A Probe Into Chinese Doctoral Students’ Researcher Identity: A Volunteer-Employed Photography Study

Xing Xu1,2

Abstract
Researcher identity has been widely studied as central to doctoral education. However, little is known about students’ emic conceptualization of what represents researcher identity based on their lived experience. Using a sample of 24 Chinese doctoral students in Australia, this study adopts volunteer-employed photography (VEP) to facilitate the participants’ delineation of their researcher identity. Findings reveal that researcher identity is indexed at three levels: belonging as being, doing as becoming, and limited limitlessness. It presents itself as a complex formulating process in which dichotomous, yet mutually constitutive, forces collide and merge. This study concretizes perceptions about the notion of researcher identity through photographs and corresponding revelatory dialogues in relation to people, objects, feelings, phenomena, and relationships. Some insights on visual research methodology are also discussed.

Keywords
Chinese doctoral students, researcher identity, Australia, volunteer-employed photography (VEP)

Introduction: An Overview of Doctoral Students’ Researcher Identity
A large number of studies support the concept that doctoral students’ researcher identity is essential to doctoral learning (e.g., Cotterall, 2013; Inouye & McAlpine, 2017; Pappa et al., 2020). Given that the doctoral trajectory might be expected to be mindfully interwoven with students’ understanding of who they are becoming and aspire to become, Green (2005) argues that doctoral study “is as much about identity formation as it is about knowledge production” (p.153). The body of current literature concentrates on illuminating either the construction of doctoral students’ researcher identity or its interchangeable counterparts, such as academic identity, scholarly identity, and disciplinary identity. This branch of scholarship has focused on the dynamic formation of identity in relation to prototypical doctoral engagements, such as academic writing (L. Xu & Hu, 2020), informal departmental interactions (Fotovatian, 2012), and other scholarly activities within a scholarly community (Coffman et al., 2016).

Having the theoretical root in Wenger’s (1998) notion of communities of practice, a rich body of research revolves around the thesis that researcher identity is essentially a transformative and self-becoming process of being socialized into a full member in a given disciplinary community (Choi, 2021). Many studies have thus scrutinized doctoral students’ positionality in their research community, with the insider/outsider debate being one of the main arguments. For example, Muhammad et al. (2015) posits that researchers represent centers of divergent power and privilege based on education, qualification, output, and other forms of identity. As novice researchers, doctoral students are prone to be identified or to self-identify as outsiders or as having marginal status compared with senior members in their research community. However, despite the fact that power hierarchies may never fully dissipate, researcher positionality is relative and fluid as illustrated by Coffey’s (1999) argument that the boundary between “a stranger or a member, an outsider or an insider, a knower or an ignoramus is . . . much more blurred than conventional accounts might have us believe” (p.22). As academic socialization proceeds, doctoral students secure “an increasingly accepted membership by gaining tacit and experience-based knowledge from storytelling and social interaction with other” (Pilbeam & Denyer, 2009, p.304). Breaking down the linearity of insider/outsider dichotomy, a recent study by Sala-Bubaré and Castelló (2017) sheds
a more nuanced light. Focusing on a complex interplay between the types and numbers of doctoral experiences and students’ positioning in the academic community, it corroborates the intersectional performativity of researchers’ positionality revealed in and by research engagements.

Despite these efforts, there is still a lack of clarity on what defines researcher identity from students’ emic conceptualization. Doctoral students’ experiences of a research community—crucial for contextualizing our understanding of their personal standing within it—are yet to be established. Knowledge about the types and nature of experiences conducive to researcher identification in the doctoral process is limited (Mantai, 2017). I believe it is important to shed light on these gaps, as unraveling doctoral students’ perceptions of themselves as researchers in their research community will facilitate understanding of how they might form epistemologies to fulfill their aspirations. Given these gaps, a research question emerged for this study to unpack:

**Research Question 1 (RQ1):** How do doctoral students perceive their identities as novice researchers based on their lived experiences?

I hope that an elucidation coalescing participants’ emic meaning-making will contribute to the pertinent literature by illuminating these under-researched, yet important facets of the topic.

