EXPLORING THE SUPERVISION EXPERIENCES OF CHINESE OVERSEAS PHD STUDENTS IN NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT. Chinese students have comprised a large part of higher degree research students in several English speaking countries. Their supervision experiences, however, have not been fully examined. Using semi-structured interviews with 24 student participants, this study explores the supervision experiences of Chinese overseas doctoral students studying in New Zealand, particularly focusing on how they handle challenges and difficulties and how they develop themselves in the supervision process. The themes of agency and autonomy emerged, challenging the stereotype of Chinese international students with learning and social deficits. The students were not a homogeneous group. We argue it is not necessary to overemphasise the impact of cultural differences on the supervisory relationship and that sometimes personal characteristics are more significant than cultural factors in shaping supervision experiences.

Keywords: Chinese overseas doctoral students; supervision experiences; agency; culture; personality traits

Introduction

Chinese students have constituted a large part of twenty-first century higher degree research students in Australia (Ingleby & Chung, 2009), New Zealand (Edmonds, 2013), the United States (Zhang, 2016). Unlike their undergraduate and Master’s counterparts, they work closely with their supervisors throughout their studies (Gopal, 2016). The supervisory relationship directly and significantly affects their learning experience (Walsh, 2010). Little research has been done on the experiences of international doctoral students and particularly their perceptions of feedback from supervisors about their work (Soong et al., 2015; Wang & Li, 2011). This paper explores the academic experiences of 24 Chinese doctoral students at four New Zealand universities, focussing on perceptions of supervision.
Unlike much literature focusing on issues and challenges facing Chinese (doctoral) students, our research investigates how they handle challenges and difficulties and how they develop in the process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 student participants in various disciplines. Our participants were not a homogeneous group: some actively exercised their agency to solve issues and improve their situations while some did not. This suggests that sometimes personal characteristics are more significant than cultural factors in shaping supervision experiences. We believe that some studies explaining student behaviours purely as cultural consequences overemphasised the influence of culture on the supervisory relationship (e.g. Edmonds, 2013; Hu et al., 2016a; Ingleby & Chung, 2009). They viewed Confucian beliefs and values as negative factors affecting students’ effective communication with supervisors. However, because we have found Chinese traditional values also to exert positive influences we argue that it is necessary not to view cultural factors in overly simplistic terms.

In the following sections we review literature on the supervision experiences of Chinese research students. We then discuss student perspectives on supervision.

**Acculturation, Stereotypes and Agency**

With the assumption of cultural superiority in English language education systems (Marginson, 2014) and the privileged position of Anglophone academic discourse (Singh & Han, 2009), much of the research (e.g. Gopal, 2016) starts from the position that it is essential for Asian international students to adjust or acculturate to the host country. From this starting point, numerous studies emphasise the negative experiences of Chinese overseas students, viewing them from a deficit perspective. Less research has been done on Chinese overseas doctoral students, but the existing literature tends to use the adaptation paradigm and highlight academic and pastoral issues facing them in the adjustment/acculturation process, such as language difficulties (e.g. Walsh, 2010), insufficient support and advice from supervisors (e.g. Zhang, 2016), ineffective communications with supervisors (e.g. McClure, 2005) and isolation and loneliness (e.g. Zhou, 2014). A mismatch between expectations of supervisors and realities is believed to lead to dissatisfaction and decreased motivation (Zhou, 2014). Supervisors view international PhD students’ expectations of them as unrealistic (Evans, 2007). For example, they feel it difficult to help them adjust to self-directed learning, while students find it challenging to adapt to less structure in research directions (Evans, 2007; Harman, 2003). Students demand more of their time and attention, making them feel pressurised. While they expect a certain distance from students, students just want them to show a caring attitude (Danylchuk et al., 2015). Conflicts occur due to such mismatched expectations, like Hiep’s case in Soong et al.’s (2015) autobiographical narratives.

