



Reproducing Inequality While Celebrating Diversity: An Ethnographic Study of International Students' EMI Learning Experiences in China

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Research background



China's **global economy and soft power projection** worldwide;
The promotion of China's **Belt and Road (B&R) Initiative**;

The **3rd largest country** of international students in the world (MOE, 2018);

The **most popular destinations** of international students in Asia (Li et al., 2020) ;

The **majority** of international students are coming from **Asian countries** (MOE, 2018);

Various **English-medium instruction (EMI)** degree programs in China.

Internationalization of higher education (HE)



In an era of **globalization**, internationalization of HE has been constructed as an inevitable trend and has become a common pursuit of many nations in their educational HE policies (Hong, 2020).

In order to achieve internationalization, correspondingly, **English medium instruction (EMI)** has increased substantially and implemented remarkably at various degree programs in the past decades, particularly in **higher education institutions (HEIs)**.

Opportunities and promises of internationalization in HE : **bringing diversity into the learning environment** (Abdulai et al, 2021); **increasing global competition** (Goglio, 2016); **opening up the unprecedented cross-border communication and cross-cultural exchanges**, *ensuring better educational opportunities and career prospects for individuals* (Li and Eryong, 2021).

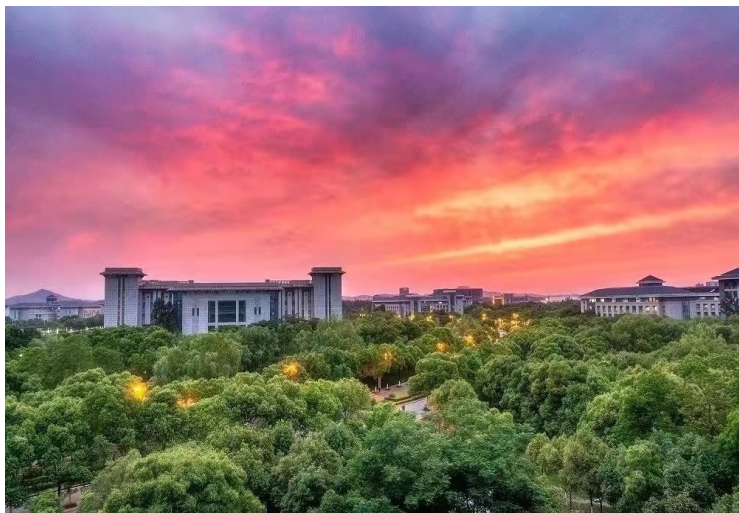
Internationalization of higher education (HE)



contexts: international students from **multilingual and multicultural backgrounds**; **linguistic diversity**

Migration-based multilingualism poses **challenges** for educational and linguistic research

Expansion of EMI



EMI involves ‘the use of the **English language** to teach **academic subjects** (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English. (Macaro et al, 2018).

Regarded as an **umbrella term** (Xu et al., 2021), EMI has expanded in many **non-English speaking countries** all over the world for the sake of attracting international students, enhancing the English language skills, cutting-edge disciplinary knowledge and employability prospects of local students, promoting the university prestige and increasing global competition (Hu and Lei, 2014; Piller and Cho, 2013; Dearden, 2014).

EMI in Higher Education (HE)

EMI has been increasingly adopted for non-language subjects at universities around the world as a symbol of internationalization. (Wilkinson, 2005).

Literature review



EMI in European countries



Advantages of EMI:

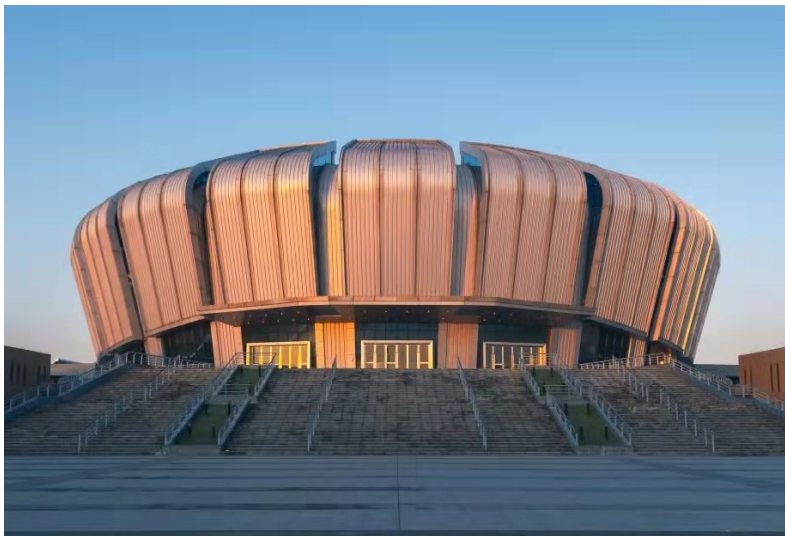
EMI can help universities recruit more international students, promote institutional prestige and raise funds from government (Coleman, 2006; Dearden, 2014). Moreover, EMI can ensure better educational opportunities and career prospects for individuals (Jensen & Thøgersen, 2011; Pecorari et al., 2011; Tong & Shi, 2012).

