THE (NATIONAL) DOCTORAL DISSERTATIONS ASSESSMENT IN CHINA: AN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	Our study explores the perspectives of international doctoral graduates on (national) dissertation assessment in China.
Background	In the absence of national standards or in the presence of impractical ones for assessing doctoral dissertations, these factors have inevitably led to what Granovsky et al. (1992, p. 375) called "up to standard rejected" and "below standard accepted." Improving upon this debate, this study examines the lived experiences of seven doctoral graduates who have completed their doctoral degrees in a leading university in China.

Methodology	An interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) method was used, which entails seven participant observations, seven semi-structured e-interviews, and 29 external reviews.
Contribution	In the present study, we addressed the issue of doctoral dissertation assessment standards with a view to enhancing understanding of the quality of doctoral education. It emphasizes the strengths of this aspect in China and critically describes the weaknesses based on the experiences of doctoral graduates in China.
Findings	Among the major findings of this study are: (a) the external review of the dissertations presented in the literature review appears to be extremely unique in comparison to the countries discussed in the literature and the countries of the participants (Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Malawi, Tanzania, and Yemen); (b) the national assessment strengthens higher education on a macro level, but is detrimental at the micro-level; and (c) while external reviews appear credible as a policy towards the standardization of doctoral dissertation assessment, this credibility evaporates when one considers the quality of reviews provided and the motivation of reviewers to pass or reject a dissertation, including the supervisor's exclusion from this process.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Students seeking a doctoral degree or dissertation should become familiar with the A-Z detail of the requirements for the degree and thesis. In addition to meeting this overt requirement, their efforts must also be directed to meet the covert requirements, including the requirements of the external reviewers, their supervisors, and the country's laws. There is a necessity for external reviewers to rethink their decisions and attempt to assess objectively, putting aside their personal views and preferences. There is a need to re-examine the flexibility granted to external reviewers for making decisions regarding doctoral degrees.
Recommendations for Researchers	Future research should consider involving an increased number of parties in the conflict between doctoral students, supervisors, and external reviewers.
Impact on Society	The Chinese government allocates substantial resources for doctoral studies for both international and local students. The spending of government funds on a doctoral student for four years or more, and then the degree is decided by an external reviewer, is uneconomical on the level of financial capital and human capital. Doctoral students are also human beings, and it does not seem logical that one should judge the quality of their efforts over the course of three or more years by reading the doctoral dissertation once. While they were pursuing their doctoral degrees, they kept their families apart, they lived alone, struggled to make it through hardships, and were easily destroyed.
Future Research	In the future, more interviews may be conducted with respondents belonging to a variety of universities in China, including Chinese students. Additionally, supervisors and external reviewers (if available) should be included. Last but not least, including decision-makers in Chinese higher education can give future research more credibility.
Keywords	China, doctoral dissertation, doctoral graduates, experiences, external review, national assessment

INTRODUCTION

Doctoral graduates are vulnerable to complex psychological experiences, mainly during the final stages of graduation. The assessment of doctoral dissertations necessarily demands the presence of well-defined standards and regulations along with examiners' sufficient expertise. The lack of national standards or the presence of impractical regulations and codes then reminds us of the "up to standard rejected" and "below standard accepted" (Granovsky et al., 1992, p. 375). Although the problem was identified around three decades ago, it persists.

Doctoral attrition, be it direct (students choose to drop out) or indirect (students are rejected to pass), could be a result of many causes, including inconsistent procedures and subjectivity in the assessment of doctoral dissertations (Devos et al., 2017). This leads to the fact that a holistic model of doctoral education, including assessment of the doctoral dissertation, is best suited for granting Ph.D. degrees, instead of just focusing on the completion of a Ph.D. dissertation that is usually judged subjectively (Syncox et al., 2017). By this means, the pre-examination review or peer review process of the doctoral dissertation should be to ensure quality and provide better improvements rather than rejecting and hindering the process of completing the doctoral degree (Kärnä, 2012). Another claim assumed that the doctoral dissertation "must be planned, executed, and written with the examiners in mind" (Bowden & Green, 2019, p. 156). Integrity concerning the quality of examination remains arguable and questionable if all examiners worldwide would make "final judgments … [focusing] on the competencies, confidence, and independence demonstrated by the candidate" (Bowden & Green, 2019, p. 158). Other reasons for rejection could be attributed to accuracy and precision, methodological issues, and results and analyses (Stigmar, 2019). Therefore, "establishing concrete guidelines, standards, and criteria for assessing doctoral work remains a hidden and mystified process" (Stigmar, 2019, p. 1044) internationally, especially when considering rejected doctoral dissertations – thinking about the economic cost, psychological cost, social cost, and educational cost for the students, the supervisor, the university, and the whole country. The causes of doctoral attrition can vary from one context to another. For instance, while many EU states are much more concerned with quality, in countries like Russia, they are more concerned with lack of experience and unpreparedness to cope with the doctoral education expansion (Maloshonok & Terentev, 2019). It is true that resilience to complete a doctoral degree, composed of different factors, decreases the chances of doctoral attrition (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020), but this does not seem to help when a doctoral student is faced with unknown wants and preferences of the external examiners.

To this end, and by employing an interpretive phenomenological methodology, and multiple-case study design, our paper focuses on divulging the participants' lived experiences of the external reviews of doctoral dissertation assessment in China. The paper addresses two research questions: (i) what are the strengths and weaknesses of the national dissertation assessment in China? and (ii) what are the doctoral graduates' psychological experiences of the external review system in China? The paper is divided into five sections. The first section introduces the study. The second section reviews the literature relevant to the topic under study, and the third section details the study methodology. The fourth and fifth sections report the findings, discussion, and conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Throughout the paper, we focus mainly on doctoral dissertation assessment in China, and in the following section, we present four accompanying themes. We have divided our literature review into four sections. In the first section, we provide an overview of the concept of doctoral dissertation assessment. Second, we discuss factors contributing to or leading to doctoral dissertation rejection, including the supervisor's role. Third, we discuss how dissertations are evaluated in several countries and compare them. We conclude this analysis by synthesizing the assessment of doctoral dissertations in China, the context for this study.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ASSESSMENT

Defined as a toilsome process (Uusiautti, 2012), a doctoral dissertation demands continuous effort in both preparation and assessment, especially when meaningless requirements become the target (Quarles & Roney, 1986). Rather than fulfilling specific managerial regulations and procedures (White, 2013), reviewers, referred to as gatekeepers (Chen, 2011), need to exercise professional expertise and total integrity. While regulations for reviewers inconsistently differ, the common trend is applying an oral defense with reviewers' subjective decisions of acceptance, minor or major revisions, or sometimes outright rejections (R. V. Smith, 1990).

While an outright rejection decision is typical, it still reflects both doctoral candidates' and society's wasted effort (Gillingham et al., 1991). The persistence of "up to standard rejected" and "below standards accepted" (Granovsky et al., 1992, p. 375) demands "transparency and public accountability" in the review processes (Langfeldt & Kyvik, 2011, p. 199), and the application of publishing a few papers before the oral defense (e.g., Blunden-Ellis, 1996; Larivière et al., 2012) in some contexts. However, while a publication-based dissertation is preferable (Hagen, 2010), the existence of ghost authors and/or third-party writers is possible (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2016). Therefore, rather than simply producing doctoral dissertations, the doctoral programs should provide quality training (Mathieu & Adams, 1997) with a dissertation production not only as an indicator of scientific growth (Fernández-Cano et al., 2012) and knowledge (Bayrak Karsli et al., 2018) but also as a mastery of language norms (Parry, 1998) and writing styles (Bayrak Karsli et al., 2018).