Some such studies suggest cultural reasons for these problems (e.g. Edmonds, 2013; Hu et al., 2016a; Li, 2016; Walsh, 2010). They indicate that such Chinese
traditional values as piety and deference to authority as well as face-saving, and language challenges, lead to Chinese PhD students’ inability to express their expectations and opinions directly. In this way, Chinese international (research) students are stereotypically seen as passive and quiet. Sometimes their differences are exploited by host academic staff (Forbes-Mewett & McCulloch, 2016). Misunderstandings and problems thus arise. By comparing differences between the host and the home educational culture, some studies conclude that Chinese students’ prior educational experiences make it difficult for them to adapt to a cross-cultural supervisory relationship (e.g. Hu et al., 2016a; McClure, 2005). The issues facing them are viewed as being rooted in educational and cultural differences.

Conclusions of this kind tend to minimise the complexity of human interaction between student and supervisor. Manathung (2011) has reminded us that ‘culture is not that simple and that stereotypes about the typical ways in which supervisors and students from various cultures are likely to behave can also become barriers to effective communication and understanding’ (p. 372). An emerging voice suggests that academic staff need to develop their cultural knowledge and share the responsibility of acculturation (Gopal, 2016; Li, 2016). Soong et al. (2015) call this ‘reciprocal intercultural supervision’. Others suggest Asian (research) students should be viewed as an asset, not as a liability or commodity to host institutions (Edwards & Ran, 2006; Singh, 2009; Singh & Han, 2009; Soong et al., 2015). Singh’s studies particularly suggest the need to engage the cultural and intellectual heritage of Chinese doctoral students doing educational research in Western academic discourse, meanwhile facilitating the development of their research capabilities and professional identities.

Others have highlighted student agency and identity. Ye and Edwards’ (2015) work shows Chinese overseas doctoral students proactively use various coping strategies to tackle challenges, and that their reflexivity and autonomy facilitate the (re)construction of their identities. Jiang et al. (2010) also discuss the significant role of agency in the process of student transformation. Such studies use a self-formation paradigm to explore the experiences of Chinese international students. In contrast to the deficit paradigm, this paradigm features agency and identity; they are seen as self-forming persons who are ‘strong agent(s) piloting the course of (their lives)’ (Marginson, 2014, p. 12).

In this study, we examine how Chinese overseas doctoral students handle challenges and problems arising in the supervisory relationship. We position them as active participants in host academic practices; they are able to take autonomous and empowered action, that is, ‘agency’ (Ecclestone, 2007), to overcome them. The study was based on the phenomenological viewpoint that people are expert in the experience of their own lives. The lead researcher is herself Chinese and has been a doctoral student in a distant country (not New Zealand). Ethics approval was obtained from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee.
participants were identified on a ‘snowball’ basis. Interviews were conducted in Chinese, and translated into English, both by the lead researcher.

**Perspectives on Supervision**

Supervisors play a significant role in determining the quality of postgraduate research experience (Walsh, 2010). All the participants talked about how they perceived their supervisors’ attributes and how they behaved towards their supervisors. Shared research interests as well as compatible and productive work styles were key elements in successful supervision for these students. Opinions differed on the ideal nature of supervisors, of imposed structure and of student independence. There was general agreement on the importance of collegial support.

**Research interests**

The ‘fit’ between the research interests of the participants and their supervisors greatly affected the participants’ learning. Some participants were given the freedom to select research topics which interested them, while some had no freedom and sometimes suffered dire consequences.

**Student-centred topics**

In our sample, some participants were able to articulate their needs and expectations very clearly. Prior to his studies, Jiezou communicated honestly with his advisor:

> Extract 1
> My supervisor got funding. He asked me if I would like to do a PhD…I honestly told him that I couldn’t do it if a research topic didn’t interest me as it would be a very painful experience. He said, ‘no problem. You can do what you want to do.’

Chang’s supervisors allowed her to change her research direction and take up a new research topic which she thought was ‘very interesting but they didn’t know much about’. Her two supervisors’ lack of expertise in her research area was the main source of her stress and anxiety: ‘Students should have the same research directions as their supervisors so that students don’t need to walk unnecessary miles like what I did. I felt tired’.

