

**Doctoral Students in Hong Kong: Exploring Academic Identity Formation Trajectories
of Mainland Chinese Doctoral Students**

by

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis investigates the nascent academic identity formation of Mainland Chinese Doctoral Students (MCDS) studying in Hong Kong. Drawing on a composite theoretical framework integrating Archer's structure-agency model, Marginson's theory of self-formation, and McAlpine et al.'s academic identity trajectory approach, the study explores how MCDS navigate structural constraints, exercise reflexive agency, and engage in longitudinal identity development. Utilising a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology, the study is based on semi-structured interviews with 14 MCDS across a range of disciplines and institutional settings. Through thematic analysis, the research develops a typology of four emergent identity trajectories: Independent Explorers, Anxious Learners, Strategic Players, and Inspired Humanists. These types reveal differentiated responses to performance-oriented academic environments, disciplinary cultures, and relational dynamics—highlighting fluid, hybrid, and often contradictory identity formations shaped by both structural pressures and reflexive agency. The findings extend existing theories by applying self-formation to an intra-national mobility setting, conceptualising agency as emotionally and relationally situated, and foregrounding the Confucian cultural ethos that underpins supervisory relationships and self-construction. The study further advances the understanding of doctoral identity formation under conditions of neoliberalism and supercomplexity, showing how students' identities emerge through dynamic engagements with policy, discipline, institutional cultures, and micro-environments of care. This research contributes both theoretically and empirically to the literature on doctoral education, international mobility, and academic identity, and offers nuanced insights into how emerging scholars navigate becoming in increasingly competitive and pluralised higher education landscapes.

Keywords: Doctoral Education, Doctoral Students' Academic Identity, Identity

Trajectory

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List of Abbreviations

CIDS	Chinese International Doctoral Students
ECAs	Early Career Academics
HE	Higher Education
MCDS	Mainland Chinese Doctoral Students
IDS	International Doctoral Students
IDS _M	International Doctoral Student Mobility
IHE	Internationalisation of Higher Education
ISM	International Student Mobility
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SAR	Special Administrative Region
UGC	University Grants Committee
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In the global higher education (HE) landscape, doctoral education occupies a central position in knowledge production and research innovation. In this increasingly interconnected academic landscape, international doctoral students (IDS) are frequently positioned as “diasporic academics” (Larmer, 2015; Lee & Elliot, 2020; Yang & Welch, 2010), acting as crucial mediators of knowledge between their home and host contexts. It also plays a vital role in facilitating transnational academic exchanges and collaborations. These students navigate what has been described as a “transnational academic space” (Lingard, 2021), where the boundaries between nation-states, institutional cultures, and epistemological traditions are becoming more porous, and universities are reimagined as globally entangled, cosmopolitan sites of knowledge circulation (Nerad, 2010; Phelps, 2016).

This transformation has been especially evident in HE systems deeply shaped by the HE internationalisation agenda, which profoundly influences institutional missions, student mobility, research expectations, and governance frameworks (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Within globally networked yet locally embedded institutions, doctoral candidates encounter complex environments valorising global discourses of excellence and competition, national priorities, and local academic cultures (Dai & Hardy, 2023; Marginson, 2008; Lingard, 2021). This convergence of global–national–local imbrications creates unique ‘glonacal’ dynamics (Lingard,

2021; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Marginson, 2016, 2022), which not only reconfigure the pragmatic landscape of doctoral education, but also place students at the intersection of multiple, and sometimes competing, values, norms, and expectations (Barnett, 2000).

In this context, doctoral students—particularly those crossing national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries—must navigate a supercomplex environment where knowledge is plural, meanings are contested, and the purposes of HE are continually redefined (Barnett, 2000). For IDS, this means grappling with ambiguities around what counts as legitimate knowledge, how success is defined, and how to become an academic across shifting terrains of policy, culture, and discipline (McAlpine et al., 2010; 2013). These uncertainties intensify the challenges of doctoral study and add layers of complexity to students’ attempts to build academic identities, negotiate belonging, and exercise agency (Barnett, 2000; Clegg, 2008). As Henkel (2005) suggests, academic identity formation is deeply relational and context-dependent, shaped not only by disciplinary socialisation but also by broader structural and discursive conditions.

Understanding doctoral education within such intricate landscapes, therefore, requires attention to how students interpret and respond to fluid institutional conditions and contradictory academic discourses (Archer, 2008). For international or cross-border doctoral students in particular, the doctoral journey is not simply about acquiring research competence, but about navigating overlapping cultural, epistemic,

and structural pressures that profoundly shape their trajectories of becoming (McAlpine et al., 2010, 2013). This study responds to these issues by examining the lived experiences of Mainland Chinese Doctoral Students (MCDS) in Hong Kong, a unique setting where global, national, and regional dynamics intersect in complex and often contradictory ways.

1.2 Statement of the Research Problem

Pursuing a doctoral degree is widely regarded as a formative experience with both rigorous intellectual training and significant personal transformation (Jazvac-Martek, 2009). It is during this period that students undergo a complex process of academic identity formation, transitioning towards being independent researchers and scholars (Caters, 2013; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2007). Academic identity formation is not merely a by-product of research training but central to the doctoral journey, where students make sense of their academic roles, responsibilities, and sense of belonging within the scholarly community (Inouye & McAlpine, 2019; Mantai, 2015; Pappa et al., 2020). As Green (2005) notes, “doctoral education is as much about identity formation as it is about knowledge production” (p. 153).

In today’s globalised HE landscape, the doctoral experience is increasingly shaped by structural, cultural, and ideological forces operating through multiple dimensions. The growing neoliberal influence of HE system reforms, such as performance-based metrics, global competition for university rankings, and the “publish or perish” academic discourse, has introduced increasing demands and

uncertainties to doctoral training (Archer, 2008; Horta & Li, 2023). These forces, coupled with broader geopolitical shifts and the rise of academic managerialism, have created a supercomplex landscape in which institutional values are unstable, expectations are ambiguous, and knowledge itself is continually contested (Archer, 2008; Barnett, 2000; Clegg, 2008). Under these conditions, doctoral students are expected not only to acquire technical expertise but to navigate shifting academic norms, reconcile conflicting discourses, and construct coherent academic identities amid uncertainty.

Hong Kong's HE system represents a particular manifestation of supercomplexity. As a former British colony for 150 years and now a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China, it embodies both Chinese and British academic traditions (Lo, 2018; Postiglione, 2017). Meanwhile, as an international economic and educational hub, Hong Kong's HE policies are heavily influenced by global neoliberal logics—exemplified by high-stakes international ranking competition, research assessment exercises, shifting language policies, and evolving political relations with Mainland China (Horta & Li, 2023; Ruan, 2024). These factors give rise to a volatile and contested academic space, where doctoral students must navigate competing value systems, multilingual academic practices, and shifting institutional priorities (Jia & Yeng, 2023; Zeng, 2021).

For MCDS, Hong Kong is both geographically proximate and culturally distinct—an intra-country yet cross-system setting. Although sharing certain linguistic

and cultural familiarity with the host society, MCDS in Hong Kong often find themselves straddling different educational traditions, institutional systems, and epistemic frameworks (Wang & Woo, 2025). Their academic journeys involve adapting to hybrid academic norms, negotiating complex power relations, and establishing legitimacy within a highly competitive, performance-driven environment (Phelps, 2016; Larner, 2015; Lee & Elliot, 2020). These conditions can pose significant challenges for academic identity formation, intensifying feelings of marginality and pressure (Archer, 2008; Clegg, 2008). Simultaneously, MCDS are active agents who navigate and negotiate their academic becoming within this dynamic context (Marginson, 2014, 2024). Understanding their identity formation thus requires an approach capturing both the structural conditions of Hong Kong's intricate HE system and those agents' reflexive practices to navigate that structure. This study examines MCDS' academic identity formation in the Hong Kong HE system, offering insights that extend beyond the more commonly studied Western contexts.

1.3 Literature Overview and Research Gaps

Pursuing a doctoral degree poses both challenges and opportunities. It is through this journey that a doctoral student becomes an independent researcher (Boud & Lee, 2009) and forms an academic identity (Green, 2015; Inouye & McAlpine, 2019; Xu et al., 2021).

Many studies have examined the academic identity of IDS within Western Anglophone contexts (e.g., Fotovatian, 2012; Li et al., 2023; Pappa et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021). Studies reveal that IDS experience “multiplicity, ambiguity, and flux in their senses of self and belonging” (Phelps, 2016, p. 3) due to institutional and societal differences between home and host countries. Other research has investigated how everyday experiences shape IDS’ identity formation, including cross-cultural interactions with supervisors (Xu & Hu, 2019), challenges in academic practices (Pappa et al., 2020; Jung, 2019), and formal and informal training activities (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2007; Teng, 2019). Together, this body of work underscores the construction of academic identity through a dynamic interplay between external structures—such as institutions and the broader academic community (Henkel, 2000; McAlpine et al., 2009; Teng, 2020)—and internal factors like individual agency, autonomy, and personal values (Marginson, 2024; McAlpine et al., 2014).

Additionally, existing research has shown that the academic identity of early career academics (ECAs), notably doctoral students, significantly influences their post-graduation plans, career choices, and mobility. For example, Cidlinska and colleagues (2022) found that a weak academic identity contributes to academic attrition. Ching and Hu (2021) demonstrated that doctoral students’ career aspirations are shaped by doctoral experiences, and that interactions with supervisors and coursework influence their identity. Other studies have also explored the post-

graduation mobility choices of IDS, whose decisions about staying or leaving the host country can be complexly intertwined with their identities. For instance, Pham (2024) revealed how Vietnamese female doctoral students' decisions to stay in or leave Australia were shaped by external factors, unequal resources, and their own multi-layered identities.

1.3.1 Research Gaps

Despite this growing body of research, most studies remain situated in Western Anglophone contexts and tend to rely on binary frameworks—such as host versus home culture, integration versus isolation, and Western vs. non-Western. Much of this literature examines discrete stressors (e.g., language barriers, supervision) in isolation rather than investigating how identity is dynamically shaped across institutional, sociopolitical, and structural dimensions. Moreover, identity is often treated as a static outcome of linear psychological development, whereas its attribute as an ongoing and emergent construct shaped by emotions, power relations, structures, and motivations is overlooked.

In response to these gaps, this study offers an in-depth, empirically grounded, and theoretically informed exploration of how MCDS construct and navigate their academic identities within Hong Kong's hybridised HE system. By focusing on their lived experiences, motivations, expectations, structural negotiations, emotional struggles, and agentic strategies, this study contributes to a more nuanced

understanding of academic identity formation in a complex and intra-national HE context.

1.3.2 Research Context

As an SAR of China with British colonial legacy and strong ties to both global academic systems and the Chinese state, Hong Kong represents a complex HE environment with competing academic discourses and structural contradictions (Dai et al., 2023; Mok & Xiong, 2022). As an international city and global educational hub, Hong Kong attracts students from all over the world. Following the trend of HE internationalisation, the local government and educational sector of Hong Kong have carried out various policies and initiatives, such as admission ceilings, scholarships, visa schemes, and employment regulations since 2007 to strategically recruit and retain non-local students (i.e., international students) (Mok & Bodycott, 2013; Oleksiyenko et al., 2013; Jung, 2019).

This context has led to a significant influx of non-local students, with mainland Chinese students constituting the most significant proportion of non-local students at the postgraduate level (Jung, 2019). In the 2022-2023 academic year, full-time mainland Chinese research postgraduate students comprised 83.8% of the total research postgraduate student population in Hong Kong's eight University Grants Committee (UGC)-funded universities (UGC, 2024). The growing number of international and mainland Chinese students pursuing doctoral studies in Hong Kong

reflects the increasing significance of the city as an international hub for HE and research given its academic reputation and resources (Jung et al., 2021).

In particular, Hong Kong's tertiary student population can be broadly categorised into two groups based on geographic origin (citizenship): local students from Hong Kong and non-local students outside Hong Kong (Jung, 2019). The non-local cohort includes international students from other countries and mainland Chinese students, previously referred to as Chinese international students. Recently, there has been a shift towards using the term "mainland Chinese students" as a more politically correct designation (Yu & Zhang, 2016, p. 2). This study adopts the term "mainland Chinese doctoral students (MCDS)" instead of Chinese non-local doctoral students from mainland China.

As the largest cohort in the Hong Kong HE system, mainland Chinese students' study experiences have garnered considerable attention, with a focus primarily on the undergraduate level (Jung, 2019). Studies have investigated their motivations for choosing Hong Kong as a learning destination (e.g., Bodycott, 2009; Li & Bray, 2007) and their adaptation experiences in the cross-border cultural context of Hong Kong (Yu et al., 2021; Yu & Zhang, 2016). These studies indicate that although Hong Kong and mainland China share cultural and ethnic similarities as part of the Confucius heritage culture (Selmer et al., 2003; Yu et al., 2021), there are remarkable distinctions between the two in certain cross-cultural dimensions, such as spoken languages (Mandarin vs. Cantonese and English), ideologies (Collectivism vs.

Individualism), power distance, and cultural inwardness (Jung, 2019; Yu et al., 2021). These distinctions, according to Xu (2018), justify the Hong Kong-mainland context as being ‘transborder’—geographically proximal and politically unified, yet ideologically and socially divergent.

In consequence, MCDS in Hong Kong are situated within a dynamic assemblage of neoliberal performativity, managerial accountability, rising nationalism, and global rankings-driven governance (Horta & Li, 2024; Oleksiyenko et al., 2021; Jung, 2019). These factors create an intricate and, at times, contested academic terrain that is likely to influence students’ experiences with supervision, research development, disciplinary belonging, and career aspirations.

1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

This qualitative study aims to explore how MCDS form their academic identities through everyday learning and research experiences and how their identities vary within the supercomplex environment of Hong Kong’s HE system. The research objectives are as follows:

- (1) Motivations: To examine the initial motivations and expectations that lead MCDS to pursue doctoral study in Hong Kong.
- (2) Structural Influences: To explore the cultural, institutional, departmental, and personal conditions that shape or constrain MCDS’ academic identity development during the doctoral journey.
- (3) Agency and Navigational Strategies: To investigate how MCDS respond to

structural opportunities and challenges and the strategies they use to navigate their doctoral journeys.

(4) Trajectories of Academic Identity Formation: To conceptualise distinct patterns of nascent academic identities that emerge among MCDS.

1.4.1 Research Questions:

To address the above objectives, this study is guided by the main research question:

How do MCDS perceive and enact the formation of their academic identities during their learning and research journeys in the Hong Kong HE context?

To better understand this process and capture its complexity, this study further breaks down the main research question into three sub-questions, organised in a temporal sequence.

- 1) How do MCDS' initial motivations and expectations to embark on the doctoral journey in Hong Kong set the foundation for their academic identity development?
- 2) How do MCDS respond to the structural challenges and opportunities presented by the Hong Kong HE context during their doctoral journey?
- 3) How do MCDS' academic identity formation trajectories develop as they navigate the Hong Kong HE context?

1.5 Theoretical Lens

This study adopts a theoretically integrated framework to examine the academic identity formation of MCDS within the HE context of Hong Kong. Grounded in a post-structuralist understanding of identity as fluid, relational, and processual, the framework draws together three interrelated strands: Archer's (1995) structure-agency

theory, Marginson's (2014, 2024) concept of self-formation, and McAlpine et al.'s (2010, 2014) identity-trajectory theory. Together, these perspectives conceptualise academic identity not as a fixed attribute but as an emergent and reflexive project, shaped through the dynamic interplay between contextual changes, institutional structures, and individual agency.

Crucially, the framework is situated within Barnett's (2000, 2003, 2024) notion of supercomplexity, which characterises contemporary HE as a space of epistemic and ontological uncertainty—where established norms, values, and knowledge claims are increasingly unstable, contested, and plural (Archer, 2008; Barnett, 2000; Clegg, 2008). In such an environment, doctoral students are not merely socialised into a coherent academic culture. Instead, they are compelled to negotiate multiple, and at times conflicting, discourses that shape their academic becoming. For MCDS, this negotiation is particularly complex, as they encounter competing pressures from global neoliberal reforms, institutional performativity metrics, traditional scholarly ideals, and regional sociopolitical dynamics.

By situating identity formation within this intricate and contested academic landscape of Hong Kong, the study moves beyond deficit models of international students as passive or struggling outsiders (Marginson, 2014; 2024). Instead, it highlights how MCDS exercise reflexive agency in navigating their doctoral trajectories, actively responding to structural constraints, affective challenges, and institutional cultures. This theoretical lens allows for a nuanced understanding of

identity formation as both contextually embedded and agentively enacted. It offers critical insights into how doctoral students forge their academic selves in an era of shifting academic ideals and structural complexities.

1.6 Significance of the study

By exploring MCDS' nascent academic identity formation, this study holds the following theoretical, empirical, and practical significance.

Theoretically, the study contributes to ongoing debates on doctoral students' academic identity development and international student mobility and experience in a cross-cultural intra-country context by adopting an integrated framework that brings together Archer's structure-agency theory, Marginson's concept of self-formation, and McAlpine et al.'s identity trajectory model, situated within Barnett's notion of supercomplexity. This composite framework enables a more nuanced understanding of academic identity formation as a reflexive, agentive, and contextually embedded process, shaped not only by broader sociocultural influences and institutional structures but also by students' subjective responses, aspirations, and temporal trajectories. By foregrounding the multidimensional pressures and possibilities that emerge in a competitive and intricate academic context like Hong Kong, the study advances theorisation on academic identity as a dynamic and negotiated outcome, rather than a linear or deficit-driven process.

Empirically, this study addresses a notable gap in the literature by examining doctoral students' academic identity formation within a HE system characterised by

heightened competitiveness and cultural hybridisation (Lo, 2018). While much existing research focuses on Western Anglophone (or Global North) settings, comparatively little attention has been paid to settings where multiple and often contradictory cultural, political, and epistemic forces converge and continuously shift. Hong Kong's HE system exemplifies such a setting (Lo, 2018). It is not simply a meeting point between East and West, but a dynamic and contested space shaped by overlapping legacies of British coloniality, Chinese sovereignty under the "one country, two systems" framework, intense global university ranking competition, shifting language policies, and the region's evolving geopolitical positioning (Lo, 2018; Postiglione, 2017; Postiglione & Jung, 2017). MCDS navigate this environment as both insiders and outsiders—sharing certain linguistic and cultural affinities while also encountering epistemological dissonance, institutional ambiguity, and performance-driven expectations (Horta & Li, 2023; Jia & Yeung, 2023). This study, therefore, provides fresh empirical insights into how cross-border doctoral students forge academic identities within a highly competitive, structurally ambivalent, and politically sensitive environment, thereby extending understandings of doctoral mobility and identity formation beyond Western-centric paradigms.

Furthermore, the study holds practical relevance for multiple stakeholders within the HE ecosystem. At the institutional level, universities and departments can draw on the findings to refine supervisory practices, mentorship approaches, and support systems in ways that are responsive to the lived realities of MCDS. A deeper

understanding of their identity formation may inform more empathetic pedagogical strategies and promote inclusive academic cultures that foster student agency and belonging. At the policy level, the study provides empirical grounding for developing policies aimed at enhancing Hong Kong's capacity as an international education hub, particularly by attending to the relational and emotional dimensions of doctoral education often overlooked in policy discourse. For the students themselves, the study offers conceptual tools and narratives that may support self-reflection, resilience, and a more grounded navigation of academic becoming amid uncertainty and contestation.

In sum, this research not only sheds light on how MCDS forge nascent academic identities within Hong Kong's HE system but also contributes to broader conversations around doctoral education, identity, and global academic mobility. It serves as both a theoretical benchmark and an applied reference for improving the quality and equity of international doctoral education in Asia and beyond.

1.7 Overview of Chapters

This thesis is structured into nine chapters, each contributing to an in-depth exploration of MCDS' academic identity formation within the contested HE environment of Hong Kong. The chapters trace the research journey from contextual framing to theoretical development, methodological execution, empirical findings, and critical reflections.

Chapter 1: This chapter establishes the research foundation by situating the study within the shifting landscape of international doctoral education, with a specific focus

on Hong Kong as an intra-national cross-border academic hub for MCDS. It outlines the research background, identifies the central problem, and delineates key research gaps. The research aim, questions, and theoretical orientation are introduced, drawing attention to the study's significance in light of increasing supercomplexity in global HE systems. The chapter concludes with an outline of the thesis structure.

Chapter 2: This chapter reviews literature across five key research domains: international doctoral student mobility, motivations for pursuing cross-border study, identity formation processes, Chinese doctoral students' academic experiences (particularly in Western contexts), and the contested space of HE landscape in Hong Kong. It foregrounds the conceptual shift from deficit models to self-formation perspectives, and critically assesses how sociocultural and institutional structures influence identity development. The chapter concludes by identifying the gaps this study addresses—namely, the limited research on MCDS' academic identity formation in a highly competitive and culturally hybridised academic setting in a non-Western region.

Chapter 3: Chapter 3 outlines the integrated theoretical framework underpinning the study. It draws on Archer's (1995, 2003) theory of structure and agency, Marginson's (2014; 2024) self-formation theory, and McAlpine et al.'s (2010, 2013) identity-trajectory framework, with Barnett's (2000) concept of supercomplexity offering an overarching metaphor. Identity is conceptualised as a dynamic, relational process emerging from the interplay of reflexive agency and layered structural forces

(i.e., interpersonal, departmental, institutional, societal). This framework guides the interpretation of participants' academic identity development within the fluid and contested terrain of Hong Kong's HE.

Chapter 4: This chapter presents the research design and methods to be employed. Rooted in a qualitative paradigm, it adopts narrative inquiry to capture the complexity of participants' lived experiences. It details the use of semi-structured interviews, participant recruitment strategies, and ethical procedures. It also reflects on the researcher's positionality and explains the thematic approach used to generate and interpret data, with a focus on ensuring analytical rigour, reflexivity, and ethical integrity.

Chapter 5: The first findings chapter explores MCDS' motivations for pursuing doctoral study in Hong Kong. It analyses how students make decisions based on personal aspirations, institutional opportunities, and structural constraints. The findings highlight the entanglement of individual intentions with broader socio-political, economic, and academic dynamics, shedding light on how motivations are shaped through both desire and necessity in a hybridised educational context.

Chapter 6: This chapter investigates how MCDS navigate their doctoral journeys in relation to institutional structures, disciplinary cultures, and supervisory relationships. It reveals how students develop strategies to manage uncertainty, maintain motivation, and respond to pressures within a competitive and performance-

oriented environment. This chapter sets the stage for the typological analysis of academic identities presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 7: This chapter presents four distinct types of emerging academic identities among MCDS: *Independent Explorers*, *Anxious Learners*, Strategic Players, and *Inspired Humanists*. Each type captures different ways in which students negotiate structural constraints, personal aspirations, and reflexive agency. These identity types are not mutually exclusive but offer a nuanced lens through which to understand the diverse ways MCDS construct academic selves amid the intricate conditions of Hong Kong's HE system.

Chapter 8: The discussion chapter critically engages with the findings through the integrated theoretical framework, synthesising how participants' motivations, lived experiences, negotiations with structural constraints, and identity types reflect broader dynamics of international doctoral education within conditions of constant change. It underscores the central role of reflexivity, temporality, and agency in shaping academic identity trajectories, while also problematising how structural inequalities, institutional demands, and cultural hybridity influence the evolving academic identities of MCDS.

Chapter 9: The final chapter concludes and summarises the study's significant findings and theoretical contributions, particularly its advancement of understanding academic identity formation in HE sectors in an age of supercomplexity. It outlines the study's implications for policy, institutional practices, and future research. The

chapter concludes with a reflection on the study's limitations and suggests areas for further investigation, such as longitudinal studies on identity transitions and comparative research across HE systems.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter critically reviews the existing body of literature related to the academic identity formation of doctoral students. Guided by the research questions, the literature review is organised into five sections. Section 2.2 focuses on literature concerning international doctoral student mobility (IDSM) and the motivations behind pursuing cross-border doctoral study in the Hong Kong-mainland case. It examines the multifaceted motivations driving international doctoral students' mobility, showing how traditional factors—such as academic prestige, career prospects, and personal growth—intersect with cultural influences, family expectations, and national policies promoting internationalisation. These motivations shape both students' doctoral experiences and their academic identity development. Section 2.3 provides a comprehensive review of scholarly work on doctoral students' academic identity formation, with particular attention to influencing factors such as challenges and stressors, supervisor-supervisee relationships, and internal struggles and coping strategies. It examines academic identity formation as a fluid, ongoing process shaped by institutional structures—such as supervision and peer networks—while also

highlighting individual agency through self-reflection and future aspirations. Section 2.4 examines existing research on the academic identity formation of Chinese international doctoral students (CIDS) in international academic contexts—primarily Western Anglophone institutions. It traces a shift from early deficit models portraying these students as passive adapters to a self-formative perspective highlighting their agency, resilience, and active identity negotiation. Section 2.5 introduces literature on the distinctive features of the Hong Kong HE system to contextualise this study. Hong Kong’s dynamic HE system—blending Eastern and Western academic traditions—emerges as a context of super-complexity opening up both opportunities and tensions for MCDS whilst shaping their identity. Finally, section 2.6 identifies the research gaps that emerge from the reviewed literature, thereby justifying the relevance and originality of the present study.

2.2 International Doctoral Students’ Mobility Literature

International student mobility (ISM) has become a defining feature of global HE. It is usually driven by students’ desire to acquire knowledge, gain international experience, and access better career opportunities. Traditionally, ISM has followed a South-North pattern, represented by students from developing countries seeking HE in developed countries for their well-established academic systems (Liu et al., 2025). In recent years, patterns of North–South and South–South student mobility have emerged, driven by such forces as the shifting geopolitical dynamics, the rise of regional academic hubs, and the growing influence of non-Western (predominantly

Asian) HE institutions (Marginson, 2022). These developments challenge Western dominance in global HE and foster a more diversified landscape of student mobility (Marginson & Xu, 2023). Hong Kong, with its contested education system blending Eastern and Western academic traditions, has become a key destination in this evolving landscape, offering a unique setting where international doctoral students' experiences unfold. This chapter lays the foundation for understanding the factors influencing MCDS' academic journeys, identity formation, and career aspirations, identifying gaps to be addressed.

2.2.1 Rationales for studies in international doctoral student mobility

ISM is a key area of research in the field of HE and student development. For many decades, ISM played a significant role in the internationalisation of higher education (IHE) and global knowledge exchange (De Wit, 2019). According to UNESCO (2023), approximately 6.4 million students were studying at a foreign HE institutions outside their home countries. The contemporary structure of global HE reflects historical imperialist legacies amid the persistent power relations between hegemonic core nations (the Global North) and peripheral nations (the Global South) (Mulvey, 2021). Throughout history, ISM has been considerably influenced by the concentration of academic resources and opportunities in the 'academic hegemonic cores'. Countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, with their prestigious institutions, robust research infrastructure, and conducive academic environments (Nerad, 2020), have acted as magnets for IDS. For decades, IDS

mobility towards these academic cores has perpetuated global academic hegemonies and asymmetries (Liu et al., 2025; Marginson & Xu, 2023). A counter trend has emerged lately, however. The growing academic influence of regions previously considered peripheral, such as China (Marginson, 2022; Oleksiyenko et al., 2024), seems to have galvanized a shift in the power dynamics of the global HE system. This shift is also evidenced by the emergence of alternative educational hubs, reshaping global ISM patterns (Marginson, 2022; Oleksiyenko et al., 2018). Under these dynamic transformations in ISM patterns, scholars have investigated the motivations of students pursuing studies in both traditional and non-traditional learning destinations.

Existing literature suggests that the rise of ISM stems from the commodification of HE and the influence of neoliberal globalisation, with an emphasis on the economic perspectives on education (Robertson, 2005). This paradigm features two main instrumentalist discourses (Lo, 2019). The first focuses on ISM as a path for students, especially those from developing countries, to achieve valuable credentials and upward social mobility. In this view, international education is an investment and commodified service that enhances personal capital (Oleksiyenko 2013; Tran 2016). The (educational) costs of investment is borne by the individual, a logic that aligns with the rational-choice model (Bourdieu, 2018). The second discourse binds ISM with national economic interests, treating HE as a state asset and tradeable export that generates revenue through incoming students and enhances national competitiveness

by retaining skilled talents (Stein & de Andreotti 2016). This perspective prompts countries and universities to proactively retain international students, thus intensifying global competition in the HE sector. Both perspectives align with the neoliberal view of globalisation, which interprets ISM as human capital investment focused on economic gains (Sweetland, 1996).

Additionally, a third discourse frames ISM as a form of ‘charity,’ where developed countries provide education as aid or cultural diplomacy. However, as Stein and de Andreotti (2016) note, such initiatives often serve Western developmental agendas rather than genuine altruism, reinforcing postcolonial imaginaries. Tikly and Barrett (2011) similarly critique this perspective for neglecting education’s ethical and rights-based dimensions. Critics such as Robeyns (2006) caution that rights-based frameworks may reduce education to legal entitlements, calling instead for models that incorporate moral, cultural, and social dimensions.

2.2.2 The Original Patterns of Chinese Students’ Mobility

Drawing on human capital perspectives and push-pull models, many studies examining individuals’ motivations to pursue ISM underscore an instrumentalist approach, framing ISM primarily through economic gains and competitive advantages (Robertson, 2005; Shields, 2013). However, this approach has recently been critiqued by some scholars (e.g., Lo, 2018; Pham, 2024). Lo (2019), for instance, refutes the traditional instrumentalist approach by advocating Stier (2004, 2010) and Ng’s (2012) critical approach emphasising ISM’s role in fostering global citizenship, intercultural

understanding, and social justice. Further expanding on these perspectives, Lo (2019) introduces the capability approach, reframing ISM as a means of enhancing students' freedom and well-being (Sen 2011; Nussbaum 2011), thus a pathway to individual empowerment and societal development (Lo, 2019).

Similar to Lo's (2019) capability approach, Yang et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative study through in-depth interviews with 35 Chinese international doctoral students in Australia. The authors identified five primary motivations among the students: enriching life experiences, self-cultivation, expanding research perspectives, enhancing career prospects, and improving life quality. The study explored the influence of external factors (e.g., family expectations, teacher and peer encouragement, institutional support, international collaborations) and internal factors (e.g., personal development) on the students' motivations. Notably, instrumental factors like supervisor reputation, university ranking, and scholarships play crucial roles in shaping these students' decisions to study in Australia.

Zhou's (2015) study on international doctoral students at a U.S. public research university identified similar motivational factors, despite students' unsatisfying socialisation experiences in the university setting. Utilising value-expectancy achievement motivation theory, the author identifies four key motivations: intrinsic interest in research and teaching, high utility of a U.S.-earned Ph.D., and the emotional and social costs of quitting. While intrinsic interest sustains students' dedication, utility value—such as career or immigration benefits—emerges as a

dominant factor when initial expectations remain unmet. The study also highlights the critical role of social and academic environments in shaping motivations over time, calling for enhanced institutional support to address the challenges faced by international doctoral students. These findings underscore the dynamic interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, contributing to conceptions of student persistence in international doctoral education.

Zhang et al. (2021) investigated the factors influencing international doctoral students' decisions to study in Canada. Adopting a three-layer 'advanced push-pull framework' while incorporating Gambetta's (2019) decision-making mechanism, the study provides a nuanced understanding of students' motivations across individual, institutional, and national levels. Key factors include academic interest, funding opportunities, faculty reputation, immigration policies, and geopolitical contexts. The findings highlight regional and disciplinary variations, with social science and humanities students prioritising funding and immigration opportunities, while natural science students prefer institutional prestige and research opportunities (Zhang et al., 2021).

2.2.3 The Changing Pattern of Chinese Students' Mobility

The global order has transitioned from a unipolar to multipolar mode, characterised by the rise of international organisations, security alliances, and economic collaborations (Marginson, 2022; Marginson & Xu, 2023). This transformation is also evident in the mobility of Chinese international students, who are increasingly

involved in a multipolar global HE structure as traditional study destinations are complemented and challenged by regional hubs (Kaya-Kasikci et al., 2025).

Mulvey (2021) critically examined the discourse around African student mobility to China, proposing the concept of semi-peripheral (post)coloniality to address limitations in traditional postcolonial frameworks propagating Western centrality. While traditional models often focus on a binary of “Western core” and “non-Western periphery,” Mulvey highlights China’s dual role: subordinated to the global core yet superior to peripheral regions like Africa. Drawing from Wallerstein’s world-systems theory (2015), the study argues that structural inequalities influence both mobility patterns and policy discourses, whereby African students are framed within rhetorics of political solidarity, civilisational paternalism, and pragmatic foreign policy. This discourse often juxtaposes China’s ethical aid narrative with implicit hierarchical undertones (Ginelli, 2018). Mulvey (2021) concluded that this mobility reproduces global inequalities while calling for nuanced analyses that account for China’s semi-peripheral status and its complex engagement with peripheral nations.

Xu et al. (2024) examined Chinese international doctoral students’ motivations to pursue Malaysia’s HE, such as affordability, cultural proximity, and geographic convenience, which position Malaysia as an emerging alternative to Western destinations. While the students’ choice reflects challenges to Anglo-Western academic dominance, the students’ “make-do” mentality and reliance on Western benchmarks like institutional rankings and publication metrics inadvertently reinforce

colonial hierarchies (Altbach, 2011; Connell, 2016). The findings show that while South-South mobility offers students academic and intercultural gains comparable to those available in traditional South-North mobility (Xu et al., 2020), it remains constrained by ongoing recolonisation dynamics embedded in global HE systems (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016).

Zhu and Zhang (2024) explored the motivations behind Chinese returnee students' reverse mobility to pursue doctoral studies in China after earning overseas degrees. The study identifies several factors driving this trend, including the narrowing quality gap in STEM education between Chinese and Western universities, promising career opportunities in China's burgeoning industries, and sociocultural challenges abroad (e.g., perceived discrimination and lack of safety). While Chinese universities offer affordable tuitions, preferential policies, and scholarships that favour returnees, these candidates further benefit from increased opportunities to publish in English-medium journals due to previous overseas training. The study highlights how reverse mobility reflects shifts in global HE patterns while emphasising the persistent influence of Western-centric academic hierarchies and neoliberal pressures.

The above literature reveals a dynamic evolution in ISM patterns, particularly international mobility of Chinese doctoral students, reflecting broader geopolitical, economic, and cultural shifts. Traditional South-North mobility remains dominated by instrumentalist motivations tied to economic gains and career advancement, supported

by push-pull frameworks (Robertson, 2005; Shields, 2013). While these models emphasise structural factors like supervisor reputation, university rankings, and funding (Yang et al., 2017; Zhou, 2015; Zhang et al., 2021), emerging critiques call for more holistic approaches. The capability approach (Lo, 2019; Nussbaum, 2011) and perspectives on identity formation (Yang et al., 2017; Zhou, 2015) highlight ISM's transformative potential in cultivating personal growth, global citizenship, and intercultural understanding. These findings advocate for policies that recognise ISM's role in fostering individual empowerment and societal development.

Emerging patterns, particularly North-South and South-South mobility, underscore a multipolar global order, challenging the dominance of Anglo-Western HE systems (Zhu & Zhang, 2024). In particular, African students' mobility to China redefines semi-peripheral dynamics, blending narratives of solidarity with underlying structural inequalities (Mulvey, 2021). These shifts suggest that alternative mobility pathways are challenging traditional paradigms that used to reinforce global power asymmetries and neoliberal academic frameworks (Altbach, 2011; Connell, 2016). Overall, the reviewed studies highlight a dual transformation in ISM: the diversification of mobility patterns and the integration of identity and empowerment alongside structural factors. This calls for a reconceptualisation of ISM that balances instrumentalist goals with critical approaches, addressing both the complexities of emerging pathways and the persistent influence of global hierarchies in shaping international students' mobility decisions.

2.3 International Doctoral Students as ISM Stakeholders

In recent decades, global doctoral education has undergone significant transformations driven by various factors. Individuals pursuing doctoral degrees now navigate a shifting landscape where pathways to doctoral education and subsequent career trajectories have grown increasingly complex, market-driven, and influenced by global dynamics (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009).

Current doctoral students and recent PhD graduates face the task of negotiating global opportunities, responsibilities, and challenges that differ significantly from those experienced by previous generations (Phelps, 2016). This is particularly relevant for individuals undertaking their doctoral studies internationally, as the doctoral journey entails both identity construction and knowledge production (Cotterall, 2013; Jazvac - Martek, 2009; Pappa, 2020). International doctoral students' identity formation has gradually become a central topic since the 21st century (Liu et al., 2025). Scholars have delved into IDS' identity development from professionalisation (Dai & Hardy, 2023), gender (Xu, 2023), social-cultural (Bai et al., 2023), and intersectional (Hou et al., 2025; Phyo et al., 2023) perspectives.

2.3.1 Doctoral Students' Identity Formation

Throughout scholarly inquiries of ISM, the conceptualisation of identity has undergone continuous evolution. Before the 20th century, identity was approached as a relatively fixed and stable characteristic shaped and reinforced by the communities that individuals belong to (MacIntyre, 1981; Taylor, 1989). However, recent studies

indicate that the fragmentation and dislocation of social institutions make it increasingly difficult for individuals to maintain a stable and coherent identity (Henkel, 2012). This shift was partially credited to postmodernism's rejection of a fixed identity, as scholars actively sought to juggle multiple interpretations through continuous change, according to which contradictory identities could simultaneously emerge in a single individual (Bauman, 1996).

In contemporary scholarship, viewing identity as fluid, changeable, negotiable, and dynamic has become more prevalent (Norton, 2016; Preece, 2016; Teng, 2020). Giddens (1991) defines identity as a "reflexive project of self" (p. 5), akin to biographical narratives. According to him, biographies should never be fixed but continuously revised at regular intervals, as they occur "in the context of multiple choices filtered through abstract systems" (Giddens, 1991, p. 5). Similarly, Henkel (2012) defines identity as "a continuing sense of self through a whole human life, in which there may have been significant, even dramatic, changes, but the past, present, and future are integrally linked" (Henkel, 2012, p. 156). In other words, identity can be understood as an ongoing or evolving biography of an individual, defining the essential issue of "who I am" in relation to the past and future. Postmodernist and poststructuralist scholars emphasise the process-oriented and evolving nature of identity, as they believe identity is never static; it is individually constructed and continuously shaped and reshaped by the context where individuals are embedded

(Exton, 2008; Yiljoki & Ursin, 2013). Identity does not exist by itself, but in relation to context.

Identity formation is therefore a personal and social process shaped by both internal and external factors. As Wilson et al. (2015) note, “identity formation is profoundly social, formed both from within and without” (p. 12). Marginson (2014) further explains identity as “what we call ourselves and what others call us” (p. 10). To understand identity, it is essential to consider how individuals see themselves and how others perceive them (Jenkins, 1994). As such, identity formation becomes a blend of cultural and social influences and personal construction (Josephs, 2004; Zakeri, 2019). It is shaped by the context and people’s choices and actions within (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Delanty, 2008).

Additionally, life experiences, past and present group memberships, and future aspirations all contribute to identity formation. Gee (2000) sees identity as the product of interactions with others and related actions that allow the individual to be “recognised as a certain ‘kind of person’ in a given context” (p.99). This aligns with Lieff et al.’s (2012) notion that “identity encompasses how individuals understand themselves, how they interpret experiences, how they present themselves and wish to be perceived by others, and how they are recognised by the broader community” (p. 208).

Identity is a broad and complex term entailing a variety of conceptual elements. Zakeri (2019) advocates researchers to identify the specific type of identity in each

study, and the (social and personal) contexts in which the identity is constructed. The current study aims to explore MCDS' academic identity development, which can be viewed as a type of professional identity in doctoral students' early career development (Choi et al., 2021). This professional identity is somewhat akin to the broader individual identity (Henkel, 2000). According to Choi et al. (2021), academic identity refers to "identity as scholar as a specific type of professional identity and as an individual's felt or recognised association with communities doing scholarship pertaining to an academic discipline" (p. 91). The following literature review will focus on doctoral students' emerging academic identity.