While a doctoral dissertation is "an administrative document necessary to obtain the doctoral degree" (e.g., Paillassard et al., 2005, p. 73), it involves the transmission of a supervisor's skills and expertise to their supervisees (Lin & Hsu, 2012). Furthermore, it should involve teaching and applying research ethics that should also be considered while assessing dissertations and deciding to grant doctoral degrees (Holbrook et al., 2017). Below we further discuss the critical roles of supervisors and the main factors for rejecting a dissertation.

KEY ROLES OF SUPERVISORS AND KEY FACTORS FOR A DISSERTATION REJECTION

Supervisors play several roles in the overall assessment of doctoral dissertations. These roles are not limited to overseeing and controlling but instead supporting, guiding, and actively collaborating on addressing major revisions (Roulston, 2012). However, the implementation of such roles depends on the relationship defined as a "complex being simultaneously subject and skills driven" (Middleton, 2012, p. 228) between supervisors and supervisees. In this concern, a doctoral graduate shared her experience, stating that a "professionally skilled supervisor does not address his/her supervisee just technically but exploits the theories of learning and identity development in supervision" (Lakkala, 2012, p. 13). In many situations, the dissertation, abstracted publications, conference papers, and patents (for some majors) are the product of both supervisors and supervisees, provided that each one plays their role sufficiently and effectively (Gilbar et al., 2013). This is reasonable since pressures affect supervisees and their supervisors (Baguley et al., 2018).

Dissertations can be rejected for several reasons. First and foremost, the poor quality of a dissertation is the main reason for rejection. An outright rejection decision may also be made when inconsistent procedures and subjectivity in assessing doctoral dissertations (Devos et al., 2017; Syncox et al., 2017) are practiced. Another factor relates to an un-realization of ensuring quality and better improvements during the pre-examination reviews (Kärnä, 2012). Additionally, when a doctoral dissertation is developed with examiners in mind (Bowden & Green, 2019), violating research ethics is possible, leading to rejection.

The examination quality integrity also remains arguable and questionable if examiners make "final judgments … [focusing] on the competencies, confidence, and independence demonstrated by the candidate" (Bowden & Green, 2019, p. 158). A lack of accuracy and precision and a presence of

problems in methodologies, analyses, and results (Stigmar, 2019) also bring about rejections. A lack of "establishing concrete guidelines, standards, and criteria for assessing doctoral work remains a hidden and mystified process" (Stigmar, 2019, p. 1044), triggering rejections. While resilience is essential for completing a doctoral degree (McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020), it is not easy to satisfy the external examiners' unknown wants and preferences. Now we turn to discuss the doctoral dissertation assessment standards from a global perspective.

A GLOBAL OVERVIEW OF DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ASSESSMENT STANDARDS

Assessment of doctoral dissertations varies among countries, leading to international and national-specific standards – controlling the quality and granting of doctoral degrees. Put differently, the doctoral level programs are considered level eight in the UK, level 10 in Australia, and the third cycle in Europe, but all aim "to produce innovative research and new knowledge" through good quality assessment of doctoral dissertations (Storey, 2016, p. 9).

Internationally, the standards of doctoral dissertation assessment witnessed progress in the last two decades, making them different from the "irregular and idiosyncratic process that could delay the completion of candidature" between the 1980s and 2000s (Erwee & Perry, 2018, p. 359). The criteria of nine factors used to examine doctoral dissertations almost reflect the different sections of the dissertation (e.g., methods, conclusion, contributions). A few authors argued that awareness of procedures and availability of these procedures to the supervisees, supervisors, and examiners is part of this examination process (e.g., Erwee & Perry, 2018). These criteria include appropriateness, sufficient knowledge demonstration, understanding of relevant literature, appropriate methodology, sound results, and successful communication of the dissertation in public (Erwee & Perry, 2018). The quality of external examiners has been debated since the 1990s (Padró et al., 2018). The absence of transparency in regulations may lead doctoral students to think that publishing many papers is enough to make the examiners accept their dissertations (Padró et al., 2018). At all rates, the assessment follows one of these forms: "examination by an internal panel or committee, examination by external experts, examination by the oral defense or a viva or some combination of these models" (Cooksey & McDonald, 2019, p. 1083). This undoubtedly leads to "subjectivity which creates inconsistency and fears about inconsistency simply add to the overall anxiety felt when your major research outcome is examined" (Cooksey & McDonald, 2019, p. 1083). Consequently, the doctoral candidates should certainly expect "failure but, more commonly, requests for substantive revision and re-submission of a thesis, dissertation or portfolio do occur" (Cooksey & McDonald, 2019, p. 1084).

National assessment standards are both similar and different. For instance, the existence of preliminary examiners and public opponents (examiners) is the Finnish standard that suffers from "the so-called third cycle of the Bologna process which concentrates on the quality of doctoral education … [and that] revealed invisible practices and unwritten regulations underlying the assessment system as a whole" (Aittola, 2008, p. 173). In Sweden, the standard of a doctoral dissertation depends on publishing papers in international peer-reviewed journals (Breimer, 2010). The assessment can be public or private in Canada, with variations among universities (Chen, 2011) that prefer granting a doctoral degree based on publications (Larivière, 2012). A publication-based dissertation/only publications (Mason et al., 2020) and a monologue-based dissertation are both accepted based on examiners' reviews with an oral examination (Clarke, 2013) and are both debatable and relatively objective (Rigby & Jones, 2020) in the UK. This model extends to South Africa and Africa in general, with additional specifications characterizing the limited sources (Cross & Backhouse, 2014). In Norway, the doctoral dissertation assessment committee includes a member from abroad to promote internationalization and neutrality (Myklebust & Withers, 2017).

In China, the context of this study, the doctoral education system is currently considered as the most extensive doctoral education system in the world (Gu et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2019) with two models: the traditional Apprentice Master Model (AMM), and the modern Collaborative Cohort

Model (CCM) (Luo et al., 2015). The latter promotes a more effective interaction and the relationship between supervisors and supervisees. The rise of the anonymous review of doctoral dissertations was in response to the quality assurance policy of postgraduate education (Blanco, 2019; Liu, 2016). In general, doctoral education in China is described as a combined model based on the Soviet Union, European, and American models, but with a more US-like model at present (Huang, 2018). However, the primary standards for granting a doctoral qualification in China include these four stages: the oral defense of the proposal, pre-defense of the dissertation, external review, and a final oral defense. The standard for including three external examiners is obligatory. In this paper, a further focus is on the quality of external examiners' reviews. In the following section, we briefly discuss the doctoral dissertation assessment in China.