**Supervisor-centred topics**

Several participants undertook topics assigned by their supervisors. They were not interested in the topics and/or had no relevant previous research backgrounds. Some of them exhibited the kind of behaviour referred to in the stereotypes, but others were able to assert themselves with regard to the topic or in the research process. The following quotes are typical:
Extract 2
When I found the potential supervisor, he gave me a topic. I didn’t think about that. I didn’t understand it. I had no direction. I followed what he had said…I should have found a topic that was interesting to me (Zhen).

Due to her urgent need to enrol for the sake of her visa and her lack of knowledge, Zhen initially had no capability to challenge the topic assigned by her supervisor and was even scared to question him because ‘my purpose was to please the teacher in order to enrol’.

Yin could also not speak to her supervisor about her concern that she was neither able nor willing to do what he required:

Extract 3
My academic and work backgrounds don’t match what I’m doing…after enrolling, my supervisor asked me if I was interested in this current research topic [different from my previous topic used in my application]. That is to say, he changed my topic. We, Chinese students, are weak. At that time…I didn’t know anything but ‘ok’. Subsequently, I’ve been feeling very sad. It’s always very painful. (Yin)

Yin had to follow the research direction which her supervisor was familiar with and he guided her step by step (cf. Sato & Hodge, 2016). Sato and Hodge suggest that Chinese international research students’ acceptance of the authority of their Western supervisors is rooted in such Chinese cultural factors as deference to authority, ‘harmony and collectivism’ and ‘face and face-saving’. These factors combining with the focus of their previous education on the value of gaining knowledge rather than improving critical thinking led them not to challenge what their supervisors said but to conform to their requests. Yin said, ‘This is our Chinese students’ frailty; we are too deferential.’ She realised her inability to challenge her supervisor’s choice and was thus left with a strong sense of powerlessness. In this case, she used ‘we’ rather than ‘I’, although she expressed her personal perspectives, generalising her own experience. Possibly emphasising that Chinese students as a group from the same cultural and educational backgrounds have something in common, allayed her feelings of powerlessness.

However, Chinese international students are not a homogenous group. Yue had a similar educational and professional background to Yin. In the first year Yue challenged the topic assigned by his supervisor but did not stick to his original ideas:

Extract 4
I didn’t question him strongly as I thought it might be a viable research direction. In fact, later I realised that he didn’t have in-depth understanding of what I was doing…According to his guidance, my research deviated from the right direction. Although later I corrected it, this caused me to waste some time… I couldn’t graduate on time as I planned. It’s my own mistake.
Yue, a newcomer in the academic community, initially encountered such challenges as a lack of knowledge about disciplinary discourses and how to do research in Western academia (cf. Li, 2016). His initial inadequacy undermined his confidence in his own judgement while widening the ‘power distance’ gap in terms of knowledge between his supervisor and him. However, he attributed responsibility to himself rather than others, a strategy which assisted in promoting harmonious interpersonal relationships (see Yang, 1986).

Similarly, Zu did not want to do the topic assigned by his supervisor because ‘what I’m doing is related to physics, which I didn’t know much about’. He expressed his opinion to his supervisor but ‘he gave me some materials and said that “no PhD research topic is easy and you should continue with it”’. His supervisor, seemed to dislike students disagreeing with him. In such circumstances Zu ‘had to do what he said’ despite lack of experimental equipment. His experience echoes Soong’s feelings in Soong et al.’s (2015) autobiographical narratives. Soong, originally from Singapore, felt constrained by his Asian values of deference when interacting with his Australian supervisor. Zu’s supervisor seemed to preserve or broaden his power-distance from Zu, thus preventing him from being more proactive. Zu therefore had to spend much time seeking methods to do experiments due to lack of equipment.

**Structured, semi-structured or unstructured supervision**

In this study we grouped the participants’ perceptions of supervisors’ work styles into three categories of structured, semi-structured and unstructured, based on professional demands and degree of organisation of student work.

