

## Self Perception and Self Representation of English Teachers from a North-Eastern Chinese University

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### Abstract

This study<sup>1</sup> examines the ways in which fifteen Chinese English teachers from a northeastern Chinese university are engaged in the process of self construction and representation at the professional level. Data collection and analysis involves fifteen life-history interviews to unfold the complex nature of self formation and the ways the respondents view and represent their self in the professional context. The examination highlights an argument that both the traditional Chinese self and the modern individual-oriented self are manifested in the ways these participants view and present themselves as university English teachers. The study also identifies key personal and sociocultural factors that have contributed to the formation and transformation of the professional self. This implies that the development of the extended or hybrid self is embedded in the traditional Chinese culture.

**Keywords:** self, globalization, traditional Chinese self, individualistic self

### Introduction

“Self”, constructed and represented in dynamic social interaction in a reflexive fashion (Mead, 1934), has become a research focus for scholars in the field of sociology, social psychology and intercultural communication. Since the late 1990s, globalization has brought about the most fundamental and dramatic social changes in how people perceive, construct and represent the self. Like other cultures in the world, China is shifting from a homogenous society to a pluralistic one and is becoming more and more integrated into the globalising community (Sun, 2006). The Chinese self could be re-conceptualized as one which is traditionally distinct, yet globally incorporated (Jia, 2009). In other words, the Chinese self is hybridized rather than homogeneous and dynamic rather than static.

This study chooses to focus on a group of Chinese college English teachers to examine the perception and representation of the self at the professional level, taking account of a number of variables in the local and global context. Globalization and English-language predominance situates English teachers as being increasingly influential mediators of both language and culture (Colarusso, 2009). New meanings of the self as an English teacher have been generated in the ever-accelerating global interaction wherein East, West and different cultures have become

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<sup>1</sup> This study is funded by Heilongjiang Education Department Humanities and Social Sciences Research Project No. 11554093.

increasingly interconnected and interdependent (Tan, McInerney, Lien & Tan, 2008).

With this view in mind, it is high time to scrutinise self construction and representation of Chinese teachers of English, which has implications for English-language teachers' professional self development. The current study on the self perception and representation of Chinese college teachers goes beyond the realm of teachers' cognition (Borg, 2003) to include a sociological analysis of the broad global contexts in which the respondents find themselves.

Previous studies of Chinese teachers (Chen, 2007; Cheng, 2002; Gao, 2006; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998; Lo, 2001; Zhang & Watkins, 2007) suggested that how the teachers construed the professional self was informed by Confucianism from their educational values to teaching practices. The teachers' role as an authority capable of imparting knowledge and facilitating character development is still deeply embedded in Chinese culture (Gao, 2006; Zhang & Watkins, 2007). How the participants perceive and represent the professional self from the traditional Chinese perspective has been analyzed in this study.

Nevertheless, teacher's self refers not only to the influence of the conceptions and expectations of other people, including broadly accepted images in society about what a teacher should know and do. Studies of educational beliefs and practices in contemporary China (Barkhuizen, 2009; Chen, 2007; Gao, 2008; Halstead & Zhu, 2009; Liu & Zhang, 2007; Wei, Brok & Zhou, 2009; Wette & Barkhuizen, 2009) found that there had also been a rise in sense of agency in the teachers in today's China. Teachers in China are open to new educational beliefs and teaching methods to respond to changing educational contexts (Zheng & Davison, 2008). This study investigates how the participants represent the professional self beyond the constraints of existing social, cultural and educational conceptions.

