



An autoethnography of an international doctoral student's multidimensional identity construction

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Received: 22 July 2021 / Accepted: 18 July 2022 / Published online: 24 August 2022
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Abstract

There is a scarcity of scholarship that sheds light on international doctoral students' identity construction in quotidian encounters beyond the formal curriculum. In this autoethnographic study, based on my diary entries, via a socio-constructivist lens, I teased out my multidimensional identity construction by referring to situations, activities and relations embedded in daily experiences during my overseas study sojourn. My autoethnography reveals that how I make sense of my becoming and being as a Chinese sojourning in Australia for doctoral education transcends the experientiality of doing research alone, but incorporates gendered, sociocultural and professional facets within my past-present-future life trajectory. As I navigated these encounters, strategically mobilising my agency and utilising structural contexts towards the aim of achieving ontological security, I engaged in negotiating a transformative identity. The research calls for more studies in the future that explore the complexities and nuances of international doctoral students' identity construction in quotidian realities.

Keywords Autoethnography · Identity construction · International doctoral student · Transnational mobility

An overview of international doctoral education and doctoral identity

Modern doctoral education, ever since its birth in Germany, has been characterised by internationalisation. This is even more so today as countries place more importance on internationalising doctoral education as a buttress to enhance international competitiveness. In tandem with these efforts is scholarly discussion. At a macro level, scholars (e.g., Nerad, 2010; Ryan, 2012) have portrayed a broad landscape,

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shedding light on policies, forces and structures that underpin the internationalisation of doctoral education. More recent studies have utilised a micro lens, giving particular voices to students, to articulate their perceptions of international doctoral journeys. These scholarly endeavours encompass a wide spectrum, such as cultural challenges shaping doctoral research approaches and supervisory relationships (Robinson-Pant, 2010; Weng, 2020); personal challenges of stress, isolation, financial constraints, ill health and transnational family commitments (Pappa et al., 2020); as well as enactment of agency (Phan et al., 2019; Xu, 2021). Focussing on different dimensions and stakeholders, previous studies help to inform our understanding of and approaches to international doctoral education.

In the current literature, there is a sustaining interest in doctoral identity as it has been long argued that doctoral education is as much about identity construction as knowledge production within a discipline (Baker & Lattuca, 2010; Cotterall, 2015; Xu & Grant, 2020). A wide body of pertinent research has consequently illuminated enablers and barriers influencing doctoral identity development (Lamar & Helm, 2017; McAlpine et al., 2009); as well as how the formation of researcher identity is mediated in relation to prototypical PhD engagements (Fotovatian, 2012; Inouye & McAlpine, 2019), contending that doctoral identity is a transformative process of being socialised into a full member of a given disciplinary community (Choi, 2021). Another branch of scholarship casts light on plurality of doctoral identity mediated in personal and sociocultural entanglements beyond the academic context, especially for the international group whose identity negotiation is even more complex. These studies highlight the significance of delving into dimensions in relation to race-ethnicity, gender, and professions that, despite appearing to be peripheral, play non-negligible roles in understanding one's doctoral identity. For example, African-American doctoral students perceived the faculty action of not acknowledging them outside of the classroom as serving to marginalise their racial identity, thus diminishing their socialisation (Felder et al., 2014). Chinese doctoral students internalised Confucianism as part of their being and incorporated Confucian cultural beliefs in malleability, interdependent self, and filial piety in their mundane life, which shaped their sustaining motivations of completing a PhD in the US (Zhou, 2014). As well, gender is widely reported as impacting perceptions of doctoral identity. For example, Sandekian et al. (2015) found that pursuing a degree in the US meant having to address extra obstacles for Saudi female graduates who were required to socialise into a mixed-gender educational environment that would be considered inappropriate back home. Similarly, gendered stereotypes were also considered a contributing factor to female international doctoral students' vulnerability due to social construction of gender values in China (Xu, 2021). Finally, the significance of professional practice was highlighted, given that non-academic work experiences are essential to strengthening doctoral students' researcher identity development (Mantai, 2018). In short, these studies point to the notion that transcending academic socialisation, doctoral identity also emerges from multidimensional and serendipitous interactions outside of formal support or structures (Hopwood, 2010). Nevertheless, there remains a relative scarcity of investigation into non-academic facets of doctoral students' identities, the navigation of which is intricately intertwined with broader sociocultural realities. To capture a nuanced understanding of a doctoral student's

identity necessitates unpacking more complexities than formal academic engagements alone.

