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Cross-Cultural PhD Supervision in Norway: A Reflective Case Study

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Abstract

This study explores the dynamics of supervising a Chinese PhD student by a French supervisor at a Norwegian university, using a reflective, single-case study and thematic analysis. It examines how three distinct cultural and educational systems intersect, revealing challenges, opportunities, and areas for growth in supervisory practice. The findings offer some insights to improve multicultural supervision, including encouraging direct communication, embracing silence as part of discussions, articulating clear expectations, providing specific feedback, and tailoring supervision to individual needs. The study is grounded in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and highlights how reflective practices in partnership with students can enhance both learning and supervisory effectiveness.

Keywords: Cross-cultural supervision, doctoral education, Norway, reflection

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1 Introduction

Cross-cultural supervision in higher education is a dynamic process driven by differences in teaching philosophies, communication styles, and academic expectations. Brookfield's four lenses of critical reflection (Brookfield, 2017), namely students' perspectives, colleagues as critical friends, personal experience, and theoretical grounding, offer a valuable framework for improving supervisory relationships. Reflective analysis of this kind can reveal how a supervisor's own cultural background and experience influences their teaching style and philosophy (Hu & Smith, 2011). In this context, effective cross-cultural supervision requires (i) involving students in uncovering implicit expectations, (ii) consulting with peers, (iii) reflecting on one's own experiences, and (iv) grounding decisions in theories of teaching and learning in higher education. Implicit expectations refer to unspoken norms or beliefs about teaching and education, which can cause misunderstandings between supervisors and students (Hu et al., 2016). Here, learning is understood as a progression from remembering and understanding to applying, analysing, evaluating, and creating, as described in Bloom et al. (1956). This paper presents a reflective case study of cross-cultural supervision between a French supervisor and a Chinese PhD student in Norway. The study draws on Brookfield's four lenses of critical reflection and is framed within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) (Boyer, 1990; Gansemer-Topf et al., 2024; Hutchings & Shulman, 1999). SoTL promotes the improvement of teaching and learning through systematic, evidence-based inquiry. According to Felten (2013), SoTL involves five key elements: (i) Inquiry focused on student learning, (ii) Grounding in specific contexts, (iii) Methodological rigour, (iv) Collaboration with students as partners, (v) Appropriate dissemination of findings. This study places reflective practice at the core of supervision. It investigates how collaboration with the student can improve both supervision and learning (Fig. 1). The main supervisor takes on this role for the first time, which offers new challenges and opportunities for professional development.

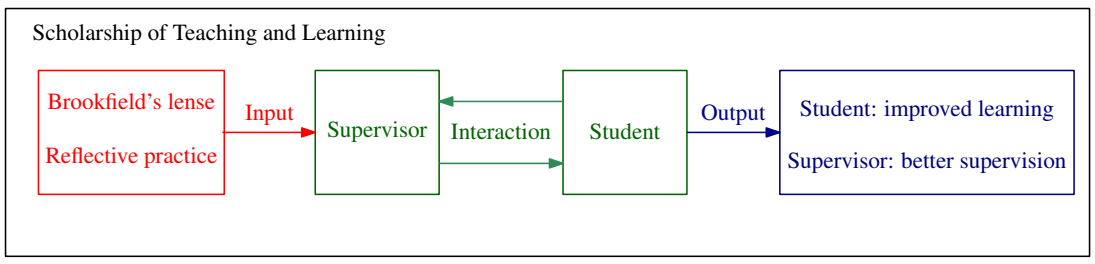

Figure 1. Summary of this paper's approach to improve cross-cultural supervision in higher education. The supervisor uses Brookfield's lenses within the framework of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning to collaborate with the student as a partner. This process aims to enhance student engagement and learning while enabling the supervisor to improve their teaching through reflective practice.

1.1 Cultural and educational differences in higher education

National education systems partly shape the supervisory relationship. Hu et al. (2016) compared Dutch and Chinese systems, highlighting differences in teaching styles and competitiveness. However, "Western" education is not uniform (Dimitrov, 2009; Spizzica, 1997). Despite efforts at harmonisation through the Bologna Process (Witte et al., 2008), countries like France maintain distinct traditions in their higher education system. Thus, cultural and educational misalignments may arise not only across continents but also within Europe. Exploring French–Chinese supervision dynamics in the Norwegian higher education environment adds a perspective rarely covered in studies that focus mainly on Chinese students in Anglophone countries.

