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

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6.1 Introduction

To develop a comprehensive understanding of Chinese foreign language (CFL) teachers' identity development in intercultural contexts, the current dissertation progresses systematically across four studies, each addressing a specific aspect of the phenomenon and collectively building a multidimensional picture of CFL teacher identity development. Four studies were performed, addressing: (1) CFL teachers' perceptions on their teacher identity in an intercultural context (Chapter 2); (2) a longitudinal exploration of CFL teachers' identity construction and reconstruction in an intercultural context (Chapter 3); (3) teacher-student relationship as a lens to investigate CFL teacher identity development in an intercultural context (Chapter 4); and (4) a broader systematic review of international teachers' teacher identity development in intercultural settings abroad (Chapter 5).

The section below will first summarize the main findings of our four studies. Then, those main findings will be discussed in depth from theoretical and practical perspectives. Following that, the limitations of the studies and indicate directions for future studies will be addressed. Finally, implications for practice will be explored.

6.2 Summary of the main findings

Chapter 2 lays the foundational groundwork by exploring how CFL teachers perceive their identity in an intercultural context. The research question guiding this study is: How do native-speaker CFL teachers perceive their identity in the intercultural context of the Netherlands? In this qualitative exploratory study with twenty-one native Chinese-

speaking language teachers, empirical data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings show teachers' perceptions of their identity are shaped by their cultural and educational background, as well as their teaching experiences in the intercultural context, and that their teacher identity adapts during the process of interacting with students from another cultural background. Although CFL teachers sometimes struggled during this process of transformation, they generally showed a willingness to adjust. The findings indicated that even if teachers' identity reconstruction is inevitable in the cross-cultural setting, most CFL teachers hold onto their primary Chinese identity. As this study chose a cross-sectional design, the identity development processes were not studied. This limitation highlighted the need for longitudinal designs to investigate the transformative processes of teacher identity development among CFL teachers.

Based on these insights, **Chapter 3** takes a longitudinal approach to examine how CFL teachers construct their identity over time in intercultural contexts. The research questions guiding the study are: 1) How do CFL teachers develop their professional identity in an intercultural context? 2) What factors influence CFL teachers' identity development in an intercultural context? In this study with three Chinese language teachers, reflective journals, oral narratives, and interviews were primary sources of data. Additionally, teachers' storylines were utilized to provide additional information regarding participants' identity development. The findings reveal that the construction of teacher identity involves an ongoing process of transformation through social practice. Through dealing with

challenges and conflicts arising from the teaching and socialization process in the intercultural context, teachers reassemble their teacher identity and develop professionally. As a result of a period of teaching overseas, CFL teachers acquired a more agentic identity than they had when they began teaching. The findings reveal that agentic identities were determined because of the experiences through teaching in an intercultural environment, as well as interactions with members of the teachers' community and with students from different cultures. In light of this, foreign language teachers, including both novices and experienced teachers, are recommended to make use of opportunities to learn in an intercultural and international environment. Through experiential learning activities such as exchange programs, they will acquire valuable knowledge, skills, and attitudes for their development as effective intercultural teachers.

Interpersonal interactions were shown as an important component during the long-term professional growth and identity transformation in both Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. Thus, building on these insights, **Chapter 4** narrows the focus to the interpersonal dimension of teacher identity development by examining the teacher-student relationship. The research question addressed in this study was: How can Chinese foreign language (CFL) teacher identity be characterized based on their teacher-student relationship, in an intercultural context? In this study with fourteen native-speaker Chinese language teachers and one hundred and ninety-two students, survey and interview methods were used as primary sources of data, and classroom observations were stimuli for interviews. The findings reveal that

overseas teaching experiences strengthen teachers' professional identity, although they also bring teachers tension. The study demonstrates that the teacher-student relationship is a useful lens to explore and interpret teacher identity in an intercultural context. The identity construction process across all fourteen teachers involved embracing the "other" culture and retaining some of their original beliefs. However, the pathways of identity construction were unique for each teacher, depending on their interpersonal profiles and prior personal experiences. This suggests that teachers from the same cultural background may develop different teacher identities in a certain context due to their previous personal experiences and their beliefs about teaching.