From a methodological perspective, the current literature regarding doctoral identity has been dominated by researchers investigating doctoral students from outside in, and hardly examines this cohort looking from inside out by using a self-reflective analytic lens. Having said that, there has been an emergence of studies adopting autoethnography to disentangle, in particular, dark, dim and obscure features (Bengsten & Barnett, 2017) shaping doctoral education, including quotidian home study spaces (Burford & Hook, 2019); impacts of performativity pressures on doctoral students (Raineri, 2013); socialisation of academic research culture (Lynch & Kuntz, 2019) and unconventional approaches to doctoral thesis writing (Weatherall, 2019). These studies bring into bold relief multifaceted hidden dimensions that have remained under-considered in doctoral education. Nevertheless, despite its great methodological potential and significance, self-study inquiry is still under utilised by doctoral students when it comes to reflecting on their identity construction in daily encounters of their doctoral trajectory (Foot et al., 2014).

Considering the above limitations in the current literature, I set out to conduct an autoethnographic inquiry into my identity construction. As an overseas Chinese student sojourning in Australia, I spent four years in a regional university located in a major city for a doctoral degree in education. Given that I largely studied independently on campus in a shared office, I focussed on the less researched hidden encounters underpinning unofficial mechanisms of learning. Two research questions anchored my exploration: what hidden elements within and outside academia are identified to emerge from my overseas study sojourn that have shaped my identity construction, and how do I negotiate a desired identity within these encounters? To tease out my inquiry into these questions, I now turn to explaining the theoretical framework that guides my exploration.

Theoretical framework

This study addresses the issue of identity construction from a socio-constructivist lens, bringing together two branches of theoretical underpinnings. First, according to this anti-essentialist view, identity is continually constructed at the intersection of narratability and experientiality of one's lived experience. For one thing, an individual's identity entails an existential involvement that cannot be understood independently of one's self-narrative. As natural storytellers, people construct a narrative identity through synthesising and internalising an evolving and integrative life story so that they can create a coherent account of identity in time with some degree of unity and purpose (McAdams & McLean, 2013). One's selfhood is constructed in and through the narration, and, by virtue of that narration, others may gain insight into the nature of an existing self (Zahavi, 2005). With a change of life plan and circumstances, individuals create, maintain and revise their biographical narrative of life stories. As a consequence, they may achieve the self-transformation and ontological security that gives them a sense of order, continuity and consistency in regard to the meaning of life experiences (Giddens, 1991). For another, identity

presents itself as an experiential process that unfolds within social engagements that, in turn, keep shaping the construction of one's identity. The experientiality denotes that identity construction is an interactional accomplishment and a social performance (Cerulo, 1997), moulded through interplay between the self and other selves, but existing only in relation to other selves (Jackson, 2010). This sociality feature is best captured in Zahavi's (2005) statement that, "I come to know who I am and what I want to do with my life by participating in a community" (p. 109).

Apart from narratability and experientiality, a socio-constructivist perspective is essentially ecological, conceptualising identity construction as a fluid negotiation that occurs at the interface of macro factors such as host nation reception and structural-institutional support, as well as micro factors such as individual agentic adaptation-change processes (e.g., Edwards & Burns, 2016; van Lier, 2011). As an ongoing project, the negotiation is subject to one's agentic endeavours, while simultaneously being "molded, refabricated and mobilised in accord with reigning cultural scripts and centers of power" (Cerulo, 1997, p. 397). This is even more so for culture crossers who need to navigate contesting forces embedded within complex structure adaptively, strategically and creatively in order to satisfy dual needs of verifying their own self-concepts while adjusting these to accommodate contextual social interactions (Adegbola et al., 2018). Considered key to the process is mindfulness, which calls for an in-the-moment reflexive examination of the ingrained meaning-making assumptions and a critical synthesis of emerging knowledge repertoires into one's mind- and eye-scape (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Informed by the above scholarship, my autoethnographic study focusses on unravelling how my multidimensional identity was made intelligible via a personal narrative of lived experiences of interacting with the milieu as an international doctoral student. As well, it shows how diverse facets of my identity that operate simultaneously on multiple levels and in different contexts have been shaped at the intersection of various agentic and structural forces. Echoing Watson (2002), who poignantly asserted that "having the 'skin' of one's personal self pierced through cross-cultural encounter is a positive experience, since it breaks the shell of old understandings and allows new understandings to emerge" (p. 152), I contend that my four-year, cross-cultural lived experience embodies such a holistic process of identity construction. In the next part, I delineate my research design.