Cultural dimensions also significantly influence the supervisory relationship. Hofstede et al. (2010) developed a framework to measure cultural differences across societies using six indices: (1) Power Distance Index (PDI): Measures the degree to which people question authority and accept unequal power distribution; (2) Individualism Index (IDV): Assesses whether individuals prioritise personal identity or group affiliation; (3) Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI): Reflects societal tolerance for ambiguity and approaches to uncertainty, i.e. acceptance versus control; (4) Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR): quantifies the focus on individual happiness, leisure, and well-being versus societal control of desires; (5) Masculinity Index (MAS): Captures the emphasis on competitive, achievement-oriented values over quality of life and relationships; (6) Long-Term Orientation Index (LTO): Examines the value placed on future rewards versus tradition and present-focused values, e.g. existing status.

These indices should not be rigidly applied to individuals. They are based on national averages and risk reinforcing stereotypes. Hofstede's model offers a simplified and static view of culture, developed in the 20th century. It may not reflect recent societal changes or the complexity of individual experiences, especially for those with international or intercultural backgrounds. In doctoral supervision, many other factors come into play. These include shifting institutional expectations, diverse academic trajectories, and personal life experiences (Bengtsen & McAlpine, 2022). As a result, supervisory practices may differ significantly from what Hofstede's indices would suggest. Despite these limitations, Hofstede's framework offers a structured way to compare national cultural tendencies, which can help supervisors anticipate potential differences in expectations and communication styles. Figure 2 highlights contrasts among China, France, and Norway. Though often grouped under "Western" societies, France and Norway differ significantly. Hofstede et al. (2010) classifies France as "Southern/Southeastern Europe" and Norway as "Northern/Northwestern Europe." For instance, Norway scores low on the Masculinity Index (MAS), while France and China rank higher, reflecting converging attitudes toward competition and hierarchy. France and China also share relatively high Power Distance Index (PDI) scores, but diverge

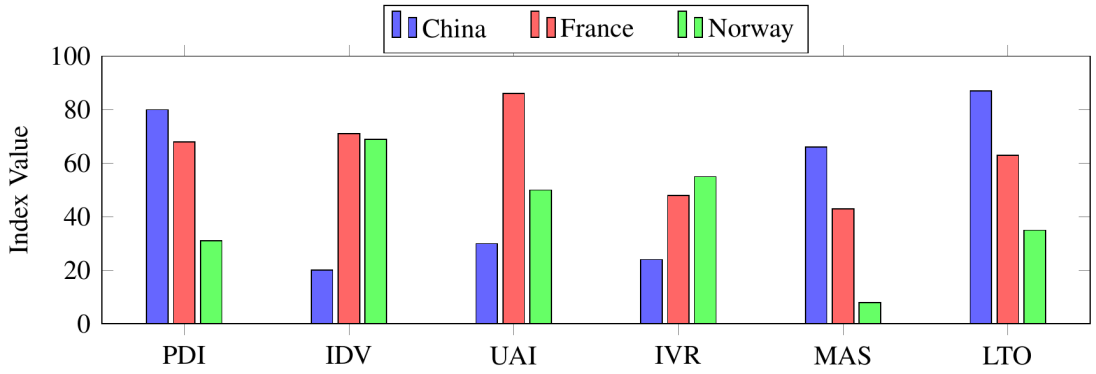

Figure 2. Comparison of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Across China, France and Norway. Acronyms: PDI (Power Distance Index), IDV (Individualism Index), UAI (Uncertainty Avoidance Index), IVR (Indulgence Versus Restraint Index), MAS (Masculinity Index), and LTO (Long-Term Orientation Index).

on Individualism (IDV) and Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI). Norway's distinct profile, with strong egalitarian values and low MAS, may challenge both French and Chinese expectations in a Norwegian academic environment.

1.2 Key challenges in cross-cultural supervision

Language barriers remain a persistent challenge in cross-cultural supervision. Ku et al. (2008) emphasises the critical role of mentoring in supporting international students, noting the need for supervisors to be accessible, patient, and genuinely caring. Campbell and Li (2008) found that Asian students in New Zealand struggled with academic norms, limited learning support, and feelings of isolation. Chinese students, in particular, often viewed teachers as parental figures who exert pressure to promote progress. This cultural expectation contrasts with Western models emphasising independence. Despite positive experiences with group discussions, many asian students reported dissatisfaction with vague feedback and continued difficulties with language. Together, these studies underline a core point for this case study: supervisors must combine linguistic clarity with frequent, personalised guidance if they are to offset language barriers and help international PhD students integrate into new academic cultures.

In doctoral supervision, cultural and educational differences can lead to implicit misunderstandings. Hu et al. (2016) identified such challenges between a Chinese PhD student and her Dutch supervisor, particularly regarding supervision styles, feedback, and learning expectations. Expanding on this, Hu et al. (2020) outlined three key difficulties in promoting student independence across cultures. First, definitions of independence may differ. Second, the level of supervisory support may not match the student's readiness. This relates to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, which is the gap between what students can do alone and what they can do with appropriate support (Vygotsky, 1978). Third, implicit expectations and cultural differences may lead

to misinterpretations of student progress. The transition to independence is a core part of doctoral education (Åkerlind, 2008). It depends not only on academic guidance, but also on the personal and professional relationships that support the student's development into a researcher (Sweitzer, 2009). For international students, this process is especially complex, as it involves navigating both academic and cultural expectations.

