

From a Doctoral Student to a Doctoral Supervisor: A Longitudinal Autoethnographic Study

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Abstract

The final year of a Ph.D. program is a crucial transition from doctoral student to independent academic and social actor. Within years, new graduates often become supervisors themselves, navigating an academic ecosystem increasingly transformed by generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Despite its importance, research tracking individuals across both stages remains scarce. Grounded in ecological systems theory, this autoethnographic study examines critical incidents and emotional encounters across two phases of my academic journey: completing my doctorate in Hong Kong (2019 – 2020) and serving as a research supervisor at a Macau university (2023 – 2025). Drawing on reflective journals, I document my thesis completion, the shift to online teaching, job searching, academic recognition, and the emergent challenges of guiding students who utilize GenAI tools. Findings reveal that both transitions were profoundly social, psychological, and emotional. Feelings of empowerment and disempowerment fluctuated based on interactions across ecological systems. Notably, exosystemic and macrosystemic constraints encountered as a student did not vanish upon becoming a supervisor; instead, they resurfaced as structural pressures I had to either reproduce or interrupt. The paper concludes with recommendations to better resource final-year students and novice supervisors through these critical transitions in the GenAI era.

Keywords: transitional development; ecological systems theory; autoethnography; doctoral supervision; generative artificial intelligence; doctoral education

1. Introduction

In the past decades, universities across the globe have witnessed the academisation and marketisation of higher education. Doctoral education in particular has captured educators' attention, as societal changes have challenged traditional provision with new types of programme on offer (e.g., Doctor of Education, Doctor of Business Administration). Additionally, in the post-pandemic era, with reduced mobility, an economic downturn, and the unavoidable involution (an anthropological concept that population growth leads to contests for limited resources without an increase in productivity), competition among university graduates has been exacerbated. This intensification has been compounded by the arrival of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). As drafting and literature-synthesis costs fall, research output rises across the sector, and candidates find that the markers by which they once demonstrated distinction, a manuscript in press, a polished job talk, a rapid turnaround on revisions, are more easily matched by their competitors (Jensen et al., 2025; Lai et al., 2025). Survival in doctoral education has therefore become less a matter of productivity than of navigating an ecology in which productivity itself is inflated, contested, and unevenly recognised across academic cultures (Bao, 2025). It is to a certain extent a *fait accompli* that a doctoral degree is now essential for entering the higher education job market, especially given the importance of university rankings and their emphasis on quantifying staff with Ph.D.-level education (Ek et al., 2013).

This landscape has driven students, supervisors, and managers to pay unprecedented attention to the process of doctoral education (Park, 2005). The process includes not only a well-crafted thesis from which graduates can publish, but also the training of students as future competent researchers, qualified teachers, and mature individuals ready to contribute to society. Carter et al. (2021) describe the doctoral journey as “doctoral borderlands... marked by uncertainty, hope, risk, and identity transition” (p. 283). The doctoral voyage is thus much more than writing a thesis; it can be rewarding, inspiring, complex, and arduous, involving socialisation from the academic to the social world where students juggle cognitive, affective, and social challenges (McGloin, 2021).

Previous studies have examined various facets of doctoral education, including the progression of study (McGloin, 2021), the enhancement of academic teaching skills (Rao et al., 2021), the provision and uptake of thesis feedback (Han & Xu, 2021), and the emotional engagement that sustains or erodes candidature (Alves et al., 2024). The identity construction of doctoral students has been widely investigated: Teng (2020) reported on a Mainland Chinese student developing his researcher identity, finding that he struggled because of prior learning experience and external restraints, yet that agency was the most essential variable in identity formation. Working with a larger group, Cong-Lem et al. (2025) traced the identity transitions of Asian international TESOL doctoral students through collaborative autoethnography and likewise found agency to be exercised unevenly, always in negotiation with institutional and cultural structures rather than in isolation from them. Although these studies illuminate different stages of doctoral education, little is known about the final-year transition.

The final year matters particularly because it is when students begin to move from academic learning to considerations of their future careers. It involves not only the pressure

to submit and defend a thesis; a student also takes on new identities as a job applicant, a novice scholar, a breadwinner, and a novice teacher. The socialisation of final-year students therefore requires a holistic, ecological understanding that goes beyond the knowledge of completing theses (Horta, 2018).

Less well understood still is what happens next. Within a few years of graduating, many early career academics are entrusted with supervising research students of their own, frequently without formal preparation and often in institutional systems quite different from the one in which they were trained. Lundberg (2025), in one of few autoethnographic accounts of this shift, documents how developing a supervisory identity requires adaptations that doctoral training does not supply. In the Chinese context, where recruitment, promotion, and publication recognition operate through distinctive structures (Liu & Li, 2024; Wang et al., 2025), and where GenAI has rapidly become part of how students read, write, and seek feedback (Lai et al., 2025), the novice supervisor occupies a doubly unfamiliar position: still adjusting to the local academic culture as a newcomer, while already expected to induct others into it. Examining the student-to-supervisor trajectory as one continuous process, rather than as two unrelated literatures, allows us to ask whether the ecological constraints experienced as a supervisee are reproduced, resisted, or simply inherited once one holds institutional authority.