This study is part of a large research project that investigated Chinese doctoral students’ perceptions of their doctoral journeys in the Australian educational context. With an aim to address a critical gap, this project recruited several international Chinese doctoral students to share their emic perceptions, given the unfortunate fact that the biggest group of international doctoral students since the 1990s (Shen et al., 2016) has received inadequate scholarly attention in terms of their emic meaning-making of an international study sojourn (X. Xu et al., 2020b). This study reports findings on their conceptualizations of researcher identity that remains a core element of the study journey.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

Pertinent discussions on identity enquiries have been salient within sociological discourse for more than 40 years (e.g., Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Bourdieu, 2000; Giddens, 1984; Holland et al., 1998). Early theorists followed the trend of essentialism, contending that identity is indexed in unified and invariable properties shared by collective members. They, however, faced opprobrium from social constructionists who disagreed with the reductionist temptation to define identity as comprising fixed and essential features. Rather, identity should be interpreted as dynamic and performative—subjected to constant (re)construction of relations, symbols, and activities within one’s social landscape. This negotiable nature is fundamentally social, as captured in Zahavi’s (2005) statement that “I come to know who I am and what I want to do with my life by participating in a community” (p.109). Challenging an either/or option, this study developed part of its analysis of researcher identity at the intersection of the two theoretical branches.

The discourse of identity is also rife with contrasting views. One widely debated issue is to what extent individuals are autonomous in constructing their own identity, and to what extent they are shaped by contextual forces (e.g., Archer, 2010; Bourdieu, 2000; Giddens, 1991). Many scholars advocating an ecological approach to identity attend to the interplay between individuals negotiating their sense of identity and the structural constructs of social, institutional, and political forces within the environment (e.g., Edwards & Burns, 2016; van Lier, 2011). Situated within a theoretical position of accommodating structure and agency, this study follows the ecological strand to explore researcher identity as an entity that is shaped by doctoral students’ agentic navigation, while also being “molded, refabricated and mobilised in accord with reigning cultural scripts and centres of power” (Cerulo, 1997, p.397) within the specific academic context.

**Method**

To stimulate participant recollection, this study adopted a participant-led method called volunteer-employed photography (VEP), which enjoys increasing popularity in education research (Baumfield et al., 2013) and was proved to be effective in examining doctoral students’ experiences (Auken et al., 2010). Bates et al. (2017) contend that VEP advances insight into the lived reality that is increasingly experienced and recorded visually, given the accessibility and advancement of visual technology. In this study, VEP, rather than pure interviewing, was chosen for several benefits that visual graphics add to interviewing. As a model of collaboration between the researcher and the researched (Harper, 1994), one of the benefits is its conduciveness to participant agency, arising from the dismissal of the power hierarchy that prevails in pure interviewing. In this study, through the participants’ choice of photographs and the justification of meanings and reasoning behind their choices, they clarify their thoughts and ideas. This benefit is explained by Richard and Lahman (2015) as the empowerment of the participants. As well, context-specific photographs give visual access to attributes, incommunicable in words, in relation to people, objects, feelings, phenomena, relationships, and many dimensions of ways of knowing (Prosser & Schwartz, 1998). This is relevant to this study as the notion of researcher identity, which seems abstract in the verbal sense, is manifested through the lived reality of research engagements that are appropriate for visual representation. Through photos and corresponding revelatory dialogues, the confines of language could be overcome and potential meanings attached to the previously indescribable notion of researcher identity could be unveiled. Utilizing VEP to delve into doctoral students’ experiences,
previous literature (e.g., Elliot, Baumfield, & Reid, 2016; Elliot, Reid, & Baumfield, 2016; X. Xu et al., 2020a) has reaffirmed that this method (combined with interviews) facilitates the bringing of abstract questions down to a hands-on and imagery level due to its visual nature (Van Auken et al., 2010) and enabling more disclosures of the students’ lived reality than an interview alone could possibly elicit. However, VEP is neither a panacea for social research, nor is it exempt from limitations as a research method. These points are expounded upon in the “Reflection” section.

This study adopted a snowball sampling for the recruitment of participants. After the ethics application was approved, I circulated the recruitment request through social networking media channels, such as WeChat and QQ groups, targeting Chinese student associations in Australian universities. The recruitment process identified the participating targets as students of Chinese nationality sojourning in Australia while undertaking doctoral study and whose candidature was in effect at the time of the interview. Twenty-four participants were selected. Despite the limitations of a relatively small sample size, the study shed light on the big picture through the sampling of participants at different stages of their candidature from a wide range of disciplines at 11 universities in Australia (see Table 1).

