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**‘Shi men’ as key doctoral practice: Understanding international
doctoral students’ learning communities and research culture in China**

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‘Shi men’ as key doctoral practice: Understanding international doctoral students’ learning communities and research culture in China

Research has been widely conducted to understand international student mobility (ISM), particularly from Global South to North. However, there is little attention paid to international doctoral students’ research and learning experiences in non-traditional destinations, particularly in the Chinese context. Drawing upon the concept of Communities of Practice (CoP), we administered semi-structured interviews with six international doctoral students and their supervisors at a prestigious Chinese university to understand how they experienced intercultural research and supervision in ‘shi men’, a culturally and pedagogically informed collective and semi-closed learning community. Our research findings help elucidate how the different social and academic practices have created various types of ‘shi men’. Each of these academic families reflects the unique features of doctoral learning in China and has implications for international doctoral students’ overall learning experience. This timely study offers distinct insights into cross-cultural learning, research, and supervision practices in China.

Keywords: international student; doctor education; supervision; research experience; Chinese Higher Education; Community of Practice

Introduction

With the increasing trend of globalisation in the last few decades, international student mobility has become one of the significant indicators of internationalisation of higher education (HE) in many countries. Arguably, research about international students in Chinese HE has become increasingly important. Recently, a growing number of studies explore international students’ motivation to study in China (e.g., Ma, 2017; Wen & Hu, 2019), their learning issues (e.g., Ma & Wen, 2018; Qi, Shen, and Dai, 2022; Dai & Hardy, 2022a), and adjustment experiences (e.g., Dai & Hardy, 2022b; Hu & Dai, 2021; Wu & Tao, 2022). However, an area that seemingly remains under-researched, yet has

become increasingly crucial, is international doctoral students' learning experiences in China. Exploring international doctoral students' experiences can offer more nuanced insights about the distinctive ways and practices that could influence the quality of doctoral education in China, which plays a significant role in global knowledge creation.

Doctoral research and learning practices are highly related to the supervision received. Regarding types of supervision, other approach beyond the traditional 'master apprentice model' is attracting renewed interest, including group supervision or the 'cohort model' (Wisker, Robinson & Shacham, 2007) or communities of practice-based approaches (Cai et al., 2019; McKenna, 2017). In social sciences and humanities where group supervision is not conventional, there has been increased attention paid to organising doctoral group activities. Various factors (e.g., individuals' motivation, relationships with supervisors and peers, university context, and social networks) may influence doctoral students' learning journey (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020). Mutual peer support in addition to working closely with supervisors is deemed advantageous in offering space for academic social practice, enriching overall doctoral learning, providing camaraderie as well as nurturing well-being (e.g., Chakraborty et al., 2021; Elliot & Makara, 2021). Regular engagement and interaction via doctoral group activities facilitate membership in a Community of Practice (CoP) where mutual support has been reported to contribute to scholarly growth, identity development, personal and professional growth as well as psychological well-being (Cai et al., 2019). In other contexts (e.g., the US or Scandinavian countries), being part of a research group comes as standard. These communities comprise the supervisors, doctoral students, post-doctoral researchers, and other scholars in the field (Elliot, 2021). Research culture and environment in different communities are diverse and complex.

Some supervisors may prefer to assign doctoral students mainly on the basis of student academic achievement; some may not solely focus on outputs (Belavy et al., 2020). In this paper, doctoral group supervision in a Chinese context will be examined - albeit restricted to supervisors and doctoral students only - as a way of comparing perspectives.

Compared to the Anglophone context, China is usually considered as a country that advocates 'collectivism' in educational practices. Meanwhile, the Confucius Heritage Culture (CHC) also impacts on people's attitudes towards education, for example, students highly respect teachers. Influenced by these sociocultural and educational traditions, doctoral training also happens in collective and semi-closed learning communities – conventionally known as 'shi men' in the Chinese HE system. The concept of 'shi men' refers to a community that reflects connections, relationships, and organisations between students and masters, which usually exists in traditional Chinese martial art (Kong Fu) training schools. Now, it depicts various learning relationships between learners and teachers. While 'shi men' is not officially set up by universities and departments, it is regarded as common practice in Chinese doctoral education. In a 'shi men', relationships between supervisors and students could be complex as informed by different supervision styles, and in turn, influence doctoral students' learning experiences. Practically, how international students experience doctoral education in China and how they understand themselves in this journey are still under-researched. This exploration can help the research community not only to understand how the Chinese training system fosters international doctoral students' development, but also how insights into doctoral group supervision in other contexts like China, can contribute to understanding and debate in this field.

