

A Case Study of Chinese Female Doctoral Students in a Malaysian University

Qiu xiaoting¹, Hui xianxin¹, Liu zhifang¹

¹Universiti Sains Malaysia 11800 USM Penang, Malaysia.

Received: 03.05.2023 • Accepted: 10.07.2023 • Published: 24.07.2023 • Final Version: 14.08.2023

Abstract: Studies have proven the negative influence of stress both on doctoral students' academic performance and their well-being from different contents. Stress sources were also well investigated in the past literature. However, the situation of female Chinese doctoral students, especially those who have married with children and left their families behind to study in Malaysia just after the reopening of post-pandemic was still rare. To bridge the gap and understand the challenges faced by them, this case study investigated the current situations faced by female doctoral students from China studying in a public Malaysian university with a purposeful sampling method. Five purposefully chosen participants were interviewed and the transcripts were analysed thematically. The findings indicate that their lives in Malaysia are satisfactory. In general, their lives as doctoral students in Malaysia are relatively less stressful, which contradicts the findings from some past literature. The specific characteristics of these five participants of this case study such as the identity transformation to be a full-time female doctoral student and the similarity between local culture and Chinese culture can be utilized to explain the different findings.

Keywords Chinese female doctoral students, Stress, Identity transformation, Malaysian doctoral students, academic performance

1. Introduction

The impact of COVID-19 on economic growth is obvious, which leads to bankrupts and the closing of many brick-and-mortar businesses throughout the world. The pandemic's influence on China's economic growth is also very evident. According to the statistics released by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, China's gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate was 2.2% in 2020, which dropped from 6.0% in 2019. The dropped GDP also indicates a sharp increase in the unemployment rate. The jobless rate reached its peak of 6.25 during the pandemic in China in 2020, as reported by the BBC (Hoskins, 2022). However, the number of fresh graduates increases annually due to the expansion of university enrollment. The total number of fresh undergraduates was 8.3 million solely in 2021. The accumulated number of graduates since the outbreak of the pandemic has worsened the unemployment rate and intensified competition in the job market. Hence, more and more graduates further their studies, which contributes to the higher enrollment rates of higher education in China. It is reported by the State Council Information Office of the Chinese government that higher education enrolment increased from 30 percent in 2012 to 57.8 percent in 2021.

Owing to the intense competition in China, both in the job market and in mass Ph.D. applications, more and more graduates seek Ph.D. candidacy opportunities overseas. According to the statistics from the Statista website, China provides the largest number of international students throughout the world. The composition of international students from China in Malaysia also sees a sharp rise. Due

* Corresponding Author: qiuxiaoting@student.usm.my

to its more affordable cost in comparison with countries like the USA and the UK, Malaysia becomes a preferred study destination.

With the opening of borders, students from overseas are allowed and welcomed to travel back to the countries where they study. It is the first time a large number of students visit and live in Malaysia since the courses during the pandemic were mainly conducted virtually. The researchers of this study used one of the top public universities in Malaysia, which has already developed to be an international prestigious university with a great number of students from different countries studying at three campuses to understand the current situation of Ph.D. students living in Malaysia for the first time after the pandemic.

The factors contributing to the challenges faced by doctoral students from various countries have been explored by different studies in the past. For instance, a study that explored the obstacles encountered by doctoral students in Iran showed that formal and informal communication between students and faculties was one of the factors contributing to their stress (Hemmati & Mahdie, 2020). A study exploring the challenges encountered by Chinese doctoral students from China has shown several predominant factors causing stress to doctor-al students, such as stress from publication, the dismay of an unpromising future, delayed graduation, and anxieties in the commutations with supervisors (Mao et al., 2022). Similar factors were also confirmed by another study, which also points out two more factors, financial factors, such as limited Ph.D. project funding, and personal factors like family pressure and marriage factors causing stress to doctoral students (Wang et al., 2019). A systematic scoping review reviewed past studies exploring the stress encountered by doctoral students and categorized the emerging themes from past studies, which showed that factors contributing stress to in doctoral settings are "issues in the supervisory relationship", "lack of transparency of university processes", "workload", "role conflict", "financial insecurity and uncertain career prospects"(Mackie & Bates, 2019).

