Learning to Teach in Chinese Public Schools: An Ethnographic Study of Teacher Professional Identity, Practice, and Interaction



Shuyan Liu

Kellogg College

University of Oxford

Thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Hilary Term 2026

Supervisors: Ian Thompson, Nicole Dingwall, Karen Skilling

Acknowledgements

I extend my sincere gratitude to my supervisors, Dr Ian Thompson, Dr Nicole Dingwall, Dr Karen Skilling, for their invaluable guidance and support throughout my doctoral journey. Ian, together with Nicole, welcomed me as a PhD student in 2021 and provided a strong intellectual foundation for my work, particularly in shaping my understanding of teacher identity. His encouragement to engage with ethnographic perspectives has been central to the development of this project. Karen offered unwavering support alongside much-needed critical advice, especially during the stages of data analysis and presentation. Her thoughtful feedback, combined with her warmth and care, has been deeply appreciated. Nicole joined the supervisory team in my second year and has been consistently caring, supportive, and organised. She helped me to identify achievable goals, allowing me to move forward with confidence and clarity in my writing and in reaching important milestones.

I wish to thank the scholars who played important roles in assessing and refining my thesis. I am grateful to Dr David Mills and Professor Qing Gu for their insightful questions and thoughtful advice during the viva. Their feedback helped me to strengthen the overall argument of the thesis, and to clarify its methodological choices and conceptual contributions. I also extend my sincere thanks to Professor Trevor Mutton and Dr Steven Puttick for acting as internal examiners and for providing constructive feedback at different stages of this work. I am also deeply grateful to all the teachers who shared their time and experiences during my fieldwork in Chengdu. Their insights have contributed significantly to the development and depth of this research.

My deepest gratitude extends to my family members who have always encouraged me to pursue my academic aspirations. Thank you to Allen, my partner, for being my critical reader and constant emotional support. Finally, to myself, for learning, enduring, and having the courage to carry this long journey through to its end.

Abstract

The thesis ethnographically explores how novice teachers in urban public schools in China negotiate and (re)construct their professional identities within a transforming and complex educational landscape. Situated at the intersection of authoritarian control and neoliberal reform, novice teacher development in China is shaped by often conflicting institutional, ideological, and market-oriented pressures. Drawing on six months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two public secondary schools in a major Chinese city, the study traces how novice teachers learn to teach through everyday professional practices and reflective interactions. Combining ethnographic methods, conversation analysis, and teacher professional identity as a conceptual lens, the research reveals how novice teachers navigate the interplay of power and agency while continuously constructing their identities. The study examines institutionalised teacher training activities, including teaching competitions and novice-mentor relationships that novice teachers are required to undertake upon entering public schools. The findings demonstrate how these activities function not only as professional development mechanisms but also as disciplinary sites that regulate the meaning of 'good' teaching and shape novice teachers' identities and professional practices. The thesis further challenges simplified cultural explanations that attribute Chinese schooling primarily to Confucian thought. Instead, it shows how Confucian legacies such as exemplarity and familial affect intersect with socialist-neoliberal forces and teachers' individual agency in shaping the making of teacher professionalism in China. Finally, the research highlights teacher identity not only as a productive conceptual tool for unpacking the complexities of learning to teach, but also as a symbolic resource through which teachers make sense of everyday school life, negotiate power and authority in moment-by-moment interactions, and continually construct what it means to become a teaching professional.

Key words: novice teacher education, teacher identity and agency, ethnography, social interaction

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements **1**

Abstract **2**

List of Figures and Tables **8**

Glossary **9**

List of Abbreviations **10**

Chapter 1: Introduction **11**

1.1 The Problem of the 'Novice' *11*

1.2 Background of Research *13*

1.2.1 The Resurgence of 'Teacher Fever' 13

1.2.2 Introducing Competition to Local Schools 18

1.2.3 Governing Education via *Suzhi* 21

1.3 Rationale and Aims of Research *25*

1.4 Overview of the Thesis *30*

Chapter 2: Literature Review **33**

2.1 Identity, Agency, and Subjectivity *34*

2.2 Unpacking Identity Through Social Interaction *38*

2.3 Teacher Learning and Professional Identity *43*

2.3.1 Situated Learning and Learning to Teach 44

2.3.2 Teacher Professional Identity (TPI) 46

2.3.3 Analytical Approaches to TPI 50

2.4 Summary of Literature Review *52*

Chapter 3: Methodology **54**

3.1 Overview *54*

3.2 Research Questions *54*

3.3 Methodological Approaches *56*

3.3.1 Ethnography 56

3.3.2 Conversation Analysis 59

3.3.3 Critical Discourse Analysis 61

3.3.4 Summary of Methodological Approaches 63

3.4 The Sampling Strategy *63*

3.5 Fieldwork Context and Participants *65*

3.5.1 School System and Admission Approach in China 65

3.5.2 The District and Institutional Context 68

3.5.3 Participants 72

3.6 Data Collection Methods *74*

3.6.1 Observation 74

3.6.2 Fieldnotes 75

3.6.3 Interviews 78

3.6.4 Audio-recordings 80

3.7 Data Analysis *81*

3.7.1 Initial Analysis 82

3.7.2 Integrated Analysis 86

3.7.3 Micro Analysis 87

3.8 Ethical Considerations *89*

3.8.1 Ethical Principles 90

3.8.2 Ethics of Autonomy 91

3.8.3 Non-maleficence, Respect and Beneficence 93

3.8.4 Power and Positionality 95

3.9 Research Validity *97*

3.10 Chapter Summary *99*

Chapter 4: Learning to Teach as a Virtuoso: Novice Teachers in Teaching

Competitions 101

4.1 Introduction 101

4.2 Teaching as Virtuoso Performance 103

4.3 Involvement in Teaching Competitions 108

4.3.1 Yu's Story 108

4.3.2 Wen's Story 120

4.3.3 Two Trajectories of Participating in Teaching Competitions 129

4.4 Front Runners, Back Runners 130

4.5 Compassion and Complicity 134

4.6 Conclusion 136

Chapter 5: Learning to Teach from *Shifu* 138

5.1 Introduction 138

5.2 Who Can Mentor? The Revered System of Teaching 141

5.3 Identity Negotiation in Mentoring Relationships: The Case of Jing 144

5.3.1 Delineating Default Identities 146

5.3.2 Enacting Collegiality and Intimacy 150

5.3.3 Managing Tension 154

5.3.4 Summary of Jing's Mentoring Relationship 159

5.4 Affective Governing Technology 161

5.4.1 Family-like Mentor-Novice Relationships 161

5.4.2 Building Families, Producing Boundaries 164

5.5 Conclusion 168

Chapter 6: Negotiating Identities in Classroom Interactions 170

6.1 Introduction 170

6.2 Contextualising Classroom Interaction for Micro Analysis 171

6.2.1 English Education Policies and Practices in China 171

6.2.2 Recurrent Pedagogical Activities in English Lessons 175

6.3 Identities in Classroom Interaction *178*

6.3.1 Introducing the Topic 179

6.3.2 Teaching New Vocabulary and Phrases 184

6.3.3 Completing Tasks 189

6.3.4 Making Up Conversations 193

6.3.5 Summary of Micro-analysis 196

6.4 Discussion *199*

6.4.1 Choral Repetition 199

6.4.2 Turn-Taking Management 202

6.4.3 The Score System 203

6.4.4 Two Spheres of Teaching 204

6.5 Conclusion *207*

Chapter 7: Ethnographic Portraits of Novice Teachers 209

7.1 Introduction *209*

7.2 Who is Considered 'Qualified' to Teach? *211*

7.3 Portrait 1: Xin, a Teacher Who Searches for Her Place *214*

7.4 Portrait 2: Yu, a Teacher Who Waits for Opportunities *221*

7.5 Portrait 3: Wen, a Teacher Who Dances in Chains *225*

7.6 Portrait 4: Jing, a Teacher Who Finds Support in Colleagues *230*

7.7 Portrait 5: Hong, a Teacher Who Keeps Compromising *234*

7.8 Discussion and Conclusion *238*

Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion 241

8.1 Summary of the Research *241*

8.2 Sociocultural Conditions of Learning to Teach in China *245*

8.2.1 The Pursuit of Exemplarity 245

8.2.2 Compassion as Affective Technologies 248

8.3 Teacher Professional Identity and Agency 251

8.4 Contribution to Knowledge 253

8.5 Limitations and Strengths 257

8.6 Future Directions 260

References 262

Appendix A: Transcription Conventions 283

Appendix B: Information Sheet 284

Appendix C: Interview Protocols 287

Appendix D: Organisation of Unit Sessions in English lessons 289

Appendix E: Data Archives 291

Appendix F: CUREC 293

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

Figure 3.1 *The Stages of Data Analysis*..... 82

Figure 4.1 *Yu's Identity Negotiation Process in Her First Teaching Competition* ... 119

Figure 4.2 *Wen's Identity Negotiation Process in Her First Teaching Competition* 128

Figure 4.3 *Two Trajectories of Participating Teaching Competitions*.....129

Figure 6.1 *Design of Wen's PowerPoint Slide* 182

Figure 6.2 *Hong's Writing on the Whiteboard*.....185

Figure 6.3 *Yu's Whiteboard and PowerPoint Design*..... 188

Tables

Table 3.1 *Overview of Five Novice Teachers in Two Schools During Fieldwork*..... 73

Table 3.2 *Ethnographic Fieldnotes Protocol* 76

Table 3.3 *Fieldnotes Contents* 83

Table 3.4 *Interview Contents* 85

Table 3.5 *Example of Data Integration* 88

Table 6.1 *Organisation of Recurrent Classroom Activities* 176

Table 8.1 *Organisation of Unit Sessions in the English Lessons* 289

Table 8.2 *Data Archives* 291

Glossary

Key terms related to the Chinese school system

Bianzhi	The state-authorised quota of officially funded posts in party, government, and public service institutions
Exemplary school	Officially designated high-performing model school
Gaokao	China's national college entrance examination
Elite school education group (ESEG)	A policy linking top and weaker schools to share resources and quality
Normal University	University specialising in teacher education
Private school	Non-state, tuition-funded school
Public school	State-run, government-funded school
***Suzhi* education**	Quality-oriented education since the 1980s as a contrast to *yingshi* (exam-based) education
Zhongkao	Senior secondary school entrance examination

List of Abbreviations

BA	Bachelor of Arts
CA	Conversation Analysis
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
CoP	Community of Practice
CUREC	Central University Research Ethics Committee (University of Oxford)
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
MoE	Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China
MA	Master of Arts
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
RQ	Research Question
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
TPD	Teacher Professional Development
TPI	Teacher Professional Identity

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The Problem of the 'Novice'

This thesis ethnographically explores how novice teachers construct their professional identities as they learn to teach in urban public schools in China. It focuses on the discursive processes through which these teachers navigate tensions between external demands and individual agency, (re)construct who they are as teaching professionals, and negotiate what it means to be 'qualified' within institutional practices and reflective interactions.

These tensions surfaced early in my fieldwork when I first observed Jing's lesson. Having joined the school less than a year, she had been recommended by the head of the English Department in School A to participate in my research. With five years of teaching experience in a private school and a state-issued teaching certificate, she was poised, humorous, and in good command of her class. To me, she hardly seemed 'novice'. Yet institutionally, she was unequivocally placed in this category.

I had not anticipated that identifying 'novices' would be so intricate. Although the term has been widely debated in academic literature and is closely intertwined with teachers' self-identification and professional knowledge (Li, 2017; Gray & Morton, 2018), I had assumed that schools would hold a straightforward definition consistent with bureaucratic hierarchy and administrative responsibility. In reality, however, the boundaries were anything but clear. 'Who counts as a novice teacher?' soon emerged as a recurring question in my fieldwork. I discovered that teachers who had taught for years in private schools, off-campus training centres, or other levels of public education were all reclassified as 'novices' upon entering a new school, alongside recent graduates. Regardless of their prior experience, all were assigned mentors (*shifu*) and required to teach demonstration lessons (*gongkaike*)—formal classroom observations in which

lessons were observed by mentors, senior teachers, and other colleagues—to participate in teaching competitions, and to rehearse and emulate the pedagogical practices deemed appropriate by the institution.

The novice, then, was not defined by experience or competence, but by the process of being 'remade' within institutional frames. For the Party-state and local authorities, such crafting is a necessary instrument to ensure that top-down directives are effectively contextualised within everyday school practice (Han, 2017; Li & Xue, 2023). From the perspective of institutional leadership, the moulding of 'high-quality' teachers has long been a priority, driven by the conviction that, in an education system that is both tightly regulated and intensely competitive, teachers are at the core of the institution's reputation and survival (Pawan, 2017; Wu, 2013).

Yet what, precisely, is deemed 'high-quality', and how are such labels circulated and reproduced within schools? And for teachers, particularly novices, how do they interpret, internalise, or event resist these expectations in their everyday work? The study demonstrates that becoming a teacher is always embedded within professional practices through which social norms, hierarchical orders, and persistent power asymmetries are reproduced. However, rather than being merely determined by social structures and discourses, teachers as agentive beings draw on pre-existing, discursive meanings to make sense of their own experiences (Clarke, 2008, 2017). They recognise the affordances and constraints within which they work and seek possibilities for exercising agency, whether by aligning with or resisting roles that portray them in undesirable ways (Holland et al., 1998). The study, therefore, argues that teacher education policy and research must attend more closely to these complex dynamics that shape the process of learning to teach.

This introductory chapter begins by laying the sociocultural and political foundations of

the study, serving three main purposes: first, to outline the historical and sociocultural underpinnings of teaching in China and to explain the resurgence of 'teacher fever' since 2018; second, to trace the China's education decentralisation policies and the rise of market-oriented competition in local schooling; and third, to explore how *suzhi* (quality), as a governing technology (Foucault, 2003, 2007), reproduces social hierarchy and shapes the aspirations, desires, and regulation of teachers and teaching in contemporary China. It then outlines the rationale and aims of research, foregrounding ethnography as a central methodology for empirically approaching teachers' social and professional worlds, informed by my positionality as a former teacher in China. This chapter concludes with an overview of the thesis.

1.2 Background of Research

1.2.1 The Resurgence of 'Teacher Fever'

Few education systems in the world can match the sheer scale of China's compulsory education. According to Educational Statistics Yearbook of China (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2024a), the compulsory education of China comprised 161 million students, a teaching force of 10.74 million full-time teachers, and 195,800 schools in 2023. Primary schools (Years 1–6, ages 6–12) numbered 140,000 with 6.66 million teachers, while junior secondary schools (Years 7–9, ages 13–15) accounted for another 50,000 institutions and 4.08 million teachers. However, the distribution of educational and teaching resources remains significantly uneven across regions, especially between urban and rural areas (Li, Zhu, & Lo, 2019). Such inequalities shape substantially the professional opportunities, career trajectories, and identities available to teachers (Liao & Yuan ,2017; Wang & Gao, 2013). Even though this study focuses on urban schooling, it approaches this context with an awareness of the wider stratified educational landscape in which it is embedded.

Teaching in China is frequently portrayed in the literature as being closely tied to the

Confucian tradition (e.g., Li & Wegerif, 2014; Mok et al., 2008). Such portrayals often draw on, or seek to recuperate, a stereotypical image of Chinese teaching as passive and repetitive, characterised by teachers standing before students and transmitting knowledge. Within this framing, Confucian teachers are depicted as moral and authoritative figures as well as learned scholars who enjoy high status both inside and outside the classroom. There is little doubt that contemporary Chinese education continues to be influenced by Confucian legacies (Bakken, 2000; Lee, 2005; Paine, 1990; Xu & McEwan, 2016). While this body of work has contributed to more nuanced understandings of Confucian education, it has paid less attention to how Confucian norms are locally mobilised and interactionally negotiated in teachers' everyday professional practices. More importantly, this cultural framing alone no longer suffices to account for the complexity of teaching in contemporary China (Woronov, 2009, 2015). For different people across different areas, 'teachers' have become a profession loaded with a multiplicity of meanings that incite divergent responses: a symbolic vehicle for national aspirations; a bearer of a moralising narrative that glorifies sacrifice, devotion, and selflessness; a strategic instrument through which local authorities facilitate policy implementations and uphold social stability; and a refuge for younger generations amid the grind of economic slowdown and the fading promise of upward mobility in the reform era. The Party-state discourse refers to teachers in instrumental and nationalistic ways, arguing for the merit and necessity of teachers as 'great educators' and 'the foundation of building a world-class education system (*jiaoyu qiangguo*)' (MoE, 2024c) and 'the hope of the Chinese nation (*zhonghua minzu*)[1]' (People's Daily, 2024a), stressing the importance of their political rectitude and compliancy, particularly in terms of ideological alignment and moral self-regulation (Wang, Lai, & Lo, 2016). In state-

[1] The Chinese nation, or *zhonghua minzu*, is a political concept referring to the collective identity of all 56 ethnic groups officially recognised within China. It has been central to the Party-state's narrative of national unity and rejuvenation. See also, *China Daily* (2021, August 30), 'Building a Strong Sense of Community for the Chinese Nation.' Retrieved in July 2025 from https://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202108/30/WS612c9e14a3101e7ce97610e3.html

affiliated mainstream media, individual teacher stories are selectively highlighted and idealised as moral exemplars and embodiments of virtue (e.g., People's Daily, 2024b).

Since 2018, the *Civil Service Fever* (*kaogong're*) has intensified, with an increasing number of graduates seeking secure employment in public institutions. The proportion of graduates aspiring to enter the public sector rose from 59% in 2018 to 72.5% in 2021 (Wang & Zhang, 2025). In 2024, over 3.41 million applicants registered for the national civil service examination, with a competition ratio of 86:1 (Xinhua News Agency, 2024). The social desire for stable employment in the education sector has also become increasingly visible. For the wider public, the teaching profession has long been desirable primarily for its stability and benefits, commonly known as the 'iron rice bowl' (*tiefanwan*) (Pawan, Fan, & Pei, 2017, p. 41). Between 2011 and 2021, the number of applicants for the teaching qualification examination increased from 172,000 to 11.44 million—a sixty-six-fold rise—reflecting the growing appeal of the teaching profession as a secure career option amid rising employment uncertainty; of these applicants, nearly 8 million were non-teacher-training majors (China News Service, 2022). However, as the news article noted, this surge in teaching qualification seekers did not necessarily indicate genuine enthusiasm for entering the teaching profession, and for most candidates, obtaining the certificate was simply seen as 'one more option' (China News Service, 2022). While this trend has meant that China has not faced a structural shortage of teachers, it suggests that many entrants have relatively low levels of intrinsic motivation for the profession (Thompson-Lee, See, & Klassen, 2025).

Before the macro education reform in the 1980s, schools in China were run by the Party-state and typically operated as *danwei* (work-unit)[2], characterised by the tight state and

[2] The *danwei* (work-unit) was the basic social and administrative organisation in China from 1950s to 1990s, providing employment, housing, welfare, and identity. It is said that the *danwei* is with a person's *sheng-lao-bing-si*, or 'in birth as in old age, in illness as in death' (Bakken, 2000. p. 34).

party control that most teachers worked in the same school until retirement (Walker & Qian, 2012). The market-oriented reforms of the past four decades brought radical restructuring to the schooling system and the individualisation of employment (Yan, 2009). Teaching was gradually transformed into a performance-driven and competitive profession within a stratified labour market, alongside the proliferation of private schools and marketised training programmes (Kipnis, 2011; Mok, 2000). Since around 2018, amid growing economic uncertainty and shrinking employment opportunities elsewhere, teaching posts in public schools (i.e., state-run, government-funded schools) have regained its appeal, even as competition for entry has grown fiercer. As I wrote this introduction in September 2025, a viral news report on a teacher recruitment fair sparked widespread discussion across China about the intensifying competition for teaching positions. The report included a large-scale job fair held at a normal university in Chongqing Municipality, where thousands of applicants vied for a few hundred *bianzhi* (state-authorised establishment) posts across education departments in a neighbouring province. Some graduates began queuing at dawn, while others paid intermediaries for a place in line, as crowds surged through the gates to hand in their applications once the fair opened at 9 a.m. Similar scenes were reported elsewhere in cities across Zhejiang Province, as many as 90% of applicants for school-level teaching posts held master's degrees, with more than half in certain subjects holding doctorates; among these employment quests, the highest competition ratio reached 107:1 (Hangzhou.Com.Cn, 2025).

This social frenzy surrounding teaching posts in public schools and the broader civil service sector in urban areas did not come out of the thin air but reflected the convergence of an economic slowdown since the late 2010s, with private sectors facing crackdown, layoffs and shrinkage (Dong, et al., 2022); heightened uncertainty resulted from increased political tightening and censoring over public expression and media production (Sun & Zhao, 2021; Ye & Zhao, 2023); social fatigue in the post-pandemic era

(Chen, Yu, & Cao, 2023). In the field of education, in the wake of the *Double Reduction* in 2021, which curtailed private compulsory education institutions, many teachers and recent graduates were directed towards the public schools (Qian, Walker, & Chen, 2024). Persistent precarity and ambivalence have led teaching posts to be reconsidered as a viable route to stability and respectability, notwithstanding, as I will show shortly, a substantial number of teachers in urban schools employed outside the *bianzhi*, or state-authorised establishment, system.

Against this backdrop, those who choose to become teachers today are often less driven by a 'calling' than by a strong desire to 'land ashore' (*Shang'an*), a buzzword widely circulating on Chinese social media to signify achieving security after prolonged precarious employment conditions and most commonly associated with passing highly competitive civil service examinations (Wang, 2025). *Guangming Daily*, a Party-affiliated national newspaper, notes that while teaching is perceived as a refuge from precarity, the everyday realities of work reveal different levels of tension, ranging from disenchantment to burnout, as teachers are constrained by heavy workload, accountability demands, and bureaucratic hierarchies. The news reported that what initially appeared to offer the possibility of *tangping* (lying flat) soon turned into an unexpected encounter with yet another regime of *neijuan* (involution), a suffocating sense of being trapped in relentless, low-yield competition (Guangming Daily, 2024).

This raises a further question: why does entry into what is perceived as a secure profession so often lead teachers into intense competition? Are these tensions merely the result of the long-standing exam-oriented (*yingshi*) education system shaped by the *gaokao* (China's national college entrance examinations) (e.g., Huang, 2023)? In what follows, I suggest that the tensions in which teachers find themselves embedded should be understood as part of national governance processes in educational and social sectors. These include: first, decentralisation policies and the introduction of market

mechanisms and competition into the schooling system, which have contributed to contradictions between nation-state and market forces within the sector; and second, the influence of *suzhi* discourse in governing social and individual conduct, thereby shaping the meanings attached to schooling as well as teachers' processes of self-making.

1.2.2 Introducing Competition to Local Schools

The problems of tight regulation and intense competitions facing teacher education and education more broadly are the repercussions of a series of economic and political reforms implemented since China's transformation from a planned to a market economy in the late 1970s (Harvey, 2005; Zhao, 2016). To make education suitable for the emerging market-oriented economy and China's conviction to be an international power, decentralisation policy was implemented to empower the role of local governments, including urban districts (*qu*) and rural counties (*xian*), in financing and administrating education (Compulsory Education Law, 2006). As a result, these local authorities took assumed primary responsibility for financing education. In 2014, for example, around 82% of national public education expenditure—that is, within China's overall education budget encompassing central and local governments—was paid by local governments (MoE, 2015). The policy also encouraged diversification of educational funding through alternative sources, including funds, donations, and tuition fees, rather than relying solely on national support. For example, between 2000 to 2009, central and local government allocations together accounted for less than 70% of total educational expenditure, with the rest of investment drawn from social sources (MoE, 2024b).

In line with the global rise of neoliberalism, competition mechanisms were introduced within local educational systems to stimulate innovation, efficiency, and effectiveness (Robertson, 2000). While the central government retained its control over the aims of education, teaching materials, textbooks, and reform agendas, local schools were increasingly exposed to market pressures and were encouraged to secure resources on

their own (Ngok, 2007; Zhao, 2015). These resources encompassed both economic capital, ranging from government allocations to non-transparent private donations (e.g., school-selection fees; see Section 3.5.1), and human capital, including teachers and students (Wu, 2012, 2013; Zhou, Mau, & Jordan, 2022).

This decentralisation policy is notable because, while market mechanisms have penetrated nearly every sphere of life in China, the centralised state apparatus continues to exert strong control and influence. The Party-state's catchphrase of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' encapsulates China's effort to construct a state-manipulated market economy which Harvey (2005) observes, 'incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralised control' (p. 120).

Another major reform effort sought to restructure school hierarchies by replacing the *key-ordinary* dual school system with an *exemplary school* system (The State Council, 2001). The so-called 'key schools' were first set up in the 1950s when the newly founded state desperately needed to identify and cultivate talent, and they were granted preferential access to educational resources. The dual system was officially abolished in 2006, when revised Compulsory Education Law (2006) called for a more equitable education system within a marketised environment. Under the new principle of 'exemplary schools', any schools could apply for the title provided it demonstrated progress and achievements in promoting *suzhi* (quality) education. The reform aimed to make exemplary schools models of 'best practice' that could lead others towards the effective implementation of quality education (Wu, 2012). Local education authorities, in accordance with this new school review system, incorporated the pursuit of exemplarity into performance evaluations and administrative inspections, turning the reform into a competition-based in quantifiable criteria (Zhao, 2015).

Against this backdrop, the meaning of exemplarity itself became diversified, contested,

and difficult to pin down. The state, local education authorities, school leaders, students and parents each upheld their own visions of 'exemplarity': what facilities a school possesses; how many awards teachers or students earn; how many high-performing students or highly qualified teachers it attracts; what educational ethos it holds. For local officials and school principals, most of whom also held Party-cadre positions, exemplary schools became highly attractive in that their establishment was a visible political accomplishment (*zhengji*) formally evaluated in cadre assessments. As Walker and Qian (2012) showed, a school principal's state-cadre status was valued much highly than their designated professional ranking, and the opportunity to be promoted to a higher-level school remained the dominant motivator for most school leaders. Yet for the public, the new school system has brought little real change to the existing hierarchies between schools; it merely rebranded them (Walker & Qian, 2012). Former key schools were often the first to receive the 'exemplary' title and the distinction between key and ordinary schools has remained in common parlance for parents and students (Jin, Wang, & Huang, 2023; Tian, Liu, & Liu, 2022; Zhou, Mau, & Jordan, 2022).

As a result, teachers are confronted with conflicting demands at three levels: (1) the central government's ideological mandates on what and how they should teach; (2) the local government's quantifiable evaluations of how well they do, which determine the allocation of national funding; and (3) the pressures from market competition for additional resources such as tuition fees, private donations, and high-performing students (Zhao, 2016). For novice teachers, these pressures are even more acute, as they learn to teach while navigating these competing forces. As frontline actors of educational reforms and policy implementation, teachers play a crucial role in interpreting and contextualising macro-level agendas (Han, 2017). Although a growing body of research shows that teachers in China often demonstrate considerable resilience and moral commitment in responding to such demands (Gu & Li, 2013; Gu, 2018; Liu & Chu, 2022), less attention has been paid to the conditions and processes through which such qualities

are cultivated and maintained. This study therefore extends previous research on teacher education through a micro-analysis of teacher identity-in-talk, illuminating how teachers negotiate the tensions and sustain their professional identities.

1.2.3 Governing Education via *Suzhi*

'Rule by morality was more widespread in traditional China than rule by law', Bakken (2000, p. 8) argues in his seminal work *The Exemplary Society*, in which he traces how moral exemplarity has been rearticulated across imperial, socialist, and reform-era China. He describes China as a disciplinary society grounded in norms. Such a society, he contends, is more enduring than one based on coercive force, for its purpose is to bind people together through moral consensus. Regulation, in this sense, operates through 'willed consent' and functions as a form of 'positive restraint', rather than relying on violence or punitive control (p. 8).

This long-standing approach of governance finds its contemporary resonance in the discourse of *suzhi*. Roughly translated to 'quality' in English, *suzhi* has become a key governance tool in China's projects of modernisation and urbanisation (Kipnis, 2006, 2007; Palmer & Winiger, 2019). Originally used to explain the nation's lack of international place by attributing it to the 'low quality' of the rural populations, *suzhi* framed these groups as deficient in education, discipline, bodily health, and moral cultivation (Sigley, 2009, p. 547). Over time, *suzhi* has evolved into an omnipresent notion that permeates everyday discourse (Lou, 2024; Zhang, 2023). Its meanings extend from a developmental discourse of 'backwardness' to a broad evaluative framework through which individuals and populations are evaluated in terms of mannerisms, appearances and looks, education background, professional competence, ethical comportment, and other minute practices that could define a person of quality (Zhang, 2023). Functioning as 'a measure of human value', *suzhi* classifies those deemed to possess worthiness and utility, typically urban, middle-class citizens, as 'high *suzhi*',

while those lacking such attributes, most notably rural migrants, are labelled 'low *suzhi*' (Sigley, 2009, p. 539).

In this sense, *Suzhi* exemplifies what Foucault terms the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 2003, p. 138), a mode of governmentality in which individuals are shaped to govern themselves through normative assessment of value, civility, and self-improvement. *Suzhi* also produces divergent desires between urban and rural populations, producing domestic stratification and social hierarchy in China (Zhang, 2023). Market reforms and growing privatisation of educational provision have given rise to an urban middle class whose desire is expressed through the relentless accumulation of educational capital to build 'quality' in their children. In contrast, for rural migrants, the desire to acquire *suzhi* takes the form of mobility, or, of 'being uprooted' from their countryside to urban cities (Anagnost, 2004, p. 192). Yet the reality that they were perceived as lacking *suzhi* renders them perpetually 'others', excluded from urban citizenship and trapped within the *hukou* system (i.e., household registration) (Anagnost, 2004).

In the field of education, *suzhi* has become one of the most influential themes in China's contemporary educational policy. Initially introduced in the 1980s as the antithesis of 'exam-oriented education' (*yingshi jiaoyu*), *suzhi* education has since expanded as a central rhetoric of reform. This signifies a policy shift from structural issues towards the improvement of schooling, teaching, and student qualities, alongside continued emphasis on exam achievement (Kipnis, 2006). Drawing inspiration from Western education theories, *suzhi* education advocates the holistic development of students across five dimensions—moral integrity, intellectual ability, physical fitness, aesthetic sensibility, and practical labour—each can be embodied through a long period of cultivation.

Suzhi governs teachers' aspirations, desires, and decisions about where to teach, which

city or school to join, and what kind of teacher they hope to become. Through dominant discourses that map 'quality' onto urban modernity, prosperity, and cultural capital, teachers deemed 'high *suzhi*' are often drawn to well-resourced urban regions. Meanwhile, underdeveloped rural areas continue to struggle with shortages of qualified teachers and educational resources. The result is that urban schools face intense competition for teaching posts, producing shortages of state-authorised *bianzhi* posts despite an ample supply of qualified teachers. Recent public debates on the abolition of the *bianzhi* system have drawn attention to the rigidity of China's state-authorised teacher establishment, whose fixed post quotas are unable to adjust to demographic change, producing a contradiction in which urban areas face *bianzhi* scarcity, with a significant number of teachers employed on non-*bianzhi* contracts, while rural regions remain sufficiently staffed but still lack qualified teachers (Wu, 2024).

In response to such disparities, national initiatives such as the *Tuition-Free Normal University Student Scheme*[3] were designed to attract high-achieving graduates from economically underdeveloped regions in order to address these disparities; however, research shows that many graduates, despite obligations to serve in rural schools, were primarily motivated by institutional prestige and aspirations for upward mobility (Wang & Gao, 2013; Xu & Tang, 2023). Consequently, they often sought positions in high-performing urban schools within their home provinces rather than remaining in under-resourced rural areas, a choice shaped by graduates' preferences for urban living, better professional development opportunities, and the weak enforcement of mandatory rural service requirements (Liao & Yuan, 2017). In this context of uneven resource allocation, high-quality teachers cluster in a small number of exemplary schools, leaving other

3 *Tuition-Free Normal University Student Scheme*, or *Free Teacher Education*, introduced in September 2007, awards student teachers with free tuition fees, living accommodation and a maintenance stipend during their teacher preparation education, and those admitted into the scheme would enter into a contract with the governments of their localities of origin that obliges them to serve as teachers in the local schools for six years upon graduation.

schools with limited means to disrupt this cycle (Qian, 2019). Strong teachers themselves often aspire to transfer to better-resourced schools, further entrenching stratification within the educational landscape (Qian, 2019).

This study does not centre on the urban-rural disparity; however, as a researcher in education concerned with social justice, I insist that any discussion of intensified competition among teachers and schools, the sorting and culling of students through academic performance, and the anxieties of the urban middle-class parents who exhaust their children with non-stop training must remain conscious of the regional inequalities that underlie these dynamics. The sharp contrast between the plenitude of urbanity and the lack of rurality in China is captured in Anagnost's (2004, p. 199) description of the 'ghostly doubling' of the rural migrant and urban child. At the same time, within urban areas themselves, similar patterns of stratification can be observed, as prestigious schools attract highly qualified teachers and high-performing students, while less prestigious schools offer more limited opportunities for professional development.

Some scholars argue the *Suzhi* discourse resonates with the Western neoliberal governmentality, which emphasises choice, entrepreneurialism, and individual autonomy through the shrinking of the state and the decentralisation of governance (Wu, 2018; Yan, 2009). However, others contend that *suzhi* does not fit neatly within a neoliberal framework (Kipnis, 2007). Despite its four decades of market reform, China is still grounded in bureaucratic state control, and *suzhi* continues to function as a moral justification embedded within the legacies of the Chinese Marxist ideal of the all-round development of individuals and Confucian thoughts of self-cultivation (Sigley, 2009). Further, originating in a historical moment when China sought to compete with global powers, *suzhi* has carried nationalism at its core (Kipnis, 2007). At all levels of education and across subject areas, students are reminded of the nation's past humiliations prior to Communist Party of China's rule, and of the Party's role as the saviour that restores

China's dignity, rejuvenation, and modernity (Fong, 2021; Yang, 2014). The discourse of *suzhi*, in sum, shapes aspirations, desires, and regulation of teachers and schools, reproducing social hierarchy and educational inequality in China, while also contributing a source of the tensions teachers encounter in everyday school life.

1.3 Rationale and Aims of Research

As the preceding discussion shows, teachers in China today grapple with the dominant discourses that often appear impermeable to contestation. Yet, structural constraints should not be mistaken for the inescapable limits on individual agency (Gu & Benson, 2014; Clarke, 2008; Holland & Lachicotte, 2007). As Edwards et al., (2002) observe, teacher education worldwide is shaped by both centralising and centrifugal forces: while standardisation seeks to reduce regional disparities and ensure equitable provision, the rapidly changing global landscape—from the advent of artificial intelligence, the post-pandemic disruptions, to escalating geopolitical tensions—calls for creativity, adaptability, and risk-taking. Within these shifting conditions, teachers are expected to move beyond standardised curricula, embrace technological and cultural innovation, and create new learning possibilities for their students (Clarke, 2008). As active agents in their professional worlds, they constantly negotiate, take up, and sometimes resist the roles and positions ascribed to them.

Teacher professional identity becomes an increasingly prominent field of inquiry in teacher education and development. Research highlights its significance in empowering teachers to act reflectively and agentively amid institutional and societal pressures (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Borg, 2006), in illuminating the psychological constructs, such as self-efficacy and reflexivity, essential to professional growth (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Tatto et al., 2018), and in informing the implementation and recalibration of educational reforms and policies (Clarke, 2008; Han, 2017). A substantial body of research has underscored the value of narrative inquiry in exploring

teachers' inner voices, self-reflection, and changing identities (e.g., Hayes, 2016; Tsui, 2007). However, relatively less attention has been paid to how teacher identity is enacted in moment-by-moment interactions, and to the linguistic resources through which teacher identities are established and maintained (Li, 2017; Gray & Morton, 2018).

Previous studies have focused either on the role of social structures—whether institutional, national, or international—in identity formation (e.g., Kipnis, 2011; Woronov, 2015), or on teacher identity to explore how teachers see themselves and the work they do (Bakhuizen, 2011; Block, 2007). The study, however, attends both to the social structures within which teachers are formed and which inform how they make sense of themselves, and to how teachers, as agentive beings, navigate the complex demands of learning to teach in their professional lives. Situated within the sociocultural foundations of Chinese urban compulsory education, shaped by authoritarian control, Confucian thought, and neoliberal ideals, this study seeks to uncover the subtle processes of teacher identity construction by examining the discursive strategies employed by novice teachers in real time, and to explore how their identity negotiations are embedded within the broader cultural, political, and institutional assumptions that govern the meanings of 'qualified' or 'exemplary' teachers in urban China.

An ethnographic study of teachers by a teacher

In the summer of 2017, when I first worked as a novice English teacher at a private secondary school in China, with a mix of anticipation and trepidation, I could never have imagined that five years later I would conduct a study of novice teachers in my hometown city. My mentor at the time told me that she expected novice teachers to be like a piece of 'blank slate' upon which she could create whatever image required by the institution. Like many other novice teachers in the school, burdened by institutional requirements and disenchanted by the everyday realities of teaching, I typically responded to mentors' comments and corrections with the word "Okay". My habitual reliance upon this token,

I later realised, reflected the hierarchical structure that emphasised obedience, duty, and compromise in teacher learning.

Empirical data of this study was grounded in six months of fieldwork conducted between February and July 2023. At the end of February 2023, I returned to my hometown, Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan Province in the southwestern China, with the aim of examining how novice teachers learn to teach in urban public secondary schools. Choosing Chengdu as the research site was driven not only by logistical convenience and access considerations, but also by its ambition and status as a pioneer of urbanisation and modernisation in western China. Having lived in Chengdu for more than two decades as a resident, student, and teacher, I carried with me a prolonged immersion, an intimate familiarity, and an emotional attachment that had consciously and unconsciously shaped my perceptions of the city and its shifting landscape. Over the past twenty years, I had witnessed its rapid urban transformation into a metropolitan centre of more than twenty million people, accounting for roughly one-quarter of Sichuan Province's population while occupying only about 2.5% of its total area. Like other Chinese megacities, Chengdu's population growth has been driven by large-scale rural-to-urban migration and the demographic shifts following the lifting of one-child policy in 2016, both of which have profoundly reshaped the city's education system. During the 2021-22 academic year, for instance, around 2,000 new full-time secondary school teachers were appointed, evenly distributed between junior and senior secondary schools. Within this context, standardisation proved particularly effective, as Chengdu's education system remains centralised and multi-tiered. District educational departments serve both as branches of local governments and as subordinate units to higher educational departments at the municipal, provincial and national levels, responsible for implementing educational policies and reforms. This organisational arrangement means that schools and teachers operate within a tightly regulated environment where top-down policy implementation is closely monitored both vertically

and horizontally, enabling standardisation to be enforced effectively.

Throughout the fieldwork, I pursued two interrelated lines of inquiry. The first involved a case study of novice teachers in public junior secondary schools (Year 7–9, typically from aged 13–15), focusing on their professional learning and identity construction. To explore these, I conduced semi-structured and unstructured interviews while observing and recording key professional practices, including classroom teaching, mentoring sessions, weekly teaching meetings, and teaching competitions. My personal and professional network helped me secure introductions to several schools. The Heads of English Department (HED) in these schools invited me to attend teacher group meetings, which marked my first encounters with novice teachers and their colleagues. Following these meetings, I was able to approach fifteen novice teachers, provide them with research information, and eventually recruit five participants from two schools who expressed willingness to take part. Prior to each observation or interview, I arranged appointments with participants at least one day in advance. Throughout the six months of fieldwork, I visited the two collaborating schools, pseudonymously referred to as School A and School B, three to five times per week.

The second line of inquiry involved a broader ethnographic examination of the district-level education and teacher development, enabling me to move beyond the limitations of studying only two schools and to better understand the broader contextual dynamics. Through a chance connection, I was introduced to Ms. Wei (pseudonymised), an officer in the local education authority, who generously facilitated my access to a wide range of local professional activities. These include teaching competitions, district- and city- level teacher training sessions, and administrative meetings, where I was able to interact with teachers, school leaders, and local educational officers. At times, I was placed at the front of the meeting rooms or competition venues, positioned as a prestigious guest and introduced as ‘Dr. Liu from Oxford University’, despite my repeated clarifications that I

had not completed my degree yet. Occasionally, I was invited to offer comments during these events, where I sensed the tense, performative atmosphere and the hierarchies that permeated professional gatherings and interactions. Over the course of the fieldwork, I visited twelve of the sixteen public junior secondary schools in the district.

The study is an inquiry informed by my lived experience as a former schoolteacher in China, oscillating between empathy, critical investigation, and self-reflexivity. Being a local and a former teacher, fluent in the Sichuan dialect, greatly facilitated my access to schools and rapport with participants. Conversations with teachers often unfolded naturally and candidly over lunches and coffees: they would switch to Sichuan dialect with me and did not hold back from sharing stories about their work, relationships with mentors, or daily frustrations. When woven together, these fragments offered me a vivid sense of their experiences, perspectives, and affective worlds, as well as the educational structures within which their processes of learning to teach unfolded. My personal experience profoundly shaped the study, to the extent that observing other novices' struggles, compromises, and desires was like revisiting my own.

Yet, my positionality as a researcher allowed and required me to maintain a certain social and analytical distance. My institutional affiliation with a British university also positioned as an outsider, particularly in my interactions with school leaders. During my visit to School A, a middle leader cautioned me not to "speak poorly of the school", recalling that, not long ago a researcher had "said too much" about a nearby school. These encounters reminded me to tread carefully in maintaining rapport with the novice teachers. To mitigate potential power imbalances, I foregrounded the reflective process of study, emphasising that its purpose was to explore rather than assessing them. I reiterated my commitment to preserving anonymity and confidentiality and maintained open communication with the participants to ensure that their participation remained completely voluntary. Through these practices of care, attentiveness, and patience, I was

able to cultivate a space of mutual respect and ethical engagement throughout the fieldwork. Whenever I used recording equipment to capture conversational details, I sought permission and ensured the setup was unobtrusive. In moments where recording was impractical, such as during informal or fleeting exchanges, I relied on memory to reconstruct conversations and wrote detailed fieldnotes immediately after leaving the sites. Over six months fieldwork, these practices yielded a rich body of data, including observations, fieldnotes, interviews, photos, and audio recordings. Further reflections on these processes, along with the ethical considerations guiding them, are presented in the Methodology chapter.

1.4 Overview of the Thesis

Chapter 1 comprises the introduction of the thesis and sets the sociocultural and political scene within Chinese schooling system. It outlines the aims and rationale for undertaking research on novice teachers in urban schools in China, and also highlights the use of ethnography in exploring teacher learning and professional practices. **Chapter 2** provides a review of the relevant literature and presents the conceptual framework underpinning the research design. It engages with key concepts such as *identity*, *agency*, and *power*, and discusses how their diverse articulations across the social sciences shape the theoretical grounding of this research. It highlights the significance of teacher professional identity in teacher education and the recent debates over methodological approaches to exploring it. **Chapter 3** details the research methodology and design, foregrounding the paradigms employed to understand the link between teachers' language practices and their professional experiences. Additionally, this chapter situates the teachers and their schools within the sociocultural and historical contexts and provides a detailed description of data collection and analysis methods. It also reflects on ethical considerations, the researcher's reflexivity, and validity of this research.

The following four chapters present the main findings of the research, each examining the identities of novice teachers from a different analytical angle. **Chapter 4** investigates the discursive construction of novice teachers within the complex and controversial setting of teaching competitions, tracing the nuanced interplay between power asymmetries and individual agency through two teachers' stories. It explores how novice teachers complied with or resisted the assigned identity of 'virtuoso performer' (Paine, 1990, p. 49), and how they defined and repositioned themselves as they recounted their experiences in these high-stakes competitions during research interviews. **Chapter 5** turns to the processes of learning to teach through mentor-novice relationships. It examines how hierarchical expectations of mentorship are negotiated and reinterpreted within everyday mentoring practices, drawing on an in-depth case study of one novice teacher and her mentoring sessions. The chapter also unpacks the familial relationships between novices and mentors: marked by care, trust, obligation, and moralised expectations, they not only bind teachers together but also offer emotional relief amid precarity.

Chapter 6 offers the discursive construction of the novice teachers' professional identities in classroom interactions. Drawing on detailed transcripts of classroom teaching, it considers how novice teachers enacted routine practices in recurrent of English lesson activities, improvised responses to students in real time, and negotiated their teacher identities. Interview data further illustrates how they reflected on the routinised classroom practices and performed their professional identities. **Chapter 7** provides ethnographic portraits of five novice teachers and traces how their narratives allow us to understand their experiences, conflicts, and challenges, as well as how they place their individual agency in relation to external demands. By situating these stories within the social, cultural, and institutional landscapes that contour their work, this chapter illuminates the interplay of choice, desire, constraints, and interrelationships between self and structure.

Chapter 8, the final chapter of the thesis, provides a discussion of findings, offers a synthesis relating to research questions, and addresses how research findings on novice teacher identity in Chinese context may further critically inquire into the implications of teacher education for induction and broader teacher education and professional development.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Much of this study is grounded in the concept of *identity*, a notion that has been much celebrated yet deeply problematised (Bendle, 2002). Within the psychoanalytic tradition, the *subject* can be most simply understood as the 'I'. *Subjectivity* arises as the individual comes to recognise their own existence through the act of saying 'I' in relation to others (Yang, 2014). Identity, however, extends beyond this basic sense of the self, towards the more complex and enduring question of 'Who am I'.

This chapter, therefore, firstly seeks to delineate the multifaceted and contested nature of identity and examine key related constructs such as subjectivity and agency in current discussions of identity, alongside a review of Eastern conceptions concerning identity and the self, whose philosophical traditions have long been overlooked, yet resonates with Western decentred understandings of the fluid, relational nature of the self.

Secondly, I examine the potential of exploring identity through close attention to micro-level details in real-time social interactions. I highlight the importance of integrating theoretical and analytical tools from both sociolinguistics and ethnography, which enables the linking of linguistic and interactional practices with broader educational issues such as inequality, accountability, and wellbeing. Furthermore, in understanding the discursive nature of identity, I examine the role of language in shaping identity as a continuous, never-ending pursuit of coherence between the symbolic and prescribed self and an imagined sense of a 'unified' self.

The final section focuses on teacher professional identity (TPI). I discuss why it has become a particularly relevant concept in teacher education, not only for its exploratory power in unpacking the complexities of learning to teach and working as a teacher, but also for its potential as a practical tool that enables teaching professionals to navigate the

everyday challenges in school life.

2.1 Identity, Agency, and Subjectivity

Acknowledging the salience of identity in educational research allows me to enlist an eclectic constellation of theories and analytical tools, spanning from *sociocultural anthropology*, *poststructuralism*, *psychoanalysis*, and Eastern philosophical conceptions of self and identity. Within the sociocultural tradition, which is arguably the most influential orientation in contemporary identity research, identity is conceived as fluid, dynamic, relational, and socially constructed rather than fixed, inherent, or immutable (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007; Norton, 2013). Some scholars preferred to use the notion of *identification* in place of identity to foreground its processual and ongoing character (Hall, 1996; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Yet, while the emphasis on identification moves beyond an understanding of identity as fixed entities, it often obscures the structural inequalities that shape 'who can identify with what' and implicitly assumes the subject's capacity to identify with particular discourses or positions; in this sense, the notion of agency remains undertheorised and largely tacit (Anthias, 2002; Yang, 2014). To elaborate this further, it is necessary to consider how the subject has been conceptualised in the history of Western thought.

Descartes' famous proposition 'Cogito, ergo sum' (I think, therefore I am) provided an essentialist vision of human subject as the possessor of consciousness endowed with rational thought. This formulation became the foundation to Enlightenment humanism and modern Western epistemology. By the late twentieth century, however, this 'unified' conception of the self had been significantly unsettled. As Hall (1996) observes, de-centring forces radically transformed the understandings of the relationship between self and society, shifting from an essentialist notion of the self towards more fragmented forms of subjectivity that are socially and discursively constituted. For example, within the Freudian/psychoanalytical tradition, the rational, thinking subject is understood as

far from transparent; instead, it is motivated by unconscious drives and irrational desires that elude conscious awareness. From a Foucauldian perspective, the notion of an inner, pre-given essence of the subject is rejected; the subject can be apprehended only through its positioning within its relations to the structures. In this view, subjectivity is coterminous with the subject positions made available within such discursive structures. Foucault (2003, 2007) conceptualises subjectivity achieved through the result of what he terms 'technologies of the self' (2007, p. 147); that is, the everyday, mundane practices through which individuals regulate, discipline, and orient themselves towards subjectivity or subject positions.

These de-centring, poststructuralist perspectives, though emerging from distinct theoretical frameworks and yielding divergent results, share a common concern with displacing the essentialist conceptions of the 'I' as explicit, static, and fixed from social structures (Block, 2007). Collectively, they contributed to a re-definition of identity, one that views identity not as a fixed entity but as something produced through its relations to power, discourse, and desire, and that conceives individual agency shaped and constrained by social structures, disciplinary technologies, and unconscious drives. Identity, therefore, must be theorised in tandem with the notion of agency, as articulated in Hall's (2006) conceptualisation of identity:

> The notion that an effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires not only that the subject is 'hailed', but that the subject invests in the position, means that suturing has to be thought of as an articulation, rather than a one-sided process. (Hall, 2006, p. 6)

In his view, individual is deemed as a highly self-agentive being for whom identity constitutes an act of investment in, or identification with, pre-existing subject positions. This argument resonates with the central critique of the Foucauldian approach to subjectivity, which tends to understate the potentials for agency, negotiation, and

resistance on the part of the subject, while it illuminates the ways in which subjects are produced through regimes of power.

Eastern thoughts demonstrate parallel yet distinctive understandings of self, identity, and agency. Ho (1995) identifies 'psychological decentring' (p. 166) as the shared theme across major Eastern systems of thought, a notion that resonates with poststructuralist conceptions of the decentred subject in the West. Ho argues that Eastern philosophies lead individuals through different intellectual and moral paths to liberate themselves from a self-contained ego. In Confucianism, the self is defined through social relationships and moral hierarchies, articulated in the Five Cardinal Relationships—between ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, siblings, and friends. Identity thus raises from one's moral position within these relationships, rendering 'a subdued self' in the Confucianist thought (ibid. p. 118). Agency, in this sense, emerges from within self-constraint as a mode of self-governance through which individuals align their conduct with the moral order, thereby reinforcing social cohesion and harmony.

Taoism (also known as Daoism) presents the self as selfless—not through annihilation, as in Buddhism, but through unity with the cosmic process. Life and death are embraced as natural and complementary expressions of the *Dao* (the Way), while harmony arises from balance and reciprocity (*yin-yang*) rather than control or hierarchy (Li, X., 2006). Agency in Taoist philosophy is conceived as a capacity to act responsively to the natural flow of the world rather than to resist it (Ho, 1995). This principle is captured in the notion of *wu-wei*, literally translated as *non-action*, though the notion is more accurately understood as acting without forced intention or ego-driven striving (Li, X., 2006).

Buddhism radicalises the de-centring self through the doctrine of no-self (*anatta*), where salvation (*Nirvana*) is achieved by extinguishing ego and cravings through meditation. Ho (1995) draws an analogy between Buddhism and Freud's notion of *decathexis*

(withdrawal of *Iibido*), noting that both involve the extinction of desire, though the Buddhist cause is moral and transcendental rather than instinctual.

Western and Eastern philosophies converge in their decentred conceptions of the self, yet they take fundamentally different paths in realising individual agency. By contrasting these philosophical orientations, I aim to ground our understanding of identity as a moral, relational process entrenched in Eastern traditions that continue to shape social conduct and value systems in China. This study, however, is primarily empirical rather than theoretical, with a focus on exploring how these philosophical perspectives can illuminate the interplay between structural conditions and individual agency in Chinese school contexts.

The aim of the research echoes recent appeals for more empirically grounded studies of identities. Bendle (2002) cautions against the excessive and uncritical use of the politicised and undertheorised concept of identity, arguing that without insights from psychoanalysis, identity research risks portraying individuals as infinitely malleable and fluid, lacking an enduring psychic core. In the same vein, Du Gay (2007) advocates a sociological-anthropological approach that examines the concrete forms of 'personhood' (p. 11) that individuals develop through their participation in, or subjection to, particular normative and technical systems of conduct. His perspective stresses the contingent nature of personhood and warns against detaching individuals from specific social and institutional contexts that shape the meaning of their identities.

Responding to these concerns, this study seeks to provide a concrete and empirically grounded account of teacher personhood and agency. By examining how novice teachers negotiate their identities through institutional events and rituals, hierarchical relationships, and classroom interactions, the study highlighted the powerful discourses that govern the appropriate forms of teaching and shape who teachers can become. At

the same time, it foregrounds agency as a contextually situated and relational capacity, improvised in everyday professional practices and exercised both in alignment with and in resistance to the conditions under which teacher identities are negotiated and (re)constructed.