The present paper therefore follows my learning, working, and supervising trajectory across two phases: the final year of doctoral study in Hong Kong (2019 – 2020) and the assumption of a supervisory role at a Macao university (2023 to 2025). Guided by ecological systems theory, it asks how I behaved and perceived myself at different stages, and how the interacting ecological systems empowered or disempowered me at each.

2. Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is a widely recognised framework for accounting for human growth into a competent member of society from a developmental psychology perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). The ecological environment, historical, cultural, relational, and fiscal, is central to understanding an individual's contextual development, because relationships between person and environment are reciprocal and bi-directional (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). An individual is an agentive person who exerts impacts on the environment, while that environment, comprising the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem, influences the person to “adapt to its conditions and restriction” (Härkönen, 2007, p. 7).

In doctoral education these five systems capture a learner's interactions at different distances from the self. The microsystem describes the immediate environment, university, family, friends, whose interactions are held to be most powerful for a student's growth; a supervisor can directly modify a student's beliefs by encouraging or reproaching. The mesosystem concerns interactions between microsystems, such as family emergencies colliding with course assignments; Härkönen (2007) argued that the extent to which microsystems support or hinder each other shapes belief and behaviour. The exosystem addresses linkages between immediate and non-immediate environments, as when a supervisor becomes less attentive because of a lockdown affecting the supervisor's own household. The macrosystem refers to wider social and cultural environment, cultural

values, national laws, economic conditions, political development, and changes here tend to influence all other systems (Cross & Hong, 2012). The chronosystem directs attention to milestones and significant historical events, which contribute to a person's development.

Two features of the framework suit the extended, two-phase account offered here. First, the chronosystem is not merely a container for events but an analytic resource for tracing how the same person is repositioned over time: the pandemic, graduation, relocation, and the arrival of GenAI are all chronosystemic ruptures whose effects can only be read across, not within, a single moment. Second, because the theory treats person and environment as mutually constitutive, it accommodates the change in structural position that occurs when a former supervisee becomes a supervisor. What was, in Phase 1, an exosystemic force acting upon me, like departmental workload allocation, institutional publication metrics, national recognition of indexing systems, becomes, in Phase 2, part of the microsystem I myself constitute for my students. The framework thus permits examination of how ecological conditions are reproduced across academic generations, an issue that studies confined to a single career stage cannot address (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 2005).

3. The Present Study

The study uses autoethnography to scrutinise my educational, professional, and personal challenges, and the emotional rollercoaster of the final doctoral year and the subsequent years of supervisory practice. Autoethnography is both a product and a process (Ellis et al., 2011), allowing a researcher to become a participant observer and to develop a systematic, emic understanding of cultural experience from a personal, accessible, and evocative perspective. In contrast to the positivist paradigm, it “acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research” (p. 274). Epiphanies or critical moments, retained by memory over time, help both researcher and readers relive and analyse that experience; the first-person pronoun is therefore retained throughout. The approach has recently been used at both ends of the trajectory examined here by Cong-Lem et al. (2025) to trace doctoral identity transitions, and by Lundberg (2025) to examine the move into supervision.

A common critique of autoethnography concerns the accuracy of data and the extent to which the researcher offers an unbiased account. Yet the aim is not to uncover absolute truth but to promote social justice and improve the living world (Ellis et al., 2011). Special attention was therefore given to genuine thoughts and experiences, and events that mattered to me were recorded at personal, university, and societal levels as they occurred. Though the findings may not be generalisable, the longitudinal design affords an in-depth, contextual perspective on the move from final-year student to research supervisor.

3.1 Research Context and Participant

Higher education in Hong Kong is acknowledged for its excellence in research and professional education, and its use of English as the medium of instruction has attracted many international doctoral students; according to Shin et al. (2018), more than 70% of doctoral students registered in Hong Kong universities were not natives of the city. The Phase 1 research site is a top public university in the Asia-Pacific region, where the quality of research and teaching is underscored among teachers and doctoral students. From the outbreak of COVID-19 in February 2020 the university adopted Zoom-based online

teaching, which affected both my learning and my teaching, as I performed research and teaching duties in the department.

Some personal background will assist readers. I hold a degree in second language education and had taught English at a Mainland Chinese university before moving to Hong Kong, where I coordinated several core courses as a novice teacher. I enjoyed university teaching and also aspired to do research, but was aware that a Ph.D. would improve my prospects; after two years I resigned from a contract-based post to begin doctoral study. The Hong Kong university required me not only to complete research but also to teach undergraduate courses independently and to support departmental teaching matters such as exam invigilation and course coordination. Over the first two years I published in well-regarded journals, edited a volume with a mainstream publisher, and received several international awards. This matters because it explains the sense of failure I experienced in my final year. By the end of my study I decided to return to Mainland China to begin my research career.