Mead's (1934) sociocultural perspective on the self provides an important, interpretive framework for the analysis of the participants' self perception and self representation as a university teacher of English. The discussion of Mead's sociocultural theorizing on the concept of self also includes: Jia's (2009) and St Clair's (2009) dialectical global perspective on self transformation; Tu's (Tu, 1985, 1994) conceptualisations of the Chinese self as the centre of an ever-expanding process, as well as the self as a dynamic process of spiritual development in the Confucian tradition; and Lu and Yang's (2006) conceptualisations of the traditional and modern Chinese self. Taking a sociocultural perspective, this study mainly examines how the dynamic, changing social and cultural environment affects the participants' professional self perception and representation.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Self as Sociocultural Product**

Mead (1934) pointed out that culture, as a shared perspective of a social group exercising control over the behaviour of its individual members, gives people their sense of the self, whether at an individual or group level (Geertz, 1973). What individuals believe, how individuals think and act, and how individuals perceive who they are, are always shaped by cultural, historical and social structures (Mead, 1934). From Mead's perspective, the self is viewed as a sociocultural product that arises in the dynamic process of social experience and

activity, which keeps shifting, developing, growing and changing, rather than being a solid and stable entity which moves from one situation to another.

In the age of globalization — a process of world-wide expansion and extension of cultural space, the emergence of intercultural identification, resulting in extended or hybrid culture and self, is occurring from within the local culture (Tu, 2000; Jia, 2009). That is to say that tradition and modernity, past and present, are co-present. Within such co-presence, the deeply-rooted cultural tradition remains salient and distinct (St. Clair, 2009; Jia, 2009). This implies that the Chinese self may have been extended by incorporating the Western cultural elements without diminishing its cultural roots (Jia, 2009).

The social-cultural perspective on the self can serve as an interpretive framework for exploring the teachers' professional self. This is because it treats the teacher as a sociocultural person who continually constructs and reconstructs his or her view of the self in the ever-changing society. Being a teacher is not merely a cognitive or technical procedure, but a personal and social set of embedded processes and practices that concern the whole person (Olsen, 2008). As an analytic frame, the sociocultural perspective on the self draws attention to the holistic, dynamic, contextualised nature of the participants' self development at the professional level.

### **The Traditional Chinese Conception of the Self**

The traditional Chinese self can find its root in the traditional philosophy of Confucianism as a mode of thinking and as a way of life, which has continued for centuries in Chinese culture. The traditional Chinese self is defined by hierarchy and prescribed roles (Gao, 1996), which can be seen in the Five Cardinal Relationships. That is, the relationship between father and son; emperor and minister; husband and wife; among brothers; and among friends (Ho, 1996; Tu, 1985).

In such a hierarchical structure, people should be aware of their positions and act accordingly (Chu, 1985; King & Bond, 1985). It is the prescribed roles, not the individual self, that determine the behaviour in Chinese society. The importance of hierarchy and role relationships contributes to the other-orientation of the self in Chinese culture (Gao, 1996). The 'way of humanity', or *ren* in Chinese, which is the overarching principle of Confucianism, also sets standards for appropriate ways to represent the self in interpersonal relationships (Gao, 1996). *Ren*, written ideographically as if two people are together, emphasises human relationships, concern for others, good interpersonal relations between individuals, the integrity and fundamental decency of a person (Brindley, 1989). Within such a construal, the Chinese self has been characterised as relation-based or relational-oriented in their daily functioning (Lu, 2008; Tu, 1985; Yang, 2004). This view of the self features the individual, not as separate from the social context, but as more connected and less differentiated from others.

Furthermore, from the Confucian perspective, the self as inner development is a lifelong commitment which necessitates a ceaseless process of learning, which is not only book-learning, but also learning to be a person (Tu, 1985; Wu, 1994). The importance of learning is influenced by the concept *ren* in Confucian teaching; a lifelong striving for becoming the most

genuine, sincere and humane person one can become (Tu, 1985). It is undertaken through the disciplining of the body and mind, implying a dynamic process of a human becoming mature physically, mentally as well as morally (Kim, 2004).

All of the above characteristics of the Chinese self, discussed as social-oriented and inner-directed self-cultivation, are different from those of the Western self (Lu, 2008; Lu & Yang, 2006), which helped the author to conceptualise the participants' professional self from the traditional Chinese perspective.