2.2 Unpacking Identity Through Social Interaction

While identity has often been theorised as a fluid and dynamic construct, a persistent tension remains between its use to describe the enduring senses of self and transient, situational ones. To address this conundrum, Baynham (2014) distinguished between the performative and portable dimensions of identity, proposing that identity is always both 'brought about' in interaction and 'brought along' across contexts (p. 67). The performative aspect emphasises identity as something that is enacted and negotiated in the moment; by contrast, the portable aspect highlights how individuals carry with them certain histories, dispositions, belongings, affiliations that shape and constrain what can be performed in particular sociocultural contexts. In what follows, I review the relationship between identity and interaction from two disciplines: sociolinguistics and psychoanalysis.

In sociolinguistics, both performative and portable identities can be examined and located through any piece of semiotic resources in interaction (Blommaert, 2005). These semiotic resources include but are not limited to language, gesture, laughter, movement, pause, or the design of narrative structure, all of which can index and point to wider macro-sociological categories such as gender, class, occupation, and socio-economic status (Silverstein, 2003) or social relationships to the interlocutors (De Fina, 2003). Bucholtz and Hall (2005) enrich the view of identity in social interaction, proposing that identity work in social interaction can be examined at three levels:

(a) macro-level demographic categories;

(b) local, ethnographically specific cultural positions; and

(c) temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles.

(Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 592)

This conceptual structure successfully builds links between fine-grained, real-time linguistic and interactional detail and wider social, cultural, political and historical phenomena. In addition to identifying which types of identity can be made relevant, their study also expands to examine the processes through which identities are indexed in social interaction, or what they term the 'indexicality principle' (p. 594):

(a) overt mention of identity categories and labels;

(b) implicatures and presuppositions regarding one's own or others' identity position;

(c) displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk, as well as interactional footings and participant roles; and

(d) the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups.

(Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 594)

Together, this framework provides a useful analytical lens for examining *what* identities become relevant and *how* they are interactionally constructed, negotiated, and made meaningful. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou's (2008) model of *positioning* offers a way to conceptualise the micro analysis of narratives-in-interaction as a lens for examining the micro-genetic processes through which identities are seen as 'in-the-making' or 'coming-into-being' (p. 379). Their framework provides a bridge between narrative inquiry and Conversation Analysis (CA), situating identity work within the analytic vocabulary established by conversation-analytic traditions. For sociolinguistic scholars, CA has been immensely productive in producing insights into identity-in-interaction by examining how identities are not simply expressed but accomplished through recurring patterns of talk and situated linguistic use (see Jefferson, 2004; Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1978; Schegloff, 1992, 1997; ten Have, 2007). Central to CA is the analysis of

the sequential organisation of talk, including mechanisms such as turn-taking, adjacency pairs, repair practices, and the unfolding of interactional sequences (ten Have, 2007). These structures demonstrate how participants, through moment-by-moment interactional choices, negotiate meaning, display understanding, and position themselves and others. By attending to the fine-grained organisation of interaction, CA offers a powerful tool for exploring how teacher identities are claimed, invoked, or resisted in real time (Li, 2017).

In the past decade, scholars proposed to integrate theoretical and methodological approaches from linguistics and ethnography to provide a comprehensive investigation of language within social life (Snell, Shaw, & Copland, 2015; Rampton, 2010; Copland & Creese, 2015). Snell et al. (2015) argue that linguistics usually seeks to generalise about language structure and use, whereas ethnography dwells in situated particularities to provide readers with apprehension of the fullness of the researched. By combining linguistics with ethnography, they argue, researchers can use ethnography to 'open up' linguistic analysis by adding openness and uncertainty, while using linguistics to 'tie down' ethnographic insights (p. 9). Rampton (2010) underscores two methodological tenets of linguistic ethnography particularly relevant to the design of this research. Firstly, he argues that 'the contexts for communication should be investigated rather than assumed, and meaning needs to be grasped ethnographically' (p. 2), highlight the need to examine communicative contexts in depth in order to understand how meanings are shaped in situ. Second, he notes that 'the internal organization of (oral) linguistic data needs to be analysed because identity, position and nuance are extensively signalled in the linguistic fine-grain' (p. 2), emphasising that close, fine-grained analysis allows researchers to uncover how individuals index and orient to identity in interaction, thus making it an invaluable tool for understanding language as situated social practice. Copland and Creese (2015) argue that the interpretive approach of linguistic ethnography works to 'make the familiar strange' (p. 12), exhorting researchers to

examine underlying institutional and cultural norms that frame and influence social practices and interactions. This paradigm calls for a grounded and reflective lens, pushing researchers to question assumed norms and explore how language shapes and is shaped by social life it operates within.

Just as knowledge is unequally distributed to individual members of the community, individuals have unequal access to semiotic resources (Silverstein, 2003). Such inequalities shape whose voices are heard, whose meanings are legitimised, and whose identities are rendered visible or marginalised in interaction. When access to symbolic and discursive resources is uneven, participants occupy asymmetrical positions in meaning-making processes, as Blommaert (2005, p. 75) called 'centring institutions', where meaning systems are always tied to powerful actors. Such centring institutions often generate indexicalities to which individuals have to orient to. Their efforts to articulate key values of an individual or a group (e.g. a good student or an ideal mentor) always involve the processes of 'homogenization and uniformization' (p. 75) with its emphasis on the reduction of differences and the creation of the norm. Resistance and negotiation thus emerge as individuals attempt to re-signify or challenge dominant discourses that constrain their agency. Crucially, these processes unfold not mentally but in the immediacy of social interaction. It is through everyday talk, narratives, and embodied practices that such asymmetries are reproduced or resisted. Attending to identity in interaction allows us to see how power relations are enacted and how individuals mobilise specific resources to self-present and position themselves and others.

In institutional contexts such as education, these dynamics become particularly salient. For example, during teachers' social interactions where there are power asymmetries, experienced teachers who are recognised as having more access to specialised fields of knowledge may constrain the courses of action of novices, for example, by having the

rights to decide the topic or the design of whiteboard (Donaghue, 2020, 2022; Li, 2017). Such interactional asymmetries exemplify what Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012) term as 'deontic authority' (p. 297), whereby more powerful participants exercise control over others' actions to carry out particular tasks. At the same time, empirical evidence also shows that interaction is not entirely predetermined by institutional hierarchy. There might be some critical moments when novice teachers attempt to depart from their default identities, turn the tables on more experienced teachers, and exercise their agentive identity (Richards, 2006).

A second understanding of identity and social interaction is through a psychoanalytical perspective, which emphasises that the most intimate and internal to the self, such as fear, control, self-awareness, are produced in and through talk. Capps and Ochs (1995) demonstrate that the experience of self, particularly in pathological conditions like agoraphobia, is socially situated and linguistically mediated. Their work extends psychology beyond the boundaries of the individual mind to the realm of social interaction, storytelling, and meaning-making. Building on this tradition, the discipline of discursive psychology reconceptualises the Freudian notion of the 'unconscious', viewing it not as a hidden mental entity but as a discursive activity that can be enacted and examined in interaction (Capps & Ochs, 1995; Li, 2017). CA has been widely applied to the study of psychoanalytic therapy sessions, as illustrated in Peräkylä's work (2013), revealing how therapeutic talk becomes a site for the construction and transformation of selfhood.

To further understand the discursive nature of identity and the conditions that make its negotiation and (re)construction in interaction possible, it is useful to turn to a Lacanian psychoanalytical approach to identity, which highlights the role of *mirroring* in identity formation (Hall, 1996). Identity first emerges in what Lacan terms the mirror/imaginary stage, when the infant recognises its image in a reflective surface, identifies with the

specular image of (m)other and the self, and misrecognises this image as a coherent self (Clarke, 2017). This moment of identification produces an imaginary sense of wholeness, a unified 'I', that paradoxically originates outside the self. At the same time, this also marks entry into the symbolic realm of language, law, discourse. The Symbolic precedes and constitutes the subject: one becomes a subject only by assuming a position within the pre-existing signifiers. However, language, law, or discourse can never fully capture the totality and immediacy of lived experience, and elements such as desire, affect, trauma, or impulse always exceed what can be said or symbolised. As a result, the subject is socially and linguistically constituted, yet also divided and incomplete. In other words, we are never who they think we truly are; yet we have to be 'someone' and so spend our lives to retrieve this real, unified self through 'the restless, interminable, and unstaunchable flow of desire that is perhaps the essence of our being' (Clarke, 2017, p. 266). Identity is, therefore, an ongoing pursuit for coherence and recognition, continually negotiated through interaction and discourse, within the symbolic structures that both enable and constrain its formation.

Owning to its indispensable yet elusive nature, identity should be examined through diverse narratives and real-time interactions, across different levels, and through the application of varied theoretical lenses. Accordingly, this study attends to the stories teachers tell, the talk-in-interaction that unfolds within their professional practices and reflective encounters (e.g., research interviews), as well as the semiotic resources circulating through institutional contexts that prescribe what counts as a 'good' teacher. Through this inquiry, I seek to illuminate how each novice teacher acquires particular forms of professional identity through ongoing processes of negotiation and (re)construction.

2.3 Teacher Learning and Professional Identity

The growing scholarly interest in teacher identity can be attributed in part to the

increasing influence of situated learning theories, which have challenged cognitivist approaches to teacher learning (Barkhuizen, 2011; Morton & Gray, 2008). Theories such as situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998) have moved to centre stage in studies of teacher professional development (Liu & Xu, 2013). As reviewed in Section 2.1, identity can be seen as 'an effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position' (Hall, 1996, p. 6). Teacher professional identity (TPI), as a form of occupational or institutional identity, can therefore be conceived as an ongoing 'suturing process' through which individuals recognise, negotiate, and invest in particular subject positions that are made available within the local and institutional contexts. Within these situated perspectives in teacher learning and professional identity, a range of approaches has been developed to examine how teachers position themselves and make sense of the work they do. This section reviews key literature on teacher learning and learning to teach, teacher professional identity (TPI), and analytical approaches to TPI.

2.3.1 Situated Learning and Learning to Teach

Situated theories of learning, particularly Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice (CoP), conceptualises learning as a process of social participation rather than the individual acquisition of knowledge. Within Wenger's CoP framework, *practice* refers to actions that are embedded in and constitutive of a shared meaning system that sustains mutual engagement among participants (Wenger, 1998). As Cook and Brown (1999) note,

> …we intend the term 'practice' to refer to the coordinated activities of individuals and groups in doing their 'real work' … we wish to distinguish practice from both behaviour and action. Doing of any sort we call 'behaviour', while 'action' we see as behaviour imbued with meaning. By 'practice', then, we refer to action informed by meaning drawn from a particular group context. (Cook & Brown, pp. 386–387)

Learning, therefore, can be viewed as a process of enculturation into the practices of

particular groups or institutions, in which cognitive dimensions such as knowledge, beliefs, and values are closely bound up with the social situations in which learning takes place (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Within such professional communities, identity develops through sustained engagement in shared practices, participation in joint enterprises, and the negotiation of mutual meanings (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In the field of teacher education, Wenger's model offers a conceptual blueprint for understanding how teachers learn to become 'competent' members of a professional community of practice. From this perspective, teacher learning is understood as a process of changing relationships with the social situations, involving a complex interplay of internalisation and externalisation (Edwards, 2005; Edwards, et al., 2002). Learners are shaped by their environments not through passive absorption, but through active engagement culturally valued knowledge and practices, which enables them to develop the capacity to interpret and respond to the opportunities and affordances available to them (Edwards, 2005; Tatto et al., 2018). In addition to the internalisation process of cultural practices, as teachers participate in the community, their relationships with social situations evolve through questioning, experimentation, and the mobilisation of prior knowledge. Supporting novice teachers, therefore, entails helping them recognise the reciprocal relationship between individual agency and the social conditions in which learning takes place.

Wenger (1998) proposes that communities of practice are essentially concerned with identity transformation: where one will gain increased competence in situated practice and consequently self-position and will thus be positioned as an insider of the community. Conversely, limited, passive, or non-participation may result in peripherality or marginalisation. In the same vein, Duff (2010) highlights the role of social situations on identity and minds through her concept of 'language socialisation', defined as 'the acquisition of linguistic, pragmatic and other cultural knowledge through

social experience and is often equated with the development of cultural and communicative competence' (p. 427). From this perspective, language socialisation describes the process through which novices are inducted into specific roles, identities, norms, and domains of knowledge, which they actively negotiate and construct through everyday social interaction and language use. Collectively, social theories of learning offer a valuable framework for this study by foregrounding the inseparability of identity from cultural and communicative competence, and by emphasising that both are co-constructed through participation in social practice.

This perspective, however, has been problematised for its idealised assumptions about inbound participation and progressive trajectories of learning. Liu and Xu (2013) point out that Wenger's framework often overlooks issues of 'bi-directionality' and 'power enactment' (p. 176)—that is, the ways in which participation can simultaneously empower and exploit teachers, particularly those who are novice or institutionally marginalised. Rather, it may involve forms of regulation, accountability, or control that reproduce hierarchical relations and institutional norms that delimit what counts as legitimate practice, knowledge, or professional identity (Liu & Xu, 2013). Moreover, access to participation itself is often uneven and mediated by organisational structures and legitimate practices. Novice teachers may be formally included in professional communities while remaining marginal in decision-making and meaning-making processes (Copland & Donaghue, 2021; Donaghue, 2022). These critiques suggest the need to attend more closely to the tensions, exclusions, and power dynamics that shape learning and identity within professional communities.

2.3.2 Teacher Professional Identity (TPI)

Teacher professional identity (TPI) has emerged as a field of interest in teacher education and teacher professional development. A central strand theme of research on TPI has been its benefits in empowering teachers to be more reflective and agentive in the face of

the institutional and societal forces that shape and constrain their beliefs and practices (Barkhuizen, 2017; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Huang et al., 2021; Schutz et al., 2018; Suarez & McGrath, 2022). Teachers' commitment, self-efficacy and self-reflections are widely regarded key components of TPI, with substantial implications for teachers' instructional practices, student learning outcomes, and the implementation of reforms and policies (Suarez & McGrath, 2022). The literature further shows that TPI has been conceptualised in different ways. Some studies foreground teachers' self-image and lived teaching experiences (Goktepe & Kunt, 2021), while others emphasise affective and motivational dimensions such as commitment, motivation, emotions, and self-efficacy (Marschall, 2022). At the same time, a growing body of scholarship argues that TPI cannot be understood solely at the level of individual self-conception, but must be situated within the social, institutional, and discursive structures that define the conditions of teaching. In this vein, Han (2017) conceptualises TPI as a 'metacognitive motive (power)' (p. 555), comprising a set of meaning systems that motivate teachers to have particular cognitive, emotional and behavioural responses to the external meanings systems of learning and teaching. Collectively, these perspectives suggest that reaching an overarching definition of the concept that encompasses the complex relationships among those important aspects of identity remains a challenging endeavour.

Block and Gray (2016) view TPI as a crucial conceptual lens for understanding both the complex process of *becoming* a teacher and the ongoing experience of *being* one. Teaching involves the continual integration of multiple and changing roles, responsibilities and duties into one's own self-concepts (Day & Gu, 2010; Galman, 2009; Gu, 2007; Schutz et al., 2018). These ongoing negotiations often generate tensions between what teachers are expected to do and how they understand themselves as teaching professionals. Lefstein and Snell (2011) illustrate these tensions through the concept of 'professional vision' (p. 505), which refers to the socially situated and politically mediated ways of seeing and interpreting classroom life. What teachers come

to perceive and value is not simply a matter of teacher cognition, but an outcome of their participation in politically and institutionally organised practices. Block and Gray (2016) draw attention to the ambivalence teachers often experience as they navigate the structures, expectations, and constraints of their professional settings. Britzman (1994) captured this complexity by identifying the contradictions that teachers, particularly novice teachers, encounter when attempting to distinguish between *role* and *identity* in the process of learning to teach:

> …the teacher's role and the teacher's identity are not synonymous. The newly arrived teacher learns early on that whereas role can be assigned, the taking up of an identity is a constant and tricky social negotiation. One must consent to signification. Indeed, the significant, albeit hidden, work of learning to teach concerns negotiating with conflicting cultural representations of and desires for what a teacher is and does. (Britzman, 1994, p. 54)

Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) further emphasise that shifting professional contexts continually reshape teachers sense of self, particularly during the formative stages of their careers. Novice teachers, therefore, engage in a constant negotiation of professional identity as they seek to reconcile institutional and societal expectations with their own beliefs, values, and understandings of what it means to be a teacher, even as the ambivalence may be acute for them (Block & Gray, 2016).

Educational researchers have drawn on the insights of Vygotsky and Bakhtin to conceptualise teacher identity and agency as socially situated, contextually contingent, and dialogically constructed. Tatto et al. (2018) employs Vygoysky's concept of the social situation of development to argue that the critical periods of beginning teachers are best understood as situated with layered sociocultural, institutional and political contexts, rather than simply as individual cognitive transitions. Teachers' capacity to act agentively depends on the affordances and constraints present in practice. Clarke (2008) draws on

Bakhtin's idea of 'unfinalisability of consciousness' (p. 29), emphasising the open-ended and unfinished nature of identity, suggesting that teachers often encounter unforeseen situations that demand improvisation and thereby create moments for agentive action. Based on Bakhtin's concepts of *heteroglossia* (the interaction of multiple social voices) and *dialogism* (meaning produced through interaction), Chen, Zhang, and Parr (2022) view teachers as active subjects capable of authoring their own utterances, actions, and consciousness through dialogic activities.

Building on these views, teacher professional identity—despite its contests and problematised nature (Beijaard et al., 2004)—retains its relevance in providing a tool for teachers to exercise agency. This perspective aligns with poststructuralist perspectives that prioritise agency as a central concern in identity research, especially amid the competing demands that define teacher education and the increasingly constrained conditions of the teaching profession. In this sense, identity and agency are 'not something teachers have, but something they use' (ibid. p. 123): resources through which teachers can construct, negotiate, and sustain a sense of professional meaning.

However, most teacher education and professional development programmes offer little exploration of this complex process of learning to teach and becoming teachers, which lies at heart of teachers' professional lives. Instead, these programmes tend to ascribe fixed identities to teachers, such as a 'curriculum deliverer' or an 'effective practitioner', that tend to constrain rather than nurture teachers' agentive and reflexive engagement with their work (Block & Gray, 2016; Duff & Uchida, 1997; Tatto et al., 2018). It is precisely because of this pervasive issue in global teacher education, that scholars and practitioners alike have increasingly recognised the importance of TPI in understanding and supporting teachers' professional practices, a stance that also informs this present study.

2.3.3 Analytical Approaches to TPI

Methodologically, one significant and productive analytical approach to TPI is narrative inquiry, which has offered valuable insights into teachers' meaning-making and identity work due to its emancipatory and reflective orientation (Barkhuizen, 2011, 2017; Johnson & Golombek, 2011). Narrative inquiry views TPI as dynamic, storied, and socially situated, emphasising how teachers make sense of their professional lives through telling, retelling, and reinterpreting experience (Barkhuizen, 2011). By foregrounding teachers' voice, emotions, and life histories, narrative inquiry allows teachers to articulate their experiences, struggles, and aspirations; at the same time, it underscores that narratives are not merely individual expressions but are socially mediated and constrained by discursive resources available to teachers (Barkhuizen, 2011, 2017; Norton, 2013).

However, critics argue that such an approach may inadvertently overstate teachers' agency while underplaying how identity is constrained, negotiated, or resisted in everyday practice. Morgan (2004), for instance, warns that by privileging personal voice and emotion, narrative studies risk neglecting the underlying material and ideological structures that shape teachers' possibilities for action. Similarly, Gray and Morton (2018) contend that while reflective practice can enable teachers to reimagine themselves as agentive individuals, such self-reconceptualisation does not necessarily dismantle the persistent power asymmetries embedded in institutional practices and policy frameworks. In real-time professional interactions, these asymmetries are often reproduced through institutionalised routines that regulate who speaks, who determines courses of action, and whose knowledge counts as appropriate.

Moving beyond narrative studies, a growing body of research has adopted close-up, sociolinguistic approaches to investigate how teacher identity negotiation is unfolded in and through social interaction (Donaghue, 2020, 2022; Lan, 2020; Li, 2017; Little, 2002,

2012; Little, & Curry, 2008; Liu, 2013; Morton & Gray, 2008). Focusing on identity work and power relations, Donaghue (2020, 2022) draws on Goffman's (1971) theory of face to examine post-observation feedback interactions between experienced teachers and supervisors. Using fine-grained discourse analysis in combination with ethnographic data, her studies reveal how participants deploy facework practices—such as face-threatening acts, face maintenance, and face support—to manage tensions between collegiality and evaluation within institutional settings. Lan (2020) employs fine-grained analysis of naturally occurring talk and narrative-in-interaction to examine how agentive professional identities are socially produced within a teacher community of practice in China. By tracing how novices' narratives are interactionally scaffolded over time, his study demonstrates how identity trajectories are shaped through language use while remaining constrained by community-valued norms. Little (2002, 2012) argues for the value of micro-process studies that closely examine teachers' situated interactions, demonstrating how everyday talk, routines, and use of artefacts both instantiate and reproduce institutional norms. Her work shows how teacher learning and professional practice are shaped through participation structures, interpretive work, and power relations that are often obscured in interview- or survey-based research. Drawing on discursive psychology and conversation analysis, Li (2017) conceptualises teacher cognition as a socially situated and discursively constructed process. By examining classroom discourse, reflective interviews, and lesson-planning sessions, the study reveals how teachers' thinking, pedagogical decision-making and identity are continuously negotiated through interaction. Similarly, Gray and Morton (2018) demonstrate that teacher identities are continuously constructed in everyday interaction between trainers and trainees, among teachers, and within institutional discourses shaped by neoliberal reforms. They highlight how social categories such as class, gender, race, and ethnolinguistic identity (i.e., teachers' experiences of multiple language use or loss within their families or communities) might intersect with and impinge on English language teacher identities in TESOL training programmes. Collectively, research

employing micro analytic approaches to teacher identity-in-interaction highlights the *link* between macro-level institutional and policy structures and micro-level interactional practices through which identity is enacted and negotiated.

To sum up, analytical approaches to teacher professional identity range from narrative accounts of teachers' meaning-making to interactional and sociolinguistic analyses of identity-in-talk. While narrative approaches foreground reflexivity and agency, micro-analytic studies illuminate how teacher identity and agency are enacted and constrained in everyday interaction, linking micro-level practices to macro-level institutional and policy structures. Informed by both strands of scholarship, this study attends to teachers' voices and reflexivity while also examining how their identities are negotiated and regulated in real-time institutional interactions.

2.4 Summary of Literature Review

In this chapter, I first reviewed in 2.1 how the essentialist notion of the self tends to overlook the formative power of the social, while the Foucauldian perspective privileges the social sometimes to an extent that downplays individual agency. Sociocultural and post-structural understandings of identity, which conceptualise it as fragmented, fluid and dynamic, have since become widely accepted. Yet, they have also received criticisms for lacking interdisciplinary depth, particularly from psychoanalysis, which emphasises an enduring psychic core; sociology, which grounds identity in material and institutional structures; sociolinguistics, which regards identity as a discursive and socially situated phenomenon. To develop a more comprehensive understanding of identity, agency and subjectivity, empirical studies informed by such perspectives must be brought into discussion. Given the contested and problematised nature of identity, the following section (2.2) explores the potential of examining identity through social interaction, drawing on sociolinguistic and ethnographic approaches that illuminate both enduring and momentary constructions of self. From this perspective, social interaction is not

merely performed by individuals but constitutes a continuous process of negotiation in which interlocutors must navigate asymmetries of power and knowledge, revealing how broader structural issues manifest in micro-level exchanges. The final section (2.3) situates these discussions within the field of teacher professional identity (TPI), positioning it within the broader shift from cognitive perspectives towards situated learning and practice-oriented theories of teacher learning. It conceptualises TPI as a dynamic and ongoing process through which teachers negotiate subject positions made available within institutional contexts, highlighting both its analytical value to unpack the complexities of teaching and its practical potential in helping teachers deal with the daily realities of school life. The section has also outlined key approaches to examining teacher identity and agency, thereby setting the methodological groundwork for the data analyses undertaken in this study.

This chapter has established the conceptual foundation for this research on examining novice teacher identity in the context of urban public schools in China. These conceptual discussions underpin the methodological choices described in the following chapter, which details the research questions, research design, context and participants, data collection and analytic procedures.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Overview

To investigate how novice teachers negotiate and (re)construct teacher professional identities in urban public schools in China, this research employs an ethnographic approach. The research combines two lines of inquiry: first, in-depth case studies of five teachers across two public schools (Yin, 2018); second, a broader ethnographic examination of the district-level teacher education and teacher professional development (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This design enables me to move beyond the limitations of studying only individual schools and to situate teachers' identity work within wider institutional, political, and sociocultural dynamics. Data were collected from multiple sources, including observation, audio recordings, semi-structured interviews, and fieldnotes. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Conversation Analysis (CA), the study examines how nuanced details of language use in professional interactions reveal the underlying power relations that generate tensions and conflicts among novice teachers. It illuminates how identities can serve as a source of empowerment, or conversely, as a mechanism of constraint and exploitation. The role my positionalities play was ineradicable and crucial; therefore, reflexivity was exercised throughout the fieldwork to explicate how my identities shaped the analysis and presentation. This chapter begins by outlining the research questions that guide this empirical study and explaining the methodological approaches adopted to address them. It then introduces the two collaborating schools and participants, following by a detailed discussion of data collection and analysis methods. The chapter concludes with considerations of ethical issues and research validity.

3.2 Research Questions

Informed by the literature review, this study examines teacher identity through a close-up method that attends to teachers' subjective experiences as well as the broader social

structures shaping their professional learning and identity construction. The study offers a detailed and rich account of how novice teachers negotiate and perform their identities through professional practices and reflective encounters, such as teaching competitions, mentoring sessions, research interviews, teacher group meetings, and classroom interactions, in urban public schools in China. These considerations lead to the following overarching research question, accompanied by three ancillary questions that further guide the inquiry:

Research Question:

How do novice teachers discursively perform, negotiate, and construct their professional identities as they learn to teach in urban public schools in China?

Ancillary Research questions:

1. How is the notion of a 'good teacher' discursively produced, legitimised, and contested within specific institutional contexts?
2. In what ways are novice teachers' identity negotiations embedded within the broader sociocultural and political discourses in China?
3. How do their identity negotiations enable or constrain novice teachers' sense of agency in their everyday professional practices?

These questions aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of how novice teachers identify with, negotiate, and sometimes resist assigned professional identities and how their identity negotiation processes are embedded within the institutional, cultural, and political landscapes of Chinese public schooling. The first ancillary question interrogates how particular notions of a 'good teacher' were contextualised and circulated through institutional discourses, professional practices, and everyday interactions. The second question situates these identity negotiations within broader sociocultural and political contexts, exploring how national education reforms, social expectations, and

institutional hierarchies shape novice teachers' professional becoming. The third question focuses on the implications of these identity constructions for teachers' sense of agency, specifically how they position themselves within institutional demands and exercise agency in their professional lives. Collectively, these questions allow for a nuanced analysis of how identity, agency and power intersect in the lived experiences of learning to teach in urban China. The following sections outline the methodological approaches employed in this study.

3.3 Methodological Approaches

The present study intends to link the micro level of teachers' social interactions and the macro-level understanding of identity as sociocultural and political phenomena. To this end, it draws on a plethora of methodological approaches to address how novice teachers' identities are enacted and negotiated in professional interactions. The scholarly works on Ethnography, Conversation Analysis, and Critical Discourse Analysis have all informed the analytic framework for understanding how novice teachers perform, resist, and adapt their professional identities.

3.3.1 Ethnography

The research questions necessitate immersion into teachers' lived experiences and their processes of identity (re)construction within school settings. Ethnography (Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Mills & Morton, 2013) was therefore adopted as the overarching methodological approach. Ethnography seeks to describe, explain, and make sense of the complex social realities, by attending closely to everyday practices, interactions, and meanings, thereby offering insights into how knowledge, norms, and identities are socially constructed (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Rampton, 2010; Snell, et al., 2015). Crucially, Blommaert and Jie (2010) argue that ethnography is a epistemological stance rather than a mere set of methods. From their perspectives, ethnographic fieldwork is understood as a context-based and inductive practice that

highlights the inseparability of micro-level interactional events and macro-level social, cultural, and political structures. By foregrounding ethnography as a way of *seeing*, *being*, and *writing* education, Mills and Morton (2013) highlight the importance of researcher positionality, reflexivity, and the iterative relationship between fieldwork, data analysis, and interpretation.

Furthermore, Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) highlight that ethnography must be responsive to the unpredictability and contingences of social contexts. This aligns with Holland et al.'s (1998) argument that individuals are not merely passive recipients of cultural norms but improvisers who continuously re-fashion their roles and positions within their institutions. Novice teachers, for example, constantly adapt their identities in response to evolving institutional expectations and demands. An ethnographic study enables me to maintain an embedded yet unobtrusive presence, allowing for the capture of the situated and emergent dimensions of identity formation as they unfold in everyday interactions.

Ethnography requires long-term engagement in a social setting, allowing for thick description of cultural practices and interactions (Creswell, 1998; Holloway et al., 2010). In contrast, case study focuses on an in-depth investigation of a bounded system, emphasising a highly structured research design (Punch & Oancea, 2014; Yin, 2018). However, both approaches present challenges, including few participants, being implicitly embedded in the studied culture, and concerns over transferability are common (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2017). These challenges are particularly salient in doctoral research, where time, energy, and financial resources are necessarily constrained. An ethnographic case study design offers a pragmatic and theoretically coherent methodological choice, allowing for in-depth engagement with participants while maintaining a manageable and clearly bounded research focus (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2017). As Angers and Machtmes (2005) argue, ethnographic case study integrates

the strengths of both paradigms: the cultural immersion of ethnography and the clear boundaries of case study research. This approach is particularly feasible for a student researcher, as it allows for sustained and in-depth engagement with participants while maintaining a clearly defined research scope (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2017). The blended design allows the best use of each design while mitigating their respective limitations, enabling researchers to explore cultural meanings while maintaining a manageable scope in terms of time and location (Angers & Machtmes, 2005).

The study of the two collaborating schools lasted about six months, from February to July 2023. The common data collection methods of ethnographic case study consist of fieldwork with participant observation, reflective journals, audio recordings, and interviews (Moore, 2011). In this study, fieldwork involved observation of novice teacher professional work both inside and outside classroom spaces for three to five days every week. The aim was to gain an emic view of novice teachers' professional practices, including teacher meetings, mentoring sessions, and classroom teaching. Fieldnotes were used to document events, conversations, reflective memos, and emerging themes, forming the foundation for later data analysis. Additionally, one-hour, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with novice teachers and key stakeholders within the school, including their mentors and the heads of the English department.

The use of ethnography has been widely criticised as a means for making overly broad generalisations about cultures and communities (e.g., Rampton, 2006). Being present in the field enables me to gain a rich source of information on the cultural and institutional norms that shape interactions of novice teachers within schools; however, it does not in itself provide a theoretical perspective to delve into the nuances of how the social interactions construct and negotiate teacher identity (Blackledge & Creese, 2010). It is specifically this concern that led to the incorporation of analysis of talk-in-interaction, a methodological approach pioneered by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) and

developed by Block (2013), Blommaert (2005), and Gumperz (1982). This integration allows me, as a researcher, to enrich the research by providing a more nuanced understanding of how identities are constructed through moment-by-moment interactions.

3.3.2 Conversation Analysis

Among all the analytical approaches to exploring identity as social interaction, Conversation Analysis (CA) has been seen as one of the most productive frameworks for examining in detail how identities are constructed and negotiated (Gray & Morton, 2018). This research draws on key concepts and analytical principles developed within CA to investigate how novice teachers' identities emerge, shift, and reconstruct through interaction.

CA focuses on *interaction*—specifically, the *actions* between individuals—and investigates how these actions are collaboratively achieved through sequences of talk (Clift, 2016). By prioritising action and sequence, CA provides unique insights into the procedural infrastructure of interaction that may be ignored by some linguistic traditions, such as structural linguistics, which focus primarily on language as an abstract system rather than a social practice (Clift, 2016). A key premise of CA is that, despite the vast structural diversity and variation across languages of the world, certain elements of this procedural infrastructure are universal (Schegloff, 1997). These elements include the mechanisms of turn-taking, sequence organisation, and repair, which underpin the smooth flow of communication across linguistic and cultural contexts (Schegloff, 1992). *Turn-taking* refers to the systematic organisation through which participants manage the allocation and exchange of speaking turns in interaction (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974; ten Have, 2007). *Sequence organisation* concerns how social actions in conversations are structured across turns, most commonly through *adjacency pairs*, such as question-answer and greetings (Clift, 2016). Through sequence organisation,

interlocutors display levels of understanding, alignment, or misalignment, and negotiate the progression of interaction. *Repair* refers to the practices by which participants address problems of speaking, hearing, or understanding to achieve mutual understanding during interaction, including who detects and initiates the repair and how error is corrected (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977).

CA highlights the centrality of identity in social interaction, arguing that actions are accomplished through orientations to identity across sequences (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Sacks, 1974). In interaction, individuals may mobilise their linguistic resources and design turns in ways that align with the rights, responsibilities, and expectations inherent in the identity categories, whether these are categories they claim membership of for themselves or assign to others (Gray & Morton, 2018). They may also convey specific stances when making evaluations, asserting relative authority or subordination in the moment-by-moment interactions; in doing this, they align with, challenge, or negotiate the social roles and identity categories attributed to themselves or others (Cliff, 2016). As a result of the unequal distribution of knowledge, semiotic resources, and authority among individuals, language in interactions often reflect underlying hierarchies and power dynamics and thus make it possible for researchers to systematically investigate how people orient to and negotiate these inequalities through their talk (Blommaert, 2005). By analysing the linguistic and sequential practices that individuals employ, CA provides a lens for understanding how social identities are consistently constructed in everyday interactions, and how broader social structures and inequalities are reproduced or resisted in real-time communication.

One of the most helpful constituents of CA for the data analysis of this study is the notion of indexicality (Silverstein, 2003), which has expanded the focus from content to context and attempted to link the interactional detail with macro institutional, societal and cultural issues. At any moment in a specific situated practice, any piece of semiotic

resources, such as lexicon, narrative structure, and the design of a pause, can index and point to sociological categories (Li, 2017). These resources can also present how individuals position themselves agentively in relation to interlocutors. For example, the pronominal choices such as 'I', 'you', 'we' and 'us' indicate different levels of involvement, solidarity or distance from the topic being discussed, with 'I' being the most agentive as it stresses individual responsibility whereas 'we' being less agentive as it conveys shared authority (De Fina, 2003, 2011; Lan, 2020). As a result, the same event can be narrated in multiple ways, with narrators casting themselves in different semantic roles and assuming varying degrees of agency (Lan, 2020).

This research engages in social interactions of novice teachers in multiple contexts: classroom instruction, novice-mentor sessions, teaching group meetings, and research interviews. The main sources of data used in this research are audio recordings of *naturally occurring* interactions in several routine activities of novice EFL teachers (i.e., classroom instruction, novice-mentoring sessions, teaching group meetings) and somewhat less naturally occurring interactions, such as those in the research interviews (Byrne, 2012; De Fina, 2011b). This dual focus helps illuminate not only how everyday professional practices unfold but also how participants construct their experiences and understandings in more reflective settings.

3.3.3 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) employed in this research builds on the work of van Leeuwen (2008), Wodak (2014), and Fairclough (2003). One distinctive property of CDA is its emphasis on semiotic resources through which people construct, legitimise and naturalise specific forms of knowledge, including representations of actors, social relationships, events, all shaped by the historical and economic conditions of a given social order (van Leeuwen, 2008). By examining these semiotic processes, CDA seeks to uncover how discourse serves to sustain, reproduce, or challenge power dynamics (van

Leeuwen, 2008). This tradition is deeply committed to social justice and adopts a critical lens to examine how language and other semiotic resources are deployed to maintain dominant ideologies and hegemonic social structures (Fairclough, 2003).

CDA operates on the premise that structural inequalities shape social roles and relationships within specific contexts (Fairclough, 2003; Widdowson, 1998). It considers both the micro level details of the discursive event or text being analysed and the macro level social and historical framework in which the interaction takes place (Wodak, 2014). By doing so, CDA connects language use with broader systems of power, ideology, and institutional control.

However, CDA has faced two major criticisms. First, it has been critiqued for its reliance on small, selectively chosen data samples, raising concerns about researcher bias and the generalisability of findings (Breeze, 2011). CDA researchers may sometimes privilege analytically salient texts at the expense of broader empirical grounding, which could narrow the scope of interpretation. To overcome this limitation, I incorporated other methodological approaches such as fieldnotes, ensuring that data selection was grounded, ethnographically driven rather than conducted by pre-existing assumptions. By triangulating data, I ensured an emic process of understanding discursive practices, derived from the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants.

Secondly, CDA has been accused of its 'politically motivated stance' (Gary & Morton, 2018, p. 13) and for placing disproportionate emphasis on institutional power, often overlooking individual agency and resistance. Some scholars argue that CDA can sometimes portray individuals as passive recipients of dominant discourses, underestimating their ability to negotiate, subvert, or contest these forces (Widdowson, 1998). In response, this study foregrounds teacher identity as a conceptual lens, recognising that identity is not a by-product of discourse, but a site of agency and

(re)construction. Even when not explicitly articulated in interactions, identity work is always present in discourse (Blommaert & Jie, 2020). By integrating CDA with an identity-based perspective, the analysis captured both the structural constraints and the ways in which individuals navigated these discursive practices.

3.3.4 Summary of Methodological Approaches

This section has outlined the methodological approaches to teacher identity, agency and social interactions, and has briefly provided a concise review of the specific paradigms employed to analyse data in this research. Drawing on the insights and tools of these methodologies, the study established a robust foundation for examining the dynamic interplay between social practices and teachers' identity construction. These paradigms illuminate the ways in which individuals construct meaning and maintain identity within their social and institutional contexts.

3.4 The Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling is predicated on the deliberate identification and selection of participants who can provide valuable evidence or contribute to the development of certain theoretical ideas relevant to the research (Maxwell & Loomi, 2003). This sampling strategy is often employed in exploratory and descriptive qualitative research. Unlike methods aimed to generate a representative or random sample, purposive sampling seeks to identify specific populations who either possess characteristics or live in circumstances relevant to the social phenomenon under investigation (Mays & Pope, 1995). This non-probabilistic sampling enables the researcher deliberately to include any specific types of informants and to select key informants who have privileged access to important sources of knowledge.

Given that vast differences between the education levels (e.g., preschool, primary, secondary) and the subject contexts (e.g., English, Math)—for example, Day et al.'s (2006)

study shows that professional identities among primary and secondary school teachers are varied due to different policies and institutional demands—this study focuses *only* on teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) at the junior secondary school level (Year 7–9, ages 13–15). In this study, I made an initial selection of participants, and they were required to meet the following criteria:

(1) Teaching at the junior secondary school level;
(2) Specialising in teaching English as a foreign language;
(3) Employed in public schools; and
(4) Novices with less than three years of teaching experience.

Although not statistically representative of a broader population, the sample was theoretically informed, practically feasible, and well aligned with the research focus, in which the emphasis was on the depth and contextual richness of participants' experiences over generalisability. It should be noted that, although the participants were teachers of EFL, the primary focus of this study is novice teacher education in China rather than English teacher education per se. While English education policy and practices are discussed in Chapter 6, the central aim is to examine how classroom interactions between novices and their students were shaped by the broader sociocultural and institutional contexts of teacher education in China.

During the fieldwork, however, the criteria were not easily met. As described at the outset of the thesis in Section 1.1, I soon discovered that public schools often defined 'novice teachers' based on their duration of service at the current school rather than their cumulative teaching experience. In many cases, prior teaching experiences, particularly in off-campus tutoring or private schools, were excluded from the calculation of a teacher's service duration. Other factors, such as the ratio of novice to experienced teachers, the availability of experienced teachers to serve as mentors, also influenced the schools' policies on training novice teachers, including the criteria used to determine who

qualified as a 'novice'.

These contingencies necessitated adjustments of the initial sampling criteria in order to align with each school's contextual definitions. Such adaptions underscored the importance of attending to practical constraints in the field and ensuring that the selected participants meaningfully reflected the research aims. Conflicts and ethical considerations regarding participant selection are further discussed in Section 3.8.

3.5 Fieldwork Context and Participants

This section introduces the fieldwork context and participants involved in the study. It first provides an overview of the school system and admission approach to compulsory education in China. It then presents the district context and the schools where the fieldwork was conducted, outlining their institutional characteristics and cultures, and relevance to the research focus. Finally, it provides profiles of the five novice teachers who participated in the study, highlighting their educational backgrounds, teaching experiences, and roles within their schools.

3.5.1 School System and Admission Approach in China

In China, children begin nine years of compulsory education at the age of six, which consists of six years of primary school followed by three-year junior secondary school. The majority of students (over 95% as of 2023) attend *public schools* for compulsory education, which are government-funded and free of charge (MoE, 2024c). After completing junior secondary school, most students either enter senior secondary schools to prepare for higher education (approximately 68%) or vocational schools (about 30%) (MoE, 2024c). Admission to both senior secondary schools and vocational schools is determined by students' scores on the *Senior Secondary School Entrance Examination* (*zhongkao*), which usually takes place at the end of Year 9 (around age 15) in late June. Upon completing three years of senior secondary schools or vocational schools, students

who wish to pursue higher education take the *College Entrance Examination* (*gaokao*), usually conducted in early June, the results of which determine admission to universities and colleges.

In 2021, the Chinese government introduced the 'Double Reduction' (*shuangjian*) policy, which imposed stricter regulations on private educational institutions offering compulsory education. As part of this initiative, the Ministry of Education released the *Notice on Regulating Public Schools' Participation in the Establishment of Private Compulsory Education Schools* (MoE, 2021), marking a significant step in curbing for-profit private schooling within compulsory education. In Chengdu, this policy led to transition of various types of private schools (e.g., state-sponsored private schools, hybrid schools, private schools) from independent operation to public governance, thereby ensuring tuition-free enrolment for all children in compulsory education. By 2023, a total of 21 private compulsory-education schools in the city had been converted into public schools. In the district where I conducted my fieldwork, there were sixteen junior secondary schools, all of which were public.

Whereas many countries such as the UK, the US and Japan have expanded school choice since the 1980s in an effort to promote competition and improve quality (Thomson, 2021), school admission in China's compulsory education operates under a limited-choice policy, known as 'neighbourhood enrolment' (*jiujin ruxue*). This policy entitles students to attend their designated local primary and junior secondary schools free of charge and without academic screening. Introduced nationally in 2014, this policy was intended to curb competition arising from school choice and to ensure that every student could 'enter a school nearest to home' (MoE, 2014). Under this system, each junior secondary school is linked to several primary schools within a catchment area. Primary school graduates need to submit their application to one of these designated schools. If the applications fall within the school's enrolment quota, all students are admitted; if

oversubscribed, places are allocated by lottery.

However, research has demonstrated that inequality persists within this limited choice admission system (Zhou, Mau, & Jordan, 2022, p. 134). In urban areas, education continues to be viewed by families and parents as a key pathway to upward social mobility, and the randomness of this lottery system has intensified anxiety. From their perspective, Senior Secondary School Entrance Examination (*zhongkao*) becomes particularly significant, as entry to elite senior secondary schools is seen as the gateway to achieving a high *gaokao* (College Entrance Examination) score and, ultimately, access to prestigious universities. Studies have revealed that schools and parents often engaged in what Zhao (2015, p. 33) described as a 'cat and mouse game' with the government, finding ways to circumvent educational policies intended to reduce competition and promote equality. For example, families with higher socio-economic status may purchase housing property within the catchment areas of high-quality schools (Jin, Wang, & Huang, 2023; Tian, Liu, & Liu, 2022) or pay school-selection fees (*zexiao fei*) as informal donations to secure admission to preferred schools (Wu, 2012, 2013; Zhou, Mau, & Jordan, 2022). Others leverage *guanxi*—a system of interpersonal relationships grounded in reciprocity, obligation and the exchange of favours in Chinese society (Yang, 1994)—to gain insider enrolment information or negotiate the size of donation fees (Wu, 2012). Some students also obtain entry to prestigious schools through 'special talent student' route by gaining certificates in extracurricular competitions like Mathematics or English (Wu, 2013).

In sum, China's compulsory education system is characterised by a state-regulated, tuition-free structure supported by a neighbourhood enrolment policy aimed at promoting educational equity. Yet despite sustained Party-state efforts to mitigate inequalities, disparities in educational resources and provision have persisted, most notably in the hierarchical distinctions between prestigious, well-resourced schools and

those with more limited resources. These structural issues continue to shape novice teachers' working conditions, access to professional support, career trajectories, and their evolving understandings of what it means to be a 'professional' teacher (Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2012).

3.5.2 The District and Institutional Context

This fieldwork was conducted in *Ronghua District* (pseudonymised), a central district of Chengdu widely recognised for offering high-quality compulsory education. According to *Ronghua District's Statistical Yearbook in 2022*, there were 16 junior secondary schools and 31 primary schools, employing 2,145 full time junior secondary teachers and 4,059 full-time primary teachers. The total student population comprised 26,825 at the junior secondary level and 73,175 at the primary level. It is worth noting that these figures did not include contract-based or school-hired teachers who were not officially listed as state-authorised *bianzhi* staff, and the exact number of such teachers employed by each school remained unknown. As one of the most educationally competitive areas in the city, Ronghua District attracted top-performing teachers, high-achieving students, and aspirational families. The local educational department actively promotes teaching quality through regular evaluations, inter-school collaborations, demonstration lessons, and teaching competitions.

The research was primarily carried out in the two collaborating schools. The first site, *School A*, was recognised as an exemplary public school in the city, known for its long history and academic excellence. The second site, *School B*, was also an exemplary school in the district, distinguished by its innovative practices. Both schools were widely regarded as high-performing institutions within the local and municipal education system. They were characterised by relatively strong institutional support, well-established routines, and heightened expectations around teacher performance and professional development. These features provided a particularly rich context for

examining how novice teacher learning unfolds under conditions of strong institutional regulation. In addition, I visited ten other schools in Ronghua District, which, although less frequently observed, provided valuable ethnographic insights into the district's broader educational landscape.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the high-performing status of the two focal schools shapes the conditions under which the research was conducted and the kinds of data that were accessible. As such, the school cultures and teacher learning experiences observed in this study may differ from those found in less- or under- resourced urban schools. The findings should therefore be understood as contextually grounded, offering analytical insights into learning to teach in high-performing urban schools, rather than as statistically generalisable to all urban schools in China.

School A

School A was a junior secondary school founded in the 1990s by the local educational department. Since its establishment, the school has been regarded as a 'Key School' and recognised by the public as one of the best schools in Chengdu. Following the government's policy to equalise provision at the compulsory level, the label of 'Key School' was officially removed in 2015. Despite this change, its reputation remained strong in the public imagination and continued to be widely acknowledged among students, educators and families. In the same year, the Chinese government introduced the *Elite School Educational Group* policy (MoE, 2015), which encouraged the formation of school alliances led by exemplary schools responsible for expanding campuses and providing support to affiliated or feeder schools. At the time of the study, School A operated across two campuses and was preparing to open a third. It enrolled approximately 6,000 students, supported by around 500 staff members. In addition, School A was tasked with mobilising resources and offering pedagogical and administrative support to six affiliated feeder schools. The campus I visited most frequently was the main site. In 2022,

around twelve new teachers joined the main campus, including both formally appointed (with *bianzhi*) and contract-based teachers; among them were three English teachers. Each class typically consisted of around 50 students, with lessons held from Monday to Friday, running from 7:40 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Within the English department, weekly teacher meetings held on Tuesdays were integral to teacher professional development. The schedule usually included a general meeting for all three grade levels (Years 7, 8, and 9), followed by grade-specific meetings, and finally, all teachers participated in district-level educational research activities, such as lectures, teaching competitions, demonstrative lessons, most of which were conducted in-person, with venues often selected from schools equipped with large lecture theatre. Attendance was mandatory for all junior secondary English teachers in the district and was often accompanied by accountability measures such as attendance check-ins.

The novice teacher education programme encompassed three key activities. Firstly, the *Shifu-Tudi* (mentor-novice) relationship paired experienced teachers with novices, providing regular guidance and support. Secondly, a series of seminars and lectures were organised to enhance their pedagogical knowledge and professional competencies. Thirdly, school-level teaching competitions for novice teachers were held annually to showcase the progress and achievements of novice teachers as part of their professional development. According to school regulations, teachers with less than three years of teaching experience were required to participate in these competitions. Those who won first prize were exempted from participating again, while those who did not were expected to continue competing until they either obtained the first prize or reached their third year of teaching. Teachers with fewer than five years of experience could also participate on a voluntary basis.

School B

School B was founded by the local government in the 2010s as a pilot project school for the *suzhi* education (education for quality) reform. The school was equipped with modern facilities: classrooms featured advanced technologies, with each student providing a personal tablet for learning. The campus included newly built multi-functional sports grounds and a swimming pool, as well as a multimedia tiered hall with a seating capacity of 1,000, which hosted most district-level meetings and activities. At the time of the study, School B had around 1,500 students and 130 teaching staff. Similar to School A, School B was positioned as an exemplary school and was also preparing to open a second campus within the following two years.

In School B, each subject classroom was decorated to reflect the subject taught here, aiming to create an immersive environment. Teacher's workspaces were nested in these classrooms, in line with the school's philosophy that teachers should be more accessible to their students and provide immediate support and feedback. The school promoted itself as a hub of innovative curriculum, pedagogy, and educational ethos, an image clearly communicated through its website:

> The school is dedicated to laying the foundation for children's happy lives, focusing on nurturing physically and mentally healthy youth who are academically proficient, rich in experience, ambitious, and innovative. (School B, Official Website)

This slogan was materialised through specific requirements, for example, every student was expected to 'learn to swim, master a musical instrument, and learn how to prepare six different dishes' (School B, Official Website). Moreover, School B adopted a flattened administrative structure aimed at breaking down hierarchical barriers among staff to foster collaboration and communication. Teachers were encouraged to make friends with students, thereby challenging the perceived boundaries of teacher-student interactions. While School B had established a department specific for novice teacher training, its practices were largely comparable to those of School A, including the novice-mentor

relationship, lectures, seminars, and teaching competitions.

3.5.3 Participants

A total of five English teachers were recruited as participants during the fieldwork, which took place from February to July 2023. This section briefly introduces them (see Table 3.1). Initially, six teachers were recruited. But one participant withdrew following a transfer from the main campus of School C to a feeder school. After discussion and with the participant's consent, it was agreed that she would be excluded from the participant sample. Data collected from her participation were retained for contextual purposes but were not included in the case study analysis.

Yu was a novice teacher in School A with one year of teaching experience at the time of fieldwork. She held a postgraduate degree in TESOL from a university in the UK, where she specialised in translanguaging. After graduation, she began her teaching career at this school. **Jing**, another participant from the same school and teaching in the same year group as Yu, held a bachelor's degree in English. Prior to this experience, she had worked as an English language teacher for five years in a private school. However, she was still classified as a novice teacher, as the school did not recognise prior teaching experience outside the public education system. Yu held a *bianzhi* post (state-authorised establishment) administered by the local education department, whereas Jing was employed on a non-*bianzhi* contract.

Wen, a novice teacher at School B, had been teaching for two years. She held an MA in Applied Linguistics and a BA in Engineering, both from China. Despite her engineering background, she had successfully transitioned into the teaching profession. Wen identified strongly with the school's educational values and ethos and was particularly appreciative of the collaborative environment that School B fostered. **Hong** had been teaching at School B for only six months and held an MA in English Literature and a BA

in English. Despite her prior two-year experience in a private school, she was still considered a novice teacher at School B. Hong brought a deep understanding of China's high-stakes examination culture and placed a strong emphasis on improving student performance, an approach that did not fully align with the educational ethos advocated by the school. **Xin**, also a novice teacher at School B, had been teaching for less than a year and held a BA in English Education. As a recent graduate from a well-regarded normal university, Xin believed that mentorship and professional development were crucial to her growth as an educator. However, her perception of inadequate professional support left her disillusioned during her first year of induction. At School B, both Wen and Xin held *bianzhi* positions, whereas Hong was employed on a contract basis. All three teachers taught in the same year group.

Table 3.1

Overview of Five Novice Teachers in Two Schools During Fieldwork

Participant	Age	Service at the School	Prior Teaching Experience	Education Background
School A				
Yu	25	1 year	None	MA TESOL (UK) BA English (China)
Jing	28	1 year	5 years: private school	BA English (China)
School B				
Wen	28	1 year	1 year: public school	MA Applied Linguistics (China) BA Engineering (China)
Hong	28	<1 year	2 years: private school	MA English Literature (China) BA English (China)
Xin	23	<1 year	None	BA English Education (China)

3.6 Data Collection Methods

The principal data collection methods used in the fieldwork are: (1) observation, (2) fieldnotes, (3) interviews, and (4) audio recordings.

3.6.1 Observation

Direct observation, a key method in ethnographic research, allows researchers to immerse in a social setting in order to investigate, experience and represent the social processes that take place in that setting (Murchison, 2010). Participant observation allows for insight into the implicit, taken-for-granted aspects of teachers' professional practices, which may not have been explicitly articulated in interviews. As Robson and McCartan (2016) highlight, observational methods provide a direct means of capturing actions and interactions that might not align with self-reported data, offering a complementary perspective to interview and document analysis.

