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## Understanding identity tension from the identity-in-discourse framework: Early-career academics in applied linguistics in China

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### ABSTRACT

The vast majority of Chinese universities have embraced higher education reform that emphasizes a “publish or perish” ideology. This brings challenges to the early-career academics, especially those working in language-related field. This paper employs a multiple case study to explore the identity tension of early career academics in applied linguistics. The three cases had diverse backgrounds and demonstrated different identity trajectories. Data were triangulated through narrative frames, interviews, and documents. Data analysis was conducted using an inductive approach that focused on interpreting the underlying meanings within the data, drawing upon relevant theoretical frameworks for guidance. The findings revealed an array of identity options (e.g., “temporary worker”, “blind follower”, “green pepper”, “leek”). The factors that shaped the identity construction included the shifting value of being a teacher and researcher, intensified “publish-or-perish” ideology, and changing institutional and societal systems and requirements. Implications on teacher development for early-career academics in applied linguistics were proposed based on the findings.

**Keywords:** identity; discourse; identity tension; identity-in-discourse; teacher development

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## Introduction

Early-career academics around the world are under intense pressure to prove their worth, and some are starting to crack. In particular, young academics in China are exhausted by a culture of hard work with seemingly little reward, leading to the new trend, known as the “Tang Ping” (“lying flat”), as an antidote to social and institutional pressures to perform well while working long shifts. The phrase “Tang Ping,” which translates to “lying flat,” has gone viral on social media, becoming a buzzword among those, including scholars in China, who feel worn out by a relentless work culture that offers minimal returns. It signifies a call for a shift towards a more laid-back lifestyle that shuns overexertion, finds satisfaction in modest accomplishments, and embraces leisure. The use of probationary employment contracts is a known cause of stress among early-career scholars in China (Teng, 2019). Different from the American tenure track, the practice in China’s “up or out” system is to hire multiple candidates for one position and pitting them against each other to obtain the tenured position. Such practice has created a sharply competitive academic atmosphere in which aspiring young academics have little margin for error and even less for slacking. The “up or out” system was first initiated in top universities as an approach to cement its status as a “world-class” institution in the 2000s. The lifelong appointment system, initiated in the decades after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, was thus reformed so that all young academics could be recruited and dismissed at the discretion of the university administration. Following the practice in China’s top colleges and universities, many institutions have reformed their recruitment and employment practices along similar lines. Although the specifics of the system used by each institution differ, they share an emphasis on evaluation and a willingness to terminate the contracts of those whose achievements they deem insufficient. The resulting consequence is that multiple early-career academics are forced to compete on uneven terms with everyone else for one position, and “Tang Ping” becomes a new lifestyle.

Associated with “Tang Ping” is an act of enfolding or entangling, also described as involution (in Chinese, *Nei Juan*). Involution describes a situation in which a society spirals into a state of internal friction, with increased complexity but not expansion and significant breakthroughs. A contributing factor to the involution experienced by early career academics in applied linguistics is the intense pressure and vulnerability they face in generating research output, coupled with impractical research demands imposed from higher authorities (Teng, 2024). Many universities in China have established various performance appraisals for early-career scholars. Although content related to the “up or out” system varies by university, these policies generally involve either 3- to 6-year short-term contracts or 3+3 or 3+3+1 contracts (Tian & Lu, 2017). In addition, lists of quantifiable objectives in getting grants are stipulated in each contract. Faculty academic performance is assessed based on predetermined objectives. Decisions to either award or withhold tenure are made based on performance after the contract is fulfilled. Thus, the “up or out” system in Chinese higher education reform has reportedly exerted substantial pressure on faculty members’ academic lives. Young academics must meet research demands within unfavorable institutional and departmental research environments. They may face struggles with identity construction and potentially professional burnout. The inherent struggles these faculty members face reflect an insecure and underrecognized status as an early-career researcher. An increasing number of junior academics in Chinese universities are suffering from possible termination of contracts, difficulties in obtaining tenure after long service, and demotivation in academic development (Teng, 2019). A contextualized understanding of early-career scholars’ professional lives can offer insights into the types of responsive support and assistance from which they can benefit. Understanding teachers’ positions in the environments in which they live and work is essential to their professional development (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

To these ends, the present study focuses on three early-career academics’ professional experiences under the backdrop of higher education reform in Chinese universities. This paper reports on

these teachers' identity construction, with identity taken as a lens for "how to be", "how to act", and "how to understand" their work and societal positions (Sachs, 2005, p. 15). Teacher identity is a key dimension in teachers' professional development (Garner & Kaplan, 2019). The identity lens helps us understand how individuals "negotiate personal and professional spaces in a site of struggle across time and space" (Alsup, 2006, p.98), demonstrate "self-efficacy, motivation, commitment and job satisfaction" (Flores & Day, 2006, p. 220), and gain "a lived sense of who we are" through interactions with others within and across broader communities (Wenger, 1998, p.192). This exploration unveils hidden structures that influence how early-career academics perceive teaching and research. Despite identity being "an integral part of teacher learning" (Tsui, 2011, p. 32), studies researching the complex process of early-career young scholars' identity tension from the perspective of discourse are limited, particularly under the "Tang Ping" phenomenon. Drawing upon discourse theory (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004), the study contributes to an in-depth understanding of identity formation, shedding light on early-career scholars' professional development, particularly with regard to "Tang Ping" or identity tension. The present study addresses the following questions:

1. How do early career academics construct their identities in discourse?
2. How does the perspective identity-in-discourse help understand early-career academics' identity tension?

