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Constructing Academic Identity Through Critical Argumentation: A Narrative Inquiry of Chinese EFL Doctoral Students' Experiences

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the experiences of Chinese EFL doctoral students in constructing their academic identities through critical argumentation in their thesis writing in an English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) context. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Narrative analysis was used to examine participants' thesis writing to gain insights into their experiences of academic identity construction. The results revealed that Chinese EFL doctoral students face challenges in developing a critical voice and authorial position, synthesizing multiple sources, and positioning themselves rhetorically in their writing. Furthermore, the results open possibilities for a broader understanding of academic writing that values international graduate student's educational background and cultural diversity in target English language discourse communities. While the narrative inquiry study on Chinese EFL doctoral students' academic identity construction through critical argumentation is insightful, there are several limitations to consider, mainly due to the small sample size of only two female Chinese respondents.

Plain Language Summary

Constructing Academic Identity through Critical Argumentation

This study investigates how Chinese international doctoral students construct their academic identities by using critical argumentation in their thesis writing within an English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) setting. The researchers collected data through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. In addition, they used narrative analysis to examine the participants' thesis writing and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences in developing their academic identities. The study's findings indicated that Chinese EFL doctoral students struggle to establish a critical voice and authorial position, integrate multiple sources, and strategically position themselves in their written work. This means that they struggle to express their opinions and ideas in their writing and use sources effectively to support their arguments. They also find it challenging to position themselves as experts in their field. The results highlight the need for a more comprehensive understanding of academic writing that considers international graduate students' educational backgrounds and cultural diversity in English language discourse communities. This means that academic writing instruction should be tailored to the needs of students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The study has some limitations, particularly the small sample size, which only includes two female Chinese participants. This means the findings may not be generalizable to Chinese international doctoral students or students from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

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academic identity construction, critical argumentation, narrative inquiry, EFL Chinese doctoral students, EMI

Introduction

Recently, Malaysia has emerged as an increasingly sought-after destination for postgraduate students from China, owing to the internationalization of education. As of June 2021, over 20,000 registered Chinese students are studying in Malaysia's public and private higher education institutions (Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia, 2021). Numerous Malaysian universities have implemented EMI policies, given that English is a second language in Malaysia. However, previous research (Singh, 2015, 2016) has indicated that the crux of the international doctoral scholars' experience lies in dealing with various linguistic, cultural, and institutional challenges, such as the need to cultivate their academic identities through critical argumentation in their academic discourse practices.

Critical argumentation and academic identity are indispensable for intellectual growth and producing original scholarship in a given discipline within higher education and beyond (McKinley, 2015; Xu & Grant, 2020). In higher education institutes where English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is employed, such as Malaysia, critical thinking is one of the essential prerequisites and desired competencies. Doctoral students are expected to adopt a well-established English academic discourse to achieve successful academic writing standards and actively participate in the EMI community. This adoption necessitates students to demonstrate critical argumentation in their academic writing and associated skills, such as evaluation and analysis. However, students in EMI programs, particularly those from cultures that practice different critical argumentation values, may require assistance applying the Western critical argumentation style in their English academic writing. Such students often encounter difficulties articulating coherent arguments and organizing their ideas, resulting in misunderstandings and communication failures (Ai, 2017; McKinley, 2017; Wang & Parr, 2021; Wu & Buripakdi, 2021).

In the context of doctoral studies, thesis writing is often perceived as a social learning space for constructing students' academic identity, as the research process encourages them to engage in discussions to resolve differences of opinion beyond the scope of their thesis (Flowerdew & Wang, 2015; French, 2020; Mertkan & Bayrakli, 2018). Scholars develop their social identities textually by presenting themselves in accordance or at odds with societal discourse as they appropriate and portray these identities (Mantai, 2019; Teng, 2019; Pu & Evans, 2018). These scholars suggest that academic identity develops over time and is constructed by the student's educational experiences. Although previous studies (Wolfe, 2011; Zhang, 2017) have established that critical argumentation is essential to higher education, how doctoral students comprehend and experience critical argumentation while writing their doctoral theses and constructing their academic identity still requires further investigation. Only a few studies (Li & Deng, 2019; Pu & Evans, 2018; Teng, 2019) have examined EFL doctoral students' critical argumentation and its impact on their academic identity while writing their theses. Furthermore, while these studies have explored the cultural factors that influence Chinese students' academic writing and critical argumentation skills, few have specifically investigated how their prior educational experiences and cultural values shape their construction of academic identity through critical argumentation.

