

Article

Faculty Perceptions of Power Distance, Value Cohesion, and Lived Experience in a Sino-British Joint Venture University

Tracy Zhang ^{1,2}  and Michael James Day ^{3,*}¹ School of Law and Social Justice, University of Liverpool, Liverpool L69 7ZX, UK² Academy of Future Education, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou 215123, China³ Institute for Lifecourse Development, University of Greenwich, London SE10 9LS, UK

* Correspondence: m.j.day@greenwich.ac.uk

Abstract

Transnational Education (TNE) at the university level is commonly evaluated through visible pedagogical and institutional mechanisms, including quality assurance, curriculum alignment, and degree legitimacy. Less attention has been given to the socio-cultural conditions through which faculty experience power in Joint Venture Universities (JVUs). This article examines power distance as a lived institutional practice at an anonymised Sino-British JVu in mainland China, drawing on 32 semi-structured faculty interviews, as part of a wider paired-site qualitative study. The interview schedule was informed by Geert Hofstede's Cultural Compass. Interviews were analysed inductively, with Hofstede used experimentally as a sensitising analytical framework rather than as a measure of national culture. This article presents findings on the power distance dimension and identifies four organisational themes—authority, hierarchy, inequality, and networks—which are presented as finding-led groupings rather than formal sub-dimensions of Hofstede's power distance. Faculty described and perceived power as an everyday professional experience shaped by control over teaching, regulation, and institutional direction; chains of command and indirect disagreement; inequalities in voice, promotion, favouritism, funding, language, and gender; and informal networks affecting access, visibility, and professional boundaries. These accounts indicate that power is produced through the intersection of Chinese regulatory conditions, institutional centralisation, professional status, and informal relational norms. The article argues that greater attention to these relations is essential for understanding faculty voice, autonomy, and value cohesion in Sino-British TNE partnerships, and thus offers leadership recommendations towards strengthening cross-cultural value cohesion.

Keywords: transnational higher education; Sino-British joint venture universities; power distance; faculty experiences; institutional hierarchy; China



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1. Introduction

Transnational Education (TNE) has become an established feature of contemporary Higher Education (HE). Within this landscape, Sino-British Joint Venture Universities (JVUs) occupy a distinctive position. They are established by two parent universities, one in the UK and one in China, which together form a private legal entity in mainland China to recruit an independent student body who can afford international-level fees and seek access to global HE markets (A. Chen, 2025). Such institutions are, therefore, neither simply offshore extensions of UK universities nor conventional Chinese universities with imported TNE

provision. They are campuses where multiple systems of authority, legitimacy, educational practice, power, and institutional expectations coexist. Presently, research on Sino-British JVUs is weighted toward policy compliance and direct pedagogical effects, such as quality assurance, whereas the indirect socio-cultural effects are under-researched (Mao, 2020; McBurnie & Ziguras, 2001; Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013; T. Zhang, 2025). This study, therefore, seeks to add original insight to change this and contends that faculty lived experience in JVUs is also shaped by indirect social, cultural, and relational dynamics that influence educational practice, career progression, and institutional trust.

To address this gap, then, this article innovatively re-adapts Hofstede's (2011) Cultural Compass, which has previously been used to classify participants or measure national cultural differences. This study used its six dimensions not as quantitative tools but as sensitising concepts and vocabulary within an interpretivist, inductive qualitative design (Bowen, 2006). This experimental process yielded findings aligned with the power distance dimension across faculty lived experience, exploring staff perceptions of the extent to which less powerful members in institutions expect and interpret distributions of power (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; Hofstede et al., 2010). Consequently, the article draws on 32 semi-structured interviews with faculty of varying levels at an anonymised Sino-British JVU in mainland China. By analysing these, the study seeks to answer:

- RQ1: How do faculty at a Sino-British JVU perceive, experience, and negotiate power distance in their professional lives?

This study uses one integrated sociological framework, while drawing flexibly on different theorists and theories with interdisciplinary openness. Within this framework, Hofstede's (2011) concept of power and power distance provides the initial sensitising vocabulary for analysing how faculty perceive unequal authority, deference, voice, access, and influence, rather than functioning as a national-cultural measurement or classification. This interpretivist research design provides the study's broader epistemological orientation, while the sociological thinking of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Michael Herzfeld is selectively drawn upon to elaborate on the empirical findings in the Discussion. Bourdieu (1986) helps interpret and frame the JVU as an institutional field structured by the distribution of capital, recognition, and professional status; Foucault (1980) explains how power is enacted through governance, institutional routines, and the structuring of possible action; and Herzfeld (2002) illuminates the relationship between official institutional narratives, informal practices, and culturally situated relational networks. These perspectives perform complementary rather than competing analytical roles. The integrated framework is therefore used flexibly across different perspectives without absolutism to encourage analytical reflection on diverse and changing faculty lived experiences.

In addressing RQ1 above, the article makes three contributions. First, it shifts attention from studying formal structures of TNE partnerships to how faculty perceive and negotiate institutional authority in a JVU. Second, it showcases the heuristic use of Hofstede's framework as an exploratory, experimental, case-specific toolkit. Third, it develops value cohesion as the negotiated capacity of a JVU to sustain a shared educational purpose, under the power-shaping practice, distance, and dynamics identified in faculty accounts. Value cohesion is introduced not as an additional coding framework or a separately coded empirical theme, but as the study's central integrative concept for explaining how the combined findings may strengthen or weaken shared educational purpose, professional legitimacy, relational trust, and institutional expectations.

2. Literature Review

The following review traces the institutional context of Sino-British JVUs before examining how socio-cultural effects have been conceptualised within this landscape.

Chinese–foreign cooperative HE in China principally includes independent joint universities, non-independent joint institutes within Chinese universities, and programme-level collaborations (Ke, 2024; Y. Li et al., 2023). This study focuses on a Sino-British JVU because UK degree-awarding and quality expectations operate alongside Chinese regulation and locally situated institutional practices, creating a distinctive context for examining faculty perceptions of power, professional judgement, and value cohesion.

2.1. Sino-British JVUs as Dual-Regulated Institutions

Sino-British JVUs represent a distinctive institutional form that combines Chinese institutional, legal, and regulatory conditions with UK curricula, degree-awarding arrangements, and internationalisation ambitions in a single entity. Thus, such institutions should not be understood as straightforward offshore UK campuses. In China, for example, JVUs are enabled through the Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools (CFCRS) policy, which encourages international collaboration while retaining national oversight of institutional activity (Han & Ye, 2017; Iftekhhar & Kayombo, 2016). Scholarship has emphasised the contribution of Sino-British partnerships to internationalisation, educational modernisation, research capacity, and the development of globally oriented degree pathways (Buck et al., 2010; Y. Li et al., 2023; Mok & Xu, 2008). Meanwhile, their viability is shaped by policy uncertainty, market saturation, regulatory change, and shifting geopolitical factors (Che, 2023; Healey, 2018; M. Heffernan & Pimpa, 2019). Consequently, the literature landscape on Sino-British JVUs and aligned TNE has concentrated on visible institutional mechanisms, such as governance and regulatory coordination, quality assurance, English-medium Instruction (EMI), and student outcomes, which help make UK TNE provision intelligible and credible across institutional and national settings (Han, 2023; T. Heffernan et al., 2018; Mok & Han, 2017; Wu et al., 2022).

Figure 1 visualises this literature landscape, showing a ‘cascade effect’ of an ‘assumption waterfall’ across three connected levels. However, it does not suggest that policies simply fail to cross borders, nor that quality assurance is inherently detached from educational practice. Rather, it draws attention to the possibility of regulatory distance: a gap between a policy’s formal application and its lived meaning. A macro-UK regulator’s policy may be demonstrably compliant at the meso-level of JVUs, yet these local campuses may experience it differently on the ground (Shi & Ramos, 2023; H. Yang, 2023). Equally, feedback from the micro-level (e.g., the classroom) may, in turn, be partial, slow, filtered, or difficult to communicate upwards, particularly where authority is centralised, measured only through performance metrics and moderated assurances, but professional voice is constrained, or indeed censored, as some suggest in China (Day, 2024b; B. Zhang et al., 2022). Such governance involving Chinese and UK partners may also protect institutional and academic autonomy by preventing authority from resting entirely with one actor. In practice, this can operate through shared programme approval, external examining, moderation, partner review, and escalation routes that scrutinise academic decisions across institutions. Such protections, however, depend on clear responsibilities, transparent procedures, and faculty access to influence.

This becomes problematic when overlapping governance creates uncertainty about whose expectations take priority, who is accountable for decisions, and where faculty can seek clarification or challenge. Staff may consequently receive inconsistent guidance, experience delays, or defer to whichever institutional actor appears most authoritative, weakening trust, professional autonomy, and the coherent enactment of shared educational standards. These difficulties become more pronounced where moderation and quality assurance practices differ across the partnership, leaving JVUs to operate within an uncertain space between Chinese regulatory oversight, UK degree-awarding responsibilities, and

local institutional implementation. A central concern is therefore not simply if JVUs are regulated, as they are, albeit indirectly, in the UK, but how regulatory authority reaches everyday practice, who oversees the interaction between partners, and which actors can define, interpret, or have autonomy.

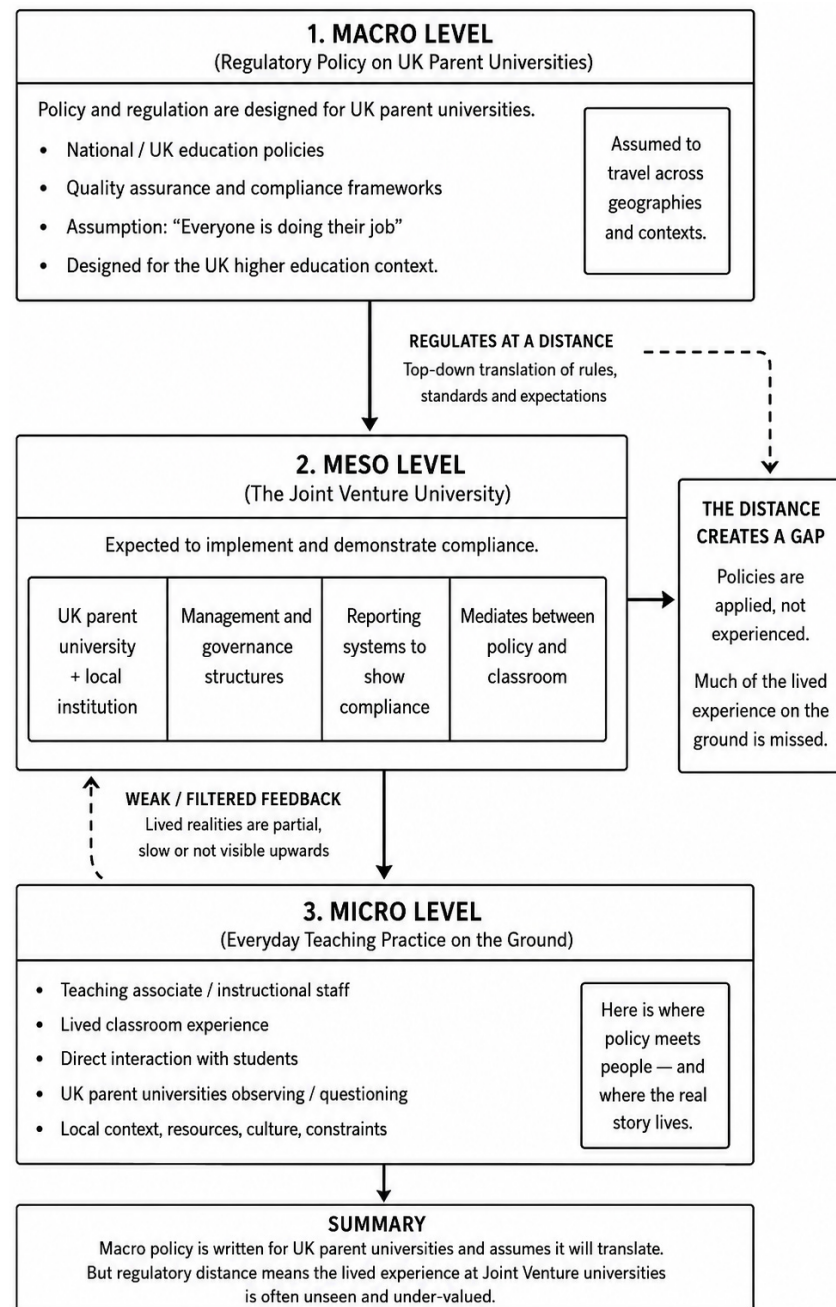


Figure 1. A Macro-to-Micro Model of Regulatory Governance of Sino-British JVUs.

