



# Positive Emotional Experiences of International Chinese Language Teachers Using Generative AI: A Case Study

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**Abstract.** As generative AI becomes increasingly integrated into language teaching, understanding teachers' emotional experiences is critical for supporting effective adoption and professional growth. This qualitative multiple-case study investigated the positive emotions of five International Chinese Language Teachers in their use of generative AI for lesson preparation and assessment. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study found that positive emotions emerged as a dynamic, phase-based process spanning before, during, and after AI use. Pre-use tensions formed an important backdrop that intensified later positive emotional responses. Emotional turning points reflected shifts in teachers' appraisals of control and value, while positive emotions contributed to professional growth through three pathways: efficiency gain and cognitive release, competence confirmation and confidence building, and role evolution and identity negotiation. Teachers' accounts also suggested key design priorities for AI tools, including operational reliability, pedagogical quality and contextual fit, and customizable interaction. These findings offer implications for teacher education, AI design, and institutional support in technology-integrated teaching contexts.

**Keywords:** International Chinese Language Teachers, positive emotional experiences, generative AI, teacher emotion, qualitative case study

## 1 Introduction

The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping contemporary education (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019)<sup>[31]</sup>. AI tools such as ChatGPT, DeepSeek, and Doubao are increasingly being incorporated into routine instructional work, including lesson planning, instructional material development, and student assessment (Hwang et al., 2020)<sup>[16]</sup>. For language educators, this shift brings both pedagogical possibilities and new adaptive demands. Within this broader landscape, International Chinese Language Teachers represent a particularly important yet under-researched group (Gong et al., 2022)<sup>[10]</sup>. Their work is shaped by specific professional demands, such as mediating cross-cultural communication, generating culturally appropriate materials, and teaching across transnational and increasingly online set-

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tings, which may influence their experiences with AI in distinctive ways (Moloney & Xu, 2015; Tsung & Cruickshank, 2011)<sup>[20,28]</sup>.

Emotion is central to understanding teachers' engagement with educational innovations. Teacher emotion has long been recognized as a fundamental aspect of educational practice, influencing instructional decision-making, classroom interactions, professional well-being, and long-term career trajectories (Hargreaves, 1998; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003)<sup>[11, 27]</sup>. In the context of technology integration, teachers' emotional responses to emerging tools can significantly influence their willingness to adopt such tools, sustain use over time, and develop innovative practices around them (Scherer et al., 2019)<sup>[25]</sup>. However, existing research on AI in education has been dominated by a technological orientation, focusing on system functionality, algorithmic accuracy, and interaction efficiency, while paying comparatively limited attention to educators' lived emotional experiences (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019)<sup>[31]</sup>. This gap is particularly pronounced in the field of International Chinese language education, where systematic inquiry into teacher emotion remains limited despite the profession's distinctive demands (Gong et al., 2022; Moloney & Xu, 2015)<sup>[10, 20]</sup>.

Theoretical perspectives in educational psychology offer valuable lenses for examining teachers' emotional experiences in AI-assisted teaching. Control-Value Theory (Pekrun, 2006)<sup>[22]</sup> posits that emotions arise from individuals' appraisals of control over activities and the subjective value they attach to them. In AI-assisted teaching contexts, when teachers perceive that AI tools enhance their efficiency and reduce uncertainty, they may experience heightened control and, consequently, positive emotions. Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2001)<sup>[7]</sup> further suggests that positive emotions broaden individuals' cognitive and behavioral repertoires and help build enduring personal resources over time. These frameworks suggest that understanding teachers' positive emotional experiences with AI is not only about documenting fleeting feelings but also about understanding how these experiences might contribute to lasting professional growth.