While there has been some research on academic identity construction among Chinese EFL doctoral students in other contexts, such as their home universities in China or Western universities, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding their academic identity construction in English as a second language setting, such as Malaysia. Additionally, while critical argumentation has been identified as an important aspect of academic writing, there has been limited exploration of its role in shaping Chinese EFL doctoral students' academic identities in this context. Therefore, further investigation is needed to understand how Chinese EFL doctoral students construct their academic identities through critical argumentation in an ESL setting.

This study examined two Chinese EFL doctoral students' experience in employing critical argumentation in writing their thesis and academic identity development. More specifically, the following research question is addressed: What are the experiences of Chinese EFL doctoral students in constructing their academic identities through critical argumentation in thesis writing?

EFL Doctoral Students and Critical Argumentation Skill

According to Walton (2012), critical argumentation is a process of identifying, analyzing, and evaluating arguments with the aim of influencing the thoughts and actions of others. Wingate (2011) posits a three-part process for constructing an argument: analysis and evaluation of content knowledge, development of the writer's position, and a coherent exposition. The first component involves the writer's ability to discern pertinent information from the literature to support their point. The second component requires the writer to articulate a well-considered position, often conveyed through their voice or stance. Finally, the

third component necessitates the logical organization of ideas at a structural level, commonly realized through the academic essay or dissertation format.

Critical argumentation in academic writing is closely linked to constructing academic identity in various ways. First, critical argumentation requires the writer to engage with complex ideas and concepts, which can contribute to developing a sense of intellectual ownership. As doctoral students learn to express their own ideas and opinions, they begin to see themselves as knowledgeable and competent individuals in their respective fields. This sense of academic confidence is a crucial aspect of academic identity, as it allows students to establish themselves as active contributors to the academic community.

Scholars (Baptista et al., 2015; Brodin, 2018) argued that critical argumentation and academic identity are highly relevant to doctoral thesis writing in seeking the novelty of disciplinary value. Doctoral thesis writing is viewed as a learning process for research and academic writing that produces a sense of self by experimenting with ideas. In doctoral thesis writing, students' critical argumentation competence is continually shaped and developed by academic interactions (feedback process, peer interaction, and academic networks; Akpur, 2020). As such, doctoral thesis writing is seen as a critical process that constitutes the writers' understanding of who they are, whom they aspire to be, and becoming a community member of the discipline. Therefore, writing a doctoral thesis remains challenging and should be discussed based on critical argumentation and academic identity concepts.

Critical argumentation allows students to establish their position as academic community members by demonstrating their ability to engage with academic discourse. By engaging with the ideas and arguments of other scholars in their field, doctoral students develop a sense of belonging and begin to see themselves as part of a larger academic community. This sense of belonging is also a crucial aspect of academic identity. It helps doctoral students develop a sense of identity as academic scholars connect to others in their field. In addition, critical argumentation allows students to construct their own academic voice and develop a unique perspective on their field of study. Students develop new insights and contribute to new knowledge as they engage with existing knowledge and challenge established ideas. This process of constructing a unique academic voice is essential for developing academic identity. It allows students to establish themselves as experts in their field and set themselves apart from others who may hold similar qualifications.

Factors Affecting Critical Argumentation

Some scholars (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; Vandermensbrugghe, 2004) used cultural stereotypes to explain the inadequacies in international students' critical argumentation. For instance, Chinese EFL students' educational background and cultural factors can influence their lack of critical argumentation in writing their thesis in English. There are several reasons why this may be the case. First, the Chinese education system traditionally strongly emphasizes rote memorization and reproduction of knowledge rather than critical argumentation and independent inquiry (Tian & Low, 2011; Zhang, 2017). As a result, Chinese students may have been exposed to a different level of critical argumentation in their previous academic experiences. Hence, they may struggle to develop these skills when writing their thesis in English.

Moreover, China's cultural values and norms influence how Chinese students approach academic writing. In traditional Chinese culture, there is a strong emphasis on collectivism, harmony, and avoiding conflict (Andrews, 2007; Zhang, 2017). These values may discourage Chinese students from engaging in critical argumentation, as it can be perceived as confrontational and may create tension within the academic community. Additionally, the hierarchical nature of Chinese society may also play a role in inhibiting critical argumentation. In Chinese culture, respect for authority and deference to elders is highly valued. Chinese students' apparent lack of critical argumentation has been attributed to their deference to instructors and scholars, where criticism can be interpreted as disrespectful (Andrews, 2007; Zhang, 2017). Thus, this deference may make Chinese students more hesitant to challenge the ideas of established scholars and academics, an essential aspect of critical argumentation.

Furthermore, the language barrier may also inhibit critical argumentation (Rear, 2017; Manalo & Sheppard, 2016). Writing a thesis in a foreign language can be challenging, and Chinese students may struggle to express their ideas in English as they would in their native language. They might find it challenging to engage in critical argumentation, as doing so might need more advanced linguistic abilities.