Apart from the well-examined areas of study challenges faced by doctoral students from different countries, the difficulties encountered by doctoral students in their daily lives in different countries have also been widely researched. Being a multicultural society, challenges faced by doctoral students in Malaysia have also received much attention. Pandian (2008) claimed that Middle Eastern students studying in Malaysia had very little interaction with local students. However, Middle Eastern students are relatively content with their studies in Malaysia even though they have been perceived as discriminated against, prejudiced, tolerant, and stereotyped by the local community (Pandian,2008). A similar study explored the perception of studying in Malaysia as an international student and challenges encountered by Middle Eastern students revealed that most of them felt very satisfied to study in Malaysia and the common difficulties for them were mainly from their English language proficiency, especially their spoken English and writing, which impeded them participating in the classroom discussion (Kaur & Sidhu, 2009). The findings of this study concur with the founding of a study conducted by Singh (2019).

Heavy research proved the association between stress levels of students' mental health among doctoral students and their academic performance. A representative sample of 3659 doctoral students in Belgium was assessed regarding their mental health (Levecque et al., 2017), which showed that 32% of the samples are at risk of having psychiatric disorders. Similar findings were also confirmed by exploring 69 biomedical doctoral students (Nagy et al., 2019). Furthermore, mental health issues have also been proven to be associated with low academic performance (Nagy et al., 2019; J. Hyun et al., 2007). It has also been reported that students with a functional relationship with their advisors experienced less stress and emotional issues (J. Hyun et al., 2007). A study comparing the stress

levels faced by doctoral students from different fields shows that students from different faculties encounter varied levels of stress. Doctoral students in humanities have been reported with the highest level of stress (J. K. Hyun et al., 2003).

Female doctoral students have been generally reported to experience higher stress levels than male students (Mackie & Bates, 2019). A study conducted by Brown and Watson (2010) explained the potential reasons for the higher stress from female doctoral students, which are domestic demands as a mother, balancing a domestic life and academic life, and being torn by the role shifts between mother and student. The last one is that conference attendance seems impossible for women doctoral students due to domestic life, which also contributes to their overall stress level (Brown & Watson, 2010).

Even though the stress faced by doctoral students is well-researched, studies investigating stress and challenges faced by female doctoral students from mainland China who are living in Malaysia for the first time after the pandemic are still rare. Therefore, this case study aims to understand the situation of female doctoral students from mainland China via a semi-structured interview case study. Due to the unique characteristics of Chinese female doctoral students, a single case study using a semi-structured interview was used.

2. Research Method

The psychological This study applies a case study, which aims to understand the experience of Chinese female Ph.D. students studying at a Malaysian public university based on a case study. Due to the nature of the case study, it is appropriate to be used since it enables researchers to have significant insights and an in-depth understanding of a particular issue (Lewis, 2015). A case study is an appropriate method for this study since the purpose of this case study is to illustrate, conceptualize and describe the situation of Chinese female doctoral students' lives in Malaysia. The objectives of this case study are to understand the challenges faced by female doctoral students from China studying in Malaysia. A semi-structured interview framework was employed in this case study, which helps researchers to understand the phenomenon better.

The semi-structured interview in this case study was guided by the protocol proposed by Merriam and Tisdell (2015). All questions in this case study were very flexible, which aim to elicit more in-depth data. In addition, most spontaneous questions generated during the interview by researchers were also highly relevant and confined to the overall topic. There were no predetermined wording or orders for the asked questions either.

A pilot interview was conducted with a doctoral student who was not included in the final participants of this case study. The transcript from the pilot interview was transcribed and analyzed, which was also discussed among three researchers. Based on the discussion, the protocol was kept, which involved questions mainly concerning the challenges faced by female doctoral students studying and living in Malaysia for the first time.

This case study employs a naturalistic approach to collect data. The data is collected via interviews and observation, where three researchers interact with participants and observe the participants. Beforehand to collect the data, participants were acknowledged about this study, and consent was obtained from participants. Three researchers took notes separately when they observed the participants during the interview. The field notes were later referred to in the triangulation process. The interview was recorded with an audio recorder.

The collected data consists of two parts, audio recording, and field notes from three researchers. Firstly, the recording was transcribed with Otter.ai software. Then each researcher checked the transcriptions individually. The mistakenly transcribed utterances were discussed among three researchers and corrected by referring to the audio. The final version of the transcription was checked by all three researchers.

The collected data was analyzed thematically after the final transcription was checked. Initially, data analysis was done individually by each researcher. Then, the generated themes from three individual analyses were exchanged among three researchers to check if there are any inappropriate themes. The inappropriate themes were further discussed and combined after the discussion among three researchers. Lastly, the themes generated by each researcher were piled under themes.

