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Maintaining self while adapting: Chinese foreign language teachers' identity development in an intercultural context

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1.1 Introduction

Teacher identity plays a crucial role in influencing how teachers teach, how they interact with students, and how they develop their professional skills. The globalization of education has led to a greater importance for teacher identity, particularly for professionals who work in intercultural settings abroad. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the complex and shifting identities of Chinese Foreign Language (CFL) teachers. Through four interrelated studies, this research therefore aims to gain deeper insight into the construction and reconstruction of CFL teachers' identity in the context of a globalized educational environment. In addition, this dissertation aims to broaden the scope of language teaching research by incorporating a cross-cultural lens to gain a more in-depth understanding of the factors affecting teacher identity.

1.2 The Background of this dissertation

Because of the increasing interest in Chinese language globally, more and more CFL teachers are now teaching in intercultural contexts abroad (Wang & Du, 2016). Gong et al. (2022) assert that while working abroad, these teachers need to navigate not only the traditional roles of imparting knowledge but also serving as cultural mediators, fostering inclusivity, and adapting to the evolving demands of an intercultural environment. The intercultural settings highlight the complexities of teaching Chinese—a language deeply rooted in Confucian cultural traditions—to students in Western settings (Moloney & Xu, 2015). These settings often require CFL teachers to

bridge significant cultural and educational divides (Ye & Edwards, 2018). Adapting to a new educational system and culture might change CFL teachers' views on teaching and consequently reshape their teacher identity. Changing roles and identities require CFL teachers to relinquish the familiarity and comfort of a role they are familiar with and experience the uncertainty of an unknown role in a new context (Wang & Du, 2014). CFL teachers might feel frustrated during the change process. Research conducted in Australia, the US and the UK has demonstrated that converting Confucian teaching concepts to Western teaching beliefs presents a great challenge for many native-speaking CFL teachers (Moloney & Xu, 2015; Ye & Edwards, 2018; Liu et al., 2024). To overcome challenges and improve the quality of CFL education in intercultural settings, CFL teachers need to develop a refined teacher identity as it helps them navigate cultural differences, adapt teaching practices and build intercultural competence (Yang, 2019). In addition, a strong teacher identity enables CFL teachers to reconcile their own cultural and pedagogical values with those of the host country, fostering inclusive and effective learning environments (Gong & Gao, 2024). In this way, teacher identity serves as a foundation for success and fulfillment for CFL teachers in intercultural teaching.

Given the importance of teacher identity for CFL teachers in intercultural educational settings, it is necessary to examine the process through which CFL teachers construct their teacher identity. There is, however, a lack of research on CFL teachers and their practices, and very few studies have examined the (re)construction of CFL teachers'

identity in intercultural settings. In order to help international CFL teachers overcome the challenges in the intercultural environment and facilitate their successful transition, more research on CFL teacher identity is needed. Therefore, the present dissertation begins by exploring how CFL teachers perceive their identity in intercultural contexts. Following on from this line of inquiry, the second study investigates the construction and reconstruction process of teacher identity and identifies the factors that shape this process. Extending the insights from the first two studies, we explore, in the third study, how CFL teachers' teacher identity development is influenced by their interactions with students. Finally, a systematic literature review provides an overview of how international educators construct and reconstruct their teacher identity in intercultural settings.

1.3 Key concepts

This dissertation is based on a poststructuralist view of teacher identity as a dynamic, ambiguous, and socially constructed professional identity. In line with Foucault (1972), who argued that identity is not intrinsic and cannot be set in the manner of discourse, power, and cultural practices, the conceptual framework of research is based on four interconnected concepts: teacher identity, stages of teacher identity development, intercultural context, and teacher-student relationship. These four concepts are integrated to understand how CFL teachers make sense of, negotiate, and (re)construct their teacher identity in intercultural settings. The following is a detailed elaboration of each concept.

1.3.1 Teacher identity

Teacher identity has received significant attention in the field of education because it is closely linked to teachers' professional development (De Costa & Norton, 2017), effective teaching (Karimi & Mofidi, 2019), and well-being (Skinner et al., 2021). From a poststructuralist perspective, teacher identity is multidimensional, fluid and dynamic, and it is constructed by individual functions and sociocultural processes (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Yazan, 2018). Villegas et al., (2020) assert that teacher identity is “neither a given nor a product” but an evolving process, constantly contested and redefined as teachers engage with different contexts and people (e.g., colleagues, students, and communities). Given the complexity of teacher identity, scholars often conceptualize it as a multidimensional construct (Brenner et al., 2018; Canrinus et al., 2011).