**Structured supervision**

We defined structured supervision as having expertise in the research topics combined with willingness to provide sufficient guidance through regular meetings. Some participants perceived such supervision kept them on track. Meanwhile some of them developed their own initiative.

Even though Yin had not selected the topic, she valued her supervisor’s teaching style:

Extract 5

My supervisor is relatively good. This is the only point where I’ve felt lucky. He is from Hong Kong but he speaks Chinese. …But I think there is the typical way of Chinese thinking at least in the half of his mindset. He is different from a typical Chinese supervisor who rushes students. He isn’t like a Yangren [white foreigners] supervisor who leaves you alone. My supervisor is in the middle. He tells me what to do and guides me to that direction. If I’ve done something but not yet got any results, he would email me, saying that the materials I’ve collected aren’t suitable and recommending others [papers]. This is good. (Yin)
Yin’s supervisor gave timely instructions and provided examples. Dou also made a similar comparison between his previous Western supervisor and his current supervisor (originally from China). Their supervisors adopted the hands-on approach (Li, 2016) to the extent of intervening in their research projects.

Again Western supervisors are not a homogenous group. Some participants mentioned that their local supervisors used this directive approach. Xue remarked:

Extract 6  
I’ve learned a lot from my supervisor. He is excellent…He has many kinds of new ideas. I feel he understands every aspect of what I’m doing. He knows what I’m doing. Basically he can find a problem quickly. He tells me what to read and what direction I should go…In the first year I did what he told me. I did step by step based on his requirements.

One student appreciated his supervisor providing time management skills: ‘He frequently taught me some methods of assessing how I’m allocating my time’.

Using structured supervision may not be incompatible with their expectations of student becoming independent and self-directed. Xue admired his supervisor’s rich knowledge and was inspired to develop his self-directed learning ability: ‘Now I’ve started to proactively do something. I talk to my supervisor about what I’ve done, but I’ve found he still knows what I’ve read. He’s excellent’. Xue, a peripheral member of the academic community, perceived his supervisor as a role model, inspiring his expectations of becoming a similar person and fully participating in the community.

Semi-structured supervision
In semi-structured supervision, supervisors were seen as having some knowledge in the research topics, providing some advice and support through regular- and/or needs-based meetings. Some of these students took autonomous action to overcome the challenge of insufficient guidance and become independent while some did not.

Some participants touched on their supervisors’ lack of expertise in the students’ projects. They might have assumed their supervisors had disciplinary knowledge and experience prior to their studies. However, later they realised that their supervisors did not have enough knowledge to guide them:

Extract 7  
I told my supervisor that I couldn’t get any results. He responded, ‘you’ll read some papers and see what others have done. Go ahead.’ In fact, he has designed many experiments but he hasn’t done them himself, so he doesn’t know them well (Degang).

Xie had similar experience. These participants had assumed knowledgeable supervisors would give the right direction and supervise closely, based on their previous research experiences in China: ‘In Chinese institutions, students always
stay with their supervisors in labs. Students do what their supervisors tell them. They work very closely. Here interaction between student and supervisor is very ‘loose’ (Yue). In this way, there was a mismatch between the participants’ expectations of supervisors, which were developed partly based on their previous experience in China, and realities. This reinforces similar findings of Edmonds’ (2013) study and Evans’ (2007) research.

Despite the above mismatches, some participants’ enthusiasm for doing research was not dampened. They took autonomous action to handle challenges. For example, Xie spent much time doing experiments; ‘once errors are found, I correct them and continue to do. Meanwhile I read literature to see how others do such experiments’. He also sought help from university technicians and his former colleagues in China. As a result, he started to enjoy undertaking independent research work: ‘I’ve taken more initiative in managing my research activities. I find problems and solve them. I enjoy it. Also, I’ve developed my networks when seeking support from others’. He focused on positive aspects in terms of personal development.

