

Difficulties and Improvement Strategies for Foreign Teachers' Identity in Chinese Universities

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Abstract—Under the social background of “demographic dividend” turning into “talent dividend”, talents have become the greatest kinetic energy for development. Currently, more and more foreign teachers choose to work in Chinese universities. However, the majority of them have experienced identity loss at different levels and have a series of mysteries in mind, like who am I, where am I, and where should I go. Through literature review, investigation analysis and international comparison, this study pushes forward from concept clarification, status description, attribution analysis to strategy construction. Then concrete suggestions are provided on the basis of Chinese characteristics. The government should form a basic framework for foreign teachers' identity by clearly confirming their legal status and effectively clarifying their rights as well as obligations. Universities should speed up the process of de-administration, form an inclusive organizational culture, and encourage foreign teachers to express their opinions freely. Foreign teachers themselves should adhere to right career motivation, change their passive mentality and adapt to the new environment.

Keywords— *difficulty; improvement strategy; foreign teachers; identity*

I. CONCEPT CLARIFICATION

A. Current Classification of Foreign Teachers Working in China

Foreign teachers refer to teachers with foreign nationalities who are engaged in teaching and research work in higher education institutions.^[1] In the specific application process, concepts such as “foreign experts”, “foreign professionals”, “foreign teachers” and “overseas high-level talents” often cross with one another. In September 2016, Chinese National Foreign Experts Bureau promulgated “Classification Standards for Foreigners Working in China (Trial)”. On the basis of point-based system, guidance catalogue, labor market testing and quota management, this document uses definition description as well as condition listing to divide foreigners working in China into three categories: foreign high-end talents (category A), foreign professionals (category B) and foreign ordinary personnel (category C), among which foreign teachers are subordinate to category A or category B. Up to then, the concept of foreign teachers becomes relatively clear.

B. Definition and Connotation of Identity

The academic theory of “identity” sprouted in the U.S. in 1940s. Erikson first proposed the concept of identity as well as

identity crisis, and pursued their deep connotation throughout his life. As the mark of “teachers' identity”, it mainly involves two elements: institutional rights and psychological satisfaction. Among them, “rights” implies the legal status, while “identity” is the psychological perception of “rights”, which is another social perception outside legal status.^[2] It is concluded that foreign teachers' identity can be further analyzed from external recognition of institutional rights and internal recognition of psychological satisfaction. An important point to note is that external identity will produce a positive or negative two-way influence on internal identity.

C. Significance of Improving Foreign Teachers' Identity

As a key component of teaching involvement and education reform, foreign teachers play an irreplaceable role in China's personnel training. And most of them work in universities, for they are attracted by wide-range disciplines and sufficient scientific research conditions. General Secretary Xi Jinping also attaches great importance to the active role of introducing foreign talents and further emphasizes this point in the 19th National Congress Report: We must keep gathering talents from all over the world, and accelerate the construction pace of talent-priority strategy.

However, the problem of identity loss becomes more and more urgent accordingly. Individuals of the same race, same nation, same class, and same gender are more likely to be established in identity, and different social structures, as well as social relations, will have big influence on individual identity. Therefore, the identity analysis of foreign teachers working in Chinese universities is quite significant. It can provide an internal driving force for foreign teachers to clarify their professional orientation and adhere to their professional norms. It can also offer a guiding framework for both society and universities to better understand the underlying meaning of teacher internationalization. Furthermore, it helps with the re-examination of some original policy documents, which will further promote the connotative development of talent work.

II. PRACTICAL DIFFICULTIES OF FOREIGN TEACHERS' IDENTITY IN CHINESE UNIVERSITIES

A. Who Is He / She – Value Orientation

With regard to overall teacher composition in Chinese universities, the proportion of foreign teachers is still not large. Most universities consider them as “adding brilliance to present splendor” during the internationalization process, rather

than “necessary initiative” to promote discipline construction and talent cultivation. As a result, foreign teachers are not included in the formal personnel system and their employment relationship is maintained by simple labor contract signed with the specific college office or the international office, rather than the human resources office.

B. Who Am I – Professional Competence

The problem of professional competence comes from the contradiction between personal ability and work requirement. Foreign teachers used to grow up in different environments, receive different educational as well as cultural backgrounds. Besides, they do not have much experience of teaching in China. Consequently, a lot of time and efforts is needed to grasp the suitable skills and methods of teaching Chinese students. When encountered with difficulties at the initial work stage, they may inevitably have many doubts in mind, like am I a qualified teacher or can I become a qualified teacher. All these will do great harm to their sense of identity.