Chapter 5 reports on a systematic literature review investigating the formation, negotiation, and transformation of teacher identity in diverse educational settings, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of how international teachers develop their teacher identity, and the underlying processes that this development. The review addressed the following research question: How do international teachers develop their teacher identity in intercultural settings abroad? The principles of the PRISMA statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis) (Moher et al., 2009) were used as a guideline to conduct and report this systematic review, which included 38 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 diverse

contexts. The findings reveal that teacher identity development in intercultural settings is a complex, multidimensional process shaped by personal, professional, and sociocultural factors. Moreover, the findings highlight the dynamic interplay among these dimensions and underscore the importance of continuous adaptation, reflection, and support. They also shed light on the challenges and opportunities faced by international teachers as they develop their teacher identity, which is both authentic to their personal beliefs and responsive to the intercultural dynamics of their host environments. By addressing the challenges identified in this review and implementing evidence-based interventions, educational institutions can better support international teachers in their transformative journeys. Thus, Chapter 5 situates the findings of this dissertation within the larger body of literature, highlighting how the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Chinese language teachers align with or diverge from broader patterns of identity construction among international teachers.

Together, these chapters form a cohesive exploration of international teachers' teacher identity development in intercultural contexts, with special focus on CFL teachers in the Netherlands. The dissertation progresses from foundational perceptions (Chapter 2), through specific relational and contextual influences (Chapters 3 and 4), to a synthesized understanding situated within the broader literature (Chapter 5). This structure highlights both the unique aspects of Chinese teachers' experiences and their relevance to the global discourse on teacher identity development.

6.3 Discussion of the main findings

6.3.1 Influence of intercultural contexts on teacher identity development

In this dissertation, the four studies all indicate the influence intercultural settings have on teacher identity development, in the form of both challenges and opportunities. International teachers generally faced considerable identity dissonance, which posed a problem of congruence between their previous teaching beliefs and the requirements of new educational systems. This dissonance often caused emotional and professional stress, which led teachers to feel uncertain, lonely, and frustrated. Teachers sometimes need to overcome such tensions on their own, hence hindering the reconstruction of their teacher identity in new educational environments (Chapter 3).

However, apart from the tensions brought by intercultural contexts, international work experience also offers many chances for teachers' growth and promotes their teacher identity. International teachers, at first, experience discomfort and then move to a higher level of self-efficacy and professional flexibility. Some of them start to consider intercultural challenges as opportunities rather than threats and, therefore, are able to increase their self-efficacy and empowerment. For instance, in the case of CFL teachers in Chapter 3, they changed from the initial feeling of being outsiders to becoming cultural brokers or ambassadors. This shift was helped particularly by reflective practices, mentorship, and support from the community, which shows the

importance of social interaction and institutional encouragement for identity reconstruction (Chapters 4 and 5).

In addition, the teachers in this dissertation developed a higher level of intercultural competence that enabled them to work efficiently in culturally diverse environments. In the process of adapting to the host countries' cultural norms, international teachers are able to integrate new pedagogical strategies into their teaching while also incorporating some of their home culture practices (Chapters 2 and 5). This dual identity enables teachers to not only work across the cultural divide in their classrooms but also to feel more satisfied with their professional lives and themselves. In line with Pennington and Richards (2016), the studies concluded that effectively working in intercultural environments enhances teachers' professional identity and pedagogical practices.