2.3.2 Doctoral Students' Emerging Researcher/Academic Identity

In recent decades, doctoral students' academic identity development has gained increasing attention in educational research, as it lies at the heart of their transformation into independent scholars and researchers (Liu et al., 2025; McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009; Phan, 2022a, 2022b). This complex, multifaceted process is shaped not only by individual factors such as personal aspirations and desires, but also by external forces such as sociocultural influences, institutional structures, and disciplinary norms. Understanding how doctoral students navigate these dynamics is critical for designing supportive environments that foster their growth and success. This literature review examines diverse perspectives and empirical studies on doctoral students' academic identity formation, focusing on stress and mental health issues (e.g., Cronwall et al., 2019; Levecque et al., 2017), the strategies they adopt to

navigate these challenges (e.g., Xu, 2021), and the influential roles of supervisor-supervisee relationships (e.g., Bao et al., 2024; Xu, 2023; Xu & Chan, 2023), academic writing (e.g., Brazill, 2022; Inouye & McAlpine, 2019; Othman & Lo, 2023), and everyday doctoral experiences (e.g., McAlpine et al., 2009; Hopwood, 2010) in their identity formation.

2.3.3 Challenges and Stressors in the Formation of Academic Identity

Doctoral study is a demanding process marked by continuous challenges involving hard work, setbacks, and personal sacrifices to reach degree completion (Wang et al., 2019). This requires significant effort, perseverance, and resilience from the students. During this journey, stress is common among doctoral students (Cornwall et al., 2018; Levecque et al., 2017). While certain levels of stress can push for doctoral students' success, prolonged stress is detrimental to physical and mental health (Anthony-McMann et al., 2016; Levecque et al., 2017; Manathunga, 2005), leading to adverse outcomes such as reduced productivity (Anthony-McMann et al., 2016; Cronwall et al., 2018) and increased social costs (Kinman & Court, 2010). These negative impacts can also lower doctoral completion rates and extend the duration of their studies (Jackman et al., 2022; McApiline & Amundsen, 2009). Existing studies have examined doctoral students' challenges and stressors and evidenced how these factors affect their sense of belonging and academic identity formation. Common challenges include socio-cultural adaptation (Bai & Li, 2023), building relationship with supervisors (Elliot & Kobayashi, 2018; Hu et al., 2020), critical writing and

augmentation (Inouye & McAlpine, 2019; Othman & Lo, 2023), and increasing publication demand prior to graduation (Jalongo, 2024). These challenges can generate tensions and stress destructive to students' mental well-being and academic performance (Cornwall et al., 2018), with long-term implications for international doctoral students' identity formation as future scholars (Cotterall, 2013; Pappa et al., 2020).

Using Activity Theory as a framework, Cotterall (2013) conducted a longitudinal study to examine how stressors and emotional factors influence international doctoral students' academic identity formation. The findings show that writing practices and supervisory relationships are primary emotional stressors. Positive emotions, such as joy and confidence, are related to achievements like publication output and community recognition. In contrast, negative emotions, including frustration and anxiety, often arise from unclear expectations, cultural misalignments, and systemic power dynamics in supervision. Similarly, Pappa et al. (2020) examined how international doctoral students in Finland negotiate their scholarly identities through stress. Via interviews with 11 international doctoral students, the study identifies three primary sources of stress: intrapersonal regulation, research challenges, and a lack of supportive networks. Participants shared that their stress frequently arose from navigating expectations, financial pressures, career uncertainties, and feelings of isolation within the academic environment. However, many students perceived stress as a motivational force, using it to develop their scholarly identities by employing

coping strategies, building supportive relationships, and viewing their doctoral journey as a transformative process. This reflects the view that stress, when managed positively, can catalyse professional growth and identity formation for international doctoral students (Pappa et al., 2020).

2.3.4 Supervision Relationship and Academic Identity

Apart from challenges and stressors, another frequently researched factor in the doctoral student identity literature is the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Existing doctoral supervision literature highlights the central position of the supervisor in fostering doctoral students' academic identity (e.g., Anderson 2016; Gardner 2008; Green 2005; Weng, 2020; Wilkin et al., 2023). During doctoral training, students often desire to become active and accepted members of their academic disciplines (Li, 2005; Trowler, 2012). This motivational force derives from interactions with “experienced members” in the academic community, where students as newcomers observe and internalise community practices and values in order to become “insiders” (Kobayashi et al., 2017). The supervisor-supervisee relationship is therefore fundamental to students' academic identity formation as it can either promote or hinder students' integration into the disciplinary community (Wisker et al., 2003). Throughout these interactions, supervisors and students form a symbiotic relationship where they share ideas, co-construct knowledge, and negotiate what it means to be an academic (Bao et al., 2024; Riva et al., 2022). Previous studies indicate that supportive supervision fosters confidence and facilitates the integration of students

into their academic communities (Hu et al., 2020; Wisker et al., 2003). However, mismatches in expectations between supervisors and students often lead to tensions, as well as feelings of isolation and marginalisation for the students (Hu et al., 2020). This mismatch is especially prominent in international and intercultural supervision, where cultural differences add extra obstacles or complexity in the supervisor-supervisee communication process (e.g., Dai & Elliot, 2022).

Existing studies have also investigated intercultural supervision in Anglophone contexts (e.g., Doyle et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2020; Elliot & Kobayashi, 2018; Manathunga, 2014; Singh, 2010; Xu, 2023; Xu & Chan, 2023). For example, Singh (2009) explored the intercultural supervision experiences of Chinese doctoral students and their supervisors in Australia, identifying mutual cultural ignorance during intercultural supervision. Specifically, some Chinese students appeared to lack an understanding of “Western” cultural norms, while some supervisors encountered challenges in understanding Chinese communication styles. Similarly, in a study on African international doctoral students’ experiences in New Zealand, Doyle et al. (2018) found that cultural differences significantly influenced intercultural supervision, leading to miscommunication between students and supervisors. Meanwhile, language deficiencies seem to hinder many international doctoral students from effectively communicating with their supervisors or writing academic papers, particularly when composing the doctoral thesis and responding to supervisors’ feedback (Xu, 2023; Xu & Chan, 2023).

More recently, Hu et al. (2020) explored Chinese doctoral students' challenges in navigating research independence in the Netherlands. Drawing on interviews with 21 students and 16 supervisors, the study identifies three main challenges: implicit diversity in conceptualising independence, gap between supervisor support and supervisee's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and misinterpretation of students' behaviors due to cultural differences. Supervisors often expect students' own initiatives and critical thinking, which many students, shaped by their educational background, struggle to exhibit. Miscommunication around expectations further exacerbates feelings of isolation and insecurity for students. Similarly, Xu and Hu (2019) explored how Chinese international doctoral students in New Zealand respond to their non-Chinese supervisors' language feedback and how this process contributes to their scholarly identity reconstruction. The study identifies four feedback response types—no revision, faithful revision, extended revision, and self-initiated revision. Students' responses are shaped by complex negotiations between cultural voices, such as deference to authority rooted in Chinese culture, and Western academic norms like independence. These negotiations are further influenced by linguistic challenges, disciplinary writing norms, and students' aspirations for academic acculturation. The authors argue that these responses reflect a dual process of feedback engagement and identity (re)construction, highlighting the need for culturally responsive and dialogic approaches to intercultural doctoral supervision (Xu & Hu, 2019).

Constrasting Anglo-centric research, an increasing number of scholars (e.g., Dai & Elliot, 2023; Bahtilla, 2022; Wang & Byram, 2019) have focused on the research experiences of international doctoral students in less traditional study destinations, such as China. For instance, Wang and Byram (2019) conducted a qualitative study examining the challenges faced by international doctoral students in a Chinese university. They found that many Chinese supervisors created “familial groups” (referred to as *Shi Men* 师门 in Chinese)—academic communities of practice involving students under the same supervisor—to encourage interaction between Chinese and international students. These groups provide a platform for students to interact with peers undergoing similar supervision processes, offer mutual support, and can help some international students understand Chinese academic norms, thus fostering their sense of belonging. Building on this, Dai and Elliot (2023) explored the learning experiences of international doctoral students in China and highlighted the diverse supervision styles within “Shi Men”. The supervisor-supervisee relationships are differentiated as boss-employee, collaborative partners, or nominal relationships. However, supervision styles significantly shaped students’ experiences, reflecting varying power dynamics within the groups. While some international students thrived as “employees” or “collaborators”, others felt sidelined under nominal supervision, where supervision existed in name only (Dai & Elliot, 2023).

Another stream of literature engages with the ongoing debates surrounding the supervisor-supervisee relationship and how its underlying power dynamics influence

doctoral students' academic identity. Relevant studies have focused on the power dynamics in and difference between hierarchical and collegial supervision (Belcher, 1994; Grant, 2010; Li, 2017; Weng, 2020). Supporters of a collegial approach argue that treating students as equals helps them take ownership of their own research and develop independence. For instance, Belcher (1994) found that a collaborative supervisor-supervisee relationship led to a student's smooth dissertation completion, while Weng (2020) showed that an equal relationship helped students build strong academic identities; in contrast, hierarchical relationships only marginalise students. However, Grant (2010) suggests the challenges of overly collegial supervision, given the hierarchical nature of academia and the dual roles of supervisors as mentors and assessors. Li (2017) further notes that power dynamics, when managed well, can help students adapt to academic practices. In light of the above debates, Bao et al. (2024) investigated how supervisor-supervisee interactions influence a doctoral student's academic identity development. Using a digital micro-ethnographic approach, the study followed interactions between a supervisor and a doctoral student over two years, analysing supervisor-supervisee message exchanges, interviews, and written feedback. The findings identify three key strategies employed by the supervisor: 1) transformative criticism, which challenges the student's assumptions and pushes for critical reflection on academic practices; 2) strategic recognition, which offers encouragement and positions the student as a legitimate contributor to the academic community; and 3) identity as pedagogy, where the supervisor models ideal academic

behaviors and values through personal narratives. The study reveals that supervisory interactions are not merely hierarchical but involve a dynamic interplay of mentorship, emotional support, and collegiality, fostering the student's identity as an emerging scholar. This research emphasises the hybrid nature of doctoral supervision, where the supervisor-supervisee relationship incorporates professional rigour with personal engagement. It also suggests that supervisors' discursive practices should be contextually adaptive, balancing critical feedback with affirmation to support doctoral students' individualised academic identity development (Bao et al., 2024). The study contributes to the understanding of how relational and discursive dynamics shape the doctoral journey, with implications for enhancing doctoral supervision and education practices.

Traditionally, doctoral supervision follows the classic Humboldtian “master-apprentice” model in which a single supervisor guides a doctoral student (von Humboldt, 2018). However, recent years have witnessed an ongoing transformation of doctoral education where some universities adopt a panel supervision system. The panel supervision usually involves at least two supervisors forming a supervisory team, with one serving as primary supervisor and the other as co-supervisor (Robertson, 2017; Wilkin et al, 2023). Some scholars believe that the panel supervision approach may moderate the power dynamics between students and supervisors and provide a safety net for doctoral students (Pole, 1998; Unda et al., 2020). Meanwhile, other scholars raise concerns about this mode of supervision as

tensions can arise when an additional supervisor is involved, bringing about differing perspectives of seniority and academic work (Cornér et al., 2017; Guerin & Green, 2015). Research in co-supervision also highlights issues about co-supervisors' overwork and doctoral students' struggles with conflicting supervision (Olmos-López & Sunderland, 2017). For example, one recent study examined the dynamics of identity construction in doctoral panel supervision, highlighting the interplay between student agency and supervisors' structural roles (Wilkin et al., 2023). The study found that principal supervisors often play a dominant role in shaping students' academic focus, whereas co-supervisors generally align with established expectations with limited influence. The findings also show that doctoral students' identities are shaped mainly by institutional pressures for tangible outputs, such as doctoral theses and research publications, rather than intrinsic scholarly growth. Although supervisor-supervisee relationships are generally positive, they often emphasise conformity over diverse opinions (Wilkin et al., 2023). The study highlights key issues such as role clarity, role conflict, and the challenge of balancing institutional demands and authentic scholarly voices (Wilkin et al., 2023). Finally, Wilkin et al. (2023) argue that current co-supervision practices often miss opportunities for diverse input and recommend more inclusive approaches that promote shared understanding and better support for both students and supervisors.

In sum, supervisor-supervisee relationship plays a pivotal role in shaping doctoral students' academic identity, functioning not merely as a site of knowledge

transmission but as a relational, cultural, and affective space where identity is negotiated. While supportive and dialogic supervision can foster confidence, autonomy, and disciplinary belonging, mismatches in expectations—often exacerbated by cultural, linguistic, and institutional differences—may lead to marginalisation or identity dissonance. Existing studies have extensively explored these dynamics in Western, Anglophone contexts, with growing attention being paid to non-Western and transnational settings such as Chinese HE. The evolving forms of doctoral supervision—from traditional hierarchies to collegial models and panel-based structures—further complicate the power dynamics and identity work involved. Despite these varied approaches, what remains consistent across the literature is that supervision is never a neutral process; it actively mediates how doctoral students come to see themselves as future scholars. This review highlights the need for further context-sensitive research that examines supervisory practices not only in intercultural or cross-national settings, but also within a contested HE system like Hong Kong, where conflicting academic discourses and educational legacies shape students’ perceptions of becoming academics.

2.3.5 Writing and academic identity formation

Another strand of literature highlights the role of critical and argumentative writing in constructing doctoral students’ academic identity (e.g., Brazill, 2022; Inouye & McAlpine, 2019; Othman & Lo, 2023), which provides them an opportunity to self-position within their disciplines (Trowler, 2012). However, for many international

students, particularly those from non-Western educational backgrounds, engaging in critical argumentation presents significant challenges. For example, Othman and Lo (2023) found that Chinese EFL doctoral students struggled to develop a critical voice and defend their authorial positions in thesis writing. These students resorted to uncritical agreement with established authorities due to Confucian cultural norms and a lack of training in critical thinking. During the writing process, feedbacks from supervisors, reviewers, or peers play a crucial role in helping students refine their academic voices and align with disciplinary conventions (Pifer & Baker, 2016; Simula & Scott, 2021). Inouye & McAlpine (2019) emphasise the importance of feedback in fostering identity development, while Brazill (2022) highlights how international students draw on their linguistic and cultural capitals to navigate academic writing. These studies underscore the need for explicit training in critical argumentation and synthesis, as students often lack prior exposure to such skills (Othman & Lo, 2023).

Inouye and McAlpine's (2019) systematic literature review on doctoral students' academic identity development through scholarly writing and feedback highlights how feedback—from supervisors, peers, or reviewers—plays a crucial role in shaping students' researcher identity by enhancing critical thinking, autonomy, and confidence. Taking a sociocultural perspective, the review explores how writing and feedback foster disciplinary enculturation, helping students develop their authorial voice and position themselves within the academic community. However, the authors

identify gaps, including limited attention to individual agency and the nuanced ways feedback influences identity construction beyond general encouragement of critical thinking and writing improvement. They advocate for longitudinal and context-sensitive studies to capture the interplay between writing, feedback, and evolving academic identities.

Othman and Lo (2023) examined how Chinese doctoral students in Malaysia construct their academic identities through critical argumentation in English thesis writing. Employing a narrative inquiry, the study focuses on two female participants and identifies key challenges, including developing a critical voice, synthesising sources, and adopting rhetorical positioning. Influenced by Confucian cultural values, the participants faced difficulties critiquing established scholars and asserting their authorial stance. These struggles reflect broader cultural and educational differences between Chinese and English academic traditions. The study underscores the importance of culturally responsive writing support to help EFL doctoral students navigate these challenges and foster their academic identity development, while also acknowledging its limitations due to the small, homogenous sample size.

2.3.6 Acts of Publishing and Academic Identity

For doctoral education, academic publishing has become not only a key performance indicator but also a formative site for academic identity construction. Recent research highlights how publishing during the doctoral stage influences students' self-

perception as emerging scholars, fosters their confidence, shapes their career paths, and strengthens their sense of belonging within academic communities.

Mason et al. (2022) explored the experiences of three Australian doctoral students who pursued a “Prospective PhD by Publication” pathway in the social sciences and transitioned to full-time academic careers. Using collaborative autoethnography, the authors reflected on how this model influenced their academic identity development and career trajectories. The findings emphasise that producing publications during doctoral study enhanced their academic confidence, facilitated early professionalisation into academic norms, and improved their employability in the competitive job market. However, challenges such as mitigating imposter syndrome, navigating rejection, and balancing personal and professional responsibilities were prevalent. The authors highlight how the publication model exposed doctoral students to the realities of academia, such as publication pressures and institutional metrics for success, while also fostering their resilience and critical awareness. This study underscores the duality of “PhD by Publication”—both as a valuable pathway for developing academic identity and as a potential source of stress due to its inherent demands.

Xu and Grant (2020) examined how publishing research papers during doctoral study shaped students’ academic identity. The authors used Stuart Hall’s (1989) identity theory to analyse interviews with two New Zealand doctoral students, highlighting the tensions and complexities in their publication experiences. The study

identifies four key results of identity construction: 1) “too much,” where students feel overwhelmed by multiple expectations; 2) “too little,” where gaps in skills or confidence hinder their publishing goals; 3) ambivalence, namely mixed feelings about academic careers; and 4) suturing, where students emotionally invest in their academic identities. The two cases in the study also present contrasting perspectives. While one student navigated publishing with confidence and autonomy, the other struggled with cultural and institutional challenges, particularly in transitioning from Chinese to Western academic contexts.

Together, these studies reveal that publication during doctoral study is both an empowering and contested process—shaping academic identity through a constant negotiation between institutional expectations, cultural positioning, personal aspirations, and linguistic and emotional complexities within increasingly globalised academic landscapes.

2.3.7 Doctoral Cumulative Experiences and Academic Identity Formation

The above literature primarily focused on single-factor explorations of doctoral students’ academic identity formation. Scholars have also tried to approach doctoral students’ academic identity formation through a multi-dimensional lens. For example, Through a series of longitudinal research on social science doctoral students’ academic identity formation in three countries (UK, Canada, and US), McAlpine and Hopwood indicate that supervisors and doctoral writings are just two of many resources doctoral students rely on (e.g., McAlpine et al., 2009; Hopwood, 2010;

Solem et al., 2011). McAlpine et al. (2009) explored how doctoral students in education developed their academic identities through various activities and challenges. The study identifies formal, semi-formal, and informal activities, noting the significant role of doctoral-specific informal activities like thesis writing and peer interactions in fostering students' sense of belonging to academic communities. The findings emphasise the cumulative impact of daily activities and interactions on students' identity formation and call for supportive academic environments to balance formal requirements with opportunities for informal engagement. The authors conclude that identity development involves thinking about oneself as an academic, performing academic roles, and being recognised by others in academic contexts, highlighting the need for more inclusive and reflective doctoral education practices.

Similarly, Richards (2015) employed a reflexive practice approach, analysing autoethnographic data (e.g., personal life events) collected from his PhD thesis participants and their impact on his academic identity during his PhD journey. Through the participants' autoethnographies, he found that both his academic and individual identities are significantly shaped by critical moments, such as becoming a father, navigating personal challenges, and working with marginalised groups (Richard, 2015). In a similar vein, Choi et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review of empirical studies on how education sciences doctoral students develop their identity as scholars. Framed through a constructivist sociocultural lens, the study highlights four key themes shaping this process: 1) objectives—students' evolving competence,

confidence, autonomy, and agency; 2) activities and processes—engagement with feedback, validation, reflection, and supportive relationships; 3) antecedents—students’ prior experiences and multiple identities influencing their development; and 4) tensions—challenges such as conflicts between idealised scholarly identities and personal realities. More recently, Phan (2022b) investigated the factors influencing four Vietnamese doctoral students’ academic identity formation in Denmark. Drawing on Vygotsky’s Genetic Method and Engeström’s Activity Theory, the study explores how interpersonal factors (e.g., supervisory support, community recognition) and intrapersonal factors (e.g., agency, academic literacy, personal history) co-shape students’ identities. Supervisors’ trust, peer interactions, and participation in academic tasks like publishing were critical in fostering a sense of belonging, though challenges like language barriers and cultural differences seem to hinder students’ integration.

Taken together, the above literature portrays doctoral students’ academic identity formation as a dynamic, emotional, and structured process. Far from being a linear progression, identity development is shaped by an intricate interplay of personal aspirations, cultural norms, institutional structures, and disciplinary expectations. Core influences include the pervasive challenges and stressors students encounter—ranging from emotional isolation and intercultural misunderstanding to the demands of publication and performance—which significantly affect their well-being and sense of belonging. Meanwhile, these doctoral students demonstrate remarkable agency, engaging in strategic adaptation, reflective negotiation, and peer support to navigate

their identity. The supervisor-supervisee relationship—whether hierarchical, collegial, or multi-member panel-based—is central to students’ identity navigation. It is an essential socialisation mechanism for students to become members of the academic community. Academic writing and publication, particularly in intercultural and multilingual contexts, serve as key identity sites, offering both empowerment and disorientation.

Additionally, the importance of informal academic spaces, affective experiences, and collaborative agency in everyday doctoral life cannot be overstated. The bulk of literature calls for institutions and supervisors to adopt more culturally responsive, emotionally attuned, and structurally inclusive approaches that nurture doctoral students not just as knowledge producers, but as evolving scholars negotiating multiple and sometimes conflicting identities. These insights lay a foundation for rethinking doctoral education as a transformative, holistic, and relational process.

2.4 Shifting Paradigms in Research on Chinese International Doctoral Students’ Identity Formation

Over recent decades, a growing body of literature has examined the academic identity formation of Chinese international doctoral students (CIDS), particularly within Western Anglophone HE contexts (Li et al., 2023; Marginson, 2014; Xu et al., 2020; Ye & Edwards, 2017). This literature broadly falls within two paradigms: an earlier adjustment/deficit approach and a more recent self-formation or agency-driven approach (Marginson, 2014; Xu et al., 2020). These paradigms reflect a shift in how

international students' learning experiences are conceptualised—moving from viewing students as passive recipients of host sociocultural norms to recognising them as agentic individuals navigating complex identities.

The first paradigm, often described as the adjustment or deficit approach, depicts CIDS as a largely homogenous group facing cultural, linguistic, and academic barriers in host contexts (Marginson, 2014; Halic et al., 2009). Within this framework, CIDS are portrayed as fledgling researchers struggling with English proficiency (Cao et al., 2016; Cruwys et al., 2020), unfamiliar academic conventions (Wang & Parr, 2021), and emotional stress (Hunter & Devine, 2016; Lu et al., 2014). Their cultural and academic adaptation is largely considered unidirectional (Ye & Edwards, 2017)—an assimilationist view that passively positions them as recipients of Western academic norms.

This deficit approach has been increasingly critiqued, however. Marginson (2014) suggests that such frameworks risk reinforcing Western cultural superiority by essentialising the students' home cultures as barriers to academic development. Ye and Edwards (2017) also caution against stereotypes that label international students as inherently “problematic” or “difficult to supervise” (Goode, 2007). In response, a growing number of researchers advocate for non-essentialist perspectives recognising the heterogeneity underlying international students' learning styles and needs (Dervin, 2011; Feng, 2009; Li et al., 2023).

The second paradigm proposes a self-formation approach, positioning international doctoral students as agentic individuals who actively pursue scholarly identities through negotiations, reflections, and interactions (Marginson, 2014; Heng, 2018; Tran, 2015). Rather than simply adjusting to host norms, CIDS are seen to exercise agency in navigating the tensions between home and host cultures, which gives rise to hybrid or cosmopolitan identities (Dai & Hardy, 2021; Phelps, 2016; Xu, 2021). Within this perspective, identity development is a reflexive project involving the interplay between structure and agency.

Many empirical studies have demonstrated how CIDS take ownership of their academic development. For example, Anderson (2016) found that Chinese doctoral students in Canada demonstrated resilience and strategic positioning in navigating challenges, while Xu et al. (2020) observed that CIDS in Australia reciprocated care and built social relationships that enhanced their doctoral experiences. These findings directly challenge assumptions of passivity and highlight the students' active engagement with their academic environments.

Studies also underscore the diverse forms of agency enacted by Chinese doctoral students. Ye and Edwards (2017), adopting Giddens' "reflexive project of the self," explored how CIDS in the UK navigate academic and personal goals through self-actualisation and resilience. Similarly, Dai and Hardy (2020) employed Bhabha's "in-between space" and transformative learning theory to show how one Chinese doctoral student in Australia reflexively navigated disciplinary shifts and power dynamics in

doctoral supervision. Xu (2021) further categorised agency among Chinese female doctoral students into three forms—struggle and resistance, needs-response, and becoming—highlighting gendered dynamics and culturally shaped aspirations of the participants. Similarly, Brazill (2022) used Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth framework to showcase how Chinese doctoral students in the U.S. draw on aspirational, linguistic, and navigational capitals to resist deficit narratives and thrive in academia. Beyond Anglophone contexts, Wu’s (2017) mixed-methods study in Germany revealed that Confucian values, unclear institutional roles, and the evolving dynamics of supervisor-supervisee relationships also influence CIDS’ academic identity formation.

Recent work also illustrates how peer communities and third spaces support identity formation. Informed by Foucault’s (1991) governmentality, Bhabha’s (2012) third space, and empowerment theory, Li et al. (2023) used critical autoethnography to examine how Asian international doctoral students in Australia negotiate institutional pressures. Their findings reveal that culturally responsive peer-led environments can enable students to resist conformity and reconfigure academic roles.

In sum, these studies underscore a critical paradigmatic shift from pathologising CIDS as culturally deficient to recognising them as complex, reflective individuals negotiating structural constraints when shaping their academic futures. While early literature often homogenised and marginalised CIDS, recent research increasingly embraces the diversity of their experiences, the multiplicity of their identities, and the

transformative power of their agency. However, further research is still needed in non-Western contexts (e.g., mainland China, Hong Kong) and across less-examined dimensions such as gender, class, and institutional power, to provide a more global and enriched understanding of CIDS' academic identity formation.

2.5 Hong Kong as a Global City in an Age of Supercomplexity

Hong Kong's HE system has been shaped by a complex colonial history and its position as a global city (Oleksiyenko, 2013). Under British colonial rule for over 150 years, the city absorbed Western governance practices, cultural values, and institutional norms, which have left a profound influence on its legal, administrative, and educational structures (Lo, 2018). Following its return to China in 1997, Hong Kong became an SAR under the “one country, two systems” framework. This arrangement preserved significant autonomy for its education sector while politically embedded its system within the socio-political realities of modern China (Lo & Huang, 2022). Regarding HE, university governance has been heavily influenced by the British model—such as the establishment of the UGC in 1965—which has played a role in safeguarding academic freedom and institutional autonomy (Lo, 2018). At the same time, Hong Kong is also influenced by the post-1949 Chinese HE governance model, rooted in Soviet traditions and increasingly shaped by rising Chinese nationalism (Postiglione & Jung, 2017). This dual governmentality often generates ideological frictions, with institutional autonomy and collegial governance

existing side-by-side centralised, policy-driven approaches emphasised by the Mainland (Postiglione, 2017; Mok & Xiong, 2022).

From a supercomplexity perspective (Barnett, 2000, 2020), Hong Kong's HE landscape is not a stable or coherent entity but a contested space where historical legacies, policy priorities, cultural identities, and political pressures intersect and sometimes collide (Mok et al., 2020). Contestations emerge across multiple layers: between British colonial traditions and Mainland governance logics (Jackson, 2020; Postiglione & Jung, 2017); between neoliberal managerialism and the preservation of academic freedoms (Lee, 2017); between globalisation's push for internationalisation and local socio-political sensibilities (Veg, 2017); and between different language regimes—Cantonese, English, and increasingly Mandarin—each with its own symbolic implications for scholarly practices (Poon, 2013). As Ruan (2024) notes, even commitments to academic freedom and intellectual leadership are negotiated within a highly performance-driven and politically sensitive environment, where institutional expectations can privilege quantifiable outputs over exploratory and critical scholarship. These tensions are not static but shift in response to changing geopolitical relations, policy reforms, and global academic trends, producing a fluid and often unpredictable HE environment (Ruan, 2024).

Hong Kong's embrace of internationalisation further adds to its supercomplexity. Seeking to build world-class universities and position itself as an international education hub, the Hong Kong government and its HE sector have implemented a

series of local, national, and global policy initiatives since 2007. These include admission quotas, targeted scholarships, visa regulations, and post-study work restrictions, designed to strategically recruit non-local students (Mok & Bodycott, 2014; Oleksiyenko et al., 2013; Jung, 2019). While these measures have expanded opportunities for global engagement, they have also accelerated marketisation and intensified competition, aligning institutional priorities with global rankings and performance metrics (Lo, 2017; Pan, 2021). The result is a policy environment where the goals of attracting diverse talents and sustaining critical scholarship coexist in tension.

MCDS are the largest non-local student cohort within Hong Kong's HE, constituting 83.8% of full-time research postgraduate students in UGC-funded universities in the 2022–2023 academic year (UGC, 2023). Their presence reflects Hong Kong's academic reputation, research resources, and strategic recruitment of cross-border talents (Jung et al., 2021). It is also within the layered supercomplexity of Hong Kong's HE that their academic experiences unfold. Despite cultural connections with Hong Kong, these students encounter distinct challenges resulting from ideological differences, language use, political sensitivities, and differing academic norms (Jia & Yeung, 2023; Yu & Zhang, 2016; Xu, 2018). Studies have shown that linguistic adaptation, political identification, discrimination, and differences in supervision and teaching styles can hinder their integration (Wang & Woo, 2025; Yu & Zhang, 2016). In this sense, the MCDS experience is not only

shaped by cultural adaptation but also by their positioning within a contested HE space—where institutional priorities, governance logics, and academic freedoms are in constant negotiation.

Thus, Hong Kong's HE system exemplifies supercomplexity through the interplay of hybrid legacies, global and local policy drivers, cultural-linguistic diversity, and shifting geopolitical forces. This multi-layered context provides both opportunities and constraints for MCDS, making it essential to examine their academic identity formation as a process embedded in, and shaped by, ongoing structural and discursive contestations.

2.6 Research Gaps

The literature reviewed in this chapter provides a comprehensive and critical understanding of the academic identity formation of international doctoral students, with specific attention to Chinese international doctoral students (CIDS) and Mainland Chinese doctoral students (MCDS) in various global contexts. Three major bodies of work are examined: 1) international doctoral student mobility and motivation, 2) doctoral students' academic identity development, and 3) Chinese doctoral students' identity formation in global contexts. From these three bodies of literature, several research gaps can be identified.

Firstly, studies on IDSM highlight evolving patterns of South-North, North-South, and South-South mobility, unveiling the influence of structural inequalities, market dynamics, and emerging regional hubs. While traditional ISM research often

adopts instrumentalist and human capital frameworks to explain student motivations, more recent studies incorporate critical and capability-based perspectives, stressing students' desire for self-cultivation, global citizenship, and personal development. Despite the rise of non-Western destinations like China and Malaysia, much of the ISM literature continues to centre on students' decisions to study in the Global North, leaving a gap in research on their motivations to study in hybrid or semi-peripheral contexts represented by Hong Kong.

Secondly, in the academic identity literature, doctoral students are increasingly recognised as active agents negotiating their identities in complex and emotionally charged environments. Influences on identity development include stress and resilience, supervisor-supervisee relationships, academic writing and publication, and institutional structures. While many studies explore these dimensions individually, few adopt an integrative, longitudinal lens to capture how these factors dynamically interact over time. Furthermore, the critical role of informal spaces, emotional labour, and multilingual practices is gaining attention but remains under-theorised in many mainstream accounts.

Thirdly, scholarship on CIDS reveals a paradigmatic shift from early adjustment/deficit models toward self-formation and agency-based perspectives. While the adjustment-oriented research frames CIDS as culturally deficient learners struggling to adapt to Western norms, more recent work repositions them as resilient, reflective, and resourceful actors who construct hybrid, cosmopolitan identities

through their cross-cultural academic journeys. Empirical studies from Anglophone contexts (e.g., Australia, the UK, Canada) have shown how CIDS negotiate linguistic challenges, disciplinary expectations, and supervision dynamics with considerable agency. These findings challenge essentialist and deficit discourses, calling for more inclusive and relational approaches to international education.

This study seeks to address these gaps by investigating how MCDS in Hong Kong navigate their nascent academic identity within a supercomplex, hybrid HE environment. Situated at the intersection of Eastern and Western academic traditions, Hong Kong offers a unique transborder context where MCDS experience both familiarity and estrangement. By exploring how MCDS manage challenges, exercise agency, and interpret their doctoral experiences, this research contributes to a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of doctoral students' academic identity development. It also responds to calls for research that is longitudinal, intersectional, and attuned to the complexities of academic socialisation beyond traditional Global North settings.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has critically reviewed the literature on international doctoral student mobility and academic identity formation, with a particular focus on Chinese international doctoral students. It identifies a paradigmatic shift from deficit-based to agency (self-formation)-oriented approach to international doctoral student research. It examines key factors shaping their identity development, including supervision,

academic writing, emotional labour, and institutional structures. While substantial progress has been made in reconceptualising doctoral students as agentic individuals, existing research continues to privilege Western contexts and overlooks the nuanced, evolving identities of students in hybridised HE environments like Hong Kong. By addressing these gaps, the present study contributes to a more contextually grounded, intersectional, and processual understanding of how MCDS in Hong Kong negotiate their academic identities. This research foregrounds the relational and dynamic aspects of identity formation and responds to broader calls for a more inclusive and critical approach to understanding doctoral education in an increasingly globalised and multipolar academic landscape (Marginson, 2022; Marginson & Xu, 2023).

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical foundations guiding this study's exploration of MCDS' academic identity formation within the Hong Kong HE context. To capture the complexity and dynamic nature of this process, the study is anchored in a post-structuralist understanding of identity as fluid, evolving, and context-sensitive. Specifically, this chapter analyses the formation and variation of MCDS' academic identities through three interconnected perspectives: 1) Archer's (1995, 2003) structure-agency interplay; 2) Marginson's (2014, 2024) notion of international students' self-formation; and 3) McAlpine et al.'s (2010, 2013) identity trajectory theory (See **Figure 3.1**). These perspectives share a common concern about how individuals, situated in complex and evolving structural environments, actively negotiate their identities over time. Drawing on these theoretical perspectives, this thesis analyses academic identity not as a fixed attribute but as an ongoing, reflexive project shaped by the dynamic interplay between external socio-cultural contexts, institutional structures, and personal motivations, aspirations, and psychological struggles over time and across spaces. Given the contested and hybrid nature of Hong Kong's academic environment, the thesis further engages Barnett's (2000) concept of 'supercomplexity' to capture the fluid, uncertain, and often contradictory nature of contemporary HE and the academic profession. Notable, throughout the thesis, the idea of supercomplexity is adopted in a light, metaphorical sense to frame Hong

Kong's shifting higher education environment, rather than as a detailed analytical framework. The interplay of these perspectives is particularly relevant to understanding how MCDS navigate and construct their academic identities within Hong Kong's rapidly changing and intellectually challenging HE landscape.

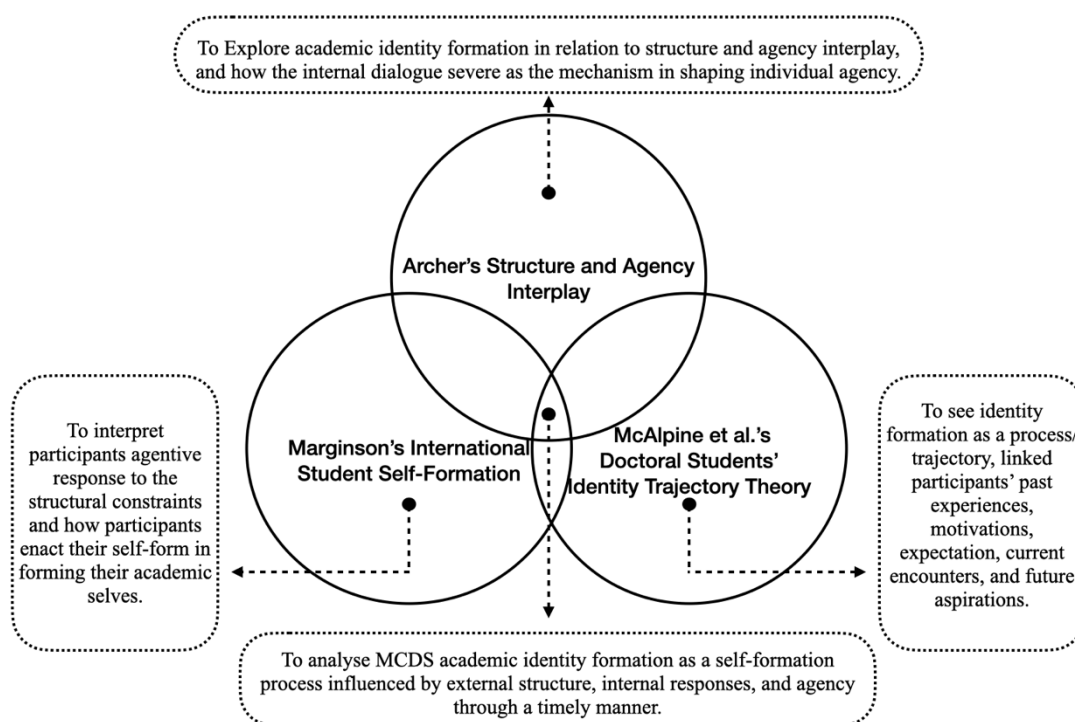


Figure 3.1 The Three-Intertwined Theories

To elaborate on how these perspectives intersect, this chapter begins by discussing the concepts of structure and agency and their roles in shaping identity (Section 3.2). It then introduces the notions of reflexivity and self-formation as crucial mechanisms linking structure and agency, which are essential for understanding individual identity development (Section 3.3). The discussion then shifts to conceptualising the contested nature of contemporary academia in the age of supercomplexity, with particular attention to the Hong Kong context (Section 3.4). Finally, building on these theoretical foundations, the chapter proposes an integrated framework for examining

the nascent academic identity formation of MCDS within Hong Kong's HE landscape.

3.2 Identity through the Lens of Structure and Agency

In contemporary scholarship, there is a broader acceptance of identity as fluid, dynamic, and continuously negotiated (Norton, 2016; Preece, 2016; Teng, 2020).

Giddens (1991) defines identity as a “reflexive project of self” (p. 5), akin to a biographical narrative. According to him, biographies are never fixed but are constantly revised in light of ongoing experiences and filtered through the complexities of late-modern social systems. Echoing this view, Henkel (2012) describes identity as “a continuing sense of self through a whole human life, in which there may have been significant, even dramatic, changes, but the past, present, and future are integrally linked” (p. 156). In other words, identity can be understood as an evolving life story, depicting not only “who we are” but also how we understand our lives in temporal and relational terms (Danielewicz, 2001; Jenkins, 1996).

Postmodernist and poststructuralist scholars similarly emphasise the process-oriented nature of identity, suggesting that identity is never static but is constantly shaped and reshaped by the contexts in which people are situated (Henkel, 2012). More recent studies conceptualise identity as a trajectory determined by time (past–present–future), space (social and institutional), and place (geographical), thus offering a more layered understanding of identity development (McAlpine, 2012a; McAlpine, 2012b; Phan, 2022a). Overall, identity is relational and contextual,

constructed through continuous interaction between the self and overarching structures.

3.2.1 Structure and Identity

Sociocultural scholars believe that identity evolution/change occurs when individuals join and are socialised within various social groups where they experience similarity and differentiation, and eventually feel affiliated and connected through negotiation (Phan, 2022b). These social groups are embedded in social structures such as culture, race, gender, and social status (Haynes, 2008; Phan, 2022b).

Broadly speaking, structure refers to “the social relationships themselves and the conditions under which people act” (Haynes, 2008, p. 623; Woodward, 2000). It involves economic, social, political, cultural, and ideological factors (Archer, 1995). Identity formation is closely linked to structure, where culture, policy, and ideologies intersect to form specific social relations and exert pressure on individuals to conform and maintain consistency within their context. Hall (1993) notes that when people express who they are in society, they are also revealing their connection to a specific place, time, history, and culture. In this way, a structure that includes both social and cultural dimensions plays an important role in shaping a person’s identity.

Meanwhile, Archer (1995) argues that “structures (as emergent entities) are not only irreducible to people, they pre-exist them, and people are not puppets of structures because they have their own emergent properties which mean they either reproduce or transform social structure” (p. 71). Other scholars also argue that social

structures are not the sole factors shaping one's experience and identity (Marginson, 2014; Inouye & McAlpine, 2019). Human agency also plays a crucial role in individual identity formation and academic practices (Archer, 1995; Marginson, 2024; McAlpine et al., 2013).