## Literature Review

### *Teacher identity tensions*

The concept of teacher identity, which refers to how teachers perceive themselves and present themselves to others, plays a crucial role in guiding their practice and development (Day, 2011; Teng, 2018). In higher education, teachers embody various identities, such as "researcher" (Sikes, 2006; Teng, 2020), "model" (Koster et al., 2005), and "collaborator" (Murray, Swennen, & Shagrir, 2009). Consequently, teachers may hold multiple identities simultaneously and utilize these identities to establish credibility and gain recognition (Swennen, Jones, & Volman, 2010). The characteristics of teacher identity encompass who teachers are expected to be or become. Teacher identity tensions arise from the challenges teachers face, the lack of acknowledgment of their profession, the support required for professional development, and teachers' perceptions of their roles after gaining experience (Sachs, 2005).

Research has shown that teacher identity tensions are influenced by the environments in which teachers receive or lack support (Kreber, 2010). Consequently, teachers' identities may be shaped through interactions with colleagues, students, and other stakeholders. Alsup (2006) argued that teacher identity is variable over time and in different settings. Murray and Male (2005) proposed that teacher identity construction is non-linear due to the dynamic opportunities and challenges inherent in their professional and personal experiences. The multifaceted, discontinuous, and socially constructed nature of teacher identity, as described by Beauchamp and Thoms (2009), arises from the "inextricable link between the personal and professional selves of a teacher" (p.180) and the misalignment between "external aspects (contexts and relationships) and internal aspects (stories and emotions)" (p.179).

Literature reports have highlighted the evolving context on teacher identity tension (Teng & Yip, 2022). Hockings et al. (2009) argued that teacher identity tension can stem from a lack of recognition for teachers' dedication to their work, which can influence their ability to negotiate the meaning of their identity and provide direction for personal and professional development.

This illustrates the intricate nature of teacher identity tension in higher education, where recognition and challenges are often intertwined. The environment, learners, colleagues, administrators, and emotions associated with or generated by the context can thus shape a teacher's identity.

### *Identity in discourse*

Identity-in-discourse stresses the criticality of language as a tool in influencing teachers' identity construction (Trent, 2011). Discourse is a social practice involving the social world and individual identity (Jorgensen & Philips, 2002); individuals construct their identities while identifying their subject positions within discourses. Individuals' commitment to discourse forms the "texturing of identity", i.e., "an important part of how they identify themselves" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 164). Exploring identities in discourse has been deemed complementary to communities of practice (CoP) because the discourse framework addresses the roles of conflict and contestation (Jorgensen & Philips, 2002). From a discourse perspective, discursive identity construction occurs through chains of equivalence, indicated by nodal points or master signifiers. Different signifiers or signs, such as 'struggling' and 'strive for', contrast a nodal point such as 'teachers'. Social antagonisms—formed by the collision of conflicting discourses—may dissolve when one discourse dominates (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). Exploring teacher identities in discourse is essential when conducting multifaceted analyses of teacher identity construction.

Several scholars have examined the nature of teacher identity construction through discourse analysis. For example, Trent (2011) investigated a group of pre-service teachers in Hong Kong using discourse theory. This group's identity positions of 'traditional' and 'modern' teachers were inherently antagonistic because they were mutually exclusive. Conflicts thus emerged between 'modern' and 'traditional' teachers. A hegemonic intervention focusing on the 'modern' teacher identity category excluded the identity category of the 'traditional' teacher, which MacLure (2003) described as the "alien other" (p. 11). These studies provided insights into the use of discourse theory in unravelling identity, which is a historical and sociocultural process manifested through language. Analyses of discourses facilitate interpretation of the process of identity formation and transformation, including how identities can be positioned, enacted, and re-enacted by agents and other members of a community. Nguyen et al. (2023) argued that a hierarchical relationship between English language teachers is supported by two discourses, contributing to a negative perception of 'Vietnamese teachers' of English. They emphasize the need for extensive community participation in language education policy, coupled with opportunities for all stakeholders to uncover and critically evaluate the discourses influencing their perspectives on language teaching and teachers. Scholars have also explored university teachers' identity construction from the perspective of discourse analysis. For example, Yuan (2017) focused on university EFL teachers' publishing experiences. His findings revealed the contested nature of teacher identity, which was neither a social category nor a personal self-understanding. Trent's (2013) study also focused on university language teachers in Hong Kong. His results showed how teachers negatively evaluated the traditional teaching approach of stressing recall of lexical and grammar knowledge (e.g., using adjectives such as "disappointing", "cruel", and "awful"). Such actions demonstrated teachers' eagerness to build an identity "as an educator" who advocated communicative language teaching. Participants' negotiation of "old-fashioned" teaching revealed that developing an identity trajectory was a potentially "antagonistic process" (p. 273). Similarly, Yuan and Lee (2014) explored how teacher identities were constructed through modality. Modal verbs (i.e., "may", "should", and "can") delineated participants' varied engagement in discourse (e.g., research practice). The perceived gap between research and practice coupled with the "publish or perish" syndrome highlights the conflict in teacher identity construction when coping with an institutional drive for publishing papers and the schisms between reform initiatives and classroom realities. In a recent study (Barkhuizen, 2021), the focus was a teacher educator's tensions and identity dilemmas, which were mapped out in a conceptual framework that outlines

tensions and identity dilemmas. In particular, the framework outlines the tensions (including meaningful versus meaningless research, meeting institutional standards versus doing research to impact one's community), the sense of being a researcher, and the agentic actions toward the situation.