In the following section, we start with a review of literature about international students in China, to highlight the significance of this research. Then, the theoretical lens, i.e., CoP is introduced. Next, we present the research design and findings respectively, followed by reflection on the empirical and theoretical contributions of the findings. Implications are raised at the end of this article.

Research about international doctoral students

Many researchers have investigated international doctoral students' cultural adjustment and learning issues in host countries. Notably, most existing studies have mainly focused on international doctoral students from Global South to North. For example, Maringe and Jenkins (2015) investigated international doctoral students' learning experiences in the UK context. They found that many students felt challenged to conduct research in English because of language barriers. Similar issues are found by Ma (2021) who explored international doctoral students' academic writing practices in Australia.

In a different vein, Elliot and Kobayashi (2019) analysed the relationship between supervisors and international doctoral students in the Danish context. Their study shows participants' complex views in relation to academic and psychosocial adaptations in the cross-cultural learning and supervision process. Altogether, these studies suggest that doctoral training can be a complex process typically involving interaction in various aspects to achieve identity formation, professional development, personal growth, socialisation, and psychological well-being, among others (Elliot, 2021). Yet, these studies have not examined how the increasingly recognised research culture or environment where doctoral students are situated can have a crucial impact on their progress and eventual success.

Distinct from the above studies, some researchers have started paying attention to international doctoral students' experiences in the Chinese context. For example, Wang and Byram (2019) explored a group of international doctoral students' relationships with their Chinese supervisors and their communication with peers in everyday university life. They observed that these students experienced 'informal enculturation' with their 'academic brothers/sisters'. Whereas this concept means that group members have the same supervisor, 'men' usually refers to the supervisor's research group – or the so-called 'familial' group. According to Wang and Byram (2019), many international students in these Chinese supervisory settings engaged in various learning models, such as group discussion, WeChat¹-based informal communication, and peer communication. These settings are seemingly instrumental for international doctoral students in establishing a harmonious relationship with their supervisors whom they typically regard as academic masters, but also with whom they pursue friendships via this 'familial' setting – typically known as 'shi men' in the Chinese HE context (Lin & Zhao, 2019). As these findings illustrate, pedagogical and research practices in the Chinese HE context have specific features that may differ from many international students' previous learning experiences in other educational contexts.

The community of 'Shi Men' in the Chinese HE context

'Shi men' tends to emphasise the role of the 'teacher' (or 'supervisor') in a particular community (Lin & Zhao, 2019). 'Shi men', represents a 'semi-formal' community of the supervisor's research groups. In a 'shi men', the supervisor is positioned at the peak of the hierarchy (Lin & Zhao, 2019). Notably, students highly 'respect' their supervisors

¹ WeChat is a popular app for everyday communication in China.

and call their peers as ‘*academic sisters or brothers*’ depending on the sequence of starting research with a supervisor within a ‘*shi men*’. The existence and wide practice of ‘*shi men*’ characterises the notion of ‘academic family’ that is typical within doctoral contexts in China.

Essentially, ‘*shi men*’ is regarded as a usual setting of Community of Practice in the Chinese academic field that has been widely adopted and recognised by students and academics in the Chinese HE context even though there are no official policies and documents to legitimise this setting (Lin & Zhao, 2019). Several features including collectivism, respect and hierarchy in the Chinese CHC context, which fostered the formation of ‘*shi men*’ have been regarded distinctive parts of Chinese academic culture (Lin & Zhao, 2019). Arguably, ‘*shi men*’ does not only significantly influence international students’ relationships with supervisors and peers, but it also enables social connectedness and a genuine camaraderie as it creates a semi-closed bond and fosters effective collective working relationship between peers and supervisors. Yet, there is very little exploration about this distinct feature in China’s doctoral practice, especially for international students. As a result, in a ‘*shi men*’, learning goes beyond the traditionally narrow focus of knowledge creation and encompasses development where scholarly or researcher identities, for example, are formed and continuously strengthened in ‘formal’, ‘semi-formal’ and ‘informal’ ways (Lee, 2018; Mantai, 2017). Arguably, affiliation with a ‘*shi men*’ is of even greater value to the international doctoral group who are typically confronted with multiple pressures associated with the combined doctoral genre and the transitional challenges from the sojourn necessitating adjustment and social support (Cai et al., 2019; Elliot & Kobayashi, 2019).

