Navigating New Terrain: The Path to Academic Competence for Chinese Doctoral Students in Social Sciences and Humanities

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the perspectives and experiences of Chinese international doctoral students in social science and humanities disciplines at U.S. institutions. Unlike doctoral students in STEM, these students have diverse and fewer guidance-development pathways. Grounded on self-formation theory and language socialization theory, this study initially focuses on the role of self-agency in their doctoral growth pathway. It also delves into their socialization experiences through interaction with faculty, peers, and programs. Employing semi-structured interviews guided by the constructivist grounded theory methodology, the findings reveal that Chinese doctoral students proactively lead their doctoral studies to reach their goals by seeking resources and interacting with others. Their experiences are significantly influenced by a combination of internal factors, such as their agency and goals, and external factors, such as program settings, resources, and interaction with others. This study offers both research and practical implications for student advisors, faculty members, student affairs professionals, and U.S. institutions.

本文旨在探讨在美国高校攻读社科和人文学科的中国博士生的经历，以及他们对于博士学习和博士项目的感悟。不同与STEM（科学，技术，工程和数学）领域的博士生，攻读社科和人文学科的博士生更加依靠自我探索来找到适合自己的发展路径，他们的发展路径也更具多样化。基于自我形成理论和语言社会化理论，本研究首先聚焦于自我能动性在他们博士成长路径中的作用。除此之外，研究还深入探讨了他们如何通过与教师，同学的互动，以及在博士项目，系所和学校的主动参与，获得社会化经验。通过采用以建构主义扎根理论方法为指导的半结构化访谈，研究结果表明，中国博士生通过积极寻求资源和与他人的互动，主动引导自己的博士学习，以实现个人目标。他们的经历受到内在因素（如能动性和目标）以及外在因素（如项目设置，学校资源和他人互动）的影响。本研究为学生导师，教师，学生事务管理人员 和美国高校提供了研究和实践方面的启示。

Keywords: agency, international doctoral students, social sciences and humanities, U.S. higher education

Introduction

Over six million students pursued tertiary education outside their home country in 2019, up from two million in 2000 (Sabzalieva et al., 2022). Although COVID-19 hampered the rising trend of international students' mobility (Mok et al., 2021), new enrollments soared, with 1,057,188 international students in the United States during the 2022/2023 academic year (Open Doors, 2023). A significant research focus is on how host higher education institutions facilitate the integration of international students into local academic life (Schneider & Jin, 2022). However, influenced by neoliberal globalization and educational commercialization, international students are frequently reviewed as objects or clients in transnational educational enterprises (Tran & Vu, 2018). The perception, coupled with the prevailing assimilation-oriented adjustment in international education research (Marginson, 2014), painted international students as passive recipients with limited options, particularly those not originating from Anglosphere backgrounds (Matsunaga et al., 2021). They are assumed to be molded by the host country's institutional practices and norms (Matsunaga et al., 2021), and their agency and capability of self-development have long been neglected (Tran & Vu, 2018). According to Marginson (2014), the model of interaction between international students and host institutions is oversimplified and one-sided since it disregards the student-centric nature of education and the complexity of human development and power imbalances. It also overlooks the absence of essential training for educators to engage with international students in US institutions effectively. Consequently, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating Chinese international students' academic socialization experiences and exploring how they exercise reflexive agency to overcome challenges in their host institutions in the United States.

Additionally, this research particularly studied challenges and unique developing paths of Chinese international doctoral students in social science and humanities disciplines since there are limited studies about them. Doctoral students in social science and humanities disciplines are not expected or required to publish early and do not have an earlier chance to focus on writing research articles for publication under their supervisor's guidance, comparing their peers in STEM disciplines (Yang, 2023). They lack gradually accumulated research experiences to provide them with "on-the-job training" for their future career (Dong, 1998; Paltridge, 2002). While efforts have been made to bridge this gap in the past decade (Cuthbert et al., 2009; Kwan, 2010; Nejad et al., 2020; Nolan & Rocco, 2009; Nygaard & Solli, 2020), research on doctoral students in social sciences and humanities disciplines remains sparse (Yang, 2023). Therefore, the research questions are: 1) How do Chinese doctoral students equip the necessary research, writing, and social skills to accumulate academic credits for their future career? 2) How does doctoral supervision mediate their academic socialization? 3) how do they grow to become competent members working in academia?

Theoretical Framework

This study employs two theories: 1) self-formation and 2) language socialization theories to investigate the experience and self-development of Chinese doctoral students in the United States. Marginson (2014, 2018) asserted that international education is a process of student self-formation, containing the concepts of agency and reflexivity. Oldac, Yang and Lee (2023) indicated that on one side, higher education enhances student agency by cultivating well-being, capabilities, critical thinking, and freedom (Yang et al., 2024); conversely, student agency plays a critical role in education effectiveness and success, for instance, fostering student engagement through self-motivated, self-regulatory, and self-reflective thinking and behaviors (Luong et al., 2023; Tran, 2016) The self-formation theory highlights that students monitor, develop and master their educational experiences in higher education (Marginson, 2024; Oldac et al., 2023). Through this lens, this study aims to examine how Chinese doctoral international students, as active learners, shape their holistic study experiences through their reflexive agency.