3.2.2 Human Agency and Identity

Agency can be defined as the human capacity to make choices, take actions, and influence one's life course in spite of external social structures (Archer, 1995, 2003; Haynes, 2008; Mead, 2002). Mead (1934) believes agency emerges from the dialogical relationship between the “*I*,” representing spontaneity and creativity, and the “*Me*,” embodying internalised societal expectations. The “*I*” allows individuals to respond differently to similar situations, try new ways of doing things, and challenge existing norms (Mead, 1934). In other words, agency is expressed when individuals do not simply follow rules or expectations but actively take actions and, potentially, shape the social world around them (Mead, 1934). Holland et al. (2001) situate agency within figured worlds—culturally and socially constructed contexts that provide the scripts for action while leaving room for improvisation and self-authorship. Archer (1995, 2003) advances this understanding by highlighting reflexivity as a mechanism of agency, whereby individuals engage in internal conversations to interpret structural conditions, evaluate personal concerns, and formulate projects that guide future actions.

As individuals move through different social situations, they interpret their experiences, draw lessons from them, and use this understanding to guide future actions. Identity formation, therefore, is an ongoing process in which individuals apply their knowledge and behaviours to act, respond, and continually revise their ways of thinking and acting. According to Acher (1995):

“People, in turn, are capable of resisting, repudiating, suspending, or circumventing structural and cultural tendencies, in which they are unpredictable because of their creative powers as human beings.” (p. 195)

In this sense, an individual is seen as an “agent” — someone who actively engages with and influences their environment (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 6). Sen (2000) defines “agent” as “someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well” (p. 19). Based on this conceptualisation, he proposes the notion of “human freedom”, according to which responsible adults should be empowered to take charge of their own well-being, making their own choices about how to utilise their capabilities (Sen, 2000, p. 288). Importantly, Sen (2000) notes that a person’s capabilities are shaped by social arrangements, which play a critical role in enabling or constraining individual freedom.

Therefore, in identity development, agency plays a critical role by enabling individuals to navigate cultural norms, institutional demands, and social expectations while shaping their evolving self-conceptions. Through reflexive deliberation and

improvisational practices, people actively construct and reconstruct their identities over time, resisting or reinterpreting externally imposed definitions of the self (Archer, 1995, 2003).

However, a sole emphasis on agency risks portraying identity formation as entirely self-directed, underestimating the powerful influence of social structures, cultural norms, and systemic inequalities (Archer, 2003). Such an agent-centric view overlooks how opportunities for self-authorship are unevenly distributed and how identities are shaped by pre-existing institutional arrangements and cultural hierarchies (Archer, 1995).

3.2.3 The Structure-Agency Interplay

Regarding the relationship between structure and agency, Archer (1995, 2003) offers a distinct perspective from Giddens, who views structure and agency as mutually constitutive and analytically inseparable. Archer critiques this conflation, arguing that it diminishes human autonomy by collapsing agency into structure. Instead, she proposes analytical dualism, treating structure and agency as distinct yet temporally interconnected. Social structures—such as institutions, cultural norms, and material conditions—exist prior to individual actions, thus exerting both enabling and constraining influences. However, individuals are not passive products of these forces. Through internal conversation (Archer, 1995, 2003), they engage in reflexive deliberation, interpreting their social contexts in light of personal concerns, priorities,

and aspirations. Identity thus emerges dynamically as individuals navigate, respond to, and sometimes transform the structures surrounding them.

Identity formation, accordingly, takes place in the interplay between structure and agency. Identity is not a direct imprint of social structure, nor is it entirely self-authored. Instead, it is forged through reflexive mediation, as individuals make sense of their positioning within structural contexts and formulate life projects accordingly (Archer, 2003). Reflexivity enables individuals to navigate complex social expectations, institutional demands, and personal goals. In consequence, identity emerges from the interplay between pre-existing social conditions and the agent's internal deliberations—a dynamic and ongoing negotiation that reflects both structural embeddedness and personal agency. In Archer's (1995, 2003) framework, it is through this reflexive engagement that individuals come to determine who they are, how they relate to others, and what kind of trajectory they wish to pursue.

3.3 Student Identity Self-formation in Higher Education through Reflexivity

Similar to Archer, Marginson (2024) also critiques the tendency in some research to treat structure and agency as inversely related—as if an increase in structural constraints automatically diminishes individual capacity. For him, this is a false dichotomy that arises from modelling the two as fixed and opposing components, rather than as distinct entities with independent trajectories. As he notes:

“Discussion of agency is attended by a common error: the assumption that relations between structure and agency are zero-sum – the more potent are the

structural forces, the more the potentials of agency are reduced. This error derives from modelling agency and structure as two halves of a fixed whole, not as ontologically heterogeneous with distinct trajectories over time. Yes, economic inequalities, cultural exclusions, and political power constrain agency, and unevenly from person to person. But the constraints are not absolute.”

(Marginson, 2024, p. 4-5)

Grounded in Sen’s notion of “human freedom” and Archer’s analytical dualism, Marginson (2014, 2024) proposes a self-formation paradigm to analyse students’ learning experiences and identity formation. Drawing on interviews with 290 international students in Australia and New Zealand, he critiques assimilationist approaches that portray international students as deficit-ridden and passive. Instead, he highlights their agentic capacities, observing that they are self-aware, reflexive individuals who actively shape “the course of his/her own life” (Marginson, 2014, p. 12). This paradigm also challenges traditional theoretical frameworks—such as human capital theory and social reproduction theory—which either portray education primarily as an economic investment or a structure that reproduces social inequality, and characterise students as consumers or neoliberal self-investors. While these perspectives explain certain aspects of HE, they tend to position students as passive recipients of institutional processes, overlooking their active, agentic role in shaping their own learning and identities (Marginson, 2024).

For Marginson (2014, 2023, 2024), the core of the self-formation process is reflexive agency, where students manage their lives and learning through an internal

dialogue that navigates structural differences and redefines personal goals. Self-formation is a non-linear, emergent process. It is relational—shaped by interactions with peers, teachers, institutions, and broader societal contexts—and deeply personal, as students engage in internal dialogues to define who they are and who they wish to become. This process often extends beyond formal curricula to include personal development, intercultural learning, and the cultivation of critical and ethical capacities.

Marginson suggests that the case of cross-border international students is particularly illustrative. These students often consciously engage in self-formation, negotiating new academic, cultural, and social norms to reshape their identities and futures. Their experiences provide clear examples of how self-formation unfolds through reflexive agency in new contexts. Their self-formation is both a process and outcome of international HE (Marginson, 2024).

3.4 The Contested Nature of Contemporary Academia

Some scholars argue that the world's HE systems have entered an era of **supercomplexity**—a condition in which institutional values are unstable, expectations are ambiguous, and knowledge is continually contested (Barnett, 2000, 2020; Clegg, 2008). In such contexts, the categories and norms through which individuals understand themselves as academics are no longer fixed but are constantly reconfigured. For doctoral students—particularly those navigating hybrid, competitive, and politically sensitive academic systems—the challenges of identity

formation are intensified, demanding continuous reflexive negotiation (Marginson, 2014, 2024; McAlpine et al., 2013).

According to Barnett (2000, p. 77), “[t]he world is radically unknowable. Every framework for knowing and every sense of our world, of ourselves, and our relationship to the world and each other is contestable.” In the age of supercomplexity, (doctoral) students and academics are no longer socialised into a single, coherent academic culture (Barnett, 1999, 2000, and 2003). Instead, they encounter multiple, often competing discourses about what it means to be an academic, yet no final authority or unified epistemological and ontological ground exists (Barnett, 2000; 2024). Within the increasingly complex structure of HE, its discourse, according to Barnett (2024), “is a carrier of academic ideologies, explicitly critiquing formations but also unwittingly revealing long-lasting associations” (p. 46). Amid these shifting conversations, academics can become captivated by the language and the powerful images and ideas it conveys (Barnett, 2024).

Therefore, Barnett (2000, 2003) defines the structure of the contemporary university as *supercomplexity*—a condition in which frameworks for understanding knowledge, identity, and value are themselves multiple, contestable, and continually in flux. Doctoral students are thus situated within a landscape where competing imaginaries (discourses) of the university shape their sense of who they are and what they are becoming (Clegg, 2008).

3.4.1 Neoliberal and Performative Discourses

Contemporary academia is increasingly shaped by the logics of market-oriented managerialism emphasising competition, productivity, performance metrics, and individual entrepreneurialism (Barnett, 2000; Clegg, 2008; Archer, 2008). Doctoral students are often positioned as future knowledge workers, encouraged to produce outputs (publications, grants, impact) that are legible to external evaluative frameworks (Archer, 2008). Academic success becomes tethered to performativity—what can be measured, ranked, and audited. It can cultivate an identity centred on visibility and valorisation in a global academic marketplace.

Scholars have criticised how the managerialism brought about by the neoliberal and performative approach could change the overall purpose, structure, and meaning of traditional HE (Barnett, 2003), leading to issues with seriously adverse effects on academic identity, such as low morale, increased stress, reduced motivation, and decreased teaching and research quality (Archer, 2008; Henkel, 2000). However, scholars also point out that these changes can bring new chances. For example, Barnett (2003) notes that change can open up opportunities that lead to new ways and new identities of being an academic. These new ways, as explained by Clegg (2008) through a post-structuralist lens, illustrate how systemic changes affect individuals' everyday experiences. Post-structuralism emphasises that identity is not fixed, offering valuable tools for understanding how individuals continuously construct and reconstruct their sense of self. Therefore, for doctoral students, neoliberal and

performative discourses are likely to shape new forms of academic identity that enable them to navigate institutional pressures and adapt to the complexities of contemporary academia.

3.4.2 Traditional Humboldtian Discourse

Contrasting neoliberal imperatives, the Humboldtian discourse frames academic identity around the ideal of the autonomous scholar devoted to truth-seeking, critical inquiry, and personal cultivation, for whom teaching and research are mutually enriching activities (von Humboldt, 2018). This identity is rooted in the values of intellectual cultivation (*Bildung*), academic freedom, and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, rather than for instrumental outcomes (Wittrock, 1993). The academic is imagined as a public intellectual and cultural educator who develops both the self and society through rigorous, disinterested scholarship and reflective pedagogy (Barnett, 2024). This discourse emphasises academic freedom, disinterested pursuit of knowledge, and the intrinsic value of intellectual exploration. For doctoral students, especially those drawn to academia with a deep sense of intellectual devotion, the Humboldtian academic identity offers a powerful imaginary that has increasingly become precarious.

While the Humboldtian model historically championed academic and institutional freedoms—aiming to free scholarship from prescriptive pedagogies and hierarchical control—its applicability to contemporary HE remains contested. Barnett (2024) argues that in current practice, the model is often invoked in ways that sustain

institutional hierarchies and resist certain forms of pedagogical innovation. As such, the Humboldtian ideal, when framed nostalgically, risks becoming misaligned with the demands of 21st-century academia. Here, navigating supercomplex and globalised conditions requires greater relationality, interdisciplinarity, and ecological responsiveness, which have become rather institutionalised. More importantly, such critiques may reflect culturally specific interpretations of “innovation,” which in some contexts is conflated with managerialist, top-down reform—an approach arguably at odds with Humboldt’s original aspirations for autonomy and scholarly self-determination.

The supercomplexity underlying current academia determines that the formation of doctoral identity has become an act of negotiation, selection, and resistance. Students are not merely “socialised” into a pre-existing culture; they are compelled to navigate ambiguities, reconcile contradictions, and actively construct their academic selves amidst tensions between these discourses. For example, a student may simultaneously internalise the pressure to publish prolifically (neoliberal performativity), aspire to embody the ideal of the independent scholar (Humboldtian tradition), and seek to position their research as a tool for social justice (critical discourse).

This study recognises the complex structure of contemporary academia not as a coherent or unified entity, but as a contested space shaped by competing discourses. These discourses mirror broader transformations like the university under conditions

of supercomplexity, where values are unstable, expectations are ambiguous, and notions of legitimate knowledge are constantly renegotiated (Barnett, 2000).

Understanding doctoral students' identity formation thus requires careful attention to the plural, conflictual, and dynamic discursive environment that simultaneously shapes, enables, and constrains the emergence of their academic selves.

In Hong Kong, these dynamics are particularly intensified. As Ruan (2024) observes, Hong Kong's HE sector operates at the crossroads of global competitiveness, local political sensitivities, and historically rooted academic traditions. While formal commitments to academic freedom remain, they are negotiated within a system shaped by performance-based funding, research assessment exercises, and strong managerial oversight. These conditions create heightened pressures for academics to demonstrate productivity, often in ways that privilege measurable outputs over more relational or exploratory forms of scholarship. For Lo (2018) and Postiglione (2017), Hong Kong's hybrid positioning further complicates such pressures: historically influenced by British colonial governance yet embedded within Chinese sovereignty, its HE produces an academic space that is volatile, contested, and deeply entangled with geopolitical currents.

For doctoral students, particularly MCDS, this environment demands continuous reflexive negotiation. They must reconcile aspirations for scholarly autonomy with the realities of a competitive, performance-driven, and politically sensitive academic landscape. Situating Hong Kong's HE system through Barnett's concept of

supercomplexity thus highlights the multi-layered and shifting conditions under which MCDS forge their academic identities. In this thesis, Barnett's idea of supercomplexity is employed as an overarching metaphor rather than as a fully developed analytical framework. My intention was not to conduct a detailed theoretical application of Barnett's model, but to use the concept in a light, contextual sense to capture the contradictory, fluid, and hybrid nature of Hong Kong's higher education landscape. This metaphor helps situate participants' identity narratives within an environment marked by overlapping global, national, and institutional expectations. The analytical process itself, however, is grounded primarily in participants' lived experiences and the thematic patterns emerging from their accounts. Thus, supercomplexity functions as a conceptual backdrop that enhances contextual interpretation, without serving as a formal coding or analytical structure.

3.5 MCDS and Self-Formation of Nascent Academic Identities: A Process-Oriented Trajectory

The formation of doctoral students' academic identity has been widely examined through theoretical lenses that integrate structure and individual agency. Scholars (e.g., Clegg, 2008; McAlpine et al., 2013) point out that doctoral candidates develop their emerging academic identities within academic practices shaped by disciplinary, institutional, and socio-cultural contexts. Henkel (2000, 2015) defines academic identity as a professional identity, a sub-dimension of broader self-identity, reflecting

a continuous sense of self constructed through participation in research, teaching, and service, and sustained by disciplinary and institutional recognition.

Grounded in Archer's (1995, 2003) theorisation of agency, intentionality, and reflexivity, McAlpine et al. (2013) highlight that identity development is guided by individual motivations while simultaneously shaped by structural influences beyond one's control. For doctoral students, their academic identity development, being continuous and fluid, cannot be separated from their broader self-identity (McAlpine et al., 2010).

A key point of convergence between Archer and McAlpine is the temporal, process-oriented nature of identity formation. Past motivations and expectations, current encounters and responses, and imagined futures all influence present actions and self-perceptions, making academic identity a longitudinal and evolving process rather than a fixed state. Archer (1995, 2003) introduces reflexivity as the central mechanism through which individuals interpret structures and exercise agency to shape identity projects over time. Complementing this, Marginson's (2014, 2023, 2024) concept of self-formation positions students as active agents who reflexively steer their personal and academic development across diverse educational contexts.

However, while these conceptualisations are insightful, none fully captures the complexity of MCDS' identity formation in Hong Kong's contested and hybrid HE landscape. Archer's (1995, 2013) structure–agency theory illuminates how reflexivity mediates between social structures and individual agency, whereas it underplays the

global–local dynamics and students’ self-formative capacities central to cross-border doctoral experiences. Conversely, Marginson’s (2014, 2024) concept of self-formation foregrounds student agency and transnational positionality, but offers less analytical precision in accounting for the institutional, disciplinary, and policy structures that condition students’ opportunities and challenges.

In light of the above, the present study adopts an integrated theoretical framework to understand the dynamic, process-oriented formation of nascent academic identities among Mainland Chinese Doctoral Students (MCDS). The framework recognises identity as emergent and shaped by the interplay of multi-dimensional structures, reflexive agency, and temporality (**Figure 3.2**).

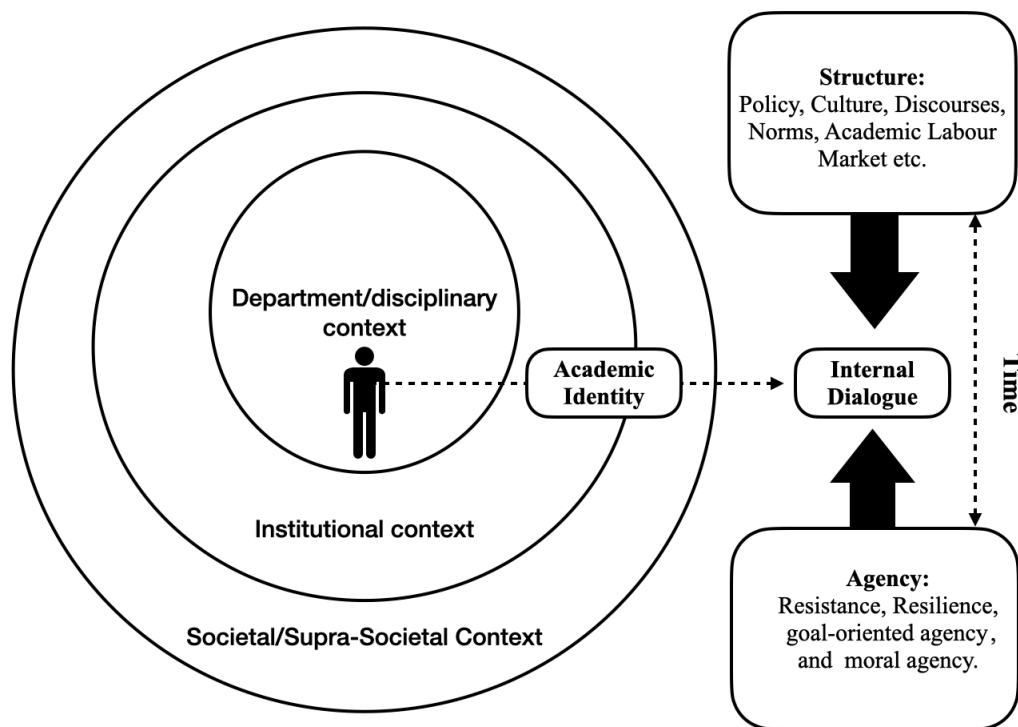


Figure 3.2 Integrated Framework of MCDS Academic Identity Formation

3.5.1 Multi-Dimensional Structure

In this study, MCDS' academic identity formation is situated in the Hong Kong HE context, characterised by contested academic norms, competing policies, and differentiated support systems at departmental, institutional, and societal levels. At the same time, students confront internal challenges of uncertainty, belonging, and autonomy while negotiating their place within academia. The proposed framework captures these influences using a three-layer nested structural model (See **Figure 3.3**):

- (1) Departmental/Disciplinary Context: Directly shapes doctoral experiences through supervisor-supervisee relationships, disciplinary norms and practices, peer networks, and departmental policies.
- (2) Institutional Context: Encompasses university-level policies, strategic priorities, funding schemes, and organisational culture that shape departmental practices.
- (3) Societal/Supra-Societal Context: Includes broader sociocultural norms, language policies, national educational agendas, research funding schemes, and local labour market dynamics.

These nested layers interact dynamically, with outer layers constraining and shaping inner ones, thereby influencing the immediate departmental environment where MCDS develop. When navigating these contested structures, MCDS often face multi-dimensional and contradictory demands arising from the complexity and instability of contemporary HE systems. This multi-layered structural conceptualisation captures

the hybridised and contested nature of Hong Kong’s HE context while simplifying its presentation for analytical clarity.

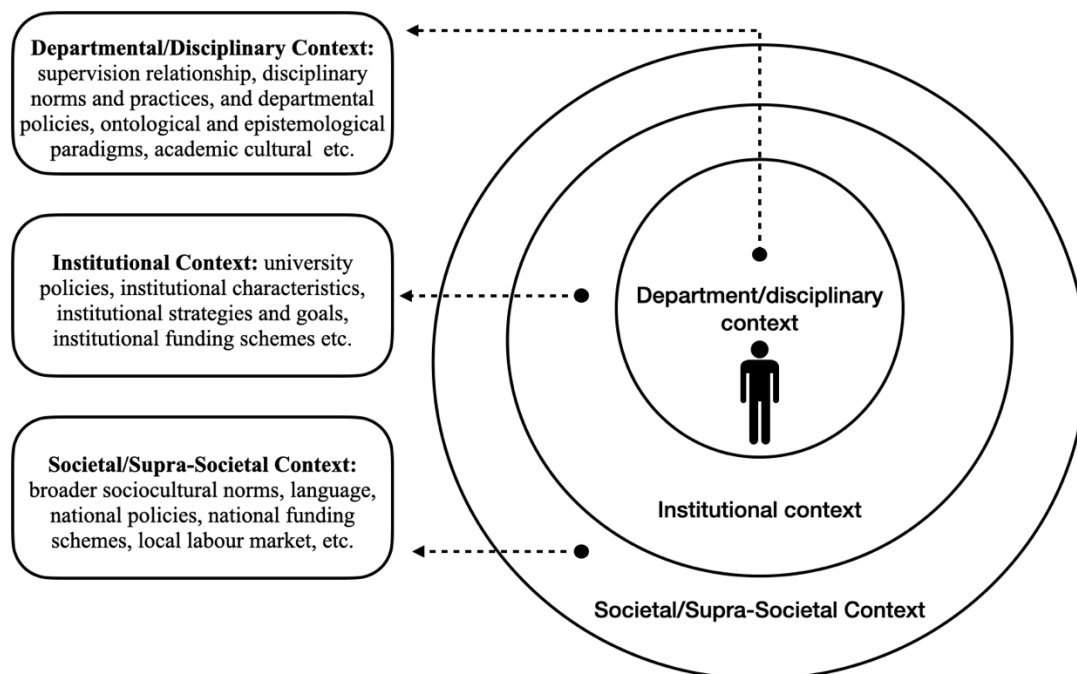


Figure 3.3 The Multi-dimensional Structure

3.5.2 Reflexive Agency

At the heart of academic identity formation is reflexive agency—the ability of MCDS to interpret their academic environment, deliberate personal concerns and aspirations, and act in ways that shape their doctoral journeys (see. **Figure 3.3**). Drawing on Archer’s (1995, 2003) conceptualisation, reflexivity is understood as the internal conversation that mediates between structural conditions and individual actions. Through internal dialogues, MCDS make sense of the opportunities and constraints they encounter, so as to navigate the tensions between dynamic and sometimes

competing academic traditions and negotiate their scholarly positioning within the Hong Kong HE context.

This study examines MCDS' reflexive agency by exploring the students' responses to multi-dimensional structural constraints—departmental, institutional, and societal. These responses exist not only in psychological processes—such as internal struggles with inclusion/exclusion, self-doubt, uncertainty, or confidence—but also in physical actions that demonstrate agency in practice, such as seeking support, modifying research approaches, building networks, or strategically engaging with institutional policies. By analysing how MCDS reflect upon and respond to these layered structures, the study captures how they exercise, adapt, and negotiate agency throughout their doctoral journeys. In doing so, it aligns with Marginson's (2014) notion of self-formation, recognising that agency is both a reflexive and embodied process through which students actively manage their development and shape their evolving academic identities.

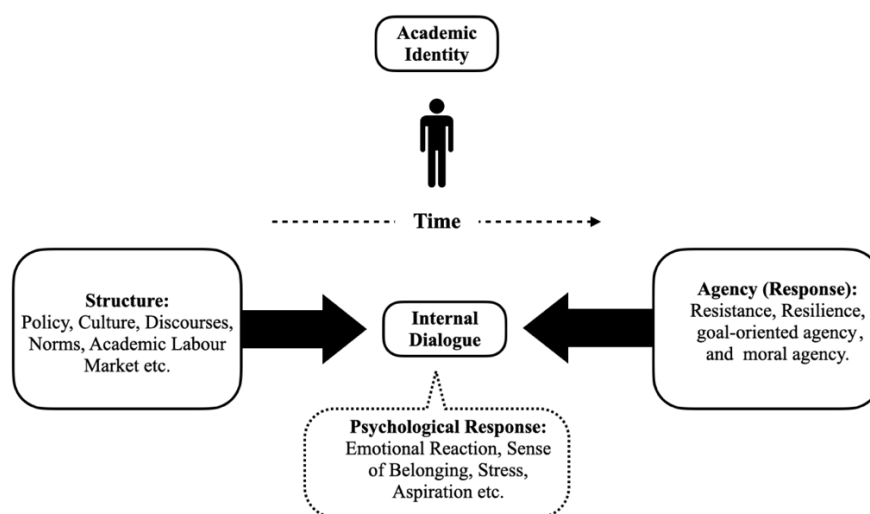


Figure 3.4 Structure and Agency Interplay

3.5.3 Temporality: Academic Identity as a Process-Oriented Trajectory

Academic identity formation is inherently temporal and best understood as a process-oriented trajectory rather than a fixed outcome achieved during doctoral study.

Building on Archer's structure-agency interplay and McAlpine's identity-trajectory theory (2010, 2014), this study recognises that the development of MCDS' academic identities unfolds through a continuum of past experiences, present engagements, and imagined futures.

This study examines explicitly how MCDS' academic identity is influenced by their initial intentions, motivations, and expectations formed before entering their doctoral programmes, and how these evolve throughout their journey in response to disciplinary practices, supervisor-supervisee relationships, institutional structures, and broader socio-cultural contexts. Identity is thus shaped by the continuity and flow of personal aspirations and lived experiences over time, with shifts and reconfigurations emerging as students navigate challenges, seize opportunities, and refine their future academic trajectories.

Reflecting the non-linear nature of this process, the subsequent findings chapter will present the data in a temporal sequence, capturing how MCDS' academic identities develop and transform before, during, and towards the completion of their doctoral studies. This temporal framing enables a deeper understanding of identity as a dynamic, evolving process influenced by past experiences, present decision-making, and projections of future academic selves.

This integrated framework not only foregrounds the complex and evolving nature of academic identity but also reflects the broader intricacy and competitiveness of Hong Kong's HE system—marked by rapid policy shifts, diverse cultural influences, and competing discourses. It offers a simplified yet holistic representation of how MCDS navigate structural constraints and enact agency in forming their nascent academic identities within this unique and contested space.

3.6 Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has laid out a theoretical foundation for understanding the nascent academic identity formation of Mainland Chinese Doctoral Students (MCDS) in Hong Kong. Drawing on post-structuralist and sociocultural theories, identity has been conceptualised as a dynamic, relational, and evolving process shaped through the continuous interplay of structure and agency. The integration of Archer's structure-agency theory, Marginson's concept of self-formation, and McAlpine et al.'s identity-trajectory theory enables a nuanced understanding of how MCDS navigate complex academic terrains. This chapter highlights the fluid, contested, and multidimensional nature of contemporary HE, particularly within the hybridised context of Hong Kong. The proposed integrated framework thus offers a conceptual tool for examining how MCDS reflexively engage with institutional, disciplinary, and sociocultural structures to shape their emerging academic identities over time.

Chapter 4: Research Design

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological foundation and research design adopted in this study, to explore how MCDS form their academic identities within Hong Kong's HE system. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, this study embraces a qualitative, narrative inquiry approach to capture the richness, complexity, and situated nature of participants' lived experiences. It begins by discussing the philosophical stance underpinning the study, followed by an account of the research aims and questions guiding research design. The rationale for employing qualitative inquiry and narrative methods is then explained, with attention to how these approaches support the exploration of identity trajectories. Subsequent sections detail participant recruitment and research sites, the iterative data collection process, and the interpretative analysis of narratives. The chapter also reflects on strategies used to ensure trustworthiness, ethical integrity, and researcher reflexivity.

4.2 Interpretivism as the Research Paradigm

A research paradigm refers to the underlying beliefs or perspectives that guide how research is carried out. It can be seen as a framework that shapes how researchers understand the world and approach their topics (Guba, 1990). Paradigms influence how researchers perceive knowledge, reality, and their relationship with participants. As Creswell and Poth (2016) explain, educational research is commonly informed by four philosophical worldviews: postpositivism, interpretivism (also called

constructivism), transformativism and pragmatism. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), postpositivism is rooted in scientific inquiry; it assumes that reality can be objectively measured and understood through hypothesis testing, quantitative methods, and causal reasoning. The transformative worldview takes a more critical stance, focusing on issues of power, inequality, and social justice, often employing participatory approaches aimed at empowering marginalised groups and driving societal change. Pragmatism departs from fixed ontological or epistemological positions, instead prioritising practical solutions to research problems, frequently using mixed-methods to address complex, real-world questions. Interpretivism differs from postpositivism's emphasis on objective measurement and generalisable laws; rather, it views reality as socially constructed and subjective, with a focus on understanding meanings and individuals' lived experiences within specific contexts (Tuli, 2010; Moustakas, 1994).

In this study, the interpretivist paradigm guides the research and shapes the way knowledge is generated. Adopting this paradigm is not only a theoretical choice but also a practical and reflective decision made during the research journey. From the outset, it became apparent that MCDS' identity formation could not be meaningfully captured through detached observation or rigid measurement. During interviews, participants often narrated experiences that blend personal histories, institutional expectations, and aspirations for future academic careers—elements that could only be understood through co-constructed meaning-making between the researcher and

participants. This interactive process exemplifies the interpretivist epistemology, whereby knowledge emerges from dialogue and interpretation rather than objective discovery (Goldkuhl, 2012).

Ontologically, the study assumes a relativist position: there is no single, fixed reality of academic identity formation, but rather multiple, contextually situated realities experienced by MCDS. This assumption is reinforced during data collection as participants manifest markedly different understandings of “being an academic” in light of various disciplinary norms, personal motivations, and structural conditions in Hong Kong’s HE system. Recognising and respecting these diverse realities aligns with interpretivism’s focus on depth and contextual meaning over universal generalisation (Wellington & Szczerbinski, 2007).

Moreover, interpretivism is coherent with the theoretical framework underpinning the study, which draws on Archer’s (1995) structure-agency theory, Marginson’s (2014, 2024) self-formation paradigm, and McAlpine et al.’s (2010, 2013) identity-trajectory theory. These perspectives conceptualise academic identity as emergent, non-linear, and shaped by reflexive engagement with complex social structures—an understanding that resonates strongly with interpretivism.

In correspondence with this paradigm, a qualitative research design using narrative inquiry is employed (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This approach enables participants to articulate their stories of navigating academic life in a hybridised and contested educational environment. The interpretivist orientation is particularly

valuable when participants recount experiences that do not fit neatly into predefined categories, prompting adaptive questioning and interpretative dialogue during interviews.

In sum, interpretivism provides a coherent philosophical foundation for this research. It enables a context-sensitive exploration of how MCDS actively construct meanings and identities, and how they position themselves not as passive subjects of structural forces but as reflexive agents negotiating cultural, institutional, and personal dimensions of their doctoral journeys.

4.3 Research Aims and Questions

This study aims to explore how MCDS form their academic identities through their everyday learning and research experiences within Hong Kong's HE system. The qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the dynamic structure-agency interplay in MCDS' academic identity formation during their doctoral journeys. Guided by this aim, the study pursues four interrelated research objectives:

- (1) Motivations: To examine the motivations and intentions that lead MCDS to pursue doctoral study in Hong Kong.
- (2) Structural Influences: To explore the cultural, institutional, departmental, and personal conditions that shape or constrain MCDS' academic identity development.
- (3) Agency and Navigational Strategies: To investigate how MCDS respond to structural opportunities and challenges and the strategies they use to navigate their doctoral journeys.

(4) Typologies of Academic Identity Formation: To conceptualise distinct patterns of nascent academic identities that emerge among MCDS.

To fulfill the above objectives, this study is guided by one overarching research question and three sub-questions:

Research Questions:

This study is guided by one main question:

How do Mainland Chinese Doctoral Students perceive and enact the formation of their academic identities during their learning and research journeys in Hong Kong?

To better understand this process and capture its complexity, this study further breaks down the main research question into three sub-questions, organised in a temporal sequence:

1) How do MCDS' initial motivations and expectations to embark on the doctoral journey in Hong Kong set the foundation for their academic identity development?

(Addresses Objective 1)

2) How do MCDS respond to the structural challenges and opportunities presented by the Hong Kong HE context during their doctoral journey? (Addresses Objectives 2 and 3)

3) How do MCDS' academic identity formation trajectories develop as they navigate the Hong Kong HE context? (Addresses Objective 4)

Reflecting a sequential research design, these questions not only guide data collection but also structure the presentation of findings in a chronological manner. The first sub-question on motivations and aspirations provide insights into participants' initial

intentions and expectations before commencing their doctoral studies, forming the starting point of the findings chapter. The second sub-question on structural opportunities and constraints capture participants’ ongoing experiences and responses during their doctoral journeys, illustrating how they navigate challenges and exercise agency over time. The third sub-question on identity typologies synthesise these evolving experiences to conceptualise emerging patterns of academic identity formation toward the later stages of the doctoral trajectory. The sequential alignment between the research questions and findings allows the study to narratively trace how MCDS’ identities emanate from initial motivations to evolving coping strategies and ultimately their nascent academic selves within Hong Kong’s HE environment (See Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Research Question Matrix

Research Questions (Main + Sub RQs)		Research Objectives	Temporal Trajectories
Main Question: How do MCDS perceive and enact the formation of their academic identities during their learning and research journeys in the Hong Kong HE context?	How do MCDS’ initial motivations and expectations to embark on the doctoral journey in Hong Kong set the foundation for their academic identity development?	Initial Motivations and Expectation	Before Doctoral Journey
	How do MCDS respond to the structural challenges and opportunities presented by the Hong Kong HE context during their doctoral journey?	Structural Influences, Internal Dialogue, and Agency Enactment	During Doctoral Journey

How do MCDS' academic identity formation trajectories develop as they navigate the Hong Kong HE context?	Typologies of Academic Identity Formation Trajectories	Upon Graduation
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4.4 Qualitative Research as the Methodology of the Study

This study adopts a qualitative methodology to examine how MCDS form their nascent academic identities within the Hong Kong HE system. The research problem requires an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences—something not readily captured through quantitative or purely descriptive approaches. As Creswell and Poth (2016) suggest, qualitative inquiry is most suitable when researchers aim to uncover the meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences and when understanding a phenomenon demands engagement with participants in their natural social settings.

The definition of qualitative research has undergone significant evolution. In recent years, some scholars and introductory texts have intentionally avoided offering a fixed definition of the methodology to prevent oversimplification and rigid categorisation (Richards & Morse, 2012; Weis & Fine, 2000). Others, such as Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2000, 2005), have provided a more fluid and evolving understanding of qualitative research—moving from social constructionist and interpretivist paradigms to incorporating social justice orientations (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The evolving definitions highlight not only the interpretive and naturalistic nature of qualitative inquiry but also its transformative potential. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings,

attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). Building on Denzin and Lincoln’s perspective, Creswell and Poth (2016) offer a more concise and process-oriented definition. They state:

“Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or signals a call for action” (p. 37).

In line with this reasoning, this study focuses on a small, purposefully selected sample of MCDS and engages with them through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. The aim is to explore their subjective experiences and reflections within the unique sociocultural and institutional context of the Hong Kong HE system. For instance, participants in this study often revisit and reframe their early motivations for studying in Hong Kong as they reflect on new challenges and achievements during their doctoral study. This iterative meaning-making is only accessible through a conversational, open-ended qualitative approach.

Furthermore, the qualitative approach allows room for flexibility during my fieldwork. While I initially developed the interview protocol based on the theoretical framework, early interviews reveal that some questions elicited only brief or surface-

level responses. To address this, I adapted prompts to encourage participants' deeper reflection on identity struggles and turning points. This adaptive process exemplifies the emergent nature of qualitative research (Holliday, 2016; Patton, 2015), where inquiry evolves in response to participants' narratives rather than imposing pre-determined categories.

Qualitative methodology also aligns closely with the theoretical underpinnings of the study. Academic identity formation, as conceptualised in Archer's (1995, 2003) structure-agency interplay, Marginson's (2014, 2024) self-formation theory, and McAlpine et al.'s (2013) identity-trajectory framework, is a nuanced and agentic process shaped by multiple structural and personal factors. Capturing this complexity requires an approach capable of tracing participants' temporal experiences and reflexive agency within specific institutional and sociocultural contexts.

Therefore, a qualitative approach is the most suitable methodology for capturing the richness, contradictions, and developmental trajectories of identity work among MCDS in the current research context.

4.5 Narrative Inquiry as the Research Method

Among the five major qualitative approaches—narrative inquiry, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies (Creswell & Poth, 2016)—this study adopts narrative inquiry as the research method to explore the complex, dynamic, and situated process of academic identity formation among MCDS. Czarniawska (2004) defines a narrative as “a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or

series of events/actions, chronologically connected” (p. 17). Connelly and Clandinin (2012) describe narrative inquiry as both a methodology and a way of understanding experience. In this view, stories are not merely accounts of events; they are fundamental to how individuals construct meanings, identities, and a sense of continuity over time (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

The narrative inquiry approach is particularly well-suited to the aims of the study. Academic identity formation is not a discrete event but a non-linear, evolving process through which doctoral students make sense of who they were, who they are becoming, and who they aspire to be (Henkel, 2005; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Narrative inquiry allows participants to articulate these internal shifts and negotiations in their own words, enabling a deeper understanding of identity development as a storied and temporal phenomenon rather than a fixed outcome.

In operationalising the research, narrative inquiry guides both data collection and analysis. Semi-structured interviews invite participants to reflect on critical moments in their doctoral journeys, such as initial motivations, turning points, relationships with supervisors, institutional pressures, and future aspirations. Following Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) framework, participants’ narratives are further interpreted through three interconnected dimensions:

- (1) Temporal: Stories reveal how identity evolves from pre-doctoral intentions to present experiences and imagined futures.

- (2) Social: Participants' narratives highlight how relationships—with supervisors, peers, and academic communities—shape their academic selves.
- (3) Place/Institutional: The unique hybrid context of Hong Kong's HE system influences how students position themselves within academic structures and discourses.

In this study, narrative inquiry proves invaluable in capturing the complexity and contradictions of identity formation. For instance, some participants initially described themselves as “not yet academics,” but through their stories of academic publication, teaching, and navigating institutional expectations, they revealed emerging forms of academic agency. Others narrated struggles and doubts that complicated straightforward notions of academic success. These layered accounts would have been difficult to uncover through methods that fragment experiences into isolated themes or variables.

Furthermore, in the findings chapters, the participants' narratives are deliberately preserved in their rich, original form, with minimal paraphrasing. This is to honour participants' voices, allowing readers to engage directly with their meaning-making processes. Preserving these narratives aligns with the interpretivist and narrative inquiry traditions, which emphasise co-constructed knowledge and authenticity of lived experiences (Riessman, 2008). Reflexively, retaining participants' own words also highlight the temporal unfolding of identity formation and reveal nuances—such

as their hesitation, emotions, and self-reflection—that might otherwise have been diluted through excessive summarisation.

Moreover, narrative inquiry supports a process-oriented presentation of findings. Instead of treating identity formation as static, the findings chapter narratively traces students' journeys—beginning with their entry motivations, moving through their strategies for navigating structural challenges, and culminating in patterns of nascent academic identities upon their graduation. This storied approach mirrors the temporal unfolding of participants' experiences and reflects the interpretive and agentic nature of identity development within an academic environment characterised by hybridity, competitiveness, and supercomplexity (Barnett, 2000; Marginson, 2014, 2024; McApline et al., 2010, 2013).

Ultimately, narrative inquiry functions not only as a data collection tool but also as a lens for interpretation, enabling the study to conceptualise MCDS' identity formation as a situated, evolving, and agentic process co-constructed through personal stories and institutional contexts.

4.6 Participants and Research Sites

This study employed both purposive and snowball sampling to recruit participants from five comprehensive, research-intensive universities funded by the University Grants Committee (UGC) in Hong Kong. A total of 14 participants were selected based on the following four criteria:

(1) Full-time Doctoral Enrollment: All participants were enrolled in a full-time doctoral program at one of the five selected UGC-funded universities. This criterion ensures a deeper exploration of participants' academic identity formation, as full-time students typically devote more time and focus to their studies and research compared to part-time students, whose academic commitments may be disrupted by career or family responsibilities. To ensure institutional diversity, participants were evenly selected from five UGC-funded universities in the study. While Hong Kong has eight UGC-funded public universities, this study focused on the top five research-intensive and comprehensive universities, which guarantee a wider range of academic disciplines central to Hong Kong's international HE reputation.