The participants of this case study were purposefully chosen based on the criteria of this case study. The participants of this case study are female doctoral students studying and living in Malaysia for the first time. Table 1. shows the profiles of participants involved in this study.

Table 1: Demographic of Participants

This study applies a case study, which aims to understand the experience of Chinese female Ph.D. students studying in a Malaysian public university based on a case study. Due to the nature of the case study, it is appropriate to be used since it enables researchers to have significant insights and an in-depth understanding of a particular issue (Lewis, 2015). A case study is an appropriate method for this study since the purpose of this case study is to illustrate, conceptualize and describe the situation of Chinese female doctoral students' lives in Malaysia. The objectives of this case study are to understand the challenges faced by female doctoral students from China studying in Malaysia. A semi-structured interview framework was employed in this case study, which helps researchers to understand the phenomenon better.

The semi-structured interview in this case study was guided by the protocol proposed by Merriam and Tisdell (2015). All questions in this case study were very flexible, which aim to elicit more in-depth data. In addition, most spontaneous questions generated during the interview by researchers were also highly relevant and confined to the overall topic. There were no predetermined wording or orders for the asked questions either.

A pilot interview was conducted with a doctoral student who was not included in the final participants of this case study. The transcript from the pilot interview was transcribed and analyzed, which was also discussed among three researchers. Based on the discussion, the protocol was kept, which involved questions mainly concerning the challenges faced by female doctoral students studying and living in Malaysia for the first time.

This case study employs a naturalistic approach to collect data. The data is collected via interviews and observation, where three researchers interact with participants and observe the participants. Beforehand to collect the data, participants were acknowledged about this study, and consent was obtained from participants. Three researchers took notes separately when they observed the participants during the interview. The field notes were later referred to in the triangulation process. The interview was recorded with an audio recorder.

The collected data consists of two parts, audio recording, and field notes from three researchers. Firstly, the recording was transcribed with Otter.ai software. Then each researcher checked the transcriptions individually. The mistakenly transcribed utterances

were discussed among three researchers and corrected by referring to the audio. The final version of the transcription was checked by all three researchers.

The collected data was analyzed thematically after the final transcription was checked. Initially, data analysis was done individually by each researcher. Then, the generated themes from three individual analyses were exchanged among three researchers to check if there are any inappropriate themes. The inappropriate themes were further discussed and combined after the discussion among three researchers. Lastly, the themes generated by each researcher were piled under themes.

The participants of this case study were purposefully chosen based on the criteria of this case study. The participants of this case study are female doctoral students studying and living in Malaysia for the first time. Table 1. shows the profiles of participants involved in this study.

Table 1. Demographic of Participants

Table 1: Demographic of Participants				
Code	Age	Marriage Status	Length of Ph.D. Enrolment	Specialization
D1	38	Married	2 nd semester	Human Resource Management
D2	34	Married	4 th semester	Curriculum
D3	32	Married	2 nd semester	English for Second Language
D4	28	Unmarried	4 th semester	Educational Technology
D5	28	Unmarried	2 nd semester	Educational Technology

3. Findings

3.1. Academic Matters

Academic Stress.

Most of the doctoral participants, in this case, were uncertain about studying overseas and concerned about their surroundings (safety, for instance), their ability to live comfortably, and the advancement of their studies before departure to Malaysia. They suffered various degrees of academic pressure.

D1 acknowledged: "I am under great pressure, and I want to graduate as soon as possible because I have two kids who need me to raise." when the interviewer asked if there were any uneasy feelings after attending this university in Malaysia. D1 said, "Someone will say that it's not worthwhile, but it's not true to me. My age is an invisible pressure." She expressed her thoughts with us regarding the stress associated with graduating: "From my perspective, the time leading up to graduation is not the main source of stress, but the graduation requirements give me much pressure." In other words, she can accept four to five years to graduate but she worried that she could not reach the graduation requirements. What stressed D1 most was the fact that she had to turn a new page to find a road to academic achievement, but it was also a worthwhile journey for her. Just as she stated: "I will be grateful for the process of learning when I graduate."