Cultural and pedagogical value of ‘shi men’

The concept of ‘*shi men*’ is argued to be culturally and pedagogically informed. Most

research students only have a single supervisor who is entirely in charge of learning and research activities in China (Lin & Zhao, 2019). Many supervisors pedagogically organise a group or regular meetings with his/her students to manage overall research activities and as a demonstration of supervisors' effort from 'the "position of support" as also applied in other contexts, particularly as doctoral learners navigate new academic contexts and understand and meet the requisite standards to achieve a doctoral qualification' (Elliot & Kobayashi, 2019, p. 926). This supervisor-initiated relationship can help deepen the connections between students and supervisors and shape a community of learning and research useful for 'combatting negative feelings of isolation, disorientation and imposter syndrome' – typically experienced by doctoral students (Mantai, 2017, p. 648). The importance of engaging in various disciplinary communities is further exemplified in Cai and colleagues' exploration of the communities of practice among the international doctoral group (Cai et al., 2019). Notably, several disciplines have adopted a '*shi men*' setting, irrespective of disciplinary differences, which seemingly has become the standard for students and supervisors in Chinese doctoral practice.

While Wang and Byram's study (2019) explored the communication between domestic Chinese and international doctoral students, relatively very few studies have comparatively explored Chinese supervisors' and their international students' relationships in '*shi men*' setting. While it is widely recognised that the advisor/advisee relationship plays a significant role in contributing to the success of doctoral studies (McAlpine, Castello, & Pyhalto, 2020; McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020), further exploration is warranted in understanding the interplay between supervisor and supervisee in group settings, but also in less-explored contexts as '*shi men*'. In this connection, we propose the following research questions to explore the relationships

between international doctoral students and their Chinese supervisors in this study: 1) *How do international doctoral students experience the 'shi men'-based research setting in China?* and 2) *How do Chinese supervisors understand the roles of international doctoral students in the 'shi men' context?* To do so, we draw upon CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) as the theoretical lens for interpreting these stakeholders' views of 'shi men', with a specific focus on international doctoral students' learning experiences in the Chinese context.

Theoretical framework

The CoP provides an effective theoretical framework for this research. While this concept has been adopted in various disciplines, it has roots in learning theory. According to Wenger (2010, p. 1), CoPs are 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'. Wenger (1998, p. 2) suggests three CoP features: 'mutual engagement', 'joint enterprise' and 'shared repertoire'. Mutual engagement means people need to share passions and work collaboratively with respect to diversities; joint enterprise refers to regular communications and interactions among members who can mutually support others amid learning journeys; and 'shared repertoire' encourages group members to share resources (e.g., experiences and knowledge) with others to achieve goals. Through CoP, the interests and aims shared by the group members are promoted and supported as they work collaboratively via joint activities, discussions, and active communications.

In this regard, the concept of CoP can be a useful theoretical tool to understanding international doctoral students' research practices and learning experiences. For example, Cai and colleagues (2019) theoretically analysed the significant potential of using CoP as effective praxis to explore international doctoral

students' cross-cultural research and learning experiences. They argued that it is essential for doctoral researchers to join communities where they can engage in a mutual process of knowledge exchange and learning. On the other hand, CoP members may encounter potential challenges, too. According to Cai et al (2019), international doctoral students' sense of identity may be (re)shaped dynamically – a way of 'becoming a certain person – a knower in a context where what it means to know is negotiated' (Wenger, 2010, p. 2). When international students start their learning journey in China, they may start engaging in an ongoing process of (re)shaping identities (Hu & Dai, 2021). As an example, they may shift between 'follower' and 'explorer' in learning and research. In the same manner, when international doctoral students engage in CoPs, the familial component of the group may put them in a difficult position, even being unable to examine critically their situations in their communities, which can have various influences on their learning and well-being. For example, for some students a CoP may facilitate in establishing their sense of belonging in a new context; by contrast, a CoP can also cause some students to feel isolated and marginalised by significant others (e.g., domestic peers).