Despite the theoretical and practical significance of this issue, empirical research examining International Chinese Language Teachers' positive emotional experiences with generative AI remains limited (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019)<sup>[31]</sup>. Three interrelated gaps warrant investigation. First, while teacher emotion research has accumulated, studies focusing specifically on International Chinese Language Teachers are limited. Given the distinct professional conditions of this field, their emotional experiences may not align with those reported for teachers of other languages. Second, existing research on technology integration has primarily treated emotions as auxiliary variables within technology acceptance models (Scherer et al., 2019)<sup>[25]</sup>, thereby offering limited qualitative insight into how emotions emerge, evolve, and translate into professional outcomes. Third, research on AI in education has largely been guided by technical concerns, seldom starting from teachers' real usage experiences to understand what kinds of technological support genuinely foster positive emotions and sustained engagement.

To address these gaps, this study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore the positive emotional experiences of International Chinese Language Teachers when using generative AI tools for teaching preparation and assessment. Guided by Con-

Control-Value Theory and Broaden-and-Build Theory, the study seeks to answer three research questions:

1. What specific positive emotions do International Chinese Language Teachers experience when using generative AI tools for teaching preparation and assessment in their practice within a single institution?
2. How do these positive emotional experiences influence teachers' sense of teaching engagement and professional fulfillment?
3. Based on participants' direct experiences, from what dimensions should technological support pathways be designed to stimulate positive emotional experiences?

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Teacher Emotions

Teacher emotions have been recognized as a fundamental aspect of educational practice, shaping teachers' instructional decisions, classroom interactions, professional well-being, and career trajectories (Hargreaves, 1998; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003)<sup>[1,27]</sup>. The significance of teacher emotion is particularly pronounced in the domain of language education, where the interpersonal and communicative nature of instruction places distinctive emotional demands on teachers (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018)<sup>[19]</sup>. For instance, foreign language teaching involves negotiating cultural meanings, managing classroom interactions through the target language, and responding to students' affective needs, which can elicit a broad range of emotions (Gkonou & Miller, 2021; Hargreaves, 2000)<sup>[9,11]</sup>.

Existing studies have explored teacher emotion from various theoretical perspectives. Specifically, sociocultural approaches conceptualize emotions as socially constructed and embedded in cultural, historical, and institutional contexts (Zembylas, 2005)<sup>[32]</sup>. Psychological perspectives focus on emotional labor and regulation, highlighting how teachers manage and express emotions in accordance with professional expectations (Hochschild, 1983)<sup>[14]</sup>. In addition, interactionist frameworks emphasize the interplay between individual dispositions and contextual conditions in shaping emotional experiences (Cross & Hong, 2012)<sup>[3]</sup>. Although these perspectives illuminate the contextual and regulatory nature of teacher emotion, they often provide limited detail about the proximal cognitive appraisals that differentiate specific emotions in achievement-oriented situations like teaching and learning.

To address this gap, Control-Value Theory (CVT; Pekrun, 2006)<sup>[22]</sup> provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the proximal antecedents of achievement emotions. CVT posits that an individual's appraisal of two factors, their perceived control over achievement-related activities and outcomes, and the subjective value attached to those activities and outcomes, are central to the generation of specific emotions (Pekrun, 2006; Pekrun & Perry, 2014)<sup>[22]</sup>. This lens is particularly relevant to AI-assisted teaching because generative AI can reconfigure both control and value appraisals during routine instructional tasks. When teachers perceive that AI tools support lesson preparation or feedback provision and reduce task uncertainty, they may appraise a greater sense of control. Similarly, when AI enables teachers to explore new

pedagogical possibilities, such as generating culturally appropriate materials or designing engaging activities, they may form positive value appraisals of both the tool and the task itself. These positive appraisals can elicit positive emotions (e.g., enjoyment, pride) as theorized by CVT (Pekrun, 2006)<sup>[22]</sup>.

Beyond the generation of emotions, it is also important to consider why positive emotions matter. The broaden-and-build theory posits that positive emotions broaden individuals' momentary thought-action repertoires and help build enduring intellectual, psychological, and social resources (Fredrickson, 2001)<sup>[7]</sup>. Applied to AI-assisted teaching contexts, this perspective suggests that positive emotions triggered by effective AI use may support sustained engagement and the accumulation of professional resources. However, the mechanisms linking AI-related positive emotions to longer-term professional growth remain underexplored, particularly in terms of how such emotions may foster resilience or expand teachers' pedagogical toolkits.

