

Shaping Scholars Across Borders: The Journey of Chinese Doctoral Students in Malaysia

Xixi Lu & Hadina Habil*

Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 UTM Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia

Submitted: 5/5/2024. Revised edition: 18/10/2024. Accepted: 11/11/2024. Published online: 15/12/2024

ABSTRAK

There has been a surge in the number of individuals from China undertaking their doctoral studies in Malaysia. However, it is complicated to cultivate international doctoral students in an intercultural environment. Current research has been widely conducted to explore the experiences and qualities of international doctoral learning, but there is little attention paid to the transformation of the intercultural academic identity of the students. This study takes a perspective of acculturation theory to examine how Chinese international doctoral students reconstruct their academic identity in a new environment in Malaysia to complete their research goals. A qualitative semi-structured interview method was adopted to gain an in-depth perception, and 8 Chinese doctoral students in a Malaysian research-intensive university were interviewed. Themes are analyzed by using the software ATLAS.ti 24, and intercultural communication competence (ICC), intercultural supervision, and learning community influence the academic identity construction. Moreover, ICC is the core element, from which other relevant factors can play a more effective role in intercultural academic identity transformation. This research forms a model of how international doctoral students' academic identity can be functionally constructed. Furthermore, it has implications for international students to improve their overall learning experiences and ultimately complete their PhD successfully.

Kata kunci: Academic identity, International Doctoral Students, Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), supervision, community

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Globalization has a tremendous impact on Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) nowadays, and internationalization has become one of the crucial indicators for HEIs to display the qualities of their education. At the same time, with the so-called “hybridized identities”, HEIs currently fulfill more roles, such as teaching, research, external engagement, consultancy, and management (Anikina *et al.*, 2020). Under those changing situations worldwide, HEIs are now engaging more in international student mobility (Dai & Elliot, 2023), through which knowledge flows and innovation processes take place (Zheng *et al.*, 2023).

On one hand, certain universities encourage teachers and students to join in overseas learning programs; while on the other hand, other universities actively recruit international students. According to Dai *et al.* (2023), international doctoral students are a substantial part of HEIs and represent the quality of education in a country. Nevertheless, international doctoral students face many cultural, educational, and psychological challenges when studying in a host country (Yasmin *et al.*, 2021). As

*Correspondence to: Hadina Habil (email: hadina@utm.my)

stated by Zheng *et al.* (2023), conflict in different values between the home and host countries may lead to the students' slow learning process, inefficient doctoral supervision, limited professional identity development, and even dropping out from academics.

As international learners, whether they can finish their PhD journey in a host country largely depends on whether they can successfully realize academic identity transformation. Doctoral education is not only about knowledge production, but identity formation, which is one of the central tasks for students (Ai, 2017). The process of doctoral identity transformation requires students to socialize and fully integrate into a given disciplinary community (Choi, 2021). For international doctoral students whose identity is more complex, identity construction goes beyond the academic context and involves personal and sociocultural contexts (Xu, 2023). This raises questions about how international doctoral students can survive these complex contexts, transform their identities, and complete the research journey. In the following sections, the article first flows to a literature review on intercultural doctoral learning experiences to highlight the significance of the study. Then, the theory of cross-cultural adaptation is introduced. Next, it displays the research method and findings followed by discussions on how these results answer the research questions of academic identity transformation, and a modal of international doctoral students' academic transformation is constructed. The author intends to contribute to theoretical and practical values, and implications are provided at the end of the article.

1.1 Objective and Research Question

The objective of this study is to examine the factors that contribute to the academic identity transformation by exploring the experiences of international Chinese doctoral students studying in Malaysia. The research question guiding this study is: What factors contribute to the functional academic identity transformation of international doctoral students?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past three decades, many studies have flourished on the issues of international doctoral students' learning experiences and research supervision (Baydarova, 2023). The author searched the keyword of international doctoral student supervision on the Web of Science where world-class research literature can be found from rigorously selected core journals, and there are around 200 articles (update in February, 2024). Using VOSviewer software, the author examined the keywords, indicating the most researched topics of international doctoral students' supervision experiences, challenges, impact, identity, strategies, perceptions, etc. (Figure 1). As can be seen from Figure 1, research about identity of the doctoral students is still lacking. Next, through full-text reading, the most relevant articles about international doctoral student supervision are chosen. Generally, they mainly cover seven categories, which are the outcome of the intercultural doctoral learning, factors influencing the intercultural doctoral learning experiences, doctoral students' becoming, qualities of supervisors, dynamic supervision process (such as in feedback), strategies for navigating cultural changes, and motivation for studying abroad.

