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Beyond Power Asymmetry: The Shimen System as Relational Scaffolding for International Doctoral Students' Collective Academic Identity in China

Huang Yu

*Institute of International and Comparative Education, Beijing Normal
University, China*

Shamillah Bano

*Institute of International and Comparative Education, Beijing Normal
University, China*

Shi Anding

Department of Education, University of Oxford, UK

Wang Zining

Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, USA

Jing Xiaoli

*Institute of International and Comparative Education, Beijing Normal
University, China*

Corresponding Author: Jing Xiaoli, xiaoli.jing@bnu.edu.cn

ABSTRACT: *Existing research on cross-cultural doctoral supervision often prioritizes power asymmetries over supportive dynamics. This study examines China's Shimen system—a Confucian-rooted academic lineage—as a relational framework for international doctoral supervision. Using a phenomenological approach and semistructured interviews with 28 international doctoral students at Chinese universities, this research explores their lived experiences. The results show that Shimen serves as "relational scaffolding," offering academic guidance, emotional support, and a sense of collective belonging. This harmony-oriented structure effectively prevents identity alienation and fosters a collective academic identity. The findings challenge Western individualistic models by demonstrating*

how hierarchy and collectivism can serve as ethical support mechanisms. Ultimately, this study offers an indigenous theoretical framework and practical implications for developing inclusive, culturally informed supervisory practices in global higher education.

Keywords: Shimen, international doctoral students, cross-cultural supervision, relational scaffolding, academic identity, China

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INTRODUCTION

In the global knowledge economy, doctoral education has become a cornerstone for cultivating advanced human capital and sustaining scientific innovation. Doctoral students contribute to both scientific innovation and intercultural understanding through their research and global engagement. Through transnational mobility and collaboration, they help bridge academic communities and shape the ethical vision of a globally engaged scholarly network. Consequently, international doctoral students are increasingly positioned as “global scholars” who must navigate multiple cultural systems, disciplinary conventions, and institutional expectations. This complex navigation inspires new considerations for how cross-cultural supervision can both support and challenge these students.

Cross-cultural doctoral supervision offers significant potential for mutual learning and innovation. Supervisors who exercise cultural humility and promote open communication often foster more inclusive and productive research environments. However, intercultural supervision also poses profound challenges for doctoral students. Adjusting to new academic standards, linguistic environments, and supervisory norms can produce dissonance, stress, and even “identity alienation”. Students frequently report uncertainty about expectations,

misalignment in communication styles, and a lack of emotional support—factors that complicate their social and academic integration. Moreover, the inherent hierarchy of the supervisor–student relationship can exacerbate these difficulties, shaping access to feedback, authorship, and research resources in ways that constrain doctoral agency. These challenges have shaped the focus of much current research on supervision.

Much of the literature on international doctoral supervision emphasizes these asymmetrical and conflict-laden dynamics. Numerous studies, predominantly grounded in Anglo-Western higher education systems, have focused on power inequalities, communicative breakdowns, and cultural misunderstandings as defining features of supervision (Manathunga, 2007; Löfström et al., 2023; Wang & Byram, 2019). While this research has shed light on ethical tensions and systemic inequities, it also risks portraying supervision as predominantly problematic. By foregrounding conflict, such studies often overlook the relational, reciprocal, and supportive dimensions that can equally shape cross-cultural supervisory practices. Recent work has begun to examine dialogic and democratic approaches that mitigate power imbalances and encourage identity negotiation (Kandiko Howson, 2022). However, the empirical understanding of harmonious, ethically grounded supervision across cultural contexts remains limited.

This narrow focus on asymmetry reflects a broader epistemic bias within global doctoral education research. Western models, which are typically characterized by individualism, autonomy, and self-directed learning, are often taken as universal benchmarks for "effective" supervision. However, these models may not fully capture the collective, relational, and community-oriented logics that underpin supervision in many non-Western contexts. As higher education becomes increasingly globalized, there is a pressing need to develop alternative theoretical frameworks that recognize supervision as a culturally embedded practice rather than a universal process. One promising model exemplifying this alternative is the Shimen system in China.

In China, the Shimen system, literally meaning the "teacher's gate", refers to a traditional academic structure in which students (disciples) are mentored by a supervisor (*Laoshi*) and form close relationships with fellow students (*Tongmen*, meaning "fellow disciples") under the same supervisor. Rooted in Confucian traditions of mentorship and academic lineage, Shimen extends beyond a dyadic supervisor–student relationship to form a collective learning community that integrates teaching, research, and socialization. Within this system, the *laoshi* functions not only as an academic guide but also as a moral exemplar and paternal figure. Moreover, *tongmen* serve as academic siblings, supporting one another intellectually and emotionally. This relational framework embodies the Confucian ethos of hierarchical harmony, collective responsibility, and reciprocal care. Contemporary forms of Shimen continue to influence Chinese doctoral education, often blending traditional moral values with modern research collaboration and team-based supervision (Dai & Elliot, 2023; Liu & Dong, 2025).

The Shimen system thus offers more than a cultural contrast; it presents a legitimate, competing theoretical framework for effective doctoral education, one in which interdependence, rather than independence, is the foundational pathway

to scholarly development and identity formation. This framework challenges the presumed universality of autonomy-centric supervision models by demonstrating how hierarchy and collectivism can function as effective, ethically grounded support mechanisms. Therefore, incorporating insights from Shimen expands the conceptualization of supervisory practices across cultural settings.

For international doctoral students, this collective environment can serve as both a site of adaptation and a space for identity negotiation. It provides a structured relational context that facilitates learning, fosters belonging, and mediates the linguistic and cultural challenges of studying in China (Bahtilla, 2022; Dai & Hardy, 2021). However, despite its pervasive influence, Shimen remains undertheorized in the global doctoral education literature.