While the "positive turn" in applied linguistics has generated valuable insights, most work has centered on the experiences of teachers of English as a foreign or second language (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Li, 2020)<sup>[5, 18]</sup>. Investigations focusing specifically on teachers of other languages, such as Chinese, are considerably fewer (Gong et al., 2022)<sup>[10]</sup>. However, within the specific context of International Chinese Language Education, systematic inquiry into teacher emotion remains limited. International Chinese teaching entails distinctive professional demands which include navigating cross-cultural communication in linguistically diverse classrooms, generating or adapting culturally appropriate materials, and increasingly operating within transnational and online teaching modalities (Gong et al., 2022; Moloney & Xu, 2015; Tsung & Cruickshank, 2011)<sup>[10, 20, 28]</sup>. As generative AI becomes more embedded in this field, teachers' emotional experiences may be shaped in distinctive ways. For instance, AI tools might enhance teachers' sense of efficiency and creativity when generating teaching materials, potentially leading to positive emotions. Conversely, they may also induce anxiety related to technological uncertainty or concerns about the cultural appropriateness of AI-generated content, as highlighted in broader discussions of AI risks in education (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019)<sup>[31]</sup>. However, few empirical studies have systematically examined International Chinese Language Teachers' emotions in relation to concrete AI-supported tasks in authentic contexts. Addressing this gap is crucial for advancing a more human-centered understanding of AI in education and for informing support that aligns with teachers' lived experiences (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019)<sup>[31]</sup>.

## 2.2 Teacher Emotions and Teacher Engagement

A significant body of literature has established teacher engagement as a critical factor influencing both teacher well-being and student outcomes (Klassen et al., 2013)<sup>[17]</sup>. Engagement, characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption in one's work (Schaufeli et al., 2002)<sup>[24]</sup>, has also been linked to professional effectiveness and success across occupational settings (Klassen et al., 2013)<sup>[17]</sup>. Prior studies have shown that engaged teachers are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs and less likely to

experience burnout or express intentions to quit (Klassen et al., 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2018)<sup>[17, 26]</sup>.

Affective factors are closely intertwined with engagement. The link between emotions and engagement is well-documented (Hiver, 2017)<sup>[12]</sup>. Among teachers, positive emotions are associated with higher levels of teacher engagement (Burić & Moè, 2020; Hiver, 2017)<sup>[2, 12]</sup>. In the context of technology integration, teachers' emotional responses to new tools influence their willingness to adopt and persist with innovative practices (Scherer et al., 2019)<sup>[25]</sup>. For instance, Scherer et al.'s (2019) meta-analysis of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) suggests that teachers who experience positive emotions when using technology are more likely to experiment with new pedagogical approaches and sustain their technology use over time (Scherer et al., 2019)<sup>[25]</sup>.

However, the specific mechanisms through which positive emotions, particularly those emerging from teachers' situated interactions with generative AI, translate into enhanced teaching engagement remain underexplored. This gap is especially pertinent for International Chinese Language Teachers, who face unique professional demands and are increasingly navigating the integration of AI into their practice (Gong et al., 2022)<sup>[10]</sup>. Clarifying how positive AI-mediated experiences may support engagement can inform more targeted professional support and contribute to a more teacher-centered understanding of AI adoption in this field.

### 2.3 Teacher Emotions and Teacher Professional Fulfillment

Beyond engagement, teacher emotion has also been found to be closely related to other important teacher outcomes, most notably professional fulfillment (Day & Gu, 2014)<sup>[4]</sup>. Professional fulfillment is conceptualized as a sense of accomplishment, meaning, and growth in one's work (Ryan & Deci, 2017)<sup>[23]</sup>, representing a core dimension of teacher well-being and career satisfaction (Day & Gu, 2014)<sup>[4]</sup>. Positive emotional experiences in teaching are believed to contribute to this sense of fulfillment by affirming teachers' competence, reinforcing their pedagogical values, and validating their contributions to student development (Day & Gu, 2014; Watt & Richardson, 2008)<sup>[4, 29]</sup>. For instance, when teachers experience moments of success, such as helping a struggling student or designing an engaging lesson, these events can generate positive emotions that accumulate over time and shape teachers' perceptions of professional efficacy and worth (Hobson & Malderez, 2013)<sup>[13]</sup>.