Unlike Xie who frequently interacted with his supervisor, Degang had very limited interaction with his supervisor as the supervisor was very busy. Moreover, the supervisor indicated his expectation of independent learning, saying ‘a person must depend on himself. You can’t rely on others. It’s a fact’. Degang then tuned his relations with his supervisor through interactions: ‘I told him about what I would do next. I needed some facilities. He was responsible for buying equipment’. During his three-year studies, Degang ‘took full advantage of this situation…I solved many issues on my own. In such circumstances, I developed myself’. By seizing opportunities he achieved a high sense of agency from his engagement in such circumstances, putting strategies in place to overcome challenges. In this process he developed interpersonal and research skills whilst enhancing his capability of solving problems. In this sense, he experienced ‘progressive transformative learning’ (Illeris, 2014). Li’s (2016) study found that non-English speaking international doctoral students including Chinese students in New Zealand were empowered as a result of the dynamic interaction between challenges and opportunities, and that they reinvented themselves.

Nevertheless, not all the participants could take empowered and autonomous action to overcome lack of enough guidance. Chang learned a lot by herself. Meanwhile, she ‘attended as many seminars and conferences as I could to meet with people who did similar research, and to get more feedback.’ At a conference she met an Australian professor:

Extract 8
He did similar research and he was very famous in my field. He liked my ideas and wanted to be a co-author and be my external supervisor…Here my supervisor refused [the suggestion] and said I was receiving a scholarship from University C. I would only have supervisors from University C and could not have any external supervisors.
It seemed that this request would have only been granted if Chang relinquished her scholarship. The scholarship afforded her supervisor the leverage in his refusal of the request. In this regard, the participants’ can-do abilities relied on not only their initiative and available resources but also other contextual factors. Lack of enough guidance was a hindrance to progress with Chang’s research: ‘He [the Australian professor] was my oral examiner…He gave me lots of comments. If he had been my external supervisor at that time, I wouldn’t have walked long unnecessary miles’. The scholarship was not Chang’s only source of constraint. Her perception of the power distance to some degree led her to defer to her supervisor:

Extract 9
In my third year, a teacher who I had met at a conference offered me a post of teaching assistant at University A... My supervisor said that I should start to seek a job after graduation… I missed an opportunity.

Chang was conscious of her supervisor’s attitudes and exercise of power. Sometimes she did not understand the reasons for the decisions made by her supervisor and consequentially gave up her expectations and harmonised disagreements in deference to her supervisor.

Unlike Chang, in his second year Yulu requested a change of supervisor due to their disagreement over research focus. In this study, other participants whose supervisors lacked disciplinary knowledge did not request a supervisory change partly because they valued feedback provided by their supervisors.

Feedback
Most of our participants appreciated such support as editing and corrections of their writings. Dongzi, for example, preferred to do research independently. Receiving feedback on writing thus constituted his main and very successful interaction with his supervisor:

Extract 10
I can finish my research myself. I don’t need any team or others’ cooperation. My boss [supervisor] discusses general information about calculation with me. He focuses much more on how to improve my thesis...My supervisor is very helpful. For example, I’m not a native speaker. My English isn’t very good. I can receive a final draft from him one day after I send a first paper draft to him. I can submit it directly to a journal because he corrects all errors and proofreads every word as well as formats the paper for submission. Just one day...sometimes in our meetings, he teaches me how to rewrite sentences and explains why he has made corrections. I’ve taken notes of what he has said. I’ve learned a lot from him in terms of academic writing.

This face-to-face interaction during the feedback process helped Dongzi to clarify his understanding. His confidence and determination were inspired by his
supervisor’s effective supervisory practices. His supervisor’s empathy and hands-on approach to teaching academic writing created a nurturing working environment for Dongzi as a novice. Xie’s supervisor also used a similar approach to training him to write journal papers. Chuan appreciated that his supervisor trained students to make academic presentations. These supervisors had a great positive impact on the doctoral students, assisting them in producing tangible results and fully participating in the academic community.

