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# Transitioning to an independent researcher: reconciling the conceptual conflicts in cross-cultural doctoral supervision

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## ABSTRACT

To gain an in-depth understanding of the causes of the often implicit misunderstandings between Western supervisors and their Chinese doctoral students, we examined my lived experiences as a Chinese international doctoral student under the supervision of my Australian supervisors. Our data revealed how misunderstandings arose and evolved from mismatched assumptions that are rooted in the home and host cultures. We found that I was able to gain new insight in three key ways: developing self-confidence in driving my own research; re-conceptualising 'critical thinking'; and re-evaluating my own gendered social construction as an independent researcher. We reconsidered the possible roles of misunderstandings as catalysts for positive development of independent judgment.

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Cross-cultural doctoral supervision; reconciling conceptual conflicts; independent researcher; catalysts; Chinese international students

## Introduction

The number of Chinese students enrolling in research programs in Western universities is growing every year, therefore more effort is needed to facilitate their learning in cross-cultural educational settings (Ai 2017; Gardner 2008; Manathunga 2014; Stanley 2015; Winchester-Seeto et al. 2014). These students have different cultural and educational values from their home country, and these can be incompatible with what is expected of them in Western learning contexts (Chen and Bennett 2012; Curtin, Stewart, and Ostrove 2013). For instance, research findings suggest that Chinese students tend to appreciate the ideas of their supervisors more than their own, whereas in a Western educational setting supervisors may expect their students to express their own opinions and critically evaluate the opinions of their supervisors (Lee 2008). These Chinese educational expectations and behaviours may be misinterpreted as indicators of passive learning and uncritical thinking in the absence of a 'meta-awareness of cultural issues and their complexities' (Ryan 2011, 638). Though heavily criticised by scholars with intimate knowledge of Chinese students, such deficit in representation of Chinese students may still prevail in implicit and unarticulated ways (e.g. Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day 2010; Manathunga 2014;

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Ryan 2011; Watkins and Biggs 1996). If these mismatched expectations occur between a Chinese research student and their supervisor, strong emotional or conceptual conflicts can be elicited on both sides (see also Johnson and Johnson 2009; Singh 2009), hindering the supervision and learning process.

Additionally, there has been a substantial amount of literature reporting the social isolation and pressure of acculturation that can impede the learning of international doctoral students (e.g. Ku et al. 2008; McClure 2007). The challenges met by these doctoral researchers and the impact of their mismatched expectation of what is required of them have been well documented (Son and Park 2014; Winchester-Seeto et al. 2014). Many international research students have experienced this shift in academic expectation as a disturbing, even distressing, conceptual conflict between how they saw themselves as a successful student in their home environment and how they must perform to meet the educational and intellectual demands of the new academic culture (Ingleton and Cadman 2002).

However, it has been shown that this kind of disquiet and friction is not necessarily negative; it can be both destructive and constructive (Vermunt and Verloop 1999), and can even be used as an instructional tool to energise learning (Johnson and Johnson 2009). Consequently, we here take the view that the so-called isolation, culture shock, academic anxiety, and other identified problems should not be taken only as impediments, but also as resources that have the potential to facilitate student learning, depending on how these frictions are managed in the supervision process (see also Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day 2010).

In this respect, it is particularly relevant to gain in-depth understandings of the learning experiences of Chinese research students in Western educational settings, particularly how they interpret the misunderstandings as experienced, how these misunderstandings evolved and contributed to their transition into independent researchers. Previous researchers have approached this topic via distributing questionnaires and interviewing students, their reports on the challenges and coping strategies help to build a broad knowledge base for the intercultural education of Chinese students (e.g. Chen and Bennett 2012; Cross and Hitchcock 2007; Curtin, Stewart, and Ostrove 2013). Further insights into these at a more micro and personal level are needed to gain a deeper understanding of supervision practice (Tian and Low 2011, 61). This could also enable supervisors to adequately recognise the specific challenges faced by Chinese students (Guerin, Kerr, and Green 2015; Manathunga 2014) and provide informed and appropriate feedback.

In this study, we aim to conduct an in-depth investigation of the cross-cultural learning experiences of one Chinese international doctoral student. It adds a concrete and individualised understanding of current intercultural education literature.