Autoethnography as the methodology

Autoethnography is a methodology that follows the principle of describing and systematically analysing (graphy) personal experience (auto) to expand understanding regarding cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis et al., 2010). As a popular form of qualitative research, it allows people to engage "in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles through personal experience" (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 111). This suits the current research well for it enabled my critical reflexivity and agency as both the observer and participant. As I connected the personal to the cultural via pertinent theoretical analysis, it expanded my

interpretation of how my identity emerged from interactivity with broader social and cultural structures.

For data collection, I did not predesign this self-study intentionally. Reflecting on my doctoral trajectory, I realised that my multidimensional identity emerged in moments, events, persons, objects and settings that I had experienced. My habit of keeping diaries facilitated the ongoing data collection. These diaries, documented regularly since my overseas sojourn started in 2016 and retrospectively mobilised in the study, as data were accounts of reflections-in-action, constituting handwritten and typed entries varying from 50-word single paragraphs to longer narratives of over a thousand words. Some entries were chosen to be included in this study because they were considered representative records with particular relevance to the complexities of my identity.

Data analysis was inspired by Bradbury-Jones (2007) who suggested several steps. I started with reading and re-reading my entire journal output interpretively, searching for entries denoting meaning and representation in relation to my identity construction. And then, I read these entries reflexively, focussing on entangling and categorising aspects of my becoming as an overseas doctoral student revealed in the data. I annotated journal entries with tentative themes that represented aspects of my identity as it emerged from the data. This inductive process, informed by the stories and my theoretical underpinnings anchoring this study, was developmental. After rounds of iterative comparison and combination, I identified three themes, each of which was illuminated with some representative diary entries. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, all persons mentioned herein have been pseudonymised. Regarding validity, I agreed with Duncan (2004) that the validity of an autoethnographic study does not lie in duplicating a design setting to match findings, but is gauged to be valid if it elicits resonance amongst readers (Ellis et al., 2010). The study incorporated authentic accounts of daily encounters that possibly resonate with international doctoral students, making them believable stories via which readers enter my subjective world and are informed about their similar and/or different lives (Ellis et al., 2010). The following section reports findings of my research.

Findings

My autoethnography revealed that many unofficial channels of learning and adjustment within the broad experiential landscape stand as genuine and useful resources contributing to identity construction. Those quotidian encounters are tantamount to hidden treasures that were quarried from the holistic doctoral ecology. Despite taking up a marginalised position in contrast to learning activities regulated by the official curriculum, they forged complementary support and reinforcement that I, as a doctoral researcher, received along the journey (Elliot et al., 2020). In general, three salient dimensions, in relation to my gender, ethnic culture and career path, were identified to impact perception and construction of my identity. As I navigated these encounters, strategically mobilising my agency and utilising structural contexts towards achieving ontological security, I engaged in negotiating a mindful identity transformational journey.

Gendered barriers and self-empowerment

As I browsed my diary entries, I recognised that many meaningful encounters brought my gender into relief. This dimension of identity negotiation was intimately embedded in interactions with some women whom I got to know since arriving in Australia. One such figure is an academic peer named Linda. Two years further into doctoral candidature than was I, Linda influenced me considerably with her strong willingness to offer me intellectual and emotional support. Our similar gendered experiences and ethnic backgrounds made it easier for me to empathise with her disquiet resulting from obstacles confronted by female academics. In hindsight, I felt many of our conversations were indicative of gendered barriers and self-empowerment.