### **The Western Conception of the Self: the Modern Chinese Self**

The Western notion of the self can be traced back to Geertz's (1975) description of the Western conceptions of a person, characterised as self-contained and autonomous:

The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures. (Geertz, 1975, p. 48)

In contrast to the traditional, social-oriented Chinese self, the Western self comprises core components as an autonomous, egalitarian and independent self. It is viewed as well-bounded, distinct and separate from others or social contexts, which is prevalent among people of Western cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Ting-Toomey, Oetzel & Yee-Jung, 2001). The individual-oriented self is also referred to as the personal, private, individualistic, or independent self (Kashima & Hardie, 2000; Lu, 2003; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001).

Under the impact of societal modernisation, the Western model of the independent and autonomous self has become more widely distributed in contemporary Chinese culture. Chinese culture, today, contains a mix of Confucian tradition, communist ideology and a newly emerging Westernised individualism. It has recently been postulated by Lu (2003, 2008), Lu and Yang (2006) and Yang (2004, 2006) that researchers should include the individual-oriented self in the representation of the modern Chinese self.

Meanwhile, Lu and Yang (2006) argue that both the traditional Chinese self and modern Chinese self are useful for theoretical analysis, but it does not mean that the modern individual-oriented Chinese self did not exist in traditional China, nor that the self in modern Chinese societies is invariably individual oriented.

As the majority of the English teachers in this study are graduates or postgraduates of the English language, they have been in frequent contact with the Western culture (e.g., history, values, norms and people) via domestic and international English learning and/or living experiences. Thus, it may be inferred that long-term English language learning, teaching and researching experiences may contribute to the English teachers' display of the modern individual-oriented self in the professional realm.

## **The Research**

This section will first introduce the selection of informants and the research setting, and then describe the data collection process, followed by the methods of data analysis.

### **The Participants**

Among the fifteen interviewed teachers, one was born in the 1940s (Jay), three in the 1950s (Henry, Mark and Ted), four in the 1960s (Tim, Sophie, Joe and Jean), and seven in the 1970s (Alice, Hank, Ann, Maria, Matt, Lucy and Wendy). Except for Henry, Maria and Lucy, all of the participants have spent time in English-speaking countries studying or working (for example, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States of America or New Zealand) for varied lengths of time from six months to over ten years.

The privacy of the participants were ensured during data collection and the reporting of research findings in order to avoid any potential harm and/or loss of privacy to the participants. The identity of each participant remains confidential and known only to the researcher to ensure participant anonymity (Neuman, 2003). Pseudonyms were used in place of names.

### **Data Collection**

Fifteen life-history interviews were employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the professional self construction and representation of the teachers. Life history in this study deals simultaneously with the past, present and future. The life history research approach is located within the naturalist-interpretive paradigm, which has a principal focus on understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values, etc.) within their social worlds (Snape & Spencer, 2003).

Fifteen teachers were interviewed individually and face to face during the period from November 3, 2008 to February 26, 2009, at sites chosen by the interviewed teachers. The duration of the interviews varied from sixty minutes to 120 minutes.

Participants were informed, prior to the interviews that they were free to leave at any stage during the interview process and could refuse to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering. Audio recordings were only made of interviews with the participants' permission. The recording equipment was visible to the participants and used openly with no deception regarding its operation and the purpose of its use. After each interview, each participant was thanked for their help and informed of future research steps.

Data was translated by the researcher, who is familiar with both languages (Chinese and English), the research topic under investigation and cultural expressions among the participants. The focus was on conveying the meaning of the concepts, expressions, ideas and issues discussed, rather than a literal translation of the words used (Hennink, 2007). Finally, the translated transcripts were checked by the researchers' supervisor for completeness and accuracy.

## Data Analysis

The fifteen teachers' life experiences were supplemented by what Douglas (1985) refers to as 'open-ended, creative interviewing'. From the data, descriptions and interpretations were developed from these experiences and accounts as told by the respondents. Analyses and interpretations were rendered in a recursive, reflexive and triangulated manner, incorporating insights and feedback from the participants, as well as the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

The transcription of recorded interview data began as soon as each individual case was completed. The researcher kept notes of the emerging themes and unique comments, and then developed overarching themes, sub-themes and unique elements for individual narratives. This might be classified as a 'thematic analysis', which aimed to provide "a coherent way of organizing or reading some interview material in relation to specific research questions" (Banister, **Burman, Parker, Tayloy & Tindall**, 1996, p. 57).