Phase 2 is set in Macau. Since 2023 I have held a research and teaching post at a teaching-oriented university in Macau, where my duties include supervising postgraduate research students in educational technology; at the time of writing I am supervising over ten doctoral students. The institutional environment differs from my doctoral training site in ways that matter analytically: publication is assessed against its own indexing systems, contract renewal is tied to quantified outputs, and supervisory capacity is allocated administratively rather than negotiated between individuals. Two further conditions distinguish this phase. My students entered postgraduate study after GenAI tools became widely available, and institutional guidance on their use in thesis work was not clear. I had received no formal training on the use of GenAI in research supervision before taking on supervisees.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Phase 1: The final doctoral year (2019–2020)

Two methods tracked my thoughts, feelings, and life stories over one year. First, a reflective journal was kept from September 2019 to July 2020, allowing me to record emic, insider thoughts and feelings that external researchers find hard to obtain over a prolonged period (Mackey & Gass, 2016). The journal contained 11,946 Chinese characters, analysed directly for their originality and accuracy following Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure: entries were read repeatedly to establish familiarity, initial codes were assigned and candidate themes sought, themes were reviewed to generate a thematic map, and themes were finalised with representative excerpts selected for clarity and conciseness. To improve the trustworthiness of the coding, the second author coded the data set, achieving inter-rater reliability above 93%; disagreements were resolved through discussion. Examples of coding are presented in Appendix 1.

Second, on the basis of the initial journal findings, a senior researcher, my doctoral supervisor, conducted a one-hour interview with me. This served to elaborate crucial moments (e.g., feelings when teaching online during quarantine) and to clarify unclear or missing points (e.g., rationales for applying to Mainland Chinese universities). The discussion helped me develop an etic, outsider perspective on my own experience, so the paper goes beyond a conventional analytic approach by inviting a senior researcher to help

interpret autoethnographic findings. The interview was conducted in English and analysed with the same steps (see Appendix 2) to triangulate the journal. Course materials and the department website were also collected as supplementary sources.

Phase 2: Becoming a research supervisor (2023 to 2025)

Phase 2 draws on a second reflective journal kept from September 2023 to May 2025 following the same protocol, in which I recorded critical incidents in my supervisory practice and the emotions accompanying them at the points at which they occurred. It contains 8,420 Chinese characters across 47 dated entries. Two supplementary sources were added: 63 sets of my written feedback on student drafts, which document the substance of supervisory interaction rather than my recollection of it, and 14 sets of notes from institutional meetings concerning research training, supervision allocation, and the use of GenAI in postgraduate work. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2006) as in Phase 1. Because Phase 2 remains ongoing, it is presented as an open rather than a completed stage, and the analysis attends particularly to moments in which my earlier experience as a supervisee became visible in my conduct as a supervisor.

Because Phase 2 concerns my own supervisory conduct, no student is named, quoted, or otherwise identifiable; where a supervisory episode is discussed, identifying details have been altered or omitted and the analytic focus remains on my own responses rather than on any student's performance.

4. Findings

This section presents five stages. The first four cover the final doctoral year in chronological order (i.e., the chronosystem), assisting readers in living through the critical moments; the fifth turns to my current position as a research supervisor. The Discussion then applies ecological systems theory across all five.

4.1 Stage 1 (September 2019 to January 2020): “I feel confident that I can land a good job”

My final-year journey commenced in September 2019 with a scholarly visit to a world-renowned university and an international award from an esteemed organisation, which together offered a strong sense of belonging within the academic community. In my journal, I wrote:

Though I only stayed in Europe for a few weeks, it was a great opportunity to visit a leading university and established some connections. I felt more closely associated with the international community. I really enjoyed my visit and appreciated that the international institute acknowledged my intellectual work. (Journal entry, 26 September 2019)

Successful interactions with international colleagues and recognition from my research area were sources of positive feeling and facilitated an active scholar identity. Yet this was not always the case, as we will see when I attempted to establish my scholarship in Chinese academia. In November, a lower-ranked Mainland Chinese university invited me for interview and offered me a lecturer position. Though not my priority choice, I was strongly positive about my prospects:

The Head was quite friendly and sincere. The department covered all my transportation and accommodation fees and offered me a position after my

presentation. I was told that I was the only attendee among others with a few SSCI publications. I feel confident that I can land a good job as long as I finish my study. Now I only need to complete my thesis on time. (Journal entry, 6 November 2019)

The sincerity shown by the Head and the allowances covered by the university made the experience authentic, interactive, and positive. As a result, I felt appreciated and acknowledged for my achievements, which raised my expectations and self-efficacy and left me more committed to writing the thesis.