In AI-assisted teaching contexts, successful experiences with technology could similarly become significant sources of professional fulfillment (Scherer et al., 2019)<sup>[25]</sup>. For International Chinese Language Teachers, using AI to efficiently generate high-quality, culturally appropriate teaching materials or to identify new pedagogical possibilities may elicit powerful positive emotions. These emotions, in turn, could enhance their sense of professional efficacy and meaning. Yet, while the potential for AI to contribute to professional fulfillment is significant, particularly in a demanding field like International Chinese teaching, empirical research examining how these technology-mediated positive emotional experiences shape this group of teachers' sense of professional achievement is scarce. This gap is particularly noteworthy given

the calls for more research that centers on educators' perspectives in the development and implementation of AI in education (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019)<sup>[31]</sup>.

### **3 Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Context and Participants**

This qualitative study was conducted in an online institution specializing in International Chinese language education. A total of five International Chinese Language Teachers were recruited to participate in this study through purposive sampling. Following Palinkas et al. (2015)<sup>[21]</sup> and the qualitative principle of maximizing information-rich cases, we used the following selection criteria: (a) participants used generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, DeepSeek) for teaching preparation or assessment at least three times per week on average over the past semester; and (b) participants were active rather than passive users, meaning that they voluntarily integrated AI into their teaching practice rather than merely complying with institutional requirements. These criteria were established to ensure that participants had sufficient experience with AI tools to provide rich accounts of their emotional experiences.

All participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the study and provided written consent. Pseudonyms (T1 to T5) are assigned to ensure anonymity.

#### **3.2 Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which are widely used in qualitative research on teacher emotions to elicit participants' lived experiences and reflective accounts (Yin et al., 2013; Huang & Yin, 2025)<sup>[30, 15]</sup>. An interview protocol was developed in alignment with the three research questions and incorporated the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954)<sup>[6]</sup>. Specifically, participants were invited to recount in detail a single episode they regarded as particularly successful, satisfying, or memorable when using AI for teaching.

All interviews were conducted in Chinese via Tencent Meeting, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The interview questions covered participants' emotional states before, during, and after AI use; the perceived impacts of these emotions on their teaching engagement and professional fulfillment; and their reflections on what kinds of technological support could enhance positive emotional experiences.

#### **3.3 Data Analysis**

All interview transcripts were coded in three rounds using NVivo15 (Braun & Clarke, 2006)<sup>[1]</sup>. First, open coding was conducted to generate initial codes. Second, axial coding was used to group these codes into broader categories. Finally, selective coding was employed to identify the core themes related to positive emotional experiences when using AI tools. To enhance trustworthiness, two researchers independently re-

viewed the coding, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion until agreement was reached.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 The Dynamic Process of Positive Emotional Experiences with AI

Analysis revealed that teachers' positive emotional experiences with AI unfolded as a dynamic process across three temporal phases: pre-interaction, active interaction, and post-interaction. Additionally, participants described pivotal moments where emotions shifted markedly, which we term "emotional turning points."

#### **Before Use: Anticipation and Apprehension.**

Before engaging with AI tools, teachers described a nuanced emotional landscape characterized by the coexistence of anticipation and apprehension. Many participants reported feelings of hope and curiosity, which served as an initial affective impetus for experimentation. For example, T5 noted that widespread public discourse around AI led them to anticipate a high likelihood of success, estimating "about an 80% chance" that AI could help. Similarly, T2, who had limited prior experience with AI, approached the technology with curiosity and a willingness to explore its potential.