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ASSESSMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CHINA: A SYNTHESIS

In China, the context of this study, the doctoral education system was founded in 1981 (Zheng et al., 2019). Now considered the largest doctoral education system in the world (Gu et al., 2018), two models (Apprentice Master Model (AMM) and Collaborative Cohort Model (CCM)) are claimed where the first is traditional and the second is modern and promoting creativity (Luo et al., 2015). The latter promotes a more effective interaction and the relationship between supervisor and supervisee. The rise of the anonymous review of the Ph.D. dissertation was in response to the quality assurance policy of postgraduate education (Blanco, 2019; Liu, 2016). In general, doctoral education in China is described as a mixed model of the Soviet Union, Europe, and the US, but with a more US-like model now (Huang, 2018). Unlike this and the description mentioned by Gu et al. (2018) about the three stages of doctoral studies in China, mainly the third stage, to all the authors' knowledge, who completed their PhDs in China, there are several complicated steps for granting the Ph.D. degree, starting with the oral defense of the proposal, pre-defense of the dissertation, external review, and then the final oral defense. However, what seems to be purely Chinese is maybe the national assessment system, which requires three external examiners to assess and decide on the whole future of a doctoral student. This paper examines this point based on seven participants' experiences and 29 external reviews.

Most doctoral programs are integrated, including courses and dissertations as compulsory requirements. For example, in one of the doctoral programs, doctoral candidates need to achieve 19 credits. Eleven credits are obtained by taking compulsory courses. Regarding elective courses, it sometimes happens that some advanced courses are not offered because the number of the quotas is not fulfilled, forcing doctoral candidates to attend introductory courses designed for master students. The assessment is based on classroom presentations, discussions, writing article reviews, and final term papers in all courses. The doctoral students must finish all these courses during the first three semesters (e.g. Beijing Normal University, 2020a).

By the end of the first year, doctoral students are required to develop a brief dissertation proposal and select three potential supervisors with at least the rank of an associate professor. The responsible department communicates the dissertation proposals with the selected supervisors. If the first chosen supervisor does not accept to supervise, the second one is selected, and so on. If the three selected supervisors refuse to supervise, the department assigns a supervisor to the doctoral student, making it difficult for the supervisee to develop a successful relationship with a faculty member during the first academic year (e.g., Beijing Normal University, 2020a; 2020b). To avoid an initial supervisee-supervisor relationship failure, many doctoral students select faculty members who have provided an initial oral agreement. The department approves a supervisor towards the end of the second semester of the first year (e.g. Beijing Normal University, 2020a).

After writing a complete dissertation proposal, a doctoral candidate must defend it by the end of the third semester, and this is referred to as a mid-course examination that includes 4-5 committee members (selected by the supervisor and approved by the department and/or the faculty). The

outcomes of the oral defense include suggestions for revision and sometimes for developing a new proposal. The doctoral candidates are given a second opportunity to defend their proposals by addressing major revisions or developing new proposals. In case of failure, the candidates are disqualified at this stage (e.g. Beijing Normal University, 2020a; 2020b).

After a successful mid-course examination, the development of the dissertation continues, depending on the relationship and communication between supervisors and supervisees. For example, some supervisors request their supervisees to attend weekly meetings to present their progress and plans. Some others choose to meet with their supervisees once or twice per month, and some others leave it to the doctoral students to communicate by phone or social media and/or visit their offices when some guidance is needed. This is vital to the supervisors because they must provide evidence of their supervision duties and activities to their faculty and the university. In addition to supervising several Chinese supervisees at all levels, supervisors also supervise 1-3 (could rarely be more) international students. In many cases, the supervisors know the levels of their students, and they will not risk ignoring their supervisees when they feel they are not well-qualified to perform the supervisory activities (e.g. Beijing Normal University, 2020a; 2020b).

By the beginning of the sixth semester, this doctoral journey comes towards an end; the doctoral dissertation complete draft must be ready and approved by the supervisor, who then arranges for oral pre-defense that involves three committee members. The committee members decide while the supervisor can attend the oral defense simply as a listener. In most cases, the doctoral candidates are requested to liaise with their colleagues to arrange for altogether defense (3-4 candidates) with the same committee. Upon receiving a positive decision (sometimes with minor or major revisions), the supervisees can move to the external review process, which is part of China's national assessment of doctoral dissertations.

The procedures for submitting the doctoral dissertation for external review assessment are tedious and complex. First, supervisees must submit their dissertations to the university library database for plagiarism check. It is a tedious and complex process as the system's language is Chinese. Second, after obtaining the plagiarism report, the supervisor and the supervisee should sign for the dissertation eligibility for the national review assessment. Third, the supervisees submit their dissertations electronically. The selection of three external reviewers is obligatory, but their selection remains a mystery. The selection process is confidential, and supervisors and supervisees cannot inquire how and who is selected. According to the graduate studies regulations, all universities in China have a database of the faculty, and a particular department in the graduate studies is responsible for submitting the doctoral dissertation to three members from China for assessment. The platform and system are responsible for selecting the examiners according to the research area. Instructions and review forms are automatically sent to the selected external reviewers along with the full version of the doctoral dissertation, title, and abstract in Chinese, and other forms showing the importance of the study and abstracted publications (if any).

Within 35 days, according to the university's regulations, the external assessment reviews should be received by the university. The results of the reviews decide whether a doctoral candidate passes to the final stage or not. The review reports are complex and sometimes are written in Chinese. All the reviewers must approve the dissertation with at least a *good* grade. This means that if the evaluation reports of two reviewers are general, it is considered a partial rejection, and two additional external reviewers are requested to review the dissertation again. They also have to approve a good grade; otherwise, the doctoral candidate is given a one-year extension to revise the dissertation.

The doctoral candidate can submit for the second-round external review upon completing the revision. Failing in this stage means terminating the enrolment – leaving the university without graduation (e.g. Beijing Normal University, 2020a; 2020b).

Succeeding through the mysterious external review stage allows for the open, oral final-defense that contains 4-5 committee (internal and external) examiners selected by the department and the

supervisor. However, supervisors cannot attend these oral, final defense sessions while the committee decision is declared. A doctoral candidate presents the dissertation for around 20-30 minutes, followed by examiners' questions and suggestions for improvement. A dissertation might get rejected outright at such a stage. The primary author witnessed this action happening to one of his colleagues because the committee members were not satisfied with the theoretical framework.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The above review indicates that at least three models are in use worldwide. Among these were publications supporting oral defense, both in public and privately with an examination committee, pre-examination, and then public or private defense. Aside from that, none of these papers reviewed examined the unique model of dissertation assessment used in China. Doctoral candidates in this system undergo several complicated stages before receiving a doctoral degree. In this paper, we present the experience of seven doctoral graduates who completed their doctorates in comparative education (with a range of research areas) at one of China's top universities. They discuss the so-called national external review system of doctoral dissertations. Besides the experiences developed through e-interviews, a content analysis of 29 reviews of the seven candidates received after the defense of their doctoral dissertations was also conducted. We evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of China's national external review system and offer suggestions and implications.