Agency is associated with freedom, especially through the enhancement and empowerment of human capability (Oldac et al., 2023). Studying abroad allows international students to expand their realm of possibility (Bourdieu, 1993). However, despite international students proactively choosing to study abroad to achieve comprehensive self-capability

growth, the experience should not be romanticized (Marginson, 2014). They always face numerous challenges, including language barriers, new social network establishment, unfamiliar academic disciplines, intensive emotional adjustment, identity issues, experiences of discrimination, and cultural shock (Gao, 2021). Even those who have met the language proficiency requirements and intentionally immersed themselves in the native language environment still encounter various difficulties daily in academic and social life (Bifuh-Ambe, 2011; Nguyen & Robertson, 2020).

Therefore, I indicate that although the experiences of international students are mainly shaped by internal factors, such as agency and self-reconstruction, it is necessary to consider external factors, such as language and academic socialization. To understand the outside influences on those students' experiences, language socialization, specifically second language learners' academic discourse socialization (L2), is included. Language socialization highlights that language development needs to be socialized in a target community, and the level of socialization is affected by an individual's language skills (Duff, 2007; Schneider & Jin, 2020). L2 academic discourse socialization reveals a complex and dynamic process where students strive to adopt new knowledge in disciplines and navigate evolving identities, seeking inclusion within new academic communities and grappling with the inherent social relations of power (Morita, 2000, 2004, 2009). Integrating self-formation and language socialization theories is essential to develop a comprehensive understanding of those students' experiences.

Methodology

This study utilized semi-structured Zoom interviews conducted twice with each participant as the primary method of data collection, spanning from November 2023 to July 2024. Additionally, a one-question survey, "What are the most important things that happened during your program?" served as a supplementary data source. The study involved eight participants from China who were pursuing various disciplines at different higher education institutions in the United States. All participants are female Chinese doctoral students, which reflects the voluntary participation of students in this study. When participating in the study, they were either working on their dissertation writing or graduated from the doctoral program in less than a year.

The rationale of sample selection was twofold: first, to ensure participants could provide comprehensive insights into their personal development and doctoral programs, and second, to gain a deep understanding of the participants' experience. Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) was utilized to collect and analyze data. I employed the constant comparative approach (Charmaz, 2014) for data analysis. This technique involved extensive comparison across different pieces of evidence. The analysis developed through initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding, in conjunction with memo-writing, theoretical sampling, and theoretical sensitivity.

Table 1:

Participants

Name	Gender	Institutions	Majors	Current Status	Year of Study
A	F	A public land-grant research university on the southwest coast	Education Policy Analysis and Leadership	Searching for jobs in the US	Graduated less than a year
B	F	A public research university in the Midwest	Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in K-12	Setting up individual business	In the 7th year
C	F	A public research university in the Midwest	Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education	Searching for jobs	In the 4th year
D	F	A public research university in the Midwest	Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education	Searching for jobs	In the 5th year
E	F	A public research university in the Midwest	Public Administration	Searching for jobs	In the 4th year
F	F	A public research university in the Midwest	Major: International Relations; Minor: Policy Methodology	Postdoc Student in the US	Graduated less than a year
G	F	A public research state university in the northeast	Educational Culture, Policy and Society	Searching for jobs	In the 7th year
H	F	A public research university in the northeast	Musical Arts	Searching for jobs Back to China	Graduated less than a year

Results

My findings indicate some similarities and differences among participants. The similarities include that all participants experienced huge challenges and isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of them started the program from virtual courses, and others had to suddenly move to asynchronous educational settings when the Pandemic happened. During the locking down period, they had difficulties in finding a community. Some experienced severe depression. Additionally, I found that all participants demonstrated their self-agency played an important role in their program. All of them showed they proactively seek resources or support to direct their growth pathway. Some contacted their programs' dean's office to seek scholarships or assistantships to obtain financial support to complete the program. Some attended conferences to meet new academic peers and look for research collaborations. Some intentionally took methodology courses to gain research skills. Some purposefully prepared class papers for converting to conference presentations or publications. While struggling with the new doctoral program and graduation challenges, they also needed to consider legal residency issues, such as student and working visas.

The differences among participants demonstrate the relationship and the types of collaboration with their advisors. Some took a leading role and controlled self-development and interaction with their advisor. Some established advising relationships with varying professors to expand perspectives and opportunities. The different interactions with their advisors have divergent influences on their experiences and perspectives about their doctoral programs. They pursued their doctoral

program for various reasons, but they diligently explored their way out by increasing academic knowledge, intentionally developing research skills through internships, assistantships, and fellowships, and gaining publications through collaborating with faculty and peers.

Future Directions

In short, the fast growth of international students' mobility is the future trend (Open Doors, 2023). The gap in preparing doctoral students in social science and humanities disciplines transformation into emergent scholars has been notified but still lacks solutions (Cuthbert et al., 2009; Kwan, 2010; Nejad et al., 2020; Nolan & Rocco, 2009; Nygaard & Solli, 2020). There is a need to conduct critical research on the perspectives and experiences of (international) doctoral students in non-STEM disciplines. To effectively assist these doctoral students, it is essential to recognize their agency, comprehend their needs, and offer suitable support for their academic pursuits in US higher education.

International students often encounter similar challenges. The findings of this study might have implications not only for understanding the specific needs of Chinese international doctoral students but also for aiding all international doctoral students in social sciences and humanities disciplines. While these students actively navigate their program pathways, it is crucial for U.S. institutions, departmental programs, faculty members, and student services staff to facilitate the academic socialization of international doctoral students to ensure their academic success. Furthermore, this study contributes to preparing international students to pursue doctoral programs in social sciences and humanities at US institutions, equipping them with firsthand experiences and insight into the academic socialization process and potential job-related challenges they might face.

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