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'Under the magnolia tree, our youth': an autoethnography on friendship and sisterhood among female international doctoral students in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates how my friendship with three other female Vietnamese doctoral students in New Zealand grew into an 'academic sisterhood' which was forged as an emplaced form of sociality that encouraged solidarity among us. As four female Vietnamese PhD students in New Zealand who shared intersecting identities as Vietnamese temporary migrants, women, mothers, and PhD students, we provided support for and learned from each other. The sisterhood strengthened my sense of belonging to both my home and host countries, and created a learning space for myself. I argue that the academic sisterhood was far more complexly imagined and meaningful than simple bonding networks of co-ethnic friendships, embracing the mixed emplaced and transnational nature of my friendship.

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Friendship; sisterhood; international doctoral student; intersectionality; Vietnam; New Zealand

Introduction

The transnational lives of international students have been well documented in the literature on international students and education mobility (Baas 2010; Phan 2022, 2023a, 2024). Researchers have noticed that the significance of friendship networks remains an emergent area of research, although friendship is particularly significant to international students' experiences since they rely heavily on their circle of friends (Hendricson et al. 2011; Sinanan and Gomes 2022). As Robertson (2018) argues, friendship networks are implicated in students' sense of belonging and sense of self. This is an autoethnographic article written to share my experiences of forming and relying on my friendship and 'academic sisterhood' with three other Vietnamese female doctoral students in New Zealand as we shared lived experiences as temporary migrants, mothers, women, and international doctoral students in the land of white clouds. It is within this context that my sisterhood was fostered through our navigation of graduate studies in New Zealand and life outside Vietnam, and our juggling of multiple roles as international PhD students and mothers. The sisterly relationship, or sisterhood, exists within and beyond our campus in New Zealand. Based on the Model of Multiple

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Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) framework, this paper highlights that the everyday relations of friendship, particularly sisterly friendship, are instrumental to the construction of sense of belonging and emplacement of international students in their host country. This point is largely unexamined in the scholarship.

Since I am a female international PhD student, my experiences are intersected in two bodies of scholarship studying international students and female academics. Therefore, in what follows, I will present how friendship has been investigated in the extant literature of these two areas and describe the understanding of academic sisterhood in this paper.

Literature review

Friendship has been studied in international education scholarship and is argued to be important in cushioning international students' transition to a new environment (Gomes 2018, 2019; Robinson et al. 2020; Sinanan and Gomes 2022). McFaul (2016) contends that international students value the connections they have with various circles of friends, including students from their own country, other international students, and domestic students. Friends can provide different kinds of resources for each other, including emotional and financial support and trust, and also influence each other's personal preferences and choices such as deciding academic destination (Phan 2023b, 2024). Gomes (2018, 2019) notes that friendship can form a network of solidarity which offers logistical and affective resources for international students to navigate everyday life while living outside their national borders. Especially, befriending with co-national student can help newcomers make sense of their adjustment experiences and act as a marker of identity for border-crossers, providing them with a sense of being grounded and a sense of belonging, and fostering collective understandings of the new culture (Brown 2009; Robinson et al. 2020; Sinanan and Gomes 2022).

For female students and female academics, researchers have illustrated how friendship can take the form of (academic) sisterhood (Hardie et al. 2023; Sobande and Wells 2021; Wong and Tiu-Wu 2014). Sisterhood can be generally understood as a bond between two or more females who are not necessarily related by blood, but they honour and love each other like sisters. The sisterly friendship has been explored mostly among Black scholars who find themselves unvoiced and marginalised in a Western academic environment. An example is a study by Mebane (2018) which reveals how sisterhood among Black students created a unique learning space for them and became a powerful aspect of their institutional culture. Using feminist theory, Mebane (2018) argues that the culture of sisterhood in women's colleges in the US could be a nurturing environment designed for the historically marginalised Black woman, providing them with mentoring, freedom of expression, freedom to lead, and positive college experience. Sobande and Wells (2021), two women who are PhD students and early career researchers in the UK, analyse their own identity work and spirit of Black academic sisterhood to highlight coping mechanisms of Black women in Britain in predominantly white institutions. Another example is by Patterson-Stephens and Hernández (2018) who, as Black and Brown doctoral students in the US, reflect on their 'sista' scholar bond' (p. 396) and analyse their agency in navigating white supremacist patriarchal culture of academia. In some other research, 'sister circles' have been used within Black communities as support groups to raise awareness, educate, and teach women about health, relationships, family, and education (Neal-Barnett et al. 2011), and