A two-phase data collection was conducted. First, when the students consented to participation, they were informed of the requirements concerning the collection of photos and advised of the ethics considerations. Each participant was instructed to compile photographs representing both their identity as a researcher and their research community. For confidentiality, it was explained that should any photographs contain identifiable people or places, they would be blurred before they were used for research purposes. The participants were also guaranteed time to compile photographs whether already captured or yet to be captured as representing a current phenomenon (Bates et al., 2017). Subsequently, 24 participants were invited to take part in a one-on-one interview of approximately 30 min duration. Depending on their availability and preference, either face-to-face (10) or telephone (14) interviews were conducted. They were asked such open-ended questions as “Can you talk through your photos?” “Why do you think they represent your researcher identity?” and “How do you depict your research community?”

As the researcher and the participants are Mandarin native speakers, all interviews were conducted in Mandarin. The photographs with concomitant elicitations and interview scripts were then transferred into NVivo 12 for thematic analysis. To boost credibility, texts were returned to some participants before analysis started to verify whether accounts were accurate, impartial, and complete. Data analysis was conducted, comprising four steps: (a) reading and segmenting, (b) sorting and labeling, (c) comparing and synthesizing, and (d) categorizing and reporting. The analysis was

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants.

| Participant | Gender | Academic discipline | Stage of PhD at time of interview (year) | University |
|-------------|--------|---------------------|----------------------------------------|------------|
| S1          | Male   | Social science      | 2                                      | U5         |
| S2          | Male   | Medicine            | 2                                      | U1         |
| S3          | Male   | Social science      | 1                                      | U7         |
| S4          | Female | Medicine            | 2                                      | U1         |
| S5          | Male   | Engineering         | 3                                      | U1         |
| S6          | Female | Social science      | 1                                      | U3         |
| S7          | Male   | Engineering         | 3                                      | U8         |
| S8          | Male   | Engineering         | 2                                      | U4         |
| S9          | Male   | Science             | 3                                      | U9         |
| S10         | Male   | Social science      | 2                                      | U8         |
| S11         | Male   | Business            | 4                                      | U1         |
| S12         | Male   | Humanities          | 1                                      | U8         |
| S13         | Male   | Engineering         | 3                                      | U1         |
| S14         | Female | Medicine            | 2                                      | U6         |
| S15         | Male   | Engineering         | 3                                      | U10        |
| S16         | Female | Humanities          | 2                                      | U8         |
| S17         | Female | Medicine            | 1                                      | U5         |
| S18         | Female | Social science      | 4                                      | U1         |
| S19         | Male   | Engineering         | 1                                      | U11        |
| S20         | Male   | Engineering         | 2                                      | U1         |
| S21         | Female | Engineering         | 4                                      | U1         |
| S22         | Female | Business            | 2                                      | U1         |
| S23         | Female | Humanities          | 2                                      | U5         |
| S24         | Female | Science             | 4                                      | U2         |
inductive and deductive, emerging from within the data and informed also by theoretical underpinnings and epistemological positions taken by the researcher. Rounds of coding were performed and themes gradually emerged. To reduce the researcher’s biases, discussions with several participants and consequent ongoing revisions were carried out to reach a consensus prior to the finalization of analysis. Findings are reported in the following section.

Findings

According to the participants, conceptualization of researcher identity could be indexed at three levels: belonging as being, doing as becoming, and limited limitlessness.

Belonging as Being

The first conceptualization of researcher identity was associated with identity markers, namely, student ID, web profile, and a specific office space. As external markers attached to student researchers, they offered bearers a sense of belonging to the research community in which they were located. This belongingness constituted the participants’ definition of their status as a researcher, which seemed to indicate a specific state of being. One such participant (S8) captured a screenshot of his profile accessed from his university webpage. The photograph depicts visual elements such as his affiliation, qualifications, research projects, candidature status, and contact information. Commenting on this photograph, he explains,

Not long after I was enrolled, I found my personal information on the website of my university which can be accessed online. This does not happen in China. A personal profile or personal webpage makes me feel that it is a good reminder of my researcher identity. (S8)

S10 provided a photograph of his student ID. This is a normal photocard and was issued to the student when he was enrolled, specifying his name, student number, and affiliation. Speaking of the reason for this choice, he explains briefly as follows: “This is my student ID. I think it signifies my researcher identity.”