After the preliminary analysis, the initially analysed data were carefully and systematically examined and interpreted, based on the theoretical framework and previous research. Codes were analytically developed or inductively identified in the data, and were transformed into categories of themes. Then the data were sorted by the themes, identifying similar phrases, patterns, relationships and commonalities or disparities.

As the interview responses were diverse and numerous, a cross-case analysis was employed in order to group together answers from different people to common questions, or for analysing different perspectives on central issues (Patton, 2002). Identified patterns were considered in terms of prior research and theories, and thus generalisations were established (Maxwell, 2005).

## Findings and Analysis

The fifteen teachers defined who they were as teachers based on their attitudes, beliefs and values toward being a teacher. The participants adopted traditional views defining themselves from two perspectives in general, as: i) a well-informed transmitter of knowledge and skills; ii) a moral educator in self-cultivation, personality and character building.

At the same time they tended to adopt a modern or Western view that teaching was a means to achieve self values and interests and to help students develop their individuality and critical thinking. The persistence of the traditional self incorporated with the prominence of the modern self formed the major trend of the participants' professional self as a teacher.

### Persistence of the Traditional Self as Authority

The fifteen teachers took a similar stance on the views of the professional self: as a well-informed figure who is able to guide, enlighten and broaden students' academic development.

In terms of students' intellectual development, the participants viewed themselves as transmitters of knowledge and skills. Jay said with pride: "A good teacher must be a well-informed authority in the traditional sense in the discipline he is engaged in. I am proud of

myself for being such a teacher ...” (Jay: Feb 12, 2009)

Mark emphasised the role of knowledge in the process of self construction as a teacher. Mark believed that “It is our duty to ensure that students can learn relevant knowledge from us. But the premise is that we must be real experts in our disciplines. We cannot afford to lead the youth astray.” He continued, “In order to do this [to ensure that students can learn relevant knowledge from us], our knowledge structure must keep abreast of the time.” (Mark: Feb 15, 2009)

The role of being a knowledge transmitter was also highlighted in Ted’s self-concept as a teacher:

I am a teacher with a wide range of accumulated knowledge who can broaden students’ horizons by incorporating cultural background knowledge based on my extensive readings, which covers history, politics, literature, culture, geography, and philosophy. (Ted: Feb 2, 2009)

Implied in the teachers’ accounts was the notion that being a teacher in the subjects they teach presupposed a familiarity not only with the subjects they were engaged in but also with general knowledge in different areas. Ted believed that the knowledge based on his extensive readings (history, politics, literature, culture and philosophy) could broaden students’ horizons. Jay tried hard to be well-informed in several fields (for example, linguistics, sociolinguistics and cross-cultural communication).

The teachers’ conception of the professional self as an authority was also found in earlier studies of the Chinese definition of a good teacher. In the Confucian-heritage culture, teachers are expected to be well-grounded and experienced in the knowledge and skills to be taught, and always have a ready answer to students’ questions (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998). The research (You & Jia, 2008) lends empirical support to the current research findings which show that the learning of the teachers is more motivated by their intrinsic desire for knowledge through reading widely, deeply and actively so as to develop the all-around professional self. In the process of broadening their minds, the self of the teachers had been broadened, as the knowledge they have gained became an integral part of their own experience.