Another participant (D2) was very upbeat about academic stress because she had a clear understanding of her research proposal, even though there could be many unknown obstacles, for the time being, there was no need to worry because it was unforeseeable, as she added. The participant, D3, appeared to be somewhat concerned about her academic future as she indicated that her research experience was not extensive because her master's degree focused on translation whereas her current study field is education. She also felt slightly anxious about her future pursuit

of a doctoral degree because she had limited experience writing research articles. The other two participants (D4 and D5) also acknowledged that to some extent there was academic stress.

Academic Progress

In certain respects, studying abroad is a more enjoyable experience than studying at home. D1 was optimistic about any scenario: "I was not influenced when I knew that my senior had completely rewritten the research proposal because I can accept all of the results, whether they are favorable or not because I have established my baseline of expectations," she stated. "Once everything is above my bottom line, I will not fall behind," she continued. She received a lot of assistance from her supervisor after relocating to Malaysia, who helped her in the proper direction. She gave an instance: "My supervisor advised me to read more literature rather than hurriedly produce some reports. Even though he would reject my reports, my supervisor is trying to reassure me by saying, don't worry, take it easy, have a good rest, and get ready for the next day." She stressed that her supervisor was very committed to his work and was always providing sufficient feedback, "Last time I sent my conceptual framework in two pages to my supervisor on Friday and I received his feedback in two days with detailed comments, such as reference, variables and listed his feedback one by one." The most sparkling part highlighted by D1 was that her purpose was not limited to completing the thesis, while she was enjoying the learning process, with which she felt less anxious. D5 echoed D1's situation, and as she explained:

My supervisor is rather responsible for my thesis. He will meet me regularly and give many comments. Pressure is motivation. With the supervisor's constant push, I'm able to continuously progress in a clear direction. Furthermore, my supervisor is very considerate. Sometimes he asked me whether it was too much knowledge for me to digest. His kindness gives me more motivation to continue.

Compared with D1 and D5, participants D2, D3, and D4 are rather autonomous learners. D2 may face a variety of potential obstacles as she moves forward but as she explained that: "It doesn't matter, once I meet with some tough questions I can ask for help from my supervisor or my peers, and I can search for resources to solve these problems." Since D3's supervisor frequently encouraged her to conduct independent research, she has become an autonomous learner. However, occasionally she would feel upset because she was unsure of whether she was on the correct road. She made note of actively participating in certain workshops so she could learn more about how to do research. D4 put forward her idea that "My supervisor emphasized how to learn autonomously. She is waiting for me to discover problems and ask her initiatively. It inspires me to keep learning." Therefore, she went on to explain that "to some extent, it makes me less stressed. I can control my learning progress and pay attention to what I'm doing now."

3.2. Life Matters

3.2.1 Life Adaptation.

. Overall, the majority of these female doctoral students adapt to this new environment and currently live comfortably in Malaysia. For D1, the environment including the people, food, and weather seemed to be well adapted. She claimed that almost everything was satisfactory in her eyes. D2 noted that she enjoyed the temperature despite some students complaining that it was too hot; thankfully, she was adjusting to the food, which was very different from what she was used to in China. Prior study abroad experience of D3 has enabled her to be a very good adapter to novel lifestyles, and life accommodations were considerably simpler for her.

3.2.2 Socializing

Their lives are filled with surprises as they moved away from home. In the interview, D2 compared her different feelings toward communicating with people before and after coming to Malaysia. She explained that:

When I was in China, I would be reluctant to communicate with others because I felt that we have less in common, but after coming to Malaysia, I find a lot of like-minded friends and would like to talk with others because it's interesting and I can learn a lot from others.

In a similar vein, when asked if there was any enjoyable, memorable, or similarly significant event while communicating with others. D5 asserted:

Of course. We enjoy Indian food with the Malaysian Indian students in our studio. I find the meal they brought to be great, even though I am not used to eating Indian food that I ordered by myself at other places. It is incredible.

Besides, they appeared to have no trouble communicating with others. She just stated, "I like making new friends and exploring new things. This place has helped me improve my cross-cultural awareness and make a lot of friends." D5 additionally showed that it was not bothered about language proficiency in this circumstance. Furthermore, she said that "there are so many Malaysian Chinese who speak Mandarin fluently, and mastering basic vocabulary and even body language can achieve the purpose of communication."

3.3. Personal Matters

3.3.1 Family Attitudes

. Most family members have backed the female doctoral applicants in this case. D1 stated that while her mother disagreed with her choices, she believed the attitude of her spouse and child only mattered. Additionally, her husband was quite dedicated to familial affairs. Though she could worry if her kid were ill, she would not have to fret too much because her family would take good care of the child. According to D1, "over-concerning to some extent will impose certain pressure upon our family members."

