

# **Academic Anxiety of Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral Students in Thailand: A qualitative study**

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**Abstract:** The study aims to make an exploration of the factors affecting anxiety among Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral students in Thailand. Qualitative pieces of evidence are collected to prove the factors affecting Academic Anxiety among Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral Students in Thailand. Nine doctoral students coming from China were selected to discuss the research topic in individual interviews. Based on the results of qualitative research, the author finds that Driving factors for interdisciplinary doctoral studies (DFF) is the moderator not only between Academic pressure (AP) and Academic Anxiety (AA), but also between Difficulties of Academic Plus English (DAPE) and Academic Anxiety (AA). It is suggested to support the mental health of Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral Students, which may give them confidence in participating in research.

**Keywords:** Academic pressure (AP), Difficulties of Academic Plus English (DAPE), Academic Anxiety (AP), Driving factors for interdisciplinary doctoral studies (DFF)

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Background of the study**

The "Belt and Road" initiative is driving the process of economic and social development between China and countries along the Belt and Road. Countries are also increasingly deepening cooperation and connection in the fields of economy, trade, communication, humanities, medical care, education, energy, and so on. Both China and other countries along the Belt and Road are increasingly in need of versatile talents with professional domain knowledge and technology. Higher education is a powerful force to cultivate the talents needed for the "Belt and Road Initiative". The study abroad experience provides ample opportunities for bilingual and multilingual learning. Therefore, investing in students' international experience to meet the requirements of global capabilities is

crucial for gradually promoting students and institutions toward internationalization and globalization (Rattanaphumma & Visuttakul, 2022). The internationalization of higher education is now a global phenomenon, but few people pay attention to the internationalization of doctoral studies, despite the exponential growth of this phenomenon in recent years (Wang & Byram, 2019). During the first few years of study, doctoral students generally experience a decline in mental health, as well as academic identity (Gonzalez et al., 2021). 32% of doctoral students are at risk of mental disorders, especially depression (Levecque et al., 2017). The overall level of depression and anxiety among graduate students is six times higher than that of the general population (Evans et al., 2018).

## **1.2 Statement of problems**

The expectations for doctoral education in higher education worldwide are increasing, and the pressure for doctoral students to publish papers in top journals is increasing. It is crucial to explore ways to enhance the inclusiveness and participation of doctoral researchers in the academic community (Teng, 2020). The problems of the study are as follows:

What are the factors affecting academic anxiety among Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral Students in Thailand?

Are there any relationship between the factors affecting academic anxiety among Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral Students in Thailand?

## **1.3 Objectives of the study**

The purpose of the study is to make an exploration of the factors affecting anxiety among Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral students in Thailand. The main objectives of the study are as follows:

To find the factors affecting anxiety among Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral students in Thailand.

To investigate the relationship among the factors affecting anxiety among Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral students in Thailand.

## **1.4 Significance of the study**

Doctoral students are laborers of scientific research achievements, driving the world's technological progress. The psychological health issues of doctoral students will have a negative impact on research output. Therefore, studying the psychological health of doctoral students and preventing their anxiety has important theoretical and practical significance. The present research about doctoral students mainly includes motivation to study, balance between work and life (Fomunyam, 2020), Foreign Language Anxiety Level, and its Influencing Factors (Akaraphattanawong et al., 2021), The tense relationship between

personal emotions and identity construction (Wang & Li, 2011), international graduate students who are not native English speakers face difficulties in academic writing (Singh & Kaur, 2016), mental health issues (Chen et al., 2021). However, there is little research on the factors affecting these anxiety among Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral students in Thailand. The study aims to find the factors affecting anxiety among Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral students in Thailand and to investigate the relationship among the factors affecting anxiety. It can fill the gap from academic view and give practical suggestion to Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral students in Thailand and the universities of Thailand.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral students in Thailand**