To understand teacher identity, it can be helpful to break it down into domains or aspects that together show a comprehensive picture of a teacher's sense of self. Hanna et al. (2019) identify six domains of teacher identity, including (1) self-image (How individuals view themselves as teachers); (2) motivation (Motivations to be or to become a teacher); (3) self-efficacy (Teachers' beliefs in their capability to organize and perform their daily teaching activities effectively); (4) task perception (The objectives of teaching); (5) teaching commitment (Commitment and/or dedication to becoming/being a teacher); and (6) job satisfaction (How teachers feel about the work and work situation). Understanding teacher identity through these domains is helpful

because it acknowledges that identity is multidimensional; a change in one aspect (e.g. the improvement in self-efficacy after a successful lesson) can influence other aspects, such as commitment (Yang, 2019).

Another framework of teacher identity divides it into personal, professional, and sociocultural dimensions, highlighting the interplay between the individual and their working context (Tajeddin & Nazari, 2025). According to this framework, personal identity concentrates on internal and individual aspects of being a teacher, professional identity refers to teachers' pedagogical practices and their sense of professional legitimacy, and sociocultural identity explains how teachers manage their roles in the host culture (Pennington & Richards 2016). Each dimension provides critical insights into how teachers navigate their roles, manage conflicts, and adapt to changing environments. Working in an intercultural context means teachers need to engage with diverse educational environments and cultures, thus, it is necessary to develop a deeper understanding of how teachers navigate the complexities of cultural adaptation, professional roles, and social integration. Previous research conducted on the dimension of personal identity reveals that teachers' emotional responses and self-perception in intercultural teaching experiences are still in the process of construction (Guo & Sidhu, 2024; Trent, 2020). In the professional dimension, teachers have to change their pedagogical methods which results in moving from teacher-centered to student-centered teaching as a result of local pressure and therefore their teacher identity is also affected (Wen et al., 2024). From the sociocultural perspective, CFL teachers are often located in-between their home and host cultures, which results in hybrid

identities that incorporate different cultural discourses into their professional roles (Sun et al., 2022).

Overall, poststructuralist theory on identity, Hanna et al.(2019) six domains of teacher identity, and three dimensions of teacher identity (Tajeddin & Nazari, 2025) all reflect that teacher identity is developed in the process of negotiation between the individual and professional self and sociocultural environment; Thus, it is a relational and contextual construct (Varghese et al., 2005).

1.3.2 Stages of teacher identity development

As teacher identity is dynamic and constructed over time (Moradkhani & Ebadijalal, 2024), researchers claim that teacher identity development is a gradual and stage-based process (Gholami et al., 2021). Although teacher identity development differs per individual and continues throughout the duration of a teacher's career, longitudinal studies have observed common stages or transitions that teachers tend to experience as they grow into the profession. Gholami et al.'s (2021) study on student teachers' identity development in intercultural settings and Brunetti and Marston's (2018) study on the trajectory of teacher development identified three similar stages during the trajectory of teachers' identity development. Although they adopted different terms to describe these stages, a common path for teachers' identity development can be observed. In the initial phase, the position of the teacher toward the profession of teaching is passive, and teacher's sense of professional competence remains provisional (Gholami et al., 2021). With growing experience, teachers enter the

second stage, becoming more reflective and confident as they experiment with new teaching strategies. During this stage, teachers begin to stabilize their identity (Brunetti & Marston, 2018). In the last stage, teachers have increased agency, professional self-assurance, and the capacity to mentor others. As Brunetti and Marston (2018) state in their study, at this stage, teachers develop a refined and enhanced identity, exhibiting a great deal of agency, positive relationship with students, taking leadership roles, a balance between work and life, etc.

Nevertheless, teacher identity continues to evolve as educators continue to encounter new contexts and experiences, demonstrating the inherently open-ended nature of identity development (Reeves, 2018). Over time, teacher identity undergoes further reconstruction as teachers interact with diverse social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Friesen & Besley, 2013). These stages are particularly significant in intercultural settings, where teachers must constantly negotiate their identities in response to unfamiliar cultural and pedagogical environments.

