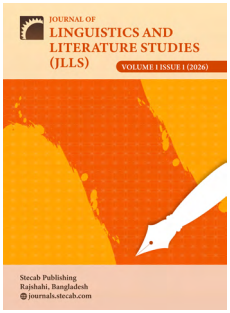

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Review Article

Third Culture Universities: Hybrid Sociolinguistic Fields, Hidden Language Hierarchies, and Artificial Intelligence in Transnational Higher Education

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About Article

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the rise of Third Culture Universities (TCUs), a concept to describe international campuses that emerge from Transnational Education (TNE) partnerships between universities in different countries, aiming to blend diverse educational systems and cultures. Such TCUs, often driven by Western academic expansion, conceal persistent power imbalances and sociolinguistic inequalities. These become more apparent as campuses grow, transform, and translate language, learning, and communication. Consequently, this article seeks to utilise Bourdieu's concepts of 'capital', 'habitus', and 'symbolic violence' to explore how these universities drive English-language curricula and Eurocentric standards. This, then, creates grounds for resistance and contested challenge. Employing a postmodern methodology for analysis, the article draws upon a conceptual analysis integrating sociological and sociolinguistic lenses to suggest that TNE partnerships perpetuate social reproduction, making true 'internationalisation' remain elusive. The increasing use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), by international students to navigate these challenges and supplement language skills, offers one way forward, we contend. However, such a practice fails to address structural inequality. We conclude by highlighting, therefore, opportunities for resistance and reflexive change in these 'hidden fields' of TNE, whilst reframing the role AI will play in shaping power, and practice in academic partnerships.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past twenty years, Higher Education (HE) has undergone a significant transformation. This has been driven by the rapid expansion of Transnational Education (TNE), particularly through the rise of 'joint-venture' universities. These ventures often take the form of offshore international campuses. In practical terms, Sino-British collaboration takes centre stage, and is the focus of this article. A Sino-British campus, then, is formed when Western parent universities collaborate with Chinese counterparts to deliver degrees in a newly created campus, located in mainland China. However, other new partnerships have emerged in Malaysia, the Middle East, and India, usually driven by UK or US institutions. Hence, within this article, we debate whether this is truly joint, or if what they have created are, in effect, third culture spaces of pedagogy and practice, given these degrees operate in terms of awarding degrees from the parent university located in the West, are situated in Asia, and staffed from a mixture of global and local staff drawing a diverse range of peoples into one place. Meanwhile, such TNE partnerships are framed as models of equal collaboration and mutual enrichment (Day *et al.*, 2025). However, such a 'brand promise' narrative conceals what the authors contend is a contested sociolinguistic reality.

To explore this further, and in conceptual terms, we develop a wider scope of the idea of Third Culture Universities (TCUs) introduced by Day & Zhang (2025). TCUs are a theoretical framing of partnership-forged international universities, which challenge the neutrality implied by 'joint ventures' and surface what Day & Zhang (2025) contend are 'hidden hierarchies' within TNE partnerships. In simple terms, TCUs refer to international campuses that do not fully belong to either of the partner institutions involved in a transnational agreement, though they may be misread as being joint ventures. Although these new campuses are established through formal partnerships of two universities of different geographies and politics, such as China and the UK, the day-to-day realities of teaching, learning, assessment, and communication often produce a distinct institutional culture that differs from both the Western parent university and the local host system. This 'third' culture emerges through everyday practices: the languages used in classrooms and administration, the appointments of professors, standards by which academic work is judged, and the informal ways students and staff navigate expectations which the authors contend are often unclear or contradictory, because they are shaped by those with power, namely the localised players operating on the ground. As a result, for Day & Zhang (2025), parent universities are content with neoliberal benefits, so maintain the idea of having a joint venture to distract from the idea that what they have created are, in effect, TCUs. They do not control what happens in these, whether we view this politically, socially, culturally, linguistically or pedagogically. Rather, they control the assurance around degrees awarded by those operating within these spaces. Thus, TCUs are shaped less by written agreements and more by how people adapt to, negotiate, and sometimes resist imposed academic norms. These tensions commonly surface around language and authority, where English-medium instruction and Western academic standards are treated as neutral measures of quality, while local linguistic practices and epistemologies are positioned as supplementary or remedial (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Liu *et al.*, 2024; Reilly *et al.*, 2024).

At the same time, students and staff navigate conflicting expectations between institutional policy and everyday practice, using translanguaging and informal adaptations to cope with assessment, pedagogy, and legitimacy in environments that remain structurally unequal despite claims of partnership (Canagarajah, 2013; McKinley *et al.*, 2021; Mansfield & Gimenez, 2024). Understanding joint-venture campuses as TCUs therefore helps explain why they frequently feel neither fully international nor fully local, and why tensions around language, authority, and academic legitimacy persist despite official claims of partnership. As Day and Zhang (2025) note, TCUs are hybrid educational communities. So, they are places where multiple languages, histories, cultures, and pedagogies coexist. As such, it is difficult to suggest they are simply outcomes of neutral mergers of East and West. These campuses, we contend, operate instead, per TCU conceptualisation discussed in Day & Zhang's (2025) work, as sociologically 'dynamic fields' where different forms of 'capital', 'habitus' and 'symbolic power', ideas forged by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1991), take shape that diverge from parents' visions for partnership. These campuses are constantly negotiated and, frequently, contested, creating a unique sense of cultural practice, in particular around language and pedagogy, which are the core themes of this article (Bourdieu, 1991).

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) ideas of 'relational sociology', then, this article argues that TCUs are shaped by the dominance of Western cultural capital. Notably, this is embodied in English-language curricula, Eurocentric standards, and Anglophone academic communication implemented in partnership campuses. To explore the impact of this, we consider the Sino-British partnership within this article. Here, Eastern cultural capital, such as Mandarin fluency, local networks, and political legitimacy, remains undervalued, in the view of TNE expansion globally; there is, then, the sense of international universities expanding, but in relation to the West taking focality in such partnerships. This imbalance generates what Bourdieu (1991) described as 'symbolic violence', understood here as the subtle imposition of dominant norms, which is replicated by those with the power to accrue 'capital', thereby marginalising knowledge pedagogies, creating conditions of symbolic language (Battiste, 2011).