6.3.2 Personal, professional, and sociocultural dimensions of teacher identity

The construction of teacher identity in intercultural settings involves a negotiation of personal experiences, professional recognition, and sociocultural positioning. As discussed in Chapter 2, the domains of self-image, motivation, and self-efficacy revealed how personal identity was reconstructed as a result of professional practice. For instance, teachers in Chapter 4, who integrated "Chinese discipline" with Dutch autonomy, developed a liminal self-image that crosses cultural boundaries. This aligns with Tajeddin & Nazari's (2025) multidimensional framework and also the findings from Chapter 5,

which reveal that personal, professional, and sociocultural identities are integrated and interdependent, and that they coalesce to define the overall identity of a teacher.

Regarding the professional dimension of teacher identity, CFL teachers in Chapter 3 embraced pedagogical globalization, blending exam-focused rigor with interactive methods in an effort to find a middle ground. This middle ground is comparable to Poole's (2020) findings on international teachers' "third space" pedagogies (Chapter 5), although in this case, with a unique emphasis on the Chinese language's structural complexity. The Chinese language's structural complexity lies in its use of characters instead of an alphabet, tonal variations that change the meaning of words, and the intricate grammar rules that differ significantly from those in European languages. This complexity requires teachers to develop innovative pedagogical strategies to effectively convey these concepts to learners. By incorporating both traditional and interactive methods, CFL teachers in Chapter 2, Chapter 3, and Chapter 4 aimed to address these challenges while maintaining high academic standards. In terms of sociocultural identity, teachers struggled with exclusionary narratives (e.g., being labeled "outsiders"), but were able to use them as a tool to assert their legitimacy. For example, a CFL teacher in Chapter 4 reframed marginality as expertise, positioning himself as a cultural mediator—a strategy echoing Galman's (2009) concept of "identity dissonance as generative".

The interplay of these dimensions underscores the context-dependent nature of teacher identity. The international teachers in

Chapter 5 emphasized sociocultural integration (e.g., learning the language of the host country), while the CFL teachers emphasized pedagogical integration, adapting methods without sacrificing cultural heritage. Taking into account this divergence, it is evident that subject matter plays an important role in identity negotiation: teaching a less popular language, such as Chinese, in intercultural settings necessitates a different approach from teaching a more widely valued language such as English.

6.3.3 Similarities and differences between CFL teachers and their international peers

During the process of developing their teacher identity abroad, both CFL teachers and other international teachers encountered some core challenges, including identity dissonance, insufficient resources and support, emotional labor, and a need for resilience. The identity dissonance occurred when teachers' previous teaching beliefs and values (e.g., Chinese hierarchical instruction) were mismatched with the host country's norms (e.g., Dutch egalitarian classrooms). Another similarity between the participants in the studies of this dissertation and other international teachers (Chapter 5) is the lack of teaching sources and inadequate institutional support. The nature of this challenge, however, differs. For example, it is evident in Chapter 2 that CFL teachers experience difficulties related to teaching materials suitable for the Dutch context, while Chapter 5 reveals that international teachers experience difficulties related to misaligned curricula. In addition, emotional labor and the need for resilience strategies are also burdens

shared by CFL teachers and other international teachers. Despite not referring to the racialized or gendered exclusion experienced by other international teachers (Chapter 5), CFL teachers still experienced emotional labor as a result of stereotypes regarding “rigidity” (Chapter 2). For example, despite some CFL teachers having high intercultural competence and extensive experience teaching international students, students from the host country judged them as too strict and difficult to understand.

These challenges, however, did not defeat the teachers: both CFL teachers from our studies and international teachers in the reviewed studies reframed challenges as professional development opportunities (Weng, 2024). Akkerman and Meijer (2011) have shown that a transformation process is necessary in order to overcome identity dissonance. This process can be observed in both CFL teachers from our empirical studies (transitioning from “authoritative role models” to “facilitators”) and international teachers from the review study (shifting from “knowledge imparters” to “cultural mediators”). Teachers developed and refined their teacher identity during this process of transformation. Both CFL teachers and other international teachers’ efforts to negotiate intercultural contexts emphasize the importance of agency in constrained environments. In sum, the above parallels between CFL teachers and other international teachers underscore the universality of identity negotiation and adaptive resilience in intercultural teaching contexts.