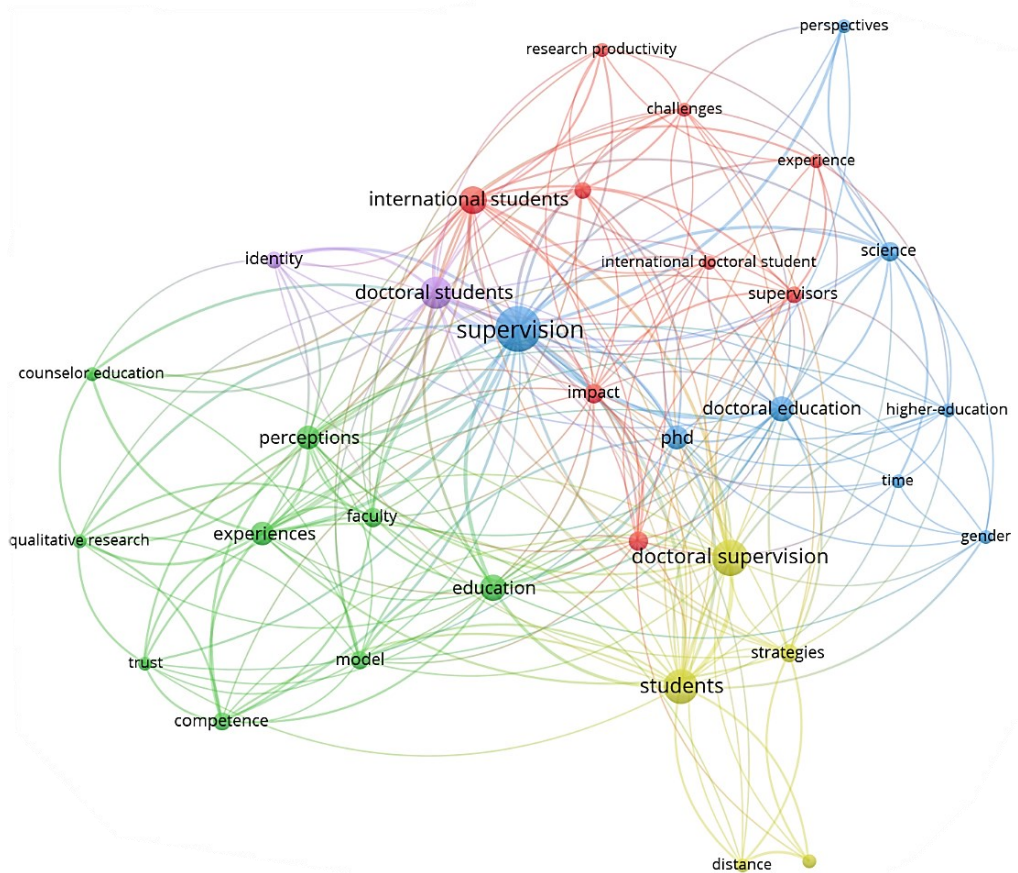


Figure 1 Main research topics related to international doctoral students

2.1 Categories of the Literature

In the first category, a study conducted by Pinto (2020) concluded that doctoral learning in the intercultural context is more productive than problematic, productive as in mutual learning, and problematic in linguistic and cultural barriers. In the second category, scholars demonstrated the influencing factors to intercultural doctoral learning experiences from different angles, such as academic and non-academic factors, cultural mismatches, institutional support, hidden curriculum, and misunderstandings, etc. (Aspland *et al.*, 2021; Baydarova, 2023; Hu *et al.*, 2016; Kidman *et al.*, 2017; Zheng *et al.*, 2023). However, those studies are mainly concentrated on macro social levels, especially cultural factors, and ignore the micro communication factors. In the third category, scholars conduct research about the becoming of PhD from different perspectives, including independence, enacting agency, voice, identity, etc. (Ai, 2017; Hu *et al.*, 2020; Nguyet Nguyen & Robertson, 2022; Wu & Hu, 2020; L. Xu & Grant, 2017), and those different terms have meanings in common as in the field of acculturation, and are all related to the process of adaptation. Among those studies, Ai (2017) illustrated that students need to go through the culture space to complete identity construction, and focus on dialogical relationships, and academic community. Nevertheless, this research ignored the relationship

between the intrapersonal and interpersonal elements. Moreover, those studies illustrate how to transform into a qualified PhD student in a different cultural context, but they lack theory support on how to improve those personal abilities systematically. Additionally, the research method is mainly the researcher's auto-ethnography, which is a little biased and subjective. In the fourth category, the quality of the supervisor is divided into intrapersonal, interpersonal, and academic abilities (Pinto, 2023). However, intercultural communication is a two-way process in which only improving on supervisors' competence is not enough. In the fifth category, some scholars conduct the study of the dynamic supervision process in such specific learning aspects as writing feedback and analyze how critical thinking can be developed (Xu, 2017; Xu *et al.*, 2021; Xu & Hu, 2020). In the sixth and seventh categories, scholars mainly discuss why students study in a specific country and how they deal with barriers using strategies such as in-between space or third space (Dai & Hardy, 2021; Elliot *et al.*, 2016).