Students and faculty from privileged, internationally mobile backgrounds are advantaged because these campuses embed Western expectations of English-Medium Instruction (EMI), quality assurance, and parental control over degree validation. Over time, these practices consolidate an institutional 'habitus', which describes a sociological ecosystem that defines what counts as competence, professionalism, practice and success, to borrow from Bourdieu (1991). Consequently, local students, or staff, who lack strong language skills, social status, or the opportunity to negotiate what happens in their own learning cultures are more likely to experience exclusion. Put another way, they must defer to formal policies on admission protocols, business agreements, or recruitment practices, which creates exclusion (Day, 2024a, 2024b). Navigating across two cultural, pedagogical and geographical ancestries can, therefore, become

a struggle of adaptation within asymmetrical structures that are far from 'joint' campuses. Rather, they are sites that can be seen to reproduce advantage for some, rather than foster equitable internationalisation, for all. Language and communication is core to this. What unfolds are everyday acts of resistance. Hence, this article offers a critical sociolinguistic analysis of TCUs, focusing on how Bourdieusian concepts of symbolic violence, resistance, and social reproduction illuminate inequities in TNE partnerships (Bourdieu, 1991).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

TCUs are complex assemblages of multiple educational systems, languages, and cultural norms, redefining one another in the moment (Day & Zhang, 2025). This challenges the notion of simple 'joint ventures' that describe a business partnership between two universities. TCUs form a new academic culture, blending Western and Eastern pedagogies, languages, and socialisation practices (Day & Zhang, 2025; Meyer, 2017). Taken this way, TCUs can be understood, then, as far from neutral, or joint, but as contested academic spaces shaped by societal multilingualism and power imbalances that influence academic practices, and outcomes (Liu *et al.*, 2024). Bourdieu's (1991) idea of 'contested fields' is found within the concept of TCUs put forward by Day & Zhang (2025). This sociological lens explains academic spaces as places where those with positional power compete. HE contested fields are not harmonious arenas of collaboration but dynamic spaces of struggle. At the core of this struggle is unequal access to capital, which includes digital capital, reflecting the growing impact of socio-technical practice (Bourdieu, 1984; Day, 2025). In TCUs, then, these struggles become visible in how languages, pedagogies, and standards are valued and policed, making them productive sites for examining how hierarchy is produced and normalised (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Within these fields, Bourdieu's (1991) idea of 'incumbents', which we can apply to describe TNE parent universities and their key stakeholders shaping partnerships, can be interpreted, using the different forms of capital described, as seeking to maintain the status quo. Put another way, they seek to preserve authority by controlling curricula, accreditation, and assessment, which underpins degree assurance. Likewise, 'insurgents', to use the same language of that sociological lens, can be mapped as referring to those locally situated students and staff who create the new partnership campus. These, for Bourdieu (1991), can be said to be the ones who then attempt to reshape institutional priorities and redistribute resources to reflect the realities they inhabit and, in doing so, create what we might interpret as TCUs. Competition, through the sociological model articulated by Bourdieu, defines each as seeking to forge position and operate strategies to maintain autonomy, while the field itself, so the university created by the partnership, is shaped by ongoing struggles by these agents for transformation, or preservation (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986, 1990). The field thus operates as a 'force field', to paraphrase Bourdieu (1984), of asymmetrical relationships. Within these, dominance, resistance, and inequality coexist. This helps explain why the notion of 'joint venture' may offer a sociolinguistic misrepresentation of how TCUs function in practice. Rather, they operate around how power is continually negotiated. However, this idea of 'jointness' beguiles a shortfall in our understanding, as well as a lack of recognition of the idea of a 'third culture' concept that traditionally has been used in research to describe Third Culture Kids (TCKs), which emerged in international schools. In short, TCK students develop hybrid identities through cultural transition in internationalised spaces, and tend to interpret this on the ground, in the spaces they integrate within (Meyer, 2017).

This manifests in different ways. For example, students facing censorship in China may, to engage with reading materials blacklisted, turn to digital piracy, engaging with online cybercrime subcultures to help gain access to texts needed to pass courses (Day, 2024b; 2024c). Hence, the work of Day & Zhang (2025) contends that TCUs emerge from the fusion of different countries' pedagogies, cultures, socio-technical operations and mediating actors, those with power and proximity to determine, or limit, equity. This means that there is very little partnership, rather heterogeneous cultural production by students and staff on the ground in joint ventures, whose interaction is a relational network, and this creates a situation that is anything joint (Day, 2025; Fenwick & Edwards, 2014). Rather, it is inherently third culture, drawing selectively on what works best for those at the centre of these new heterogeneous networks. For example, Western and Chinese educational systems, producing pedagogical and linguistic practices that reflect both collaboration and conflict (Mansfield & Gimenez, 2024).

Hence, using China as an exemplary setting, TCUs operate in the Sino-British 'hybrid fields' where English dominates as the language of academic prestige. In contrast, Mandarin retains political and social importance to students and local staff teaching in these new campuses created by international partnership. These partnerships are operating on the ground, in their home countries. Hence, students and staff navigate this duality through translanguaging, blending languages to negotiate meaning, assert agency, or resist marginalisation (Mansfield & Gimenez, 2024). Societal multilingualism, we contend, in TCUs becomes a contested resource that mirrors wider hierarchies. Linguistic gatekeeping, such as English proficiency tests, for example, can be said to disadvantage students from under-resourced backgrounds (Liu *et al.*, 2024). Yet, as English is less emphasised in some Chinese public-school pathways, hybrid language practices become essential for academic participation in TCUs and because of this it creates the situation where degrees studied at such universities are determined by those who have the greatest resource, rather than ability (Mansfield & Gimenez, 2024).

TCUs thus embody Bhabha's (1994) concept of 'cultural hybridity'. This suggests adaptation coexists with mimicry, suggested to be enacting subtle forms of resistance (Liu *et al.*, 2024). Yet, such practices rarely disrupt the underlying dominance of English as the marker of academically interpreted 'quality' that also underpins the assurance of degrees issued by another country, but studied within China (Reilly *et al.*, 2024). Symbolic violence can, then, be said to persist through English language dominance and Western standards, which naturalise the superiority of globalised universities, marginalising

alternative epistemologies and reinforcing stratification (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Mansfield & Gimenez, 2024). This sustains monolingual ideologies within institutions that present themselves as 'global' partnerships. Nonetheless, students, and staff, can engage in micro-resistances, such as translanguaging, curriculum localisation, and strategic recontextualisation of knowledge. It also, arguably, may serve to legitimise local perspectives and challenge imported norms (Liu *et al.*, 2024).