## **Background**

### ***Conceptual conflicts***

It has been noted that conflicts are almost inevitable in any classroom. Especially so in a cross-cultural educational setting where the students and teachers may differ in their understanding of what counts as a good student and therefore what constitutes an optimal learning environment. While conflict has often been considered as undesirable

and destructive for student learning, some researchers argue that intellectual conflict can energise students to work harder and longer, and to learn at a higher or deeper level (Johnson and Johnson 2009). Cognitive dissonance, near one's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978), can act as a catalyst for change and enable students to re-examine familiar events so as to see them differently (Opfer and Pedder 2011). Vygotsky (1978) defined the zone of proximal development as 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers' (86). Similarly, Manathunga (2014) argues that within cross-cultural supervision, students and supervisors may challenge assumptions, which can result in more nuanced, critical and theoretically-based understandings of time, place and knowledge.

Johnson and Johnson (2009) describe four types of conflict which can be either constructive or destructive for student development: controversy, conceptual conflict, conflict of interest and developmental conflict. They define 'conceptual conflict' as that 'which occurs when incompatible ideas exist simultaneously in a person's mind or when information being received does not seem consistent with what one already knows' (Johnson and Johnson 2009, 38). They make the case that conceptual conflicts can be capitalised on to enhance student learning and development when appropriate instructional procedures follow. Therefore, in this study, we focus on the conceptual conflicts that occurred during the cross-cultural learning process experienced by a successful doctoral candidate. This analysis was carried out because, as previously noted, candidates engaged in cross-cultural education are likely to experience emotional frustration when their previously developed learning habits are no longer suitable to cope with the learning situations in the new educational setting. For instance, what is important to be learnt, how much and what kind of guidance can be expected from the supervisor. Rather than working to avoid such conflicts, we assume that the conceptual conflicts involved in cross-cultural doctoral research can be reconciled and structured in ways that can assist student development, which in this case is the transformation towards an independent researcher.

### **Contextual background**

The review study of Henze and Zhu (2012) shows that many studies on Chinese international students have focused on describing the various challenges they encountered; such as language deficiency, the unfamiliarity of the educational norms, social isolation, acculturation and financial pressure. Research evidence remains underdeveloped regarding the causes and impacts of such challenges on students' transition into different education systems, in this case, how these challenges shaped students' successful transition to become an independent researcher. Therefore, we have focused on two sources of conceptual conflicts which could shape students' intercultural learning, namely, differing expectations of self-evaluation and student autonomy in a Chinese education setting, and social gender values of females in current Chinese society. In this study, self-evaluation is operationalised as doctoral students' awareness and ability to self-evaluate their performance by comparing 'self-observed performance against some standard' instead of relying on the evaluation of the supervisor (Wang et al. 2017; Zimmerman 2002, 68).

Student autonomy develops through the educational journey from a low autonomy environment characterised by highly structured goals and learning to an environment requiring high levels of self-determination of what is investigated and how that is done (Willison and O'Regan 2007). Self-evaluation and student autonomy may be evolving as the educational curriculum changes rapidly in countries like China (Paine and Fang 2006; Ryan 2011). Gender role is also reshaped by the rapid social development especially the increasing number of highly educated female students (Wang 2010). Nevertheless, this provides a general frame for understanding the cultural and educational origins of the conflicts that may occur and for assisting wider interpretations of individual experiences in comparable intercultural education process.

### ***Self-evaluation and autonomy in Chinese education***

Self-evaluation and student autonomy are two key aspects of developing independence as a researcher in many Western universities. However, the traditional Chinese educational system encourages students to learn through reflection on existing knowledge and emulating the examples of successful seniors (Wong 2011; Yang 1993). Students generally have limited training in how to self-evaluate their performance or development and to engage in autonomous learning due to general knowledge-focused teaching methods, test-driven evaluation and assessment systems, and the qualification emphasis of Chinese education (see also Elman 2009; Niu 2007; Paine and Fang 2006). This can produce unexpected conceptual conflict for Chinese doctoral candidates in their transition to a Western educational context. Though these practices have been heavily criticised and are changing in China, this is part of the recent education history and is closely relevant to the way teachers and students interact nowadays.