C. Where Am I – Affiliation Perception

The organizational culture of western universities is more often expressed as a “community”, while Chinese universities are objectively causing “organizational separate islands” under administrative command.^[3] The problem of affiliation perception is about the contradiction between self-expectation and work environment. After entering the universities, foreign teachers are often in a state of “hanging in the air”. In some cases, they are not invited to attend regular meetings, to give suggestions for their college’s development and to vote for some specific issues. In terms of detailed work, the atmosphere for communicating and cooperating with other Chinese colleagues has not been formed neither.

D. Where Should I Go – Future Development

Identity is an unfinished, process-oriented, open-ended and malleable multi-component, with the core of “who I will be” and “what kind of teacher I want to be in the future”.^[4] The problem of future development is from the contradiction between career planning and current policy. Under most circumstances, foreign teachers are not treated in the same way as native teachers. They lack professional promotion channels, cannot obtain scientific research support, and have no discourse rights in matters including university construction. This greatly reduces the adhesion between foreign teachers and universities. Thus, identity loss or multiple identity reconstruction is easily caused.

III. LOGICAL ATTRIBUTION OF FOREIGN TEACHERS’ IDENTITY DIFFICULTIES IN CHINESE UNIVERSITIES

Teacher identity is at the core of teacher profession, which determines how teachers construct their professional roles, that is, how to teach as a professional. The attribution analysis of foreign teachers’ identity difficulties is actually the analysis of its multiple affecting factors and corresponding operation mechanism. Classical identity theory holds the perspective that identity is a permanent and invariant personality state, which serves as the benchmark for determining people’s rights and behaviors.^[5] While modern constructivism believes that identity is constructed by society, and individuals continually meet with their unidentified or unanticipated experiences in the

social environment and will choose certain experiences as their own. Therefore, identity is a process of construction.^[6] This paper tends to adopt the second point of view. According to the research conducted by Christopher Day, Alison Kington, Gordon Stobart and Pam Sammons, teachers’ identity is constructed from four different aspects: macro structure, meso structure, micro structure and personal biography.^[7]

TABLE I. AFFECTING FACTORS OF TEACHERS’ IDENTITY

Different Aspects	Affecting Factors
Macro Structure	Board social/cultural features usually referred to in discussion of social diversity and/or government policy as it is implicated in the order of an education service
Meso Structure	The social/cultural/organizational formations of universities and teacher education
Micro Structure	Talked of in terms of colleagues, students and parents
Personal Biography	Values, beliefs and ideologies

A. Macro Structure Level

1) Omission of National Policies

China issued Teacher Law in 1993, and it clearly stipulated the identity mission of Chinese teachers. That is, Chinese teachers are professionals who undertake education and teaching duties, train socialist builders as well as successors, and improve national citizen quality. However, currently, despite more and more foreign teachers are working in China, there are no related policies about the definite roles of foreign teachers. Their corresponding rights and obligations are also in a vague grey area. What’s worse, the setting of various talent projects has shaped different types of foreign teachers, which inevitably causes the division within the overall group, thus affecting the identity of each individual.

2) Impact of Market Economy

The market economy makes competition in society quite fierce. Public and private kindergartens, primary schools, middle schools, high schools and universities all have great demand for foreign teachers. However, the income of foreign teachers working in universities is not high. Taking those working in commercial training institutions as a reference, the psychological gap caused by economic income difference has intensified their identity uncertainty.

B. Meso Structure Level

1) Lack of Top-Level Design

At present, some Chinese universities follow international indicators and devote lots of their energy into recruiting foreign teachers. Nevertheless, they tend to emphasize more on short-term benefits and scientific entrance criteria have not been established yet. Questions like whether imported foreign teachers are in line with the university’s academic strategy as well as development direction, what outcomes are expected and have they achieved original targets, lack cautious pre-design discussion and post-evaluation adjustment. As to the operation mechanism, there exists a crossover of functions between the international office and the human resources office, which may lead to some important work involving foreign teachers’ personal interests undone.

2) Backwardness of Supporting System

Salary is the most basic guarantee for teachers' work and life. By way of contrast, the salary composition of foreign teachers working in Chinese universities is quite simple and short of incentive attribute. In addition, they are unable to apply for research funding in their home country, and they cannot get support from the current employer neither. This has done great damage to the development of their scientific research. Meanwhile, humanistic care for those foreign teachers cannot be guaranteed. According to Interim Measures for Foreign Teachers' Fund issued in 2016, the fund allocated by National Foreign Experts Bureau has a clear scope of expenditure, including round-trip air tickets, accommodation and salaries or lecture fees or subsidy fees. Some universities also do not have special funds which could be used to organize relevant activities and provide meticulous supporting services.

C. Micro Structure Level

The internationalization process of Chinese universities is still moving forward and needs further improvement. Some native teachers lack cooperation awareness and their language level is also limited. It is difficult for them to actively help foreign teachers adapt to the new environment. In terms of work division, there is no communication between native teachers and foreign teachers. Both sides tend to complete their work separately. This also exacerbates the identity loss of foreign teachers.