In line with the traditional Chinese conception of being an all-around teacher, inability to do so would rouse self-denial toward the professional self. When they failed to answer the students’ questions or made mistakes in front of the class, such as misspellings, they felt “uncomfortable” (Maria: Nov 3, 2008), “a little bit ashamed” (Hank: Nov 27, 2008) and experienced “loss of face” (Jay: Feb 12, 2009). Jay told the researcher in an interview:

As a teacher, I have a high regard for my image in the eyes of students. I would feel like losing face or at least embarrassed when I can’t answer the students’ questions or have my shortcomings pointed out by them. (Jay: Feb 12, 2009)

In the case of Wendy, when she heard of a book in English which the students knew but she didn’t in a class activity, she felt somewhat ashamed:



I have to admit that I wish I could answer any questions raised by the students ... Once in our class discussion, they were talking about a book in English, and I had never heard of that. I felt very bad, because that book was written in English and I am an English teacher. How could I know nothing about that book? As a teacher, at that moment I felt I lost face. (Wendy: Dec 20, 2008)

The above teachers wished to establish a competent and professional image in front of students. To them, failure to answer students' questions was equal to acknowledging ignorance or exposing limited language proficiency. This also entailed the traditional conception of the teacher.

The teachers' negative feelings toward themselves when they failed to answer students' questions entailed the traditional Chinese perception of 'the teacher as authority' in status and knowledge. In the Chinese tradition, embracing the quality of an authority is expected by both teachers and students. If teachers fail to prove their capability in front of students, they will be considered superficial and shallow which is similar to being blamed for immoral behaviour (Hu, 1944). It implies the failure to live up to their own expectations and students' as well.

Knowledge of delivering and helping students to solve problems in the classroom is also found in conceptions of the teacher in other cultures (reviewed by Borg, 2003). However, the participants endeavor to become an enlightener who may help construct students' self as a person beyond the classroom (see below). This makes their professional self representation distinct from that depicted in other cultures.

### **Traditional Chinese Teacher as a Moral Educator**

In addition to setting up an authoritative image in the disciplines they taught, the participants viewed themselves as moral mentors. The participants tried to cultivate themselves so as to become a person of integrity; they passed onto the students the ethical values and principles of life (*chuan dao*) so as to develop them into morally sound persons.

Lucy incorporated the role of moral educator in her self-conception as a teacher, "I am responsible for cultivating students' characters through teaching them the principle of being a good person." (Lucy: Feb 26, 2009)

Tim incorporated a strong sense of responsibility into his professional self. He elaborated:

I am strict with my students. I require them not to be late for and absent in my class without reasonable excuses ... In their eyes, I am a responsible teacher. I always tell my students that they should have a sense of social responsibility as a person in the society. (Tim: Dec 20, 2008).

Ann also stressed responsibility in her students' moral development. Ann pointed out, "As teachers, we are responsible for correcting students' inappropriate behaviours". She illustrated her point with a personal example:



For several times, some students did not do their assignments and much worse they copied others' assignments. I was really upset and criticized them for their irresponsible and dishonest behaviour, during which I could not control my tears. (Ann: Feb 14, 2009)

Henry also highlighted his role in facilitating students' moral development as a teacher. Henry felt that it was his duty to lead young students onto the "right track" by sharing his personal experiences with them. As Henry said: "I have rich and bumpy experiences ... I like to share them with my students ... help them avoid mistakes and thus help them to know how to be morally sound and useful to the society." (Henry: Dec 23, 2008)

The participants' moral teaching was not achieved via bringing moral content into the classroom but mainly via manner. Modelling was the most prominent form of teaching morality through manner. The teachers would rather not criticise the students directly: "I would rather point out their misconduct indirectly and let them realize it themselves" (Joe: Dec 22, 2008); or "I would not argue with them regarding what is good. In the Confucian sense, the role of teachers is to exemplify the good character to their students rather than to argue with them regarding what is good." (Alice: Feb 13, 2009)

Both Hank and Wendy established their professional self as moral educators by setting up personal examples. Hank and Wendy hoped their students could show more care to the students who feel inferior or unconfident. Wendy noted:

Some students who are from the countryside feel inferior or unconfident. I would set up a personal example to let my students know that this student group needs more attention, care, and encouragement so as to build up their self-confidence. (Wendy: Dec 20, 2008)

In students' character development, Hank constructed his professional self in a similar way:

I will pay more attention to those students who feel inferior to others for reasons such as poor family background, etc. I try to create equal opportunities for them to speak in the class and encourage them more. I hope my students can show warmth and care toward those students as well. (Hank: Nov 27, 2008)

Hank and Wendy exemplified a high sense of morality by caring and encouraging students who felt inferior or unconfident so as to instil the humanistic values of equality and empathy in the minds of their students.