can also be employed as a research method similar to focus group to collect data specifically from Black women (Allen 2019; Buxton 2022). For Black women, the sense of sisterhood is associated with a shared history, a feeling of support, loyalty, and attachment to other Black women (Collins 1986).

The concept of sisterhood also emerges in studies by female academics of other ethnic minorities. As Asian-originated immigrants, Wong and Tiu-Wu (2014), in their account of academic sisterhood, discuss their similarities in their upbringing, cultural heritages, and mothering practices as immigrant Asian scholars living in the West. Their collaborative autoethnography provides a better understanding of the East–West dynamics in their professional and personal identities. In a recent study by Hardie et al. (2023) on a team of bicultural female academics in Australia, the authors compare sisterhood with the ‘flock cultural approach’ (p. 1256), emphasising that the combined strengths of individuals impacted by intersectional challenges will create a supportive unit with positive synergy to cope with ongoing workplace challenges. In the studies that have been reviewed, sisterhood building is created out of mutual understanding of being marginalised or being minority, and similarities in backgrounds and experiences in professional career, education, personal life, and emotion. Following these lines of inquiry, in this paper, I understand sisterhood as a relationship between us, four female international PhD students and mothers, who have built sisterly bonding and support through sharing our personal and academic experiences in our doctoral journeys. This academic sisterhood, with academic being added to emphasise the initiation of our sisterhood from our shared academic journeys and academic aspiration, functions not only as a friendship between me and my three Vietnamese doctoral friends-sisters, but also as a space within which we feel comfortable sharing similar and different experiences and using language and vernacular that are familiar to us. This space allows and encourages connection, sincerity, support, empathy, and vulnerabilities. As my argument will unfold in the paper, my academic sisterhood also functions as an emplaced form of sociality that encourages sharing and support, while allowing constructive criticism and disagreement that eventually leads to better understanding of each other and of ourselves.

Although existing literature has investigated friendship and (academic) sisterhood among international students and female academics, ‘the centrality of the emotional aspects of friendships as intimacy, as well as networks of support, has received little attention’ (Sinanan and Gomes 2022, p. 674). Furthermore, there is a paucity of research that specifically focuses on the formation of friendship and (academic) sisterhood among female *international* PhD students who are double minoritised, who encounter not only social and linguistic challenges but also family responsibilities if they are married with children (Phan 2022; Zhang 2020). In other words, there is a gap in the scholarship that investigates the (academic) sisterhood of women against their complex juggling of multiple roles and responsibilities that are confounded by their transnational lives and social expectations of both home and host cultures. Understanding how this particular form of relationship supports international female students will expand the literature on international students’ well-being, academic satisfaction, and migration experience. These insights can be helpful for international student offices and student service offices in universities. In addition, as Hardie et al. (2023) notice, we need more research that investigates the coping mechanisms used by marginalised academic groups, including female academics or female international doctoral students, to tackle the

intersectional challenges they encounter in the higher education sector. This article aims to address these gaps in the literature. It hopes to participate in the intersectional scholarly discussion of higher education, gender, and migration studies by giving prominence to the voices of female students of colour who are engaged in transnational social and academic spaces and seek mutual support and collective strength while embracing vulnerabilities. In so doing, the paper highlights an interesting aspect of the diversity of migrant-student relationships and invites further discussion on the complexity of the migrant and academic experiences of female international doctoral students, especially in the New Zealand context where Vietnamese students have shown increasing interest in educational opportunities (Phan 2023a, 2023b, 2024).