Most existing studies of Shimen have focused on domestic doctoral students or conceptual analyses of its Confucian roots (Xu & Liu, 2023; Dai & Elliot, 2022). Few studies have empirically examined how international students experience this system or how it functions as a culturally embedded form of relational support. As a result, little is known about how Shimen practices mitigate identity alienation and foster collective academic identity among international doctoral students in China. Furthermore, while hierarchy in cross-cultural supervision is often problematized as an obstacle to equity, Shimen suggested that hierarchy, when embedded within a network of relational reciprocity, can also be a foundation for care, stability, and growth.

To address this gap, the present study conceptualizes Shimen—a Confucian-rooted academic lineage system—as a form of "relational scaffolding". Here, relational scaffolding refers to a culturally grounded structure that shapes relationships and provides academic guidance, emotional support, and a sense of social belonging for international doctoral students. By exploring international doctoral students' lived experiences within this system, this study seeks to understand how Shimen functions as a relational mechanism that alleviates identity alienation and enables the formation of a collective academic identity. Two guiding research questions frame this inquiry: (1) How do international doctoral students experience Shimen as relational scaffolding? (2) How does this scaffolding influence their collective academic identity formation?

By examining Shimen through the lens of cross-cultural supervision, this study contributes to the ongoing retheorization of doctoral education in global contexts. It aims to move beyond deficit-oriented perspectives of international supervision and to highlight how culturally specific, harmony-oriented relational structures can enrich both theory and practice in international doctoral education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Building on this rationale, the following section reviews three strands of literature relevant to this study. Doctoral education is not only an academic apprenticeship but also a process of identity formation shaped by institutional, cultural, and interpersonal forces. This review situates the present inquiry within three intersecting areas: (1) academic identity formation, (2) supervisory relationships in doctoral education, and (3) the *Shimen* system as a cultural–pedagogical

framework in China. Together, these strands establish the conceptual foundation for understanding how *Shimen* functions as relational scaffolding that supports international doctoral students' identity formation.

Academic Identity Formation

Academic identity is a dynamic and continuously negotiated process shaped by institutional structures, disciplinary norms, and personal trajectories (Henkel, 2000; Billot, 2010). Scholars develop their academic selves through integrating past experiences, current roles, and future aspirations within the broader sociocultural context (Geijsel & Meijers, 2005). Rather than being a stable construct, identity represents ongoing meaning-making, as academics balance multiple, sometimes conflicting, roles as researchers, teachers, and learners (McLean & Price, 2019).

Western higher education typically constructs academic identity through an individualistic lens that prioritizes personal achievement, measurable outputs, and autonomous performance (Robbins, 2009; Marginson, 2022). Within this neoliberal paradigm, early-career researchers are encouraged to pursue visibility and competitiveness in the global market (Nordbäck et al., 2022). In contrast, non-Western contexts tend to emphasize collaboration, community, and moral responsibility. In South Africa and China, for example, identity is coconstructed through collective participation, mentorship, and service to social and national goals (Leibowitz et al., 2014; Mok & Marginson, 2021; Li, 2021).

This duality between individualistic and collectivist orientations reveals that academic identity is not universally defined but is negotiated between global and local expectations. Such negotiation is particularly salient for international doctoral students, whose identity formation unfolds across multiple epistemic traditions and cultural systems. These insights inform how supervision—primarily when culturally embedded—can mediate the tensions between autonomy and belonging.

Supervisory Relationships in Doctoral Education

The supervisor–student relationship remains the central axis of doctoral education, shaping academic progress, well-being, and professional development. Prior studies highlight how the quality and type of supervisory relationships directly influence students' resilience and satisfaction (Guo, 2025; Mai Le et al., 2021). Supportive supervision, characterized by empathy, timely feedback, and trust, enhances both mental health and research productivity, whereas authoritarian or inconsistent supervision exacerbates anxiety and disengagement (Han & Jin, 2025; Ringo, 2025).

In cross-cultural contexts, these dynamics become more complex. International doctoral students frequently encounter mismatched expectations, language barriers, and differing feedback cultures (Bahtilla, 2022; Li, Xu, & Chen, 2025). Miscommunication and unclear guidance can lead to frustration and delay progress, whereas culturally responsive supervision—marked by flexibility,

reflexivity, and open dialog—facilitates mutual adaptation (Pinto, 2024; Zheng, Cai, & Zuo, 2024). Recent scholarship further emphasizes that intercultural sensitivity serves as a vital pathway for students' identity formation during global academic exchanges (Rogler et al., 2026).

From an institutional perspective, structured mentoring systems and transparent communication policies can reduce misunderstandings and promote sustainable collaboration (Gao, 2021). Adaptation within supervision is therefore not an individual effort alone but a relational process involving emotional attunement, intercultural learning, and reciprocal adjustment between supervisors and students.

However, existing research largely frames power asymmetry as the defining characteristic of supervision (Manathunga, 2007; Wang & Byram, 2019). This focus—although valuable in uncovering ethical tensions—has created a deficit narrative that underplays the supportive and harmonious aspects of supervision in non-Western contexts. Addressing this conceptual imbalance requires attention to culturally embedded frameworks, such as China's Shimen system, which reconceptualize hierarchy as a potential source of care and cohesion rather than control.

The Shimen System as a Cultural-Pedagogical Framework

In Chinese academia, Shimen represents a traditional model of mentorship rooted in Confucian ethics and the transmission of scholarly lineages. Historically, Shimen has embodied hierarchical harmony and relational reciprocity, integrating moral cultivation with intellectual apprenticeship (Dai & Elliot, 2023; Wang, 2019). The supervisor (laoshi) assumes both academic and paternal roles, whereas peer students (tongmen) form a familial network of mutual learning and support.

Contemporary research has identified diverse manifestations of Shimen culture, from family-like to enterprise-like and team-based structures, each shaping academic interaction in distinct ways (Liu & Dong, 2025). Despite hierarchical norms, this framework fosters collaboration and psychological security by embedding supervision in shared values and collective responsibility (Liang et al., 2021). When trust and reciprocity are maintained, Shimen provides a powerful relational context that nurtures both academic development and a sense of emotional belonging.