Challenges of EMI:

EMI was ineffective due to students and teachers' inadequate English proficiency, limited disciplinary knowledge and insufficient pedagogical training for EMI teachers (Bolton et al., 2017; Ekoç, 2020; Werther et al., 2014).

“English-monolingual ways of seeing multilingualism entail a very peculiar perspective, which **disguises its peculiarity as general and universalistic**. This perspective has two consequences: first, **English-monolingual ways of seeing are obscured from being recognized as particularistic**; and, second, **examination of the detailed and specific in its local context is devalued**” (Piller, 2016).

EMI in Non-English speaking Asian countries



EMI studies have **emerged in Asian contexts**, such as in South Korea (Murdoch et al., 2018), Bangladesh (Jahan & Hamid, 2019), India (Bhattacharya, 2013), Singapore (Bolton et al., 2017), Nepal (Sah & Li, 2018), Japan (Bradford, 2019), Indonesia (Hamied & Lenkanawati, 2018).

In comparison with European countries, Asian countries are confronted with **more problems and challenges** in the process of implementing EMI policy due to many factors. These factors have brought many negative consequences in various social contexts, such as English deficiency of teachers and students, student' s limited disciplinary knowledge, ineffective and insufficient pedagogical training for EMI teachers. Some studies revealed the linguistic marginalization and educational inequality and injustice caused by EMI (Hu & Lei, 2014; Piller & Cho, 2013; Sah & Li, 2018)

EMI in China

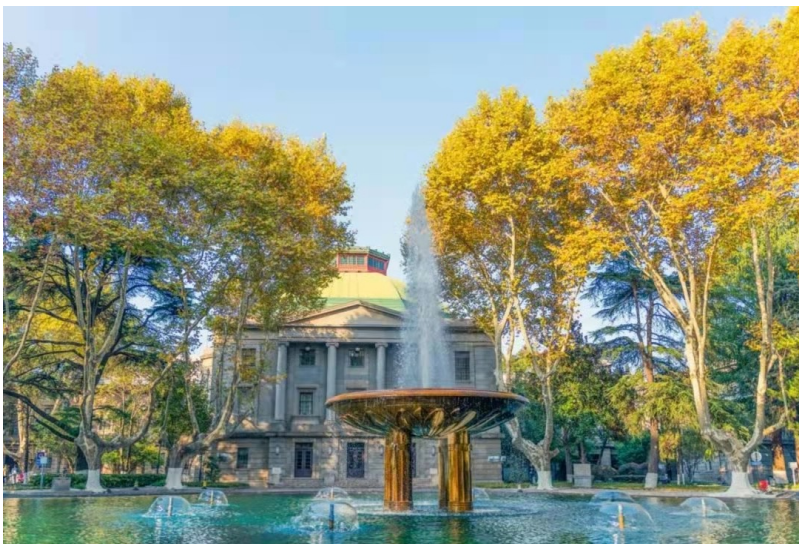


EMI at the tertiary level has been **accelerated** by the ever-increasing degree of the **internationalization of HE** in China. This is evidenced at China's Southeast university, where EMI has been employed in seven majors (including architecture, software engineering, international economy and trade, clinical medicine, etc., totally more than 150 courses) (MOE, 2018).

Researchers have touched upon the EMI field with great variability in topics such as **teachers and students' perceptions and attitudes** towards EMI, **advantages and disadvantages of EMI**, **EMI teachers' professional development etc.** (Macaro and Han, 2020; Yuan et al, 2020).

Existing studies focus on EMI in China's **developed cities and regions**, such as Hong Kong (Gu, Li & Jiang, 2021); Shanghai (Song, 2021); Beijing; Hangzhou.