First, traditional Chinese education emphasises knowledge-focused teaching methods and therefore limit the space for student autonomous learning. Although, as a result of the introduction of a new schools' curriculum in 2001, today teachers are encouraged to use multiple ways of teaching to foster students' conceptual development rather than relying on historically validated procedures of knowledge transmission (Paine and Fang 2006). Nevertheless, the effects of this change have not yet been widely observed. Teachers nowadays may believe that their teaching should encourage students' autonomy and stress more specifically students' cognitive development, but, without informed understanding and training, they are not yet able to put this belief into their ongoing teaching practice (Hu, van Veen, and Corda 2016).

Second, the frequency of the tests and the high stakes of those test results leave little space or encouragement for students to self-evaluate their study progress. These tests are primarily based on closed questions with prescribed correct answers (see also Niu 2007). The test-driven education system in China is highly competitive, and the evaluation of student performance is primarily assessed on the results of tests. Though continuous efforts have been made to revise the content of the test and the format of the evaluation, it remained unclear to what extent these efforts have lessened the pressure to compete and perform well. This could be one of the most significant barriers preventing many Chinese students from experiencing transformation towards independence in research.

Finally, despite some recent changes, the goal of education in Chinese society has been mainly oriented towards qualification, instead of promoting personal cognitive

development through self-evaluation and autonomous learning. Traditional Chinese education was greatly influenced by the Imperial Examination System, the results of which were used to appoint high-ranking state officials (Elman 2009). This goal continues to be present in the modern Chinese education system as represented in the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) (Niu 2007). Education has been and is still seen as a way to enhance employability, allowing individuals to improve social and economic status in light of the intense competition in the Chinese educational system.

### ***Social construction of gender values in China***

A further issue that may also lead to conceptual conflicts for Chinese international students, especially for female students, relates to the ways in which gender values are constructed in Chinese society. There is a conception of the traditional role of a Chinese woman: a kind mother and considerate wife (Wang 2010). This means that women in China often find it difficult to win family support to pursue advanced doctoral education, especially for women who have not married or have not had child (Han 2010). Fincher (2014) has shown how a 'state-sponsored media campaign' denigrated urban professional women aged over 27 who are unmarried, referring to them as 'leftover women'. It is a socially generated gender stereotypes in popular consciousness in China and perpetuated through media messaging (Feldshuh 2017; Liu 2015).

Female doctoral students can easily fall into this group. Despite the great importance of personal agency, it can still be challenging to escape the normative frames of a social structure (Yang 2011). Hence, female Chinese international students with such a preconception would have to reconstruct their gender roles and identities in the transition to becoming an independent researcher. The reconstruction can be a painful process (Carter, Blumenstein, and Cook 2013; Cotterall 2013).

### **Method**

We investigated the experiences of a Chinese female doctoral student to gain an in-depth understanding of the conceptual conflicts in intercultural context. We used first-person voices (Singular: the participant, also the first author of this paper, Plural: the authors) to enhance the sense of 'immersion'.

We chose a methodology blending analytical autoethnography with interactive interview (Anderson 2006; Ellis 2008). First, the autoethnography approach was partially applied to the investigation of my doctoral education journey because autoethnography allowed us to explore in greater depth the tacit knowledge and implicit misunderstandings involved in actual cross-cultural supervision encounters (Anderson 2006). The implicit nature of misunderstandings makes it likely that participants are not able to articulate their thoughts explicitly. In autoethnography, participants develop their thoughts and realisations as a result of participating in the research process. We, therefore, perceived autoethnography as an effective means for me to become more conscious and articulate about the implicit misunderstandings I experienced through the reflexive research steps.

Second, we perceived analytic autoethnography as a way to explore the broader relevance of our findings for supervisors and international students in comparable intercultural encounters. As Anderson (2006) says,



The purpose of analytic ethnography is not simply to document personal experience ... [but] to use empirical data to gain insight into some broader set of social phenomena than those provided by the data themselves. (386–387)

Third, an interactive interview approach was applied in my discussions with the co-researcher. Contrary to a standard interactive interview, where experiences of the co-researcher were included, our study focused on my experiences. The experiences of the co-researcher were only used to inspire my self-probing process. We chose interactive interview method because it emphasised the communicative and joint sense making that occurs in interviewing. More specifically, the disclosures and self-probing of myself invite the disclosure of another. This provided ‘a level of understanding and interpretation that is not present in traditional hierarchical interview situations where interviewers reveal little about themselves’ (Ellis 2008, 444). Such a collaborative communication process helped us to unpack the implicit conceptions and to get in-depth understanding of the lived experiences within emotionally charged critical moments.