METHOD

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to guide the design of this study. The IPA is an experiential methodology and enables an idiographic analysis for a specific phenomenon and experience (Padilla & Chávez-Hernández, 2020; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). It was chosen because it is consistent with the objectives of this study to understand the practicality of the national assessment system of doctoral dissertation assessment in China and how the seven participants of this study made sense of it as the significant step in deciding to grant them the doctoral degree. The IPA helps to understand participants' experiences at different ages, be it aged people (Breheny & Griffiths, 2017), parents' experiences (Storhaug & Øien, 2012), women's experiences (Boreham et al., 2019; Hefferon et al., 2008; Safari; 2013; Wood et al., 2016), or students (Chapman & Clucas, 2014). It includes several advantages of which cultural context appropriateness (Kawano, 2018), subjective experiences during the transition (Brown et al., 2018), academic settings (Lee, 2020; McIntosh, 2018), and emotions change (Kemkes & Akerman, 2019). Interviews and transcripts are the most common methods for collecting data following the IPA design. These could be in-depth interviews (Menage et al., 2020) or semi-structured interviews (Voski, 2020). Being simultaneously the researchers and the participants of the paper, the IPA best suits this study's design as it is characterized by integrating the researchers' experiences with those of the participants (Dabengwa et al., 2020).

PARTICIPANTS

The population of this study is doctoral graduates who completed their doctoral degrees in China regardless of their major or nationality. However, this research focused on international students' experiences. The study used purposive sampling, where seven doctoral graduates who completed their doctoral degree in a top-ranked Chinese university shared how the national assessment of doctoral dissertation made sense to them. Regardless of whether this was a positive or negative experience, using the IPA methodology, the participants who are also simultaneously the authors of this paper, present their understanding for this critical step of doctoral degree-granting; that is, national assessment of the doctoral dissertation which includes three steps: pre-defense with an internal committee from their university, an external review, and then followed by a final oral defense if the second one is passed! All the participants are now employed with academic positions either in their home countries or abroad. They all graduated with a Ph.D. in Comparative Education (each has a different research area). Table 1 gives descriptions of the participants. While it was not the

intention of the authors to focus on male participants, female participants could not be reached. Table 2 shows the number of the received reviews and stages each participant went through until graduation.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

No.	Position	Age range	Gender	Graduated in	Location	Origin	Pseudonym	Code
1	Lecturer	35-40	Male	2018	Tanzania	Tanzania	Lecturer in Tanzania	LT-1
2	Lecturer	35-40	Male	2019	Tanzania	Tanzania	Lecturer in Tanzania	LT-2
3	Higher Education Officer	35-40	Male	2019	Tanzania	Tanzania	Higher Education Officer in Tanzania	HEOT
4	Assistant Professor	35-40	Male	2019	Ethiopia	Ethiopia	An assistant professor in Ethiopia	APE
5	Assistant Professor	35-40	Male	2019	Malawi	Malawi	An assistant professor in Malawi	APM
6	Assistant Professor	35-40	Male	2020	Bangladesh	Bangladesh	An assistant professor in Bangladesh	APB
7	Assistant Professor	35-40	Male	2020	China/ Italy	Yemen	An assistant professor in China	API

Table 2. Reviews for doctoral dissertation assessment

No.	Code	PhD duration	Pre-defense	External review			Final oral defense	External reviews
				Round 1	Additional review 1	Round 2		
1	LT-1	3.5	√	√			√	3
2	LT-2	3	√	√			√	3
3	HEOT	3	√	√			√	3
4	APE	3	√	√			√	3
5	APM	3	√	√			√	3
6	APB	4	√	√	√	√	√	8
7	API	4	√	√		√	√	6

Since this study reveals the lived experiences of the seven included participants in the external review stage of the doctoral dissertation system in China and their understanding of this stage, generalizability is intended. Although the number of the participants is small, the phenomena they presented are unique and discussed in-depth, yet experienced by every doctoral student in China except those who enroll in professional or integrated doctoral programs.

DATA COLLECTION

We employed three research collection sources to address the research questions thoroughly. The first is a critical review of more than 60 publications using such keywords as: Ph.D. dissertation, Ph.D. dissertation quality, Ph.D. dissertation assessment, Ph.D. dissertation defense, external review of Ph.D. dissertations, rejecting Ph.D. dissertations, Ph.D. dissertation examination, and doctoral thesis examination. The second is the primary two authors' development and application of the e-interviews that collected thick data regarding the participants' experiences of the external review of the national doctoral dissertation. The third is collecting 29 external review reports given to the participants during the stages of defending their doctoral dissertations.

In detail, the research project went through several stages, including proposing the research idea (by the primary author), signing an authorship letter, designing data collection and analysis templates, drafting the first manuscript, and redrafting the manuscript until it reached its current form. The primary two authors prepared e-interviews that focused on exploring the participants' experiences concerning positive and negative traits of the external review system, readability and practicality of the reviews, and their suggestions for improvement. The e-interviews were sent to the participants through WeChat App (and emails for those with no WeChat App on their laptops). Since some external review reports were written in Chinese, the participants also translated them into English using Google Translate.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Previous research identified four standards to replace validity and reliability used in quantitative research. The credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria were used to establish trustworthiness throughout the different stages of conducting this study (Trochim, n.d.; Williams, 2011). Credibility was established through the participants' prolonged engagement in the doctoral programs for 3-4 years, enabling them to deeply understand the nature of the national assessment of doctoral dissertation through external review reports. In addition to being part of this experience themselves as doctoral students, the authors have always been inquisitive about the nature of this stage – be it in terms of advantages and disadvantages – motivated by their experienced positive and negative moments. Transferability was achieved through a thick description of the target context. The second author, who is not a study participant, interpreted the collected data. This helps to avoid any biases. Furthermore, the application of participants' reflexivity on the interpretations strengthens confirmability.

PROCEDURES

This research was conducted between June and December 2020. Several steps were followed towards the proper completion of this paper. They started by proposing the research idea, signing authorship letter, designing data collection and analysis templates, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation, drafting the first manuscript, preparing publication version, and ending with the paper's publication in its current form.

Having reached an agreement on the proposed research idea by the first author, an authorship letter stating the roles and order of the authors was made by the first author and shared on the WeChat group to be signed and returned. The authors accepted the suggested alphabetical order of the authors. They all signed the form and shared it via email or WeChat. The signatures were collected to make one form containing all the signatures, the order of authors, and roles.

The first author drafted the e-interview and the reviews' analysis. The second author revised and prepared the final versions of these templates and approved sharing them with the other authors to start the data collection. Before that, all the authors were requested to collect the reviews they received for their doctoral degree defense during the external review, translate them into English as most of them were in Chinese, and send them to the first author. Twenty-nine reviews were collected

from seven participants, and the second author could not access his university account for three years since his graduation.

The data collection was conducted in three steps. First, external reviews were collected from all the participants. Second, the participants received the e-interview with instructions and a deadline. After submitting the e-interviews, the authors finally received the template for the review analysis with instructions and a given deadline. There were delays and extensions based on the situation and circumstances of each author, but all these steps were completed in early October 2020.

The IPA guided six steps through analysing the collected data. These included reading and re-reading, initial noting, developing emerging themes, searching for connections among the emerging themes, repeating the same steps for the next case(s), and finally looking for patterns. Both content and discourse analyses were used to analyse the collected data, mainly for the e-interviews and the external review reports.