More substantive change, effective integration of different pedagogies and practices, as well as expansion of TNE across geographical borders, therefore, requires flexible language policies that validate translanguaging as a legitimate academic practice and quality frameworks that can accommodate hybrid pedagogies, rather than treating them as deviations that invalidate learning equivalence, a key aspect of quality assurance underpinning the award of degrees in TNE partnerships (Reilly *et al.*, 2024). Recent scholarship on transnational and joint-venture universities reinforces this call for more adaptive language and quality assurance frameworks by highlighting persistent misalignments between institutional policy and pedagogical practice (Cui & Gardiner, 2024). Studies of Sino-foreign cooperative universities, alongside rapid expansion into other TNE contexts by Western universities, show that English-medium instruction is frequently governed by monolingual, deficit-oriented policies. These are shown, in research, to fail to reflect the multilingual realities of classrooms, where translanguaging is routinely employed by both students and staff as a pragmatic and pedagogically productive resource (McKinley *et al.*, 2021; Liao, Zhang, & May, 2025).

This policy-practice gap creates tensions for quality assurance, potentially creates favourable conditions for the delivery of foreign degrees, and reflects blurred pedagogies and multilingual assessment practices are often rendered invisible or framed as risks to academic standards rather than as legitimate forms of knowledge-making (Harper & Sun, 2022). Comparative and 'glocal' analyses further demonstrate that rigid equivalence models imported from sending institutions struggle to accommodate locally situated teaching practices, exacerbating staff uncertainty and constraining curricular innovation in joint-venture settings (Ma *et al.*, 2020). Emerging work on translanguaging in assessment and EMI contexts argues that quality frameworks premised on linguistic purity undermine equity and learning validity, and instead calls for reconceptualising standards in ways that recognise multilingual repertoires as integral to academic competence rather than deviations from it (Liao & May, 2025). Collectively, this body of research underscores the need for TNE quality assurance regimes to move beyond compliance-driven notions of equivalence and towards more context-sensitive, linguistically inclusive models capable of legitimising hybrid pedagogies within joint-venture universities.

3. METHODOLOGY

This article is explicitly framed as a conceptual research paper. Therefore, its purpose is not to produce empirical generalisations, but to develop theory through critical analysis and synthesis to examine how language, power, and emerging technologies intersect within transnational joint-venture universities (Jackson & Mazzei, 2022). Consistent with postmodern and critical traditions, knowledge is understood in the paper as situated (Koro-Ljungberg *et al.* 2018). This means we view it as partial, and power-laden. Hence, conceptual insights are valued for their analytical usefulness rather than claims to data generalisability, objectivity or cumulative truth (Foucault, 1980; Lyotard, 1984). From this standpoint, universities in this article are treated as conceptualised through their emergence as historically contingent institutions embedded within global relations of power rather than as neutral transmitters of knowledge operating through technical or business partnerships (Biesta, 2010). Transnational campuses are thus understood, and indeed seen by Day & Zhang (2025), as forged through practices and struggles among those who inhabit them, with institutional norms continuously produced, negotiated, and contested (Marginson, 2016). With this in mind, to strengthen methodological transparency and analytical coherence, the conceptual analysis proceeds through four interrelated stages, which together provide a clear and systematic roadmap for theory development.

3.1. Identification of core phenomena

The first stage involves developing a conceptual narrative that builds on the literature review, which shapes the identification of core phenomena relevant to the study's conceptual focus. The analysis centres on challenging transnational joint-venture universities as partnerships, instead proposing Third Culture Universities (TCUs), which enables a narrative reflection and conceptualisation whereby the language hierarchies that shape teaching, assessment, and quality assurance practices within these institutions create new forms of cultural practice. This, then, is different to partnership, and this conceptual analysis seeks to understand that further. Within the conceptualisation, then, language policy and instruction modality are treated not merely as pedagogical arrangements, but as structuring mechanisms through which legitimacy, academic value, and learning equivalence are defined and regulated. In line with critical sociolinguistic perspectives, these hierarchies are approached as socially produced and historically situated, rather than as neutral or technical responses to internationalisation (Canagarajah, 2013; García & Wei, 2014). This framing, as described in the literature review above, enables the analysis to foreground tensions between policy ideals and everyday academic practices within transnational education settings.

3.2. Selection and critical interrogation of key theoretical frameworks

The second stage of the methodology approached to conceptualise this phenomenon entails the selection and critique of key theoretical frameworks capable of illuminating understanding about TCUs. The analysis that follows, then, draws primarily on Bourdieusian sociology to conceptualise universities as social fields structured by unequal distributions of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1990). Within this framework, language is treated and understood by the authors as a form of symbolic capital whose value is contingent on the institutional contexts in which it circulates (Bourdieu, 1991). This Bourdieusian lens is discussed, and developed to form a

critical sociolinguistic scholarship. Conceptual scholarship enables us to foreground the role of discourse, ideology, and power in shaping language norms and institutional hierarchies (Heller, 2010; Canagarajah, 2013). These theories are, then, mobilised reflexively rather than prescriptively, allowing their explanatory limits to be interrogated in relation to contemporary transnational higher education.

3.3. Theoretical integration and conceptual extension

The third stage of the methodological approach undertaken involves theoretical integration and extension. While Bourdieusian and sociolinguistic frameworks provide powerful tools for analysing linguistic stratification, they do not fully account for the growing role of digital infrastructures and AI-mediated practices in shaping academic life. To address this limitation, the analysis introduces the concept of socio-technical capital. Building on critical work on digital governance in education, socio-technical capital is used to conceptualise how authority, legitimacy, and expertise are increasingly mediated through algorithmic systems, which include AI-assisted writing, AI technologies and platform-mediated academic practices that change the nature of learning scholarship and teaching activity (Selwyn, 2019; Williamson *et al.*, 2020). This extension, as discussed, reshapes the nature of culture within campuses, hence framing these ideas together enables a more comprehensive account of how language, technology, and quality assurance intersect within contemporary TCUs.