To sum up, those seventh categories about international doctoral students' research help form the concepts of intercultural academic identity construction. Nevertheless, the current literature has not formed a theoretical framework for international doctoral students' acculturation process and has ignored the students' initiative to develop intercultural communication competence (ICC). Furthermore, the research methods mainly adopt the researchers' auto-ethnography, through which the findings are limited and biased to some extent. Additionally, most scholars only pay attention to the cultivation of international doctoral students in the context of developed countries (Dai *et al.*, 2023). Few studies have concentrated on international students' academic challenges in non-Western countries. As highlighted by Singh (2021), in the context of modernization and internationalization of the universities, Malaysia is recognized as a hub for international students, with its number still growing every year. As a result, this research sets out to explore these issues in the Malaysian academic context. By taking the perspective of cross-cultural adaptation, it examines how Chinese international doctoral students build their academic identity in Malaysia, and finally forms a model of international doctoral students' academic identity construction.

2.2 Theoretical Lens

Two theories are adopted in this study, which are Cross-Cultural Adaptation (Kim, 2017) and Academic Identity (Clegg, 2008). According to an Integrative Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation (Kim, 2017), humans have an inherent drive to adapt and grow. When in a new cultural environment, individuals will go through the iterative process of stress, adaptation, and growth. To finish the transformation of intercultural identity in a state of both functional fitness and psychological health, individuals need to develop personal and social communication activities. In the dimension of personal communication, individuals need to improve host communication competence, while in the dimension of social communication, individuals need to build interpersonal relationships and be involved in mass community. Moreover, the host's communication competence is associated with participation in interpersonal and mass communication activities.

The other theory used in this study is academic identity, which was systematically illustrated by Clegg (2008), and reviewed by other scholars, such as Anikina *et al.* (2020). The structure of identity consists of four dimensions, which include personal identities, relational identities, collective identities, and professional identities (Ashmore *et al.*, 2004). As a kind of professional identity, academic identity develops through the interactions of the academics with their surroundings by way of linguistic exchange

and social performance (Cerulo, 1997). According to Clegg (2008), academic identity is related to the local and contextual environment, which involves interaction with changes in university systems and external circumstances, and hybridity in relationship to discipline and place. Academic identity consists of such aspects as values, professional self-regulation, collegiality, and behavioral patterns (Anikina *et al.*, 2020).

3.0 METHOD

A qualitative paradigm was adopted to investigate the academic identity construction of Chinese international doctoral students in Malaysia. The qualitative paradigm is the most appropriate means to gain a complete perception of the participants on the real-life experiences (Anikina *et al.*, 2020). The study was conducted at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), a research-intensive comprehensive university that is one of the world's top science and engineering institutions with various disciplines. This university was chosen because it recruits a large number of international students (the current number is 4987 from the official website of the university in 2024) by offering a variety of programs. The author is currently studying at this university, and is positioned as in-between (Dai & Elliot, 2023). As an insider, the intercultural environment of the university gives the author the inspiration and motivation to conduct this study. As an outsider, the author attaches to other Chinese international doctoral students on the campus to gain their views. This study focused on Chinese international doctoral students only. This is because Chinese students on the campus occupy a large proportion, and participants coming from only one country can better explain the academic identity transformation experiences in this specific population.

The sample for the study was 8 Chinese international doctoral students (demographic information in Table 1) currently studying in UTM for different disciplines. The participants were selected using purposive sampling. They possessed unique experiences, varying in age, gender, career paths, marital status, academic semester, disciplines, and research stages. This diversity made the findings more applicable to a wider range of contexts and supported the exploration of how different factors influence the academic identity transformation. Eight participants were sufficient to achieve data saturation, as no new themes emerged during the interviews. In-depth semi-structured interviews were adopted for collecting data on Chinese doctoral students' experiences, through both in-person and digital communication methods (WeChat). Questions for international doctoral students focused on their learning and research experiences. After obtaining consent, the author conducted interviews with 8 international doctoral students, and the process was audio-recorded with each interview lasting 40-90 mins. The author first interviewed two participants to check the interview frame flow, and then analyzed the data to check whether the frame could collect abundant data. The sequence and content of the interview structure were revised accordingly. Then the rest 6 participants were interviewed one by one. The interview language was either in English or Chinese to make sure they could express their ideas fluently and deeply without any language barriers. The recording was then transcribed, reviewed, and translated into English. Then, the flow of data analysis procedures included familiarization with the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research question of how Chinese international doctoral students construct their academic identity in Malaysia guided data collection and analysis procedures. ATLAS.ti 24 was used to analyze the data.