1.3 Research questions and objectives

Cross-cultural supervision involves navigating differences in education systems, cultural norms, and communication styles. This study examines the supervisory relationship between a French supervisor and a Chinese PhD student in Norway to explore how reflective practice, framed by SoTL, can improve supervision. It contributes to understanding how cultural heterogeneity, both within and across regions, shapes doctoral education. The study is guided by two research questions:

RQ1: How can reflection on culturally diverse supervisor–student interactions inform better supervision?

RQ2: What practices best support PhD students in a multicultural environment?

2 Methodology

2.1 Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

This study is methodologically grounded in SoTL, which treats teaching and learning as objects of systematic, evidence-based inquiry. First, the inquiry is focused on student learning, examining how the PhD student's learning process is influenced by cultural and educational differences and by supervisory practices. Second, the study is context-specific: data collection and analysis are situated within the Norwegian academic environment and guided by the multicultural backgrounds of both student and supervisor. Third, the study maintains methodological rigour through structured reflective practice, systematic data collection, and an analytic process that developed iteratively across two rounds of interviews and subsequent collaborative discussions. Fourth, consistent with SoTL's emphasis on students as partners, the student participated as an active collaborator through interviews, co-reflection, shared interpretation of emerging themes, and co-authorship. Finally, the study adheres to SoTL's expectation of scholarly dissemination by presenting its findings in this paper, which contributes to ongoing discussions on multicultural supervision in higher education.

2.2 Context and participants

The study focuses on a supervisory dyad consisting of a first-year PhD student from China and his main supervisor from France at a Norwegian university. Their differing cultural and academic backgrounds provide the context for examining the supervisory relationship and the student's learning experience.

Participants: PhD student Yuanchen is a 27-year-old first-year PhD student from China, currently pursuing a doctorate in wind engineering at the University of Bergen. He holds undergraduate and master's degrees in engineering from Chinese institutions. As a native Mandarin speaker, he initially scored 6.5 on the IELTS, which allowed for functional communication in English. While he faced some challenges with academic language and cultural adjustment early on, his English skills have improved significantly after one year in Norway.

Participants: Main supervisor The main supervisor, Etienne, is a 35-year-old associate professor with a French engineering background from the competitive Grande École system and a PhD from the University of Stavanger (Norway). He has lived in Norway for over 12 years and combines French academic traditions with Norwegian supervisory practices. He has previously supervised master's and PhD students in co-supervisory roles; this project marks his first experience as a main PhD supervisor. Eight months after the interviews, Etienne visited a Chinese university as a guest professor, where he engaged with local master's and PhD students. This experience provided additional insight into Chinese academic culture. It also helped him to reflect on Yuanchen's educational background and the cross-cultural dimensions of supervision.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

Data were gathered through two semi-structured interviews conducted solely between the main supervisor and the PhD student. The first interview explored key aspects of supervision in China and Norway, including supervision expectations and experiences, challenges, cultural differences, assessment, feedback, and the supervisor-student relationship. The interview questions were provided on a written sheet in English. The PhD student wrote his responses in Chinese (his first language) to minimise any influence of English language proficiency on the content. The student translated the responses into English using ChatGPT (GPT-4) and member-checked them to confirm their accuracy.

A second interview was conducted with the same supervisor and student after the supervisor discussed the results of the first interview with a peer (Professor Kenan Dikilitaş, third author of this paper). This helped identify points requiring further

exploration. The new questions were jointly developed by the supervisor and Kenan Dikilitaş and again followed the same written-response format: questions provided in English, responses written in Chinese, followed by translation with ChatGPT (GPT-4) and subsequent member-checking.

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The supervisor manually conducted the initial inductive coding of both translated transcripts, identifying recurring ideas relevant to the research questions and documenting reflections throughout the process. These preliminary codes were then reviewed collaboratively: first during a debriefing with Kenan Dikilitaş, who acted as a critical friend by questioning interpretations and prompting methodological transparency; and later with the PhD student, who clarified nuances and confirmed that interpretations resonated with his experience. Through this iterative dialogue, we refined and reorganised the code set.