Critical moments, alternately called fateful moments (Giddens 1991), critical events (Fay 2000), or turning points (Strauss 1959), are experiences or events which have important consequences for one’s lives and identities. In the case of international students, critical moments are ‘key moments and experiences that had a significantly positive or negative impact on their perceptions of their effective management of their study, lives and communication with others’ (Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day 2010, 10). The critical moments in our study are experiences or events when I experienced strong emotional reactions such as confusion, shock, depression, excitement, satisfaction, and so on. The critical moments were used as a means to decompose the conceptual conflicts between my supervisors and me (i.e. potential mismatches between my previously developed learning habits and my perceived learning expectations from the supervisors). Specifically, we addressed the following research questions:

1. What critical moments did I, as a Chinese international student, experience during my doctoral study in Australia?
2. How might these critical moments relate to my Chinese cultural and educational background?
3. How did these critical moments contribute to my development as an independent researcher in a Western Anglophone educational setting?

### ***Doctoral programs in the University of A (anonymous) in Australia***

This study took place in the University of A (anonymous), it is important to briefly describe the design and supervision of doctoral programs in the context of this study in Australia. In general, Australian doctoral programs, as distinct from Professional Doctorates, do not require courses to be taken by candidates. The University provides the Intercultural Bridging Program (IBP), designed to facilitate ‘transcultural learning’ of international students (Cadman 2000).

The research degree programs in A University are often initially provisional in candidature. During the probationary period, the student needs to pass a major review usually assessed by a relevant review committee to determine their potential capacity to complete



their research and submit a high-quality thesis for examination within three to four years. Such a review committee can recommend that the candidature be confirmed, extended provisionally, terminated, or downgraded from Doctoral to Masters Level. Subsequently, each student has to pass an annual review, discussing the progress of his or her research project and establishing a plan of work for next year.

Finally, when supervisors feel their students' thesis is ready to be examined by international world-class experts in that field, then the candidate will submit it to a graduate administration office from where it will be sent out to examiners.

### ***Participant***

I am the participant and also the first author of this paper. I finished my master level study in a comprehensive research university in China. I went to Australia for doctoral study in the field of Media Studies in 2010 and finished in 2014. I had three supervisors, two Australian and one Chinese. This study focuses on my interactions with my supervisors, in particular the conflicts encountered with my Australian supervisors and the support I received from my Chinese supervisor.

We focused on my experience for several reasons. First, I had several strong critical moments as a doctoral candidate, most notably having to change my research project after the major candidature review and being advised by my principal supervisor that I may need to embark on a further major review. The strong emotions generated at the time helped me articulate my experiences more fully today. Secondly, I successfully completed my doctoral study and became appreciative of the significance of the critical moments I had experienced. Therefore, the investigation into how I responded to these moments and managed the conceptual conflicts involved can be a valuable source of reference for supervisors and international students to reflect on their own experience for optimal teaching and learning.

### ***Data collection and analysis***

Data collection and data analysis in this study followed an iterative process conducted over three major phases. Due to the highly implicit nature of the misunderstandings involved in actual supervision interactions, the research process included several sessions of profound inquiry in repeated rounds of questioning and interpretation.

First, the data collection started with a brainstorm by recalling critical moments that had happened during my four years of doctoral study in Australia. These moments refer to a specific time or event when I experienced strong emotional reactions.

Second, I referred to my diaries written from 2010 to 2014 for more detail about certain events and actions. Then I further reflected and composed a list of critical moments, writing down what exactly happened in each moment. This list was used for discussion in the third step.

A third step in data collection, also interwoven with the data analysis, was the interactive interviewing process, comprising open and ongoing investigative discussions between my co-researcher and me. My co-researcher is not directly involved in the supervisory process, thus I can fully express my experiences and the critical moments occurred during the doctoral journey. Moreover, my co-researcher, being Chinese herself, has

also experienced a comparable process of studying for her doctoral in a Western educational setting and studied comparative higher education for her doctoral research. This further ensured that the ongoing discussion is in depth and able to capture the implicit assumptions embedded in the conflicts. Altogether, we had five rounds of in-depth discussions. To create an open and relaxed atmosphere so that I can fully express myself, we had the discussions in a cafe. As the discussions proceeded, we, as researchers, found that all the critical moments identified had been tipping points for me to reflect on my learning habits, my critical thinking ability, adaptation to the new academic culture, and self-identity awareness.