Not all experiences, however, appeared to be universal. CFL teachers in our studies confronted some unique challenges. These

challenges tied to the Chinese language's geopolitical marginality in Western curricula, which brought the burden for CFL teachers to legitimize their subject (Chapter 4). Compared with other international teachers of dominant languages (e.g., English) or STEM fields, whose disciplines are institutionally prioritized, CFL teachers in the Netherlands appeared to face more pressure. For example, some CFL teachers (Chapter 2) had to leave the teaching profession because of a sharp decrease in the number of students. Additionally, the systemic neglect of less commonly taught languages leaves CFL teachers reliant on self-directed experimentation (Chapter 3), unlike other international teachers who often access structured training (e.g., TESOL certifications).

Furthermore, CFL teachers also emphasized their role as cultural ambassadors, balancing language instruction with the sharing of Chinese culture. For example, apart from seeing themselves as foreign language teachers, some CFL teachers also described their role as the representatives of Chinese culture (Chapter 2 and Chapter 4). In contrast, other international teachers of dominant languages focused more on pedagogical adaptation than cultural representation (Chapter 5). This duality may stem from the Chinese language's symbolic ties to Chinese identity, amplifying CFL teachers' role as cultural mediators. The above distinctions highlight how language status and cultural differences can intensify identity reconstruction for CFL teachers compared to their international peers.

6.4 Limitations

The dissertation collectively provides some valuable insights into teacher identity development in intercultural contexts; however, there are some limitations to these conclusions due to methodological issues. Firstly, two of the four studies in this research (Chapters 2 and 4) were cross-sectional research, which gave only a picture of identity at one time. Due to the lack of longitudinal data, these studies could not fully present the shifting characteristics of teacher identity over time.

The size of the samples also affects the generalizability. In fact, all the empirical chapters concentrated on native-speaker Chinese CFL teachers in the Netherlands, and the small, culturally homogeneous samples made the findings not applicable in other international settings. Therefore, some problems specific to other intercultural situations, like racial discrimination of teachers of color in different countries, have not been addressed. Hence, the conclusion of the findings across a wider intercultural teaching context must consider these important sampling restrictions.

6.5 Recommendations for future research

Future research could conduct longitudinal studies to monitor the changes and dynamic process of international teachers' teacher identity development. Chapter 3 and Chapter 5 clearly show the importance of tracking the teacher identity development over time. This approach is particularly relevant because identity development is understood as nonlinear and ongoing; it is only by studying teachers over time that we can understand fully the 'unbecoming-to-becoming' (Chapter 5)

processes that have been observed qualitatively in this dissertation. It is possible to gain a better understanding of the identity development process if researchers investigate international teachers from the time that they first enter the intercultural context and follow their identity changes over several years of overseas teaching. While a two-year longitudinal study was carried out in Chapter 3, studies spanning a period of several years could indicate whether initial identity tensions (e.g. feeling ‘de-skilled’, excluded) are resolved as teachers gain experience. It could also identify stages or patterns of identity reconstruction, for instance, do teachers generally experience an initial decline in professional self-efficacy, also known as a ‘culture shock,’ followed by an increase in self-efficacy? Longitudinal research could show whether there are any common trends or different paths international teachers go through, contributing to the theoretical knowledge of intercultural identity development. Moreover, as called for in Chapter 5, it would be worthwhile to examine the long-term effects of intercultural teaching on the teacher identity of international teachers once they have returned home. For example, researchers may explore whether the identity transformation persists, and how intercultural teaching experiences affect teachers’ teaching beliefs, pedagogical practices, and careers in the long run.