I negotiated with my supervisor a quite detailed timeline of my final Ph.D. stage, including when I should finish the first, the revised, and the final drafts. With the timeline, I am clear that my supervisor is supportive and I will be able to graduate without extensions. (Journal entry, 17 December 2019)

A well-defined timeline instilled confidence that I was on the right track. Alongside the thesis I was working on journal articles and book chapters, and despite the workload I enjoyed this stage of Ph.D. life:

Also, I am writing papers with my supervisor. I enjoy working with him as I could constantly learn from him about academic writing. It's worthwhile to have a busy academic life. (Journal entry, 29 December 2019)

I was also invited to give a presentation at an international conference outside Hong Kong in early 2020, and felt more positive about my future career as a result:

I delivered a specially invited talk at an international conference and received some positive feedback. I shared the news with my friends and teachers and they felt quite proud of my achievements. (Journal entry, 23 January 2020)

In summary, during this first stage I felt optimistic about my prospects, had received international and domestic recognition, and enjoyed the multitasking life of writing both a thesis and journal papers.

4.2 Stage 2 (February to March 2020): "I was facing multiple challenges"

As part of my duties I was required by my home department to teach a General Education course to undergraduates. The pandemic then interrupted my doctoral journey: from February 2020 Hong Kong universities responded to the outbreak with an abrupt shift to online teaching while I was quarantined. The sudden change brought challenges:

I am caught off guard when it becomes mandatory to teach via Zoom. I've never used it before and now I have to adapt my teaching to a new form of instruction. Though my research is about education, I am not sure how I could make quick adjustments to online teaching and what ways will be useful. Meanwhile, the syllabus is designed based on face-to-face teaching. I wish the course team would adjust the assessment. (Journal entry, 28 February 2020)

Novice teachers such as myself faced significant pedagogical challenges during the pandemic (Miller & Wu, 2022). Without prior experience of Zoom I struggled to identify effective approaches, and the absence of pedagogical guidance left me unsupported, especially as the syllabus had been designed for traditional instruction. The extra time required burdened me as I neared submission:

I am also overwhelmed with my thesis writing and editing. As the deadline for my thesis submission is approaching, I am under huge pressure. Though my supervisor chats

with me via FaceTime constantly, it is still stressful, particularly with the pandemic. I wish our department could have exempted final-year PhDs from their teaching duties and let us focus on writing! (Journal entry, 6 March 2020)

Although academic and emotional care from my advisor was provided, I felt unsupported by the department, still struggling with teaching and research duties at the final stage of thesis writing. The situation worsened when I had to quarantine in a compact room:

I had to stay at home 24/7 as everyone was scared of the pandemic. I could not get new facial masks anywhere so I had to keep using one mask ... I was facing multiple challenges, including the pressure of finding appropriate ways of teaching online, the pressure of finishing up my thesis, and most importantly the psychological stress of being locked down. Things had gone out of hand and I started to have trouble sleeping.

(Interview excerpt)

During this second stage I experienced a difficult time for want of sufficient professional, collegial, and institutional support. Holding the dual role of instructor and research student, I underwent substantial pressure and had to cope with change pedagogically, physically, and psychologically.

4.3 Stage 3 (April to May 2020): “I was stuck in the middle”

Having submitted my thesis for examination in April, I resumed the search for a job and began applying for teaching posts in Mainland China. Though earlier job-hunting had been positive, at this stage I encountered a serious confidence and identity crisis:

I have applied for a few positions in Mainland China but I haven't got any interviews yet. I am starting to worry whether I am not a strong candidate. I do believe I have an 'okay' package as I have full-time tertiary teaching experience and some international publications. I have been waiting for quite some time since the submission of my job applications and I am not sure when I will be interviewed. (Journal entry, 12 April 2020)

COVID was in full swing, and I was concerned about its effect on the job market and my own competitiveness:

My colleagues, working at Chinese universities, told me that many Westerners had applied for teaching jobs in their Chinese universities partly because the pandemic reduced the number of job vacancies in the West. They are native speakers of English. I don't believe I can compete with them, though they may not have doctoral degrees. (Journal entry, 25 May 2020)

My identity as a non-native English speaker undermined my confidence, since I believed a doctoral degree might be less attractive than the identity of a native speaker. My self-confidence thus changed dramatically: initially positive about securing a position, I was gradually worn down by the reality of the pandemic job market. The loss of self-esteem intensified when I discovered that:

I was stuck in the middle. I was told that Scopus and ESCI are not recognized as proper indexing systems among most Chinese universities. In that case, most of my publications were void and they could not be counted towards my academic achievements. I don't think that's fair as they were peer-reviewed and took me a lot of time to get them revised and published. (Interview excerpt)