Themes and subthemes were identified by clustering related codes and examining how these clusters related to one another and to the aims of the study. While the interview prompts provided an initial structure, the thematic development was shaped primarily by the aspects the student chose to elaborate on in his responses. Representative questions included: "Reflect on your supervision experiences in China and those in Norway. What were the key aspects of the supervision you noticed?" and "How do differences in feedback styles influence your understanding of your progress in research?" The final themes were: (i) supervisory support, (ii) cultural influence, (iii) assessment and feedback, and (iv) challenges. All three authors contributed to the interpretation of these themes, thereby strengthening trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017).

Hereinafter, we distinguish between assessment and feedback, although both are often studied jointly as in Sadler (1989) or Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006). Assessment primarily involves measuring and documenting performance, including summative tools (e.g., conference participation) and informal observations (e.g., the extent to which the student has become comfortable with programming skills). Feedback should be understood as an interactive process aiming to improve learning. Feedback is thus used in this study as a developmental tool rather than a means of evaluating performance. In other words, we include a dialogic dimension to feedback, which can promote independent learning (Beaumont et al., 2011). The dialogic aspect of feedback aims to keep the feedback loop alive, allow the student to respond to the feedback, support the relationship between supervisor and supervisee, and enable individual growth (Steen-Utheim & Wittek, 2017). The success of dialogic feedback relies on the student's ability to understand and interpret feedback (Carless & Boud, 2018), a competence often referred to as feedback literacy (Sutton, 2012). In this study, dialogic feedback was used throughout the thematic analysis, the drafting of this paper, and the design of the interview. In addition, the concept and role of feedback as a learning tool were

clarified with the student prior to the interview to avoid misunderstandings.

3 Findings

Figure 3 summarises the main theme and subthemes identified from the two interviews. This section elaborates on each of these themes using both the perspective of the student (Yuanchen) and the supervisor (Etienne).

3.1 Supervision support

Autonomy development

Etienne described his transition from co-supervisor to main supervisor as a significant shift marked by increased responsibility and the need to be proactive instead of reactive. “As a main supervisor, I feel an invisible "weight" on my shoulders that did not exist when I was a co-supervisor,” he confessed. Unlike his previous role, the main supervisory position requires anticipating challenges and actively guiding the student’s

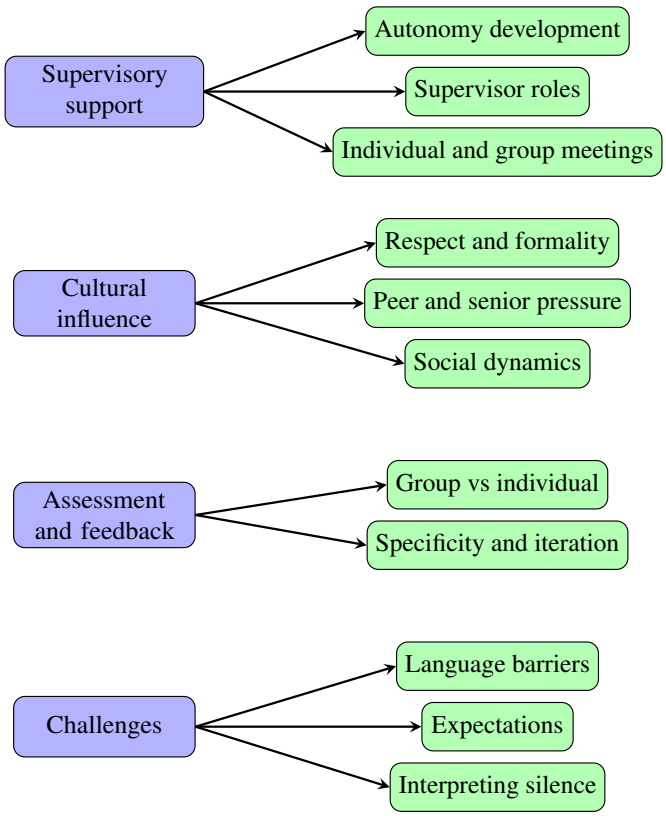

Figure 3. Thematic visualisation of the method, showing main themes and subthemes derived from the qualitative analysis.

progress. This stance reflects a high uncertainty avoidance index (fig. 2).

Weekly one-to-one meetings form the cornerstone of Etienne's strategy, focusing on technical skills, discussing research results, and academic writing. "My goal is to help him build the skills he needs while gradually encouraging more autonomy," Etienne noted. Following the supervision management styles elaborated by Gatfield (2005), Etienne emphasises a planned progression from "a directive style in the early stages to a more laissez-faire approach" as the student gains independence. This approach aligns with the gradual release of responsibility framework introduced by Pearson and Gallagher (1983) but also echoes the "hands-on" PhD supervisory approach described by Sinclair (2004).