Robson and McCartan (2016) argue that observation can be dichotomised as formal and informal observation. Formal observation imposes a structured protocol of what to be observed; in comparison, informal observation is less structured, allowing for a more holistic, nuanced engagement with complexities and completeness in social worlds (Robson & McCartan, 2016). In this study, I employed informal observation, focusing particularly on novice teachers, their daily professional practices, as well as their utterances in interaction. However, my observation extended beyond individual actions and interactions to include the broader semiotic landscape within the school setting. This entailed looking at signs, symbolic resources, and the dominant ideologies that were circulated and reinforced in spatial arrangements and institutional discourses (Blackledge & Creese, 2010).

Another issue regarding observation is the role adopted by the researcher within the setting being observed (Musante & DeWalt, 2010). In the fieldwork, my role fluctuated

between being primarily an observer and, at times, a participant when invited into activities by teachers. While most observations were non-intrusive, I occasionally took part in activities, gaining insights into how practices and interactions unfolded. This fluid positioning aligns with the principles of ethnographic inquiry, where the participant observer is a human instrument actively engaged in co-constructing social reality with participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Rather than maintaining a fixed, detached stance, direct observation requires an adaptive and reflexive approach, where the researcher navigates different levels of involvement based on contextual factors, relationships with participants, and the unfolding nature of social interactions (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Recognising the complexity and ethical implications of this approach, the Section 3.8 (Ethical Considerations) was incorporated into this chapter. This section provides a critical reflection on the challenges, decisions, and ethical dilemmas encountered during fieldwork, ensuring transparency and reflexivity in the research process.

3.6.2 Fieldnotes

To document their observations, qualitative researchers often rely on fieldnotes, which are 'detailed, nonjudgemental, concrete descriptions of what has been observed' (Marshall, Rossman, & Blanco, 2014, p. 139). Typically written contemporaneously with events, experiences, and interactions, they provide a chronicle of settings, people, and social activities, often employing thick description to capture contextual nuances (Corwin & Clemens, 2020).

Fieldnotes are intended to provide descriptive accounts of people, events and dialogic interactions, as well as personal experiences and reflections, while minimising explicit interpretation. As Emerson et al. (2011) argue, description is not a simple act of documenting facts but an active process of sense-making and interpretation. Rather than simply mirroring reality, descriptive representation is shaped by theoretical frameworks

and researchers' positionality. Consequently, writing fieldnotes is an inherently selective process. By determining which incidents to highlight, which interactions to detail, and which contextual information to foreground, the researcher plays a critical role in constructing the representation of the social world (Emerson et al., 2011). Narayan (2012) highlights how ethnographic description is never neutral but shaped by the researcher's sensibilities, theoretical lens, and positionality. She encourages ethnographers to approach writing as an active form of engagement that combines empirical attentiveness with creativity and reflexivity.

In this study, I took field notes based on an ethnographic fieldnote protocol, drawing inspiration from Narayan (2012), Emerson et al. (2011), and Mills and Morton (2013) (See Table 3.2).

Table 3.2

Ethnographic Fieldnotes Protocol

Components	**Content**
Date and Time	e.g., Feb 21, 2023. From 8 am to 1 pm GMT+8 on Tuesday
Location and Activity type, Participants	e.g., School A, English teacher meeting involving all three grade levels; all English teachers from School A, and one district-level teacher education officer
Description	What happened: • Setting: layout, seating, artefacts, technologies; sensory features such as atmosphere, colour, sound, smell; • Participants' actions and interaction: who did and said what, in what sequence; patterns of participation such as who spoke and who remained silent; • Key topics and insider language.
Researcher Reflection and positionality	• Researcher position and role (e.g., observer or participant); • Personal feelings, reactions, surprises, questions; • Moments of alignment, tension, alienation or ethical uncertainty.
Preliminary Analysis & Memos	• Questions about specific actions or practices; • Emerging patterns or themes; links to key concepts (i.e., identity);

	• Questions raised for further exploration and data collection.
Follow-up actions	• Questions to ask later; interactions to revisit or observe again; documents to collect; • Adjustments to focus or data collection strategies; • Expansion into full descriptive field notes or vignettes.

This protocol enabled rich and context-based accounts of everyday teacher practices and interactions while foreground the researcher's reflection and positionality. By integrating observation, reflexivity, and iterative memo-writing for documenting fieldwork, the protocol supported an inductive and ethically grounded approach to understanding teacher identity construction in school settings. In this fieldwork, observations generated 47 sets of fieldnotes, each typically combining detailed descriptions, contextual information, personal reflections to convey a vivid and rich account of the experience. The following example is a vignette from my first visit to School A, revised from one of these fieldnotes:

Extract 3.1 'The first visit'

> It was 8:00am, on a regular morning in February 2023 in Chengdu, I was invited to observe a teacher meeting in School A. Navigating the bustling street during rush hour, I made a turn into a small alley and immediately entered a secluded place where high rise buildings gave way to quaint structures and ambient noise diminished. The school, one of the flagship secondary schools of the city, was nestled in this tranquil alley at the heart of the city centre. Once at the school's main entrance, I was impressed by its light grey architectural demeanour that exuded an air of solemnity. The main gate was adorned with several large words, '为中华崛起而读书'(Study for the Rise of China), a quote from the first Premier of China, Enlai Zhou. The building behind the main gate stood with a pair of vibrant red banners draped across its façade, boldly announcing: '冲刺百日，鱼贯龙门' (A hundred days countdown to Senior Secondary School Entrance Examination; Our school students change from fish to dragon). It was in the

> final three months leading up to the senior secondary school entrance exam, and even more than a decade after the conclusion of my study, that familiar anxiety resurged and came over me.
>
> (Fieldnote_Feb 21, 2023_School A)

This vignette provides a detailed, immersive account of my first visit to School A in February 2023. During this visit, I paid particular attention to how dominant discourse, such as competition and nationalism, were materialised and communicated through semiotic resources in the spatial arrangements of the school environments. These discursive practices offered insights into the institutional demands and expectations that shaped the concept of teacher professionalism and experiences of novice teachers.

3.6.3 Interviews

Interviews have long been recognised as a powerful method for exploring personal experiences, perceptions, and emotions, while situating individuals within their broader social milieu (Punch & Oancea, 2014). In line with Brinkmann's (2013) perspective, the study considers the interview not as passive instruments for *mining* data, but as a social practice where knowledge is co-constructed through the 'inter-view' of participants (p. 3), and identities are not merely expressed but actively negotiated (De Fina & Perrino, 2011).

As De Fina, Schiffrin, and Bamberg (2006) argue, the research interview itself is a particular social context where professional identities are discursively performed and constructed, and it is a field that has been relatively overlooked in identity research. Two key methodological considerations underpinned this approach. Firstly, viewing research interview as talk-in-interaction places the focus on how novice teachers discursively construct their experiences using linguistic and interactional resources (Byrne, 2012).

The second reason is that previous theme-based interviews often underplay the co-constructed nature of the data elicited by the interviewer, preferring to use interviews as resources to explore themes of interest and follow a simple report-and-response format, rather than acknowledging the interactive process that produces this data (Brinkmann, 2013; Gray & Morton, 2018). An interactional analysis approach, on the other hand, pays close attention to the joint construction of reality between the interviewer and interviewee, emphasising the collaborative nature of the interview setting (De Fina, 2011b).

I developed three sets of interview schedules tailored for the novice teacher participants, their mentors, and the heads of English Department. There were also event-based interviews, such as interviews after teaching competitions, mentoring sessions, or classroom teaching. These interview questions were intended as prompts rather than fixed questions, allowing for gaining an emic view of the novice teachers' lives (Brinkmann, 2013). Question wording was changed, and explanations given; questions that seemed inappropriate with a particular interviewee were omitted, or additional ones included. The aim was to encourage the participants to talk freely, using narratives to construct their views, concerns and experiences, without being directed by the interviewer (Brinkmann, 2013).

As reviewed in the literature (Gu & Benson, 2014; Lan, 2020), research on novice teachers highlights their dual identities as both teacher and learner when they navigate their early professional experiences. Additionally, studies highlight the impact of prior educational backgrounds and school cultures on novice teachers' identity formation processes, shaping their positionings and roles (Clarke, 2008). Given these insights, I designed four key topics to guide the teacher interviews (See Appendix C for full Interview Protocols): (1) Novice teachers' educational background and teaching experiences; (2) School settings and teaching group culture; (3) Novice teachers'

perception of themselves as teachers; (4) Novice teachers' perception of themselves as learners.

To gain a deeper understanding of institutional contexts, this study also included interviews with key stakeholders, specifically mentors and the heads of the English departments, who played a critical role in shaping novice teachers' professional development (See Appendix C). These stakeholders acted as informants and gatekeepers of institutional norms, offering insider perspectives on school expectations, policies, and support structures. Mentors provided regular, structured mentoring sessions to novice teachers, and their perspectives were essential in understanding how novice teachers positioned themselves with more senior colleagues. Mentor interview protocols covered three main topics: (a) Mentors' education background and their teaching experiences; (b) Mentoring practices and institution support; (c) Perceptions of the novice teacher's professional development. At the departmental level, the heads of the English department provide a more macro-level perspective on novice teacher induction, institutional frameworks and expectations. Interviews with them focused on: (1) Introduction to the institution and the department, as well as novice teacher education; (2) Institutional and Departmental expectations and challenges regarding novice teachers' professional development; (3) Reflections on teacher professional development.

3.6.4 Audio-recordings

Following the participants' informed consent, I audio recorded the novice teachers' routine activities using a portable recording device (ten Have, 2007). The initial aim was to record each teacher's conversations in various contexts, including teacher group meetings, novice-mentor meetings, classroom teaching.

However, this plan encountered several unforeseen circumstances. For instance, the outbreak of flu led to the lockdown of the schools for several weeks, and teacher meetings

were postponed due to directives from higher educational departments, such as compulsory participation in district or municipal level activities. The participants of the research informed me that, the district and municipal education departments mandated various in-person training sessions, often requiring a full morning on a weekday, to compensate for the lack of training activities during the Covid-19 period. Consequently, weekly school-based teacher meetings had to be postponed or cancelled. Additionally, practical factors such as variations in schedules and preferences for mentoring session formats—for example, some favoured informal chats in offices, while others preferred more formal conversations lasting 20 to 30 minutes—contributed to differences in the recordings obtained from each teacher. These circumstances, while challenging for data collection, highlighted the fact that each novice teacher had a unique professional development trajectory and faced specific challenges in their work environment.

To address these variations and ensure a comprehensive understanding of the teachers' professional lives, the research adopted more adaptive and flexible methods, which were intrinsic to ethnographic fieldwork. For example, these methods included complementing audio recordings with informal chats, interviews and detailed fieldnotes. Moreover, I arranged for the participants to record their teaching sessions and meeting activities without my presence and share with me afterwards. The goal was not to produce a uniform dataset across all participants, but to lean into the idiosyncrasies of their lived experiences, thereby facilitating a rich, in-depth understanding of each participant's unique professional trajectory.

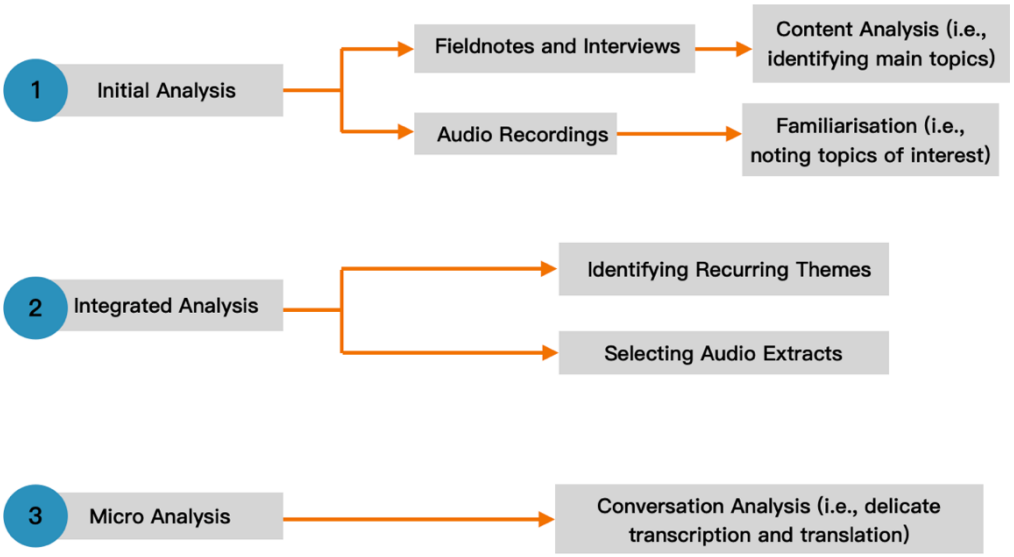
3.7 Data Analysis

This section presents the stages undertaken to conduct data analysis on the different data sets. This flowchart below (see Figure 3.1) illustrates the stages of data analysis, though it would be misleading to suggest the data analysis followed an entirely linear process (Copland & Creese, 2015). Rather, the stages of analysis were iterative, involving

numerous rounds of back and forth, self-doubt and revision (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020; Elliott, 2018).

Figure 3.1

The Stages of Data Analysis



For example, regarding the issues of transcription and translation, I initially had planned to transcribe and translate everything. I soon realised this was too time-consuming and decided to fully transcribe the interviews, while the audio recordings of interaction did not employ immediate transcription and translation.

3.7.1 Initial Analysis

Initial analysis involved managing and organising fieldnotes, interview transcripts and audio recordings as separate data sources by means of coding and indexing (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). This stage aimed to identify patterns, inconsistencies and contradictions that could provide deeper insights into the research focus.

Analysis of Fieldnotes

The fieldnotes contained immersive and detailed accounts of my observations. The fieldnotes were initially rough jottings and casual entries in the laptop memo. The drafts contained snippets of conversations, observational notes, half-finished sentences, initial interpretations, highlights of events, and quick sketches. These notes were completed during the observations and intended for my eyes only. As soon as I left the school, I would find a quite spot, whether in a café, library, or at home, to write up a more refined second draft. The second draft was coherent and organised, allowing a more detailed analysis later (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

Table 3.3

Fieldnotes Contents

Headings	**Sub-headings**
Public and Institutional Discourses	Recontextualising macro policies Institutional settings, aspirations, values
Novice Teachers Professional Development Activities	Teacher groups and meetings Mentors and mentoring Teaching competitions Demonstration lessons City/district level TPD activities Special events
Classroom Practices	Pedagogy Classroom management Teacher language use Assignments and tests Novice teachers and their specific acts
Social Practices	Nationalism Hierarchy Face issues Accountability Competition
Researcher Positionality	Controlling the research process Researcher as insider and outsider Researcher's emotions

After the completion of the fieldwork, the fieldnotes gained a higher level of attention as they provided crucial ethnographic, contextual information. I conducted an inductive, bottom-up content coding approach (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020). The method involved meticulously reviewing the notes to identify patterns and categories grounded in the detail of observations. From the analytical reading, five main headings were produced, each with several subheadings. The main headings were 'Public and Institutional Discourses', 'Novice Teacher PD Activities', 'Classroom Practices', 'Social Practices' and 'Researcher Positionality' (Table 3.3). The fieldnote data were then organised by these main contents and populated with extracts cut and pasted from the fieldnotes, which could be linked with interview transcripts and audio recordings for further synthesised analysis.

Analysis of Audio Recordings

At this stage of analysis, I opted not to transcribe or translate the audio recordings. Instead, I engaged with the recordings by taking one participant one time, listening, and focusing on one session at a time. These recordings contained a rich collection of interactions from various contexts, such as teachers' group meetings, mentoring sessions, and classroom interactions.

This process involved carefully listening to the recordings and making notes of interest. For each session, I composed concise reflections, typically a few sentences, to capture potential themes and noteworthy episodes of interaction. These reflections not only served as a means of identifying emerging patterns but also acted as a valuable resource for refreshing my memory when revisiting the data. However, these reflections involved a degree of data reduction to ensure focus and clarity; thus, the process required carefully condensing the information to highlight the most salient points or episodes in relation to teacher identities. Overall, these reflective notes fostered a more integrated analysis in the subsequent stages of the research process.

Analysis of Interviews

A total of 27 recorded interview sessions were analysed using two distinct analytical lenses. The first method mirrored the approach I used for fieldnotes, focusing on 'what was said' by the participants. After listening to and transcribing the interview data, I conducted a content coding method to summarise the main topics that emerged from the interviews (see Table 3.4). The process led to the creation of several overarching topics, most of which were derived from the interview schedules, while some were inductively identified from the data itself. For example, themes such as aspiration and emotion were initially included under other general prompts. But during the interviews, these themes recurred frequently, gained higher attention, and finally emerged as separate topics. Additionally, the theme of competition emerged as a new and significant theme during the course of fieldwork, which was not initially anticipated.

Table 3.4

Interview Contents

Topic	Summary
Profile	Profile included previous teaching experience, education background, English learning experience all contributed to participants' expertise, satisfaction, and self-construction.
Aspiration	Teachers' aspirations—what they want to achieve and strive to accomplish in the future—seemed central to their practices and emotions.
Setting	Relate to school culture, teaching group culture, level of support from school. What support do they provide for teachers? How do teachers perceive the support it offers?
Teacher Identity	Teacher identity mentioned included their perceptions of teacher role, confidence, expertise. How do they think of role of teachers, and how do they determine what is, or not is, part of their roles at work? Feel confident or not when making pedagogical decisions in classroom teaching?
Learner Identity	The socialisation process into the schools differed from person to

	person. Each novice teacher employed different strategies to cope with issues at work.
Emotion	Emotions mentioned in interviews included emotional labour attached to the work, such as investment in student wellbeing, and also emotional distress that participants experienced (e.g., anxiety, frustration, stress, conflicts) that influenced their perceptions and actions.
Competition	Competition includes the culture of competition at all levels, and actual events such as school or district level teaching competitions. Competitions served as a crucial mediating tool for novice teachers to construct their teacher identity.

The second method was similar to that of the audio recordings, focusing on 'how it is said', or the teachers' discursive practices. The rationale was that how the teachers used discursive practices to co-construct the interview with the researcher could reveal more levels of complexity in relation to teacher identities.

3.7.2 Integrated Analysis

In the first phase of data analysis, I attended to different types of data while keeping them separate and treating as distinct entities. In the second stage, therefore, I sought to make connections between episodes of interactions and the recurring topics identified in interviews and fieldnotes (Blackledge & Creese, 2010).

To achieve this, I re-listened to the audio recordings and identified extracts that could be in relation to the participants' identity enactment and worthy of detailed analysis. The decisions of what interactional extracts might serve as a resource for further micro analysis were not arbitrary; rather, they were informed by a thorough reading and analysis of fieldnotes, memos, and a review of literature. As I listened, I simultaneously crossed-referenced and integrated findings from the interviews and fieldnotes.

It was during the second stage of analysis that I re-visited the literature that I had found

relevant to my research topic. This process allowed me to approach my data with a more informed perspective and identify connections between my own data sets and the findings of other researchers. Moreover, this cross-referencing enabled me to find patterns across data that were not immediately apparent during the initial stage.

3.7.3 Micro Analysis

The third stage of analysis focuses on micro analysis, which involves transcription and translation, followed by building links between real-time interactional practices and broader sociocultural issues embedded within them.

Once the extracts were selected, they were transcribed and translated. I started with line-by-line transcription following the conventions of Conversation Analysis (See Appendix A: Transcription Conventions for CA). I listened to the audio files repeatedly and produced detailed transcripts by using the specialised software, CLAN (Computerized Language ANalysis). For translation, I only translated interactional extracts that I found to be of most relevance to the research questions. The translation process presented two primary challenges: (1) preventing the loss of nuances inherent in the original language (Halai, 2007; Santos Jr. et al., 2015), and (2) rendering the translated text in a way that retained as much contextual and interactional information as possible. To mitigate these concerns, I chose to present the interactional extracts with both the original Chinese transcripts and their corresponding English translations. Where necessary, relevant cultural or linguistic features were clarified in the analytic discussion, providing contextual support for understanding participants' language choices and interactional actions.

Drawing on Gumperz's (1982) work, this analysis highlights how the semiotic resources that novice teachers bring to the conversations, such as word choice, intonation, gestures and other communicative behaviours, serve as indexical signs that orient to contextual

features. These contextual features, as Gumperz (1982) argues, would in turn provide a basis for researchers to interpret interlocutors' identities, roles, and actions within specific interactional settings. During this stage of analysis, I paid close attention to the real-time interaction practices of novice teachers, examining how certain interactional strategies might reflect their attempts to conform to professional norms while others could orient to resistance or misalignment with those norms. Furthermore, integrating data from interviews and fieldnotes allowed me to contextualise these interactional practices within the broader professional landscapes that shaped the lived experiences of novice teachers. Interviews provided insights into the novices' motivations, reflections and beliefs, while fieldnotes captured the situational factors that influenced these interactions. By doing so, I was able to build links between real-time interactional practices with the wider sociocultural issues. An example of this integrated approach can be seen below (Table 3.5), where I explored the theme of 'constructing a teacher identity as rule enforcer' in the case of Yu.

Table 3.5

Example of Data Integration

Theme: Constructing a teacher identity as rule enforcer in the case of Yu		
Sources	**Transcripts**	**Interpretations**
Audio recordings	**Yu's classroom practice (2023/04/27)** **Yu**: ok good (.) first of all S1 please (0.4) so I will give an example (.) g is tomatoes (.) go = **S1**: = b is beef **Yu**: ok sit down please very good (.) >go on< (0.6) number three (.) um right um °let me see° S2 please **S2**: ((unintelligible)) **Yu**: C? **S2**: is [noodles **Yu**: [noodles (.) ok sit down please (.) next one (.) how about S3 **S3**: (1.5) hmm (.) picture a is tomatoes **Yu**: ok °tomatoes° (0.1) ((gesturing to	Using directive speech acts (e.g. commands, orders) to command the flow of the classroom interaction. Providing immediate, short feedback and quickly moving on with 'go on'. She tends to use minimal elaboration to ensure efficiency. Switching to Sichuan dialect to emphasize her point more sternly (expressing disapproval and exerting

	S3 to sit down)) 你就没有听我讲嘛 ((in Sichuan dialect: didn't you listen to me?)) (.) 我的格式是啥子 ((what is my format?)) (0.6) 什么叫作 ((what is it)) picture a is tomatoes?	authority). She pointed out the rules she expected to be followed.
Interview transcripts	**Yu_Follow-up interview 2023/04/27** **Liu**: Logically speaking, the child's answer is right. Why did you say that he didn't follow your format? **Yu**: what you said is right, and what the child said is also correct… But this is my task. I think it's a way to check if you have been listening attentively in class. It's not just that what you said is right…I demonstrated it for you and my PowerPoint also had this pattern displayed, so I expect you to follow this pattern, although it might be a bit rigid…the children in this class are very lively and their thinking is very active. Some of the rigid methods and stuff might be more suitable for this class…	Her insistence on formats reflects a belief that rules are necessary for effective learning and for maintaining order in the classroom. Commenting on the lively nature of the children. Her structured methods are then portrayed as suited to channelling this liveliness into genuine engagement and learning.
Fieldnotes: institutional settings	**Fieldnote_school visit 2023 Mar** …even though there were a few minutes left before the official start of class, both students and teachers seemed ready to begin (perhaps because it was the first lesson of the day): students were quietly seated, heads down, with one teacher standing in the middle of the classroom watching the students do their homework…	Despite there being a few minutes to the official start of classes, students and teachers are already in place, suggesting a disciplined approach: the school's emphasis on preparedness and order.
	Fieldnote_school visit 2023 Mar Looking around the classroom, the side walls were adorned with posters. I leaned in to look at an English score sheet: there were about 52 students in the class, and the variation in scores was significant, ranging from 140 at the highest to 35 at the lowest, with most students scoring between 110 and 130, but there were also quite a few students with lower scores.	The academic performance displayed on the walls, highlighting significant disparities in student achievement, which poses challenges to novice teachers' classroom teaching—a more disciplined way is regarded as a more effective in such a context.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

This section outlines the ethical considerations that influenced the research design, data collection, and analytical choices in the research. I start with a brief discussion of central principles of ethics, before dissecting specific ethical concerns encountered during the research process. Following this, I explore issues related to autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and respect. I then offer reflections on power relations between myself and the participants, as well as the identities or positionalities I carried throughout the research.

3.8.1 Ethical Principles

In the social sciences, principles of ethical research have been drawn from medical sciences and experiment research (Copland & Creese, 2015). While these principles have been critiqued for their limited applicability to ethnography, they continue to inform the considerations of ethics committees and the questions posed on ethics approval forms (Hammersely, 2009). These core principles are, as outlined by Beauchamp and Childress (2013): *autonomy*, participants must be fully informed and have rights to refuse participation or withdraw; *beneficence*, the researcher is obligated to prioritise the well-being of participants; *non-maleficence*, ethical research is to do no harm, which extends not only to participants but also to institutions and communities being studies; and *justice*, research demands equitable and fair treatment of all participants.

In this study, efforts were made to ensure adherence and fidelity to these principles. Participants were informed and were given opportunities to make her choice about whether or not to take part (autonomy). The research was aligned with the institution goals to facilitate teacher professional development and ensured that the teacher participants could benefit from the process and results (beneficence). Potential harms to participants, institutions, or communities were carefully weighed up, with measures taken to mitigate risks (non-maleficence). And finally, the research aimed to fairly and accurately represent teacher identities across diverse professional contexts (justice).

While decisions were guided by ethical principles, further complicating ethical questions when considering ethics became relevant:

(1) How thorough should I present my ethical considerations in this thesis?

(2) What steps should I take to empower teachers and minimise the exploitative aspects in research arising from power imbalances?

(3) To whom do I own my loyalties? Should I prioritise the well-being of the teacher participants, the benefits of the institutions and communities, or the broader international public who may benefit from the results?

(4) How should I resolve ethical practices effective in Western contexts but problematic in China, such as the act of signing?

These complexities posed here reflect an ongoing ethical exploration and I will provide my responses in the following sections, which are not final but continually evolving.

3.8.2 Ethics of Autonomy

In terms of autonomy, informed consent and the right to withdraw are two key elements (Copland & Creese, 2015). Informed consent requires the researcher to explain fully to participants the research aims, methods, and implications in order that the participants can choose to take part in or decline. However, in practice, achieving informed consent presents challenges related to both the quantity and quality of information provided (Turkmendag, Dingwall, & Murphy, 2008). The issue of quantity revolves around how much information the research should give to participants. In this study, if the researched knew their language would be recorded and subjected to detailed, micro analysis, they might alter their language use or behaviour in ways that could compromise the authenticity of the data. Balancing transparency with the need to capture participants' naturally occurring interactions has been an ethical challenge for this study.

When it comes to the issue of quality, it pertains to how effectively participants understand and engage with the research. For example, how should I expect teachers to

grasp the complexities of the research focus like teacher identity and therefore feel invested in the study? As Murphy and Dingwall (2001) point out, providing a clear and comprehensive explanation of the research objectives to the researched is not always straightforward. This difficulty is compounded by factors such as my participant's familiarity of education research, educational background and interest.

To cope with the issues, I adhered to transparency and attempted to be explicit and clear with my participants. Prior to the start, I provided an information sheet (See Appendix B) designed to offer as much detail as possible about the research while remaining open to participants' inquiries. The document outlined the research aims, scope and procedures, and included information about ethical considerations. When introducing my research to the teachers and institutions, I purposefully avoided using complex terms such as identity or agency; instead, using alternatives such as teacher beliefs or self-understanding, to foster relatability and comfort. Once the research was underway, I regularly encouraged the novice teachers to ask questions about the research and checked in with them to ensure they were comfortable continuing their participation.

The information sheet also highlighted teachers' rights to withdraw, aligning with the ethical principle of autonomy. My research received strong support from the heads of English department and an official in the local education authority. These figures encouraged, if not subtly compelled, novice teachers to participate, which raised concerns about whether participants' involvement was entirely voluntary. While I successfully recruited six teachers from three schools, this incident left me uncertain about the participants' genuine wishes. To address this issue, I consistently engaged with the teachers throughout the research by sharing emerging thoughts and findings, checking in on their well-being and feelings, and reiterating their rights to opt out. I assured the participants that the data would be securely protected and would not be fed back to the authority figures. One example was Ke, a participant from School C, who

faced a significant workplace change when she was transferred from the main campus of School C to its feeder school. Despite this perceived 'degraded' transition and professional uncertainty this brought along, she expressed a sense of obligation towards me, which complicated her participation. After discussing her situation thoroughly, I found a way to exclude her from further involvement while securing her permission to retain the data already collected.

Even though informed consent in ethical approval required participants to sign consent forms to give permission, the act of signing was perceived by my participants as merely a formality or even as a form of alienation. Signing the form, firstly, did not necessarily mean participants were fully aware of the ethical issues, which placed them in a potentially powerless position. Secondly, participants expressed reluctance to sign forms, especially the senior experienced teachers, stating that oral permission should suffice. This was partly because my access to the schools was facilitated through informal and relationship-based channels rather than bureaucratic procedures, which aligned with the local trust norms. To address this, before the start of every interview, I explicitly explained data protection strategies and provided participants with clear ways to raise complaints about any perceived wrongdoing.

In all, the goal of autonomy extended beyond merely providing information; it was about ensuring that the ethical considerations were communicated in an accessible, relevant and regular way so that participants could make informed decisions at every stage of the research process.

3.8.3 Non-maleficence, Respect and Beneficence

Copland and Creese (2015) highlight that non-maleficence, the ethical principle of doing no harm, might be the most challenging principles to uphold. This is particularly true when findings risk presenting participants or communities in a negative light, potentially

causing harm. In this study, which adopted critical discourse analysis as its research methodologies, the analytical foci were to uncover the mundane and routines, and to capture moments of conflicts and inequality. While research critically examined local discourses, its incentives and goals were centred around empowering teachers, contributing positively to the field of teacher education.

A consistent and reflexive examination of choices made throughout the research was crucial in ensuring the principle of non-maleficence. Firstly, anonymity and pseudonyms were employed once the data was collected. While complete anonymity was not possible in this study due to its ethnographic nature, the audience of the thesis would be unlikely to have direct contact with the participants. This approach minimised the risk of identification while maintaining the contextual integrity of the research.

Secondly, data protection and storage protocols were addressed in the procedural ethical committee review with the University. Identifying information, such as names, contact details, and addresses, was stored on an encrypted hard drive accessible only to the research.

Thirdly, ethics regarding recordings focused on minimising invasiveness while providing an emic perspective. Recording interactions began only in the second month of data collection, allowing time to build rapport and establish trust with participants. Recording sessions were scheduled in advance, respecting participants' time and preferences. This approach stood in contrast to the practice of 'open classes' commonly seen in Chinese schools, where teachers are observed without prior notice (discussed further in Findings Chapter 1). This deliberate approach respected the participants' willingness and reduced any type of intrusion or discomfort. Moreover, ethical issues of recordings also emerged during data analysis. For example, when examining linguistic use and forms within mentor-mentee sessions, findings occasionally highlighted knowledge asymmetry and

suggested that teacher mentors displayed authority or indifference. While these audio extracts were critical for understanding the power dynamics at play, thought was paid to how these findings were framed to avoid cheery-picking evidence, misrepresenting their intentions, or unfairly criticising the participants.

Another potential ethical consideration is beneficence in the research. The research aimed to provide teachers opportunity to benefit from the interview process and the resulting findings (Evans et al., 2017). However, tensions in beneficence arose during data collection. For example, a novice teacher initially expected practical support but was informed that the study was exploratory, not solution oriented. As trust was established, the interview evolved into a space where she vented her frustrations, expressing complaints about various aspects of her workplace. Although she was not compelled to do so and felt the research posed no harm, she believed the results would not lead to meaningful change in her surroundings.

This incident raised critical questions of who the audience and benefactors are. In most cases, participants highlighted the benefits of engaging in the research and reflecting on their practices; but at times, their reflections revealed complaints and vulnerabilities. Despite not offering immediate, tangible benefits for participants, the research aimed to contribute to a broader goal of voicing teachers' experiences and promoting long-term changes in practices and policies.

3.8.4 Power and Positionality

The identities I brought to the research shaped the power dynamics and relationships between myself and the participants. Zimmerman (1998) identified three levels of identities: transportable identities, situated identities, discourse identities. This framework provided an insightful lens for understanding how my positionalities influenced the research process.

The *transportable identities*, or 'tag along' identity (Zimmerman, 1998, p, 90), are those related to my gender, educational backgrounds, shared linguistic and cultural norms: Having been born and bred in Chengdu, I spoke the Sichuan dialect fluently, which served as a valuable linguistic resource for opening up and sustaining conversations with teachers. Though I worked as an EFL teacher in a private institution with a different agenda from public schools, I was educated in public schools during my school years, which gave me prior knowledge of how the system operated from a student's perspective. These shared experiences, combined with my understanding of their professional contexts from reviewing literature, helped me build trust quickly. For example, many teachers expressed curiosity about my educational journey, asking where I completed my bachelor's and master's degrees, and often comparing their higher education experiences in China with those I described from the UK. Additionally, my identity as a young female sometimes impacted how teachers perceived me. I was often assumed to be a novice teacher and occasionally received unsolicited help during professional activities. On one occasion, while observing a class, a teacher handed me her annotated teaching materials and thoroughly explained the session to me as though I were new to the institution. These transportable identities were largely unencumbered and played a significant role in fostering connections.

In contrast, my *situated identity* as a researcher from a distinguished university added another layer to the relationships. As a researcher, I pursued my agenda of studying teacher professional development, but this identity often came with an association of authority. At times, I was positioned as an 'expert' or a 'knowledgeable model' who could offer professional guidance. For instance, a head teacher once invited me to deliver a speech at a meeting with about 10 head teachers, saying "We need your guidance". On another occasion, a head teacher suggested I initiate a pilot English group with all EFL teachers at her school.

It was through the production of *discourse identity* in the social interactions that I could carefully mitigate these power imbalances. During my conversations with participants, I presented myself as a patient listener, a respectful explorer, or an outsider whose findings would not directly impact their work. By framing my role as someone who was seeking to learn from them rather than evaluate or guide them, I attempted to build a more equitable relationship.

These identities were fluid and discursively constructed through the research process. Reflexivity required me to consciously and continually monitor and interrogate my roles and positions, values and beliefs, bias and prejudices, and my interactions with the researched that might influence the study.

3.9 Research Validity

The validity of this research is anchored in Maxwell's (1992) realist framework, which emphasises the relationship between research accounts and the phenomena they seek to describe, interpret, and explain. Maxwell's typology of validity offers a comprehensive lens for evaluating the quality of qualitative research, moving beyond positivist standards prevalent in quantitative research, to reflect the nuanced and situated nature of qualitative research. He refers to these categories as descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, generalisability, and evaluative validity (Maxwell, 1992). The following discussion outlines how each of the validity is conceptualised and addressed in the research.

Descriptive validity pertains to the factual accuracy of the research data (Maxwell, 1992). In this study, audio recordings of interviews and professional practices were employed and complemented by detailed observational notes to capture the physical and transient moments. Efforts to maintain descriptive accuracy included cross-referencing

participant accounts with institutional documents, fieldnotes, interview transcripts to make sure the descriptions as much detailed as possible. *Interpretive validity* concerns the emic perspective of participants, particularly how they perceive and comprehend everyday teaching practices. This study draws on insights from discourse analysis to prioritise novice teachers' self-construction through semiotic resources they have on their own hand. For example, the narratives told in research interviews were analysed to uncover their motivations, beliefs, and emotional responses to external categories imposed by the institutions.

Theoretical validity examines the appropriateness and coherence of the theoretical frameworks used to explain the phenomena under study. In the research, identity is a central construct, alongside agency and power, for analysing participants' actions and experiences in social interactions with others. During the literature review, the concept of identity was critically examined for its interdisciplinary origins, elusiveness and fluidity, as well as its potential applicability to the Chinese context, which places significant emphasis on collectivity. Despite these challenges, identity was retained as a theoretical lens due to its dual utility: it offers a powerful framework for exploring individual teachers' learning trajectories and identity formation, while also serving as an emancipatory tool to empower teachers. Rather than being applied uncritically, these constructs were refined iteratively through an ongoing dialogue between the empirical data and relevant literature. This iterative process ensured that the theoretical frameworks provided meaningful and contextually grounded insights into novice teachers' identity negotiations under institutional pressures.

While qualitative research often does not aim for statistical generalisability, this study strives for what Maxwell terms 'internal generalisability' (p. 293)—the extent to which findings apply across the participants and contexts studied. By employing purposive sampling, this research captured a range of perspectives from novice EFL teachers in

diverse urban schools. Additionally, the theoretical insights generated aim for transferability, offering frameworks that may be relevant to similar educational contexts beyond this study.

Finally, *evaluative validity* addresses the ethical and critical dimensions of research conclusions. For example, this study critically examines the broader implications of teaching competitions, such as their role in reproducing educational inequalities and shaping the notion of teacher professionalism. By situating participants' experiences within the institutional and policy contexts of Chinese education, this research evaluates power asymmetry, ethical tensions and the unintended consequences of teacher professional development activities.

3.10 Chapter Summary

This Chapter has outlined the methodological decisions underpinning this study. Drawing on an ethnographic study design, the research combined the depth of ethnographic inquiry with the bounded focus of case study research, enabling an in-depth exploration of novice teachers' learning experiences and how their experiences were embedded within the sociocultural and institutional contexts. Data were collected over an extended period through observations, audio recordings, semi-structured interviews, and fieldnotes, providing a rich and comprehensive understanding of teacher learning and professional practice. Analytical approaches were informed by Critical Discourse Analysis and Conversation Analysis, which enabled a close examination of language use, interactional practices, and the way power and ideology are embedded in everyday professional discourses.

The fieldwork was conducted in two public junior secondary schools in *Ronghua District* in the city of Chengdu, involving five novice teachers of English as a foreign language. Throughout the research, I maintained a reflexive stance, recognising that my

positionalities and identities inevitably shaped the process of data collection, interpretation, analysis, and representation. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed at all stages of the study.

The following four chapters present the empirical findings, focusing respectively on: 1) teaching competitions; 2) *Shifu-Tudi* (mentor-novice) relationships; 3) classroom teaching practices; and 4) ethnographic portraits of the five novice teachers. They involve the different contexts and discursive sites through which novice teachers negotiated their professional identities, illuminating the complexity of learning to teach and the challenges teachers encountered in navigating the tensions between personal agency and institutional expectations.

Chapter 4: Learning to Teach as a Virtuoso: Novice Teachers in Teaching Competitions

4.1 Introduction

In the very first encounters with the novice teachers, I asked of their plans to further their professional development. Almost all of them responded with, "by participating in teaching competitions." At that time, I assumed these competitions were just another routine professional development activity, similar to open classes. A few days later, I was invited to observe a competition. The event took place at 9 a.m. in a vast, tiered hall at a local school, equipped with an enormous screen and a front stage large enough to accommodate an entire class's desks. A striking red banner was suspended above the stage, bearing the slogan:

> 促教学提升，展教师风采
>
> *(Promote Teaching Development, Showcase Teacher Charisma)*

In the hall, about fifty students were arranged in rows of desks, with five judges positioned right behind them, and hundreds of teachers filling the rows further back. At the forefront stood a young teacher, dressed impeccably and wearing subtle makeup. The entire setting carried an air of formality. The class was working on the topic of 'Science and Technology', and the teacher skilfully used a projector to display various learning materials. After playing a pre-arranged audio recording for the class, she and students coordinated each other in a highly interactive and seamless way, transitioning smoothly from pair work and choral reading to student role-playing and group presentations, as if they had been practicing the lesson for many times.

As the teacher concluded her lesson with a "class over", a student stood and signalled, "stand up". The entire class rose in unison, reciting in clear voices, "Thank you, Ms. X",

followed by a synchronised bow. The students then exited the stage in orderly rows, making way for the next group of students, who were assigned to the following competitor and entered wearing their neat uniform and red scarves.

There were eight competitors in total, all novice English language teachers, each assigned a lesson topic and a specific group of students determined by random draw. After all the competitors had presented their lessons by late afternoon, the judge committee, comprising model teachers, university-based teacher educators, and local teaching research officers (*jiaoyanyuan*), took turn delivering ten-minute speeches about the lessons they had just observed and evaluated. Some talked about specific highlights of the lesson they found, while others commented on the effective use of hands-on materials. Finally, the judges announced that the rankings would be released in the next few days.

At that point I came to realise that competitions are far more than a routine teaching exercise, but rather a high-stakes event where all teachers have to partake in at the initial stage of their teaching careers. Since then, and throughout the six-month fieldwork at the two schools, I have come to apprehend the significant role of these contests in particularly shaping novice teachers' identities and their careers trajectories. All participating teachers competed the first time in such teaching competitions during the fieldwork. I conducted interviews with them both before and after these events and, on several occasions, took part in their trial lessons to observe how an 'exemplary' lesson was conceptualised and crafted. Beneath the surface of the vocabulary favoured by the Party-state and its educational authorities—*Competitions for Promoting Learning and Teaching* ('以赛促学, 以赛促教', *yisai cuxue, yisai cujiao*)—lies a complex web of forces. These competitions are more than just a showcase of teacher charisma or pedagogical skills; instead, they serve as an important sphere of teaching profession, moulding the way teachers teach, their social relationships with colleagues and students, and how they position and understand themselves as teachers. Participation in teaching competitions

compelled them to move beyond their previously imagined identities and to (re)construct their professional identities through the cultural and linguistic repertoires authorised by the institutional discourse.

Due to their high-stakes, performative, and often contested nature, teaching competitions offer a productive site for examining how novice teachers learn, negotiate meaning, and construct their professional teacher identities in urban China. This chapter explores novice teachers' self-construction to dissect the complexities of power and individual agency in the context of teaching competitions, drawing on data from interviews and ethnographic fieldnotes. I begin by discussing the Chinese model of teaching as *virtuoso performance* (Paine, 1990), an approach that legitimises teaching competitions from a cultural perspective while overlooking the underlying power asymmetries within the educational system. I then delve into the two novice teachers' narrations and recounting in research interviews to explore their competition trajectories and how their identities were talked into being, negotiated and continuously constructed. I extend the analysis beyond an exclusive focus on what the novice teachers said to an examination of how they said it and their discursive construction embedded within the institutional context. In the final two sections, I lay out the two prominent themes that contribute to novice teachers' evolving identities: (i) how they positioned themselves as 'front runners' or 'back runners' in relation to the uneven distribution of resources across schools, after participating in competitions; (ii) the emergence of compassion and complicity which illustrated how teachers navigated the tension between opportunities for institutional support and professional growth, and the persistent demands of routine teaching work.

4.2 Teaching as Virtuoso Performance

In 1990, Paine described the Chinese approach to teaching as akin to that of a 'virtuoso' (p. 49). This identity of teacher as virtuoso highlights that teaching in China is referred

to as an art, more than just a craft. The performance of art is through the combination of teachers' accomplishment of subject knowledge and their personal, humanistic qualities such as aesthetics, affection, and dedication (Paine, 1990). This cultural model of teaching is so deeply naturalised among Chinese teachers that its underlying meanings became visible, for example, in my interview with Ting. As an expert teacher and the head of the English department in School A, Ting had participated in nearly a hundred teaching competitions over her twenty-five-year career. She remarked,

Extract 4.1 'Open classes'

> Ting: …competitions can be compared to like 'open classes' where anyone can walk in, listen to, and learn from the lessons. Since you are a teacher, you should be able to deliver your lessons in front of your audience. Anyone, whether they are your mentor, judges, or colleagues, can all be considered your students.
>
> (Interview 1_June 28, 2023_School A_Ting)

Open Classes, also known as *walk-in lessons*, refer to a common practice where teachers should always keep their classroom open and allow anyone to observe without prior notice. Teachers should be ready to perform to anyone, even those who are not a part of their daily teaching duties. In this sense, an excellent teacher is one who has so mastered the knowledge of the curricular text that she can transcend it, adding her own interpretation, and finally performing on a stage, in front of an audience of students, colleagues and judges in explicit and organised ways that are aligned with the audience's interests and needs (Xu & McEwan, 2016).

A review of literature published in Chinese educational journals indicated that teaching competitions began to emerge across provinces and municipalities in the mid- to late 1980s, in the wake of the post-Opening Up reforms (e.g., Guo & Gao, 1995; Huang, 1991;

Peng, 1989). These early competitions were initially introduced as a means to address the perceived lack of expertise among young teachers, and at the same time, to advance ongoing reforms aimed at shifting the system from exam-oriented to quality-oriented education. Early forms were commonly known as 'Excellent Lesson Appraisal Activities' (*youzhike jiangping huodong*), which emphasised the production of a single exemplary lesson. Over time, however, these activities evolved into what is now widely referred to as 'Excellent Teacher Competitions' (*youshi saike*), 'Teacher Competitions' (*jiaoshi saike*), or 'Instructional Competitions' (*jiaoxue bisai*), in which the quality of a teacher is judged through the performance of one lesson. By the late 1990s, such competitions had become pervasive across regions and gradually expanded into large-scale national events (e.g., Hu & He, 1999; Li, M., 2006).

Teaching competitions can be seen as an example of the model of teaching as virtuoso performance. In competitions, teachers showcase their roles as both masters of knowledge and performers of artistry. That is, they must be well-prepared, and their lessons well-rehearsed (typically five to seven times of mock lesson delivery). They use multimedia tools such as projectors, videos, and interactive whiteboards, alongside innovative pedagogical activities, including student performances, group discussions, and hands-on activities such as making posters or crafts, to enhance student engagement. Other elements, such as voice projection, hand movements, eye contact, and body language, are rehearsed as well to present as natural and fluid as possible during the performance. There are multiple levels of the competitions organised by multiple layers of educational authorities, ranging from the school level, district, city, provincial, and ultimately to national levels. The themes of teaching competitions are equally diverse. During my fieldwork, I attended a city-level competition held in 2023 that focused on interpreting the 2022 national curriculum standards through exemplar lessons, including the articulation of the theoretical principles underpinning those standards. One session focused on applying theories to practice, requiring participants to present a

lesson based on a specific concept drawn from a pool of contemporary educational theories. My informant, Yu, drew the theory of 'multimodality', which she had never encountered before. However, the competition pushed her and her team to conduct research, learn the theory and apply it in the classroom. After two months of intense preparation, Yu and her team presented a lesson integrating the concept and ultimately won the first place in this competition.

Even if the preparation process is extremely time-consuming and labour-intensive, success in teaching competitions often brings opportunities for promotions, recognition, and monetary awards; accumulated achievements may also translate into professional titles (Pawan, 2017). It is precisely this high-stakes nature that drives many teachers to participate. Yet, despite the existence of formal evaluation criteria—for example, Pawan, Fan, and Pei (2017) outlined six dimensions, including teaching objectives, lesson preparation, pedagogical strategies, teacher quality (*jiaoshi suzhi*), student participation, and learning outcomes—the standards remained vague and were inconsistently applied by judges. This inconsistency raised concerns about fairness, the legitimacy of the evaluation process, and overall transparency (Zhang, 2010, 2011).

Perhaps inevitably, it has become natural to assume that all young teachers should seize every opportunity to showcase themselves early in their careers. Not only because novice teachers are regarded as key assets for the school's future, but also because they are perceived to be, as one participant explained, "more flexible, open to change, and unburdened by families" (Wen, interview 1). Although most teaching competitions set an age limit of 40, in practice most competitors are under thirty. One 30-year-old teacher, noticing that her peers of a similar age were no longer active or encouraged to participate, and that the school instead recommended competitors aged only 24 to 25 years old who often newly entered the profession, complained to me, "Why is it that teachers over thirty are no longer considered worthy of professional development?"

Notably, when I observed the ways in which these novice teachers employed the state-of-art theories to deliver their lessons, I marvelled at the dynamics during the lesson—it did not differ from my understanding of hierarchical relationships between teachers, textbooks and students: The teacher stood at the centre stage and textbooks served as the primary source of knowledge, while students sat quietly, all facing the teacher and responding only when prompted.

Some may argue that this scenario reflects longstanding Confucian norms and aligns with the model of the teacher as a virtuoso performer (Paine, 1990), which emphasises teachers as learned figures and positions students as recipients of knowledge. However, this cultural explanation alone cannot account for why this model has persisted and even remained dominant across successive waves of education reform in China since the late 1970s, which have prioritised reducing teacher-centred instruction, promoting student-centred learning, and advancing educational equality. If a Confucian view reveres the supremacy of the textbook and the dominance of teachers, it is then in conflict with criticisms over traditional teaching approaches and with calls for teachers to introduce innovation. Yet, as many ethnographic studies of compulsory education in China have shown (Perez-Milans, 2013; Woronov, 2015), the model of virtuoso performance, together with the events such as teaching competitions and demonstration classes, is seen as best suited to these reforms. Rather than being dismissed, it is rearticulated with a reform agenda shaped by the complex interplay between global neoliberal logics which valorise free-market competition, and a socialist ideology which dictates what should be taught and how schools should operate (Paine, 1990; Zhao, 2015).

However, this raises several important questions in relation to teacher identity, wellbeing, and professionalism: How does the desire of novice teachers to participate in teaching competitions come about, or is constructed, throughout the process of participating in

such high-stakes competitions? How do these competitions shape their identities as teachers, their social relationships with colleagues and students, and consequently, the meanings of teacher professionalism in this context? And how do teachers navigate such powerful yet competing forces, where they must respond to the current calls for progressive change while also complying with the ideology-based mandates and market-oriented performativity? Exploring these questions will shed light on the interface between teacher agency and broader educational structures.

4.3 Involvement in Teaching Competitions

This section employs a micro analysis of two novice teachers' self-construction of who they are as they recounted and narrated their experiences of participating teaching competitions in the research interviews. Like the scaffolding of a building, delineating narrative structure reveals the linguistic resources one habitually or unconsciously draws upon to create emotions, thoughts and identities (Capps & Ochs, 1995). The analysis pays particular attention to how power asymmetries are oriented to, how agency is highlighted or downplayed, and how broader structural concerns enter their narratives.

4.3.1 Yu's Story

Yu, from the high-performing School A, was selected as a focal case for this chapter not only because she secured first place in her initial teaching competition in June 2023, but also for her dramatically shifting stances towards teaching competitions, evolving from strong resistance to eventual alignment. To understand Yu's transformation process, this section delves into the stories she told and the emotions and reflections she expressed in the process of narrating them.

Building Resistance

When Yu received the notification that she needed to participate in the school-based teaching competition in June 2023, she felt an overwhelming sense of resistance. In her

mind, she had only been teaching for a year and was still unfamiliar with the intricacies of teaching, let alone being prepared to compete. She explained to her team leader that she simply did not have the time. However, the request was met with a sharp response, "If you don't participate, you'll certainly become famous—you'll be the first teacher ever to refuse to compete." The following extract reveals her reluctance as she faced the unexpected challenge of participating in a teaching competition.

Extract 4.2 'Yu's first time participating in teaching competitions'

1 Liu: 这是你第一次参加赛课吗?

Will this be your first time participating in teaching competitions?

2 Yu: 对，会是我第一次参加赛课.

Yes, it will be my first time participating in teaching competitions.

3 Liu: =哦::

=Oh::

4 Yu: 以前从来没有.

Never done it before.

5 °工作过 一年多 嘛° / 从来没有 (0.3).

°I have been working for over a year° / never had that (0.3).

6 也没想到过那么 (.) 快:: 就 [哈哈哈

(I) didn't expect (.) to start so soo::n [hahaha

7Liu: [哈哈，开始比赛了=

[haha starting competitions=

8Yu: =哦，要喊到上这种东西.

=Yeah, being asked to do something like this.

In this extract, Yu stresses her limited teaching experience, implying that competitions are premature for her stage of professional development. The pauses and soft tone in lines 4–6 convey her hesitation and discomfort at being thrust into such a challenging situation.

In lines 7–8, the speakers collaboratively construct meaning in interaction, with Liu stepping in to complete Yu's unfinished utterance in line 7 and Yu not only accepts the completion ('Yeah') but also elaborates on it by adding a further description ('something like this'). This framing clearly shows that she downplays the significance of the competition, portraying herself as being thrown into the chilly waters of contests.

Moreover, in line 8 Yu's use the passive construction ('being asked to do') further highlights her resistance. A discursive resource Yu draws on is *ellipsi*s (Capps & Oches, 1995)—grammatically possible deletion of a component of a sentence—a practice used here to downplay the referent to the point of invisibility. In other words, she did not explicitly name the subject, presumably the school, that exerts control over her actions. By leaving the agent unnamed, she softens the impact of the institutional demand while still communicating her resistance. Similarly, in another episode (Extract 4.3) concerning her feelings about the school's unethical conduct in positing her video clip online, Yu once again uses this strategy, despite overt expressions of anger.

Extract 4.3 'Aw, just for internal use'

1 Yu: 你 不 晓得 / 当时我接到通知的时候

You have no idea / when I received the notice

2 心头 好: 恼火 / 好:抗拒哦.

I felt ve:ry upset / ve:ry resistant.