Simultaneously, these positive expectations were frequently accompanied by anxiety, doubt, and uncertainty, particularly when tasks were urgent. As T5 reflected: "My mood was quite anxious, and I was skeptical... a complicated feeling of anxiety, urgency, and doubt." In a few cases, the pressure associated with challenging tasks translated into a sense of being overwhelmed and unsure of where to begin.

Crucially, these challenging emotions did not lead to avoidance. Instead, they appeared to act as a motivational catalyst, prompting teachers to test AI as a potential solution under pressure. This initial tension between optimistic expectations and situational concerns set the emotional conditions for subsequent positive experiences during interaction.

#### **During Use: Emerging Positive Emotions.**

During active interaction with AI, teachers reported a progressive emergence and intensification of positive emotions as the tool responded to their prompts and constraints. Surprise was most salient when AI generated ideas that exceeded teachers' expectations, particularly in terms of creativity and task variation. T3, for instance, described being pleasantly surprised by activity designs that were "beyond my own imagination," indicating that AI occasionally expanded the perceived solution space rather than merely automating routine work.

Teachers also expressed satisfaction when AI outputs aligned with concrete pedagogical needs. This satisfaction was closely tied to perceived utility, especially efficiency gains and idea generation. As T3 noted, AI "saves a lot of time and provides creative ideas," suggesting that positive affect was often grounded in practical value rather than novelty alone.

As problems were resolved, happiness and relief frequently co-occurred. These emotions were described as a shift from a tense, effortful state to a lighter one following successful completion. T5 described the shift: "After it solved the problem, I suddenly relaxed, and felt very satisfied and happy." In addition, some teachers reported gratitude when AI provided timely assistance in moments they experienced as urgent or high-stakes. T4 recalled situations in which AI helped them manage time-pressured translation work and during periods of uncertainty about a thesis topic.

A sense of clarity emerged when iterative questioning led to breakthroughs in understanding. T1 described moving from confusion to clarity through multiple rounds of interaction, indicating that positive emotions were sometimes tied to cognitive breakthroughs facilitated by sustained dialogue with the tool.

### **After Use: Reflection and Consolidation.**

After completing AI-assisted tasks, teachers often entered a reflective phase in which immediate emotional reactions were re-evaluated and, in some cases, transformed into more stable professional appraisals. A strong sense of affirmation was common. For example, T1 noted that successful experiences confirmed their approach, reinforcing a sense of confidence.

Over time, repeated successful interactions also contributed to increased trust in AI as an instructional support resource. T2 described a gradual shift from skepticism to trust, suggesting that trust was not instantaneous but accumulated through consistent performance and perceived reliability. Notably, this trajectory reflects a turning-point pattern. Early doubt did not simply disappear but was recalibrated through experience, gradually giving way to more confident reliance under defined conditions.

Simultaneously, teachers developed more critical awareness. Some teachers articulated concerns about becoming dependent on AI, with T4 admitting that they had become somewhat reliant on the tool. Participants also recognized limitations, including the risk of fabricated or inaccurate information. T4 observed that "AI can lie," referring to instances where references were generated inaccurately or invented. In addition, teachers reflected on the practical threshold for effective use, noting that outcomes depended on knowing how to engage the system productively.

Importantly, teachers' reflections extended beyond evaluating AI to include meta-cognitive reflection on their own interaction strategies. T3 reflected that "the way I ask questions affects the quality of the answers," indicating a developing awareness of prompt formulation as a professional skill. Overall, the post-interaction phase was thus not merely an end-point, but a crucial period where immediate positive feelings were consolidated into more durable professional resources.

## **4.2 Impacts of Positive Emotions on Teaching Engagement and Professional Fulfillment**

Teachers consistently reported that the positive emotions generated during AI-assisted tasks had meaningful impacts on their subsequent professional lives. Three interconnected themes were identified.

### **Efficiency Gain and Cognitive Release.**

This theme captures how positive emotions—particularly satisfaction and relief—enabled teachers to perceive AI as a resource for workload reduction, which in turn freed cognitive capacity for more meaningful pedagogical engagement. Teachers' accounts illustrated a clear progression from efficiency gain, to cognitive release, and finally to reinvestment in teaching.