Research gap



Little is known about EMI learning experiences of **non-English speaking** international students who come from **less-developed Asian countries in China's under-resourced peripheral borderland universities**.

This study attempts to explore EMI learning experiences of **international students from Bangladesh, Yemen, Uzbekistan at a university in Yunnan, a city in China's peripheral region, the educational hub connecting China with South Asia and Southeast Asia**.

Theoretical concepts



(1) Neoliberalism as language policy (Piller & Cho, 2013)

Language in Society 42, 23–44.
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Neoliberalism as language policy

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how an economic ideology—neoliberalism—serves as a covert language policy mechanism pushing the global spread of English. Our analysis builds on a case study of the spread of English as a medium of instruction (MoI) in South Korean higher education. The Asian financial crisis of 1997/98 was the catalyst for a set of socioeconomic transformations that led to the imposition of “competitiveness” as a core value. Competition is heavily structured through a host of testing, assessment, and ranking mechanisms, many of which explicitly privilege English as a terrain where individual and societal worth are established. University rankings are one such mechanism structuring competition and constituting a covert form of language policy. One ranking criterion—internationalization—is particularly easy to manipulate and strongly favors English MoI. We conclude by reflecting on the social costs of elevating competitiveness to a core value enacted on the terrain of language choice. (English as a global language, globalization, higher education, medium of instruction (MoI), neoliberalism, South Korea, university rankings)*

NEOLIBERALISM is an **economic doctrine** that has undergirded the global expansion of advanced **capitalism** over the past three or four decades. Its basic idea is a resuscitation of nineteenth century **laissez-faire** (hence, neoliberal) **capitalism** based on Adam Smith’s competitive equilibrium model, in which the unregulated (hence, free) market is assumed to work for the benefit of all if individual competition is given free reign (cf. Stiglitz 2002:74).

Neoliberalism serves as a **covert form of language policy**, which imposes **English as a natural and neutral medium of academic excellence**” (Piller & Cho, 2013).

Influenced by neoliberalism, **competition** in higher education has been intensified and English language is considered as important capital for individuals (Bourdieu, 1991).

Theoretical concepts



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These structures of competition allocate **a central place to English—as an index of global competitiveness—as a mechanism** to distinguish those who are allowed to progress to better opportunities from those who are forced to bear the burden of underperformance by being relegated to a progressively shrinking sphere of opportunity.

In fact, “the spread of English is not a result of the free linguistic market but of a **systematic, organized, and orchestrated policy**” (Piller & Cho, 2013, p.38). Such policy like EMI not only promotes the competitiveness of higher education and increases the social cost but also **widens the gaps between the elite groups and disadvantaged groups.**



Theoretical concepts



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Competition is heavily structured through a host of testing, assessment, and ranking mechanisms, many of which **explicitly privilege English as a terrain** where individual and societal worth are established.

University rankings are one such mechanism structuring competition and constituting a covert form of language policy. One ranking criterion—**internationalization**—is particularly easy to manipulate and strongly favors English MoI.

Internationalization is tied to English MoI, making MoI a terrain where universities compete and a relatively cost-effective means to improve their standing in university rankings.



Theoretical concepts



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(2) Social reproduction theory (Collins, 2009)



Review in Advance first posted online
on June 12, 2009. (Minor changes may
still occur before final publication
online and in print.)

Social Reproduction in Classrooms and Schools

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Key Words

language, social class, social inequality, education, ethnographies,
multilevel analysis

Abstract

Social reproduction theory argues that schools are not institutions of equal opportunity but mechanisms for perpetuating social inequalities. This review discusses the emergence and development of social reproduction analyses of education and examines three main perspectives on reproduction: economic, cultural, and linguistic. Reproduction analyses emerged in the 1960s and were largely abandoned by the 1990s; some of the conceptual and political reasons for this turning away are addressed. New approaches stress concepts such as agency, identity, person, and voice over the structural constraints of political economy or code, but results have been mixed. Despite theoretical and methodological advances—including new approaches to multilevel analysis and alertness to temporal processes—the difficult problem remains to understand how social inequality results from the interplay of classrooms, schools, and the wider society.

A globalized world is characterized by extreme **economic inequality and mass migration**. Together these features pose significant challenges for many parts of society.