In addition, the three empirical studies in this dissertation focus specifically on CFL teachers, thus offering depth insights in one cultural case. Future research could extend the study to include a wider range of participants and environments to examine the process of identity development for international teachers. For example, Chapter

3 indicates that comparative research involving teachers of different nationalities, subject specialization, ethnicity, and host countries would help to explore the universality and specificity of teacher identity development in intercultural settings. One example would be research that focuses on the CFL teachers in Western contexts and CFL teachers in Southeast Asian contexts, to compare the differences and similarities of the teachers and how they develop their identity in different cultural contexts. Moreover, Chapter 5 proposes research that investigates Western teachers in Asian or Middle Eastern contexts, teachers of other foreign languages (e.g., English, French) in various countries, or non-language subject teachers in intercultural contexts. For instance, it is necessary to explore the intercultural experiences of teachers from particular backgrounds, who may face particular identity tensions, such as levels of societal prejudice. Future research could examine the identity development of teachers of color in different contexts, since Chapter 5 indicates that teachers of color may be facing issues related to their racialized identities (e.g., legitimacy based upon race) that are not addressed in CFL teacher-specific studies. Besides, the racialized experiences of CFL teachers are also worth investigating. In this way future research can determine which intercultural identity issues are cross-cultural and which are specific to particular cultural combinations, thus offering a more complex, globally applicable understanding.

In regard to methodology, multi-method and multi-perspective approaches could add strength to the empirical findings. Besides interviews and reflective journals, the data could be complemented by classroom observations, student feedback, and administrative

perspectives. As mentioned in Chapter 4, one approach could involve observing teachers' actions in the classroom, or using video-stimulated recall, to examine how teachers' teacher identity is realized (or not realized) in teaching practice. Including students' opinions on what an international teacher does and how they interact with students would help to expand the knowledge about teacher identity as a relational construct. In addition, Chapter 3 suggests that the use of tools like oral narratives or critical incident logs can capture identity transformations that occur in real-time and may not emerge in retrospective interviews. New approaches like social network analysis could be employed to chart the process of teachers' feeling of being part of the school's community or the broader community over time. In sum, the above-mentioned approaches for future research could provide a more holistic picture of international teachers' identity development.

Another potential direction is to explore targeted interventions and support systems that assist the identity development of international teachers when teaching abroad. Chapter 3 and Chapter 5 indicate the benefits of teachers developing a more agentic identity by overcoming challenges in the new teaching contexts, thus, future research could aim to foster such agency intentionally. Research could also build and evaluate support programs, such as mentorship pairs, reflective workshops, or online communities for international teachers, and analyze the influence of these programs on teachers' identity reconstruction. For example, a longitudinal intervention study could assign new intercultural teachers to trained mentors or local experienced teachers, and then compare their identity development

with a control group without such support. Additionally, four studies in this dissertation all reveal the importance of critical reflection during international teachers' negotiation in the host countries. Therefore, researchers could experiment with structured reflection interventions, such as guided journal clubs or narrative inquiry groups, to determine whether reflective actions are helpful during teachers' adaptation in the new contexts. Hence, the future research directions we propose may fill the theoretical and empirical gaps left by the present dissertation, therefore offering a better map of what can be done to help teachers who are teaching in today's diverse teaching environment.

6.6 Implications for practice

In addition to implications for future research, this dissertation also provides practical implications for teacher education, for receiving institutions, and for international teachers themselves, in order to strengthen teachers' teaching practice and identity development in intercultural settings abroad.

6.6.1 Suggestions for teacher education

Teacher education programs in home country as well as host country could try to assist international teachers in the development of teacher identity. Firstly, in addition to providing general pedagogical training, pre-service and in-service teacher education could address cultural and educational issues that international teachers are likely to encounter while working abroad. For example, Chapter 3 reveals that adjusting to the Dutch educational system is difficult for CFL teachers in the Netherlands, and therefore programs focusing on the host country's

educational culture, the host country's curriculum, and the students' characteristics are required. Such programs may help teachers to be prepared for and deal with possible challenges. Furthermore, workshops focusing on development of intercultural competence would also be helpful. Chapter 4 shows the necessity for teachers to know how to interact with students from another cultural background, adjust to the new context, and solve conflicts in culturally diverse classrooms. In addition, all four studies in this dissertation show the importance of reflective practice in the process of identity development. Therefore, in-service teacher education programs could organize regular reflective meetings or group discussions where international teachers can discuss and share their international experience, and reflect on their teaching practice. Such reflective meetings may assist international teachers to overcome identity dissonance easier and gain professional development.