The above studies reveal the need to explain the texturing of teacher identities from a discourse perspective. An inextricable link exists between language and identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2010). When stressing the discursive nature of identity construction, the analysis of teacher identity-in-discourse can shed light on how teacher identity can be constructed and reconstructed from individual histories, agency, and shifting experiences in coping with complex and ever-changing education contexts. Discourse analysis is based on tactics of intersubjectivity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004), which refers to strategies or methods used to establish mutual understanding and agreement between individuals or groups. This perspective can shed light on societal discourse (i.e., the discussions, debates, and narratives that take place within a society) and social practices (i.e., behaviors, actions, and activities that individuals and groups engage in within a society). This perspective can also help understand the closely intertwined relationship between language, identity, and society from a sociocultural linguistic perspective (Bucholtz & Hall, 2010). Tactics of intersubjectivity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004) frame identity as a mechanism created from the sameness of individuals and groups and as a sociocultural product constituted through denaturalization and illegitimization. Denaturalization involves the process of stripping an individual of their identity recognition, resulting in the loss of rights and duties associated with a certain perception of identity. Illegitimization is the process of delegitimizing or discrediting something or someone. This approach can also promote research on understanding the discursive nature of teacher identity. Such scholarship may reveal implications for educational administrators and policymakers in helping university teachers develop a robust identity to confront obstacles in professional practices and enhance teacher development. Findings can also provide knowledge about the construction, honing, and transformation of teacher identities within the tug-of-war between catering to education advocates as a change agent in teaching and meeting the needs of higher education systems as a follower.

## Method

### *Research design*

The present study intended to explore three early career English teachers' identity construction in higher education in China. The research involved a qualitative case study that spanned over two years. In particular, we explored how individual English teachers constructed identities during their teaching and research experiences in their respective contexts. We adopted a case study approach to probe and interpret participants' personal and professional development.

### *Selection of participants*

The present study involved three early-career academics in applied linguistics, Sabrina, Tony, and Becky (pseudonyms). They participated in this study on a voluntary basis. The participants were early-career faculty members under the tenure track system. The study was approved by institutional review board. The participants signed informed consent.

In the present study, each participant represented a case revealing variable features of a phenomenon in a specific context. The participants had disparate teaching and research experiences as well as diverse educational backgrounds. They exhibited different personal and professional development trajectories toward becoming and working as English teachers along

with challenges in their pursuit of becoming researchers. Their varied experiences arising from different work contexts contribute to an in-depth understanding of the teacher participants' identities.

Sabrina had worked a few years as an English teacher at a college. She resigned from her position as a lecturer and then pursued her doctoral degree in applied linguistics. After graduation, she joined a key university in Mainland China based on a tenure track system. She was given the title research fellow.

Tony studied at a key university from bachelor till doctoral degree in applied linguistics. He continued to work as a post-doctoral fellow at the same university. At the time of this study, Tony was forced to leave his university where he had stayed for more than 10 years.

Becky had worked as an English teacher for about 10 years at a mainland Chinese university. She had extensive teaching experiences but was new to academic research, considered as an early-career researcher. She held a lecturer position. She had become accustomed to her work and lifestyle. At the time of this study, she was forced to join the research publication evaluation scheme that was launched recently by her university.

### ***Data collection***

Data collection lasted two years. Data were triangulated through narrative frames, semi-structured interviews, and documents. The narrative frame is a technique to gather participants' storied experiences and general ideas about their professional experiences and identities (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008). In this study, participants completed a narrative frame in Chinese. The questions for the narrative frames focused on how they perceived their teaching and research, especially how to cope with the stress in relation to publications.

However, frames could be insufficiently long or detailed to encourage participants to record their experiences and feelings. To address these challenges, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews provide a means to explore participants' perceptions, feelings, and attitudes in order to gain a deeper understanding of why and how individuals attribute specific meanings to a phenomenon or event under investigation. In the present study, interview questions focused on exploring the participants' perceptions, feelings, and attitudes in their life experiences and work to better understand why and how participants attach certain meanings to the phenomenon of "up or out" system in China. In the present study, five semi-structured interviews with different focal points were conducted with each participant. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese, their preferred language.

Finally, document analysis, a technique of researching ready-made data sources, can provide additional details about research participants' settings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Documents reflect the time and processes of research participants' practices and activities and can be compared with other data sources. In the present study, we included the participants' contracts as document analysis.

### ***Data analysis***

Data analysis was iterative with data collection (Merriam, 2009). Data were also recursively and iteratively analyzed based on the theoretical notions, including denaturalization, illegitimization, and intersubjectivity tactics, to obtain a comprehensive portrayal of participants' professional identities. We analyzed data for this study using both "bottom-up" and "top-down" approaches

to provide a complete understanding of the focused themes either from data or theories. These approaches provided a holistic perspective on the focal problems. Bottom-up analysis refers to the analysis of various forms of data to identify emerging patterns and gain knowledge from the data. This process was conducted through open coding, including recursive coding or interceding, to identify and examine themes common to the work and life settings of each case. Analysis of language use offered insights into how participants enacted their identities (Merriam, 2009). For this purpose, data collected from each participant were examined repeatedly, and codes were used to organize the data (e.g., the frequency of words, phrases, and ideas). Top-down analysis was employed to examine themes within the data by referring back to the theoretical notions. This technique was implemented to probe how participants might answer the question “Who am I?” in diverse communities.

### ***Data presentation***

Data were presented by case. Such an approach involves organizing and displaying the research findings based on individual cases or participants. This approach allows for a detailed examination of each participant's responses, experiences, and perspectives within the context of the study. By presenting the data in this manner, researchers can highlight the unique characteristics and nuances of each case, providing a comprehensive view of the research participants' experiences and identity tensions. The importance of presenting data by case lies in its flexibility to capture the diversity and complexity of individual experiences. It allows researchers to identify patterns, themes, and variations across different cases, leading to a deeper understanding of the research topic. Additionally, presenting data by case can help illustrate the impact of individual differences and contextual factors on the study findings, enhancing the richness and depth of the research outcomes.