There was a consensus among the participants that a teacher should not only be concerned about students' intellectual or academic growth, but also concerned about their moral development, personality and character building. As indicated in these responses, being a teacher meant to attend to "both mind and heart, to transmit knowledge to the students while also transforming them" (Paine, 1990, p. 76). Humanistic qualities of the ethical person and educator can better describe the participants' professional self as teachers.

As the above analysis suggested, the participants' role as a teacher extended beyond the cognitive sense to the moral, as well as the affective. They wished to bring about enduring personal changes in students' awareness of the self in a moral sense. In this process, personal feelings were involved. The participants' responsibility in facilitating students' character development indicated a strong orientation of relational self by constructing themselves as part of an in-group, of which students were also an integral part.

The ways in which the teachers displayed the professional self as a moral mentor were reflected in some influential Chinese sayings: "Teach by personal exemplary behavior as well as verbal instruction" (*Yan Chuan Shen Jiao*), "Teaching as well as cultivating good persons" (*Jiao Shu Yu Ren*), and "Profound knowledge makes teachers, upright behavior makes models" (cited by Gao & Watkins, 2001). These sayings highlight the complex view of teacher's self, that transmitting knowledge is interwoven with the moral education of the students.

However, it would be misleading to conclude that these teachers' professional self broadens only to cultivate students' moral self. Teaching morality was also a process of self-cultivation by modelling good character. In essence, acting in an exemplary fashion in the role of a moral mentor predisposes a process of transforming and cultivating the individual self. In this sense, the participants are more self-oriented in terms of self-cultivation. It is in this process of learning and teaching that their professional self is able to be developed in the fullest sense.

### **Individualistic Self Incorporated into the Professional Self**

While persisting in traditional ideology, the participants acknowledged that overseas experiences have led to self reformation and transformation as teachers. Having experienced learning and teaching practices in Western countries and domestic sociocultural changes, they learnt to appreciate the differences and reflect on what modifications could be made to enhance their own teaching and the understanding of their self as a teacher. In this process, they have incorporated individualistic values into their professional self.

There was a marked contrast between the findings in this study and those of earlier research on English classroom practices in China (reviewed by Gieve & Clark, 2005). The findings of previous studies concluded that the classroom practices in Chinese society did not help the learners to develop communicative competence and autonomous learning (Halstead & Zhu, 2009; Yu & Wang, 2009). In this study, the teachers consciously provided more opportunities for students to demonstrate individuality and develop their independent and critical thinking.

Jay positioned his professional self in today's global context: "This globalizing and multi-cultural environment requires university English teachers to embrace multi-cultural identities." In order to meet the heightened expectations of teachers brought by the societal development, Jay was consciously constructing a multi-cultural professional self with aims to cultivate the intercultural self-awareness in his students:

I am trying to build up multi-cultural awareness so that I can develop intercultural and multicultural competent students. I consciously increase students' knowledge and skills of cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural awareness. (Jay: Feb 12, 2009)

Jay derived legitimacy for his multicultural self from the belief that “this [multicultural professional self] is important especially for English teachers, as language teaching and learning is in nature cultural teaching and learning.” (Jay: Feb 12, 2009)

The overseas experience of Alice led her to add new roles to her professional self: “My overseas study enables me to realize that the main role of a teacher is not only transmitting knowledge, but also developing their abilities in independent learning and critical thinking.” (Alice: Feb 13, 2009) Alice also provided space for her students to set and change goals to suit their own learning needs and interests: “I ask them to give their feedback to my class after three units of study. I would make some changes accordingly and adjust my teaching strategies.” (Alice: Feb 13, 2009)

Jean adopted the same stance in ways in which she displayed her individualistic self in terms of developing students’ autonomy in the learning process: “I always invite my students to write anonymously for me their suggestions for the class. I will make changes to some extent if their suggestions are reasonable and feasible.” (Jean: Dec 21, 2008)