However, some participants were dissatisfied with their supervisor’s feedback not only in terms of the feedback itself, but in terms of how it was given. For instance, in the first year Nan’s anxiety was mainly caused by her then supervisor’s feedback: ‘He wasn’t responsible. I gave him my research proposal. He didn’t read it closely. He just gave some very general comments’. Talking about how her current supervisor treated her well:

Extract 11
My current supervisor always encourages me. Unlike that previous supervisor who always undermined me, he always says ‘excellent’. I think supervisors have a key impact on students. I thought my writing wasn’t good enough. He thought it was very good.

At the end of her first year Nan requested a change of the supervisor due to a breakdown of their relations: ‘I couldn’t work with him any longer. I had wanted to change since the ninth month. I communicated with him and then his attitude towards me was improved. But he couldn’t help me grow academically’. By contrast, Nan described her current supervisor as ‘the best person and the best supervisor in the department’. Moreover Nan was happy to receive praise from her current supervisor, feeling confident and motivated to proceed with her research.

Nevertheless, the continual praise from Zu’s secondary supervisor led to dissatisfaction: ‘he isn’t helpful. Every time I report what I’ve done, he seems not to be much interested in it…Perhaps because he isn’t my primary supervisor, every time he says the same words ‘good’ and ‘very good’. He seldom gives advice’. Zu’s primary supervisor did not have much knowledge about what he was doing, related to physics, but his secondary supervisor had expertise in this field. Zu seemed to have held high expectations of the secondary supervisor, such as receiving specific feedback. However, unlike the Dutch supervisors who highlighted emotional encouragement by giving praise first and then providing suggestions to students in Hu et al.’s (2016b) research, Zu’s Western supervisor gave no further guidance beyond praise. Similarly, Yin preferred to have specific comments particularly on her critical analysis and creative skills. She saw being critical as a challenge:

Extract 12
I don’t know how to create a problem…I read papers and talked to my supervisor about what others had done. My supervisor said, ‘you don’t tell me what others have done. What do you want to do? Those are
others’ things.’ But I hope to borrow something from others to be my theoretical basis. He said, ‘No, you must think about what you want to do.’

One year later Yin still struggled to develop her ability to read and write critically as well as form arguments. Yin did not understand what the supervisor meant. Yulu, however, challenged his supervisor’s feedback: ‘My supervisor wanted me to write a chapter of case study. I thought it wasn’t necessary as I had already written some relevant content. I refused to write it’. But Yulu ‘had to write it as my supervisor still insisted on it in the end’. Completing a doctoral degree in a new academic environment not only means students being autonomous and independent but also includes students being ‘subjected to authority, to degree regulations, to the convention of thesis writing within a field, and to examinations’ (Foucault, 1977, 1982, cited in Middleton, 2001, p. 4). Later Yulu ‘thought his supervisor was right about writing it’.

**Collegial support**

Some participants mentioned that their supervisors regularly organised group meetings or seminars, where ‘we discuss some issues in depth. I’ve learned a lot’ (Nan). Observing such group meetings organised by other supervisors in her department, Zhen remarked: ‘They discuss and give comments with one another…They get lots of feedback. This is a very good process…They gather to eat together…I think they can benefit [from the seminars]’. This confirms findings by Li’s (2016) that such seminars help students develop their support networks and ‘group feeling[s]’ (Walsh, 2010, p.551), thus fighting isolation. Evans and Liou (2011, p.408) refer to such informal seminars as ‘a lodge’. Some supervisors offered them opportunities to be research and/or teaching assistants. Being academic assistants not only helped the participants to loosen their financial constraints, but introduced them to the academic community:

> Extract 13
>
> I’m a research assistant. In the office, I feel totally different than when I studied. I start to communicate with locals and then I start to discuss something about research. It is serious for me to enter a different work environment in a different country. It’s serious and formal. It means a milestone to me (Hei).

