

Identity construction in acknowledgements in dissertations written by Chinese doctoral students in German Linguistics and Literature at German universities: A diachronic study from the 1980s to the 2020s

Acknowledgements in dissertations are more than formal expressions of gratitude; they represent a key site for constructing academic identity. As an institutionalised space of legitimate self-presentation, acknowledgements allow authors to “present themselves as persons” (Hollstein/Schütze 2004, p. 179). While previous research has mainly focused on the structure and functions of acknowledgements (Hyland 2003; Mikołajczyk 2013; Wesian 2015; Dinkel 2022; Li 2023), diachronic intercultural studies examining identity construction amongst doctoral students writing outside their home academic contexts remain limited.

Building on Hyland’s (2003) distinction between professional and social identity, acknowledgements in dissertations written in German can be characterised as a highly conventionalised and functionally complex paratext genre. The present study investigates identity construction in acknowledgements written by Chinese doctoral students in German Linguistics and Literature at German universities from the 1980s to the 2020s. The analysis focuses on two central dimensions: the construction of others and the construction of the self.

The study is based on the assumption that acknowledgements function not only as expressions of gratitude but also as linguistic actions through which authors construct academic and intercultural identities. Accordingly, the following research questions guide the analysis:

1. What identities do Chinese doctoral students construct in their dissertations within a German-speaking academic context across different time periods?
2. How do Chinese doctoral students adapt and modify linguistic and structural conventions as well as prototypical features of the acknowledgement genre within the German-speaking academic community?

The study thus aims to contribute to a better understanding of intercultural identity construction amongst Chinese doctoral students in German academic contexts.

The analysis is based on a diachronic corpus of one hundred acknowledgements spanning approximately 45 years. It examines how Chinese doctoral students position themselves linguistically within German academic contexts and how this positioning evolves over time. The findings indicate a dual orientation: Chinese doctoral students align with the norms and communicative conventions of German academic culture while simultaneously remaining rooted in the cultural values and educational trajectories of their Chinese backgrounds.

To generate meaningful data, the study combined purposive and convenience sampling. A mixed-methods approach was employed using MAXQDA 2024 and the UAM Corpus Tool. The recipients of acknowledgement and forms of support were first coded and then interpreted with regard to identity construction. In addition to professional and social

identity, the analysis identified a third dimension, namely intercultural identity, emerging within the dynamic interplay between a Chinese cultural background and German academic culture. Acknowledgements thus function as a central space in which intercultural experiences are reflected and academic positioning is negotiated.

The diachronic analysis revealed three phases of identity construction: the 1980s to 1990s, the 2000s and the 2010s to 2020s. During the 1980s and 1990s, doctoral students primarily constructed themselves as learning novices strongly oriented toward German academic structures. Supervisors were portrayed as respected authorities while doctoral students positioned themselves as dependent junior scholars. Academic support was mainly attributed to German scholars and social networks remained locally confined. Family members were rarely mentioned, likely due to geographical distance and limited communication opportunities. This phase was characterised by a strong alignment to German academic culture and limited intercultural self-reflection.

In the 2000s, identity construction changed markedly. Chinese doctoral students increasingly presented themselves as “academic wanderers” operating between China and Germany. Relationships with supervisors became more egalitarian and emotional support gained in importance alongside academic guidance. Academic networks expanded, with Chinese scholars appearing more frequently in acknowledgements. This shift reflects stronger intercultural orientation and increasing cultural self-confidence. Family members also gained prominence as sources of emotional support. Doctoral studies were increasingly framed as an intercultural learning process encompassing both academic and cultural experiences.

In the 2010s and 2020s, this development intensified further. Doctoral students positioned themselves as “intercultural navigators” embedded in transnational academic networks. Supervisors were described as partners in scholarly exchange, indicating reduced power distance. Social networks expanded beyond academic contexts, with friends and peers forming an “extended doctoral family”. These intercultural relationships fostered emotional resilience, intercultural competence and a stronger sense of belonging to an international academic community.

Overall, the diachronic analysis demonstrates a significant development in identity construction from the 1980s to the 2020s. Chinese doctoral students have evolved from learning novices to academic wanderers and, ultimately, to independent intercultural scholars. This trajectory reflects a shift from dependent positioning to confident intercultural self-representation, mirroring both transformations in the international higher education landscape and increasing intercultural competencies amongst doctoral students. Nevertheless, a dual orientation between German academic culture and a Chinese cultural background remains consistent across all periods.

The findings provide important insights into identity construction in the context of intercultural academic mobility. Furthermore, they demonstrate that linguistic practices in acknowledgements reflect broader cultural and academic transformations. The study contributes to intercultural acknowledgement research and academic identity studies and offers avenues for future research, including comparisons across disciplines and qualitative interviews with doctoral students.

References

- Dinkel, Jürgen (2022): Dank sagen: Geschichte einer akademischen Kulturtechnik. In: *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 19, 3, pp. 537–559.
- Hollstein, Betina/Schütze, Yvonne (2004): Selbstdarstellungen in der Wissenschaft am Beispiel von Danksagungen in der Soziologie. In: Häder, Sonja/Tenorth, Heinz-Elmar (eds.): *Der Bildungsgang des Subjekts. Bildungstheoretische Analysen.* (= Zeitschrift für Pädagogik, Beiheft 48). Weinheim a. o.: Beltz, pp. 153–181.
- Hyland, Ken (2003): Dissertation acknowledgements: The anatomy of a Cinderella genre. In: *Written Communication* 20, 3, pp. 242–268.
- Li, Jing (2023): Danken in wissenschaftlichen Texten: Eine kontrastive Untersuchung zu deutschen und chinesischen Monographie-Danksagungen. (= *Deutsche Sprachwissenschaft international* 39). Berlin: Lang.
- Mikołajczyk, Beata (2013): „Mein Dank gilt in erster Linie meinem Doktorvater“ – Danksagungen aus linguistischer Perspektive. In: *Studia Germanica Posnaniensia* 33, pp. 77–88.
- Wesian, Julia (2015): Danksagungen in Dissertationen: Zur Genese einer Textsorte. (= *DASK – Duisburger Arbeiten zur Sprach- und Kulturwissenschaft / Duisburg Papers on Research in Language and Culture* 106). Frankfurt a. M. a. o.: Lang.