Having read to get familiar with the data and re-read to get a deeper understanding of the collected data, initial noting was performed to highlight important parts and those of potent to the study. This stage used descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual concepts to mark the differences between highlighted parts. The descriptive comments were used to establish contexts and settings for the analysis. The linguistic comments were used to emphasize the participants' particular experienced event or mentioned issue. The conceptual comments were used to establish an analytic framework for the investigated phenomenon (i.e., external review of doctoral dissertations assessment). These resulted in the development of emerging themes, super-ordinate themes using the abstraction of potential excerpts. The final stage concluded this by searching for patterns among these available and emerging themes, the super-ordinate themes, and abstracted excerpts.

DATA ANALYSIS

Guided by the IPA for robust analysis and interpretation of the collected data, the following six steps were followed: reading and re-reading, initial noting, development of emerging themes, searching for connections among the emerging themes, repeating the same steps for the next case(s), and finally looking for patterns. Content and interpretive analyses were used for data collected through e-interviews and external review reports.

Extensive reading of the collected data helped highlight some transcripts and develop descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual concepts, which in turn assisted in marking the differences and/or similarities between the highlighted parts. The descriptive comments were used to establish the context of the analysis. The linguistic comments were used to emphasize a particular experienced event or issue mentioned by all participants. The conceptual comments helped establish an analytic framework for the investigated phenomenon (i.e., external review of doctoral dissertations assessment). These resulted in the development of emerging themes and super-ordinate themes, using the abstraction of potential excerpts. The final stage concluded this by searching for patterns among these available and emerging themes, the super-ordinate themes, and abstracted excerpts. The application of all these steps also led to the development of two conceptual models that reflect the experiences of the international doctoral students towards the external review system in China.

RESULTS

NATIONAL ASSESSMENT AND HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY

There is a strong relationship between the doctoral dissertation external review system and higher education quality. This relationship lies in the fact that the purpose of the doctoral dissertation external review system is to ensure the quality of higher education. The participants agreed on this relationship, using figurative language. For example, one participant mentioned that "there is a saying that two or more heads are better than one [and] the external review becomes more of the third head

that crosschecks" [LT-1]. The other participants highlighted that the system "[helps] to minimize biases … [and ensures] … work in the neutral ground" [LT-2] and "makes sure that the final products are well written and written according to standards" [HEOT]. Consistent with previous comments, APE also confirmed that the doctoral dissertation external review system assists in "producing competent graduates who fit the skills' demand of the 21st century".

Further, higher education is improved since this step "make[s] students write in high-quality standards to meet the set criteria" [APM]. It is an essential step to ensure better higher education, motivated by the truth that "both the supervisor and the student are under much pressure to produce a high-quality dissertation" [APB]. Additionally, the system "at least theoretically indicates the efforts of the ministry of higher education in China towards a standardized doctoral dissertation assessment" [API].

NATIONAL ASSESSMENT QUALITY AND PROCEDURE

While the participants agreed that the doctoral dissertation external review system is positive in ensuring higher education quality, they raised critical concerns about the quality and complex procedures of the external reviews. For example, HEOT wondered that "there was not enough guidance provided to me before entering the review process … in terms of what is expected by the external reviewers". This is not so much different from APE, who also stated that "the dissertation evaluation system is full of procedures which confused me [the participant and candidate] a lot. I was not clear with different rounds of review". The timeline as part of this procedure is another drawback. According to APM, "the challenge which has been observed when you have been asked to resubmit is that of the time factor." In most cases, those who passed after several review rounds and extensions seemed to have experienced more suffering. For example, APB expressed his sufferings stating that "many students have bitter experiences regarding the external review process … let alone, most of the Ph.D. candidates do not know the review process" and "this process took me [the participant and candidate] one year more, with some physical and mental harassment, and other hazards."

The quality of the external reviews is questionable, mainly when the comments of the external reviews reflect a weak understanding of the dissertation. This poor review could be attributed to the lack of time (35 days) or possibly the conflict of interests that is not solved in the system. Following are exemplary quotes on the quality of the external reviews.

> The external reviewers are given a very short period of time … [which] is not enough for them to give constructive feedback [LT-1].

> The comments given are sometimes too few to pass a decision on the grade of the paper. This may emanate from a lack of accountability among reviewers … I got one negative review among three; it was mentioned that my English writing was poor, lack of dissertation quality, and other comments. The other two reviewers did not comment on my dissertation language and its quality. However, I improved my writing quality before sending it to the additional reviewers; there were no comments on the issue at that stage. However, one reviewer was not positive and stated that my discussion part [sic] was not perfect [APB].

> I was told that I needed to extend and do all the procedures again, starting from supervisor approval, pre-defense, plagiarism check, and external review. The reason for the rejection was really illogical, and the reviewer who disapproved simply mentioned that I did not understand the education system in China. It was like he wanted me to write from their perspective, other than mine, as an independent researcher [API].

Providing logical reasons for rejecting a doctoral dissertation is ethically necessary; otherwise, it merely shows a poor quality and unethicality of reviewers. It further reflects a subjective decision, leading to the need for improving the external review system. As mentioned before, external reviews

help ensure the quality of higher education. However, when such external reviews lack providing constructive feedback, the issue of quality then becomes questionable. Reflecting upon their disappointment and dissatisfaction regarding the quality of external reviews, two participants commented:

> A total of eight reviewers reviewed my paper, and I re-read my paper and worked on most of the reviewers' suggestions. My supervisor also checked it again and again. Finally, I missed receiving unanimously positive feedback from the reviewers. This situation disappointed me as I put much of my effort [APB].

> I never expected my dissertation to be rejected for 2-3 lines claiming that I did not understand the education system in China. It was disappointing to realize that I had been rejected but could not see enough feedback reasoning the rejection. I just thought about how this step had changed me from an outstanding throughout my life into a failure. What made me dissatisfied was the covert procedure and, above all, the poor quality and scarce of feedback [API].

Both doctoral candidates [APB and API] felt depressed and stressed to realize that the reviewers were more concerned with, for example, the dissertation topic despite its being approved by a long list of official authorities (the supervisor, proposal defense committee, pre-defense committee, and the faculty and graduate studies committees). Further, his dissertation was rejected despite the API's published works (abstracted from his dissertation) in peer-reviewed journals. His reflections showed that external reviewers were not pleased with the doctoral candidate's critiquing educational issues in China. This shows less credibility of external reviews. More surprisingly, one reviewer rejected the API's dissertation by commenting: 'how a doctoral student could publish such several papers.' Such a comment shows the low look towards doctoral candidates and the power of external reviewers in rejecting dissertations based on their subjective reasons.

NATIONAL ASSESSMENT AND STUDENTS' PSYCHOLOGY

The psychological status of the students in general, and doctoral students in particular, is also crucial while pursuing their studies. Regardless of the happy moments and pleasures, the participants enjoyed during their doctoral education journey, they all experienced stress, pressure, negative experiences, and threats to future career and study, specifically attributed to the national assessment process. Table 3 demonstrates these variable experienced feelings with selected quotes for each participant. These different feelings include stress, pressure, negative experiences, and potential threats to future careers.