D. Personal Biography

1) Restrictions on Cultural Background

Foreign teachers have different educational cultures and growth backgrounds. Directly teaching in another country actually has brought enormous challenges to them. They need time to find appropriate teaching styles and grasp effective teaching skills. Some studies find that when teachers do not enter maturity, whether they are qualified for work and whether a sense of accomplishment can be obtained from work greatly affect their professional identity.^[8]

2) Imperfection of Entrance Criteria

In accordance with Classification Standards for Foreigners Working in China (Trial), foreign teachers should obtain bachelor degree or have relevant working experiences of two or more years. Among them, foreign language teachers who obtain education or language bachelor degree or graduate from normal universities can exempt from the requirement of working experiences. Indeed, the entrance criteria are deficient and it becomes too easy for foreign language teachers to work in universities. Taking employment motivation into consideration, some of them, especially those from economically disadvantaged areas, are likely to be affected by external influence of work and life, and lack the inner love of education. Lack of faith is also prone to loss of identity.

IV. STRATEGY CONSTRUCTION FOR FOREIGN TEACHERS' IDENTITY IN CHINESE UNIVERSITIES

A. The Government Should Raise the Introduction Standards and Strengthen the Legal Supply of Foreign Teachers' Rights.

Concerning job qualifications, compared with native teachers, the employment standard for foreign teachers is relatively lowered. To reverse this situation, the government should stick to the principle of fairness, make a wise top-level plan and increase the introduction of high-level foreign teachers working in scarce fields. In addition, some research on foreign teachers' identity and its affecting factors, including professional capability requirements should be encouraged.

Also, the government should enhance the institutional recognition of foreign teachers and provide more economic support for high-level talents. The precondition is to determine the subject of performing this function. Article 42 of China's Teacher Law clearly stipulates that foreign teachers' appointment documents shall be prescribed by education administrative departments of the State Council. However, in terms of foreign teachers' legal status, rights and obligations, they should not be resolved by Ministry of Education, whose legal hierarchy is obviously insufficient. Instead, related contents should be written in Labor Law or Civil and Commercial Law for foreigners, which certainly includes foreign teachers. Moreover, special attention needs to be paid to project categories, which should be scientifically designed to avoid internal division.

B. Universities Should Speed up the Innovation of Personnel System and Center on Long-Term Development.

Universities are the working place of foreign teachers, and their practical deeds have a great influence on foreign teachers' identity. American universities enjoy great autonomy in hiring foreign teachers. Meanwhile, the employment of foreign teachers is no different from that of native ones, and is completely of the same standard. In theory, regardless of nationality, as long as someone meets the specific requirements for a certain position, he or she can apply to become an official member and enjoy the same labor rights in accordance with law, that is, have equal pay and labor security, enjoy the same wage standard, enjoy medical and social insurance, equal labor claims, non-discriminatory treatment and protection from infringement.^[9]

China's universities should learn from the U.S. practices and gradually involve foreign teachers in the tenure track system. Sense of belonging will be enhanced in this way. Through the reform of teacher education content and teacher evaluation method, foreign teachers can improve their ability to adapt to Chinese teaching environment, which is beneficial to promoting their recognition from colleagues and students. For example, the current "International Model Academy" is a successful attempt.

Besides, universities should abandon the out-of-time idea of focusing only on quantity and stress the virtuous circle of talent work. For example, pre-job training and post-job exchanges should be added and the provision of humanistic care, such as various forms of cultural activities should be

increased. Furthermore, as colleagues, native university teachers should be open-minded, fervently cooperate with foreign teachers and support them in every possible way.

C. Foreign Teachers Should Adjust the Mentality and Continuously Strengthen Their Professional Ability.

Teachers should be adult learners. That is, teachers should constantly reflect on and re-evaluate his or her own value and the practical relationship with others.^[10] Foreign teachers must first adhere to the correct professional motivation and uphold the good tradition of “teaching and educating people”. Another important aspect is actively adjusting the mentality and striving to adapt to changes in the new environment. For instance, foreign teachers can try to learn more about Chinese culture, which will help them integrate into Chinese teaching better and faster.

There are many other useful attempts to improve professional skills, such as talking to students frequently, understanding their needs and receiving direct feedback. Or they can exchange opinions with other foreign teachers to gain beneficial experiences for continuous improvement of their professional ability. Based on this information, foreign teachers can adjust working methods and teaching styles in a timely manner. This also does help to improve identity.

V. CONCLUSION

The identity of foreign teachers in Chinese universities cannot be instilled by external simple role indoctrination, but through the multi-party efforts to promote active exploration and construction. The government, universities and foreign teachers themselves all have respective duties. Only when the three of them perform their duties fully can we truly guarantee the identity of foreign teachers.

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