Theoretical framework

This research study was informed by the Abes et al.'s (2007) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI) which suggests that identity consists of multiple, intersecting dimensions that become more or less salient, depending on contexts. According to Jones and McEwen (2000), there are three basic tenets on which MMDI is built: (1) identity is understood as having multiple dimensions; (2) the salience of these dimensions depends on the context and contextual influences of the situation in which the participant lives at a given moment in time; and (3) identity development is fluid and dynamic, not linear and static. MMDI draws 'on feminist theoretical conceptualisations of multiple identities ...' and 'feminist narratives (that) demonstrate recognition of the concurrent, nonhierarchical experience of multiple identities, in other words, intersectionality' (Evans et al. 2010, p. 245). Intersectionality is a common theorisation in feminist research (Crenshaw 1991). It acknowledges the multiple layers of discrimination that an individual is subjected to because of various aspects of their identity. Davis (2008, p. 68) defines intersectionality as 'the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power'. The concept has been used to critically challenge how the status of a woman, particularly those of colour, remains undervalued and oppressed (hooks 1990). In academia, there are a number of studies that unravel the way female academics of minority ethnic backgrounds are marginalised and disempowered (Hardie et al. 2023; O'Keefe and Courtois 2019). Researchers such as McCall (2005) and Berger and Guidroz (2010) contend that an intersectional approach allows researchers to socially locate individuals in their real lives, taking into account how the relationship, connection, and overlap between one's multiple layers of identities. Accordingly, individuals' past experiences, social relations, and varying power structures accurately reflect their very own lived experiences. In migration studies, the intersectionality approach has proved to be powerful in unravelling 'hierarchies constructed in social and institutional practices and to reveal the role that state policy norms, discourses, and practices play in perpetuating or counteracting inequalities' (Scuzzarello and Moroşanu 2023, p. 2997).

MMDI, thus, provides a framework for examining multiple identities within graduate school and exploring the intersectionality of these multiple identities held by female international PhD students like myself. In this paper, I used MMDI to explore how the intersecting identities as mother, wife, international doctoral student, and

Vietnamese migrant evolved throughout the PhD journeys of myself and three other Vietnamese doctoral students in New Zealand forged a sisterly relationship that became an important part in my/our international sojourns and encouraged me/us to move forward.

Methodology

Autoethnography can be understood as a research methodology in which researchers use their own personal experiences to do research and relate to social contexts and cultural backgrounds. Although there is no single definition of autoethnography, autoethnography can be understood as ‘an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural’ (Ellis and Bochner 2000, p. 39). Three key components in autoethnographic research are: the process – *graphy*, the self – *auto* and the culture – *ethno* (Ellis and Bochner 2000). Although writing about the self, autoethnography is not similar to autobiography because autoethnography is not simply about the self of the researcher; it goes beyond stories of an individual, about an individual, told by an individual. It needs to reveal some social phenomena and evoke thoughts and feelings in its readers. In this regard, the insights into a personal life in an autoethnographic study work towards the aim of extending sociological understanding and contribute to people’s lives by ‘making them reflect on and empathise with the narrative presented’ (Lawal and Bitso 2020, p. 118).

In autoethnography, the researcher, the subject performing the investigation, is also the researched, the object of the investigation (Ngunjiri et al. 2010). It is a research methodology premised on the legitimacy of making the writer’s voice visible in the research texts produced and the writing of the autoethnographic text as a creative analytic practice. As Richardson (2001) and Bochner (2001) assert, this analytical process can create evocative narratives that reveal social worlds from a deeply personal lens and at the same time, deepen the understanding of the self within a socio-cultural context, and also establish a connection with readers.

This autoethnography is part of my doctoral research project which investigated the lived experiences of Vietnamese international PhD students during and after their doctoral sojourns. In preparation for the autoethnographic component of the project, I talked about the idea to do research about my own experiences to Le, Ha, and An (pseudonyms), my three PhD friends-sisters who were also Vietnamese and doing PhD in the same Faculty with me. After the ethics application was approved by my institution in New Zealand, the participant information sheet was sent to them, and their written consent was obtained. They were informed of their rights to withdraw from the study at any point during the data generation process (2019–2021). The data for this autoethnography article came from my personal notes from March–August 2019 and a research journal from September 2019 and 2020.