Supervisor role

During a discussion about the topic of the supervisor-supervisee relationship, Yuanchen raised the question: "What is supervision?". Yuanchen described supervision as encompassing both academic and non-academic dimensions, including mentorship in navigating personal and professional challenges. "Broadly speaking, PhD supervision encompasses a process of solving problems or sharing experiences about all the issues that may arise during the supervision period," he explained, highlighting encouragements and career guidance as integral to the learning process. Etienne, in contrast, saw supervision primarily as a professional relationship, defined by a contractual obligation and a moral duty to guide the PhD student toward becoming an independent researcher. Etienne clarified, "I try to maintain a clear boundary between private and professional life, almost like a role play. I am open to providing support with personal challenges within my capacity, but only if the student explicitly requests it." While this reflects a task-focused approach, Etienne also sees supervision as a process that changes over time, depending on the student's progress and level of independence. The contrast highlights differences in expectations shaped by cultural and academic backgrounds.

Individual and group meetings

From Yuanchen's past experience, his supervision experience in China was characterised by structured, collaborative group meetings to encourage peer learning and collective problem-solving. "It's also common for the supervisor to invite all the students to a restaurant for a big dinner after the big group meeting, making it feel like a big family gathering," Yuanchen recalled. In contrast, supervision in Norway with his French supervisor is more individualised, focusing on one-to-one meetings with clear boundaries. "Professors tend to prefer one-to-one meetings, setting a timetable for individual discussions," Yuanchen observed. Etienne notes "I choose to hold one-to-one

meetings as a matter of personal preference. While some professors in Norway opt for group meetings, I find individual sessions better suited to addressing specific needs and achieving efficiency. They are also easier to manage". In a further discussion, Yuanchen expressed a preference for individual meetings, as they allowed him to focus on specific topics and explore them more deeply than in groups.

3.2 Cultural influence

Respect and formality

Etienne observed Yuanchen's polite and respectful behaviour, especially during the first year of supervision. For example, Yuanchen would stand when Etienne entered the office or assist in cleaning the blackboard after lectures. While these gestures were appreciated, they felt unnecessary in Norway. Etienne interpreted them as signs of formality and hierarchy, consistent with Chinese cultural norms where status differences between students and professors are more visible (Hofstede et al., 2010). Yuanchen, however, described these actions as expressions of politeness rather than deference. During his visit to a Chinese university, Etienne noticed similar practices, such as students standing when professors entered the room. Over time, Yuanchen stopped standing when Etienne arrived, an indication that he was gradually adjusting to local academic norms.

Respect and informality can coexist. Sheu (2018) observed that Chinese students often see teachers as strict and authoritative in class, but friendly and informal outside. This dual perception is less common in the UK. Reflecting on this, Etienne remarked: "Being a supervisor is part of my job, but it is like a coat I take off at the end of the day. Outside the university, I prefer to interact on more equal terms." This reflection highlights that effective supervision depends more on mutual understanding than on cultural generalisations.

Peer and senior pressure

French and Chinese education systems both emphasise ranking and meritocracy. "French and Chinese students come from competitive systems, like the Grandes Écoles in France or the Gaokao in China, which heavily influence their academic expectations," Etienne reflected. In contrast, the Norwegian system places less emphasis on prestige and competition. Students must often reestablish their academic credibility, as foreign institutions are seldom well-known in Norway.

Peer pressure appeared less prominent in Norway. Yuanchen observed that grades in Norway are anonymised and provided without exact scores, reducing opportunities

for direct comparisons with peers. “In Norway, it seems people hide some information, maybe to reduce peer comparisons,” he noted. This approach contrasts with China, where grades and rankings are more openly shared, encouraging competition but also contributing to peer pressure. Among postgraduate students, competition can go beyond grades and ranking. Yuanchen noted that “In China, I think that a significant challenge is peer pressure or senior pressure. Students in China report their research progress with all PhD and master’s students in the same research group. This means you can know everyone’s projects, their research progress, and their achievements. This can lead to peer pressure. If fellow students who join the group at the same time demonstrate faster progress, it can lead to peer stress. Similarly, senior students may have already published many high-quality papers, you might wonder whether you will be able to produce outstanding work like them when you reach that stage”. This comment echoes a case study by Dimitrov (2009) showing how peer pressure among Chinese students in Canada can be counterproductive at the doctoral level. For this reason, Etienne reflected: “I think that one major advantage of supervision meetings involving only one student is the mitigation of peer pressure, even though this type of meeting may lack the social dynamics that Yuanchen was used to.”