One diary entry recording our meeting in our office caught my attention:

Engrossed in finishing up the last section of the methodology chapter, I didn't notice Linda's coming back to office until she greeted me, apparently drained out. "A busy working day?" I asked. "Oh, just keep moving around serving tables like crazy," Linda answered while calling her elder son, "Brekkie for tomorrow is in the fridge, honey. Mom might be very late back home. Please put the little one to bed." "Will you burn the midnight oil again?" I asked, concerned about her health. As usual, Linda replied, with mixture of sweetness and bitterness, "that's how you manage work and study as a PhD mom." As I nodded, I felt a surge of respect for this tough Asian woman.

Another entry about her graduation ceremony after our meeting in the office was also noteworthy:

Tears started to well up in my eyes as I watched Linda proudly approaching the podium to receive her doctoral degree. With the hall erupting into a thunderous applause, I suddenly found myself lost in memories of the past three years flashing through my mind. An enduring memory that I recalled concerned her habitual closure of each talk when she would soothe me, eyes beaming, with a comforting tone, saying, "It's okay Ming, all hard work will pay off. We will get through this." For sure, Dr Linda at the podium has finally triumphed in this marathon, about which I feel so joyful. With the faith that hard work will pay off in the end, I now look forward to the day when I too will be entitled to be called "Dr".

Needless to say, not all the challenges disclosed by Linda were gender specific, specifically the arduous efforts required by the doctoral study and financial obstacles. However, the need to find a balance between familial and academic roles seemed more notable among women (Crabb & Ekberg, 2014), including Linda and me. I myself encountered an even greater range of demands. For example, beyond a socioculturally anticipated age for a woman to settle down, I have been constantly confronted by the stress-inducing expectation from peers and parents concerning a deep-seated notion in Confucian culture that, "At thirty, one should

establish a household and build up a career.” Working towards a career trajectory of a female academic, I was mindful of career challenges that contribute to the leaks during each stage of a female’s academic pipeline (Gasser & Shaffer, 2014). Beyond individual choices, these norms and practices are ongoing, stable, and deeply embedded in specific cultural and professional contexts, constituting structural constraints that significantly limit one’s decision-making ability.

Nevertheless, instead of succumbing to the constraints, with her encouraging words and actions as a senior female doctoral student, Linda’s story inspired and empowered me in relation to being and acting as a modern woman who displays inner qualities of independence, resilience and self-efficacy, despite experiencing adversity. Convinced by Linda’s perception that “hard work will pay off”, I downplayed the ideological and practical gendered hindrances and relied on inner strength to pursue the ambition of becoming a “Dr”. My construction of an agentic female identity was performed as I inculcated within myself the strong will, toughness and independence embodied by women such as Linda, through interacting with them and orienting my life course towards self-reliance and self-efficacy.

Cultural otherness and belonging

As with gender, I experienced contending forces of social structure and human agency, feeling torn between a structural loss instigated by cultural dislocation and my agentic efforts to preserve my cultural identity. On one hand, my long-term disembeddedness from cultural familiarity accentuated awkwardness and discomfort by being conceptualised as a cultural “other” in the host context. A common experience was related to food practices. My Chinese style of cuisine, which may not fit into what mainstream Australians define as normal, embodies such an experience of cultural otherness. One diary documented an encounter with local students in a common room illuminated this:

Upon entering the room, I noticed Jason and Jenny seated opposite to each other, chewing while chatting. “Hello” greeted I, while putting my lunchbox into the microwave. Turning back, I saw them both wearing a beaming smile towards me with boxes containing fruit, vegetables, and sandwiches scattered on their table. Standing in front of the microwave waiting for my food to be ready, I just hoped time would go by faster so that I wouldn’t appear such an ignorant person who was not knowledgeable enough to get involved in their conversation about some latest Australian sports news. After three minutes, the microwave finally let out a cheerful ‘PLING!’ The moment my lunchbox was taken out, a strong aroma immediately floated across the room. “What do you have for today?” asked Jason. “Salted chicken feet,” I replied. “Oh... sounds... interesting,” said Jenny. Judging from their subtle yet explicit facial expressions, I understood what I considered savoury might be nasty for others. “Sorry about the smell,” I apologised, feeling embarrassed, and darted out of the room.