For international doctoral students, Shimen serves as both an adaptation mechanism and a cultural encounter. Participation in collective rituals, group meetings, shared meals, and research collaborations provides relational scaffolding that eases cultural transition and cultivates a sense of belonging (Dai & Hardy, 2021; Bahtilla, 2022). The relational ethics underlying Shimen offer a distinct model of harmony-oriented supervision, in which hierarchical care is replaced by transactional authority and academic guidance intertwined with emotional and moral support.

Nevertheless, empirical research on Shimen in international doctoral contexts remains scarce. Most studies examine domestic students or discuss the concept

theoretically (Xu & Liu, 2023; Dai & Elliot, 2022). Few studies have explored how international students experience Shimen as a relational scaffold for identity formation.

This study directly addresses that gap by conceptualizing Shimen specifically as a form of ‘relational scaffolding’—a culturally embedded support structure that integrates academic, emotional, and moral dimensions into a single, interdependent network. This concept extends beyond Wenger's (1998) community of practice, which centers on shared repertoires and legitimate peripheral participation by foregrounding hierarchical care (*Fuguan*, 父管) and ethical obligation (*Ren*, 仁) as the binding forces of the community. It also differs from Dai & Elliot's (2023) focus on Shimen as a learning community by analytically disentangling its tripartite scaffolding functions and positioning it as a legitimate alternative model to Western individualistic supervision rather than merely a cultural contrast. Herein lies its theoretical novelty: it reframes hierarchy not as a barrier to be minimized (Manathunga, 2007) but as a potential architecture for distributed, morally grounded support. This integrated framework is visualized in Figure 1, which depicts Shimen as a tripartite model of relational scaffolding.

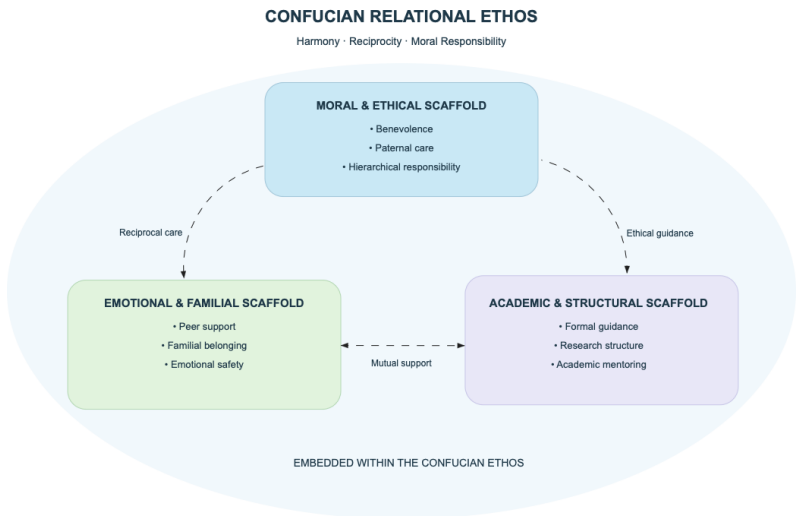


Figure 1. Tripartite Relational Scaffolding of the Shimen System

The model illustrates the three core, interdependent layers of support: (1) the Academic & Structural Scaffold, comprising the supervisor (laoshi) and formal research guidance; (2) the Emotional & Familial Scaffold, encompassing peer support (tongmen) and a network of care; and (3) the Moral & Ethical Scaffold, grounded in Confucian principles of benevolence (*ren*) and hierarchical responsibility (*fuguan*). These layers are embedded within and sustained by the

overarching Confucian Relational Ethos. The arrows represent the bidirectional flows of support, care, and reciprocity that characterize the system.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to examine the lived experiences of international doctoral students within the Shimen system. Rooted in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, this approach seeks to understand how individuals interpret and assign meaning to their everyday experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). It was particularly suitable for exploring how students perceive Shimen as a relational and cultural framework that shapes supervision and academic identity. By foregrounding first-person narratives, this study aimed to reveal how relational scaffolding within Shimen alleviates identity alienation and fosters collective belonging.

The phenomenological stance also guided the analytical attitude of "reduction", which entails focusing on participants' descriptions without imposing external theoretical assumptions. This orientation enabled the interpretation of participants' voices authentically and the identification of the essence of their experiences within China's harmony-oriented academic environment.

Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2014) was used to recruit information-rich cases capable of providing deep insights into the Shimen experience. The participants were selected according to three criteria: (1) enrollment in a full-time PhD program at a Chinese university; (2) membership in Shimen under a Chinese supervisor for at least one year; and (3) willingness and ability to communicate their experiences in English.

The final sample consisted of 28 international doctoral students from 15 countries—including Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, Bangladesh, Russia, Sri Lanka, Azerbaijan, the Philippines, Pakistan, Kenya, Uganda, Algeria, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Iran—representing the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences. Among these participants, 12 were female (42.9%), and 16 were male (57.1%). This diversity provided a wide range of disciplinary and cultural perspectives while maintaining a focus on a shared experience of studying within China's Shimen system.

To ensure ethical integrity, all the participants used pseudonyms. Participation was voluntary, and each student provided written informed consent after receiving a detailed explanation of the study's aims and confidentiality procedures.

Data collection

Data were collected through semistructured interviews, which allowed participants to articulate their lived experiences freely while maintaining consistency across cases (Ahmadi & Weisi, 2024; Seidman, 2006). Each

interview provided participants with space to recount how they entered their Shimen, interacted with supervisors and peers, and negotiated both academic and emotional support within this collective setting. Particular attention was given to how students described the relational and cultural dynamics that influenced their sense of belonging and scholarly identity. The interview guide thus evolved as a flexible framework, enabling participants to direct the conversation toward aspects of their experience that they found most meaningful. All the interviews were conducted in English, lasted between sixty and ninety minutes, and were audio-recorded with informed consent. Transcripts were produced verbatim to preserve linguistic and emotional nuance. The study followed standard ethical procedures, with prior approval obtained from the university's ethics committee and assurance that participation was voluntary, confidential, and fully informed. This approach generated a rich body of data capturing the cognitive, emotional, and relational dimensions of doctoral life within the Shimen system.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed via the six-phase thematic analysis procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which aligns well with phenomenological inquiry. The process began with intensive familiarization and open coding across transcripts, identifying statements related to hierarchy, emotional support, belonging, and identity negotiation. Codes were then collated into potential themes through constant comparison and iterative review.