Senior pressure may reflect the “publish or perish stance” commonly found in academia. Yuanchen noted that “In practice, Chinese supervision tends to be more result-oriented, while in Norway, supervisors are often more focused on the process. This seems to be the difference in thinking”. Etienne acknowledges that this observation aligns with his own teaching philosophy, shaped by his experience: “As a PhD student, I was shielded from the pressure to publish and did not realise it was expected until my final year. When I eventually wrote three articles alongside my monograph, they were of much higher quality than if I had attempted them earlier”. During a university visit in China, Etienne learned that even master’s students are expected to publish conference papers, unlike in France or Norway. Still, pressure to publish is growing in Norway too, especially as article-based PhD dissertations have become the norm in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. In contrast, PhD theses in France are often monographs, without a national-level requirement for peer-reviewed publications. In China, they are monographs complemented by at least two peer-reviewed papers.

Social dynamics

In China, Yuanchen experienced more group-oriented supervision than in Norway, with blurred boundaries between social and professional roles. Supervisors sometimes hosted group dinners after meetings, creating a sense of community. Etienne attended one such dinner during his visit to China and noted that a strong sense of respect and formality remained. Yuanchen commented, “In Norway, people tend to keep clear boundaries between work and private life”. This difference reflects both the

Norwegian academic culture and Etienne's own preference for keeping work and private life separate, resulting in fewer group social activities.

Yuanchen values a balance between group and individual work: "I look forward to collaborating with other PhDs [...] In my view, research is inherently an international activity. Collaborating with other PhDs allows for mutual learning and experiencing the differences in problem-solving approaches and logical thinking in different cultures. This is a collision of ideas and cultures, which is quite fascinating. At the same time, it can also improve my language (English) communication skills". At present, opportunities for collaboration are limited: Yuanchen is only in his first year, the research group is small, and projects are diverse. Etienne recognised this as an area for potential improvement, particularly in promoting a more collaborative environment as the group matures.

Communication tools also reflect different social norms. Yuanchen noted, "In terms of communication tools, Norwegian supervisors and students use email, which means that the content of the communication tends to be more formal and related to work. In China, communication between supervisors and students often occurs through WeChat, an instant messaging app that allows for a lot of casual conversation unrelated to research work". Etienne acknowledges WeChat's usefulness but noted that WeChat does not offer a clear separation between work and private life. His preference reflects a desire to maintain professional boundaries, in contrast with the Chinese approach, where work and personal communication often overlap.

3.3 Assessment and feedback

The feedback process was a central theme during the interviews, reflecting both cultural differences and individual preferences. Yuanchen's experiences in China and Norway revealed similar methods of feedback delivery but differences in the context and interaction surrounding it.

Group vs individual

According to Yuanchen, feedback in China was often delivered in group meetings where students could ask questions directly to the supervisor. These sessions encouraged collaborative learning, with senior students frequently guiding junior peers. Outside these formal meetings, WeChat groups served as the main channel for communication. Yuanchen explained: "you can also ask questions through WeChat, and the supervisor will respond directly, sending you relevant literature, user manuals, instructional videos, etc...". Etienne observed a similar structure during his visit to China, where one or two supervisors managed around 30 master's and PhD students. In such large groups,

one-to-one meetings are unlikely, and students would rely heavily on peer feedback. While this model promotes collective learning, Etienne noted that students often had to navigate their research independently, with limited expert feedback from academic staff.

Supervision in Norway placed greater emphasis on individual feedback. Yuanchen and Etienne worked in close physical proximity, allowing for weekly face-to-face meetings. Feedback was typically delivered one-to-one, sometimes with one or two co-supervisors, a format Etienne preferred to reduce peer pressure and encourage open communication. While Etienne also supervises other master's and PhD students, they may not interact with Yuanchen as frequently as peers would in China, even if they share office space. In some cases, students are located in different buildings, further limiting interactions. This contrasts with the more integrated, peer-supported supervision model Yuanchen experienced in China.

Specificity and iteration

Yuanchen noted similarities in the methods of feedback; he expressed a clear preference for comments that are specific and actionable. "When feedback isn't clear about the problem or how to fix it, I spend a lot of time figuring it out," he explained. Yuanchen valued concise, direct input that supports efficient problem-solving. This contrasts with the implicit, high-context feedback sometimes associated with Chinese higher education (Dimitrov, 2009). Etienne aimed to meet this preference by providing written feedback, structured to clarify expectations, offer suggestions, and address specific issues. To normalise the feedback process, Etienne shared a personal experience, recalling, "I once received over 400 comments from a professor on an early draft. I viewed it positively as it showed they had taken the time to help me improve". This anecdote was intended to encourage Yuanchen to view feedback as an integral part of the learning process.

To avoid ambiguity, Etienne avoided open-ended questions like "Why?" or "What does it mean?". However, during a later feedback session, it became clear that this approach was partly based on a misunderstanding. Yuanchen clarified that he finds reflective questions helpful, as they prompt deeper thinking. This led Etienne to adjust his approach by incorporating more focused, question-based feedback, limiting each comment to one idea, and spreading feedback across multiple rounds to avoid overload. This episode also highlights that questions may help keep feedback dialogic rather than unidirectional. It further suggests that the student's input can shape the feedback process. Therefore, clarifying expectations about question-based feedback early on may be helpful for the supervisory relationship.

