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Care Across Academic and Geographical Margins: Feminist Mentoring, Ethnic Minority Women, and Fieldwork in China

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Abstract. Doctoral supervision is often conceptualised as a dyadic transfer of disciplinary knowledge, thereby obscuring the material, affective, collective, and spatial labour through which students become academic subjects. This paper develops a feminist ethics-of-care analysis of a supervisor-centred doctoral research group at a Chinese university. The group has comprised 13 doctoral students, including 12 women; eight women identify as Uyghur, Bai, Manchu, or Tibetan, and several undertake educational fieldwork in ethnic minority regions. The proposed qualitative case study integrates interviews, reflexive journals, selected fieldwork accounts, and group documents. It advances collective mentoring ecology as a framework linking material support, intensive intellectual feedback, peer relations, professional sponsorship, and fieldwork brokerage. Care is treated not as inherently feminine or benign, but as a power-laden practice that can redistribute the conditions of academic participation while also generating indebtedness, dependency, and constraints on dissent.

Keywords: feminist mentoring, ethics of care, doctoral supervision, ethnic minority women

1. Introduction

Doctoral education is at once an intellectual project, a form of professional socialisation, and a sustained encounter with institutional power. Doctoral researchers must learn to formulate questions, position claims within disciplinary debates, write for publication, negotiate field access, participate in scholarly forums, and imagine a viable academic future. These capacities are rarely acquired through formal curricula alone. They are mediated by supervisory and peer relationships, access to material resources and professional networks, and everyday interactions through which students become recognised as legitimate scholars. Research on doctoral socialisation accordingly identifies supervision and supportive institutional environments as central to persistence and scholarly identity [1-3].

Conventional accounts remain limited in three respects. First, mentoring is frequently represented as a dyadic and unidirectional relationship in which a senior academic transfers expertise and sponsorship to a junior recipient. This model underestimates the collective relations through which students teach, reassure, and connect one another. Second, instrumental outcomes such as completion and publication often receive greater attention than the affective and embodied conditions that make them possible. Financial precarity, family obligations, shame, exhaustion, and

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personal safety are treated as private concerns despite their effects on academic participation. Third, mentoring research remains disproportionately grounded in Euro-American settings. Feminist scholarship demonstrates the importance of culturally responsive and intersectional support for minoritised women [4], yet ethnic minority women in Chinese doctoral education remain comparatively underexamined.

This paper examines the Riverbend Education Research Group, a pseudonymous doctoral *shimen* led by a woman professor who supervises students across education and English studies. Across its history, the group has comprised 13 doctoral students: 12 women and one man. Eight women identify with Uyghur, Bai, Manchu, or Tibetan backgrounds and maintain ties to Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Yunnan, Guizhou, or Tibet. Their projects commonly involve educational fieldwork in ethnic minority regions. The first author is a Manchu woman in the first year of doctoral study who plans fieldwork in Kashgar and therefore occupies the dual position of researcher and group member.

The study asks how an ethics of care is enacted and negotiated within this women-majority group; how ethnic minority women relate mentoring to academic belonging and scholarly development; and how care extends from campus-based supervision into geographically remote field sites. The paper contributes the concept of collective mentoring ecology, which connects vertical supervision, horizontal peer relations, and the material infrastructures of participation. It also asks a critical question: under what conditions does care redistribute academic resources, and under what conditions does it individualise structural problems or intensify dependence on a powerful mentor?

2. Feminist care, intersectionality, and mentoring ecology

Feminist mentoring departs from a transmission model that equates success with adaptation to established institutions. It asks whether mentoring challenges or reproduces the gendered organisation of academic work [5]. Rather than promising advancement through self-optimisation and competitive networking, feminist mentoring foregrounds reciprocity, collective capacity, open communication, advocacy, and reflexive attention to power [6, 7]. Mutuality does not imply equality of status: supervisors retain authority over feedback, progression, funding, recommendations, and access to networks. The feminist question is therefore how asymmetry is acknowledged, negotiated, and made open to response.