Yulu also highlighted the importance of being a research assistant in successfully completing his PhD research: ‘It was very helpful. I knew more about the process of doing research. I couldn’t make any big mistakes when doing my own research’. Moreover, using his professional networks, Xie’s supervisor sent him to do research for a short time at a university in Singapore. Such exposure in the academic field undoubtedly led the participants to grow academically. Jian’s supervisor provided support for him to finish experiments, frequently driving him to outskirts and introducing volunteers to him.
Unstructured supervision

In unstructured supervision, supervisors were seen as having some knowledge in the research topics their students did but adopting non-directive supervision. This is quite similar to the hands-off approach described by Li (2016), which requires students to be independent and autonomous. Like most supervisors in Li’s research, Zhen’s supervisor used this method to interact with her in three years:

Extract 14
My supervisor never asks me any questions…For example, I have a question to ask him, which I don’t understand. I don’t know how to solve it. Other teachers might say that this should be done in this way. My supervisor always says to me, ‘You should go back to do research on your own…It will be the conversation topic for the next meeting…I can’t say if this style is good or not good. Doing a PhD is a process of self-directed learning, but sometimes I do need some help. I don’t know if what I discuss in my writings is correct. He can’t tell me but lets me go back to think about it. I wrote a paper before. In the process of writing it, I asked him if what I had written was ok. He said we would talk about it in the next meeting. Then I went back. When I finished the paper and gave it to him, he finished it in ten minutes, saying ‘ok’. He should have given me some advice, but he can’t.

In Li’s (2016) study, the supervisors using the hands-off approach believed it was students’ responsibility to write their theses, and that students should do research on their own without providing needed support and supervision. However, the non-directive supervision ‘didn’t suit me. If I were strong enough, it might be suitable’ (Zhen). Zhen lacked disciplinary knowledge and research skills as well as confidence when embarking on her PhD research. She expected to be directed and advised:

Extract 15
When I met my supervisor for the first time, I was full of fear. I didn’t understand what I was going to do. I was scared. I didn’t know how to answer them if my supervisor asked me questions. But my supervisor didn’t ask me anything. I thought it was good. But half a year later I realised such style wasn’t what I wanted.

This corresponds with an argument that student expectations and supervision experiences are not static but dynamic in the supervision process (Li, 2016). Zhen felt she needed directions and academic support but her supervisor did not or could not provide them to her. She became unsatisfied with his work style and struggled to decide if she should request a supervisory change: ‘this person is good…He accepted me when I needed to study…I talked to myself that I couldn’t change the supervisor and the topic. I always have this confusion’. Her scholarship however would be cancelled if she changed the supervisor. Therefore, she continued to defer to the non-directive supervisory practices. ‘It can be an unquestioning allegiance
that makes us vulnerable to all kinds of delusion and abuse (Wenger, 1998, p.181). As a consequence, she felt disoriented (‘I’ve always changed my research focuses.’) and isolated – ‘I have to rely on myself’.

Extract 16
Now we meet less frequently than before. Before we met once a week and then once in two weeks. I felt that I learned a lot from him…now …I’ve read a lot…I don’t have any feelings for him. Meeting with him seems like a friend. Have a chat and go.

The supervisory relationship became less hierarchical and more ‘equal’. Following Wenger’s (1998) notion of supervisory relationship as a community, Zhen was on the margins of the community. She used a diplomatic way – ‘have a chat and go’ - to keep the supervisory relationship alive. She seemed to ‘go along’ ‘through willing allegiance or mere submission’, which Wenger (1998) defines as ‘a form of identification because it shapes the way we experience our own power and thus contributes to defining our identity’ (p. 196). Zhen’s disconnection can be seen as a form of resistance. Lack of guidance and support seriously demotivated her, causing her feelings of frustration (cf. Zhou, 2014). She decided to quit two months after we interviewed her.

Conclusions

A topic reflecting the interests of both supervisors and students laid the groundwork for a good supervisory relationship. The supervisors who led students (newcomers) into the academic community were valued by our participants. The students who reported positive supervision experiences viewed their supervisors as being able and being willing to assist them in fully participating in the community. These supervisors created a nurturing atmosphere and helped them grow both professionally and psychologically. The students for their part admired these supervisors and learned a lot from them.