1.3.3 Intercultural context

The development of teacher identity is complex within intercultural contexts. According to Liao et al. (2017), Chinese foreign language (CFL) teachers who work abroad not only go through identity development stages but also adjust to unfamiliar cultural and sociopolitical environments. This dual adjustment often makes the teachers act as cultural mediators who represent their home culture in the host country (Moloney & Xu, 2016). On the one hand, being a

cultural mediator empowers teachers to feel proud and have a purpose while teaching (Ye & Edwards, 2018). On the other hand, this mediating role brings challenges to teachers as they struggle to keep their original identity while also meeting the requirements of the new contexts (Wang & Du, 2016). Therefore, CFL teachers typically experience complex identity tensions in terms of cultural authenticity versus the necessity to change practices for them to be effective in the new teaching contexts.

Cultural adaptation is a process of intercultural identity development that involves the re-examination of previous teaching beliefs by CFL teachers. According to Yue (2017) teachers from Confucian-oriented Chinese educational systems, which are characterized by hierarchy and authority, may experience identity mismatches when they enter Western environments marked by student-centeredness. The cultural divide requires educators to maintain some aspects of their original identity while adopting new practices appropriate to the local environment (Moloney et al., 2015). As a result, intercultural contexts facilitate the development of an integrated identity among teachers who are situated between two different cultural traditions.

Intercultural teaching experiences are characterized by dynamic identity shifts across personal, professional, and sociocultural dimensions that are context-specific. Beginning with the belief that they are authoritative figures who will have their commands obeyed without question, many CFL teachers change their perspectives and become facilitators in the context of the host country's educational systems

(Yang, 2019). This transition emphasizes identity fluidity, which is driven by the processes of interaction in new cultural settings. Nevertheless, such shifts are not linear and are not without their complications; teachers can feel discomfort, isolation, or identity denial, particularly when teaching in the context of exclusionary environments (Lee & Jang, 2023; Zheng, 2017). Nevertheless, the effective steering of these challenges can lead to important growth on a personal and professional level. International teachers, therefore, enhance their intercultural competencies and embrace a more resilient and agentic identity that may even entail the creation of a hybrid identity that goes beyond the binary cultural frameworks (Bailey & Cooker, 2019). Therefore, intercultural contexts can be viewed as transformative spaces where teacher identity is reassembled and reconstructed through cultural adaptation and sociopolitical engagement.

1.3.4 Teacher-student relationship

From a post-structuralist perspective, teacher identity is defined as the way a teacher understands themselves as a teacher, which can be interpreted through and within their language and discursive practice (Varghese et al., 2005). Discursive practice in teaching refers to the interactions between teachers and their students (Reeves, 2018; Zembylas, 2003) and is demonstrated by the teacher-student relationship. Therefore, the teacher-student relationship, as the “outer side” of teaching (Korthagen and Evelein, 2016), serves as a critical lens for examining teacher identity as the “inner side” of teaching (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011).

Teacher-student relationships have been found to relate to teachers' identity tensions or problems (Pillen et al., 2013), especially among teachers who struggle to balance showing authority with developing rapport with students. Such tensions become particularly obvious in intercultural contexts due to different expectations between teachers and students (Wubbels, 2015). For example, Wang and Du (2016) state that CFL teachers who hold hierarchical, teacher-centered teaching beliefs, often experience identity dissonance when confronting Western expectations for informal, collaborative relationships. Ye and Edwards (2018) suggest that these initial mismatches can trigger identity crises, forcing teachers to reconsider pedagogical approaches and their roles.

Navigating these relational tensions in intercultural contexts might cause the reconstruction of international teachers' identity. Moloney and Xu (2016) reveal that CFL teachers who work abroad experienced conflicts in their classes as their established authoritative roles were challenged by students' expectation of more cooperative interactions. Teachers who successfully transform their roles, integrating authoritative and supportive aspects, can develop enhanced interpersonal skills and a more adaptive teacher identity (Jeongyeon & Young, 2020). Van Lankveld et al. (2017) further assert that students' increased engagement and positive feedback enhance teachers' self-efficacy, thus assisting them to develop and refine their teacher identity. Conversely, persistent relational tensions can undermine identity development, causing self-doubt or dissatisfaction. Therefore, building rapport with students can be a turning point in a teacher's identity

development in intercultural settings, moving from uncertainty to greater confidence and stability.