As visualised in Figure 2, the existing literature primarily focuses on direct educational effects through which varied ambitions and policies are translated into regulated educational provision in Sino-British JVUs in China. For example, JVUs are often positioned within internationalisation agendas as providing access to UK-awarded qualifications, internationally oriented educational pathways, and potential graduate opportunities without requiring full overseas study (McNamara & Knight, 2014; Wu et al., 2022). For students and families, a degree from a recognised overseas institution may hold both educational and symbolic value, particularly when it supports future international mobility, postgraduate

aspiration, and the acquisition of internationally recognised forms of capital (A. Chen, 2025; Delval, 2024; Yu, 2021). However, the institutional character of JVUs is shaped by more than its international brand or policy compliance. Instead, they operate in a multi-layered environment in which institutional actors must live and negotiate Chinese approval processes, UK quality expectations, local operational realities, and the demands of a competitive international HE market (Hu & Willis, 2017; Mok, 2021). An earlier Quality Assurance Agency (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA], 2012) case study of a Sino-British JVU acknowledged that the transfer or adaptation of UK practices relating to assessment, moderation, external examining, and programme monitoring can encounter tensions in educational environments shaped by different institutional histories, cultural practices, and pedagogical expectations. It thus highlights the need for further research to understand the lived experiences of staff engaging in cross-cultural complexities of teaching and learning in China, and of bridging diverse HE systems on one campus.

What Figure 2 demonstrates is that such indirect socio-cultural effects matter because formal governance and quality assurance arrangements do not fully explain how TNE is enacted in practice. Over-emphasis, then, on quality assurance and policy risks missing deeper faculty interpretations of authority, hierarchy, recognition, communication, and professional risk. Hence, these things shape how policies are understood, adapted, challenged, or reproduced in everyday teaching and institutional life. Examining these dynamics, therefore, helps explain why formally comparable partnership structures may produce uneven experiences of autonomy, trust, participation, and educational practice. Faculty are central to this inquiry because they translate regulatory, institutional, and partnership expectations into everyday teaching, assessment, and academic practice. Their perceptions of power reveal how authority is experienced at the point of enactment, shaping professional judgement, staff voice, trust, and participation even where formal policies appear clear.

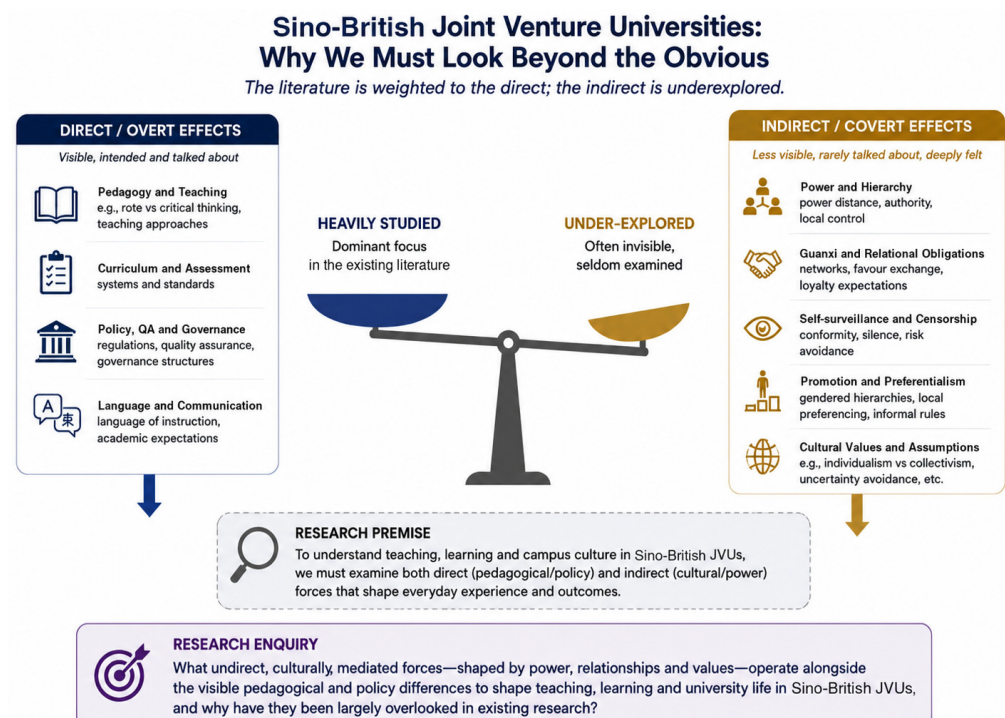


Figure 2. A Representation of the Literature Landscape on Sino-British JVUs and Aligned TNE.

2.2. Sociological Exploration of JVUs

Research has recently begun to pay attention to the indirect socio-cultural effects operating beneath the surface within JVUs (C. Chen & Vanclay, 2023; Lai & Jung, 2024). As

explored in [Mu and Dooley \(2023\)](#), Sino-foreign JVUs are not simply contractual partnerships or cross-border delivery arrangements, but a set of educational fields structured by unequal access to authority, resources, recognition, and mobility, underpinned by the sociological thinking of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's concept of field is central to this reframe. A field comprises "*objective relations between positions*" in which actors hold different forms and volumes of capital and therefore possess unequal capacity to influence what is valued, recognised, or rewarded ([Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992](#), p. 97). Applied to Sino-British JVUs, this means that the university cannot be understood as a neutral meeting point between two national systems, but a socially structured arena in which state regulators, Chinese and UK parents, senior leaders, faculty, students, and families occupy different positions. In this field, different actors compete and use power to define legitimate knowledge, international prestige, educational quality, and institutional purpose. Chinese regulation, UK degree-awarding authority, institutional reputation, rankings, tuition income, disciplinary status, and international mobility all shape the conditions under which JVUs operate ([Dooley & Mu, 2023](#)).

[Pan et al.'s \(2023\)](#) discussion is also useful because it frames Sino-foreign partnerships through the interaction between institutional habitus and institutional action. Partners do not enter a JUV as blank organisational entities. They bring historically developed assumptions about academic authority, quality assurance, market positioning, internationalisation, language, and regulation. A UK university may hold symbolic capital associated with degree-awarding authority, international reputation, and EMI education, while a Chinese partner holds regulatory access, local legitimacy, political knowledge, and operational capacity within the national HE field ([Hu & Willis, 2017](#); [Xu, 2023](#); [H. Yang, 2023](#)). A JUV thus becomes a site where these resources are exchanged, converted, and sometimes contested ([Bourdieu, 1986](#)). This shows that power and distance define understandings of quality, curriculum, institutional identity, and educational legitimacy on the ground in JVUs, rather than relying on what their parent universities say. Access to private JUV study has been shown to depend on families' economic resources, familiarity with English-language qualifications, and knowledge of international HE pathways, enabling the conversion of economic capital into valued institutionalised cultural capital and social distinction ([X. Wang & Liu, 2023](#)).

[Huang's \(2023\)](#) discussion shows that English in Sino-British JVUs is not solely a medium of instruction but also a form of linguistic and symbolic capital. Forms of academic English and the ability to understand UK educational discourse may be recognised as markers of authority, while bilingual practice or locally developed linguistic repertoires may be marginalised ([Bourdieu, 1991](#); [Hiller, 2021](#)). [Dai et al. \(2023\)](#) similarly show how Bourdieu's theory of capital, habitus, and field can illuminate the circulation of power within China-linked TNE settings. Read together, the emerging critical research provides a strong rationale for examining Sino-British JVUs as sites of structured but negotiated power. Bourdieu's (1988) distinction between academic and institutional power is particularly relevant here. Academic authority may derive from disciplinary expertise, teaching experience, research credibility, or professional judgement. Institutional power, however, may be exercised through control of promotion, hiring, workload, funding, validation, performance evaluation, and access to decision-making ([Neri & Wilkins, 2019](#); [Wilkins & Neri, 2019](#)). As [Bourdieu \(1988\)](#) argues, academic fields involve struggles over the legitimate principles through which authority is defined. In JVUs, this raises questions about who can define quality, whose interpretation of policy is treated as authoritative, and whether staff can convert their expertise into meaningful institutional influence. [Bourdieu and Passeron \(1990\)](#) argue that educational institutions can reproduce relations of authority precisely through practices that appear routine, objective, or meritocratic. For example,

moderation, validation, learning–outcome mapping, EMI delivery, promotion criteria, and strategic priorities may serve academic purposes while also distributing recognition unevenly between different forms of expertise.

Michel Foucault’s observation that power “*exists only when it is put into action*” (Foucault, 1983, p. 219) complements the argument. Power is not held exclusively by senior leaders, regulators, or degree-awarding partners, but is enacted through everyday institutional practices: completing moderation records, interpreting assessment rules, attending meetings, writing reports, allocating workloads, setting promotion criteria, and translating strategic priorities into teaching practice. However, scholarship on Sino-British JVUs has mostly sought to showcase organisational success in quasi-formed case studies rather than critically examining the experiences of staff responsible for UK degree delivery and likewise focuses primarily on student experiences (Carvalho et al., 2023; Ke, 2024; Mok et al., 2017; Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013). Day (2024b) has suggested that, because JVUs are operated in highly politicised environments linked to actors who draw on localised political power to exploit and engage with the status quo as they see it, they are subject to political censorship, shifting the learning experience away from UK norms and reducing equality. This helps explain why tentativeness may be observed in research on JVUs, which often operate under wider neoliberal-oriented, market-driven logics that UK universities use to supplement financial survival in a landscape of instability and poor government support (Bamberger et al., 2019; Bennell, 2019; Day et al., 2025). In this sense, faculty voice is not simply a matter of whether faculty can speak. It concerns whether they are recognised as legitimate contributors.