“Schools are not institutions of equal opportunity but mechanisms for perpetuating social inequalities”. Specifically, schools make it more likely that students with dominant cultural backgrounds will succeed, thus contributing to the **reproduction of existing social hierarchies**.



Theoretical concepts



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In this regard, studies often try to understand how learning and schooling is “reproductive,” that is, how features of economic background, cultural practice, or language use, as played out in school and nonschool sites, enter into educational processes and result in **the perpetuation of class, cultural, and linguistic inequalities** (e.g., Collins 1988; Foley 1990; Heath 1983; Heller 1994; LaDousa 2005).



In studying classrooms, schools, and face-to-face interaction, it is necessary to account for the existence and operation of structural inequalities, to study how language hierarchies forged at the level of nation or region come to play themselves out in classrooms, schools, and local communities.

Scholars are interested in how people experience global processes like migration and new forms of cultural and linguistic diversity and how that experience is given shape and meaning by the way they use language and the way language is used with them.

Research questions



1

What are the discourses about the international students in EMI programs at national and provincial levels?



2

What are institutional practices and learning experiences in EMI programs for international students at China's border university (BU)?

Methodology: research context



Geographical advantage of Yunnan:

China's Southwest of *borderland*, “*educational hub*”, “*bridgehead*” connecting China with Southeast Asia and South Asia (Li & Han, 2020; Ling, 2018).

Demographic information:

more than **19,000** international students in Yunnan in 2018 (MOE, 2018), over **80%** come from South Asian and Southeast Asian countries in Yunnan (Yun & Zhu, 2017)

Research site: border university (BU) in Yunnan



“The South and Southeast Asian University Network” was held by BU and other institutions at Kunming (the capital city of Yunnan province) in 2018.

BU has sped up its internationalization to implement the national policy guidelines and serve the economic and social development of Yunnan province (Official website of BU, 2021).

BU recruited around **2400 international students** in 2018 (MOE, 2019).



A critical sociolinguistic ethnography (CSE) as Approach



1

CSE aims to precisely **reveal the links between local discourse practices, the everyday talk and interactional routines of classrooms and the wider social and ideological order in the field of education** (Martin-Jones, 2007, p.171).

2

CSE provides opportunities for researchers to engage themselves into the **local contexts for conducting deep observations**, which allow researchers to illuminate how people behave, interpret, and engage with language policy (Sutton & Levinson, 2001).