In conclusion, Chinese EFL students' educational background and cultural factors may influence their lack of critical argumentation in writing their thesis in English. The traditional Chinese education system, cultural values and norms, hierarchy, and the language barrier can all inhibit the development of critical argumentation skills. Therefore, addressing these factors and supporting Chinese EFL students to develop these skills can be essential to their academic success and professional development.

Theoretical Context

Examining the influence of critical argument on EFL doctoral students' academic identity construction requires a theoretical framework that inspires a relationship between

critical argument academic identity. Doctoral students' academic identity development could be understood through Ivanic's (1998) identity-building theory. Ivanic (1998) expanded on the theory to describe how social and cultural elements influence academic writer development, which occurs in written discourse when a writer makes certain linguistic decisions in an effort to influence readers. For EFL students, academic writer identity development coincides with cultural identity development. Clark and Ivanic (1997) reported that academic writers' identities manifested in their writing as various "*selves*" (autobiographical, authorial, or discoursal), which are used according to the writer, task, and sociocultural component (Ivanic, 1998). The autobiographical self is the writer's life story and sense of self, including their background, cultural beliefs, and inclinations. The discoursal self is the image a writer deliberately or unconsciously presents in writing, which is tied to the writer's sense of self, values, beliefs, and power relations in a social environment. The authorial self refers to how writers show themselves as authoritative in writing by presenting their thoughts and beliefs. Possibilities for selfhood refer to the interaction between a writer's social-cultural background, institutional setting, and disciplinary discourse, which can lead to forming writer identities distinct from the autobiographical self. The autobiographical and discursive selves can eventually lead to the creation of an authorial self, and the possibilities for selfhood might impact how we perceive ourselves. These identities are manifested by the writer's attempts to persuade the reader through various forms of argumentation, which occurs in the final step of a writer's identity development. In academic writing, the authorial self is a means of representing ideational and interpersonal meanings.

Critical argumentation influences a writer's academic identity construction that conforms to the academic discourse community value system by defending an authorial position. The concept of critical arguments states that a debate results from an argument in jointly constructing knowledge (Andrews, 2015; Wolfe, 2011). Regarding academic writing, the identity-building theory is based on the notion that writers create an argument with several strategies and formats. Two possible approaches are taking a position based on one's schemata and supporting it with source information. Another approach is to read widely first and establish a position decision based on the evidence. Examples of different forms of critical argumentation are deductive or inductive writing and the use of an autobiographical, authorial, or discursive self (Clark & Ivanic, 1997). Overall, Ivanic's identity-building theory provides a valuable lens to analyze the complex and dynamic process of constructing academic identity among Chinese EFL doctoral students in an EMI context.

Methodology

This study employs a narrative inquiry approach that explores the Chinese EFL doctoral students' engagement with critical argumentation in thesis writing and their academic identity development. According to Connelly and Clandinin (2006, p. 375), narrative inquiry involves examining "experience as a story" and is primarily a means of conceptualizing experience. As such, narrative research emphasizes the individual and the idea that a life narrative or biographical account can provide insight into one's life. This method is particularly well-suited to studying academic identity construction because it allows researchers to capture the complex and often personal ways individuals make sense of their academic experiences.

Through narrative inquiry, researchers gather narratives from participants and use them to interpret their experiences of the world, with a focus on the three-dimensional space of temporality, sociality, and place. Hence, exploring the participants' academic identity involved examining three dimensions. The first dimension was time, which provided insights into their past experiences and current practices. The participants in this study shared narratives that described their past educational experiences in their home country and their transition to the current academic program in Malaysia.

The second aspect of narrative inquiry focused on personal elements, revealing how the participants' identities as PhD thesis writers evolved and shifted within their experiences and research practice. In this study, interviews focused on participants' personal and social aspects, with questions designed to elicit their feelings and beliefs and their interactions with supervisors' feedback.

Lastly, the institutional and sociocultural environments were considered to investigate the influence of context on the development of their academic writer identity.

Participants

This study involved two female Chinese EFL doctoral students at the Faculty of Education of a public university in Malaysia. The study involved a purposive sample of Chinese EFL doctoral students who have completed at least one semester of coursework and are currently working on their thesis. Purposive sampling helps enroll the participants who may provide credible and rich information on the subjects under consideration (Patton, 2002).

The EFL doctoral students in the education discipline were selected for the study as they had to write their thesis in English. At the university, potential doctoral candidates are required to meet a cut-off International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score of 6.0 and hold a recognized master's degree with a minimum cumulative grade point average (CGPA) of 3.0 to gain entry to the doctoral studies in education.