Cook-Sather (2006) argues that meaningful TNE partnership requires power redistribution, rather than a symbolic display of authority. Ade-Ojo and Duckworth (2015, 2019) similarly show how globalised HE institutions can normalise unequal forms of recognition through practices that appear ordinary or meritocratic. The issue, then, is how authority is justified and exercised in Sino-British JVUs. Herzfeld’s (1992) concept of crypto-colonialism is useful here not as a label for JVUs, but as a caution against assuming that external models of prestige, regulation, and professional legitimacy move unchanged across settings in TNE partnerships. Herzfeld’s (2005) concept of cultural intimacy further highlights the gap that can emerge between official institutional narratives and the practical understandings of global partnerships. In Sino-British JVUs, partnership language may emphasise reciprocity, internationalisation, and shared educational purpose, while UK quality assurance responsibilities carry symbolic authority. Everyday academic work, however, remains shaped by locally negotiated relations of status, staffing, promotion, language, and institutional control.

Recent media reporting has increasingly identified issues of power within China-based TNE partnerships. Coverage has raised concerns about oversight, UK-branded provision, quality processes, and staff working conditions. Notably, concerns included anonymised sources, suggesting media commentary may have become a space where staff could voice their lived experience without duress or reprisal (Day, 2024a; Packer, 2025a, 2025b, 2026). The prominence of anonymous staff testimony is relevant and should not be dismissed as lacking rigour. For example, media accounts can provide contextual clues and register perspectives and concerns not yet adequately represented in the peer-reviewed literature, particularly where research itself may be shaped by positionality, access, and risk (see: Amoamo, 2012; Dybicz & Hall, 2021). This matters because the apparent lack of academic evidence critically deconstructing JVUs cannot straightforwardly be treated as evidence of absence where academic control, self-censorship, and political sensitivity in China and China-linked HE institutions may shape what participants disclose, what researchers can investigate, and what enters the published record, as has been well documented in research

(Greitens & Truex, 2020; Leng & Plantan, 2025; Pringle & Woodman, 2022; Woodman & Pringle, 2022). Following guidance on document analysis, media reports are included in this review to highlight unanswered questions, and reinforce the need for ethically protective research on lived experience (see: Iphofen & Tolich, 2018). Media coverage, then, introduces the possibility that reputational, contractual, or hierarchical pressures shape the conditions under which critical accounts can be voiced.

2.3. Power Distance as a Situated JVU Practice

A smaller body of sociologically informed research examines JVUs as institutional fields shaped by unequal authority, resources, recognition, legitimacy, and mobility. This work provides a basis for analysing how formal partnership arrangements are mediated through professional status, language, institutional position, and everyday relationships. In this study, power distance refers to the perceived relational and institutional distance between those able to define, interpret, communicate, and enforce institutional decisions and those expected to enact or experience them. It captures not only the existence of unequal authority, but also how accessible, intelligible, negotiable, and contestable that authority appears to faculty. Power distance is therefore examined through participants' perceptions of who can make decisions, whose professional judgement is recognised, how safely decisions can be questioned, and whether formal or informal mechanisms enable staff to influence institutional practice. It is treated as a situated feature of organisational life rather than as a fixed national–cultural attribute or a numerical characteristic of Chinese or British culture. Hofstede and aligned researchers have directed attention to the idea of power distance to encapsulate an umbrella of authority, leadership, participation, teacher–student relations, and communicative expectations in organisations, including educational settings (Hofstede, 1980, 2001; Bond & Hofstede, 1989; Hofstede et al., 2010; Tan, 2014; Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

In this article, however, power distance, one of several cultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede (2001), is not treated as a national–cultural score. It is used as a situated means of examining how power, organisational complexity, and cross-cultural practice become visible within a particular institution. A growing but fragmented literature has identified the indirect sociological effects of wider Sino-foreign TNE partnerships. Some have examined cultural differences and governance within China–UK alliances (X. Li et al., 2016; Mok & Han, 2017), while others have explored institutional legitimacy, dual identity, resource acquisition, and strategic positioning (Liu & Pan, 2024; Zhan & Marginson, 2023; Zhao et al., 2025). Research has also discussed the neoliberal, globalising, and reputational narratives through which JVUs present themselves (Goodbody, 2024; Miani, 2025; Xu, 2023). Research on student profiles, graduate outcomes, international experience, and community engagement further illustrates that TNE shapes social status (A. Chen, 2025; C. Chen & Vanclay, 2023; Wu et al., 2022; H. Q. Yang & Wu, 2021).

Within the JVU, the notion of power distance could be read to reflect a definition that encompasses several connected manifestations of power. Bureaucracy concerns the procedures, approval routes, documentation, and chains of command through which authority is exercised or obscured. Institutional control concerns the capacity of regulators, parent institutions, leaders, and managers to shape teaching, curriculum, research, workload, and strategic direction. Hierarchy refers to formal differences in rank and the perceived legitimacy or risk of challenging those in senior positions. Inequality concerns uneven access to voice, recognition, funding, promotion, and professional opportunity, including advantages or barriers associated with language, gender, status, or institutional position. Networks capture the informal relationships, communication platforms, linguistic communities, and forms of relational access through which information and influence may

circulate. References to censorship are, then, within this study treated more cautiously as participants' perceptions of anticipated or experienced boundaries around politically sensitive teaching, research, and public expression, rather than as independently verified evidence of institutional prohibition.

Faculty-focused research is substantially smaller, but identifies workload pressure, cross-cultural adjustment, recruitment and career tensions, professional isolation, and disagreements over which pedagogies and forms of institutional knowledge carry authority (Cai & Hall, 2016; J. Chen & Zhu, 2022; Duffy, 2025a, 2025b; Wilkins & Neri, 2019; B. Zhang et al., 2022). Emerging work on identity, belonging, legitimacy, and governance further suggests that JVU experience may be shaped by centralised authority, uneven access to local knowledge, socio-political repressions, and relational networks mediated by dominating Chinese cultural practices, such as 'guanxi' or the practice of reciprocal favour-giving and social repayment (Day, 2024c; Han, 2022; Miani & Picucci-Huang, 2023; Mukhopadhyay, 2019). Collectively, this literature establishes that power is implicated in the everyday life of JVUs and is tethered to the inherently political oversight of mainland China. We would expect much critical research, but struggle to find it; Sino-British JVUs operate in markedly different academic freedom environments with different parent university values. China's one-party, authoritarian governance context has comparatively restrictive conditions for academic freedom compared with the UK partner's stronger, though still contested, protections for institutional and academic autonomy (see: Pringle & Woodman, 2022; Woodman & Pringle, 2022; Zha & Shen, 2018).

However, the comparison should not be used to infer that all China-based institutions operate identically, nor that UK universities are free from hierarchy, audit, or managerial control. Research shows that academic freedom in Chinese HE is unevenly experienced and shaped by ideological and political sensitivity and self-regulation (Burnay & Pils, 2022; Fulda & Missal, 2022; Prelec et al., 2022). For JVUs, this creates a power distance tension: UK-awarded provision may carry expectations of critical academic autonomy, while institutional operations remain dependent on Chinese regulatory approval. Value cohesion may, therefore, be weakened where asymmetrical regulatory conditions shape staff voice and professional judgement. For example, Cui's (2022, 2023, 2024) research on queer academics in Chinese HE shows how institutionally aligned political adherence can extend beyond formal governance, shaping disclosure, teaching, research, and professional safety. Cui and Burford (2025) demonstrate that restrictive gender norms in Chinese HE create conditions of power distance. The literature thus illustrates that power is felt not only through formal governance but also through the practical limits placed on voice, recognition, curriculum, research, and institutional belonging, whereby JVUs may clash with UK parents' expectations of freedom, as per their regulated obligations (Figure 1).

2.4. Research Gap

Consequently, there is limited empirical research on how faculty experience, perceive, and live JVUs, understand their hierarchy, negotiate professional autonomy, access decision-making processes, encounter unequal recognition, and manage the formal and informal networks through which institutional life operates. Understanding these indirect socio-cultural effects is essential to evaluating TNE partnerships beyond formal compliance. As suggested, although existing studies identify governance tensions, cultural differences, workload pressures, and questions of institutional legitimacy, limited empirical research examines how faculty themselves perceive and negotiate power in the everyday operation of Sino-British JVUs. In particular, insufficient attention has been given to how staff experience authority, hierarchy, professional autonomy, unequal recognition, decision-making, and formal and informal networks. This study addresses that specific faculty experience gap.

3. Materials and Methods

To address this gap, the methodology of this article outlines a process centred on 32 interviews with faculty working at a Sino-British JVU in mainland China (Site A).

3.1. Research Design and Setting

This article presents research from Site A, which is part of a wider paired-site qualitative study of faculty lived experience in a China-based Sino-British JVU (Site A) and its UK degree-awarding partner and parent university (Site B). Both are reported anonymously, with any specific details in participant responses removed or redacted, and this article presents only data from Site A. The study adopted an interpretivist qualitative design, approaching faculty accounts as situated, self-perceived interpretations of institutional life rather than as transparent reports of a single organisational reality (Crotty, 1998; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This orientation was appropriate because, as discussed above, the study concerned less visible conditions through which faculty experienced authority, professional autonomy, quality assurance, institutional communication, and workplace relationships. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to explain indirect effects, such as ambiguity, contradiction, concern, and adaptation, in their own terms, while allowing the researcher to probe unanticipated issues arising from professional experience (Barriball & While, 1994; Seidman, 2013).

Site A is an anonymised Sino-British JVU located in mainland China, delivering UK degrees within Chinese regulatory conditions and a locally embedded institutional environment. The article avoids identifying the institution, its city, academic units, degree-awarding partner, or participants' precise disciplinary locations. This approach was intended to minimise deductive disclosure and protect participants in a professionally and politically sensitive field (British Educational Research Association, 2018; Glasius et al., 2018; Iphofen & Tolich, 2018). The researchers' prior educational and professional familiarity with Chinese HE supported sensitivity to institutional language, tacit practices, and cross-cultural reference points. The lead researcher's broader positionality in the setting also informed the contextual rapport, with trust among participants established through transparent pre-interview information, voluntary participation, participants' control over disclosure, and the right to review and amend transcripts. However, following Bourdieu's (2003) principle of participant objectivation, reflexivity was treated not as a confessional exercise or a claim to neutrality, but as a methodological means of making the researcher's positionality in the field visible and open to critical scrutiny (da Silva & Webster, 2018; Ortlipp, 2008).

3.2. Participants and Recruitment

The Site A dataset comprised 32 semi-structured interviews with academic staff. Participants held a broad range of academic roles, including lecturer, assistant professor, associate professor, professor, professor of practice, educational developer, and director. Participant demographics varied by gender, nationality, educational background, and career stage, as shown in Table 1.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. This approach was appropriate for accessing faculty straightforwardly within a bounded institutional setting, but it does not claim statistical representativeness. Instead, the sample was intended to provide contextual breadth across diverse participant characteristics. No disciplinary matching quota was applied, since the purpose was to investigate institutional experience rather than compare subject areas (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denscombe, 2007). Because, then, participants were recruited through convenience sampling to provide contextual breadth across academic and educational development roles, rather than proportional

representation of each role group. Uneven numbers of lecturers, professors, educational developers, directors, and other participants were therefore expected, and these roles are not reported due to ethical considerations as noted below. During analysis, role categories were used to interpret participants' institutional positions and experiences, but were not treated as equally sized comparison groups or automatically assigned equal evidential weight. Themes were developed from the relevance, depth, and recurrence of accounts across the dataset rather than from role-based quotas or simple frequency counts.