Themes were refined through repeated movement between data and interpretation to ensure both empirical grounding and conceptual coherence. The final themes—such as academic and structural scaffolding, familial belonging, and harmony in collective practice—capture the essential structures of relational scaffolding as participants experienced them. To enhance validity, analytical memos and peer debriefing were used throughout the process.

This rigorous analytic procedure enabled the identification of the Shimen system as a culturally situated model of supervision that integrates academic, emotional, and communal dimensions of doctoral life.

Researcher Positionality

The research team comprised both Chinese doctoral supervisors, who were insiders in the institutional and cultural context of the Shimen system, and international doctoral students, who were insiders in the lived experience of cross-cultural doctoral adaptation. This collaborative insider–outsider composition enabled a multiperspectival interpretation of the data. While the supervisors provided a contextual understanding of the ethical and historical norms shaping Shimen practices, the international student coauthors contributed sensitivity to the participants' vulnerabilities and experiential meanings. Reflexivity was maintained through ongoing team discussions during data analysis, in which interpretations were critically examined and checked against interview transcripts. This process supported a phenomenological orientation by bracketing

the researchers' preunderstandings and foregrounding the participants' own accounts.

FINDINGS

This section presents the key findings of the analysis, which focus on how the Shimen system operates as a robust relational structure to counteract the identity alienation commonly experienced by international doctoral students. Three central, interrelated themes emerged from the data, and these themes collectively organize the presentation of findings as follows: (1) Shimen as an antidote to identify alienation, (2) cultivating collective identity and emotional belonging, and (3) the Academic Community as a Conduit for Harmony. Notably, these themes do not function in isolation but form a cohesive, multilayered relational scaffold—one that often operates concurrently yet follows a logical progression in delivering support: starting with addressing initial identity dislocation, advancing to fostering deep emotional bonds, and ultimately enabling collaborative academic harmony. As a synergistic framework in which each theme reinforces the next to build comprehensive support, the following content presents the specific findings for each theme, detailing how they collectively contribute to mitigating international doctoral students' identity alienation.

The Shimen as an Antidote to Identity Alienation

For most participants, the beginning of their doctoral journey in China was marked by feelings of disorientation, marginalization, and "being invisible". Many recounted that, before joining their Shimen, they felt isolated in classrooms and laboratories, where language barriers and cultural distance often hindered academic communication. Entering Shimen fundamentally changed this experience. The system provided them with an immediate social identity, embedding them in a familial academic network that offered direction, structure, and belonging.

We divide our whole lab into father, big brother. We call each other shidi or shixiong (brothers). My batchmates are in the middle, and we have master's or first-year PhD students who are younger brothers. (Hasan, interview)

This symbolic inclusion has real emotional and practical implications. The use of kinship language—*laoshi* (teachers as fathers) and *tongmen* (peer disciples as siblings)—was not simply metaphorical but enacted daily through relationships of mentorship and care. Supervisors were described as father figures who balanced authority with compassion, whereas peers served as siblings who mediated cultural norms and academic expectations.

The time when we got COVID-19, my supervisor checked on me. I told him I couldn't eat anything, and then he sent me a bunch of food. I kind of felt like, okay, maybe I'm home, like somebody's taking care of me. (Tewodros, interview)

Such acts, although small, became potent symbols of relational care. They signified recognition and affirmed students' worth as whole persons rather than as subordinate researchers. This sense of being "seen" stood in contrast to previous academic environments, where supervisors were distant or overly critical.

Importantly, care within Shimen was reciprocal. Students feel morally obliged to reciprocate the trust and investment of their supervisors and peers through diligence, loyalty, and achievement. Several referred to this as "working hard not to disappoint the teacher". This mutual responsibility transforms hierarchy into a relationship of interdependence, which is consistent with Confucian ethics of reciprocity and benevolence (Dai & Elliot, 2023).

Nevertheless, the Shimen was not uniformly experienced as nurturing. Some participants initially perceived its hierarchy as overly restrictive or opaque. A few felt uncertain about implicit expectations or feared overstepping social boundaries. However, these challenges often become learning opportunities. Senior tongmen frequently serve as cultural interpreters, guiding new members through subtle codes of respect and interaction.

At first, I didn't know how to talk to my supervisor. My senior brother showed me what to say and when. He became my bridge. (Hasan, interview)

Through this layered mentorship, Shimen provided multiple points of access to support, transforming potential isolation into a sense of integration.

This kinship terminology was operationalized into a functional hierarchy of care. The analysis revealed a spectrum of adaptations shaped by students' prior academic cultures. Those from more collectivist backgrounds (e.g., Pakistan, Ethiopia) often described an immediate sense of recognition and a feeling of "fitting in" within this familial structure. In contrast, students from traditions valuing greater individual autonomy (e.g., Russia) initially perceived the same hierarchy as intrusive or opaque, requiring a period of negotiation before they could appreciate the security and embedded support it provided. While hierarchy remained evident, it was mediated by empathy and collective responsibility, offering a structured yet humane context for identity reconstruction. The Shimen, therefore, acted as a counterweight to identify alienation by giving international students a stable role within a moral and relational order that valued care as much as competence.

Cultivating Collective Identity and Emotional Belonging

Beyond initial inclusion, the participants emphasized that Shimen cultivated an enduring sense of collective identity. Belonging was not a static feeling but an ongoing process constructed through shared rituals, mutual accountability, and everyday interactions.

The participants consistently described the lab or research group as "home like", emphasizing warmth, mutual encouragement, and an atmosphere of moral responsibility. Regular activities—weekly group meetings, end-of-semester

celebrations, shared meals, or even informal gatherings—served as recurring reminders of collective membership.

Every Friday, we have a lab meeting, and there is always fruit or snacks. It sounds simple, but it makes everyone relax and connect. (Murad, interview)

These gestures of inclusion, although mundane, reinforced social cohesion and normalized cooperation. The repetition of such rituals transformed the lab into a community where students felt emotionally supported and intellectually stimulated.