## **Findings**

### ***The Story of Sabrina***

Sabrina was in her mid-30s. She was born in the northeastern province of Mainland China. Sabrina's parents, who were secondary school English teachers, treated Sabrina's studies quite seriously. She studied hard and entered a local key primary and secondary school followed by a key university in Liaoning. Her parents' roles as teachers influenced her career choice and identity development. Growing up watching and learning from her mother's work helped Sabrina develop a vision of being a teacher. In Sabrina's narrative, she mentioned, “I want to be a teacher because my parents are teachers”.

Sabrina's interest became a form of “imagination” (Wenger, 1998), which helped her orient herself to reflect upon and explore her imagined teaching community. She gained new insights into teaching, cultivated an awareness of broader systems, and voiced a more positive motive for being a teacher. In her narrative, Sabrina described her first teacher profession as “Blessing, bewilderment, and frustration”. Sabrina's imagined identity as an English teacher was strengthened after she was cordially accepted by her colleagues. Joining a harmonious department motivated her to engage more in shared teaching practices, contributing to the community's mutuality (Wenger, 1998). For example, her experience of exchanging ideas with the department head and fellow teachers, who she described as “very friendly” in her narrative, promoted her passionate involvement in creating meaning for her job.

However, Sabrina expressed bewilderment with the teaching. Such emotions influenced her identity investment. She exhibited mixed feelings of commitment and compliance as well as

participation and non-participation (Wenger, 1998). In the interview, Sabrina expressed that she felt constrained by the syllabus, which diverged from her endeavor to promote students' interest in speaking English. Such barriers ultimately constituted a component of Sabrina's identity construction, causing her to doubt her capacity to realize her preferred identity under current circumstances. She used opposing phrases, including "I don't want" and "I want to", which reflected her anxiety about being unable to design and implement classroom activities to encourage student participation. As she mentioned in her narrative, "Teaching English is like a monologue". In this sense, "monologue" reflected Sabrina's role in the classroom, which was to give long speeches about language structures. The resulting lack of classroom interaction reinforced Sabrina's overt emphasis on spoon-feeding language structures. An absence of institutional understanding and support further reinforced her identity as a passive English teacher.

Sabrina decided to do research rather than being a language teacher. She finally resigned from her first job and followed the words in her heart, "I have to study for a doctoral degree". Sabrina identified "studying for a doctoral degree" as either an attempt to belong to the target discourse or seek her true self. Sabrina's shaping of her identity depended on her self-perception and required a compromise between self and belonging. Confirmation of this belief was related to consistency between her prior beliefs and the target discourse community.

Sabrina graduated with a doctoral degree but used "regret" to describe her doctoral study experiences. The lack of support during the doctoral study reduced Sabrina's confidence and morale in the possible formation of an identity as a researcher, as specifically displayed in her adamant statements ("I did not know what I have learned after graduation"); second, the possible transition from being a doctoral student to a researcher was thwarted by the broader societal academic discourse of "publishing imperatives" (Rabbi & Canagarajah, 2017, p. 10).

After starting her new job, Sabrina exclaimed, "How can I be a researcher?" in responding to the appraisal system in the contract. In the contract, Sabrina was required to "publish two SSCI- or CSSCI-indexed journal articles and obtain a research grant of no less than 200,000 RMB in three years". She was also required to "teach 4 hours a week and provide service as a headmaster for first-year students". In responding to the unanticipated appraisal system in terms of teaching, research, and service, Sabrina encountered explicit and implicit rules that constrained her membership in higher education. The newfound teacher appraisal system marked a critical point in Sabrina's perception of potential exclusion from the teacher professional community, indicated by "I don't think I can get it" (interview 2). Transferring to the research track triggered a positional dilemma and shaped her non-participatory orientation. As a result, Sabrina felt anxious about her contract. In discussing the lack of institutional support, Sabrina described herself as a "Qing Jiao" ("green pepper") and "truly stressful". (Interview, 3)

Stress related to the appraisal system negatively influenced Sabrina's teacher identity construction. Her sense of authority as a researcher was threatened and became vulnerable. She perceived herself as being unsure of the future. In the face of an uncertain future, Sabrina was forced to grapple with how to be an authority; however, vulnerability emerged before she was able to achieve that role. This process manifested as a cyclical balance and imbalance in Sabrina's identity. When asked whether she opted to relinquish the position of an authority figure and choose "Tang Ping", she rejected the idea of "Tang Ping". She mentioned that although she occasionally struggled to balance the requirements with her personal agency as a researcher, she was not ready for "Tang Ping", as "Tang Ping" is a form of rejection to all the efforts she had devoted. Despite the struggles, Sabrina believed the value of being a teacher and researcher.



### *The story of Tony*

Tony was in his early 30s. Tony was born in a “blissful” family. His father and mother were running a big company. Tony studied in a key primary school, a key secondary school, and one of the top universities for his bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees. He had the motto “Where there is a will there is a way”. As Tony stated, “I like English literature and translation, and I still have a lot to learn”.

Tony had not thought of being a teacher. His vision was to become a translator or interpreter for international conferences. After finishing his doctoral degree, Tony was recruited as a three-year postdoctoral fellow at the university where he obtained his doctoral degree. Despite misalignment between reality and imagination, Tony decided to have a try.

Tony had thought of seeking this three-year chance and becoming a researcher. His idea quickly subverted when he signed the contract. Based on the contract, “a postdoctoral fellow should publish three SSCI papers and complete a key grant before being considered for conferring the postdoctoral fellow certificate”. Without other options, Tony decided to have a try.