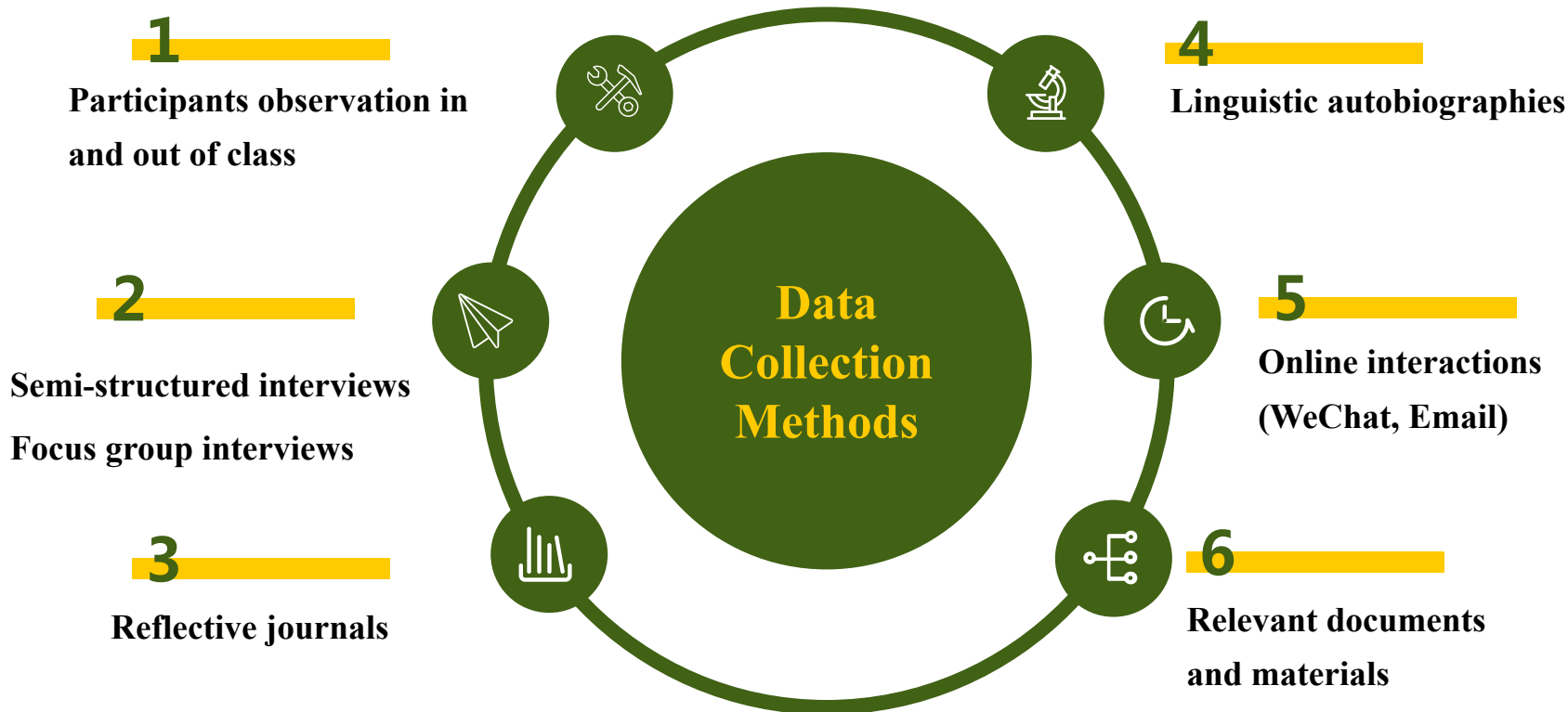
3

CSE also allows the analysis of the **tensions and contradictions** that participants experience in locally situated practices in relation to wider social dimensions and policy agendas (Heller, 2006, 2011; Li, 2017).

Data collection methods



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Summary of datasets



Data Sets	Contents
Policy documents	EMI policies for international students from China's MOE; Admission requirements for international students in EMI; Aim and scope of international students cultivation in China etc.
Interviews	International students from Bangladesh, Yemen and Uzbekistan; EMI Chinese teachers etc.
Class observations	Interactions between teachers and international students; class equipments; students performances and feelings in EMI classes etc.
Reflective journals	International students' language and disciplinary learning experiences; students' attitudes towards course design and EMI learning etc.
Linguistic autobiographies	Mainly focusing on students' Chinese and English language difficulties and strategies etc.
Online interactions	Teachers and international students' EMI teaching and learning experiences and strategies etc.

Key research participants



Participants profile - 14 international students

Pseudonym	Year of birth	Gender	Nationality	Chinese proficiency	Self-identified language backgrounds
P1	1996	M	Yemen	Basic	Arabic; English
P2	1997	M	Yemen	HSK 4	Arabic; Chinese, English
P3	1999	M	Uzbekistan	Basic	Uzbek, Russian, English
P4	2000	M	Uzbekistan	Basic	Uzbek, English
P5	1999	F	Bangladesh	Basic	Bengali; Hindi; English; Chinese
P6	1996	F	Bangladesh	Basic	Bengali, English
P7	1999	F	Bangladesh	Basic	Tribe language; Bengali; English; Hindi; Chinese, Japanese
P8	1997	M	Bangladesh	Basic	Bengali, English
P9	1997	M	Bangladesh	Basic	Bengali; English; Hindi; Chinese
P10	2000	M	Bangladesh	Basic	Bengali, English, Hindi, Urdu,
P11	1998	M	Bangladesh	intermediate	Bengali; English; Chinese
P12	1998	M	Bangladesh	intermediate	Bengali; English; Chinese
P13	1988	M	Bangladesh	HSK5; HSKK (advanced)	Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, Chinese, English
P14	1994	M	Bangladesh	HSK5; HSKK (intermediate)	Bengali, Arabic, Chinese, English

Participants profile - 5 EMI Chinese teachers

Partici pants	Age	Year (s) of teaching	Gen der	Professio nal titles	Self-identified language backgrounds	Names of the instructed course	Research expertise	Educational backgrounds
T1	24	0.5	F	Teaching assistant	ChineseEnglish; CET 6	The experiment of high-level language programming	software engineering	First-year postgraduate in China
T2	33	2	M	Associate professor	ChineseFrench English (IELTS, 6.5 points)	High-level language programming	mechanical engineering	PhD in France
T3	33	2	F	Associate professor	ChineseEnglish; CET 6	Professional Chinese Reading and Communication	social computing	PhD in China, Visiting scholar in Canada
T4	41	1	M	Lecturer	ChineseEnglish; CET 4	Introduction to Software Engineering	artificial intelligence	PhD in China
T5	43	15	M	Lecturer	ChineseEnglish; (IELTS, 6.5 points)	Computer architecture	financial engineering and security	MA in China