China is a major country in graduate education, but not a strong country in graduate education (SUN et al., 2021). Chinese students are influenced by economic, political, social, cultural, and personal factors in the decision-making process of choosing foreign countries to study abroad. It also proves that all five types of factors have a positive impact on the decision of Chinese students to study in higher education institutions in Thailand, from high to low (Yang & MacCallum, 2022; Ye, 2020). In Southeast Asia, Thailand is the third most popular country for Chinese international students after Malaysia and Singapore, providing learning for a large number of international students (Chen et al., 2018). A study found that Thailand's university education level and residence time are two main factors affecting mental health of the students. When students stay longer in Thailand, their mental health is improved (Chen et al., 2018). It is suggested that universities and mentors can play a more active role in cultivating international doctoral students to become diaspora scholars, in order to motivate these students to imagine themselves as diaspora scholars and critically participate in their cross-border networks (Lee & Elliot, 2020).

### **2.2 Language barriers**

The internationalization of higher education is now a global phenomenon, but few people pay attention to the internationalization of doctoral studies, despite the exponential growth of this phenomenon in recent years (Wang & Byram, 2019). Most graduate students need to work closely with teacher advisors to successfully complete their graduate studies. Language barriers and economic difficulties are the main challenges faced by international students in adapting to academic and social environments and collaborating with teacher advisors.

Understanding the formal responsibilities and expectations of graduate students and supervisors is crucial for establishing a good student supervisor relationship (Omar, 2015). The anxiety level of Thai graduate students is moderate, and there is a significant negative correlation between English classroom and English proficiency, that is, the lower the language proficiency, the higher the language anxiety, the higher the language proficiency, and the lower the language anxiety (Akaraphattanawong et al., 2021). In the past twenty years, the number of Asian students at Thai universities has increased sharply. The main advantages of Thailand lie in its low cost, geographical location, high-quality campus facilities, and welcoming attitude towards outsiders, while the quality of many international projects in Thailand is often related to low English proficiency (Viseshiri et al., 2023). Research has shown that doctoral students from China who use English as a foreign language exhibit statistically significant levels of anxiety in public speaking (Wei & Chang, 2023). The research results indicate that international graduate students who speak non English as their mother tongue face difficulties in academic writing, especially when it comes to English as the language of instruction (Singh & Kaur, 2016). They hesitant to integrate Chinese or Chinese knowledge into academic theory, and Chinese bilingual doctoral students in English believe that global publishing is difficult (Shen, 2023). Previous studies have studied students' learning of academic English from the perspective of teachers, while future studies suggest obtaining data from classroom observations or interviews with students to study how to promote academic English learning (James, 2023). The study used semi-structured interviews in qualitative research to collect relevant data of academic English learning among the students.

### **2.3 Factors of anxiety**

Most students are satisfied with their decision to pursue a doctoral degree abroad, but they are not satisfied with the learning work life balance during their study abroad process (Fomunyam, 2020). The main problems that Chinese foreign students suffer in foreign universities are language anxiety, culture shock, initial adaptation, psychological changes and academic problems. These language and cultural issues are relevant among international students, especially those from China, but many studies suggest that these cross-cultural communication challenges can be overcome through cross-cultural communication skills (Xiuwen & Razali, 2020). The research found that doctors in Bangkok survive in anxiety and depression (Singh, 2020). The research results show that Chinese graduate students exhibit a significantly increased average level of stress when studying in Thailand ( $X=4.09$ ). In addition to diet ( $X=4.77$ ), academic issues ( $X=4.56$ ), cultural difficulties ( $X=3.59$ ), and educational related

administrative management ( $X=3.44$ ), many other factors also account for the majority of stress relief factors(Wei & Chang, 2022).Students have encountered language, personal, and social challenges, but they have learned to handle writing exercises and are striving to become new members of the academic community(Wu & Buripakdi, 2022).