Experiences immersed in a Western educational context resulted in a shift in Joe’s self perception and representation from a teacher who used to dominate the class, to one who approaches teaching by underlining individualistic self orientation:

I used to play the dominant role in students’ English learning process ... But after witnessing the teaching practices in the Western countries, I came to realize that teachers do not have to impose what we know on their students. (Joe: Dec 22, 2008)

Henry, who adjusted his professional self consistent with the current sociocultural trend, also displayed the individualistic self in developing students’ communicative capabilities:

Today’s youth have more chances to interact with people from other cultures. I have adjusted my teaching strategies. I require my students to actively get involved in the group discussions, presentations, and after-class writing assignments. (Henry: Dec 23, 2008)

The individualistic self was made explicit in Wendy’s self representation in the professional realm. Wendy associated her professional self with cultivating students’ independence in their future academic development. She had been teaching academic writing to postgraduates and her teaching purposes were “to develop students’ independent abilities in academic writing for future thesis writing and defense, making presentations at domestic or international conferences, and writing qualified research papers.” (Wendy: Dec 20, 2008)

The teachers’ practice of developing students’ independence highlighted two types of autonomy suggested by Littlewood (1999). One was the proactive autonomy reflected in Alice and Jean’s classes, in which their students set and changed goals to suit their own learning needs and interests. Another one was the reactive autonomy practiced in the classes of Henry and Sophie, in which the students were asked to work independently on some specific task, assignment, project work or homework. The teachers’ promoting students’ independence and autonomy in the classroom made their individualistic self explicit.

The teachers displayed the characteristics of the traditional Chinese self as an authority in the subjects they taught; simultaneously, the teachers displayed the modern individualistic self regarding students as equals, as revealed in the following remarks: “I hope students are free to challenge me, for they can stimulate me and other students in their thinking and exploration” (Tim: Dec 20, 2008); “... this is a good chance to find out truth together with students” (Mark: Feb 15, 2008) and “The equality orientation is helpful to build up students’ self-confidence, develop their individuality, and independent and critical thinking” (Jay: Feb 12, 2009).

The interviews showed that the teachers encouraged students to present their own positions on curricular themes and work together with them to find answers. They perceived the professional self as a facilitator who fostered freedom of speech in the classroom. Being questioned or even challenged by students was not deemed as disrespect for the teachers’ authority, but as an opportunity to enhance students’ competence in critical thinking.

Conducting research on cross-cultural communication played a significant role in Sophie’s professional self transformation, from a teacher who neglected the values of equality in teacher-student relationships to one who is more individualistic in interactions with students. Sophie admitted that, “I lacked such awareness before. The further I progress in the research of cross-cultural communication, the more I identify with the values of equality and respect for the individuals.” (Sophie: Dec 24, 2008)

On the one hand, Matt and Hank promoted an equal relationship with students; on the other hand, both avoided building a close interpersonal teacher-student relationship, thus indicating a strong sense of the individualistic sense of self. Matt said, “I like to communicate with students on the basis of mutual respect. Also, I have a strong sense of privacy. I usually keep my private life to myself.” (Matt: Dec 23, 2008)

On this point, Hank constructed his self as a teacher in terms of teacher-student relationship in different ways. Implied in his self-concept were two kinds of teachers in binary opposition: One with which Hank identified, “As a teacher, I am not above my students”; another kind was one from which Hank distanced himself, “But unlike some of my colleagues, I won’t share my private life with my students. I do not maintain a close interpersonal relationship with students outside class.” (Hank: Nov 27, 2008)

From these examples, it was evident that viewing themselves as a caring figure or an authority in the subjects they were engaged in did not mean that they were above students as traditionally prescribed. Identification with individualistic values resulted in the teachers’ display of the individualistic self. The teachers began to construct the professional self, not as authoritative figures who do not allow their authority to be challenged (see Ho & Ho, 2008; Pratt, 1991), but as co-learners or co-explorers in the classroom. This was a new kind of the self, a mixture of the relational and the individualistic self.