The cultural disparities between the international and Chinese academic communities shocked me; it had never occurred to me that my doctoral efforts would be undervalued

within Chinese academic culture, and I was unprepared for the shock. Despite recognition from the international community and a developing researcher identity, my identity was largely threatened within the domestic community because my work did not conform to the local research culture, causing a marked decline in self-efficacy. This misrecognition accords with evidence that overseas-trained candidates cannot straightforwardly convert international credentials and networks into domestic academic value (Wang et al., 2025). Financial and living difficulties compounded matters, as I had decided to move back to Mainland China but could not retrieve my savings from Hong Kong under quarantine policies:

I underwent a phase of depression. Nothing worked out well at that stage. I was unhappy most of the time. Luckily my Ph.D. peers and supervisor were always there for me. We shared our concerns and encouraged each other. That absolutely helped me overcome the negative moments. But I still wished that our university could have offered more support to final-year students. (Interview excerpt)

Despite a hard time in career and life, I remained grateful for the support of peers and teachers. No support at departmental or university level was reported at this stage either.

4.4 Stage 4 (June to July 2020): “I am willing to take a chance”

Near the end of July I officially finished my study and regained self-confidence through two critical incidents: passing my online viva and receiving job offers. The pandemic left me no choice but to accept an online viva conducted over Zoom, which proved successful:

It was a relaxing viva and we exchanged opinions and thoughts about my thesis. I enjoyed the process and I am honoured that my work is recognised by international scholars. (Journal entry, 10 June 2020)

In multiple entries I referenced the term *renke* (认可, recognition or acknowledgement). Being recognised by the academic community evidently had an irreplaceable impact on my identity construction as a successful Ph.D. student, and similar comments appeared when I was offered positions at Chinese universities:

At last! I received a few offers and honestly, they should have happened months before. (Journal entry, 18 July 2020)

With offers at hand I rebuilt my confidence and displayed a confident identity, believing the offers were overdue. Yet a thorny issue followed, i.e., making a final decision:

I am not sure which university I should choose. Teachers in Mainland China are underpaid with demanding research and teaching requirements. I come from a working-class family so I have to take the financial factor into serious consideration. Meanwhile, due to the low salary, I am not sure whether I can focus on doing research and teaching. I have to establish a personal life, right? (Journal entry, 23 July 2020)

I was hesitant because leading universities in China may not offer competitive salaries, yet I was equally unsure about trading career development for pay. This is a disappointing but realistic situation for fresh graduates, as university teachers earn much less (on average around GBP 1,100 per month for a lecturer) than other professions. The tension is not idiosyncratic: in Liu and Li's (2024) study of Ph.D. graduates entering universities in the Greater Bay Area, financial concern and risk mitigation operated as two of five competing strategic logics shaping career decisions. Other obstacles for novice university teachers in China also weighed on me:

Many Chinese universities have adopted a mixed-mode of university systems from everywhere (e.g., UK, USA, Germany ...). Novice teachers are under enormous

pressure just by looking at the contractual and promotion requirements. I have to figure out which job offer is more reasonable. (Journal entry, 25 July 2020)

Family also stood out in my decision-making. My parents would have liked me to work near my hometown, whereas I intended to stay in a city far from it. As the only child, I commented:

In China, we have a saying ‘While one’s parents are alive, one should not travel to distant places.’ I know as the only child in my family, I need to take care of my parents at some point. Yet, I would like to stay in Guangdong for a while. (Interview excerpt)

This last stage was bittersweet: I regained a sense of pride but was caught in dilemmas when making career decisions. After weighing the various factors, I decided to take a chance at a teaching-oriented university far from my hometown.

4.5 Stage 5 (2023 to 2025): “Am I the one they are waiting on?”

From 2020 to 2023, I worked at a Mainland Chinese university, where teaching was prioritized over research, although the position was well paid. Seeking a more international academic environment, I decided to move to Macau.

In Stage 5 I was allocated my first research supervisees. The transition was administrative rather than ceremonial: no training preceded it and no conversation marked it. What changed was the direction in which expectation flowed. Where I had waited on a supervisor’s comments, a department’s decisions, and a job market’s verdict, I was now the person others waited upon. Four themes trace how that reversal was experienced.

4.5.1 Inheriting a role without a script

My first sustained difficulty was relational rather than intellectual. I knew the content of educational technology and had learned to write for international journals, but I had no repertoire for supervision itself: how much direction to give, when to withhold a solution so a student might find it, how to say a draft was not yet adequate without extinguishing the confidence needed to revise it. The only available model was the one I had lived through:

What language style should I adopt when providing revision comments to my students? My own supervisor was democratic and open-minded, offering general guidance while expecting me to take intellectual initiative rather than wait for direction. In my current context, however, all my students are self-financed and some hold jobs alongside their studies. This leaves me uncertain: would they prefer a traditional top-down Chinese supervisory style, or a more collaborative Western co-negotiated approach? ... I think I will start by applying my usual approach with students and then see how they respond. (Journal entry, 14 October 2023)

The entry shows a supervisory repertoire being improvised in real time, with my own supervisor’s practice as the sole reference point. This echoes Lundberg’s (2025) account, in which supervisory identity had to be constructed largely from personal experience of being supervised rather than from formal preparation. The absence of institutional induction meant that the microsystem I built for my students was, in effect, a copy of the one I had inhabited - a mode of transmission that carries forward good practice and unexamined assumptions with equal fidelity.