The peer hierarchy within Shimen also shaped a sense of belonging. Senior tongmen mentored juniors, offering academic guidance and emotional reassurance. This structure distributes responsibility across levels, creating what participants call a "multilayered support system."

When I don't understand something my supervisor says, my senior brother explains it. It's like having translators of both language and culture. (Viser, interview)

Through this mentoring, Shimen became a learning environment that blended formal supervision with peer socialization. International students learned not only disciplinary norms but also how to navigate implicit expectations—how to ask questions politely, when to challenge ideas, and how to balance independence with deference.

Belonging also manifested in a shared moral commitment. The participants repeatedly referred to phrases such as "we are one family" or "we help each other grow". These collective affirmations reduced competitive tension and fostered solidarity.

When I was frustrated about my experiment, my supervisor told me that we are one team. That gave me strength and motivation to continue. (Jamil, interview)

For many, such affirmation mitigated the loneliness of studying abroad. Some, particularly those from collectivist societies, adjusted easily to this family-like structure; others from more individualistic academic cultures initially found it intrusive but later came to value its emotional security. A female participant from Russia reflected that although she had expected a "strictly professional" relationship, she found comfort in the warmth and informality of her group.

We have meals together, we celebrate birthdays. It feels more personal. I think that's why I could finish my proposal successfully. (Masha, interview)

In this way, Shimen communities blurred the boundary between academic and emotional life. Belonging was expressed not only through shared success but also through mutual empathy in times of failure. Supervisors and peers provided

a psychological safety net, allowing students to take intellectual risks without fear of judgment.

However, collective identity also has limitations. A few participants reported that language barriers and cultural differences occasionally created feelings of partial inclusion. Some noted that Chinese students conversed more freely in Mandarin, leaving international peers at the margins of informal discussions. Despite these occasional exclusions, most students felt that the overarching tone of harmony encouraged re-engagement rather than withdrawal.

Even if I don't understand everything, I know they care I can feel it.
(Murad, interview)

Thus, Shimen's collective ethos functioned as emotional scaffolding for a support network that integrated academic collaboration with affective solidarity. Through repeated rituals, peer mentorship, and shared responsibility, international doctoral students not only adapted to a new academic culture but also redefined themselves as part of a collective scholarly identity rooted in relational harmony.

The Academic Community as a Conduit for Harmony

The third theme highlights how Shimen transformed academic work itself into a collective, harmony-oriented enterprise. Within this framework, hierarchy, cooperation, and mutual respect coexist to create a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) in which supervision becomes a shared moral and intellectual endeavor.

Weekly academic meetings exemplified this process. Rather than serving as hierarchical evaluations, these sessions were described as dialogic spaces for idea exchange and collective problem solving.

When we discuss in the group, others often give better suggestions than I could think of. Sometimes even my supervisor changes his view after hearing the discussion. (Priya, interview)

Such participatory practices democratized feedback and reduced the power distance between supervisors and students. Knowledge production was reframed as collaboration rather than competition, creating what participants called “a friendly pressure to improve”.

The supervisor's communication style was another crucial factor in sustaining harmony. The participants appreciated those who combined academic rigor with emotional sensitivity.

He gives time to talk, and his feedback is always encouraging. He never puts you down. That makes me more confident. (Selam, interview)

This relational sensitivity—anchored in *ren* (benevolence)—converted critique into guidance and supervision into mentorship (Dai & Hardy, 2021). For many, the supervisor's kindness and patience embody an ethical model of leadership that inspires both loyalty and productivity.

Harmony, however, was not a passive condition but an active process of negotiation. Some participants recalled moments of miscommunication or perceived favoritism that disrupted group cohesion. A few mentioned that discussions sometimes shifted entirely to Chinese or that domestic students received more immediate feedback. However, these disruptions rarely escalated into lasting conflicts. Instead, they were addressed through open conversation or quiet mediation by senior peers.

Sometimes the Chinese students talk too fast, and I feel left out. However, my senior brother always notices and translates the main points. That small gesture makes me feel included again. (Elsa, interview)

These micropractices of care demonstrate that harmony within Shimen is maintained not by avoiding conflict but by continuously repairing relationships. The community's emphasis on respect and empathy provided a moral compass that guided members' responses to tension.

Importantly, this relational ethic reshaped participants' understanding of academic success. Rather than viewing achievement as individual accomplishment, the students described it as collective progress. When one member published a paper, others celebrated it as a shared victory, reinforcing the idea that "we succeeded together". This sense of shared purpose not only motivated students but also reduced anxiety and self-doubt—issues often reported among international doctoral students in unfamiliar cultural settings (Bahtilla, 2022).

By embedding emotional care within academic collaboration, the Shimen system demonstrated that harmony and excellence are mutually reinforcing. The community's moral orientation transformed hierarchical supervision into relational mentorship and competition into solidarity.

In my country, supervision means independence; here, it means interdependence. I learned that we grow by helping each other. (Anders, interview)

Through these experiences, international doctoral students reframed their academic identities not as isolated scholars striving for individual achievement but as members of a relational network grounded in shared responsibility and collective growth.

In essence, Shimen operates as a conduit of harmony, integrating structural, emotional, and ethical dimensions of support. It exemplifies how an indigenous, Confucian-informed supervisory model can transform cross-cultural doctoral supervision into a holistic, community-based practice that nurtures both academic competence and human connection. These findings collectively reveal that the Shimen system operates as a moral and relational ecology, which the next section discusses in relation to existing theories.

Negotiating Tensions: The Limits and Pressures of Scaffolding

While the preceding themes illustrate Shimen's robust supportive functions, the participants' narratives also revealed inherent tensions that highlight the conditional nature and potential pressures of this relational scaffold. These tensions were not failures of the system but constitutive features of its dense relationality.

A recurring theme was the risk of prolonged dependency. Some students, while grateful for the clear guidance, voiced concerns that the strong, directive support from their laoshi and senior tongmen might inadvertently delay the development of their independent research judgment.