Table 1 Demographic information of the participants

No.	Pseudonym	Age	Marital status	With Family in Malaysia	Gender	Candidate	Semester	Proposal defense	Research field
Pt 1	Ben	45	Married with children	No	Male	Part time	6	Yes	Linguistics
Pt 2	Pinka	28	Single	No	Female	Full time	3	No	Education Technology
Pt 3	Zoocy	28	Single	No	Female	Full time	2	No	Vocational Education
Pt 4	Juen	32	Married with children	No	Female	Part time	5	Yes	Education Technology
Pt 5	Wong	31	Married with children	No	Female	Part time	4	Yes	Mechanical Engineering
Pt 6	Jay	39	Married with children	No	Male	Part time	5	Yes	Computer Engineering
Pt 7	Jing	38	Married with children	No	Male	Part time	6	Yes	Electrical Engineering
Pt 8	Rachele	31	Single	No	Female	Full time	6	Yes	Civil Engineering

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In examining how Chinese international doctoral students construct their academic identity in Malaysia, the aspects of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and mass communication guide the author to identify 3 themes, including 11 sub-themes, and 107 codes from the interview transcripts. The word cloud generated from ATLAS.ti 24 helps with theme identification (Figure 2). The 3 themes include learning community, ICC, and intercultural supervision. The findings indicate that ICC, intercultural supervision, and learning community play an important role in constructing Chinese doctoral students' academic identity in Malaysia.



Figure 2 Word cloud of the interview transcripts

4.1 Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC)

According to Chen & Starosta (1996), ICC can be divided into intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural adroitness. As for international doctoral students, ICC is beneficial for their adaptation process in the host country (Kim, 2017). Based on the interview participants' experiences, intercultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity can be developed by former overseas experiences and strengthened by the experiences in the host country continuously. As a result, the ICC levels and the intercultural environment are interrelated. ICC is crucial for the identity construction of international doctoral students, since they need this competence to communicate with supervisors and classmates from different cultures in the host country. Ben stated his former experience in Singapore and the influence on his intercultural awareness and intercultural sensitivity, such as tolerance and open-mindedness.

I've been to Singapore before. Actually, such experience promoted my motivation to be cautious on cultures of different countries. In another country or speaking to other people, I realize it is not only about language, but culture, too. I think you should be tolerant to the differences, and also you should be open-minded. [Ben, Married 45-year-old Male, Linguistics]

Jay put it that he became more respectful of people from different cultures as he stayed longer in Malaysia to study. Communication and touch with people from different cultures are beneficial for the development of intercultural understanding and respect.

I came here five months ago, and I'm more careful about the culture now. Malaysia is a Muslim country, so I'm afraid that some of the conversations have a taboo, or something different. It seems impolite to violate their taboos. There are many differences between the Malaysian culture and our domestic culture, but gradually I have a better understanding and respect other people's culture. [Jay, Married 39-year-old Male, Computer Engineering]

Pinka illustrated her intercultural class experience and her intercultural awareness toward cultural differences of students from Asian and Western countries. She harbors the attitude of respect and also has the intercultural communication skills of making jokes to maintain harmonious relationships with other classmates and they help each other effectively in learning.

When in class, I observed that students from Japan and South Korea in East Asia are a little quieter. In comparison, students in New Zealand, Britain and Russia are lively and sometimes would interrupt the teacher in the process of teaching. We made some jokes, and in the end, we actually got along very well, even if we were from different cultural backgrounds. In fact, we can live in harmony and help each other. [Pinka, Single 28-year-old Female, Education Technology]

Zoey illustrated her overseas experience in Russia, and believed that this broadened her horizon on her thesis angle and teaching methods. Experiencing the educational systems of different countries of Russia, China, and Malaysia inspired her on the critical thinking about student-centered learning. She does not believe in a single educational system, and has come to a higher level of aerial view of different educational systems. Embracing open-mindedness toward various educational systems is essential for her as she transferred to a new academic environment in Malaysia. ICC not only facilitates her adaptation, but also significantly shapes her identity as an international student. Being receptive to different academic cultures fosters a deeper understanding of the global academic community.