(2) Mainland Chinese Doctoral Students (MCDS): MCDS are defined in this study as non-local doctoral students who are originally from Mainland China (mainland Chinese passport holders) and have not previously studied at any Hong Kong institution. However, the study also includes MCDS with study-abroad experiences in other regions (e.g., the US, UK, Australia) to explore how international exposure may influence their academic identity development in the Hong Kong context.

(3) Disciplinary Diversity: Participants were recruited from a range of disciplines to explore how academic identity formation differs across fields. Becher's (1989) typology—comprising hard pure, hard applied, soft pure, and soft applied disciplines—was used to categorise and balance disciplinary representation (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Notably, two participants (Rainie and David) were intentionally

recruited from interdisciplinary fields to examine how disciplinary boundaries and cross-disciplinary work influence academic identity formation.

(4) Progression in the Doctoral Journey: To ensure participants could reflect meaningfully on their academic development, only students who were in at least their fourth year of study were included. Additionally, the study also includes recently graduated doctoral students (within one year of completion, e.g., Lily) to capture their retrospective thoughts on the entire doctoral experience.

Efforts were also made to achieve a relatively gender-balanced participant representation to minimise bias in the findings. By applying these selection criteria, the study aims to recruit a diverse and balanced sample to investigate how academic identity formation among MCDS varies by institutional background, disciplinary affiliation, gender, and stage in the doctoral journey (See **Table 4.2**).

Table 4.2. Participants' Demographic Information

Participants Name	No.	Gender	Institution	Becher (1989)'s Category
Jason	SP1	M	A	Soft–Applied
Wendy	SP2	F	A	Soft–Applied
Georgia	SP3	F	B	Soft–Applied
Lily	SP4	F	B	Soft–Pure
Rainie	SP5	F	C	Hard–Applied/Soft–Pure
David	SP6	M	C	Hard–Pure/Applied
Bob	SP7	M	B	Hard–Pure
Tina	SP8	F	B	Soft–Applied
Kelly	SP9	F	D	Hard–Applied
Jasper	SP10	M	D	Hard–Applied

Emily	SP11	F	D	Hard–Applied
Jane	SP12	F	D	Hard–Applied
Mike	SP13	M	A	Hard–Applied
Yuki	SP14	F	A	Soft–Applied

4.7 Data Collection

4.7.1 *Semi-structured Interviews*

To investigate the process of academic identity formation among MCDS within the context of Hong Kong’s HE system, data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. Semi-structured interviews are a widely used qualitative method that balances predetermined guiding questions with conversational flexibility, allowing researchers to explore emerging themes in depth (Kallio et al., 2016; Longhurst, 2003). This approach is particularly well-suited to the aim of this study, as it allows participants to narrate their lived experiences, perceptions, and reflections in their own words—an essential component of understanding identity development (Galletta, 2013). In addition to the formal interviews, a small amount of supplementary data—such as informal follow-up conversations, brief text exchanges, and publicly shared updates on participants’ social networking platforms—was used to enrich contextual understanding and clarify key episodes in the participants’ narratives. These supplementary insights did not generate new themes but supported and deepened the interpretation of the formal interview data.

Each participant was interviewed individually, with sessions lasting approximately 60–90 minutes to allow ample time for personal reflections and

storytelling. The interview protocol was initially designed based on the study's integrated theoretical framework and guided by Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three dimensions of narrative inquiry: temporal, social, and place/institutional (See **Table 4.3**).

- (1) For the temporal dimension, participants were prompted to recount their academic development over time, including pre-doctoral motivations, significant turning points during their studies, and future academic aspirations after graduation.
- (2) For the social dimension, questions explored participants' interactions with supervisors, mentors, peers, and academic communities, revealing how these relationships shaped their scholarly identity.
- (3) For the place/institutional dimension, participants were guided to situate their stories within disciplinary, institutional, and sociocultural contexts, uncovering the multi-dimensional structural challenges and opportunities they encountered in Hong Kong.

To capture how participants navigated these dynamics, additional prompts solicited their responses reflecting personal agency, coping strategies, and reflexivity during their doctoral journeys. Example interview questions include:

Questions exploring MCDS' motivations for pursuing a doctoral degree in Hong Kong:

- (1) What motivated you to pursue a doctoral programme in Hong Kong?

(2) What does undertaking a doctoral degree mean to you personally and professionally?

Questions exploring challenges and opportunities during the doctoral journey:

(1) Could you share one or two challenging moments or events that left a lasting impression on you?

(2) Can you describe specific experiences during your doctoral studies that you believe have significantly shaped your academic identity?

(3) Are there any ‘significant others’—such as supervisors, mentors, or peers—who have supported or influenced you, either academically or emotionally?

Questions exploring participants’ responses to challenges and key turning points:

(1) What are the main stressors you have encountered in your doctoral journey?

(2) How have you coped with these challenges?

(3) Have you noticed any personal or professional changes since entering the programme? If so, what are they, and how do you make sense of them?

Questions about their self-perception and academic identity formation:

(1) What factors have most contributed to your academic development?

(2) Do you currently see yourself as a scholar, academic, or researcher? Why or why not?

(3) What do you consider to be the top three influences in shaping your academic identity?

Although the initial interview protocol was carefully developed, pilot interviews revealed that some participants provided brief or surface-level responses when questions were too abstract or future-oriented (e.g., “Do you see yourself as an academic?”). In response, probing techniques and follow-up prompts were adapted mid-way through the interview process to encourage more situated storytelling—for instance, by asking participants to describe specific turning points or emotionally significant events. This adjustment not only yielded richer narratives but also aligned more closely with the temporal and storied logic of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Additionally, building rapport was essential to eliciting deep reflection. Some participants were initially hesitant to discuss challenges, particularly when talking about supervision or institutional constraints. To address this, interviews began with more neutral or positive questions (e.g., motivations) before gradually moving toward sensitive topics. This structure helped foster researcher-participant trust and created space for more vulnerable disclosures later in the interview.

4.7.2 Supplementary Data and Contextual Enrichment

In addition to the 14 in-depth narrative interviews that formed the core dataset, this study also drew on a small set of supplementary materials that enhanced contextual understanding and provided additional texture to participants’ evolving identity trajectories. These supplementary data were generated through informal conversations that naturally unfolded in non-interview settings—such as casual lunch gatherings

with a few participants—as well as through ongoing text-based exchanges via WeChat and WhatsApp. Furthermore, with participants’ consent, I observed publicly shared content on their personal social networking platforms, including WeChat Moments, X (formerly Twitter), ResearchGate, and updates on their publication activities. While these materials did not introduce new analytical themes, they served as valuable supplementary sources that helped clarify ambiguous moments in the formal interviews, confirm temporal sequences in participants’ narratives, deepen understanding of key turning points, and provide triangulation for interpreting how participants’ academic identities were being constructed and negotiated over time.

As a researcher, I found these supplementary engagements invaluable for deepening my understanding of participants’ evolving academic journeys. Informal conversations—whether during lunch gatherings, short follow-up chats, or spontaneous online exchanges—allowed me to witness how participants made sense of their experiences in everyday contexts, often in ways that felt more candid and unfiltered than the formal interview setting. Observing participants’ publicly shared posts and academic updates also provided insight into how they presented themselves, negotiated academic expectations, and articulated moments of progress or challenge in real time. While these supplementary sources remained secondary to the formal interview data, they enriched my interpretive process and strengthened my appreciation of the nuanced, lived realities underlying their narrated identities.

In sum, semi-structured interviews proved to be a powerful and flexible method, allowing participants to narrate their identity formation processes in contextually rich and emotionally resonant ways. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of how MCDS in Hong Kong negotiate structural constraints, draw on personal and social resources, and make sense of their emerging academic identities through lived experiences and narrative reflections. The addition of supplementary data—such as informal follow-up conversations, brief text exchanges, and observations of participants’ publicly shared updates—further enriched this understanding by clarifying key narrative episodes and providing temporal and contextual depth. Together, these complementary sources supported a more holistic interpretation of how MCDS in Hong Kong navigate structural constraints, mobilise personal and social resources, and make sense of their emerging academic identities through their lived experiences and ongoing narrative reflections.

Table 4.3 Sample Interview Questions

Narrative Dimension	Interview Focus	Sample Questions
Temporal (Time)	Pre-doctoral motivations, turning points, aspirations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What motivated you to pursue a doctoral programme in Hong Kong? - What does undertaking a doctoral degree mean to you personally and professionally? - What are your academic or professional aspirations after completing your PhD?
Social (Interactions & Relationships)	Role of supervisors, peers, mentors, academic communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can you describe specific experiences during your doctoral studies that you believe have significantly shaped your academic identity? - Are there any ‘significant others’—such as supervisors, mentors, or peers—who have supported or influenced you, either academically or emotionally?
Place/Institutional (Contextual Settings)	Institutional, disciplinary, and sociocultural settings in Hong Kong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How would you describe the academic culture or environment of your department/university? - What structural or cultural differences have you noticed between Hong Kong’s higher education context and your previous educational experiences?
Agency, Coping, Reflexivity (Cross-cutting theme)	Identity negotiation, coping mechanisms, reflexive change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have you faced any institutional challenges (e.g., language, policies, funding)? How have you responded to them? - What are the main stressors you have encountered in your doctoral journey? - How have you coped with these challenges? - Have you noticed any personal or professional changes since entering the programme? If so, what are they, and how do you make sense of them? - Do you currently see yourself as a scholar, academic, or researcher? Why or why not?

4.8 Data Analysis: Inductive and deductive approach

This study adopts a comprehensive analytical strategy that combines both inductive and deductive approaches to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; 2019). This dual approach is appropriate for exploring MCDS' academic identity formation in the Hong Kong HE context, allowing for both theory-driven interpretation and openness to emergent patterns grounded in participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Specifically, this study employed five steps in analysing the research data, as shown in **Figure 4.1**.

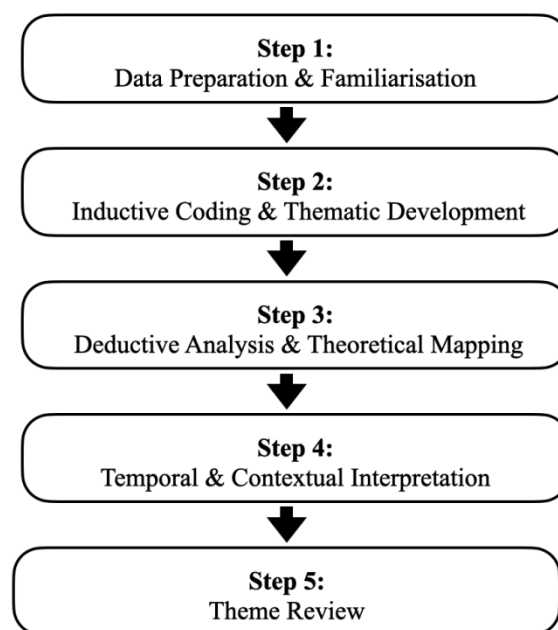


Figure 4.1 Five steps of data analysis

4.8.1 Step 1: Data Preparation and Familiarisation

Following the interviews, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Given that the interviews were conducted in Mandarin, transcripts were first analysed in Chinese

and later translated into English to facilitate analysis and thesis writing. Translation involved a careful, iterative process, with transcripts cross-checked for accuracy to preserve participants' original meanings and nuances.

To familiarise with data, I engaged myself in careful reading and re-reading the transcripts, taking preliminary notes, and immersing myself in the participants' narratives. This phase is crucial for identifying initial ideas and meanings within the data, setting the stage for systematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2013; 2019).

4.8.2 Step 2: Inductive Coding and Thematic Development

Inductive data analysis was first undertaken, allowing codes to emerge naturally from participants' narratives without imposing pre-existing categories. Using NVivo software, I generated initial codes that captured meaningful segments of data (e.g., “struggling with academic writing,” “uncertainty about the future,” “seeking validation from supervisors”). These codes were iteratively compared, merged, and grouped into broader categories through axial coding. Selective coding then focused on core categories that appear to shape or reflect participants' academic identity trajectories (e.g., structural constraints, reflexive responses).

Following Braun and Clarke's (2013; 2019) six-phase model of thematic analysis, the analytic process moved from generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, and finally naming themes. The emphasis throughout this process was on capturing the depth and complexity of the participants' experiences across social, institutional, departmental, and personal dimensions. Moreover, this

inductively driven process generated unexpected findings, such as emotional struggles regarding supervisors' feedback and dynamic interpretations of academic success, that might have been overlooked with a strictly deductive approach.

4.8.3 Step 3: Deductive Analysis and Theoretical Interpretation

In parallel with the inductive process, a deductive analysis was conducted, guided by the study's conceptual framework based on Archer's (1995) structure–agency theory, Marginson's (2014, 2024) self-formation, and McAlpine et al.'s (2010, 2013) identity-trajectory theory. Codes and themes generated inductively were reinterpreted through this theoretical lens to explore how MCDS' identity formation is shaped by their interaction with multi-dimensional structural environments and their exercise of reflexive agency.

In this phase, theory-informed coding supplemented the emergent themes by mapping them against key theoretical constructs. For example, codes related to institutional pressures, departmental norms, and supervision relationships were analysed in relation to structural constraints. In contrast, codes reflecting self-reflection, psychological struggles, or coping strategies were linked to reflexive agency.

4.8.4 Step 4: Temporal and Contextual Interpretation

To deepen the interpretation, the data were further interpreted and presented using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry framework—temporal (past, present, future), social (personal and relational), and spatial

(institutional and geographical context). This interpretive layer informed the structure of the findings chapter, organised temporally to reflect how identity evolved across different stages of the doctoral journey—from entry motivations, through navigational strategies, to the emergence of nascent academic identities.

4.8.5 Step 5: Theme Review, Reflexivity, and Validation

The identified themes underwent multiple rounds of review and refinement, ensuring internal coherence and distinctiveness across themes. Throughout this process, I maintained a strong focus on enhancing the trustworthiness and rigour of the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexive memoing played a central role, allowing me to critically examine how my background as a Mainland Chinese doctoral student in Hong Kong might have influenced interpretations of data. Regular peer debriefing sessions with academic colleagues and supervisors further helped rectify assumptions and refine thematic structures. Additionally, triangulation was achieved by iteratively comparing inductively generated codes with theoretical constructs, ensuring that interpretations were conceptually informed while remaining grounded in the data. These strategies collectively strengthened the credibility and authenticity of the findings, supporting a nuanced understanding of how MCDS constructed and negotiated their academic identities within a contested and hybridized HE system.

In sum, data analysis blends inductive openness with deductive theoretical guidance. Through systematic coding, theme development, and contextual interpretation, the analysis revealed how MCDS construct, negotiate, and form their

academic identities. By tracing participants' narratives temporally and contextually, the analysis illuminated identity formation as an ongoing, reflexive process situated within Hong Kong's highly contested HE environment.

4.9 Validity and trustworthiness

Ensuring the validity and trustworthiness of qualitative research is essential for establishing the credibility, reliability, and authenticity of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Throughout the research process, multiple strategies were employed—including triangulation, member checking, and reflexivity—to enhance rigour and maintain an interpretivist commitment to constructing contextually grounded, co-constructed knowledge. These strategies were not merely post-hoc verifications but were integrated into every stage of the research, shaping data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

4.9.1 Triangulation

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the study employed data triangulation, which involved drawing upon multiple sources of evidence to corroborate and contextualise participants' narratives. While semi-structured interviews remained the primary data source, supplementary materials were intentionally integrated into the research process to strengthen the depth and reliability of the interpretations. I observed participants' academic and social activities on social platforms, including WeChat Moments (朋友圈), Google Scholar, and ResearchGate. These platforms offered objective insights into how participants performed and projected their

academic identities in semi-public or professional digital spaces—through narratives that sometimes complemented or contradicted their self-descriptions during the interviews.

In addition to online observations, the study also analysed written artefacts produced by the participants, such as academic publications, institutional bios, and online profiles. These textual materials served not only to triangulate the narratives shared in the interviews but also to situate them within broader institutional and professional discourses. The integration of these diverse data allowed me to build a multi-dimensional portrayal of participants' academic identity construction, cross-validating the themes that emerged and revealing patterns that might not have been visible through interviews alone. This triangulated approach supported a richer, more holistic understanding of MCDS' identity work within and beyond the doctoral setting (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2015).

4.9.2 Member Checking

Another key strategy for enhancing the trustworthiness of this study was member checking, which involved seeking participant feedback on the preliminary findings and interpretations (Birt et al., 2016). After conducting a round of thematic analysis, selected excerpts, emergent themes, and interpretive summaries were shared with participants for validation. This process invited participants to reflect on how accurately the themes captured their experiences, and whether the meanings conveyed in the analysis aligned with their intended meanings.

In several cases, participants offered clarifications, additional insights, or pointed out nuances that had initially been overlooked. For instance, one participant emphasised that a quote initially coded under “institutional pressure” was more deeply connected to their internalised expectations of success, prompting a revision of the theme to more accurately reflect the structure-agency interplay. These dialogues ensured that the findings were not solely filtered through my interpretive lens but were also validated through the lived realities of the participants themselves (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Birt et al., 2016). Member checking thus functioned not only as a verification tool but also as a collaborative process that strengthened the ethical integrity and interpretive accuracy of the research.

4.9.3 Reflexivity

Throughout the research process, reflexivity was actively practiced to maintain transparency and self-awareness about my positionality, assumptions, and potential biases (Watt, 2007). As a researcher who shares similar cultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds with many of the participants, I recognised the dual role of being both an insider and an outsider. This positionality offered unique advantages in building rapport and understanding context-specific nuances, but also carried the risk of interpretive bias or over-familiarity (Berger, 2015).

To address this, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the study, documenting my emotional reactions, evolving assumptions, and key decision points in data collection and analysis. For example, after certain interviews, I recorded reflections on how my

academic trajectory might have subtly shaped the way I framed follow-up questions or interpreted participants' struggles. These reflexive notes served as a tool for critical self-examination, keeping me aware of the power dynamics inherent in the research relationship and the interpretive process (Watt, 2007; Berger, 2015).

Moreover, reflexivity was not limited to internal reflection—it was integrated into ongoing conversations with peers and academic supervisors who provided feedback on data interpretation, theme development, and ethical dilemmas. These dialogues further ensured that my analysis remained open, grounded, and responsive to alternative perspectives. In this way, reflexivity contributed significantly to the methodological transparency and analytical depth of the study.

In sum, the above-mentioned strategies ensured that the findings authentically reflected participants' voices and experiences, while also demonstrating analytical rigour and transparency. They were not simply post-hoc validations but were embedded throughout the research, fully reflecting the interpretivist commitment to constructing knowledge that is credible, context-sensitive, and co-produced (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

4.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity formed a central pillar of this qualitative research. Given the interpretivist nature of the study and its focus on participants' lived experiences, attention to ethical sensitivity, relational respect, and procedural transparency was essential (Cohen et al., 2018).

Prior to data collection, the research protocol underwent formal ethical review. It was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the Education University of Hong Kong (EduHK) (ethical approval number No.2023-2024-0129). The approved application included details on participant recruitment, data collection procedures, confidentiality safeguards, and mechanisms to address potential ethical risks. This formal approval ensured that the study adhered to institutional and international standards for research involving human subjects.

Upon receiving ethical clearance, participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, and each individual was approached with a comprehensive informed consent form (see Appendix 2). The consent document clearly explained the study's aims, the nature of participation, the voluntary basis of involvement, and the participant's right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. It also outlined any foreseeable risks, such as participants' emotional discomfort when discussing challenges. Efforts were taken to ensure participants' psychological and academic security.

In practice, informed consent was treated not as a one-off formality but as an ongoing ethical relationship (Jefford & Moore, 2008). Participants were encouraged to ask questions before, during, and after interviews. Verbal confirmation of consent was also obtained prior to each interview session, as the interviews were conducted online, often across different geographical and institutional settings.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all participants were assigned pseudonyms, and any identifying details—such as names of supervisors, institutions, or research topics—were either anonymised or excluded during transcription and analysis. Data were securely stored in password-protected digital folders accessible only to the researcher and the principal supervisor. Audio recordings, transcripts, notes, and supplementary materials were handled in accordance with the Data Protection Principles outlined by EduHK, with all digital files encrypted to prevent unauthorised access.

During interviews, extra care was taken when participants shared sensitive narratives involving institutional critiques, supervision challenges, or personal struggles. Quotations used in the findings were carefully selected to maintain participant dignity and anonymity (Jefford & Moore, 2008). In the process of member checking, participants were allowed to review any quotations attributed to them and to request revisions or withdrawal if they felt uncomfortable with how their words were interpreted or used.

After each interview, a brief debriefing session was conducted to reiterate the study's purpose and to thank participants for their time and insights. During these sessions, participants were informed of the next steps in data analysis and dissemination and were given contact information for follow-up inquiries or concerns. Several participants expressed interest in receiving a summary of findings upon completion, which will be shared with them.

Ethical practice extended beyond formal procedures to encompass relational ethics in building trust and fostering a safe environment for sharing experiences. For instance, during sensitive discussions about academic pressures, participants sometimes paused or displayed emotional strain. In these moments, interviews were slowed down, and participants were offered the option to skip questions, with follow-up discussions prioritising their comfort and well-being. These instances underscored that ethical considerations were not confined to institutional approval but were embedded in researcher-participant interactions and interpretive processes, ensuring that participants' rights and dignity were respected throughout the study.

4.11 Reflection and Conclusion

Conducting this research was a challenging but valuable learning process for me. One of the biggest difficulties I faced was recruiting a diverse group of participants from different universities and disciplines. Initially, I relied mainly on my personal networks, but this approach yielded only a few responses, and participants' disciplines were limited. To solve this, I later used snowball sampling, where existing participants recommended others. This strategy helped me reach a wider range of students and showed me the importance of being flexible during fieldwork.

Interviewing participants also had its challenges. Some students were hesitant to talk openly about sensitive topics like the supervisor-supervisee relationship. I learned to start conversations with less personal questions to build trust, and use gentle follow-up prompts to encourage further sharing. This approach allowed the interviews

to become more conversational as each session moved on, providing the comfort for participants to tell richer and more personal stories.

The analytic stage was another area where I had to adapt. Initially, I created numerous codes, which were too detailed for themes to emerge. I worked through this by reviewing codes many times, writing reflexive notes, and discussing my ideas with supervisors and peers. This helped me narrow down and connect themes, and I realised how important it was to let participants' voices stay strong in the findings instead of summarising too much.

Ethical considerations required careful attention throughout the study. Some interviews became emotional, prompting me to pause or shift topics to ensure participants' comfort. On several occasions, interviews extended well beyond the scheduled time (over four hours) as participants became deeply engaged in sharing their experiences. In these cases, I remained flexible and adjusted my plans accordingly. During the preparation of findings, I conducted member checking with participants to ensure their views were accurately represented while safeguarding their identities.

Looking back, these challenges strengthened my analytic capacity and resilience as a researcher. Adjusting recruitment strategies, improving interviewing style, and refining my analysis all helped me delve into the participants' academic journeys. It also reminded me that qualitative research is not a fixed and rigid outcome, but a process that changes as we learn from each other.

In conclusion, this chapter presents the research design, data collection, data analysis, and ethical measures of my study. I have also reflected on the main challenges and how I dealt with them. These experiences shaped the way I conducted this research and built the foundation for the following chapters. Next, I present the participants' stories and show how their academic identities developed over time in Hong Kong's complex HE environment.

Chapter 5: Before the Journey-Initial Motivations and Expectations for Pursuing a Doctoral Journey in Hong Kong

5.1 Introduction

Grounded in the integrated theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3, this study conceptualises the academic identity formation of MCDS in Hong Kong as a process-oriented and continuously evolving trajectory. This process is shaped by the interplay between multi-dimensional structural conditions, such as institutional policies, disciplinary cultures, and socio-political contexts, and individual reflexive agency, encompassing personal motivations, aspirations, emotions, and internal deliberations (Marginson, 2014, 2024). Academic identity is, therefore, not formed in a vacuum; it is deeply connected to students' temporal positioning, influenced by their past educational experiences, current engagements, and imagined academic futures (McAlpine et al., 2010).

To better capture the complexity and evolving nature of this identity formation process, the findings are presented in a temporal sequence, structured across three analytical phases: (1) Chapter 5: before the doctoral journey (initial motivations, intentions, and expectations); (2) Chapter 6: during the doctoral journey (academic challenges, structural constraints, and students' reflexive responses); and (3) Chapter 7: after the doctoral journey (four distinct nascent academic identity trajectory types that reflect participants' self-positioning through this process). Specifically, this chapter presents the findings related to the first phase, which occurs before the

doctoral journey. It explores participants’ initial motivations for pursuing doctoral studies in Hong Kong, their expectations of academic life, and how their past academic and personal experiences shaped these expectations. These early expectations form the foundation of students’ academic identity, influencing how they enter and begin to navigate the doctoral landscape. In doing so, this chapter addresses Research Sub-Question One: *“How do MCDS’ initial motivations and expectations for embarking on the doctoral journey in Hong Kong set the foundation for their academic identity?”*

To aid the reader’s understanding, the following narratives will refer to each participant using a pseudonym, followed by their identity trajectory type in parentheses (e.g., “Jason-Independent Explorer”; see **Table 5.1**). While the identity trajectory types will be discussed in detail in Chapter 7, their early introduction in Chapters 5 and 6 helps establish a clearer picture of each participant’s academic journey. This structure enables more meaningful comparisons across cases and lays the foundation for the typological analysis that follows.

Table 5.1 Participants’ Academic Identity Trajectory Types

Identity Trajectory Types	Participants
1. Independent Explorer	Jason, Lily, Bob
2. Anxious Learner	Wendy, Tina, Kelly, Jasper
3. Strategic Player	Mike, Jane, Emily, Rainie, David

5.2 The Pursuit of Internal Self-growth Versus External Recognition

Participants' primary motivations for pursuing doctoral studies generally revolve around their desire for internal "self-growth" and external credentials signifying "success". However, definitions and interpretations of "success" vary significantly among individuals. For some participants, such as Jason, Lily, and Bob, who all from the *Independent Explorer* type, success is closely tied to intellectual curiosity and knowledge exploration, reflecting more intrinsic motivations. Conversely, other participants, including Kelly-*Anxious Learner*, David-*Strategic Player*, and Jasper-*Anxious Learner*, associate "success" with external recognition and achievements within their professional fields. Thus, their motivations focus more explicitly on career advancement, professional status, and gaining credentials. In the following sections, I illustrate these differing perspectives by drawing on narratives from five selected participants: Jason-*Independent Explorer*, Lily-*Independent Explorer*, Bob-*Independent Explorer*, Wendy-*Anxious Learner*, and Rainie-*Strategic Player*.

5.2.1 Intellectual Curiosity and Knowledge Exploration as Intrinsic Motivation

Jason-Independent Explorer

Jason is a fifth-year PhD student in the social sciences (Education). He described his decision to pursue a PhD as rooted in long-standing internal struggles, confusion, and a deep desire to make sense of the world. Unlike peers who might approach the PhD

as a career step, Jason's narrative reveals how his decision to pursue research emerged gradually, to cope with his internal struggles since adolescence.

He described his earlier life as filled with constant confusion—about himself, about society, and about how to interpret the world. Despite choosing science in high school, he admitted that he lacked interest and struggled academically. He explained:

Even though I chose science subjects, I wasn't interested in them, and thus didn't perform well academically... I had always been a confused child who gradually became a confused young adult, and this confusion wasn't ordinary—it truly caused me distress.

Jason's confusion, as he narrated it, was not just academic but existential. The lack of intellectual frameworks and critical tools made him feel disoriented and emotionally distressed. For years, he sought guidance from external sources—family, peers, popular discourse—but found only contradictions and ambiguity. His longing for ontological stability persisted until graduate school, when a turning point occurred:

This confusion continued until my master's studies, when I took an introductory course in qualitative research methods. That course reshaped my thinking—it offered me a structured pathway to analyse and understand the world around me... It gave me a whole new perspective on reality.

Through learning to think critically and analytically, Jason not only found intellectual tools but also gained a new lens through which to understand life. His narrative traces a movement from confusion and helplessness toward clarity and agency (Archer,

2003; Marginson, 2014, 2024). He began to see academia not just as a career but as a way of living and thinking:

Academia provided me with a relatively reliable pathway to make sense of my life and society. It helped me not to believe in things without questioning... This was a very important realization and a key reason why I chose to continue the academic path.

Jason's narrative reveals that pursuing a PhD was, for him, an act of truth-seeking and self-construction. The meaning of his academic journey lies not in external validation or success, but in its capacity to help him organise a coherent understanding of self and society. His storytelling positions academia as a refuge from earlier uncertainty—a space where deep, unresolved questions could be productively explored.

Lily-Independent Explorer

A similar internal motivation can be found in participants like Lily, a recent PhD graduate in Social and Behavioural Sciences. Her narrative intertwined personal introspection with academic inquiry. While career development was part of her motivation, it was not the driving force. Instead, Lily used her doctoral research as a medium to explore unresolved questions about her adolescent experiences. Her research project on youth digital addiction was directly inspired by her personal history:

Actually, I wanted to explore myself—my research interests have always revolved around my own experiences. For instance, I was very addicted to using my phone during adolescence. Now, seeing many young people similarly glued

to their phones, I'm curious about why I managed to move forward toward my life goals, while some remain stuck and unable to progress. On the one hand, I wanted to understand myself better: why could I reach this stage in life despite such habits? On the other hand, I wanted to find ways to help young people who feel stuck in their phone usage. If I could turn this personal inquiry into a career, it would be ideal—allowing me to explore myself and build a profession at the same time. That's why I decided to pursue a PhD.

Lily's narrative reveals a clear moment of self-inquiry through academic research, where the boundary between researcher and participant becomes blurred. Her motivation was not only to investigate the research phenomenon (i.e., digital addiction) externally, but to understand how she, as a subject of that same experience, had progressed differently. In doing so, her research journey became a process of self-reflection and transformation, offering a space to reconstruct her personal narrative as part of an emerging academic identity (Marginson, 2014, 2024).

Bob-Independent Explorer

Another participant, Bob, a fourth-year PhD student in mathematics, also expressed motivations driven by an intrinsic desire to explore knowledge. His motivations aligned closely with the theoretical emphasis of his hard-pure discipline, as he sought to develop deeper critical thinking and ultimately make meaningful contributions to his field. His narrative reflected a similar internal intellectual motivation:

What I care about is understanding fundamental concepts more deeply and pushing the boundaries in my area... To me, doing a PhD isn't just about the

degree; it's about contributing something that feels real and meaningful within the field.

While Bob's story is more discipline-oriented, it still demonstrates reflexive agency (Archer, 1995, 2003; Marginson, 2014, 2024). His motivations reflect an internal desire to advance knowledge for its own sake—a commitment that Archer (1995, 2003) would frame as a reflexive project of self, where individuals pursue actions that align with their internal concerns and values, even when external rewards (e.g., career opportunities) are uncertain.

The narratives of Jason, Lily, and Bob (all from *Independent Explorer* type) reveal shared yet distinct patterns of intrinsic motivation for pursuing the doctoral journey. All three participants were originally driven not by external rewards or institutional pressures, but by deep, internal commitments to intellectual growth and meaning making. Their narratives show that academic identity formation begins before institutional structures shape the doctoral experience. Their initial motivations—whether deeply personal, like those of Jason and Lily, or seriously intellectual, like those of Bob—illustrate how MCDS enter the doctoral space as active agents already engaging in meaning-making (Marginson, 2014; 2024). As their journeys unfold within the intricate structure of Hong Kong's HE system, these reflexive-self projects must also adapt to, resist, or align with institutional norms, disciplinary expectations, and external pressures.

5.2.2 Career Advancement and Professional Credentials as External Motivation

In contrast to intrinsic motivations centred on intellectual exploration and knowledge development, other participants, such as *Wendy-Anxious Learner* and *Rainie-Strategic Player*, were primarily motivated by external factors, including career advancement and professional recognition. Although participants like Wendy also perceived external achievements as indicators of personal growth, their choices to pursue doctoral studies were marked by strategic planning and clearly defined professional goals.

Wendy-Anxious Learner

Wendy, a fourth-year PhD student in the social science field at A University, had spent seven years teaching at a local college in Mainland China before entering her doctoral programme. Her original plan was pragmatic: to enrol in a part-time EdD programme while maintaining her secure teaching position in the Mainland. This arrangement, she believed, would enable her to meet the increasing demands for research output in her institution without compromising her job stability.

My initial motivations were both practical and idealistic. Practically, having been a university lecturer for many years, I clearly sensed that the academic evaluation system had become increasingly demanding. At my previous position (lecturer), to achieve further career advancement, I needed to meet specific academic requirements, such as publishing in core Chinese journals (CSSCI) or international SSCI journals. At that time, both were very challenging for me. Although I was deeply interested in educational research and teaching, my academic background wasn't in education. I hadn't received systematic training

in educational research, nor did I have mentors who could guide me. I realised that strengthening my academic research ability was not only crucial for career advancement but also beneficial to my students, enabling me to improve my teaching effectiveness. Therefore, to further my professional career and to enhance my teaching, I chose to pursue a doctoral degree.

However, her doctoral journey quickly took a different path. The first turning point occurred when she decided to resign from her teaching position and transition from a part-time EdD to a full-time PhD. This bold move, although immersing her in the academic environment of Hong Kong, also meant letting go of the job security she had valued. The second turning point occurred when she changed supervisors halfway into her doctoral study, necessitating a shift in her research focus and the rebuilding of her support networks.

Wendy's story illustrates a motivation grounded primarily in career advancement and professional recognition, shaped by structural pressures within the Mainland's HE system. While her journey began as a strategic career move, the significant transitions she experienced along the way also brought deeper personal challenges and moments of self-reflection, gradually shaping her evolving academic identity.

Perhaps it was because my initial motivation for pursuing a doctorate was simply to obtain a degree for career promotion. When I actually entered the programme, I felt a huge gap between my expectations and reality. I realised my initial thinking was naïve — it was impossible for me to work while doing a doctorate. Perhaps because of these early expectations, I experienced a lot of friction with my previous supervisor during my doctoral studies.

Nevertheless, her initial pragmatic expectations also became a source of challenge. The mismatch between her early assumptions and the realities of full-time doctoral study, compounded by conflicts with her supervisor, contributed to a less smooth doctoral journey. Her experience highlights how motivations and expectations—when not recalibrated in response to structural demands—can create additional challenges in MCDS’ academic identity formation.

Rainie-Strategic Player

Rainie, now a fourth-year PhD student at C university, has been part of the university’s research community for six years; she has also transitioned from an MPhil to a doctoral programme. Her current interdisciplinary project explores “the effects of different environments in VR, comparing virtual environments with real-world landscapes.” she is jointly supervised by two professors, one in sociology and the other in electronic engineering.

Before arriving in Hong Kong, Rainie earned a master’s degree in design in the United States, followed by an undergraduate degree in the same field. While she valued the creative aspects of her studies, she often felt out of place. Her early schooling in Mainland China had cultivated a strong science-oriented mindset, and she found the subjective and interpretive nature of art and design increasingly unsatisfying.

After these two educational experiences, I realised I wasn’t very fond of the subjective, artistic aspects of my previous studies. Given my educational

background in mainland China—especially during my schooling from elementary to high school—I was always oriented toward science, and wasn't particularly interested in humanities or arts. I also recognised my thinking style was more logical and science-oriented. Thus, studying design during my undergraduate and master's years felt somewhat painful and confusing. After graduation, I didn't pursue a career directly related to design but instead joined a game company in a management-oriented role. This job didn't require me to code or handle technical tasks directly, but it did require an understanding of various game development processes and art design elements, such as modelling, animation, and rigging. However, I hoped to shift my career toward technology and development, and I soon felt inadequate because my technical and programming knowledge was limited. This prompted me to pursue further education.

This realisation marked a turning point in Rainie's career trajectory. Rather than continuing in purely creative roles, Rainie decided to re-skill, seeking a programme that could integrate her art background with technical competence. Her interdisciplinary PhD programme provided the perfect platform to bridge the gap between her artistic and technical knowledge while positioning her for future roles in her desired career pathway.

My current PhD programme is interdisciplinary, co-supervised by professors from both social sciences and engineering, which aligns closely with my interests and career goals. Pursuing a PhD allows me to build on my strengths and background while working toward my aspiration of securing my desired career.

Rainie’s initial motivation shows how professional career aspirations and perceived skill gaps can serve as strong external motivators for embarking on a doctoral study. Like Wendy-*Anxious Learner*, she entered her programme with a clearly defined goal—advancing her career by strategically building expertise.

Although Wendy-*Anxious Learner* and Rainie-*Strategic Player* entered their doctoral programmes from markedly different disciplinary and professional backgrounds, their narratives reveal strikingly similar patterns in how career advancement and professional positioning shaped their initial motivations. Both approached doctoral study strategically—Wendy to secure promotion within Mainland China’s increasingly performance-driven academia, and Rainie to bridge the skills gap limiting her progression in a creative-technical industry.

5.3 Pursuing a PhD amid Uncertainty and a Need to Escape

In contrast to the precise, goal-oriented motivations described above, some participants entered their doctoral programmes without a strong manifestation of either internal aspirations or external career goals. For participants such as Jasper-*Anxious Learner*, Tina-*Anxious Learner*, and Yuki-*Inspired Humanist*, the decision to pursue a PhD arose from unexpected opportunities or dissatisfaction with other available options, most notably limited job prospects. Many participants did not initially plan to pursue an academic career; instead, they were drawn by a supervisor’s invitation (Yuki-*Inspired Humanist*), the availability of a scholarship (Jasper-*Anxious Learner*), or uncertainty in the job market (Tina-*Anxious Learner*).

Yuki-Inspired Humanist

Yuki, a final-year PhD student in A university preparing for her thesis defense, exemplifies this trajectory. With a background in Chinese literature from a prestigious university in the Mainland, she found her path to doctoral research to have been shaped by a mix of chance, academic curiosity, and limited employment opportunities. She described this as “机缘巧合”—“a door that opened at the right moment.” A personal connection between her undergraduate institution and her current university created the opportunity: her prospective supervisor was seeking a candidate with both an undergraduate and postgraduate background in Chinese literature, and Yuki’s former supervisor recommended her. At the time, she had briefly considered a PhD. She had dismissed the idea due to a lack of suitable supervisors in Mainland China. Instead, she strongly desired to work or pursue professional certifications. The unsatisfying jobs she encountered, coupled with this timely recommendation, led her to accept the offer. Reflecting on the decision, Yuki described it as a turning point:

My current supervisor was recruiting students and specifically looking for someone with a background in Chinese literature at both undergraduate and master’s levels—I happened to match this perfectly. My master’s supervisor recommended me, and I’ve always been deeply grateful to my current supervisor for offering me this opportunity when I was feeling lost. It truly felt like ‘a door opened at the right moment’.....Looking back, this decision was undoubtedly the best choice I could have made, marking a significant turning point in my life. This experience didn’t just reshape my understanding; it was also a

comprehensive transformation of my mindset and approach to life. It's no exaggeration to say I underwent '脱胎换骨 (profound personal transformation)'.

While *Yuki-Inspired Humanist's* embarking the doctoral study lacked the deliberate, internally driven planning seen in participants like in *Independent Explorer* type (e.g., Jason, Lily, and Bob), it nonetheless set in motion significant personal and intellectual development. Her account illustrates how motivations that stem from uncertainty or contingency can, over time, evolve into a deep commitment, resulting in substantial gains in knowledge, perspective, and self-understanding. This suggests that even seemingly unplanned doctoral pathways can be reframed through reflexive agency, transforming initial ambiguity into purposeful engagement and identity growth (Marginson, 2014, 2024).

Jasper-Anxious Learner

Jasper—a fourth-year PhD student in Physical Therapy at D University—entered his programme without a strong initial motivation to pursue a doctorate. Having completed his undergraduate degree in prosthetics and orthotics, he disliked the field because of its physically demanding and messy nature. After an unfulfilling experience in an unrelated master's programme in the Mainland, he reevaluated his options and decided to pursue a PhD in physical therapy. His decision was shaped less by a clear academic vision than by a “*just try it*” attitude, while simultaneously driven by career uncertainty and the appeal of a stable PhD stipend in Hong Kong. At the

outset, Jasper admitted that he was unsure whether he belonged in academia, viewing the PhD primarily as an option to explore.