Distinct from western contexts and cultures, which tend to conform to 'individualistic' traits and behaviours, Chinese society tends to represent collectivistic features (Hofstede, 1986). With the concept of collectivism aligning with CoP principles, we argue that this theoretical lens tends to fit well into China's disposition towards collectivistic practices. The concept of '*shi men*' is arguably a reflection of the society's collectivistic feature duly extended in the Chinese academic context. The CoP framework has, therefore, been adopted to understand the research learning experiences of international doctoral students in China and their relationships with their Chinese supervisors and fellow doctoral students within the distinct '*shi men*'-based context.

Methodology

A qualitative exploratory study was conducted to explore international doctoral students' intercultural learning and research experiences in China. The study was conducted at a research-focused comprehensive university in Beijing. It is one of the 'Double First-Class' institutions with various disciplines. The university was selected as the research site as it offers many programmes for international doctoral students. Also, one of the authors was working there during this study and had established connections with potential academics and students. This study focused on full-time international PhD students and their supervisors only. This is because in accordance with the Chinese government policies, foreign students are not allowed to study other types of doctoral programmes (e.g., part-time, professional doctorate).

By adopting purposive sampling, we recruited potential participants from the target university. Specifically, the first author sent invitation letters to potential academics and sought their support to recruit potential students. A total of twelve participants voluntarily participated in this study, including six international doctoral students and their respective Chinese supervisors. Doing so enabled a comparison of views from both key stakeholders and afforded a triangulation of perspectives 'to corroborate the accounts of one person or group using the accounts of others' (Yardley, 2008, p. 239). Participants' demographic profile is in Table 1. Each participant is given a pseudonym to protect privacy. In China, doctoral students usually have a single supervisor, which may be different from other contexts (e.g., Australia, the UK, and the USA).

Table 1. Participants' demographic profile

International doctoral students					Chinese supervisors		
Name	Gender	Nationality	Major	Years of PhD	Name	Gender	Country of PhD awarded
Amir	M	Bangladesh	Engineering	1	Long	M	USA
Dinesh	M	Pakistan	Economics	4	Xia	F	USA
Kim	M	Japan	Education	2	Wei	M	USA
Lipon	M	Pakistan	IT	3	Ding	M	Singapore
Sana	F	Pakistan	Engineering	2	Hao	M	USA
Astrid	F	Nigeria	Management	2	Yun	F	UK

In-depth and face-to-face interviews were adopted for data collection. Semi-structured interviews allowed researchers to hear ‘the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience’ (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Based on the first author’s previous research of investigating Chinese doctoral students’ experiences in Australia, the interview protocol was amended and developed to explore international doctoral students’ learning experiences in China and Chinese supervisors’ perceptions on this foreign group. Questions for international students focused on understanding their overall learning and research experiences, relationship with supervisors and peers, and issues they faced. Questions for Chinese supervisors focused on their attitudes towards these international students and issues they encountered. After obtaining ethics approval from the first author’s university, from September to November 2019, the first author conducted all the interviews. Each interview lasted between 1 to 1.5 hours and was audio recorded. Interviews with students were in English and were then transcribed. Interviews with supervisors were in Chinese enabling them to express their thoughts

without any language barriers. The first author then translated these Chinese recordings into English and invited these supervisors to check the accuracy of the translation prior to the data analysis. Then we applied cross-checking through comprehensive discussions seeking to confirm legitimacy of selected data with the emergent specific and converging themes.

Considering the researchers' positionality in the study, we regarded our positions as in-betweeners (Milligan, 2016; Dai, 2021). On the one hand, we are insiders. The first author was an international doctoral student in Australia and had experience of working with supervisors in a cross-cultural context. The second author was also an international doctoral student in the UK and is now working as an academic at a Russell Group British university supervising doctoral students from various countries. These first-hand experiences as international students were deemed crucial in critically understanding international doctoral students' experiences from a reflexive perspective. On the other hand, we are also considered outsiders as we did not have experience as doctoral students in the Chinese system. Thus, as researchers, this enabled us to exercise greater objectivity in examining participants' experiences from multiple perspectives (Milligan, 2016).