Table 3. Doctoral candidates' psychological experiences

Concepts	Exemplary quotes
Stress	LT-1: "It becomes stressful to hear I received a rejection kind of feedback that requires me to extend a semester or a year."
	APB: "When I started my seventh semester after the rejection of my dissertation, it was challenging for me. I was physically ill for several weeks. I lost my weight … with other physical issues. I did not sleep properly. I never had any sleeping problems at night, but here it happened."
	API: "I do teach psychology and have deep knowledge of psychology, but the quality of the received reviews caused me to lose all my skills and self-confidence."
Pressure	LT-1: "My colleagues and I used to check in the system almost every day to see if there is feedback."
	HEOT: "We were also under pressure to respond to the supervisor who confused us by giving us many revisions at the end of the process."

Concepts	Exemplary quotes
	APM: "Because of the uncertainty of whether you will pass or repeat, and that the International Students Office has its own dates to apply for the extension, this created pressure. I remember I had to just apply for an extension and later withdraw my extension form after the positive results that came later".
	API: "I used to check the external review platform almost every hour…I remember I would wake up some nights to check the result and come back to sleep."
	APB: "I did not get any salary from my country after three years and did not also contribute enough to my family members. It took me one year of extra time, and I became a financial loser; the monthly salary was stopped; it was aloof from my family member. All these created an enormous physical and mental pressure on me".
Threats on future career	LT-1: "It is frustrating to get rejection when one has already planned to go home or has applied to the other university for another program in the next academic year."
	HEOT: "The process discouraged students from continuing with graduate studies if they are not given enough counseling services."
	APM: "Most of us [international students] are employees … it is tough to convince our employers if we are to extend by a year just because the reviewers have rejected the thesis. It indeed affects our career."

REFLECTION AND ASSESSMENT

Feedback is of great importance when developing a particular strategy, plan, or procedure. The participants expressed their different attitudes and thoughts openly towards this critical step during their doctoral study. These included the strengths, weaknesses, and possible suggestions to develop this procedure and make it more efficient yet effective for all the involved parties in this process (supervisees, supervisors, external reviewers, HEIs, and the MoE in China) (see Table 4).

EXTERNAL REVIEWS BETWEEN PRACTICALITY AND CREDIBILITY

At this stage, the doctoral candidates' fates were already decided by the content of these external reviews. Those who were maybe lucky enough (e.g., participants 1-6) were passed by the first-round review; that is, receiving three external reviews each, and they all have positive feedback and average, above average, or excellent grading. Since neither the supervisors nor the supervisees can communicate with the external review or even discuss its validity and reliability to decide their future, the communication among these was nothing other than stress, pressure, and hopelessness. The participants here managed to make up a scenario of communication between the external reviewers, their submitted reviews, and the doctoral students after they gradually graduated and passed that experience. Table 4 includes how the received positive feedback from the reviewers helped to improve the quality of the doctoral dissertations. More importantly, it reveals the participants' negative gained experiences and sufferings. These included how they managed to deal with the submitted reviews, which in most cases were in Chinese. It also deepens the quality of the feedback and its credibility, evidenced by poor general statements and suggestions abstracted from the provided external reviews (see Table 5.).

Dissimilar to participants 1-5 are participants 6-7 who went through longer experiences. The former needed to go through additional review after the first-round review due to a low grade by one of the external reviewers on the first round. Having not passed due to one more negative feedback by one of the two additional reviewers, he needed to do all the processes again (i.e., supervisor's approval, pro-defense, plagiarism check, and submit for external review again). Participant 7 experienced a similar scenario but without the additional review. His external reviews included one negative review with a below-average grade which meant, according to national assessment regulations, he could not

apply for an additional review and should directly extend the study period for one or two semesters and then resubmit the whole dissertation for a new assessment. In this excerpt, participant 7 expressed his disappointment with the situation after sending his dissertation for an additional external review:

> [First,] my dissertation went to the two internal reviewers to examine my quality. Both internal reviewers are satisfied with my dissertation and agreed to send it to additional reviewers. However, I received one positive and one negative feedback. It indicated that I would not go for the final defense. However, a total of five reviewers (3 external and two internal) reviewed my paper, and I have reread my paper and met most of the reviewers' suggestions. My supervisor also checked it again and again. Finally, I missed receiving unanimously positive feedback from the reviewers. This situation made me disappointed as I put in my highest effort.

This disappointment is not different from that of participant 7, who also expressed his lived experience stating:

> I never expected my dissertation to be rejected for 2-3 lines claiming that I did not understand the education system in China. It was disappointing to realize that I had been rejected but could not see enough feedback for this rejection. I just thought about how this step had changed me from an outstanding throughout my life into a failure. What makes me dissatisfied is the covert procedure and, above all, the poor quality and scarcity of feedback. Whenever I receive a rejection or major revisions from a top-ranked journal, they will sometimes write pages to reason the rejection and their decision. Not only this, but the editor also still has a saying on these decisions. Their feedback will be thoughtful, fruitful, and insightful. I received nothing like that here!

Participant 7 felt more depressed and stressed to realize that the reviewers were more concerned about his examined topic, which was approved by a long list of official authorities – his supervisor, proposal defense committee, pre-defense committee, and of course, the faculty and graduate studies committees.

> They are careful of the research topic, which does not go with their policy. In my experience, Chinese academicians called it a 'sensitive' research issue. More clearly, they are conservative in choosing the research topic. Choosing a research issue should not have any barrier if it is fitted with the relevant discipline. Such measures block the open path of research easily … when a student cannot reach the final stage only because of the so-called quality – this is the right misfortune. It is an injustice to the students. It will never maintain quality overall.

What is more disappointing is maybe what happened to participant 7, who thought publishing several papers from his doctoral dissertation indexed in Scopus and ISI would give his dissertation more credibility.

> I thought the list of my publications, which I included in the form of dissertation contribution and innovation, would give my research more credibility yet make it easier for the reviewers to decide on the good quality of my dissertation. Surprisingly, a reviewer stated how a doctoral student could publish several papers! I felt that this reviewer was saying to me: who are you to publish several papers from your dissertation? You are just a student! Don't I have the right to do so, or can I only be a student if my level and skills are poor!

From Table 4, which reports the participants' reflections, it is noted that some of the feedback was clear and informative (e.g., comments provided to LT-1, HEOT, and APE under the 'received positive feedback'). Other comments indicated that the reviewers did not intensively read the dissertations (e.g., the comment provided to APE in 'feedback quality' and 'reliability of external reviews'). Furthermore, other external reviewers' comments were unclear and less informative (e.g., the comments provided to LT-1 and HEOT under 'feedback quality'). Interpretively, comments such

as these caused stress among doctoral candidates. This is because the doctoral candidates were worried about the consequences of not responding to some of the comments raised by the reviewers, which were unclear, less informative, and not related to what was written in the dissertations.