3 （他们）之前 本来 给我们说 / 这个视频是不放出去的=

(They had) originally told us / that this video wouldn't be released publicly=

4 Liu: =哦

=oh

5 Yu: 所以 我就 想 / 哎: 内部嘛

So I thought / Aw: just for internal use

6 （我） 衣服 也 不换 / 就随便在那犒一个几分钟的视频.

(I) didn't even change my clothes / and casually recorded a few minutes of video.

7 >（但是我）最后没想到<（.）居然放到- 放到网上去.

>(But I) didn't expect< (.) It would actually be post- posted online.

Prior to the competition, the school requested a video clip showing teachers' 'talent performance', such as dancing or singing, as part of warmup for the competition. The school initially assured the teachers that these videos would not be publicly released, but ultimately, the videos were uploaded online on the school's official WeChat account, a public-facing social media platform widely used by Chinese schools for institutional publicity.

In this extract, Yu positions herself affectively, intensifying her emotional stance through the use of intensifier '*hao*' ('very') in line 2. Meanwhile, the utterance 'Aw, just for internal use' in line 5 functions as a performative recall, pulling her into the past to the moment when the incident occurred. These elements serve to amplify her sense of vulnerability, as it underscores the gap between her expectations and the school's conduct.

However, in lines 3 and 7, she uses an ellipse structure twice in a row ('originally told us that'; 'be posted online'), severely diminishing her agency and casting herself as someone caught in the grip of larger forces. This suggests that Yu's omission of the subject can be oriented to power asymmetries between herself as a novice and the institution. In doing this, she shifts attention to the internal and emotional tensions she is navigating. Her resistance becomes less about overt defiance and more about a quiet negotiation of her own identity within an institution that constantly reasserts its authority.

This interpretation is further supported by Yu's remarks in the subsequent interview after the teaching competition, when she said to me, 'I did learn a lot from this

competition. I'll just not dwell on the other stuffs.' Here, Yu tries to downplay the grievances, discomfort, or possible unethical practices she may have encountered, opting instead to focus on the positive aspects of the experience.

Designated Participation

When Yu found out she must participate in the teaching competition, her first step was to begin the arduous process of 'lessons grinding' (*moke*)—an intense cycle of refining her lesson plan, performance techniques, and the use of pedagogical tools. These rehearsed lessons involved students temporarily brought in from other classes, as well as colleagues from her teaching group who observed and provided feedback. Teachers revised their lessons repeatedly throughout this process until they could deliver a 'perfect' lesson on the day of competition. Completing this task alone was nearly impossible for a novice teacher like Yu. Consequently, she sought assistance from her mentor, while her year group rallied behind her, offering feedback and support at every stage.

Extract 4.4 'Keep revising it, version after version'

1 Liu: 这个课大概准备了多久呢?

How long did it take to prepare for the competition lesson?

2 Yu: 最开始我们是自己在准备这个课 (2.0)

Initially we were working on the lesson ourselves (2.0)

3 （我） 上了 可能 三四次 / 改了一版又一版.

(I) probably taught it three or four times / revising it, version after version.

4 上 周 星 期 六 / 周老听了我的课.

On Saturday last week / Ms. Zhou listened to my lesson.

5 听 了 之 后 我 理 了 下 思路 / 之后我又回去改.

After receiving the feedback I organised my thoughts / went back and revised the lesson again.

6 但是(.) 我 星期二 比赛 嘛 / 星期一的时候我又去上先行课.

but (.) the competition was on Tuesday / I did another trial lesson on Monday.

7 结果发现如果要按到那样上的话 / 就上不完了.

But I realised that if I taught it that way / (I) wouldn't be able to finish on time.

8 太 挤 了 /于是我们又进行大量的修改.

It was too crammed / So we again made significant revisions.

9 反正 这个时间 很 紧张 / 但是我感觉自己还是尽力了 / 我尽力了.

The time was really tight / but I feel like I tried my best / I tried my best.

10 整个过程下来 / 实实 在在 弄的 / 可能一周多两周的样子差不多有.

Overall / really working on it/ (I) probably spent about a week, maybe two.

In this extract, the interviewer initiates a simple question-answer sequence, but Yu's response comes in the form of a long, detailed turn. Time pressure, numerous revisions, last-minute changes—she paints a picture of the intense effort and internal struggle she, as a novice teacher, endured during the two-week period.

Throughout this extended turn, she alternates between the first-person singular pronoun, 'I', and the first-person plural pronoun, 'we'. The use of 'I' conveys a strong sense of personal effort, responsibility, and commitment to doing her best in the preparation process, while 'we' suggests that the preparation was a collective process involving her mentor and teaching group. By occasionally shifting to 'we', Yu aligns herself with the collegial support around her.

However, this agency is simultaneously tempered by her repeated use of the phrase, 'I tried my best'. Much like the English word 'try', this Chinese expression implied a sense of uncertainty and, in this context, signals her awareness that her efforts may not necessarily lead to success. It also reflects the burden she feels, and the obligation imposed by the institution. By doing so, she portrays herself as acting under external forces and the actions she undertook were not entirely self-motivated. However, through her participation she gradually developed a deeper appreciation of how teaching

competitions operated and what they required of teachers, a shift that became evident in the following extract.

Extract 4.5 'In competitions like this…'

1 Liu: 这次比赛感觉如何?

How do you feel about this competition?

2 Yu: =肯定 有 帮助 的 / 按照我以前来上的话 (.) 嗯.

=It is definitely helpful / If I had taught it the way I used to (.) hmm.

3 整个课堂就比较死::

The whole class would have been pretty dull::

4 我选的这个比赛的课它讲的是比较独特的博物馆.

The topic I chose for competition was about a unique museum.

5 但是 当时 选题 的 时候 / 我们还是在商量 / 觉得娃儿不太感兴趣.

But when choosing the topic / we were discussing / (we) felt that students might not be interested (in the topic).

6 所以就很容易把这个课上死::

which could easily get the class dull::

7 像这样子的赛课的话

In competitions like this

8 其 实 / 因为包含着有其他比如说其他的.

in fact / include other for example.

9 这个 / 数学 语文 的 (.) 这样子的评委进去.

like / math and Chinese (.) judges are included.

10 他可能就存在他 (.) 他听不懂 (英文).

It is possible that (.) they could not understand (English).

11 但是 他 咋个 去评判? 就是看学生起活不活得来.

but how does they evaluate? They look at whether the students are active.

12 他 动 起来 了 / 他就觉得你这个课是好的.

If the students are active / then they think the lesson is good.

In this extract, Yu positions herself as someone who is familiar with competitions and knowledgeable about balancing student engagement with judges' expectation. Following the researcher's question about her stance towards the competition, Yu provides a preferred response (Sack, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974) with an emphatic token, 'definitely', in line 2. In the account, Yu draws a sharp contrast between the regular lessons and those tailored for teaching competitions (lines 4–6). From her perspective, regular lessons risk being '死' (*si* 'dull', literally means 'dead') if not carefully planned or taught using her previous methods. In contrast, competition lessons, as she highlights, must be '活' (*huo* 'active', literally means 'lively'), a term she associates with high levels of visible student engagement. This liveliness is typically demonstrated through behaviours such as raising hands or participating in group discussions. The terms of 'dull' and 'active' function as a categorical distinction within her narrative, reflecting how Yu understands and responds to the expected presentation for the competition.

In line 7 Yu transitions from discussing the specific lesson to a more generalised, iterative narrative ('In competitions like this'), indicating her assertiveness in understanding the norms that govern these events. The rhetorical strategy ('But how does they evaluate?') reinforces this assertiveness. This question is not posed to solicit an answer but rather to lead into her point that judges rely on student activeness as a key criterion for evaluation. Here the judges are positioned as the authoritative figures whose priorities significantly shape Yu's perception of what defines a successful competition lesson.

Building Alliances

Yu won first place in her first teaching competition. When I congratulated her, she responded with surprising calm, saying, "The credit really goes to the team; I was just the one presenting". Initially sceptical of teaching competitions, she now began to see

them in a new light, recognising the experience as a pivotal moment for her professional growth. In the interview conducted after the event, Yu reflected upon specific areas in her practice that needed improvement, began to rethink her long-term professional goals, and most importantly, developed a stronger sense of empathy and belonging towards her teaching team.

Extract 4.6 'I need to improve that'

1Liu: 通过这次的活动

Throughout this event

2 你觉得自己在哪些方面有需要更多关注的地方? =

are there any aspects that you think you need to focus on more =

3Yu: =当然 有一个 就是 / 对

=One certain thing is / well

4 在这个 磨课 过程中 / 老师们来听 / 当然肯定是暴露了很多问题的.

during the lesson grinding process / when the other teachers came to observe / Of course it certainly exposed many problems.

5 比如 / 说我上课语速太快了 / 她们说 / <语速太快了>.

For example / my speech rate during the lesson was too fast / They said / <you spoke too fast>.

6 这个东西 确实 也说得 是 一针见血 / 要改进嘛.

This advice was indeed right on point / I need to improve that.

7 就 (.) 为啥子我们班娃娃很多差生哈? 他可能就 (0.2) 上课也跟不上.

Like (.) why do my classes have so many low-performing students? They probably (0.2) can't keep up.

8 我想可能也是跟我语速太快 / 要说太多有关.

I think it's probably related to me speaking too fast / trying to say too much.

9 我的上课的语言方面就是 / 一个说太快 / 二个我 (.) 啰嗦

In terms of my teaching language / first I speak too fast / second I (.) ramble

10 我老觉得我要跟你解释到位.

I always felt like I need to explain everything thoroughly.

In this extract, Yu identifies specific problems in her teaching, particularly her speech

rate and tendency to ramble during regular lessons. These issues, in her construing, are not merely personal flaws but contextual ones, arising from the demands of her teaching setting, which can have direct, negative impacts on some students' ability to engage with the lesson, and ultimately, their learning outcomes. For Yu, a good lesson means adopting a controlled teaching style that suits the large classroom setting where student performance is highly emphasised. Yu's self-assessment illustrates how teaching competitions serve as a mechanism for enhancing pedagogical expertise and as a means of reinforcing institutional norms regarding what counts as 'good teaching', thereby shaping her professional identity in alignment with these hallmarks.

In addition, the fact that such advice was received, not during regular lessons, but only during the competition period adds another layer of complexity. Yu is not simply being informed about the areas for improvement; she is being instructed to change her practice for the competition, a suggestion she embraces throughout her reflections by describing it as 'right on point' (line 6). Here the advice goes beyond simply improving her teaching manner for the benefit of the students; rather, it concerns how Yu's current approach may impact her performance and ranking in the competition, the outcomes of which carry significant implications for a teachers' professional standing as well as the school's reputation.

In the following extract, Yu demonstrates a clear sense of normalcy in her understanding of 'how things are' within the discourse of teaching competitions.

Extract 4.7 'It is a step we must go through'

1 Yu: 学校看重（这个比赛）

The school places great importance (on this competition)

2 而且 对于很多（.）像我们这种年轻老师来说的话 / 这是必走的一步.

And for many (.) young teachers like us / it is a step we must go through.

3Liu: 哦::

oh::

4Yu: 哦 / 你是肯定还是要 – 要先从这一步起走 (.)

Yeah / You definitely hav– have to start from this step (.)

5 然后你才再- 再来说以后的.

before you can mov–move on to other things in the future.

6 相当于给你提供一个平台 / 你起码先展示一下自己嘛

It is like a platform that allows you / at least to showcase yourself

7 给自己积累一个赛课的经验嘛.

accumulate some experience in teaching competition.

8 然后 你 以后 / 再 去 往 上头 / 再走其他层面嘛.

And after that / you can continue / to advance to higher levels, or other things.

Yu positions the competition within a temporal progression of professional development, using phrases like 'start from this step', 'before you can move on', and 'after that'. The competition is framed as a legitimised initial step in a structured, linear path that leads to higher levels of professional growth. This framing relates closely to the Wenger's (1998) concept of imagination, which allows individuals to envision themselves beyond their current participation and visualise their future identities within the community. Through this lens, Yu is not merely engaging in this one-time event; she is participating in an imaginative process that links her present efforts with the future roles she aspires to. By doing this, she connects her personal stories with the normalised vision of professional development, which, in her construction, is a predictable, step-by-step process.

Moreover, Yu employs several discursive strategies to construct the competition as a normative experience embedded in the professional trajectory of a teacher. She uses inclusive qualifiers such as 'many', pronouns like 'we' and 'you', and the deontic modal verbs (e.g., '必', or 'must') to align herself with a broader group of novice teachers facing

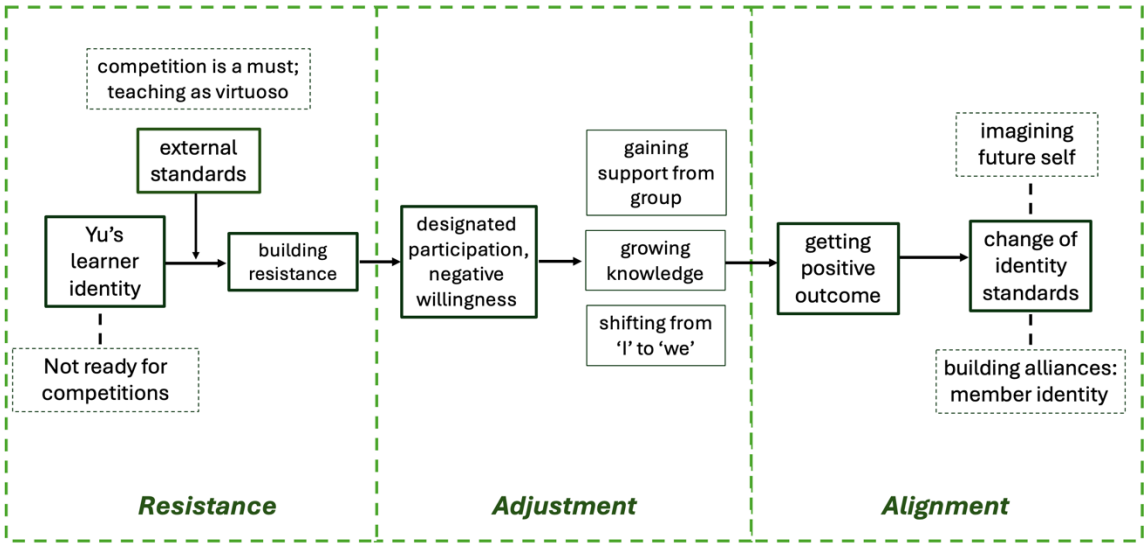
similar expectations. These linguistic choices serve to normalise her participation, positioning the competition as part of a social norm for novices.

Summary of Yu's Story

Evident in Yu's story is her identity negotiation process (Figure 4.1), evolving from peripheral participation to full participation, and from initial reluctance to eventual alignment with teaching competitions. The meaning systems of her identity shifted as a result of collegial support and positive outcomes she received. For Yu, the competition served as a starting point and pivotal moment to reimagine her future role as a teacher.

Figure 4.1

Yu's Identity Negotiation Process in Her First Teaching Competition



However, a micro analysis of the way she told the story suggests a more complex picture of how her teacher identities were shaped by power differentials. While her story highlighted her personal transformation and professional growth, the way she talked about the experience depicted her as less agentive when confronted with powerful institutional demands. For example, the discursive resources she drew on tend to obscure the subject of a practice—likely the school or other authoritative bodies that exerted control over her actions. By downplaying the presence of institutional actors, she

mitigated her agency and portrayed her decisions as not self-directed, but rather compelled by the external pressures. Moreover, the incident involving the school uploading the videos online without teachers' consent raised ethical concerns related to teacher well-being and vulnerability. Teachers who are placed in such situations often have little choice over their own professional image and conduct and tend to be forced to adjust their actions to meet the institutional expectations, even when they do so with less willing alignment.

4.3.2 Wen's Story

Wen, a teacher from School B, found herself stepping into this unfamiliar territory just six months after joining this school. She was selected as the second case not only because I had the opportunity to observe her throughout the entire preparation and competition process, but also because her experience diverged markedly from Yu's.

Voluntary Engagement

Unlike Yu, Wen signed up her first, a city-level competition voluntarily. When I asked her why she made this decision, she said that she saw the competition as a valuable learning opportunity and did not expect to win an award. "The school had a selection process, ultimately choosing me to represent us," she said with joy and pride, "the winner will be required to deliver what is known as no-student lesson in the next phase of competition." A *no-student* lesson (*wusheng shijiang*) refers to a 30-mintue session, meticulously planned down to every single word, delivered to an empty classroom, with only the judges present to assess the teacher's performance. It seemed that the prospect both excited and challenged her, pushing her beyond the familiar rhythm of her daily teaching.

However, she quickly found herself struggling to begin preparing for the lesson. The teaching task she chose, '*Ask for Directions*', drawn from a predefined pool of

competition topics, required students to learn language features such as the 'there be' sentence structure and spatial prepositions. As she delved into the preparation, Wen found out the difficulties of presenting this lesson and realised that certain types of lessons were more favoured in a competitive context. In the interview, Wen talked about her concern of the chosen topic.

Extract 4.8 'We didn't know what we were getting into'

1 Wen: 这节课属于不好上的类型

This lesson was one of the difficult to teach

2 语法和知识点很多.

as it involves lots of grammar and knowledge points.

3 说 实 话 / 就是我和她当时在选定这一节课的时候

To be honest / when my mentor and I initially selected this lesson

4 都不知道它意味着什么.

we didn't really know what we were getting into.

5 就是觉得 / 正好是我们马上要上的下一个单元就选了它.

We simply thought / and chose it because it happened to be the next unit we were about to teach

6 嗯 (.) 也没有什么太多的考虑.

emm (.) there wasn't much deeper consideration.

7 可能 这个 因为 / 跟我参赛经验不足有关.

Perhaps this is / because of my lack of competition experience.

8 再加上我师傅 / 她已经有了二十几年教龄

And my mentor / having over 20 years of teaching experience

9 (但是) 她也已经很久没有管过赛课的事情了 / 所以说

(but) hasn't been involved in teaching competitions for a long time / So

10 我们俩其实就 / 稀里糊涂地 /就把这节课给定了.

We both kind of / haphazardly / settled on this lesson.

In the extract, she characterises the lesson as one of the 'difficult to teach' types. These lessons, with grammar-heavy content, make it harder to engage the audience in the

competition context. Wen expresses uncertainty about topic selection, admitting that 'we didn't really know what we were getting into' (line 4) and 'there wasn't much deeper consideration' (line 6), as they made the decision 'haphazardly' (line 10).

This account inadvertently positions them at the margins of the competition activities. Wen's mentor, despite her 20 years of teaching experience, has not been involved in competitions for quite some time and is not familiar with the unwritten rules, such as topic selection, that often contribute to, if not determine, success. Wen's lack of agency is discursively reinforced by aligning herself with a more experienced teacher who, despite her extensive experience in everyday classroom, lacked knowledge and authority in this competitive space. This lack of experience left the two feeling far less assured compared to Yu and her team, who seemed to have an intuitive understanding of how to choose a topic and tailor it to the preferences of the judges.

Lacking Authority

At Wen's year group meeting in April 2023, one week before her teaching competition, I saw around ten teachers gathering to offer her advice. "Why don't you turn the classroom into a map?" one suggested. "Your whiteboard notes are practically stickers already, so why not use them to explain the prepositions' meanings?" another added, pointing to the movable elements on the board. "Oh, you could add a bit more here," a third chimed in, eager to provide even a tiny improvement. Initially, I was amazed by the collaborative vibe as the group worked together to give advice to Wen, who was carrying out this complex and demanding job. But I soon became confused by the form of the suggestions—none of them were directives, but rather as spontaneous 'pure sharing', sometimes reflecting a hint of uncertainty. I also began to wonder how Wen could navigate a sea of well-meaning, but sometimes fragmented, advice. In a later interview, she explained.

Extract 4.9 'Everyone was crossing the river by feeling for stones'

1Liu: 我听到你的同事们提出了不同的意见 / 甚至有一些是相左的

I noticed your colleagues raised many different opinions / some even conflicting each other

2 你的感受是什么?

What are your feelings about this?

3Wen 我相信他们是出于好心 / 出于热心 / 给我提 idea.

I believe they were well-intentioned / and enthusiastic / in giving me these ideas.

4 但是因为个人风格 / 因为他们对我的思路不够了解.

But due to personal teaching styles / and the fact that they didn't fully understand my thought process.

5 所以说才会有一些 (.) 一些跟我 (.) 嗯 (0.2) 就是最后没有采用的意见.

therefore there were some (.) some suggestions that (.) emm (0.2) I didn't adopt.

6 当然也是因为那段时间 (.) 我们学校最权威的老师Bing / 哈哈 (.) 他 (.)哈哈 (.) 他太忙了 / 没有办法来指导我 =

Of course another reason is that during that time (.) our school's most authoritative teacher, Bing / haha (.) he (.) haha (.) was too busy to guide me =

7 =很多事情他是可以定板的 / 因为他有着丰富的赛课经验 / 他可以给你提供到一些比较建设性的意见.

=Many things could have been decided by him / because of his rich experience in teaching competitions / He could have provided some constructive advice.

8 但 他 不 在 / 所以大家都是一个摸着石头过河的状态.

But since he wasn't available / So everyone was crossing the river by feeling for stones.

9 那拍板的只能是我自己了呀.

Then I was the one who had to make the final decisions.

The theme of uncertainty emerges again in this extract. In response to Liu's inquiry about

the conflicting opinions from her colleagues, Wen initially frames their feedback as good intentions and mutual support. However, in lines 4–5, she quickly shifts her stances, acknowledging that she did not adopt all of their suggestions due to differences in teaching styles and their lack of understanding of her lesson plan. Her use of hedging expressions such as 'em' and pauses indicates her careful navigation around potential conflict.

In line 8, Wen uses the Chinese metaphor, 'crossing the river by feeling for stones', to encapsulate the team's act of offering advice. This metaphor emphasises the team's exploratory efforts in the absence of the authoritative figure, Bing, whose expertise could have played a crucial role in guiding their decisions. Faced with ambiguity, Wen reluctantly takes up an agentive role, asserting herself as the final decision-maker despite the surrounding uncertainty. The following extract is drawn from an interview conducted after her competition lesson, but before the results were announced, in which she reflected on her understanding of the differences between regular and competition lessons.

Extract 4.10 'By the end, I had such a good grasp of the lesson'

1 Liu: 那你觉得上赛课跟常规课有什么不太一样的地方?

How do you think a regular class differs from a competition class?

2 Wen: 一个 不太 一样 的 肯定 就是: (.) 嗯 (2.0)

One major difference must be: (.) well (2.0)

3 首先（你）会考虑的细节特别特别多.

first (you) need to consider a lot more details.

4 因为常规课它是 / 相对来说很自由的。

Because a regular class is / relatively more flexible.

5 就进度来说它并不是很死板的.

The pacing in a regular class isn't as rigid.

6 这节课内容确实也<很多> (.) 常规课可能会需要一节半课的时间来完成

The content of this lesson is indeed <a lot> (.) If it were a regular class I might need one and a half lessons to complete it

7 但是它只有 40 分钟 / 那我就需要把它压缩到 40 分钟 / 提高效率.

Since the class is only 40 minutes / I had to compress it into 40 minutes / increase efficiency.

8 我比赛那天有一个小插曲 / 我并不知道我的开始时间.

There was a little incident on the day of the competition / I didn't know exactly when my lesson would start.

9 但是 最后 拿到 视频的 时候 / 39 分钟 30 秒.

When I received the video afterward / the duration was 39 minutes and 30 seconds.

10 到了 最后 / 我对自己这节课已经很有把控了

By the end / I had such a good grasp of the lesson

11 才能做到这种精确.

that I was able to control the timing with that level of precision.

In Wen's construction, the keys to a competition lesson are precision and efficiency. Her account reveals an intriguing contrast with Yu in terms of differences between regular lessons versus competition lessons. While Yu views her regular lessons negatively, describing them as '*si*' ('dead' or 'rigid') and unengaging and considers competition lessons to be more lively and dynamic, Wen takes a more neutral, even positive perspective. For Wen, regular lessons are characterised by flexibility, with less rigid pacing, allowing her to adapt the lesson according to its content, and sometimes requiring more time. In contrast, when it comes to competition lessons, Wen recognises that a certain level of rigidity is necessary to meet the constraints and expectations of the competition setting.

In lines 8–11, Wen recounts an episode about time management during the competition lesson, introducing a subtle layer of unpredictability to heighten the drama ('I didn't know exactly when my lesson would start'). This unexpected twist could have thrown her

off balance, but instead, Wen builds suspense to emphasise how she overcame it. By sharing this episode, she demonstrates her ability to handle unforeseen situations and justifies her view of time precision as a critical marker of teaching competence. Through this narrative, she constructs herself as a capable teacher who not only meets the rigid demands of competition but also handles them with precision and confidence.

Self-Marginalisation

Wen did not win the top prize in the competition this time—she received a second-place award. But every participant was guaranteed at least a second prize, with only a few earning first place or the special prize. After the results were announced, I interviewed Wen and asked about her future plans. To my surprise, this usually highly agentive novice teacher appeared somewhat frustrated.

Extract 4.11 'I don't really have a clear goal anymore'

1 Wen: 我觉得这个真的可能算是我一个比较迷茫的点

I think this is a point of confusion for me

2 现在（.） 就是真的没有明确的目标了

Now (.) I don't really have a clear goal anymore

3 我就唯一一个目想要维持住我班上的"有效人数"/ 是一个非常具体的目标.

My only goal is to maintain an 'effective number of students' in my class / which is very specific.

4 是 there be 这节课（让）我很系统去做了很多事情.

I've worked systematically on the 'there be' lesson in many ways.

5 但因为我看到了我自己的差距在哪里

But because I've recognised where my own gaps are

6 我觉得要去弥补这种差距

I feel if I need to close those gaps

7 要对自己的能力进入到下一个满意的阶段 / 想要去尝试去证明自己的阶段

if I want to reach a stage where I'm satisfied with my abilities / try to prove myself.

8 可能还需要一定时间的积累.

this will take more time and accumulation of experience.

Wen opens by expressing her confusion, explaining that the only tangible goal is to increase the effective number of students in her class, a metric that reflects how many students achieve or exceed the target scores in the high school entrance exam, thus contributing to the schools' overall performance and standing. She reflects on the competition lesson and how she had poured herself into the competition process: grinding lessons, exchanging ideas with colleagues, and tirelessly completing every task with her utmost effort. Yet, in line 5, she speaks about 'the gap' she notices—an uncomfortable distance she does not fully define. Is it a gap between her own abilities and those of her peers? Or perhaps between her school's resources and the advantages others had? The answer remains elusive here. But as she has mentioned in the above extracts, much of this understanding might come from uncertainty expressed by her mentor and year group team, compounded by the outcome of this competition. At this moment, she experiences a sense of identity loss, though she acknowledges her shortcomings and contemplates a way forward.

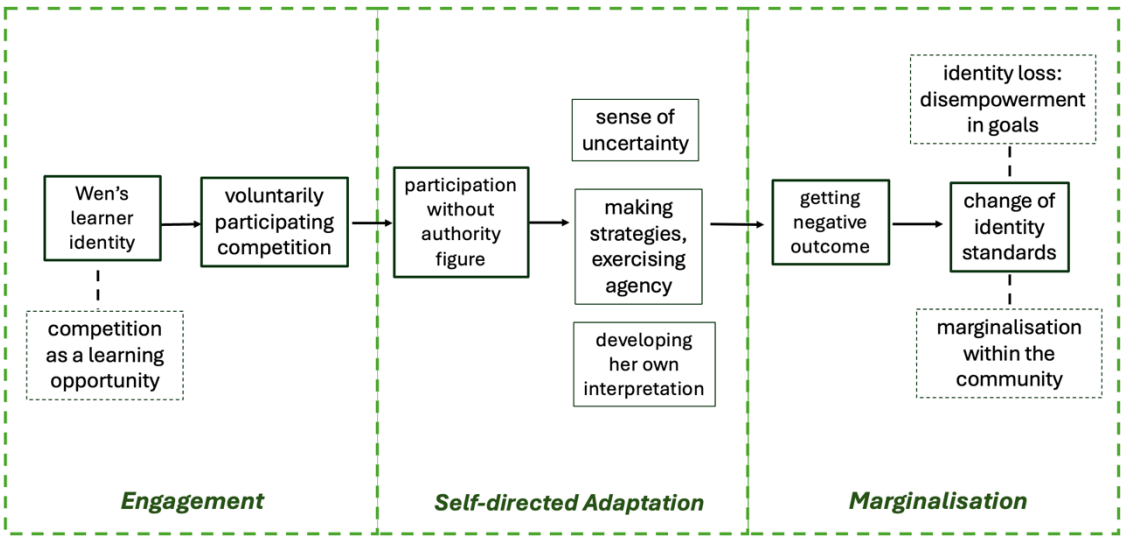
Summary of Wen's Story

Wen constructed her experience from active engagement, self-directed adaptation to marginalisation (Figure 4.2). Wen voluntarily signed up a city-level teaching competition, excited by the opportunity to learn. However, she quickly struggled to organise her lesson due to her inexperience and lack of guidance from her mentor, who was unfamiliar with teaching competitions. Despite support from her colleagues, their suggestions left her uncertain; and in the absence of the authoritative figure, she had to navigate the process largely on her own. She constructed this as an opportunity to exercise her agency, making key decisions independently. In the end, after receiving a less favourable results in the competition, Wen experienced a deep sense of disempowerment in relation to her

professional goals and disenchantment with teaching competitions. For her, the competition process, which had seemed like a valuable learning opportunity, exposed significant gaps in both her abilities and resources available to her through the school. These gaps left her feeling that her efforts, despite being diligent, were insufficient to meet the demands of such a high-stakes setting.

Figure 4.2

Wen's Identity Negotiation Process in Her First Teaching Competition



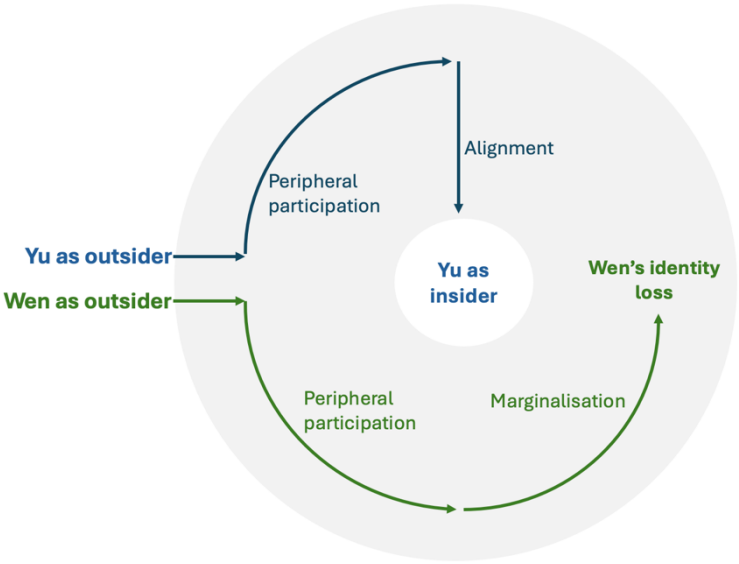
The shifting stances towards teaching competitions and the school as the learning environment had a great impact on her sense of agency—what had once been visioned as a space for professional growth and self-direction now became a source of frustration. Her earlier confidence of being selected by the school to represent them was disrupted as she confronted the limitations imposed not only by her being as a novice teacher with less level of experience and knowledge, but also by the structural inequities between schools. As a result, Wen began to experience identity loss, where the once clear aspirations and sense of competence became blurred, and her position as a novice teacher in a competitive, high-stakes educational landscape seemed more constrained, rather than promising.

4.3.3 Two Trajectories of Participating in Teaching Competitions

For both teachers, participating in the teaching competition was transformative. Inspired by Liu and Xu's (2013) illustration of learning within workplace communities of practice, Figure 4.3 shows that Yu underwent a shift from resistance to alignment with the demands and expectations, while Wen's path took her from early alignment to self-marginalisation.

Figure 4.3

Two Trajectories of Participating Teaching Competitions



As illustrated, despite their differing attitudes towards participating competitions at the outset, both novice teachers were 'outsiders' of this practice (Wenger, 1998, p. 112; see also Liu & Xu, 2013; Tsui, 2007), as they had limited epistemic knowledge about teaching competitions and its importance in their teaching profession. They relied on their experienced colleagues, who they believed had the epistemic rights to assess what counts as a good competition lesson. Yu considered them as authority who have not only privileged access to the field of competitions, but also deontic authority to determine actions of others (Heritage, 2012). For example, Yu's speech rate was strongly disadvised

by the colleagues' exercise of their epistemically based deontic authority. Wen, however, initially placed her trust in her team and mentor, who she believed to be insiders within the competition community. Yet, as preparation progressed, Wen began to realise her mentor's and colleagues' peripheral positions in the context of teaching competitions, with less levels of epistemic authority than Bing, the Master Teacher[4] of School B. As a result, she kept herself at the centre, selectively adopting her colleagues' suggestions and ultimately presenting a lesson she believed to be good by her own standards, rather than relying on the collective team vision. However, the competition outcome led her to question her professional roles and left her feeling disenfranchised and uncertain about future goals.

This micro analysis reveals different layers of power dynamics at play. In Yu's case, the school acted as a dominant agent, imposing the task of competing and, in doing so, compelling her to construct a new professional identity aligned with institutional expectations. Her identity trajectory was enormously shaped by external pressures, as the school dictated her participation and finally led her to frame the competition as a key element of her professional development. In contrast, Wen faced a different situation of power dynamic. While Yu was required by her school to take part in the competition, she volunteered to participate. However, without authorisation, Wen and her team were left to feel the way through the preparation process, even though collegial relations were evident. While Wen made genuine efforts to exercise her agency and try to move closer to the central membership, she ended up realising that her position remained marginalised in the community.

4.4 Front Runners, Back Runners

[4] *Master Teacher* (*minshi*) is a prestigious professional title in China' hierarchical teacher-ranking system. For a detailed discussion of this revered system of teaching and its implications for professional status, see *Section 5.2*.

The stories of the two teachers illustrate how teaching competitions, despite their goal of enhancing teaching quality and reducing inequalities, lead to divergent professional trajectories and senses of efficacy. Drawing on data from other participating teachers, this section examines how novice teachers constructed these competitions as a mechanism of stratification, positioning themselves into two distinct categories: front runners and back runners.

The reform to improve quality education (*suzhi*) is widely promoted in schools and districts in China through the slogan '*Leadership Dissemination, Quality Balance*' (*yinling fushe*, *youzhi junheng)*. This slogan encapsulates the policy's goal: to cultivate a group of excellent teachers and schools who, by leading and influencing others, will help elevate the over quality and equality of education. In a casual conversation with a teacher from School A, the flagship school, I mentioned that I was also conducting research at one of her school's so-called rival schools (i.e., School B). She smiled and replied, "They are probably not our competitors". This brief exchange reflects the competitive dynamics among schools and how this teacher perceived her school's status relative to others. The schools I visited in Ronghua District strived to boost their profiles by cultivating excellent teachers, and teaching competitions played a crucial role in this pursuit. Teachers' success in teaching competitions was translated into professional titles, and the number of teachers held these titles was ultimately displayed on the school websites, serving as a testament to the institutional excellence. As teachers strive to showcase their expertise through competitions, disparities in resources, support, and institutional prestige are further intensified.

This stratification reshaped how the novice teachers perceived themselves as teachers and their schools within a competitive educational landscape. In this study, the novice teachers in top-tier exemplary schools, Yu and Jing, easily accepted their dominance through teaching competitions, while those in less privileged schools grappled with a

sense of disadvantage, believing they would always be playing catch-up in a race they were never meant to win. For example, Jing, similar to Yu, from School A became more aware that their school was superior to others through teaching competitions. In the following extract, Jing contrasted her school with others:

Extract 4.12 'This lesson was clearly designed just for the competition'

> Jing: During Yu's competition, we saw a few lessons—not from our school—that had some gimmicks. These gimmicks were things I wouldn't use in my regular classes. But when you're in a competition, you have to come up with something flashy. Yet, they also talked about things that were really disconnected from reality. At the time, we felt that this lesson was clearly designed just for the competition.
>
> (Interview 2 _School A_Jing)

Jing explicitly critiqued the practices of other schools, describing them as disconnected from real classroom teaching, even if she acknowledged the inherent performative aspect of competitions. She considered her own school as more grounded, focusing more on practical methods rather than superficial performance. By contrast, teachers from School B were left with a clear sense of 'the gap' between their school and others after participating in teaching competitions for their first time. The following extracts show how the participants from School B, Hong and Xin, not only evaluated their own teaching expertise in the contests but also gauged the resources and support their schools offered compared to others.

Extract 4.13 'There's no one who helps me out'

> Hong: …my biggest feeling is that, when we were preparing for it, it was just me working on it. I feel like the gap comes from how our teaching research group operates…There's no one who helps me out. There's no one to point you in the right

direction. After I finished, I sent it to Bing to look at. He gave me some suggestions for revisions, but the core issues remain unresolved… it's not very effective and the gap between us and other schools is getting bigger and bigger.

(Interview 2_School B_Hong)

Extract 4.14 'Their groups definitely help each other'

Xin: …when you see teachers from other schools participating in competitions, you think they're impressive. And people say that in other schools like School A, their teaching research groups definitely help each other refine their lessons. But in our school, most of the time, it feels like I am fighting alone.

(Interview 2_School B_Xin)

Teacher identity is constructed through a series of differences, oppositions, and by defining 'what they are not' (Gu & Benson, 2014; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). By comparing their struggles with the collaboration and solidarity of teachers in other schools, the two teachers from School B, Hong and Xin, considered their own professional environment as unsupportive and lacking a system that could improve their teaching skills. As such, they portrayed themselves as 'back runners' or 'underdogs', expressing frustration at a system in which success appeared more accessible to the 'front runner' schools and teachers.

The sense of 'left behind' also emerged from the novice teachers who simply observed the competitions. For the participating teachers, the process of grinding lessons and receiving feedback could be beneficial. But for the audience teachers, what they could learn or gain from these competitions was less clear. From my fieldwork, it was not uncommon to see teachers attending these events with piles of student assignments.

They were sent by their school as a duty and often tasked with writing a feedback report afterwards. Many found themselves shuttling between district- and city- level activities (normally every one or two weeks), losing precious time that would otherwise be spent on other duties.

4.5 Compassion and Complicity

The impact of teaching competitions was profound, not limited to teachers' self-positioning within their professional community, but extended to their social relationships with peers and students. In participants' narratives, compassion emerged as a significant theme in shaping how novice teachers viewed their profession. For example, during the grinding lessons, they often had to 'borrow' regular classes from other teachers to practise their competition lessons and receive feedback from peers. This practice led the teachers develop a sense of empathy and appreciation for collegial support. Teaching in classes other than their own also deepened their understanding of pedagogy and strengthened collegial ties. Wen described how she and Ms. Pei exchanged classes: she taught Ms. Pei's class, where students were notably active and quick-witted, while Ms. Pei taught her typically quieter class, where students nonetheless engaged with her in ways she found enjoyable. Wen noted that this experience fostered a sense of mutual learning and growth for both of them.

While this theme-based analysis brings compassion in teaching competitions to the fore, it leaves marginalised counter-narratives largely unexamined. These less visible perspectives, revealed from micro-analysis, expose contradictions between competition and compassion that are often flattened out in thematic accounts. The following extract exposed these inherent tensions.

Extract 4.15 'without managing students, a lot of ideas came in hahaha'

1 Liu: …相当于是在比赛这么短的一个时间去集中地学习=

...it is like learning and refining things in such a short time during the competition=

2 Yu: =确实 / 不夯学生 / 不改作业的情况下 / 确实自己思维的空间就大了 / 哈哈哈

=Indeed / without being bogged down by students / (or) grading assignments / it really frees up my thinking space / **hahaha**

3 所以说前段时间不管学生 / 大量的思维 / 大量的这种点子 / 就进来了 / 哈哈哈

So during that time without managing students / a lot of thoughts / a lot of ideas / came in **hahaha**

Yu's narrating offers a paradoxical situation in competitions, where teachers are temporarily freed from the everyday burdens of grading and managing students; this moment of freedom, in turn, allows their creativity and 'thinking space' to flourish. The fact that a teacher is excused from the very core tasks that define her professional role as a teacher is rationalised within the context of competitions, as the teacher assumes a more important role: showcasing herself and competing for the schools' reputation.

Yu's laughter in line 2 and 3 carries complexity more than just mere amusement. It signals her awareness of the irony embedded in this practice and indexes a tacit understanding of how such experiences come to be shared and normalised. By laughing, Yu exercises agency through taking up a less willing compliance: while she conforms to this contextually legitimised arrangement, her laughter acts as a subtle, self-aware commentary on the conflict she faces between her existing beliefs and the demands of the competition.

This complicity in teaching competitions extended beyond the teachers—it also involved students. In the participants' construction, students were positioned in a unique role within these competitions, becoming part of the staged performance. Typically, the students in competition lessons were not the teacher's own students but were assigned randomly through a lottery system, which was aimed at enhancing fairness. However,

regardless of the selection process, students often exhibited behaviour that was more obedient and engaged than usual with many teachers and judges in the audience watching closely. The teacher therefore was expected not only to craft a perfect lesson but also to execute it with unfamiliar students. A common remark from participating teachers after competitions was, “The students were very cooperative.”

The construction of students as compliant performers, alongside teachers who must navigate a conflicted competition context, highlights the layers of complicity and compassion embedded in these events. Even at a young age, students are socialised into a collective consciousness that obliges them to perform in ways that serve the collective, managing distinct ‘frontstage and backstage’ personas (Goffman, 1971, p. 114), which is, the contrast between the polished, public-facing self-presented in accordance with the competitive events and the less regulated self-expressed in everyday classroom life.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the discursive construction of novice teachers’ identities within the context of teaching competitions, which emphasised teaching as virtuoso performance. The high-stakes competition stage became a site of negotiation where novice teachers grappled with defining and constructing themselves amidst the personal aspirations, motivations, institutional demands, and broader education environments. Novice teachers, whether they initially resisted or complied with the assigned identity of a virtuoso, experienced identity shifts throughout their participation, depending largely on the processes and outcomes of the competitions, as well as on the resources their schools made available to them.

In analysing the evolving positionings and stances of the two novice teachers, I examined how they discursively constructed their identities in relation to teaching competitions and how power was oriented through their linguistic and cultural resources at hand.

What emerged from two teachers' narratives was the delicate interplay between individual agency and centring institutions (Blommaert, 2005). For Yu, the competitions shaped her professional identity in ways that were aligned with the institution's expectations, moulding her into a more compliant teacher who embodied the school's ideal of excellence. In contrast, Wen's journey, due to the absence of authority and her growing sense of marginalisation, highlighted how external forces could constrain a teacher's learning and identity development. These analyses show how their identities were continually shaped through the push and pull of institutional demands and differential access to authority and knowledge, producing professional trajectories that were enabled and limited by the structures within which they worked.

A closer, micro analysis of teachers' narrative structures, combined with data from ethnographic fieldwork, offers a better understanding of how established teaching norms were reinforced through teaching competitions. It also sheds light on how these competitions in China, while ostensibly aimed at promoting teacher development or showcasing teacher charisma, inadvertently reproduced inequalities rather than resolving them. Teachers who lack institutional support or epistemic access to key resources are more likely to find themselves marginalised and disadvantaged, perpetuating a situation wherein only certain 'front runners' could benefit from these opportunities. In this way, the very competitions that purport to promote excellence risk becoming mechanisms that consolidate existing hierarchies within the education system.

Chapter 5: Learning to Teach from *Shifu*

5.1 Introduction

On a mid-afternoon in the first month of the new semester in March 2023, the lecture hall of School A was filled with members of the teaching faculty. The principal, mid-level administrators, experienced teachers and novice teachers had all gathered for the annual *baishihui*, a ceremonial initiation of the *Shifu-Tudi* mentoring relationship. At the host's invitation, the *Shifu*, or mentors, entered the stage and stood shoulder-to-shoulder. One-by-one, their *Tudi*, or mentees, approached them, each carrying a bouquet and a gift. Upon reaching them, they bowed deeply—a reverent bend at the waist—and offered the flowers and gifts as tokens of gratitude and deference. The mentor received these offerings with both hands, a gesture of mutual respect. The *Shifu* then held up the official mentorship letter (*pinshu*), and the pair posed for a commemorative photograph. Upon the completion of these ritualised acts, the *Shifu-Tudi* relationship was officially established.

Although the procedures may vary, the *baishihui* ceremony is commonly held in Chinese schools and marks the beginning of a teacher's professional journey, where learning to teach is intertwined with learning from the experienced (Fan, 2017). *Shifu*, the term for mentor in Chinese, literally means 'Teacher-Father'. In the Confucian doctrine, a commonly held belief is 'one day as a teacher, a lifetime as a father', encompassing the moral concept of '*xiao jing*' (filial piety). The *Shifu-Tudi* relationship therefore resembles a 'Father-Son' relationship, and mentors are positioned as figures of authority and moral leadership, while mentees are cast as apprentices expected not only to respect and love mentors (*xiao*), but also to be obedient, conforming, and deferential with them (*jing*) (Fan, 2017).

The *baishihui* ceremony, by staging the asymmetry between mentors and mentees in a

public setting, embeds the moral order into teachers' professional development and allocates teachers their institutional positions, with each expected to perform their designated roles. In this sense, the ceremony serves as a clear reminder that learning to teach from the experienced is not only an educative process but also a disciplinary one. As one novice teacher from School A, Jia, explained to me, for many experienced teachers the *baishihui* functions as an opportunity to 'establish authority' (*liwei*), a process that not only enhances their prestige but also inscribes the mentor-novice relationship more firmly within a hierarchical moral order.

The disciplinary nature of the *baishihui* ceremony was also evident in the latter half of the event, illustrated in the following vignette:

> … In the next segment, the host recounted the past year's achievements of novice teachers under their mentors' guidance, highlighting awards from teaching competitions, professional certifications, published research, and completed training programmes. These accomplishments were presented in a slideshow, followed by the public recognition of two exemplary mentor-mentee pairs, who were invited on stage to receive certificates and applause as their achievements were displayed on screen. Seated in the audience, the newly assigned mentor-novice pairs observed the awards ceremony and absorbed the message the ritual conveyed.
>
> (Fieldnote_March 11_2023_School A)

This part of the ceremony illustrates how novices and mentors are publicly defined, evaluated, and rewarded, and how mentoring relationships are expected and regulated. Against the backdrop of neoliberal governance, such rituals suggest that Confucian ideals here emerge not merely as a revival of tradition; rather, they function as instruments of disciplinary governance, entangled with neoliberal pressures such as performativity and accountability (Palmer & Winiger, 2019; Sigley, 2009; Zhang, 2023). In this configuration, the meaning of the appropriate teacher and of the *Shifu-Tudi* relationship

is simultaneously moralised and audited.

On the other hand, while structural conditions carry binding, taming, and normative characteristics that set the moral agenda, they cannot, on their own, account for the specific choices individuals make (Clarke, 2008; Holland & Lachicotte, 2007). The hierarchical expectations reinforced through rituals such as *baishihui* are constantly negotiated, reinterpreted, and contested within the everyday practices and interactions between mentors and novice teachers. While a substantial body of studies has examined the teacher honour system imposed by Chinese educational authorities (e.g., Fan, 2017; Song, Zhu & Liu, 2015; Zhang & Shao, 2017), relatively few studies have explored how such hierarchies are interpretated, negotiated, or resisted in teachers' everyday professional practices, or how professional identities are claimed and (re)constructed through these processes.

The complexity of these cultural-historical realisations indicates that mentor-novice relationship cannot be understood simply through the official language of 'transmission, assistance, guidance' (*chuan*, *bang*, *dai*) (e.g., MoE, 2025c), but must instead be seen as a dynamic site of power asymmetries, identity re-construction, and ongoing conflicts. This chapter, therefore, examines how moral and hierarchical orders unfold in mentoring relationships and how the identities of novices and mentors are enacted, constructed, and negotiated through talk in the professional practices. It offers a complex, nuanced account of mentor-novice relationships situated within competing demands of moral authority and bureaucratic accountability.

Two main observations emerge: first, the analysis challenges the monolithic and prescriptive image of the always passive and conforming novice or the invariably authoritarian mentor. Instead, it provides evidence that teacher identities are continually ascribed, (dis)avowed, and negotiated in real time professional interactions. An in-depth

case study of a novice teacher, Jing, and her mentor, Chen, illustrates how teacher hierarchies are reproduced, intimacy and collegiality are cultivated, tensions are managed, and expectations surrounding gender and age are articulated and reinforced. Second, this chapter explores the quasi-familial intimacy that characterises many mentoring relationships by drawing on evidence from other participants. Building on Lin and Zhao's (2023) concept of 'affective governing technology' (p. 154), it shows how such relationships can function as affective mechanisms that redeem novice teachers from the pressures of neoliberal accountability and enable them to develop a more congruent self as legitimate members of their teaching communities. At the same time, however, these family-like relations are entangled with practices of cronyism, through which access to authority, support, and resources becomes unevenly distributed.

The chapter begins by introducing the revered system of teaching through which teacher hierarchy is legitimised and through which decisions about who can serve as mentors are made, thereby shaping novices' imaginations of what it means to become a good teacher in the context. The next section turns to the case study of Jing. Following this, underpinned by the framework of affective governance, the chapter examines the complexities of mentor-novice relationships: while they provide emotional support and help novices establish legitimate membership, they also reveal broader structural inequalities embedded in mentorship and the precarious conditions under which many novice teachers begin their careers in contemporary China.

5.2 Who Can Mentor? The Revered System of Teaching

Although, in principle, any teacher with over three years of teaching experience is eligible to serve as a *Shifu* to a novice teacher, in practice the role is most often assumed by model teachers: those who hold prestigious professional titles and enjoy strong reputations within their schools or districts (Fan, 2018). Before turning to Jing's mentoring experiences, it is essential first to consider how teacher hierarchies are established and

authorised with the Chinese educational system.

In Kipnis's (2011) ethnographic study of Chinese schooling, exemplary governing is operationalised through a proliferation of models: model Chinese calligraphy, model students, model teachers, and model behaviours. These models are not merely about rewarding excellence but operate as norm through which social control is enacted and sustained. Both Kipnis (2011) and Bakken (2023) argue, education (*jiaoyu*) in China has historically functioned less as a method for fostering learning and more as a means of cultivating social order and reinforcing hierarchical norms. For Bakken (2000, 2023), an exemplary society is one in which social behaviour is shaped less by critical reflection or individual decision-making than by habitus, conformity, and imitation. Within the teaching profession, this logic of exemplarity is institutionalised through the evaluation and inspection systems, which bureaucratically structure teacher hierarchies through quantifiable achievements and measurable indicators of performance (Kipnis, 2007, 2011; Song, Zhu, & Liu, 2015).

A clear illustration of this system emerged during my fieldwork, when the local District issued the *Ronghua District Teacher Development Guidelines* (2023), which outlined eight core competences for teacher professional development: *Classroom Teaching*, *Lesson Planning*, *Assignment Design*, *Assessment Design*, *Technology Proficiency*, *Research Engagement*, *Topic-based Case Study*, and the *Delivery of Exemplary Lessons*. Each of these competences was evaluated through a system of awards generated via inspections, evaluations, and competitions. For instance, teachers were assessed through assignment-design contests, the number of published works and participation in demonstration lessons. This evaluative system was widely considered central to the recognition of teaching expertise and thus closely associated with the teacher honour system and the formal pathway for professional advancement (Zhang & Shao, 2017). The pathway consists of four progressive titles, *the Potential Leader* (*youxiu jiaoshi*), *the*

Subject Leading Figure (*xueke daitou ren*), *the Master Teacher* (*mingshi*), *the Special Class Teacher* (*teji jiaoshi)* (Fan, 2018; Zhang & Shao, 2017). These titles can be awarded at district, municipal, provincial, or national levels. A *Special Class Teacher* represents the most distinguished category within the China's teacher honour system (Hu, 2006). According to the *Regulations on the Selection of Special Class Teachers* issued by the State in 1993, '*Special Class Teachers* should serve as moral exemplars, models of student cultivation, and expects in teaching' (Hu, 2006, p. 66) The total number of such teachers is strictly capped at no more than 1.5% of the total teacher population within each province or municipality (Zhang & Shao, 2017). Below is a profile of a *Special Class Teacher* in School A, as presented on the school website.

Extract 5.1 'A Special Class Teacher's Profile'

> Ms. Mel, a Senior Teacher and Head of the English Subject Group at School A. Her accolades include *National Outstanding Foreign Language Teacher*, *Provincial Special Class Teacher*, *Lead Educator of Provincial Model Teacher Workshops*, *Provincial Master Teacher*, *Municipal Master Teacher*. Ms. Mel has won the First Prize in the *National English Quality Lesson Competition*. She has led multiple research projects and earned the First Prize from the Provincial and Municipal Governments' Teaching Achievement Award.
>
> (School Website_Retrieved in May, 2023_School A)

Recognition as a *Master Teache*r or *Special Class Teacher* entails not only significant monetary rewards, promotion, and salary increases, but also opens up new professional opportunities and institutional privileges. One such privilege is the authorisation to establish a *Model Teacher Workshops* (*mingshi gongzuoshi*), through which exemplary teachers are enabled to convene their own teacher development teams and extend their pedagogical influence via demonstration lessons, research projects, and mentorship (Liu,

2010). The team may include teachers from both within and beyond their schools, as part of reform aimed at promoting educational equality and quality (Liu, 2010). However, such workshops have also attracted criticisms. Zeng and Zhang (2016) indicate that, these activities often intensify rather than mitigate inequalities, as model teachers tend to recruit participants from their existing professional networks, particularly their own *tudi* (mentees) (Zeng & Zhang, 2016). This can result in a system in which a small group of elite teachers accumulates disproportionate access to resources, recognition, and professional opportunities, while many ordinary and novice teachers remain positioned as peripheral participants (Liu, 2010; Zeng & Zhang, 2016).