### **3.Method**

#### **3.1 Method theory**

A qualitative research is designed, focusing on a social phenomenon by studying the social background and individuals (Lune & Berg, 2017) . The in-depth semi-structured interviews are adopted in the study. It usually uses non-random but still representative small sample research (Cypress, 2018; Mohajan, 2018; Power & Gendron, 2015). The study adopts constructing grounded theory. The theories are constructed by the researchers in the process of participating in practice and interacting with the subjects. The researchers themselves are a part of the world they study.

#### **3.2 Sample selection**

Due to the fact that the researcher is a doctoral student in the surveyed university, the author has conducted preliminary open interviews with some classmates in the same academic or social circle (various WeChat groups, QQ groups) in the research field. Therefore, in the formal research, semi-structured interviews were selected to focus on the important questions and remaining questions that appeared in the previous survey. The author selected the samples from the doctoral students in Thailand. There are 9 students who have studied doctoral courses in Thailand. Among them, three have studies for 1 years, three have studied for 2 years and three have studies for over 3 years. The students are majoring innovative management in PHD study but with different majors of master degrees.

#### **3.3 Data collection**

According to the research design, the researchers selected doctoral students as the interviewees. Implement interviews based on the convenience of the interviewees' time and location. An interview outline based on previous literature review and analysis was developed. The interview outline lists the main issues that the interviewer believes should be understood during the interview and the scope of content that should be covered. For doctoral students, the questions we designed in the interview outline include: "Do you think there are symptoms of depression and anxiety after pursuing a doctoral degree?" "Do you think your stress

will be affected by the academic level of classmates in the same major?" "Do you think interdisciplinary selection of a doctoral degree will have some academic pressure on you?" and so on. The interview time was from December 2022 to February 2023. Before the interview, the interviewer informed the interviewees that the author is currently studying for a doctorate degree majoring in innovation management at College of Innovation and Management, Sunandha Rajabhat University, and the interview is for academic writing. The interviews were conducted with the permission of the interviewees, and the interviewer guaranteed the confidentiality and anonymity of the interviewee throughout the whole process.

*Table 1. Basic information of interviewees*

No.	Major of master degree	Major of doctoral study	Interview duration	Interview method
1	English Education	Innovation Management	30 min	Face-to-face
2	English Education	Innovation Management	40 min	Face-to-face + online
3	English Education	Innovation Management	80 min	Face-to-face + online
4	Accounting	Innovation Management	70 min	online
5	Accounting	Innovation Management	89 min	Face-to-face +online
6	Accounting	Innovation Management	65 min	Face-to-face
7	Media	Innovation Management	63 min	Face-to-face +online
8	Media	Innovation Management	70 min	online
9	Media	Innovation Management	75 min	online

### 3.4 Data processing

The entire interview content was processed and converted into text after completion. Extract thematic concepts based on the textual data

generated from interviews and classify them. The direction of theme, concept and theory would be got by the researchers (Saldaña, 2009). The researcher would like to use open coding, axial coding, and selective coding are used in the study (Pandit, 1996) . Qualitative data includes interview transcripts, on-site notes, journals, documents, diaries and so on (Saldaña, 2009).

### 3.4.1 Open coding

The first step of data analysis, then axial coding, and selective coding would use words or phrases as open coding are used as (Pandit, 1996). The author categorizes the data into three categories: Reasons for interdisciplinary doctoral studies, Academic pressure for doctoral students and Academic English pressure for doctoral students, encodes the data, and divides it into as many conceptual categories as possible from these three categories. According to this research method, the author obtained open coding. Starting with open coding, the author combs and analyzes the data obtained from interviews, and at the same time organizes the interview sentences or paragraphs into further codes. Through the sorting and coding of interview data, 108 free nodes are obtained, and then conceptualizes these free nodes to get 9 initial categories. The categories and concepts of open coding (some examples) are shown in Table 2. Categories and concepts of open coding (Part of examples) are as follows.