Volunteers were recruited through targeted invitations sent via WhatsApp and Telegram group chats and online community platforms exclusively for doctoral students at a Malaysian public university's Faculty of Education. Interested individuals were encouraged to contact the researchers to schedule a face-to-face briefing on the informed consent process and interviews. Initially, five doctoral students (two males and three females) agreed to participate, but three withdrew after the first interview. The researchers investigated the reasons for withdrawal and documented them thoroughly. All three (two males and one female) participants cited scheduling constraints as their reason for discontinuing their involvement in the study. They had requested a one-semester postponement of their doctoral studies. In addition, the two male participants had full-time jobs and financial difficulties (self-funded PhD) that made it challenging to continue their studies.

In contrast, the female participant cited her recent marriage commitment. Prospective participants were given a week to review the research information before deciding whether to participate. Volunteers were informed of the study's purpose, data collection processes, time commitment, and their right to privacy and anonymity. The two students included in this study were selected as they met the aforementioned descriptive criteria. Moreover, they volunteered to participate in the study. They were willing to reflect on their experiences writing their doctoral thesis at a Malaysian university and how they progressed through the course 1 year later. The primary premise of sampling is that the informants can provide first-hand accounts of EFL doctoral students' thesis writing. The pseudonyms Ming and Yuwei were used to protect the students' identities. The two students had completed a master's degree by coursework at an Australian and a university in China. Ming has an IELTS score of 7.5, while Yuwei scores band 7. At the time of the study, the students had been in Malaysia for more than 6 months. The two students were enrolled in a qualitative research methodology course that focused heavily on the philosophical underpinnings of this research approach.

The study received ethics approval from the university where it was conducted. In addition, we obtain signed informed consent from both participants and ensure that their identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms. We also ensure that the data collected is kept confidential and used only for this study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The interviews aimed to explore students' experiences using critical argumentation in their academic writing and how it is linked to their academic identities. Each participant took part in two 1-hour interviews. The initial interview, which was done at the start of the research, was intended to understand the participants' educational background and academic writing experiences in their native language and EFL. The main topics of the second interview session were how they assumed their academic identity as doctoral students and how they handled critical argumentation in their thesis writing. This second interview also discussed any potential sociocultural and personal factors influencing their academic writing practices. During the interviews, the participants were encouraged to describe and evaluate their own academic writing experiences from their perspectives.

An interview protocol was employed for in-depth interviews based on the existing instruments (Ivanic, 1998; Shang-Butler, 2015). All the interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded for transcription purposes. The interviews were transcribed immediately, and the researchers reviewed each transcription with written notes from the interview while listening to the recording.

The document analysis was conducted 2 to 4 weeks after the students had completed writing sections of their thesis. Document analysis was used to examine participants' thesis writing in order to gain insights into their critical argumentation and rhetorical positioning. In addition, they discussed their written texts and how they exercised their agency to mediate their academic writing and adapt to disciplinary practices.

Data Analysis

In this study, we adopted a narrative approach as the primary unit of analysis. The data collected from the participants were subjected to this analysis. This involved examining each participant's narrative structure, themes, and discourse to identify patterns and gain insights into their personal experiences of critical argumentation and academic identity formation. An iterative inductive analysis was conducted, whereby each narrative was scrutinized without taking notes or discussing the stories with other researchers. Each researcher independently analyzed each narrative to determine key themes later discussed during a subsequent meeting for a final joint perusal.

The analysis aimed to understand the narratives the Chinese doctoral students shared by focusing on the differences in their experiences rather than simplifying them into one meaning. It is worth noting that narratives represent and interpret personal life experiences, as stated by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). The narrative analysis was particularly fitting for this study, enabling the researchers to identify common thematic elements across the participants' accounts and interpret their intended meaning. Overall, the use of narrative analysis in this

study provided a powerful lens through which to explore and understand the experiences of Chinese EFL doctoral students concerning their critical argumentation and academic writer identity development in an EMI context.

Being small-scale and exploratory, we do not suggest that the findings of this study will necessarily be representative of Chinese EFL doctoral students' experiences in Malaysia or other countries. However, the interpretations reached in the study may shed some light on other doctoral EFL students' experiences in a similar context.

Findings

This narrative inquiry aimed to explore the experiences of Chinese EFL doctoral students in constructing their academic identities through critical argumentation in an EMI context. The findings suggest that critical argumentation in doctoral thesis writing plays a vital role in shaping Chinese EFL students' academic identity construction. Three key themes emerged through a narrative analysis of the interview data: developing a critical voice, defending authorial positions and constructing English rhetorical positioning.