That said, this revered teacher system shapes how 'good' teaching is understood and pursued. Model teachers are not only seen as exemplars of professional excellence but also positioned as normative figures through whom all teachers are expected to emulate and regulate themselves. Within this framework, teachers no longer aim simply to become a competent practitioner, but to continuously strive for 'excellence'. Scholars in China have criticised the performance-based teacher evaluation system. Zhang and Shao (2017), for example, argue that evaluation practices rely heavily on students' exam scores and quantitative indicators such as awards and publication counts, prioritising administrative control over teachers' professional development. They caution that such honour systems risk intensifying competition and reproducing inequalities within the profession (Zhang & Shao, 2017).

5.3 Identity Negotiation in Mentoring Relationships: The Case of Jing

Jing, a first-year novice teacher at School A, entered the public education system after five years of teaching in a private school. Her mentor, Chen, was an exemplary teacher with over three decades of experience and held a respected position within the school. Jing's case was selected primarily for practical reasons, as their regular 20–30 minute mentoring sessions were accessible to me for close observation and audio recording. At

the same time, her case offers a richly layered, in-depth example of how institutionalised mentorship unfolds in practice and how the tensions and contradictions emerge in real-time interactions. Having transitioned from the private sector to the public school system, Jing's professional identities were continuously negotiated, claimed, challenged, and adjusted through her engagement with mentoring practices.

Jing and Chen's mentoring relationship was shaped by several institutionalised practices: (1) Jing and Chen taught the same grade level and shared the same office space, allowing Chen to provide timely and casual feedback and inviting Jing to ask questions at any point; (2) both were required to observe at least six of each other's lessons per semester, with written reflections submitted after each observation; and (3) after observing Jing's class, Chen provided feedback on the teaching in post-observation sessions that typically lasted between 20 to 30 minutes. These post-observation mentoring sessions constituted the primary site of mentor-novice interaction and thus offer a rich source for examining how roles and relationships are enacted and negotiated. Compared to the more casual, fleeting exchanges in the shared office space, these sessions provide a more structured and observable context in which pedagogical practices and beliefs are communicated, politeness strategies are employed, and mentor-mentee identities and relationships are established. Across all five of Jing's mentoring sessions, three of which I attended in person and the remaining shared with me as audio recordings. Their sessions consistently followed a structured format: each typically opened with the mentor offering positive feedback on the novice's teaching practice, followed by critical moments or suggestions for improvement. Yet professional identities were neither fixed nor stable; through various interactional resources such as expressions of vulnerability, politeness strategies, and shifts in footing, the mentor and novice collaboratively constructed the hierarchical roles assigned to them, even as moments of resistance emerged. To provide a nuanced account of Jing's mentorship with Chen, this analysis draws on multiple sources of data, including audio recordings of mentoring sessions, detailed fieldnotes,

and interviews with Jing.

5.3.1 Delineating Default Identities

Jing viewed her mentor, Chen, as an authority figure in English teaching. Chen's authority as a teacher was also evident in the mentoring sessions. In particular, the opening phase of each session functioned as a key moment in which the default identities of mentor and novice were explicitly claimed. The extract below captures the opening exchange between Chen and Jing shortly after Jing's classroom teaching. In this interaction, Chen's authoritative position and Jing's role as the novice were clearly delineated.

Extract 5.2 'so I'll start now'

1 Jing: 我- 我觉得我讲得有点混乱其实.
I- I think I was a bit unclear in what I taught actually.

2 Chen: 嗯 我 感觉 喃:: 就 是 (.) 处理的比较快.
Mm I feel like:: it was (.) handled a bit quickly.

3 Jing: 对 / 我 [过得有点快.
Right / I [went a bit fast.

4 Chen: [然后很多
[And a lot of

5 就是 / 一些知识点 (.) 你是在最后单独来的 =
like / some of the key points (.) you covered separately at the end=

6 Jing: =对 对 / 我- 我 每次都是放到最后来讲的知识点.
=Yeah yeah / I- I always leave the key points until the end.

7 Chen: 嗯=
hmm=

8 Jing: =就 (.) 中途 / 就是觉得 (.) 更多的是那种
=Like (.) in the middle / (I) just feel like (.) it's more like

9 [带着你猜 (.) 的那种理解嘛.
[guiding them to guess (.) that kind of understanding.

10 Chen: [嗯
[hmm

11 嗯 / 我现在就开始了 / 我觉得今天做的特别不错的地方哈.

hm / I'll start now / I think something you did really well today.

12 Jing: 哈哈哈

Hahaha

13 Chen: 哈哈 / 有两个地方 / 一个地方 (.) 是班级的管理.

Haha / were two things / one of them (.) was the classroom management.

The interaction begins with Jing initiating a self-evaluation of her own performance (line 1). By doing this, Jing takes up the role a reflective teacher who is open to critique. Chen aligns with this self-assessment in line 2, thereby the two parties co-constructing the critique. In line 4, Chen expands on her observation, adding her observation that 'some of the key points you covered separately at the end' (line 5). Although this is an indirect evaluation as Chen softens her tone from 'lots of' to 'like, some of', it still marks a more specific, possibly face-threatening, feedback. Jing's response in line 6, however, diverges from a typical deferential stance. She offers a firm explanation with 'I always'. This response is assertive and signals her pedagogical agency, suggesting that her approach is not accidental, but intentional and based on a rationale she has developed over time. Here, Jing positions herself not as a passive apprentice but as someone with an evolving professional agency.

Nevertheless, Chen's reaction to this assertion is notably minimal, 'hmm=' in line 7. As Jing elaborates further in lines 8-9, Chen again withholds explicit uptake, offering again only a soft 'hmm' (line 10). This acknowledgement token neither affirms Jing's reasoning nor advances the discussion, but instead, holds evaluation in abeyance as Chen prepares to reassert her authority. This reclaiming occurs in line 11, when Chen abruptly shifts the interactional roles with the statement, 'So, I'll start now'. This marks a demarcation, indicating that the preceding interaction where Jing portrays a self-assertive and reflective image is now being bracketed off. With this move, Chen claims the role of mentor-as-evaluator, initiating the structured feedback session and transitioning the talk from peer exchange to an asymmetrical mentor-novice interaction. Jing's immediate

response to this shift is laughter (line 12), which is echoed by Chen. Their laughter could be a face-saving strategy that mitigates the tension of Jing being formally evaluated. At the same time, it appears to also index her awareness of the hierarchical dynamics at play and hints at her subtle discomfort with the shift to the apprentice role. As shown in this extract, the interplay of humour, (mis)alignment, and shifts in footing reflects the nuanced ways in which mentor-novice relationships were established, and default professional identities were claimed and negotiated.

This clear delineation of identities can also be seen when Chen delivers positive feedback, where Chen usually ascribed a positive professional identity to Jing (Copland & Donaghue, 2021). In the extract below (Extract 5.3), the mentor used positive assessment to ascribe an attentive and interpersonally skilled professional identity to Jing. When English classes began in China, it is common practice for teachers to start the lesson by saying, 'Class begins', prompting students to stand and bow while greeting the teacher with 'Good morning, Ms. or Mr. X.' In the scenario discussed below, however, one student did not follow this ritual when greeting Jing. This moment became one of the points for Chen's feedback on Jing's classroom management.

Extract 5.3 'Is your butt stuck to the chair?'

1 Chen: 第 三个 (优点) 嘛 / 我觉得班级管理 / 还有一个很重要就是 / 你跟学生在批评他的时候 / 这个语言 (.) 就变得更丰富了 =
The third (strength) / I think in terms of classroom management / there's another important thing / when you're criticising students / your language (.) has become much richer =

2 Jing: =哈哈 [哈哈哈
=haha [hahaha

3 Chen: 我觉得也就 (.) 也就其实 / 你可以把这个关系搞得很融洽 / 就不用今天我非要黑个脸来骂你 / 或者说什么. 我可以 (.) 很笑嘻嘻的 / 很轻松的. 比如你说, "你屁股粘到 [板凳上了哇？"
I think well (.) actually / you're able to make the relationship feel much more harmonious / There's no need to put on a stern face, scold them or make harsh comments. You can do it (.) with a smile / in a relaxed way. For example / when

you said, 'Is your butt stuck [to the chair?'

4 Jing: [我最近学了些阴阳怪气的骂人.

[I've recently learned how to scold (students) in a sarcastic way.

5 Chen: 一下子 (.) 就有点 (.) 就感觉整个氛围就更好了 / 学生呢不会觉得 / '今天 Jing 一直在骂我们' / 好像是在开玩笑一样的. 但是实际上你依然可以达到 / 而且效果可能更好 =

Right away (.) it's kind of (.) I feel that the whole atmosphere is better / The students don't feel like / 'Today Jing is just scolding us.' / It's more like a joke. But you're getting the point across / and it's even more effective =

6 Jing: =对

=Yes

7 Chen: 他会很不好意思.

They might feel a bit embarrassed.

From the outset of this extract, Chen frames the observation as 'the third strength', indicating that it forms part of a structured sequence of praise. Chen highlights Jing's classroom management as a notable strength, focusing on her use of rich and responsive language when addressing problematic student behaviour. In doing this, the mentor ascribes a professional identity of being adaptive and competent teacher. Jing's laughter (line 2) suggests alignment with the evaluation, and her response in line 4 reveals that her classroom language is not improvised but deliberately crafted. This exchange demonstrates a process of co-construction of identity, in which both mentor and mentee build a positive image of teacher.

Yet, a closer look indicates that Chen's ascription of a professional identity is constructed through contrasting Jing's practice with what she implies is Jing's earlier approach. She suggests a shift in Jing's classroom climate (line 5), and notes that there is no need to put on a poker face to scold, but rather that one can manage the classroom 'with a smile, in a relaxed way' (line 3). By defining what counts as professional progress and good practices, Chen maintains her dominant role in directing the mentoring interaction.

In this way, hierarchy between novice and mentor was achieved not through formal titles alone, but through the subtle classroom practices and linguistic moves in mentoring sessions. Chen positions herself as an expert and guide, while Jing aligns herself as a learner seeking guidance. This alignment was also evident in Jing's everyday pedagogical decisions. Assigned Chen as the primary point of contact when confronted with pedagogical difficulties, Jing frequently observed Chen's lessons before teaching her own, especially when dealing with challenging textbook content. "If there is a problem", she explained, "the first person I go to is my mentor". English lessons were often centred around 'examination points' (*kaodian*) such as key vocabulary, grammar structures, and sentence patterns, which formed an important part of pedagogical content knowledge (Qi, 2004). For novice teachers who were unfamiliar with the structure and intent of the prescribed textbook, the fear of omitting such examination points could be acute. Although Jing had accumulated some teaching experience in a private training institution, she often relied heavily on Chen's interpretations of lesson content to reduce uncertainty and frustration.

5.3.2 Enacting Collegiality and Intimacy

Although Chen regularly provided feedback, Jing was not required to follow her mentor's approach in any strict sense. This was because the mentoring sessions themselves were an administratively mandated formality, often compressed into brief post-lesson evaluations that left little room for extended discussion or pedagogical negotiation. More importantly, because mentors were not institutionally responsible for assessing novices' teaching performance, Jing retained a certain degree of autonomy in making her own pedagogical choices. In this sense, while their relationship was structured by institutional hierarchy, it was not a coercive form of authority in which the mentor dictated the novice's every move. Instead, it left room for negotiation, selective uptake, and even divergence in mentee's classroom practice. Although Jing recognised that not all of her mentor's practices were directly transferable to her own classroom, she nevertheless

deeply respected Chen's methods and professional experience.

This sense of collegiality was performed in moments when the mentor expressed vulnerability, momentarily stepping away from an authoritarian stance within the mentoring sessions. Although critical feedback and suggestions formed a central part of these sessions (Lewis & Wagner, 2023), mentors often relied on a range of discursive strategies to fulfil their instructional goals and navigate potential face-threatening interactions (Donaghue, 2022). The following extract shows how Chen achieved this by cultivating a sense of mutual understanding and collegiality.

Extract 5.4 'My geography is terrible.'

1 Chen: 讲时区的时候 / 你就飞出来一个 (ppt 动画) / 讲时区是咋个回事. 其实你看没有? / 理解时区他还是很不容易的. 也就是说 / 我感觉在你讲的时候 (.) 他就 (.) 有些学生还是比较懵.

When you were teaching time zones / you popped up a (PowerPoint slide) / explaining how time zones work. But did you notice? / Understanding time zones is really not easy for students. That is / I felt that when you were teaching it (.) they (.) some students were still pretty confused.

2 Jing: 对

Right

3 Chen: 他对 那个 具体的 时间 是 [咋回事

They didn't really get what the exact time [meant

4 Jing: [他不晓得

[They didn't know

5 Chen: 所以说我在备课的时候 / 确实我就想了 / 比如 (.) 国际日期变更线 / 它是这样转的 / 它就先进入了 =

So when I was preparing this lesson / surely I thought about it / for example (.) the international date line / it moves like this / So it goes into it first =

6 Jing: =我不敢那样子来讲

=I wouldn't dare teach that

7 Chen: [可. 能 会 (.) 可 能 会 (.) 直观一点.

[Maybe it would (.) Maybe it (.) would be more intuitive.

8 Jing: [自己都不明白 / 哈哈

[I don't even understand it myself / haha

9 Chen: 但是也不晓得是不是更直观一点

But I don't know if it really is more intuitive

10 比如说 (.) 为啥子澳大利亚先 / 它更快呢？/ 因为这样子 [转的时候 =

Like (.) why does Australia come first? Why is it faster? / Because when it rotates [like this =

11 Jing: [这样转的

[It turns like this

12 Chen: =它就先进入这条线.

=It enters the line first.

13 Jing: 对

Right

14 Chen: 所以可能就 a 它更容易理解一点 / 然后就是日本 / 然后中国 / 但是（你）已经考虑到这个 / 我觉得 (.) 就很不错了 /[帮助学生理解 =

So maybe that makes it easier to understand / And then Japan / then China / But (you) already thought about this / I think (.) that's great / [It helps students understand =

15 Jing: [我 (.) 主 要 是 / 我 / 我自己就::

[I (.) The main thing is / I / I just::

16 Chen: = 因为 这个 东 [西很不好理解

= Because this stuff [is really hard to understand

17 Jing: [地理太撇了

[My geography is terrible

18 Chen: 我 也是 / (我) 理不[清 楚 (.) 很混乱 (.) 哈哈.

Me too / (I) [don't get it (.) So confused (.) haha.

The sequence begins with Chen evaluating Jing's lesson on time zones. She starts with a description about Jing using a PowerPoint animation and quickly moves to a critique, noting that some students appear confused (lines 1–3). This follows the default mentoring role where the mentor proposes an alternative way to teach time zones (line 5). However, Jing explains how she finds the topic challenging to her in lines 6 and 8, admitting 'I don't even understand it myself'. Notably, Chen, rather than following this up with directive advice, transitions into expressing uncertainty by using speculative

language, such as ‘Maybe it would be…’ and ‘But I don’t know if it really…’. She later acknowledges that she, too, finds the topic of time zones challenging and echoes Jing’s comment about weak geography knowledge in line 18. This shared struggle temporarily flattens the mentor-novice hierarchy. Rather than maintaining the position of an expert offering solutions, Chen takes up the identity of a comrade grappling with complex content. In doing so, she models not mastery but vulnerability, creating a safe space in which uncertainty is normalised. In addition, Chen often framed her feedback with phrases such as ‘I feel’ or ‘I think’, adopting a mitigated and subjective stance rather than a directive one. She often relied on first-person (i.e., ‘I’) or third-person (i.e., ‘they’) formulations, rather than second-person directives, thereby avoiding explicit prescriptions for what the novice should do.

Beyond collegiality, Jing also came to view Chen as a familial elder within their mentoring relationship. One afternoon in June 2023, Jing and I sat on a bench outside School A. When I asked if Chen had expectations for her to participate teaching competitions, Jing laughed and replied, “She just wants me to get into a romantic relationship”. Surprised, I asked whether this was a joke meant to ease the mentoring dynamic. Jing shook her head, saying, “She’s serious. And it’s not just her; our whole office talks about it”. As one of the only two single women in her year group, Jing had become the subject of frequent matchmaking conversations among her colleagues. Her mentor had even arranged a date for her, and during that period, colleagues urged her to stop working overtime and “go home to date”. Jing explained to me that she found it difficult to refuse these interventions, because “everyone is just caring about my well-being”. In this setting, private matters such as singlehood of young women teachers became collective concerns, subject to scrutiny, commentary, and even intervention. The social expectation that a female teacher should balance professional work with normative life stages such as dating and marriage embedded within the teacher community, extending professional relations into an intimate regime of moral regulation.

Furthermore, discussions of how to survive and how to secure a more stable future were not formally included in the mentoring agenda, yet they frequently emerged through the space between mentor and novice. Jing often shared her anxieties about being a contract teacher with her mentor, and Chen, in turn, provided a strategic and empathetic response to help Jing navigate the internal hierarchies of the school. For instance, Chen advised Jing to consider transferring to a feeder school of School A, where greater teaching opportunities and institutional resources were more accessible. As Jing put it, "Chen is very responsible—she is like a parent to me." In these exchanges, the mentor acted more as an intimate guide and helped the novice make sense of and move through the precarious institutional terrain; and this relationship resonates with the enduring Confucian ideal that 'once a teacher, a father for life'.

The mentorship between Jing and Chen did not unfold solely through formal procedures but was accomplished through intimacy and collegiality, reproduced through everyday interactions and institutional rituals within the broader institutional context.

5.3.3 Managing Tension

While intimacy and collegiality softened the hierarchical dynamics of mentorship, tension sometimes emerged in Jing's interactions with Chen. These tensions did not take the form of overt conflict, but appeared through moments of disengagement, silence, or deferred resistance. In what follows, I examine how such tensions were managed and performed in practice, particularly focusing on how critical feedback was delivered, how novice teachers perceived divergent pedagogical decisions, and how professional identities were ascribed and resisted.

Despite Chen's tendency to avoid directive language when feeding back on Jing's teaching, the following extract illustrates how she sometimes verbalised critique in a

more authoritarian stance.

Extract 5.5 'Do you know how many new words there were today?'

1 Chen: 然后第三个呢 / 就是你个人 (.) 要很大的改进 / 就是你的板书. 一直是一个 (0.8) / 我的主黑板一定会出现重要的单词.
And the third thing / is something you (.) need to really improve on / which is your board writing. It's always been a (0.8) / My main board will always show key vocabulary.

2 那 (.) 今天有几个单词你晓不晓得呢？
So (.) do you know how many new words there were today?

3 Jing: 我 没 数 / 我想哈::
I didn't count / I think::

4 Chen: 这 节 课 有 [四个新单词 =
In this lesson there were [four new words =

5 Jing: [volunteer
[volunteer

6 Chen: =你 要把 这四个 新 单词 把它 [在黑板上写出来 =
=You need to clearly write those four new words [on the blackboard =

7 Jing: [然后
[and then

8 Chen: = 而且字要写得够大 / 要考虑到最后一排的同学都能够看得到.
= And the words need to be big enough / you have to think about the students in the last row being able to see them.

In this extract, the mentor, Chen occupies the default role of the problem-finder by identifying a specific area for improvement: (black)board writing (line 1). She presents this as a recurring issue and uses her own teaching practice as a reference, stating that her main blackboard always displays key vocabulary. In doing so, Jing is positioned as someone who needs to adjust her current approach. In line 2, Chen abruptly shifts her stance and asks, 'Do you know how many new words there were today?'. While phrased as a question, the utterance functions more as an evaluation than a genuine question. It indicates that Jing may not have been adequately prepared or attentive to the lesson's

key vocabulary items. In the next few turns, Chen moves into offering more concrete suggestions: she points out the number of new vocabulary items (line 4), emphasises the need to clearly write them on the board (line 6), and even suggests considering the font size for visibility (line 8). Nevertheless, Jing responds minimally and does not engage fully with the advice she receives. Instead, she manages to name one of the vocabulary items ('volunteer', line 5) and adding the phrase 'and then' (line 7), without addressing the Chen's concern about board writing. The overlapping between the two could suggest that Jing does not view the blackboard design issue as particularly important, or perhaps that she prefers not to engage with that aspect of feedback at the moment. Chen maintains the roles as advice-giver and mentor-as-evaluator by taking up a critical stance and offering detailed guidance, but Jing takes up the novice role, but her minimal contribution suggests a degree of disengagement and distance from the mentor's framing of priorities. Critical feedback is likewise delivered by Chen through the ascription of roles and professional identities, as shown in the following extract.

Extract 5.6 'That style really resembles schools like New Oriental.'

1 Chen: 你是就纯粹把它（单词）放到这个时候来集中讲了

You basically saved all (the vocabulary) at the end and taught it all at once.

2 这个 时候 就很 像 那种 / 新 东 方 啊 / 学而思啊

That style really resembles schools / like New Oriental / or Xue'ersi

3 是集中讲语法 (.) 就全部放到这来讲.

Taught it all at once. It's like cramming all the grammar into one block.

4 但是我们喃就是 / 这个- 这个知识点 / 我是在这个时候出来 / 我就把它分别讲了. 我到最后 / 只是很快的把这些重点再把它勾下来就可以了.

But what we usually do is / when a- a vocabulary item comes up / I just teach it right then separately. At the end / I just quickly go over the key points again.

5 （但是）你是集中一哈全部出现了 / 所以说他印象不深刻 / 包括 (.) 你有些重点单词根本没有出现 =

(But) you presented everything all at once / So it didn't leave a strong impression on the students / include (.) some of the key words you didn't even teach =

6 Jing: 我 [呵呵

I [hehe

7 Chen: [=Children (.) 就没出现

[=Like 'Children' (.) that one didn't appear

8 Jing: 我搞忘带书 / 哈哈 / 没找到

I forgot to bring the textbook / haha / couldn't find it

9 我书没拿下来 / 我真的瓜起.

I didn't bring it down / I seriously blanked out.

Chen begins by simply describing Jing's teaching move—presenting all the vocabulary at the end of the lesson. However, in line 2, she explicitly compares Jing's approach to those used in market-oriented private training schools where Jing had previously worked as an EFL teacher. This comparison serves to ascribe a particular institutional and pedagogical identity to Jing, aligning Jing's practice with a system characterised by high-speed, exam-driven instruction— an approach implicitly considered a less appropriate within the context of Chinese public schooling. To manage the potential face threat of this comparison, Chen employs discursive strategies that soften the critique. For example, she uses phrases such as 'what we usually do' (line 4) to normalise the teaching practice she prefers and to reaffirm Jing's belonging within the school's teaching community. She introduces her own approach in line 4 as a more effective strategy. Also, in lines 5, Chen continues to explain that presenting all vocabulary at once leads to weak student engagement, and notes that some keys words 'you didn't even teach. By grounding her critique in personal teaching experience, shared norms of public schooling, and student outcomes, she avoids a direct criticism of Jing's method.

Jing's response in line 8, laughter followed by an explanation, suggests an attempt to save face. Rather than engaging with the implied identity ascription, she attributes the issue to a temporary oversight, namely forgetting to being her textbook. This explanation serves to frame the situation as an isolated, logistical mistake rather than a reflection of institutional alignment or teaching philosophy. In doing so, Jing subtly resisted the identity ascription of a marketised, exam-driven instructor, and instead positions herself

as a teacher who momentarily fell short.

While Chen was known for her gentle demeanour and consistent use of English as the medium of instruction, Jing's lessons were marked by frequent switches to Mandarin or Sichuan dialect to manage discipline or assert authority. For Jing, these differences reflected not just pedagogical preferences but also generational and experiential gaps.

Extract 5.7 'They're just not afraid of young teachers'

Liu: The advice Chen gave you was really good. I think it's about classroom management strategy—you don't necessarily have to yell at or scold students.

Jing: em…but if we use that kind of gentle approach, the students won' t take it seriously.

Liu: At the very least, it gives you a new way to think about it.

Jing: Sometimes I really have to ((scold)). We all feel now that students kind of 'naturally pick on new teachers'. They're just not afraid of young teachers… Some students are very close to older teachers, but still afraid of them. With young teachers, their sense of boundary is weaker… Because they see you as one of them, like a peer—it's something natural. We really don't know what to do. So the only way is to scold them. You have to get angry; that's the only way to control them. If you're too gentle, it just won't work.

(Interview 1_School A_Jing)

As the interviewer brings up the mentor's feedback, Jing responds with hesitation and quickly shifts to discussing the practical difficulties she faces in maintaining authority. She draws a contrast between 'old teachers' and 'young teachers', arguing that students tend to have an emotional distance from senior teachers while perceiving young teachers as peers, who are more approachable but lacking authority. Despite receiving the positive feedback from Chen, Jing expresses scepticism towards the gentle disciplinary strategy, arguing that it is unlikely to work because of perceived proximity in age and seniority. In her view, shouting or scolding became a necessary approach to assert authority and

establish boundaries.

This deferred resistance, in which Jing's disagreement did not occur during the mentoring session but emerged later in a reflective interview, can be partially attributed to the largely non-dialogic nature of the mentoring interaction. While the mentor offered praise, she did not invite deeper reflection on Jing's belief about discipline. Jing was not prompted to reflect on why she felt scolding was necessary, nor encouraged to consider the institutional constraints shaping her practice. As a result, when asked in the interview about the mentor's advice, Jing did not engage with the suggestion itself. Instead, she reframed the issue through the lens of teacher-student power relations, focusing on factors such as age, seniority, authority, and emotional boundaries in shaping classroom management.

These interactions thus reveal how tension was managed not through direct confrontation, but through subtle, fleeting, or deferred modes of resistance. Chen and Jing worked to maintain rapport while also asserting distinct pedagogical identities. Managing tension is therefore an important part of mentorship, which importantly reveals how novice teachers make space for their own ways of teaching while mentors balance support and evaluation.

5.3.4 Summary of Jing's Mentoring Relationship

Jing's mentoring relationship highlights the complex interplay between authority, intimacy, collegiality, and tension in everyday professional practices. Novices and mentors were expected to perform their designated roles and identities in order to fulfil institutional aims, particularly the provision of pedagogical guidance to novices. Yet a detailed analysis of interviews and mentoring sessions shows that identity shifts and negotiations recurred in and through these practices.

At the micro level, both mentor and novice employed various strategies to step away from their default roles, provide collegial support, ease interactional tensions, and mitigate face-threatening moments. However, the overall structure of the mentoring sessions remained asymmetrical, with the mentor making the dominant contribution. Firstly, Chen consistently held the conversational floor and assumed the roles of problem-finder, solution-provider and evaluator, while Jing was largely positioned as a listener and recipient of advice. While moments of empathy or vulnerability softened the tone, Chen sometimes returned to a more directive and authoritarian stance when addressing issues that she viewed as pedagogically non-negotiable, for example, when she asked Jing of how many new words were in the lesson. Secondly, their talks were largely non-dialogic (Copland & Donaghue, 2021). The mentor rarely invited Jing to reflect on her own teaching practices or express her own perspectives. Feedback tended to follow a unidirectional format, with Chen articulating what she believed to be the essential characteristics of good teaching, such as classroom discipline or board design, without opening space for Jing's voice or rationale. This non-dialogic nature may help explain why Jing's resistance sometimes showed only in the follow-up interviews rather than during the mentoring interactions. A detailed, micro analysis of mentoring sessions reveals not only identity negotiation but also the persistent asymmetries of power embedded within mentoring relationship.

This section explores how Jing positioned Chen as a professional authority, a caring elder, and an intimate family-like figure, thereby illuminating the relational complexity that underpins mentoring practices. It demonstrates how mentoring extends beyond its institutional mandate, taking on affective and moral characteristics that evoke familial roles and obligations. As to be discussed in the following section, these dynamics operate as affective 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 2003, p. 147), through which teachers craft meaning and seek redemption amid contested neoliberal working conditions, binding them more tightly together while simultaneously disciplining novices through

moral obligations of care, order, and gratitude.

5.4 Affective Governing Technology

Intimacy is framed as essential for one-to-one guidance within the mentor-novice relationship and serves as the moral foundation that legitimatises the mentoring practices. While my micro analysis of Jing and Chen's interactions shows that default and ascribed identities were constantly negotiated in real time, such negotiations cannot be adequately explained by sociological notions of *face* or *politeness* alone (Copland & Donaghue, 2021; Donaghue, 2022). Rather, it is produced through a form of quasi-familial intimacy that is continuously cultivated through daily interactions, ritual practices infused with Confucian moral logics, and recurring articulations of 'mother-child' metaphors. Hierarchy and intimacy, therefore, should not be understood as opposing relational logics, but as mutually constitutive and tightly entangled forms produced within mentor-novice interactions. Drawing on Foucault's (2003) terms of governmentality, Lin and Zhao (2023) conceptualise this Confucian cultural ethics of family-like relation as an 'affective technology of the self' (p. 154) which enables teachers to develop a congruent self-identification. However, their framework primarily focused on teacher-student relations. In this study, I extend the concept of affective governing to mentor-novice relations, particularly in interactions with more knowledgeable colleagues who provide emotional, professional, and practical support. While such relations may offer novices a sense of redemption from the pressures of neoliberal governance such as performance, contractual insecurity, and bureaucratic surveillance, they are also entangled with issues of unequal access to opportunities and resources.

5.4.1 Family-like Mentor-Novice Relationships

During the fieldwork, novice teachers frequently drew on familial metaphors to describe their mentors as 'mothers' and themselves as 'children'. Those without active mentors, by contrast, referred to themselves as 'children raised in the wild', expressions that

conveyed a strong sense of emotional dependence or vulnerability. Wen, for instance, recounted a teacher development session in which novice teachers were expected to present their progress and receive feedback from their mentors. Because her mentor had left the school, no one spoke on her behalf. “At that moment,” she recalled, “I suddenly felt like a child without a mother. I could sense that the people in the audience saw me as an extra burden.”

These familial relationships have two implications. First, such intimacy could at times function as a buffer against the complex and demanding working conditions of urban schools in China, where novice teachers resorted to the familial affective support that redeemed them from the grip of neoliberalism. For novices, everyday experiences of precarity were shaped by performance pressures, employment status, and the bureaucratic mechanisms embedded in the mentorship system. This performance-driven environment influenced how novices understood their own value as teachers, as student achievement became central to their sense of competence and legitimacy. Xin, for example, frequently described her mentor as an admirable and dependable figure, whereas in other interviews, she tended to talk about her own classroom primarily in terms of exam scores, commenting on her class’s ranking relative to others, the number of high-performing students, and the frustration caused by those low-performing students.

In the demonstrative schools I visited, there seemed to be an ‘open secret’ that novice teachers with consistently poor student performance could be reassigned to feeder schools or other subsidiary campuses. In one such school, a novice teacher, Yan, confided that she was deeply anxious about being transferred. As a result, she maintained a stern demeanour in the classroom and avoided smiling in front of her students, fearing that appearing too friendly would undermine her authority and negatively affect their performance. “My mentor even asked me why my smile had disappeared within a year

of entering this school," she recalled. Reflecting on her mentor's support, she added, "My mentor has helped me a great deal. She makes me feel that I still have room for professional growth, and that I can turn to her whenever I encounter difficulties."

Second, mentors, like their novices, sought meaning and professional value through the mentoring relationships. Wen's mentor, Shao, for instance, remarked, "although I'm Wen's mentor, there are many times when I feel I learn from her. For example, with the school's digital systems, she mastered them immediately." In terms of the trajectory of learning to teach, Shao commented, "when I was younger, I wasn't nearly as active as Wen is. She doesn't just observe English lessons; she attends maths and Chinese classes as well." Within such intimate and affectively charged relationships, neoliberal pressures could become more bearable for both novices and mentors through a sense of collective belonging, emotional support, and compassion. At the same time, some novice teachers reported that their mentors withheld pedagogical expertise, offering only general encouragement while avoiding critical feedback, possibly to preserve their own advantage in a competitive environment. Nevertheless, in most accounts, mentoring relationships were described as collegial, characterised by mutual support and shared struggles.

That said, this family-like relationship simultaneously reproduced social expectations by reinforcing norms surrounding career paths, life stages, and social order. Novices often found it difficult to refuse requests or to voice disagreement. Many avoided questioning their mentors out of a sense of gratitude and obligation. As Jing put it, "I didn't agree with her advice, so I just listened but didn't follow it." For some novices, mentors encouraged them to participate in teaching competition as a form of support. Wen remembered how her former mentor, who regretted not participating in teaching competitions early in her own career, urged her to seize such opportunities as a novice. In a similar way, Yu's experience in the competition illustrated how these family-like

relationships between novices and experienced teachers could become a form of discipline, shaping how novices understood their work and the choices available to them. Furthermore, these expectations also extended to age-related norms. Novice teachers were steered towards what they were supposed to be doing at particular stages of life, whether in their careers or in their personal relationships. Mentors rarely disciplined novices through overt reprimand or formal punishment; instead, discipline was enacted through care, support, and advice.

These affective, family-life bonds between mentors and novices may help explain why Chinese teachers always exhibit high levels of turnover intention but show low levels of actual turnover behaviours (Lin & Zhao, 2023). Within such intimate and emotionally charged ties, the pressures of neoliberal accountability and authoritarian control can become more bearable, as senses of belonging, emotional support, and compassion softens the experience of precarity.

5.4.2 Building Families, Producing Boundaries

However, my fieldwork also revealed forms of complicity among teachers that contributed to inequalities within the profession. One incident offered a particularly clear illustration. During fieldwork in 2023, I was invited to attend the inauguration ceremony of a newly established *Model Teacher Workshop* led by the renowned Master Teacher, Jane, who was now serving as a district-level teacher educator. I was treated as a special guest and seated in the front row of the classroom alongside several middle-aged expert teachers who had been invited to witness this moment. The red velvet tablecloths, the old-fashioned white porcelain teacups with lids, and the lingering scent of green tea stood in striking contrast to the modern decor of the newly renovated classroom. This ceremony was one of many held across the Ronghua District. As part of a local initiative to promote a culture of exemplarity, the local education department had established approximately 115 such model teacher-led workshops within the span of just

two months.

Part of the ceremony required the twenty participating teachers, who had been selected by Jane as members of her Model Teacher Workshop, to introduce themselves one by one. As they spoke in turn, it became evident that their connections to Jane varied. Some were her current or former mentees, others her colleagues from the same professional cohort, while a few came from other schools but shared years of personal friendships or professional exchange with her. They ranged from newly recruited teachers at the very beginning of their careers to senior educators who already held highly recognised positions. Yet, regardless of these differing backgrounds, nearly every speaker conveyed deep admiration and gratitude towards Jane. What was ostensibly a series of brief self-introductions soon evolved into a collective performance of praise. Many described Jane as the 'light' of their professional lives, someone whose recognition had made their inclusion in the workshop possible and whose mentorship and support had enabled their growth. Their gratitude was not only heartfelt but also highly performative, expressed through improvised poems, metaphors, and even physical gestures such as bows. The atmosphere was saturated with sincerity, reverence, and emotional intensity. Having grown up and worked previously within such a cultural environment, I found myself momentarily drawn into the affective force of the scene. At the conclusion of the ceremony, Jane stood to address the audience with relish and pride. She acknowledged the gratitude expressed by her colleagues and affirmed that, having become a 'light' for so many others, she now bore the responsibility to continue striving in order to remain worthy of such reverence.

Yet, as I sat there, I became increasingly unsettled and puzzled. There was something undeniably surreal about the ceremony. Had I just witnessed a performance, or a genuine expression of gratitude? With this question in mind, I approached two workshop members, Yun and Xia, separately after the ceremony. Both were already middle leaders

in their respective schools, each coming from what were regarded as 'weaker' schools in Ronghua District. Yet as they spoke about their career paths, their tone grew noticeably more emotional. Yun told me that during the first ten years of her teaching career, she often felt stuck and invisible. At one point, she had seriously considered leaving the profession altogether to open an online clothing shop on Taobao, one of China's largest e-commerce platforms. At least, she said, that way she might be able to earn a bit more money for her family. Her father had been a rural teacher, and she believed she had inherited a certain gift for teaching from him. Yet she was often troubled by a sense of inferiority about her non-standard English accent, which made her doubt her place in the profession. It was only after she participated in a teaching competition judged by Jane—where she eventually won a prize—that her career, in her words, began to be "seen".

Xia shared a similar story of stagnation. She described eight years of frustration in a county school, where opportunities were limited and recognition was rare. It was only after Jane visited the school as a model teacher—observing lessons and serving as an evaluator—that her situation began to change. Following that encounter, she was transferred into Ronghua District and given access to further competitions and professional opportunities. Both teachers spoke candidly about the struggles and confusion they had faced as 'ordinary' teachers, and both described Jane as their *Guiren* —the person who enters one's life at the timely moment to help one through difficult challenges and bring about positive change.

In this case, teacher's career advancement no longer appeared to rest solely on individual merit. Instead, it was reframed as a 'gift' bestowed by a more powerful mentor figure to whom one remained affectively, morally and materially indebted. The task of developing teachers, which ought to be seen as part of Jane's institutional responsibilities as a model teacher and teacher educator, was instead cast as an act of moral generosity and personal virtue.

Within an educational environment marked by resource inequalities and a strong emphasis on exemplarity, model teachers could rely on family-like relationships to build teams such as workshops through particularistic networks of trust and reciprocity. This 'familial' mode of relationships became deeply embedded in the practices through which resources and professional standing were allocated. Access to high-profile opportunities, such as representing the school in teaching competitions or participating in Model Teaching Workshops, was often not determined through open or meritocratic procedures but was selectively extended to individuals perceived as 'suitable'. Without transparent criteria of qualifications, decisions were often made by school principals, heads of departments, or exemplary teachers themselves. In this way, family-like relationships served as a strategic mechanism through which model teachers consolidated their professional capital, treating their mentee's success as an extension of their own professional prestige.

Consequently, these practices undermined fairness and transparency, blurring the pathway of professional development and leaving many novices confused and disillusioned. Xin, for instance despite winning a prestigious first prize in a teaching competition, expressed uncertainty about what such recognition actually meant for her future. "How many competitions must I win," she asked, "When will I finally count as having 'made it' and be able to stop competing?" Xiang, a teacher in her thirties from School B remarked, "Sometimes promotions are based on student scores, sometimes on your relationship (*guanxi*) with school leaders, sometimes on your years of teaching, and sometimes on your competition results." She put it succinctly, "A model teacher must win many prizes, but winning many prizes doesn't necessarily make you a model teacher." In this context, proximity to well-connected exemplary teachers can significantly shape a novice's opportunities for advancement. Yet, the lack of transparency undermines many novice teachers' sense of their overall professional trajectory, leaving them

uncertain about how their careers are expected to unfold.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter traced how mentoring in contemporary Chinese schools operates as a professional practice and an affective governing technology, offering a micro analysis of how different dimensions of mentoring relationship intersect to shape the making and governing of novice teachers in Chinese schooling. First, it began with the *baishihui* ceremony and showed how institutional rituals publicly constructed hierarchical structures which drew on Confucian imaginaries of *Shifu-Tudi* relationships. These rituals delineated mentor and novice roles, symbolically legitimising moral expectations on these relationships and making social interactions more manageable and predictable.

Moving to Jing's case, a close analysis of mentoring sessions revealed that neither mentor nor novice passively performed their assigned roles. Mentors, attentive to face-threatening acts, often employed a range of strategies, such as showing vulnerability, laughter, and softening language to avoid overt conflict. Novices, meanwhile, expressed hesitation, ambiguity, or subtle resistance, revealing an emerging sense of professional self. While her mentor, Chen, occupied the dominant evaluative position, Jing also enacted agency through interactional strategies. Yet, Jing's perception of her relationship with her mentor, Chen, extended far beyond professional guidance. She viewed Chen as a caring elder and a family-like figure, through whom emotional support, moral expectations, and personalised strategies for navigating precarities were transmitted. This shift from pedagogical supervision to intimate guidance demonstrates how mentoring becomes infused with affect and moral obligation.

Building on these insights, the chapter conceptualised mentorship as an 'affective disciplinary technology', which drew on Lin and Zhao's (2023) analysis of affective governance within teacher-student relationships in China. Such intimacy, marked by

care, trust, obligation, and expectations, binds teachers together, offering emotional relief and making neoliberal pressures such as performance pressure, contractual insecurity, and bureaucratic surveillance more bearable. At the same time, this affective mode of governance disciplines novices by rendering compliance natural and necessary. Intimacy did not dissolve hierarchy but worked as an affective and moralised interactional framework that rendered hierarchy natural and legitimate. Professionalisation in this context thus proceeds through affect-laden and relational forms rather than merely through rigid performativity and accountability.

Finally, I showed how these familiarised relations also generated complicity and inequality. Intimate mentor networks formed selective teams that accrued opportunities, resources, and recognition, often at the expense of transparency and meritocratic ideals. Through cases such as the Model Teacher Workshop, I illustrated how familial intimacy not only cultivated solidarity but also produced boundaries, reinforcing cronyism and uneven distributions of professional capital. To sum, these analyses demonstrate that mentoring in China is not merely a vehicle for novice teacher development, but a complex mechanism which is shaped by competing structures and meanwhile shapes how teachers relate to one another, how expertise is regulated, and how authority and power are maintained and reproduced.

Chapter 6: Negotiating Identities in Classroom Interactions

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, I examined novice teachers' participation in teaching competitions and their relationships with their mentors, showing how their professional identities were negotiated through the institutionalised training activities that emphasised competition, hierarchy, and compassion. In this chapter, I turn to another crucial dimension of English teachers' professional lives: classroom interaction.

Rather than seeing classroom interaction as a process that showcases teacher expertise, I approach it as a space where the negotiations of novice teachers' professional identities were played out (Li, 2017). In this study, all participants were teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), working in classrooms characterised by largely fixed routines and highly structured pedagogical sequences, typically comprising introducing a lesson topic, explaining new vocabulary, assigning practice tasks, and evaluating student responses. Practically, it is within these *recurrent routines* that novice teachers attempted to construct their own professional voice by negotiating the tension between institutional expectations and their emerging pedagogical beliefs in real-time interaction. These attempts sometimes occur only in fleeting moments of departure from prescribed routines, for example, when they modify pre-established textbook tasks, manipulate interactional episodes to be more student-centred, introduce humour or personal anecdotes, or simply adjust the lesson pacing (Li, 2017; Seedhouse, 2004). At times, however, they remain unaware of how their everyday practices may reproduce the very patterns they hope to move beyond.

The chapter is organised in three parts. First, I introduce these conflicting expectations in English education in China by tracing their sociopolitical and historical contexts and identify the recurrent pedagogical activities that structured English lessons, with

particular attention to the interactional routines. Next, I examine how novice teachers engaged with these recurring interactional sequences to perform and negotiate their emerging teacher identities through classroom talk. Finally, drawing on insights from interviews and fieldnotes, the discussion section demonstrates how institutional expectations and personal decisions were enacted and mediated in naturally occurring classroom talk.

6.2 Contextualising Classroom Interaction for Micro Analysis

6.2.1 English Education Policies and Practices in China

Since the late 1970s, English has been viewed as an essential tool for strengthening intercultural communication, facilitating China's modernisation and integration into globalisation, and providing individuals with access to economic, social and educational capital (Hu, 2005; Wang, 2007). English education policies and practices have been closely connected to the nation's political and economic reforms as well as its social development.

In the late 1970s, the English language emphasised its political and ideological functions, being framed as a vehicle for 'International Class Struggle' (Hu, 2005, p. 8)—a Marxist concept that situates class conflict beyond national borders between the working class (proletariat) and capitalist class (bourgeoisie). English education policies at the time reflected a cautious approach that sought to reaffirm Chinese identity and guard against perceived ideological threats from the West (Fong, 2021). Consequently, English was conceived as a technical means for knowledge acquisition, detached from any associations with foreign nations, cultures, or traditions. The universal provision of English language education was promoted as an embodiment of the socialist values of education equality in the Mao era (Tsang, 2000).

However, with the consolidation of Deng Xiaoping's leadership in the early 1980s, Mao's

approach was abandoned and a utilitarian orientation towards educational modernisation came to the fore (Tsang, 2000). Deng prioritised efficiency over equity, favoured meritocracy and stratification within education, and criticised the quality of universal provision of English education 'deplorably low' (Hu, 2005, p. 8). This led to several curricular reforms. First, the Ministry of Education introduced a six-year English syllabus for key secondary schools and imposed curricula heavily oriented towards language training on foreign language schools. Second, the English subject was removed from the national primary curriculum, leading to its disappearance from rural schools and its retention only in urban areas staffed with qualified teachers. These policies embodied a pragmatic yet stratified approach: English was promoted as an essential skill for modernisation, but its access and quality were unevenly distributed across regions and school types. With the implementation of nine-year compulsory education and decentralisation reforms, economically developed provinces and municipalities gained greater autonomy in designing local syllabuses and textbooks, while rural areas continued to lag behind (Tsang, 2000). Consequently, English education increasingly became a marker of socioeconomic differentiation.

By the 2000s, as China further integrated into the global economy, English became increasing associated with national competitiveness and individual upward mobility. It was incorporated into the broader discourse of *suzhi* (quality), as discussed in the Introduction chapter, and came to serve as a key indicator for assessing individual's overall quality. Mastery of English was closely intertwined with the state's project of cultivating a high-quality population (*youzhi renkou*) capable of contributing to China's modernisation and its global competitiveness. At the same time, while China's engagement with the globalised world created momentum for the adoption of modern teaching methodologies, a stronger nationalist discourse called for a cautious adaptation of Western methods, which required that greater emphasis be paid on developing 'English learning with Chinese characteristics' (Fong, 2021, p. 18); that is, students learn

English not only to communicate with the world, but importantly also to educate the world about China and to reinforce one's sense of belonging to Chinese culture (Pérez-Milans, 2013). Since the early 2000s, English education reform has institutionally emphasised the localisation of Western teaching methodologies to align with Chinese educational contexts. Scholars and teachers in China have criticised communicative language teaching (CLT) for its incompatibility with local classroom realities (Li, 2023), while instead advocating for more grounded, bottom-up pedagogical approaches (Hu, 2007; Li, 2023). In the latest Curriculum for Junior Secondary Education (2022), English education is organised around four core competencies (*hexin suyang*) (Language Proficiency, Cultural Awareness, Thinking Skills, Learning Competence), positioning English learning not merely as an element of well-rounded education, but as a vehicle for fostering a 'modern national Chinese identity' (Fong, 2021, p. 34).

Adjustments in English education policies have profoundly shaped pedagogical approaches in Chinese classroom. Based on four months of ethnographic fieldwork, Pérez-Milans (2013) observed that English classes in China were 'traversed by traditional, communicative, and culturally contrastive principles' (p. 125). Despite the widespread adoption of CLT-oriented textbooks, technological resources, and cultural materials from both China and English-speaking countries, management of classroom interaction remained largely teacher-centred, reflecting the influence of traditional pedagogical practice. Zhu and Li (2020) argue that learning in Chinese classrooms is simultaneously collective and individual. It is deeply embedded in traditional pedagogical notion of performance, which encompasses 'a variety of presentation, repetition and memorisation' (p. 10), yet students are also positioned as individual learners responsible for developing their own methods to succeed in examinations. Although their analysis concerns classroom teaching in general, these characteristics are equally visible in English classrooms.

According to the *English Curriculum Standards for Junior Secondary Education* (2022) issued by China's Ministry of Education, English teaching in urban schools was expected to fulfil multiple and layered goals. Teachers of English were required to enhance students' linguistic knowledge, which was still closely tied to exam performance, while also developing students' thinking and learning abilities, including reading and writing skills and strategies for processing listening materials. They were further tasked with cultivating students' 'cultural awareness', a term that remains abstract and implicitly articulated across official documents. In practice, these goals are locally recontextualised within schools. In School A and B, English teachers were expected to use *only* English as the medium of instruction. Compared with other subjects, English lessons are positioned as spaces where teachers should actively engage students and foster oral communication. At the same time, these expectations coexist with the realities of large class sizes and strong behavioural norms. Teachers were required to maintain strict classroom control, and 'good teaching' is often equated with students following instructions with military-like precision: sitting properly, maintaining correct posture and appearance, and performing reading tasks in unison and synchrony (Hu, 2004; Kipnis, 2011). Informal or casual talk is generally perceived as inappropriate and potentially disruptive within this classroom culture (Hu, 2004).

These contrastive demands of English education, between global competitiveness and national Chinese identity, communicative and traditional forms of teaching, individual achievement and collective discipline, pose significant challenges for novice teachers of English (Li & De Costa, 2018; Liu & Fisher, 2006). Navigating the conventionalised practices and routines in English lessons requires constant negotiation. In this process, they perceive, reproduce, or resist the pedagogical templates prescribed by textbooks, curriculum standards, and institutional cultures. The chapter therefore contributes to ethnographic understandings of English classrooms in urban Chinese schools, while also engaging with broader questions about professional learning, teacher identity, and the

need for sustained support in teacher education.

6.2.2 Recurrent Pedagogical Activities in English Lessons

My analysis of novice teacher identity in classroom interaction focuses specifically on how novice teacher enacted *recurrent pedagogical activities* in Chinese EFL classrooms. Recurrent pedagogical activities were selected as the primary analytic focus for three interrelated reasons.

First, these activities were empirically pervasive across the dataset. Drawing on observations of 65 English lessons (57 regular lessons and 8 demonstration or competition lessons), four pedagogical activities were found to recur across nearly all classroom sessions, cutting across grade levels, lesson types (e.g., listening-and-speaking, reading-focused lessons; see Appendix D for *Organisation of Unit Sessions in English lessons*), and teachers. This pervasiveness renders them analytically comparable sites for examining novice teacher identity in Chinese EFL contexts. These four recurrent activities are: *Introducing the Topic*, *Teaching New Vocabulary and Phrases*, *Completing Tasks*, and *Making Up Conversations*.

Second, compared with more fine-grained analytic units such as conversation turns or utterances, which risk fragmenting and stripping it of its institutional context (Blommaert, 2005), and more macro-level units such as lesson types, which tend to smooth over real-time variations in participants' roles and positionings, pedagogical activities offer an appropriate unit of analysis. These activities are characterised by clear pedagogical goals, relatively stable participation frameworks, and recurrent, comparable sequential organisations (Pérez-Milans, 2013). Each recurrent activity thus constitutes an interactionally bounded frame within which teachers' moves to allocate turns and evaluate responses and students' actions to respond and provide feedback are predictably organised (Li, 2017). Table 6.1 summarises these recurrent pedagogical

activities and their micro-sequential organisation.

Table 6.1

Organisation of Recurrent Classroom Activities

Recurrent Activity	**Typical Sequential Steps**
Introducing the Topic	Teacher elicits students' interests by asking questions, often supported with audiovisual resources → Students respond to the questions → Teacher introduces today's topics
Teaching New Vocabulary and Phrases	Teacher writes new words or phrases on the whiteboard → Students copy them down → Teacher explains the meaning → Choral reading
Completing Tasks	Teacher assigns listening, reading and writing tasks and sets time → Student complete the tasks → Teachers review and correct answers
Making Up Conversations	Teacher assigns dialogue tasks → Students work in pairs or groups → Students perform the dialogue for the whole class

Third, these recurrent pedagogical activities were salient for the evaluation of teachers' professional expertise. During fieldwork, they were also repeatedly discussed, scrutinised, and assessed in weekly teacher group meetings, mentoring sessions, demonstration lessons, or teaching competition activities. Such discussions typically centred on how these recurrent pedagogical activities should be designed and enacted, for example, how topics were introduced and how students were guided through exercises. It can therefore be argued that, in these institutional settings, recurrent activities were treated as benchmarks against which teachers' professional competence was demonstrated and judged. Consequently, they functioned as key sites through which teachers came to be recognised as 'competent' within their institutions.

Its significance can be understood in light of previous interactional studies of language classrooms, which have shown that what counts as legitimate participation is closely tied to recurrent pedagogical activities and their sequential organisation (Heller & Martin-Jones, 2001). Pedagogical activities do not merely mediate instructional content; rather, they operate as institutionalised interactional frameworks through which participation roles, obligations, actions, goals, and evaluative criteria are organised and made recognisable to participants (Heller & Martin-Jones, 2001; Pérez-Milans, 2013). The same interactional practice, for example, error correction or student self-selection, may therefore be treated as appropriate in one pedagogical context but inappropriate in another (Seedhouse, 2004).