*Table 2. Categories and concepts of open coding (Part of examples)*

<i>Initial concept</i>	<i>Initial Categorization</i>
Proactive interdisciplinary	Encourage interdisciplinary, diverse perspectives, integrated development, and interdisciplinary warriors. A single discipline cannot explain clearly and systematically understand.
Passive interdisciplinary	Unable to understand, not smart, not what one wants, giving up original knowledge, no choice.
Difficulties in doctoral courses	The course is difficult, I don't understand the professional terminology, the progress is too fast, the pace is too fast, starting from 0.
Academic atmosphere pressure	Difficult to integrate into discussions, not in the discourse circle, not understanding academic viewpoints, layman, layman.
Difficulties of Academic English	Although I have a good level of English, I am unable to cope with academic and professional classes, cannot understand the course, does not understand statistical terminology, does not understand research tool language, and cannot keep up with the course.

Academic speaking	Weak spoken language, afraid to speak up, unable to present, difficult to interact in class, unable to communicate with teachers, and difficult to communicate orally.
Academic Writing	Poor writing ability, lack of understanding of academic written language, difficulties in early research, lack of understanding of academic language, lack of citation, lack of academic understanding, lack of understanding of the structure of the paper, poor grammar, and lack of logic in language

### 3.4.2 Axial coding

When compiling the spindle code, the author mainly distinguished various organic connections between the main concept categories and secondary concept categories based on the research questions and the environmental conditions of the research samples, and reorganized the scattered data in a new way. According to the axial coding, the influencing factors of depression and anxiety symptoms among doctoral students mainly fall into 6 categories: Positive Factors in Choosing a Cross disciplinary PhD, Negative Factors in Choosing a Cross disciplinary PhD, Lack of understanding of academic research, The pressure of academic backwardness, The Difficulties Caused by Academic Plus Spoken English, t The Difficulties Caused by Academic Plus Written English. Therefore, the author has obtained the spindle codes in Table 3 below.

*Table 3. Examples of axial coding*

<u>Node name</u>	Sources	Reference node
Positive Factors in Choosing a Cross disciplinary PhD (DFFP)	5	12
Negative Factors in Choosing a Cross disciplinary PhD (DFFN)	5	24
Lack of understanding of academic research (LOU)	6	20



The pressure of academic backwardness (POA)	4	18
The Difficulties Caused by Academic Plus Spoken English (DAS)	2	21
The Difficulties Caused by Academic Plus Written English(DAW)	3	31

### 3.4.3 Selecting Coding

The author summarized the content of the spindle encoding, analyzed and merged all interview content step by step, and completed the reconstruction of the selection encoding. Based on other relevant information, the author has selected new codes for the three categories: reasons for interdisciplinary doctoral studies, academic pressure for doctoral students and academic English pressure. As shown in Table 4. In order to verify the scientific nature of the research, the author selected the data of four interviewees for validation. The validation results showed that the research results had reached theoretical saturation, and no different selective encoding was generated during the validation process, indicating that the research results were acceptable. The authors have fully explored the connotation of the interview data.