Although we were not enrolled in the same faculty, I had a nodding acquaintance with Jason and Jenny as we occasionally met each other in a shared common room over lunch. As well-educated Westerners embracing multiculturalism, they never made me feel racially uncomfortable. Despite no intended racial mockery, the “subtle yet explicit facial expressions”, along with the “interesting” remark indicated that palatability is socioculturally contingent. What is accepted in many Asian countries as a delicacy might be considered a weird adventure in Australian culinary culture. Given that cooking and eating practices transcend being symbolic but also represent tangible and concrete ways that ethnic identities are preserved (D’Silva & Beagan, 2011), it was hardly surprising that I felt “othered” in a food culture space where the mainstream practices differ from those of my own, which, however constitute an integral part of my authentic cultural identity.

Simultaneously, despite constraints at the structural level, I have given agency full play to maintain my cultural selfhood. Part of the effort was demonstrated by my proactive engagement in establishing close connections with a Vietnamese family. Hannah’s loving family, with which I had a cultural and affective identification, was a substitute for my own family. A diary entry about a farewell dinner held for her mother at her house is an example:

I volunteered to make Chinese hotpot to repay their kindness expressed in the many dinners they had treated me to over many months. I brought over soup base, ingredients and wine. Beaming with contented smiles, Hannah, her husband, her mum, two children, and I were all busy filling our bowls with meat, dumplings, and vegetables while engaging in chit-chat and laughter. Apart from subjects Hannah believed would interest me, she did not translate their conversation, otherwise entirely carried in Vietnamese. Surprisingly, instead of feeling embarrassed, I found the ambience as intimate, cosy and reassuring as that of my own family. I think for many years to come, this affectionate send-off party will stay in my memory, in tandem with all the homemade meals and quality time we had together.

My enactment of agency in terms of “volunteering a Chinese hotpot” transcended being merely a token of gratitude but was out of my aspiration for cultural attachment to safeguard my cultural selfhood that was marginalised in an alien context. In strengthening my connections to this family, I was better able to preserve my cultural embeddedness in Confucianism that values a harmonious family life featuring affectionate elders and dutiful offspring. Confucianism provides a philosophical foundation to many East and Southeast Asian cultures, and its deep and wide influence has been well recognised throughout this region including in Vietnam (Truong et al., 2016). The cultural proximity between the Vietnamese family and me provided a core reference point that worked like a magnetic field pulling us together. Our shared family values had bequeathed us the same cultural capacity to construct and interpret meanings without needing to depend on language. By means of initiating interactions with Hannah’s family I gained the recuperative power to uphold the integrity of my Confucian self that was otherwise vulnerable and lacked recognition in a country where a more individualistic ethos prevailed and where loneliness for me was consequently more likely.

Invisible capital and professional networking

My identity transition from being an EFL teacher in China to a PhD student in Australia pertained to a bioecological transition that instigates structural challenges. For me and many other research peers, we found constructing a new and legitimate doctoral identity a challenging structural barrier. A diary recording a conversation between me and my course mate, Alina, was an example:

“Hooray! My essay assignment was finally finished! How about you?” I send a message to Alina who was taking the same course as me this semester. “Congrats! I am racking my brains working on it. Wondering if Green may find much of my writing confusing and unintelligible as before,” replies Alina. Her words remind me to go through my own product again, which turns out to stir anxiety on my part as well. “NOW I feel the same. Isn’t it a shame for both of us who used to teach English at universities? Invisible English lecturers! Lol,” I jokingly respond.