3.4. Generation of conceptual models: The paradox loop

The final stage of the conceptual analysis involves the generation of an integrative conceptual model, referred to in this paper as the 'paradox loop.' This model synthesises insights from the preceding stages to illustrate the recursive dynamics through which language hierarchies, quality assurance frameworks, and AI-mediated practices simultaneously stabilise and destabilise institutional authority within transnational universities. In doing so, new cultural practices, rather than partnerships, unfold. The paradox loop, then, is an effort to show learning equivalence, maintained through rigid language and assessment regimes, often intensify inequality, while hybrid pedagogies and translanguaging practices, suited to a TCU model, emerge as pragmatic responses that are nonetheless rendered institutionally risky or illegible. In this sense, the model functions as a heuristic device rather than a predictive one, offering a structured way of theorising complexity and contradiction in transnational education systems of thought.

3.5. Analytic logic and reflexive positioning

Across all stages, the analysis follows an iterative and abductive logic, moving between theoretical constructs and documented patterns in transnational education research (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Discursive practices are treated not as reflections of underlying structures, within the methodology of this paper, but as productive of academic realities themselves, shaping what becomes intelligible, governable, and auditable within institutional settings (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018; Williamson & Piattoeva, 2019). Finally, the analysis embraces sociological and linguistic interdisciplinarity as a source of methodological robustness, and through author sensemaking. This reflexive positioning is treated not as bias to be eliminated, but as an analytical resource that strengthens conceptual sense-making (Biesta, 2010; Day & Skulsuthavong, 2022).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In making sense of the way partnership unfolds within TNE, it is important to recognise that partnership campuses, so TCUs, operate foremost at the intersection of Western and Eastern education systems. When considered, then, through Bourdieu's (1986) lens, this means they are far from neutral spaces of equal partnership.

4.1. Bourdieu's framework and sociolinguistic power in TCUs

Bourdieu's (1990) theory of practice, for example, centres on the interplay of 'capital', 'habitus', and 'symbolic violence', which together clarify how power circulates in academic fields. Capital, as a conceptual idea proposed by Bourdieu (1986) extends beyond economic resources; rather, capital as a sociological concept, as well as lens, can also include cultural, social, symbolic, and technical assets that individuals or organisations mobilise to create advantage, which shapes agency and power within institutional structures (Bourdieu, 1986).

Applied to TCUs, then, we can see various forms of Bourdieu's (1991) capital that are manifested, and contested, by those working, leading, and learning within them. For example, cultural capital could be argued to include education, language proficiency, and familiarity with Western academic conventions. Social capital, meanwhile, could refer to networks that facilitate access to resources and opportunities. Symbolic capital, likewise, might include prestige and recognition that confer legitimacy and authority. Technical capital, in contrast, encompasses competence. However, this could be widened to describe socio-technical capital, to suggest the intersection of where social ability collides with technical skill, for example being able to utilise AI tools for transcription, translation, and learning support. The interaction of these forms of capital shapes the wider 'habitus', the sense of ecosystem and structure whereby durable dispositions are formed that guide how individuals act and interpret legitimacy on campus. Habitus thus clarifies why Western expectations feel 'natural' to some participants but foreign to others, resulting in uneven belonging within TCUs.

4.2. Power, capital, and inequality in Third Culture Universities (TCUs)

For Bourdieu (1986, 1990), two cultures are unlikely to coexist on equal terms. This suggests, then, very little is joint in TNE 'joint ventures' since capital is acquired through localised socialisation and experience, which evolves and unfolds on the ground and within the new campus partnership. The resulting habitus shapes how people act and interpret their social environment, often unconsciously reproducing existing social structures, especially when institutional routines are misrecognised as neutral meritocracy (Bourdieu, 1991). In TCUs, EMI and Western-validated curricula impose the linguistic and epistemic norms of parent universities, producing what

Bourdieu (1986, 1990) described as 'symbolic violence', whereby the invisible reproduction of inequality, through practices appearing legitimate, can become felt by both staff and students. For example, through Bourdieu's (1991) capital lens, degree-awarding authority remains largely Western, compelling those locally situated to internalise external standards (McKinley *et al.*, 2021). Competence thus becomes equated with imitation of dominant forms of English language writing, Western critical reasoning, and social presentation, legitimising asymmetry between local and global students within the same campus, or even those with IELTS training and language competency. However, this is framed as degree 'global quality assurance', and not a form of intellectual repression of the local context. Such processes, as a result, embed hierarchy into the institutional habitus and perpetuate Western dominance under the rhetoric of equal partnership. Symbolic violence, therefore, functions not through coercion but through consent, as actors misrecognise institutional inequality as professional excellence (Waters & Day, 2022).

Within TCUs, cultural capital is primarily embodied in linguistic competence and familiarity with Western academic norms and practices (Liu *et al.*, 2024). Those educated locally may hold rich contextual knowledge but lack recognised linguistic repertoires. When language fluency is treated as talent rather than an inherited advantage, inequality is reframed as an individual shortcoming (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Consequently, those possessing valued capital progress more easily, while others internalise deficit identities, reinforcing symbolic violence under the discourse of meritocracy. Within the classroom, mastery of Western argumentation or citation norms both enables advancement and sustains domination. The privileging of English, as a form of cultural capital, in TCUs can also be suggested to marginalise Mandarin speakers, and indeed other local and regional languages, because the partnerships of TNE are inherently situated in leadership originating in the West (Liu *et al.*, 2024).

4.3. Language, habitus, and symbolic violence

This division reproduces potentially both colonial mindsets and linguistic hierarchy in which English is treated as the primary resource for academic legitimacy, while other linguistic repertoires are subordinated (Canagarajah, 2013). In Chinese contexts, Guanxi, which describes a practice of forging personal ties and reciprocal obligations, functions as a social capital, remaining influential in academic and administrative life, thereby structuring who can participate fully in decision-making and receive institutional recognition (Zhang, 2025). Fluency in Mandarin and being of Chinese cultural background can, therefore, function as social capital that partially counterbalances English dominance (Webb *et al.*, 2017). However, this can redistribute advantage unevenly, empowering some locally situated actors while marginalising those who are more international and less able to access Guanxi networks. TCUs thus sustain layered hierarchies in which Western epistemic authority and Chinese socio-political power coexist but rarely align equally in the same 'field' to borrow from Bourdieu (1991).