Student agency influences the supervisory relationship. Facing similar difficult circumstances in terms of lack of sufficient academic guidance, some actively exercised their agency to solve problems and improve their situations while some did not. The former harnessed their responses to an unsatisfactory situation to move from being students to being independent researchers, creating a working relationship with their supervisors. Some however could not do this. Chinese students are not, in fact, a homogeneous population.

Some participants preferred self-directed learning: ‘I much enjoyed learning something myself. I don’t like someone to teach me. I can achieve a sense of accomplishment throughout a self-learning process’ (Wan). Several participants were not passive and quiet. They clearly expressed their expectations and opinions to authorities – their supervisors. They knew how to handle tensions and resolve conflicts with supervisors. In this study, three participants requested a supervisory
change and one participant planned it. This does not confirm findings by Edmonds (2013) that Chinese international postgraduate students in New Zealand rarely changed to other supervisors when their supervisors were not unreliable. These participants do not conform to the usual stereotype of Chinese international students.

In contrast, some participants liked to be instructed and directed. Some were reluctant to question their supervisors because they were still trapped within such traditional values as deference to authority and respect for teachers. They could not communicate effectively with their Western supervisors (cf. Edmonds, 2013). They deferred to them and followed their decisions even when they caused difficulties for them. Their piety to some degree blinded them to the realities of the situation.

Chinese international doctoral students are not a homogenous population. We argue that an overemphasis on the influence of cultural factors on supervisory relationships to some degree ignores the effects of personal factors, simplifying complex human interactions between student and supervisor. In their studies, Ingleby and Chung (2009) and Edmonds (2013) attributed differences between Chinese doctoral students and their Western supervisors to cultural misunderstandings, calling supervision issues ‘cross-cultural’. If this were the case, cross-cultural supervision issues might be solved by pairing supervisors originally from China with Chinese students. However, our research found that similar issues existed between some participants and their Chinese/Asian advisors. Complex interplay between cultures, personal experiences and personality traits affects international doctoral students’ interactions with their supervisors (Manathung, 2011).

Current literature also tends to view Chinese traditional values as barriers to effective supervisory practices. We did find that partly owing to the traditional value of self-abasement, some participants blamed themselves for slow research progress rather than attributing responsibility to their supervisors, keeping supervisory relationships smooth.

We thus argue that cultural factors should not be taken for granted in doing an analysis of international students’ interactions with host university staff. Otherwise, it seems like watching flowers in fog.

Implications and limitations as well as future research
On a cautionary note, the study was limited to student perspectives and the qualitative data could not be generalised to the entire population. Given these limitations, future research may examine the supervisor-student dyad from supervisor perspectives.

This paper explored Chinese international doctoral students’ supervision experiences and particularly how they actively used various coping strategies to handle challenges and problems arising in the supervisory relationships. The findings questioned the stereotype of Chinese international students. This study offered the participants an opportunity to speak for themselves. We hope that this paper will assist host university staff in developing new strategies to enhance the international student experience.
NOTE

1. Chang was interviewed five months after graduation and was still seeking a position.

REFERENCES


QUN DING studied and taught Economics at Anhui University in China, then went on to a Joint Master’s degree in Higher Education from the Universities of Oslo (Norway), Tampere (Finland) and Aveiro (Portugal). She continued at Tampere to complete a Master in Administrative Sciences, then went to England to write a PhD in Higher Education at Sheffield University. Her research involved mature students at three universities in different parts of China. Later, Ding held a post-doctoral post at the Hebrew University of Israel, and more recently at Auckland University of Technology. Ding has now returned to China, and her colleagues are anxious to hear from her!

NESTA DEVINE taught History and English in Auckland high schools, then initial teacher education for secondary school teachers at the University of Waikato. She is now professor at the School of Education at Auckland University of Technology. Her research interests centre on educational philosophy and policy. Much of her work involves supervising her wonderful doctoral students and post-docs, who take her into diverse worlds. Nesta is an Associate Editor of Educational Philosophy and Theory, co-editor (with Dr Leon Benade) of New Zealand Journal of Teachers’ Work, and book reviews editor for New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies.