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Chinese Teachers' Professional Identity and Beliefs about the Teacher-Student Relationships in an Intercultural Context

Abstract This paper presents a qualitative study of immigrant Chinese teachers' professional identity and beliefs about the teacher-student relationship in an intercultural context. Theoretically, this study takes its departure from a sociocultural perspective on understanding professional identity. The empirical analysis in the study drew mainly upon ethnographic interviews with a group of Chinese language teachers in Denmark concerning their life experiences, perceptions, and beliefs. The results of this study suggest that teachers' beliefs about their roles as teachers and about student-teacher relationships are shaped by both their prior experiences and backgrounds and the current social and cultural contexts in which they are situated. Changes of context (e.g., from China to Denmark) often lead to a transformation of their professional identity and beliefs. Being a teacher in an intercultural context often exposes them to the confrontation of diverse challenges and dilemmas. On one hand, teachers in this study generally experienced a transformation from being a moral role model, subject expert, authority and parental role to being a learning facilitator and culture worker. On the other hand, they developed diverse individualized coping strategies to handle student-teacher interactions and other aspects of teachers' professional identity.

Keywords professional identity, teachers' beliefs, immigrant Chinese teachers, teacher-student relationships, intercultural context

Introduction

The globalization and internationalization process in education has seen an

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increase in teachers' mobility in the past few decades (Sun, 2012). This is also true of the field of foreign language teaching and learning and in particular of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) due to the increasing demand for learning Chinese worldwide (Wang, Moloney, & Li, 2013). The increase in the number of Chinese language programs has led to the need for more Chinese teachers, and many immigrant Chinese have become new educators under these circumstances. Intercultural contexts have increased the complexity of teaching and learning, raising new questions for teachers who come from a different national culture and educational system from that in which they teach. These new questions and issues offer the possibility of making changes to the teaching profession, a subject that calls for further research (Sun, 2012). A rich body of literature has reported on the professional identities and beliefs of foreign language teachers in general, but little research has been conducted on immigrant foreign language teachers entering Western teaching and learning contexts (Gao, 2010). In relation to the field of TCFL, it is necessary and interesting to investigate immigrant Chinese teachers' professional identity development and beliefs in an intercultural context.

In Denmark, foreign language learning is considered to be a key factor in an international education, with a growing variety of foreign languages being implemented as essential elements of internationalization strategies (Egekvist, 2012). Due to this prevailing attitude and an increase in public interest in China in Danish society, Chinese language classes have been introduced into high school curricula as elective courses. In the last three years, more than one fifth of Danish high schools have begun offering Chinese classes. An increasing number of lower secondary schools have also begun providing Chinese classes. With students' interest in Chinese language and culture increasing, more qualified teachers are needed for programs focusing on these subjects (Du & Kirkebæk, 2012). This increased demand for Chinese teachers has resulted in some Chinese immigrants being hired as new educators.

Previous studies have reported that Chinese educational culture strongly influences how Chinese immigrant teachers perceive themselves in an overseas context (Pratt, Kelly, & Wong, 1999), and have suggested that their professional identities tend to be authoritarian and teacher-centered as a result of the impact of Confucianism (Gao & Watkins, 2002; Ho, 2004). Danish educational culture is characterized by a low power distance and higher level of equity in teacher-

student relationships and by students' active role in choosing teaching and learning activities (Egekvist, 2012). Beliefs about characteristics of Danish education identify a great difference in the role of teachers and teacher-student relationships in relevant literature about China (Du & Hansen, 2005; Li & Du, 2013).

Based on results from previous research, this study assumes that immigrant Chinese working as teachers of Chinese language in Denmark confront challenges to some aspects of their professional identities and teacher-student relationships. Therefore, to maximize student learning, it is necessary to understand how this group of teachers experiences, perceives, and copes with these challenges in the process of developing their professional identities in an intercultural context.

This study aims to broaden knowledge and understanding of immigrant teachers' professional identity and their beliefs about interacting with students in an intercultural context in Denmark. Two research questions have been formulated to guide the study: 1) How do the immigrant Chinese language teachers perceive their professional identity in an intercultural context in Denmark? 2) How do these perceptions influence their beliefs regarding the teacher-student relationship? To answer these questions, a qualitative study was conducted using ethnographic interviews with four immigrant Chinese teachers to gain insight into teachers' perceptions, thoughts, life experiences, and professional identity work.

Theories

Understanding Teachers' Professional Identity: A Sociocultural Perspective

An increasing amount of research attention is being paid to the role of teachers' beliefs in classroom practices as well as teachers' developing identity (Gao, 2012). The significance of understanding teachers' identities lies in the relationship between thinking and practice and in the assumption that a teacher's perception of him or herself influences his or her actions (Fraser, 2011). Although professional identity has been defined in multiple ways, it is essentially concerned with an understanding of self and a "who" question (Gao, 2010). Nevertheless, many researchers agree that this concept has a dynamic and

shifting nature (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Previous works often relate professional identity to teachers' images of themselves and stress teachers' roles (Vähäsantanen et al., 2008). For example, Beijaard (1995; Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000) defines teachers' professional identity in relation to perceptions of teachers' roles, teachers' relationships with students, and the subject being taught. The understanding of professional identity in this paper follows Lasky's (2005) definition, that is, teachers' understanding of themselves and their relationships with others. In this paper, the authors regard teachers' professional identity as their view of their role as a teacher and their perceptions of their relationships with students. Many other researchers argue similarly that teachers' perceptions of themselves influence the way they develop as teachers and how they perceive students. Teachers' professional identity is believed to be influenced by a wide range of internal and external factors (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). Factors that are presumed to contribute to identity change have been investigated and identified by scholars; these factors include cultural background (Johnson, 2003), contextual factors (Xu, 2013), attitudes, motivations, and emotions (Rodgers & Scott, 2008), among others.

Although ways of defining professional identity vary depending on perspective and angle, the authors have taken a sociocultural perspective on understanding teachers' professional identity in this study, giving significant weight to how teachers construct and transform their identities in a given context. This perspective enables us to view the establishment of professional identity as an ongoing, dynamic process involving teacher-context and teacher-student interactions that is subject to cultural, contextual, and personal influences (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

Language Teachers' Professional Identity

In language classrooms, teachers' professional identity is a crucial component in determining their relationship with learners and the ways in which language teaching is conducted (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005). Some researchers see language teachers' identities as pedagogy with an emphasis on continuous interweaving of identity negotiation and language teaching (Gao, 2012; Morgan, 2004). Although a few studies have investigated language teachers' professional identity using quantitative methods (Beijaard et al., 2000),

this subject is usually explored using qualitative methods including interviews, observed participation, journals, etc. Emphasis is placed on examining the interactions between teachers and learners of the target language (Gao, 2012). Prior research on language teachers' professional identities is mainly based on TEFL (Teaching English as Foreign Language) and draws attention to identity construction and transformation in relation to teacher education (Abednia, 2012), teacher identity in relation to the teacher-student relationship (Johnston, 2003), and the target language teachers in relation to other language learners (Ramanathan, 2002). This research has shown that national and/or ethnic cultural differences negotiated in language classrooms comprise a special dimension of teachers' professional identities (Gao, 2010), especially for those teachers whose students have a different linguistic and national and/or ethnic cultural background.

The Significance of Teachers' Beliefs about the Teacher-Student Relationship

One of the features of teachers' professional identity identified by researchers is its reliance on social interactions with others, especially students (Coldron & Smith, 1999), which may explain why teacher-student interaction has usually been the focus of professional identity research. Therefore, exploring teachers' beliefs about the teacher-student relationship is an important consideration in studying professional identity and can significantly enhance our understanding of it. Furthermore, the overall transformation from teaching to learning required by the paradigm of student-centered education implies an epistemological and belief shift (European Students' Union, 2010). Teaching is no longer a one-way knowledge transmitting process, but is instead a practice involving students' active participation and teachers' facilitation (Motschnig-Pitrik & Holzinger, 2002), which poses challenges to teachers' identities and their role in the classroom (Du & Kirkebæk, 2012).

The traditional role of teachers and the teacher-student relationship have been changing. In order to promote an equal teacher-student relationship with teachers as facilitators, we first need to examine exactly what beliefs teachers have about their roles as language teachers and their relationships with students. These beliefs significantly affect teacher-student interaction, quality of teaching, and teachers' professional identity (Phipps & Borg, 2009). According to Kember

(1997), teachers' beliefs are their general views on the process of teaching; they are "lenses" through which teachers perceive and interpret themselves in their teaching practices. Research has found that teachers' cultural backgrounds; educational, professional, and life experiences; and teaching contexts exert influence on their beliefs (Ho, Watkins, & Kelly, 2001; Peacock, 2001; Garmon, 2005; Wang & Jensen, 2013), which in turn shape the way they choose to design and deliver teaching activities (Du & Kirkebæk, 2012).

Chinese Immigrant Teachers' Professional Identity and Beliefs about the Teacher-Student Relationship

Very little of the literature on teachers' professional identity and beliefs is about immigrant teachers who teach in a cultural and educational setting differing from that of the country in which they were born and educated (Gao, 2010). A prevalent assumption in studies of immigrant teachers' identities and beliefs is that because of beliefs and identities formed earlier in their lives, adapting to a new educational system brings challenges and transformation in teachers' identities and views on teaching.

Some studies have been performed in Western countries such as the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand that investigate teachers' negotiation processes in a new context, explicating the difficulties teachers face in adjusting to the various practices, beliefs, and roles involved in being a teacher (Santoro, 1997; Sun, 2012). There are also comparative studies on Chinese teachers' images in relation to distinctive Chinese conceptions of teaching and learning (Pratt et al., 1999; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). They claim that the cultural contexts from which teachers come frames their early perceptions of professional identity. However, the dynamic and shifting nature of immigrant Chinese teachers' professional identities was left unexplored. Moreover, few studies have conducted in-depth, specific exploration of the complexities of immigrant Chinese teachers' identities, or, more specifically, the influence of their beliefs on the teacher-student relationship in a Western foreign language classroom. Studies of teachers' identities and beliefs show that they are "co-constructed, negotiated, and transformed on an ongoing basis by means of language" in educational practices (Gao, 2012). However, the interplay between teachers' professional identities and beliefs has not been thoroughly explored. Therefore, this study is

intended to fill the gaps in the area of immigrant Chinese teachers' professional identities.

Method

Data Generation Methods

This study employed ethnographic interview, which is a well-used method to help researchers acquire an in-depth understanding of teachers' perceptions and beliefs (Frank, 1999). The interviews started with interviewers asking teachers open-ended questions to encourage them to speak freely (Damen, 1987; Allen, 2000). Descriptive questions were also asked in order to encourage the informants to describe their educational and professional experiences. Since developing a good rapport is important for a successful ethnographic interview (Westby, 1990), researchers had several email exchanges with all participants before the planned interviews. A wide range of questions were asked during the interviews, with subjects ranging from participants' prior educational background, professional experience, beliefs and perspectives on being a teacher in both China and Denmark, and how they perceive the teacher-student relationship in both countries.

Contexts and Participants

Chinese as a foreign language is relatively new in lower secondary and secondary schools in Denmark. According to Du and Kirkebæk (2012), in 2011, there were more than 30 upper secondary schools offering Chinese classes. Due to the increasing rate of growth in the past three years, updated official statistics about the number of schools offering Chinese programs in Denmark are not yet available. Most of these Chinese programs are elective and are held during the regular school day, while some are compulsory and integrated into international study programs (Egekvist, 2012). Chinese programs in upper secondary schools are often offered in a regular term based on the teaching plan worked out by the Danish Ministry of Education. Such programs often award certificates to students who complete them.

According to Du and Kirkebæk (2012), Chinese programs in Danish schools

are taught by native-Chinese speakers who have newly arrived in Denmark, native-Chinese speakers who have lived in Denmark for many years and local Danish teachers with university degrees in Chinese. Some of these Chinese language teachers work part time while some work full time. In the latter case, the teachers usually teach another subject in addition to Chinese. There are not yet formal recruitment procedures in place for teachers of Chinese in secondary schools.

Participating in this study was voluntary. We hoped to find immigrant Chinese teachers from different geographical areas of Denmark. After we sent invitations to a large group of teachers through the network of the Chinese Teachers' Association in Denmark, some teachers replied expressing their willingness to join this study. We contacted four teachers (A, B, C, D) from different cities (Copenhagen, Aarhus, and Svendborg) for interviews, in the hope of securing a diverse representation of geographic cultures in Denmark. These four teachers were born and educated in Mainland China, though all of them later received degrees from Danish universities or colleges. Teachers A and D received formal teacher education in Danish teacher training colleges, while Teachers B and C had university educations. All of them had at least four years of teaching experience in Danish lower secondary schools and had received certain kinds of professional training. Teacher A, who was in her 40s, worked as a mathematics teacher in China before teaching in Denmark, and had seven years of experience teaching Chinese and other subjects to lower secondary school students. Teacher B was in his 40s and had originally come to Denmark as a high school student. He had taught Chinese for four years in upper secondary schools. Teacher C was a university teacher before he came to Denmark, and had four years of experience working as a part-time Chinese teacher in secondary schools and at the university level. Teacher D had 15 years of teaching experience, but only had one year of experience in teaching Chinese to lower secondary school students.

Data Generation and Analysis

Interviews were conducted individually in face-to-face form, except for one interview via Skype video interaction, and varied in duration from one and a half to three hours. After each interview, the researchers made reflective records of the interviews in the form of a research journal in order to gain a better

understanding of participants' comments and revise the interview questions. The interviews of participants B and D were given in English because they felt comfortable with the language due to their past experiences of working as English-Chinese interpreters, while the interviews of participants A and C were carried out in Chinese. All interviews were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. The two interviews carried out in Chinese were translated into English. An analytical structure was first generated after each transcription and a preliminary analysis was made. After having read all transcripts several times, the authors highlighted and coded the interview transcriptions according to the relevant question sections in the interview schedule. Certain lines of data may refer to several questions. In order to simplify the data and make them more manageable, they were divided by different question sections and refined into some subheadings and categories under each question. During this process, some descriptive themes emerged: "educational experiences in China/Denmark," "experiences of working as a teacher in the Chinese/Danish educational system," "challenges and adjusted practice," "perceptions of teachers' roles," "perceptions of Chinese/Danish students," "experiences of interacting with students." After these themes and categories were generated, two research questions were used as a guide to focus on participants' views on the role of the teacher and their beliefs about teacher-student interaction. During the process of data analysis, several meetings were conducted to discuss and agree on the main categories that emerged. Before the writing process began, one of the researchers exchanged emails with selected participants to check the appropriateness of the categories, which provided a check for validity of coding (Burnard, 1991).

Findings

Based on the data analysis, the findings of this study are structured in the following way: (1) participating teachers' understanding of the role of the teacher, which also reflects their perceptions of professional identity; (2) participants' beliefs about the teacher-student relationship.

Perceptions of Teachers' Professional Identity

Participating teachers based their earlier understandings of "being a teacher" on

their past experiences of working as teachers or prior schooling in China. Their perceptions of “being a teacher” in Denmark were derived from educational and teaching experiences in a Danish context. Teachers’ perceptions of “being a teacher” in two contexts imply comparisons and identity transformation.

Being a Teacher in China

The image of a teacher in China, according to the participants, is one of someone who is a good moral role model, represents authority, is capable of answering questions, and has both deep and broad knowledge.

Moral Role Model

When talking about being a teacher in China, all of the participants mentioned that one should always set a good example for students. Teachers A and C, who worked as teachers in China, believed they had a moral responsibility for their students, and both guided students spiritually to “teach them by words and deeds.” For example, Teacher A illustrated this point by saying, “As a teacher, I was fully committed to my work and took my teaching very seriously, which I think would exert a subtle influence on students’ learning attitudes.” Teachers B and D said they were impressed by their Chinese teachers’ dedication and devotion to their work, which still influenced them. In addition to cultivating students’ adaptive attitudes towards study, they stressed Chinese teachers’ moral guidance through setting examples.

Expertise in Subject

All participating teachers stressed the importance of being knowledgeable as teachers. They considered Chinese teachers to be experts in their subjects since one important role for them was to transfer basic knowledge and information. Teacher A expressed her earlier understanding of being a teacher in this way: “I was trained in a teacher college in China where we heavily emphasized the knowledge of the subject. When I was teaching, I was quite confident, as I thought I was more knowledgeable than my students. I can answer all kinds of questions students ask.” Teacher B recalled his experience of learning English in

China, and regarded a teacher who was skilled in English speaking and teaching as a very good teacher. "The teacher was very good, and she had graduated from a well-known university, but she was very strict and also very good at her subject. Yeah... I think it was very important." Teacher C described his previous teachers in the teacher training school in China: "Our teachers in China were very excellent teachers. They were from older generations, but they influenced us a lot. They were all experts in their fields and had a very broad knowledge." Teacher C's appreciation and perception of being a qualified Chinese teacher could be heard in his words.

Authority

All participating teachers held the image of the ideal Chinese teacher as being that of an authority figure. They explained that in Chinese classrooms teachers always expect students to obey their instructions and rules; students are not encouraged to express different opinions. Teacher A described a scene from when she was teaching mathematics in China: "When I was teaching in China, no students expressed their disagreement or dissatisfaction to me. Chinese students have an automatic respect for us teachers." Teacher D stated that Chinese teachers always make an effort to keep the class quiet and expect students to maintain a high level of discipline in class.

Parental Role

According to participating teachers, Chinese teachers are expected to care about individual students, to understand their troubles and difficulties in and after school, and to guide them in both learning and personal development. Teachers' responsibility for students goes beyond the classroom; they are used to guiding students holistically and giving them advice on their life choices.

Being a Teacher in Denmark

The participants described a variety of expectations of teachers in Danish schools: being able to organize activities, use various teaching methods and give effective instructions, motivate students' interest, and provide clear explanations of the

subject matter.

Pedagogical Expert

Being accustomed to believing that solid knowledge of the subject matter was sufficient preparation for being a teacher, these teachers were challenged by the Danish school setting. In the course of their professional education (teacher training), they learned that in order to be considered a legitimate teacher in the Danish classroom, one must be equipped with both pedagogical and subject expertise. All participant teachers stated that a traditional, lecture-based method of organizing a class would be poorly received by Danish students, who were “very hard to motivate” (Teacher A, C, D) and “not hard-working” (Teacher A, B, C, D). So, if one is going to teach in a Danish classroom, one has to develop the pedagogical skills necessary to achieve good communication with students and to design and organize teaching content that involves students’ participation in interactive activities.

Learning Facilitator

Teachers showed a strong awareness of students’ active roles in teaching and designing courses. For example, Teacher C said “I have to take my students’ interest and characteristics into consideration when I am making a teaching plan... it is very important.” Facing the “independent Danish students” (Teacher A, B, C, D), all participant teachers prefer to guide students to manage their time and energy rather than giving detailed and systematic instructions. Because Danish students are “critical,” teachers need to facilitate deep understanding rather than simply transfer factual knowledge.

Instead of a teacher-controlled approach, they design various teaching methods to engage students in experiences, discussions, reflection, and active learning. They frequently use group teaching and task-based teaching methods. Teacher D described the way she organizes teaching with groups: “I think it is very good to organize students in groups; students like it. We could learn characters and Pinyin through teamwork. Of course, when they are doing group work, I am there and I walk around asking whether they have any questions. I think this works well.”

Work within Boundaries and Scope

Working with “independent Danish students,” teachers commented on being aware of the implicit boundary between them. Teacher C said in the interview, “the Danish students are more independent; you have to be more careful.” He used an example to illustrate how he learned to be cautious about maintaining professional boundaries. “There were two students who were a couple in my class. After they broke up one day, the girl student, who was so good at Chinese, transferred to another school. I felt so sorry to have lost a good student. Then the boy fell in love with another girl in class. I was so nervous, and consulted the principal about this issue.” Teacher C was told by his colleague that if he had asked students about the incident between the romantically involved students, they would have regarded him as invading their personal affairs, which can be very dangerous. Teacher C mentioned that he would have shown concern about his students’ personal lives if the incident had taken place in China; however, he would be more cautious about the line between himself and his students in a Danish context.

The issue of professional boundaries in a Danish context was also discussed by Teacher C, from another perspective. “In China, a good teacher often shows selfless dedication to work. But here, it is another story. I would not be that dedicated since others are not willing to be. Why should I be so dedicated? No one would pay for my extra work. Maybe some Danish colleagues would think I am stupid and a workaholic... I knew one Danish teacher who was enthusiastic about doing extra work, but was then questioned and denounced by his colleagues... So, I prefer the Danish way of dealing with this kind of thing. During my teaching, I tell students I cannot make an appointment if I think it might occupy my private time.” It is obvious that Teacher C’s understanding of what makes a professional teacher and of his responsibility has changed as a result of the change in context.

Culture Worker

All participating teachers felt a strong need to present Chinese culture to students in language classes. They consider introducing and transferring Chinese culture to be an important part of language teaching since they believe that Chinese

language and culture are closely related and cannot be separated. Teaching Chinese culture not only helped Danish students to have a better understanding of modern China and its people, it also maintained the students' interest in learning Chinese.

Teaching as Learning

For teachers, teaching Chinese in Denmark is a process of learning; since they are facing a new teaching context and new students with an exotic culture and language, they have to learn through experiencing, reflecting, and adjusting. Teacher B noted, "Here in Denmark, everything is new; you have to learn about your students, and you also have to learn about the Danish culture and how the Danish do things... it is important." Additionally, teachers claimed that what they had learned from their university education or teacher training colleges was not sufficient for teaching. Teacher D's thoughts illustrate this view:

I don't think the things I learned in the college in Denmark can be used directly when you come out of the classroom and become a teacher. It [college] doesn't tell you directly how you teach when you become a teacher... You learn much more when you start teaching as a teacher. You learn much more from the colleagues you are going to work with and how they do things... in the first one, two, or three years. You have your own pupils, and you have your own class, and you learn at the same time.

The above statements suggest that the teachers did not regard themselves as authority figures who knew everything. Instead, they were willing to learn new things and acclimatize to the new experience. All participating teachers believed that it was important to learn from colleagues by consulting, observing, and cooperating with them. Teachers A, B, and D said their colleagues were instrumental in helping them gain knowledge about how to deal with discipline problems and manage their classes in a more professional way. Cooperation with staff members at their schools also provided teachers with opportunities for social and emotional support, a place to exchange ideas and gain instructional advice, and a group with which to share experiences, all of which promoted a strong professional identity and sense of professionalism.

Teachers emphasized the significance of demonstrating an understanding of Danish language and local culture while teaching, which made them more

confident and solidified their legitimacy as teachers in the eyes of their students. Teacher C mentioned that being able to speak Danish and being familiar with the Danish school system “helped to gain respect and appreciation from my colleagues and students.” Since teacher training in TCFL was not easily accessible, all participating teachers displayed a great deal of motivation and enthusiasm about the idea of participating in more relevant professional teacher training in order to learn from other teachers' experiences.

Transformation of Teachers' Professional Identity

From teachers' perceptions of their professional identities, the authors identified a transformation and change in their beliefs about what it meant to be a teacher. Participants' conception of their role developed from a more teacher-centered approach to teaching to one focusing more heavily on the role of the student. Teachers A and D related that when they started teaching, they expected a high level of discipline, with students meant to sit quietly in class. However, they gradually learned to treat students as young adults rather than thinking of them as their own children. Teachers A and D also expressed the point that before they came to Denmark, they regarded exercising authority over students as being appropriate, since this primarily reflects care for and nurturing of the student. Teacher A's statement described the change in her role as a teacher:

My ideas towards Danish students have changed. At the very beginning, I thought they were all small children; I was the teacher, so I thought they must listen to what I said in class. But now, it is different. I think students are students, and I am their cooperative partner. In the class, we should have a very good relationship.

The teachers' understanding of their role reflected a transformation in professional identity, which was mainly brought about through cultural differences. This phenomenon is addressed in the discussion section of this paper. A strong professional identity can be observed both in the participants who have been professionally trained and in those who were not educated as teachers. Some of the factors influencing professional identity are teachers' familiarity with Danish educational systems and teaching culture, Danish language proficiency, educational background in Denmark, identity as native Chinese

speakers, and participation in professional activities such as teacher training from the Confucius Institute Headquarters (CI, Hanban).

Beliefs about the Teacher-Student Relationship

In the above section on teachers' understanding of their role in a different culture, different characteristics of the teacher-student relationship in a Danish context (compared to a Chinese context) are described. In this section, teachers' perceptions of and beliefs about the teacher-student relationship are presented and the ways in which these beliefs are related to their professional identities are discussed.

Teacher-Student Relationship in China: Teachers' Earlier Experiences

All participating teachers agreed that there is a close relationship between teachers and students in China. "In China, our culture emphasizes the close teacher-student relationship" (Teacher A). "In China, teachers and students are very close, and when I was a teacher in China, I had several students who kept very close contact with me after school" (Teacher C).

In keeping with this view, they also said Chinese teachers were "more caring" and "ready to help students whenever they had problems." However, they admitted that such relationships were characterized by teachers' authority and dominance. The hierarchy of the teacher-student relationship can be seen from Teacher D's recollection of the educational experience in the Chinese school system. "We did not talk or discuss much with teachers in class in China; it is the teacher who is always talking and talking."

At the same time, teachers may neglect students' autonomy and interfere in their personal affairs without giving them enough space and individual rights. Teachers A, C, and D stated that their teachers in China gave them direct suggestions and helped with significant choices in their lives.

The Teacher-Student Relationship in Denmark

Because of their perceptions of teachers as facilitators, all participating teachers believed that the teacher-student relationship they experienced and observed in

Denmark was very different from that which is prevalent in China. It was “more equal and like friendship” (Teachers A, B, D), with teachers giving students more space and freedom to develop and make choices. However, there were differences in the participants’ understanding of “closeness” between teachers and students. Teachers A, B, and C admitted a rather “loose” and “plain” relationship with students due to very little personal contact and interaction after school. “Here, the relationship between teachers and students is just so plain and equal. They don’t have so much personal communication after school... take the relationship between me and my students, for example; it is also very weak and plain” (Teacher C). However, Teacher D believed there was a “close” and “intimate” connection between teacher and students. She illustrated the “closeness” with an example of chatting with students about holiday plans and private life in class, which would not often happen in China. In Denmark, it is normal for teachers to show interest in their students’ lives. According to Teacher C, the reason for the “loose” connection between teacher and students could be Danish students’ stress on certain levels of space and boundaries in their communication and personal relationships.

All participating teachers, with the exception of Teacher C, expected to extend their roles beyond the classroom. For example, Teacher B was willing to offer email or Skype contact or extra classes in order to tutor students and help them with learning Chinese. However, he was disappointed by his students’ inactivity or unwillingness to accept his help. His beliefs about his role as a teacher were still under the influence of his earlier educational experience in China, where teachers always have very close interactions with students after class and expect students to be dependent on them. Teacher C had different views on the role of a teacher in Denmark. From his words in the earlier section, it is obvious that he has adopted the Danish idea of being a teacher, framing his relationship with students in an institutional way.

By working with “independent” Danish students, teachers found their “authoritarian” teacher image derived from China weakened. They realized that students were people who had a certain “personal autonomy.” However, they always found it a challenge to balance teachers’ authority and students’ autonomy. To better facilitate this, they created ways of negotiating discipline and made commitments together with their students. They organized teaching in a constructive and collaborative way in order to pique students’ interest. All

participating teachers emphasized that a strong relationship with students was helpful in maintaining their learning and motivation levels. As Teacher D said, a good personal relationship with students provides them with a better opportunity to concentrate and learn.

Discussion

A Transformation of Teachers' Professional Identity

The teacher's professional identity is not stable or fixed; instead, it is an ongoing and dynamic process within teacher development, involving interaction between teachers and contexts (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). In this study, Teachers A, B, C, and D's professional identities underwent notable changes. They developed from seeing themselves as the center to taking the role of students more seriously as facilitators. This finding is consistent with previous research on teacher expertise and career phases. When teachers move through different stages, and develop from novice teachers to expert teachers, they will show greater respect to students (Berliner, 2001, 2004). Before they started teaching in Denmark, their professional identities were "subject and teacher-centered," "authoritarian," and "spiritual." The major reason for this is likely the fact that their educational experiences and backgrounds were influenced by the Confucian educational culture. Traditionally, teachers in China enjoy a great deal of authority and are treated with respect and dignity by their students. Furthermore, teachers are regarded as good examples: people who have a broad base of knowledge and are emulated by students (Li, 2001). The role of teachers is similar to the role of parents, which makes it culturally acceptable for teachers to be responsible for students' personal and intellectual development (Pratt et al., 1999). These teachers emphasize moral guidance in addition to transmitting knowledge.

After our participating teachers received training and worked as teachers in the Danish teaching and learning context, which features student-centered education (OECD, 2009), what they found important to success in teaching conflicted with what was considered good in China. For example, the Chinese teacher's role as a pseudo-parent, exemplified by being selflessly dedicated to work, showing a high degree of responsibility, and caring for students' personal affairs, was not considered professional in a Danish context. When facing Danish students with

individual and distinct personalities, these teachers realized their previous understanding of what it means to be a teacher did not place enough consideration on the complexity of the intercultural teaching environment. They discovered that a teacher who was merely an expert in his or her subject rather than an instructor with pedagogical knowledge was not legitimate. They gradually accepted the ideas of teachers as “pedagogical professionals,” “learning facilitators,” “students’ partners and friends,” “teacher learners,” and “cultural workers,” which implies that they had acquired a sense of the “Danish Chinese teacher” role.

However, the transformation of teachers’ professional identity and conception of the teacher’s role from “Chinese Chinese teacher” to “Danish Chinese teacher” is not an easy process; it always involves struggle and dilemmas. Changing roles and identities requires teachers to relinquish the familiarity and comfort of a known role, such as knowledge master and authority figure, and experience the uncertainty of an unknown role, such as teacher learner and students’ equal partner. The dilemma these teachers are facing is where to draw the line between authoritarian teacher and learning facilitator and between caring parental teachers and professional who respects students’ personal lives.

Due to the complexities of the intercultural teaching context in a Danish foreign language classroom, special dimensions could be found in the immigrant Chinese teachers’ professional identity; they had to become “cultural workers” and “teacher learners” with intercultural competence. Teaching is a lifelong process of learning and developing the self, which may undergo many changes and challenges (Keiny, 1994). Teachers’ professional development with transformations in professional identity when teaching abroad is a dynamic process involving constant experimenting, reflecting, exploring, and responding to challenges (Borg, 2003). Nevertheless, our participants connected their identity as Chinese people with their chosen profession and remained committed to teaching Chinese culture.

Identity change is an active process of negotiating meaning between the individual and the outside sociocultural context (Xu, 2013). During this process, attitudes of open-mindedness and responsibility are critical in enabling teachers to reflect on their professional life and identity transformation, as Dewey (1933), Bailey, Curtis and Nunan, (2001), Zeichner and Liston (1987, 1996) have claimed. The teaching experience in Danish classrooms prompted teachers to reflect on

issues of culture and self. They gained more cultural awareness, allowing them to compare the different educational cultures in Denmark and China. It has been suggested that among the multiple forms of identity teachers have in different contexts, there may also be a “core identity” that teachers hold more uniformly (Gee, 2000). Even as our participants’ professional identities were transformed, their personal identities, which have a core of “being Chinese,” did not change. Teacher A, who had been in Denmark for 28 years, claimed: “As Chinese born, I am Chinese inside and I still carry my Chinese part with me.”

Dilemma of Teachers’ Beliefs about the Teacher-Student Relationship

Teachers’ perceptions of the relationship between teacher and students in China were more unified; they characterized it as “close” and more “hierarchical.” They regarded the relationship between teacher and students in Denmark as “equal” and “democratic,” and held that they had a different understanding of teacher-student “closeness” than their Danish students. All teachers with the exception of Teacher D noted a “loose” and “plain” teacher-student relationship in the Danish classroom. The discussion of different characteristics in relationships in the two contexts could be linked to the cultural differences that have been explored in previous cross-cultural research (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 1991; Pratt et al., 1999; Watkins & Biggs, 2001). Emphasizing individuality and democracy, teachers often treat students as equals in Nordic countries, including Denmark (Hofstede et al., 1991). Within the Chinese educational system characterized by Confucian educational culture, however, the relationship between teachers and students is more like that between parent and child, and their reciprocal roles reflect a respect for hierarchy and authority (Pratt et al., 1999). Clearer Western-Eastern educational and cultural differences can be seen in whether teacher-student interaction takes place inside or outside formal classes (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). In Danish schools, teachers emphasize more informal classroom interaction, in which students are encouraged to express different ideas and even disagreement. Teacher C’s argument about a close teacher-student relationship implied a more active and dynamic interaction in Danish classrooms. However, Chinese teachers lack opportunities to interact with students informally after class in Danish schools, which results in their perception of a “loose” teacher-student relationship. Although interaction is

missing in teacher-student relationships in Chinese classrooms, as described by the participating teachers, they have more teacher-student interaction outside the classroom, with informal discussions and group activities (Watkins & Biggs, 2001). This is why all participating teachers agreed that a close teacher-student relationship exists in Chinese classrooms.

Although a transformation of teachers' professional identity is evident, their beliefs about appropriate roles and relationships between themselves and students is not a question of choosing one way, Danish or Chinese, over another. In addition, contradictions in the teachers' beliefs regarding the teacher-student relationship were evident. When participating teachers talked about handling relationships with students, all of them mentioned a "Danish way" of interacting with students for the sake of their autonomy and independence. They highlighted learning from other Danish teachers and treating students more like equals in Danish school settings. However, three of them did emphasize extending their role as teacher outside of the classroom by offering extra classes and help for students, making an effort to make students listen to their instructions in class, and gently persuading students to work and follow the class structure. All of them expressed their expectations of Danish students' appropriate respect and politeness to them as teachers and stressed the importance of discipline in class. The teachers' views of relationships with students were still deeply rooted in the educational culture of their native country. Some of their beliefs about the teacher-student relationship remained unchanged, which implied a system of belief that was somewhere in between the "Danish" and "Chinese" systems. Their discussion of these beliefs regarding teacher-student interaction and instructional practices makes clear that they still struggle to reconcile these sometimes opposing views.

There are a number of influential factors which should be taken into consideration when discussing these teachers' "loose and plain" relationship with students in the Danish context. First, some of the Chinese courses (those Teachers C and D teach) are not obligatory, and students are not required to take exams at the end of the course. This means that to some extent, students take these courses less seriously than their core courses. Moreover, the "overseas-born status" (Peeler & Jane, 2005) of these Chinese teachers makes them "outsiders" in the host country (Sun, 2012). Teacher A attributed their "loose" relationship with students to their different values with respect to personal space. She also mentioned that students made fun of her accent in speaking Danish. This shows

that cultural and linguistic differences are implicit barriers behind the “plain” (Teacher A, C) relationship.

The teachers’ beliefs regarding the relationship between teacher and students exhibit a great deal of diversity. Participating teachers each had individualized ways of handling relationships with students. For example, Teacher C saw his professional responsibility as ending after working hours, while the other teachers preferred to try to extend their roles beyond the classroom. These differences resulted from their different personalities and professional and life experiences.

The cultural differences in Chinese and Danish contexts have shaped the teachers’ understanding of their professional identities and teacher-student relationships. As a result, their revised understanding of roles and relationships for students and teachers have modified their beliefs concerning teaching and organizing the classroom. The teachers’ changes in professional identity, role conception, and relationships with students imply that they have a new understanding of the ways in which teaching and educational settings function, and are adapting to a new educational culture while restructuring their previous beliefs and perceptions (Bateson, 1972; Keiny, 1994).

Conclusion

This paper examined immigrant Chinese teachers’ beliefs about their professional identities in a Danish context as well as their perceptions of the teacher-student relationship. It provided insight into how immigrant Chinese teachers perceive struggles and dilemmas while transforming their views on being a teacher and handling relationships with students. The findings suggest that the teachers’ perceptions of their professional identities are influenced by their prior experiences related to various cultural elements such as ethnicity and educational background, among others. These professional identities are not fixed, but instead are perpetually changing, particularly when working in a different environment from what they are used to and/or in an intercultural context. These teachers’ shifting professional identities (re)frame their interactions with students due to changing perceptions of the teacher-student relationship. Due to a lack of shared cultures and values, there might be a cultural dissonance so that these teachers may have conflicting expectations of their students. These teachers confronted challenges and dilemmas when working in an intercultural context and developed diverse

strategies to handle student-teacher interactions and other aspects of teachers' professional identity. In particular, this study observes a transformation of these immigrant Chinese teachers from being a moral role model, subject expert, authority and in a parental role to being a learning facilitator and culture worker in the given context in this study.

This study sheds light on immigrant teachers' struggles and learning process with regard to interacting with students of another culture. However, the study is a small-scale investigation, focusing on four immigrant Chinese teachers, which limits the generalizability of the study's findings. This study shows that intercultural settings provide opportunities for teachers to adjust their understanding of the roles of both teacher and students and to develop "culturally appropriate" knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995, Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2007). How Danish students develop cultural sensitivity and accommodation through interaction with Chinese teachers could be the focus of further study. As the current research only included data from teacher interviews, researchers cannot reference this insight with students' narratives or observations of what actually happens in the classroom. Future studies could collect data through non-participant observations in classrooms, where teachers and students have the most direct interactions, and could validate teachers' belief changes by including interviews with students.

This study identified contextual and intercultural factors that influence teachers' interactions with students such as the status of Chinese courses as elective, cultural divergence, and the teachers' limitations in the Danish language as non-native speakers. In future studies, researchers could enter micro level classroom settings to investigate how teachers and students handle these situations and how addressing them could improve the teaching and learning process. As this study explored teachers' perceptions of the role of the teacher and beliefs about the teacher-student relationship, future studies could further investigate teachers' beliefs about their choices of teaching content and could relate teachers' beliefs to their professional development in an intercultural context.

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