These two examples first pointed to the notion that researcher identity is closely linked to a sense of belonging and is embodied by official documentation, which stipulates the recognition of the participants’ membership of a university. Affiliation with a certain organization creates the boundaries that define similarities or differences between groupness and non-groupness with reference to those markers. They serve as indicators of in-groupness, asserting an individual’s being as distinct from others who are not entitled to those markers. As S10 explained, his student ID served as an official validation of his status as a doctoral student from X University, authorizing a social and cultural label of his belonging to the institution in which he is expected to conduct research. In S8’s case, an official personal profile specifying more research-relevant information, such as his research project and office address, provided a fuller picture of the dimensions constituting his conceptualization as a researcher. In these and similar cases, the participants’ identification stemmed from identity markers that enact the recognition and promotion of their research-relevant realities.

In addition, researcher identity was intertwined with a sense of belonging, which is essentially tied to the appropriation of a physical space. This is manifested in S22’s choice of a photograph of her office (see Figure 1).

The photograph depicts a cubicle assigned to S22 as her office space by the university. Separated from neighboring working spaces occupied by other research peers, it is equipped with a chair, a desk, and a shelf on which are scattered a few of her personal belongings. Glued to the thin wall is a tag on which are printed a number—T65—and her name, indicating belongingness. She explains the possession of an allocated cubicle with her name on it in the following way:

This is my desk. I think since I have a desk with my name on it, it equates to recognition of my researcher identity. Because undergraduates are not entitled to this. They share an office with others. Also they will not have a desk with their names on it. (S22)

This view suggests that physical boundaries draw a line of demarcation between in-groupness and out-groupness by defining the limits within which an individual is capable of traveling and being. An office is the physical space allocated to a doctoral researcher and is a space that others are not reasonably entitled to appropriate; therefore, it serves to claim inclusion and exclusion, a sense of belonging or not. As an office is meant to be used for research purposes and was confirmed by many participants as where most research happens, it stands to reason that there is an associative

Figure 1. S22’s office.
significance between the office and researcher identity. To a certain extent, identification with researcher status is attached to a valid occupancy of a physical space that accommodates research functions.

**Doing as Becoming**

Second, researcher identity is anchored in performing activities related to research, including daily transactions of doing research, presentation of research output, and popularization of academic research. This view revealed that researcher identity is not static but temporally and situationally negotiated, constructed, and enacted through a performative course of research-specific norms and engagements. The participants disclosed that this continuous process of understanding and giving meaning to researcher identity is navigated through relationships with others and is shaped by lived experiences. To illustrate this, S4 offered an image of herself performing an experiment (see Figure 2).

In this photograph, sitting in front of a long workbench as the central figure, S4 is dropping a tube of reagent into a bottle. The image is set against the background of her lab in which features typical of an experiment-based working environment can be identified: experimental facilities and consumables, laboratory equipment, and shelves and documents. S4 explained that the photograph records her “normal working state” as “doing experiments in the lab is a routine.” Similarly, S16 provided a photograph (see Figure 3) of her office as an embodiment of her researcher identity.

Representing S16’s working environment, this photograph includes many visual elements typical of a doctoral student’s office: chair, computer, file rack, stationery, reading material, drinking bottle, and notes. S16 stated that her identification as a researcher was associated with “reading and writing in the office every day”; “the information sheets nailed to the wall about conferences, lectures, and supervisory meetings”; and “the Excel tables about prospective journals to submit works to.”

These two photographs—accentuating laboratory experiments in S4’s case and office-based research in S16’s case—embody different approaches to research among science-based, and humanities and social science–based students, respectively. Nevertheless, they agreed on one point—that researcher identity arises from dealing with routine research practices regardless of the discipline, which, in S4’s words, is the “normal working state.”