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Demographic Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender reported		
Man	16	50.0
Woman	16	50.0
Nationality		
Local	12	37.5
International	20	62.5
Highest degree-awarding system		
British	8	25.0
Non-British	24	75.0
Career stage		
Early career: fewer than two years in HE	1	3.1
Mid-career: two to 10 years	16	50.0
Late career: more than 10 years	15	46.9
Total	32	100.0

3.3. Data Collection

Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted either face-to-face on campus or online via Microsoft Teams, according to participant preference and practical circumstances. Approximately half of the participants selected the online option. A common semi-structured protocol was used across the wider study, allowing discussion of faculty experience of teaching, learning, and campus life. Open-ended questioning enabled participants to elaborate on their own experiences and introduce issues not anticipated in the interview schedule. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis, though the data are not made publicly available due to the potential for reidentification of participants and their study sites (Barriball & While, 1994; Seidman, 2013; Tessier, 2012). As this study was designed specifically to examine faculty lived experience, participants' accounts were not systematically triangulated with institutional policies, governance documents, promotion criteria, or observations. They are therefore treated as situated perceptions of power and institutional practice, rather than as independently verified evidence of favouritism, institutional inequality, misconduct, censorship, or procedural failure, reflecting the self-interpreted nature of participants' own recollections of their lived experience, which are anonymised. Within this interpretivist design, then, themes were judged by their analytical relevance rather than numerical prevalence. Accounts raised by one or a small number of participants may therefore illuminate important institutional dynamics, but are not treated as statistically representative of the wider sample.

3.4. Data Analysis

The wider interview corpus was initially analysed through reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) iterative process of familiarisation, coding,

theme development, review, definition, and reporting. This generated initial open codes from participants' accounts of teaching, assessment, governance, professional practice, and institutional experience. Codes were then compared across accounts to identify convergences, differences, contradictions, and meaningful exceptions. They were then interpreted through a theoretically focused analysis by Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions framework, which provided a disciplined vocabulary for organising the analysis. Hofstede's model was not used to assign cultural characteristics to participants, determine national culture, or test whether Site A was 'high' or 'low' in power distance, as such uses would risk cultural essentialism, particularly in a setting that includes local and internationally recruited staff with varied educational biographies, linguistic resources, and positions (McSweeney, 2002; Taras et al., 2012). Instead, power distance, one of many dimensions used, informed the research agenda (Appendix A.1) and shaped the design of the interview guide (Appendix A.2), subsequently serving as a sensitising concept through which inductively generated patterns could be interpreted. This experimental approach created an explicit starting point for analysing how unequal authority, deference, voice, access, and influence were described in faculty accounts, without predetermining the findings (Bowen, 2006; Charmaz, 2003). Inductive coding preceded this theoretical organisation. Only after patterns had been identified across interview transcripts were power-related extracts revisited and consolidated into four empirically developed themes:

1. Authority: Control over teaching, regulation, institutional direction, and professional discretion.
2. Hierarchy: Chains of command, seniority, indirect disagreement, and the perceived legitimacy of challenge.
3. Inequality: Voice, promotion, funding, gender, language, and relational advantage.
4. Networks: Formal and informal communication channels, digital platforms, visibility, access, and professional boundaries.

These themes are not presented as formal sub-dimensions of power distance. They are finding-led groupings that emerged through the focused analysis of power distance: how faculty described power in their lived experience. Put simply, power distance served as a sensitising concept, while authority, hierarchy, inequality, and networks were treated as distinct organisational constructs through which perceived asymmetries of power became visible. In doing so, the study offers a context-bound, but hypothetically transferable insight into how JVU partnership systems may be mediated through authority, informal networks, and everyday institutional practice (Lincoln et al., 2011; Yin, 2018). In cross-cultural education, power distance is often invoked to explain pedagogical differences in classroom participation, deference to teachers, feedback practices, and willingness to challenge authority (Tan, 2014; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Such scholarship can be productive when it opens questions about how authority is understood, but may risk treating national culture as a complete explanation for individual or institutional behaviour. Operationally, the analysis identified power distance where participants described an asymmetry between institutional actors' capacity to shape decisions and faculty members' capacity to understand, influence, question, or seek redress concerning those decisions. Extracts were therefore examined for accounts of control, deference, voice, procedural opacity, professional recognition, unequal opportunity, informal access, and the anticipated consequences of disagreement.

Bureaucracy, censorship, promotion, institutional control, hierarchy, inequality, and networks were not treated as separate theoretical frameworks. They were analysed as institutional arenas through which power distance became visible in participants' lived experience. Hence, in this study, Hofstede's framework was re-adapted for sensemaking comparisons, not for assigning cultural characteristics to individuals or diagnosing the in-

stitutional character of a particular university (Brewer & Venaik, 2014; Fougère & Moulettes, 2007; McSweeney, 2002; Williamson, 2002). Accordingly, the analysis proceeded within a single integrated yet sequenced sociological framework. First, the interview corpus was examined through reflexive thematic analysis, with inductive codes generated from participants' accounts of teaching, governance, professional practice, and institutional experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Second, Hofstede's (2011) concept of power distance was applied as the study's principal sensitising framework to organise and interpret patterns concerning authority, deference, voice, access, and influence. Bourdieu, Foucault, and Herzfeld did not guide the initial coding or determine the themes. They were subsequently used as complementary interpretive perspectives, with interdisciplinary openness, through which the empirically developed findings could be discussed.

The four finding-led themes were developed from patterns across the full dataset, rather than from the frequency of individual quotations. The results presented in this study include illustrative accounts from 21 of the 32 participants, and thus capture a wide range of cross-aligned, perceived experiences, while quotations revisited in the Discussion serve as analytical examples rather than measures of prevalence. Member checking was not undertaken, as participants were not asked to review or approve the final themes. Analytical credibility was instead supported through iterative coding, comparison across the full dataset, attention to divergent accounts, reflexive interpretation, and ethical engagement, whereby participants had access to a full set of questions, participant information sheets, consent disclosures, transcript review process on request, and the right to edit that transcript to best reflect their opinions, consistent with British Educational Research Association (2018). One participant reviewed a transcript and was satisfied; all participants were explicitly aware of what the study was about and how their data would be used after it was anonymously incorporated into analytical processes. All consented to participate.

3.5. Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained before fieldwork from research bodies overseeing research where the lead author is affiliated, and data collection was supervised by a member of their doctoral supervising team [#14938, 6 November 2024]. Within the study, given the potential sensitivity of discussing workplace authority, consent was an ongoing process. Participants received a participant information sheet and consent form before the interview and were verbally reminded that they could decline any questions, pause, withdraw, or end the interview without explanation. All participants were anonymised using neutral participant codes. Potentially identifying institutional, disciplinary, personal, and relational details was removed or [redacted] in quotation reporting where necessary. Audio files, transcripts, consent materials, and analytic records were stored in secure university systems, with access restricted to the researcher. These procedures were designed to minimise risk and protect participants' confidentiality in a professionally and politically sensitive research setting (British Educational Research Association, 2018; Glasius et al., 2018; Iphofen & Tolich, 2018). Whilst we recognise guidance by the British Educational Research Association (2018) on using anonymous names to humanise participants, to reduce potential for re-identification, in this study, participants are labelled using an anonymised participant number signalling order-engagement in the study, followed by the study site; for example, '5A' denotes Participant 5 from Site A. Interview modality may have influenced disclosure, and this was considered ethically. Microsoft Teams use, for example, may have increased convenience and distance from the workplace, but concerns about privacy, recording, or digital monitoring may have reduced discussion of sensitive issues. Hence, participants were encouraged to review transcripts and contact the interviewer to make any amendments. Meanwhile, in-person interviews may have supported rapport while also

making some participants more conscious of institutional visibility, hence the interviewer took specific steps to provide information and disclosure of research in advance of engaging the study.

4. Results

The analysis identified four distinct but interconnected organisational domains through which participants described power distance in their professional lives: authority, hierarchy, inequality, and networks. These domains are not treated as equivalent to Hofstede's concept of power distance. Rather, they are stated for analytical clarity to show the organisational contexts through which participants perceived, negotiated, or challenged unequal authority. References to 'Chinese', 'Western', 'face culture', or 'guanxi' are reported as participants' own ways of interpreting their experiences, rather than as fixed cultural explanations of institutional behaviour.

4.1. Perceived Authority: Layered Control over Teaching, Regulation, and Campus Direction

Several participants perceived and described authority and power distance at Site A as layered rather than concentrated in a single institution. It was experienced in classroom expectations, local management, UK degree-awarding arrangements, and Chinese regulatory approval. This created a setting in which professional judgement was exercised across multiple, sometimes competing, sources of direction. Some participants felt that institutional priorities could limit professional discretion. Participant 2A perceived and connected prescribed pedagogical approaches with a perceived lack of recognition for academic expertise: *"Obviously, the thing I would change the most is to stop trying to tell us what to do with learning and teaching. . . too intrusive, and it's widening power distance and not taking professionals seriously."* This was not only an objection to a particular teaching method but reflected a wider concern that pedagogical direction could be determined at a distance from class size, student needs, and the practical conditions of delivery. Authority was, therefore, experienced through the question of who could define appropriate teaching practice and whose knowledge of the classroom carried weight. Participant 5A perceived and described a need to adjust approaches to student independence gradually:

"The teacher has a lot more control in a Chinese high school, and the students are following exactly what the teacher wants them to do, so in university students expect the teacher to be very much in control and leading all the time. . . I've tried to encourage students in [this JVU] to take more ownership or control over their learning."

This account did not present authority solely as an organisational matter but suggested that faculty exercised pedagogical authority through their interpretations of students' prior educational expectations and their attempts to foster participation without destabilising trust or confidence in the classroom. Meanwhile, the regulatory authority was described as particularly consequential. Participant 12A perceived and identified the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) as a decisive source of programme approval:

"We need to make sure that any new module or programme meets the [JVU]'s standards and [UK parent university]'s standards, and if it leads to an award, we need to make sure the Ministry of Education in China will recognise what we're doing there. . . At the end of the day, if the Ministry of Education doesn't sign off on something you're doing, then no one will come do it. . . they always win."

However, other accounts contrasted this and positioned the UK parent as retaining external power through its degree-awarding status. Participant 9A perceived and described the relationship in explicitly unequal terms:

“Who has the power here? It certainly isn’t Chinese universities, but the UK universities. And I think our job is to safeguard their reputation as the little sister or the little brother. But they’re the Big Brother. So, I don’t see it as an equal partnership at all. All of our degrees must be approved by [UK parent university]. . . it seems like a parent-child relationship more than an equal partner to me.”

Together, these accounts revealed a layered structure in which UK degree validation, Chinese regulatory approval, local management, and faculty judgement could each become consequential in different decisions.

4.2. Perceived Hierarchy: Centralisation, Disagreement, and Conditions of Voice

Some participants perceived Site A as hierarchical and centralised. For some, hierarchy-limited dialogue and decision-making appear distant from academic units. Participant 11A perceived and stated:

“But we [JVU] are very centralised, and the central building has a lot of power. . . Sometimes, we follow a traditional Chinese model of leadership. It doesn’t allow for too much discussion, and I think we’re going too much down that way. Because policies are decided from the top, nobody gets to discuss them. I don’t know where the discussions happen, and we seem to keep hearing that policies are decided from the top, so even our foreign leaders don’t know why they happen.”