Within this layered field, students and staff must shift their habitus to manage the intersecting forms of capital required by EMI academic demands, while engaging Mandarin-based socio-political networks. Those able to mobilise both cultural and social capital are better positioned, while others may be marginalised or compelled to conform to whichever form of capital dominates in each context. This is what makes the 'third culture' emerge in practice, as success depends on converting multiple capitals across shifting rules of recognition. Such dynamics help explain challenges reported in Sino-British collaborations, including contested language practices, favouritism, and exclusion of both Western and Eastern groups (Marginson, 2014). Habitus is central here because actors carry dispositions shaped by prior Western or Chinese educational socialisation into TCUs, and these dispositions shape expectations and strategies for participation (Bourdieu, 1990). Over time, everyday negotiation becomes embedded as institutional practice, contributing to the evolution of TCUs beyond the organisational rhetoric of 'joint ventures' (Xu *et al.*, 2021).

4.4. English, Mandarin, and social hierarchies

Within TCUs, contrasting pedagogical traditions frequently generate tension. Students socialised in Confucian-heritage systems may prioritise memorisation, respect for authority, and deference to teachers, whereas Western pedagogy emphasises critical inquiry, debate, and individual expression, where students are positioned as partners in the learning process (Mansfield & Gimenez, 2024). These tensions are manifested in different ways as some participants internalise dominant Western habitus to meet assessment and evaluation expectations, while others attempt to reconcile conflicting demands by blending familiar and imported practices (Liu *et al.*, 2024; Marginson, 2014). Subsequently, these adaptations produce hybrid academic identities, y*et al*so reveal the limits of agency found within such TCU campuses. Put another way, because English-language curricula and Western quality assurance standards remain the primary measures of legitimacy, whether in the classroom, in assessments, or even in the languages and queries emergent around teaching, what is supposed to be a hybrid joint space, venture and society, is in fact a series of local practices tolerated only to the extent that they do not disrupt EMI norms (Reilly *et al.*, 2024). The reproduction of inequality, therefore, continues through the use of language in and around teaching, as those whose habitus already aligns with dominant standards convert their advantage more easily than those who must adapt under constraint in increasingly globalised settings that may be deeply unfamiliar, but necessary to embrace in order to succeed in study of internationally awarded degrees (Canagarajah, 2013; Zhao, 2020).

4.5. Pedagogy, identity, and resistance

The rhetoric of 'internationalisation' often conceals global hierarchy, positioning Western epistemology and publishing norms as universal measures of scholarly legitimacy (Marginson, 2014). However, students joining an internationalised university in China may view this differently, setting aside the fact that there are numerous successful academic institutions located outside the Western domain. Again, this reflects that symbolic violence, the authors contend. This is because it extends beyond

language to encompass epistemological dominance, thereby positioning Western knowledge production as universal and local epistemologies as derivative of it, so allowed to exist around the core practice of degree delivery within TNE ventures that, as we contend in this article, are anything but joint.

Rather, symbolic violence is neither static nor uncontested, but integrated into an emergent and contested TCU 'space' where new practices are operated to find ways to engage, avoid or align with the values of a TNE parent university that shapes the campus learning culture and assures the degrees within them (Bourdieu, 1990). TCUs also become arenas of negotiation where local actors deploy translanguaging, bilingual teaching, and curriculum localisation to challenge imposed standards and validate local knowledge (Mansfield & Gimenez, 2024). These acts rarely overturn structural dominance but can revalue multilingual competence as an academic asset and slightly reconfigure what counts as legitimate participation. Over time, such practices may contribute to the transformation of a 'third culture' habitus that is more responsive to multilingual and multicultural realities. The next section extends this analysis by examining how AI operates as socio-technical capital that can both disrupt and entrench these hierarchies.

4.6. AI and socio-technical power in TCUs

The rapid integration of AI tools, particularly for translation and communication, has the potential to reshape power relations within TCUs, because it allows much greater scope to integrate languages and deploy them concurrently within a campus. Equally, AI capacity, skill and ability, functions as an emergent form of technical capital, with digital literacy and fluency often more evenly distributed among students than advanced English proficiency (Selwyn, 2019). This means that universities may be able to build AI development and support into their habitus, practices and classrooms to create more equality, celebrate difference and empower language use. Such an idea is particularly significant in TCUs, as linguistic hierarchies often marginalise those lacking strong English proficiency, while students and staff must negotiate hybrid academic identities. AI can, therefore, we contend operate as a pragmatic support for navigating EMI environments, reducing exclusion that might otherwise be reproduced through language. Meanwhile, AI should be read as part of broader socio-technical fields, where human agency and technological mediation jointly redistribute influence, rather than as a neutral tool that simply 'helps' learning. Bourdieu's (1990) original framework did not account for technical capital in the sense of 'digital capital' or even 'AI capital' focusing instead on economic, cultural, social, and symbolic forms (Bourdieu, 1986; Low *et al.*, 2022).

4.7. AI, language, and access in TCUs

Figure 1, found below, extends this framework by visualising how what we might more appropriately summarise as 'socio-technical' capital to encompass all such digital tools and technologies, can expand participation in learning across TCUs, and better situate knowledge through language augmentation and translation. Likewise, it reflects on how symbolic violence may be most acute for already disadvantaged groups when they lack this socio-technical capital. Hence, narrowing the space in which they can accumulate and convert capital. The diagram shows a hierarchical socio-technical system where agents are positioned according to power, capital, and influence, which brings together the different ideas discussed in the previous sections of this article. At the top, dominant agents possess high socio-technical capital and habitus (e.g., language, credentials, digital skills), enabling them to shape norms and practices in ways that define and shape the campus culture taking shape within TCUs; not joint, but emergent in new forms of culture and practice that may not reflect either 'parent' university forming the partnerships discussed. At the base, marginalised agents experience symbolic violence, as limited capital and influence constrain their participation and recognition. Navigating agents sit in between, using tools like technology or AI to cope with or partially overcome structural disadvantages without fully dismantling the hierarchy.