4.5.2 The metrics return, from the other side

The indexing systems that had invalidated much of my publication record in Stage 3 did

not become less consequential once I was employed; they became the terms in which I was expected to advise. My students' progression, my own contract renewal, and the resources available to my supervision were all calibrated against recognised output:

Today, I convinced my student to drop the classroom ethnography in favour of a questionnaire. I cited methodological reasons and they were sound. But honestly? Ethnography would take two years, and our faculty tallies recognised publications every semester. Students need Scopus-indexed papers to graduate. Three years ago, my Scopus papers were deemed irrelevant. Now I fear my students will suffer the same fate when they go on the job market. (Journal entry, 9 May 2024)

What had been, in Stage 3, an exosystemic constraint imposed upon me from above became, in Stage 5, a rule I was now compelled to actively pass on to my own students. This is where the ecological framework does analytic work a single-stage study could not: the constraint was not removed by my change of position, only relocated from the environment acting upon me to the environment I constitute for others (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Wang et al. (2025) show how deeply the recognition of credentials and networks is embedded in Chinese academic recruitment; my findings suggest that this embedding is sustained partly through the ordinary, well-intentioned advice of supervisors who were themselves disadvantaged by it.

4.5.3 Supervising alongside generative AI

The most substantial discontinuity between my own candidature and my students' is that theirs is conducted with GenAI as a constant presence. Drafts arrive fluent; literature reviews arrive comprehensive in coverage and thin in judgement. The diagnostic signals I had been trained to read, such as awkward phrasing indicating unresolved thinking, a missing reference indicating an unread field, no longer indicate what they once did:

The literature reviews were better written than anything I produced in my doctoral years. Every sentence was smooth and every citation existed. But when I asked him why he referred to this theory, he could not answer. He had not made that decision; AI had made it for him. I asked him to talk me through the arguments ... With AI handling the routine supervisory work, perhaps I can now focus on higher-level guidance: nurturing independent thinkers, compassionate educators, and real humans, not paper machines. (Journal entry, 22 July 2024)

These experiences correspond to the tensions documented by Lai et al. (2025), who found that GenAI adoption generated conflict not only between affordance and limitation but between productivity-oriented practice and established academic norms, surfacing interpersonally as divergent expectations among students, supervisors, and peers. They also illuminate what is at stake in Jensen et al.'s (2025) finding that chatbot feedback is task-focused and agency-enhancing whereas supervisory feedback is relational, contextual, and developmental. From the supervisor's side that difference is experienced as a redistribution of function: the tasks by which I formerly demonstrated my usefulness, including line-level correction, pointing to overlooked sources, are now performed adequately without me, which obliges me to make the relational and developmental dimensions of supervision explicit rather than incidental. In ecological terms, GenAI entered as a macrosystemic and chronosystemic change and rapidly reorganised the supervisory microsystem itself.

4.5.4 Choosing what not to reproduce

Against these reproductions stands what I have declined to pass on. The most acute

deprivation of Stages 2 and 3 was not any single hardship but the silence of the department: teaching duties that were not lifted, guidance that was not offered, wellbeing that was not asked after. Having named that absence in my own account, I found it difficult to replicate:

Students spoke about both academic and personal hurdles, including no library access to journals, no funding for conferences, and unhealthy competition among supervisors' groups. I've tried to treat them as whole people who get sick, feel down, or just need a break. Yet the underlying tension remains: if they do not keep writing and submitting, their annual report to the faculty will reflect poorly on them. (Journal entry, 6 January 2025)

The practices I have adopted most consciously are corrective ones: asking about circumstances before asking about progress, protecting writing time from administrative encroachment where I have discretion, and stating plainly that the recognition economy my students are entering is arbitrary in ways that are not their fault. Yet my capacity to act remains bounded. As a junior faculty member subject to the same output requirements as my students, I hold limited authority over workload allocation, admissions, or policy. The agency I exercise is real but narrow, operating in the interstices of structures I did not design and cannot alter, close to what Cong-Lem et al. (2025) describe as agency negotiated within, rather than against, structural constraint. Stage 5 therefore does not resolve the disempowerment of Stages 2 and 3 so much as recast it: I moved from lacking power over my own conditions to lacking power over conditions for which I am now held responsible. Becoming a supervisor did not complete the transition begun in Stage 1; it opened a further one, in which the ecological constraints of my own candidature reappeared as material I had to handle on behalf of others, under a technological condition that had no counterpart in my own training.