Findings: celebratory discourses at national level



In 2010, ***“The Outline of China’ s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)”***

*.....to promote the comprehensive, balanced and sustainable development of studying in China, and [to] build an **international brand of Chinese education**. (MOE 2010)*

In 2010, ***“The Plan for Studying in China”***

*Development Goals: **making China the largest destination country of international students in Asia by 2020** ; aiming to establish a work and service system that is commensurate with China’ s international status, scale and level of education; establishing a large number of high-level teachers in international education; building up universities with distinctive characteristics and high-level disciplinary teams; cultivating a large number of high-quality foreign graduates who know and are friendly with China (MOE, 2010).*

*Professional courses: **creating majors with brand, optimizing major structure, and establishing a professional course system which is more attractive to foreign students studying in China.....offering a certain number of degree programs in EMI and focusing on degree programs with Chinese characteristics and advantages to improve their international influence** (MOE, 2010).*

Findings: celebratory discourses at national level



In 2016, **“The Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative”**.

.....to jointly develop open language courses and gradually incorporate courses in our different languages into the curricula of each Belt and Road country to encourage institutions from the Belt and Road countries to work in partnership with Chinese institutions to establish programs that teach their own languages in China (MOE 2016).”

In 2019, **“China’s Education Modernization 2035”**.

.....to further open up [China] to the outside world in education’, the number of international students increased from 238,184 in 2009 to 492,185 (from 196 countries) in 2018 (MOE 2019).

Convergent management for international students



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The head of the International Department of the Ministry of Education answers reporters' questions on issues related to studying in China (MOE, 2019)

“The Quality Standards for International Students in Higher Education (for Trial Implementation)” clearly proposes to promote the convergence of teaching, management and services for Chinese and foreign students. The document requires universities to integrate the international students education into the whole university’s education quality assurance system, enact a unified standard teaching management and examination and assessment system, provide equal and consistent teaching resources and management services, and protect the cultural exchange and legitimate rights and interests of Chinese and foreign students

.....We should not only treat Chinese and foreign students equally, but also see the differences in customs, language and culture of international students, and help them understand Chinese culture and integrate into the school and society as soon as possible with the principles of reasonableness, fairness and prudence.(MOE, 2019)

Findings: celebratory discourses at provincial level



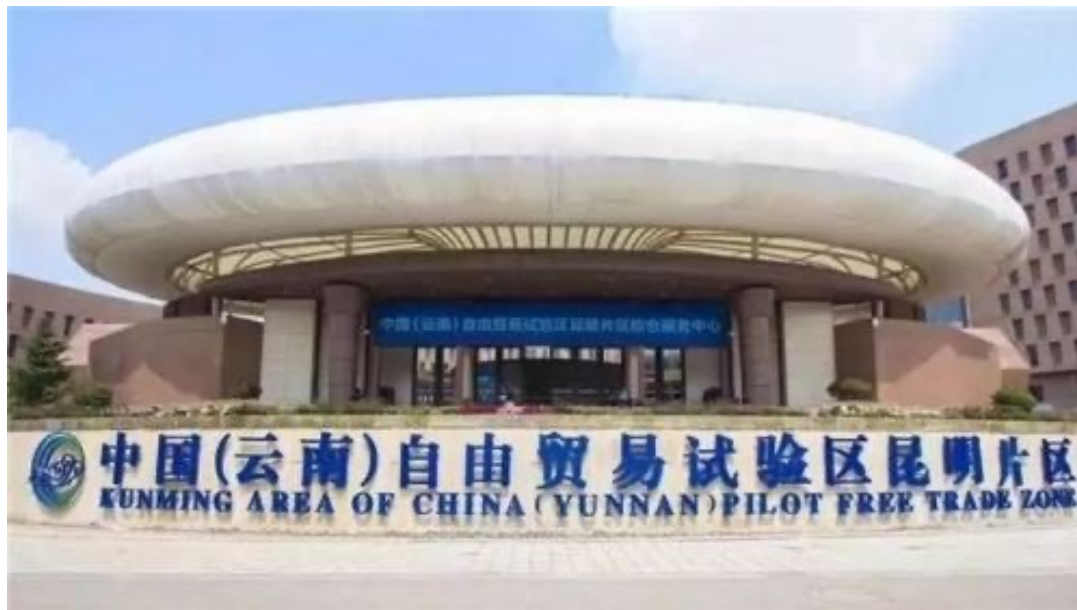
《中共云南省委关于制定云南省国民经济和社会发展第十四个五年规划和二〇三五年远景目标的建议》明确提出——