I started my doctoral study in New Zealand in early 2019. At the time, Le, Ha, and An were all in the middle of their second year. We were all in our thirties, and married with children. Le lived in New Zealand while her husband and her son stayed in Vietnam. Ha brought her son to New Zealand in her first year of PhD study, then she was pregnant and came back to Vietnam to give birth to her daughter. Ha returned to New Zealand by herself to complete her thesis, leaving her family in Vietnam. An flew to New Zealand

with her husband and two sons. And I had my two young daughters who joined me in my academic sojourn while my husband would fly to New Zealand every two months for short visits.

As we were the only four Vietnamese PhD students in our campus, studying the same major in the Faculty, and three of us shared the same doctoral office, we met almost every day, having lunch together and talking about our PhD progress. As Le, Ha, and An all started their studies before me, the first ‘PhD friends’ I met and had were them. We were automatically bonded, in a way, because of our nationality (Vietnamese), gender (married women with children), shared cultural and linguistic capitals, professional backgrounds (all of us worked as university lecturers in Vietnam before our PhD endeavours), and aspirations for an academic pursuit. Sojourning to a new country normally requires students to navigate multiple transitions as they encounter academic, personal, and social adjustments (Briscoe et al. 2022). I, therefore, relied on them to learn about new norms in a new environment, believing their experiences would resonate with mine. In other words, I treated them as a valuable resource to learn from, and they were happy to have me joining the ‘flock’.

During our lunches, conversations or ‘hallway chats’, I paid attention to some interesting points and took ‘mental notes’ of ‘certain details and impressions’ (Emerson et al. 2011, p. 24). I would sit down for some ‘jottings’ – a ‘brief written record of events and impressions captured in key words and phrases’ (Emerson et al. 2011, p. 29) in my personal notes and research journal right after our conversations to avoid forgetting important details of the talk or what I would love my friends to explain more the next time we met. I kept some of their words/phrases verbatim and put them in quotation marks in the journal entries if I found them particularly important. I typed up the notes in a Google doc, following the chronological order for easy retrieval. I also left a space in the full research journal for my own thoughts, reflections, and comments on what was recorded. There was no strict format for my notes and entries, but I made sure the report and description was distinguished from the reflection I had by using highlighting or word colouring.

I used thematic analysis to analyse the data. The analysis process started when I read and re-read my research journal entries and personal notes, reducing raw data down to the most significant and relevant content to my inquiry. I highlighted each mention of the identities in a separate colour to differentiate the data. After identifying references to each of the identities, I reviewed the data again and started coding categories, such as language, cultural influence, mothering, ritual lunch, gender role, family separation, homesickness.

The next section describes the thematic findings that are discussed in light of relevant theory and literature.

Findings and discussion

As Vietnamese: speaking our language

Before I started my sojourn, I had tried to look for some Vietnamese students in my university, hoping to establish some networks before arrival. The feeling of ‘knowing somebody’, having ‘a familiar name and face’ in a foreign country was both an act of

preparation for relocation and formation of friendship. I met Le for the first time several days after I arrived in New Zealand, then I met others. As we were on the same campus, we met and talked during our lunch time once a week, and I always enjoyed our ‘ritual lunch’ in which we talked in Vietnamese about almost everything possible. Most of the time, we hung out in the largest doctoral common room on Level two of a building where we could see right through big windows a magnolia tree changing leaves in winter and blossoming in spring. The common room became a glocal-local hybrid space (Martin and Rizvi 2014) where we, on the one hand, got connected with other PhD fellows and academics through academic discussions. On the other hand, we remained up to date with contemporary news, social trends and norms in Vietnam. This hybridity formed a significant part in my experience of my campus life. The doctoral common room was a meeting-place, a site within our campus where rituals of friendship were performed (Robertson 2018). And the magnolia tree was our invisible friend. We noticed if all the leaves had dropped in winter, and were excited when new buds appeared when spring came. We often took pictures of ourselves under the tree when magnolias were in full blossom. “This is part of our “youth””, we told each other, looking at the selfies. I wrote in my research journal.