5. Discussion

The study illustrates that both as a doctoral student and as a novice supervisor I experienced innumerable critical moments. The last year of doctoral education was not merely a matter of writing up a thesis but involved multiple tasks and a psychological journey shaped by interactions across a wide range of social contexts; the extension into Stage 5 suggests that graduation did not conclude that journey. Below I interpret both phases through ecological systems theory.

First, the transition from final-year student to scholar and social being is inherently continuous and social. In alignment with Gardner (2008), final-year students often encounter “a drastic transition” (p. 344) from school to workplace. Strong self-confidence marked Stage 1, yet when I turned seriously to job hunting in Stage 3 I lost that confidence as severe challenges were met, and recovered it only on receiving offers. As Gravett (2021) argues, completing a thesis does not in itself signify transitional development; it is a dynamic and fluid process of emotional and psychological instability arising from interactions among ecosystems, for which most students are unprepared. That instability is structurally patterned rather than merely personal: Liu and Li (2024) identify five competing strategic logics through which Ph.D. graduates in the Greater Bay Area negotiate career decisions, and Wang et al. (2025) show that the social capital facilitating an academic job search in China is unevenly distributed between domestically trained and returnee candidates. The confidence I lost in Stage 3 was thus less a failure of self-belief than an accurate reading of a market whose terms I had not been taught.

My narrative also highlights a progressive trajectory of becoming a scholar. Recognition of my work prompted greater emotional and physical investment in academic activity, which in turn furthered recognition of my academic status, a bi-directional relationship between doctoral engagement and academic development (Baker & Pifer, 2011). Through interaction within research environments and the development of research skills, students can re-negotiate their researcher identity, exercise agency, and develop belonging (Cong-Lem et al., 2025; Teng, 2020). Yet my agency was largely subject to contextual factors in the meso-, exo-, and macrosystems (Mantai, 2019). The external factors named across Stages 1 to 4, economic, political, cultural, re-positioned me through an emerging (Stage 1), reducing (Stage 3), and re-emerging (Stage 4) sense of being a competitive applicant, while I had limited agency and scarce resources with which to influence the workplace.

Second, *renke*, a keyword repeatedly stressed in my journal, indicates the significance of recognition and validation from supervisors, peers, academic organisations, and the workplace. In accordance with Mantai (2017), “validation (recognition by others) influences internal validation (self-belief)” (pp. 647 – 648): external validation supports a positive orientation towards oneself and motivates students to resolve difficulties. Mantai reported three routes to such validation, closely tied to the micro- and mesosystems, including publishing, conducting projects, and disseminating findings. My findings complicate this. Although I held publications and international recognition, I met disappointment in the Chinese job market, because Hong Kong, Macau, and Mainland Chinese universities have distinct learning, teaching, and management cultures, and most Mainland Chinese universities do not recognise Scopus-indexed papers as proper publications. In addition to Mantai’s three microsystemic constructs, self-belief and emotion are shaped by the wider academic culture and by social rules that operate across ecosystems. Wang et al. (2025) supply a mechanism: where recruitment operates through *renqing* and *guanxi* as well as formal criteria, advisor-related ties and institutional prestige accumulated in one system do not transfer intact into another.

Third, doctoral learning is an emotional practice. Emotions trigger physical and psychological change, shaping and being shaped by the learning process (Naude et al., 2014), yet emotional processes remain comparatively underexplored relative to cognitive ones (Trigwell et al., 2012). Alves et al. (2024) show that doctoral emotional engagement is fostered by autonomy-focused supervision, perceived project relevance, personal development motivation, and an inclusive academic context - precisely the conditions whose presence and absence structure my account. Novice graduates often experience anxiety when expectations go unrealised (Teng, 2017), and Rabe et al. (2021) found supervisors sometimes overlook students’ “emotional rollercoaster journeys” (p. 318). Differing from Rabe et al., I received abundant support from peers and supervisor, but complained of the vulnerability of studenthood and the absence of support at departmental and university levels, since as a final-year student in quarantine I still had to teach. That absence, with my troubled job search, produced the depression and despair of Stages 2 and 3. The results suggest that students find it hard to regulate intrinsic emotions “through seeking extrinsic emotion regulation from others” (Han & Xu, 2021, p. 2), because they lack power to influence departmental decisions or pandemic policy. Power mediates

emotional self-regulation: the micro- and mesosystems contributed positively to my emotional development, while the wider exo- and macrosystems posed insurmountable challenges.

Fourth, the extended timeframe shows most distinctively that these constraints did not dissolve with my change in structural position. Stage 5 shows the same exosystemic and macrosystemic forces reappearing on the other side of the supervisory relationship, where I was no longer their object but their conduit. The indexing regime that invalidated my publications in Stage 3 became the criterion by which I advised my students; the absence of supervisory preparation documented by Lundberg (2025) meant the microsystem I built for them was largely a copy of the one I had inhabited. Two implications follow. Transmission in doctoral education is not confined to knowledge and skills: ecological conditions are themselves inherited, and most faithfully where no institutional structure makes them visible and open to revision. And the agency of a novice supervisor is a poor instrument for interrupting them; my capacity to shield students was confined to matters of personal discretion, while workload allocation, output requirements, and recognition criteria remained where they had always been. If the disempowerment of Stages 2 and 3 is to be addressed, it will not be addressed by waiting for wounded students to become better supervisors.