Table 4. Participants' reflections according to the 29 external reviews

	Provided feedback or situation	Participants' comments
Received positive feedback	LT-1: "The thesis results meet the requirements of the doctoral dissertation" (reviewer 1), "the dissertation has basically reached a level of doctorate dissertation" (reviewer 2), and "The doctoral dissertation reached a doctoral degree Thesis level" (reviewer 3).	The external reviewers summarised the dissertation and provided their feedback on my dissertation. The positive feedback I see from their feedback is mainly their final decision that the dissertation has met the requirements of a doctoral thesis.
	HEOT: "The data is obtained based on discussion and observation, using thematic analysis and content analysis methods to analyze the collected data, reflecting the innovation of this article" (reviewer 1).	My study has positive innovation because I did an in-depth analysis, and I used different methods in data collection. Because of this, it helped me to get clear findings that have practical and theoretical significance.
	APE: "The clear structure, standardization, and proper method of the dissertation reflect the author's ability to conduct research in the field of higher education" (reviewer 2).	I can say that reviewer two has gone through the dissertation carefully.
Feedback quality	LT-1: "Based on literature review, based on methods such as unstructured interviews, a more in-depth study was conducted from the perspective of critical thinking skills, teachers and students. Research and draw some valuable research conclusions" (reviewer 1).	This kind of feedback is not clear and not informative; as a result, I was not able to follow what the reviewer wanted to communicate to me.
	HEOT: "Fourth, and most importantly, there is a lack of a complete comprehensive analysis of the results of qualitative studies and quantitative studies" (reviewer 1).	I was not able to understand this comment. The supervisor and I could not understand what the external reviewer meant by "comprehensive analysis."
	APE: "The research adopts a mixed methodology" (reviewer 3)	Reviewer 3 expressed this though my dissertation was purely qualitative research. Such problems may emanate from reviewers' lack of a closer look at my dissertation.
	APM: "The dissertation should be better contextualized in terms of generalizing empirical data, namely more theoretical analysis should be enhanced, particularly when a qualitative method is being used, some theme should be better deliberated by a coding and re-coding way than that now" (reviewer 1).	I think, though the reviewer had a point, my study was purely qualitative, and few areas would have been used, especially … [in relation to] contextual interaction theory.
Readability of external reviews	LT-1: Two of the three reviews were in Chinese. In such situations, I used google translate to understand the feedback from the external reviewers. It is unfortunate that the translations from Google Translate were not clear and not informative.	
	HEOT: My reviews were all in Chinese. We had a friend who had showed us how to translate using Baidu. But again, the translation was not that accurate, so we had to find friends who were conversant in Chinese to read for us.	

	APM: Two out of the three reviewers were Chinese, making it hard to understand the comments. At first, I used a Google Translator and later contacted a friend conversant with the Chinese language and English.	
	APE: "The study is conducted in four public universities and research institutes in [study context]" (reviewer 1).	Some of the points mentioned in the comment section by reviewer one didn't describe my dissertation. However, it is conducted in four colleges/institutes of one public university.
Revision quality	LT-1: "It is recommended to sort out and re-write the abstract to make it more in line with the normative requirements of academic papers" (reviewer 1).	This comment was somewhat clear to me, but I did not work with it because I had written an abstract the way APA requires an abstract to be written. I had included all the essential elements of the abstract such as the general study introduction, purpose of the study, methodologies used, significant findings, and general study conclusion. I wondered what the reviewer wanted me to re-write in the abstract.
	HEOT: "Reviewer 1 only demanded me to make the Chinese translated abstract more accurate, with no comments on methodology or any section of the dissertation."	Some of the minor changes were not that much applicable as they did not involve the main aspects of my dissertation.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study unwrapped the lived experiences of seven doctoral graduates who completed their doctoral degrees in a top-ranked university in China. It put their personal and academic knowledge together, digging into the national assessment of doctoral dissertations through the external review in China. Being part of this experience, supported with evidence of e-interviews and analysis of 29 collected external reviews, the IPA analysis resulted in several findings.

Put differently, this investigation of the doctoral dissertation assessment through external review has at least five themes to help understand how the participants made sense of it: (a) the assessment of doctoral dissertation represented by the external review seems to be unique compared to the presented countries in the literature review and the countries of the participants (Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Malawi, Tanzania and Yemen); (b) the national assessment enhances higher education at the macro level but hinders it at the micro level; (c) while the external reviews might be credible as a policy towards the standardisation of doctoral dissertation assessment, this credibility vanishes when considering the quality of the provided reviews and the motivation of the reviewers to pass or reject a particular dissertation including the supervisor's role; (d) the findings present also the psychological status of the participants and how this procedure caused psychological damages to them through stress, pressure, gained negative emotions, and even threats to future career; and (e) the provided feedback from the participants creates a scenario to communicate their message which was not possible while living this experience, not only to improve this national assessment policy so that future doctoral candidates will not live the same negative experiences, but also to promote the positive side of this policy and its efforts to standardise the assessment of the doctoral dissertations in China, and *possibly* worldwide.

The above-generated findings have different possible interpretations, leading to theoretical and applied implications that can better enrich our understanding of China's national assessment of doctoral dissertations. These are elaborated below, concerning previous literature.

First, assuming that the external review procedure is a unique system being practiced in China to assess doctoral dissertation, the narrated experiences by the seven participants evidenced this claim. When they shared the doctoral dissertation assessment in their own countries, it was noticed that they all share the traditional model; that is, submission of the dissertation to a committee for assessment, and this committee will be the same for the final defense. There are, of course, minor differences among these countries (Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Malawi, Tanzania, and Yemen), at least in terms of granting doctoral degrees. However, none of these countries seems to have the complicated external review system being practiced in China. This is also evidenced by reviewing previous literature in other countries that are similar or dissimilar (e.g., Aittola, 2008; Chen, 2011; Larivière, 2012; Myklebust & Withers, 2017) doctoral dissertation assessment procedures, but not identical to that of China. This interpretation has at least one implication at the higher education level, mainly internalization. The participants of this study are now working in their home countries and other countries, and they consider transferring the experiences they gained to other countries. The transfer of this experience is positive since it aims at standardizing doctoral dissertation assessment, but the negative gained experiences due to the ambiguity of this process *hinder* the transfer of this experience. By all means, these findings agree with previous literature that the doctoral dissertation system is similar yet dissimilar (Storey, 2016), but also disagrees with existing literature claiming the complete efficiency and effectiveness of the current doctoral dissertation system in China (Jianxiu Gu et al., 2018; Luo et al., 2015). It is true that it is developing but in which direction!

The second theme proposed that an external review of the doctoral dissertation enhances higher education quality in China, whether at the national or the international level. In comparison, this finding seems to be consistent with previous literature supporting these views (Blanco, 2019; Liu, 2016). However, this enhancement is partial and claimed to be limited to the macro level, not the micro level. While the macro level refers to the availability of national standards, the control doctoral dissertation assessment in all China, and practiced by all the HEIs, the micro level refers to considering the parties involved in this process. It includes elements like the efficiency, effectiveness, and impact of this policy on doctoral students, doctoral supervisors, external reviewers, and committees involved in decision-making for granting doctoral degrees. This level includes more specific elements like those related to the psychological status, social status, economic status, and even logical aspect (i.e., the process being logical or not). The narrated experiences by the participants, analysis of the collected 29 external reviews, and the participants' observation indicated a gap between theory and practice of this policy (i.e., doctoral dissertation assessment).