Tony depicted his first year as “trial and error”. He described his struggles as an early-career academic without sufficient preparation and guidance. Tony encountered a “reality shock” in transitioning from the community of doctoral education to the community of research and publication. The pressing issue for him was that there were 35 fellows in his faculty. His vision as a researcher was constantly undermined and distorted after he was told that only one fellow could be allowed to stay upon completion of the three-year contract.

In the interviews, Tony kept using “vulnerable” to describe his researcher identity in dealing with the probationary employment system. Tony said, “I don’t have a friend here” (Interview 3). The changing social relation had a great impact on Tony’s identity formation. In his narrative, Tony wrote “doing research is more like a teamwork”. In reality, he stressed that “post-doctoral fellow” is a process of “putting 35 fellows together in a big office and fighting for publications without any guidance or teamwork”. His shock came from the “unfamiliar institutional norms”, although he had spent more than 10 years there.

Tony began to doubt his motto “where there is a will there is a way...”. His doubts implied Tony’s vulnerability and powerlessness as a young scholar. Such doubt depicts an ironic situation for Tony. He felt deprived as a young academic. His struggle as a young scholar was undermined or authenticated (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004).

When questioned about the effort he put into securing his contract, Tony revealed that he had dedicated countless days and nights to writing for publication. Additionally, he made every effort to connect with influential figures, taking note of their names for the grants he intended to apply for. He believed it may be easier for him to publish articles and obtain grants when approaching those authorities. However, when seeing other fellows did the same thing, Tony began to feel anxious and worried, and his legitimacy to negotiate the meaning of conducting research was shattered. Tony found himself in a state of both participation and non-participation. The mixture of participation and non-participation led to his peripheral trajectory, when he found it difficult to obtain the resources for publishing. Feeling a lack of institutional recognition or support, he constructed his identity as only a “temporary worker”.

In regard to the third year, Tony was suddenly told that his performance was deemed “unsatisfactory” as he had not published anything. His imagined “temporary worker” became true when his salary was cut and he had to return one half of the pay he had received to the school. He

felt shocked, as such rules were not mentioned in his contract. He had a feeling of distrust to the university in which he had spent more than 10 years. He spent one year looking for a job while receiving financial support from his parents. He finally secured a job as a three-year research fellow in another institution.

When asked how he thought of “Tang Ping”, he expressed that he had decided to receive a salary for the lifestyle of “Tang Ping”. He stated some of the reasons as below (Interview 3):

*“Sending articles to a Chinese [CSSCI-indexed] journal was like fishing for a needle in the ocean.”*

*“The final result is to leave, then should I work long shift? I have prepared a letter by myself.”*

*“I have been beaten up by society. I just want a more relaxing life... I am not saying I am waiting to die. I work. I just don't overstretch and kill myself for an unreachable goal.”*

*“I reject being ripped off like leeks.”*

Along with the experience of marginalization, Tony claimed a disadvantaged role as an early-career scholar. Tony discursively constructed an *identity relation of differentiation* between himself and other scholars. As situated in such a relation, Tony positioned himself as a “leek” that can be cut anytime. He rejected growing up as a “leek”, as he believed he would be cut more if he did.

### ***The story of Becky***

Becky, who was in her mid-40s, was born in a small city. She was raised by worker parents. Becky was a hard-working student who enrolled in a key secondary school and then a key university. Becky chose to study English because it was one of the most popular majors at that time. Becky took a job in higher education after earning her bachelor's degree in 1998. She regarded herself as “an accidental teacher”. She finally decided to accept a position at a local university after her parents persuaded her; they insisted that the job would be “stable and rewarding” (narrative).

Becky grew professionally “through trial and error” in her initial years of teaching. The transition from student to teacher was rife with bewilderment, frustration, encouragement, and excitement. As a teacher who joined the university teaching community after undergraduate study, this shift was challenging because Becky did not know how to meet “students' various expectations and needs” (narrative frame). She also mentioned that she was not confident in her teaching, especially when everything was new to her. Becky described her first few years of teaching as “a period of trial and error” (narrative). In the interview, her use of verbs (e.g., “try” and “overcome”), adjectives (e.g., “beneficial” and “rewarding”), and adverbs (e.g., “extremely”) authenticated the values she attached to her community of teaching (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Becky's initial experiences challenged but enhanced her self-positioning as a teacher. As a newcomer to higher education, Becky found herself in conflicting circumstances of challenges and opportunities in her work setting.

In 2006, Becky's son was born; becoming a mother changed her life dramatically. In her narrative, Becky described her son as a blessing and gift, using phrases such as “the biggest achievement” and “a paradise on earth” to describe her newborn. Her son was very quiet when he was an infant, and Becky easily maintained a balance between work and family. However, as her son grew, he became irritable. Becky then had to spend more time trying to understand him, explaining that, as an autistic child, he was “non-communicative”. Becky's perceptions about the seamlessness of teacher identity meaning were distorted.

Becky described two incidents for which she formed “a weakening sense of being an English teacher”. One was the closure of the English program, and the other was the transition from teacher to researcher track. The changing status of English programs in China led to a shift in Becky’s identity from a central teacher identity to a marginalized one. Institutional administrators’ negative stances toward English curricula permeated Becky’s narratives and shaped her teacher identity construction. A typical example of such negative perceptions is reflected in the interview, as she described: “there is no market for teaching and learning English in China”.

To earn more resources or funding from the government, the institution suddenly transferred its resources for teaching to research. Teaching did not align with the direction of a research-oriented university and was not prioritized and valued by the institution. All English teachers, including Becky, were required to publish at least one SSCI- or CSSCI-indexed paper each year (school documents: contract). Responding to this, Becky said she was only a bachelor’s degree holder, and research was something that was not realistic for her. Becky’s comments revealed a *logic of difference* between institutional positioning and English teachers’ professional practices. The mismatch further delegitimized Becky’s professional practice and the association between institutional restructuring and traditional language teachers. The identity relation was thus mediated by an institutional agenda. This delegitimized relation also affected membership, a core element of identity. Institutional restructuring apparently led Becky to assume a lower community position within “the broader constellations of practice” (Wenger, 1998, p. 168). The undervalued competence undermined Becky’s English teacher identity and thus distinguished Becky from former perceptions of being an English teacher.

In the interview, her repeated use of the words “not suitable” and “I don’t” demonstrated her position for rejecting academic research and how the institutional research requirements “illegitimized” her attitude toward research (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) in higher education discourse dominated by a research paradigm. The use of “I don’t belong to...” in the narrative indicated Becky’s concerns about doing research. Such tensions were related to a lack of direction; she described herself as “a blind follower” who had to conform to mainstream sociocultural rules. Becky rejected any claim of a researcher identity. Becky’s use of the rhetorical question “How can I become a researcher?” (Interview 4) showed a lack of self-positioning declarations and appeared to undermine any possible legitimacy of a researcher identity. Ongoing shifts in institutional policy turned Becky’s professional identity into a site of contestation and struggle. One of the obstacles, as mentioned in Becky’s narrative, involved “increasing difficulties in getting a promotion” (interview 3).

In responding to the question on how she treated the phenomenon “Tang Ping”, she laughed, “Tang Ping” is the lifestyle that fits her, which was to teach English lessons and take care of her son. She reiterated “I don’t care about promotion now” (interview 3). The statement provided an especially vivid depiction of her place as an English teacher who was happy to be a teacher, rejected alignment with new institutional requirements by meeting the imposed publication requirements, and chose to live in a comfort zone of “Tang Ping”.

## Discussion

### *The case of Sabrina*

This paper illustrates how Sabrina constructed personal and professional identities within a complex set of social relations. In Sabrina’s case, social relations were created between her and other social agents, between her past self and present self, and between the self in one situation and the self in another. Tied to social relations, Sabrina positioned herself and others as particular

kinds of people while responding to research publication moves. Social relations can also be interpreted as a process of constructing professional identities on an intrapersonal and interpersonal level.

Intrapersonally, Sabrina discursively constructed her teacher identity in relation to her past self and to different selves constructed in two settings: teaching and research. Through adequation (i.e., suppressing social differences that might otherwise disturb a seamless representation of similarity) and distinction (i.e., suppressing similarities that might otherwise compromise the construction of difference), Sabrina constructed and reconstructed her teacher identities. For example, through adequation, she recognized the value of an English teacher, which aligned with her previous vision of being an English teacher. In terms of distinction, Sabrina discursively demonstrated salient differences in her identity as a different type of teacher (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). For example, she distinguished between her practice when teaching English majors and non-English majors. Due to this distinction, Sabrina felt deprived of value when teaching English for non-English majors and demonstrated an identity as a teacher who found it difficult to be innovative in the classroom. As such, individuals will likely acquire multiple identities through discursive identification with various discourses, and those identities may be moment-to-moment, plural, and contradictory. Identity development is not linear but instead incorporates influences from the social environment and social position, which can mediate multiple interests and identities.

In receiving her lack of interest in doing research, Sabrina was perplexed by her career development. Such intense feelings may have resulted from a lack of support and recognition in a community of practice. Sabrina delineated between herself and teachers with more publications. In relation to this distinction, Sabrina's potential researcher identity became distorted, a situation that was reinforced by the institutional restructuring related to teacher appraisal. She failed to sustain her commitment. Finally, due to non-participation and a lack of institutional and peer support, she found it impossible to act as a resister to surmount conflict and empower herself in dealing with unknown circumstances (Ollerhead & Burns, 2016), while at the same time, she experienced identity tension as she rejected the lifestyle of "Tang Ping".

Overall, Sabrina's teacher identity construction involved negotiating social and institutional cultural structures along with specific stances and roles. The interactional positions Sabrina assumed while responding to unfolding discourse helped construct an ideological alliance between macro and local categories of identity work. These ideological alliances, once forged, guided what Sabrina wanted to do and how she interacted with stakeholders (e.g., students). Overall, the identification process was bivalent: Sabrina was an author of social processes and the subject of them. Her identity relationality can be addressed through chains of equivalence, such as discourses of adequation and distinction, which refer to the sameness and differences that shaped Sabrina's identity construction experiences (Scherer, 2009). Identity tension can be understood through adequation and distinction, which connect signifiers to build relational identities (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). During this process, Sabrina was required to either suppress social practices that did not align with her desired identity or to highlight those practices that concurred with it. Therefore, Sabrina's identity construction involved negotiating and renegotiating social practices and personally ascribed identity meaning.

### *The case of Tony*

This paper reveals that Tony's professional identities were constructed within a complex set of social relationships between Tony and other social agents, between his prior experiences and present situation, and between the self built in one setting and the self built in another setting. The construction of Tony's professional identities was thus discursive, interpersonal, and

intrapersonal. First, this can be detected in the use of linguistic strategies demonstrated by various sources, such as narrative frames, interviews, and discourse activities. Echoing previous studies (e.g., Sayer, 2000), the relationship between texts, events, practices, and structures influenced his sense of agency. Indeed, as Tony moved from abstract structures toward concrete social events, he felt it increasingly difficult to meet the institutional publication requirement. At the generic level, Tony's identities emerged from various meaning-making messages embedded in his speech. His sharing of experiences in the narratives and interviews about his publication challenges indexed his undermined researcher identity. Positive expressions of "worried" feelings demonstrated his determination to live a "Tang Ping" lifestyle. Such values, beliefs, and commitments to his work served as a critical source for his identity construction (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002), for which he discursively rejected the professional practice as a leak to be ripped off by the authority.