When you have the experience of learning in different countries, you can see more diversities and possibilities. Just like what I experienced in Russia before, I can see the teaching methods of Russian teachers and the differences between Chinese education methods. And now there are still some differences with the Malaysian way of education. I will combine the teaching methods of different countries, write them in my thesis, and use them according to the different characteristics of my students. [Zoey, Single 28-year-old Female, Vocational Education]

Those findings coincided with the study by (Ali *et al.*, 2022) that intercultural competence is considered to assist people in the adaptive process in multicultural contexts, and overseas experience taught them how to develop knowledge, skills, and motivation as international students. Consequently, overseas experience has a positive impact on the students' ICC, such as the awareness of different cultures, the sensitivity of respect and open-mindedness, and the skill of making jokes. Reversely, ICC as one of the core competencies when studying in the host country, can adapt to a new education system easier, and inspire mutual learning and critical thinking, too.

4.2 Intercultural Supervision

Chinese doctoral students experienced a lot of intercultural interactions with their Malaysian supervisors. They gradually construct their academic identity through learning and communication with their supervisors. Effective supervisions include technical support, managerial support, and emotional support (Nguyet Nguyen & Robertson, 2022). The students gain academic skills and psychological support from the interactions with their supervisors gradually, such as research topic, research methodology, and tools, academic writing skills, journal publication feedback, proposal defense, independence, confidence, etc. Those findings are in accordance with the statement by Xu and Hu (2020) that identity (re)construction involves intense cognitive and social interactions with culturally differentiated parts that are across time and space and associated with the students' identities-in-the-making. Juen explained her experiences of proposal defense guided by her supervisor, and how she became more independent in research after experiencing anxiety. The transition into independence is often emotionally challenging, not only because doctoral students often feel insufficiently guided, but supervisors can become frustrated that students depend excessively on them (Yasmin *et al.*, 2021). The positive aspect is that encountering conflict situations during supervision interactions can significantly elevate students' ICC. In the intercultural supervision process, Juen figured out a way where meeting frequency with her supervisor was negotiated to a comfortable zone by both of them. Such challenges prompt the students to implement effective communication strategies to navigate complex intercultural communication scenarios.

When I prepared for my proposal defense, my entire preparation was under her guidance, and we did the simulation twice. She taught me very useful skills to defend. There were other times when I texted her, I expected her to reply soon. But she wouldn't. I felt anxious, and kept messaging her. I guess my supervisor got annoyed, too. She told me that if I graduate with a doctor's degree, but can't carry out research independently, then I don't deserve the title of doctor. So, I learned to figure out those problems by myself. But I still contacted my supervisor when in need. I guess in the end we figured out a way to get along with each other. [Juen, Married 32-year-old Female, Education Technology]

Rachele shared her experience on her supervision experience under her supervisor. Although she had some doubts about herself in the journal publication, she struggled and survived by receiving some psychological comfort from her supervisor. As international doctoral students transition into their status as new researchers, advisory from supervisors can build confidence in themselves (Aspland *et al.*, 2021). Emotional support from her supervisor fostered a deep sense of trust and significantly bolstered her confidence in her research. The importance of establishing conditions conducive to learning is the trust between the candidate and supervisor in supervisory relationships (Buirski, 2022). She benefitted from a comprehensive support system that not only sharpened her academic skills but also provided emotional backing. These experiences were instrumental in her personal and professional growth, ultimately leading her to publish a high-quality paper, and have confidence in herself.

There was one time when my supervisor asked me to finish writing a paper within 2 weeks, but I didn't listen to him. I spent 2 months actually, because I wanted to do a thorough literature review. And during that time, I highly doubted my ability, and was afraid he might criticize me. To my surprise, he did not blame me but respected my choice. Then he would share with me his experience of studying for a PhD and such moments of self-doubt at that time. My trust in him is becoming more and more profound. I think we are not just like teachers and students or friends, but comrades in arms. That paper is indexed

in SCI, Q1, and we are going to conquer one thing after another together. [Rachele, Single 31-year-old Female, Civil Engineering]