From this perspective, recurrent activities provide participants with routinised expectations about what constitutes legitimate or illegitimate conduct. As Seedhouse (2004) argues, participants orient to shared expectations concerning relevant actions, appropriate responses, and legitimate contributions within a given pedagogical context, and such that deviations from these expectations become noticeable, accountable, and potentially sanctionable. Legitimacy in the language classroom is therefore not defined by linguistic form alone, but by participants' alignment with the interactional norms associated with the activity. Similarly, Pérez-Milans (2013) demonstrates that classroom participation is evaluated in relation to activity-specific expectations governing timing, relevance, and stance. In this sense, these studies suggest that recurrent pedagogical activities operate as normative frames linking micro-level interactional conduct to broader institutional definitions of what it means to participate 'properly' in classroom life.

This salience was also reflected in novice teachers' own remarks. When I asked to observe their lessons, novice teachers often expressed hesitation about certain lesson types, particularly *xitike* (unit exercise lessons), which they described as involving "little

interaction to witness" and therefore "not worth observing". By contrast, they attached particular importance to lessons organised around recurrent activities, where classroom interaction was more visibly structured and publicly displayed. This emic description underscored the relevance of recurrent activities as sites for examining identity negotiation and professional legitimacy.

It is precisely because these activities were treated simultaneously as routine classroom procedures, institutional showcases of teacher expertise, and participants' own sense of research-worthy contexts that they provide a productive site for micro-level analysis. Within these routinised sequences, teachers were nonetheless required to respond and provide feedback moment-by-moment—whether by managing unexpected silences from students or responding to unanticipated answers. It was through such real-time interactions that teacher identities were revealed and negotiated. Moments of difficulty or misalignment did not necessarily signal a lack of expertise; rather, they illuminated how novice teachers grappled with displaying what 'good teaching' meant in classroom teaching. In this sense, these activities can also be understood as key sites of identity negotiation.

Having mapped out the recurrent pedagogical activities and their typical sequential organisations, I now use them as the analytic foundation for examining how novice teachers negotiated their identities through the moment-by-moment interactional work of classroom teaching. Later in this chapter, I return to *xitike* (unit exercise lessons) to examine how its marginality in novice teachers' framing further illuminates these dynamics.

6.3 Identities in Classroom Interaction

To examine how novice teachers managed the interactional work in English classroom, I draw on lessons taught by Yu, Wen, and Hong to Level 7 and 8 students (aged 13–14).

My analysis approaches their classroom practices through four recurrent pedagogical activities: Introducing the Topic, Explaining Vocabulary and Phrases, Completing Tasks, and Making Up Conversations. For each activity, I juxtapose two cases from different teachers to highlight the contrasting ways in how they managed the task and enacted their professional identities. The analysis combines close observation of their classroom practices with insights from follow-up interviews, providing evidence for how identities were performed in real time and talked through in retrospect.

6.3.1 Introducing the Topic

The introduction of the topic was positioned at the start of a session to capture attention and establish a thematic focus. Teachers often asked questions, employed multimedia resources, or initiated brief exchanges with students in this activity. The two cases drawn from lessons taught by Yu and Wen illustrate how novice teachers sought to balance authority and engagement, and how their teacher identities were shaped by the tensions between communicative goals and teacher-centred routines. In the first case, Yu opened her lesson with two warm-up questions, 'What did you have for breakfast today?' and 'Do you like to eat out or eat at home?'

Extract 6.1 'my mum isn't good at cooking'

1 Yu: As we can see today ((with a PPT showing a picture of food))/ We are going to talk about something very <u>In</u>teresting. So first of all. I'd like to ask you a question.
2 S1: ((unintelligible))
3 Yu: <u>Yes</u> (.) you said you were hungry. So ((points to Student 1)) so::
4 ((S1 stands up))
5 Yu: First of all XXX ((S1's name)) what did you have for breakfast today?
6 S1: Only milk.
7 Yu: Only milk? How poor you! And (0.5) How about XXX ((S2's name)) what did you have for breakfast today?
8 S2: First I have an egg (.) I have a bread=
9 Yu: =a bread? Or (.) I HAVE BREAD.

10 S2: Emm (.) And I have a cup of milk

11 Yu: Oh you have milk. You had a lot of food. Good! Both of you have milk. So I have another question for you. Do you like to eat out or eat at home?

12 Ss: EAT OUT! EAT OUT!

13 Yu: How? Why? ((points to S3)) Let's see.

14 S3: ((stands up)) Because my mom and dad can't make delicious food.

15 Yu: Haha this is one reason. How about you XXX ((points to S4))?

16 S4: ((stands up)) I like to eat at home (.) Because my dad can cook (.) can cook very well. And I'm very lazy and don't want to go out to eat.

17 Yu: Thank you so much. Good to hear that you like to eat at home. Miss. Yu likes to eat out because °my mum isn't good at cooking° ((Yu cupped her hand to her mouth)).

18 Ss: hahaha

It is evident that Yu played a dominant role in allocating turns. In line 5, Yu oriented to Student 1's low-volume self-selection in line 2 (not fully audible on the recording) by selecting him to answer. In line 13, following the choral response in line 12 ('EAT OUT'), she singled out an individual to elaborate, shifting the interaction from collective to individual talk. In line 7 and 15, she used name-calling, gestures, and embodied cues such as gaze and laughter, to manage student participation, while students displayed compliance by standing up before responding.

In her back-and-forth exchanges with students, once students produced their answers, Yu provided immediate feedback, either through recasts or positive feedback. In lines 8 to 10, before Student 2 completed his answer, Yu quickly stepped in and provided the corrected form ('I HAVE BREAD'), thereby momentarily halting the student's ongoing production (line 10, 'Emm'). At the same time, she framed her feedback through positive evaluation ('Good') or affiliative stances ('How poor you!'). At the end of the sequence, she also produced self-disclosure in her turn (line 17, delivered in the manner of secret-telling), which elicited laughter from her students in line 18.

These sequences illustrate how Yu accomplished the activity of introducing the topic, by enacting her authority through controlling turns (e.g., turn allocation and interruption), correcting language forms, and offering evaluative comments, while also downplaying this authority through moments of humour and affiliative feedback.

In contrast to Yu's fast-paced and concise approach, Wen oriented students to the lesson's theme by drawing on multimedia resources, yet the interaction unfolded in a notably different way from Yu's case.

Extract 6.2 'What does this song remind you of?'

1Wen: So (.) at first, I want to ask you. Are you a music lover?
2Ss: Ye=s
3Wen: =Some of you say yes. Now, let's test whether you can tell the music kind ((playing the music track)). What kind of it?
4Ss: °((unintelligible))°
5Wen: Yes, what kind of it? Well (.) I heard some of you have told me the answer (.) and (.) Actually. Yes. So. Some of you know it's country music, right? Did you (.) Have you heard this song before?
6Ss: No=
7Wen: =No? Okay. Now let me share a video with you.
8 ((video plays for about 30 seconds))
9Wen: Okay (.) this is the video. Do you know who is he? Did you see his name?
10 ((Students shake heads))
11Wen: No? You didn't notice? Now let's look at the lyrics here. What does this song remind you of? Remember (.) what is re-min-d ((circles the word *remind* on PPT)) remind in English. What is remind? (0.8) means (0.2) <something makes you think of>. Okay. >Follow me<. Remind. Remind=
12Ss: =Remind. Remind.
13Wen: Remind. remind. So, what does this song remind you of?
14 ((silence, 4 seconds))
15Wen: Okey (.) Look at this first line. *Looking back on the memory of*. If we talk about memory we are talking about what? (1.8) If we talk about memory. We are talking about (2.5) what (3.2) the past (.) right? We are talking (0.8) the (1.2) the old days. How about the second line (1.5) If we talk about some (.) if we are

beneath the stars, we can enjoy what (2.0) We enjoy what (4.8) Think (1.5) <When you are under the stars>, what do you feel?

16S1: Relaxed

17Wen: Relaxed. Why are you relaxed? We are enjoying <the> (.) what.

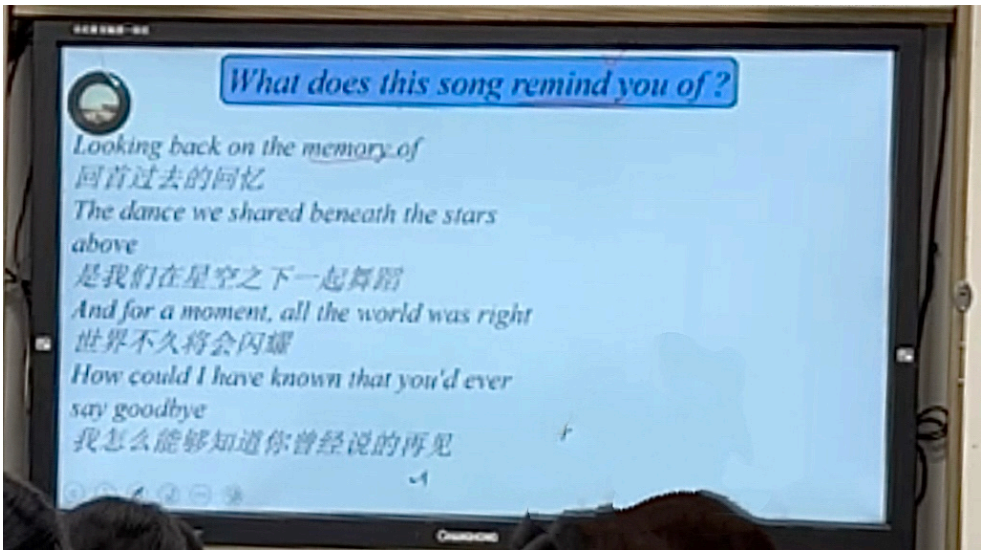
18Ss: °Enjoy ourselves=°

19Wen: =Enjoy ourselves and enjoy the <BEAUTY of NATURE>. Actually, these two are the things we can usually see in country music.

Wen's activity of introducing the topic of 'country music' illustrates how she opened the lesson through visual and audio resources, and how she attempted to balance the use of multimodal resources by eliciting student responses, explaining new words, and providing immediate responses. Below is the PowerPoint slide she was working with (Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1

Design of Wen's PowerPoint Slide



The activity was structured around three warm-up questions intended to elicit student responses before summarising the key features of country music, the lesson theme. The first question, 'Are you a music lover', was a polar question designed to encourage participation. Although students responded with 'yes' in line 2, Wen immediately

overlapped their response and moved on (line 3). The second cluster of questions related to the video and audio clips. Wen did not preface the video with any listening-focused tasks, leaving students with little to contribute beyond shaking their heads (line 10). In response to this silence, she did not pursue further student contributions (e.g., by replaying the video or providing prompts), but moved directly to the next stage of exploring the lyrics.

The third question, as shown in Figure 6.1—'What does this song remind you of' (lines 11–13)—was designed to elicit interpretation. Anticipating difficulty, Wen shifted to introducing a new word, *remind*. She explained its meaning, underlined it on the PPT, and led students in choral repetition (lines 11–13). Despite these efforts, when she re-asked the question in line 13, silence persisted. Wen then reformulated the task by working through the lyrics line-by-line, inserting prompts and long pauses to encourage contributions (line 15). Yet student responses remained minimal, often taking the form of a single-word answer ('Relaxed') or low-volume phrases ('Enjoy ourselves'). Ultimately, Wen brought the topic introduction to a closure with a teacher-delivered summary, completing the task not through constructive classroom interaction but through her own talk.

Compared to Yu's approach, Wen struggled to elicit student responses despite multiple prompts and lengthy explanation. Yet the follow-up interview further revealed a disjuncture between the interactional outcomes of Wen's lesson and her own retrospective interpretation. She described her use of video clip as a 'highlight' of this session, noting that it had been adapted from pre-prepared materials shared by her teaching group:

Extract 6.3 'I tried to get them to sense the music'

This unit is about music, so of course it requires a lot of sensory, cultural experience,

and multimedia is meant to serve that purpose. I started with the video, tried to get them to sense the music, then to analyse the lyrics and to learn new words. In this way I could lead them into reading the text.

(Follow up interview 4_School B_Wen).

This interpretation shows that she assessed the quality of the lesson in terms of what she had done, while overlooking how students responded and how the interaction actually unfolded. When asked about the evident silence in the classroom, she attributed it not to her pedagogical strategies but to external factors such as students' "idol baggage" (face concerns), "exam fatigue", and "the general stage of adolescence". In doing so, she positioned herself as a teacher who fulfilled professional expectations, while interactional cues that appeared to indicate student disengagement remained underexamined.

6.3.2 Teaching New Vocabulary and Phrases

Another recurrent classroom activity was explaining new words and phrases, which often appeared at multiple points throughout an English lesson. This activity involved teachers writing it on the whiteboard or projecting lesson points on the PPT, students copying them down, providing definitions or translations, and leading students in choral repetition. The following extract illustrates how Hong carried out this activity when explaining new phrases related to asking for directions in English.

Extract 6.4 'How do we ask for directions'

1Hong: Okey. Let's have a look at the listening material. Let's listen and repeat.

2 ((Audio recording plays: '*Section A, Activity1B. Conversation 1*'. Hong raises her hand towards the sentence on the PPT.))

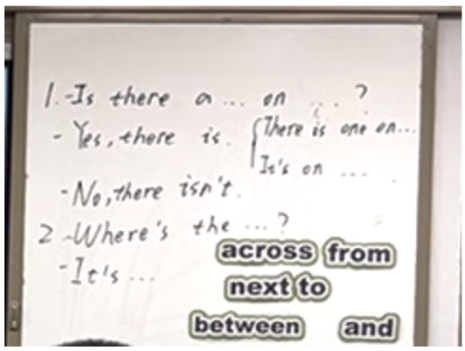
3Ss: ((Choral repetition)) *Conversation 1. Is there a restaurant in Bridge Street? Yes, there is. Conversation 2. Is there a post office near here? Yes, there is one on Long Street. Conversation 3. Is there a hospital on Centre Street? No, there isn't.*

4Hong: Wow, you are doing very great. Now let's have a look (.)
5 How do we ask for directions (0.5) How can we ask for it?
6Ss: ((unintelligible))
7Hong: We use the sentence like < 'is there a restaurant on where'> Yes, this is our first sentence.
8 ((Hong turns to write on the whiteboard; students write down notes)) (8.0)
9 'Is there a blabla on blabla' (0.5) And pay attention (.)
10 In the answer, don't forget the article here. We use 'a' here. And look (0.8), we use a pronoun, 'one', here. What is this 'one' for? Here one means=
11S1: =Post office
12Hong: Yes, 'one' means one post office. Okey. When you want to answer it and you don't want to use the whole phrase, you can use 'one' to replace it.
13 And question two. How do we give directions? (2.0) How do we give or answer directions?
14Ss: °Yes/No°
15Hong: Yes, just use 'Yes, there is' or 'Sorry, no, there isn't'.
16 ((turns back to write on whiteboard; students write down notes)) (12.00).
17 Now read after me. 'Is there a post office near here?'
18Ss: Is there a post office near here?
19Hong: Yes, there is.
20Ss: Yes, there is.
21Hong: No, there isn't.
22Ss: No, there isn't.

Figure 6.2 shows what Hong wrote on the whiteboard while explaining the phrases, after the class had engaged in choral repetition of the listening material in lines 17-22.

Figure 6.2

Hong's Writing on the Whiteboard



At the beginning of this activity, Hong appeared to intend for students to re-listen to the audio material in order to draw their attention to the target phrases (Figure 6.2). However, her verbal instruction was misaligned with her gesture in line 2, which indicated that students should read aloud collectively and in synchrony, along with the audio material. But students did not seem to be confused, which might signal this was a ritualised activity, that the seconding listening of texts always turned into a choral repetition activity. After the collective reading in line 3, she directed students to look closely at the phrases related to asking for directions. After few students' responses, she provided the sample structure herself: 'Is there a … on …', announcing, 'This is our first sentence' (line 7). As she wrote it on the board, and without any prompting, students began taking notes simultaneously with her, indicating how routinised this sequence between teacher explanation and student copying had become.

In lines 9–12, she further explained how to answer questions about directions, focusing particularly on the use of the pronoun 'one' to avoid repetition. This grammar explanation elicited a single student response. In line 13, she proceeded to introduce the second question type, 'how to give directions' despite having just provided explanations related to answering direction questions. As with the first question type, she explained the structure, wrote it on the whiteboard, and students copied it down. She then

concluded the sequence by having the class read both sentences aloud collectively.

This tightly scripted cycle—moving from teacher writing to students copying down, to teacher explanation, and then to choral reading—constituted the routine through which new phrases were introduced and practiced in classroom teaching. Notably, Hong maintained an English-only medium throughout, even when referring to grammatical terms such as *article* and *pronoun*, which many teachers would typically explain in Chinese. In the follow-up interview, she explained that this choice aligned with the institutional expectations for English-medium pedagogy and represented, in her view, an effort to improve her professional competence.

The next extract comes from Yu's class, in which she guided students in examining a PowerPoint image depicting a Chinese restaurant scene.

Extract 6.5 'How did you know it's a Chinese restaurant?'

1Yu: Tell me. Where are these people?
2Ss: Restaurants.
3Yu: Yes. What kind of restaurant?
4Ss: Chinese restaurant.
5Yu: How did you know it's a Chinese restaurant?
6S1: 灯笼, 灯笼 [Lantern, Lantern]
7S2: Red, Red
8Yu: Hhh ((points to the lanterns)) did you see this? We call them red lanterns. ↑ Lantern. ↓Lantern.
9Ss: ↑ Lantern. ↓Lantern.
10Yu: We only see lanterns during Spring Festival. Right? Follow me. ↑ Lantern, ↓lantern.
11Ss: ↑ Lantern. ↓Lantern.
12Yu: Ok. So only the lanterns? What's on the table?
13Ss: 筷子
14Yu: Yes. We call them chopsticks. ↑ Chop. ↓Chop.
15Ss: ↑ Chop. ↓Chop.

16Yu: ↑ Sticks. ↓Sticks.

17Ss: ↑ Sticks. ↓Sticks.

18Yu: ↑ Chopsticks. ↓Chopsticks.

19Ss: ↑ Chopsticks. ↓Chopsticks.

20Yu: So this one. This woman is wearing a [旗袍((qipao))=

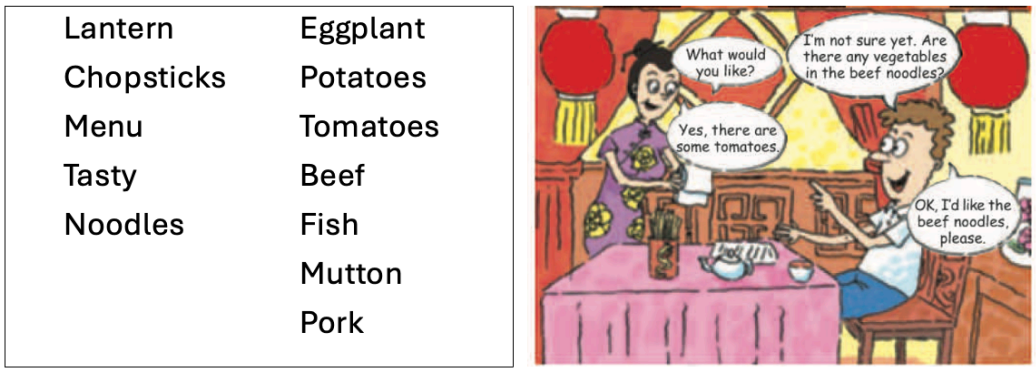
21Ss: [旗袍((qipao))

22Yu: =or, traditional Chinese cloth. Good. Let's move on to the listening material.

In extract 6.5, Yu guided students to examine a picture of a Chinese restaurant as a way of introducing new vocabulary. Figure 6.3 shows the whiteboard design and slide used by Yu for illustration.

Figure 6.3

Yu's Whiteboard and PowerPoint Design



Yu used a picture in the textbook to elicit student engagement while teaching new words. Through a series of simple, straightforward questions (lines 1–5), she directed students' attention from the picture itself to the vocabulary items associated with the setting. Although students did not know the English word 'lantern', they drew on available resources to describe the object in the picture, for example, through using Chinese (i.e., 灯笼), or referring to the colour of it (i.e., red). Yu did not criticise these responses;

instead, she responded with laughter, easing the interactional pressure and treating these answers as legitimate before supplying the target word 'lantern'. Without any explicit instruction, the class moved smoothly into choral repetition. Yu repeated 'lantern' twice with rising (↑) and falling (↓) intonation, briefly explained it, and moved into another choral reading (lines 10–11).

Following the same sequence, she introduced the word 'chopsticks' in lines 12–14. Recognising that its pronunciation might pose challenges and potentially disrupt the rhythm of collective chanting, she broke the word into two syllables (*chop* and *sticks*) and led students through rhythmic repetition before recombining them into the intended word. This pattern highlights Yu's emphasis on oral rhythm and synchrony as tools in teaching vocabulary. By reading aloud the new words with marked upward and downward intonation, or by decomposing them by syllable, Yu sustained student participation and maintained classroom management.

Comparing to Hong's strong orientation to institutional expectations, including adhering to ritualised routines, offering detailed grammatical explanations, and using English throughout, Yu prioritised students' comprehension and managed the activity through rhythmic synchrony. Despite these divergences, both cases reflect how teachers interpret and respond to multiple demands in the classroom, adopting different instructional methods that produce different interactional effects.

6.3.3 Completing Tasks

During task assignment activities, teachers typically allocated exercises from the textbook, specified a set amount of time for completion, and then reviewed the answers together in class. In what follows, I examine how novice teachers organised this cycle of assignment, completion, and review.

Extract 6.6 'You still didn't give the right answer'

1Yu： Look at exercise 2b. Let's listen and fill in the blanks.
2 ((Audio recording plays around 27 seconds, Yu moved around the classroom))
3Yu: Okay. One more time? (3.0)
4Ss: No=
5Yu: =Most of you know how to use the tips (.) how to use a listening skill. Only write down the first or first two letters. But XX ((S1's name)) you did not use that. Okay (.) One more time.
6 ((Audio recording plays again))
7Yu: Okay. Boys (.) I would like a pair of you. ((students raise hands)) XX ((S2's name)), your group.
8S2: ((stands up with S3)) I'd like a large bowl of noodles.
9S3: I'd like chicken, potato and cabbage noodles.
10Yu: Ok. What is your group number? Seven (.) okay.
11 ((She adds a point for Group Seven on the score chart displayed on the whiteboard)))
12 Sit down.
13 ((S2 and S3 sit down))
14Yu: XX ((S4's name)). I'd like chicken, potato and cabbage noodles means:
15S4: I'd like chicken noodles with cabbage and potato.
16Yu: ((to the class)) Cabbages and potatoes. ((to S4 who still stands up)) 你看我第二次抽你，你依然没反应过来. ((in Sichuan dialect: 'See, I've asked you a second time, and you still didn't respond correctly.'))

This extract highlights how Yu's identity-in-talk was constituted through the interplay of her roles as assessor, motivator, and regulator. During the listening activity, Yu walked around the classroom and monitored whether students were applying the listening strategy she had previously taught (line 2). When she asked if the recording should be replayed, some students responded 'no' (line 4), suggesting confidence that they had already arrived at the correct answers. Nevertheless, Yu reported her own observation to the class and justified replaying the recording by pointing out the one student had failed to use the prescribed strategy (line 5). In doing so, she enacted the stance of a stern assessor who emphasised not simply the correctness of answers but the process of 'using

the skill'.

After the second listening, Yu shifted the activity into a group-based competition (line 7). She first divided the class into boys' and girls' groups, and second, as was the same across her lessons, awarded points to groups whose answers were correct and then recorded the scores on the left side of the whiteboard (lines 7–13). Students self-selected to respond to the teacher's questions, and their answer were linked to their group's scores. In Yu's view, the teacher was the motivator in the classroom, and this score system functioned as a motivational device to prompt active participation and sustain students' attention during the task.

The final part of the sequence focused on the language form. When she asked students 'I'd like chicken, potato and cabbage noodles means', she was invoking content from the previous lesson and prompting students to reformulate the sentence as 'chicken noodles with potatoes and cabbages'. The ungrammatical response (line 15) led her to recast the target words with an emphatic stress on the inflectional morphemes (i.e., *-ges* and *-toes*), and notably, to switch to the Sichuan dialect to deliver a reprimand (line 16). This code-switching marked a break from the sequenced pedagogical routine, where she reframed the mistake as a lapse of attentiveness and as squandering the 'second chance' she had offered. Drawing on a locally recognisable disciplinary voice, she intensified the reprimand and indexed her authority not only as a language teacher but also as a regulator of engagement. In the below extract, Wen's management of the reading task illustrates a different approach from Yu's.

Extract 6.7 'Let's scan the reading material'

1Wen: After skimming, do you remember the second strategy we've learnt? It's called <scanning>. And we scan <u>for</u>:: (0.2) specific information, or what we called details. So now, let's <u>scan</u> the first paragraph. Let's listen, read, and fill in the answers. Okay?

2 ((Audio recording plays around 37 seconds))

3Wen: (5.0) Okay. XX ((Student1's name)), the first one.

4S1: ((stands up)) When Sarah was a teenager, she used to fight over everything with her family.

5Wen: Okay very good. Sit down please. Here we have 'fight over'. Can you tell me in English. What means 'fight over'?

6Ss: ((students murmur))

7Wen: (2.0) fight (1.2) against somebody <u>for</u> something. If you fight over something means you have a fight <u>about</u> something. Okay. And we use ((writing on the whiteboard)) fight over something

8Ss: =with somebody.

9Wen: =<u>with</u> somebody. And actually. 'Fight' is irregular. Remember? The past tense of fight is (1.2) fought. It is an A-B-B verb. Read after me. Fight, fought, fought.

10Ss: Fight, fought, fought.

11wen: Fight, fought, fought.

12Ss: Fight, fought, fought.

At the outset, she explicitly framed the activity around the reading strategies of skimming and scanning, positioning them as key skills for the task at hand (line 1). Yet, the activity then expanded to include multiple demands on students: listening, reading aloud, and filling in answers (line 1).

Compared to Yu's strategy to stimulate participation through the score system, Wen relied on direct nomination: she selected a student to present the first answer (line 3). Notably, as with Yu's case, nominated students were expected to stand up first before answering and remain standing until formally permitted by the teacher to sit down (lines 3–5; cf. line 10 in Extract 6.8). If students gave an incorrect answer, the teacher may delay the order and have students remain standing for a while before being allowed to sit down.

When Wen asked, 'what means fight over' (line 5), her question, much like Yu's earlier rephrasing task (Extract 5, line 16), was not oriented towards the definitions or meanings

of words but towards eliciting alternative phrasal structures students had previously learned, which could later serve as examinable content (lines 5–9). This mechanical invoking was faced with a sign of uncertainty, as students murmured in line 6. After that, she extended the explanation, writing on the whiteboard and leading the class in choral repetition of the word 'fight' (lines 9–12). In this way, the focus of the reading task was shifted from learning and practicing reading strategies to detailed attention to lexical and grammatical items.

In this activity, both Wen and Yu placed strong emphasis on the skills required to complete the tasks, and the application of previously learned knowledge. Yu reinforced the skill by scorning a student and replaying the listening material, whereas Wen did not guide students back to review or apply them. Instead, Wen shifted to an expansive explanation of items that frequently appear in exams, moving away from the immediate task at hand.

6.3.4 Making Up Conversations

In the activity of making up conversations, students were usually asked to work in pairs or small groups to prepare short dialogues, which were then performed for the whole class and commented by the teacher. I explore how the novice teachers structured and evaluated these practices. In the below extract, Yu invited students to make up a conversation in pairs by using the key points they just learnt, which were projected on the slide to guide their preparation

Extract 6.8 'Any other mistakes?'

1Yu: XXX You and your partner. Come here
2 ((Student 1 and 2 move to the front stage))
3S1: Excuse me. Can I help you?
4S2: Yes, please. Are there any vegetable and beef noodles?
5S1: Yes, there are tomatoes and cabbage.

6S2: Okay. I'd like beef and tomato noodles.
7S1: emm. Well. What size would you like?
8S2: em I'd like a medium size bowl of noodles.
9S1: Okay. You will emm wait (0.3) thirteen minutes.
10S2: haha. Thank you. ((S1 and S2 move back to their seats))
11S3: Mistakes=
12Yu: =Okay. Here. You can get two points. Because you talk about something we have learnt. Thank you very much. Okay Group three, two points. Okay here. Mistakes? ((Ss raise hands)) XX ((S3's name))
13S3: 那个，当时好像是 XX ((S1's name))说的 there are cabbage 后面没有加 s. ((Um, I think it was XX who said, 'there are cabbage,' but didn't add the 's' at the end.))
14Yu: Okay. Still get one point for you. Group eight. So, any other mistakes?
15S4: 应该是((It should be)) wait <u>for</u>.
16Yu: Yes. It's wait for. And you don't have to say, 'you'll wait', you say 'please wait for thirteen minutes'. And if you want to pay, you can say, 'here is the money', 'here you are'. Alright?

In Extract 6.8, Yu invited two students to the front of the class to perform a dialogue using recently introduced expressions projected on the slide. In such structured exercises, students were expected to use the target expressions to make up a dialogue; however, S1 and S2 not only adhered to these expressions but also expanded them into a real-life exchange in a context of placing order in a restaurant, marked by hesitation (lines 7–9) and laughter (line 10). Yu quickly responded by praising their improvisation and awarding points to the group (line 12).

Almost immediately, however, she shifted from commending to correcting errors (lines 11–12). As soon as Yu opened the floor to the class by asking 'Mistakes?' (line 12), many students already raised their hands, indicating this was a routinised classroom practice. Students actively participated, identifying issues such as missing plural morphemes ('cabbages', line 13) and prepositions ('wait for', line 15). Yu accepted these contributions and further extended the corrections by providing alternative expressions for the context,

such as 'please wait for thirteen minutes' and 'here is the money' (line 16). This correction sequence illustrated how classroom authority was momentarily distributed, as students were invited to adopt the role of evaluator, while Yu ultimately reclaimed authority by refining their responses for more natural conversations.

Extract 6.9 'When do you eat breakfast?'

1 Hong: Now let's talk about routines with your partners. You have one minute and a half. Go.
2 ((Hong sets a timer of 1min and 30sec))
3 Hong: Okay. XX ((S1's name))
4 S1: ((stands up with his partner)) Students usually do homework at quarter to three in the afternoon. How about you?
5 S2: Well. I do. I do homework at half past seven. And when do you eat breakfast?
6 Hong: ((to Ss)) Keep quiet, okay?
7 S1: I usually eat breakfast at seven o'clock in the morning. When do you go to bed?
8 S2: I go to bed uh go to bed (.) a quarter to eleven in the evening.
9 Hong: At quarter. Question! When does XX ((S1's name)) eat breakfast?
10 S3: At seven.
11 Hong: At seven? ((to S1)) Yes or no?
12 S1: Yes.
13 Hong: Great! Next one? XX ((Student 4' name))
14 S4: ((stands up with his partner)) Students usually get up at half past six=
15 Hong: =shhhh ((posting a gesture))
16 S4: How about you?
17 S5: Well, I always get up at seven o'clock.
18 Hong: Sit down please. XX ((student 5's name)) did a very good job, because he used the word, 'always'. Remember the frequency? What other words of frequency do you remember? ((writing on the interactive screen)) Always=
19 Ss: ((unintelligible, low voice))
20 Hong: =Usually, often, sometimes, seldom, hardly ever, and last one, never.

Unlike Yu's classroom where authority was distributed, Hong's practices in Extract 6.9 exposed the fragility of classroom control. She launched a pair-work activity on daily

routines and set a strict time limit, signalling control and order. However, as pairs performed, other students continued chatting, prompting Hong to intervene first with a verbal command ('keep quiet') and later with a 'shhh' gesture (line 15). In line 9, she sought to transform the pair performance into a collective comprehension check, a move similar to Yu's practice (cf., line 12 in Extract 6.9). Yet, for Hong this questioning device functioned less as a means of co-construction than as a tool of regulation and an attempt to secure attentiveness. The continued off-task talk suggested that it was not fully effective as a strategy of classroom management.

Lines 18–20 illustrate a further shift whereby Hong redirected the pair-work dialogue towards vocabulary instruction. While Yu tended to give brief evaluations, Hong expanded the moment into a mini lesson on adverbs of frequency, writing on the interactive screen and eliciting responses from the class. In doing this, Hong reclaimed interactional control, resuming her role as the primary speaker.

6.3.5 Summary of Micro-analysis

Across the four recurrent activities, the extracts illustrate how the three novice teachers worked within institutionalised routines, made immediate pedagogical decisions, and navigated multiple demands while shifting and negotiating their roles and identities.

In the *Introducing the Topic* activity, both Yu and Wen followed the expected procedural structure: capturing student interest through initial questions or stimuli, eliciting student responses, and then moving towards the announcement of the lesson theme. However, their interactional practices diverged significantly. Yu realised the procedure through tight control of turn-taking, concise question-answer exchanges, and occasional humour, which generated a steady flow of student responses and allowed her to keep the activity moving smoothly. Wen, by contrast, enacted the same procedure through multimodal presentation and a series of prompts, yet the interaction ultimately became

teacher-led, as student participation remained minimal. The follow-up interview with Wen further highlighted this gap: when assessing the activity, Wen emphasised what she herself had done, particularly those contributing to the innovative aspect of lesson such as multimedia resources, rather than focusing on how students had responded.

The next two extracts illustrate how ritualised routines shaped the activity of *Teaching New Vocabulary and Phrases*, while also revealing notable differences in the teachers' practices, particularly in relation to notetaking and the use of English as the medium of instruction. Yu neither wrote the words on the board nor asked students to do so, prioritising the rhythm, synchrony, and pace of her lesson. In contrast, in Hong's classroom, the teacher's writing immediately triggered students to write at the same time, indicating how coordinated that routine had become. Additionally, Yu allowed both Chinese and English in classroom interaction, acknowledging students' available linguistic resources, whereas Hong maintained an English-only mode even when explaining grammar terminology. Despite these differences, both teachers relied heavily on choral repetition as the central mechanism for introducing and practising new vocabulary and phrases, underscoring how deeply institutionalised such collective routines were in shaping novice teachers' understanding of what counted as 'effective teaching'.

In the *Completing Task* activity, both teachers placed strong emphasis on task-completion skills and on key language points from the text, which had been taught previously and were likely to appear in exams. However, Yu embedded additional elements into the task cycle by reinforcing the skill, introducing a score system to motivate participation, and issuing reprimands when she deemed them necessary. Wen, by contrast, delivered a focused explanation of reading skills but did not guide students through a review of the task, but instead chose to extend the lesson towards discussing items frequently tested in examinations.

In the activity of *Making Up Conversations*, both teachers faced challenges in managing student behaviour, but they responded in markedly different ways. Yu drew on her score system to praise and to discipline: when students deviated from the expected expressions, she celebrated their improvisation yet framed their inaccurate language use as mistakes for the class to identify. In doing so, she redistributed evaluative authority to students before ultimately reclaiming it through her own closing feedback. Hong, by contrast, appeared to struggle with maintaining classroom control. Despite giving explicit instructions and warnings, and even attempting to check whether other students were listening to their peers' dialogues, the class remained difficult to manage. She eventually had to reclaim her authority by shifting from pair-work conversations to teacher-led explanations of key language points, where her role as the evaluator became reasserted.

Overall, these extracts show that classroom interaction was not merely the mechanical execution of ritualised routines but a site where novice teachers grappled with competing institutional goals and dealt with real-time contingencies. Although the activities followed similar ritualised routines, teachers' practices diverged in pacing, classroom management, degrees of control, opportunities for student contribution, and motivational tools. These differences reflected their own interpretation of what counted as 'good teaching' under their current conditions, and the affordances and limitations of their professional vision. In Wen's case, for instance, the misalignment between her retrospective reflections and her real-time practice revealed how she reproduced pedagogical patterns she aimed to move beyond. Yu, in contrast, enacted a more multifaceted professional identity, balancing engagement with control through a range of strategies. For both Wen and Hong, the tension between communicative aspirations and the need to maintain order often resulted in a return to vocabulary-driven instruction.

In the next section, I build on these insights and combine interview data to discuss how these moment-to-moment classroom interaction can be embedded within broader patterns in education, English teacher education in particular, and what they reveal about novice teachers' learning, agency, and professional development in urban Chinese schools.

6.4 Discussion

This chapter has not sought to evaluate teacher competence, compare pedagogical knowledge, or rank differences among the three teachers. Although it is important to acknowledge that Yu may have demonstrated comparatively more sophisticated expertise—particularly in eliciting student engagement and managing classroom interaction across the four activities—while Wen and Hong appeared to display less full-fledged professional skills, such distinctions are not the analytical focus here. Rather, the chapter seeks to examine the shared practices evident across their experiences, the tensions that emerged, and the strategies individual teachers mobilised in responding to these tensions and their consequences. By foregrounding these common tensions and situated responses, the three cases are positioned as a lens through which broader issues in Chinese education and teacher education can be more clearly understood.

As the extracts demonstrate, novice teachers drew on a range of strategies to manage the class and achieve the multiple goals of English lessons. These goals included developing students' linguistic knowledge, fostering thinking abilities and cultural awareness, and maintaining classroom order. Many of these practices were so routinised in Chinese classrooms that teachers themselves were not always fully aware of them. This discussion section unfolds in four parts: choral repetition, turn-taking management, score system, and also *xitike* lessons.

6.4.1 Choral Repetition

One routinised practice is choral repetition. Characterised by stylised intonation patterns (e.g., lines 8–19 in Extract 6.5) and prescribed turn allocations (i.e., students chorally repeat after the teacher), choral repetition served both pedagogical and regulatory purposes. Yu (interview_4) noted that, "choral reading helped students become familiar with and review what they have learned before", but her interview also revealed its disciplinary dimension:

Extract 6.10 'Ideally, we should do it once or twice'

> Yu: … it helps them to concentrate, especially when they seem unfocused or low in energy. Because when the class reads well together, I give them extra points…I still prefer that every day, no matter whether it's a listening and speaking lesson or a reading lesson, there should be a choral reading activity. Ideally, we should do it once or twice–if time allows, even two or three times.
>
> (Interview 4_School A_Yu)

The use of collective performance as a basis for rewarding or punishing underscores its role in managing student behaviour. Wen, who always allocated two minutes of choral reading at the start of every lesson, described it as "a way to help students regain focus and settle down quickly" (Wen_Interview 4). Similarly, Hong noted that when the choral reading "was not in sync… and this lack of uniformity is a sign of students' poor concentration" (Hong_Interview 3). When novice teachers sensed waning attention or declining participation, they often turned to choral repetition as a safe, routinised mechanism for restoring order (e.g., Extract 2 for Wen; Extracts 3 & 6 for Hong).

Crucially, this was a classroom practice so pervasive and routinised that it required almost no elaboration from the teacher: with only a brief prompt or model, students responded immediately and in unison, and this tight coordination between teacher

and students generated an atmosphere of collective intensity. It is precisely this synchronised flow that teachers were sometimes reluctant to interrupt, for example, in Yu's extract 4, where she temporarily opted not to follow the routine practice of having students write down new vocabulary so as not to disrupt the rhythm of the classroom activity. Unsurprisingly, choral repetition was also prominent in demonstration lessons and teaching competitions, where it was seen as a marker of 'effective teaching'.

Research on Chinese classroom interaction, however, has questioned the pedagogical effectiveness of choral repetition. Wong and Barcroft's (2020) experimental study shows that choral repetition does not significantly improve vocabulary learning outcomes. Other studies highlight that the practice of choral reading merges pedagogical objectives with a broader set of moral and attitudinal values, including 'motivation, cooperation, patriotism, internationalism, and cultural forms of knowledge emphasising cross-cultural awareness' (Pérez-Milans, 2013, p. 156). These studies argue that this practice has become ideologically linked to a distinctly 'Chinese' model of English teaching, one that places a strong emphasis on collective performance, synchronised participation, linguistic accuracy, and the visible display of order and enthusiasm.

However, such arguments obscure the extent to which these routines are shaped by structural constraints, such as large class sizes and examination pressures, which pose practical challenges for teachers attempting to balance communicative pedagogy with classroom management. In this light, choral reading can be understood not merely as a cultural practice, but from a pragmatic response to these complex conditions. It offers a reliable technique for maintaining student attention, coordinating participation, and demonstrating visible signs of 'effective' teaching within highly regulated and performance-oriented educational environments in

urban China.

6.4.2 Turn-Taking Management

Another routinised practice concerned turn-taking management. In the observed classroom teaching, most speaking turns were allocated by the teacher through nomination, a practice that interactionally reaffirmed hierarchical order. Through nomination, teachers selected individual students to respond—calling them by name, directing their gaze, or signalling through gesture—and thereby determined who was authorised to speak, when, and for how long (Jefferson, Sacks, & Schegloff, 1978). The nominated student was expected to stand, answer aloud, and remain standing until explicitly permitted to sit.

In contrast to more open, student-centred Q&A formats in which students may volunteer, compete to answer, or contribute spontaneously, nomination in this context allowed teachers to hold tight control over class: active students can be nominated as a reward, disengaged students as a form of sanction, and particular individuals can be selected strategically to regulate the pace and direction of the lesson. For example, Yu mobilised nomination to invite peer evaluation (Extracts 5 and 7), thereby distributing authority in a manner that simultaneously acknowledged student contributions and reinforced her own instructional control. In this sense, nomination was not simply as a routine turn-allocation device, but as a technique through which authority could be temporarily redistributed while ultimately remaining anchored in the teacher's position.

Even so, there were moments in which novice teachers displayed clear misalignment with the expected script of teacher nomination. Wen's interview, for instance, revealed her ambivalence towards the authoritative implications of this routine. She noted that she did not "care very much whether students stood up when nominated",

explaining that she aspired to cultivate a more balanced relationship between teacher and students. “Especially when it risked embarrassing quieter or less confident students”, she described, “I did not always feel comfortable enforcing them to stand up”. In her classroom teaching, there were occasions when students hesitated or refused to stand, as well as moments when students bypassed the nomination sequence entirely by answering spontaneously. In such situations, Wen responded contingently, adjusting her interactional strategies as needed. These moments of deviation illustrate how classroom authority was continually negotiated in real time, shaped as much by teachers’ improvised actions as by students’ responses.

Her ambivalence reflected a broader tension between institutional expectations and teachers’ pedagogical agency. While the standing-and-answering sequence was treated as a normal and even necessary part of classroom order, Wen’s comments suggest that novice teachers did not internalise these routines unquestioningly. Instead, they navigated them agentively and selectively, sometimes softening or bypassing the expected sequence in an attempt to create a more relaxed or egalitarian atmosphere.

6.4.3 The Score System

Another routine through which novice teachers exercised control over the class was the use of a score system. The score system offered novice teachers a practical tool for managing large classes and coordinating participation, allowing them to reward cooperation, encourage engagement, and maintain order without resorting to overt disciplinary measures.

However, in practice, the score system functioned not merely as an incentive for classroom participation, but also as a regulatory tool. As Yu explained, “The score system

not only served as a motivational tool but also determined students' seating arrangements. Groups with higher scores could freely choose their seats" (Interview 3_Yu). This system, often combined with exam results, was widely used by teachers I encountered within the fieldwork, as a means of motivation and control.

Yu's explanation helped explain my field observation that less successful or less vocal students were often relegated to the back rows of the classroom, while more active or high-performing groups occupied the more desirable middle or front rows. As an observing teacher-researcher, I was often seated near this group of so-called "low performing" students at the back. While I was taking fieldnotes, they assumed that I was evaluating the lesson, and many of them became so nervous that they barely moved. During and after completing classroom exercises, they would even cover up their answers so that I could not see them. On one occasion, a boy dropped his pen on the floor but did not dare to pick it up. I felt that this sense of anxiety was closely related to their awareness of being placed in the 'low performing' section of the classroom and, over time, coming to see themselves as such.

Collectively, these routinised practices reflect novice teachers' developing expertise and their interpretations of institutional expectations for effective classroom management. They illustrate how novice teachers reproduced and adapted pedagogical cultures that emphasise both communication and discipline, performance and personal development, hierarchy and egalitarianism, as well as motivation and control.

6.4.4 Two Spheres of Teaching

Compared to lessons with more visible interactional practices, the unit exercise lessons (*xitike*) were often dismissed by novice teachers as unimportant and unworthy of research. Yet the ethnographic orientation of my fieldwork compelled me to probe what they considered worthy, *and* what they did not. These exercises

lessons typically occurred at the end of each unit and constituted one of the major lesson types in the curriculum. Observing them revealed a persistent tension in English teaching in China:

Extract 6.11 'unit exercise lessons'

> The classroom atmosphere during *xitike* was strikingly different from regular English lessons. Hong appeared quieter, sterner and more restrained. Her tone was low and fast-paced as she and her students followed the same printed test paper, their heads bent over the exercises. The expressive gestures, tonal shifts, and movements that featured her teaching were absent. Speaking mostly in Chinese, she projected each question from the test onto the PPT and wrote key grammar points on the whiteboard. Students copied down notes silently. Some resting their heads on the desks, occasionally glancing up at the screen.
>
> (Fieldnote_May 23, 2023_School A)

This vignette illustrates how teacher and learning unfolded in unit exercise lessons, creating a sharp contrast with other lesson types. Across the fieldwork, I became increasingly aware that English teaching operated within two distinctive spheres: one focused on the performance and refinement of pedagogical practice, and the other shaped by pragmatic exam concerns. In weekly teacher group meetings, discussions about classroom pedagogy routinely shifted to issues such as which exercises to assign, how to improve test scores, and how to design student self-assessment checklists. Surprisingly, for novice teachers, and indeed for many experienced teachers, these two spheres were not perceived as interconnected. Whereas the former was associated with the performative dimensions of teaching and with professional visibility, the latter offered a safer option, and for many, a practical survival strategy. This divide was articulated by Zhao, a teacher with over 20 years of experience in School B, whose

critique highlighted how teaching competence and teaching outcomes were often separated in everyday school life:

Extract 6.12 'three types of teachers'

> Zhao: In my view, there are three types of teachers. The first type focuses on professional credentials but doesn't spend much time with students. The second type, like me, has good relationships with students and students perform well but lacks formal achievements. The third type—those who do both—is extremely rare.
>
> (Interview 1_School B_Zhao)

Zhao explained that she lacked the time to refine her pedagogical expertise or actively pursue public recognition, as she "had two children who required her daily care" (Zhao_Interview 1). She identified herself as belonging to the second category—valuing diligence, care, and strong student performance—while recognising that institutional rewards and titles tended to privilege those who heavily invested in performative teaching, often at the expense of personal or family responsibilities. Her case underscores how, for many teachers, the pursuit of professional prestige and the pursuit of high student outcomes emerge as a mutually exclusive dilemma—one can only choose either of them.

For novice teachers, the pressures of accountability often made test-oriented teaching an attractive shortcut. Xin and Hong both explained that skipping warm-ups or interactive tasks in favour of grammar explanations and vocabulary drills allowed them to maintain classroom order and improve student performance, even when doing so ran counter to institutional expectations and to their own commitments to communicative, student-centred pedagogy. At times, when communicative tasks became difficult to sustain or were undermined by limited repertoire of classroom management strategies, novice

teachers reverted to the safer option of consolidating examinable knowledge through familiar, form-focused routines such as lengthy explanations, as illustrated in Extracts 6.7 and 6.9.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how novice English teachers in Chinese secondary schools negotiated their professional identities through everyday classroom interactions. I began by outlining the broader historical and institutional contexts that frame English education in China, highlighting the curricular expectations, ideological orientations, and classroom conditions that shaped teachers' everyday work. Against this backdrop, I conducted a micro-analysis of classroom interaction in the lessons of three novice teachers, tracing how immediate pedagogical decisions were made and how teacher identities were negotiated and re-constructed in real time across four sequenced, recurrent activities.

Through fine-grained analysis of interactional data, the chapter showed how novice teachers enacted multiple and shifting identities such as assessors, motivators, disciplinarians, and facilitators in the unfolding of their classroom teaching. Many of these identities were closely aligned with national and institutional goals and expectations. Novice teachers routinely drew on practices such as choral repetition and teacher nomination, which were widely recognised as a distinctly Chinese model of teaching and as markers of 'good teaching' and components of teacher expertise in the context. These routinised practices functioned simultaneously as pedagogical and disciplinary tools, creating a sense of collective intensity and enabling teachers to stabilise participation, maintain order, and assert authority in large classes. Beyond their immediate instructional purposes, these practices may also serve broader ideological and social functions by inculcating dominant values of unity, collectivism, obedience, and moral discipline through the routinised performances of classroom interaction (See

Extract 6.6). However, at the same time, moments of resistance and misalignment highlighted that these routines were not always enacted in a predictable and stable manner. Teachers and students were observed to negotiate these prescriptive norms in real time interaction, and such deviations underscore the interactionally accomplished and consistently negotiated nature of classroom life.

The discussion finally turned to a broader discussion of the two competing spheres that shape English teaching in practice in China: one oriented towards the performance and refinement of pedagogy, and the other driven by the pragmatic demands of exam preparation. Ethnographic observations of *xitike* (unit exercise lessons) and teachers' reflections illustrated how these spheres co-existed in tension. For many novice teachers, the pressures of accountability, efficiency, and classroom management rendered test-oriented teaching a safer and more viable option, even when it conflicted with their schools or/and own commitments to communicative, student-centred approaches. This analysis highlighted how the combined pressures of curriculum mandates, school evaluation systems, and exam performance expectations produced structural dilemmas that shape teachers' career pathways, their professional identities, and their understandings of what counts as 'good teaching'.

Chapter 7: Ethnographic Portraits of Novice Teachers

7.1 Introduction

In this final findings chapter, I shift focus to ethnographic portraits of five novice teachers. Having examined fragments of their stories through institutional events and practices, it becomes necessary to weave the pieces together into fuller accounts of their professional life as teachers. How did these individuals come to the teaching profession? What misalignments, opportunities, or pressures shaped their trajectories of learning to teach? And how, through telling their stories, did they construct identities of themselves and their relationships with the institutional and social worlds they acted?

Ethnographic portraits offer a way to explore these questions. These narrative images of self, as Capps and Oches (1995) suggest, 'allow us to see identities, relationships, and world views in the making' (p. 54). Drawing on their framework of storytelling, which highlights key structural elements such as setting, problematic event, attempt, consequence, and psychological response, I trace how these narratives enable novice teachers to make sense of their experiences, articulate conflicts and problems, and place their individual agency in the face of external demands. As Arnold and Blackburn (2005) argue, such portraits 'reveal insights not just into the experiences and attitudes of the individuals directly concerned, but also of the wider society, or social segment, of which they are a part' (p. 6). By situating novice teachers' stories within the social, cultural, and bureaucratic landscapes that contour their work, these portraits illuminate the interplay of personal choice, desire, constraints, and interrelationships between self and society (Ryang, 2008).

The writing of the portraits of novice teachers is, as Narayan (2012) reminds us, both a depiction of lived practices and a work of fiction. While the stories were told by novice teachers themselves, the portraits were crafted through my interpretative work based on

their accounts in interviews, field observation, and recorded interactions with others. Audio-recorded extracts may provide a measure of reliability, yet the act of ethnographic storytelling is always part fiction and part fact. Acknowledging this creative process not only safeguards anonymity but also recognises the broader epistemological stance of ethnography as a mode of *writing culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). In this sense, the portraits are not merely mirrors of reality, but crafted narratives that illuminate how lived moments and experiences are transformed into meaning through the process of storytelling.

These five young women, aged between twenty-three to twenty-eight, entered the two public schools in Ronghua District in Chengdu through three distinct yet emblematic recruitment pathways that structure access to teaching in China. **Xin** graduated from the *Tuition-Free Normal University Student Scheme* (See Footnote 3), a nationally promoted and widely debated policy initiative aimed at improving teacher quality by funding teacher education and requiring graduates to return to their home provinces to teach for at least six years. Upon graduation, students must go through a placement process, where they rank preferences for city or district and school level (primary, middle, or high school). Final placements are then determined based on academic performance and ranking by the local educational departments (district or county). **Yu** and **Wen** entered the profession through *campus recruitment*, a route typically reserved for high-achieving graduates from elite or normal universities. This pathway often bypasses written examinations and prioritises performance-based interviews. In the interview, 'no student teaching demonstration' (*wusheng shijiang*) was often employed, which interviewees were assigned a lesson topic and required to teach it to a panel of judges, instead of students, for about 10 to 20 minutes. During these sessions, they were expected to present their pedagogical and interactive skills, blackboard design, and teaching goals. **Jing** and **Hong**, by contrast, were hired through *social recruitment*, a process designed for graduates outside the elite university system or teachers who have

gained teaching experience. This route was widely perceived as more competitive, involving multiple stages such as written exams, group interviews, and several rounds of teaching demonstrations. Despite competitiveness, recruitment from this route did not always guarantee *bianzhi* posts. Both Jing and Hong were employed on a non-*bianzhi* contracts.

Before turning to the novice teachers' life stories, I begin by examining recruitment criteria posted by public secondary schools in Ronghua District. These documents outlined the basic institutional requirements for who counted as a 'qualified teacher'. As the next section shows, these expectations extended far beyond the possession of a state-recognised teaching certificate, encompassing a wide range of criteria including political rectitude, moral conduct, personal dispositions, and academic achievements. Collectively, these criteria provide a backdrop for understanding how novice teachers navigated the expectations placed upon them, a process explored in the following section through ethnographic portraits.