The process of identity formation for Tony became dynamic, continuous, fluid, and situated within and across multiple discourses. Language and identity were inextricably connected (Johnston, 2010), thereby demonstrating the complex relationships among educational background, social structure, and the institutional system that define a set of possibilities and social practices (i.e., what actually happens during social events). During the period of achieving a sense of a scholar, Tony demonstrated different ways of coping with structural possibilities, thus making it difficult to demarcate "authorization", the process in which identities were affirmed through structures of institutional power, from "illegitimation", the process through which identities were censored, pushed, or dismissed by institutional and social structures (Bucholtz & Hall, 2010, p. 24). Therefore, power differentials, power interplay, and context introduced multiple facets to Tony's identity formation.

### *The case of Becky*

Becky's concrete language use conveyed the involvement of "authentication" and "denaturalization" in teacher identity construction (Bucholtz, 2003). Student recognition served as a source of authentication for Becky's teacher identity. Her teacher identity was later denaturalized, and her identity as a struggling teacher was authenticated because she found it challenging to balance work commitments and family responsibilities. Hence, denaturalization occurred when the authenticity of Becky's teacher identity was challenged or questioned, resulting in a perceived rupturing of her teacher identity. Becky was in a mutable interactional situation, and numerous identities emerged from negotiation with other social actors and unyielding power structures. Resources, including prior experience, family life, professional knowledge, characteristics of the setting, and wider sociocultural contexts (Søreide, 2006), affected how Becky shifted and negotiated her identity meanings to address conflicts between hierarchical identities and tensions inhibiting her from sensing or deriving meaning from teaching.

"Authorization" and "illegitimation" also influenced Becky's identity construction as an English teacher. Due to "structures of institutional power and ideology" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2010, p. 24), Becky's teacher identity could be either authorized or illegitimized. For instance, Becky fashioned her own identities because the institutionally authorized teacher identity aligned with her self-authorized teacher identity when she satisfied students' English learning needs. Becky filled her teacher identity with meanings and developed a commitment to teaching. However, her identities could be illegitimized or challenged in light of structural constraints. Without institutional support, Becky struggled to cope with institutional demands around research output, leading to identity conflict between being a teacher and a researcher. The perceived dissonance between teaching and research threatened Becky's identity management.

Hirsh and Kang (2016) argued that identity conflicts stem from simultaneous activation of competing norms and related behavioral responses and that resulted identity conflicts trigger negative emotions and effects. These phenomena were reflected in Becky's case, wherein past and present situations affected her identity meaning. The illegitimization of identity work deprived Becky of agency in performing research and research publication, which elicited uncertainty and doubt. She was further isolated because of the promotion system; she responded negatively because she did not earn the recognition that a long-serving teacher deserves. These negative emotions weakened her self-efficacy as well as her professional identity as a teacher. Therefore, Becky encountered struggles in locating meaning for her identities. As she encountered authorization/illegitimization social relations in professional practices, positive and negative identities emerged and were enacted and altered through her linguistic use (Sikes, 2006). The multifaceted nature of teacher identity construction thus represents a process of responding to contextual variability.

### *A tentative framework on Identity-in-discourse*

Identity-in-discourse provides a rich understanding of the extent to which the social setting influences identity construction. The identity-in-discourse perspective can unveil power relationships operating within one's identity construction. How teacher participants presented their identities and acquired identities from others was reflected in their language within their textual, social, and psychological contexts. Discourse is a representative carrier of teacher identity construction, and teacher identity construction, in turn, shapes discourse. This perspective considers how an individual relates to the world through commitment and stance and to other social actors through identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Fairclough, 2003). Drawing upon discourse theory (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Fairclough, 2003) and the findings, a tentative framework for understanding identities from a discourse perspective was proposed (Figure 1). Within this framework, teacher identity construction is a discursive process that emerges through social interaction and is strengthened while linking societal discourse and social practices. Constantly and simultaneously coordinating societal discourse and social practices requires teachers to become change agents. The coordination leads to relationships among tactics of intersubjectivity. Adequation and distinction both stress similarities. While adequation supports identity work and is foregrounded, distinction suppresses difference construction and is downplayed. Authentication and denaturalization refer to how identities are discursively verified or subverted. Authorization and illegitimization both highlight structures. While authorization affirms identities through structures, illegitimization dismisses, censors, or ignores identities through structures. It is essential to connect the three tactics of intersubjectivity as a whole to understand teacher identity. These tactics shape one's sense of agency and, in turn, identity construction.