Like me, Alina used to be an English lecturer prior to being sponsored by her government to do a PhD overseas. Our professional experience was significant for the doctoral sojourn since our research topic was born out of previous EFL teaching that inspired and shaped our research trajectories. Being enrolled in the same course, we had many discussions like the one above, sharing our uncertainty, insecurity and invisibility. These negative emotions were concomitant of assuming a research role in the unfamiliar Australian academic milieu where capitalisation on international doctoral students’ professional experiences seemed neglected. The feeling of incompetence permeated my doctoral trajectory, partially due to the fact I was dealing with new structural requirements, which I found operationally and psychologically unfamiliar. For me, assuming a new role as a doctoral student necessitated a core task of internalising prototypical disciplinary norms and developing a repertoire of competencies in relation to becoming and working as a novice researcher in the discipline of education. Despite the fact that I was a competent EFL teacher prior to pursuing a doctorate, I found the professional knowledge and skills accumulated during my lectureship inadequate for a PhD program. Furthermore, the insecurity stemmed from my lack of confidence that was born from a fear of being judged as an unqualified language professional by native English gatekeepers. At an institutional level, implicitly ignoring diverse cultural literacies while heralding Western ways of knowing and learning as templates (MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003) has silenced international students who may possess abundant assets to contribute to host educational settings. Should host universities pay more heed to international doctoral students’ voices in our respective workplaces, incorporate multicultural philosophies and pedagogies that underpin our prior professional experiences in the (in)formal doctoral curriculum, there would be a fruitful East–West knowledge flow that balances the prevailing Western-centric perspectives (Pu & Pawan, 2013). This, unfortunately, remains rare. The self-deprecating practice of naming ourselves as “invisible English lecturers” embodied a humorous means of the identity transition’s tensions, the root of which lies not only in the difficulty of academic socialisation

per se, but also in the biased attitudinal and operational practices dominating the host educational context towards international students.

Facing the structural challenge of identity transition, I mobilised agency to initiate a grassroots network among visiting Chinese scholars. This served to sustain my professional identity and create more opportunities to benefit my future career path. One diary about a Chinese Teachers' Day lunch party illuminated this:

It's September the 10th, the annual Teacher's Day in China. Days ago, with my housemates Brother Lou and Sister Lin, I decided to set the date for inviting visiting Chinese scholars in our university to a family lunch to celebrate this festival. The clock struck noon and we ended up preparing a table of savoury dishes, scrambled egg with tomato, braised beef with brown sauce, tender stewed fish, etc. So yummy! It turned out we had ten guests finally, with two new lecturers who just arrived in Australia two weeks ago. Sitting around the lunch table, we toasted "Happy Teachers' Day" to each other while indulging ourselves with the lovely lunch. The after-lunch party was enveloped in amiability and collegiality as we exchanged views on experiences in relation to publications, grants application, teaching environment and so on. What a rewarding networking day.

As noted above, the transition from being a teacher to a student was accompanied by feelings of loss, challenge and ignorance. To offset emotional repercussions, I took the initiative networking with visiting Chinese scholars, including Brother Lou and Sister Lin, who hold teaching positions in Chinese universities as I did previously. For one thing, this manifested investment in maintaining my linguistic capital that was not recognised in the Australian research space where English serves as gatekeeper (King & Scott, 2014). More importantly, a shared social identity of "Chinese university teacher" stirred up within us a sense of profession-based in-groupness in the alien educational context where we were perceived outsiders. As we interacted, organising day-trips and hosting parties such as the one documented above, we formed a social structure that bestowed on sense of belonging and bridged my connection to Chinese academia. To me, networking with my "own kind of people" turned out to be a significant way to sustain my "invisible" professional capital and enhance my preparedness for Chinese academia where I imagined landing an academic position upon graduation.

Discussion

Via a socio-constructivist lens, my autoethnographic study unpacks my multidimensional identity construction as a negotiation narrated and experienced within the informal encounters along my overseas study trajectory, subject to the interacting forces of my human agency and structural contexts within the transnational space. Some insights can be gleaned from my exploration of the research questions.