The most controversial issue among these is the external reviewers' quality of their produced reviews. This was evidenced by the negative experiences, psychological damages caused to most of the participants, the poor feedback quality, the poor communication among the supervisees and the external reviewers who, in most cases, provided feedback in Chinese. Given this, this policy needs to be reformed to consider both the macro and micro levels. This also adds to the current debate on external review examiners worldwide (Cooksey & McDonald, 2019; Padró et al., 2018). Previous research reported the advantages of having clear outlines for doctoral students, provision of topics based on the national need of the country, encouraging publications of papers, and guidance of supervisor selection (Francis et al., 2009; Goff & Getenet, 2017; Ray, 2007; Weber & Allen, 2016).

Third, credibility plays a major role in measuring the quality of administrative practice. Having the external review to decide the future of a doctoral student, the efforts of 3-4 years – be it financial, social, psychological, or educational – is an indicator that credibility is worth considering here. While a few participants experienced difficulties with their supervisors who chose to protect themselves (ignoring their supervisees), most participants expressed negative feelings, experiences, and emotions towards the used procedure for the external review. This includes the competency of the external

reviewers whose reviews reflected the poor quality of their efforts. Internalization means that the HEIs are ready to provide the best services for their international students, including competent external reviewers who can read the doctoral dissertation seriously. When they choose to reject them for whatever reason, they need to write as many reasons and explanations as possible as the value of this document is being a doctoral degree. Not only did the doctoral students put so much effort into it, but the university of the hosting country also spent so much money on it. All these should not be wasted because of the subjectivity being practiced by external reviewers and possibly the ignorance of the administrators and decision-makers involved in this process. This argument about the credibility of external reviews is consistent with the current debate on the causes that lead to doctoral attrition (Devos et al., 2017; Kärnä, 2012; Syncox et al., 2017).

The fourth theme explored the psychological damage caused to the participants by the external review process. The participants who went through more than one round of external review and those who passed by the first round experienced psychological suffering, including stress, pressure, negative emotions, and threats to their current and future careers. It is crystal clear that this policy concentrates on the fact that the standardization of the doctoral dissertation system is taking place in China, but it is definite that the psychological status of the doctoral students is valueless to them. These psychological damages are not limited to the doctoral students; that is, the supervisees, but extend to their supervisors, too. Previous research reported a correlation between supervisor and supervisee's feelings and trustworthiness (Roberts, 2020). The revealed experiences by the participants indicate how much their lives were turned upside down due to the inaccuracy of this policy, the surface thinking of the external reviewers and the one-sided procedure. This reached finding is consistent with previous literature describing doctoral students and society (Gillingham et al., 1991; McCray & Joseph-Richard, 2020; Stigmar, 2019). It is also consistent with previous research that considers doctoral students' personal, social, and mental aspects (Grim et al., 2021; Guha & Pande, 2021; Mantai, 2019; Yang & Bai, 2020).

The last theme related to feedback analysis and reflection of the participants on the reviews, the external reviewers, and the process itself, provided more evidence that the poor communication among the involved parties played a major role in causing these negative experiences and caused psychological damage. Doing this makes it clear that the HEIs are assumed to practice a high level of anonymity but they are practicing extreme anonymity instead. The external reviewers are also working hard to play their holy role as gatekeepers – using the extreme authority granted to them! They are not only keeping this gate; they are practicing ethical yet academic violence against the doctoral students, their families, their supervisors, and their affiliated HEIs. While it is typical to have doctoral dissertations rejected due to their poor quality, it is atypical to have a doctoral student studying for 3-4 years, passing a different course, passing different gates until the student reaches the final step, to be told that the time has come to a stop here! If this is the case, research doctoral degrees should be promoted instead, and then the doctoral student, the supervisor, and the HEI are all prepared to assume that it is only this dissertation – product – qualifying for the doctoral degree. The external reviewers' role in gatekeeping being practiced either intentionally or unintentionally remains debatable and threatens research integrity. This is consistent with prior research approaching this matter (Chen, 2011). Meanwhile, just like it is said that "history repeats itself", the complex yet questionable equation proposed by Granovsky et al. (1992, p. 375) is still valid for now, due to *subjectivity* – doctoral dissertations are still suffering from "up to standard rejected" and "below standard accepted."

CONCLUSION

The results of our study suggest that the external review system for international doctoral dissertations in China contributes positively to the quality of higher education at the macro level but fails to do so at the micro level. The system offers the benefit of standardizing the doctoral dissertation assessment, but the downside is the ambiguity and complexity of the external review

process. In contrast to the macro level, which refers to the availability of national standards, the control of doctoral dissertation assessment, and enforcement of these standards by all universities in China, the micro-level pertains to considering the parties involved in this process. These elements include the efficiency, effectiveness, and impact of this policy on international doctoral candidates, supervisors, external reviewers, and committees involved in granting doctoral degrees.

Furthermore, our findings demonstrate the need for external reviews to have visible credibility. Subjective comments reflect poor quality of reviews and lead to unjust rejection decisions. Whenever a rejection decision is made, it is imperative to provide clear, logical, and objective justifications. Further, our findings provide evidence reflecting the participants' psychological experiences regarding the external review system for doctoral dissertations. This study shows that poor quality reviews and subjective rejections result in psychological damage to doctoral candidates, including stress, pressure, negative emotions, and threats to their careers. In light of this, it is urgent to improve the quality of the external review process and the reviews themselves. It is possible to accomplish this by disseminating information regarding the review procedures, providing sufficient time and assessment criteria to external reviewers, and initiating open reviews.

Despite the fact that external reviews may be considered credible as a policy toward standardizing international doctoral dissertation evaluations, the legitimacy of the external review process is diminished when the quality of external reviewers' comments and their subjective decisions to accept or reject doctoral dissertations are considered. In light of the psychological damage external reviews and procedures cause to doctoral candidates, the international doctoral dissertation external review system must be improved to ensure quality at a micro-level. This would lessen the possibility of negative psychological experiences for future doctoral candidates.

As much as this paper has practical implications for those responsible for higher education in China, it also has theoretical implications for international audiences interested in assessing doctoral dissertations and the quality of doctoral education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For improving the quality of the external review system, the participants provided insightful suggestions. First, the university administration needs to publish information about the review procedures so that doctoral candidates understand what is needed in advance. Second, preparing assessment criteria for external reviewers are helpful for both reviewers and doctoral candidates. Previous research reported several factors to be considered for better doctoral dissertation administration (i.e., internal factors like personal lives and external like academic identity) (Freeman, 2018; Sverdlik et al., 2018). This also suggests the presence of genuine reviews that help ensure the reviews' credibility and ethicality. Third, giving sufficient time (three months) for reviewers to review dissertations and provide constructive feedback critically is essential for the quality of the external reviews. Furthermore, it would be more valuable to receive reviewers' comments in the language of the dissertation (English). Finally, when two reviewers provide positive feedback, it is not logical to reject dissertations based on one reviewer's unfavourable decision.

ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

ETHICS DECLARATIONS

The first author proposed the plan and drafted the first manuscript. The second author edited the final version. Other co-authors participated in collecting and analysing data and reviewing the final version. All authors contributed equally to the final version.

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent was obtained from all participants who are the authors of this paper.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on a reasonable request.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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