D2 is a courageous, independent woman. As she said, "In my parents' eyes, I am the one who will bravely pursue dreams, and willing to face challenges all the time." Her parents always support her in doing what she wants. While her husband and parent-in-law disapproved of her choice at the beginning because they were worried about the growing gap between D2 and her spouse. She was, nonetheless, a highly tenacious individual as she portrayed herself: "Once I have decided to do something, I will persist in doing it. I already have ideas in my mind. I just informed them of what I will do next."

The family members' attitudes from D4 and D5 toward their further study in Malaysia were consistently positive. Both expressed that they have high freedom of making decisions. Their family members respect what they want. For instance, D4 emphasized that "My parents and boyfriend give me great support. I can graduate and work at my own pace, and then travel everywhere to broaden my horizons."

D3's family-related situation is different. Her in-laws did not appear to agree with her choice because she has married and has been preparing to get pregnant, even though her biological parents and her husband support her. She expressed how devoted her husband was to their family, saying, "He will visit our parents regularly, have dinner with them, and accompany them." D3 went on to say that

most Chinese people believe that married women should be family-oriented, which is hostile to married women in China.

3.3.2 Identity Transformation

. After they arrived in Malaysia, all the participants have undergone role changes. Before that, they were juggling multiple responsibilities as mothers, wives, daughters at home, and workers at the workplace while they only shared one identity—student as they started to learn in Malaysia. In the words of D1, “When I was in domestic, I had to play different roles but now I perceive a strong sense of freedom and live for myself.” Her words evoked the other participants. Since it would be such a dramatic contrast to life at home, D2 truly remarked how much she would value her time studying abroad. For instance, as she put it:

We are so powerful that we are shouldering different responsibilities, but we fearlessly decide to pursue our aspirations. Although it seems that we have diverted from the original path, which is considered a normal track, when we return to it someday, the journey of studying abroad will be unforgettable.

Participants D4 and D5 reached a consensus that they quite enjoy being full-time students in Malaysia. D5 indicated: "When I was in China, I always undertook intense work but after arriving in Malaysia, I felt quite relaxed to be study-orientation." Similarly, D4 reported that "After I came here, my progress in the study is more evident than I was in China because I have a stronger sense of being a Ph.D. student."

4. Discussion

4.1. Academic Matters

The current study found that the female doctorate participants would transform their stress into involvement in their academic performances, especially the interaction with their supervisors, even though they have suffered great pressure. The findings echoed Xu (2021) that female doctoral students have self-initiated aspirations to transfer the tough situation by utilizing and constructing relations and resources around them. According to Xu (2021), some female participants would intend to take advantage of academic workshops to assist them in filling the gaps in research skills, which concurred with the findings in the current study that one of the doctoral students, D3, mentioned that her supervisor was persistently encouraging her to be an autonomous learner driving her to join in various workshops for learning.

The supervisory relationship highlighted in this study did not resonate with the previous research (Phan, 2023; Robertson & Nguyet Nguyen, 2021). In the current study, the supervisors have provided great help to their learning as D1 and D5 indicated that their supervisors would professionally establish rapport but also be willing to offer mental encouragement. However, according to the research (Phan, 2023), some female doctoral students have undergone unfair treatment such as receiving insufficient feedback and being neglected by their supervisors. Robertson and Nguyet Nguyen (2021) revealed in their study that some females experienced frustration with the mismatching working styles that their supervisor did not finish reading their writing and supervising them in an inconsistent way. Nevertheless, the features of females embodied in the study (Robertson & Nguyet Nguyen, 2021) were interactional and resilient to the power of supervision. The Chinese female doctoral students in this case share the same traits in that they do not surrender to difficult academic situations and will adjust themselves to bravely undertake challenges.