The common room today was not as crowded as usual, most of the time only us. That triggered our conversation about how we shared this space.

This space is shared among staff and PhD students, but at the same time to us, it is private, because nobody understands us besides us. We talk in Vietnamese.

Oh Vietnamese!

A language just spoken by Vietnamese people

And we don’t have many Vietnamese around here

We know us all.

And in that sense, we have a private space in a communal space in which we could talk about everything.

And when we speak our language, we construct and maintain/sustain our national identity: as Vietnamese. (Personal note, August 2019)

Nothing can tell you if a person comes from your home country faster than language. Our native language was the first thing that connected us and helped us feel connected. Although we were all proficient in using English for daily communication, the Vietnamese language made us strongly feel our cultural identity as Vietnamese. At the same time, our native language created an invisible borderland in the New Zealand space we were in. It should be noted that in our faculty, the majority of PhD students were international, mostly from China, India, and Southeast and East Asian countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Korea. There were a few New Zealand doctoral students, but they were mostly first or second generation immigrants with Romanian, Chinese, Korean or India background. English was the mediating connection I had with my international friends who were themselves sojourners, and I really enjoyed the friendship developed with people sharing the same *routes* as myself. But by using my mother tongue, Vietnam, my friends-sisters and I produced a social space of our own within a multicultural social space in our campus, not to exclude ourselves from others, but to retain something of our own, our *root*, and nurture our national identity. I felt as if I could always find a private corner in my campus where a shared sense of identity as a Vietnamese person was embraced.

As women and mothers: sharing about our gender roles

Mothers undertaking doctoral studies are challenged to intersect their developing academic identity with one's core self and other identities such as mother, wife, and professional and this can cause tension and conflicts to arise (Hardie et al. 2023; Phan 2022). We all were aware of such tension, and we cared about it. 'Caring about' here means us expressing affection and concerns about each other and our families. We were willing to listen to each other's ranting about our juggling roles and offer advice if we could. We were as supportive of each other as possible.

Le talked about why she decided to do a part-time job. She is far away from her family (husband and son), and she feels 'not belonging' here. So she works, to 'kill time', to be away from the academic setting of the work station, her office, and to practise English.

We had lunch today, at our usual place, a ritual place. Le talked about her being here and there so often. She said: 'People often say as I do not bring my family with me here, I have time and energy to focus on my study. It is not the reality. My mind is with my family. Even when I am sitting in the office, I still follow what my family, my parents, my husband, and my son are doing through CCTV'. She is always in the state of 'my mind is in Vietnam'. All of her posts on facebook are about Vietnam, or at least her life in Vietnam. Her latest post, several pictures captured on her way home from work, was of a full moon. It was the Moon Festival in Vietnam, and she said when she looked at the moon, she was thinking about her family, what they were doing at the time. She is never here 100% in that sense. Not being with her son, there are moments like when he falls ill, she feels particularly worried.

An is different, her husband and two children are here. She said she feels 'complete', 'enough'. What about me? I of course feel 'incomplete' because my husband is not here 'full time' with me. But I keep being busy with my two small children.

Our 'ritual lunch' became an in-between space when we spoke about all of our identities that merged and emerged. (Personal note, May 2019)

Ha missed her daughter's first birthday. She felt really sad about it. That I totally understand. I'm wondering how I would feel if I were her. No mother wants to miss her child's first birthday. What should I do to make her feel better?

'It's my daughter's birthday today', said Ha.

'How's she today?', I asked.