Sometimes I follow the path my senior brother suggests because it is easier, but then I wonder if it is truly my research. (Ghana, interview)

Furthermore, the very moral economy of reciprocity that fostered loyalty and diligence could, under pressure, transmute into significant performance anxiety. The imperative "not to disappoint the teacher" was a powerful motivator but also a source of stress, particularly for students whose experiments failed or whose writing progressed slowly. This pressure was acutely felt within the collective, where one's struggles were perceived as affecting the group's harmony and reputation.

Finally, despite the ethos of familial inclusion, linguistic and cultural barriers could subtly recreate lines of exclusion. As noted by Elsa and others, informal conversations that swiftly switched to Mandarin could momentarily marginalize international members, reminding them of their peripheral linguistic membership within the "family". These moments exposed the limits of translation and the occasional gap between the ideal of seamless belonging and the practical reality of cultural difference.

Critically, these tensions were typically managed through Shimen's own relational mechanisms, including peer mediation, supervisor attunement, and the collective ethos described earlier. A senior student might proactively clarify expectations to reduce dependency, or the supervisor might publicly affirm the value of the learning process over immediate results to alleviate performance anxiety. Thus, the system contained, within its structure, tools for its own relational negotiation and repair.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how China's Shimen system shapes the supervision experiences of international doctoral students. The findings reveal that Shimen operates through a relationally oriented paradigm of harmony in which ethical responsibility, emotional care, and collective participation converge to alleviate identity alienation and foster collective academic identity. The discussion that follows interprets these findings in light of the literature and theoretical perspectives, highlighting how the Shimen system extends the current understanding of doctoral supervision beyond the dominant discourse of power asymmetry and toward a culturally grounded, relational model of support.

Moving Beyond the “power asymmetry” narrative

Much of the existing research on doctoral supervision has emphasized asymmetrical power relations, focusing on issues such as hierarchy, miscommunication, and cross-cultural tension (Manathunga, 2007; Wang & Byram, 2019; Löfström et al., 2023). These analyses have been invaluable in revealing ethical challenges and supervisory inequalities; however, they also tend to portray hierarchy primarily as domination and supervision as control. The Shimen system complicates this narrative.

Within Shimen, hierarchy is not simply a structure of authority but a moral framework of care. Supervisors' authority entails responsibility for students' academic and emotional development, reflecting the Confucian principle that power must be exercised for the collective good. International students often described this moralized hierarchy as a source of stability and reassurance—a dependable foundation that allows them to develop independence within an environment of trust. Authority, in this context, becomes relational rather than bureaucratic, defined by ethical obligation and reciprocity (Dai & Elliot, 2023).

The data further demonstrate that power in Shimen is relationally distributed. Supervisors' benevolence, peers' mutual assistance, and the collective ethos of support transform vertical structures into webs of interdependence. Respect for hierarchy coexists with emotional closeness and open dialog, showing that authority and affection are not opposites but mutually reinforcing. Shimen thus redefines hierarchy as a moral relationship that empowers rather than subordinates.

Shimen thus redefines hierarchy as a moral relationship that empowers rather than subordinates. This understanding resonates with Confucian notions of *Ren* (benevolence) and *He* (harmony), in which leadership is sustained through moral examples and reciprocal obligation. When viewed through this lens, power asymmetry need not be eliminated; rather, it can be reframed as structured care, a relational balance between authority and compassion.

The Shimen system, therefore, challenges the presumed universality of autonomy-centric supervision models and presents itself as a legitimate, competing theoretical framework for effective doctoral education, one in which interdependence, rather than independence, is the foundational pathway to scholarly development and identity formation. It demonstrates how supervision, when embedded in ethical responsibility, can be both hierarchical and humane, inviting a broader understanding of supervision that accommodates diverse cultural logics of authority and support.

Shimen as Relational Scaffolding for Collective Academic Identity

Synthesizing these findings, the Shimen system can be understood as a multifaceted form of relational scaffolding that integrates academic guidance, emotional support, and social belonging within a coherent cultural framework. Whereas Western supervisory models often separate these domains by assigning intellectual guidance to supervisors, pastoral support to counseling services, and

socialization to peers, Shimen unites them through a single relational structure grounded in collective responsibility.

This integrative approach engages directly with evolving understandings of supervisory support as a holistic, affective practice (Pyhältö et al., 2022). Research confirms that effective supervisor support in doctoral education is multidimensional, critically encompassing empathy, care, and fostering belonging, which are factors that significantly impact student well-being and engagement. In Shimen, these affective components are not optional extras or sources of potential burnout; they are formally embedded as the ethical duty (*Ren*) of the supervisor. Acts of care, such as providing food during illness or inquiring about personal well-being, are thus reframed from informal kindness into culturally prescribed expressions of a moral pedagogical contract. This structured approach to emotional support can mitigate the role ambiguity and variable commitment that sometimes characterize the affective dimensions of supervision in other systems.

The metaphor of scaffolding captures this dual quality of structure and flexibility. Supervisors provide intellectual and moral guidance while encouraging students to cultivate initiative; peers mediate cultural understanding and share practical experience; and collective rituals nurture belonging and resilience. These interconnected layers form a "web of care" that supports not only research progress but also students' psychosocial adaptation to a new academic culture. This relational model challenges the conventional Western binary between dependence and independence (Baker & Lattuca, 2010). Within Shimen, autonomy is achieved through relational negotiation. As students demonstrate reliability and commitment, they are gradually being granted greater academic freedom. This "earned autonomy" corresponds with Dai and Hardy's (2021) notion of contextualized academic identity, in which selfhood emerges through mutual recognition rather than detachment.

Moreover, Shimen enriched Wenger's (1998) concept of the community of practice by adding indispensable emotional and ethical dimensions. While Wenger emphasized participation and shared repertoires as the foundation of learning, Shimen demonstrated that sustained participation is undergirded by culturally codified care. Supervisors act as moral exemplars, peers act as emotional anchors, and shared rituals act as the connective tissue of the group. In this sense, care itself becomes pedagogy, transforming supervision into an integrated affective and ethical practice.