The iterative nature of the feedback process, where drafts are revised multiple times, relies on the implicit expectation that students respond promptly and thoroughly to

each round of feedback. This assumption may not be obvious to international students unfamiliar with such practices. In Etienne's case, this assumption was not made explicit enough at first, highlighting the need to clarify how feedback rounds are structured and negotiated. In line with this, Carter and Kumar (2017) argue that feedback should be reframed as a dialogic process rather than a monologue, and that early conversations about how to navigate rounds of feedback, differing opinions and different writing styles are essential to minimise frustration and support mutual understanding.

Although the interviews did not explicitly address the role of positive or negative feedback, this aspect warrants further exploration. In French and Chinese culture, praise is uncommon, and critical feedback tends to dominate supervisory exchanges (Eckstein et al., 2024; Gröschl & Barrows, 2003; Hu et al., 2016; Sheu, 2018). As a result, the absence of explicit praise may be interpreted by students as a sign of dissatisfaction rather than neutrality. Etienne's feedback, while aimed at being clear and constructive, may have implicitly reinforced this dynamic by focusing primarily on corrections and improvements.

3.4 Challenges

Language barrier

Language emerged as a recurring challenge in the first year of the PhD, particularly in the context of academic English versus informal communication. Assessment of oral skills is also complicated by language barriers, particularly in interactions with non-Chinese colleagues. Etienne encouraged Yuanchen to engage more with non-Chinese speakers and to limit remote work, which became common following the COVID pandemic, to improve his spoken English.

The language barrier is not unique to international students in Norway. During a visit to a Chinese university in June 2025, Etienne relied on translation tools such as ChatGPT, DeepSeek, and DeepL to communicate with PhD and master's students. These tools, along with the widespread use of mobile voice input for real-time transcription and translation, enabled more efficient communication than older translation methods.

To provide additional support, Etienne invited Yuanchen to attend Bergen Offshore Wind Centre meetings, encouraging him to present his research in English. These sessions are mainly intended to strengthen oral communication skills. While Etienne views oral proficiency as a skill developed over time through repeated use, Yuanchen tends to frame presentations as "targeted tasks", a perspective shaped by his prior experiences. This suggests a potential misalignment in expectations. Clearer communication about the broader goals of such activities could help Yuanchen see how they support his learning and academic development.

Expectations

In this study, Etienne and Yuanchen may have identified implicit expectations regarding the definition of "what is supervision" (e.g., formal vs. informal) and the nature of collaborative work (e.g., group vs. individual). Interestingly, the similarity in power distance between the French and Chinese education systems may have reduced misalignments in expectations regarding the informality or formality of the supervisor-supervisee relationship, which contrasts with the context described by Hu et al. (2016).

Yuanchen's perspective on feedback and assessment aligned fairly well with Etienne's expectations. As Etienne explained, "From previous work with master's students and pedagogy courses offered at the University of Bergen, I learned to clarify early that the numerous pieces of feedback I provide should not be interpreted as a critique but an integrated part of the learning process". Navigating rounds of feedback may be challenging if the student does not fully realise the importance of openly discussing areas for growth, which may happen when expectations around feedback remain implicit or misaligned. Finally, Yuanchen identified formal assessments as the primary means of evaluating their learning, while Etienne emphasises both formal and informal assessments, which may not be immediately evident to the student.

Etienne's implicit expectations regarding the PhD topic reflect his cultural orientation toward high uncertainty avoidance, which is significantly higher in France compared to China and Norway (Fig. 2). Etienne noted that "The data needed for the PhD were collected the year before the PhD starts, so there was little risk of delay." This suggests an expectation that research topics should prioritise practicality, leaving less room for improvisation. This could potentially conflict with the expectation that a PhD is a process of exploration and discovery. Finally, Etienne noted that he avoids placing high expectations on students, preferring to define practical milestones, such as attending conferences. This approach is in line with Dimitrov (2009), who recommends not having overly ambitious goals for first-year PhD international students, who need first to overcome culture shock.

Interpreting silence

In face-to-face meetings with Yuanchen, moments of silence can also be challenging to interpret, a common issue in multicultural communication (Dimitrov, 2009). Etienne reflected, "I often wonder whether these pauses reflect a need for more time to process and respond, a potential language barrier, or hesitation to seek clarification. At times, Yuanchen may not realise a question has been posed, which further complicates our interactions." Turn-taking practices in conversations are shaped by cultural norms (Stivers et al., 2009); French speakers, for instance, often exhibit a higher tendency to interrupt

their interlocutors (Wieland, 1991), while Chinese communication norms may prioritise reflection, especially in the context of PhD supervision. These differences highlight the need for cultural sensitivity in supervisory relationships. Etienne recognises the need to frame questions more clearly, allow more time for reflection, and encourage open dialogue.