加快建设我国面向南亚东南亚辐射中心



South Asia and Southeast Asia Radiation Center established in Kunming, Yunnan (2017)

Findings: celebratory discourses at provincial level



Yunnan built the “**China (Yunnan) Pilot Free Trade Zone**” in 2019.

Its ultimate goal is to **create a commodity exhibition and trading center focusing on import and export commodities in South and Southeast Asia** (Yunnan Daily, 2020).



Summary



To sum up, relevant policy documents at the national and provincial levels indicate that China and its HEIs **celebrate the diversity discourses** of international students for achieving China's ambitious development and realizing the “**equality**”, “**inclusivity**”, “**accessibility**” and “**diversity**” for international students education through **convergent management**. It can be seen that international students are seen as **valuable symbolic capital** (Li, 2020). They are **warmly welcomed** in such celebrating discourses and are regarded as ideal cross-cultural communicators for China and other countries.

Findings: exclusionary experiences

Explicit institutional practices

(1) Class placement:

There are six Schools/Departments recruit international students in EMI programs at BU, all international students are grouped into 6 classes in terms of their major. All of them are physically segregated in classes only with foreign students but without Chinese students at BU. (Low English proficiency and limited disciplinary knowledge)

International students' experiences: isolated

We have been attending classes for more than two months, and I wish we could learn and communicate with Chinese students. Unluckily, we are placed in a separate classroom. It's like we are isolated, so we can't understand Chinese culture, we can't learn Chinese well, it's so meaningless (interview with P3, 22/11/2020).

Findings : exclusionary experiences



Explicit institutional practices

(2) Course design:

In comparison with Chinese students, EMI international students have **much fewer** engineering major courses. Most of their classes are related to Chinese language learning rather than major courses. (Chinese deficiency and limited professional knowledge)

International students' experiences: **unfair**

S10: We have 6 classes for Chinese language, 3 classes for software engineering. I mean it seems that software engineering is optional, and Chinese language is my major. ***This is unfair for international students. We hope that we can have more major courses as Chinese students.***
(The interview with S10, 15/08/2020)

Findings: exclusionary experiences

Implicit institutional practices

(1) EMI teachers:

There are only 3 or 5 Chinese novice teachers are appointed to take EMI for international students at the School of Software (SS). These teachers are relatively young teachers without too much experiences in teaching . (unequal teacher distribution, economic incapability)

International students' experiences: **disappointed**

*When talking about teacher's professional ability, we are **disappointed**. Frankly speaking, in my class, most of students cannot understand what teachers are teaching. If I say it directly, **many teachers don't know enough about software engineering**. They are **not qualified to teach**. **All the classes are dull, boring and repetitive**. So, in my free time, I would like to teach some fundamental knowledge to my classmates, like C++. (Interview with S7, 20/09/2020)*

Findings: exclusionary experiences



Implicit institutional practices

(2) Class equipment:

EMI Engineering international students use the Chinese-versioned computers for experimental practices. However, a majority of them are beginners of Chinese language learner. (economic incapability)

International students' experiences: depressed

"In our experimental class, we need to use Chinese-versioned computers for programming design. The tragedy is that I don't know Chinese language at all". We are EMI international students, why not English-versioned computers. I am so depressed.
(Interview with S8, 20/09/2020)

Findings: exclusionary experiences



Implicit institutional practices

(3) EMI Textbooks:

There is no strict examination and approval system for the textbooks used for international students. The university does not have any mechanism to help EMI teachers to choose textbooks. On the contrary, Chinese students have specific teaching materials, and the selection of teaching materials is discussed and approved by the research team. (Inadequate teaching and research team)

International students' experiences: helpless

Although I couldn't understand what the teacher was teaching in class, I expected that I could use the textbook to study. But the textbook was also in Chinese. I felt helpless.
(Interview with S10, 22/11/2020)