Through these dynamics, Shimen fosters a collective academic identity that presents a distinct alternative to the identity pathways often documented in international doctoral education. Studies in Western neoliberal contexts describe how international students can feel pressured to adopt a "strategic individualism", in which they must often perform or subsume their cultural identities to navigate competitive, individual-centric academic markets (Laufer & Gorup, 2019). In contrast, Shimen provides a legitimate, structured pathway for a contextualized, hybrid academic identity (Dai & Hardy, 2024), forged with and through others through negotiated belonging and reciprocal obligation. International students learn to define their academic selves not through isolated competition but through

relational contributions to a collective. This hybrid identity, which is globally oriented yet grounded in the Confucian ethics of Shimen, illustrates how culturally specific frameworks can generate inclusive, supportive forms of academic life. Conceptualizing Shimen as relational scaffolding thus provides a powerful theoretical lens for understanding how culture mediates identity formation, highlighting that belonging, adaptation, and scholarly growth are interdependent processes sustained through deliberate relational interconnection.

Harmony as Dynamic Negotiation

The findings also reveal that harmony within Shimen is not a passive or fixed state but rather a dynamic negotiation that requires continual relational work. The participants frequently acknowledged moments of tension—language barriers, unequal access to information, or perceived favoritism—that temporarily disturbed the group's cohesion. However, these disruptions seldom escalated into enduring conflicts. Instead, they became occasions for moral reflection and relational repair.

When miscommunication occurred, senior tongmen often stepped in as mediators, translating intentions as well as words. Such practices align with what Dai and Elliot (2023) describe as relational repair—a culturally embedded mechanism for restoring equilibrium through empathy and reflexivity. In these moments, harmony functioned both as an ethical value and as a social process.

This dynamic understanding counters the stereotype of harmony as avoidance of conflict. Within Shimen, maintaining harmony demands emotional intelligence, patience, and moral awareness. It requires all members to participate in the ongoing work of understanding and adjustment. For international students, this experience develops intercultural competence and relational sensitivity, reflecting Wang's (2019) observation that Chinese supervision involves moral education as much as intellectual education.

At the same time, the recognition of harmony as negotiated rather than inherent underscores its conditional nature. The same hierarchical and collectivist structures that provide stability can, if mismanaged, lead to exclusion or dependency. Some students reported moments when harmony felt performative, imposed through authority rather than nurtured through reciprocity. These contradictions highlight the necessity for transparency and fairness in maintaining relational equity. Ultimately, harmony endures not because conflict is absent but because members continually choose empathy over alienation.

By framing harmony as a process rather than a condition, the Shimen model reframes cross-cultural supervision as an ethical practice of coexistence. It transforms cultural differences from a source of division into an opportunity for shared moral growth.

Toward an Indigenous Framework of Doctoral Supervision

Bringing these insights together, the Shimen system offers an indigenous framework for rethinking doctoral supervision in global higher education.

Grounded in Confucian relational ethics, it positions learning as both intellectual cultivation and moral formation. The framework challenges the presumed universality of Western supervisory paradigms by demonstrating that adequate supervision can emerge from cultural logics centered on reciprocity, community, and care.

Within this relational ecology, hierarchy functions as a mechanism of responsibility, belonging becomes a pedagogical method, and harmony operates as a collective goal. These interdependent mechanisms form a holistic model in which cognition, emotion, and ethics are inseparable. Shimen's success, therefore, lies not in replicating Western notions of individual autonomy but in fostering interdependent flourishing in which academic excellence and human connection advance together. By reframing the supervisor–student relationship as a collective endeavor, the Shimen system offers a model for fostering equitable academic communities. This aligns with the call for moving toward more balanced Global North–South academic partnerships through the cultivation of shared learning outcomes and intercultural competence (Shimoyamada, 2026).

This perspective also supports the broader effort to decolonize doctoral education. By emphasizing local epistemologies and relational pedagogies, Shimen redefines internationalization as dialog rather than assimilation. This perspective also supports the broader effort to decolonize doctoral education. By emphasizing local epistemologies and relational pedagogies, Shimen redefines internationalization as dialog rather than assimilation. It shows how non-Western systems can generate theoretical innovations that improve the global understanding of supervision.

The Shimen model emphasizes that supervision is not just a technical part of research training but also a moral practice centered on relationship building that involves care, respect, and a shared purpose. It offers a framework for intercultural doctoral training that values relational harmony and collective well-being as vital to scholarly growth. This approach helps advance global internationalization efforts by promoting a more inclusive, diverse view of effective supervision that respects different cultural logics instead of imposing a single Western model.

Conceptualizing Shimen as relational scaffolding thus provides new analytical vocabulary for cross-cultural doctoral education. It identifies culturally embedded pathways of relational care, collective belonging, and dynamic harmony through which doctoral supervision can support both scholarly achievement and personal growth. More broadly, it invites comparative inquiry into other collectivist traditions that embody similar ethics of reciprocity. By recognizing Shimen as a living example of indigenous pedagogical wisdom, this study contributes to a more inclusive and plural understanding of what constitutes adequate doctoral supervision in a globalized academy. Beyond its cultural specificity, the Shimen framework also offers insights for diversifying global models of doctoral education by illustrating how relational and harmony-oriented supervision can complement, rather than oppose, Western paradigms of autonomy and independence.

CONCLUSION

This study synthesized these findings to examine how the Shimen system supports international doctoral students' learning, adaptation, and identity formation. By employing a phenomenological approach and analyzing interviews with 28 participants, the research revealed how Shimen functions as a relational scaffold that integrates the academic, emotional, and social dimensions of supervision. Through this framework, international doctoral students not only navigated the challenges of cultural differences and linguistic barriers but also reconstructed their academic identities within a moral and communal order that values care, reciprocity, and harmony.