Honestly speaking, my master's programme wasn't very useful—I studied for half a year but felt I hadn't learned anything substantial. Everyone was saying the job market wasn't good at the time, and when I tried to find a job, I couldn't find any good positions. Feeling out of options, I thought about pursuing a PhD, even though I wasn't sure what exactly I wanted to study. So, with a mindset of 'just try it', I approached my current supervisor, whose research direction matched my undergraduate major. Previously, I disliked my undergraduate major because it was physically demanding and messy, involving materials like plaster every day. But after experiencing another field during my master's studies, I realised that my original major wasn't so bad after all. I simply hadn't had the chance to compare. Given my confusion and lack of alternatives at the time, I chose to pursue a PhD as a tentative attempt to move forward.

Compared to *Yuki-Inspired Humanist's* narrative, *Jasper-Anxious Learner's* narrative carries a more tentative and pragmatic tone. Unlike participants such as Jason, Lily, and Bob—all in *Independent Explorers' Type*, he did not frame his decision in terms of intrinsic intellectual curiosity or a strong desire for self-exploration. Instead, his choice reflected a critical reappraisal of his prior educational experiences, a need to escape an uncertain job market, and a calculated assessment of the financial and practical benefits offered by Hong Kong's PhD programmes. While initially instrumental, his decision nonetheless illustrates how doctoral study can function as a transitional phase—providing a structured environment in which uncertainty is

managed, opportunities are explored, and professional directions are gradually clarified.

Tina-Anxious Learner

Tina's pathway into her doctoral study was also shaped by a desire to leave behind an unsatisfying professional trajectory instead of a long-standing academic ambition.

After completing a master's degree in the UK, she spent three years working in a bank as a product manager—a job she undertook largely because it aligned with her economics and management background. In hindsight, she described this decision as “隨大流” (going with the flow), noting that while the job was stable, it was often devoid of real value creation, misaligning with her personality and professional aspirations. Advancement within the bank, she realised, would require excelling in marketing-oriented roles, something she felt she was neither suited to nor motivated by. The work left her feeling drained, leading her to reconsider her career direction and ultimately choose a PhD as an alternative path.

I studied economics and management, so going into banking felt like going with the flow. But in my role as a product manager, I often felt my work wasn't really creating value, and it was not what I had originally imagined. I assessed myself and realised that to advance in the bank's system, you had to go up through marketing roles, but my personality isn't like that. Even if I forced myself, it would be exhausting. So the nature of the job and I were not a good match, and that's why I chose to do a PhD.

Her decision to study in Hong Kong was influenced by both practical considerations and her academic background. Having been away from the academic environment for three years, she felt that many Mainland universities would place greater value on recent postgraduate applicants or those with strong connections with their former master's supervisors. Neither of these conditions applied to her. Given her UK master's degree and the travel restrictions during the pandemic, Hong Kong emerged as a natural choice: close to home, internationally oriented, and potentially offering opportunities to return to Mainland China in the future. As she put it:

I wasn't moving directly from my master's to a PhD—I had three years of work experience. I assumed that many universities in China would care more about continuity in study and your connection with the master's supervisor. Since completing my master's in the UK, I have viewed overseas and Hong Kong universities as my top choices. With the pandemic, I also wanted to be closer to home—maybe there'd be opportunities to go back.

Compared with *Yuki-Inspired Humanist* and *Jasper-Anxious Learner*, Tina's account combines elements of both dissatisfaction-driven change and pragmatic career repositioning. Like *Jasper-Anxious Learner*, she utilised her PhD as a means to exit a misaligned professional path; similarly, her choice was also shaped by timing, opportunity, and context rather than a pre-existing academic plan. Her narrative highlights how uncertainty—whether in the labour market, personal career fit, or future prospects—can create opportunities for doctoral study to serve as both an escape route and a platform for reimagining one's professional identity.

Taken together, these narratives reveal how the doctorate can function as a space of refuge and redirection for those confronting professional dissatisfaction, market instability, or stalled career trajectories. Unlike participants driven by clearly defined academic ambitions, *Yuki-Inspired Humanist*, *Jasper-Anxious Learner*, and *Tina-Anxious Learner* exercised what Archer (1995, 2003) terms *reflexive agency* in a more emergent form—responding to structural openings and constraints in the moment rather than following a pre-set plan.

5.4 Pursuing a PhD Based on Geographically Favourable Conditions

5.4.1 Hong Kong as a ‘Middle Ground’

Beyond the specific motivations and intentions driven by either an internal desire for self-growth or external, credential-oriented career considerations, many participants also highlighted the significance of additional context-related factors in shaping their initial intentions and expectations for starting a doctoral journey in Hong Kong.

Jane-Strategic Player

For many participants, Hong Kong’s geographical proximity to Mainland China and its cultural accessibility emerged as decisive external factors shaping their choice of Hong Kong as a doctoral destination. Among them, Jane’s account illustrates quite clearly how these advantages became critical during moments of geopolitical uncertainty. Jane, who applied for her PhD during the COVID-19 pandemic, was navigating a period when international mobility was fraught with instability. Having completed her master’s degree in the UK, she initially considered continuing her

studies overseas but was deterred by safety concerns and the high cost of largely self-funded programmes. Returning to Mainland China was also not her preferred choice for professional development.

It was during the pandemic, and the situation at that time was quite unstable. I felt that the environment in the UK wasn't very safe, and there was a lot of turmoil abroad. Another reason was that pursuing a PhD in the UK would mostly be self-funded. So, I thought about returning, but considering my professional development, the Mainland wasn't my first choice either. Hong Kong presented a balanced advantage, and it offered both professional and geographical benefits.

For Jane, Hong Kong offered a “best of both worlds” solution — combining academic opportunities, an English-medium learning environment, and a familiar cultural context. Its geographical proximity also allowed her to quickly and conveniently travel back to Mainland China when needed. This “emotional comfort,” as she described it, is equally important as her academic considerations in solidifying her choice.

The stories of other participants echoed and complemented Jane-*Strategic Player*'s. Tina-*Anxious Learner*, also a UK master's graduate, emphasised that Hong Kong's proximity was appealing after three years of full-time work outside academia; it provided a chance to return to research without severing ties to home (i.e., Mainland China). Rainie-*Strategic Player*, similarly, viewed Hong Kong as an ideal place to sustain her English academic writing skills while benefiting from a Western-style academic environment that she perceived as more egalitarian and less bureaucratic

than that in the Mainland. For Lily-*Independent Explorer*, who had completed all her previous degrees in Mainland China, Hong Kong represented a “middle ground” — offering more academic autonomy than she had experienced at home, while still maintaining cultural familiarity and family closeness.

Together, these narratives reveal how Hong Kong’s location functions as both a structural advantage and an emotional anchor. For participants like Jane-*Strategic Player*, the decision was shaped by global uncertainties, pandemic-era travel restrictions, and the interplay between career ambitions and personal well-being. For others, the city’s unique combination of Chinese cultural familiarity, English-medium education, and ease of mobility made it a strategically ideal space to pursue doctoral studies — one that bridges the local and the global, allowing for varying degrees of continuity with their previous academic and personal lives.

5.4.2 Financial Stability and Stipend Attractiveness

David-Strategic Player

For David, a fourth-year PhD student in Bioscience Medicinal Engineering (an interdisciplinary field bridging bioscience and engineering), the availability of Hong Kong’s doctoral scholarship was a decisive factor for him to pursue a PhD in Hong Kong. Having previously worked in a Mainland hospital, he knew that pursuing research at work would mean squeezing professional training into his spare time, without access to structured mentorship in fundamental research methods. For him, the stable stipend offered in Hong Kong reframed the PhD as a “unique academic job”

— a rare chance to focus entirely on research training without the burden of financial anxiety.

The scholarship provides enough for your living expenses, so you can see it as a job specifically for research training. If I had continued working in the hospital, any research training would have had to be done in my spare time, and I don't believe anyone would have been able to provide me with professional guidance on how to conduct research, especially in terms of basic research methodology. Also, since my PhD started during the pandemic, studying in Hong Kong gave me a breathing space. Unlike the Mainland, where lockdowns were frequent, I didn't have to worry about that here in Hong Kong during the pandemic...Overall, the PhD programme gave me a period of freedom — a chance to focus on research in a more open and supportive environment.

Compared to the demands and constraints of his clinical job, the Hong Kong PhD stipend offered David not just financial stability, but also academic freedom and the psychological space to immerse himself in learning and research. This combination, he reflected, was a “significantly better opportunity”, one he could not afford to miss.

Georgia-Inspired Humanist

Georgia, a fourth-year PhD student in business, also recognised the scholarship as a significant decision-making factor, while professional ambition and personal circumstances also shaped her decision. Before embarking on her doctoral journey, she had worked in a company for several years, earning a competitive salary but feeling limited in intellectual growth. At the same time, her boyfriend had applied for a doctoral programme in Hong Kong and received an offer. The possibility of

studying in the same city provided both emotional support and practical convenience, tipping the decision in favour of Hong Kong over other destinations. The financial package from the Hong Kong PhD Fellowship Scheme (HKPFS) then sealed her decision.

From an investment perspective, I heard that the scholarship provides around 20,000 HKD per month. After weighing my options, I realised that pursuing this degree wasn't a loss at all. Since I wouldn't need to rely on my family for financial support, and if I lived on campus and maintained a relatively simple lifestyle, I could even save a decent amount of money. It felt like a win-win — I could immerse myself in research, build my academic credentials, and still remain financially independent.

For *Georgia-Inspired Humanist*, the decision to study in Hong Kong emerged at the intersection of career calculation, relational considerations, and structural incentives. The stipend was not just a financial lifeline; it was a strategic enabler that allowed her to commit to research full-time, travel for conferences, and maintain independence from family support.

Jasper-*Anxious Learner*, in a more pragmatic tone, viewed the stipend as a financial cushion that compared favourably to entry-level salaries in Mainland China, even after accounting for Hong Kong's high living costs. According to Jasper:

The stipend here is like a salary — higher than many first jobs in the Mainland — and you can still save a bit if you live modestly.

Collectively, these narratives highlight how Hong Kong's funding system provides more than just basic financial support. It operates as a structural enabler of doctoral study, reducing participants' economic stress, creating space for academic risk-taking, and signalling institutional recognition of students' potential. For participants like *David-Strategic Player*, *Georgia-Inspired Humanist*, and *Jasper-Anxious Learner*, the scholarship was both a material resource and a form of symbolic capital, reinforcing their confidence in pursuing doctoral study in Hong Kong and shaping their early academic identity under conditions of relative financial security (Bourdieu, 1989).

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter examined the diverse and multilayered intentions and motivations of MCDS to pursue their doctorates in Hong Kong. Across participants' narratives—from *Jason-Independent Explorer*'s existential search for ontological security to *David-Strategic Player*'s financially and relationally informed calculation—the first step of academic identity formation is sowed in a tangle of initial motivations, intentions, expectations, and prior experiences. These beginnings seem to function as early identity projects that participants carry into their doctoral programmes (McApline, et al., 2010). For Jason and Lily both from *Independent Explorer* type, persistent personal questions (e.g., confusion, self-exploration) crystallised into research agendas; for Bob-*Independent Explorer*, an inclination for abstract reasoning set the tone for a discipline-centred scholarly self; for Wendy-*Anxious Learner* and Rainie-*Strategic Player*, professionally oriented goals (e.g., promotion; technical

upskilling) were initially paramount; for Jane-*Strategic Player*, Tina-*Anxious Learner*, Georgia-*Inspired Humanist*, David-*Strategic Player*, and Jasper-*Anxious Learner*, favourable structural conditions (proximity, language regime, stipend, funding) made specific identity projects feasible. In each case, the “before” is already identity work: a narrative that connects individual past, present, and future (Archer, 2003; McAlpine et al., 2010, 2013).

Viewed through the integrated theoretical lens, these early trajectories reflect the interaction between *structural conditions*—including Hong Kong’s geopolitical proximity, institutional cultures, and funding structures—and *reflexive agency*, as participants evaluated their personal histories, aspirations, and resources (Archer, 2003; Marginson, 2014, 2024). This phase marks the initial negotiation between their emerging academic self as future researchers and the wider academic structures they were entering, laying the foundation for their further navigation of the opportunities, constraints, and identity shifts throughout their doctoral journey.

Overall, the findings suggest participants’ initial intentions and motivations significantly shape their early academic identity (McAlpine et al., 2010, 2023), influencing their subsequent navigation of Hong Kong’s complex academic landscape. The following chapter explores the interplay between the participants’ initial motivations and structural conditions, and their personal responses in the ongoing development of their emerging academic identities during their doctoral journey.

Chapter 6: MCDS Navigating the Hong Kong Higher Education Context

6.1 Introduction

While all participants began their PhD journeys with hope, purpose, or intellectual curiosity, many encountered a range of complex challenges upon entering the Hong Kong HE system. These difficulties often stemmed from structural differences between the academic environments of Mainland China and Hong Kong—such as variations in supervision styles, language practices, and institutional expectations and policies. In response to these structural differences and amid the realities, participants also experienced significant psychological burdens, including emotional exhaustion, self-doubt, and a sense of academic illegitimacy as they adjusted to unfamiliar norms. In response to these challenges, participants employed a variety of coping strategies, reflecting their exercise of agency—whether through adaptation, negotiation, or subtle resistance. Their emerging academic identities, therefore, were not passively shaped by external forces but developed through a continuous and dynamic interplay between structural constraints and internal processes of meaning-making.

This chapter presents the key findings in addressing Research Sub-question Two:

“How do MCDS respond to the structural challenges and opportunities presented by the Hong Kong HE context during their doctoral journey?” It is organised into two parts: 6.2 Structural Challenges in Multidimensional Contexts and 6.3 Enactment of Reflexive Agency through Internal Dialogue.

6.2 Structural Challenges in Multidimensional Contexts

As MCDS transition into Hong Kong’s HE system, they encounter a range of structural challenges embedded across multiple levels. These challenges are not isolated but interconnected, spanning from macro-level sociocultural expectations and language norms to institutional policies, departmental cultures, and interpersonal dynamics. This section examines how such structural forces—often taken for granted within the local academic environment—present complex and, at times, conflicting pressures for MCDS. By unpacking these challenges across the supra-societal, institutional, departmental, and interpersonal levels, this section highlights how structural conditions shape, constrain, and sometimes complicate the early academic identity formation of MCDS in Hong Kong’s complex HE context in an age of supercomplexity.

6.2.1 Supra-societal Level: Language and Communication Barriers

Upon arriving, many participants faced initial language challenges in both English and Cantonese. Participants, such as *Emily-Strategic Player*, *Jasper-Anxious Learner*, and *Yuki-Inspired Humanist*, who had non-English educational backgrounds prior to coming to Hong Kong, encountered language-related challenges. These challenges were not just about language fluency, but also about mastering disciplinary language, delivering confident academic presentations, and interacting with supervisors and peers both locally and globally.

Emily-Strategic Player

Emily is a fourth-year PhD student at C University. She completed her undergraduate and master's studies in Mainland China. She chose to pursue a PhD in Hong Kong for pragmatic reasons, such as financial stability, professional opportunities, and proximity to her hometown and her partner. She also viewed the PhD as a temporary escape from work pressures and an opportunity to explore her identity. Emily initially struggled with Hong Kong's dual-linguistic environment, where English predominates in formal academic contexts and Cantonese is used in everyday and local research settings. These challenges emerged most notably in research presentations and discussions with local peers, where her confidence in both languages was tested.

In seminars, I could understand the slides, but catching everything the professor said in English was hard. With local classmates, Cantonese sometimes made me feel like an outsider—I couldn't always join in naturally.

For Emily, language barriers were not just a communication hurdle; they shaped her sense of belonging and her early positioning within Hong Kong's academic community.

Jasper-Anxious Learner

Jasper, also from C University and in his fourth year as a PhD in Physical Therapy on adolescent idiopathic scoliosis, occupied a different disciplinary and linguistic starting point. After earning a bachelor's degree in prosthetics and orthotics and an unfulfilling master's degree in Health Sciences & Management, he returned to

rehabilitation science by pursuing a PhD, motivated by career uncertainty and the appeal of a stable stipend. His early days were also marked by linguistic disorientation:

My supervisor speaks English in group meetings and mixes English with Cantonese in one-on-one meetings. I'm not fluent in either, so most of the time I was lost... My research participants were also local Hong Kong students, and communicating often felt like we were speaking entirely different languages... What's worse is that in my fieldwork, most of my participants are Hong Kong locals, who wish to communicate in their first language (Cantonese).

For Jasper, the linguistic structure of Hong Kong's academic environment posed challenges on multiple fronts. In supervision, switching between English and Cantonese left him feeling excluded from nuanced academic discussions, making it harder to follow theoretical debates or methodological critiques. In fieldwork, participants' preference for Cantonese created a subtle yet persistent barrier—not only in basic comprehension, but in interpreting culturally embedded expressions, tones, and implicit meanings essential for qualitative research. These difficulties limited his ability to develop rapport, a key factor in gathering rich and authentic data in the doctoral research.

Yuki-Inspired Humanist

Yuki, with a background in Chinese language and literature from Mainland China, faced a similar challenge. Familiar with only exam-oriented English given her

previous experience, she needed to acquire disciplinary English for writing, presenting, and scholarly discussion.

I completed both my undergraduate and master's degrees in Mainland China, majoring in Chinese language and literature. So, after the college entrance exam, I hardly used English at all—only starting to study it again during my postgraduate entrance exam preparation. But that was mostly exam-oriented English, which is very different from the kind of English used in academic settings. When I came to Hong Kong, the biggest challenge at first was adapting to English. Although my supervisor is also from the Mainland, the academic environment, and formal occasions here are primarily conducted in English. He always holds our meetings in English, and it took me two full years to adjust. I once even worried that my English skills might affect my thesis defense. At the beginning, the language barrier made me feel really out of place. To adapt to this new environment, I spent a year and a half practicing English speaking and listening.

Her account shows how language challenges extend beyond fluency to encompass disciplinary literacy and self-presentation, both of which require prolonged effort to master.

Jane-Strategic Player

Distinct from the above participants, Jane, from Guangdong Province, entered her PhD with fluency in Cantonese but still experienced language as a site of negotiation. She deliberately chose to communicate with her local supervisor in English rather than their shared mother tongue (Cantonese):

At the beginning, my supervisor spoke to me in Cantonese, which is our shared mother tongue. Through Cantonese, we could naturally pick up on each other's emotions. But when we switched to English—which isn't my strong suit, and also not my supervisor's first language—those emotional cues became harder to convey. During my first year, I was quite anxious, especially because I hadn't found a clear research topic yet. I felt very nervous before every meeting with him. So I intentionally speak English with him during the meeting, because it allowed me to distance myself emotionally—I couldn't fully sense his tone or mood, which helped reduce the pressure I felt from his emotional responses.

Jane's decision reframes language from being purely a *barrier* to a strategic resource. By shifting to English, she used the structural dominance of the language to manage emotional intensity in supervision, exercising reflexive agency in navigating power and relational dynamics (Archer, 1995, 2003; Marginson, 2014, 2024).

Taken together, these narratives show that language in Hong Kong's HE context functions as a supra-societal structural condition, shaped by the city's post-colonial legacy and its internationalisation policies (Jung, 2009). English dominates formal academic life, while Cantonese is used in everyday and local interactions. For MCDS, these linguistic dynamics create varied constraints—from the slow acquisition of disciplinary discourse (*Yuki-Inspired Humanist*) to compounded bilingual inadequacy (*Jasper-Anxious Learner*), to the strategic use of language for emotional regulation (*Jane-Strategic Player*), and to the professional refinement of academic voice (*Emily-Strategic Player*). Viewed through the integrated theoretical lens, these cases illustrate

how linguistic structures and doctoral students' reflexive agency are intertwined from the very outset of their academic identity formation (Marginson, 2014, 2024).

6.2.2 Institutional Level: Policies and Bureaucratic Friction

During their academic journeys in Hong Kong, MCDS not only have to adapt to the linguistic dynamics but also need to fit into the academic norms and institutional policies in this new academic environment. Participants reported various academic challenges associated with institutional policies and bureaucratic arrangements, such as early research topic confirmation and rigid research progress management. These challenges also stem from the structural and contextual differences between HE systems in Mainland China and Hong Kong.

6.2.2.1 Early Research Topic Confirmation

Among the structural challenges that shaped participants' early sense of becoming academics, the most frequently reported was the pressure to confirm a research topic within the first semester. At C University, all PhD students were required to submit a full research proposal—including the intended topic, methodology, and three-year plan—within four months of enrolment. While intended to fast-track research progress, this policy placed strain on those entering without a well-developed topic or with limited prior research experience.

Kelly-Anxious Learner

Kelly, now in the final year of her PhD at C University, completed both her bachelor's and master's degrees in Mainland China before deciding to pursue doctoral

study in Hong Kong. Aware of the policy before arrival, she had attempted to alleviate the pressure by preparing a research proposal in advance and confirming the topic with her supervisor before entering the programme. However, shortly after enrolment, she was told the necessary resources for that project were unavailable, forcing her into researching an entirely new field:

Before I started, I had already discussed my topic with my supervisor, and we had agreed on it. However, after I enrolled, he informed me that there were no resources available for that topic and asked me to switch... so I had to change to a completely new field.

The sudden shift erased Kelly's early preparation, compressing an already tight timeline for adjustment. Rather than building on familiar ground, she had to navigate the disorientation of entering a new field under severe time pressure—transforming what was meant to be a smooth start into an abrupt intellectual reorientation. This case illustrates how structural requirements, when combined with resource constraints beyond a student's control, can destabilise even those who are psychologically prepared.

Jane-Strategic Player

For Jane, similarly, the policy's pressure was compounded by what she described as her supervisor's "hands-off" mentoring style. Having experienced highly structured supervision in her UK master's degree, she was unsettled by the lack of detailed direction:

Our university requires us to finalise the proposal in the first semester. But my supervisor didn't provide me with a clear direction... Under the pressure to submit on time, I felt really lost.

For Jane, the policy amplified the impact of supervisory style on early academic adjustment. The combination of tight institutional deadlines and limited proposal guidance forced her to navigate the initial research phase with uncertainty, which challenged her confidence and sense of belonging within the academic community.

Jasper-Anxious Learner

Jasper's experience was even more acute. Entering the PhD programme without prior research experience, he quickly fell behind peers who seemed to have determined their thesis topics with ease. The policy's time constraints intensified his self-doubt and triggered imposter syndrome:

The first three months were incredibly overwhelming... Everyone around me seemed to quickly figure out their research direction, but I was still struggling to even understand how things worked. Sometimes I even felt like my supervisor regretted accepting me.

For *Jasper-Anxious Learner*, the policy's compressed timeline intensified existing insecurities, triggering imposter syndrome and reinforcing perceptions of inadequacy. Unlike *Kelly-Anxious Learner*, who had to pivot her direction mid-preparation, or *Jane-Strategic Player*, who struggled with supervisory distance, Jasper's challenge lay in bridging a disciplinary gap while racing against institutional deadlines and struggling for intellectual competence.

These cases illustrate how a supra-societal structural requirement—rooted in institutional policy—intersects with individual preparedness, prior research experience, and supervisory style to shape the first step of academic identity formation (McApline et al., 2010, 2013). For competent or well-prepared students, the policy might encourage efficiency; for those still building disciplinary competence, it risks reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and limiting space for exploratory thinking. From an integrated theoretical lens, this policy operates as a supra-societal and institutional levels that compresses time, privileges certain forms of capital, and requires students to mobilise reflexive strategies—otherwise they risk early disengagement from their academic trajectory (Archer, 1995, 2003).

6.2.2.2 Rigid Research Progress Management

Apart from participants from C university, other participants also reported challenges related to gaining institutional confirmation to pursue the doctoral research topic.

Jason--Independent Explorer

Jason described the period before his “confirmation day” as one of the darkest and most frustrating times of his doctoral journey.

It was around January 2022, right before my proposal defense. I felt completely unprepared. I was struggling with the theoretical framework—I just couldn’t get it right. I kept revising it, but it never reached a point where I felt satisfied. At the same time, there was a COVID outbreak, and my health took a serious hit. My relationship with my dad wasn’t good either, and my parents didn’t understand or support me. I really felt like I couldn’t take it anymore.

So I went off on my own to focus on writing my proposal. When the school emailed me to confirm my defense date, I didn't even reply. I was mentally drained. In the end, my supervisor reached out. Eventually, I postponed my submission and delayed my confirmation. I just didn't want to let the school's rigid deadlines compromise my work.

Jason's experience demonstrates that the university policy regarding submitting thesis proposals was supposed to stimulate PhD students to complete their research on time. However, this kind of management policy may, in turn, lower some students' research quality if they rush to meet the deadline without a solid exploration of the topic. In Jason's case, he exercised his agency by resisting the structural policy, as he did not want to lower the quality of his research to meet the rigid university timeline (Archer, 1995, 2013). With his insistence, he eventually wins confirmation of a successful thesis proposal and gains recognition from other professors in his department. As he further described:

In the end, my proposal defense went really well—it was highly recognised by many professors. That experience reaffirmed for me that I will always prioritise quality. I also realised Hong Kong universities have some flexibility. Even though I missed the deadline, once I explained the situation, it wasn't a big issue.

By delaying, Jason not only protected the quality of his research but also learned how to navigate institutional policies on his own terms, which helped stabilise his academic trajectory.

Yuki-Inspired Humanist

Other participants, like Yuki, who is from the same university as Jason, hold a more positive attitude towards the university's policy of submitting thesis proposals during the doctoral journey. She views thesis topic confirmation as a significant event that shapes her early identification as a researcher. She explained,

When I attend conferences and engage with other scholars, I feel noticeably more confident if I've already completed my thesis confirmation. It allows me to present my research direction in a clear and concrete way, rather than giving a vague or general description. So for me, the thesis confirmation is an important milestone in establishing my identity as an early-career researcher.

Yuki's narrative contrasts with Jason's. For her, the structured timeline provided purpose and legitimacy, enabling her to articulate her academic interest effectively in professional settings.

From the above narratives, institutional policies evidently play a critical role in either supporting or hindering participants' research development (Henkel, 2000), depending mainly on how individuals reflexively respond to these policies (Archer, 1995, 2003). Therefore, individual agency significantly influences participants' perspectives and how they navigate institutional expectations and constraints. At the same time, Hong Kong universities generally maintain autonomy in formulating their own policies and initiatives (Ruan, 2014); these policies still offer some flexibility and room for MCDS to negotiate their academic identities strategically.

6.2.3 Departmental Level: Navigating Structural Constraints

In addition to institutional policies related to thesis confirmation and progress management in the early stages of the doctoral journey, participants also reported a range of structural constraints that directly or indirectly influenced their academic identity formation. These include interdisciplinary tensions, prolonged ethical approval in specific fields, and rigid academic expectations in structured disciplines, as well as discrepancies between departmental and university-level requirements for doctoral graduation timelines. The contradictions between institutional and disciplinary (departmental) structures further contributed to uncertainty—and, in some cases, unexpected flexibility—for MCDS as they navigated their doctoral journeys in Hong Kong.

6.2.3.1 Interdisciplinary Contradictions

Rainie-Strategic Player

Rainie, enrolled in an interdisciplinary field, has two supervisors from two distinct fields (computer science and social science). This interdisciplinary supervision, on the one hand, offered her opportunities to draw on resources and knowledge from both fields; it also led to challenges in balancing research expectations (theoretical and epistemological) and priorities between these two fields, as well as the distinctive styles of her two supervisors.

My two supervisors' styles are so different. One from the social sciences tends to be more gentle and casual, while the other, from engineering, is much more

formal and strict...When I conduct my research, I have to engage with both disciplinary norms. For example, I might draw on a sociological theory to provide direction or a particular analytical lens. But I don't go deep into the theoretical debates of the social sciences. Instead, I use that perspective to guide the application of engineering tools and methods to further explore or solve the problem.

To be honest, I went through a long period of struggle and confusion. I was reading literature from both disciplines, but their writing conventions, preferred terminology, and research paradigms were completely different. Eventually, I realised that my overall research orientation aligns more closely with the engineering paradigm, which has always been my ideal path from the beginning.

Rainie's account reveals how interdisciplinary dissonance operates simultaneously at epistemological, ontological, and professional levels. These tensions are embedded in the structural design of her programme and in the contrasting supervisory styles she encounters. Initially, she experienced a prolonged period of confusion, caught between the competing research paradigms of two fields. Over time, she exercised reflexive agency by strategically positioning herself more firmly within engineering, treating social theory as a supplemental lens rather than a primary anchor of identity (Marginson, 2014, 2024). This selective disciplinary alignment allowed her to progress with greater clarity and confidence, though it also meant engaging less deeply with theoretical debates in the social sciences. In identity-trajectory terms, she moved from a liminal "in-between" stage toward a more defined scholarly self, more

able to move across fields while maintaining a clear disciplinary commitment (Marginson, 2014, 2024).

David-Strategic Player

Similar to *Rainie-Strategic Player*, David also encountered difficulties brought by interdisciplinary research, where he struggled to integrate clinical knowledge with bioscience and engineering, making his research more complex.

Our interdisciplinarity isn't just 'you do your part and I do mine.' You must sit down and seriously study the other discipline. I'll be lucky if I can graduate smoothly.

For David, interdisciplinarity involves far more than cross-field collaboration; it demands deep immersion in multiple disciplinary worlds. He must master both the technical skills and tacit logics of each domain. This dual apprenticeship reflects the structural demands inherent in his PhD programme. Besides, he also must meet the lab's publication expectations, methodological standards, and assessment criteria.

Both *Rainie-Strategic Player* and *David-Strategic Player*'s experiences highlight the inherent complexities and contradictions that doctoral students encounter when navigating interdisciplinary research within institutional and departmental structures. These structural tensions, exemplified through divergent disciplinary expectations, distinct supervisory styles, and varying research paradigms, significantly shape their academic identity. Although interdisciplinary research provides opportunities for broadening intellectual horizons, the necessity of deeply engaging with multiple fields

creates substantial identity struggles and confusion. Ultimately, students tend to align more closely with the disciplinary identities resonating most strongly with their academic aspirations. This illustrates the intricate interplay between institutional constraints and individual agency in doctoral students' academic identity development (Archer, 1995, 2003).

6.2.3.2 Institutional and Departmental Contradictions

Mike-Strategic Player

Distinct from Rainie-*Strategic Player* and David-*Strategic Player*, Mike is a fourth-year doctoral student in the engineering field at A university. He encountered severe academic performance pressure in his peer group, as his supervisor implemented an unspoken academic norm requiring all his PhD students to publish at least three journal articles before graduation. As Mike described,

In our group, it's an unspoken rule—three papers before you can defend. Officially, the university lets you choose between a traditional 70,000-word thesis or a thesis-by-publication (three interconnected journal articles) pathway. But in practice, my supervisor won't approve the thesis if we don't publish. I had one publication before joining the programme, but he said it didn't count. So I still have to publish three more. The pressure is intense... Still, I understand—it's the disciplinary norm in computer engineering. Without this standard, we'd struggle in the later job hunting phase. The market is too competitive, especially in Mainland China and Hong Kong.

While the university offers flexibility, the supervisor's self-initiated research group culture, known as "shimen" (师门) (Dai & Elliot, 2023), can impose a more rigid training standard. In Mike's case, the supervisor has transformed an optional pathway (i.e., thesis *or* publication) into a mandatory one (i.e., thesis *and* publication). This structural contradiction increases his workload and pressure, which he has rationalised as a career necessity within the competitive engineering job market. Mike's narrative illustrates how students sometimes internalise and reproduce disciplinary structures, even when these exceed official institutional requirements.

Participants like *Tina-Anxious Learner* and *Georgia-Inspired Humanist*, who are from the Business Department at B university, also faced a contradictory policy between their university and department. However, their experiences are more positive towards this dynamic.

Tina-Anxious Learner

Publishing in our field is very difficult. Most PhD students need five years to finish their degree. By the time they graduate, having even one paper—whether it is still under review or not yet published—is already a big achievement. Some employers actually prefer to have their paper under reviewed rather than already published. Because, If the paper is still under-review, the author affiliation can be changed to the new institution instead.

Here, the department's tacit recognition of publishing difficulty translates into more realistic expectations, reducing pressure and allowing students to time their outputs strategically for career benefit.

At our university, the official PhD duration is usually three or four years. This policy directly affects how long we can receive a salary. If a student doesn't graduate within the standard timeframe, the university stops paying their salary. On top of that, the student has to pay an extension fee. But in our department, this rule doesn't really apply. That's because producing research results in our field usually takes longer. So there's an unspoken rule in our department that PhD students can extend their studies to five years. They can still receive their salary and don't need to pay the extension fee...I think this is a very important form of policy support for us. It also shows that in Hong Kong, policies can be flexible and take disciplinary differences into account. (*Georgia-Inspired Humanist*)

In *Georgia-Inspired Humanist's* and *Tina-Anxious Learner's* case, the policy misalignment between their university and department resulted in advantageous flexibility rather than barriers. Their experiences illustrate how disciplinary-specific practices within departments can mitigate broader institutional constraints, ultimately benefiting the academic progression and career planning of doctoral students. This departmental autonomy enabled them to navigate structural contradictions effectively, fostering an academic environment that was conducive to both academic productivity and professional development. Thus, their narratives underscore that while institutional policies may present challenges, context-specific departmental adjustments can effectively accommodate diverse disciplinary requirements, significantly influencing the academic identities and experiences of doctoral students.

The above cases illustrate that doctoral academic identity formation is shaped not only by supra-societal and institutional structures but also by departmental norms and the research group cultures within them. Structural policies at these different levels may not always align, creating contradictions that students must navigate. When confronted with such policy tensions, students respond strategically by exercising their reflexive agency (Archer, 1995). Where departments impose stricter norms than official guidelines (as in Mike-*Strategic Player's* case), students may adopt strategic compliance grounded in career pragmatism. Where departments loosen or adapt policies (as in Tina-*Anxious Learner's* and Georgia--*Inspired Humanist's* cases), students gain temporal and financial flexibility, enabling more deliberate scholarly development. In both scenarios, departmental autonomy plays a decisive role in how students negotiate structural contradictions and position themselves within their academic trajectories (Henkel, 2000).

6.2.4 Interpersonal Level: Mentorship-Related Issues

Apart from these structural differences across supra-societal, institutional, and departmental levels, some participants also face challenges when interacting with their supervisors, whom they believe play a significant role in shaping their early academic identity. As an international educational hub, Hong Kong attracts academics from diverse sociocultural and academic backgrounds (Bray & Koo, 2004). These academics also bring various academic cultures and habits to enrich the Hong Kong academia. In this study, participants are from four different universities and research

diverse disciplines (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Many of them reported experiencing a dynamic supervision style (e.g., “hands-off” and “familial” styles).

6.2.4.1 Hands-off Facilitator Style: Autonomy Versus Isolation

Many participants experienced a supervision style characterising minimal intervention, with an emphasis on independent research and self-direction. While some appreciated the freedom and autonomy (e.g., Jason, Lily, and Bob-all from *Independent Explorer* Type), others felt lost and unsupported (e.g., Kelly-*Anxious Learner*, Mike-*Strategic Player*, and Emily-*Strategic Player*), especially in the early stages.

Jason-Independent Explorer

Jason works in the social sciences under a supervisor known for subtle and indirect mentoring. From the beginning, his supervisor gave him complete freedom to choose and refine his research topic. Jason valued the absence of top-down control and found their discussions intellectually stimulating.

My supervisor never tells me directly what to do. Instead, he uses conversation to guide me toward my own conclusions. I can sense he has a framework in mind, but he lets me reach it myself. Neither of us likes strict deadlines, which gives me time to think deeply. The downside is that my publication record is low, but I don't regret it. I prefer thorough exploration over rushing to publish.....He also never asserts his authority. For example, I replaced one of his theoretical frameworks with another, and he didn't mind. We sometimes go months without talking, but when I send him something, his feedback is immediate and sharp. There's a

strong trust between us.

Jason's experience of mentorship reflects a highly empowering and rare supervisor-supervisee relationship marked by inspiration, intellectual freedom, open-mindedness, and deep mutual trust. His supervisor's indirect guidance, tolerance of intellectual independence, and flexible communication style significantly shaped Jason's doctoral journey, fostering profound intellectual autonomy and personal satisfaction. Despite acknowledging potential downsides (such as reduced publication output), Jason prioritises depth, integrity, and meaningful academic exploration over productivity. This mentorship dynamic illustrates how supervisors can profoundly impact students by promoting a balanced approach that combines intellectual rigor with emotional reassurance and independent academic identity formation.

Lily-Independent Explorer

Like Jason, Lily's supervisor also adopted a hands-off supervision style. At first, Lily struggled with this approach, as her supervisor's heavy administrative workload—being an Associate Dean—left Lily to make most research decisions on her own. Over time, however, she began to see this absence as an opportunity to cultivate her research independence. While hands-off in terms of developing research, her supervisor provided timely support with logistics and strategic decisions, though he rarely offered substantive feedback on her research work.

My supervisor is extremely busy. Meetings have to be booked down to the exact minute, and sometimes they're delayed because he's coming straight from

another meeting. He doesn't usually give detailed academic feedback but offers strategic advice—like telling me whether a topic is realistic in my context. At first, I wanted to do an intervention study. He said it might not be wise because it's resource-heavy and the results can be unpredictable, but he still let me pursue it when I explained my reasons. Administratively, he's very efficient—paperwork, approvals, department coordination—he handles all that quickly. But academically, I've had to rely on myself.

For Lily, the supervisor's limited engagement in supervising details of her research was counterbalanced by his efficiency in administrative facilitation, which ensured her work to progress smoothly without institutional blocks. While the lack of academic mentoring required her to self-teach more than she expected, it ultimately strengthened her ability to make independent decisions and defend them—a skill she now sees as essential for her future academic career.

Kelly-Anxious Learner

Kelly experienced more negative feelings like isolation, confusion, and even lost when facing the supervisor's "hands-off" style, especially in her initial doctoral journey. Kelly described that she stays at a distance from her supervisor, as her supervisor has to supervise about ten PhD students at a time, in addition to being the head of the department, leaving him with minimal time for providing individual guidance. Therefore, she relied on an assistant professor outside her supervisory team for substantive feedback.

He prefers email for communication, and replies are often slow. He gives me a lot of freedom, but it means I have to rely on myself for almost everything. My research involves experiments with human participants, so I need ethics approval for each stage. Sometimes he's so busy he forgets to endorse my application, and I feel awkward reminding him. This happened more frequently after he became department head, and the delays began to hinder my progress. I eventually began seeking feedback from an assistant professor outside my supervisory team because I wasn't getting enough guidance.

Kelly's account highlights the risks of "hands-off" supervision when the supervisors undertake high supervisory workloads and institutional responsibilities. Unlike Jason and Lily, she struggled to mobilise agency in the absence of close mentorship, resulting in feelings of isolation and frustration. Her experience highlights how, without compensatory support structures, autonomy can become a barrier to timely and confident academic development.

In sum, the "hands-off" facilitator style of supervision represents a double-edged influence on doctoral students' academic identity formation, highlighting a nuanced interplay between structural conditions and individual agency (Archer, 1995, 2003). Structurally, supervisors who adopt minimal intervention practices establish conditions that prioritise autonomy and self-directed exploration, which may either empower students through enhanced independence or constrain them through insufficient guidance and support. Participants like Jason-*Independent Explorer* and Lily-*Independent Explorer* effectively mobilised their agency within these structural constraints, proactively developing their intellectual autonomy and scholarly

confidence. Conversely, participants like *Kelly-Anxious Learner* experienced these structural conditions as isolating and disorienting, struggling to assert their agency without sufficient mentorship and support. These divergent experiences highlight the crucial importance of supervisors striking a delicate balance between fostering independence and providing suitable support, thereby enabling doctoral students to exercise their agency within a supportive structural framework.

6.2.4.2 Gate Keeper or Challenger Style: Confidence Versus High Stress

Other participants, such as *Mike-Strategic Player*, *Wendy-Anxious Learner*, and *Jane-Strategic Player*, viewed their supervisors primarily as gatekeepers to their academic progress. These supervisors focus on setting benchmarks and controlling access to academic legitimacy through publications, deadlines, and approvals, or, as challengers, pushing students to justify their ideas rigorously. This style combined high expectations with limited emotional or developmental support. While it fostered independence and academic resilience for some, it caused stress, self-doubt, and feelings of pressure for others.