Identity construction is a dynamic process in the educational context, and students need to be aware of the new educational system in the host country. Without understanding the culture in a new context, identity construction is difficult, even impossible (Ai, 2017). In Chinese contexts, some students are obedient to listen to the teachers. Silent might signal respect for teachers, and the desire to maintain harmonious relationship (Hu *et al.*, 2020). But knowledge can also be gained from dynamic communication interactions. As doctoral students, they should defend and have some critical thinking. Supervisors in Malaysia expect students to ask questions instead of just listening and nodding. Actually, the power-sharing between students and their supervisors can stimulate critical thinking (Xu & Grant, 2017). Students' critical thinking skills are stated as essential in the Malaysian Qualification Framework (Baydarova, 2023). The ability to sense the different educational cultures during the intercultural supervision interactions with the supervisor is crucial for students to construct their new academic identity. As stated by Zoocy:

The students in China usually don't ask too many questions. But when you come here to study, you find that the teacher encourages you to ask more questions. Sometimes, the teacher is not even telling you the answer, they expect to hear your thoughts. [Zoocy, Single 28-year-old Female, Vocational Education]

4.3 Learning Community

PhD students enrolled at UTM are encouraged to attend academic activities where their academic identities are constructed step by step. The international doctoral students enriched their academic resources and expanded their professional networks by participating in international conferences and workshops recommended by their supervisors. Students become known by either participating in or presenting in-school workshops and activities while networking with fellow PhD students and academics, which can develop long-term professional networks (Nguyet Nguyen & Robertson, 2022). In fact, those academic activities can strengthen their awareness of their academic identity as doctoral students. Connected activities of academic work contribute to wider experiences and enhance academic identity construction (Anikina *et al.*, 2020). What is more, this exposure not only enhanced their research capabilities but also significantly improved their ICC levels. Ben described the writing activity he attended.

The most important thing I feel about this writing retreat is the communication between students and teachers and the communication between students. This kind of activity brought us together. So, I'm in an academic atmosphere. I feel like a scholar. I think this is the activity that a doctoral student should participate, it will promote your research. [Ben, Married 45-year-old Male, Linguistics]

International doctoral students typically engage in two distinct learning groups. One is a domestic learning group, where Chinese students create a cohesive learning circle among themselves. The other is an international learning group, which includes Chinese students and their peers from various countries. Both domestic and international groups are supportive of the adaptation process in the host country (Kim,

2017). Those learning groups can be supervisees under the same supervisor, roommates, friends, etc. Juen explained her experience of studying together with her Chinese friends. The identity of an international doctoral student can be constructed by being together with other students of the same professional identity in the same group, and doing the academic activities the academics should do every day. While Rachele stated her interaction with Malaysian Chinese under the same supervision, and she was deeply influenced by their learning attitude and diligence. Those findings are similar to the statement by Dai and Elliot (2023) that regular engagement via doctoral group activities facilitates membership, and mutual support can contribute to scholarly growth, identity development, and psychological well-being.

We have a small circle. It has a very strong academic atmosphere. Although we do not have the same major, not the same department, we are all Chinese. So, we often study together, cook and eat together, and go to exercise together. I think this is a process of helping each other, and the difficulties we encounter are very similar. It also plays a role of mutual supervision. When they're around me, I feel I'm a doctoral student. I need to follow what a doctoral student should do, and I focus on my research every day. [Juen, Married 32-year-old Female, Education Technology]

In communicating with them, I can feel that they work very hard. It is meaningless for me to complain, and the only thing I can do is keep running. To change the fate, I need to rely on my own efforts. [Rachele, Single 31-year-old Female, Civil Engineering]

Wong expressed mutual support could only happen in the initial stage of research, and could not continue with the depth of research. Consequently, scholars in the same group benefit from each other in the aspect of knowledge sharing and psychological support. However, there are some minor differences between the Arts and Sciences disciplines. Students in Arts majors can share methodology, but students in Sciences find it hard to communicate in experimental research.

Then everyone discussed with each other, because they were all in the primary stage of research, whether in the liberal arts or engineering field. But in the experimental stage, there was nothing to discuss together. Because everyone's experiment is completely different, there is not much reference value. There is no point in communicating and discussing it, unless you are doing a similar experiment. [Wong, Married 31-year-old Female, Mechanical Engineering]

Based on the findings, the author has constructed an academic identity construction model for international doctoral students (Figure 3).