Here, centralisation was significant not only because decisions came from senior levels, but also because the route by which they were made was unclear. The absence of visible, distributed discussion among all faculty voices and levels created uncertainty about where faculty concerns about teaching and learning could be directed. Indeed, several participants described indirect communication as an important means of negotiating hierarchy. Participant 14A perceived and explained that critical discussion was more effective with senior leaders when: *“behind closed doors. . . here in China, it’s a very hierarchical system, where people in the hierarchy tend not to question at all what their superiors are saying.”* Participant 8A perceived and similarly expressed this more succinctly: *“We’re not challenging them [leaders], we discuss things with them.”* Together, these accounts suggest that voice was not necessarily absent but was understood to depend on form, timing, respect for ‘face’, and relationships. Public disagreement, then, was deemed inappropriate or ineffective in JVUs, perhaps because of the loss of ‘face’, a unique cultural practice in China, whereas private discussion was seen by some as a more workable route. This made faculty participation contingent on familiarity with local communicative expectations and access to appropriate spaces for conversation.

Other participants treated chain-of-command structures as an unavoidable part of institutional responsibility in the JVU; as Participant 31A perceived and stated: *“You have a chain of command in everything that you do, which is the feature of our leadership structure.”* This account illustrates an important finding that hierarchy is not universally rejected. It could be understood as a necessary structure. Yet, such a structure could constrain professional voice when the capacity to flag up issues did not extend to meaningful influence over the final decision. Not everyone agreed, however, that the university was a challenging or hierarchical place; Participant 20A perceived and described their own perception of experience as a rigorous but extremely rewarding effort that afforded them many benefits in their own delivery of UK degrees, and their personal completion of one in swift terms whilst working full-time:

“After I started to work at this [joint venture] university, I find myself really interested in [topic]. So that’s why later on I started to do a PhD as a part-time student while I’m a full-time staff here. . . I started in [redacted] and completed my viva in [redacted]. So in

the two and a half years, I think it's really a lot of hard work because, as you know, I'm a part-time staff."

4.3. Perceived Inequality: Recognition, Language, and Career Opportunity

Some participants identified that they perceived professional opportunities were accessed and mediated by power, including promotion, appraisal, funding, language, gender, and academic voice. Participant 2A perceived and described an appraisal process in which criteria were perceived to have changed without adequate justification: *"I've never actually failed an evaluation, but one year I was evaluated on criteria that were just made-up, and so it was suddenly inserted into my [report], and it was totally unfair, but nobody was going to challenge my boss, so I had to just live with it."* Language ability was also described as shaping access to opportunity in multiple directions, as Participant 3A perceived and described difficulties associated with Chinese-language external funding applications mediated power exchange and distance with local academics:

"One of the huge challenges that I face when I'm working here [JVU] because a lot of the grant applications have to be in Chinese. But I can't write in Chinese. They require a Chinese citizen collaborator, which means that I'm forced to look for somebody who fits those sorts of exogenous criteria that have nothing to do with the actual research ability. . .for true expats, it's very difficult."

Conversely, Participant 9A perceived and argued that English-language promotion applications could advantage native English speakers: *"You have to write an application arguing in English in a very specific way that you deserve the promotion. If English is not your first language, can you write in a way that would put you on the same level of fairness as someone whose English is their first language, and perhaps as an English teacher?"* These contrasting accounts suggest that JVUs' bilingual and transnational environment may generate different forms of linguistic advantage and disadvantage. Chinese could be necessary for access to certain funding routes, while English could become decisive in promotion applications aligned with UK-oriented academic conventions. Participant 23A also perceived and described promotion criteria as formally available but difficult to relate consistently to visible academic achievement:

"It's not very clear about [promotion criteria]. I know some people are quite frustrated with the promotion just because it's too general. And sometimes you see people who are professors but have very, very few publications. But then at the same time, you see people like assistant professors, they're doing really well, but then they have to wait to be eligible. So, for example, they have to wait for three years to pass their first contract or whatever. So the criteria are also changed from year to year, although perhaps not dramatically."

This is one participant's account of how promotion criteria were experienced; it does not establish that any procedure was improper. Its analytical importance lies in representing the perceived power distance and confusion amongst faculty between published criteria, eligibility requirements, personal advantage, and everyday professional understanding of how those rules are interpreted, adapted, communicated, and made open to scrutiny in practice. Gender also featured in several accounts, suggesting power distance may be tethered to sex. Participant 19A perceived and stated: *"...having a strong voice and having people to receive our voice to really listen to our voice is very challenging because we're women."* Participant 4A perceived this differently: *"I remember one of my conversations with my colleagues, he said, oh, it's more challenging for you as a female leader. I was sort of shocked when I heard that. So I did not view it that way. I feel people, no matter whether my colleagues or boss are male leaders or not, we're just colleagues."* The inequality domain, therefore, reflected varied and sometimes conflicting experiences that were not reducible to a single formal policy or demographic distinction. Instead, it concerned the ways career opportunities could be

mediated by language, managerial discretion, relationships, gendered expectations, and the capacity to make one's contribution visible. Participant 9A perceived this as linked to gender imbalance at the senior level: "...especially at the senior levels where it is very male-dominated. I think if there were more females at that level, this [joint venture] university would run very differently and I would argue better." Participant 1A perceived and aligned in their perceived view, recounting a second-hand, unverified account they were told about: "It was told to me by an Asian female academic, and she had been on an interview panel whereby the interview panel had discounted another female applicant because she was 40 and wasn't married." A further dimension concerned participants' perceptions of the boundaries around politically sensitive research, and how these intersected with local laws, regulations and cultural norms. For example, Participant 15A perceived and stated they felt there were challenges for international staff used to discussing things openly, with balancing respect for local laws and regulations: "there are also restrictions on the types of topics you can talk about in the classroom...you would never be able to talk about, even questions over the sovereignty of Taiwan, issues with human rights violations in Xinjiang, and Feminism." Participant 5A similarly perceived issues in their lived experience with respect to engaging sensitive issues, noting the challenges of reconciling this:

"People at this [joint venture] university can research and publish on anything they want to, as long as it's not a very sensitive topic like the most sensitive topics in China, around things like Taiwan, Tibet, or Xinjiang. During COVID, they became very sensitive and actually, some professors at [redacted] were doing medical research on COVID, and they published their results. And the government got very nervous, and they came up with a new rule that said, before you publish anything on COVID, you must send your research to the government for them to say ok or not ok. . .another sensitive topic these days is feminism and the role of women, especially women in government and women in business, and I know that whenever the word feminism is used at our university, people get very nervous and for a foreigner, the word feminism is not controversial anymore. . .[redacted] would tell you no, you can talk about women in work, but you could not openly say this is going to be a feminist perspective."

These accounts do not establish a universal institutional prohibition, nor do they determine how any research proposal or classroom discussion was handled by a JVU; they do not suggest, nor are they reported to mean, that a violation of human rights was at play within the JVU. Rather, they are framed here to present how some participants independently perceived politically sensitive topics as areas in which the UK-linked character of the institution did not remove the practical force, importance for respect of, and legal attributes of locally situated political boundaries. Inequality was thus experienced not only in career opportunities and recognition, but also in uneven confidence in whose knowledge, language, identity, and areas of inquiry could be safely recognised within JVUs, which affected how staff lived and experienced their teaching.

4.4. Perceived Networks: Informal Access, Communication, and Professional Boundaries

Networks also formed a domain of power distance where participants described a distinction between formal channels, particularly email and documented processes, and informal channels through which information, expectations, and relationships circulated. Participant 25A perceived and connected informal communication directly to the timing of institutional participation: "Higher-ups at this [joint venture] university are unilaterally coming up with these proposals. They do discuss it with people below them or in their chain of command. But most of those people are Chinese speakers. . ." Here, power was not described solely as the right to make a final decision. It also concerned access to information before a decision became public. Informal access could therefore shape the difference between

formal inclusion and meaningful staff participation. A popular externally situated Social Media Platform (SMP) was seen as central to informal socio-technical infrastructure among faculty and students, and across decision-making processes. Participant 22A perceived and described it as necessary and intrusive:

“We have to use [SMP] to survive in China. There is no way that you cannot use [SMP], but it’s a two-way. When you are in a rush to get things done, communicating with your colleagues through [SMP] is very effective. But if some of your colleagues are chasing you to get things done on [SMP], sometimes it’s very annoying. But definitely we use [SMP] very, very much. It’s not that we just rely on emails.”

These accounts indicate that informal communication technology shaped power distance and set expectations for staff of a work culture of continuous responsiveness and coordination, while simultaneously extending institutional expectations beyond formal working hours and documented internal systems. For some participants, this required deliberate boundary-setting. Participant 28A perceived and explained:

“I don’t agree with social media in the workplace at all, and this is what I’ve clearly established myself within my department. Because social media in this [JVU] has a policy that is not a formal channel of communication. But unfortunately, a lot of Chinese people are using it for daily communication here, being a Dean, manager, teacher or lecturer. . .but in the Western world, we don’t use [SMP] for the workplace. . .But in the context of this joint venture university, everyone is using it. I actually got angry when my former [senior manager messaged] me when I was on holiday. He said oh I need this. I need that. And I got really angry and I said I’m sorry, I’m on holiday.”

Informal socio-technical networks also featured again in accounts of promotion, appraisal, and access to senior visibility. Participant 25A perceived and described a *second-hand, unverified account* of their perception of a colleague’s experience of promotion and perceived relational influence:

“One of my colleagues [in this JVU] was devastated that he didn’t get promoted when he had very good publications, and then there was nitpicking of, oh, he wasn’t the first author in his publishing, there are too many other people. And now he’s looking for jobs elsewhere, and he is such an amazing guy and contributes so much to our [school]. . .I know of several cases where the only reason people got promoted was because someone in that position of power was their champion—person in power pulled their promotion application and said this person is definitely getting promoted. So it’s not based on ability, it’s just based upon connections. . .”

Similar claims were perceived by participants as aligned through ‘guanxi’, a widely practised localised cultural network practice of reciprocal behaviour. Participant 10A perceived it as alongside any formally published promotion criteria:

“I don’t think [the promotion criteria] was written on the paper message. I think what was more important was guanxi. Because I know three people who do the review and then make the decision in my department. Someone else who also applied for promotion and didn’t get it needs to do a lot of their work on another campus. . .it’s more important to be well known among the senior leaders at [the school] level. But I’ve already started building some guanxi with higher-level people, which will be useful in about three or four years.”

Participant 28A similarly perceived advancement with Chinese-speaking and proximity to local centralised power:

“Because the merit is not there, it’s always communication in the background and then you decide to leave. I’ve been here for [5+] years, and I’ve applied for promotion twice. On

both occasions, I was rejected. But we get Chinese local staff who joined three years ago, and they have been promoted twice. You look at the background, you don't see anything, but they have good communication with the hiring manager, who is also Chinese. . . I think that easily can set the ethos here, in Chinese communication, and you need to be in that communication. . ."

These attributions should not be read as evidence that Chinese staff, as a group, or the Chinese partner institution were responsible for unfair practices. Their significance lies in how participants experienced and perceived access to promotion as culturally and linguistically patterned. Participant 31A perceived and recognised formal openness while, intriguingly, suggesting that power distance shifted over time, suggesting perceived advantage was bound to temporal–spatial conditions and who occupied positions of authority:

"In terms of equal opportunity [of promotion], we are quite fair in terms of how we open up positions and we call for people to contribute and apply. But because we are in China and we have a Western educational model, and leaders might be one day a Westerner, one day a Chinese person, it also has consequences for who has the best shot at climbing up and getting new roles. . . It depends on whether we're facing more Chinese or more Western, you might have people who might be an advantage in different periods of time. . . Westerners tend to select Westerners, and Chinese people tend to select Chinese for interviews and internal development."