First, teachers consistently reported that AI significantly reduced the time required for routine tasks. This efficiency gain was not merely about speed; it also streamlined workflows and reduced trial-and-error. T3 contrasted their initial labor-intensive preparation with later efficiency, simply stating, "It really saves a lot of time." T5 quantified this, estimating that AI could handle "at least 50% of PPT creation time." T1 added that AI helped "save many intermediate thought processes," eliminating the need to search multiple platforms for guidance.

Second, this saved time translated into freed-up cognitive and emotional space. Teachers described feeling less mentally burdened, which allowed them to redirect attention. T5 elaborated that with reduced preparation time, they could "have more things to share with international students during class, instead of constantly working on PPTs."

Finally, the cognitive release enabled teachers to reinvest their energy into more interactive and creative aspects of teaching. Rather than focusing on mundane preparation, they could devote more attention to student engagement and lesson enrichment. Thus, the positive emotions generated by initial efficiency gains initiated a reinforcing process, in which freed cognitive resources supported deeper pedagogical investment, which in turn generated further positive emotions.

### **Competence Confirmation and Confidence Building.**

This theme describes how successful AI interactions served as external validations of teachers' professional judgment, reinforcing their sense of competence and contributing to longer-term professional fulfillment. Teachers' accounts pointed to two inter-related layers of impact: an immediate boost in professional confidence, and a more cumulative accumulation of fulfillment from multiple sources.

On one level, teachers experienced a direct and tangible increase in professional confidence. When AI outputs aligned with their pedagogical intentions, teachers interpreted this as confirmation of their expertise. T1 described how successful AI use affirmed their approach, directly increasing their confidence in facing future teaching challenges. T2 linked this confidence boost to tangible classroom outcomes, noting that positive student feedback and smoother interactions "greatly enhanced my teaching confidence." T4 agreed that AI "indeed increases confidence," particularly when outputs were supported by data. This confidence extended to specific professional capabilities, such as smoother classroom delivery and enhanced ability to cope with teaching challenges. T3 described how AI helped address the challenge of teaching beginner students entirely in Chinese, while T4 noted that with successful experiences, they felt "more at ease" when facing similar challenges.

On another level, these positive experiences contributed to a deeper sense of professional fulfillment, which was reinforced by multiple sources. Student feedback was

particularly significant. T1 described how positive student responses, more engaged participation and smoother communication, provided "a great confidence boost." Recognition from colleagues and supervisors also contributed. T1 described how project teachers noticed improved lesson flow and offered affirming feedback. Furthermore, the accumulation of reusable teaching resources emerged as an important source of fulfillment. T4 described how AI-generated frameworks could be reused with similar student groups, making teaching more convenient. T5 referred to developing an "ability to draw inferences," applying successful approaches to new tasks. These layered experiences show that positive emotions with AI do not merely produce fleeting satisfaction but can accumulate into a more durable sense of professional worth.

### **Role Evolution and Identity Negotiation.**

This theme captures the deeper, more reflective impact of positive AI experiences. By experiencing efficiency gains and competence confirmation, teachers gained the cognitive space and professional validation to critically examine their role. This process prompted them to re-imagine their professional identity within an AI-integrated educational landscape, moving beyond immediate task completion to a more fundamental negotiation of what it means to be a teacher.

Some teachers described an evolution from a passive executor of a fixed curriculum to a more proactive designer of learning. T1 articulated this shift clearly, moving from being "driven by the class" to using AI to intentionally design and structure lessons. This enhanced sense of agency contributed to a strengthened professional identity: "Gradually, I've developed a more comprehensive understanding of the teacher role... and gradually developed some sense of professional identity." T2 similarly described feeling "more composed" and experiencing "very positive growth" through AI use.

Teachers also developed new metaphors for understanding AI's relationship to their work. Some viewed AI as liberating teachers from routine thinking burdens. T4 noted that AI could reduce time spent on lesson planning and activity design, allowing teachers to focus on higher-level tasks. T3 reflected that with AI handling routine work, teachers could devote energy to "some higher-level things."