4.2. Life Matters

The results revealed in this study that all female doctoral students were well adapted to the physical environment including the food, the weather, and the people in Malaysia which indicates that they are open-minded to embrace diversity and inclusive of different cultures. Additionally, the female doctoral students in this case are attempting to build a support network where they can make friends and seek guidance. By doing this, they can have a sense of belonging which, in turn, will enhance their ability to cope with different challenges. It was also indicated that the female doctoral students were willing to share and collaborate with their peers, which facilitated their learning progress. Horta et al. (2021) claimed that intercultural collaboration competence would be impaired by the degree of cultural differences between home and host countries. However, if the doctoral students take the initiative to narrow down the discrepancy, the situation will be developed into a positive scenario. Similarly, Ye and Edwards (2015) found that one of the female doctoral students in their research had a successful intercultural experience when she was studying overseas and could realize her contextual roles in a new environment where cultural awareness was demanding, and it would enhance her social inclusion if she recognized it.

4.3. Personal Matters

Based on the findings above, family attitude plays an essential role for Chinese female doctoral students pursuing further study. This again consolidated the study conducted in South Korea by Hidajat et al., (2020), who put forward that family members have a significant impact on the motivations, career decisions, and decision-making processes of women in pursuing Ph.D. degrees, especially for engineering programs. For female doctoral students, especially studying abroad, there are different opinions from family members based on their different perspectives. In this research, some family members are firmly opposed due to their inherent stereotypes. D1's mother disagreed with her decision to go abroad when considering her young children. Besides, regarding D2, her husband and parent-in-law disagreed about her choice due to a concern about outmatching her husband. D3 also has not gotten support from her parents-in-law because they think it was more important to prepare for pregnancy. These were verified in the research of Yao and Jiale (2022), who claimed that female doctoral learners were far more likely to experience numerous forms of discrimination, including ageism, marital status discrimination, and genderism. Similarly, in the research of Xu (2021), when talking about the biased positionality of women, an ideology was noted that a woman should stay at home and a girl ought to prioritize her family over her career at a girl's age.

However, it was also shown that female doctoral students chose to self-consciously fight and did not yield despite the gender-based obstacles and negative environments. As D3 emphasized, it was hostile to married women in China that they should be family oriented. Furthermore, without support from her husband, D2 still chose to insist on it because she believed her life was in her hand. The findings of this study echoed Xu (2021) whose research identified that Chinese female Ph.D. students changed the stereotype of family and relatives toward them. Meanwhile, it was gratifying to find that some family members gradually respected the desire of female doctoral students to advance. For D1 and D3, both received their spouse's understanding and support. Meanwhile, speaking of D2, D4, and D5, their parents gave them great courage to take this step. Aside from their unconditional love, one important external reason was that women's social roles were paid more and more attention to increasing social status, which was consistent with Liu et al. (2020) who found that women were

becoming more and more active in their roles in society along with gradually separating from the influence of their families.

Besides, when coming to Malaysia, these female doctoral students profoundly realized their roles shift from mother, wife, daughter, or girlfriend to one identity—student. All of them showed a high capacity to control, regulate, and transform their identity overseas and enjoy their identity of being a full-time students. It was in line with a recent study by Castelló et al. (2020) showing that researcher identity was socially created and dynamic and that fundamental concepts like the self and agency might help to comprehend how it develops over time.

5. Conclusion

Our inquiry aimed at exploring the challenges a group of Chinese female doctoral students experienced when they furthered their studies for the first time in Malaysia after the pan-demic of COVID-19. While after probing into the situation of them from academic, life, and personal matters, it was surprised to find that the majority of them enjoy their life here without great burdens. When referring to academic matters, this study illuminated that their pressure and motivation coexist. Meanwhile, the supervisor, as the contributor who stimulated them by converting pressure into motivation, has played an essential role in their academic progress. Regarding life matters, these female doctoral students demonstrated great adaptability. Many of them experienced the diversity of cultures and the strangeness of the environment with an open and inclusive mind. They also deeply demonstrated intercultural collaboration with international classmates. As far as personal facets are concerned, this study revealed that these Chinese female doctoral students put their efforts into pursuing an international education trajectory to heighten their self-identity as well as trying to be outstanding academics although there were skeptical voices. This research centered around exploring the status quo of such a group of Chinese female doctoral students who first left their families for Malaysia through semi-structured interviews and how they achieved identity transformation to more emphasizing self, especially shaping students' identity in the condition of social prejudice and family bondage.

As one of the studies focusing on international Chinese female doctoral students after the pandemic of COVID-19, this study has made empirical contributions. It enriches relevant studies for providing a more positive experience of such an international education program different from previous studies. What's more, it offers more women who want to study abroad a boost of confidence and encourages them to put it into action. However, it has a few limitations that probably future studies will resolve. Although this case study produced meaningful findings, they might not be replicable in other contexts. Further, this study focused on female doctoral students who came to Malaysia for a short period of time, and further research could be conducted in a longitudinal way.