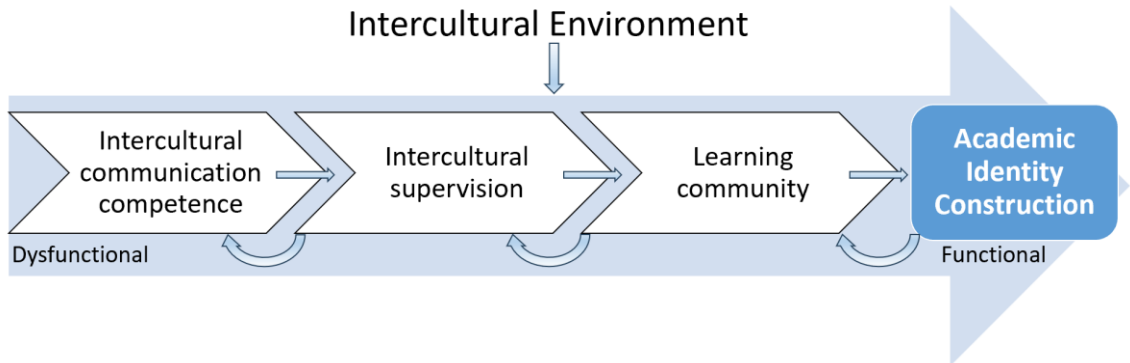


Figure 3 An academic identity construction model for international doctoral students

In Figure 3, the functional academic identity transformation of international doctoral students is affected by the elements of ICC, intercultural supervision, and learning community, with each representing the main activities of personal, interpersonal, and mass communication in the intercultural environment. Meanwhile, ICC is the core element, the improvement of which can bring the enhancement in intercultural supervision and learning community, and finally realize the new academic identity construction. Kim (2017) proved that host communication competence is directly and reciprocally associated with their participation in the host society's interpersonal and mass communication activities. Additionally, the functional academic identity construction can also improve the learning community, intercultural supervision, and ICC, forming a positive circulation for international doctoral students' learning experiences.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This research investigates the adaptation experiences of Chinese doctoral students in Malaysia, beginning with the exploration of the challenges they face. By adopting the theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Academic Identity, it then analyzes the process of how the students construct their new academic identities. Therefore, understanding the perspectives of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and mass communication is vital, as they serve as the basic approaches for international doctoral students to construct their new academic identities in the intercultural context of Malaysia. Finally, the study highlights the growth of the students, both academically and non-academically.

By illustrating the three perspectives of ICC, intercultural supervision, and learning community that shape the identity of the Chinese doctoral students' overall PhD journey, this study aims to raise awareness for all future Chinese doctoral students in Malaysia. The findings of this research reveal that, for the successful (re)construction of the academic identity in Malaysia, the Chinese doctoral students' awareness of their international doctoral identity is extremely important. Furthermore, the construction of students' academic identities is closely linked with the development of intercultural awareness, sensitivity, and adroitness. This growth extends to academic abilities such as research independence and critical

thinking, as well as emotional well-being, including trust and confidence. Additionally, the students' ICC levels, often developed through prior experiences such as overseas study, facilitate effective intercultural supervision and enhance learning within communities. Similarly, participating in these learning communities can improve the effectiveness of intercultural supervision and further strengthen the students' ICC levels.

As elucidated in this paper, a model of academic identity construction in the intercultural context is built. In the era of educational globalization, this study aims to serve as a reference for Chinese doctoral students in Malaysia, guiding international students in effectively constructing their academic identities to ensure timely graduation. This study also has some limitations. The model presented may require further exploration and understanding, as the research was conducted on a relatively small scale. Future studies may investigate a larger sample size of international doctoral students in Malaysia. Meanwhile, it is also necessary to compare the academic identity construction experiences of students from different countries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author is profoundly grateful for the guidance of her supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hadina, whose supervision provided significant inspiration for this study: academic and non-academic knowledge from her, the emotional support she gave me, the conferences she advised me to attend.... She is not only an exemplary doctoral supervisor but also a guiding influence in life. Her expertise and patience have been invaluable to me, playing a crucial role in my research journey. Additionally, the sharing of experiences by participants is also acknowledged.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

REFERENCES

- Ai, B. (2017). Constructing an academic identity in Australia: An autoethnographic narrative. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 36(6), 1095–1107.
- Ali, M., Arifin, W. L., & Muttaqin, Z. (2022). Hasan Aydin Having the First Year as Overseas Students. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 9(2), 66–80.
- Anikina, Z., Goncharova, L., & Evseeva, A. (2020). Constructing academic identity in the changing Russian higher education context: Preliminary perspectives. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 39(5), 855–868.
- Ashmore, R. D., Deaux, K., & McLaughlin-Volpe, T. (2004). An organizing framework for collective identity: Articulation and significance of multidimensionality. *Psychological Bulletin*, 130(1), 80–114.