6.6.2 Suggestions for institutions

Educational institutions and policymakers could also help international teachers in their identity development process. Institutions that employ international teachers are advised to provide clear and well-organised programs for teachers to help them adapt to the new teaching context. Other useful support includes the offer of formal mentoring programs. As mentioned in Chapter 3, pairing novice international teachers up to experienced colleagues in a mentoring role could provide not only technical but also emotional support. Besides mentorship, institutions could also establish professional learning communities for international teachers. Chapter 2, Chapter 3, and Chapter 4 all show that many CFL

teachers in the Netherlands were the only Chinese teacher in the school. Providing access to professional networks (such as regular intercultural teacher meetups or collaborative projects) would assist in the formation of a supportive community of practice. Perhaps, educational administrators could consider offering some material support as well: as Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 both mention, access to shared resources would have been useful for the CFL teachers who had no materials relevant to the local context.

In terms of policy, institutions may address structural factors that hinder international teachers' teacher identity development. Chapter 5 indicates that offering equal positions and appraisals for international teachers and helping to solve their work permit issues will increase the professional security of the teachers, thus promoting their identity development. Institutions can also take an inclusive stance of valuing international teachers' cultural and ethnic diversity and creating inclusive teaching environments through culturally sensitive curriculum, cultural celebrations, and support services (e.g., counseling, professional dialogue groups). The above recommendations may allow institutions to transform adapting process into a more positive experience for international teachers.

6.6.3 Suggestions for international teachers

In terms of pedagogy, the studies in this dissertation indicate some concrete measures teachers working in intercultural settings could take to refine their teacher identity and effectiveness as teachers. One way is to demonstrate professionalism that integrates their home and host

cultures in order to create a harmonious intercultural classroom. Chapter 2 showed this approach improved not only the engagement of students in class, but also teachers' sense of purpose and belonging. Furthermore, international teachers may also take action to strengthen their teacher identity, for example by showing willingness and curiosity to better understand their students' culture, working on building positive relationships with their students, and providing students with a more diverse learning experience. They might also reflect on and analyze their pedagogical methods in intercultural classrooms, and identify their growth points during intercultural teaching, with an eye to continuous professional development.

The above recommendations could assist international teachers not only in overcoming the challenges of intercultural teaching but also in leveraging the opportunities it presents to develop a richer, more resilient teacher identity. The implementation of such recommendations may significantly improve teachers' intercultural teaching experiences and, therefore, their job satisfaction and performance.

6.7 Conclusions

The four studies included in this dissertation have explored international teachers' teacher identity development in intercultural settings, and what this means more generally for global education. The findings contribute to the growing body of research on teacher identity by highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities brought about by intercultural contexts. The findings indicate the importance of

intercultural competence and adaptability in teachers' development as professionals. Furthermore, international teachers are required to have flexible and culturally sensitive teaching strategies in order to meet the challenges of intercultural teaching. In addition, teacher identity development should be viewed not just as an individual journey but as a process shaped by the school environment and broader education policies. As education systems all over the world are becoming more interconnected and diverse, educational policies and professional development practices could promote inclusive pedagogy and equitable educational environments to support teachers' teacher identity development. Therefore, in conclusion, this dissertation calls for a global education system that not only embraces cultural diversity, but also makes best use of it to improve international teaching and learning. Through maintaining self while adapting, international teachers can develop as well-rounded professionals for today's global education contexts.