'She's happy', Ha smiled, 'she's with my husband and everybody'. (Research journal, November 2019)

'Everybody, except her', I thought. I knew that was what she thought too. As a mother, I *knew*. I could tell that sometimes, Ha and Le felt guilty because they could not provide mothering care for their children. Oftentimes, Ha told us about her guilt of leaving her one-year-old daughter in Vietnam. Unlike them, my guilt came from the struggles to balance the mother role and the student role simultaneously, and An had a similar guilt of juggling roles. It is acknowledged that the experiences of academic mothers are not monolithic and there is no assumption made that everyone is experiencing the same (Guy and Arthur 2020). As yet, we were able to combat negative feelings of guilt and stress through finding solace in our company, where we exchanged daily life stories, talked about what was happening in our home country and our families, and our research progress. By unloading our emotional burdens, we were more sympathetic with each other, learned from each other, and reflected upon our own lives.

It was clear to me that there was a sense of security created through our sharing, which forged latent ties in our sisterly friendship. These ties offered a significant source of

comfort felt by all of us. In a way, we developed ‘compassionate mothering’, understood ‘as a mode of mothering in which women are encouraged to engage with other mothers with empathy, especially when they encounter differences in maternal practice’ (Veazey 2018, p. 8). As the mothers who were far away from their children, Le and Ha managed isolation from family in ways I did not experience because my children sojourned with me to New Zealand. However, as a mother, I felt connected to their feeling of separation, and I learned from their strength and resilience. I believed our academic sisterhood was one of the emotional pillars for them to feel less lonely and homesick. Ha said: ‘I feel happy that I can play with your children, because it somehow mitigated the feeling of missing my kids’.

I was grateful that our friendship was built on trust, understanding, and solidarity, thus, we would not feel afraid of being judged if we spoke our minds. Our friendship became solidified through such experiences, growing into a sisterly friendship and contributing to our emotional bond. Janzen (2016) reminds us that ‘no two experiences are exactly alike, but within the sharing of experiences, others may benefit’ (p. 1508). Our merged, intersecting, and at times competing identities as a mother, a wife, a doctoral student, and an early-career academic evolved throughout the PhD journey and encouraged us to form ourselves into a group to share mothering concerns. While academic motherhood is often thought as negative, oppressive, and exclusive, Huopalainen and Satama (2019) critically ask whether motherhood could be a transformative practice that strengthens and develops mothers as professionals too. My experience shows that motherhood as a shared practice can actually provide a community of practice among us from which we enjoyed learning from each other and reflecting on our own maternal performance, even if it was mothering from afar as in Le’s and Ha’s case.

As international graduate student: developing as early-career academics

Graduate school can further isolate individuals due to the nature of the academic work. Therefore, I felt the need to maintain social and professional connections to help mitigate isolation in order to ensure academic and social success during my sojourn (Lugo-Lugo 2012). Our talks were always about miscellaneous topics, and we never missed to discuss our study progress: the stages we were in, challenges we encountered while collecting data and analysing data, our plans to proceed, the comments we received from our supervisors, or our anxiety or excitement when writing our theses. This was a learning space for us to learn from each other, and discuss our understanding of our own projects. As we shared our learning experiences together and with each other, on contrary to the common assumption that international students are passive, lacking critical thinking, or unfamiliar with Western academic culture, we were engaged with discussions and debates on methodological and theoretical issues in our doctoral projects. We would disagree with each other and have conflicting opinions in research approaches. But we would provide constructive comments and critical questions in order to help understand our study better. We stood by each other on important events and our PhD milestones. The PhD was our strong link and one of our biggest commonality, thus our sisterhood was academic sisterhood. It was a site that hosted our friendship and academic development, and a bond that encouraged us to learn from each other.

I might never feel interested in early childhood education (ECE) if I had not met Ha. Ha's PhD is about children's literacy, something I know very little about. ECE is a realm that I didn't feel belong to, because even when I became a mother, I still thought ECE required specific knowledge and skills that I didn't have. Ha's passion for her research area and the way she talked about her young participants really made me think differently. The way children open their world to adults is unique. When Ha told us about her interactions with her 4-year-old participants and how she learned to communicate with them offered me a chance to reflect on my interactions and communication with my infants. As a researcher, I also learned from her methodology and her experiences as a researcher who came into the field, observed, and built a relationship with her participants. That is so enlightening to me. (Research journal, December 2019)

Although it seemed that our exchanges were similar to what most PhD students were concerned about, to me, these academic small talks taught me to socialise into the wider academic community. What I learned from my Ha, Le, and An's PhD projects expanded my knowledge of different research areas from what I did for my doctorate, enabling me to engage with other students and academics in conferences, seminars, and workshops.