In TNE contexts, socio-technical capital encompasses the skills necessary to utilise digital technologies to access, produce, and legitimise knowledge (Selwyn, 2022). In TCUs, AI-powered translation tools can reduce reliance on English proficiency as the traditional gatekeeping mechanism, partly challenging linguistic barriers tied to Eurocentric academic conventions (Reilly *et al.*, 2024). When used responsibly, AI can democratise learning by offering real-time translation, writing assistance, and language scaffolding, thereby empowering broader engagement with curricula and assessments. In TCUs, translation tools, such as Baidu Translate, Google Translate, and DeepL, are increasingly enabling students to comprehend and produce academic content across languages, including the recording and translation of English lectures (Karjo & Chandra, 2025). Rather than removing hierarchy, these affordances reduce its immediate effects by widening access to instruction, vocabulary, and institutional communication; so, AI tools can widen participation, create equity, and likewise reshape how language is mediated in and across TCUs, where students who may not speak English well, can use a tool within teaching, assessment and even written work to help them better express themselves. As a result, conventional gatekeeping measures may be partially reconfigured, particularly for students who cannot afford extensive preparation for high-stakes language testing, or simply never learnt English well to begin with (Liu *et al.*, 2024).

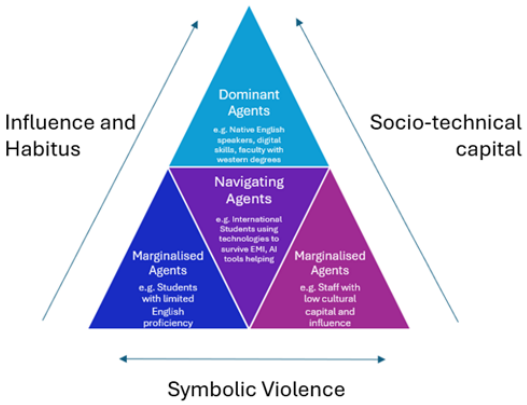

Figure 1. Model of 'Hidden Hierarchies' and Socio-technical Fields in Third Culture Universities (TCUs)

4.8. AI as support for learning and communication

AI-mediated translation can supplement EMI shortfalls and disrupt the symbolic dominance of English by enabling students to engage with Anglophone curricula without native-level proficiency. Students may draft in Mandarin, translate their work into English, and refine it with AI writing support, preserving ideas and perspectives while meeting institutional requirements and reworking, but not eliminating, the symbolic violence embedded in Eurocentric curricular norms (Fernando & Li, 2025). This practice exemplifies digital translanguaging, the fluid combination of linguistic and technological resources to assert multilingual identity and resist monolingual norms (García & Wei, 2014). Yet, this resistance is ambivalent, from the perspective of Bourdieu; AI may widen access while reaffirming English as the ultimate marker of legitimacy, because many tools still operate foremost with English at the front of the language preference. Thereby, AI success within translated conformity emerges through dominant standards and again satisfies the criteria of degree awarding (Liu *et al.*, 2024; Reilly *et al.*, 2024). Hence, we might instead suggest that AI mitigates symbolic violence while simultaneously reproducing it, opening routes into dominant norms without dismantling the hierarchy that makes those norms decisive. This tension can be amplified when AI is used not only to translate meaning, but to reproduce the rhetorical and stylistic conventions through which 'good' academic work is recognised (Abrahamson, 2025).

Beyond translation, AI writing tools such as Grammarly, QuillBot, and ChatGPT support students in meeting Western academic conventions. For example, they are well known at being particularly effective in argumentation, coherence, and tone. This is particularly salient in TCUs, where staff may not be trained in Western educational systems, resulting in confusion for students navigating between Confucian heritage and Western expectations (Mansfield & Gimenez, 2024). AI tools can assist with grammar, structure, and rhetorical framing, for example. This enables students to produce work that aligns with institutional standards without requiring full assimilation into Anglophone academic habitus. Consequently, this helps empower some sense of preservation of both their language and cultural norms within what, as a result, is a Third Culture Space (Zawacki-Richter *et al.*, 2019). AI usage, therefore, represents a strategic form of habitus adaptation, in which students develop technical capital to participate in global HE fields while attempting to maintain local perspectives and linguistic repertoires (Attewell, 2025). However, the same support can shift learning toward performative compliance if 'success' depends on reproducing Western linguistic and rhetorical styles through AI-mediated editing. In this sense, the boundary between empowerment and dependency becomes blurred. This suggests a need to view AI not as neutral assistance but as a technology that carries implicit pedagogical and epistemic assumptions (Selwyn, 2022).

AI can help, then, students meet standards, but it can also stabilise those standards by making adaptation easier than contestation to shifts to dominate both language and culture, by TNE universities shaping these partnerships. Over time, this can 'gamify' creating new forms of study; therefore, shifting effort toward running campuses around meeting degree requirements, rather than deepening intercultural exchange and conceptual understanding, because AI becomes an enabling crutch that helps both universities, and students (Naz, 2025). This could unfold in a place determined by a partnership that creates such universities, for neoliberal motivations driving the degrees they award, rather than any real sense of value cohesion in shared cultural space, third culture or otherwise (Low *et al.*, 2020; Zawacki-Richter *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, AI can reproduce algorithmic bias and linguistic hierarchy; translation systems often prioritise standard Mandarin over regional dialects or minority languages, while English remains the lingua franca of many digital platforms (Karjo & Chandra, 2025).

4.9. AI, standards, and academic practice

Universities are increasingly using AI for plagiarism detection and enforcement of academic integrity, reflecting concerns about rigour and legitimacy (Fernando & Li, 2025). Institutions also face questions of critical thinking, authorship, and epistemic authority as reliance on AI-generated content grows (Williamson & Piattoeva, 2019). Indeed, we need to rethink how students use AI to navigate these spaces, rather than automatically signalling misconduct (Selwyn, 2022). This requires us to design our TNE partnerships around equitable access to digital tools, situating critical digital literacy, and transparent ethical guidelines, into how we build student experience, which distinguishes assistance from substitution, through staff development, clear assessment design, and accessible resources for under-resourced students (García & Wei, 2014). These institutional conditions shape whether AI becomes a compensatory resource for the marginalised or an amplifier of existing advantage through unequal access and proficiency. Widespread AI adoption in TCUs produces what this study terms the 'AI Language-Capital Paradox': where, through the conceptual discussion undertaken in this paper, a rationale has positioned that students employ AI to succeed in EMI environments, but this same overreliance may ultimately deepen their structural dependence on English and Western norms. Hence, for students experiencing linguistic constraints, in partnerships forged within TNE, AI provides short-term support and even be rapidly adopted within TCUs, but this may undermine sustained language development, and celebration of culture, which is often a key aim of forging such partnerships, and of students studying in EMI settings in their home countries to begin with. Meanwhile, students already proficient in English, who are digitally confident, may leverage AI to amplify their advantage. For example, using tools to add extra help to their coursework, which they can do more easily, because many AI tools are English in format, and hence their use further widens the sociolinguistic gaps felt within TNE spaces between those who have language and technical capital. These practices risk extending existing stratification rather than reducing it (Reilly *et al.*, 2024).