Furthermore, apart from these mundane transactions, researcher identity is negotiated through activities that are less frequent, yet are integral to research, such as the dissemination of knowledge through conferences and fairs. For example, S13 showed a photograph in which he was giving an oral presentation of his doctoral project at an international conference. He explained that a conference is “a good way to connect and display.” A platform in which research outputs, ideas, and critiques are shared situates doctoral students in dialogic relationship with others who relate to them through, and about, their roles (Ennals et al., 2015). As a form of interactive knowledge sharing, an academic conference helps students to internalize and hone implicit and explicit disciplinary codes of conduct peculiar to academic discourse, which constitutes an integral role in forging an academic identity. Similarly, S7 provided a photograph (see Figure 4) of when he served as a guide at a fair on Campus Open Day.

Sitting behind a show stand with his doctoral peer, S7 served as a volunteer to introduce his “discipline and lab so that more senior high school graduates would be interested to enrol.” A wide range of objects signify the theme of this photograph as dissemination and promotion of his research center: brochures, standing banners, PowerPoint slides on the screen, and souvenir T-shirts with the logo of the research center:
I think this represents my researcher identity because doing research is on one hand about exploring something new and on the other, popularisation of scientific findings. You need to display your work to the public and encourage the next generation to engage themselves in doing research. (S7)

S7 supported the idea that researcher identity is intertwined with a social role of communicating knowledge to the public about the significance and the intrigue of science. It is the researchers’ responsibility to disseminate knowledge, ensuring specifically that it reaches the younger generation. To enhance scientific literacy in the community could be elevated to the level of ethics and an ethos that defines “researcher” as a social role, which doctoral students enact. This view is echoed by other participants, including S7 who incorporated a social responsibility to disseminate research as an essential part of researcher identity.

**Limited Limitlessness**

Finally, the research community was conceptualized as a dynamic metamorphosis, subjected to external barriers and internal enablers. The predominant nature of a research community was widely accepted as being loose and lonely due to elements such as the lack of curricula, students’ multiple research interests, epistemological underpinnings, and methodological approaches. These are external constraints, which may limit the community as a functional entity. For example, S18 shared a photograph of her office to demonstrate the disengaging environment, explaining,

From an academic research point of view, all research students in my research community are working on our own. Because our research topics vary and there is not much relevance, we don’t have much in common to communicate with each other in terms of research.

Nevertheless, despite being confined by structural constraints, the participants initiated informal socialization to enhance the connectivity of their research community—thus, consolidating their identities as researchers. A case in point is S3, who provided a photograph of an afternoon tea held at his department following a movie. He added, “Every Tuesday we watch a film together. As a promoter, colleagues from various countries will introduce a great home film for us to enjoy. After that, we usually have a discussion over a cup of drink” (S3). This socially oriented event reflects grassroots attempts to develop peer rapport and interconnectivity among a research community.

The above dichotomy of structural constraints and agentic endeavors is succinctly captured by S6 whose photograph constitutes a pair of antonyms in Chinese (see Figure 5).

This photograph is of Chinese calligraphy hung outside S6’s office. It consists of four characters, which form two phrases: “有限” and “无限.” The former means “limited” and the latter means “limitless.” S6 elaborated on the reason that this calligraphy represents her research community:

Limited refers to the fact that my university is not a top one on world universities ranking tables. Also, I am aware of other disadvantages of my department and research community. This is the limited side of the objective aspect. But at the subjective level, I find my research environment inspiring and capable of stimulating our agency. We have limitless possibilities for improvement. (S6)

S6’s elicitation manifests that the trajectory of researcher identity was navigated through engagements in the structure of intellectual and institutional norms, mechanisms, and values, as well as practices. The objective realm involuntarily
confronted by doctoral students possesses degenerative powers, or structural constraints, which is encapsulated in “有限.” However, the research community also characterizes facilitative forces, which are conducive to mobilizing student autonomy to consolidate the researcher identity as an inwardly generated formulation (Ennals et al., 2015) in which agency has full play. This sense of “limitless possibilities of improvement” is embodied in “无限.” A research community is perceived as an entity constituting unity of opposites, featuring “limited limitlessness.”