Participant 7A perceived and described a similar perceived concern about the capacity of individual actors to reshape promotion expectations: *"I have observed that some smart person who wants to make things difficult for promotion is going to add in their perspective, and nobody is strong enough to challenge that, so that person's perspective is suddenly part of the criteria."* These accounts do not establish individual misconduct. However, they show that, for some faculty, power was experienced not simply as formal hierarchy but sensed as personal, opaque, and difficult to challenge. Participant 10A perceived this in a similar way, discussing an alleged and interpreted sense of a 'broken promise' relating to a performance review and promotion. The account was particularly striking because the participant perceived their presented subsequent promotion not as a transparent correction, but as a means of ending the complaint, whether this was true or not:

"I did have one main thing of being unfairly treated. . . I think because I had been complaining about it for so long that they just gave me the promotion to shut me up, and that's good now. I'm a believer in justice and I would really like a written apology from the original director for lying to me. Actually, I worked really hard that year and I didn't get any reward for it. So it's quite demotivating. And I don't think it's appropriate for managers to lie about stuff like that, especially in the onboarding process."

These accounts point to a central issue of redress: not only that an adverse decision had been made, but also that staff perceived the procedures intended to regulate judgment as incapable of providing an effective challenge to managerial authority. Participant 1A perceived and expressed a broader, unverified perception: *"I have seen people promoted based on who their parents are. I've seen people being given jobs based on family relationships and political relationships."* This can be understood as an outcome of power distance, which may reduce commitment, promote silence, or shape withdrawal from institutional life. Participant 17A, for example, perceived and linked prior challenge to a decision to limit future dissent: *"It's not good to challenge your leader, to be honest. Because I challenged my leader, and the result was very bad. . . And I'm not going to do that to a large extent."* These more critical accounts are not treated as evidence that any individual award or promotion departed from applicable regulations, and indeed, these views are presented as the staff's own lived experiences and subsequent perceptions. However, the significance of this divergence is

itself important: formal procedures may have been available, but staff did not experience their operation uniformly and attributed this lack of uniformity to the workings of power and personal networks.

5. Discussion

The findings are interpreted through the integrated sociological framework established above. Hofstede's power distance provides a sensitising lens for understanding the perceived power and distance between those who can define, interpret, or enforce institutional decisions and the faculty expected to enact or experience them. Bourdieu, Foucault, and Herzfeld are used flexibly rather than as absolute or competing explanations to show that power and the resulting power distance at Site A were neither fixed national-cultural attributes nor simple consequences of formal hierarchy, but rather a situated institutional relationship with implications for value cohesion. Four empirical domains that were common in faculty lived experience of authority, hierarchy, inequality, and networks were thus perceived as determining who had power on the campus.

5.1. Authority: Professional Judgement Within Layered Governance

The authority findings demonstrate that faculty judgment was exercised within overlapping, rather than singular, systems of control. Participants perceived and described Chinese MoE, UK parent, local senior leadership, and school-level management as consequential sources of direction. Participant 12A's perceived observation of the MoE, *"they always win"*, illustrates the material importance of Chinese regulatory approval. Participant 9A, by contrast, perceived and described the UK partner as a *"Big Brother"* and the JVu as occupying a *"parent-child relationship."* These accounts should not be treated as objective descriptions of constitutional authority. They reveal how faculty perceived the distribution of institutional legitimacy and the limited scope of their own power within it. A Foucauldian reading helps avoid reducing authority to a question of who formally holds power. Foucault (1983, p. 219) argued that power *"exists only when it is put into action"*. At Site A, authority was exercised through programme approval, curriculum requirements, teaching expectations, quality documentation, and managerial direction. Participant 2A's perceived concern that staff were instructed to undertake a particular and prescribed pedagogical approach described as *"too intrusive"* and *"not taking professionals seriously"* shows how authority was experienced at the point where institutional prescription met professional expertise. This idea, presented by participants, of a constant, directional, layered authority aligns with recent research showing that Sino-foreign provision is governed by multiple institutional and regulatory actors, rather than by a simple bilateral partnership (Liu & Pan, 2024; Miani, 2025).

Bourdieu helps explain why some sources of authority carried greater weight than others. Symbolic capital, in his terms, is *"the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition"* (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 72). The UK degree-awarding authority held symbolic value, in participants' perceived view, because it represented internationally recognised academic standards. Faculty professional knowledge was also a form of capital, but participants' accounts suggest that its value could be weakened when pedagogical decisions appeared to be determined elsewhere. Herzfeld (2002) further explains this as a mediation that local actors may selectively invoke UK standards to consolidate internal authority where it best suits them. This resonates with the media debate discussed above about how UK quality assurance or Chinese regulation was interpreted in institutional practice, which interpretation became authoritative, and whether faculty could question or influence that process (Packer, 2025a, 2025b, 2026). Such an idea is central to value cohesion: participants indicated they are more likely to recog-

nise institutional expectations as educationally legitimate when they can see how those expectations relate to the realities of teaching and can exercise meaningful professional judgement in their enactment. Value cohesion, based on reading participants' points, was strengthened where faculty understood how institutional expectations related to teaching practice and could exercise professional judgement. It weakened where authority appeared distant, opaque, or disconnected from classroom realities.

5.2. Hierarchy: Voice, Indirect Disagreement, and Possible Field of Action

The hierarchy findings show centralised decision-making and limited visibility of deliberation. Participant 11A's perceived account that *"policies are decided from the top, nobody gets to discuss them"* suggests that hierarchy was experienced, in part, as an absence of accessible explanation. Others viewed hierarchy as necessary for accountability, as Participant 31A perceived that *"the decision lies with the line manager"*. The findings, therefore, do not support a simple conclusion that hierarchy was inherently dysfunctional. Rather, they show that hierarchy became problematic for staff where institutional responsibility did not coexist with intelligible procedures for dialogue, challenge, and feedback. Foucault's concept of governmentality is useful here because it directs attention to how power shapes conduct without necessarily relying on overt prohibition. To govern, he argues, is to *"structure the possible field of action"* (Foucault, 1983, p. 221). Indirect disagreement thus suggests that the possible field of action was shaped by relationship, setting, timing, and communicative form. For example, Participant 14A perceived a critical discussion with senior management *"behind closed doors"* as more effective than a public challenge. This does not demonstrate that the faculty had no voice, but suggests participants felt their voice was contingent on knowing how, when, and through whom disagreement could be safely communicated. This echoes recent TNE research that identifies alignment as essential to effective partnerships; the present findings suggest that such alignment must also be experienced through accessible communication and meaningful faculty participation (Ke, 2024; Miani & Picucci-Huang, 2023).

Bourdieu's concept of habitus offers a way of understanding why such conditions may be experienced differently by different faculty. Habitus comprises *"durable, transposable dispositions"* (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72), such as learned orientations toward authority, critique, communication, and professional risk. Faculty socialised in different educational or organisational settings, and some participants related to their status as international or local staff, a theme that was felt in several views, which may suggest a clashing set of different assumptions about what counts as appropriate challenge, transparent deliberation, or legitimate leadership. This should not be converted into a national-cultural explanation, as participants themselves perceived and used varied cultural language to interpret their experiences. However, the empirical point is institutional: some staff had greater familiarity with the tacit rules governing disagreement than others, depending on the geopolitical location of their campus and its complex, often confusing relationship with a UK parent university. Herzfeld's (2005, p. 3) concept of cultural intimacy is highly relevant, providing *"insiders with their assurance of common sociality"*. Deliberation occurs through private conversations, informal consultations, or pre-meeting negotiations for participants. Thus, power does not disappear in JVUs; it becomes less visible to those without access to such familiar spaces, a point echoed in participants' perceptions and broader research (T. Zhang, 2025).

5.3. Inequality: Capital, Recognition, and Unequal Conversion of Achievement

The inequality findings show that power distance was experienced through the recognition and conversion of professional resources. Participants perceived success in funding, language, gender, and managerial discretion as factors that affected whose achievements

became visible and valued. This is strongly aligned with Bourdieu's (1988, p. 11) conception of the academic field as *"the site of a struggle over the monopoly of scientific authority"*. It does not reward merit in an abstract sense, but rewards forms of achievement that can be recognised and converted within the field. Participant 9A, for example, questioned whether an English-language promotion application could fairly compare candidates with different linguistic backgrounds, and perceived that those whose *"English is their first language"* will probably write a better application. Conversely, Participant 3A perceived Chinese-language requirements as a barrier to accessing external funding. These accounts show that linguistic capital could operate in more than one direction. English mattered in promotion and UK-linked academic communication, while Chinese mattered for funding routes, regulatory interaction, and access to locally embedded professional activity. Such findings echo recent evidence that academics at China-based offshore campuses navigate bureaucratic and geopolitical pressures that can shape recognition, professional experience, and perceived security (Cui & Burford, 2025; Duffy, 2025a).

Foucault's (1980, p. 131) concept of *"regime of truth"* is highly relevant, as it highlights how institutions define what counts as valid evidence, expertise, and performance, and why certain discourses are accepted as legitimate while others are marginalised. Promotion forms, publications, external grants, teaching evaluations, and English-language narratives do not merely record achievement but shape the institutional categories through which achievement becomes visible. Gender, though not a specific focus of this article, was also felt and warrants further analysis. Participant 19A perceived, then, that having a strong voice is challenging *"because we're women"*; this should not be read as a generalised claim about all women or all institutional settings. However, it may suggest that this participant perceived being a woman in a JVU as challenging. Hence, the capacity to convert expertise into influence may be shaped by gendered expectations concerning authority, assertiveness, and professional credibility in JVUs. Bourdieu's (1977) habitus is useful precisely because it directs attention to these apparently ordinary distinctions: the forms of speech, conduct, language, networks, and confidence that come to appear natural or professionally appropriate can themselves reproduce unequal access to recognition. As discussed across the data, perceived inequalities also affected value cohesion because staff did not experience recognition and opportunity to be consistently aligned with stated institutional values. Perceived unfairness weakened trust in shared standards and professional legitimacy.

5.4. Networks: Access, Informal Knowledge, and Architecture of Inclusion

The network findings offer the clearest illustration of Foucault's claim that power is *"exercised through networks"* (Foucault, 2003, p. 29). Participants distinguished formal channels, such as email and documented procedures, from informal channels, such as SMPs, Chinese-language communication, and personal relationships. Participant 25A perceived that proposals were discussed with staff lower in the chain of command, but that *"most of those people are Chinese speakers."* Power, therefore, concerned not only who made decisions, but who had informal access to proposals early enough to influence them. SMPs further shaped access. Participant 22A perceived, *"We have to use [SMP] to survive in China"*, while Participant 28A perceived *"everyone"* as using it despite the policy that it was not a formal channel. The issue then is not that informal networks are illegitimate, but that informal access can become a form of social capital that systematically shapes visibility, timing, and influence. Bourdieu's (1984) account of social capital, in the form of networks, political trust, and relational embeddedness, explains that information, endorsement, and familiarity with senior colleagues could influence opportunities for recognition. Participant 10A's perceived emphasis on being *"well known among the senior leaders"* suggests that advancement was perceived as partly relational alongside written criteria. Staff lacking these resources may

remain formally included yet also excluded. Herzfeld's (1992) work further clarifies that in JVUs, networks translate expectations across UK award requirements, Chinese regulation, leadership, and faculty practice. They may support a sense of belonging while widening the gap between formal membership and substantive participation. Networks, both personal and professional, supported value cohesion when they enabled communication, access, and mutual understanding. However, cohesion weakened where informal, linguistic, or relational and preferential access determined who could influence decisions, in the view of participants.

5.5. Power Distance, Assurance, and Value Cohesion

Analytically, the four themes identified above play distinct yet interconnected roles. Authority identifies who can define and legitimate institutional practice; hierarchy structures how that authority is communicated, enacted, and challenged; inequality captures the uneven distribution of voice, recognition, and professional opportunity; and networks mediate access to information and influence across these four domains. Value cohesion, thus, is not presented as a fifth empirical theme but serves as the central integrative concept through which the collective implications of these four domains are interpreted. Taken together, the findings challenge the assumption that quality assurance and regulatory frames alone can secure value coherence in Sino-British JVUs.

Meanwhile, participants perceived and expressed uncertainty about how far formal policies had travelled across distance. Value cohesion, thus, was shown across participants' accounts not as agreement with either UK or Chinese norms, but rather as a context-bound, negotiated capacity to engage with often-debated understandings of educational purpose, professional legitimacy, professionalism, and participation. Participants perceived a need for visible routes through which staff can understand the rules that govern them, contribute to their interpretation, raise concerns without disproportionate risk, and see how feedback travels back into institutional decision-making. Where these conditions were absent, assurance was felt to remain symbolically present but lacked capital in educational meaning-making, which participants discussed as unevenly distributed in everyday practice, often due to power and its operation.

Notably, accounts did not establish JVUs themselves engage in prohibition, such as over teaching or research freedoms. Yet, two participants independently perceived politically sensitive topics, notably Taiwan and feminism, as areas in which being a joint UK venture seemed to do little to offset local expectations, perceptions of state-determined reality, or cultural practices within political boundaries. Power distance was thus experienced not only through managerial hierarchy or formal governance, but through the anticipated limits of what could be named openly. Figure 3 presents the four founding-led themes as reciprocal rather than linear relationships, showing how their interaction may widen or narrow experienced power distance and, consequently, strengthen or weaken value cohesion in Sino-British JVUs.

The findings, summarised in Figure 3, can be consolidated into pragmatic recommendations for future TNE partnership expansion and mediation, as explored in Table 2. The table translates the study findings into practical leadership considerations and potential institutional responses, and the findings upon which this is based, shown in this article, align with recent TNE research showing that staff must negotiate intercultural and institutional tensions in everyday practice, often without sufficient formal support (Che, 2023; J. Wang, 2025). They further suggest that partnership alignment depends not only on governance structures, but also on whether faculty experience clear expectations, meaningful voice, and context-sensitive institutional support. Table 2 thus seeks to reinforce the article's central argument that value cohesion in JVUs should emerge from documented lived experience,

rather than free-floating generalisation, assumption that policies travel, or that complex cross-cultural business partnerships can be easily integrated without constant leadership vigilance, reflection and concrete institutional mechanisms to empower staff and student voice as part of decision-making processes.

Table 2. A Summary of Findings and Actionable Leadership Recommendations.

Finding	Leadership Implication	Recommended Action	Concrete Institutional Mechanism	Relevant Results Subsection
1. Authority is distributed across Chinese regulation, UK awarding requirements, senior leaders, and schools.	Staff may be uncertain about who holds authority or which requirements apply.	Clarify responsibilities and approval routes.	Publish a bilingual decision-making map identifying decision owners, approval stages, consultation routes, and escalation contacts.	Perceived Authority
2. Policies may be experienced as top-down or insufficiently explained.	Limited explanation may weaken trust and staff voice.	Explain decisions and demonstrate how feedback was considered.	Introduce defined consultation periods and publish brief “you said, we did” reports stating decisions, rationales, and responsible leaders.	Perceived Hierarchy
3. Assurance requirements may not align with local teaching realities.	Formal compliance may not produce workable educational practice.	Co-design and test major educational policies.	Pilot policies in selected modules, gather staff and student feedback, and revise them before institution-wide implementation.	Perceived Authority
4. Promotion and appraisal processes may appear unclear or changeable.	Staff confidence in procedural fairness may decline.	Stabilise criteria and strengthen feedback.	Publish annual criteria and timelines, provide written outcomes, and establish an independent review or appeal route.	Perceived Inequality and Networks
5. English and Chinese communication practices may shape access to opportunities.	Language may create barriers to information, funding, and promotion.	Provide bilingual guidance and practical support.	Issue key policies in both languages and provide translation or application support for promotion and funding processes.	Perceived Inequality and Networks
6. Informal networks may shape early access to institutional information.	Some staff may be formally included but unable to influence decisions.	Formalise the early circulation of proposals.	Circulate draft proposals through official bilingual channels and maintain a shared consultation register.	Perceived Networks
7. Sensitive topics may create uncertainty around research and teaching.	Staff may self-censor or avoid seeking clarification.	Provide confidential and consistent guidance.	Establish a confidential advisory route with named contacts, written guidance, and clear response times.	Perceived Inequality
8. Opportunities for voice may depend on status, relationships, and timing.	Raising concerns may be perceived as professionally risky.	Create safer and more inclusive routes for dialogue and escalation.	Hold quarterly bilingual faculty forums, provide anonymous feedback channels, and publish clear escalation procedures.	Perceived Hierarchy and Networks
9. Value cohesion depends on trust and shared understanding.	Formal rules alone may not sustain a shared educational purpose.	Review staff lived experience alongside formal assurance.	Include faculty voice, fairness, transparency, and evidence of follow-up as standing measures in annual partnership reviews.	Perceived Authority, Hierarchy, Inequality, and Networks

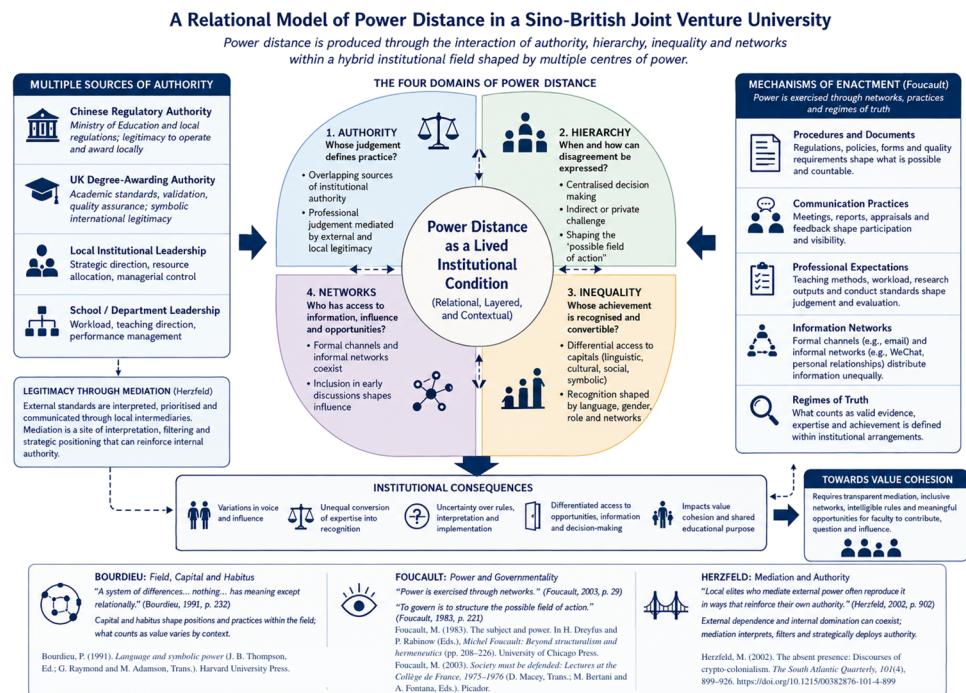


Figure 3. A Relational Model of Power Distance in a Sino-British JVU Informed by Bourdieu (1991), Foucault (1983, 2003), and Herzfeld (2002).

6. Conclusions

This article examined power distance as a lived institutional condition within an anonymised Sino-British JVU in mainland China. The findings answer RQ1 by showing that faculty encounter power through authority, hierarchy, inequality, and networks, and negotiate it through formal procedures, relationships, indirect dialogue, and informal access, perceiving uneven opportunities for voice and influence.

6.1. Limitations

This study is context-bound, drawing on 32 faculty interviews at one anonymised Sino-British JVU. It does not seek to represent the wider TNE sector or evaluate the institution as a whole, nor does it claim that participants' views are correct, truthful, or that they absolutely represent what happens within Site A, or indeed JVUs as a whole. It is about what a small group of people perceived as relevant to questions tied to power distance, as part of a method that may itself influence and make sensitive any subsequent interview and discussion. The study is intended to be of educational development in purpose, so it seeks to identify how faculty experiences may inform reflection on leadership, communication, professional voice, and institutional practice. The findings may support comparison with similar settings, but their form and significance cannot be assumed to apply across other JVUs. The data reflect how participants perceived, interpreted, and felt about institutional power at a particular time. Such accounts are inherently subjective, should be treated with caution, not assumed to be correct, and may be shaped by personal position, incomplete information, selective recall, misunderstanding, or the way events were represented to participants. Participants may therefore be accurate, partial, mistaken, or could be utterly contested. Moreover, these interviews were not systematically triangulated with institutional policies, governance documents, promotion criteria, observations, or decision-making records. Perceptions of favouritism, unfairness, restriction, inequality, or procedural failure are therefore not presented as independently verified institutional facts. The analysis also excludes the perspectives of a UK parent university and parent, Site B, collected within the broader study but not reported here, as well as any Chinese

stakeholders engaged in government or local regulatory policy who supported the establishment of the JVU, more senior decision-makers, and non-participating faculty. Hence, those engaged are those who are reported, and as institutional anonymity was necessary to protect those discussing professionally and politically sensitive experiences, it limits the use of contextual detail, such as policy analysis or documentary statistics, rendering them unavailable for independent interpretation. Accordingly, the study offers a modest, educationally focused account of perceived power distance within one setting, claiming limited analytical transferability rather than statistical generalisability or factual adjudication of perceived interpretations perceived by staff. The institution's geographical location may also have shaped the findings through local resources, infrastructure, recruitment conditions, and access to international networks, particularly as many Chinese JVUs are located in well-resourced or first-tier cities. However, anonymisation prevents disclosure of the city or region, limiting the extent to which these contextual influences can be assessed or compared with other JVUs.

6.2. Future Directions

Future research could extend this study. Comparative research across multiple Sino-British JVUs would be valuable in examining whether similar patterns of institutional power emerge in settings characterised by different governance arrangements, disciplinary profiles, partnership histories, or levels of UK partner involvement. Such work could help distinguish features specific to Site A from those more broadly associated with TNE contexts. Further research could also adopt a matched, multi-perspectival design involving academic staff, professional services colleagues, senior leaders, students, and representatives of UK partner institutions. Including these different groups would enable a fuller account of how authority, legitimacy, participation, and power distance are understood and experienced, while avoiding the assumption that any one institutional group provides a complete account of organisational life. Future research could also strengthen the analysis by triangulating faculty accounts with institutional policies, governance documents, promotion criteria, and decision-making records, where ethical access and participant protection permit. Longitudinal research would offer an additional contribution. Power distance may shift as institutions mature, leadership structures change, policies become embedded, staff turnover occurs, or partners renegotiate their strategic priorities. The issues raised by participants regarding academic freedom, language, gender, and digital communication also merit more sustained attention, and indeed, new technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), may drive changes in the operations of power and lecturer behaviour (Luo & Day, 2026). Finally, this study re-adapts Hofstede's concept of power distance as a sensitising device applied as an experimental method, rather than as a national score or fixed explanatory framework. Future research could replicate this novel approach (Appendices A.1 and A.2) across other JVUs and partnership models, testing whether it contextualises deeper insight into other socio-cultural dimensions, as it has been shown to do so with respect to power distance in this study.