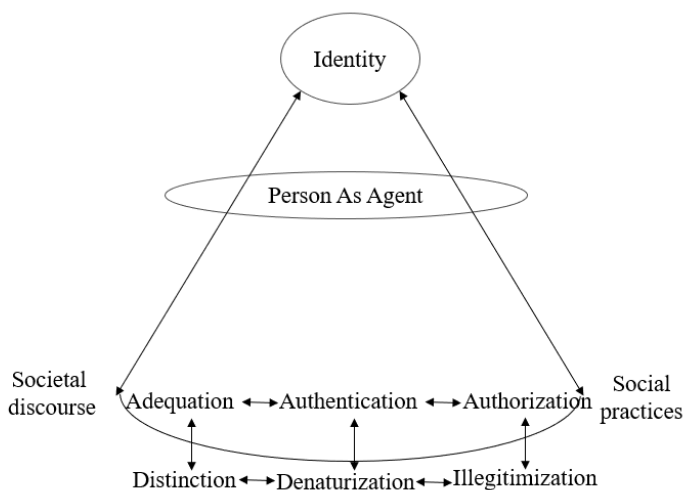


Figure 1. A framework for teacher identity construction in discourse

The participants were involved in different sets of social relationships while interpreting the resources that were made available to them through their positions. These findings revealed the complex nature of professional identity, which is an individually varied response to contextual conditions, reaffirming that professional identities are often experienced uniquely (Soreide, 2006). Linguistic practices revealed important information related to each of the four teachers' identity constructions. For example, Becky found herself in an authorization/illegitimization social relationship between being an English teacher and being a researcher. Sabrina perceived herself as being in a state of denaturalization as a contract-based English lecturer. Tony struggled in an adequation/distinction social relationship as a researcher. Tony was not able to draw upon the discourse of research as an individual accomplishment, shortening the professional distance between himself and other fellows. Despite different attitudes towards "Tang Ping", Becky, Tony, and Sabrina deliberately distanced themselves from the research community. The discourse of research as an individual or community accomplishment leads to conflicts in a "given order" (Mouffe, 2013, p. 2), especially "a particular configuration of power relations" (Mouffe, 2013, p. 2). Teachers with desirable positions and strengthened beliefs for future development could juxtapose themselves as change agents, while teachers with undesirable positions may value engagement in the community as a tightly controlled circumstance.

The similarities and differences outlined in discourse theory indicate the discursive nature of identity formation (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Discursive identity construction is made evident by linguistic strategies (e.g., evaluation and modality) and through various sources (e.g., interviews and discourse activities such as classroom interactions). Echoing the findings of previous studies (e.g., Sayer, 2000), teacher agency in event participation and identity construction was influenced by the connections between societal discourse and social practices. Indeed, as the participants attempted to break from cultural and social norms, they encountered challenges in making free decisions and acting independently (e.g., Becky was a "blind follower" for applying for a research project, and Tony chose to approach authorities to obtain research resources). The participants' distinct identities—a vulnerable researcher (Tony), a struggling researcher (Sabrina), and a perplexed teacher (Becky)—can be better understood in terms of whether each teacher could

adapt to the similarities and differences between reality and imagination and conform to the imposed categories in each one's given context.

We propose that the relationship between language and identity construction is situated in the link between societal discourse and social practice. In responding to the relationship between societal discourse (i.e., education structure, background, and institutional system) and social practices (i.e., what happened to early-career researchers at social events), the participants' identity construction involved a process of acknowledging, denying, discovering, doubting, inventing, and downplaying their similarities and differences to peers. The interrelated tactics they employed shaped each participant's identity, just as their changing identities affected the tactics they later employed.

The integration of intersubjectivity tactics contributed to theoretical knowledge of identity-in-discourse by illustrating ways in which identity and discourse can work together to legitimize a teacher's presence. For example, being situated in a harmonious or hostile context (e.g., moving from a non-key to a key university) could produce legitimate or illegitimate identities; constructed identities influenced Sabrina's response to evolving discourse. In particular, the struggles in building a researcher identity, as revealed in the cases of Sabrina and Becky, spoke to the pressures of being a female academic. The stress of being a mother of a son with autism made it challenging to adjust to motherhood for Becky. The development of identity as a female scholar seems to be impossible for Becky and Sabrina. Reasons included the nature of the academic workload (e.g., doing research and publishing), the ingrained gender roles, and the patriarchal norms of women as family caregivers. Becky and Sabrina's stories solidify that the academic world or institutional system is not adequately designed to provide adequate support for the development as female scholars. Tony's vulnerability as an early-career researcher manifested him as a disadvantaged individual and a community member either resisting or succumbing to the "publish or perish" ideologies or regime. Such analyses can enhance one's understanding of the complex relationship between identity and discourse as it evolves within societal discourse and social practice.

Based on theoretical understanding and data interpretation, we argue that teacher identity construction is not simply a constant balancing of "self and other" (De Fina, 2011, p. 269); rather, teacher identity construction is a socially grounded process of revisiting challenges at different points in life, managing the changing selves under divergent circumstances, and understanding oneself and others in a given context. Teacher identity construction can be captured through an analysis of the resources available to them. Identity categories can be influenced by stereotypical situations, societal discourse, and social practice. Such influences are salient contextual factors that do not always fully promote teachers' professional development. Teacher identity construction thus reflects pre-existing social and mental categories and locally contextualized influence, such that constructed identities are plural and not simply created in discourse but also shape it.

### **Concluding remarks**

The findings are based on data collected from only three participants, which may not fully represent the entire phenomenon of "Tang Ping." This limited sample size may affect the generalizability of the findings. The study focuses on a specific higher education reform context in China, which may limit the broader applicability of the findings to other contexts or subjects. The study does not explicitly address power relations, which should have been included in the analysis to provide a more comprehensive understanding of identity construction.

However, the study extends the understanding of identities in discourse by highlighting the role of language, particularly linguistic strategies, in identity construction. The use of words and



expressions in participants' speech showcases their commitment to their work setting and identity construction, emphasizing the importance of language in professional identity. At the lexicogrammatical level, the use of words or expressions (e.g., adjectives, noun phrases, and modal verbs) showcased their commitment to their work setting and identity construction. The three tactics of intersubjectivity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004) while interacting with institutional discourses further delineated the relationship between language and identity. The study reveals that early career English teachers' identities are essentially discursive, and language use is an attempt to make sense of their professional settings and themselves as teachers and researchers in higher education. Exploring identities from a discourse perspective can unveil the power relations of identity construction, allowing for a concrete understanding of Wenger's (1998) three levels of social configuration (i.e., individuals and community, between communities, and between community and the broader institution/constellation).

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