4.10. Inequality, dependence, and the AI paradox in transnational education

As such, the result is a self-reinforcing loop. Such a loop can be conceptually aligned with Bourdieu's social reproduction

theory, where apparently meritocratic systems preserve privilege through unequal access to capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In the scenario described in this paper, such a situation occurs when students or staff face power imbalances, notably linguistic and/or socioeconomic disadvantages, that they cannot solve without technological mediation, such as AI. To unfold this idea further, this paradox operates through institutional expectations. TCUs often presume EMI and language skill, alongside competence, upon entry; however, when non-native students' language skills fail to meet the required levels, they may become increasingly dependent on AI for translation, drafting, and revision, as well as to support their applications. This can limit opportunities to build long-term linguistic and cultural capital in their own languages, even as it increases digital competence, thereby building socio-technical capital, in TCU spaces.

Thus, the 'equitable support' that enables immediate participation also perpetuates self-reinforcing inequality. Over time, students who most need to strengthen English proficiency may become caught in a cycle that reinforces their vulnerability and marginalisation, as using AI mitigates the digital divide in the short term, but can paradoxically deepen existing hierarchies. Figure 2 visualises this paradox as a loop in which AI both enables participation and stabilises the conditions that make AI dependence necessary. This paradox illustrates how new forms of technical capital, rather than dissolving hierarchy, extend Bourdieu's social reproduction into the digital realm. Figure 2 suggests the conceptual idea rooted in the discussion above, which proposes that existing power imbalances shape how AI tools are used, which in turn affects the quality of EMI practice within TNE partnership campuses. The crossed links indicate that AI can either disrupt or reinforce these imbalances, leading to enhanced or reduced EMI outcomes depending on context and access.

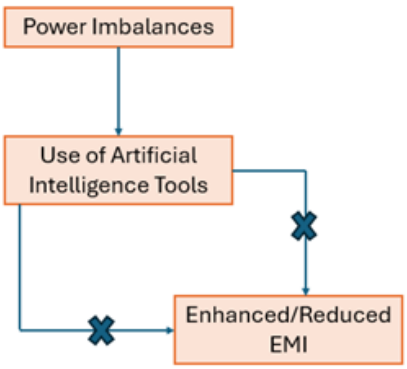

Figure 2. Model of the AI Language-Capital Paradox Loop

5. CONCLUSION

Through a Bourdieusian lens, this article demonstrates how language, power, and technology intersect to shape educational outcomes and social reproduction in TCUs. Language remains a central form of cultural capital, as English proficiency and familiarity with Western academic norms are often privileged, enabling students and staff from affluent backgrounds to succeed more easily while marginalising others (Bourdieu, 1973; 1986; Richardson, 1986; Reay *et al.*, 2005; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Webb *et al.*, 2017). Put another way, students and staff negotiate what counts as legitimate language, competence, and academic identity, and how much capital they have determines practices within campuses as much as TNE university parent oversight. AI introduces a new layer of technical, more precisely, socio-technical capital, that both challenges and reinforces existing sociolinguistic inequalities. While AI translation and writing tools can democratise participation by supporting multilingual engagement, they also privilege those already proficient in English and digitally literate, creating paradoxes for those who rely on tools to participate while trying to develop language competence (Abrahamson, 2025; Davies *et al.*, 2021).

Moreover, unequal access to advanced systems and subscription-based platforms mirrors traditional educational disparities. This produces an extension to the sense of digital divide in university campuses across TNE, which reflects earlier hierarchies of linguistic privilege (Attewell, 2025; Naz, 2025). Such power dynamics demonstrate that technology alone cannot address inequity without institutional policies that ensure equitable access. These need to be built around student-focused ethical frameworks, and transparent guidance about legitimate AI usage, whereby we move away from a prohibitive mindset and embed the use of AI into our language, modes of teaching, assessment and marking.

The limitations of the article are clear. It is entirely conceptual, relies on sensemaking and operates through a sociolinguistic interpretation of a complex, emergent area of interest, namely partnership in TNE. Through this, the article has, despite lacking generalised scope for future development, and likewise itself being a tool of the same language dominance it critiques, argued that Transnational Education partnerships, conceptualised originally and extended here as Third Culture Universities (TCUs), are not neutral or genuinely joint ventures in any real sense of the term. Rather, they are hybrid sociolinguistic fields structured by unequal distributions of linguistic, cultural, and socio-technical capital. Drawing on Bourdieusian sociology and critical sociolinguistics, then, the analysis has shown how English-medium instruction, Western academic norms, and degree-awarding authority operate as forms of symbolic violence, which operate from the sociological lenses described and exemplified. The key point, then, of the arguments made by the authors within their analysis is that these systems and concepts applied in TNE inherently naturalise hierarchy while remaining largely invisible within narratives of internationalisation, in particular within research on Chinese joint-ventures, hence hidden but still impactful daily to the lives of staff and students within these ventures (Zhou *et al.*, 2021).

