

Navigating Academic Becoming: Mainland Chinese Doctoral Students in Hong Kong's Supercomplex Higher Education Context

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

This study explores the academic identity formation of Mainland Chinese Doctoral Students (MCDS) in Hong Kong's supercomplex higher education landscape. Positioned within an intra-country, cross-border context, MCDS navigate a hybrid academic environment shaped by Chinese cultural traditions, Western colonial legacies, and neoliberal global forces. Drawing on Henkel's notion of academic identity, Barnett's concept of supercomplexity, and Marginson's theory of student self-formation, this qualitative research analyses narrative interviews with eight MCDS in the social sciences. Findings reveal a four-phase journey—struggling, surviving, empowering, and balancing—highlighting how students confront linguistic, structural, and psychological challenges while exercising agency to adapt, publish, and prepare for academic careers across borders. Academic identity emerges as a dynamic, ongoing negotiation shaped by institutional discourses and individual aspirations. This study contributes to international student mobility literature by offering a non-Western, intra-national perspective and calls for inclusive institutional policies to better support cross-border doctoral students.

Full paper

Introduction

The pursuit of a doctoral degree is a transformative yet challenging journey (Cotterall, 2013), particularly for international doctoral students who must navigate academic, cultural, and social transitions (Phelps, 2016). Mainland Chinese Doctoral Students (MCDS) studying in Hong Kong represent a distinctive group, experiencing a blend of familiarity and estrangement as they straddle Eastern cultural roots and Western-influenced academic practices in a cross-border, intra-country setting.

This study investigates the academic identity formation of MCDS in Hong Kong, focusing on their challenges, coping strategies, and inner psychological negotiations. While much of the

literature on international doctoral students (IDS) centres on experiences in Western contexts, this study contributes a non-Western, intra-national perspective, situating MCDS within the neoliberal, internationalised, and hybridised landscape of Hong Kong's higher education.

Context and Theoretical Framework

Hong Kong's higher education system reflects a unique convergence of influences. Its colonial legacy imparts strong Western academic traditions (Bray, 1997), while increasing policy alignment with the Chinese mainland situates it within the framework of national development agendas (Lo et al., 2021). Additionally, the system is shaped by neoliberal rationalities—performance metrics, competition, and managerialism (Macfarlane, 2017)—creating a 'supercomplex' academic environment (Barnett, 2000) characterised by competing discourses and shifting expectations.

This study draws upon Henkel's (2000) notion of academic identity, Barnett's (2000) concept of supercomplexity, and Marginson's (2014, 2023) theorisation of student self-formation. Using a qualitative narrative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight MCDS in the social science field across four UGC-funded universities in Hong Kong.

Findings and Discussion

The academic journeys of MCDS in Hong Kong unfolded in four overlapping and iterative phases: struggling, surviving, empowering, and balancing.

In the struggling phase, participants encountered linguistic and epistemological barriers. Their prior exposure to test-oriented English did not prepare them for the demands of academic writing and communication in both English and Cantonese. This linguistic marginality, coupled with unfamiliar academic conventions, impeded early scholarly engagement. Structured coursework, although useful, delayed their research focus, leading many to identify more as students than early researchers. This stage reveals how institutional structures and implicit expectations in Hong Kong's neoliberal academia can initially destabilise students' academic self-conceptions.

In the surviving phase, participants began to decode the 'hidden curriculum' of academia. They learned the unspoken norms of research productivity, disciplinary communication, and networking. Participation in conferences and informal peer study groups became vital for disciplinary socialisation. However, peer comparison—amplified by the competitive climate—also triggered anxiety and self-doubt. While some participants viewed competition as motivational, others experienced pressure and insecurity. This duality reflects the ambivalence of neoliberal academic environments, which both cultivate excellence and induce precarity.

In the empowering phase, students actively repositioned themselves within the academic field. Publishing emerged as a central strategy, with several participants adopting thesis-by-

publication to meet expectations in both Hong Kong and mainland China. This approach enhanced their academic legitimacy and career prospects but also introduced tensions between producing quality scholarship and meeting publication quotas. Career planning was also highly strategic, involving cross-border considerations.

In the final balancing phase, students acknowledged that empowerment is not a static endpoint but an ongoing negotiation. As they continued navigating the supercomplexities of Hong Kong academia, participants realised that academic identity is perpetually “in process”—shaped by shifting structures, policies, and personal aspirations. They learned to balance contradictory pressures and sustain a flexible identity that allows them to work within, and sometimes against, dominant institutional discourses.

Throughout these phases, MCDS demonstrated significant agency in responding to structural constraints. Their narratives underscore the fluid, nonlinear, and contested nature of academic identity development, particularly in hybridised higher education contexts marked by East–West intersections and neoliberal imperatives.

Conclusion

This study reveals how the academic identities of MCDS in Hong Kong emerge through complex interactions between institutional structures, cultural discourses, and personal agency. The supercomplex academic terrain of Hong Kong—infused with colonial legacies, Confucian traditions, and neoliberal policies—presents both challenges and openings for identity construction.

Findings contribute to theoretical understandings of academic identity by illustrating its processual, negotiated, and relational character. Rather than viewing identity as a stable or linear progression, this study affirms its formation as contingent, strategic, and situated within overlapping academic cultures.

The study also offers practical implications. Universities should provide tailored support for MCDS and similar cross-border students through inclusive workshops, clearer orientation to academic norms, and enhanced supervisory training. By recognising the diverse experiences and needs of international doctoral students beyond the traditional West/non-West binary, institutions can better foster academic belonging and success.