- Aspland, T., Datta, P., & Talukdar, J. (2021). Transitioning into the Australian higher education experience: The perspective of international doctoral students (AUR 63 02). *Australian Universities Review*, 63(2), 44–54.
- Baydarova, I. (2023). The impact of neoliberal education on the alignment of student–supervisor expectations in Malaysia. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 42(3), 544–558.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2).
- Buirski, N. (2022). ‘Ways of being’: A model for supportive doctoral supervisory relationships and supervision. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 41(5).
- Cerulo, K. A. (1997). Identity Construction: New Issues, New Directions. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.*, 23. www.annualreviews.org.
- Chen, G.-M., & Starosta, W. J. (1996). Intercultural communication competence: A synthesis. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 19(1), 353–383.
- Choi, L. J. (2021). The identity (re)construction of international students in the process of academic literacy acquisition. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 26(4).
- Clegg, S. (2008). Academic identities under threat? *British Educational Research Journal*, 34(3), 329–345.
- Dai, K., & Elliot, D. L. (2023). ‘Shi men’ as key doctoral practice: understanding international doctoral students’ learning communities and research culture in China. *Oxford Review of Education*, 49(5), 588–603.
- Dai, K., & Hardy, I. (2021). The micro-politics of cultural change: A Chinese doctoral student’s learning journey in Australia. *Oxford Review of Education*, 47(2), 243–259.
- Dai, K., Hu, Y., Li, X., & Oladipo, O. (2023). Conducting doctoral research in China: an exploration of international students’ motivation to study at Chinese universities. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 42(5), 1133–1149.
- Elliot, D. L., Baumfield, V., & Reid, K. (2016). Searching for ‘a third space’: A creative pathway towards international PhD students’ academic acculturation. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 35(6), 1180–1195.
- Hu, Y., van Veen, K., & Corda, A. (2016). Pushing too little, praising too much? Intercultural misunderstandings between a chinese PhD student and a Dutch supervisor. *Studying Teacher Education*, 12(1), 70–87.
- Hu, Y., Zhao, X., & van Veen, K. (2020). Unraveling the implicit challenges in fostering independence: Supervision of Chinese doctoral students at Dutch universities. *Instructional Science*, 48(2), 205–221.
- Kidman, J., Manathunga, C., & Cornforth, S. (2017). Intercultural PhD supervision: exploring the hidden curriculum in a social science faculty doctoral programme. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 36(6), 1208–1221.
- Kim, Y. Y. (2017). Integrative Communication theory of cross-cultural adaptation. *The International Encyclopedia of Intercultural Communication* (pp. 1–13). Wiley.
- Nguyet Nguyen, M., & Robertson, M. J. (2022). International students enacting agency in their PhD journey. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 27(6), 814–830.
- Pinto, S. (2020). Encounters of cultures in doctoral supervision: Productive or problematic? *Revista Lusofona de Educacao*, 48(48), 151–167.

- Pinto, S. (2023). International doctoral students' perspectives on the qualities of supervisors: Expectations for intercultural supervision in Portuguese higher education. *Research in Comparative and International Education*.
- Singh, J. K. N. (2021). Academic resilience among international students: lived experiences of postgraduate international students in Malaysia. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 22(1), 129–138. Springer Science and Business Media B.V.
- Soong, H., Thi Tran, L., & Hoa Hiep, P. (2015). Being and becoming an intercultural doctoral student: reflective autobiographical narratives. *Reflective Practice*, 16(4), 435–448.
- Wu, M., & Hu, Y. (2020). Transitioning to an independent researcher: reconciling the conceptual conflicts in cross-cultural doctoral supervision. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 42(3), 333–348.
- Xu, L. (2017). Written feedback in intercultural doctoral supervision: a case study. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 22(2), 239–255.
- Xu, L., & Grant, B. (2017). International doctoral students' becoming: A dialogic perspective. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 54(6), 570–579.
- Xu, L., & Hu, J. (2020). Language feedback responses, voices and identity (re)construction: Experiences of Chinese international doctoral students. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 57(6), 724–735.
- Xu, L., Teng, L. S., & Cai, J. (2021). Feedback engagement of Chinese international doctoral students. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 43(1), 119–135.
- Xu, X. (2023). An autoethnography of an international doctoral student's multidimensional identity construction. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 50(5).
- Yasmin, F., Li, S., Zhang, Y., Poulouva, P., & Akbar, A. (2021). Unveiling the international students' perspective of service quality in Chinese higher education institutions. *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, 13(11).
- Zheng, G., Cai, Y., & Zuo, B. (2023). Cultivating Global Scholars: Delving into Chinese Doctoral Students' Integration Experiences at Finnish Universities Through an Institutional Logics Lens. *Journal of the Knowledge Economy*.