6.3. Concluding Remarks

The article makes three original contributions. First, it provides an empirically grounded account of how faculty perceived and negotiated power through decision-making processes, indirect forms of challenge, recognition, language, and access to informal networks, rather than through formal partnership structures alone. Second, it demonstrates the heuristic value of Hofstede's framework as a sensitising lens for qualitative research, enabling situated analysis of authority, hierarchy, inequality, and networks without reducing participants' experiences to national culture. Third, it develops further the importance

of the concept of value cohesion as a practical institutional condition sustained through effective mediation, inclusive networks, intelligible rules, and meaningful opportunities for staff to exercise professional judgement, raise concerns, and contribute to a shared educational purpose within Sino-British JVUs.

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Data Availability Statement: Data is unavailable for public dissemination due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Appendix A

Appendix A.1. Cultural Dimensions Applied to Interview Foci on JVU Faculty Practices

Hofstede’s Cultural Dimension	Interview Foci
Power Distance	Classroom authority and student engagement; student–staff partnership and feedback exchange; staff voice in curriculum, assessment, and moderation decisions; hierarchical structures in institutional decision-making; influence of leadership, governance, and external oversight on teaching and learning practices within transnational settings.
Individualism–Collectivism	Expectations around independent learning, critical thinking, and classroom participation; tensions between teacher-centred and student-centred pedagogies; collaboration and conformity in teaching, assessment, and curriculum delivery; cultural and language influences on communication, participation, and professional practice; institutional pressures shaping teaching priorities and student outcomes.
Masculinity–Femininity	Balance between teaching, research, assessment, and institutional performance expectations; influence of leadership styles and professional voice on teaching and learning practices; recognition of academic labour and performance; pastoral care, emotional labour, and student support within academic roles; relationships between institutional competitiveness, workload, and teaching quality.
Uncertainty Avoidance	Role of rules, policy, and quality assurance procedures in teaching and assessment; curriculum documentation, moderation, and administrative processes; clarity and consistency of professional expectations around promotion, supervision, and academic responsibilities; regulation of classroom discussion, teaching content, and supervision practices within transnational environments.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimension	Interview Foci
Long-Term–Short-Term Orientation	Institutional reputation, rankings, and long-term educational goals; relationship between teaching quality, research priorities, and student outcomes; professional adaptation to institutional culture and strategic direction; internationalisation of curriculum and development of global perspectives in teaching and learning; tensions between sustainable educational development and short-term institutional pressures.
Indulgence–Restraint	Expectations around workload, availability, and professional responsiveness; wellbeing, work–life balance, and emotional pressures in teaching; role of digital in staff–student interaction and learning; boundaries between formal and informal communication; supervision practices, academic support, and professional responsibilities in postgraduate supervision.

Appendix A.2. Semi-Structured Interview Guide: Hofstede-Aligned Research Questions

Site A Interview Question	Semi-Structured Potential Follow Ups/Researcher Guidance/Notes	General Prompts	Thematic Domain (Hofstede's Cultural Dimension)	Pedagogical Context	Sociological Theme
1. Do you feel it is appropriate to challenge your leaders in your work?	Explore whether hierarchy, cultural expectations, professional status, or concern about consequences shapes Site A staff willingness to challenge authority in teaching and learning practices.	Staff voice in curriculum, assessment, and moderation; hierarchical structures in institutional decision-making.	Power Distance	Leadership and professional challenge	Symbolic power; discipline
2. How can you describe the leadership structure in your university, collective or distributed?	Encourage reflection on current leadership style in Site A and recommendation on leadership type staff believe would support ethical, inclusive, and sustainable JVU practice.	Influence of leadership, governance, and external oversight on teaching and learning practices within transnational settings.	Power Distance	JVU leadership structure	Governmentality; bureaucratic power
3. To what extent can your voice be heard or ideas be adopted, even if they contradict your leaders in your work?	Elicit experiences on how leaders influence teaching, curriculum, assessment, supervision or institutional decisions, and how contradictory views/opinions were received at Site A.	Staff voice in curriculum, assessment and moderation; authority and professional participation.	Power Distance	Staff voice and academic decisions	Symbolic power; power/knowledge; misrecognition
4. Can you describe your educational background?	Trace how staff qualifications, cultural traditions, language, and previous education shaped their teaching practices and expectations of students, and whether they encountered any challenges in promoting their education philosophy when delivering UK degree education at Site A.	Expectations around independent learning, critical thinking, and classroom participation; tensions between teacher-centred and student-centred pedagogies.	Individualism–Collectivism	Pedagogical formation	Habitus

Site A Interview Question	Semi-Structured Potential Follow Ups/Researcher Guidance/Notes	General Prompts	Thematic Domain (Hofstede's Cultural Dimension)	Pedagogical Context	Sociological Theme
5. Do you feel different cultural practices shape your current university positively or negatively?	Invite examples of how participants negotiate different cultural values, ethics, and languages that shape teaching and learning, classroom participation, research practice, approaches to supervision, and the criteria of selecting postgraduate supervisor at Site A.	Collaboration and conformity in teaching, assessment, and curriculum delivery; cultural expectations shaping communication, participation, and professional practice.	Individualism–Collectivism	Intercultural teaching and supervision	Cultural intimacy; local moral orders
6. Is there a particular university ethos or identity you feel you need to “melt into” to succeed in your university?	Consider authenticity, language, collective belonging, conformity, institutional loyalty, ethics, and the balance between local identity and reliance on UK degree-awarding status and prestige at Site A.	Cultural and language influences on communication, participation, and professional practice; institutional pressures shaping teaching priorities and student outcomes.	Individualism–Collectivism	Institutional belonging and identity	Doxa; crypto-colonialism; normalisation
7. Does publish or perish research pressures affect your career in your university?	Discuss reward systems, competition, research quality versus quantity, innovation, authorship, academic integrity in Site A, and how research expectations affect teaching, supervision, and academic priorities.	Balance between teaching, research, assessment, and institutional performance expectations; relationships between institutional competitiveness, workload, and teaching quality.	Masculinity–Femininity	Research and teaching pressures	Field; symbolic capital
8. Have you ever applied for funding support to do your research in your university?	Explore whether funding opportunities and criteria are transparent and equally accessible across nationality, discipline, status or professional networks in Site A.	Competition and access to resources; institutional performance expectations; recognition and professional opportunity.	Masculinity–Femininity	Research funding and opportunity	Economic capital; field
9. To what extent do you feel professional development opportunities are fairly distributed in your university?	Explore access to UKPSF participation, training, mentoring, promotion, leadership development, and postgraduate supervisory roles, including whether criteria are clear and whether merit, pastoral care for students, academic achievement, or favouritism influences the distribution of recognition and opportunity.	Recognition of pastoral care, emotional labour, and student support within academic roles; influence of leadership styles and professional voice; institutional competitiveness and access to professional development.	Masculinity–Femininity	Professional development and progression	Symbolic capital; misrecognition

Site A Interview Question	Semi-Structured Potential Follow Ups/Researcher Guidance/Notes	General Prompts	Thematic Domain (Hofstede's Cultural Dimension)	Pedagogical Context	Sociological Theme
10. How often must your work deal with extensive documents, administration, and bureaucracy?	Discuss whether documentation provides clarity or operate as bureaucracy, control or restrictions on teaching and academic practice.	Role of rules, policy, and quality assurance procedures in teaching and assessment; curriculum documentation, moderation, and administrative processes.	Uncertainty Avoidance	Quality assurance and bureaucracy	Governmentality; discipline
11. How freely can you discuss or pursue your research without interference from an external force?	Explore the influence of academic freedom, censorship, political influence, institutional expectations, and how participants manage uncertain or sensitive areas around research, publication, classroom discussion, teaching content, and supervision.	Regulation of research, classroom discussion, teaching content and supervision; institutional and external oversight.	Uncertainty Avoidance	Academic freedom and teaching content	Surveillance; self-regulation
12. Do you tend to avoid or be willing to face conflict in your working environment?	Reflect on whether uncertainty about rules, hierarchy, relationships, consequences, or institutional support influences participants' response to conflict, and what conditions enable professionally safe disagreement.	Clarity of expectations and procedures; responses to ambiguity and disagreement; regulation of professional conduct; institutional support and accountability.	Uncertainty Avoidance	Conflict management and professional safety	Discipline; power/knowledge
13. What is your motivation to work at this university?	Discuss differences between prior expectations and institutional reality in working at Site A, and whether its educational mission, international reputation, business priorities, and anticipated student outcomes support long-term commitment.	Institutional reputation, rankings, and long-term educational goals; relationship between teaching quality, research priorities, and student outcomes; professional adaptation to institutional culture and strategic direction.	Long-Term–Short-Term Orientation	Institutional mission and motivation	Habitus; field
14. How many years have you worked for your last job, and why did you change to work here?	Reflect on employment opportunities, family or personal considerations, institutional reputation, and adaptation to a different academic and cultural environment.	Professional adaptation to institutional culture and strategic direction; career development and long-term goals.	Long-Term–Short-Term Orientation	Career trajectory and institutional adaptation	Habitus; social capital

Site A Interview Question	Semi-Structured Potential Follow Ups/Researcher Guidance/Notes	General Prompts	Thematic Domain (Hofstede's Cultural Dimension)	Pedagogical Context	Sociological Theme
15. Do technologies enable you to be more globalised in your work?	Consider international collaboration, global citizenship, curriculum internationalisation, educational quality, and the longer-term development of students and colleagues in Site A.	Internationalisation of curriculum and development of global perspectives in teaching and learning; tensions between sustainable educational development and short-term institutional pressures.	Long-Term–Short-Term Orientation	Digital internationalisation	Cultural capital; local/global orders
16. How often do you use the technology in your work, and what do you use most?	Explore usefulness and challenges of AI, WeChat, and other social media platforms for teaching, assessment, supervision and communication, including plagiarism, ghost-writing, academic integrity, monitoring, and accessibility at Site A.	Role of digital tools in staff-student interaction and learning; boundaries between formal and informal communication.	Indulgence–Restraint	Digital teaching and communication	Surveillance; self-regulation
17. How do you deal with your mental health, and do you think your work influences it?	Invite reflection on workload, availability, work-life balance, emotional pressures, academic support, and professional responsibilities in teaching and postgraduate supervision, including the measures needed to protect staff and student welfare.	Expectations around workload, availability, and professional responsiveness; wellbeing, work-life balance, and emotional pressures in teaching.	Indulgence–Restraint	Staff and student wellbeing	Discipline; self-regulation
18. Have you ever considered changing your current job and leaving your university? If so, why?	Elicit insights on leadership values, institutional changes, and sustainability priorities that might improve staff retention and job satisfaction at Site A.	Workload and professional responsibilities; wellbeing and work-life balance; staffing, institutional change, and retention.	Indulgence–Restraint	Staff retention and institutional sustainability	Field; capital

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