In analysing the data, we adopted both inductive and deductive approaches. First, we conducted inductive analysis to explore potential features and patterns that emerged from the data by adopting the thematic method (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The first author coded the data and generated potential themes, with the second author engaging in deeper discussion of the analysis to provoke further reflection. During the analytical stage, the two authors regularly discussed the findings and their implications aiming to reach a high degree of congruence.

Meanwhile, we also analysed data deductively. While thematic analysis is inductive-orientated, researchers further adopted a deductive approach to interpret findings by using existing theoretical concepts – in this case, CoP, to analyse participants' experiences. Through iterative cycles of recoding to identify key themes, we selected representative quotes to illustrate participants' views and experiences with rich descriptions and illustrations.

Findings

Our findings demonstrate that although all doctoral students belonged to a '*shi men*', the outcomes could be diverse. Comparative reflections from supervisees and supervisors on their relationships led to the identification of three '*shi men*' categories: 1) a collaborative research partnership; 2) a 'boss-employee' model; and 3) a nominal doctoral relationship. Each category has implications for the quality of the supervisor-supervisee relationship in the Chinese doctoral setting.

A collaborative research partnership via 'shi men'

Many doctoral students described their relationships with Chinese supervisors as being research partners who collaborate with each other. For instance, Dinesh shared his learning experiences:

Doing a doctoral study is my first time [in] China ... When I communicated with my supervisor, I can feel that she is a very kind person and wants to help students and share her knowledge. ... she treated her students as research partners without a strong sense of hierarchy. (Dinesh, PhD student)

This experience illustrates a healthy and positive view of the relationships between student and supervisor. Reflecting on the supervisor's own experience, Xia (Dinesh's supervisor) explained her motive for treating doctoral students as partners:

...it is important for researchers to have students from different cultural background and [*shi men*] setting could potentially motivate students to create something new via communicating with different people. So, when I completed my PhD in the US and went back to my current university to do research, I actively supervise international students. (Xia, PhD supervisor)

Xia's previous learning experiences in the US had seemingly enhanced her sense of responsibility to provide high quality supervision. These experiences had motivated Xia to build a collaborative context in her group – a 'research partnership'-based '*shi men*' setting for students. As Xia mentioned, 'my group has a collaborative culture ... students are my research partners and even 'family' members'. Xia's group seemed to be an effective model for doctoral training, which reflects several features of CoPs, such as mutual support and engagement, collaboration, and knowledge exchange (Cai et al., 2019; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2010). Xia's collaborative approach has influenced her overall practice: '*I try my best to provide useful feedback and we co-publish papers. This cycle also helps me to get more publications in different topics, which seems to be a win-win mode for all of us*'.

Compared to Dinesh, Amir completed his master's study in China and then conducted a doctoral study. He had established a close relationship with his supervisor:

I did my master's in China with my current PhD supervisor ... Peers have very good relationships, and I can highly engage in group activities. My Chinese is very fluent, and it helps me to adapt to the community. (Amir, PhD student)

As the extract indicated, Amir seemed to enjoy his learning journey in his supervisor's group. Through their respective CoPs, Amir gained support via various activities:

Some of my peers invited me to join their research projects and let me do some works. Through working with them unofficially, I can also practise my Chinese. Moreover, as my English is good, some of them also asked me to check grammar before submitting articles. This mutual support is essential to us.

These activities enabled Amir to recognise various lessons via the ‘hidden curricula’ as well as reinforce further learning obtained through the formal channels (Elliot, 2020).

His supervisor, Long, also shared his philosophy of being a supervisor.

The culture of my supervision and lab is collaborative. My work is to support them when they encounter challenges and provides different opportunities to build their academic careers, for example, asking them to lead some projects, and co-writing something together. (Long, PhD supervisor)

In these two cases, supervisors encouraging collaboration within the research group was adopted as a strategy to create a sense of ‘partnership’ among scholars. Interestingly, Long’s philosophy of supervision indicates that he seemed to shift dynamically between different types of identities in his ‘*shi men*’ as a supervisor, collaborator, coordinator, and facilitator. Drawing upon Long’s experiences, identity development may happen not only to students, it can also reshape supervisors’ roles, which may indicate a consistent shift of power relations in supervision (Robertson, 2019). Such a shift seemed to have positive influences on cross-cultural supervision and learning for Chinese supervisors and international students.