An ethics-of-care perspective directs attention to need, interdependence, attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness [8]. Care is not simply a warm disposition; it is situated labour that sustains another person's capacity to act. In doctoral education, it may include close engagement with a draft, paid research work, shared meals, recognition of distress, safe-travel arrangements, or professional introductions. These practices span intimate, administrative, and infrastructural registers. Their value depends on whether support is timely and responsive, whether expectations are transparent, and whether recipients retain room to disagree.

Care is also politically ambivalent. Women academics are often expected to undertake disproportionate advising and emotional labour, especially for women and minoritised students. Celebrating an exceptionally caring woman professor can therefore consolidate the gendered burden it appears to value. Material assistance may enable participation while deepening dependence if access to income is controlled by one senior academic. Intensive feedback may make tacit conventions accessible while encouraging imitation or anxiety. Care must consequently be assessed by who provides it, who receives it, how it is distributed, and which institutional failures it silently compensates for.

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Intersectionality further clarifies how gender, ethnicity, class, region, language, and institutional status are mutually constituted rather than accumulated as separate disadvantages [9, 10]. Concepts developed through racialisation in North American universities cannot be mapped uncritically onto China's *minzu* system. Nevertheless, regional inequality, language hierarchies, gendered family expectations, and the symbolic authority of metropolitan universities may converge in shaping academic trajectories. The Riverbend group is distinctive because ethnic minority women are numerically substantial rather than isolated tokens. Numerical presence may alter the relational environment, but it cannot be assumed to produce solidarity or erase differences among Uyghur, Bai, Manchu, Tibetan, and other participants.

3. Case design and methodology

The project is designed as a feminist qualitative case study of a bounded doctoral *shimen*. It does not seek statistical representation of doctoral education in China; instead, it aims to generate a contextually situated account of how care operates within a supervisor-centred research group and to develop concepts that can travel analytically through comparison. The proposed sample comprises up to 12 current and former students, excluding the first author, together with the supervisor in a separate reflexive interview.

Data collection will combine semi-structured student interviews, a supervisor interview and written reflection, selected fieldwork or reflexive materials, and an eight-week first-author journal. Interviews will elicit concrete incidents involving feedback, financial support, conference participation, peer assistance, fieldwork preparation, pressure, disagreement, and belonging. Participants will be asked not only when care was effective but also when it was absent, controlling, unevenly distributed, or refused. Interviews will be conducted in participants' preferred languages, with translation decisions documented and culturally specific relational terms retained where direct substitution would erase meaning.

The study will employ reflexive thematic analysis [11, 12]. Coding will remain inductive while being sensitised by feminist care, intersectionality, doctoral socialisation, and insider-outsider positionality. Provisional codes include material care, intellectual feedback, sponsorship, peer mentoring, safety, translation, field access, belonging, gratitude, dependency, emotional labour, disagreement, and institutional constraint. Negative cases will be actively pursued, including detailed feedback experienced as surveillance, paid work understood as exploitation, or introductions that constrain field access.

The authors' positions require explicit safeguards. The first author's group membership affords access while creating risks of normalisation, loyalty, and self-censorship. The supervisor's co-authorship intensifies the power asymmetry. She will not recruit participants, learn who declines, or access the identity key; participants will approve quotations selected for publication. Because combinations of ethnicity, field site, degree stage, and distinctive financial events may identify individuals, demographic details will be aggregated and some accounts paraphrased. Data collection has not yet been completed; the following propositions organise future analysis and must not be read as empirical findings.

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4. Provisional analytical propositions

4.1. Material care as infrastructure

Doctoral participation depends on money, time, housing, food, health, and family circumstances, although the ideal of the autonomous scholar conceals these conditions. Within Riverbend, project funds have supported paid research tasks, fieldwork, conference attendance, and assistance during acute difficulty. Analysis will distinguish remuneration for labour from personal generosity and examine whether assistance expands choice or produces expectations of availability, loyalty, or silence.