However, this role evolution was inherently dialectical. Positive experiences also triggered critical reflection on the implications of AI for their professional future. Teachers expressed concerns about AI potentially replacing some aspects of their work. T3 acknowledged that AI "really will replace some work," while T5 expressed concern that some teaching outcomes might be suspected of AI generation, potentially hindering teachers' professional growth.

Crucially, this negotiation led to a more sophisticated, agentic stance. Teachers emphasized the importance of maintaining human agency and subjectivity. T5 articulated this clearly: "After becoming a teacher, we still need to reduce AI use somewhat... humans are still better than AI in many ways." This stance represents an active negotiation of professional identity in the face of technological change, neither uncritical embrace nor wholesale rejection, but a thoughtful integration that preserves core professional values while leveraging AI's capabilities.

This theme demonstrates that positive AI experiences do not just make teachers feel good; they actively engage them in a critical and ongoing process of professional

identity negotiation, ultimately leading to a more nuanced and resilient understanding of their role.

### 4.3 Teacher-Generated Insights for AI Tool Design

Teachers' reflections on their experiences provided valuable insights for designing technological support that could systematically enhance positive emotional experiences. Three interrelated design dimensions emerged from their accounts. Teachers' accounts suggest a layered design logic: (

) operational reliability as a baseline, (2) pedagogical quality and contextual fit as the core value, and (3) customizable interaction as a personalization layer.

#### **Operational Reliability as Foundation.**

Teachers consistently emphasized that positive experiences depended, first and foremost, on whether the tool could support a smooth, uninterrupted workflow. Fast response speed was crucial for maintaining what one teacher described as cognitive "connectedness"; delays could disrupt their train of thought during complex instructional tasks (T1, T3). Beyond speed, the ability to iteratively refine outputs through multi-turn prompting emerged as key to achieving professionally satisfactory results. T5's experience with PPT generation illustrated this: an initial, over-complicated output was successfully refined after a more targeted prompt. System stability directly affected teachers' trust and their willingness to persist with a tool. Instances of freezing or disorganized outputs (T4, T5) eroded confidence, suggesting that for teachers, operational reliability is not merely a convenience but a precondition for investing emotional and cognitive resources in AI-assisted work.

#### **Pedagogical Quality and Contextual Fit as Core Value.**

Beyond basic functionality, teachers valued features that resonated with the specific professional demands of International Chinese teaching. Their accounts highlighted four interwoven quality dimensions. First, content richness and comprehensive information were highly prized. Teachers appreciated AI's capacity to analyze student essays, identify error patterns (T1), offer multiple cultural perspectives (T2), and access "massive data and corpora" (T3). Second, creative inspiration was the most frequently cited value. Teachers described AI as an "inspiration reservoir" (T3) that generated unexpected yet pedagogically useful ideas, from creative classroom games (T1) to novel ways of framing cultural content (T2). Third, logical clarity and organized output facilitated lesson planning; teachers valued how AI could break down complex problems and structure information in a clear, stepwise manner (T1, T2, T3, T4). Fourth, and most critically, content accuracy and cultural sensitivity were non-negotiable. Teachers frequently encountered inaccuracies—from confused grammatical points (T1) and fabricated historical details (T2) to culturally insensitive suggestions (T1, T5)—that negatively impacted their emotional experience. T4's observation that "AI can lie," generating false academic references, underscores the professional risk of

uncritical reliance. For teachers, pedagogical quality means that the tool must be not only helpful but fundamentally trustworthy in its domain-specific output.

### **Customizable Interaction as Personalization Layer.**

A third layer of teachers' insights concerned the nature of the interaction itself. Their accounts revealed a need for flexible and customizable engagement that respects both the teacher's evolving competence and their personal preferences. This was evident in three areas.