In building rapport with students, Moloney et al. (2015) propose a middle ground where teachers combine authoritative and interactive approaches to develop a hybrid, context-based teacher identity. Teachers constantly refine their teacher identity through ongoing negotiation and reflection prompted by daily classroom interactions, balancing strictness with friendliness, and authority with rapport. In summary, teacher–student relationships in intercultural settings are critical, serving as both catalysts for identity challenges and opportunities for professional development, thus influencing the teacher identity and identity development of teachers.

1.4 Outline of this Dissertation

This dissertation examines the development of teacher identity in intercultural settings, with special emphasis on native-speaker CFL teachers in the Netherlands. The dissertation aims to develop a deep understanding of international teachers' identity construction in intercultural contexts, using CFL teachers in the Netherlands as an example. To achieve our goal, we conducted four studies (see Table 1.1), each addressing a specific aspect of the phenomenon and collectively building a multidimensional picture of teacher identity construction. Below is a description of each study.

Chapter 2 lays the groundwork by exploring how CFL teachers perceive their identity in an intercultural context. Empirical data was collected through semi-structured interviews with twenty-one native

Chinese-speaking CFL teachers. Using Foucault's poststructuralist view of identity, this chapter emphasizes the dynamic and evolving nature of teacher identity, shaped by teachers' cultural and educational backgrounds as well as their teaching experiences in the Netherlands. The findings of this chapter highlight the need for tailored pedagogical strategies and collaborative teaching communities, which serve as the backdrop for deeper investigations in the subsequent chapters.

The evolving dynamic nature of teacher identity found in Chapter 2 underscores the importance of continuous reflection and adaptation in teacher identity development. Building on these insights, Chapter 3 takes a longitudinal perspective to examine how CFL teachers construct their identity over time in intercultural contexts. In this longitudinal study, reflective journals, narratives, and semi-structured interviews are the primary sources of data. Additionally, teachers' storylines were utilized to provide additional information regarding participants' identity development. Chapter 3 reveals that teacher identity construction is an ongoing, transformative process influenced by social practice and the need to navigate challenges and conflicts. In this Chapter, interpersonal interactions were found to be an important aspect that contributes to long-term professional growth and identity transformation.

Building on these insights, Chapter 4 narrows the focus to the interpersonal dimension of teacher identity construction by examining the teacher-student relationship. This chapter uses the teacher-student relationship as a lens to analyze how interactions with students influence teacher identity in intercultural contexts. Fourteen native-

speaker CFL teachers participated in this study, along with one hundred and ninety-two students. Survey and interview methods were used as primary sources of data, and classroom observations were stimuli for interviews. This chapter explores the distinct identity profiles among teachers based on their interpersonal behaviors, which further illustrate the multidimensional nature of teacher identity development as described in Chapters 2 and 3.

To fully contextualize the insights from Chapters 2-4 and assess their broader relevance, it is critical to situate them within global discourses on international teacher identity. Building on the empirical and theoretical insights from Chapters 2-4, Chapter 5 synthesizes these findings through a systematic review of international literature, investigating the formation, negotiation, and transformation of intercultural teacher identity in diverse educational settings, thus contributing to a comprehensive understanding of how international teachers develop their teacher identity. This systematic review examined research on international teachers' teacher identity development in intercultural contexts based on 39 peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2024. By employing a three-dimensional framework (personal, professional, and sociocultural identity), this chapter identifies key themes in teacher identity development across intercultural contexts. It situates the findings of this study within the larger body of literature, emphasizing how the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Chinese language teachers align with or diverge from broader patterns of identity development among international teachers.

Table 1.1. Schematic overview of the dissertation

Chapter	Research Focus	Research Type	Measurement instruments	Participants	Time of data collection
2	CFL teachers' perceptions about their identity in an intercultural context	Qualitative	Interview	21 Chinese language teachers	April 2021-July 2021
3	How CLF teachers' identity be characterized by teacher-student relationship	Mixed methods	Questionnaire; Classroom observation; Interview	14 Chinese language teachers; 192 Dutch secondary school students	December 2021-July 2022
4	Stages of CFL teachers' identity development and factors that influence the development	Longitudinal; Qualitative	Reflective journal; Oral narrative; Interview; Storyline	3 Chinese language teachers	February 2022-January 2024
5	How do international teachers' identity development in intercultural settings	Systematic literature review	N/A	N/A	August 2024-March 2025

