

Doubts at the Start of a Doctoral Journey

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师者，所以传道授业解惑者也。

A teacher is one who transmits the Way, imparts learning, and dispels doubts.

People often caution that our values harden as we cross into adulthood, yet as I embark upon doctoral study, my experience has proven precisely the opposite: each step forward reveals more uncertainty, deeper questions, and a greater reliance upon those who have already traveled the path. Although friendship remains natural, navigating interactions with senior researchers—who control funding, resources, and critical opportunities—demands skills I do not yet fully grasp. In these matters, I earnestly seek guidance.

Doctoral research scatters students across intricate networks of interests—local supervisors, distant mentors, and essential collaborators—each bearing their own pressures and priorities. I find myself uncertain how to align these varied expectations without sacrificing my intellectual curiosity. While I sense intuitively that concrete contributions and clear, evidence-driven dialogue offer a stable foundation, I continually face dilemmas beyond textbook solutions.

The academic environment in China introduces additional layers of complexity, emphasizing metrics and deliverables that sometimes threaten genuine intellectual inquiry. I find myself following dual paths—fulfilling formal obligations while cautiously safeguarding time to explore the deeper questions that initially drew me to research. Yet even as I attempt this balance, I remain uncertain of its sustainability or ultimate effectiveness.

In moments of confusion, I become acutely aware of how profoundly I depend on mentorship. My friends studying in Europe speak often of traditional training—mastering the subtle art of influencing powerful people within the brief span of an elevator ride. Yet, like most people, I find myself largely learning by observing the actions of others and progressing step by incremental step. I have not yet discovered the precise roadmap toward becoming the scholar I aspire to be; I hold no definitive answers.

When the goldfinch cannot sing,
When the poet is a pilgrim,
When praying is of no use to us.

*“Wanderer, there is no way,
the way is made by walking...”*

— Antonio Machado