Studying abroad required international doctoral students like us to socialise, build networks, and make new friends in the new environment and the new culture (Holliday 2017; Ye and Edwards 2017; Doyle et al. 2018). However, little did previous literature explore how co-ethnic friends help students to make new friends, which I argue would mitigate social disconnectedness, homesickness, discrimination, and culture shock that might negatively affect international students' sociocultural adaptation. I started my PhD two years after Le, An, and Ha. To a certain extent, they had had experience socialising with other PhD fellows in our faculty, they had known more people, and they had known the system. It was them who got me introduced to other international doctoral students, and engaged me in multiple study groups. Le, An, and Ha became a conduit for an expansion of my friendship networks by joining their existing circles of friends. In return, I also made friends with other students who enrolled at the same time as me, and introduced them to Le, An, and Ha. Our circles of network started to overlap and grew bigger, which significantly eased and expedited my social and academic socialisation into the scholarly community in my university. I enjoyed going to campus and the 'student atmosphere' we had every day in the doctoral hubs (Phan 2023a). It was a mix of academic discussions and personal life sharing, silence and noise, study and coffee, seminars and lunch breaks.

Going beyond friendship to sisterhood: developing sustainably together

My academic sisterhood provided me with a site to critically examine my experiences as a Vietnamese woman living in New Zealand. Even though we had different family situations when sojourning for our PhD studies, we shared many similarities: juggling roles, exhaustion, study-related stress, determination, resilience, and eagerness to learn, all mixed. Our support for each other was formulated by a complex understanding of our ways of life as Vietnamese women, mothers, and international doctoral students. We worked to create a reciprocal small community and a safe space that emphasised solidarity, understanding, and respect. This safe space supported our wellbeing, feeling of safety and self-esteem (Phan 2023a). While other peers and professors might only see us as doctoral students, or international friends, we saw more roles in us and recognised

our challenges and tensions in our multiple roles. To some extent, our ability to recognise our multiple roles while sojourning engendered a heightened sensitivity to the world around us (Anzaldúa 1987), assisting us in navigating life in a foreign country. That was why it was not only friendship, it was *sisterhood*.

My group of 'PhD sisters' was a peer support system that was established to provide support for us in both academic and social settings. To me personally, the support positively impacted my sense of belonging to the university, my PhD journey, my campus, and New Zealand. I felt grounded in my study country. In a way, the sense of belonging contributed to the academic integration of myself as an international doctoral student (Phan 2022, 2023a; Son and Park 2015; Zhang 2016; Williams-Shakespeare et al. 2018). The sisterhood also provided me with space for self-development, which I might not be able to have if I had not sojourned for my PhD. I learned from their challenges to raise and take care of their children from afar (Le and Hang), or practise mothering (An). I learned to be stronger for my children who had to make sacrifices since they were separated from their father. Despite all the challenges we encountered, we realised our relative privilege in our PhD journeys. We all were rewarded with scholarships for our scholarly pursuits. We were all significantly supported by our families, including our husbands, parents, and children to achieve higher and better. As Ha explained multiple times, she was proud of herself and of those like us who defied the dominant discourse of Vietnamese mothers whose space was circumscribed within home and whose professional career was not prioritised as they were supposed to sacrifice for the husband's career and children's rearing. I believe we together also challenged the deficit view of international students in general as passive and uncritical, instead, I argue that we enacted our agency in mobility and considered our academic sisterhood as part of our becoming.