Using our narrative approach, we start with two short anecdotes to present Ming and Yuwei's encounters with critical argumentation while working on their theses. Next, we will discuss how their thesis-writing process influenced their academic identity development, exploring the transformation and conflict between their previous interpretations of academic writing and disciplinary requirements.

Ming's Story

During the interview period, Ming, a 29-year-old first-year PhD student, had recently commenced the second study semester. In 2018, Ming completed a Master's degree by coursework in Australia and applied for a PhD program in Malaysia. Ming was admitted as a doctoral student in the summer of 2019. Ming originated from China and considered English a foreign language despite having received training in English academic writing and educational experience in Australia for her Master's degree. In the first interview, Ming expressed a few preconceived beliefs about doctoral thesis writing, acknowledging the need to enhance the quality of writing to meet the doctoral-level criteria. Owing to Ming's exposure to English academic writing and the educational system for the Master's degree in an EMI context, Ming was conscious that doctoral thesis writing required extensive critical thinking.

Ming noted that numerous countries and universities employ EMI-educated academic writing at different levels, constituting a culture of analytical writing. "*In Australia, it was so common where we will need to critique the work of others, whether it is discussion-based in class or written work*," Ming remarked. Ming acknowledged that the situation resembled her experience in Malaysia. In class discussions or written work, critiquing the work of others was also the norm in her doctoral program in Malaysia. However, Ming perceived a greater emphasis on critical thinking in the PhD thesis writing than in her Master's degree coursework. Ming viewed her Master's degree as merely a collection of coursework assignments, whereas the PhD thesis required more in-depth analytical and evaluative skills. Ming added, "*Critical discussions in the classroom will suffice for a Master's degree, but now I need to develop critical argumentation in thesis writing, which I was not required to do previously*." Ming also expressed concerns about her thesis writing, specifically the lack of critical reasoning and positioning in her English thesis writing.

Critical Argumentation: Developing Critical Voice and Defending Authorial Position

During the discussion of her thesis, Ming demonstrated comprehension and agreement with the reading materials presented. Furthermore, she seemed to perceive critical argumentation as the ability to acknowledge and endorse diverse perspectives. Ming appeared to understand and agree with everything she had read when discussing her thesis writing. To her, critical argumentation was related to how she could agree with different views. Ming discussed how she attempted to be critical, which is illustrated below:

> *I think all these professors' view is correct, and I agree with them. However, I really want to make a point in the face of my agreeing to all these professors' work. I know I must write that what they said is correct, and I cannot say that it is not correct.*

Ming was unaware of what critical argumentation entails in her writing and felt that she needed to obscure her emerging voice and endeavors to position herself in the text. Moreover, she believed critical argumentation referred to agreeing with the authors cited in her claims. For this reason, Ming's strategy was to avoid confrontation and preserve her view while simultaneously placing herself in a more secure position. She referred to her critical argumentation with the following terms: "*I agree with…*". "*This is in agreement with…"*, and "*We should… as noted by…*". Her linguistic choice appeared to indicate the tension between her desire to construct an insider's identity in her discipline and her interpretation of the disciplinary requirements. Thus, how Ming constructed meaning revealed how she thought she could agree and how she wanted to argue regulated her critical argumentation. This insight acknowledged EFL students' unfamiliarity with critical argumentation culture.

In the quote mentioned above, Ming noted that she struggled to comment on or criticize other researchers' work as she was shaped by her admiration for the experts' ideas and fear of expressing herself against book and journal authors. Ming elaborated on how she evaluated the literature in the following excerpt:

> *I don't dare to give my opinion or critique the authors who have written and published so much. These are professors and established authors. I feel not qualified to do so as a doctoral student.*

Ming felt compelled to follow established authors who demonstrated what should be done. Therefore, in this specific example of meaning-making, Ming experienced challenges manifesting her presence, which is a critical writing voice. Given Ivanic's (1998) identity-building theory, her avoidance of critiquing could have been due to a lack of confidence in positioning her view in relation to established authors or uncertainty about how she could achieve a balance between others and expressing herself. This finding highlighted how critiquing and presenting a position requires a sense of power and control over the reading text. Ming's case indicated that doctoral students might lack the power to develop a critical voice and defend an authorial position in critical discourse within the disciplinary community. Ming explained why she refrained from critically commenting on others' work in the following excerpt:

> *In my culture, Chinese, we are not encouraged to challenge authority. We show our respect for elders and high-ranking people like professors. Professor is very knowledgeable, and I am just a doctoral student. The professor is always right, you know.*