Wendy-Anxious Learner

Wendy's doctoral journey began with a damaging supervisor-supervisee relationship that undermined her confidence. Her first supervisor's criticism was blunt and public, leaving her feeling unworthy of being in the programme.

When I decided to pursue a PhD, I knew it would be challenging. But I didn't expect that the biggest challenge would be my supervisor. I thought being

accepted meant they saw some potential in me. But my former supervisor told me in front of others that he regretted taking me on. Later, when things got worse, he said, ‘You don’t have a PhD in you.’ After hearing that, I kept questioning whether I could really do this.

The negative effect of the supervisor’s words was profound. Wendy began to question her ability, often thinking about leaving the programme. At the time, she also relied heavily on her supervisor for step-by-step guidance, which made the relationship even more important to her sense of academic security. The turning point came when she switched to her current supervisor. From the start, this supervisor clarified that doctoral research should be self-driven.

She told me it’s my journey to go through. She can give feedback and make sure I’m heading in the right direction, but she won’t walk me through each step. If she did, I’d never become an independent scholar.

Although this “gatekeeper” approach still set clear performance expectations, the absence of personal attacks allowed Wendy to rebuild her confidence. Over time, she reframed independence as an opportunity rather than a burden. The shift marked a significant step in her academic identity formation—from dependence shaped by external approval to self-directed navigation.

Mike-Strategic Player

Mike also saw his supervisor as a gatekeeper, but in a way he considered in alignment with disciplinary norms. In his research group, there was an unwritten rule: students must publish at least three papers before being allowed to submit their thesis.

My supervisor is more like a boss than a mentor. He sets the targets—three papers—and we figure out how to get there. He doesn't help with the writing. You draft, submit, revise, sometimes resubmit to another journal, all on your own. And his name goes on the paper as co-author. In engineering, that's normal.

This expectation was unrelated to, and prioritised over, the official university policy, which only requested doctoral students to complete a thesis without publications. However, Mike accepted his supervisor's benchmark to better prepare for the competitive academic job market, especially in Hong Kong and Mainland China, where publication numbers are heavily weighted.

It's a lot of pressure, but I think if he didn't enforce it, we'd be in trouble when applying for jobs. In this field, publications are everything.

Mike's acceptance reflects an understanding of the broader structural realities of his discipline. While the pressure was intense, he viewed it as a necessary filter, positioning him for future opportunities rather than as an unfair burden.

Tina-Anxious Learner

Tina's supervisor took on the role of an intellectual challenger. With an academic background in economics, Tina initially proposed models that her supervisor found

too shallow. He consistently pushed her to think more deeply, often questioning her assumptions until she could justify them at a much more sophisticated level.

At the start, I couldn't answer his 'why' questions quickly. I wasn't used to that pace. He wanted instant responses, and I struggled. Eventually, he told me to reflect on my whole way of thinking. It wasn't just about fixing my models—it was about developing a deeper research mindset.

This constant challenge was initially frustrating, but over time, Tina adapted to it.

Now I enjoy the process of being challenged. I've learned to defend my ideas and to think critically in real time. It's exhausting sometimes, but I can see how much I've grown because of it.

Her experience illustrates how the challenger style can be transformative when a student can reframe discomfort as intellectual training.

Bob-Independent Explorer

Bob, from a hard-pure discipline (mathematics), referred to a similar challenger style when describing his supervisor. His supervisor placed strong emphasis on theoretical depth and originality over practical application, offering minimal guidance beyond setting broad expectations.

He points me toward a path but leaves me to handle the challenges on my own. It's like a video game—he points out the destination, but I have to defeat each 'monster' myself before I can level up.

The supervisor's approach reflected disciplinary norms in pure mathematics, where independent problem-solving is a key marker of scholarly maturity (Lee, 2008).

While the absence of step-by-step guidance could be isolating, it also encouraged Bob to develop resilience and a stronger sense of ownership over his work.

The gatekeeper or challenger style of supervision evokes a broad spectrum of emotional and developmental responses among participants. While some, like *Wendy-Anxious Learner*, initially found this approach deeply discouraging—especially when framed by harsh criticism and a lack of support—others, like *Mike-Strategic Player*, accepted it as a professional norm within their discipline, adapting to high expectations with minimal emotional engagement. For students like *Tina-Anxious Learner* and *Bob-Independent Explorer*, the challenger style—marked by persistent questioning and indirect guidance—gradually fostered deeper critical thinking and academic maturity, though not without initial discomfort. Across these narratives, this supervisory approach appears to operate through a structure of high expectations and evaluative control, which students must either resist, adapt to, or grow into. Their trajectories reflect not only differing disciplinary cultures but also how supervisory pressure can serve both as a constraint and a catalyst for developing scholarly independence and an early academic identity (Trowler, 2012; Wang & Li, 2011).

6.2.4.3 Dual-Support Model: Balanced Rigor and Warmth

Other participants, such as *Yuki-Inspired Humanist*, *David-Strategic Player*, *Jasper-Anxious Learner*, *Rainie-Strategic Player*, and *Georgia-Inspired Humanist*, reported that their supervisors provide both intellectual challenges and emotional support.

They maintain boundaries but build a sense of familial or personal connection with students. Emotional validation is balanced with academic rigor.

Yuki-Inspired Humanist

Yuki described her supervisor as being “like a father,” but not the traditional authoritarian Chinese father type; instead, he embodies a supportive yet non-intrusive presence that combines academic rigor with thoughtful acts of care.

Early in her PhD, Yuki felt a sense of distance. The supervisor’s administrative duties left little time for step-by-step guidance, and his questions in meetings were demanding. Over time, however, she noticed his subtle but significant gestures: securing scholarships for self-funded students, creating opportunities for research engagement, and ensuring everyone in the group felt included.

He doesn’t express his care openly in words, but you can feel he acts in your best interest... He’s still influenced by Chinese habits and values, but he’s also very receptive to new ideas. That’s why our group feels like a family.

For Yuki, this balance of firmness and warmth fostered trust. Even though the academic expectations were high, the underlying sense of security allowed her to take intellectual risks and persist during moments of self-doubt.

Georgia-Inspired Humanist

Georgia also perceives her supervisor to be like a father. She believes that her connection with her supervisor is rooted in shared values and recognition of her intellectual curiosity. Having entered academia after working in a more utilitarian environment, she longed for academic conversations exploring the “why” behind societal and academic questions. Her supervisor valued precisely that quality.

When he took me on, what he cared about wasn’t just my academic performance—he valued my reflections on society and life. He was genuinely willing to have open-ended conversations with me and never made me feel my ideas were childish. Because he was also a Christian, Georgia felt a profound moral and personal connection with him. After each group meeting, he would invite her for a meal and always pay for it. These regular gatherings provided an informal setting to discuss life beyond research. The steady blend of academic guidance and personal care strengthened her confidence and nurtured her sense of belonging in the academic community.

Jasper-Anxious Learner

In contrast, Jasper has two supervisors. His primary supervisor is a very strict person who constantly questions his ideas until Jasper could justify them adequately, while his co-supervisor acts as a supportive mentor. This contrast between “strict” and “gentle” mentorship styles provided Jasper with both academic rigor and emotional reassurance.

My primary supervisor is a very serious person. He never directly tells me what to do—instead, he constantly questions me. After I submitted my thesis proposal, I still felt uncertain, but he didn’t say whether it was good or not. He just let me

continue exploring and finding direction through trial and error. Because of that, I was always a bit afraid of him and kept a certain distance. It wasn't until my third year that things began to shift. My supervisor was leading a project in Guangzhou and asked me to help plan and organise part of it. I did quite well, and during a group dinner, he praised me in front of everyone. That was the first time he had ever complimented me. After that moment, I felt like a weight had been lifted. I became more relaxed and confident. My co-supervisor, on the other hand, has a completely different personality. He's much older and very easy-going. He treats me like a child and often gives me emotional support and encouragement, even though he doesn't get too involved in my academic work. In a way, the two of them balance each other perfectly—one plays the 'strict role' and the other the 'supportive role.' Together, they've formed an effective team.

The dual-support model illustrates how a balanced combination of intellectual challenge and emotional affirmation can create a nurturing yet rigorous environment for MCDS' early academic identity development. Supervisors who offer both high expectations and personal care help students navigate the emotional and intellectual uncertainties of doctoral life without sacrificing autonomy. Yuki and Georgia, both from *Inspired Humanist* type, described their supervisors as “father figures”—not in an authoritarian sense but as emotionally present and morally supportive mentors—highlight the significance of relational trust in fostering a secure space for scholarly growth. Meanwhile, Jasper-*Anxious Learner*'s experience with two contrasting supervisors—a disciplinarian and a nurturer—underscores how complementary

supervision styles can collectively sustain both academic rigour and emotional resilience.

In sum, this study illuminates the complex and often contradictory structural conditions that MCDS must navigate in Hong Kong's HE system. Across diverse institutional policies, supervisory practices, and disciplinary norms, participants' academic identity formation emerges as a dynamic negotiation between structural conditions and personal agency (Aecher, 1995; McAlpine et al., 2010, 2013).

Institutional policies—ranging from rigid research proposal deadlines to mismatches between university policy regulations and departmental expectations—can act as both constraints and catalysts, depending on how students respond to and work within them. Similarly, the supervisory landscape is characterised by multiple styles—hands-off facilitators, gatekeepers, challengers, and dual-support mentors—each generating distinct emotional and developmental impacts. Whether facing pressure to publish, navigating interdisciplinary tensions, or adapting to unfamiliar mentoring cultures, students' ability to assert agency, reinterpret structural expectations, and reconfigure their scholarly trajectories plays a critical role in the formation of their emerging academic identities (Marginson, 2012, 2024). Ultimately, this research section highlights that academic identity is not merely produced by institutional structures or supervisor influence but is actively co-constructed through participants' situated strategies, emotional labour, and intellectual choices.

6.3 Enactment of Reflexive Agency through Internal Dialogue

In this study, the formation of MCDS' emerging academic identity is understood as a dynamic process shaped by the continual interplay between external, multidimensional structural constraints (as discussed above) and individual internal responses—such as struggles, intentions, and actions. This section shifts the focus to those individual responses, explored through participants' internal dialogue. Such dialogue reflects their psychological engagement with, and reactions to, external structural conditions.

Focus is given to how participants enacted their reflexive agency, actively shaping their positioning as early-career academics in Hong Kong's highly complex HE context. This enactment involved resisting, conforming to, or strategically negotiating the constraints they encountered. Findings reveal how they questioned their own academic worth, redefined their goals, and recalibrated their strategies in response to shifting expectations and contested academic norms.

6.3.1 Imposter Syndrome and Self-Doubt

During the interview, many participants (e.g., Jasper-*Anxious Learner*, Tina-*Anxious Learner*, and Yuki-*Inspired Humanist*) experienced imposter syndrome during their doctoral journey. They questioned their belonging in academia and had concerns about the meaning of conducting research, especially in comparison to their peers who had better academic performance.

Jasper-Anxious Learner

Jasper experienced imposter syndrome and questioned his research capacity during his first semester, particularly when comparing himself to his peers in the group.

The first three months of my PhD were incredibly stressful. I even seriously thought about quitting. I hadn't taken my undergraduate studies very seriously, and I had no prior research experience at all. It was only after starting my PhD that I was truly exposed to an academic research environment for the first time. Everyone around me seemed to quickly figure out their research direction, while I was still struggling to even understand how the system worked. At times, I even felt like my supervisor might have regretted accepting me. I was completely overwhelmed and felt like I could barely breathe.

Initially, Jasper's reflexive agency took the form of withdrawal rather than active resistance. However, his internal dialogue began to shift after he recognised that others were also struggling:

I started talking to a few classmates who looked very confident at the beginning, and I realised they also had no idea what they were doing. That helped me calm down. I told myself, "Okay, I may be slower, but I can catch up if I put in the work." From then, I stopped comparing myself every day and focused more on my own progress.

Jasper's reflection illustrates a strategic negotiation of structural pressure—redirecting his focus from competition to self-paced improvement.

Tina-Anxious Learner

Similar to Jasper, Tina also experienced imposter syndrome during the first year, when her supervisor always expected a higher level of critical thinking from her. Tina found it challenging to meet those expectations from her superior, as she thinks it is too difficult for her to shift from a Confucian learning model (obedience) to a Western critical model.

During my first year, I often thought about dropping out. Every group meeting felt like a painful experience for me. My supervisor focused on training our way of thinking—he expected us to be highly critical. But as a Chinese student, I found that especially challenging, because critical thinking was something I lacked and hadn't been trained in through my previous, more traditional Eastern education. The shift in academic culture was really difficult to adapt to, and I spent most of that first year struggling.

Tina's turning point came when she reframed this challenge as a skill to be learned rather than an impossible expectation:

I realised that if I kept thinking "I can't do this," I would stay in the same place. So I began writing down all the "why" questions he asked me in our meetings and tried to answer them later, even if I couldn't in the moment. Gradually, I started preparing for these challenges instead of avoiding them.

Tina's resilience reflects resistance through adaptation—while she accepted the structural demand for critical thinking, she developed her own incremental method to meet it on her own terms.

Yuki-Inspired Humanist

Similarly, Yuki often compared herself to more confident and articulate peers in her faculty, particularly in public speaking or theoretical discussion contexts. This fed into her imposter syndrome, compounding her self-doubt.

In the beginning, every time I attended other students' presentations, I felt like everyone else was doing so well. Their theories were solid, and they answered questions so smoothly. Meanwhile, because of my English, I sometimes couldn't even fully understand what they were talking about. During that period, I often doubted whether I was truly suited for academic research.

However, Yuki's internal dialogue moved from pure self-doubt to a pragmatic negotiation of her linguistic constraints:

I told myself, "I can't sound like a native speaker, but I can make sure my content is solid." So I started focusing on preparing clear slides and practising my answers to likely questions before every presentation. I still get nervous, but now I feel I have something valuable to say.

In sum, imposter syndrome and self-doubt were prevalent emotional reactions and struggles faced by participants as they navigated complex structural demands during their doctoral journeys. *Jasper-Anxious Learner*, *Tina-Anxious Learner*, and *Yuki-Inspired Humanist* each experienced intense feelings of inadequacy, uncertainty, and questioning of their belonging in academia. Their anxieties were amplified by comparing themselves unfavourably with peers who appeared more confident, capable, and academically fluent. These accounts underscore the profound impact of

transitioning into demanding academic environments, particularly when expectations of critical thinking and linguistic proficiency challenge students' prior educational experiences and self-perceptions.

However, through internal dialogue, each participant enacts their reflexive agency to transform negative feelings into positive actions. For *Jasper-Anxious Learner*, agency meant withdrawing temporarily to preserve mental stability before strategically focusing on self-progress rather than peer comparison. Similarly, *Tina-Anxious Learner* enacts her reflexive agency by reframing structural demands as learnable skills for self-growth and building her own methods to meet them. *Yuki-Inspired Humanist's* agency shifted her focus from language itself to research capacities. These examples show that reflexive agency often begins in moments of acute self-doubt, when participants engage in internal dialogue that either resists the structural pressure outright, conforms to it, or strategically reshapes it to fit their own trajectories (Marginson, 2023, 2024). This process becomes a critical mechanism in their emerging academic identity formation within Hong Kong's highly complex HE landscape (Archer, 2003; Barnett, 2000).

6.3.2 Struggle for Autonomy and Building Confidence

Many participants believed that becoming independent and gaining autonomy is a key milestone in building up their confidence and developing their academic identity in the early stages (Choi et al., 2021). However, some participants felt powerless in their research trajectories, particularly when supervisors imposed rigid expectations and

interfered in their research. For example, *Kelly-Anxious Learner* struggled to assert her own research vision, while *Mike-Strategic Player* oscillated between resisting and conforming to the pressure of publication demands. This affects their feelings of autonomy and questions their own freedom as nascent academics (doctoral students).

Kelly-Anxious Learner

Kelly began her PhD with a carefully prepared research plan, which she had developed over six months prior to enrolment. However, structural constraints quickly redirected her trajectory:

I had spent over six months preparing for a research topic before joining the programme, but had to abandon it due to my supervisor's limited resources. He suggested a new topic aligned with his latest grant. Partway through, he assigned another doctoral student to the same project, and we were told to split the work—she would handle the experiments, and I would do the literature review and theoretical framework.

At first, she tried to reframe the situation positively:

I tried to see the positives: reviews require less funding and might lead to quick publications, helping me graduate faster.

Yet over time, her internal dialogue revealed growing discomfort with the loss of intellectual ownership:

I feel conflicted. I won't be able to conduct a full study or tell a cohesive research story. To meet the three-paper requirement, I'll have to patch together different topics, which feels fragmented. I also worry that relying on review papers may weaken my academic profile and future job prospects.

Kelly's experience reveals how structural arrangements, such as project-based funding resources and supervisor authority, can significantly curtail a student's autonomy (Archer, 1995). Although she began her PhD with a prepared research plan and strong motivation, she was soon required to abandon her initial topic due to resource limitations and shift to a topic assigned by the supervisor as part of a grant project.

Her reflexive agency surfaced in her capacity to critically evaluate the implications of this arrangement—recognising its efficiency for graduation but also its cost to her scholarly identity. This is a case of constrained negotiation: she adapted to the imposed structure but retained a critical stance toward its long-term value.

Mike-Strategic Player

Mike's struggle for autonomy is marked more by internal conflict between resisting and conforming to disciplinary norms and supervisor-imposed benchmarks:

My supervisor can be quite assertive at times. For example, there's an unspoken rule in our group that every student must publish three papers to graduate. This rule is non-negotiable. So for me, the pressure to publish has been there since the very beginning. Now that I'm in my fourth year, that pressure is still very intense.

While Mike acknowledged the structural logic behind this demand, he also reflected on its personal cost:

I understand that he wants us to be more competitive on the job market, and to be fair, this is how our field operates—everyone is constantly publishing. But sometimes I feel like I don't really have a choice. All I can do is keep writing,

submitting, and trying to get papers published. There are times when I question myself—am I becoming just a paper machine, or am I truly a scholar?

Mike's narrative shows a tension between conformity and critical reflection. On one hand, he complies with the structural demand, accepting it as necessary for success in engineering academia. On the other hand, his internal questioning—framing himself as a “paper machine”—demonstrates a reflexive awareness that this metric-driven culture may erode the deeper intellectual values of scholarship. This oscillation between acceptance and critique reflects partial resistance, where agency exists primarily in his capacity to problematise the system even while participating in it.

Both *Kelly-Anxious Learner* and *Mike-Strategic Player*'s accounts reveal how autonomy is negotiated within powerful structural constraints that define legitimate academic work—whether through supervisor-imposed research agendas or disciplinary publication norms. *Kelly-Anxious Learner*'s reflection illustrates how limited resources and hierarchical authority can compel early-stage doctoral students into roles that fragment their intellectual projects, eroding their confidence and sense of scholarly ownership (Marginson, 2024). *Mike-Strategic Player*'s narrative illustrates how competitive disciplinary cultures normalise productivity pressures, creating a space where students comply while simultaneously questioning the meaning of their academic labour.

6.3.3 Getting Lost in Competing Academic Discourses of Hong Kong

Participants expressed confusion and anxiety when encountering contradictory academic expectations influenced by competing academic discourses in Hong Kong's HE system. On one side, a Western-oriented academic tradition emphasises originality, critical thinking, and scholarly independence. On the other hand, an increasingly output-driven discourse—influenced by neoliberal and managerialist logics—prioritizes rapid publication and measurable outcomes (Archer, 2008; Clegg, 2008). This clash of academic ideologies placed participants in discursive limbo—needing to meet competing standards while struggling to define their own academic identities. For MCDS, these tensions were further complicated by the influence of Mainland China's "involution" (内卷) culture, where academic success is heavily tied to the quantity of publications.

Wendy-Anxious Learner

Wendy was frustrated by her previous supervisor's emphasis on writing speed over research depth. She also questioned how to measure academic contribution in today's context, as she suspected they might represent mere academic rationalisations rather than genuine contributions:

One major conflict with my former supervisor was that he thought I was too slow in writing. But I felt I needed to fully understand the theory and methods before I could begin. He believed that writing should come first—even before fully reviewing the literature—which left me confused.

Her current supervisor valued depth over quantity, which aligned more closely with her own preferences, but she continued to reflect upon the meaning of “academic contribution”:

People often say that even small extensions to theory or minor methodological tweaks can be significant. But sometimes I wonder if that’s just a form of self-comfort rather than real impact. It makes me feel uncertain and frustrated.

Wendy’s internal dialogue reflects a critical negotiation of competing discourses—accepting the pragmatic need for measurable outputs while questioning whether they truly represent scholarly value.

Lily-Independent Explorer

Similarly, Lily grappled with feelings of insignificance. Comparing her research contributions to groundbreaking achievements, such as Nobel Prize-winning innovations, led her to question if her work merely amounted to “academic garbage”.

I’ve come to realise that truly groundbreaking academic innovation—like winning a Nobel Prize—is extremely rare. So in comparison, I often feel that my own work isn’t particularly outstanding. Even if it gets published and has some implications, they don’t feel especially strong. Sometimes I wonder what the point of all this is—whether what I’m doing is just a kind of academic garbage.

Nevertheless, she simultaneously reassured herself of the inherent meaning in even the smallest scholarly contributions.

But most of the time, I remind myself that what I do still has meaning. Even if it's small, it still matters.

Her reflections show a strategic negotiation—acknowledging the prestige-driven discourse while carving space for valuing incremental scholarly contributions. She also recognised that, regardless of her own beliefs, academic survival requires mastery of the “rules of the game”:

How many papers you publish and whether those papers receive citations essentially determine whether you have the necessary capital to survive and sustain yourself in this academic field. However, it doesn't necessarily indicate genuine recognition from others. Personally, I don't believe that citation counts or the sheer number of publications truly reflect significant academic value—that's just my perspective.

Jason-Independent Explorer

Under a similar dilemma of balancing publication quantity and quality, Jason demonstrated his agency in resisting the external criteria that merely assess academic performance (quantity-driven). He said,

When it comes to balancing quality and speed, I definitely prioritise quality. I wouldn't want to rush things and compromise the outcome. If my understanding of the research question doesn't reach a certain depth or maturity, I simply can't achieve a breakthrough. Without concentrating all my effort at that critical point, transformation isn't possible; I'd just keep going in circles. Rushing to produce something mediocre and planning to revise it later would only require much

more effort down the line. If I harness my momentum effectively and thoroughly understand the issue, it elevates my research approach to an entirely higher level.

In addition to the above participants *David-Strategic Player* and *Rainie-Strategic Player* also expressed concerns regarding the prevalent ‘publish or perish’ discourse in Hong Kong’s HE context.

Rainie-Strategic Player

Reflecting on her previous academic experience in the United States, Rainie provided insights into the reasons behind this competing academic discourse:

Hong Kong is influenced by Western academic traditions that emphasise scholarly freedom, critical thinking, and academic quality... However, positioned as a bridge connecting Asia (especially mainland China) and the world, Hong Kong inevitably is influenced by the ‘involution’ culture prevalent in mainland China, which highly values the number of publications.

For MCDS who anticipate returning to the Mainland for career development, these quantity-focused norms continue to be a powerful structural influence.

The above participants’ narratives reveal the pervasive tension between research quality and quantity in Hong Kong’s HE context, shaped by competing academic discourses. While some participants, such as *Wendy-Anxious Learner* and *Lily-Independent Explorer*, deeply questioned the significance and value of their academic contributions under the pressure of output-driven expectations, others, like *Jason Independent Explorer*, actively resisted this logic by asserting the primacy of research

depth over speed. For MCDS, this tension is further intensified by cross-border academic norms, where national structures (competing job markets, academic culture) contradict Hong Kong's local academic norms (Marginson, 2014, 2024). This further exacerbates the confusion and internal conflicts in how MCDS define academic success and construct their nascent academic identities in this supercomplex context (Barnett, 2000).

These participants' internal dialogues also demonstrate varied enactments of reflexive agency: resistance (e.g., *Jason-Independent Explorer*), resilience (e.g., *Wendy-Anxious Learner*), and strategically acceptance with contextual awareness (*Rainie-Strategic Player*). This reflexivity enables them to position themselves—albeit unevenly—within a highly complex academic landscape where competing norms necessitate the constant recalibration of scholarly identity and values (Marginson, 2014, 2024).

In sum, this section (6.3) investigates participants' emotional responses—ranging from frustration, uncertainty, and diminished self-worth to deliberate resistance and self-reassurance—that are not merely symptoms of academic pressure, but active sites of reflexive agency. Through their internal dialogues, participants continually evaluated the competing logics of research quality versus quantity, interrogated the meaning and value of their scholarly contributions, and recalibrated their strategies considering these reflections. In Archer's (2003) terms, these emotions illustrate a *double morphogenesis* of structure and agency: the structural contradictions in Hong

Kong's supercomplex HE system trigger internal reflection, which then shapes how students respond—whether by complying, resisting, or finding a middle ground. These emotions, rather than being weaknesses, mark important turning points in academic identity formation, where MCDS demonstrate their ability to think, decide, and act within a highly complex and often contradictory academic environment (Barnett, 2000).

6.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has explored how MCDS navigate the multidimensional structural landscape of Hong Kong's HE system—an environment shaped by supercomplexity and competing academic discourses (Barnett, 2000). Through their narratives, it becomes evident that academic identity formation is neither a predictable linear progression nor a static outcome but a negotiated, dynamic process (McAlpine et al., 2010; 2013) that unfolds through an ongoing dialectic between external structures (departmental, institutional, and broader sociocultural) and individual agency (Archer, 1995).

MCDS' experiences reveal that structural constraints—such as language barriers, institutional policies, rigid performance expectations, and interdisciplinary contradictions—often disrupted their academic trajectories and psychological well-being. These challenges were intensified by cross-border policy and cultural differences between Hong Kong and the mainland, which made even familiar tasks, like thesis confirmation or supervision, feel unfamiliar and alienating. While these

external constraints at times limited students' autonomy and provoked internal struggles, such as imposter syndrome or self-doubt, they also served as catalysts for growth and academic development when participants enacted reflexive agency to view them positively (Pappa et al., 2020).

Simultaneously, participants exercised reflexive agency in diverse and context-sensitive ways—by resisting rigid publication norms, redefining supervisor-supervisee relationships, adjusting expectations, or reframing their academic values. While some participants internalised institutional expectations, others, like Jason-*Independent Explorer*, actively pushed back, prioritising research depth over speed. Others sought relational distance (as Jane-*Strategic Player* did) or emotional containment (as Yuki-*Inspired Humanist* and Georgia-*Inspired Humanist* experienced), highlighting how emotional and interpersonal dynamics also shaped coping strategies. These agentic practices were not merely reactive but also creative and strategic, enabling participants to maintain a sense of authorship and ownership in shaping their academic selves.

The findings also reveal how structural constraints at the interpersonal level, especially supervisor-supervisee relationships, play a pivotal mediating role between structure and agency. Whether experienced in hands-off, gatekeeping, challenging, or dual-support styles, the supervisor-supervisee relationship significantly shaped how students interpreted their doctoral journeys, responded to institutional pressures, and internalized or resisted dominant academic discourses. Crucially, participants'

reflections demonstrate that academic identity formation is both a cognitive and emotional process, informed not only by institutional logics but also by feelings of recognition, confidence, and care (Cotterall, 2013; Pappa et al., 2020).

Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that the academic identity formation of MCDS in Hong Kong is deeply contingent, relational, and processual (McAlpine, 2010, 2013). Rather than being entirely determined by structural conditions or driven by individual will, identity emerges through a continuous interplay between structure and agency, pressure and resistance, belonging and doubt (Archer, 1995, 2003). In this supercomplex and transnational HE context, academic becoming is not simply about acquiring knowledge or credentials—it is about learning to navigate uncertainty, negotiate meaning, and inhabit contradictions with resilience and reflexivity (Marginson, 2014, 2024; McAlpine et al., 2010, 2013). Connecting the previous chapter on initial motivations and expectations with the current chapter on structural constraints and reflexive responses, the following chapter identifies four distinctive types of MCDS' nascent academic identity within the complex and dynamic Hong Kong HE context.

Chapter 7: Self-formation of MCDS' Nascent Academic Identity in the Hong Kong Higher Education Context

7.1 Introduction

The previous sections have explored both external structural factors and participants' internal struggles and responses that contribute to their emerging academic identity.

This chapter answers Sub-research Question Three: *How do MCDS' academic identity formation trajectories develop as they navigate the Hong Kong HE context?*

Based on the above explorations, this section identifies different types of MCDS' nascent academic identity trajectories in the Hong Kong HE context. Based on participants' narratives, I categorise their nascent academic identity into four distinctive trajectory types: the Independent Explorer, the Anxious Learner, the Strategic Player, and the Inspired Humanist.

7.2 The Independent Explorer (Jason, Lily, and Bob)

The Independent Explorer represents a type of emerging academic identity characterised by a relatively strong sense of personal agency, intellectual autonomy, and a deep commitment to pursuing intellectual growth and curiosity-driven research.

These participants do not view their doctoral journey as a linear path laid out by supervisors or institutions. Instead, they see it as a terrain they must map by themselves—often at personal and intellectual risk. Their academic identity is not passively shaped by institutional structures or disciplinary norms but actively constructed through inner dialogue, intellectual questioning, and independent

engagement with scholarly traditions (Archer, 2008; Clegg, 2008). This type is most clearly embodied by participants such as Jason, Lily, and, to a lesser extent, Bob, all of whom articulated an academic identity rooted in self-direction, theoretical engagement, and a belief in research as both personal and transformative.

7.2.1 Initial Motivation and Expectation

Independent Explorers typically embark on doctoral study driven by intrinsic motives—intellectual curiosity, a desire for personal growth, and a commitment to advancing knowledge for its own sake. Participants in this category often arrive with strong internal motivations and a high degree of reflexive agency even before entering their doctoral programmes. Jason and Lily, for instance, both expressed an earnest desire to understand the world or themselves, while Bob’s motivation was closely tied to his commitment to producing new knowledge.

Jason described his decision to pursue a PhD as one born of “天真” (naïveté), passion, and a touch of “冒险精神” (adventurous spirit). He used a vivid metaphor—“与狼共舞” (“dancing with wolves”)—to capture his academic journey, highlighting both the risks and the exhilaration of stepping into uncharted intellectual territory.

I think I do have a bit of a risk-taking spirit. Without it, I would’ve just settled, picked an existing theoretical framework, and followed a standard path. In that way, I might have already graduated by now. But to me, real research requires courage. I see myself as someone who dares to take risks. I’m the one ‘dancing with wolves’, the one sent to the very frontlines of the wilderness of the research problem.

Jason believes that a defining trait of an academic is the courage to take risks, which he metaphorically describes as “dancing with wolves”. In his view, without a spirit of adventure, it is impossible to push the boundaries of knowledge. He cited the example of American westward expansion to illustrate that research should be driven by a desire to explore the unknown—even if it is done boldly or aggressively. This metaphor reflects both his experience of intellectual isolation and his sense of epistemic bravery: a willingness to embrace uncertainty, challenge established norms, and venture into uncharted theoretical territory without a clear roadmap.

Similarly, Lily’s initial motivation stemmed from a deep desire to understand human behaviour and social systems. Even before starting her doctorate, she had been involved in social service work, which motivated her to bring an ethical commitment to connect her research with societal benefit. This predisposition toward meaning-making — rather than merely acquiring credentials — shaped her later capacity to navigate structural tensions without compromising her personal values.

Bob’s entry into mathematics was equally intrinsic. He was less attracted by career advancement than the intellectual elegance of mathematical reasoning. His pursuit was anchored in the belief that mathematical inquiry should serve the discipline’s internal logic, rather than external metrics or immediate applicability.

7.2.2 Perceptions of Structural Constraints

Unlike participants who rely heavily on their supervisors or institutional scaffolding, Independent Explorers often carve their own paths through strategic disengagement or selective alignment. They do not disregard institutional systems entirely, but instead position themselves on the boundary, aligning selectively where conditions suit their intellectual trajectory.

Jason's response to the institutional pressure to submit his topic confirmation demonstrates his resistance to structural deadlines. Rather than submitting a low-quality draft to meet the original timeline, he chose to postpone the submission—a decision unprecedented in his research group—and ultimately delivered a high-quality proposal.

Bob also resisted structural imperatives to produce “useful” or high-volume outputs. In his department, as he explained, publication quantity holds little sway compared to the elegance and correctness of proofs:

In our mathematics department, practicality isn't the main focus, and publication quantity isn't what I care about most. My supervisor often says that what you do doesn't have to be “useful,” but it must be a question that holds value within the field of mathematics. And the entire research process must strictly follow mathematical standards—there's no room for error.....Since in mathematics, our theses usually aim to prove a theorem or two, the correctness of those theorems is everything. You simply can't prove something that turns out to be false. In other words, it can't be a pseudo-proposition. (Bob)

This stance reflects a deep internalisation of disciplinary epistemology rather than compliance with generic institutional output demands. Lily, while more engaged with applied research, still constructs her work around self-defined standards, often seeking out informal mentors and interdisciplinary readings when her supervisor’s guidance is limited.

7.2.3 Agency Enactment

Independent Explorers also exercise their agency through sustained reflexivity—the internal process of evaluating meaning, value, and purpose. This sustained reflexivity enables them to either resist, adapt to, or strategically integrate structural pressures into their identity trajectory.

Lily’s reflections reveal an ongoing internal negotiation about the meaning and value of academic work. While she experiences moments of doubt—wondering if her work amounts to “academic garbage”—she simultaneously affirms its quiet, modest significance. From frustration through constant self-questioning of the meaning-making and impact of her research, she gradually formed her academic identity (Marginson, 2014) through alternative means, integrating her academic capacity to help frontline workers.

During the pandemic, a student leader once told me, “You could contribute more by collecting data and identifying key issues, rather than just volunteering.” That moment shifted my perspective. I realised that while frontline workers focus on immediate action, they often overlook research design, control groups, or sample size—things we, as researchers, are trained to consider. . . . From then on, I

began to see value in working behind the scenes—designing studies, creating manuals, and supporting intervention planning. Later, when papers based on these projects were cited, especially in meaningful ways, I truly felt that my contributions mattered.

Lily regards herself as an academic designer for frontline social workers, as she believes that her research design and academic integrity can help strengthen and improve the practical work of frontline social workers and volunteers. In this sense, she recognises the value of her contributions as an emerging academic as well as the means to balance her previous tension between practicality and theoretical engagement. Her academic identity is not only constructed through external validation (e.g., publication metrics) but through an introspective process of meaning-making, grounded in personal ethics and the pursuit of socially relevant knowledge.

Jason’s reflexivity manifests in his deliberate pacing and choice of theoretical frameworks. He resists “rushing for the sake of output” because he believes that deep conceptual understanding precedes meaningful innovation. Bob’s reflexivity is more discipline-bound; his emphasis on mathematical purity over pragmatic considerations reflects an alignment with the internal priorities of his field.

7.2.4 Identity Self-Formation

The Independent Explorer type exemplifies self-formation in its most active and intentional form. These participants entered their doctoral programmes with curiosity-driven and knowledge-oriented expectations, which provided them with a strong internal compass for navigating the complexities of Hong Kong’s HE system. Their

reflexive dialogues—whether challenging deadlines, questioning the meaning of their research, or reaffirming intellectual integrity—became the very mechanism through which self-formation unfolded.

Jason’s “dancing with wolves” metaphor demonstrates how self-formation is fuelled by risk-taking, as he consciously embraced the uncertainty of exploring new theoretical terrains over the security of compliance. Lily’s oscillation between self-doubt and affirmation reveals how reflexive struggle allowed her to reconstruct the meaning of her academic work, moving from anxiety about producing “academic garbage” to recognising the enduring value of designing research that strengthens frontline social work. Bob’s alignment with mathematical ideals, rather than careerist pressures, illustrates how an evident disciplinary ethic provided him with a framework for self-directed growth.

In all three cases, the process of self-formation is evident in the ways the participants repeatedly interrogated their own positions, re-anchored their practices in initial value commitments, and internalised struggles as opportunities to refine what it means to be an “academic.” Rather than being shaped primarily by structural demands, their academic identities were actively constructed through ongoing reflexive dialogue, where structure served as a foil rather than a determinant. As such, their self-formation became relatively autonomous, allowing them to craft an identity consistent with their personal intellectual values.

In sum, the Independent Explorer represents the most significant enactment of self-formation among MCDS. Their nascent academic identities did not result from surrendering to the demands of supervisors or institutions, but rather emerged through cycles of reflexive questioning and value-seeking self-dialogue. By grounding themselves in curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, they managed to resist structural pressures, exercising a higher degree of autonomy and agency than other types.

7.3 The Anxious Learner (Wendy, Tina, Kelly, and Jasper)

The Anxious Learner represents a transitional, nascent academic identity—marked by early dependence, institutional disillusionment, and ultimately, a movement towards a more agentic, self-reflexive positionality. Participants identified in this type began their doctoral journeys with rather East-Asian oriented expectations toward their doctoral learning, where supervisors are imagined as authoritative figures from whom step-by-step instruction is expected. When confronted with Hong Kong's more individualised and competitive academic culture (Lo, 2018), with its minimal supervision, contradictory discourses, and emotionally distant mentorship, they experienced an acute feeling of abandonment and anxiety.

However, this anxiety did not manifest an endpoint. Through cycles of struggles, emotional crises, and gradual adaptation, participants such as Wendy, Tina, and Kelly slowly regained their academic identities. Their trajectories reflect how agency and

academic identity are self-sustained, not with ease, but through navigating and surviving in unsupportive structures (Marginson, 2014, 2024).

7.3.1 Initial Motivation and Expectation

All three participants began their doctoral journey with expectations of receiving more direct and step-by-step instruction from their supervisors. This expectation stemmed from their previous educational experiences in the Mainland, where teacher-centred supervision is predominant (Elstein, 2009).

According to Wendy, she used to put too much expectation on her first doctoral supervisor and wished that her supervisor could guide her step by step. However, her expectation did not materialise due to the problematic relationship between her previous supervisor and her. Frustrated and disappointed, she realised that she had no one to depend on but herself.

The problematic relationship with my former supervisor was the biggest challenge of my PhD journey. We had very different expectations and ways of thinking. He wanted me to be independent from the start, with clear goals and quick research output. But I had hoped for step-by-step guidance and time to grow. Because of this mismatch, our relationship became increasingly strained. He often made me question whether I was cut out for academia, and I frequently felt that he regretted accepting me. At one point, he even said he didn't see the potential of a PhD student in me. I was seriously considering dropping out at that moment.

Similarly, Kelly faced an abrupt disruption when her carefully planned research project was dismissed due to a lack of resources:

Right after I started, I realised I had to change my research topic completely due to a lack of resources, and it disrupted all my original plans. My supervisor was also very busy and couldn't provide more detailed guidance; I felt frustrated.

Tina experienced even greater emotional strain, as the demand for critical thinking clashed with her prior educational habitus characterising students' obedience and deference. Each group meeting became a site of emotional exhaustion and internalised failure:

In my first year, every group meeting felt like a painful experience. My supervisor expected us to be highly critical and quickly adapt to his fast-paced questioning style. It was quite difficult to adjust to that kind of academic environment.

Jasper also began his PhD with original confidence in the university's structural support, expecting that institutional training mechanisms would chart a clear doctoral trajectory for him. Instead, he became uncertain about his expectations and struggled to reconcile his ambitions with a lack of external direction:

I thought a PhD meant being given a clear problem to solve, and the supervisor would tell me how to proceed. But very quickly I realised no one would hand me a roadmap. I felt lost, almost like entering a fog without a compass.

The above narratives reveal that the mismatch between participants' initial expectations and their actual experiences left them feeling abandoned, anxious, and uncertain about how to proceed. This disorientation led to a temporary identity

vacuum, where they struggled to understand what it meant to “be” a doctoral student. As a result, they faced significant emotional and academic challenges during their doctoral journey, with both Wendy and Kelly even considering dropping out.

7.3.2 Perceptions of Structural Constraints

As participants moved beyond their initial expectations, they were confronted with structural barriers that amplified their sense of inadequacy and anxiety. Supervisory disengagement, abrupt topic changes, and departmental norms prioritising rapid productivity left them feeling powerless. In these moments, their reliance on external validation made structural contradictions particularly acute.

Jasper described how institutional requirements, such as rigid topic confirmation timelines, became overwhelming when coupled with unclear guidance:

The pressure to pass the confirmation was huge, but I didn’t even know if my work was going in the right direction. It felt like being asked to run a race without knowing the track.