References

- [1] Brown, L., & Watson, P. (2010). Understanding the experiences of female doctoral students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 34(3), 385–404. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2010.484056>
- [2] Castelló, M., McAlpine, L., Sala-Bubaré, A., Inouye, K., & Skakni, I. (2020). What perspectives underlie “researcher identity”? A review of two decades of empirical studies. *Higher Education*, 81(3), 567–590. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00557-8>

- [3] Hemmati, R., & Mahdie, A. (2020). Iranian PhD students' experiences of their learning environment and scholarly condition: a grounded theory study. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(1), 187–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1576164>
- [4] Hidajat, H. G., Hanurawan, F., Chusniyah, T., & Rahmawati, H. (2020). Why I'm Bored in Learning? Exploration of Students' Academic Motivation. *International Journal of Instruction*, 13(3), 119–136. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2020.1339a>
- [5] Horta, H., Birolini, S., Cattaneo, M., Shen, W., & Paleari, S. (2021). Research network propagation: The impact of PhD students' temporary international mobility. *Quantitative Science Studies*, 2(1), 129–154. https://doi.org/10.1162/qss_a_00096
- [6] Hyun, J. K., Quinn, B. C., Madon, T., & Lustig, S. (2003). Graduate Student Mental Health: *Needs Assessment and Utilization of Counseling Services*.
- [7] Hyun, J., Quinn, B., Madon, T., & Lustig, S. (2007). Mental Health Need, Awareness, and Use of Counseling Services Among International Graduate Students. *Journal of American College Health*, 56(2), 109–118. <https://doi.org/10.3200/jach.56.2.109-118>
- [8] Kaur, S., & Sidhu, G. K. (2009). A Qualitative Study of Postgraduate Students' Learning Experiences in Malaysia.
- [9] Leveque, K., Anseel, F., De Beuckelaer, A., Van der Heyden, J., & Gisle, L. (2017). Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students. *Research Policy*, 46(4), 868–879. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2017.02.008>
- [10] Lewis, S. (2015). Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches. *Health Promotion Practice*, 16(4), 473–475. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839915580941>
- [11] Liu, X., Yang, M., & Luo, C. (2020). *A Statistical Analysis of the Social Status of Chinese Women: Data Mining Method Based on MapReduce*. <https://doi.org/10.3233/faia200698>
- [12] Mackie, S. A., & Bates, G. W. (2019). Contribution of the doctoral education environment to PhD candidates' mental health problems: a scoping review. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 38(3), 565–578. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1556620>
- [13] Mao, Y., Zhu, Y., Jia, C., Sun, F., Chen, S., & Liu, B. (2022). Anxiety Status of Female Chinese Ph.D. Candidates and Its Association with Sports. *Healthcare*, 10(7), 1203. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare10071203>
- [14] Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass, Cop.
- [15] Nagy, G. A., Fang, C. M., Hish, A. J., Kelly, L., Nicchitta, C. V., Dzirasa, K., & Rosenthal, M. Z. (2019). Burnout and Mental Health Problems in Biomedical Doctoral Students. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 18(2), ar27. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.18-09-0198>
- [16] Phan, H. P. (2023). Narratives of “delayed success”: a life course perspective on understanding Vietnamese international students' decisions to drop out of PhD programmes. *Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00992-9>
- [17] Robertson, M. J., & Nguyet Nguyen, M. (2021). Robing up: transactional identity development of Vietnamese PhD students. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2020.1772197>
- [18] Wang, X., Wang, C., & Wang, J. (2019). Towards the contributing factors for stress confronting Chinese PhD students. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 14(1), 1598722. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2019.1598722>
- [19] Xu, X. (2021). The enactment of agency in international academic mobility: a case of Chinese female PhD students in Australia. *The Australian Educational Researcher*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00411-x>
- [20] Yao, G., & Jiale, Y. (2022). Types, Scope, and Differences of Employment Discrimination Faced by PhD Graduates: An Empirical Study Based on Data from the 2017 National Graduation Survey. *Chinese Education & Society*, 55(1-2), 101–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611932.2022.2046429>
- [21] Ye, L., & Edwards, V. (2015). Chinese overseas doctoral student narratives of intercultural adaptation. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 14(3), 228–241. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240915614934>