The technological condition of Stage 5 sharpens the point. GenAI entered doctoral education as a macrosystemic change and reorganised the supervisory microsystem with unusual speed, redistributing the functions through which supervision has conventionally demonstrated its value (Jensen et al., 2025) and generating interpersonal tension over legitimate use and appropriate expectation (Lai et al., 2025). In my experience institutional policy followed adoption rather than preceding it, leaving individual supervisors, often, like me, junior and untrained, to negotiate a novel and consequential boundary without a shared framework. This is an exosystemic failure of provision of the same kind described in Stage 2, recurring in one account for the same structural reason: the burden of adapting to abrupt environmental change was devolved to the individual least equipped to bear it (Teng & Wu, 2021). In short, landmark learning and life moments can facilitate or hinder transitional development for final-year students and for those who go on to supervise. Bronfenbrenner (2005) argued that special care is needed to support a person through life changes; care required, on this evidence, not only at graduation but at the point of assuming responsibility for others.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The paper offers evidence of how a wide range of ecological factors influenced a doctoral student's transitional development, and how those same factors persisted into the early years of a supervisory career. Final-year doctoral study can be severely challenging, with demands ranging from academic requirements to online teaching, job searching, and personal life management amidst a pandemic; and the transition into supervision brings a further, largely unsupported adjustment, now complicated by GenAI. Five implications follow.

First, effective training and support are critical to help final-year doctoral students move smoothly from university to the job market. Although a major task of doctoral

education is to prepare students to conduct research independently, research competence alone does not suffice in today's market. Programmes might also help final-year students develop a repertoire of strategies for meeting career expectations and adjusting to job markets in different cultural contexts, such as familiarising them with local academic cultures, recognition criteria, and recruitment practices, and preparing them for job talks. Given that social capital operates differently for domestically trained and returnee candidates (Wang et al., 2025), such preparation should be explicit about the informal as well as the formal terms on which appointments are made.

Second, because of cultural, economic, and political differences, those who learn transregionally or transnationally may struggle to adjust to different ecological cultures at work. Proactive agency in responding to these challenges is called for, but joint support across ecological systems is necessary for that agency to be exercised, for instance, Chinese universities recognising Scopus-indexed journals as proper venues, and university management developing a healthier perspective on rankings.

Third, emotional flux is an important yet overlooked aspect of doctoral education. Emotions, embedded in sociocultural context, play an invisible but key role in shaping future commitment. Support from supervisors and peers was constructive here in combating negative feelings during the pandemic, but the lack of care at departmental level caused distress, indicating that departmental support is essential in regulating final-year students' emotional states. The predictors identified by Alves et al. (2024), including autonomy-focused supervision, project relevance, and an inclusive academic context, offer concrete points of intervention rather than general exhortation.

Fourth, the transition into supervision warrants the same institutional attention as the transition out of doctoral study. Consistent with Lundberg (2025), novice supervisors improvise from their own experience of being supervised, transmitting both its strengths and its deficits. Structured supervisor development, collegial mentoring, protected early-career time, and non-punitive discussion forums would render inherited supervisory practices visible and open to revision. This is both an equity and a quality concern: without such provisions, it is the students of the least supported supervisors who pay the price.

Fifth, institutions need to move ahead of GenAI adoption rather than behind it. Supervisors are currently negotiating questions of legitimate use, authorship, and the assessment of understanding case by case and without shared criteria, which generates avoidable friction in the supervisory relationship (Lai et al., 2025). Because GenAI most readily substitutes for the task-focused components of feedback while leaving the relational and developmental components untouched (Jensen et al., 2025), policy and training should aim not at prohibition but at helping supervisors and students identify what supervision is uniquely for. Critical GenAI literacy might usefully be treated as a shared curriculum for candidates and supervisors alike.

The study is not without flaws. Readers should interpret the findings with caution, as this is a single person's journey; the experience reported was distinctive in that I acquired academic rules in Hong Kong while pursuing a career in Mainland China, and may not transfer to other contexts. A larger study with more participants would yield more generalisable results. The two phases are also not methodologically equivalent: Phase 1 was documented contemporaneously across a bounded year, whereas Phase 2 concerns an

ongoing period and therefore reports a transition still in progress rather than one whose outcome is known. Finally, interviews with supervisors, department heads, students, and parents could help triangulate a single narrator's account.

Declaration of GenAI Use in the Writing Process

The authors used ChatGPT to improve language, clarity, and readability. The authors reviewed and edited all AI-generated content as necessary and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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