7.2 Who is Considered 'Qualified' to Teach?

Every year around June and July, public schools in China, began recruiting new teachers and releasing job requirements through their official online platforms (i.e., *Wechat public platform*). A typical job posting included the following essential requirements (taking School A as an example):

(1) Stand with the leadership of the Communist Party of China and demonstrate strong patriotism;

(2) Be passionate about education and committed to professional ethics;

(3) Embrace innovation, align with the school's culture, and comply with institutional arrangements;

(4) Exhibit strong professional competence; preference given to masters' or doctoral graduates from Double First-Class universities;

(5) Hold a valid Teacher Qualification Certificate and a Putonghua Proficiency Certificate[5] (Level 2-A or above);

(6) Be in good physical and mental health. In this job post, political allegiance is position as a prerequisite, taking precedence over professional expertise and commitment.

(School A_online platform_June 2023)

In this job post, political allegiance is position as a prerequisite, taking precedence over professional expertise and commitment. The preference for the graduates from Double First-Class (*shuangyiliu*) universities privileges those from less prestigious institutions. Innovation is encouraged, but only within the bounds of institutional demands. The requirement for a high-level Putonghua proficiency certificate serves not only to standardise spoken language but also to reinforce state-led projects of national integration and identity. These criteria painted a teacher image: prospective teachers were expected to be politically disciplined, academically elite, and institutionally compliant.

In the recruitment process, a degree in teacher education was not a strict requirement; the only mandatory credential was a valid teaching qualification certificate. This led me to reflect on what advantages, if any, a normal university background might offer within the context of school teaching. When I raised this question in interviews with heads of department in School A and School B, their responses were as follows:

Ting: Teacher training in higher education institutions is still important. It helps establish underlying logic: how you understand teaching, how you see yourself as the one delivering instruction, and how you grasp students' psychology. These are all things that the teacher-training curriculum covers. But in university, it's

[5] *Putonghua* refers to Standard Mandarin Chinese. The Putonghua Proficiency Test is a national assessment administered in mainland China to evaluate standard Mandarin pronunciation and fluency.

a bit like a factory: students are produced as similar components, more or less the same. It's only through practice that they start to become different, develop their own style. Teacher-education graduates may have a slight advantage at the beginning—but only a slight one. (Interview 1_ School A_Ting)

Bing: Twenty years ago, we were all trained in sub-degree tertiary normal colleges. What normal universities teach now, such as linguistics and English or American literature; that's all fine, very high-level. But when it comes to actual classroom teaching, how much does it really help? If they really want to grow into good secondary school teachers, what they need is practical insight, accumulation of experience, observing lessons, learning from one another, and watching how senior teachers do things. (Interview 1 _School B_Bing)

Both heads of department emphasised that effective teaching depended less on teacher-education preparation in higher education and more on practical experience and situated learning in schools. Their responses point to a tension between *professionalisation* and *professionalism*. As Crandall (1993) argues, professionalisation refers to the standardisation of credentials and the institutional efforts to define the knowledge that pre-service and in-service teachers should possess, whereas professionalism denotes the ongoing, lifelong learning through which teachers develop their practice. This distinction raises a question: how are novice teachers—many of whom possess strong formal credentials and high levels of academic qualification—prepared to navigate the tensions between these two dimensions of the profession? The ethnographic portraits that follow may shed light on how these tensions were experienced and negotiated in novices' everyday professional lives.

Further, in China, public school teachers are generally public institution personnel (*shiye renyuan*), a stable, state-backed category of employment. While not equivalent to civil

servants (*gongwu yuan*), they receive similar benefits, such as pensions, healthcare and job security, and are administered by local government authorities. Civil servants often hold administrative and enforcement powers, participate in policy formulation and contribute to ideological governance; by contrast, public institution personnel, a category that includes professionals in education, healthcare and research, are considered quasi-civil servants (Wu, 2018) and are also expected to strictly comply with the Party's directives.

Unlike the teaching professionals in England (Thomson, 2020), Chinese civil servants and public institution personnel are highly politicalised. In every public school, a Party branch is established to ensure alignment with state ideology and governance. Teachers who demonstrate strong professional performance and political reliability are often encouraged to apply for Party memberships, as joining the Party is seen as a mark of distinction, consistent with the official propaganda that calls for 'fully leveraging the vanguard and exemplary role of Communist Party members' in all walks of life (Qiushi, 2022). Senior staff such as school principals may eventually transition into full civil servant roles and thereby acquire greater administrative authority. Teachers, while positioned 'within the system' (*tizhi nei*) and tasked with ideological reproduction of the nation and selection of talents, occupy a marginal location within the hierarchy: they are not civil servants but must conform to political expectations; nor are they autonomous market actors yet remain subject to competition mechanics. As a result, they are caught in the entangled forces of bureaucratic control and market-oriented accountability.

7.3 Portrait 1: Xin, a Teacher Who Searches for Her Place

When her gaokao score turned out to be high enough for the *Tuition-Free Normal University Student Scheme*, which a highly selective, state-funded track for training future public school teachers, Xin took it as a sign. She reflected, "It would feel like a waste not to go. And being a teacher didn't seem like a bad option". At the time, the

decision felt reasonable and reassuring. It was not so much a dream fulfilled as it was a door opened. Teaching, in her view, was a respectable and stable profession, and the programme offered clear guarantees. But she gave little thought to what the work would demand of her, or to what kind of teacher she might become.

She enrolled in English education at one of China's six prestigious normal universities affiliated with the Ministry of Education, an elite institution regarded as a cradle for the nation's teaching force. Yet even there, pedagogy and teaching occupied only roughly one-fifth of her undergraduate coursework in the curriculum, and it wasn't until the second semester of her sophomore year that she encountered her first teaching-related class. Among the scattered teacher training modules, only a third-year class on lesson planning left her a strong impression:

Extract 7.1 'Xin's Portrait 1'

Liu: What made it memorable for you?

Xin: …in that class, I first felt the thrill of crafting a 'complete English lesson'. I learned how to move through each stage on purpose: warming up with fun or eye-catching materials to engage the class, then ask clear questions that matched the day's goals, introducing some new vocabulary, and wrapping up with an output activity, which is perhaps a group discussion, a role-play, or a whole-class presentation.

Liu: This was structured.

Xin: Yeah…but each part of lesson had so many pedagogical possibilities. I really enjoyed figuring out how to make everything fit together, how it could feel clear, purposeful, and smooth. I found satisfaction in achieving that flow. But compared to that, the other so-called 'must-have' teaching skills, such as Chinese calligraphy, teachers' public speaking rituals and etiquettes, or technology skills, just felt pretty pointless to me.

(Interview 1_School B_Xin)

Even at the very early stage of her career, she had already started to envision the kind of teacher she wanted to become. The agentive voice emerged as Xin found meaning in the craft of the classroom, when she spoke with a sense of ownership over lesson planning and an evaluative stance towards different training courses. During her fourth-year practicum, Xin was placed in a top-tier high school in Chengdu. For four months, she attended lessons, helped planning units, wrote teaching scripts, and even participated in student performances for an English arts festival. This experience left Xin both inspired and aware of the complex realities of school life that no training had fully prepared for her:

Extract 7.2 'Xin's Portrait 2'

> Xin: The school environment was academically outstanding, collegial, and collaborative. The students were highly motivated…working over there me a glimpse of what teaching could look like when conditions were optimal. But honestly, the students were already so good that I felt teachers didn't matter that much. Teaching might feel different elsewhere.
>
> (Interview 1_School B_Xin)

Xin's critical comment revealed a subtle observation of the stratified educational system she was entering. Yet this experience also gave her chance to imagine the kind of English teacher she might become and the constraints she might face along the way: a teacher grounded in relationships with students, colleagues, expertise, and critical reflection. "I don't want to be an inefficient, performative one," she said, "nor a functionary just ticking boxes or doing tasks that felt empty of purpose."

Upon graduation, students of the Programme entered a structured placement process

(*xuangang*), through which teaching positions were allocated based on academic performance and ranking. Like many of her peers, Xin preferred an urban placement over a rural one, and a school closer to her hometown rather than in a distant region. Her strong academic record enabled her to select a highly competitive district in Chengdu. In early June, while on a graduation trip, she received a call from School B in that district, informing her of her assignment and requesting that she begin a two-week internship immediately, ahead of the summer break. Xin hesitated. She knew little about the school and was uncertain about committing to it. But after hearing from friends that both the district and the school had a solid reputation, she decided to give it a try. On the first day of the new semester, Xin stood before her very first group of students, wearing a white blouse and black dress, which a typical neat professional outfit. To avoid being mistaken for a fresh graduate, she consulted with older colleagues on how to appear more mature, hoping to project a both approachable and serious image, especially with parents visiting that day. It was an anxious yet proud moment.

Xin's first two months were a dense mix of teaching tasks, training sessions, school meetings, and administrative tasks. As a teacher recruited by the district, she was required to attend district-level trainings, including lectures and monthly visits to other schools where host teachers gave presentations on school history, special programs, model classrooms. During these visits, Xin met other new teachers from across the district:

Extract 7.3 'Xin's Portrait 3'

Liu: How is your relationship with them? Do you ever talk about teaching?

Xin: Mostly just venting, honestly. We talked about difficult students, how late we stayed up marking homework, or just how exhausted we were all the time…usually over rushed lunches or in the group chats. No one really brought up actual teaching, like how to plan better lessons or support

student learning. I had hoped, at first, that we'd talk more about those things.

Liu: Do you think that's because of the competition between schools?

Xin: I'm not sure. But frankly, it was comforting to know others were also struggling. At least I wasn't alone. Still, a part of me felt uneasy. There were just so many things to keep up with, like trainings, meetings, reflections to submit. It all started to feel like just ticking boxes.

(Interview 2_School B_Xin)

The overwhelming cycle of trainings, meetings, written reflections, and tasks to complete left her feeling disillusioned. Little of it seemed to speak to the kind of teacher she had once imagined becoming. By December, her first Christmas at the school, Xin decided to bring a bit of festive vibe to her classroom by teaching a lesson about Christmas and decorating the room accordingly. She told me this story in a coffee shop one afternoon, "I had fond memories of celebrating Western holidays during my own school years and hoped to recreate a similar sense of joy for my students." But the school leadership quickly intervened. Although there were no formal regulations banning the celebration and teaching of Western festivals, any mention of them became increasingly sensitive, especially in the wake of the *Double Reduction* policy, when regulatory scrutiny intensified. Teachers who raised such topics were often met with stern warnings. Still, Xin felt reluctant to let the day pass unrecognised. On Christmas morning, she wrote a small 'Merry Christmas' in the upper corner of the blackboard. A student came up to her and asked, "Teacher Xin, what does the second word mean?" The question, ordinary as it was, caught her off guard. 'Merry Christmas' had once been among the first English phrases she learned during primary school, a cheerful and ubiquitous expression that marked a window into an English world. Now, it was unfamiliar to her own students, even though most of them had been learning English from an early age. Later, Xin discovered that in the new national English textbooks launched in 2024, all references

to Western holidays, such as Christmas, Halloween, Easter, had been removed. In their place were culturally nationalist and patriotic topics, like traditional Chinese festivals, the nation's space exploration achievements, the Belt and Road Initiative (i.e., China's global infrastructure and economic strategy launched in 2013), and China's infrastructure aid to Africa. This shift unsettled her. This was not how she had imagined the purpose of learning English. For her, it was meant to be a way of exploring foreign cultures, not merely a means of narrating China to the world. Xin brought up her discovery over lunch with colleagues, but on one said much. Someone chuckled and added it to other small bureaucratic frustrations. "Maybe I was being naïve," she said to me, "but something changed." She stopped thinking about it, at least outwardly. Yet the student's innocent question stayed with her quietly and tellingly.

The turning point in Xin's first year, when her relationship to teaching began to fundamentally shift, came suddenly and unexpected through her body. She collapsed with dizziness one day and was later diagnosed with a chocolate cyst. Surgery was required immediately.

Extract 7.4 'Xin's Portrait 4'

Liu: It is my first time hearing about chocolate cyst.

Xin: The doctor told me that this was a kind of gynaecological condition often caused by stress and emotional strain. I just felt this isn't worth it. The experience let me to confront what I'd been doing to myself, to my body. That first year, I was often up past 10 p.m., marking papers, writing lesson plans, managing extracurricular activities. And no matter how much I did, it never seemed enough. The school always wanted more. I started to ask myself, why was I working this hard for so little in return?

Liu: Did the school give you some support?

Xin: The doctor told me I needed at least a month to recover. But after just two weeks, the school called, asking if I could come back. I was stunned and a

> bit disgusted. They said my absence had messed up the English schedule, and the other teachers weren't correcting my students' homework. It made me feel like teachers aren't even allowed to be sick. Even if you take leave, you're still expected to be responsible for everything, including your students' grade.
>
> (Interview 3_School B_Xin)

In the wake of the illness experience, her initial enthusiasm about delivering well-structured lessons and building meaningful connections with students gave way to a colder, more pragmatic stance. She no longer viewed warming up activities, speaking activities or group work as essential. After all, these forms of oral practice were not assessed in the English exams that determined both student outcomes and teacher evaluations. Gradually, her lessons shifted towards a tighter focus on input and explanation, the segments she thought most likely to influence test scores.

Her resistance extended beyond the classroom. When a new department head introduced a peer-teaching initiative that required teachers to deliver fifteen-minute 'no-student demonstration lessons' at weekly staff meetings, Xin quietly refused to conform. When it was her turn, she offered only a brief five-minute walkthrough of a lesson plan. The department head was awkward and furious, but Xin stood her ground. "I don't want to do things that are ineffective. These mock lessons create huge pressure for teachers, especially since our principal supports the new head," she explained to me, "But I just can't keep doing things that don't matter. The thing that really matters now is exam scores, and that's where my pressure is."

Her assigned mentor, a middle leader of the school, was too busy with administrative responsibilities to offer meaningful guidance. Class observation feedback sessions, where everyone offered polite praise due to the culture of conflict avoidance, but little

constructive feedback, always felt superficial and performative. Over time, Xin stopped expecting support from formal activities and began turning to informal networks instead: a trusted middle school teacher at her own school time, a senior mentor she had met during her practicum, and a few approachable colleagues within School B. Through these relationships, she picked up small but practical strategies of how to manage difficult students, or how to navigate conversations with parents.

"I don't know if I hate teaching, but I definitely know I don't like this school," Xin said to me one day after school and went on to share that she was already thinking about moving to another school, "To leave this school, I need to build up enough capital first, either strong student results or accolades from teaching competitions." It wasn't enough to simply finishing everyday tasks; she needed proof that would make her legible to another school, perhaps one more aligned with her values. But whether such a school actually existed, Xin wasn't so sure.

7.4 Portrait 2: Yu, a Teacher Who Waits for Opportunities

Yu came from a middle-class family in Chengdu. After completing her postgraduate degree in TESOL in the United Kingdom, she entered School A through the highly competitive campus recruitment route. This decision gained full support from her family. I first met her during an open class event hosted by School A, which brought together teachers from other schools as well as several local educational authorities. Yu served as the host of the event. Throughout the event she moved quietly and efficiently between tasks. Taking photos, coordinating transitions, and later drafting the written summary that would be posted on the school's official WeChat account. In those early encounters, I often saw her with her head lowered in silence, and when she did look up, her eyes often wandered past me, calm, composed yet slightly detached.

She frequently described herself as *fo* (Buddha-like), a buzzword circulated among young

people in China over the past decade. The idea of *fo* points to a disposition of responding pressure, injustice, or frustration with indifference, quiet resistance, and when necessary, withdrawal. It conveys a subtle refusal to be fully invested, a quiet disdain towards the external demands, and at the same time, a languid readiness to seize opportunities should they arise. Only a few months later did I learn that, during this period, the work pressure had grown intense enough that Yu had considered leaving the teaching profession.

As a novice teacher, she had once imagined putting into practice the ideas she had learned in the UK. Yet she soon realized that such attempt was not possible here. Not only because she lacked the time and mental space to think, but also because the very footing of teaching in this environment rested largely on exam preparation. To fight this 'exam battle', teachers working with large classes and limited instructional time relied on a standardised, unified teaching style: the same PowerPoint slides, the same teacher persona, the same scripted ways of delivering lessons. She felt she had little choice but to follow this established pattern:

Extract 7.5 'Yu's Portrait 1'

> Yu: I still can't quite grasp what my students are really like. I don't know them well enough to judge which teaching approach suits them, or which method will inspire which student. So, the safest, and really the only, option is to follow the style that everyone else uses.
>
> (Interview 1_School A_Yu)

However, a shift began to take shape during her first teaching competition. Although it was only a school-level event, winning first place allowed Yu to stand out within this exemplary secondary school and drew the attention of the district- and city-level teacher educators who attended. More importantly, the experience transformed her

understanding of what professional teaching entailed. She had long believed that the core of teaching was simply to 'secure survival'; that is, to ensure that students acquired the test-ready knowledge expected of them. The competition, however, exposed her to a different pedagogical rhythm: one that unfolds step by step, each move building towards the next. She came to realize that a teacher's task is not to supply answers, but to create the conditions in which students, through careful scaffolding, arrive at the answers themselves. Through this process, she became aware of the wide space in which her own teaching practice could continue to grow.

Yu gradually adjusted her mindset, learning to understand and adapt to the school's culture, its teacher training routines, and its modes of teaching. She soon developed a professional vision that helped her discern what counted as desirable or undesirable classroom behaviours, what kinds of students were regarded as 'good' or 'bad', and which learning habits were recognised as productive or unproductive. When Yu was reassigned to teach a new cohort of first-year middle school students at the start of a new academic year in September 2023, she grew noticeably more confident, especially in classroom management. "There's a clear difference: the kids don't try to push you around anymore. They're more obedient," she reflected, "The way they interact with you the conversations you have with them, even the communication with parents. I feel like everything is… not exactly easier, but definitely smoother." Her students, she noted, had begun to perceive her as a strict and meticulous English teacher. An image intentionally strengthened the authority of both her and the subject she taught. "When they think the English teacher is strict and takes things seriously," she said, "they naturally pay more attention to English as a subject."

In another city-level competition, she again won first place. The success further energised her, and she attributed much of it to her willingness to take others' feedback. She said, "I was really open to all these of suggestions. Maybe I used to really like a certain

step in my lesson, but when someone pointed out that it didn't work, I would genuinely think about it and ask myself why they saw it that way." With so many young teachers in her year group, competition was intense, which made Yu's ability to distinguish herself even more notable. As she described it,

Extract 7.6Yu's Portrait 2

> Yu: There are so many young teachers, of course everyone is *juan*[6]. But honestly, who isn't? You might not want to join in, but once you're here and everyone else is working hard, you can't just opt out. Everyone finds their own way of keeping up…When everyone is putting in so much effort, you think, 'I can't afford to slack off,' and it keeps you going.
>
> (Interview 3_School A_Yu)

At times Yu complained about the sheer volume of work or moments of unfair treatment. Yet she often quickly shifted her perspective, reminding herself of the support the school provided, such as chances to participate in teaching competitions, access to strong student cohorts, and the guidance of many experienced colleagues. She also found her year group very supportive. "They really welcomed young teachers, encouraged us to speak up and contribute more, and offered many opportunities," she noted, "The school and the teaching group really are helping you. It's definitely faster than fumbling around on your own."

Yu now believed that opportunities required proactive pursuit. Whenever a new chance appeared, whether it was an invitation to join an event, a small task, or a competition,

[6] Juan, or neijuan (内卷), is the term that rose to prominence in China around 2020. It derives from Chifford Geertz's (1963) use of the anthropological concept of 'involution' to describe processes that become increasingly intense and complex without real advancement. In contemporary China, the term is commonly used to express the feeling of being trapped in a relentless cycle of escalating overwork, stress, and competition that produces little results.

she made a point of stepping forward. In an environment where teachers of all ages worked intensely, the pressure on novice teachers was constant, leaving little room for hesitation or rest. Her daily life, as she described it, had become entirely saturated by work: from the moment she opened her eyes to the moment she went to sleep, teaching tasks filled her mind. She repeated in our last interview, "I'm just a very *fo* kind of person. Wherever I am, it's all the same." However, for Yu, *fo* seemed to take on a different meaning here: less about lying flat or resisting, and more about a quiet, steady diligence, a belief that if one keeps working consistently, opportunities will eventually come.

7.5 Portrait 3: Wen, a Teacher Who Dances in Chains

Wen never imagined she would become a teacher. As an undergraduate, she studied management at a top-tier Double Class university and later secured a place in a graduate program in neurolinguistics. Pursuing a PhD had long been her dream, and academically, it felt like the most natural next step. But her family didn't see it that way. "For a girl," they argued, "a stable job is more important." With both emotional and financial support for further study off the table, Wen gave up the idea of pursuing a PhD.

As a cross-disciplinary student, graduate school had already been an uphill climb. When she began applying for jobs after graduation, she cast her net wide, sending applications across sectors without a clear direction. The early rounds brought little success. Then, almost by chance, she noticed an opening for public school teachers through campus recruitment. She applied, interviewed, and received an offer. On the very same day, another offer arrived, and that was from a major tech company. Wen found herself facing a choice she had never anticipated. "I never thought I'd be a teacher," she admitted, "To me, it meant low pay and an easy, repetitive life I was afraid of. I worried that if one day I ended up with a child and no reliable husband, would I be able to support myself and my kid on a teacher's salary?" But the lure of a permanent teaching post, with its guaranteed job security and institutional benefits, was powerful. "When you actually

have the choice, you suddenly become deeply conflicted," she said. In the final minute before the online system closed, she clicked accept.

But the job turned out to be nothing like what she expected. The starting monthly salary was around 3,000 RMB per month (roughly £333); with bonuses and holiday stipends, her total annual income amounted to around 100, 000 RMB (about £11,100)[7], which she described as "just enough to get by" in the city. What surprised her most, though, was the workload. The pace was relentless. Each morning, Wen left home at 6:40 a.m. and arrived at school by 7:10 a.m. She filled her thermos with tea. Teachers were expected to be in class fifteen minutes before the morning reading session began to ensure everything ran smoothly. At 7:30 a.m., students arrived, and Wen led them in reading aloud, scanning the room to see "who's really awake, who's still in dreamland". By 7:50 a.m., she had barely sipped her tea before the first lesson began. At 8:40 a.m., she headed to the playground to supervise morning physical exercises. At 9:50 a.m., after her second lesson, she used the break to speak with students who hadn't completed their homework. By 10:00 a.m., she was attending grade-level and department-level teaching meetings, while at the same time, correcting daily vocabulary quizzes and yesterday's homework. At noon, her tea sat untouched. After lunch and a short rest, she refreshed her water and returned to the classroom to monitor students during their nap. The afternoon passed in a blur: finishing grading, fielding a half-hour call from a parent upset about their child's grades, submitting overdue training reflections after reminders in the teacher chat group. By 4:20 p.m., she was leading two extended day service sessions, focused mostly on exercises and test prep. Evening study ran from 6:20 p.m. to 8:30p.m., during which she tutored struggling students one-on-one. By 9:00p.m., she was home, quickly showered, and preparing the next day's lessons until nearly 11:00 p.m.

[7] In 2023, the minimum monthly wage in Chengdu's main urban districts was 2,100 RMB (around £233). The average annual wage of urban *danwei* (work-unit, see section 1.2.1 and footnote 2) employees in Chengdu was around 100, 606 RMB (around £11,000).

Extract 7.7 'Wen's Portrait 1'

Wen: The next morning, I'd wake up at 6:00 and do it all over again. Honestly, I often feel like I can't breathe. I teach an average of four lessons a day across two classes. And that's not even counting the extended day sessions, grading piles of homework, answering parents' messages, attending meetings, or all the ongoing training we're constantly required to do. I started stress-eating and gained quite a bit of weight. My Apple Watch kept sending me warnings, showing that mental wellness score was constantly below average.

(Interview 2_School B_Wen)

Despite this, Wen was not passive in the face of institutional pressure. When the new department head, Xue, a fast-moving, sharp-eyed teacher with a reputation for control, was appointed, the atmosphere in the team shifted. "Once she decides something, it's hard to change it," colleagues said. Wen often disagreed with Xue's style but chose not to directly confront her. She treated changes in the work environment as a form of adaptive challenge.

Extract 7.8 'Wen's Portrait 2'

Liu: Do you feel like you need to be extra careful when talking to her?

Wen: No. Some people say they're careful around her because they're scared. But I don't avoid her because I'm afraid. I just think talking to her takes too much effort. If there's a better way to solve the problem, I'll choose that. For me, it's always about solving the issue, not arguing or convincing her.

Liu: Do you think her arrival changed how you see your job? Like you said, now you just focus on getting things done.

Wen: Yeah, the whole atmosphere feels more stressful than before. But maybe

> I've also learned to compromise. I try to turn external rules into things I can manage. Some decisions I agree with, others I don't. but I try not to get swept along. I want to keep thinking for myself. And even if we get a new team leader next term, I'll still have my own way of doing things. something I've worked out that feels steady.
>
> (Interview 3_School B_Wen)

Wen poured herself into professional development. She attended more trainings and teaching competitions than anyone else in her group, sometimes two or three times as many. She admitted that while many teaching demonstrations had performative elements, they still reflected real preparation and gave her insight into pedagogical trends. "Even if it's performative, it's prepared. I always learn something from watching how others teach," she said. But she drew a line at administrative tasks like reflective reports and academic writing. Those, she felt, were burdens, not growth.

Unlike many new teachers, Wen rejected the popular notion that "today's students are naturally not afraid of younger teachers." She followed education blogs on *Zhihu*, a widely used Chinese knowledge-sharing platform often compared to Quora, especially those written by an experienced high school teacher in Beijing. From those posts, she began shaping her own view of education. "In the classroom, I want students to respect me for my knowledge," she said, "but after class, we're equals." She didn't shout or scold. Instead, she tried to build trust through consistency and clear expectations. "Management isn't about power," she reflected, "It's about working towards shared goals." Curious about what she meant by 'shared goals', I asked her to elaborate. Wen explained that even early-adolescent students understand when teachers take their interests seriously. She described, for instance, a boy who struggled academically but was deeply fascinated by astronomy. When his English performance declined, Wen reminded him that most cutting-edge research in that field is published in English. The goal was

not to pressure him, but to help him see the subject as a meaningful tool rather than an obstacle. Weeks later, the boy's mother told Wen he had repeated her words at home. For Wen, this was evidence that students responded when teachers connected learning English to something they cared about; shared goals emerged when students saw that the teacher was invested in their future, not just their grades.

Extract 7.9 'Wen's Portrait 3'

Wen: Another kid in my class is super spoiled at home. he's not scared of teachers at all. Early on, he came up to me chatting away about all kinds of American and British TV shows, asking me what I'd watched. I told him my favorite British series is Downton Abbey. He actually watched the whole thing over winter break. We got along really well, but in class, he was totally undisciplined. It's like he thought his English was already good enough, so he didn't need to bother with the basics. One day, he got into a fight in class with another boy who was kind of arrogant too. I was really mad. After class, I didn't yell, but I made them both write incident reports in English. I told him, 'You think your English is amazing, right? You talk all the time about going abroad or transferring to an international school. But look at this, your report is full of grammar mistakes. If you ever really go overseas, and you can't even explain yourself clearly in writing, how will you speak up when something goes wrong?'

Liu: haha, that is fair.

Wen: Maybe I was exaggerating a bit, painting a dramatic picture. But that's my way of handling it. It's based on really knowing my students. Not just yelling at them but finding the thing that might actually relate to them. And I do think, when I talk to them like that, they really hear it.

(Interview 4_School B_Wen)

Becoming a teacher, and walking into the emotional lives of her students, brought Wen back to her own experience as a student. She realised how much certain teachers had shaped her ways of thinking and being, not through authority, but through the patient ways they explained ideas and encouraged her curiosity. These memories foregrounded her emerging professional identity. Gradually, her own philosophy began to take shape; that is, persuasion through reason, not discipline through fear, to achieve shared goals with students. Moments like these with her students made the heavy workload and the blunt manner of her leaders seemed a little more bearable.

7.6 Portrait 4: Jing, a Teacher Who Finds Support in Colleagues

Jing graduated from a normal university with a degree in English, but she was not trained in the teacher-education track. Yet, becoming a teacher was one of the most common career paths for English majors, so before entering School A Jing had spent five years working in a private training school. When she joined School A, it treated her as a new teacher starting from scratch, and she likewise positioned herself as one. At the training school, she was the kind of teacher students saw only once a week, typically on weekends; now, she saw them every weekday and was responsible not only for their academic work but also for their broader development and well-being.

Jing was someone whose emotions showed easily on her face. She laughed openly with students and colleagues and was not hesitant to express anger in front of students when necessary. In weekly group meetings I attended, she spoke up readily and shared her opinions; whenever there were technical issues with computers or equipment, she was often the first to respond. Direct, communicative, and warm, she occasionally shared stories about herself or her cat with students, and the lively atmosphere she created has become one of her traits. Students would describe Jing as kind and endearing. Yet this closeness between her and her students had become a problem. In her view, students tended to feel naturally more attached to younger teachers than to older ones, and more

to female teachers than to male teachers. Her lively persona sometimes led students to overstep boundaries, blurring the line between closeness and authority. As a result, she often had to raise her voice to gain control, otherwise classroom management became difficult.

What worried her most, however, were her students' academic results. The Double Reduction (*shuangjian*) policy had prompted her and many colleagues to leave their previous jobs and move quickly into public schools, even though none of them held *bianzhi* posts. In her view, the promised 'reduction of burden' had not been realised at all. Far from easing pressure, she said, "every school was now pushing students to the limit." Occasionally, the local education bureau distributed surveys to assess the implementation of the policy, but school leaders usually warned teachers in advance, so the responses submitted were far from truthful. Once, the school forgot to give such a reminder, and the resulting answers were a complete mess. Teachers were scolded afterwards by the school leadership. Although the policy had banned tutoring centres, she often noticed that more than half of her students already had pages of notes written in their textbooks before she even introduced a new lesson, which was clear evidence that many were still studying ahead of class through shadow schools. What's more, the policy required 'balanced development': children were expected to do well not only in English but across all subjects, and teachers had to allocate students' time evenly among each core subject such as Math and Chinese. For schools, having high-achieving top students was not enough, and the lowest performers also had to be pulled up. Moving from classes of around twenty students in her previous private school to classes of more than fifty had been a shock. Even more unsettling, she said, was to find that some students were performing far below what she had expected.

Still, Jing felt fortunate that in School A, teachers were not isolated. The whole English group worked together to push students hard, sharing the workload. She found the

atmosphere within her teaching and research group was genuinely supportive. “Most of the strategies they share are useful for me. Whether it’s about classroom management or teaching, they’ve seen far more students and situations than I have, so what they say is valuable,” she explained, “I might not use their suggestions immediately, but maybe the next time I will.” She recalled a city-level teaching competition in which Yu and two other teachers formed a team to represent School A. All the colleagues who were not participating came to the venue to support them. Jing found the atmosphere particularly uplifting. In comparison, she felt the support and teaching presentations from other schools were far less impressive.

Yet one persistent problem with public schools, she noted, was that although teachers shared an office, finding even half a day for group meeting was extremely difficult. Novice teachers, in particular, grappled with a demanding schedule of teacher training activities: they were officially allocated one training session each week, though those sessions were frequently disrupted or postponed. Competitions became a major source of professional development, “A lot of things are really learned through competitions,” she said. Each semester, novice teachers were required to deliver at least one demonstration lesson to their year group, and at the end of the term they had to teach a more formal demonstration lesson to the whole school. There were also Model Teacher Workshops, giving novice teachers’ access to expert teachers outside her year group, but they also came with extra assignments that novice teachers were required to complete.

One of the biggest changes she felt after moving into the public system was in how she understood teaching and the teacher role.

Extract 7.10 ‘Jing's Portrait 1’

Jing: You realise that as a teacher, teaching is the least important part compared with everything else. Even though I’m a subject teacher rather than a homeroom

teacher, if students' habits weren't cultivated, like taking notes, writing homework properly, you simply couldn't work on their grades. On top of this, there were countless other tasks and reports to complete. I understood the leadership's intentions, but when everything falls on me, I get impatient. In the end, I realised that actually teaching was the easiest and happiest part of the job.

(Interview 3_School A_Jing)

Alongside her daily responsibilities, other things were unfolding quietly, which Jing noticed but never spoke about or criticised openly. Although student admission was supposedly determined by a lottery system, some students were in fact enrolled through informal *school choice fees* (*zexiao fei*), typically coming from families with well economic and social resources. From time to time, a parent would invite all subject teachers, the homeroom teacher, and even the principal out for a meal. She also heard from other teachers that, in order to maintain favourable statistics, the school had quietly transferred lower-performing students' registration to a feeder school or screened out at the point of admission. She told me this in a low voice. Even if the rumours were entirely accurate, the mere possibility of such practices had weighed on Jing.

As a contract teacher, Jing carried a constant sense of instability. In the following year, she did not stand out in teaching competitions, and her mentor Chen even advised her to consider moving to a branch campus, where opportunities might be more accessible. When I asked Jing about her goals, she told me:

Extract 7.11 'Jing's Portrait 2'

Jing: …with these students, most of your ideals simply can't be realised. Educational ideals can only be carried out with the excellent ones. When you're dealing with low-performing students, none of those ideals would work. All that talk about

transforming children with love. It's impossible.

(Interview 3_School A_Jing)

As she spoke, this usually cheerful young woman, known for her cheerful voice and easy laughter, shook her head, her expression growing serious. A year after I wrote her portrait, she had already resigned from School A and returned to a private training centre. Although she told me that her main reason was her family's financial situation, I could not help but feel that her experiences at the school had also significantly shaped that choice.

7.7 Portrait 5: Hong, a Teacher Who Keeps Compromising

When Hong left her previous job at a once-prestigious private middle school during her first year of teaching, it was not with on a whim but with thorough consideration. The school, once known for producing top scorers in the national college entrance exam, had enjoyed its heyday and now declined as policy shifted focus back to public education. The resources were shrinking, the future uncertain, and for Hong the decision to leave was strategic. She joined School B, a public school marketed itself as progressive and student-centered. She didn't choose it out of alignment with its vision, but because it was a rare offer from the public system. In her words, "At least it's a public school. Those opportunities don't come easy."

Becoming a teacher wasn't part of her original plan. In high school, Hong had studied sciences and scored well enough on the *gaokao* to enter a Ministry-affiliated normal university. Her goal was to major in computer science, but due to an oversubscription of students that year, she was involuntarily transferred to the English department. Refusing the reassignment would have meant forfeiting the year entirely, so she stayed. She never grew to love English, but she completed her degree, advanced to a master's program in American literature at a Double Class university and wrote her thesis on Faulkner. But

even then, she didn't see herself as a literary person:

Extract 7.12 'Hong's Portrait 1'

Liu: …in the normal university, so you graduated with a teaching degree?

Hong: ((exhale)) No, I didn't. It was just English language. I didn't want to be a teacher at first. I really didn't. I was a sciences student in high school so studying English didn't really make sense for me, you know?

Liu: But how did you switch to teaching after graduation?

Hong: I never liked English, and I never wanted to teach. Teaching seemed so. exhausting. But after graduation, I applied to many jobs, but all met with silence. It was so hard to find a job. So, I thought, okey then, I'll go to teach.

(Interview 1_School B_Hong)

For Hong, 'teaching' (*jiaoshu*, literally 'teaching books') could carry a negative tone, which means mechanical, unrewarding, burdensome. Teaching, she concluded, was a practical choice, aligned with her academic background, socially respectable, and in her words, "better than having nothing at all."

Yet even after making the deliberate decision to transfer to School B, Hong quickly found that the day-to-day realities of the school didn't match the promises. The school prided itself as a model of 'flat management' where teachers, students, parents, and middle leaders were positioned as equals. In theory, that means parents could approach head teachers directly with concerns, and teachers, too, were expected to report issues independently rather than coordinate through collective reports. However, the head teacher, who promoted the school's ethos of equality and student-centered growth, appeared to Hong less as an idealistic leader and more as someone perpetually inspecting teachers' work. He regularly patrolled hallways, stepped unannounced into classrooms,

and observed lessons with a critical eye. If he spotted practices that didn't meet expectations, such as poorly designed whiteboard or insufficient classroom discipline, he would send pointed messages in the school's online teacher chat groups, sometimes even naming the teachers involved. When teachers performed well or won awards, he also posted praise in the same groups. Yet this too created pressure: teachers often felt obliged to respond with enthusiastic comments and positive emojis, as Hong put it, "It's all forced praise." Every day, Hong found herself immersed in a flood of online communication. Messages flew back and forth, issuing task reminders, attendance records, lesson updates, and reports of noncompliant behaviour. Dozens of teacher chat groups filled her phone screen: the English subject group, grade-level group, homeroom teachers' group, new teacher training group, leave request group, and others. The screen constantly lit up, and notifications kept popping up. Most of them felt redundant but ignoring them wasn't an option. Not only was she being monitored in real time. She was also expected to monitor others.

Hong also realised that public schools weren't much different from private ones, if anything, the workload was heavier. In her previous private school, teachers often held more authority over parents and students and were treated with greater respect. But in School B, parents felt entitled to demand that schools reduced academic pressure, while administrators still expected consistently academic pressure. She said, "We teachers carry all the contradictions." For a long period of time, Hong often went home in tears. Her husband and family would comfort her and say, "It's just a job. Don't take it so seriously."

Despite entering into the profession out of practical considerations rather than calling, Hong once hoped she could improve her teaching expertise, but that hope began to fade quickly. As a contract teacher, she was excluded from district-level professional trainings, and the in-school trainings felt more like pressure. She also made attempts on her own

to explore new teaching approaches. Once she tried to bring something more engaging into the classroom, she introduced a short passage from Hemingway during a reading activity. Some students listened politely. Others weren't so sure. One boy raised his hand and asked, half-joking, "Why are we learning this–are we training to be spies?" As a new teacher, Hong didn't know how to handle the reaction. She let it pass, quietly abandoning her attempt to enrich the lesson. After that, she stopped using any external materials not in the textbook. "I just didn't want to be embarrassed again," she told me. She talked about where she stood in the larger education system, "Education's already distorted. Moving schools just means falling into a bigger or smaller pit." She joked that with the current birth rate, many schools would close within ten years and teachers would be laid off anyway. One day during my fieldwork, she sent me an unprompted long message about her frustration with professional development. She wrote,

Extract 7.13 'Hong's Portrait 2'

> Hong: I felt I was busy every day, but that was not a way to improve professional development. I feel like a withered flower. When finishing every weekend and thinking of going to work the next day, I felt so depressed. The school's tasks were burdensome and every time I had tried asking for help but was met with vague suggestions or encouragement to 'work harder'. Sometimes, I even felt like I was letting my students down, as if they weren't really developing the way they should.
>
> (Interview 2_School B_Hong)

These experiences led her to shift energy towards helping students get better test scores. "Good performance is a foundational thing for *Suzhi* education," she told me, "Without good scores, all talk of holistic education is just empty words." In the classroom, this shift became visible.

Her office desk sat tucked in the corner of a classroom, piled high with student notebooks and attendance sheets. Teaching materials and exam papers were stacked neatly to the side. Inside a small, locked glass cabinet drawer, there were a tiny figurine, a box of throat lozenges, and a colourful mug. These small traces of comfort, as if storing a piece of self in the drawer. In school, she showed indifference towards, for example, the new leader's rigid style but chose to comply. "She has her pressures too," Hong tactically protected herself from workplace conflict, "Sometimes she speaks harshly, but it's fine. Whatever she says, I'll just do it." Outside school, she curated a different life. Her social media was filled with images of travel, fine food, and carefully styled outfits. When I once asked her if, given another chance, she would still choose to teach and still choose to come to School B, her answer came without hesitation, "I'd probably still choose the same."

7.8 Discussion and Conclusion

The five portraits in this chapter suggest that policy not only shapes the conditions of teaching but also influences who becomes a teacher in the first place. Many of the young teachers I worked with did not enter the profession out of a deep, long-held calling, but rather out of a desire for stability and security. Once inside the school, these teachers had to navigate multiple forms of pressure and accountability. Across the five cases, each teacher experienced their own moments of uncertainty, adjustment, and change.

Yu offered a relatively positive story. She stood out within her cohort of novice teachers, gaining access to teaching competitions and other scarce opportunities. She governed herself in relation to the existing pathways to recognition, actively aligning her practice with what the system valued. At the same time, she was fully aware that she was caught in *neijuan* (involution), working ever harder within an endless competitive loop. This competition did contribute to her professional growth, but it did so by moulding her into the kind of teacher that the system was prepared to recognise and reward.

The remaining four teachers more closely reflected the broader of teaching force in my fieldwork. They described feeling lost and frustrated amid chaotic administrative demands, intensive school surveillance, and fragmented or inconsistent forms of professional support. These portraits also drew attention to practices that were ethically questionable. Many teachers felt they were not treated as professionals, but as interchangeable parts in an institutional machine, because they were expected to absorb expanding responsibilities and contradictions without the support or care needed to sustain them. In this sense, their experiences highlight how teacher identity is (re)constructed not only through relationships with students and pedagogical practice, but also through living with and responding to the tensions between ethical commitment, a pervasive sense of precarity and ambivalence, and structural constraints.

However, most of them did not simply acquiesce. Instead, they sought out their own pathways of development. Xin turned to former mentors and sought out opportunities such as teaching competitions to move towards schools more aligned with her ideals. Wen searched for resources online, experimented with new forms of relationship with students, and quietly adjusted her teaching routines. Jing tried to distinguish between the particular collegial culture of her teaching group and the broader structural issues shaping it, and to make what she considered a sensible choice for herself, even if that meant leaving the public school system altogether. Hong's attempt to introduce English literature into her teaching generated moments of friction, though the experiment was short-lived and met with obstacles.

The practice of everyday life allows individuals to claim agency through subtle acts from the all-pervasive forces of the state, politics, and culture (de Certeau, 1984). Agency appears as improvised and contingent but deeply embedded in the social worlds teachers inhabit. These ethnographic portraits reveal not only teachers' agency under neoliberal conditions but also its fragility. We see moments of improvisation, resilience, creativity,

and self-directed learning, yet we also see attempts that fade away for lack of institutional support, resources, or recognition. Their stories prompt us to reflect not only on the structural conditions that constrain teachers' autonomy and agency, but also on the potential and limits of teacher professional identity as a resource for action.

Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion

8.1 Summary of the Research

This study has examined how novice teachers discursively performed, negotiated, and (re)constructed their professional identities, and how these ongoing processes of learning to teach were embedded within broader sociocultural and political conditions in urban Chinese schooling. I have mobilised the concept of 'identity' to explore what it means to learn to teach in urban public schools, and have argued that this identity construction process can be understood as a process of identification, through which novice teachers 'suture' themselves to particular roles and positions by continuously recognising, negotiating, and investing in them (Hall, 1996, p.6). Conceptualising identity in this way foregrounds its dynamic and fluid character, capturing how novice teachers were shaped by externally prescribed images and by their own evolving understandings of what it means to be a 'good teacher'. The study also draws on insights from sociolinguistics, which argue that identities can be examined and located through any piece of semiotic resources in moment-to-moment interaction (Blommaert, 2005). Building on this perspective, the analysis attends closely to teachers' talk, narratives, and institutional interactions to show how professional identities and senses of agency were continuously negotiated within the constraints and affordances of school life.

Teachers around the world are confronted with change, uncertainty, and a range of external constraints (Gu & Li, 2015). To make sense of how teachers negotiate their identities under such conditions, it is necessary to situate novice teachers within the broader institutional and ideological landscape that structures teachers' work and lives. This study shows that novice teachers in China are required to adjust their professional practices within an education system driven by both socialist and neoliberal rationalities. The former promotes a collectivist ethos, patriotism, and Chinese moral-cultural traditions, positioning teachers as moral exemplars who embody sacrifice and devotion

and who carry the weights of national aspirations (Kipnis, 2011; Paine, 1990). The latter is linked to meritocracy, competition, and innovation, framing teachers as individually accountable performers whose value is measured through a range of quantifiable metrics (Song, Zhu, & Liu, 2015; Zhao, 2015). Within this context, teacher professionalism is constituted through multiple, and always competing, discourses. This analysis thus problematises the enduring influence of Confucian thought in shaping dominant understandings of Chinese schooling, viewing it not as a static or fixed tradition, but as a rhetorical repertoire which is selectively revived and combined with the modernised technologies of governance (Foucault, 2007; Kipnis, 2006; Zhang, 2023).

As the same time, the 'good teacher' is not merely the passive outcome of these forces but a discursive construct that becomes dynamic, negotiable, continually shifting as it is inhabited and performed in professional practices and social interactions. Therefore, the study also attends to how teachers enact, interpret, and sometimes resist dominant norms and (re)construct their professional identities at the micro level of moment-to-moment interactions with colleagues, students, and the researcher (Little, 2001, 2012; Little, & Curry, 2008; Liu, 2013; Morton & Gray, 2008). A detailed analysis of how they accounted for their experiences and interacted with others provides an in-depth understanding of the complex and contradictory processes of learning to teach. Crucially, it also offers insights for teachers and teacher educators into how teacher agency may be recognised, supported, and fostered, especially for early career teachers in China, many of whom enter the profession primarily for stable employment and income rather than from a strong sense of intrinsic vocational commitment (Liu & Onwuegbuzie, 2014)

Drawing on six months of ethnographic fieldwork, the study examined the professional practices through which novice teachers were required to participate in professional practices in two urban schools. The schools I gained access to were widely regarded by both families and teachers as among the most prestigious, high-achieving institutions in

one of the most advantaged districts in the city of Chengdu. As exemplary schools in the local hierarchy, they function as key sites where competing discourses of pursuit of exemplarity, quality, and equality converge. In this sense, while the findings are not intended to be generalisable to all urban schools in China, these cases offer an analytically grounded account of how broader structural pressures are experienced, negotiated, and enacted at institution and individual levels. Their willingness to open their doors to research is itself indicative of their institutional confidence and their positioning as exemplary models within the local education system.

This positioning is sustained and reproduced through institutional practices that foreground and mediate these competing forces. For example, in Chapter 4, teacher competitions—high-stakes activities that are pervasive among schoolteachers in China—provided platforms for pursuing the ideal of exemplary teacher by polishing model lessons and engaging in intensive collaboration with colleagues. I paid particular attention to how teachers mobilised semiotic resources to narrate and frame their experiences, for example by mitigating the negative effects of powerful and sometimes ethically problematic institutional demands, and by cultivating a sense of collective and collaborative belonging to the institution or teaching group in which they worked.

I also explored mentor-novice relationships (Chapter 5), where participants negotiated their default identities as 'mentor' and 'novice'. Although these relationships were formally prescribed and reinforced through school rituals such as the '*baishihui*', where novice teachers publicly bowed to their future mentors to mark the formal establishment of this relationship, the case study of Jing and her mentor showed how, at the micro level of interaction, they managed power imbalance through discursive strategies such as laughter and face-saving. In doing so, they sought to achieve the formal goals of mentoring, to negotiate their mentor-novice relationships, and to support the novice teacher in developing a sense of authority in her own expertise or undermine her ability

to do so. Building on insights from this case and narratives from other participants, this chapter conceptualised mentor-novice relationship as an 'affective disciplinary technology', which was drawn on Foucault's (2003) notion of governmentality and Lin and Zhao's (2023) analysis of affective governance within teacher-student relationships in China. The intimacy between novices and mentors, marked by care, trust, obligation, and moralised expectations, binds teachers together, offering emotional relief amid precarity and making neoliberal pressures such as performance pressure, contractual insecurity, and bureaucratic surveillance more bearable. On the other hand, I illustrated how familial intimacy not only cultivates solidarity but also produces boundaries, reinforcing particularistic ties and uneven distributions of professional capital.

Through fine-grained analysis of classroom interaction, Chapter 6 showed how novice teachers enacted multiple and shifting identities such as assessors, motivators, disciplinarians, and facilitators in the unfolding of their classroom teaching. Many of these identities were closely aligned with national and institutional goals and expectations. Novice teachers routinely drew on practices such as choral repetition and teacher nomination, which were widely recognised as a distinctly Chinese model of teaching and as markers of 'good teaching' and components of teacher expertise in the context. However, at the same time, moments of resistance and misalignment highlighted that these routines were not always enacted in a predictable and stable manner. Teachers and students were observed to negotiate these prescriptive norms in real-time interaction, and such deviations underscored the interactionally accomplished and consistently negotiated nature of classroom life. These observations suggest that teacher professional identities are fluid, interactionally accomplished, providing teachers with opportunities to exercise agency through symbolic power in real-time classroom interactions.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I wove their narratives into ethnographic portraits to make more

holistic sense of their experiences, beliefs, and the critical incidents that shaped them. Through these portraits we see moments of improvisation, resilience, creativity, and self-directed learning within an education system shaped by competing forces, yet we also see how these attempts fade away due to lack of institutional support, resources, or recognition.

To bring together the key arguments of this thesis, it is helpful to revisit the research questions that have guided this study:

RQ: How do novice teachers discursively perform, negotiate, and construct their professional identities as they learn to teach in urban public schools in China?

I. How is the notion of a 'good teacher' discursively produced, legitimised, and contested within specific institutional contexts?
II. In what ways are novice teachers' identity negotiations embedded within the broader sociocultural and political discourses in China?
III. How do their identity negotiations enable or constrain novice teachers' sense of agency in their everyday professional practices?

In the following two sections, I revisit and synthesise the key insights that address these questions through two interrelated themes: first, the sociocultural conditions of learning to teach in China, and second, implications for teacher professional identity and teacher agency.

8.2 Sociocultural Conditions of Learning to Teach in China

8.2.1 The Pursuit of Exemplarity

Education in China is inextricably entwined with the nation's aspiration to ascend as a global power and its assimilation of neoliberal economic rationalities within the ideological framework of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. This edifice generates a dialectical tension between socialist moralism and market-oriented competition: while official rhetoric extols collective culture, moral virtue, and civic harmony, policy

implementation is rigorously governed by quantifiable metrics of productivity and efficiency (Sigley, 2006; Zhang, 2023). Consequently, the revival of Confucian tradition since the 1980s functions less as a nostalgic return to cultural authenticity than as a moral discourse that legitimises social hierarchy, authoritarian governance, and neoliberal efficiency (Gilgan, 2023; Yu, 2008). From this perspective, the pursuit of exemplarity becomes not only an administrative mechanism of defining who is to be rewarded and punished, and as a technology through which teachers are urged to govern themselves.

This exemplary imperative is recursively reproduced across different levels of the education system. At the regional level, local governments curate model schools and model teachers as emblematic showcases of educational reforms and political accomplishments. At the institutional level, schools compete to cultivate distinctive brands to accrue symbolic, cultural, and economic capital (Kipnis & Li, 2010). Within teacher education, the same exemplary logic is internalised: teachers are envisioned as virtuoso performers of excellence and exemplars of moral virtue. In such a climate, to be 'average' is to be deemed unpromising, dismissed as mediocre, or relegated to the peripheries of professional communities, despite the paradox that it is precisely the hundreds and thousands of 'average' teachers who sustain the everyday functioning of the educational system.

As Bakken (2000) observes, drawing on Quatelet's (1848) theory of the 'average man', the meaning of the 'norm' in modernity typically shifts from a moral to a comparative register: values are defined not *a priori* but through an iterative process of comparison. The average man embodies not an ideal model but a statistical construct through which individuals are judged relative to one another. Within such a normative system, the exemplary is merely an extreme point on a statistical continuum rather than the moral standard itself. In contrast, within China's education culture, this logic is inverted: the

exemplary has become the norm, and moral virtue has been absorbed into the mechanics of normalisation, becoming the very criteria through which teachers are evaluated and governed. For teachers, the pursuit of exemplarity thus embodies both self-improvement and self-governance: they align their desires, emotions, and self-improvements with institutional goals and become, in Foucauldian terms, 'free subjects' who govern themselves in the process of becoming exemplary (2007).

While I do not intend to essentialise Chinese teachers' identities nor to deny their subjectivities, and certainly not to offer reductive accounts for their experiences and choices, I argue that Chinese public schooling, as a 'centring institution' (Blommaert, 2005, p. 75), exerts a profound influence on the formation of teachers. Entering the profession imbued with idealistic visions of stability or social respectability, these teachers are soon compelled to become ruthlessly utilitarian, pursuing quantifiable achievements as a means of securing both personal advancement and collective prestige. Through highly ideologised and politicised discursive practices, they internalise and reproduce dominant discourses of professionalism, hierarchies, and patriotism. They are driven to compete, to excel, and to align themselves with the institutionally assigned roles; yet for most, these moments engender negotiation, disappointment, dissonance, and a sense of marginalisation.

As illustrated by the cases of these two urban schools, being 'average' often leads to exclusion from professional development opportunities and relegation to a marginal institutional status. By contrast, those deemed exemplary accumulate the symbolic and material capital required to perform excellence sustainably and consistently. This pursuit of exemplarity entrenches hierarchies that marginalise those who refuse, or fail, or are unable to embody its ideal. While a small number of teachers are regarded as exemplary, the majority of teach are positioned as not-yet-exemplary, compelled into a lifelong trajectory towards becoming more than average (Zhao, 2017).