Ming revealed that Chinese academic practices emphasized respect for authority and scholarship. Strikingly, Ming used "*we*" when referring to her community. It appeared that Ming adopted her Chinese discoursal tradition or thoughts (way of thinking) either consciously or unconsciously in her thesis writing. Briefly, cultural elements appeared to influence her critical argumentation. She believed it was irrational to be "*critical*" of an authority, such as a book writer, who was more knowledgeable than her. As she found critiquing challenging, Ming resorted to agreeing to multiple views and tended to hide or neutralize her writer's voice. This ultimately undermined her critical voice and authorial position of having an opinion. Reflecting on her thesis writing challenges, Ming demonstrated more complex perceptions of critical argumentation in the following excerpt:

> *Yes, I took a master's [degree], and the professor values critical argument, but we are not taught how to show it in writing. So, it is very difficult for me to know what is that and to comment or evaluate.*

The preceding excerpt indicated that Ming's critical argumentation was hampered not due to cultural barriers but because it was not explicitly taught in higher education. It may have been more challenging for Ming as she had not engaged in critical argumentation when pursuing her Master's degree (coursework). They involve a research project and a series of taught modules delivered through lectures and seminars. Moreover, her doctoral studies involved embarking on a new and unfamiliar research topic of which she needed more knowledge. This challenge highlighted how the value of argumentation is embedded in lecturers' expectations, but it needs to be explicitly taught as a component of doctoral students' experiences (McKinley, 2015). In this case, Ming's critical argumentation was confined to retelling, comparing, or contrasting other researchers' work. Consequently, Ming needed help to meet the demands of self-representation to position herself within the academic community, project her writing voice, and adopt an academic identity.

Ming's account was compelling as her academic writer identity development coincided with cultural identity development and higher education discourse practices. The previous excerpt provided valuable perspectives on critical argumentation nature and practice in higher education. The excerpt highlighted how culture could influence writing styles but is not considered a barrier to critical skills acquisition and critical voice development. Ming's unfamiliarity with critical argumentation in thesis writing was probably due to a lack of exposure to critical argumentation structures or experience with developing a clear and coherent argument. Her transformation regarding critical argumentation was complex and multilayered in the attempt to express her critical voice and defend her authorial position.

Yuwei's Story

Yuwei was 27 years old and completed a Master's degree through coursework in China in 2018. In the same year, she applied for a doctoral program in Malaysia and was admitted as a doctoral student in 2019 despite having limited experience in thesis writing. Yuwei mentioned that she only wrote an academic project paper in her Master's degree program, which put her at a disadvantage in the thesis-writing process. During the first interview, Yuwei discussed the evolution of personal beliefs on doctoral thesis writing before and after commencing the PhD program. Before commencing the PhD program, Yuwei regarded her English proficiency as "*good for students like me from China.*" However, after commencing the doctoral program in Malaysia, Yuwei

considered her "*understanding of critical thinking and academic writing skills"* an obstacle. Yuwei felt inhibited by her linguistic nuances and expression during thesis writing, despite being comfortable with spoken English. She also noted the disparities in English usage between China and Malaysia, where English was more widely employed outside the classroom in Malaysia.

In reflecting on the first year of doctoral studies in Malaysia, Yuwei acknowledged that the experience was relatively difficult. She struggled to cope with the English as a medium of instruction (EMI) context and constantly expressed that "*PhD takes me into unknown space" and "feels so different from what I learned all these years*." She described her doctoral studies in Malaysia as dissimilar from her previous education experience in China, with less focus on rote learning and more problem-based in nature. As a result, Yuwei encountered difficulties in synthesizing ideas and evaluating academic arguments, which delayed her thesis writing progress and influenced her adoption of academic identity. Despite these struggles, Yuwei acknowledged the advantages of writing a dissertation in an EMI context, allowing her to situate herself outside her comfort zone, namely her native country and language, during thesis writing. She also regarded her dissertation writing success in Malaysia as a stepping stone in her personal development as an academic writer while increasing her employability. Nevertheless, Yuwei remained constantly concerned about her thesis writing progress and publication as it was part of the PhD graduation requirement of the public university.

Critical Argumentation: Construction of English Rhetoric Positioning and Synthesizing Multiple Sources

In discussing critical argumentation in thesis writing, Yuwei demonstrated a different approach to implementing a critical stance compared to Ming. Yuwei's critical argumentation was linked to her attempts to reflect Chinese rhetorical norms, which is shown in the following excerpt:

> *I prefer to use Professor's name to support my thesis writing. After I write something, I am expected to present famous professors in my field as evidence to prove my point. This will make my writing more believable since there is another superior to support it.*

Yuwei's approach to critical argumentation was dependent on what she thought she was expected to do. She stated that she was exposed to using the words of famous people or books as evidence as she was exposed to Chinese expository essay writing. Her reasoning for her approach, which was not apparent on the surface of her thesis writing, was uncovered by exploring how she thought she was (or was not) expected to demonstrate this critical argumentation and how she struggled to do so.