The findings reveal that Shimen provides a distinctive form of hierarchical care in which authority operates through responsibility rather than control. Supervisors' attentiveness to students' emotional and personal well-being transforms hierarchical distance into relational trust. For many participants, this ethical form of authority countered feelings of isolation, a common experience in cross-cultural doctoral supervision (Bahtilla, 2022). The structure of Shimen also fostered collective belonging, where peer mentoring, shared rituals, and moral expectations created an academic family that supported both intellectual and psychological growth. Finally, the maintenance of harmony emerged as a dynamic process—a continual negotiation that required empathy, transparency, and ethical awareness from all members. In combination, these mechanisms enabled international doctoral students to reframe their understanding of supervision, seeing it not as a unidirectional transmission of knowledge but as a relational journey of mutual care and transformation.

Theoretically, this study advances a culturally informed understanding of doctoral supervision by situating Shimen within the discourse of relational pedagogy. It challenges the dominant Western narrative that equates adequate supervision with autonomy, independence, and minimal hierarchy. Instead, it demonstrates that interdependence, when structured by moral responsibility, can foster both scholarly excellence and personal growth. The Shimen framework extends the idea of "communities of practice" (Wenger, 1998) by emphasizing emotional and ethical participation as essential to learning. It also aligns with Dai and Hardy's (2021) concept of contextualized academic identity, showing that doctoral identity is not only cognitive or professional but also relational and affective. By theorizing that Shimen is a form of relational scaffolding, this study contributes to ongoing efforts in international higher education to decolonize knowledge production and recognize the legitimacy of indigenous, non-Western educational practices.

Practical and Global Implications

The Shimen framework offers concrete, transferable insights for enhancing doctoral education beyond the Chinese context. Its value lies not in replicating its specific cultural form but in adapting its core relational principles to diverse institutional settings.

For supervisors and graduate schools globally, the Shimen model demonstrates the efficacy of intentionally designing microcommunities of support. While the exact familial hierarchy may be culturally specific, three principles are highly transferable:

Structured Peer Mentorship: Formalizing senior-junior ('buddy') systems within labs or cohorts can provide consistent, low-stakes guidance and cultural translation for new students.

Collective Accountability for Well-being: Making the health and integration of all group members a shared responsibility and meeting regularly can prevent isolation.

Supervisor-led Rituals for Belonging: Supervisors can initiate simple, recurring practices, such as regular group meals and collective celebrations of milestones, that build social cohesion and signal that students are valued as whole persons.

For international offices and policymakers, this study argues for a paradigm shift from deficit-based support to ecosystem-based support. Instead of solely providing services to 'fix' international students' problems, institutions should invest in fostering the relational ecosystems that naturally support them. This involves:

Development programs should move beyond generic 'communication skills' to include modules on culturally informed relational models, helping supervisors understand different frameworks of care, authority, and feedback.

Funding and incentives could support the creation of interdisciplinary doctoral peer communities that mimic the tongmen support network, reducing overreliance on a single supervisor.

For global decolonizing and internationalization agendas, the Shimen model provides a critical case study. True internationalization cannot be limited to recruiting diverse bodies; it must involve validating diverse pedagogical epistemologies. University leadership and accreditation bodies must recognize that effective supervision can be logically grounded in harmony, collective responsibility, and hierarchical care, not solely in ideals of autonomy and critical independence. This opens avenues for developing hybrid supervisory praxis that are more inclusive of global doctoral candidates.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides deep insight into the lived experience of Shimen, its findings must be considered within its limitations, which also illuminate productive paths for future inquiry. Participants were recruited from leading Chinese universities, which are likely resource-rich environments with internationally engaged supervisors. The benefits and challenges of Shimen may differ across less resourced institutions. The study captures the student experience. The supervisors' voices, interpretation of Shimen ethics, emotional labor, and challenges are absent. The data reflect experiences at a given point in time. A longitudinal design is needed to trace the evolution of relational scaffolding and identity throughout the full doctoral journey.

Future research could investigate Shimen-like structures (e.g., koza in Japan, with relationships in Muslim academic cultures) to distinguish universal principles of relational support from culturally unique expressions. In addition, we explore how Shimen dynamics operate across 'hard' and 'soft' sciences, where lab dependencies, funding structures, and publication practices differ. In addition, we develop and evaluate pilot programs in diverse institutional settings that adapt Shimen principles (e.g., structured peer mentorship) to measure their impact on international student success and well-being. In addition, we examine the motivations, burdens, and development needs of supervisors who enact or navigate holistic, care-based supervisory models.

In conclusion, this study highlights that culturally embedded frameworks such as Shimen offer more than local insight; they contribute to a global rethinking of doctoral education. By foregrounding relationships, morality, and harmony, Shimen demonstrated how doctoral supervision can be both academically rigorous and deeply human. This finding reminds us that the pursuit of scholarly excellence does not come at the expense of emotional connection or cultural identity. For international doctoral education to be genuinely inclusive, it must value not only intellectual diversity but also the diverse relational logics through which learning, mentoring, and identity are sustained.

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- None
- Some sections, with minimal or no editing
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- Entire work, with minimal or no editing
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Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used solely for language editing and stylistic refinement. No AI tools were used in the generation of academic content, data analysis, interpretation of findings, or development of arguments. All intellectual contributions and scholarly judgments are the sole responsibility of the authors.

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Author bios

HUANG Yu, PhD, is an Associate Professor at the Institute of International and Comparative Education, Beijing Normal University. His research interests encompass sustainability in higher education, environmental education and education for sustainable development. Email: huangyu@bnu.edu.cn

Shamillah Bano is a doctoral candidate at the Institute of International and Comparative Education, Beijing Normal University. Her research interests focus on international and comparative higher education. Email: shahshamillah123@gmail.com

SHI Anding is a doctoral candidate at the Department of Education, University of Oxford. Her research interests focus on international and comparative higher education. Email: anding.shi@education.ox.ac.uk

WANG Zining is a graduate student at the Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests focus primarily on international and comparative higher education. Email: wang0627@upenn.edu

JING Xiaoli, PhD, is a lecturer at the Institute of International and Comparative Education, Beijing Normal University. Her research focuses on international mobility in higher education. Email: xiaoli.jing@bnu.edu.cn
