in third culture kids: A systematic review of literature. – Frontiers in Psychology 13(1): 1-29.
[18] Lagesen, V.A. (2010): The importance of boundary objects in transcultural interviewing. – European Journal of Women's Studies 17(2): 125-142.
[19] Latour, B. (2004): Whose cosmos, which cosmopolitics? Comments on the peace terms of Ulrich Beck. – Common Knowledge 10(3): 450-462.
[20] Law, J., Lin, W.Y. (2018): Tidescapes: Notes on a shi (勢)-inflected social science. – Journal of World Philosophies 3(1): 1-16.
[21] Low, D.S., Aung, M.T., Day, M.J. (2020): Cognitive sociology: Developing the 'diversity pathways' model in cultural neuroscience. – Human Behavior, Development and Society 21(4): 66-77.
[22] Low, D.S., McNeill, I., Day, M.J. (2022): Endangered languages: A sociocognitive approach to language death, identity loss and preservation in the age of artificial intelligence. – Sustainable Multilingualism 21(1): 1-25.

[23] Lu, X. (2018): Transnational education: Sino-foreign cooperative universities in China. – World Education News and Reviews 16p.
[24] Mao, Y. (2020): The development of Chinese overseas joint venture universities: Context, characteristics, and implications. – The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, United States 224p.
[25] Pollock, D.C., Van Reken, R.E., Pollock, M.V. (2010): Third culture kids: Growing up among worlds. – London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing 480p.
[26] Tsui, A.S., Wang, H., Xin, K.R. (2006): Organizational culture in China: An analysis of culture dimensions and culture types. – Management and Organization Review 2(3): 345-376.
[27] Useem, R., Downie, R.D. (1976): Third-culture kids. – Today's Education 65(3): 103-105.
[28] Vygotsky, L.S. (1978): Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. – Cambridge: Harvard University Press 174p.
[29] Walters, K.A., Auton-Cuff, F.P. (2009): A story to tell: The identity development of women growing up as third culture kids. – Mental Health, Religion & Culture 12(7): 755-772.
[30] Wang, S., Zhang, Y. (2021): Integrating multimodal courses into mobile learning in international Chinese education. – In W. Jia et al. (Eds.), International Symposium on Emerging Technologies for Education, Cham: Springer International Publishing 17p.
[31] Waters, T., Day, M.J. (2022a): Multicultural mosaic? Studying the cultural integration of international students in 'Thai higher education 4.0'. – Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Studies 22(1): 131-142.
[32] Waters, T., Day, M.J. (2022b): Thai menschenbild: a study of Chinese, Thai, and international students in a private Thai university as measured by the national survey of student engagement (NSSE). – Humanities and Social Sciences Communications 9(1): 1-12.
[33] Zhao, N., Valcke, M., Desoete, A., Sang, G., Zhu, C. (2014): Does teacher-centered teaching contribute to students' performance in primary school? A video analysis in Mainland China. – International Journal of Research Studies in Education 3(3): 21-34.
[34] Zhao, W. (2020): Problematizing "epistemicide" in transnational curriculum knowledge production: China's suyang curriculum reform as an example. – Curriculum Inquiry 50(2): 105-125.