Elaborating on how she evaluated the literature, Yuwei stated, '*I refer to the professor or authorities to advance my argument… it is sort of using the authorities to promote trustworthiness*.' Therefore, in this specific example of meaning-making, Yuwei self-positioned as a writer who attempted to provide the perceived desired response according to the voices she considered representative of doctoral thesis writing in previous essay-writing experiences. Therefore, she demonstrated her Chinese expository strategy by relying on authorities in the field to allow her to promote the trustworthiness of her writing and convey her writer's voice less directly to academia. This over-reliance on referencing famous writers to advance an academic argument simultaneously obscured her stance and undermined her efforts to construct the identity of an authoritative and knowledgeable member of her chosen field of study. Yuwei's stance aligns with Andrews's (2007) argument that Confucius's heritage culture places great importance on respect for authority and scholarship. As a result, novice writers tend to avoid presenting their critical arguments before mastering their field.

Yuwei revealed that this habit was influenced by the Chinese collective way of thinking: "*I should think in this way and be taught to use this kind of strategy in Chinese essay writing for years*." This response indicated that her previous writing experiences and exposure were limited to Chinese composition style and framing. The different writing experiences Yuwei acquired in school and undergraduate studies did not prepare her for the fact that doctoral thesis writing style is different and adheres to different literary conventions. More importantly, Yuwei's reliance on her previous writing style could be specifically challenging for her to adopt the expected writing practices in her current academic environment and restrict her approach to critical argumentation. According to Liu and Huang (2021), rhetorical aspects in EFL academic writing are not considered as important in the Chinese context. This may contribute to Yuwei's challenges in adapting to English academic writing conventions.

Yuwei explained that her approach to critical argumentation was rooted in her prior literacy practices (Chinese rhetorical strategy) and acknowledged that she found it challenging to understand the rhetorical differences between Chinese and English in thesis writing. While finding it challenging to compose the target discourse, Yuwei appeared to face barriers in negotiating identities within two selfhoods. She viewed the Chinese and English writer's selfhoods as a conflict between two positions and preferred identities. This conflict resulted

in her struggling to engage in critical argumentation and writing her thesis, necessitating an awareness and understanding of English rhetoric. In the second interview, Yuwei expressed concern over critical argumentation in the following excerpt:

> *I know that for PhD thesis writing, I need to present critical arguments, but I have so many questions in mind: will I be in danger if I sound too outspoken? Or will I sound like a problematic writer that disagrees with the other professors? So I don't think I need to refute it. I want to be safe and stable, you know.*

Yuwei appeared to be highly aware of the politics of writing and the unequal power relations between her and other authors. This awareness appeared to influence her writing, prompting her restraint in expressing personal opinions, specifically those contrary to consensus or those in positions of authority. Yuwei's attempt revealed that she believed her writing would be favored and more acceptable if she intentionally incorporated the words of authorities in the field. Saying, "*I do not think I need to refute. I want to be safe and stable*" also reflected Yuwei's conscious decision of not wanting to exercise critical argumentation skills and her Chinese discoursal strategy. The preceding excerpt indicated that Yuwei needed to gain more knowledge about critical argumentation or was unaware of the significance of rebuttals in completing argument structure, integrating argument, and counterargument. The following excerpt is Yuwei's reflection on her experience in doctoral thesis writing:

> *I find it hard to bring together the different ideas and my own. I know I need to synthesise, but I had not practised this in English or Chinese before. So in my thesis, I summarise and paraphrase to use the information from several sources.*

Yuwei's account indicated that she had minimal experience and prior knowledge and understanding of the rhetorical nature of synthesis writing. Moreover, she highlighted the need to focus on summarizing and paraphrasing the source text when writing her thesis, which suggested that she needed to fully understand the vital role of synthesis and a clear conceptual understanding of synthesizing from a writing perspective. Briefly, Yuwei demonstrated underdeveloped writer-source integration by combining sources and her own ideas. Her lack of experience with synthesis writing and presenting new ideas based on interpretations of other evidence or arguments reflected one of the challenges she faced in representing herself as intertextually knowledgeable and adopting an appropriate academic identity (Chang, 2016; Liu & Huang, 2021).