A ‘boss-employee’ model via ‘shi men’

In another scenario, some students felt that supervisors treated them as if they were ‘employees’ or ‘labourers’, at times, not even giving them due credit for their work.

My supervisor asked me to write something on Japanese education in a paper. However, I noticed that he published it and did not put my name as co-author. I think I became cheap labour for him to do data analysis and writing reports. (Kim, PhD student)

Kim’s experiences have affected not only her views towards the learning mode but also her relationship with her supervisor, where being constantly asked to do various tasks

(data analysis, report writing) for other projects outside PhD work contributed to feeling ‘so stressed’. This boss-employee experience was also shared by Lipon who studied IT:

My supervisor usually asked three international students as a working group as we can communicate with each other easily. Interestingly, Chinese students usually presented their study in Chinese, we just sat there. Then the supervisor briefly translated what they reported. When foreigners presented, the supervisor then explained key ideas in Chinese again. It seems that the supervisor is a lab boss and a mediator. (Lipon, PhD student)

Lipon’s experience indicates that the ‘boss-employee’ model is employed as a supervision approach by some academics. This view tended to be confirmed by two supervisors who proposed that such a model is a means of helping doctoral students not only in completing their research work but in achieving a PhD qualification.

As a supervisor, I should let them join my project to do something, which not only helps them find a direction but also complete projects. I think this approach is much easier to work together. (Ding, PhD supervisor)

In my field, research is quite project-based. By doing projects, students can learn many things rather than focus on what they proposed to research. (Wei, PhD supervisor)

This model, however, is likely to create tension due to the existence of various working style preferences. Lack of sensitivity to these preferences may serve as a barrier between international doctoral students and their Chinese supervisors (Singh, 2009) – hinting at a power dynamics issue. Consequently, the unequal power relations at play may lead some international doctoral students to perceive that they are not well-treated in these doctoral ‘*shi men*’ settings (Grant, 2005; Robertson, 2019).

A nominal 'shi men' doctoral relationship

Distinct from the above two cases, international doctoral students also suggested that some were allocated with 'nominal supervisors'. While these students had been officially 'welcomed' to the group, they also, at times, felt helpless, marginalised, and dissociated for various reasons:

My school nominated one academic as my supervisor [although] I don't know how they arranged this supervision. I met my supervisor and noticed that her interests seemed to not match my previous research proposal. It felt so hard to communicate with her, which made me so stressed. (Sana, PhD student)

In Sana's case, while persisting in her research, the mismatch between her interests and her supervisors' made her feel that her 'shi men' membership was merely nominal – affecting their communication and leading to some confusion. Astrid's comments on supervisors' quality of feedback contributed to greater stress, leading to nearly losing direction in her research. Like Sana's, the relationship was regarded as nominal and superficial.

My supervisor is the deputy head of my school, and he is busy for many admin works. He cannot provide detailed feedback and usually provided very broad comments, such as 'this is good; well done; change grammar'. Such feedback is not helpful... I am the only international student that my supervisor has for now. Due to language barriers, communication between me and peers is very superficial. ... I don't think I belong to this academic community. (Astrid, PhD student)

When Astrid tried to seek help from peers in her 'shi men', existing language barriers made her feel even more disempowered. This implies that neither her '*academic brothers/sisters*' nor '*shi men*' were able to offer her adequate support. Consequently, Astrid became demotivated, stressed, and marginalised; this tends to contradict the core of Wenger's (1998) CoP, for example, mutual collaboration.

In seeking supervisors' views, employing a 'nominal' model was seemingly prompted by the university's mandatory policies to supervise and pursue regular communication with international doctoral students, which inevitably added to their workload.

My university asked me to supervise at least two international students per year and I cannot reject this work as it will count as my workload. (Hao, PhD supervisor)

To ensure the quality, my university also asked that supervisors must communicate several times with international students per week as compulsory work. If supervisors do not follow this rule, international students could complain to the school or university. Such setting makes many supervisors feel very tired and have negative attitudes to supervise international students. (Yun, PhD supervisor)

As illustrated in these passages, some supervisors and students may then become frustrated as a result of being in a nominal '*shi men*'. Whereas international students can become active members of '*shi men*', '*shi men*' communities are organised differently affecting the form of support, extent of communication and nature of collaboration pursued. Specifically, when international students and supervisors find themselves in an unmatched and disharmonious situation, the impact of the community on doctoral students and supervisors can be far from positive (Janssen, van Vuuren, & de Jong, 2020).