First, the study expands pertinent scholarship of international doctoral students' identity construction via understanding its narratability and experientiality. It manifests that narrative reflection on lived experiences provided individuals a

chance to turn a lens inward, deliberating and constructing experiential insights on whom we and would like others believe we are. How we define and present who we are is contingent on the values, ideals and beliefs we hold, in which are embedded distinctive particularities of meaning and significance for an individual. Casting light on non-academic engagements, it showcases that whereas a probe into formal mechanisms and channels closely related to a student's becoming a novice researcher is essential, those mundane transactions are far from negligible. The reason is that the manner in which a doctoral student makes sense of his/her being transcends the experientiality of doing research alone but incorporates gendered, sociocultural, professional and many other facets within one's past-present-future life trajectory. For international students, this is even more so, given that their lived experience is intricately entwined with different temporalities and spaces. As has been discussed elsewhere (e.g., Dai & Hardy, 2021; Grant et al., 2016; Moran et al., 2021), this research reveals doctoral identity is relational in ways much more nuanced and diversified than could be adequately captured in an orthodox discourse of formal doctoral curriculum that focusses on learning activities and attainments occurring strictly within the academic setting. It contributes further empirical weight to the value of teasing out those daily, unconscious and taken-for-granted realities.

Second, identity construction is an ecological negotiation, subject to shaping forces of social structure and human agency (Tran et al., 2020; Xu, 2021). As an in-betweener travelling home and hosting sociocultural spaces, I have been enmeshed in many structural relations, symbols and activities, which have presented themselves as structural barriers in relation to my gender, minority status and teacher-student identity transition. With my enactment of agency to meet structural needs and capitalise on structural resources, I have managed to discover and construct more ways of knowing and being myself. These endeavours were salient in my resilience inspired by agentic female friends such as Linda to achieve self-empowerment; in sustained efforts of establishing an attachment with a Vietnamese family featuring small cultural distances from those of mine; and in networking with visiting Chinese scholars to reclaim my ignored professional capital and prepare for my future career. Although I experienced vulnerability, exclusion and unpredictability in these structural constraints, as I exerted agentic efforts orientating towards building an inclusive, proactive and adaptive identity, I gradually accrued emotional security, identity inclusion and autonomy. In particular, the study lends weight to the proposition that mindful reflexivity is crucial to identity negotiation in a transcultural context (Collie et al., 2010; Ting-Toomey, 2015; Xu et al., 2020). Mindfulness facilitates my becoming an autonomous agent despite gender-specific constraints for female academics (to be), my search for maintenance of cultural in-groupness as a cultural other in the dominant context, and my initiative to bridging my hardly recognised professional history to an imagined future career. Turning a self-reflective analytic lens on these encounters, I performed a mindful inquiry of understanding myself, unfamiliar others and the new macro-micro cultural system, with in-the-moment wakefulness and watchfulness of attuning to notions, judgments and assumptions held by me and embedded in the new context (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018).

Conclusion and implications

The autoethnography reveals that the sense-making of my becoming and being as a Chinese international doctoral student emerged from those quotidian gendered, sociocultural and professional encounters along my past-present-future life trajectory. As I navigated these encounters, strategically mobilising my agency and utilising structural contexts towards the aim of achieving ontological security, I engaged in negotiating a mindful and transformative identity. The meanings derived and interpreted from my experience, I believe, transcend the limitations of a simple self-study and have reference for this cohort as a whole. Despite being situated in the Chinese and Australian contexts, this study has wider significance for international students in other milieux since gendered, sociocultural and professional facets discussed in this study are realities (dis)similarly experienced across different contexts.

This study has implications for stakeholders involved in international doctoral education. First, it encourages more international doctoral students to embark on an inner journey of mindfully and critically reflecting on the richness and fluidity of their identity development, so as to reconcile conflicts and achieve attunement in the betwixt-and-between milieu. Furthermore, given identities are socially experienced and constructed, future autoethnography should also be performed communally in conversations among students in relation to each other (Foot et al., 2014) so that they can articulate, revise and legitimate their identity formation in a collaborative and participatory manner. Host institutions have ethical and functional responsibilities to shoulder too. Not only should they hold dear international students' repertoire of knowledge and experience, but, more importantly they should provide resources and support beyond formal academic mentorship to facilitate students' personal and cross-cultural aspects that interrelate with their academic life. A fine-grained elaboration of these practices, however, is neither the focus of this study, nor possible to accomplish in a piece of this length. Future research is encouraged in order to shed more light on these issues.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethics This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Newcastle (protocol code H-2018-0082).

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