Yuwei's case highlighted how EFL writers new to critical argumentation in the target language could find it unconsciously challenging to change cultural elements and rhetorical aspects (thinking pattern, audience consideration, and synthesis writing). Chien (2007) argues that traditional Chinese text structures and rhetorical strategies continue to influence the contemporary English writing of Chinese students. Yuwei's experiences reflected the fact that English rhetoric positioning construction presents specific challenges for Mainland Chinese students. In her bachelor's and master's degree research projects, Yuwei was exposed to, directed, and trained in Chinese rhetoric. This limited her understanding of the target English language discourse practices.

In this case, audience consideration in the rhetorical context required considerable readjustments. Specifically, the readjustments posed challenges to Yuwei as a foreign language writer due to the differences between English and Chinese writing. Consequently, this imposed an extra burden on Yuwei as a writer, influenced her thesis writing progress, and affected her identity construction as an academic writer.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of Chinese EFL doctoral students in constructing their academic identities through critical argumentation in an English-Medium Instruction (EMI) context. The findings revealed that critical argumentation plays a crucial role in shaping the academic identity construction of Chinese EFL students in their doctoral thesis writing. Using Ivanic's (1998) framework of identity building, the doctoral students' narratives illustrate their struggles in negotiating their autobiographical, authorial, and discursive selves in academic writing. Insights into the thesis-writing experiences of both doctorate students in this study serve to illuminate the various factors underlying their academic identity construction, particularly in the development of critical argumentation. These challenges are often rooted in linguistic, cultural, and educational differences between doctoral students' life histories and EMI institutional requirements.

This study highlights the influence of the EFL doctoral students' educational background and cultural values on how they express themselves in their writings. For instance, Ming acknowledged the importance of critical thinking in doctoral thesis writing but struggled to develop her critical voice and defend her authorial position. Cultural influences, such as respect for authority, shaped Ming's reluctance to critique established authors' work. Ming's case highlighted the need for explicit instruction and support in developing critical argumentation skills for EFL students.

In another narrative, Yuwei's difficulties in synthesizing ideas and rhetorical positioning led to her merely reiterating facts or summarizing the main ideas. She relied heavily on referencing famous authors to support her arguments, reflecting her Chinese expository essay writing background. This over-reliance on authorities hindered her ability to construct an authorial voice and rhetorical positioning in her thesis. Yuwei's case emphasized the challenges of adapting to English academic writing conventions and the need to understand the rhetorical differences between Chinese and English. Studies by Chang (2016; Liu & Huang, 2021) have shown cultural differences to play a role in shaping Chinese EFL students' rhetorical positioning.

Overall, the findings of this study shed light on the complex nature of academic identity construction among the two Chinese EFL doctoral students in an EMI context. The participants' experiences reflected the influence of cultural norms, educational backgrounds, and language proficiency on their engagement with critical argumentation. The study emphasizes the importance of providing explicit instruction and support for developing critical argumentation skills in doctoral programs to facilitate the construction of academic identities among EFL students. By addressing these challenges, universities can better prepare EFL doctoral students for successful academic writing and contribute to their development as scholars.

The findings open up possibilities for a broader understanding of academic writing that values international graduate students' educational background and cultural variety in target English language discourse communities. In addition, the study's conclusions could be a platform for other EMI higher institutions to better prepare for international students' academic experiences. International graduate students, for example, can be offered long-term academic support in coping with their academic studies.

Limitations of the Study

While the narrative inquiry study on Chinese EFL doctoral students' academic identity construction through critical argumentation is insightful, there are several limitations to consider, mainly due to the small sample size of only two female Chinese respondents. First, the study's findings may not represent all Chinese EFL doctoral students as the sample size is small and homogeneous. Therefore, the study's results should be generalized with caution. Second, the study's focus on only two female Chinese respondents limits the scope of the study in terms of gender and cultural diversity. Gender and cultural differences may impact the way individuals construct their academic identities, and by only focusing on two female participants, the study may not account for these differences. Lastly, the study's focus on only academic identity construction through critical argumentation may not be comprehensive enough to capture the full scope of factors that influence academic identity construction. Other factors, such as educational background, cultural values, and institutional context, may also shape academic identities. In conclusion, while the narrative inquiry study on Chinese EFL doctoral students' academic identity construction through critical argumentation is insightful, its limitations should be considered when interpreting the results. Future research should address these limitations by using larger and more diverse samples, incorporating multiple perspectives, and considering a broader range of factors that impact academic identity construction.

Furthermore, it would be valuable to explore the experiences of other international doctoral students in other contexts and disciplines to understand further the challenges they face in developing their critical voice and authorial position in their thesis writing. Finally, longitudinal studies that track EFL doctoral students' development over time would be valuable for understanding the long-term effects of interventions and support strategies on their academic writing skills and identity construction.

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