4 Discussion and conclusions

This study reflects on supervising a Chinese PhD student (Yuanchen) by a French supervisor (Etienne) at a Norwegian university. It examines how three distinct cultural and educational systems intersect, revealing challenges, opportunities, and areas for growth in supervisory practice. The study highlights the importance of adapting power dynamics, communication practices, and academic expectations to support the student's transition to becoming an independent researcher. This study is grounded in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and highlights how reflecting on teaching in partnership with students can enhance both student learning and supervisory practices. The findings are thought to provide some valuable insights for supervisors and institutions aiming to better support international PhD students. This reflective practice helped Etienne identify several ways to improve his approach to multicultural supervision:

(1) Direct communication should be encouraged early by building a trusting relationship in which students feel confident to voice their concerns. This helps create a safe environment for open dialogue. Both Yuanchen and Etienne emphasised the importance of shifting from a high-power distance relationship, common in Chinese and French education systems, to a lower power distance approach as the PhD progresses.

(2) The role of silence should be acknowledged. Pauses in conversation may reflect cultural differences or processing time, and these moments can be embraced as part of a meaningful discussion.

(3) Feedback practices should be explicitly discussed early in the supervisory relationship so that expectations, roles, and individual preferences are clear. While dialogic feedback is essential to support learning, questions should be suited to the student's stage of development; vague prompts may be unhelpful, especially for novice writers working under time constraints. Feedback processes may evolve if these preferences are revisited regularly as the student grows more confident and independent as an academic writer. Such evolution depends on continued, transparent communication between student and supervisor.

(4) Individual characteristics should be taken into account to avoid rigidly applying generalised findings from the multicultural supervision literature. Supervision should be tailored to each student's unique needs and background. For example, Yuanchen's preference for straightforward feedback and Etienne's preference for impersonal communication illustrate individual differences that extend beyond cultural frameworks such as those proposed by Dimitrov (2009) and Hofstede et al. (2010).

This reflective work also showed how supervision can support learning more effectively, in the sense used in Bloom's taxonomy: moving from remembering and understanding to applying, analysing, evaluating, and ultimately producing new knowledge. Yuanchen reflected on what it meant to become a better learner:

> I can more easily pick up which part of the feedback matters, and I get familiar with Etienne's way of thinking. I also understand better that doing independent research is not doing everything alone. In my PhD project, I also supervise Norwegian master's students, so I can use this experience to avoid misunderstandings related to different cultures and educational backgrounds.

For Etienne, the process highlighted what it meant to become a better supervisor

> I learned that my usual feedback style may not always fit Yuanchen's needs and that supervision relies as much on patience and uninterrupted listening as on technical advice. I also became more aware of the need to adjust my approach over time.

Together, the reflections highlight the mutual benefits of a transparent supervisory partnership: the student refines their ability to engage with feedback and manage learning across cultures, while the supervisor gains a better understanding of how cultural assumptions, communication habits, and feedback choices shape the supervisory process.

As with the study by Hu et al. (2016), the findings of our study should not be generalised and aim to contribute to the existing body of literature on PhD supervision in multicultural environments. The study is limited in scope, focusing on a single supervisor-supervisee pair, which may not fully capture the range of experiences in other cultures. The analysis emphasises the early stages of the PhD program, offering limited insight into how supervision dynamics might evolve during the middle and later stages of the PhD. Another limitation lies in the reliance on self-reported data, which introduces potential biases, such as selective memory or personal interpretation of events. Although efforts were made to mitigate this through debriefing with Professor Kenan Dikilitaş,

critical reflection and the involvement of Yuanchen, self-reported data inherently reflect subjective experiences. Future research could focus on deeper collaboration with students as partners, not just at the start of the PhD but throughout its middle and later stages. Further studies could also use questionnaires on supervisor–doctoral student interaction developed by Mainhard et al. (2009) to explore and address misalignments between supervisors and students.

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Yuanchen Wan is a Chinese PhD student at the Geophysical Institute (Faculty of Science and Technology) at the University of Bergen. He was in the first year of his doctoral studies when the interview for this article was conducted. He contributed actively to the reflection process and co-authored this article based on his experience as a supervisee.

Kenan Dikilitaş Kenan Dikilitaş is a professor in the University Pedagogy Program at the University of Bergen. He is currently teaching pedagogy courses, including PhD supervision and pedagogical project work, both of which provided the context and foundation for this article, led by Etienne Cheynet.

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