Discussion

As the findings show, the participants perceived their researcher identity as indexed within both the notions of essentialism and social constructionism. Whether representing official documentation or exclusivity of research space, they are identity markers, signifying a sense of belonging, which the participants internalized as part of their being as a researcher. Much as a passport of a certain nationality embodies citizenship of that nation, and the appropriation of a piece of farmland instantiates a farmer’s identity, the participants confirm that their researcher identity is intricately connected to those markers that are, to a great extent, clearly demarcated and stable. This supports Dowling and Mantai’s (2017) suggestion of the important role played by institutional spaces such as offices in fostering research identification. To distinguish themselves as authentic researchers, rather than students, is associated with materially occupying a space. For this group of participants, the notion of researcher identity can be encapsulated in “belonging as being,” echoing an essentialist view that supports identity as a fixed entity anchored in those attributes or essence defining its existence.

Furthermore, rather than a mere state of being prescribed by an official membership stipulating belongingness, researcher identity involves a progression of sociocultural construction built up by research activities substantiating meanings ascribed to it. This resonates with Mantai’s (2017) finding that doctoral students gain validation of their growing identity as a researcher when engaged and immersed in various “acts” of research that are usually of semiformal and mundane nature. A researcher identity is not carved out and then remains fixed; it emerges from a constant state of rehearsal with a preparedness to enact its performativity (Lapum, 2008). This performativity is integral to a process of socialization, whereby individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that prepare them as more or less effective members of a society. As they are academically socialized into the culture of a discipline, they are consolidating their identification with the thinking, feeling, and behavior of a researcher.

This study supports Smith’s (1991) middle ground approach, which links essentialism and social constructionism in interpreting identity in which being and becoming are interlocked and mutually influential. Identity is a complex notion, influenced by ascribed characteristics and achieved characteristics (Muhammad et al., 2015). A researcher identity could spontaneously emerge, referring to “ascribed” identity markers such as an ID or an authorized occupancy of office space; it anchors also in creating “achieved” attributes ever adjusting and enriching the becoming of a researcher whose identity keeps unfolding and evolving.

In addition, rumination about the research community discloses more nuances than the long-standing insider/outside debate. It revealed that researcher identity is a relational and dynamic concept, which must be understood in relation to the participants as agents and the structure in which their agency enacts. Ideological and material constructs (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) constitute the academic context that imposes structural limitations on the students; conversely, the context could be generative, boosting their agency to control, regulate, and transform the mechanisms, systems, and relations in which they are enmeshed for the purpose of pursuing personal goals (Ahearn, 2001). This is best captured by Creely and Laletas (2020) who assert that “humans are partially free and partially bound in their circumstances, experiencing limited agency, but a potentially generative agency.” Structure and agency are interacting forces in the creation, development, and performance of researcher identity.

Reflection on Methodological Insights and Conclusion

As one of the first studies utilizing VEP to address doctoral students’ researcher identity, I have been reflexive in my positionality as a critical insider, accommodating to outsider-ness as the researcher throughout the investigation. I positioned myself as an insider because I share with these respondents identification as a Chinese doctoral student in Australia. Our homogeneity in an array of dimensions, such as educational practices, temporal-spatial structure, and cultural milieu generates research insideriness, which not only facilitates empathy, openness, and rapport but also boosts mutual understanding and perspicacity into meaning-making. I was also aware of the “fuzzy boundaries” (Cox et al., 2014) between the participants and me, acknowledging that my conceptualization and interpretation of their subjective accounts echoes my own experiences and is intimately intertwined with my personal perception of becoming a PhD.

I admit that this insider closeness might be problematic, risking an enclosed, self-contained world of common understanding and conventions of acquaintance, which cloud opportunities for discovery (Mannay, 2016). To address this challenge, I followed Geer’s (1964) proposal to make the familiar strange throughout the research. It started with the recruitment process when participants from a wide range of disciplines and at various stages of their candidature at different universities were selected. The intensified heterogeneity between the participants and me was intended to decrease
my subjectivity as a researcher who could identify with some of these points of reference. The distance facilitates data analysis to emerge from the data without being influenced by my preconceptions, which might otherwise be true, should there be a high degree of similarity between me and the other participants. In addition, the adoption of VEP for fieldwork pushes my positionality toward outsidership. Although the respondents were prompted to respond to my assignment in visuals, I had only limited control over which aspects are portrayed and interpreted (Pauwels, 2015). Accompanied by verbal clarification, the participants were given the role of expert to explain visual information and projective comments, so that their personal knowledge and the broader culture they inhabit, which might differ from what I imagine, were decoded from their own perspective. The internal narrative of letting the image speak limits my intrusive presence as the researcher and helps to make the familiar strange (Mannay, 2010).