*Table 4. Categories of typical relational structure.*

Parties of relationship	Connection relationship	Examples of Interview texts
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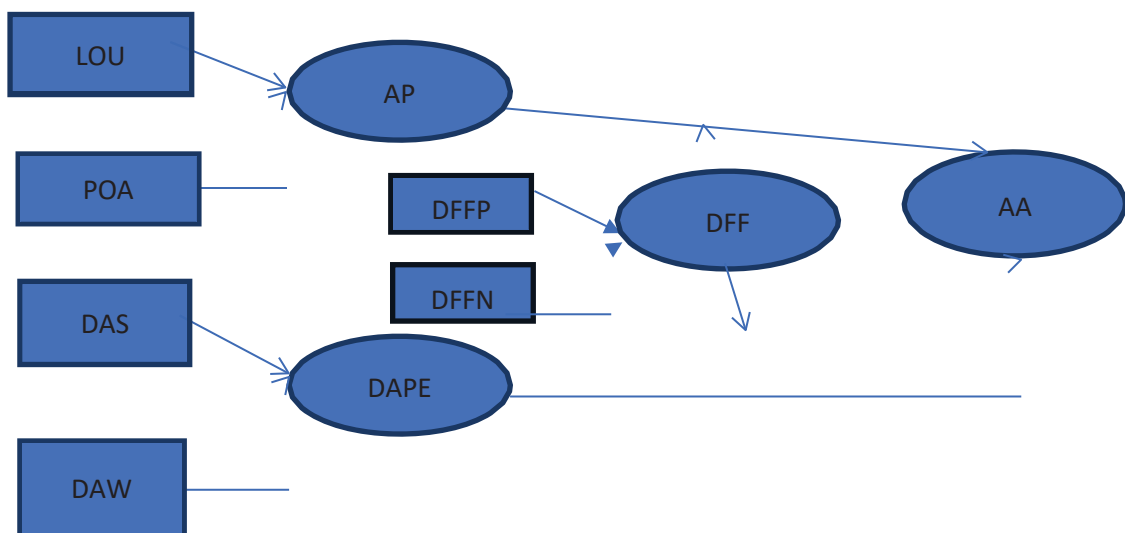
AP and AA	Academic pressure (AP), has a significant impact on Academic Anxiety (AA).	Academic pressure makes me feels emotions, nervousness, anxiety, memory loss, sleep disorders, and appears to be more pronounced in terms of anxiety and depression. I worry about whether the thesis can be successfully passed - the requirements of the doctoral thesis are very strict, and there is great uncertainty about whether it can be successfully passed. The longer the research time, the higher the risk of depression and anxiety
DAPE and AA	Difficulties of Academic Plus English (DAPE) has a significant impact on Academic Anxiety (AA)	After all, English is a foreign language, and there is a natural language barrier. Reading English literature, especially lengthy literature, makes me very restless. I don't even understand Chinese statistical knowledge, and I am very anxious about how to use statistical terms in English literature.
DFF between AP and AA	Driving factors for interdisciplinary doctoral studies (DFF) is the moderator between Academic pressure (AP) and Academic Anxiety (AA)	My purpose of pursuing a PhD in an interdisciplinary field is to broaden my horizons. I am ready to start from scratch and can handle my studies. I feel less anxious. I didn't originally want to pursue this major, just to obtain a doctoral degree, but the pressure of interdisciplinary learning is too great, which has increased my anxiety.
	Driving factors for	This is my own choice, and

<p>DFE between DAPE and AA</p>	<p>interdisciplinary doctoral studies (DFE) is the moderator between Difficulties of Academic Plus English (DAPE) and Academic Anxiety (AA)</p>	<p>cross majors are more useful for my own development prospects. I am willing to accept challenges, including facing academic difficulties in foreign languages. I thought Thailand was a non English speaking country and it would be easier for me to graduate. As a result, my English proficiency requirements are also very high, which exceeded my imagination and made me very anxious.</p>
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### 3.4.4 Credibility tests

The whole process included clustering, comparison, decomposition, establishing logical evidence chain and so on. The study confirmed the research results through the triangulation of data sources, in which the information provided by one interviewee is mutually confirmed with the information provided by other interviewees to ensure the effectiveness or credibility of the research results.

### 4.Results and limitation



*Figure 1. Model of the relationship of the factors affecting Academic Anxiety among Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral Students in Thailand*

Based on the qualitative research results, a theoretical model is established for the interaction of factors affecting Academic pressure (AP) among Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral Students in Thailand. The two factors, namely Academic pressure (AP) and Academic Plus English (DAPE), interact closely affect Academic Anxiety (AA), moderated by Driving factors for interdisciplinary doctoral studies (DFF) .

#### **4.1 Results**

We collated and coded the interview data, and used the qualitative research method to construct the above figure 1, Model of the relationship of the factors affecting Academic Anxiety among Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral Students in Thailand. The theoretical model we have constructed reveals the interplay of two core elements: Academic pressure (AP) and Academic Plus English (DAPE) which influence Academic Anxiety (AA). In the model we constructed, Academic pressure (AP) and Academic Plus English (DAPE) can directly explain the sources of Academic Anxiety (AA), And these factors are moderated by Driving factors for interdisciplinary doctoral studies (DFF).