For Wendy, strained supervisory relations created a cycle of self-doubt, while Kelly’s abandoned research project left her questioning her place in academia. Tina, meanwhile, internalised the critical academic culture as personal failure, interpreting every difficult meeting as evidence of her inadequacy.

These structural constraints—whether in the form of supervisory neglect, inadequate institutional resources, misaligned academic cultures, or unrealistic institutional deadlines—pushed participants into cycles of doubt and hesitation. The

absence of guidance intensified their anxiety, leading to feelings of abandonment and failure. These moments of frustration, however, also nurtured opportunities for transformation, prompting participants to reevaluate their assumptions and consider alternative approaches to navigating the doctoral journey.

7.3.3 Agency Enactment

Rather than surrendering to frustration, these participants slowly began to rebuild their confidence by actively seeking alternative solutions. For Wendy, changing supervisors was a turning point. Her new supervisor's more holistic approach to prioritising research quality over speed and his more frank expectations of student's independence offered her a different interpretation of success.

My current supervisor believes that the number of publications doesn't determine whether someone is a successful PhD graduate or not.

Kelly, similarly, stopped relying on her supervisor, who had numerous administrative responsibilities, and built an informal mentorship network by seeking support from junior faculty in the same field. These changes signalled a shift in her academic identity—from being a passive learner to a strategic actor who curated her own academic development.

At first, I didn't want to bother my supervisor, so I decided to reach out to other professors in similar research areas. That's when I met an Assistant Professor who was really kind and whose research was quite close to mine. I started asking him some questions, and over time, we gradually built a connection.....He told me that if I ever needed help, I could always reach out. At first, I thought he was

just being polite, but later I realised he genuinely meant it. Whenever he was available, he would take the time to answer all my questions seriously.

Under high pressure, Tina actively sought support from more experienced peers, which helped alleviate her struggles and brought her to the realisation that challenges were a shared experience.

I had an epiphany thanks to a friend who had already completed his PhD. I was seeking advice from him on how to manage my anxiety and struggles. He said the real difference between a PhD graduate and someone with just a master's isn't academic ability, but the ability to handle pressure. That helped me see my PhD as a form of self-cultivation.

Gradually, participants' disillusionment gave way to adaptive reflexivity. Instead of waiting for supervisors to fulfil initial expectations, they redefined what it meant to "learn" as doctoral students—seeking new networks, drawing insights from others, and reinterpreting failure as formative.

7.3.4 Identity Self-Formation

For Anxious Learners, self-formation is not a smooth journey, but as a process of rupture, struggle, and reconstruction. Their identities emerged through a dialectical interplay: initial structural dependence clashed with institutional indifference, producing crises of confidence that, in turn, triggered reflexive rethinking and the development of new strategies.

This form of self-formation is distinct from the Independent Explorer. Where Explorers sustain autonomy from the outset, Anxious Learners must painfully disentangle themselves from structural dependence before reconstructing a more agentic self. Emotional suffering—feelings of failure, rejection, and disorientation—was not merely a symptom of difficulty but the crucible through which agency was activated.

The Anxious Learners demonstrates that a nascent academic identity can be forged in the midst of disillusionment. Starting with misplaced expectations and experiencing deep structural misalignments, participants encountered an identity void that left them anxious and vulnerable. Through reflexive dialogue and adaptive action, they gradually reestablished themselves as independent and critically conscious researchers. Their agency was not an inherent trait but an emergent outcome of struggle, recalibration, and strategic survival. In this sense, their identity-making affirms that self-formation is often born in contradiction. It is rather the structural constraints' painful collision with personal expectations that compels MCDS to become more agentic within the supercomplex Hong Kong HE context.

7.4 The Strategic Player (Rainie, David, Mike, Jane, and Emily)

The Strategic Player represents a nascent academic identity formed through realistic considerations, pragmatic adaptability, and flexible self-positioning. Unlike Independent Explorers driven by intrinsic aspirations, or Anxious Learners who struggle with uncertainty, Strategic Players deliberately treat the PhD as a career

game: one defined by rules, outcomes, and competition. Their orientation is less about romanticising intellectual pursuits than strategic manoeuvring—they comply with institutional norms where necessary, yet also exercise agency to secure concrete outcomes, such as increasing publications, recognition, and employability.

This identity emerges at the intersection of compliance and calculation, embodying a hybrid positioning. These participants are outwardly aligned with institutional expectations, yet inwardly reflexive about its purpose, limits, and future direction.

7.4.1 Initial Motivation and Expectation

Strategic Players entered doctoral study with a sober recognition that academic careers are increasingly performance-based and precarious. Their motivations were therefore framed less in terms of pursuing intellectual nourishment, but more so as an investment. For them, doctoral study is a vehicle for mobility, qualification, and credibility in the competitive academic labour market. David recognised this pragmatic starting point clearly:

The PhD, for me, was never just about doing research for fun. It's a step for my academic career. If I want to move up, I need to understand how the system works and play accordingly.

This mindset reflects what Marginson (2014) calls a strategic orientation to self-formation, where doctoral candidates engage in reflexive calculation rather than pure passion. For Rainie, this meant consciously balancing ideals and realities:

I knew from the beginning that if I want to survive in academia, publications and networks were key. I cannot just follow what interests me. I have to balance my passion with what the system recognises.

These narratives suggest that Strategic Players' initial expectations already contained seedlings of tactical agency. Rather than being later "pushed" into strategic behaviour by external pressures, they entered with the anticipation of constraint, which laid the foundation for a calculative identity trajectory.

7.4.2 Perception of Structural Constraints

Hong Kong's doctoral system is deeply embedded in a neoliberal performative culture—where visibility, productivity, and metrics dominate evaluations. For Strategic Players, such constraints were not surprising disruptions but expected features of the field. What distinguishes them is how they instrumentalise conformity: treating compliance not as passive submission, but as a necessary tactic for survival and progress. Mike explained this bluntly:

In our research group, there's an unspoken rule that you must publish three papers before your supervisor will approve your thesis defense and graduation... It saves time and helps you adjust your mindset from the beginning.

Here, conformity is reframed as early adaptation—learning the rules quickly rather than resisting them. Jane echoed this sense of pressure:

My supervisor has clear expectations for my publication output. But publishing a paper isn't something that can be done in just a month or two, so most of my

pressure later on came from trying to meet his expectations for research outcomes and getting my work published.

Her experience highlights how demands from the supervisor become proxies for institutional norms, shaping identity not only through intellectual development but also routinised task orientation.

At a more structural level, Rainie's reflection shows how Strategic Players contextualise constraints historically and culturally:

As a place situated between East and West, it's influenced by both cultures...
Even if you don't fully agree with the system, you still have to adapt to the rules of the game. That's the reality.

This indicates that constraints are not merely external burdens; they are internalised reference points, shaping how students calibrate their academic expectations and choices.

7.4.3 Agency Enactment

Strategic Players do not exercise agency as a source of resistance or open defiance. Instead, agency takes the form of calculated manoeuvring within limits. They view academia as a structured field (Bourdieu, 1988), where success depends not on idealism but on knowing how to navigate between opportunities and constraints strategically. David exemplified this by strategically shifting research direction:

In pure biology, it's unrealistic to expect fast results... So I've learned from one of my engineering supervisors and gradually shifted my research from pure to applied science. This makes it easier to publish and apply for grants. Still, I won't let myself become an 'academic garbage producer.' Therefore, choosing an interdisciplinary research path is also part of my strategy.

Here, his agency manifests as boundary-crossing—repositioning himself between disciplines to meet external demands while preserving intellectual integrity. Emily framed her agency in terms of securing legitimacy through performance:

If I can publish a paper in a reputable journal, it shows that I've passed the strict review process... If I can publish more than one paper in highly ranked journals, that proves it's not just luck. It shows my academic capability.

Rather than seeing output as empty compliance, she reframes it as a symbolic marker of belonging and competence. This resonates with Mike's view of publications as an "entry ticket" into academic conversations. Together, these accounts illustrate a strategic reframing of external demands into personal milestones, demonstrating that agency can operate even within the confines of compliance.

7.4.4 Identity Self-Formation

Over time, Strategic Players' self-formation crystallises into a hybridised identity that is simultaneously compliant, reflexive, and tactical. They remain in the game, albeit aware of its structuredness. Their identity is therefore both anchored in output and sustained by reflexivity, making them neither naïve conformists nor cynical outsiders.

Rainie described this hybridity as conscious cultural navigation:

Right now, my approach is to absorb the strengths of both cultures while learning how to navigate the system. I feel like I'm living an 'in-between' identity.

Her narrative demonstrates what Dai et al. (2024) refer to as an “in-between” position—grounded in the rules yet maintaining an interpretive distance from them.

Mike's reflection on recognition through publication reinforces this:

For me, the key identity marker of an early career academic is publication and citation... That's like my 'entry ticket' or 'name card' into the academic community.

Taken together, Strategic Players' identity trajectory reflects pragmatic self-formation. Their academic selves are shaped not through uncritical compliance or outright resistance, but through calibrated engagement with structures, where conformity is a tactic, agency is strategic, and identity is flexible.

In sum, the Strategic Player type highlights how MCDS in Hong Kong actively reshape themselves through calculated engagement with the system. Rather than being overwhelmed by external structures or consumed by inner anxiety, they adopt a pragmatic stance that allows them to comply with institutional demands while retaining a degree of reflexivity and agency. Their strategies—whether shifting disciplines, treating output as symbolic markers of belonging, or embracing an “in-between” positioning—illustrate how doctoral identity is forged at the crossroads of constraint and choice. The Strategic Player thus embodies a hybrid mode of self-

formation, one that is simultaneously outcome-oriented and critically aware, revealing how early academic identities can be sustained in neoliberal, metrics-driven environments without collapsing into either blind conformity or outright resistance.

7.5 The Inspired Humanist (Yuki, Georgia)

Unlike participants who prioritise research output (Strategic Player) or intellectual adventure (Independent Explorer), the Inspired Humanist represents a form of academic identity that is relationally grounded, ethically reflexive, and value-oriented. These participants construct their academic selves through a strong sense of purpose, often tied to humanistic, moral, or community- and service-centred ideals. Their understanding of scholarship is often shaped by meaningful interpersonal relationships, such as mentorship encounters and life experiences, that emphasise empathy, responsibility, and reflection.

For them, being an academic is not only about knowing, but about becoming a better person and helping others do the same. This aligns with Henkel's (2000) conceptualisation of academic identity as part of a continuing sense of self, in which professional and personal dimensions are deeply intertwined.

7.5.1 Initial Motivation and Expectation

The Inspired Humanists' identity trajectories were grounded in a blend of structural opportunities, personal value-seeking, and crucially, interpersonal relationships.

Unlike other types whose motivations leaned heavily on either external incentives or

internal intellectual drive, the Humanists demonstrated how relational contexts shaped both the decision to pursue a doctorate and their subsequent academic selves.

For Georgia, the decision to pursue doctoral studies in Hong Kong reflected more than just professional ambition or financial calculation. While the scholarship was an important enabler, her choice was also relationally anchored. The prospect of studying in the same city as her partner provided a powerful layer of emotional support and stability. This relational consideration, intertwined with her personal desire for intellectual growth, reinforced a sense of purpose that was both pragmatic and affective.

Yuki's trajectory illustrates a different but equally relational dynamic. Her eventual decision to accept a doctoral offer was catalysed not only by structural chance but also by the trust and encouragement of a supervisor who sought her out and believed in her potential. This interpersonal connection transformed what could have been a pragmatic career decision into a moment of profound significance, reframed by Yuki as a turning point that set her on a path of personal transformation:

When my prospective supervisor reached out, it felt like more than just an opportunity — it was someone recognising me at the right moment. Without that encouragement, I might have turned away from a PhD. It gave me a sense that I was stepping into this path with someone's trust behind me.

These narratives suggest that for Inspired Humanists, motivation is not reducible to structural incentives or individual aspirations alone. Instead, it emerges in the

interplay between values and relationships, where supportive figures—such as partners, mentors, and supervisors—help participants reinterpret opportunities into meaningful journeys. Their initial choices thus became a relational foundation for identity work, framing the doctoral experience as a vehicle not only for academic progress but also for becoming more ethically attuned and socially responsible individuals.

7.5.2 Perception of Structural Constraints

Despite Hong Kong's broader neoliberal and metrics-driven academic environment, Inspired Humanists were able to construct micro-environments of care and purpose that buffered against structural pressures. Central to this process was mentorship.

Unlike participants who experienced their supervisors as distant evaluators or task-makers, both Yuki and Georgia described their supervisors as father-like figures who modelled care, integrity, and responsibility. These relationships offered stability and inspiration within otherwise competitive contexts.

What my supervisor valued was my sensitivity to social and life issues, and the depth of my thinking. That was the reason he accepted me into the programme. After I joined, he would often have open, wide-ranging conversations with me. He never saw my ideas as naive, and that made me feel truly seen, which was incredibly encouraging for me.....During my PhD, what I learned wasn't just how to publish papers, but how to do research and how to think deeply about life and society. To me, he is like a kind and caring father figure. (Georgia)

My supervisor is like a father to me. He cares not only about our academic progress but also about our well-being and mental health. He carries a sense of authority, but he's also very thoughtful. For example, when some of our peers were self-funded PhD students, he quietly helped them apply for financial support without making a fuss. Even though he has administrative responsibilities, he always responds to us promptly and puts students first. Our entire research group feels like one big family. He sets an example for us—not just in academia, but also in how to be a good person. (Yuki)

These mentorship experiences provided protective counter-spaces within the wider competitive system, allowing participants to hold on to their values even while acknowledging the structural weight of performance norms. Their academic identity thus took shape not in opposition to structures, but through selective engagement with supportive micro-contexts, relationally sustained.

7.5.2 Agency Enactment

Inspired Humanists embody a form of morally anchored agency—the conscious decision to align one's academic practices with the values of empathy, contribution, and relational care (MacIntyre, 1999). Their agency, to some extent, is enacted by meaningful relationships, such as the affirmation of trusted supervisors, peers, and partners. These meaningful relationships enabled them to confirm the value and priorities they brought over competing ones. Yuki's reflection vividly illustrates this point:

I believe that the formation of my academic identity is shaped through a combination of both external and internal recognition... I care about whether my work can genuinely contribute to the field of education and to broader society.

Here, internal recognition is not purely individualistic but relationally mediated—her sense of worth emerges in dialogue with supervisors and others who validate her orientation toward meaningful contributions.

Similarly, Georgia’s commitment to “supporting students within her reach” shows how moral agency is enacted relationally. Her sense of responsibility was not abstract but rooted in the care modelled by her supervisor, which she sought to reproduce.

Everyone has their own capacity, and what we can do is make the most of our abilities. This perspective has had a profound impact on me. While many of my peers focus heavily on publishing and citations, I don’t hold tightly to those metrics. No matter how many papers I publish or where they take me, I’m committed to supporting students within my reach. I see that as a key part of the academic identity I aspire to build.

Georgia highlights that she now finds her own identity of making a meaningful impact, embracing more of a teacher’s identity within her academic identity, and helping others, thanks to her supervisors’ inspiration. In this sense, she believes that doing a doctorate is about discovering herself.

For both Yuki and Georgia, agency manifests as moral choice—a deliberate alignment of academic practices with personal values. Importantly, these choices were

nurtured and sustained through trusted relationships: encouragement from supervisors, affirmation from peers, and emotional support from partners. In this sense, *Inspired Humanists* demonstrate how agency in doctoral education can be relationally mediated, enabling the development of ethically resonant identities within constrained environments.

7.5.4 Identity Self-Formation

The self-formation of Inspired Humanists is relationally co-constructed through meaningful mentorship and value-driven practices. Like Independent Explorers who rely primarily on internal motivation, these participants emphasised relational affirmation and the co-construction of identity through relationships with significant others. Participants in this type embraced a more service-oriented academic identity (as mentioned by Georgia). Their identity is a self-formation process that showcases how significant others, such as supervisors or partners, can act as important mediators in confirming their identity to pursue contribution and meaning-making under the increasingly contested and competitive environment of the Hong Kong HE system. Their narratives also indicated the argument that academic identity is a socially embedded, relational process (McAlpine et al., 2010, 2013).

From a structural lens, Yuki and Georgia carved out micro-contexts of care and recognition within an otherwise competitive system. They enacted moral self-formation, prioritising becoming overachieving (Marginson, 2014, 2024). Georgia described this as “learning not just how to research, but how to live responsibly,”

while Yuki reflected that “my identity is inseparable from the relationships that guided me.”

This identity trajectory aligns with Burford and Hook’s (2019) notion of moral agency in doctoral education, where identity emerges not simply from meeting external demands but from cultivating inner integrity and relational ethics. For Inspired Humanists, becoming an academic was inseparable from becoming a better person within a network of meaningful relationship.

Table 7.1 MCDS’ Five Types of Nascent Academic Identity

Identity Type	Core Orientation	Initial Expectation	Structural Conditions	Forms of Agency	Self-formation of Identity	Participants
1. Independent Explorer	Intellectual independence, deep engagement with theory	Enter doctoral study with strong intrinsic motivation (intellectual curiosity and pursuit of knowledge for its own sake)	Loose supervision, conceptual freedom, under-defined structures	Resistance to structural pressure, self-driven pacing, reliance on reflexive internal dialogue	Form identity through autonomy and self-direction, embracing risks and uncertainty (“dancing with wolves”)	Jason, Lily, Bob
2. Anxious Learner	Struggles with expectations, growing self-reliance through adaptation	Expect clearer guidance and support from supervisors, hope for structured mentorship and step-by-step guidance	Conflicting mentorship styles, ambiguous expectations, lack of clarity	Gradual adaptation, emotional struggle as reflexive dialogue, learning to manage uncertainty	Identity formed through resilience, learning to navigate ambivalence, shifting from dependency to cautious self-reliance	Wendy, Tina, Kelly, Jasper
3. Strategic Player	Task-focused, product-oriented, structurally aligned	Initially motivated by pragmatic outcomes (scholarships, career advancement, building CV)	Strong supervisor control, bureaucratic emphasis, clearly defined performance goals	Strategic compliance, tactical adaptation, pursuit of tangible outputs (publications, jobs, funding)	Hybridised identity: balancing conformity to structural demands with selective agency to secure concrete outcomes	Mike, Jane, Emily, Rainie, David
4. Inspired Humanist	Purpose-driven, ethical, and reflective scholarly becoming	Motivated by both personal values and relational opportunities (partner’s choices, mentor’s invitation)	Supportive and values-based mentorship, relational supervision models	Exercising moral agency, prioritising contribution over competition, relational affirmation	Identity co-constructed through mentorship, relational ethics, and value-driven scholarship	Georgia, Yuki

7.6 Chapter Summary

Taken together, the four dominant trajectories of nascent academic identity among MCDS are Independent Explorer, Anxious Learner, Strategic Player, and Inspired Humanist (see **Table 7.1**). These distinctive academic identity trajectory types illustrate the diverse ways doctoral students negotiate the supercomplex Hong Kong HE context. While all participants are situated within the same structural environment, their identity formation trajectories diverge sharply depending on their initial motivations, their perception of structural constraints, and the forms of agency they enact.

The Independent Explorers stand out for their high level of reflexive agency, primarily driven by intrinsic intellectual curiosity. They experience relatively fewer structural pressures because their expectations of autonomy align partially well with Hong Kong's loosely structured doctoral system compared to Mainland China. By contrast, Anxious Learners encounter tension and emotional struggle in the face of ambiguous supervision and unclear expectations. Their academic identity emerges through early delimitation and adaptation, as they gradually shift from dependency to self-reliance. Strategic Players adopt a markedly pragmatic orientation, aligning their goals with institutional performance metrics and bureaucratic demands. While they often conform to structural controls, they also exercise tactical agency to secure tangible outcomes such as publications and career prospects. Their hybridised identity reflects both compliance and strategic calculation, showing flexibility in balancing

personal aims with external demands. Inspired Humanists, on the other hand, construct their identities primarily through value-driven and relational ethics. Their motivations are shaped by interpersonal ties—whether with partners or mentors—and their agency is expressed less through strategic manoeuvring than moral action and value-driven scholarship. For them, self-formation unfolds within micro-environments of care, in which supportive mentorship becomes a protective force against the broader neoliberal pressures of Hong Kong’s HE context.

These four types highlight the dynamic interplay between structure and agency in the formation of identity. Where Independent Explorers thrive on autonomy, Anxious Learners struggle with a lack of clarity; where Strategic Players gamify the system, Inspired Humanists humanise it through relational commitment. Together, they demonstrate that academic identity is not a singular or linear process but a plural and situated negotiation—sometimes resistant, sometimes adaptive, sometimes strategic, and sometimes relationally co-constructed. This typology underscores that nascent academic identity formation among MCDS is deeply heterogeneous, reflecting both personal dispositions and the uneven terrains of the Hong Kong context.

Chapter 8: Discussion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an in-depth discussion of the findings presented in the previous chapters, focusing on how MCDS navigate and construct their nascent academic identities within Hong Kong's supercomplex HE context. Drawing on an integrated theoretical framework—Archer's (2003) structure-agency interplay, Marginson's (2014, 2024) theory of self-formation, and McAlpine et al.'s (2010, 2013) identity-trajectory model—this chapter conceptualises identity formation as a dynamic, relational, and agency-driven process. This chapter is structured around four identity types empirically derived from the participants' experiences: Independent Explorers, Anxious Learners, Strategic Players, and Inspired Humanists. Each type forms a separate section (Sections 8.2 to 8.5); within each, the discussion is organised into four dimensions: initial motivation, structural constraints, forms of agency, and processes of self-formation. This enables a nuanced, theory-informed analysis that integrates participant experiences with current scholarly literature. Section 8.6 presents a critical discussion of the theoretical framework adopted in this study, highlighting the contributions to the development of the theory made possible by the findings of this study. It also focuses on the theoretical insights that this study concludes, comparing them to existing literature. Finally, section 8.7 provides a comprehensive conclusion of this chapter.

8.2 Independent Explorers: Autonomy and Risk

The Independent Explorer represents a distinct academic identity among MCDS, characterised primarily by intellectual autonomy and self-directed inquiry. Their academic identity is constructed less through external guidance than their own reflexive processes and intrinsic motivation. This group shows that MCDS' self-formation in Hong Kong's HE context involves courage, risk-taking, and the ability to treat uncertainty as part of academic becoming.

Independent Explorers enter their doctoral studies with strong intrinsic motivations prior to their doctoral study. They behold curiosity, personal growth, and a commitment to advancing knowledge as central to their academic goals. Jason explained his journey as “dancing with wolves,” a metaphor that conveys both the risk and excitement of stepping into uncharted intellectual territory. Lily entered with a desire to connect scholarship to social contribution, while Bob was motivated by the intellectual elegance of mathematics rather than by career advancement.

These findings contrast with economically driven explanations found in neoliberal discourses, which frame doctoral motivation primarily in terms of human capital development and outcome-based rewards (Robertson, 2005). The Independent Explorers in this study reflect an alternative pattern. Their initial motivations align with McAlpine et al.'s (2010, 2013) theory of identity trajectories, which views doctoral study as a long-term project shaped by personal meaning. Therefore, their

identity trajectories rely more on internal dialogue than external scaffolding (Archer, 1995). Their examples suggest that doctoral students may construct their academic identity through serious reflection on personal values, even when external incentives are limited. These findings contrast with most of the “South-North” mobility literature, where Chinese doctoral students’ motivations for pursuing their doctoral studies in Western “core” countries are primarily centred on academic prestige (Yang et al., 2017), research opportunities (Zhou, 2015), and immigration (Zhang et al., 2021; Zhou, 2015).

8.2.2 Loose Structures and Supercomplex Contexts

The Explorers’ orientation was reinforced, but also tested, by the loose supervisory and institutional structures of Hong Kong’s doctoral programmes. Participants in this type experienced supervisory styles characterised by facilitative (e.g., Bob and Lily) or hands-off (e.g., Jason) approaches, which allowed them to exercise autonomy. This finding partially aligns with existing studies highlighting the role of collegial and egalitarian supervisor-supervisee relationships in facilitating doctoral students’ successful dissertation completion and their development of strong academic identities during doctoral training (Belcher, 1994; Wang & Li, 2011; Weng, 2020). In this study, however, as all three participants entered their doctoral programmes driven by more intrinsic motivations, they exercised a higher level of agency from the beginning, compared to other types. For these participants, their initial desire for autonomy is stronger, which led them to depend less on their supervisors (especially

in Jason's case). However, loose supervision could also expose them to the pressures of Hong Kong's broader managerial culture, where deadlines, confirmation requirements, and performance expectations are strongly enforced (Mok & Xiong, 2022). This also creates tension between their inner will and the external assessment system.

Barnett's (2000) concept of supercomplexity helps explain this tension.

Independent Explorers faced multiple and competing academic discourses, including originality, productivity, disciplinary rigour, and interdisciplinary exploration. They were required to navigate these discourses without clear guidance. For some, this freedom necessitated intellectual risk-taking (e.g., Jason). For others, it intensified feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability (e.g., Lily and Bob). In both cases, the loose structures served less as a direct support mechanism than a context in which students had to continually reframe ambiguity as an opportunity for growth.

8.2.3 Reflexive Agency and Intellectual Resistance

From the agency perspective, the Independent Explorers exercised their agency through sustained reflexivity. They questioned the meaning of their work, evaluated the pressures they faced, and made deliberate choices to protect their intellectual values. As Archer (2003) notes, reflexivity embodies continuous self-evaluation, 'like a conscience' (Archer, 2003, p. 26).

Jason resisted the pressure to submit a rushed proposal, choosing instead to postpone his proposal defense to produce higher-quality work. Bob dismissed the

need for “useful” outputs in favour of disciplinary purity, adhering to principles and the inherent logic of mathematics. Lily confronted self-doubt but eventually reframed her work as meaningful through its contribution to frontline social services.

These examples illustrate a form of reflexive agency (Archer, 2003; Marginson, 2023) expressed as intellectual resistance to external demands. This is significant because most studies describe Chinese doctoral students as struggling under supervisory and institutional pressures, who often perceive supervisors as authoritative, patriarchal figures who play a central guiding role in their academic journey (Jung, 2019; Xu, 2021). The Independent Explorers in this study provide an alternative account. They show that some students actively resist and reinterpret external pressures to preserve the depth and quality of their academic work. Their reflexivity is risk-tolerant, as they are willing to embrace uncertainty and delay recognition to practice their academic values.

8.2.4 Self-Formation as Intellectual Becoming

Through this process, the Independent Explorers form an academic identity anchored in intellectual independence. Their self-formation involves risk, reflexive questioning, and the selective use of structure. Jason emphasised epistemic courage, Lily transformed doubt into a socially meaningful contribution, and Bob reinforced disciplinary ethics over performance metrics. Their stories illustrate that self-formation is not a smooth process, but characterised by ongoing negotiation between personal values and structural pressures (Marginson, 2023). All three participants

received relatively limited direct guidance from their supervisors, yet still formed a strong, intellectually driven academic identity. This finding, to some extent, also diverges from the conventional emphasis on the supervisor's central role in doctoral education (Gardner, 2008; Green, 2005).

This pattern extends Marginson's (2014, 2024) self-formation theory by showing that uncertainty and risk are not simply barriers to be managed, but also productive conditions for becoming. It also provides a nuanced understanding of McAlpine et al.'s (2010, 2013) identity trajectory framework by demonstrating that trajectories may be sustained through inner reflexive dialogue rather than continuous support from supervisors or peers. Finally, it challenges the deficit framing of Chinese students as dependent or passive knowledge receivers who need to "adjust" to host cultural norms (e.g., as noted in Ploner & Nada, 2020; Wilczewski & Alon, 2023). The Independent Explorers demonstrate that doctoral students from Mainland China can be highly agentic, deeply reflexive, and willing to embrace academic risk as a central aspect of their identity development (Marginson, 2014, 2023, 2024).

In summary, the Independent Explorer represents a highly agentic type, showing that academic identity can be shaped most significantly by intrinsic motivation and reflexive agency (Marginson, 2024). The complex structure in Hong Kong's doctoral programmes both enables autonomy and exposes students to pressure. Independent Explorers respond to these conditions by reframing risk as part of their academic

journey, developing identities grounded in intellectual independence and meaning-making rather than in compliance with institutional metrics.

8.3 Anxious Learners: Negotiating Ambiguity through Struggle

The second academic identity type, as identified in this study, is the Anxious Learner.

This type demonstrates how doctoral identity can emerge through early frustration, emotional struggle, and gradual adaptation. MCDS in this type began their programmes with strong expectations for structured guidance and close supervisory support. When confronted with ambiguous or inconsistent supervisory practices, they experienced anxiety and self-doubt. Through ongoing negotiation, they eventually developed a more resilient and cautious approach to academic self-formation.

8.3.1 Expectations and Supervisory Misalignment

Many Anxious Learners entered doctoral programmes with high expectations of receiving structured doctoral training, expecting their supervisors to provide step-by-step guidance in reaching milestones. This expectation may reflect their prior educational experiences in China, where supervisory relationships are often characterised by a directive and hierarchical approach (Li, 2016; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Tian & Lowe, 2018). Hong Kong institutions, however, influenced by previous British academic cultural legacy (Lo, 2018; Ruan, 2024), present MCDS with looser structures and sometimes contradictory practices that contrast students' previous educational experiences in Mainland China (Jia & Yeung, 2023; Yu & Zhang, 2016;

Xu, 2018a). This gap between expectation and reality created uncertainty and undermined their initial confidence.

This form of supervisory misalignment has been documented in studies on international doctoral students, where a lack of shared expectations often leads to early struggles in doctoral trajectories, highlighting how mismatches in expectations between supervisors and students can lead to tensions, isolation, and marginalisation (Doyle et al., 2017; Elliott & Kobayashi, 2018; Hu et al., 2020; Manathunga, 2011; Xu, 2023). However, unlike much of the existing literature, which focuses on intercultural supervision in Western contexts, the expectation-experience mismatch (e.g., Wendy) took place within an intra-country Chinese setting. Wendy's case reflects a form of intercultural miscommunication and supervisory tension between a Hong Kong professor and a mainland Chinese student, revealing that such dynamics can also emerge within shared national boundaries when regional academic cultures differ (Jia & Yeung, 2023).

8.3.2 Structural Constraints and the Experience of Ambiguity

Given the initial misaligned expectations, the Anxious Learners further encountered structural constraints within the unique educational system of Hong Kong. Their expectations of directive supervision collided with an actual supervisory culture in Hong Kong (Wang & Woo, 2025). For instance, in the case of *Wendy-Anxious Learner* and *Jasper-Anxious Learner*, their supervisors provided broad directions or shifting requirements rather than step-by-step guidance. This inconsistency generated

uncertainty about academic standards and blurred the criteria for progress. As a result, students often felt they were working in a vacuum, unsure whether their efforts met expectations.

These supervisory conditions reflect broader structural features of doctoral education in Hong Kong, where institutions encourage international competitiveness but provide limited formalised structures for doctoral support (Ruan, 2024). The lack of codified milestones or transparent expectations means that the quality of the doctoral journey depends heavily on individual supervisors. For students socialised in systems where rules and hierarchies are more straightforward, this flexible model can feel like a structural void rather than an opportunity for autonomy (Li & Seale, 2007; Tian & Lowe, 2018).

The ambiguity of supervisory practices also created power asymmetries. Without clear institutional guidelines, supervisors' expectations could constantly shift, and students had little recourse to negotiate these changes. This resonates with Bourdieu's (1988) observation of academic fields as hierarchical spaces where power is unequally distributed. For Anxious Learners, unclear rules aggravated their reliance on supervisors' judgments and feelings of insecurity. This finding aligns with studies suggesting that a well-managed hierarchical supervisor-supervisee relationship is sometimes favoured by Chinese students, as it can help them adapt to academic practices and positively support the development of their academic identity (Bao et al., 2024; Li, 2017).

In addition, structural constraints extended beyond the supervisor–supervisee relationship. Bureaucratic requirements, such as frequent progress reports and rigid timelines for confirmation, increased students’ stress rather than providing assurance (e.g., *Kelly-Anxious Learner* and *Jasper-Anxious Learner*). The pressure to publish in high-impact journals, an institutional demand in Hong Kong’s neoliberal academic environment (Lo & Hou, 2019; Mok, 2020), further deepened students’ anxiety. When coupled with weak supervisory support, these institutional structures created double pressure: students were accountable to institutional performance metrics, yet lacked the guidance to achieve them.

Confronted with these constraints, the Anxious Learners often described themselves as being “lost” or “stuck.” Their struggle and reflexive questioning were not signs of inherent weakness but outcomes of institutional ambiguity. In this sense, their eventual adaptation demonstrates how agency is forged within and against structural barriers, aligning with Marginson’s (2014, 2024) view of self-formation as a socially situated process that can heighten agency.

8.3.3 Agency of Resilience

The Anxious Learners gradually shifted from dependence on supervisors to cautious self-reliance. This process was uneven and slow. They did not suddenly become independent; instead, they learned through cycles of disappointment, reflection, and incremental adjustment. This trajectory is consistent with Cotterall’s (2013) and

Pappa et al.'s (2020) view that doctoral identity development is non-linear, shaped by moments of rupture and reorientation.

Their adaptation also illustrates Marginson's (2014, 2024) theory of self-formation. Self-formation is never a matter of complete autonomy; it emerges within and against structures. For these students, their self-formation took place within constrained conditions of limited supervisory support and institutional ambiguity. Through reflexive effort, they reconfigured their expectations and gradually claimed agency of resilience (Ye & Edwards, 2017). In this sense, their resilience was an active form of self-formation. It shows how individuals can generate capacity even when structural resources are weak. These findings also resonate with Anderson (2015), who found that resilience is not a fixed personal trait but a relational and affective process of adaptation, mobilised as a mode of governing uncertainty.

Other studies similarly suggest that doctoral persistence often depends on resilience and the ability to create meaning out of uncertainty (Gardner, 2008; Pyhältö et al., 2012; Peltonen et al., 2017). The Anxious Learners add to this scholarship by showing that resilience is not only psychological but also relational and structural. It arises from the ability to recalibrate expectations of supervision, to learn to tolerate ambiguity, and to negotiate one's own path within unstable conditions.

8.3.4 Self-formation as Resilient Survivors

Ultimately, the Anxious Learners developed identities that were cautious, resilient, and shaped by their struggles. They did not become boldly independent, nor did they

remain passive recipients of supervision. Instead, they learned to cope with ambiguity and move forward with guarded confidence. This finding also challenges deficit narratives that portray Chinese students as uncritical or dependent (Halic et al., 2009; Wu & Hammond, 2011). While they did experience dependency issues and self-doubt, these experiences set the foundation for resilience and cautious self-reliance. This echoes Marginson's (2024) argument that the self-formation of mobile students is often triggered by exposure to novel environments, where they must renegotiate their relationship with structural conditions and strive to adapt within those contexts.

Theoretically, this type demonstrates how self-formation is not always heroic or self-assured. It may emerge through experiences of fragility, anxiety, and adaptation (Kudaibergenov, 2023; Marginson, 2023). It also highlights that doctoral identity trajectories are diverse. Some students develop autonomy from the outset, while others gain it only after long periods of struggle. By foregrounding the Anxious Learners, this study shows that identity can be forged throughout the tension between dependency and adaptation, and that resilience itself is a valid form of agency (Mu, 2020).

8.4 Strategic Players: Structural Alignment and Pragmatic Adaptation

The Strategic Players represent a group of students whose academic identities were formed in close alignment with structural expectations. Their initial motivations were mixed and relatively pragmatic, centred on securing scholarships (e.g., Emily), advancing their careers (e.g., David and Rainie), and producing tangible outputs like

publications (e.g., Mike and Jane). Unlike the Independent Explorers or Inspired Humanists, they were less concerned with intellectual autonomy or relational care. Instead, they developed strategies that aligned more closely with institutional rules and performance metrics.

8.4.1 Pursuing Doctoral Study as Career Capital

Strategic Players entered their doctoral journey with motivations that were shaped by clear goals. David described the doctoral degree as a step in an academic ladder that requires visible performance at each stage. This orientation reflects what McAlpine et al. (2013) describe as “project-driven trajectories,” where students view their doctoral training as a means to build credentials and career capital rather than an end in itself

In contrast to Independent Explorers who pursued knowledge for its own sake, Strategic Players were more motivated by tangible returns that could be measured and leveraged in competitive academic and professional environments. Their motivation, although seemingly driven by external rewards, was rooted in a highly personalised vision of growth. As Tomlinson (2013) and Leonard et al. (2005) suggest, career-centred decisions may reflect deeper aspirations for self-actualisation, autonomy, and meaningful contribution. In this sense, what may appear as “external” motivations were often infused with personal narratives of agency and self-definition.

This finding aligns with research in other contexts, which shows that many doctoral students, especially those studying abroad, regard the PhD as a vehicle for upward mobility and a gateway to secure academic or professional positions (Yang et

al., 2017; Zhou, 2015; Zhang, 2021). In Hong Kong, where academic jobs are highly competitive and tied to measurable outputs, students' pragmatic expectations were reinforced from the outset by the strong emphasis on scholarships, international rankings, and publication requirements (Horta & Li, 2023). Recent work on peer comparison and market pressures among Chinese doctoral cohorts helps to explain this anticipatory positioning (Horta & Li, 2023; Jia & Yeung, 2023).

8.4.2 Navigating Prescriptive and Performance-Oriented Structures

After enrolment, Strategic Players encountered supervisory regimes and institutional processes that were prescriptive and output-driven. Several students reported that supervisors set target journals, timelines, and quantified expectations for publications. Mike summarised his group's "unspoken rule": three journal articles were expected before the supervisor would approve the thesis for defense. Jane described sustained pressure tied to her supervisor's publication timetable. These conditions reflect Hong Kong's academic metrics culture and modern managerialism (Bray & Koo, 2004), which intersect with Barnett's (2000) supercomplexity, exposing students to multiple performance discourses simultaneously—speed, quantity, quality, and international visibility.

Structural constraints also appeared in the contradictions across institutional, departmental, and interdisciplinary levels. For example, participants like Rainie and David, who are both enrolled in interdisciplinary fields, encountered similar struggles and confusion when doing disciplinary research that sometimes creates contradictions

and tensions. These tensions, exemplified through divergent disciplinary expectations, distinct mentoring styles, and varying research paradigms, significantly shape their academic identity. As Henkel (2000) suggested, academic identity is primarily influenced by disciplinary identity and norms. Current studies also criticise that scholars who engage in interdisciplinary activities are unable to frame problems in ways that invite an integrative approach while resonating with an interdisciplinary audience (Boix Mansilla & Duraising, 2007). Moreover, given the university's disciplinary structure and the nature of faculty socialisation, cultivating an interdisciplinary environment for doctoral students is a challenging task (Holley, 2015). These studies help explain why Rainie and David, both from interdisciplinary fields, eventually aligned more closely with the disciplinary identity that best resonated with their academic aspirations. Beyond interdisciplinary tensions, participants also encountered policy contradictions between the institution and the department. For example, Mike experienced heavy pressure from his supervisor's strict publication expectations in engineering, which he perceived as disciplinary norms. In contrast, Tina (Anxious Learner) and Georgia (Inspired Humanist) from the business field experienced more positive misalignments, as their departments offered flexibility that acknowledged disciplinary-specific needs, easing institutional pressures and supporting their development.

These narratives suggest that academic identity formation is deeply tied to recognition within one's disciplinary community (Henkel, 2000). When

contradictions arise between broader university policies and departmental or disciplinary expectations, students tend to prioritise the latter, as these are more directly aligned with the norms of their fields. This finding aligns with prior research, which demonstrates that disciplinarity and disciplinary boundaries remain central to academic identity formation, even in universities that increasingly emphasise institutionalised interdisciplinarity (Pifer & Baker, 2016; Simula & Scott, 2021; Trowler, 2012).

8.4.3 Tactical Agency Through Strategic Compliance

In terms of agency enactment, previous studies have intensively criticised the neoliberal and managerialist approach adopted in modern universities, which is increasingly harming academics as well as doctoral students' agency as it reduces autonomy and freedom, and leads to a precarious academic identity (Clegg, 2008, 2011; Crutchley et al., 2024). In this study, Strategic Players represent a type that mostly aligns with the neoliberal approach; however, they do not necessarily lack agency. Instead, they displayed "strategic" agency through careful calculation and selective alignment with the institutional norms. Emily explained that publishing in high-ranking journals signalled capability because it met recognised standards; she prioritised tasks that increased her visibility in that system. David shifted from a pure to an applied orientation because the latter enabled faster publication and better grant prospects, which still allowed him to preserve basic intellectual integrity. Scholars have argued that the neoliberal model has not erased students' broader possibilities for

subjectification, but has subordinated and obscured them, particularly in the eyes of governments and institutions (Marginson, 2024; Tomlinson, 2022).