Our academic sisterhood has been formed as a channel of support for our long-term professional development. After our doctoral studies, Le, Ha, and An all returned to Vietnam, while I continued to seek opportunities in other parts of the world. We continue to meet in person or online to share about our work and life. In academia, women may struggle to interact with their female co-workers because of fierce competition, which is often overlooked in extant literature since we seem to put more focus on gender equity between men and women when it comes to academic career progression. The 'sisterhood ceiling' (Bingham 2016; Lee et al. 2016), or women's aversion to competition with other women in their profession, thus may not be as widely known as the glass ceiling phenomenon, or the challenges women face in the workforce. In my experience, our academic sisterhood sustains because each of us is well aware of our professional trajectories, meaning that we know where we want to be, what areas we want to pursue, and how we imagine our careers will become. Le has always been committed to returning to her institution where she worked before her PhD, An has always showed her interest in policy analysis and consultancy, while Ha has always dreamed of having a school of her own. The diversity in our research interests and career development allows us to provide support for each other when necessary. We also attempt to seek opportunities for professional collaboration while still regarding our academic sisterhood as a space to share our concerns in child-raising. In that sense, the sustenance of our academic sisterhood is made through our past (our PhDs and our experiences of studying and living in New Zealand), our present (challenges at work and in

life after our PhDs), and our future (research and work-related collaborative efforts), and across spaces (New Zealand, Vietnam, and other possible places). Our differences in each of our similar identities allow us to share affirmations for the women we have become.

Conclusion and implications

Analysing the intersecting identities as international PhD students, Vietnamese temporary migrants in New Zealand, women, and mothers, of myself and my other three friends, this paper contributes to contemporary research agendas around the international graduate student mother and migration. It highlights the ways in which we constructed new attachments of belonging to form a meaningful relationship: academic sisterhood. Our academic sisterhood became an affective resource for each of us, thereby counteracting isolation and insecurities and constructing spaces and relationships of belonging. While research focuses on international graduate students' lived experiences, the complex issues of friendship, sociality and relational belonging among international female doctoral students remain relatively unexplored. My autoethnography underscores the significance of sisterly friendship developed through different modes of sociality, from casual intimacy to heartfelt friendship. Participating in migrant maternal communities helped participants not to overcome these emotions, but to reconcile them with the possibility of belonging. Our 'academic sisterhood' was designed to meet our own needs for friendship, support, and advice. I suggest that subsuming international female graduate students' sisterly relationships into a framework of 'parallel society' (Gomes 2020) risks undermining what women do for themselves and each other.

While sisterhood forged among Black women who suffered from marginalisation, trauma, or abuse in academic environments is often found in existing literature, my autoethnographic account offers a nuanced way to form and understand (academic) sisterhood which is an emplacement of international education mobility and a site of sharing that reinforced a sense of place in the host country. Or in the words of hooks (1990), our sisterly friendship has cultivated a 'homeplace'. It is my recommendation that universities and student support units can encourage international female doctoral students, especially those who share the same cultural identity, to host focus groups among themselves to provide a safe space to converse about their lived experiences of their multiple identities to feel inclusive, and how they can go forward together. In so doing, they curate enclaves of collective care to better navigate their life and study abroad. As Dillard (2016) asserts, 'as we learn to (re)member through uncovering and discovering our diverse identities, we initially engage in the process of (re)searching, seeking, looking, and searching again' (p. 52).

While existing literature has confirmed that international students grow to become more attentive to cultural diversities, more tolerant with differences and more responsible (Zhang 2016) as they interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, in this article, I highlight how international students can acquire these dispositions as interacting with co-national peers who share similar cultural roots and routes while sojourning. My sisterhood was layered through different aspects of our identities (international PhD students in New Zealand, mothers, Vietnamese temporary migrants). The sharing

of our multiple roles has formed an academic sisterhood among us and established affective ties among us and to our sojourns. The camaraderie, friendship, and belongingness bind us together in unique ways. My autoethnography unpacks how our intersecting identities facilitated our emplacement and the transformation of my sense of self through my transnational mobility. In this regard, the sense of sisterhood clearly has ‘boundary-crossing potential’ (Bunnell et al. 2012, p. 494), assisting me to achieve an overall sense of belonging in New Zealand. As such, I argue that the academic sisterhood was far more complexly imagined and meaningful than simple bonding networks of co-ethnic friendships, embracing the mixed emplaced and transnational nature of my friendship.

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