In hindsight, besides my between-insider-and-outsider positionality to strengthen rigor and trustworthiness, ethics considerations in relation to the visual representation permeates my practice. Although visual data sources are valuable, I am reflexive regarding the role of the photographs, being flexible when representing them. Enlightened by Richard and Lahman (2015), I omitted photographs that serve as merely a supplement to verbal clarification, and which restate explicitly the participants’ understanding. To guarantee the anonymization of other highly identifiable photographs, I followed the suggestion from researchers to adopt creative approaches to dissemination (e.g., Mannay, 2016; Richardson, 2015), replacing some visual communication with captions adapted from the respondents’ narration to illuminate the photographs that I had refrained from disseminating. The photographs reproduced in this study were necessary for making an analytical point (Guest, 2016). I keep photographs clearly visible and recognizable if they are not sensitive and if the participants did not request that I disguise them. For others with easily identifiable information, despite none being of an intimate or offensive nature, I disabled the recognizability of people and the institutions with which they were affiliated. Given that the distribution of images—not least those involving non-consenting others—may be emotionally evocative for participants, I decided to blur those images. However, this effort does not completely resolve ethical concerns of anonymity and confidentiality; these are almost impossible to guarantee in visual research (Sweetman, 2009). As an attempt to give flexibility to visual representation, this is an alternative approach to ethical research (Sweetman, 2009).

My reflection offers two methodological insights for future VEP research. First, the insider/outsider dichotomy between the researcher and the researched should be replaced by a more dynamic approach—one that incorporates insider and outsider dimensions. Roberts’ (2018) notion of transient insider implies that it is advisable for a researcher to be equipped with “cultural and linguistic competencies that share with participants within the research setting,” while also being “more flexible and fluid than absolute understandings of insidership” (p. 116). Second, standing as one of the main ethical problems for photo-elicitation-based research (Lapenta, 2012), anonymity and confidentiality of visual data call for practitioners to be more creative and constructive in the choice of direction in overcoming predicaments pertaining to image-based research rather than those confronted by word-oriented research (Wiles et al., 2012).

To conclude, based on a small sample of 24 Chinese doctoral students in Australia, this study has an obvious limitation of lacking a more nuanced probe into perceptions that may vary as students’ doctoral trajectories incorporate heterogeneous elements. For example, a student who also works as staff might perceive his or her researcher identity in a way different from a student coming directly from a postgraduate degree. This study includes only participants who share a great degree of homogeneity as research-centered students with no teaching or other working responsibilities. In addition, due to it being a qualitative study that incorporates a small sample, it has not yielded convincing evidence regarding nuanced differences between students of diverse variables. Taking into account existing variables, such as years into candidature, disciplines, and genders, no significant differences regarding perception patterns are found. Besides, our findings are not generalizable or representative. For one thing, they should not be taken as features to define and essentialize Chinese doctoral students as a homogeneous cohort; for another, they do not suggest exclusivity as other international student groups may share conceptualizations similar to the Chinese group. Future research is thus encouraged to attend to these limitations by recruiting a larger sample with different academic experiences (e.g., disciplines, academic stages, and genders) and adopting a comparative lens. Having said that, developed within the method of VEP, this study adds to the current literature of doctoral students’ researcher identity new experiential insights through analysis of visual representations of their personal feelings, doings, and thinking. Compared with previous studies that are text-based, it brings to life the abstract notion of researcher identity, with concrete and explicit reference points—the interpretation of which helps to delve into highly idiosyncratic and multiple meanings (Collier & Collier, 1986) that might not be readily accessible during mere interviewing. This study demonstrates how the introduction of nonverbal elements facilitates a rich disclosure of researcher identity embodied in those objects, persons, physical spaces, and social circumstances documented in the preceding photographs.

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ORCID iD
Xing Xu https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0706-2338

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