Discussion

Drawing upon the concept of CoP, this study examined international doctoral students' learning experiences in relation to the Chinese notion of '*shi men*' – complemented by Chinese supervisors' views. The findings suggest that '*shi men*' seemed to have become a research culture in the Chinese higher education context, which has crucial influences on international doctoral students' research journey (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020).

Notably, the distinct practices of '*shi men*' – conceptualised as models of CoP – can facilitate in understanding international doctoral students' learning experiences in the Chinese academic context by focusing on the impact of their research environment. The types of relationships as perceived by international doctoral students and their Chinese supervisors proposed three different categories for the '*shi men*' communities – collaborative, boss-employee, and nominal models. Each of these research environments has their own genre and creates doctoral pedagogies within a small research culture that is situated within their respective '*shi men*'. In turn, each '*shi men*' has implications for the overall quality of the international doctoral experience. Our findings also challenge the predominantly affirmative models often associated with communities of learning, particularly when power dynamics concerns exist that can affect all, not just international doctoral students (Robertson, 2019). While these findings highlight that the relationships between international students and supervisors primarily and significantly influence the doctoral learning journey (Dai & Hardy, 2021; Elliot, 2021), it is equally simplistic to suggest that all communities are all valuable and useful to all international doctoral students.

The collaborative research partnership in a '*shi men*' can be argued to be an ideal model of doctoral research communities. As experienced and shared by Dinesh and his supervisor (Xia), their '*shi men*' helped establish healthy, collaborative, and strong relationships. This finding is in line with what Wang and Byram (2019) observed i.e., a 'friend-master' relationship in some international doctoral student communities in China. In Xia's '*shi men*', students and the supervisor practise 'mutual engagement', 'joint enterprise' and 'shared repertoire' within a flexible space, which reflect the key values of CoP (Wenger, 1998). In this '*shi men*', peer ('*academic brothers/sisters*') support from other community members facilitated international doctoral students'

capacity to adapt. '*Shi men*' then helped create a harmonious community encouraging group members to access different developmental activities, collaborate with peers, and establish networks (Cai et al., 2019). Of the three, this type of '*shi men*' seems to be the only model that reflects the core values of CoP. Not only does it offer a deeper sense of belonging among international doctoral students, but it has also become their 'academic home' in the Chinese context, and to an extent, serves as an extension of their social home while studying in China.

Distinct from the collaborative research partnership and many previous doctoral studies (e.g., Barnes & Austin, 2009; Wang & Byram, 2019), this study also highlights the drawbacks entailed by 'boss-employee' and 'nominal' supervision relationships that exist in some Chinese '*shi men*' communities. The 'boss-employee' model illustrates a complex relationship and reflects different stakeholders' perspectives. International students tended to be wary of a 'marketised' type of relationship with their supervisors, which often contributes to students feeling more stressed. Despite engagement in a community, they find it hard to adapt to the new context, particularly since their experience underlines the unequal power relations between students and supervisors (Grant, 2005; Robertson, 2019), which is not supportive of doctoral students' personal growth and psychological wellness (Elliot, 2021).

On the other hand, supervisors contended how project-based research in their '*shi men*' is ideal in training doctoral students. Essentially, it is these 'bosses'' utilitarian way of motivating 'employees' to collaborate with each other through various sub-groups, with a view to promoting interaction, discussion, and communication among students. From the supervisors' perspectives, this particular '*shi men*' community can accelerate productivity with the added advantage of enhancing collaborative efforts among group members (Wenger, 2010). Further, these supervisors

perceived this model as a potential avenue for helping international doctoral students enhance their professional skills and experience of socialisation (Elliot, 2021)).

Lastly, as for doctoral students who engaged in a ‘nominal’ relationship with their supervisors via ‘*shi men*’, this raised immense difficulty working with their supervisors, with their overall learning experience negatively affected. Although these students officially study with Chinese supervisors, they are marginally operating in their ‘*shi men*’ community. In this regard, their experience may challenge the assumption underpinning CoPs that group members work collaboratively to achieve certain goals via regular interaction and communication (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2010). It seems that this kind of ‘*shi men*’ may not be of benefit to international doctoral students, and arguably even to their local counterparts.