A strong sense of equality and equity manifested in Mark’s practice in interactions with students pointed to his individualistic self as a teacher:

Influenced by the Western educational philosophy, I treat every student equally ... I have a strong sense of fairness, which can be seen from the scores I gave to the students. I won’t add extra points to my students whose parents are colleagues/friends of mine. (Mark: Feb 15, 2009)

Jean used her personal experience, in which she remained true to her individualistic self at the price of a friendship, to illustrate her point:

Once, one of my colleagues who used to be my best friend asked me to do a favour for her. Her son was in my class and failed in my course. She asked me to let him pass based on our deep friendship like sisters. But I didn't and I couldn't, for if I did so, it was unfair to other students who failed ... But this ruined our friendship. (Jean: Dec 21, 2008)

Mark and Jean set up a binary opposition between two kinds of teachers: one who would compromise to the traditional Chinese practice of relationship (*guan xi*) and the other who adopted the individualistic self promoting values of equality and equity, but which may put the relationship with friends and/or colleagues at risk. Jean legitimised her individualist self and expressed it in her belief that “we as teachers and parents should not mislead the youth into believing that they can get everything done via the relationship rather than through their own efforts and ability.” (Jean: Dec 21, 2008)

These two teachers' articulation of the individualistic self came into direct conflict with the conventional value of *ren qing* that regulates Chinese behaviour in interpersonal relations (Gao, 1996). It was a really hard decision for Mark and Jean, for one's failure to offer or reciprocate favours to relevant others typically arouses other-focused negative emotions (Lu, 2008). It was through the negotiation and conflict with these restrictions that the individualistic self was discursively established.

The representation of the individualistic self by the participants resonated with the argument (Stephens, 1997) that changes in Chinese social, political and economic conditions may now be legitimising individualism, which will eventually manifest itself in educational contexts. This transition of the purpose of English teaching and teaching methods indicated the transition and transformation of the professional self as an English teacher in China.

### Conclusions and Implications

This study examined the ways in which fifteen English teachers constructed and represented the self at the professional level. The integration or co-existence of the ethical and moral tradition and the Western value orientation became the norm. These two contrasting self-orientations were merged and integrated into what is called ‘unity in diversity’ (Jia, 2009), in which mutual reciprocity and mutual benefit is the norm. The status of the teachers' professional self at the time of the research could be described as a self with Chinese cultural tradition, remaining salient and distinct and, at the same time, incorporating modern and individualistic values.

The findings suggested that the teachers' self at the professional level was multilayered and non-unitary, “each with its definite social structure—highly complex and organized and unified — and each with a number of different sets of social attitudes constituting it” (Mead, 1934, p. 307), which is highly dependent on the contexts of interaction.

Analysis of the participant's self perception and representation in the professional domain reinforces St. Clair's (2009) and Jia's (2009) dialectic and global perspectives of transformation

of the self. The teachers' professional self, as an authority and moral mentor, can be understood as the assertion of Confucian educational tradition. The emergent individualistic orientation can be understood as expressions of change and progress towards modernisation and global hybridisation.

The research offers empirical evidence of the coexistence model of self. It may lead to the unveiling of aspects of the interactions between cultures and self, which can serve as a tool to examine why and how the contrasting self orientations function among Chinese individuals. This implies that the frame of 'either-or' or 'us' and 'others' distinction needs to be reframed into the frame of hybridisation and blending in the conception of Chinese culture and self.

The results have some implications for teacher education, personal and professional development. Given the potential consequences for teachers' self construction and for students in whose self teachers invest, there is a pressing need for educational researchers and teacher educators to better understand the nature of the construction and development of the professional self (Reeves, 2009).

The professional self as teachers was socially constructed and was dynamic rather than static. It had been undergoing emergent sociocultural formations, transformations and reformations. It will be continuously defined and redefined, especially in the ever-accelerating global interaction wherein different cultures have become increasingly interconnected and interdependent (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004).

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