From Figure 1, it can be seen that the influencing factors of Academic Anxiety among Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral Students in Thailand are composed of two aspects: Academic pressure and Difficulties of Academic Plus English. The result proved that key factor of anxiety is the lack of practical and language professional knowledge (Rasool et al., 2023). From the perspective of Academic pressure (AP), two factors, namely Lack of understanding of academic research (LOU), Pressure of academic backwardness (POA); From the perspective of Difficulties of Academic Plus English (DAPE) , Difficulties Caused by Academic Plus Spoken English(DAS) and Difficulties Caused by Academic Plus Written English (DAW) are the factors. Based on the results of qualitative research, the author finds that Driving factors for interdisciplinary doctoral studies (DFF) is the moderator not only between Academic pressure (AP) and Academic Anxiety (AA) ,but also between Difficulties of Academic Plus English (DAPE) and Academic Anxiety (AA).

#### **4.2 Research limitation**

The theoretical model constructed in this study is based on sufficient analysis of textual data, and after gradually summarizing the influencing factors of anxiety, further quantitative and qualitative verification is needed for the questioning and hypothesis of the formation mechanism.

#### **5 Conclusion and discussion**

During the first few years of study, doctoral students generally experience a decline in mental health, as well as academic identity (Gonzalez et al., 2021). 32% of doctoral students are at risk of mental disorders, especially depression (Levecque et al., 2017). Few research focuses on Academic Anxiety among Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral Students in Thailand. The research studies from the perspective of Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral Students. The study shows that Driving factors for interdisciplinary doctoral studies (DFF) is the moderator not only between Academic pressure (AP) and Academic Anxiety (AP), but also between Difficulties of Academic Plus English (DAPE) and Academic Anxiety (AP). This study suggests that doctoral students should have a positive motivation for pursuing a doctoral degree, whether it is through their own efforts, in order to improve themselves, return to the workforce, add weight to their career, or achieve their predetermined employment direction. Correct motivation can reduce Academic Anxiety (AP) on doctoral students. Expecting to obtain a doctoral degree without putting in hard work will inevitably be dealt a heavy blow by reality.

The main obstacles in academic writing include barriers to needs, negative self-awareness, and low self-regulation (Calle-Arango & Ávila Reyes, 2022). It is suggested to support the mental health of Chinese Interdisciplinary Doctoral Students, which makes them give them the confidence in participating in research and learning, a positive awareness can help them make progress in conceptual thinking and writing (Wisker, 2018). From the perspective of Difficulties of Academic Plus English (DAPE), Difficulties Caused by Academic Plus Spoken English (DAS) and Difficulties Caused by Academic Plus Written English (DAW) are the factors. Writing is one of the main challenges that doctoral students face in becoming researchers. Expert feedback and interaction with other researchers can help doctoral students improve their writing skills. The academic exploration of doctoral students can be carried out through self-reflection and dialogue (Huet & Casanova, 2022). The relationship between intermediate level doctoral students and supervisors poses negative challenges, especially in the communication process related to research design, data collection, and analysis (Corcelles et al., 2019). To create the community network of doctoral students in academic writing (Kim, 2018), it is suggested that Thesis Writing Group (TWG) to be the educational method and not only enable doctoral students to quickly improve their academic writing skills but also promote self-regulation in the emotional dimension (Calle-Arango & Ávila Reyes, 2022; Chatterjee-

Padmanabhan & Nielsen, 2018).

From the perspective of Academic pressure (AP), two factors, namely Lack of understanding of academic research (LOU), Pressure of academic backwardness (POA). The learning of doctoral students can draw inspiration from the peer learning methods of undergraduate students (Meschitti, 2019). The most relevant conditions for doctoral students to effectively promote the process of paper writing and dialogue are the exchange of drafts and the disciplinary background of participants(Álvarez & Colombo, 2021).

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