Summary



Despite China's language policies at macro and meso levels aim to **celebrate the diversity discourses of international students and achieve the equity, inclusiveness and excellence** of international students' education through **convergent management**, there are some **problems of policy practices at meso and micro levels.**

The findings reveal the **discrepancies and inconsistencies** between EMI policy rhetoric and actual practices from **multiple levels** because of a series of **explicit** (class placement, course design) **and implicit** (EMI teachers, textbooks, class equipment) **institutional practices.** The local university faced two realities: **economic incapability and under-resourced condition of itself in a peripheral region; unqualified international students from underdeveloped countries.**



Summary



This epistemology of **English monolingual hegemony** in the **English-speaking countries** is challenged by China's multilingual contexts, especially in the emerging EMI contexts for international students who come from **underdeveloped countries** studying in **China's multilingual and under-resourced regions**.

The **envisioned promises and benefits of English and EMI** failed to meet the real needs of international students in China's borderland. By contrast, the **educational inequality and social reproduction** caused by English and EMI are **reinforced by institutional practices**.

Challenging the “monolingual ways of seeing multilingualism” mindset

The epistemology of English monolingual hegemony in the English-speaking countries is challenged by China's multilingual contexts, especially in the emerging EMI contexts for international students who come from underdeveloped countries studying in China's multilingual and under-resourced regions.

Echoed with Piller's (2016) concept of using generic and context-free perspective to see multilingualism, this monolingual way of seeing multilingualism neglects the speciality of the participants and research site in current ethnographic study. In this case, multilingualism is seen as an umbrella term that covers a wide variety of linguistic contexts and practices in the name of diversity. Indeed, this diversity is erased in context-free multilingualism regarded as a combination of serial or parallel monolingualism (Heller, 2007; Piller, 2016).

Discussion



HEIs perpetuating social inequalities

*The successful integration of international students is greatly hindered by structural mechanisms. **BU does not bridge but rather widens the gap** between international students and local Chinese students because they are physically segregated and linguistically underprepared.*

*Although attempting to **achieve equality for Chinese and international students** through convergent management, BU reproduces the social stratification and injustice for international students as a result of its **economic incapability and faculty inadequacy** through implicit and explicit practices in EMI program.*

*Officially, BU positions itself as an international university embracing cultural diversity, **but in reality**, the ways in which BU helps students from diverse backgrounds to fit into local community and study **overlook the diversity**.*

*Despite the rhetoric of celebrating diversity, **BU has entrenched educational inequality for international students**. The study resonates with findings from other contexts of the **social reproduction** of international student education (Collins, 2009; Li, 2017; Li, 2020).*

Discussion



EMI entrenching educational inequalities

Apart from the English proficiency required for EMI in the focal university, BU, located in a **China's peripheral region, also lacks economic capital**. This can be reflected in the inadequacy of competent EMI teachers and difficulties in selecting English-version textbooks and class equipment **constraint by their financial conditions**.

International students who come from less-developed countries studying in a peripheral region in China are economically and linguistically disadvantaged. English proficiency and economic ability serve as the “gate-keeper” of EMI in China's borderlands. Such mindset is accordance with Piller and Cho's (2013) concept of “Neoliberalism as language policy”, which imposes English as a natural and neutral medium of academic excellence. Neoliberalism reinforces the English hegemony by increasing the free competition among higher education institutions and individuals. It makes English and EMI as the overwhelming capital for higher education, thus increasing social costs and strengthening social and educational stratification.

The spread of English is not a result of the free linguistic market but of a “systematic, organized, and orchestrated policy.” Such policy like EMI promotes the competitiveness of higher education and increases the social cost but **widens the gaps and reproduces the inequality** between elite groups and disadvantaged groups.



Implications



The different levels of language policy are interrelated with each other. We should not only consider EMI policy from top-down implementation, but also from bottom-up practices. Implicit and explicit institutional practices might reinforce education inequality for international students.

This study indicates that HEIs need to reconstruct their social, cultural, and institutional systems to embrace equity, diversity and inclusiveness to empower international students' capacity.

A more inclusive and open-minded pedagogy should be implemented to help international students integrate into Chinese society and higher education system. We should consider the international students education in China's context from multilingual lens rather than monolingual perspective.

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Thank You !

Your comments, suggestions are warmly welcomed !

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