Furthermore, this also reveals a deeper dilemma in the governance of Chinese education reform. While the Party-state seeks to utilise exemplar models to improve overall educational quality and to demonstrate the effectiveness of top-down policies, it often exacerbates stratification and inequalities at the local level. These inequalities extend beyond the material to encompass professional credibility, self-efficacy, peer and public recognition, and moral legitimacy, all of which are crucial to a novice teachers' professional formation and standing.

To summarise, the findings show that the notion of a 'good teacher' is a discursive construct continually shaped by institutional and political demands, reproduced and legitimised through institutional rituals, training activities, and performance evaluations. Novice teachers' identity negotiations and (re)constructions are thus deeply embedded within wider sociocultural and political discourses, particularly those shaped by neoliberal competitiveness and moral expectations within schools and across the educational system. These discourses are underpinned by the Party-state's emphasis on *exemplarity* and *suzhi* (quality), which moralise the pursuit of excellence as a defining attribute of the expected teacher identity and normalise the corresponding understandings of teaching professionalism. This normalisation is manifested in quantifiable metrics for evaluating teachers' performances—for example, the number of teaching awards received, students' examination results, and participation in demonstration lessons or teaching competitions—which transform the moral imperative of being exemplary into a rigid, manageable set of outcomes.

8.2.2 Compassion as Affective Technologies

Across the various professional practices explored in this study, from mentoring relationships to teaching competitions and everyday classroom interactions, a recurring thread emerged: teacher identities were deeply mediated through collegial compassion.

Forged under contested neoliberal conditions of performativity and accountability, such compassion functions as a supportive resource, redeeming teachers from a stressful and competitive grid while enabling a more congruent identification as members of a professional community (Lin & Zhao, 2023).

During fieldwork, it was common to see teachers worked intensively with one another in preparation for examinations, teaching competitions, and other high-stakes events. Collegial compassion in these contexts can be understood as a collective coping practice through which teachers worked together to manage the external pressures and demands imposed upon them. Importantly, this compassion was not merely an abstract feeling of empathy but was enacted through concrete social practices such as dividing labour, sharing teaching materials, observing lessons voluntarily, and offering emotional support. Through these practices, teachers secured their belonging and recognition as legitimate members within their communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). When teachers were burdened by the dominant discourses of performativity and competition, their motivations often shifted from striving for individual excellence towards protecting the collective reputation, whether of their institutions, subject groups, or year teams. Individualised struggles for recognition were thus transformed into affective and moral engagement in a shared enterprise, where teachers collaborated for the collective good and redistributed the burdens of neoliberal demands. These family-like relationships created space for teachers to negotiate and soften external pressures.

Rooted in Confucian cultural ethics, such moments of shared care can be conceptualised as ‘affective technologies’ (Foucault, 2007), through which teachers exercised agency amid precarity, vulnerability, and institutional scrutiny. Compassion and cooperation thus constitute a form of ‘relational agency’ (Edwards, 2005, p. 168), one that does not necessarily overturn existing hierarchies but instead strategically work, adapt, and survive within them.

As a moral and affective disciplinary force, compassion defines what it means to a 'good teacher' within the teaching communities: caring, self-sacrificing, and devoted to collective interests. However, the very acts of offering and receiving guidance are often entangled with power asymmetries. One incident from my fieldwork illustrates this dynamic. A principal in Ronghua District strategically exercised *guanxi* (a form of interpersonal relations) to enhance his school's reputation by leveraging personal ties with a district education officer responsible for promoting educational equity. When the officer attempted to diversify competition results and prevent a few elite schools from monopolising awards, the principal capitalised on the opportunity and ensured that novice teachers from his school received first prize in a teaching competition. Afterward, the principal instructed the participating teachers to express gratitude to the officer through gifts and banquets.

This episode reveals that teacher compassion in Chinese schools cannot be equated with Wenger's (1998) notion of Community of Practice, in which members engage in shared professional inquiry or pursue the public good collectively. Instead, these practices are better understood through the lens of *guanxi* (interpersonal networks) structured by reciprocity and emotional indebtedness (Yang, 1994). School leaders and mentors strategically mobilise and display their relational ties to assert and consolidate influence, often invoking the rhetoric of 'honour' and 'collective good'. In this process, offering guidance and support to novice teachers not only reinforces their status as experienced professionals but also consolidates their institutional authority (Fan, 2017). In turn, novice teachers are expected to demonstrate respect, loyalty, and deference, reproducing hierarchical dependencies within ostensibly caring relationships. That said, this thesis does not take *guanxi* as a primary analytical lens; future studies could build on this discussion to investigate how *guanxi* influences teachers' promotion and career trajectories.

Teachers are encouraged to realise themselves through the collective, subsuming personal ambition, privacy, and wellbeing within the broader moral narratives of institutional honour and harmony. Power asymmetries are often veiled in the rhetoric of unity, while ethical boundaries such as privacy or autonomy become blurred. These relationships can diminish teachers' sense of self-efficacy and agency and undermine policy aims of educational equity and professional development. As the circulation of recognition and resources is not solely shaped by top-down reforms but is also by leaderships' interpersonal ties, trust may substitute for teacher professional expertise. Under such conditions, cross-school collaboration is restricted, stratification persists, and teacher agency becomes increasingly difficult to exercise, opening space where corruption and corrupt practices may take root.

8.3 Teacher Professional Identity and Agency

Despite external demands and dominant discourses, the participating teachers, along with others encountered during the fieldwork, did not simply acquiesce or comply. Instead, they acted as social agents who actively interpreted, negotiated, and improvised institutional expectations. This agency became visible at the micro-level, in real-time interactions with colleagues, students, and the researcher, where moments of resistance, misalignment, hesitation, or silence demonstrated identities and routines as neither predictable nor stable.

Mentor-novice interactions provide a compelling illustration of this dynamic. While the institutional script positioned mentors as experts and novices as learners, these categories were continuously negotiated and (re)constructed in practice. Novice teachers provided alternative interpretations and leveraged personal experience to shift the epistemic authority of the exchange (Heritage, 2012; Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012). Mentors, in response, sometimes softened their authoritarian stance by acknowledging

shared uncertainty. These deviations reveal that identities are not merely assigned social categories, but are accomplished in interaction, profoundly shaped by the contingencies of talk, the distribution of knowledge, and the moral evaluations circulating among participants. The same applies to teachers' classroom interactions, where moment-to-moment exchanges become sites for identity negotiation. Novice teachers continually constructed their professional selves by reinforcing dominant instructional roles, and at other times enacting alternative ones that diverged from institutional expectations. Such moments constituted the ongoing process through which novice teachers explored who they could become as teachers.

Such findings challenge dominant framings of teacher professionalism that prioritises compliance with externally defined standards. Instead, they align with poststructuralist and sociocultural understandings of identity and agency, which view teachers as constantly negotiating the boundaries of what is appropriate, legitimate, and possible within their institutional contexts (Tsui, 2007). Even within highly monitored, test-driven environments, teachers mobilised semiotic and relational resources to reframe their participation (Gray & Morton, 2018). They used discursive strategies to diffuse hierarchical tension, invoked care and moral responsibility to justify alternative pedagogical practices, or employed brief hesitations, delays, and minimal responses to push back against expectations (Donaghue, 2022). These micro-level utterances illustrate that agency operates not only through overt acts of defiance or resistance, but also through the mundane, often unnoticed ways teachers reshaped interactional footing and positioning in moment-by-moment unfolding of talk (Copland & Donaghue, 2021; Li, 2017).

The ethnographic portraits in this study further show that teachers do not simply submit to external demands. Rather, they navigate competing institutional forces, balancing performance pressures, moral expectations, and relational obligations. This underscores

the need for teacher education programmes, whether in universities or schools, to create spaces that value teachers' voices, wellbeing, and vulnerability. Such spaces should encourage teachers to critically engage with, rather than merely comply with, normative assumptions about 'appropriate' teaching. Moreover, teachers require legitimate, protected channels through which they can raise concerns, especially when confronted with unethical or coercive practices. In the Chinese context, these channels remain limited, often constrained by hierarchical structures and the moralised discourse of collectivism. Strengthening ethical governance and safeguarding teachers' rights is thus crucial, not only for teacher wellbeing but also for fostering a professional culture in which agency can be responsibly exercised. Future research and policy efforts should attend to these structural conditions, ensuring that teachers' capacity to act, speak, and dissent is recognised as an essential component of educational reform.

8.4 Contribution to Knowledge

The research contributes to knowledge in four main ways, offering conceptual, empirical, and methodological insights into the study of teacher identity, agency and professional development in urban China, as well as into international conversations in education and teacher education.

First, conceptually, the study employs in-depth ethnographic case studies to explore the nuanced and complex processes through which teacher identities are negotiated and (re)constructed in contemporary China. It offers rich evidence that deepens understandings of Chinese urban schooling through the lived experiences of novice teachers. While students in parts of mainland China, particularly the Beijing-Shanghai-Jiangsu-Zhejiang (B-S-J-Z) region, have excelled in the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), this success has drawn worldwide attention and prompted scholars to examine the sources of China's educational achievement (Zhao, 2016). However, far less attention has been paid to the intense pressures, competition,

and inequalities that shape teachers' everyday professional lives within a system where neoliberal, socialist and Confucian discourses intersect. This study reveals how teacher education and professional development are entrenched in structural power asymmetries that reproduce inequality and constrain teachers' professional agency. With such systems, teachers' identity negotiations become sites where agency is both constrained and enabled. On the one hand, while the rigid institutional system paints a clear picture of the professional path, powerful institutional forces impose ascribed identities that novice teachers may feel compelled to perform, leaving them with little room to challenge normative expectations or exercise agency (Han, 2017; Tatto et al., 2018). On the other hand, the study also demonstrates that relational forms of agency are not external to institutional pressures, but as constituted through them. In a context where exemplarity renders teachers constantly comparable, and where competition intensifies tensions and anxieties, novice teachers, as well as their colleagues, do not simply resist these pressures as isolated beings. Instead, they turn to one another, forming family-like yet pragmatic and affective ties that enable them to cope with, navigate, and negotiate institutional expectations. These practices include sharing teaching materials and offering emotional reassurance, and engaging in face-saving strategies at the micro level of interaction.

Importantly, such relational practices are less about striving together *for* excellence than striving together *against* pressure. Rather than being driven primarily by shared professional aspirations, these ties are grounded in a sense of shared precarity and the need for mutual survival within a highly competitive environment. This highlights the need for teacher education research to attend more closely to its ambivalent and survival-oriented dimensions of teacher community and collaboration, and to reconceptualise teacher identity and agency as enacted under constraints.

Second, methodologically, the research combines ethnography with sociolinguistic

frameworks, attending to multiple layers of meaning-making: from semiotic signs circulated in the school environment to the linguistic and interactional resources mobilised in professional talks and reflective interviews. Teachers' professional practices and dialogic interactions, observed and analysed ethnographically, are situated in relation to broader structural and discursive forces. Although the study involved only five focal participants, the fieldwork extended to visits and observations across most public junior secondary schools within *Ronghua District*—an area with a population of nearly one million and widely regarded as one of the city's most educationally competitive districts, attracting top-performing teachers, high-achieving students, and aspirational families. This extensive engagement allowed for a deep and contextually situated understanding of the research context. Without such depth, we might only see teachers' heavy workloads and competitive pressures in public schools, while the underlying structural issues shaping these conditions would remain obscured. The ethnographic immersion also made it possible to capture fleeting incidents and subtle tensions that participants often took for granted and would have been difficult to articulate in research interviews or autobiographies. Recorded through detailed and sustained fieldnotes and audio recordings, these moments, for me, were key to understanding the contradictions that run through teachers' everyday professional lives.

Third, through the fieldwork process, I came to question the use of Confucianism as an overarching analytical framework for interpreting the Chinese education system in academic research. Instead, this study shows that the tensions and conflicts experienced by novice teachers were embedded in discourses of performativity, competition, and hierarchy—discourses shaped by the interplay of socialist and neoliberal values and communicated through semiotic resources and institutional rituals in schools. While I acknowledge that elements of Confucian thought are occasionally invoked in political rhetoric and policy narratives, such references often serve as a disciplinary technology rather than reflecting a cultural revival. For example, the *baishihui* described in Chapter

5 was frequently framed through the rhetoric of filial piety and reverence for the more knowledgeable other. The ceremony employed performative acts, such as bowing to mentors and offering sending gifts and flowers, to legitimise hierarchical relationships and render social interaction more controllable.

However, structural constraints should not be mistaken for the inescapable limits on individual agency. The final contribution of this research, therefore, lies in providing empirical evidence that adds to the growing body of research on teacher identity. In this study, the theoretical framework of identity adopted (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Beijaard et al., 2004; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Hall, 1996) makes it possible to connect the transient, momentary identities in the micro analysis of teachers' talks with the identities assigned or expected by institutions (Gray & Morton, 2018; Li, 2017; Little, 2012). In the mentor-novice relationships, for example, the notion of identity enables an exploration of how institutionally prescribed hierarchies are negotiated in interaction, and how mentors and novices claim, perform, resist, and (re)construct their assigned roles through everyday professional practices. Teachers, therefore, are not merely recipients of ideology but social agents who interpret and perform its meanings—even if only in fleeting moments of resistance during mentoring sessions, in subtle acts of silence or irony in group meetings, or in pedagogical decisions that implicitly challenge prescribed routines in the classroom. In doing so, they reproduce, adapt, and at times even subvert the dominant moral and institutional orders that define their profession. The study therefore highlights symbolic power teachers can wield through talk to position themselves, negotiate asymmetries, and reclaim authority over their work.

To sum up, these potential contributions offer a more nuanced and situated understanding of teacher identity, agency, and professional development in urban China. By foregrounding teachers' lived experiences, the study places the analytical focus to the everyday realities of teachers. It also demonstrates how combining ethnographic and

sociolinguistic approaches can reveal the complex interplay between discourse, structure, and experience in schools. Conceptually, the research moves beyond culturally essentialist explanations, showing that teacher professionalism in China is shaped by the intersecting forces of socialist, neoliberal, and moral discourses. More importantly, it reconceptualises teacher identity and agency as relational, highlighting the importance of collegiality and interdependence in teachers' everyday professional lives. Such relationality is often shared by precarity and enacted as a form of mutual coping and survival within a highly competitive environment. Finally, by linking micro-level identity enactments to institutional and ideological structures, the study contributes to broader debates on how teachers negotiate agency within systems that both enable and constrain them.

8.5 Limitations and Strengths

This study was shaped by its contexts, relationships, changing circumstances. While these are discussed here under the heading of limitations, I regard them as part of the ongoing process of knowledge construction. In what follows, I reflect on several limitations related to context, methodology, and positionality, and consider how they have informed both my development as a researcher and my understanding of the field.

While this study concentrates on urban schools, it is important to clarify that educational resources in China remain highly uneven: not only between rural and urban regions, as often discussed in the academic literature, but also among urban schools and between cities themselves. The study, therefore, cannot represent all the complexities of Chinese schooling. Yet it illuminates how learning to teach is neither a linear nor one-size-fit-all process, but one deeply intertwined with the contextual conditions in which it takes place. Conducted in Ronghua District, a well-resourced urban district, I began with the assumption that teacher development and professional practices in such settings would be standardised and uniform across schools, and that novice teachers' experiences would

therefore not differ substantially. But as the fieldwork unfolded, I came to realise that how structural inequalities played out even within privileged urban systems. The boundaries between high-performing, exemplary schools and under-resourced, less visible ones were often neglected. This stratification influenced not only how professional practices and everyday interactions were organised but also the ways novice teachers came to understand their professional identities. It taught me to attend more carefully to how teacher professional identities were negotiated through the hierarchies that exist between schools and among individuals.

Second, the fieldwork was both unpredictable and chaotic, with many unexpected turns that were far beyond what I had initially planned. When I first designed this research during the Covid-19 pandemic from 2021 to 2022, my plan was to conduct a comparative study in two cities through online data collection. However, the sudden lifting of quarantine polices were a major surprise for me, as it opened up the possibilities of on-site fieldwork, but also disrupted all these arrangements I had made. This shift required me to adjust the research design and reassess the methodologies. Ultimately, I decided to focus on one city to allow for a more immersive and manageable approach. What's more, negotiating access proved more difficult than anticipated. Several schools were reluctant to participate when I sent initial invitations, and even after gaining entry, the lingering effects of the pandemic continued to shape everyday school life. Outbreaks of seasonal flu further disrupted the school calendar, and teacher meetings that I had hoped to observe were postponed multiple times. Eventually, after establishing trust and rapport with participants, I asked some of them to record their sessions on my behalf. As a result, the data collected from novice teachers were inevitably uneven, reflecting the contingencies and constraints of conducting ethnographic research in school contexts.

These disruptions, however, became an important part of my own learning as researcher. I initially saw mentoring relationships as the main site through which institutional power

and teacher learning were negotiated. But as the fieldwork progressed, I started to notice that other disciplinary mechanisms, such as teaching competitions and open classes, also played influential roles in shaping teacher professional identities. What first looked like an unplanned change in my research design gradually turned into a conceptual shift in how I understood learning to teach in this context. I came to realise that teacher professional development in schools not confined to specific practices but is constituted through the daily routines, relationships, and institutional practices that make up school life, mediated through multiple and overlapping forms of recognition, control, and surveillance. The activities I highlighted in the findings chapters, such as teaching competitions, mentoring session, and classroom teaching, exemplify a shared underlying logic of governance. In this sense, the governing process of learning to teach was established not only through institutional rules or external assessments, but more through self-discipline, self-regulation, imagination, and aspiration. Teachers learned to internalise institutional expectations and to envision themselves as the particular kinds of 'good' teachers, motivated by the desire to belong to the teacher communities where those ideals sustained.

All these incidents made me aware that 'change' is a persistent theme in qualitative and ethnographic research. The process of *working through change* taught me that qualitative research is never prescribed or fixed, but evolves with the subjects, spaces, places, and relationships that shape it. In this sense, the changes I encountered are not limitations but contributions, both to my own way of understanding those I studies and to others who find themselves learning in and through navigating uncertainties.

Third, my positionality as a young woman and a doctoral researcher from a well-known UK university shaped both my access to the field and my relationships with participants. While my institutional background sometimes lent me legitimacy, it also created distance. I often sensed hesitation from school leaders when I approached them about

participating in the study. Due to their busy schedules, previous experiences with research, and the power dynamics within schools, opportunities to talk with senior teachers were rare. In contrast, I had far more chances to get to know novice teachers, as we were closer in age, educational experience and areas of interest, which made it easier to talk about their professional and personal experiences.

When I did interview experienced teachers, I sometimes hesitated to ask about sensitive issues such as school funding or teacher hierarchy, as I could feel a sense of caution and vigilance in the conversation. Over time, I came to see these hesitations not as methodological weaknesses but as data in themselves, as they might reflect the very issues that I was trying to study. To understand these dynamics more fully, I turned to other sources, for example, teachers' own accounts of experience and emotion, schools' self-presentations on their websites, and publicly available interviews with head teachers. These documents and materials helped me see how leadership and teacher professionalism were talked about, portrayed, and reproduced across different discourses. This experience taught me that ethnographic knowledge is constantly shaped by the researcher's own position within the field. It made me more aware that, as a qualitative researcher, my role is deeply entangled with the contexts, relationships, and power structures that shape the research process, reminding me of the need for constant reflexivity and self-reflection.

8.6 Future Directions

Building on the limitations and insights discussed above, future inquiry could extend this study in several directions. First, while this research focused on urban public schools, comparative studies across different regions, such as rural areas or lower-tier (third- and fourth- tier) cities in China, could further illuminate how teacher professional development is embedded in institutional, social, economic, and political conditions. Such comparisons would help reveal how ideas of 'good teaching' are differently

constructed and negotiated across educational settings.

Second, this ethnographic study has highlighted how different disciplinary mechanisms shaped teacher identities. Future research could explore these mechanisms more explicitly by tracing their history roots, examining their spread across China as part of boarder neoliberal competitive cultures, and analysing how they intersect with both communist and Confucian legacies in schooling. Further work could also investigate how such activities and events are internalised or resisted by teachers in their everyday work, drawing on theoretical perspectives such as teacher emotion, gendered subjectivities, and professional ethics and wellbeing.

Thirdly, research on teachers is evolving, relational, and situated. Future studies could adopt more participatory qualitative methods, positioning researchers and teachers in shared spaces of inquiry and reflection. For example, involving teachers as co-researchers or co-analysts, or engaging researchers in teaching roles, could generate more dialogic understandings of professional life in schools. Such approaches would also challenge perceived hierarchies between the researcher and the researched, ensuring reciprocity and ethical engagement throughout the research.

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Appendix A: Transcription Conventions

(1.8)	Numbers enclosed in parentheses indicate a pause. The number represents the number of seconds' duration of the pause, to one decimal place.
(.)	A pause of less than 0.2 seconds.
=	An equal sign is used to show that there is no time lapse between the portions connected by the equal signs. This is used where a second speaker begins their utterance just at the moment when the first speaker finishes.
[]	Brackets around portions of utterances show that those portions overlap with a portion of another speaker's utterance.
((looking))	A description enclosed in a double bracket indicates a non-verbal activity or the transcriber's note.
↑↓	Up or down arrows are used to indicate that there is sharply rising or falling intonation. The arrow is placed just before the syllable in which the change in intonation occurs.
<u>Under</u>	Underlines indicate speaker emphasis on the underlined portion of the word.
°would°	This indicates an utterance that is much softer than the normal speech of the speaker. This symbol will appear at the beginning and at the end of the utterance in question.
> <, < >	'Greater than' and 'less than' signs indicate that the talk they surround was noticeably faster or slower than the surrounding talk.

Appendix B: Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: CIA-22TT-119

My name is Shuyan Liu, a doctoral student in the Department of Education, University of Oxford. You are being invited to participate in a research project that I am undertaking for the completion of my doctoral degree, under the supervision of Professor Ian Thompson and Dr Karen Skilling. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take your time to read the following information and decide whether you wish to take part. Should you have any questions about the research, or you would like more information, please contact me at shuyan.liu@education.ox.ac.uk or +86 13981765075.

Why is this research being conducted?

The current study intends to advance the field of teacher education by exploring how the complex identity formation of novice English language teachers (ELT) through social interactions with other teachers in urban public schools in China. It also attempts to reveal how institutional demands, traditional Confucian thinking and the hierarchical structure in teacher education in China play a role in facilitating or sometimes impinging on individual teachers' learning and professional identity construction in the workplace.

My experience of working as an English language teacher in China makes me aware of the role of teacher identity and agency in teacher professional development. Sustainable teacher education should be constructed by active engagement from both novice and experienced teachers, thereby empowering novice teachers to critically reconceptualize their teaching practices and benefit the professional community. Also, teachers are direct policy practitioners and their responses can predict the outcomes of new reforms. A better understanding of how identity is embedded in the quality of teacher education enables researchers and policymakers to understand the complexity of the learning trajectories of novice teachers.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You are invited to take part in this project because you meet the following criteria at the same time: a. you are a junior secondary teacher (Year 7, 8, 9) and teaching English as a second language in a state-funded school in China; b. you are a formally authorized teacher (*formally authorized teacher: teachers who are recruited and managed under the national education system*); c. you are a novice teacher with less than three years of teaching experience. The research aims to recruit eight teachers in total from four schools in two cities to participate in this study. With each school, two teachers will be recruited.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the study, without giving a reason, by advising me of this decision. The deadline by which you can withdraw any information you have contributed to the research is Dec 2024. If you decide to withdraw, any data that has already been collected will not be presented or will be turned over to you for your disposal.

What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

With your consent, you will be involved in the research for one school semester (four months/16 weeks). During this period, the research activities will involve:

1. I would like to audio record how you interact with your mentor in one-to-one mentoring and with other teachers and educators in lesson planning activities. You will

be asked to suggest particular meetings of mentoring and lesson planning that you may want to share with me. Through audio-recorded observations, I hope to investigate how you communicate with your mentor and relevant others, what roles you play as you talk about what you think and plan to do, and how the process of learning to teach is co-constructed by members of a professional community.

2. You will be invited to take part in interviews. That includes two formal interviews and several follow-up interviews after recording observations. In formal interviews, the following topics will be covered: your educational background, your motivation for entering the profession, perceptions of the English language and English Language teaching, and perceptions of mentoring and lesson planning. To make sure I can have an accurate record of our talk, the interviews will be audio-recorded as well. The interviews will last for no more than 2 hours each time and regular breaks will be offered.

Are there any benefits in taking part?
Although there will be no immediate benefit to you from the participation, you will find it very rewarding. This will be a great chance for you to reflect on your close-up encounters in the workplace, which are one of the essential parts of the process of being a teacher. You can be more aware of and critical about your professional development and the social situations of your development. Further, you will contribute to the body of knowledge about teacher identity and teacher learning in situated activities that may help others in the future. Once the research has been completed, the researcher will update you about the findings from the study. In this way, you will be aware of how your contribution has added to the knowledge of teacher education.

What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?
The data that will be collected involves: a. identifiable data: your age, gender, teaching experience, education history, contact details, consent records of written consent forms; b. other research data: audio recordings of your personal encounters in school from recording observations, and audio recordings of interviews, and transcripts of audio recordings, archival materials of school websites.

Interactional data that features the linguistic use of interlocutors in real-world settings will be collected to explore how the complex identity formation of novice English language teachers through social interactions with other teachers. At the same time, the study attempts to reveal how cultural, institutional and societal issues play a role in facilitating or sometimes impinging on individual teachers' learning. Therefore, the ethnographic data about the participants and the social situations of your professional development will be relevant for achieving the research aim.

Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?
The research may be published in academic journals or books, or be used in conference presentations. Direct identifiers such as your name and contact details will be removed from the data in any publications or other research outputs. All identifiable details will be replaced with pseudonyms directly after the transcription of the data.

For this study, it can be difficult to completely anonymise your personal data without losing its academic value, but all research data and results will be used and presented with codes and pseudonyms to preserve the confidentiality of the research participants.

Data Protection
During the course of the research, measures will be taken to protect the confidentiality

of you and other participants. Your personal and research data will be transferred and stored as safely and securely as possible. Identifiable and personal data (including consent forms) will be encrypted and stored on OneDrive for Business, a platform approved by the University's Information Security team for the storage of research data. After the research has been completed, your exact names and addresses will be removed but contact information may be retained for future use. The data of audio recordings collected from a Chinese video meeting platform, *VooV meeting*, will be immediately transferred and then stored in encrypted files in storage systems provided by the University of Oxford. Research data will be stored for three years after publication or public release of other research outputs.

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the study. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

Who has reviewed this study?
This study has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?
If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact Shuyan Liu at shuyan.liu@education.ox.ac.uk, we will do our best to answer your query. We will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

> Social Sciences & Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee; Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk; Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Boundary Brook House, Churchill Drive, Headington, Oxford OX3 7GB

Further Information and Contact Details
If you would like to discuss the research with the research beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:
Shuyan Liu, Department of Education, University of Oxford
shuyan.liu@education.ox.ac.uk, +44 07763648476 (UK); +86 13981765075 (CHINA)

Appendix C: Interview Protocols

Interview Protocols for Novice Teachers

1. **Profile**
   - Tell me about your education background
   - Tell me about your previous teaching/learning experiences
   - Tell me about what you want to achieve and strive to accomplish in the future?
2. **Settings**
   - School culture (e.g. culture, workload, support)
   - Teaching group culture (e.g. culture, TPD practices)
3. **Teacher identity**
   - What is the role of teachers?
   - Tell me about your role at school?
   - Pedagogy/teaching strategies (e.g. pedagogical practices, language use in classroom)
   - Do you feel confident about classroom teaching?
   - Tell me about your experiences of participating teaching competitions.
   - What emotions are attached to your professional work?
4. **Learner identity**
   - What is your role in your teaching group?
   - What strategies do you use to cope with teaching-related issues at work?
   - How do you develop your teaching?
   - How is your relationship with others (i.e. school leadership, group leader, colleagues)?
   - Do you feel a sense of belonging to the learning community?

Interview Protocols for Mentors

1. **Profile**
   - Tell me about your education background
   - Tell me about your prior teaching experiences
   - What previous professional experiences do you consider important for your role as a mentor?
2. **Mentor Practices and institution support**
   - Can you describe your experience serving as a mentor to novice teachers? How many novices have you mentored? For how long?
   - How is mentoring organised or supported within your school? Are there any formal guidelines, trainings, incentives, or evaluations?
   - How do you personally understand the purpose of mentoring and the mentor-

novice relationship?

- What do you think a mentor is responsible for? What about the novice?
- Have you encountered any challenges in your mentoring relationships? Can you give me an example and how you handled them?

3. Views of novice teachers' professional development

- How do you perceive your tudi's (novice) professional development over time? In what areas have you observed growth or struggle?
- In you view, what supports or hinders novice teachers' development in your school?
- How do you see the mentorship contributing to novices' identity and professional learning?

Interview Protocols for Head of English Department

1. School and Departmental Context/Culture

- Could you briefly introduce the school's approach to novice teacher induction or training? What formal training activities/programs/event do you provide?
- Within the English Department, how are novice teachers supported in their first years? Are there any departmental guidelines or informal practices?

2. Expectations & Challenges

- How do you understand graduates from normal universities and those who are not? What are the differences?
- What expectations does your Department hold for novice teachers?
- What challenges do novice teachers typically face in departmental work? (i.e., I noticed that novice teachers tended to observed classes from different experienced teachers. Some thought this was necessary but some felt a sense of confusion as too many lessons observed at the same time?)
- How does the Department measure or assess novices' progress?

3. Reflections on Professional Development

- How does your institutional collaborate with the district or city level educational authorities to contribute to novice teacher professional development?
- How do you navigate recent reforms? How do department practices and broader policies interact in shaping novices' growth?
- In your view, what supports or hinders novice teachers' professional development in this school?
- What changes would you suggest to better support novice teachers going forward?

Appendix D: Organisation of Unit Sessions in English lessons

Table 6 summarises the typical organisation of unit sessions observed during fieldwork. Based on 65 English lessons—57 regular lessons and 8 demonstration or competition lessons—the table outlines the recurring sequence of activities across different session types within a unit. While the specific ordering and emphasis of activities varied across lessons, the table captures the dominant instructional patterns that structured lesson preparation and classroom practice.

Table 8.1

Organisation of Unit Sessions in the English Lessons

Unit Sessions	Typical Sequence of Activities
Listening and Speaking 1	Introducing the topic → Explaining new words and phrases → Listening to audio texts and completing tasks → Making up conversations
Listening and Speaking 2	Reviewing previous content → Explaining new words and phrases → Listening to audio texts and completing tasks → Making up conversations
Grammar Focus	Introducing the topic → Explaining grammar points → Students completing tasks → Making up conversations
Reading	Introducing the topic → Explaining new words and phrases → Students reading the texts and completing tasks → Making up conversations
Writing	Introducing the topic → Students reading model texts → Completing tasks → Writing exercises
Extensive Reading and Project Work	Introducing the topic → Students reading texts → Conducting a project (e.g., interview, class survey) → Making up conversations

Unit Exercise	Reviewing knowledge points → Completing exercises → Checking exercises

Appendix E: Data Archives

This appendix provides an overview of the data collected during fieldwork, including the types, quantity, and key features of each data source. The primary data sources consist of fieldnotes, audio recordings, and interview transcripts. Additionally, supplementary data such as photographs, school policy documents, and institutional materials, were collected to provide contextual information. Although not presented as main data sources, they have contributed to shaping the interpretations and arguments I made.

Table 8.2

Data Archives

Research Methods	Instruments	Products	Features
Observations	Observation	Fieldnotes (47 sets)	Detailed accounts of observations and institutional discourse on teachers and teacher education
	Document Collections	Governmental policies, school websites, photos, textbooks	Public and institutional discourses on teaching and teacher identity
Audio recordings	Audio recordings of novice teachers' routine activities	Audio recordings of classroom teaching (15 lessons), mentoring (3 sets), and teaching group meeting (10 sets)	Novice teachers' talk-in-interactions with others in the institutions
Interviews	Semi-structured interviews of participants	Audio recordings of interviews (21 sessions)	Novice teachers' talk-in- interactions with the researcher and their perceptions, beliefs, past

			experiences
	Semi-structured interviews of key stakeholders (i.e., Mentors, Heads of English Department)	Audio recordings of interviews (6 sessions)	Institutional values and beliefs

Appendix F: CUREC

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC)

CUREC 1A Form for Application form for research projects in the social sciences and humanities with less complex ethical issues

Section A: Filter for CUREC 2 application		
This section determines whether the application for ethics review should be made using this form (CUREC 1A) or the CUREC 2 form (for research with more complex ethical issues).		
Please indicate with an 'X'.	**Yes**	**No**
Does the research involve the deception of participants?	☐	☒
Are the research participants vulnerable in the context of the research, or classed as people whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question? For example, • Participants aged 16 or under (also answer question A5); • Participants aged 16 – 18 (refer to competent youths for guidance); • adults at risk; Note the University's Safeguarding Guidance and Code of Practice and its implications for researchers involving young people or adults at risk.	☐	☒
By taking part in the research, will participants be at risk of criminal prosecution or significant harm?	☐	☒
Does your research raise issues relevant to the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (the Prevent Duty), which seeks to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism? Best Practice Guidance 07 on the Prevent Duty provides further guidance.	☐	☒
If you answered **'No'** to all the questions above, go to Section B. If you answered **'Yes'** to any question above, continue to question 5 below.		
Is your project covered by a CUREC Approved Procedure?	☐	☐
If yes, list the CUREC Approved Procedure(s) you will follow		
If you have answered '**No**' to all questions 1-4, go on to **Section B**. If you answered '**Yes**' to ANY of questions 1-4, and answered '**No**' to question 5, **stop** completing this form and do not		

submit it for ethical review. You will instead need to submit a CUREC 2 application form. If you answered '**Yes**' to **any** of questions 1-4, and your project is covered by an Approved Procedure, **go on to Section B**. If more than one Approved Procedure applies, contact the SSH IDREC or your DREC for advice on whether a CUREC 2 form should be submitted instead.

Section B: Researchers		
1. Name of Principal Investigator or student's supervisor	Ian Thompson	
2. Department or Institute	Department of Education	
3. University of Oxford email address	ian.thompson@education.ox.ac.uk	
Copy and paste the following six rows as necessary to complete for each additional researcher who will be involved in this study, including student(s) and those external to the University.		
4. Name of researcher or student	Shuyan Liu	
5. Department or Institute	Department of Education	
6. University of Oxford email address	shuyan.liu@education.ox.ac.uk	
7. Role in research	student	
8. Degree programme, if student research	DPhil	
The whole research team		
9. Have the researchers undertaken research ethics and integrity training?	**Yes** ☒	**No** ☐
10. Please provide details of any research ethics and integrity training undertaken, including the dates of the training. Alternatively state relevant research experience.	1. The core course of research integrity and ethics training for all University students (Date: 9 June, 2022) 2. A session of Ethical and CUREC Inquiries in Research Training Session (RTS) for DPhil students in Department of Education (Date: 11 Feb, 2022)	
3. State any conflicts of interest and explain how these will be addressed.	none	

Section C: The research project	
1. Title of the research project	
Negotiating identity in social interaction in professional communities of practice: a case study of novice English language teachers in urban public schools in China	
2. Anticipated start date of the aspect of the research project involving human participants and/ or personal data (**dd/mm/yy**).	01/11/2022
3. Anticipated research end date (**dd/mm/yy**).	01/12/2023
4. Provide a brief lay summary of the aims and objectives of the research. This should cover the questions it will answer and any potential benefits. (max 300 words)	

Aims and objectives

The current study intends to advance the field of teacher education by exploring how the complex identity formation of novice English language teachers (ELT) through social interactions with other teachers in urban public schools in China. It also attempts to reveal how institutional demands, traditional Confucian thinking and the hierarchical structure in teacher education in China play a role in facilitating or sometimes impinging on individual teachers' learning and professional identity construction in the workplace.

Research questions

RQ 1: How do novice English language teachers negotiate and construct their professional identity through social interactions in professional communities of practice in urban schools in China?

RQ 2: How are novice teacher identities embedded in the macro issues of institutional, cultural and social phenomena?

Significance

Methodologically, the research moves beyond narratives towards a fine-grained, close-up analysis of moment-to-moment talks of teachers in professional communities. A better understanding of how identity is embedded in teacher education will not only enable researchers and policymakers to understand the complexity of teachers' learning trajectories, but also provide teachers with a tool to exercise agency in the face of influential political and institutional forces.

5. Please indicate the methods to be used (indicate with an '**X**'):	
Analysis of existing records	☒
Snowball sampling (recruiting through contacts of existing participants)	☐
Use of casual or local workers e.g. interpreters (refer to guidance in BPG 01: Researcher safety)	☐
Participant observation	☐
Covert observation	☐
Observation of specific organisational practices	☒
Participant completes questionnaire in hard copy	☐
Participant completes online questionnaire or other online task (refer to guidance in BPG 06: Internet-mediated research)	☒
Using social media to recruit or interact with participants (refer to guidance in BPG 06: Internet-mediated research)	☒
Participant performs paper and pencil task	☐
Participant performs verbal or aural task (e.g. for linguistic study)	☐
Focus group	☐
Interview (refer to guidance in BPG 10: Conducting research interviews)	☒
Audio recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☐
Video recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☒
Photography of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☐
Others (please specify below)	☐
6. Provide a brief summary of the research design and methods. What will research participants be asked to do? (max 300 words) Please also submit a copy of the questions participants will be asked, if applicable, or some information about the sorts of topics that will be covered.	

To explore an in-depth understanding of how novice teachers construct and negotiate identity in the process of learning to teach, I utilize a multiple case qualitative design drawing on a range of sources of evidence—interviews, observations and documents. In the study, I define the cases (or units of analysis) as individual novice English language teachers in secondary public schools in China. Given the definition of novice teachers varies in the literature, the study focuses on novice teachers who are under the mentoring of experienced teachers and with less than three years of teaching experience in Chinese secondary public schools. The study draws upon eight teachers from four public schools in two cities in China.

The thrust of the study is to investigate teacher talk and teacher learning by examining their linguistic use in social interactions, and how the macro issues are played out by examining contextual, ethnographic details. Therefore, two different types of data sets will be generated: 1) interactional data that features linguistic use of participants, and 2) ethnographic data that involves textual data of interview transcript and policy documents.

For naturally occurring interactional data set, the instrument is video-recorded observations. I will use stimulated recall interviews by inviting participants to view the sequences of video-recordings and then they can reflect on their utterances and behaviour. Semi-structured interviews and documents such as policy documents, school websites will be employed as well.

7. List the location(s) where the research will be conducted, including any other countries.	The research sites will be four public schools in two cities in China.
8. Clarify which parts of the research will be conducted in-person and which will take place remotely, e.g. online.	The whole process of data collection will be conducted in-person.

9. If your research involves fieldwork or travel and your department requires a travel risk assessment, will you have completed and returned a risk assessment form beforehand? Please indicate with an '**X**'. (This must be approved by your department before you travel. If you are travelling overseas, you are advised to take out University travel insurance.) Refer to guidance available from your Department, the Safety Office, the Social Sciences Division, and the Humanities Division, and on travel for University business.	Yes	☒
	No	☐
	Not required in this instance	☒

10. In the case of international or collaborative research, explain how you will address any ethical issues specific to the local context. Please provide details of the local review, approval or permission obtained or required. Refer to the BPG 16: Social science research conducted outside the UK. If there will be no local review, explain why not. Please mention any stakeholder or community engagement that has been/ will be undertaken in relation to the research. Please also address any physical or psychological risks for Oxford researchers and local fieldworkers in Section G.	
For this project, there will be no local reviews or approval because there is no research ethics committee or equivalent institution in China in which the research is to take place. However, a letter to the gatekeepers (school principals in this study) will be sent to make sure that they fully understand the aims and purposes of the research and what ethical issues may be involved in the study. Consent forms will also be obtained from the gatekeepers. (See the attached files of Letter to School Principal and Consent Form for school principal). Throughout the whole study, I will refer to the Ethics Issues Checklist for International Research during the course of the research.	
11. Name of departmental/ peer reviewer (if applicable)	
12. External organisation funding the research and grant reference (if applicable)	
13. Please refer to the CUREC Best Practice Guidance and list any that have been used to develop your research.	

Section D: Recruitment of research participants	
1. Number of participants	Approximately 6-8 participants
2. How was the number of participants decided?	Given the nature of the study is an in-depth exploration of teacher learning in social interactions and identity construction over a

	period of one year, a sample size of "no fewer than three cases" allows me to generate thick descriptions (Cohen et al., 2018). Considering the issues of potential attrition and data overload, 8 participants from four schools in two cities will be recruited in the study.	
3. Age range of participants	18 and over	
4. Inclusion criteria	Subjects who qualify for inclusion if they meet the following criteria: 1. Subject who is a junior secondary teacher (Year 7, 8, 9) and teaching English as a second language in a state-funded school in China; 2.Subject who is a formally authorized teacher (*formally authorized teacher: teachers who are recruited and managed under the national education system*); 3.Subject who is a novice teacher with less than three years of teaching experience; 4.Subject who is under the mentorship of veteran teacher(s) assigned by the school	
2. Exclusion criteria	Given the study is a case study with a specific purpose for the target population, subjects who don't meet any one of the criteria listed above will be excluded.	
3. Indicate with an '**X**' all intended recruitment methods **Please submit copies of the recruitment material that will be used, e.g. advertisement text, introductory email text.**	Poster advert	☒
	Flyer	☐
	Email circulation	☐
	Social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook)	☐
	Website	☐
	In-person approach	☒
	Snowball sampling	☐

	Recruitment sites (e.g. Mechanical Turk)	☐
	Existing contacts or volunteer database	☐
	Other (please specify):	☐
4. How will potential participants be identified and approached?	Instead of directly recruiting individual teachers, the gatekeepers (e.g. school principals) will be identified at first for this research. The procedure of participant recruitment is as follows: **1.Securing access:** I will first identify public schools providing junior secondary education in two cities in China. I will try to approach the school principals by contact information provided on the school websites. I will then attempt to secure access and make sure that gatekeepers are fully informed of the research. **2.Identifying potential participants:** after obtaining permission to conduct the research from gatekeepers, posters will be used to identify potential participants who meet the criteria of recruitment. **3.Recuiting participants:** I will then contact these novice teachers, introduce the aims and procedure of the project to them, and recruit those who meet the criteria and are willing to take part in the research.	
5. Will informed consent be obtained from the research participants or their parents/ guardians? If not, please explain why not.	Yes	

6. For each activity or group of participants, explain how informed consent will be obtained from the participants themselves and/ or their parents/ guardians, if applicable. How will their consent be recorded? **Please submit copies of all participant-facing materials for review.** E.g.: • Recruitment material (e.g. emails, posters) • Information for participants to read (or hear) before they agree to take part (e.g. written information or, if applicable, an outline oral information script). • A document to record informed consent. Further guidance and templates.	Written informed consent will be obtained via emails from the participants and gatekeepers of the schools after they read through the information sheet carefully and agree to take part in the study. The consent forms will then be transferred, encrypted and stored on OneDrive for Business. The consent forms as well as other identifiable data will be deleted after the research has been completed.
7. Provide details of any payments and incentives and the rationale for providing these. Further guidance in Best Practice Guidance: 05 Payments and incentives in research.	None
8. Describe how participants • may withdraw from the study • may withdraw any personal information they have provided from the study State any limits to withdrawal, for example once the data has been anonymised or at some other specified stage prior to publication. Make sure participants are aware of any withdrawal limits.	Participants can withdraw from the study, without giving a reason, by advising the researcher of this decision. If they decide to withdraw, any data that has already been collected will not be presented or will be turned over to participants for their disposal.

Section E: Research data			
All information provided by participants is considered research data for the purpose of this form. Any research data from which participants can be identified is known as personal data; any personal data which is sensitive is considered special category data. Management of personal data, either directly or via a third party, must comply with the requirements of the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018, as set out in the University's Guidance on Data Protection and Research. In answering the questions below, please also consider the points raised in the Data Protection Checklist and Data Protection Screening Assessment and whether, for higher-risk data processing, a separate Data Protection Impact Assessment may also be required for the research. Advice on research data management and security is available from Research Data Oxford and your local IT department. Advice on data protection is available from the Information Compliance team. For guidance on conducting internet-mediated research, refer to CUREC's Best Practice Guidance 06: Internet-mediated research.			
1. What data will be collected? (Indicate with an '**X**')			
Screening documents	☐	Task results (e.g. questionnaires, diaries)	☐
Consent records (e.g., written consent forms, audio-recorded consent, assent forms)	☒	IP addresses (refer to Best Practice Guidance 09: Data collection, protection and management for guidance)	☐
Contact details for the purpose of this research only	☒	Field notes	☒
Contact details for future use (guidance)	☒	Photographs	☐
Opt-out forms	☐	Information about the health of the participant (including mental health)	☐
Audio recordings	☒	Previously collected (secondary) data	☐
Video recordings	☒	Data already in the public domain. Specify the source of the data: the city-level and district-level policy documents; school websites	☒
Transcript of audio/ video recordings	☒	Other, please specify:	☐

2. During the course of the research, where will **each type of** research data be stored?	Identifiable data (such as participants' age, gender, teaching experience, education history, contact details, consent records of written consent forms, archival materials of school websites, policy documents) will be stored in an encrypted file in a storage system provided by the University. After the research has been completed, direct identifiers such as exact names and geographical details will be removed but contact information of participants may be retained for future use (e.g. longitudinal studies). Consent for retention of contact details for future use will be obtained from the participants. Other research data (e.g., audio recordings of observations, audio recordings of interviews, transcripts of audio recordings and interviews; documents) will be stored in encrypted files in Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business. Audio recorded data collected from a Chinese video meeting platform, VooV meeting (note: Microsoft Teams and Zoom do not work in China), will be immediately transferred and then be stored in encrypted files in Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business. Research data will be stored for three years after publication or other research outputs.		
3. Who will have access to the research data during the project?	The researcher, supervisors and colleagues and third parties (including 1) a the University approved transcription service supplier, APPEN; and 2) a translator) Confidentiality agreements will be in place before the recordings are transferred to the service provider and the translator. Once the transcription has been completed and returned to me, I will then make sure the third parties will delete all audio materials.		
4. Please complete this section if your research involves the use of secondary (i.e.	**Please indicated with an 'X'.**	**Yes**	**No**
	Are data access agreements in place for access to and use of this secondary data? (If so, please attach these.)	☐	☒
	Did the individuals agree that their data could be used for this purpose?	☐	☒

previously collected) data.	Could anyone (including members of the research team) link the data back to an individual or individuals? If this is a possibility, please explain how the associated ethical issues will be addressed:	☐	☒
5. How do you intend to share the research data at the end of the project?	Depositing in a specialist data centre or archive	☒	
	Submitting to a journal to support a publication	☒	
	Depositing in an institutional repository	☒	
	Dissemination via a project or institutional website	☒	
	No plans to share the data	☐	
	Other (please specify):	☐	
6. How do you intend to report and disseminate the results of the research? (Indicate with an 'X')	Thesis publication	☒	
	Publication in a peer reviewed journal	☒	
	Publicly available report	☒	
	Conference presentation	☒	
	Publication on a website	☒	
	Pre-registration	☒	
	Report to a research funder	☒	
	Providing participants with a lay summary of the results	☒	
	Submission for academic assessment	☒	
	Other (please specify):	☐	

7. Explain what will happen to the data at the end of the research project.
   This question must be answered for each type of data, including completed consent forms.

Research data will be stored for three years after publication or public releases of other research outputs. The data will be encrypted and stored on OneDrive for Business, a platform approved by the University's Information Security team for the storage of research data.

Given the researcher may be likely to leave the University after the completion of the project, direct identifiable data (such as names, addresses and postcodes) will be destroyed

in order to comply with the UK General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act. For the research data that has its academic value, it may be stored with appropriate safeguards (e.g. pseudonymisation) in the institutional repository. Considering that I may wish to reuse or re-approach the data for subsequent studies, research data and results will be retained in the repository of the Department of Education, University of Oxford. Contact details of participants may also be retained in order to re-approach participants about future studies. This will be clarified in the information sheet and consent forms will be obtained from the participants.

Section F: Protection of research participants and their personal data		
1. How identifiable will the participants be from the **research outputs**? (Indicate with an 'X')	Directly identifiable from the information included	☐
	Pseudonymised/ indirectly identifiable	☒
	Not identifiable – data is anonymous	☐
	Other, please specify:	☐
2. To what extent will the **data** be de-identified? How identifiable will any individuals be from the research data? Describe any measures you will take towards assuring confidentiality, potential risks to confidentiality.	The personal and identifiable data will be used with codes and pseudonyms to avoid identification. For example, the exact location of the school will be pseudonymised with "a school in West China". Given the study intends to conduct an in-depth exploration of novice teachers' professional development, it is unlikely to completely anonymise the personal data of participants (e.g., as age, education background, socioeconomic status). But all research data and results will be used with codes and pseudonyms to preserve the confidentiality of the research participants. To keep the anonymisation process under control, all identifiable details will be replaced with pseudonyms or indirect identifiers directly as soon as the recordings are transcribed.	
3. How will you ensure that third parties (e.g., interpreters and	Confidentiality agreements will be obtained from the transcriber and the translator to make sure that they are fully informed of the statements listed in the agreement.	

transcribers) are aware of and adhere to the measures described in this form?	

Section G: Risks and benefits of the research
1. Will the research involve topics that could be considered sensitive? If so: a. Please provide more detail or supporting information (such as the interview questions) to show the range of questions; b. Explain what steps will be taken to reduce risk of distress; c. Consider seeking advice from within your Department or from the ethics committee including whether the application might benefit from additional ethics review (e.g., via a CUREC 2 application).
No
2. Describe any additional burden or risks to the participants and the steps you will take to address these.
As the fieldwork will last for four months in each school, it may become a burden to teachers who already have big workloads in school. Participants' wellbeing must be considered during the course of the study.
3. Describe any physical or psychological risks to the researcher(s) (including local fieldworkers or research assistants) and the steps you will take to address these.
No
4. Describe any benefits of the research, both to participants and to others.
Although there will be no immediate benefit to participants from the participation, they will find it very rewarding. This will be a great chance for them to reflect on their social encounters in the workplace, which are one of the essential parts of learning to be a teacher. They can be more aware of and critical about the professional development and the social situations of your development. Further, the study will contribute to the body of

knowledge about teacher identity and teacher learning in situated activities from a perspective of Chinese schools.
5. Give details of any other ethical issues or relevant information.
Given the study is an in-depth qualitative case study, ethical issues are situated. In addition to the ethical issues listed above, situated ethics issues might be identified during the fieldwork. For example, other methods (such as digital journaling) may be used to improve engagement of the participants, or there might be occasions when mentors may feel uncomfortable when their mentoring is audio recorded. If any ethics issue takes place during the fieldwork, I will immediately refer to the CUREC guidance and act accordingly.

Section H: Professional guidelines		
Please indicate with an '**X**' at least one set of professional guidelines you will follow.		
Research specialism/ methodology	**Association and guidance**	
Anthropology	Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK	☒
Computer Science	ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct	☐
Criminology	British Society of Criminology Statement of Ethics	☐
Education	British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research	☐
Geography	American Association of Geographers Statement on Professional Ethics	☒
History	Oral History Society of the UK Ethical Guidelines	☐
Internet-mediated research	Association of Internet Researchers Ethical Guidelines British Psychological Society: Ethics Guidelines for internet-mediated research Association for Computing Machinery Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct	☒
Management	Academy of Management Code of Ethics	☐
Political Science	American Political Science Association (APSA) Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science	☐

Politics	Political Studies Association. Guidelines for Good Professional Conduct	☐
Psychology	British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct	☐
Social research	Social Research Association: Ethical Guidelines	☐
Socio-legal studies	Socio-Legal Studies Association: Statement of Principles of Ethical Research Practice	☐
Sociology	The British Sociological Association: Statement of Ethical Practice	☒
Visual research	ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper: Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research	☐
Other professional guidelines	List any other guidelines used here.	☐

Section I: Endorsements and signatures

Please ensure this form is endorsed by the Principal Investigator (or student's supervisor), the Head of Department (or nominee) and, if student research, by the student themselves. **The SSH IDREC Secretariat accepts either option below. If you have a DREC, check which signature option it prefers.**

- **Option 1: direct email endorsements**
  Each of the signatories should submit an email from a University of Oxford email address, indicating their acceptance of the responsibilities listed below.
- **Option 2: signatures**
  Please scan the signed form and email it to us as a PDF. Pasted images of signatures cannot be accepted.

Endorsement by the Principal Investigator/ student supervisor and student, if applicable

I/ we the researchers understand my/ our responsibilities as Principal Investigator (and student, if applicable) as outlined in the guidance on the CUREC website. I/ we declare that the answers above accurately describe the research as presently designed, and that the ethics committee will be informed of any changes to the project which affect the answers to this form.
I/ we will inform the relevant IDREC if the Principal Investigator changes.

Name of Principal Investigator	Ian Thompson
Principal Investigator's signature	

Date	
Name of student (if applicable)	Shuyan Liu
Student's signature	
Date	9 June 2022