At the same time, the paper has demonstrated that the growing use of AI introduces an emergent form of socio-technical capital that offers extension to traditional sociolinguistic areas of application when capital is being discussed. This can both mitigate and reproduce inequality, the authors have suggested, thereby enabling participation in English-dominant environments, such as TNE campuses established globally, while reinforcing the very standards that

marginalise local languages and epistemologies to begin with. Hence, by theorising this tension as an AI language-capital paradox, the article contributes a conceptual rationale for better understanding how power, language, and technology intersect in contemporary TNE contexts. It argues that meaningful internationalisation requires not technical solutions alone, but reflexive institutional change that recognises multilingualism, hybrid pedagogies, and unequal access to capital as central rather than peripheral concerns. These thinking points are, then, useful for understanding the interactions taking place, and perhaps even emergent space, within and between universities that are not joint partners, but facilitators of new forms of language, interaction and practice. This rationale is consolidated into Table 1, discussed below, which captures the different dimensions described in our conceptual analysis, applies them to the framework of Third Culture Universities and maps the subsequent impact on power and inequality for both staff and students:

Table 1. The AI language-capital paradox loop in third culture universities

Dimension	Description in TCUs and TNE	Effect on Power and Inequality in TNE HEIs
Structural linguistic hierarchy	English-medium instruction and Western academic norms operate as default markers of quality and legitimacy in TNE partnerships within modern neoliberal growth of HE.	This then privileges those with inherited English and cultural capital; it, in turn, marginalises local linguistic repertoires and epistemologies, simplifying culture to something easily 'partnered' not evolving.
Symbolic violence	Dominant language and assessment standards of Western universities are misrecognised as neutral or meritocratic rather than historically situated, creating conditioning.	This ensures power becomes imbalanced because inequality is naturalised and internalised by students and staff as individual deficit rather than structural constraint, and suggests that success requires fluency in symbolic violence to make progress.
Need for AI mediation	Linguistic and academic demands of TNE expansion and study exceed the resources of many participants, both staff and student, creating reliance on AI for translation, drafting, and communication.	Participation and use of AI tools becomes contingent on access to socio-technical capital rather than pedagogical equity. Those with less capital and resource are unable to use AI tools effectively to bridge gaps and narrow divides.
AI as socio-technical capital	AI tools function as convertible resources that support compliance with English-dominant academic norms within expanding HE contexts.	The impact is that AI empowers short-term access while reinforcing English as the ultimate gatekeeping mechanism, because it is the commonplace language of engagement.
Habitus adaptation	Students and staff strategically adapt practices using AI rather than challenging institutional standards.	Contestation is displaced by adaptation, limiting structural transformation. Through this, AI becomes a mediator of survival, not success.
Paradox loop	AI mitigates exclusion while stabilising the norms that produce exclusion.	The impact on inequality is reduced at the level of access but reproduced at the level of structure. Hence, AI tools are not just to be prohibited, but seen as a feature of culture.
Outcome for TCUs	Emergence of a 'third culture' shaped by negotiation, dependence, and selective resistance.	TCUs widen participation without fully realising equitable internationalisation because they are not understood as dynamic, contingent and heterogeneous networks taking shape in the moment and between the campus spaces, learning modalities and practices.

Consequently, drawing together the ideas of Table 1, in the first instance and beyond its theoretical synthesis, this article advances the concept of Third Culture Universities (TCUs) as a necessary reframing of how transnational partnerships are understood and evaluated. By moving beyond the language of 'joint ventures', the TCU framework foregrounds the lived sociolinguistic realities of campuses shaped through unequal but interdependent forms of capital. This helps university leaders to consider policy and expansion approaches, and our reframing exposes how partnership is not simply organisational or contractual, but cultural, linguistic, and symbolic, unfolding through everyday academic practice rather than formal agreements alone. In doing so, the TCU concept offers a vocabulary for naming forms of hierarchy and negotiation that are otherwise obscured by celebratory narratives of internationalisation.

Second, this article further contributes by extending Bourdieusian theory into the socio-technical domain through its conceptualisation of AI as a form of capital that reshapes access, legitimacy, and participation within TCUs. By theorising the AI language-capital paradox, the analysis highlights how AI-mediated practices both mitigate and reproduce inequality, enabling students to navigate English-dominant academic environments while simultaneously reinforcing the standards that marginalise local linguistic and epistemic resources. This paradox underscores that AI should not be treated as a neutral

pedagogical enhancement, but as a structurally embedded force that interacts with existing hierarchies of language, class, and institutional authority.

Third, importantly, the analysis also recognises that TCUs are not solely sites of domination, but spaces in which agency, resistance, and hybrid practice are continually enacted. Through translanguaging, curriculum adaptation, and strategic engagement with institutional norms, students and staff actively negotiate the constraints imposed by English-medium instruction and Western quality frameworks. While such practices rarely dismantle structural inequality, they nonetheless contribute to the emergence of a third culture habitus that challenges monolithic models of academic legitimacy and reveals the contingent nature of power within transnational education settings.

Fourth, and from an institutional perspective, our conceptual rationale suggests that addressing inequality in TNE requires a shift away from compliance-driven models of equivalence towards more reflexive and context-sensitive frameworks. Language policies, assessment practices, and quality assurance regimes must move beyond monolingual assumptions and recognise multilingual repertoires and hybrid pedagogies as legitimate academic resources rather than deviations from standard practice. Without such structural change, technological interventions such as AI risk functioning as compensatory mechanisms that obscure, rather than resolve, deeper sociolinguistic inequalities embedded within transnational partnerships.

Central to this analysis and the outcome of recommendations is the paradox loop through which TCUs reproduce inequality while appearing to expand access. This loop operates when structural linguistic hierarchies, most notably the privileging of English and Western academic norms, create campus culture conditions that make AI-mediated support necessary for participation, particularly for students and staff positioned with limited linguistic or cultural capital. AI tools, this paper contends, then function as socio-technical capital that enables these actors to meet institutional expectations, but in doing so, stabilise the very standards that rendered such support necessary in the first place. As reliance on AI increases, opportunities to challenge or reconfigure dominant norms diminish, and adaptation becomes more viable than contestation. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle in which inequality is mitigated at the level of access, yet reproduced at the level of structure. This paradox loop captures how TCUs can simultaneously widen participation and deepen stratification, extending Bourdieu's logic of social reproduction into digitally mediated academic fields. In doing so, we shape a deeper and more cohesive approach to value within neoliberal partnerships that are sustainable (Zhang, 2025).

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Per CRediT: MJD was responsible for the majority contribution and leadership of all aspects of the research paper. TZ was responsible for contributing to the literature review, supporting data analysis and discussion. The authors declare no competing interests, and per COPE, identify that AI tools were used for copy-editing and language proofing purposes to enhance the readability of the thesis.

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