On the contrary, this ‘*shi men*’ is more likely to bring forth practical disadvantages for all concerned. Several factors can potentially lead to international doctoral students’ disempowerment, partially concerning linguistic challenges (e.g., Hu & Dai, 2021; Ma & Wen, 2018). As in Sana’s experience, the case is exacerbated when universities or departments do not have a proper procedure for arranging suitable supervision, further leading to collaboration and communication barriers. While some universities intentionally push academics who may not be motivated to supervise international students, as in the case of Yun and Hao, its consequences for both parties can be problematic. Altogether, as our study findings illustrate, there exists multiple types of doctoral ‘*shi men*’ communities and various kinds of relationships between international students and their Chinese supervisors rather than only the ‘friend-master’ model depicted in Wang and Byram’s (2019) research.

Distinct from existing models of doctoral supervision (e.g., master apprentice and group supervision), our study examines and elucidates the culturally embedded ‘*shi*

men' models in the Chinese doctoral community context. Each '*shi men*' has its unique features and can potentially influence identity formation, growth and development, socialisation, and psychological well-being – all crucial in the doctoral process (Elliot, 2021). Drawing upon the CoP principles, it is necessary for a '*shi men*' to embrace wholeheartedly the key characteristics of CoPs, i.e. mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998). It is only then that each member can become mutually accountable to each other and finds being part of the community meaningful and beneficial, subsequently encouraging group coherence. It is, therefore, essential for international students to be aware of the different types of '*shi men*' when they conduct their doctoral research in China, and which one is in operation in their respective '*shi men*' community. These complex contextual factors as part of the research culture may systematically influence their doctoral research and learning journeys (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020).

Several implications can be drawn from this study. Being aware of the '*shi men*' communities in the Chinese higher education context is simply a starting point. For international doctoral students coming to China, it is necessary to communicate with potential supervisors even before starting their doctoral journey to explore the type of '*shi men*' community they favour and practise. Enhancing intercultural competence is not a one-way approach after all. The '*shi men*' model also needs to be recognised as an ideal platform for fostering both high quality doctoral practice and intercultural competence, if used strategically. In this respect, Chinese supervisors can reflect further on their model of '*shi men*' and how this affects the overall experience of the doctoral students in their respective groups. Likewise, Chinese universities can provide more support to both international students and Chinese academics towards more meaningful cross-cultural collaboration and understanding. Outside China, this study may also

inspire a similar model that can be employed strategically to enhance the research culture and doctoral environment in other contexts.

Conclusion

As in the case of international doctoral students who sojourn in Western countries to pursue a doctorate, those who decide to embark on a doctoral study in the Chinese context are also likely to be confronted by parallel sojourn challenges. By adopting CoP as a theoretical concept, this paper reports how doctoral pedagogical practices are conventionally characterised by the '*shi men*' model, which tends to be the norm in China. Therefore, understanding the concept behind '*shi men*', is arguably vital as it, by extension, serves as international doctoral students' 'academic home' in the Chinese context. It may even be an extension of their social home, as a result of being away from their home country.

By illustrating the three categorisations of '*shi men*', which can inform doctoral students' overall doctoral journey, this study aims to raise awareness for all future international doctoral students in China. These pedagogical and cultural communities tend to be implicitly understood by local doctoral students, but not necessarily by their international counterparts. In this regard, it can be argued that there needs to be greater recognition and understanding of '*shi men*' communities, their purposes and the ways in which the '*shi men*' can be operationalised by the supervisors. Transparency over what '*shi men*' is and its associated implications for doctoral students can have vital implications for their relationships with their supervisors and for their overall international cohort's experiences. On a broader level, this can impact on China's reputation as a destination for international education coming from the testimonies of its very own ambassadors, i.e. international doctoral students. As elucidated in this paper, each '*shi men*' model could potentially enhance or seriously weaken the overall doctoral

experience of international students who aspire to study in China. In sum, these models arguably warrant further comprehension, primarily to assist international students' successful doctoral journey, but equally to promote a better intercultural understanding when participants involved in the international experience come from qualitatively different academic and social contexts.

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