4.2. Intellectual care as disciplined becoming

Intensive line-by-line feedback can make tacit academic standards explicit, particularly for students entering unfamiliar genres or writing across languages. Conference participation can similarly provide visibility and disciplinary socialisation. Yet close correction may privilege the supervisor's voice or encourage students to await approval. The relevant criterion is whether feedback develops students' capacity to diagnose, revise, and defend their own arguments while preserving legitimate disagreement.

4.3. From supervisory dyad to mentoring ecology

The ecological lens shifts attention from a singular benevolent mentor to relations among the supervisor, senior and junior students, graduates, professional contacts, funding arrangements, shared meals, and digital communication. Opportunities created vertically are translated horizontally through shared readings, administrative guidance, presentation rehearsal, and emotional reassurance. The analysis will trace who gains access, who performs organisational and caring labour, and whose needs become collective concerns.

4.4. Care that travels, and care under hierarchy

Supervisory networks can facilitate entry to remote field sites, identify assistants, support safety planning, and respond to logistical difficulties. These arrangements are methodological as well as practical because gatekeepers and translators shape who speaks and how knowledge is produced. Ethnic minority women working in home or home-adjacent regions occupy shifting insider-outsider positions [13]; familiarity may enable trust while generating family obligations or new authority over participants. Across both campus and fieldwork, caring practices remain embedded in supervisory power. Their feminist potential therefore depends on whether students can refuse tasks, pause unsafe work, challenge interpretations, and criticise group practice without losing future support.

5. Discussion and implications

Collective mentoring ecology advances feminist mentoring scholarship by integrating material, affective, intellectual, and spatial dimensions of doctoral formation. Belonging is not produced by affirmation alone. It develops through opportunities to undertake consequential work, receive rigorous feedback, enter scholarly networks, and recognise the value of one's situated knowledge. The conventional division between academic and personal support is therefore misleading: financial

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insecurity can become a writing problem, humiliating feedback can prompt withdrawal, and an informal meal can become the setting in which a methodological difficulty is articulated.

The framework also extends intersectional analysis beyond a simple transfer of categories from Western higher education. It asks how ethnicity, region, gender, language, and academic status are configured within a specific Chinese institution while preserving differences among ethnic minority women. Home-region fieldwork adds a spatial dimension: professional networks may provide protective infrastructure but also reproduce gatekeeping, while insider identity can support accountable research yet be romanticised. Evaluation of mentoring should therefore include the conditions under which field knowledge is produced and the vulnerabilities on which it depends.

These arguments suggest practical reforms. Doctoral programmes should provide transparent paid research opportunities, sustained writing development, fieldwork-risk protocols, and access to multiple mentors rather than relying on discretionary rescue. Research groups can establish peer-writing practices and rotate responsibilities so that caring labour does not fall invisibly on senior women. Fieldwork preparation should include positionality mapping, translation ethics, recognition of local collaborators, emergency communication, and an unequivocal right to suspend unsafe research. Institutions should also recognise and reward the relational labour that sustains doctoral participation.

Care is not a complete remedy. It may make unequal institutions more liveable while leaving their organising structures intact, and it may become a moral vocabulary through which criticism appears ungrateful. A mentoring ecology should therefore be evaluated not by the affection it inspires but by whether students acquire intellectual independence, material security, ethical capacity, and substantive room to dissent.

6. Conclusion

This paper proposes a feminist ethics-of-care study of a Chinese doctoral *shimen* composed predominantly of women and including a substantial group of ethnic minority women. It conceptualises mentoring as an ecology linking material resources, intellectual feedback, peer relations, professional sponsorship, and fieldwork infrastructure. This approach renders visible forms of labour that conventional supervision models treat as peripheral despite their consequences for who can remain in doctoral education and become recognised as a scholar.

The central question is not whether an individual supervisor can be designated caring. It is how academic relationships construct collective conditions in which minoritised women can develop scholarly voices, conduct ethically responsible research, and challenge the institutions they enter. An empirically completed study must therefore centre participants' divergent accounts, including instances in which care was absent, misrecognised, or failed.

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