The Strategic Players' practices also illustrate Archer's (2003) reflexivity in action, with deliberation directed toward feasible means under existing constraints. Agency is not expressed through overt resistance in this case. It is expressed through tactical compliance, which preserves momentum and builds symbolic recognition within the evaluative system that students inhabit.

Marginson's (2014; 2024) account of self-formation helps explain why this alignment remains agentic. Students act within structures and shape themselves toward imagined futures. Strategic Players judged that visible outputs would unlock opportunities, so they oriented their work to those signals. McAlpine and Amundsen (2009) similarly note that identity work is negotiated across personal projects, relationships, and structural contexts. In these cases, the personal project of securing future positions was closely tied to institutional logics surrounding publication and confirmation, and students organised their practices accordingly.

8.4.4 Self-formation through Strategic Engagement

Over time, Strategic Players formed hybrid identities that combined personal ambition with institutional scripts. Mike treated the "three papers" norm as a roadmap rather than a burden because it conferred legitimacy in his field. Jane equated timely outputs with becoming a "real" early-career academic. This identity work aligns with Marginson's (2023) self-formation, as students craft selves in relation to systems of

recognition, not in isolation from them. It also aligns with McAlpine et al.'s (2020, 2013) trajectory model, as the doctoral project is continuously recalibrated against structural signals and turning points.

This pathway has clear benefits. Students gain entry to networks, achieve recognisable milestones, and accumulate credentials that matter in competitive markets (Horta & Li, 2023; Jia & Yeung, 2023). Unsurprisingly, there are underlying costs. Several participants acknowledged that they avoided riskier questions or slower designs which may take longer time to finish because rapid publication was the safer route. That trade-off matters for the longer arc of scholarly imagination. Clegg (2008) and Archer (2008) warn that performativity can reshape academic subjectivities. Tülübaş and Göktürk (2020) add that metricised environments can constrain the meanings attached to academic work. The current study nuances those critiques.

Strategic Players were not passive recipients of performativity; they actively constructed identities through compliance because it advanced their aims. The finding is therefore double-edged. Strategic compliance delivered short-term gains and a coherent early academic identity, while also narrowing the space for intellectual improvisation. Recognising both sides clarifies how structure and agency intertwine in the formation of early academic selves among MCDS in Hong Kong.

8.5 Inspired Humanists: Relational Ethics and Value-Driven Becoming

The Inspired Humanists represent a final type of MCDS whose academic identity formation was shaped by personal values, moral responsibilities, and strong

interpersonal relationships. Unlike other types who navigated their doctoral journey through strategic planning, instrumental goals, or reactive resistance, Inspired Humanists characterised a deep sense of ethical commitment and a desire to make meaningful contributions to community and society. Their academic paths were often initiated or sustained through significant others—such as mentors or partners—whose encouragement and recognition played a central role in shaping their trajectories. Despite the challenges of a competitive and performative academic culture in Hong Kong, these students managed to cultivate a scholarly identity grounded in care, inner cultivation, relational ethics, and integrity. This identity type draws attention to the affective and moral dimensions of doctoral education, expanding current understandings of agency and identity in internationalised contexts.

8.5.1 Values and Relationships as Catalysts for Doctoral Pursuit

Inspired Humanists entered doctoral study with motivations that were deeply relational and value-oriented. Unlike other types, who were primarily driven by instrumental or intellectual goals, these students viewed the doctorate as a means to make a broader contribution to society, or as a path aligned with their personal ethical commitments. Georgia, for instance, was encouraged by a mentor who recognised her potential, which shaped her decision to pursue a doctorate, even though it was not initially part of her plan. Yuki's path was similarly shaped by life circumstances and the opportunity to pursue a more meaningful academic life matching her personal values. These narratives echo McAlpine et al.'s (2013) findings that motivations are

not always careerist or intellectual, but can be deeply connected to life histories, relationships, and values.

Inspired Humanists' entry into academia was often unforeseen or emergent, shaped by relational encounters rather than strategic planning. This challenges conventional assumptions in the literature that student motivations can be reduced to either extrinsic or intrinsic binaries (Zhou, 2015; Kim, 2016). Instead, the findings support the view that doctoral motivation is contextually situated and often shaped by personal values and relational networks (Cotterall, 2015; Gopaul, 2011).

8.5.2 Structural Conditions and the Space for Care

Inspired Humanists experienced supportive and relatively flexible structural conditions, particularly through mentorship. Their supervisors often modelled care, ethical responsibility, and academic integrity. Georgia experienced a balance of distance and encouragement from her supervisor, who offered her the space to explore ideas while remaining available when needed. Yuki similarly benefited from a mentoring relationship characterised by trust and autonomy, which allowed her to manage her academic journey independently. These supportive structures helped mitigate the effects of Hong Kong's otherwise competitive and metric-driven academic environment.

While literature on doctoral education often highlights the negative impact of performative pressures (Clegg, 2008; Archer, 2008; Tülibas & Göktürk, 2020), this group illustrates that alternative supervisory relationships can create micro-

environments of care (Hughes, 2022). Within these relational structures, students found affirmation, purpose, and space to explore their academic identities in non-instrumental ways. This contributes to Marginson's (2014) theory of self-formation by demonstrating how structures can also nurture moral agency, rather than merely constrain or enable instrumental advancement.

8.5.3 Moral Agency and Reflexive Praxis

The agency exercised by Inspired Humanists was primarily moral and reflexive in nature. Rather than resisting or complying with institutional expectations, these students interpreted their actions through ethical lenses. Georgia, for instance, placed a higher value on relational connection and social awareness than on competitive metrics of success. She viewed her academic journey as an opportunity to develop her sensitivity to social and human issues. Yuki focused on pursuing topics that genuinely interested her, resisting the pressure to follow academic trends purely for instrumental gain. Their agency, while less visibly disruptive, was quietly subversive. It resisted dominant norms through value-based priorities and relational ethics.

This morally anchored agency can be traced to the Confucian cultural heritage (CHC), where values such as collectivism, self-cultivation, and the desire to learn have long shaped the educational ideology of Chinese students (Li, 2012; Yang, 2022). The Confucian notion of “will” or “free will” resonates closely with the Anglophone concept of “agency” (Yang, 2022). The Inspired Humanist type offers a vivid example of this Chinese agency, where action is guided less by expediency and

more by ethical evaluation and contribution to society (Hayhoe & Liu, 2010). While much of the existing literature on doctoral students' agency highlights strategic or resistant forms (Amundsen & McAlpine, 2009; Pifer & Baker, 2016), this study underscores the significance of ethical reflexivity and value-driven decision-making. Inspired Humanists exemplify an agency that is affective, relational, and grounded in moral values.

8.5.4 Self-Formation through Relational Ethics

The identity formation of Inspired Humanists was a co-constructed and ethically infused process. Their academic selves emerged not solely from personal effort, but ongoing relational dialogue and value-based practice. Georgia viewed her doctoral experience as an opportunity to cultivate personal responsibility and moral growth alongside academic development. Yuki expressed that her academic journey contributed to her personal growth, enabling her to understand herself better through scholarly engagement.

These narratives align with McAlpine et al.'s (2013) identity-trajectory model, which highlights the importance of relational and affective dimensions in doctoral identity development. They also extend Marginson's (2014, 2024) concept of self-formation by showing that becoming is not merely an individual project of advancement but can be an ethically driven, relationally mediated process. In Barnett's (2000) terms, the Inspired Humanists are navigating supercomplexity not by imposing certainty, but by leaning into ambiguity with ethical intentionality.

In sum, this identity type reveals a hopeful possibility within the competitive structures of internationalised doctoral education. Through strong mentorship and moral reflexivity, some students can construct scholarly identities rooted in care, responsibility, and ethical contribution. Their stories offer a valuable counter-narrative to the dominant discourses of productivity, competition, and strategic compliance that often shape doctoral education in neoliberal contexts, such as Hong Kong.

8.6 Revisiting the Theoretical Frameworks: Structure, Agency, and Identity

Considering the findings and discussions above, this section critically revisits the three core theoretical perspectives—Archer’s (1995, 2003) structure-agency theory, Marginson’s (2014, 2023, 2024) theory of self-formation, and McAlpine et al.’s (2010, 2013) identity trajectory theory. Framed by the integrated lens of multidimensional structure, agency, and temporality, the study extends, nuances, and in some cases challenges these frameworks by grounding them in the lived experience of MCDS navigating Hong Kong’s contested and intricate academic landscape.

8.6.1 Rethinking Structure

Archer’s (1995, 2003) morphogenetic theory of structure and agency offers a valuable framework for analytically distinguishing between structural conditions and individual agency, and examining how their interaction shapes identity formation. However, this study shows that for MCDS in Hong Kong, structures are not uniform or stable but rather multidimensional, layered, and often contradictory. As highlighted

in prior research, Hong Kong's HE system has been profoundly shaped by competing socio-cultural and political forces, producing a hybridised environment for students (Dai et al., 2024; Lo, 2018). Structures at the macro level (national policy and academic culture), meso level (institutional policies and disciplinary norms), and micro level (supervisory, peer, and family relations) interact recursively, generating tensions, contradictions, and unpredictability.

For instance, some *Anxious Learners* encountered contradictory supervisory norms and ambiguity between institutional and departmental expectations, highlighting how intricate structures in Hong Kong universities can produce a sense of instability. Meanwhile, *Strategic Players* experienced highly prescriptive expectations from supervisors, especially in STEM fields, which aligned with performance-based institutional logics but clashed with interdisciplinary goals broadly (High et al., 2024). These cases illustrate that structural forces at different levels may not always be uniform, and that doctoral students often need to navigate internal contradictions within and between structural levels—a complexity that Archer's (1995, 2003) original framework does not fully theorise.

These complexities resonate with Barnett's (2000) concept of supercomplexity, according to which knowledge production is shaped by competing values (originality versus productivity, autonomy versus accountability). The findings suggest that structure in transnational academic spaces must be understood as both enabling and disorienting, often offering autonomy in some domains while tightly regulating

others. Thus, the structural dimension of Archer's theory would benefit from incorporating this inter-level dynamism and cultural hybridity present in Hong Kong's global, postcolonial, cross-border context (Mok & Cheung, 2011; Ruan, 2024).

8.6.2 Diversifying Agency

The findings affirm Archer's (1995, 2003) concept of reflexivity and Marginson's (2023, 2024) notion of reflexive agency, particularly regarding how MCDS engaged in internal dialogue to evaluate their circumstances and craft their responses.

However, this study identifies diverse forms of agency that go beyond Archer's and Marginson's original concepts. For example, *Independent Explorers* exercised intellectual and curiosity-driven agency by prioritising epistemic integrity and resisting premature instrumentalisation. *Anxious Learners* gradually developed resilient agency, forged through emotional struggle and adaptive recalibration (Cotterall, 2013). *Strategic Players* displayed tactical and goal-oriented agency, aligning with institutional structures to maximise symbolic capital. *Inspired Humanists* demonstrated a moral and relational anchored agency grounded in interpersonal ethics and personal meaning, shaped by mentors and value-based practice.

This diversity complicates simplistic readings of agency as resistance or conformity. Instead, it supports Marginson's (2014, 2024) theory of self-formation, which sees agency as situated, negotiated, and shaped by imagined futures. However, Marginson's (2023) framework often privileges a notion of agency that is more

centred on autonomy. This study demonstrates that strategic and even compliance-based self-formation can still be agentic, particularly when students respond to structurally constrained environments with realistic awareness and intentionality.

Thus, the findings, to some extent, may extend Marginson's self-formation theory by recognising that instrumental agency does not preclude personal growth. In neoliberal academic contexts such as Hong Kong, pragmatic self-formation may coexist with moral or intellectual aspirations—particularly among students who navigate cross-cultural pressures and uncertainties about future employment prospects (Dai & Hardy, 2024).

8.6.3 Trajectories in Time

McAlpine et al.'s (2010, 2013) identity trajectory theory offers a valuable lens to understand doctoral identity as an evolving process shaped by time, relationships, and multiple domains (intellectual, institutional, personal). This study supports and extends their framework by showing that identity trajectories are not only individually diverse but also typologically patterned, as each type reveals a distinct profile.

Independent Explorers follow a risk-tolerant, self-driven trajectory anchored in intellectual autonomy. *Anxious Learners* undergo non-linear trajectories, marked by crisis, adjustment, and emerging confidence. *Strategic Players* pursue precise, performance-based trajectories, shaped by benchmarks and external validation.

Inspired Humanists embody relationally co-constructed trajectories, shaped by ethical mentorship and emotional affirmation.

This suggests that identity formation is not only temporal but also deeply affective and situational (Syed & Mitchell, 2015). The importance of mentors, peers, and family in sustaining or reorienting MCDS' identity over time reflects a relational ontology of becoming that both Marginson (2014, 2024) and McAlpine et al. (2010, 2013) touch on but do not develop in sufficient depth. In Hong Kong's intricate HE environment, interpersonal affirmation (or its absence) significantly mediates whether structure is experienced as enabling or alienating (Burford & Hook, 2019; Wisker et al., 2017).

Moreover, this study highlights that identity work can also be understood as sometimes recursive rather than always progressive (Dings, 2019). Participants adhered to initial motivations, recalibrated their expectations, and reinterpreted setbacks considering evolving personal narratives. Temporality in identity formation can therefore be cyclical, suggesting that future adaptations of the identity trajectory model should attend more closely to turning points, emotional labour, and narrative restructuring in doctoral journeys.

8.6.4 Contextualising Theory: Hong Kong as a Theoretical Frontier

Finally, this study underscores that theory-building in HE must be context-sensitive (Yang, 2023). Hong Kong's HE system—manifesting postcolonial hybridity, neoliberal governance, cross-border student flows, and disciplinary fragmentation—constitutes an increasingly complex academic ecology (Lo, 2018). These conditions

challenge static models of structure, agency, and identity, requiring more fluid, contextually grounded, and culturally attuned frameworks.

By centring MCDS as active academic identity-makers within a unique intra-country setting, this study contributes an alternative perspective to dominant Western-centric theorisations. It illustrates how cultural expectations modulate agency, how structure is fragmented across epistemic and institutional levels, and how identity is formed through recursive, often fragile negotiations within unstable terrains.

8.6.5 Cultural Layering in Agency and Identity Formation

While the integrated framework of structure, agency, and temporality provides a robust lens for analysing the formation of nascent academic identity, the findings also suggest that cultural ideologies—such as Confucian values—may play a critical mediating role in the formation of MCDS’ academic identity. For example, Inspired Humanists’ identity development was deeply relational and morally anchored, shaped by mentorship embodying Confucian ideals of ethical exemplarity, relational hierarchy, and self-cultivation. Here, supervisors were seen not just as academic authorities but as moral guides, reinforcing a view of academic identity as an ethical journey rather than a competitive pursuit.

This challenges Western-centric models of identity and agency by illustrating how moral alignment and relational affirmation—rather than individualism or resistance—can also be central to some participants’ (especially the Chinese learner) self-formation (Yang, 2022). Such insights underscore the need for identity and

agency theories to be more culturally responsive, especially in transnational, intercultural spaces like Hong Kong, where neoliberal logics intersect with enduring traditional Chinese culture and values to shape MCDS academic identity trajectories in complex, hybridised ways.

8.7 Concluding Remarks

This chapter has examined how Mainland Chinese Doctoral Students (MCDS) form their nascent academic identities within Hong Kong's intricate HE context, highlighting four distinct trajectories: Independent Explorers, Anxious Learners, Strategic Players, and Inspired Humanists. These types demonstrate the heterogeneity of identity formation, where students respond differently to structural constraints, cultural expectations, and personal aspirations.

By integrating Archer's (1995, 2003) structure-agency framework, Marginson's (2014, 2024) concept of self-formation, and McAlpine et al.'s (2010, 2013) identity trajectories, this study proposes a multidimensional perspective that accounts for the layered structures, varied forms of agency, and the temporal unfolding of doctoral students' academic identity. Findings reveal that identity formation emerges not from passive assimilation but through strategic negotiation, moral positioning, and relational meaning-making. The influence of Confucian values—particularly evident in relational mentorship and the Inspired Humanists' value-driven trajectory—adds cultural nuance to existing theories, extending their applicability beyond Western contexts.

Finally, Hong Kong's unique position as a hybrid, competitive, and neoliberal academic hub underscores the supercomplexity (Barnett, 2000) shaping doctoral identity work. MCDS do not merely adapt to structural demands; they co-construct micro-environments of care, opportunity, and agency, navigating tensions between personal meaning and performance imperatives. These insights refine theoretical understandings of self-formation while offering critical implications for supporting diverse doctoral trajectories in globalised academic spaces.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

9.1 Summary of the Study

This study explored how Mainland Chinese Doctoral Students (MCDS) form their nascent academic identities within the hybridised, intricate, and competitive HE landscape of Hong Kong. Grounded in Archer's (1995, 2003) theorisation of structure-agency interplay, Marginson's (2014, 2024) conceptualisation of international student self-formation, and McAlpine et al.'s (2010, 2013) identity trajectory theory, this study proposed an integrated framework to understand the evolving and dynamic nature of MCDS' academic identity formation in the Hong Kong context. This study found that MCDS' academic identity formation is a nuanced process that is continuously shaped by external structural factors across social, institutional, departmental, and interpersonal levels, as well as internal individual psychological responses through the enactment of reflexive agency. Specifically, the external structural factors, including dynamic elements such as policies, significant others (supervisors, family, and peers), important events, expectations, and sociocultural and academic norms, co-exist and interact across different levels to create a complex and sometimes contested Hong Kong HE context for MCDS to navigate. This study further found that MCDS form their emerging academic identities by exercising agency through actively responding to both external structural constraints and internal psychological struggles that emerged amid the competing discourses in the complex academic landscape of Hong Kong over time. Their nascent

academic identity, formed during their doctoral journey, is also connected to their initial motivations and expectations, which emerged and evolved over a longitudinal time frame.

The findings revealed that MCDS are not passive recipients of academic norms but active agents in negotiating, contesting, and sometimes redefining what it means to become an academic in a context characterised by contradictory expectations and shifting discourses. While existing literature has often framed international doctoral students as vulnerable or adapting subjects, this study challenges deficit-oriented models by illuminating the nuanced strategies MCDS employ to manage complexity, assert autonomy, and construct meaning. These strategies range from emotional distancing and critical compliance to redefinition of academic success and value through alternative epistemologies or relational ethics. Participants' accounts consistently demonstrate how their identity formation is shaped not in isolation, but through the interplay of structural constraints—including funding policies, supervisory arrangements, disciplinary cultures, and broader sociopolitical conditions—and personal aspirations, motivations, and coping strategies.

Importantly, the study extends current conceptual understandings by applying the self-formation framework within an intra-national, cross-border context. Although Hong Kong and Mainland China share political ties, their educational and academic cultures differ markedly, creating a unique transborder terrain in which MCDS must reconcile conflicting academic discourses, performance logics, and cultural

expectations. The study also contributes empirically to the literature by proposing four nascent academic identity types—Inspired Explorers, Anxious Learners, Strategic Players, and Inspired Humanists—each representing different pathways and positionalities that reflect the diverse ways MCDS interpret and navigate their academic journeys. These identity types provide an interpretive lens for a deeper understanding of the heterogeneity among doctoral students, underscoring the need to approach academic identity as neither fixed nor uniform, but as relationally and contextually constituted.

Taken together, the study presents a comprehensive and empirically grounded account of how MCDS form their academic identities within a distinctively complex HE environment. It highlights the significance of contextual specificity, affective labour, and reflexive agency in the development of doctoral identity. It invites a rethinking of doctoral education in the age of supercomplexity through the lens of relationality, hybridity, and structural negotiation.

9.2 Implications and Contributions

9.2.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study refines and extends existing theories of academic identity formation by integrating Marginson’s self-formation, Archer’s structure–agency interplay, and McAlpine et al.’s identity trajectory framework within the distinctive context of MCDS in Hong Kong.

The analysis demonstrates that academic identity formation in cross-border doctoral education cannot be understood through either structural determinism or individual autonomy alone. Hong Kong's HE environment, characterised by supercomplexity (Barnett, 2000), presents competing forces, including neoliberal performance metrics, institutional hierarchies, colonial legacies, an increasing Chinese national policy agenda, and enduring Confucian relational norms. Within these layered structures, MCDS identities are shaped by selective engagements with structures rather than by simple compliance or resistance. While Archer's framework remains useful for distinguishing structural constraints from agency, this study shows that agency is multi-modal: it can be strategic (as seen in the pursuit of publications by *Strategic Players*), moral (in the value-driven practices of *Inspired Humanists*), resilient (as in *Reconstructing Learners*), or intellectually oriented (in *Independent Explorer*). This diversification complicates existing dichotomies of structure and agency.

Meanwhile, the study extends Marginson's theory of self-formation by demonstrating its applicability to an intra-national, cross-border context. MCDS experience Hong Kong as simultaneously familiar and foreign despite its political affiliation with Mainland China. Students thus must navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting discourses of success. Self-formation here is not an individualistic project but one embedded in relational and cultural dimensions, with Confucian values—particularly regarding mentorship, trust, and collective responsibility—playing a

significant role in shaping students' aspirations and academic becoming. This offers a culturally attuned refinement to Marginson's framework, highlighting that desire, belonging, and identity are negotiated within both structural hierarchies and relational ethics.

Finally, the findings deepen McAlpine et al.'s concept of identity trajectories by foregrounding temporality and the possibility of hybrid and fluid identities. The four identity types identified in this study capture the shifting and negotiated nature of doctoral becoming. Students' motivations evolve, intersecting with structural opportunities, emotional labour, and interpersonal relationships. In particular, the hybridity exemplified by *Strategic Players* illustrates that doctoral identities often combine partial compliance with creative agency, challenging more linear or binary models of student development.

In sum, the theoretical contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that academic identity formation among MCDS in Hong Kong is a multi-layered, relational, and temporally dynamic process. By situating identity trajectories within a supercomplex, hybridised doctoral context, the study moves beyond Western-centric models. It proposes a more context-sensitive, culturally grounded understanding of how academic selves are constructed under conditions of mobility, pressure, and possibility.

9.2.2 Empirical Contributions

This study makes several important empirical contributions by foregrounding the underexplored lived experiences of MCDS in Hong Kong’s HE context. While prior studies have widely examined international doctoral students in South–North mobility contexts, this research foregrounds an intra-national, cross-border setting where students negotiate academic and cultural differences within a shared political framework but divergent institutional traditions. By centring MCDS in this “transborder” context, the study expands the empirical scope of doctoral mobility research and reveals distinct challenges and possibilities that are often overlooked in existing literature.

A key empirical contribution lies in demonstrating how MCDS experience multiple, intersecting structural layers simultaneously — from suprasocietal forces, such as international and Mainland–Hong Kong policy dynamics, to institutional pressures around funding and performance, to disciplinary traditions and micro-level supervisory relationships. The findings illustrate how these structural layers do not operate in isolation but interlock to create contradictory expectations and hybrid academic norms, positioning students in constant negotiation between Mainland and Hong Kong academic cultures. These dynamics highlight the contextual specificity of Hong Kong’s doctoral landscape, where colonial legacy neoliberal governance, and Chinese sociocultural norms converge.

Second, the study provides a nuanced understanding of agency as situated, emotional, and relational, rather than purely individualistic. Participants responded to structural demands in diverse and context-sensitive ways. For example, some actively pursued curiosity-driven exploration (Independent Explorers), others engaged in strategic adaptations to secure concrete outputs such as publications and employment (Strategic Players). In contrast, others emphasised moral contribution and collective well-being (Inspired Humanists). Across these trajectories, agency is revealed as micro-negotiations shaped by emotions, motivations, and relationships embedded in students' everyday academic practices.

Finally, the introduction of a four-fold typology of nascent academic identities provides a differentiated lens for understanding variation among MCDS. Rather than treating these students as a homogeneous group, the typology captures the heterogeneity and hybridity of their trajectories, shaped by diverse motivations, structural positions, and relational dynamics. This empirical model offers a framework that can be applied, adapted, and tested in other hybrid and supercomplex doctoral contexts, extending the relevance of these findings beyond Hong Kong.

In doing so, this study contributes a richer, more situated empirical understanding of doctoral identity formation. It illuminates how students' experiences are shaped by the entanglement of structural contradictions, emotional labour, and relational commitments within a unique geopolitical setting. While theoretical frameworks inform these interpretations, the findings foreground the voices of MCDS themselves,

revealing the everyday negotiations and meaning-making practices that underpin their academic becoming.

9.3 Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size, although purposefully diverse in terms of disciplinary and institutional representation, remains relatively small and specific to three public universities in Hong Kong. The findings, therefore, cannot be generalised to all MCDS or other cross-border doctoral students in the region, especially those in private institutions, part-time programmes, or different geographic contexts. Second, the data collection relied exclusively on semi-structured interviews, which were conducted primarily in English. Although participants occasionally used Chinese expressions to convey complex feelings, the choice of English as the primary interview language may have constrained the depth and emotional richness of their responses, especially given the nuanced and affect-laden nature of identity work. In addition, the study focuses on a single cohort of doctoral students within a specific geopolitical and institutional setting, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other national or cross-border contexts.

Furthermore, although this study was designed with a processual lens, the data were gathered at a single time point. While participants shared reflexive narratives about their evolving doctoral experiences, the cross-sectional nature of the data may not fully capture the longitudinal complexity of identity development as it unfolds

across different stages of the doctoral journey. A temporal, longitudinal approach might offer more profound insights into how identity shifts occur in response to institutional transitions, supervisory changes, or personal transformation over time. In addition, the research focused specifically on MCDS, whose cultural, linguistic, and academic backgrounds differ from those of other international student groups. While this focus allows for in-depth exploration of a relatively understudied population, it also limits the transferability of findings to broader doctoral mobility contexts. Finally, the study did not include the perspectives of supervisors or institutional actors, which could have provided a more relational and systemic account of the academic identity formation process.

9.4 Implications for Future Research

Given the insights and limitations of this study, several implications emerge for future research. There is a clear need for further empirical work that expands the scope of participant profiles beyond MCDS to include other intra-national and regional doctoral student groups, such as students from Taiwan, Southeast Asia, or those studying in less globalised HE systems within China. Such studies could help illuminate how different cultural and policy configurations shape doctoral identity formation in varied ways. Additionally, longitudinal and multi-modal research designs would enrich future studies. By following doctoral students over time and incorporating diverse forms of data—such as reflexive journals, email exchanges with

supervisors, and institutional documents—researchers could more fully capture the evolving, situated, and embodied nature of academic identity.

Moreover, future studies could benefit from a stronger relational orientation by incorporating the perspectives of both supervisors and peers, which would enable researchers to examine how identity is co-constructed within mentoring relationships, peer networks, and academic communities of practice. Comparative research across institutional or national contexts may also be valuable in tracing how structural differences in policy, governance, or disciplinary norms give rise to divergent pathways of identity development. Comparisons between MCDS in Hong Kong and those studying in Western countries could help surface context-specific challenges and coping strategies, and better explain the interrelation between academic culture, structure, and identity.

There is also growing urgency to investigate the intersectional dynamics that shape doctoral students' experiences—such as gender, class, and disciplinary stratification—as these dimensions mediate how students experience and respond to pressures within increasingly competitive and performative academic environments. Finally, future research would benefit from deeper engagement with policy contexts and their lived consequences. Exploring how doctoral education policies—such as funding models, internationalisation strategies, or performance metrics—translate into everyday academic practices and identity negotiations could inform more inclusive, supportive, and equitable doctoral training environments.

Future research could therefore build on this study by incorporating larger and more diverse samples, adopting longitudinal or multi-sited designs, or integrating additional data sources such as supervisory perspectives, institutional documents, or ethnographic observations. Such extensions would help further illuminate the dynamic and context-dependent nature of academic identity formation among internationally mobile doctoral students.

In conclusion, this study has revealed the layered, contested, and agentic processes through which MCDS form their nascent academic identities within the supercomplex higher education system of Hong Kong. It calls for a re-examination of doctoral education that moves beyond the binaries of adjustment and success, and toward a more relational, contextualised, and humane understanding of what it means being a doctoral students in uncertain and evolving times.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Outline (Approximately 1.5-2 hours)

Introduction:

Purpose of Study:

This qualitative study aims to explore mainland Chinese doctoral students' learning and research trajectory through their day-to-day experiences in Hong Kong's higher education field and how they make sense of these experiences in relation to their academic identity formation.

这项定性研究旨在通过中国大陆博士生在香港高等教育领域的日常经历，探究他们的学习和研究轨迹，并了解他们如何解读这些经历与其学术身份形成的关系。

Main Interview Questions:

● ***Study Motivations:*** 学习动机（第一部分）:

For the first dimension, interview questions are designed to investigate participants' personal backgrounds, past experiences, and their motivations to pursue doctoral degree in Hong Kong: 在第一部分，面试问题旨在调查参与者的个人背景、过去经历以及攻读香港博士学位的动机:

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself? (e.g.name, field of study, research interests, year of study) 简单介绍一下自己? (名字, 学科方向, 个人具体研究方向, 博士第几年)
2. What is the driving force for you to pursue the doctoral program? 攻读博士学位的主要动机是什么?
3. Why did you choose Hong Kong as your learning destination? 为什么选择香港作为求学目的地?
4. What is the doctoral program mean to you? 博士项目对你意味着什么?
5. What did you do before you entered the program? 在进入博士项目之前, 你做过什么?
6. Where did you earn your master's and bachelor's degree? 之前本科和硕士是在国内还是海外读的?

● ***Living and Research Experiences in Hong Kong Universities*** 在香港的研究生生活
In this session, questions are navigated by the clue of checking participants' learning and research experiences as doctoral students in Hong Kong and its relationship with their academic identity formation: 在这一部分, 问题通过检查参与者在香港攻读博士学位期间的学习和研究经历以及这与他们学术身份形成的关系:

1. Can you describe your academic journey and experiences so far in Hong Kong? What is your overall feeling about pursuing a doctoral degree here? 你能描述一下你在香港的学术历程和经历吗? 你对在这里攻读博士学位的整体感觉如何?
2. How does your experience studying in Hong Kong differ from your previous academic experiences in other places, such as mainland or overseas? 你在香港的学习经历与在其他地方(如大陆或海外)有何不同?
3. What are the advantages here you believe of pursuing your doctoral journey here in HK?

香港的读博的优势有哪些？可以举个例子吗？

4. Are there any challenges or you've during your doctoral journey? 在你攻读博士学位期间，你遇到过哪些挑战？
5. Could you share 1-2 challenging moments or events that left a lasting impression on you? How did you navigate through them at that time? 能否分享 1-2 个让你印象深刻的困难时刻/事件？你当时是如何应对的？
6. What are the major stressors in pursuing your doctoral journey? 在你攻读博士学位的过程中，主要的压力来源是什么？
7. Is there any 'significant others' in your doctoral journey that you depend on/support you either spiritually or academically? 在你读博期间是否有重要的人给你提供精神支持或者学术支持？
8. What role do mentorship and academic guidance play in the development of your academic identity? Can you share any memorable interactions with supervisor or professors? 你和导师的关系是什么样的？你认为导师在你的学术旅程中起到了什么作用？你能分享与导师或教授的任何令人难忘的互动吗？
9. What are the major factors that contribute to your academic progression? 你认为自己的学术进程主要受益于什么？
10. Do you find yourself belong to any kind of academic community? Describe it? 你认为自己属于任何形式的学术组织吗？
11. Do you perceive yourself as scholar/academic/researcher right now? Why or why not? 你现在是否认为自己是学者/学术界人士/研究者？为什么或为什么不是？
12. Can you share specific moments or experiences during your doctoral journey that you believe significantly influenced your academic identity formation? 你能分享在攻读博士学位期间，你认为对你的学术身份形成产生了重大影响的具体时刻或经历吗？
13. Are there any changes happened that you preserve on yourself after you entered the doctoral program? What are these changes? Can you describe it? 在你进入博士项目后，有没有发生任何变化？这些变化是什么？你能描述一下吗？
14. What are the top three influential factors for you in shaping your academic identity? 对于你塑造学术身份的三个最具影响力的因素是什么？
15. How adaptive you are, in terms of life and research in Hong Kong? 在生活和研究方面，你对香港目前的适应程度如何？
16. In what ways do you think the university can better support mainland Chinese doctoral students in their academic and cultural integration? 你认为大学在支持中国大陆博士生在学术和文化融合方面有哪些改进之处？

● ***Career Plan*** 职业规划（第三部分）

Finally, interview questions are designed to investigate their desired future career plans: 最后，面试问题旨在调查他们期望的未来职业计划：

1. What is your plan after your graduate? 你毕业后的计划是什么？未来 5 年左右
2. Will you consider stay in Hong Kong? Why or why not? 你会考虑留在香港吗？为什么或为什么不是？
3. Where in the future you desire to see yourself be? 在未来，你预想的最理想的职业状态是怎样的？在什么地方？

4. Who you wish to become? 有没有哪位学者是你心中的 role model?_

Closing Part:

1. Recap and validate the accuracy of the information discussed during the interview.
 2. Ask if the interviewee has any additional comments or questions to share.
 3. Express appreciation and thank the interviewee for their participation and contribution to the research.
1. 总结并验证面试过程中讨论的信息的准确性。
 2. 询问被访者是否有其他评论或问题要分享。
 3. 表达感谢并感谢被访者对研究的参与和贡献。

Appendix B: Ethical Approval Letter



12 August 2024

Ms LIU Yabing
Doctor of Education Programme
Graduate School

Dear Ms Liu,

Application for Ethical Review <Ref. no. 2023-2024-0129>

I am pleased to inform you that approval has been given by the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) for your research project:

Project Title: Doctoral Students and Academic Identities: Exploring Research Journeys of Mainland Chinese Students in Hong Kong

Ethical approval is granted for the project period from 12 August 2024 to 1 June 2025. If a project extension is applied for lasting more than 3 months, HREC should be contacted with information regarding the nature of and the reason for the extension. If any substantial changes have been made to the project, a new HREC application will be required.

Please note that you are responsible for informing the HREC in advance of any proposed substantive changes to the research proposal or procedures which may affect the validity of this ethical approval. You will receive separate notification should a fresh approval be required.

Thank you for your kind attention and we wish you well with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Jacqueline Hui (Ms)
Secretary
Human Research Ethics Committee

c.c. Professor YUNG Kin Lam Ken, Chairperson, Human Research Ethics Committee

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Appendix C: Informed Consent

(revised 2022)

THE EDUCATION UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

<Department of International Education>

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

<Doctoral Students and Academic Identities: Exploring Research Journeys of Mainland Chinese Students in Hong Kong>

I _____ hereby consent to participate in the captioned research supervised by <Professor Anatoliy OLEKSIYENKO> and conducted by <Yabing LIU>, who is student of <Department of International Education> in The Education University of Hong Kong.

I understand that information obtained from this research may be used in future research and may be published. However, my right to privacy will be retained, i.e., my personal details will not be revealed.

The procedure as set out in the attached information sheet has been fully explained. I understand the benefits and risks involved. My participation in the project is voluntary.

I acknowledge that I have the right to question any part of the procedure and can withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

Name of participant

Signature of participant

Date

INFORMATION SHEET

<Doctoral Students and Academic Identities: Exploring Research Journeys of Mainland Chinese Students in Hong Kong>

You are invited to participate in a project supervised by <Professor Anatoliy V. OLEKSIYENKO> and conducted by <Yabing LIU>, who are staff and student of the <Department of International Education> in The Education University of Hong Kong.

The introduction of the research

A) Procedure of the research

- *This qualitative study aims to explore mainland Chinese doctoral students' learning and research trajectory through their day-to-day experiences in Hong Kong's higher education field and how they make sense of these experiences in relation to their academic identity formation.*

The methodology of the research

- *To investigate the process of academic identity formation among doctoral students in the context of Hong Kong higher education, data will be gathered through semi-structured interviews. Each participant will be interviewed individually, with sessions lasting approximately 1 hour to provide ample time for reflection and story-sharing. The interview will be audiotaped. The audio document will be converted into written transcripts. To protect participants' identified information, their real name will be removed and renamed under a pseudonym.*

B) Potential benefits (including compensation for participation)

- *100 HK dollars' Gift Card or equivalence*

The potential risks of the research

A) There is no potential risk or discomfort in this study.

Your participation in the project is voluntary. You have every right to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. All information related to you will remain confidential and will be identifiable by codes known only to the researcher.

How results will be potentially disseminated

- *Confidential information of this study will be stored securely and only accessible to authorized personnel. The data obtained from the interviews will be removed after 3 months since the article have been done.*
- *Anonymization techniques such as de-identification, aggregation, and pseudonymization will be used to protect the privacy of research participants.*
- *Permission will be obtained in advance from participants to videotape the interviews. All video data will be destroyed after 3 months since the article have been done.*

If you would like to obtain more information about this study, please contact Yabing at telephone number _____ or their supervisor Professor Anatoly OLEKSIYENKO at telephone number 29487503.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research study, please do not hesitate to contact the Human Research Ethics Committee by email at hrec@eduhk.hk or by mail to Research and Development Office, The Education University of Hong Kong.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study.

Yabing LIU

Principal Investigator

香港教育大學

<國際教育學系>

參與研究同意書

<博士生與學術身份：探索中國大陸學生在香港的研究之旅>

本人_____同意參加由<Anatoliy OLEKSIYENKO 教授>負責監督,<劉雅冰>執行的研究項目。他們是香港教育大學<國際教育學系>的員工和學生。

本人理解此研究所獲得的資料可用於未來的研究和學術發表。然而本人有權保護自己的隱私，本人的個人資料將不能洩漏。

研究者已將所附資料的有關步驟向本人作了充分的解釋。本人理解可能會出現的風險。本人是自願參與這項研究。

本人理解我有權在研究過程中提出問題,並在任何時候決定退出研究，更不會因此而對研究工作產生的影響負有任何責任。

參加者姓名:

參加者簽名:

日期:

有關資料

<博士生與學術身份：探索中國大陸學生在香港的研究之旅>

誠邀閣下參加<Anatoliy OLEKSIYENKO 教授>負責監督,<劉雅冰>負責執行的研究計劃。她/他們是香港教育大學<國際教育學系>的學生/教員。

研究計劃簡介

A) 闡述研究計劃的目的

這項定性研究旨在通過中國大陸博士生在香港高等教育領域的日常經歷，探究他們的学习和研究軌跡，以及他們如何解讀這些經歷與其學術身份形成的關係。

研究方法

A) 說明工作及步驟

為了調查在香港高等教育背景下博士生學術身份形成的過程，我們將通過半結構化面談收集數據。每位參與者將獨自接受面談，每次面談約為1小時，以確保有足夠的時間進行反思和故事分享。面試將會錄音。錄音文件會轉換成文字記錄。為了保護參與者的身份信息，他們的真實姓名將被刪除並以化名代替。

B) 潛在利益（包括參與補償）

等值於 100 港幣的禮品卡

說明任何風險

A) 這項研究對參與者沒有潛在風險。

B) 閣下的參與純屬自願性質。閣下享有充分的權利在任何時候決定退出這項研究，更不會因此引致任何不良後果。凡有關閣下的資料將會保密，一切資料的編碼只有研究人員得悉。

將如何發佈研究結果

- 本研究的機密信息將被安全存儲，僅授權人員可訪問。從面談中獲得的數據將在文章完成後的3個月內刪除。
- 為了保護研究參與者的隱私，將使用去識別化、匯總和假名化等匿名化技術。
- 將事先徵得參與者的許可，以錄製面談。所有錄像數據將在文章完成後的3個月內銷毀。

如閣下想獲得更多有關這項研究的資料，請與<劉雅冰>聯絡，電話 或聯絡她/他們的導師<Anatoliy OLEKSIYENKO 教授>，電話 29487503。

如閣下對這項研究的操守有任何意見，可隨時與香港教育大學人類實驗對象操守委員會聯絡（電郵：hrec@eduhk.hk；地址：香港教育大學研究與發展事務處）。

謝謝閣下有興趣參與這項研究。

劉雅冰

首席研究員