Therefore, the discussions became more focused towards identifying the exact conflicts that were embedded in the critical moments. Questions emerged—what learning habits and cultural values did I bring to my doctoral study? What new information or expectation did I encounter in my new learning environment? After the identification of each conflict, we then investigated how these conflicts may be linked to my previous cultural and educational background in China, and, how I learned and changed as a result of these conflicts or experiences.

To gain consensus and ensure the validity of the findings, we sent the discussion results to the two Australian supervisors and the Chinese supervisor for feedback and suggestions. Their comments were then integrated into our findings.

## Findings and discussion

Analysis of these critical moments during my doctoral study in Australia revealed that my transition to an independent researcher through the conceptual conflict process occurred in three phases. For clarity, the phases have been organised here as a timeline to reflect how these actually happened with the participant in our study (Table 1). Though we are aware that their occurrences do not necessarily follow a chronological order, the conceptual conflicts can occur throughout different phases. The first phase consists of the candidate's completion of the 'Core Component of the Structured Program' (CCSP) for research skills training; the second phase is the confirmation of doctoral candidature through a 'Major Review'; and the final phase is the thesis submission.

In the following, we report on three noteworthy conceptual conflicts which occurred in this process. The conflicts in phase one and two reflect more strongly the educational differences, while the conflicts in phase three associate more closely with differences in social gender value. Though they appear to be common misconceptions shared by

**Table 1.** Critical moments and development of independent researcher by phase.

Phase	Project progress	Conceptual conflicts	Main source of conflicts	Development
Phase 1	CCSP/IBP completion	Who is the "research driver"?	Student autonomy	Awareness of need to be in charge of research project and the role of supervisor as supporter
Phase 2	Major review of candidature	"Non-critical thinker" or what makes "a critical thinker"?	Educational Self-evaluation	Reflecting on other possible conceptions of critical thinking
Phase 3	Dissertation submission	Dependent or independent self-identity?	Social gender values	Re-evaluating gender values and becoming an independent researcher

many doctoral students in general (Curtin, Stewart, and Ostrove 2013; Gardner 2008), they are more likely to be intensified in this context due to cultural and educational differences between the supervisors and me. Among the various challenges, we chose to report on three critical instances because they represent three different cultural and educational roots identified in the internal conflicts that were experienced. We also described how these conceptual conflicts contributed to my development in the three different aspects identified in [Table 1](#): increased awareness of autonomy in my research project, reflecting on other possible conceptions of critical thinking, and a re-evaluated and reconstructed independent identity.

### ***Who is the 'Research driver'?***

One of the earliest conflicts arose from confusion about who should lead the doctoral project trajectory. While I was expecting my supervisors to provide specific guidance and 'drive' the research, my supervisors on the other hand were expecting me to play the chairing role in my doctoral project (see also Johnson, Lee, and Green 2000).

The confusion started like this. The principal supervisor asked me to fill in a questionnaire that was designed to diagnose my learning habits and my expectations of responsibilities allocated to my supervisors and me. This questionnaire informed me that I should be independent, critical and creative. At the time, I guessed I had ticked the 'proper' answer because I saw the satisfied smile on my supervisor's face. However, psychologically, I was actually expecting more guidance from supervisor and unconsciously took it for granted that a supervisor would act as a beacon lighting up one's way forward, remaining unaware that this conception would differ from that of my supervisors. Even though that questionnaire kept on reminding me that I was meant to be the 'driver' of my research, not my supervisors, I still waited for them to tell me what I should do and how to do it. This means that, while I theoretically knew the academic rules in my host university or in Australia, I did not know in practice what driving the research meant or how to drive it yet.

In our view, this conflict derived from my previous distinctive learning traditions and values, in which I had become used to a more structured learning environment, and more habituated to teachers and supervisors telling me what to do and in what way to do it. This directly echoes one of Cadman's (2000, 479) participants who said, 'As a [research] student, the biggest challenge for me was to learn to work independently. Before I was used to more structured schemes'. However, this should not be taken simply as a characteristic of a passive learner – I did not feel at all passive at the time – but rather a lack of shared understanding regarding how responsibility should be distributed between student and supervisor in a Western context. A second reason may lie in the differences in their expected goal. While the student may be expect to create a rigorous and quality research project, utilising the input from the supervisors, the supervisors are aiming at developing student's independence, thus emphasised the student's role in actively putting forward their own ideas.

Things changed one day when I went to ask my principal supervisor for advice on a particular direction the research was taking. I was shocked to hear him reply with, 'I do not know', and became alarmed that it was not possible to count on my supervisor for everything. Although I was told to anticipate this through the IBP, after this incident, I came to realise that I had to be the one in charge of the research project. What is missing

between the student and the supervisor could be an open exchange of what they had expected when confronted by the actual reactions of each other. For example, when I was shocked by the supervisor's response 'I don't know', it could have been different if I communicated this shock to my supervisor from the Chinese perspective, which likely could lead to the supervisor explaining the rationales of this reaction from a Western point of view. This clarification provides information for both sides to develop empathy rather than moulding a potential emotional wedge. However, each of us may be unaware of our own cultural 'style' of thinking and acting and this makes it hard to identify and address these assumptions. As a result, I had to reorient my relationship with my supervisor from a top-down model to a colleague and academic support.

### **What makes 'Critical thinking'?**

A second conceptual conflict was rooted in the differences between how the student and supervisors defined and valued critical thinking. The conflict led me to realise the diversity or multiplicity of critical thinking (see also Verburgh 2013).

This insight was first glimpsed from one of the supervisory meetings when my co-supervisor recommended that I change my research doctoral project. My first project was 'The comparative case studies of *The New York Times* and *China Daily*'. At that time, Liu Xiaobo was the first Chinese to win the Nobel Peace Prize, but Liu could not go to attend the award ceremony because of 'home arrest' in China and there were thousands of media articles on the 'Empty Chair of the Nobel Prize Winner' across the world. My co-supervisor recommended me to do a case study on 'Liu Xiaobo' but I refused and said this topic was too sensitive in China. The co-supervisor tried to encourage me to criticise the Chinese government and the media regulation policy in China. I kept on saying, 'No, it's too sensitive', the supervisor said, 'Well, if you do not have critical thinking, then you cannot do that project'. Though I was confused and shocked, at that time, I agreed with her comments without comparing my understanding of critical thinking against my supervisors' judgement.

This incident made me realise that my supervisors probably endured what they perceived as a lack of critical analysis for some time. This further reminded me to be aware that there were probably many mismatched understandings between what kinds of competencies good research students should have, and how a critical thinker should practice in Australian academic community. I had always thought a good student should first be a polite listener with a soft smiling and nodding manner during meetings with my supervisors. However, they had expected of me to explain how and why I would do this or that, rather than just nodding my head. This misunderstanding is reflected in the differences between the dominant Chinese and Western teaching pedagogies. While Western teaching principles are seen to focus on learning through robust exchange of dialogic question and answer, Chinese education emphasises modelling as a fundamental essential of learning, and a supervisor is most often regarded as the model and authority (Hu, van Veen, and Corda 2016). The student may also lack confidence in, or awareness of, their own self-approval. This leads them to believe in, rather than challenge or negotiate with authorities. At the very least, I did not have a lot of practice or experience in this kind of self-confidence.

After this incident, I unconsciously began to recognise the value of being critical and the need for different critical thinking performance, which I then considered to be the most important attribute of a good graduate student in the Australian education paradigm. Then, I consulted my Chinese supervisor ‘what does critical thinking mean in Australia?’ and instead of giving me a definition, she responded, ‘critical thinking can be learnable’, which encouraged me to re-conceptualise critical thinking. I became aware that to be a critical thinker was more than just to be an informed person. More importantly, I came to see another layer of critical thinking referring to a courage, where appropriate, to challenge authorities, including supervisors, schools and the government, which is not encouraged in Chinese culture in the same explicit way as in the west. Nearing the end of the doctoral journey, I realised that my dissertation was primarily based on Western theories. A theoretical framework based on a Chinese theory would be better able to explore the nuances of Chinese society. This incident also shocked me as the supervisor seemed not aware of Chinese communication styles which have a clear cultural rationale, that of promoting and building consensus whilst shying away from conflict with authorities. This was an eye-opener for me, and demonstrated how differently critical thinking can be framed outside the Chinese context. This gain could have been strengthened if my supervisors and I had explicitly discussed what both sides meant by critical thinking, a key concept that needed urgent re-examination, however this mismatch in definitions was difficult to vocalise due to cultural differences, as my supervisor remarked:

I remember when I finally ‘got’ that your way of arguing was often to bury the main point and circle around it rather than the bold or bald explicit argument of a western paradigm. Now I understand that was also a clearly cultural tactic by using the implicit and embedded critique of authority.

This example demonstrates the mismatch between Western models of critical thinking versus the one that I was accustomed to. The way I delivered information took into consideration power structures and relationships that were not the focus in the western environment. The carefulness of giving feedback in my case, that of nuanced as opposed to explicit communication styles, helped me overcome what could have been a potentially unpleasant episode with my supervisor and allowed us the conceptual space to navigate what was clearly a frustrating situation for both parties.

### ***New identity through self-evaluation rather than social assessment***

The last conflict is, in our estimation now, most profoundly grounded in Chinese cultural background and related to attitudes towards women in Chinese society. It has been well documented that women’s personal and social lives continue to reflect limits to what families and friends consider acceptable levels of female endeavour; there are developmental expectations for women as they mature, such as home building and reproduction, which clash with the interests of academic engagement (Carter, Blumenstein, and Cook 2013). In China, a stereotype still dominates in that a woman should be, first and foremost, a considerate wife, a supportive mom, and as a caregiver (Fincher 2014). These traditional gender roles have all exerted strong psychological constraints on me in obtaining higher education. I initially felt depressed, frustrated and helpless, when I saw myself as still ‘in school’ at the age of 30. In China, at my age I could live a more ‘normal’ life with my boyfriend and parents, even having a child around, rather than reading and writing day after

day. I felt lonely, misdirected and often bored in the first two years of my doctoral study. I complained and kept on asking myself why I was doing this in Australia – it was far from China and I could not afford to go back to China each year on my scholarship. I missed my boyfriend and my mother's cooking.

However, as time went on, I started to observe other women around me, including colleagues, supervisors, coffee friends, university staff, and gradually a new self-identity began to grow. I was impressed by the images of women that were smart, humorous, open-minded, independent, and creative. I began to accept that there was not necessarily a gender distinction in all respects between men and women. If you find the job you love and you are competent at it, then you can have a rich rewarding life. Therefore, psychologically, I gradually broke through my gender culture constraints.

Meanwhile, I also felt I would be respected by others not because of my soft voice, sweet smile or curly long hair, but by sharing my opinions rationally and reasonably. I cut my hair and enjoyed my short hairstyle, and adopted more mature dress style. I performed as a professional lecturer while I was tutoring. I felt happy and complete.

Although this struggle seems more social and personal one, these reconstructed gender values also had a strong positive influence on my academic development. I became more confident to review published works critically with reference to my own project context.

My social and intellectual development was reflected in remarks by my supervisors as I was leaving Australia. My co-supervisor caught sight of the photo on my student ID and said, 'Look, is this you? Is this not a very different person? You have become a completely thoughtful person'. The principal supervisor also commented, 'You are already a scholar and an expert in your field', and I felt I was. My Chinese supervisor also remarked that I was 'a great example of transcultural education' further showing that I had become competent in code switching between the two cultures.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates how a blend of autoethnography and interactive interview can be used to codify, analyse and ultimately further intercultural discourse. It allows individuals such as myself to understand our transformational journey towards becoming independent researchers, using the model of turning points to highlight the differences in education and cultural mismatches that may occur in transcultural settings. We also give three examples of such points; supervision instruction, definition of critical thinking, and the social construction of gender values. We have done this to allow other Chinese in academia to develop their discourse and to forward cross-cultural learning.

Conceptual conflicts widely exist at different stages of a doctoral research study but are hard to recognise in daily supervisory practices. Some candidates tend to give up or be forced to withdraw when these conflicts are not reconciled successfully or managed positively (Gardner 2008). Others can learn fruitfully as a result of being engaged in conflictual situations, but usually at great psychological and emotional cost (Cotterall 2013). Though in our case, the conflicts were successfully reconciled, learning by trial and error, as we look back, my experience could so easily have been unsuccessful (see also Ai 2017). Whereas our example shows that implicit differences in the expression of these ideas is an area that needs to be more clearly stated for both parties to have a better working relationship.



Our findings also show that Chinese educational or cultural heritage has the possibility to promote rather than only impose obstacles to learning in the three critical moments. The first conflict arose from a confusion regarding the expected level of supervisor instruction being provided in the actual supervision meetings. This resembles the struggle experienced by many doctoral students in Western universities, where they also constantly look for guidance from their supervisor when transitioning from a more structured undergraduate education to the relatively independent doctoral research program (Gardner 2008; Lee 2008). In our case, this conflict was also rooted in Chinese educational background, which was highly structured. Our reflection pointed to a lack autonomy-related training, corresponding to the knowledge-based, test-driven and qualification-oriented educational norms in China (Elman 2009; Niu 2007; Hu, van Veen, and Corda 2016). The Chinese educational heritage emphasises learning through reflecting and analysing the expertise and examples set by teachers (Wong 2011; Yang 1993). Nevertheless, it is an efficient way for students to gain knowledge which is a basis for further innovation.

The second conflict refers to a mismatched expression of critical thinking, which is both culturally and educationally grounded. In this conflict, I was too quick to doubt myself to lack critical thinking upon hearing this evaluation from my supervisor. This could have derived from the inadequate training of self-evaluation in my previous education in China, which focused more on high stake test performances (Elman 2009; Niu 2007). Scholars argue for an urgent need for a transcultural approach to re-examine the practice of 'critical thinking' (e.g. Song 2016; Tian and Low 2011). In the Chinese context, critiques are not often welcomed from a subordinate, and can be easily frowned upon when people lack the skill to express critique in a respectful, friendly and constructive manner. Whereas our example shows that implicit and embedded critique of authority added to the understanding of critical thinking.

The final conflict identified in this study focuses on the restructuring of a socially dependent and conservative gender identity into that of an independent academic researcher. My new, developing identity is continuously constructed through self-evaluation and opinion sharing. It is likely that other female doctoral candidates may resonate with this conflict, even with differing nationalities and educational backgrounds (Carter, Blumenstein, and Cook 2013).

In addition to my self-reflections as discussed above, there were other support mechanisms that helped me solve conflicts in a productive and character-building way. The Integrated Bridging Program (IBP) offered by the University of A help me acclimatise to western academia. I was also fortunate to have a Chinese supervisor to act as a mediator in helping me to overcome and capitalise on conceptual conflict barriers. She was able to clarify my Australian supervisors' expectation, explain the targets set for me to complete my thesis, and share her experiences of transcultural differences in methodology both in Chinese and English. There were also a number of workshops and resources recommended by both my Australian supervisors and Chinese supervisor to help me develop my English academic writing.

However, the study is limited in several aspects. Though the education system is largely assumed to socialise students in particular ways, we do not assume homogeneity of all Chinese students or static cultural and educational traits. Therefore, how these three phases and the conceptual conflicts reported here can be attributed to collective cultural and educational differences is open for discussion. Our study is also limited to the



exploration of the three specific cultural and educational factors as the intensifiers of challenges experienced by doctoral students in general. We should note that there are alternative explanations for the conceptual conflicts and their resolutions: personalities of student and supervisor, age and previous experience of the student, where in China the student originated—all of which may have influenced the way a student reacts in the intercultural context. Our illustration of the cultural and educational roots of these conflicts is only a means to enrich this discussion by adding a cultural and educational perspective, and these conflicts should in no case be seen as exclusively cultural specific.

In closing, our study demonstrates that students and supervisors involved in cross-cultural education are encouraged to explicitly communicate about the expected learning behaviour and supervisory support. Our detailed description and analysis of the three examples provides a reference to diagnose and vocalise the potential areas in need of such meta-communication. Future research is needed to investigate more areas of conflict and the conditions in which such conflicts may be used as constructive avenues for learning. It is important to investigate the reasons why they occur and how to recognise them in practice. We hope to inspire both supervisors and students to recognise intercultural interaction as an opportunity for mutual learning, specifically in light of the growing number of international students in higher education.

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