First, teachers highlighted the importance of interaction strategies that support professional learning. Teachers did not simply use AI; they developed and refined a repertoire of prompting strategies over time (T1, T2, T3, T5). T3's reflection that "the way I ask questions seems to affect the quality of the answers" indicates that effective AI use is itself a learned skill. This suggests that tools could be designed to support this learning curve, perhaps by offering guidance on prompt formulation or by making their "processing logic" more transparent.

Second, teachers articulated clear boundaries regarding the human-AI division of labor. AI outputs were consistently viewed as drafts requiring professional judgment and adaptation. T1 emphasized that regardless of the platform, AI outputs "cannot be used directly in class and require subsequent modification." T2 framed AI's role as supportive rather than directive: "I try to make it play a helping role, not a leading role." This points to a design principle in which AI is positioned as an augmentative tool that leaves the ultimate pedagogical authority with the teacher.

Third, teachers expressed divergent preferences regarding affective feedback, revealing a need for personalization in interaction style. Some teachers valued encouraging responses, which provided emotional support and confidence (T4, T5). T4 appreciated Deepseek's emotional encouragement when doubting their thesis topic. Others, however, expressed strong preferences for purely functional interactions, viewing affective elements as unnecessary or even intrusive. T2 stated simply: "This I don't really need; I just want the information I need." T3 described excessive politeness as a hindrance, suggesting that there should be an option to disable affective feedback. Importantly, all teachers shared a fundamental priority: accuracy and functionality must come first. As T4 summarized, "95% should be rationality and efficiency. You can do without emotion, but if the content is wrong, that's really too much." This suggests that while a personalization layer for interaction style is desirable, it must never compromise the tool's core professional utility.

## **5 Discussion**

### **5.1 The Affective Trajectory: Pre-Interaction Tensions as Catalysts for Positive Emotion**

The findings regarding the first research question reveal that teachers' positive emotional experiences with AI unfolded as a dynamic process across three phases, with pre-interaction tensions, including anxiety, doubt, and uncertainty, sometimes func-

tioning as antecedent conditions that heightened the salience of subsequent positive emotions. This challenges a simplistic view that positive technology experiences are merely the absence of negative ones. Instead, it suggests that the emotional trajectory of AI use is characterized by meaningful contrasts, through which the intensity of positive affect may be heightened by the preceding tension.

This finding aligns with Control-Value Theory's emphasis on appraisals as proximal antecedents of emotions (Pekrun, 2006)<sup>[22]</sup>. Teachers' initial anxiety reflected appraisals of low control over urgent or challenging tasks, while their subsequent relief and satisfaction reflected restored control through AI's assistance. The "emotional turning points" identified in this study, including transitions from anxiety to relief, doubt to trust, disappointment to surprise, and confusion to clarity, represent moments at which appraisals of control and value were fundamentally reconfigured.

Importantly, the specific context of International Chinese teaching appears to shape these dynamics in distinctive ways. The need to generate culturally appropriate materials and navigate cross-cultural communication (Gong et al., 2022; Moloney & Xu, 2015)<sup>[10, 20]</sup> meant that teachers' anxiety was often tied to concerns about cultural appropriateness. When AI successfully handled these nuanced tasks, the resulting relief and gratitude were particularly salient, which may reflect the unique demands of this professional context.

## 5.2 From Momentary Feelings to Lasting Impacts: Three Pathways of Professional Transformation

In response to the second research question, this study identifies three pathways through which momentary positive emotions translate into lasting professional outcomes: efficiency gain and cognitive release, competence confirmation and confidence building, and role evolution and identity negotiation. These pathways extend previous research on teacher emotions by illuminating not just that emotions matter, but also how they matter in teachers' professional lives.

The efficiency gain and cognitive release pathway operates through time savings and cognitive offloading. When AI handled routine tasks, teachers experienced relief and satisfaction, which in turn freed cognitive resources for more meaningful pedagogical engagement. This finding extends research on teacher engagement (Hiver, 2017; Klassen et al., 2013)<sup>[12, 17]</sup> by demonstrating how technology-mediated efficiency gains can fuel sustained engagement through a cognitive release mechanism. Unlike previous studies that focused on efficiency as a utilitarian outcome, this study reveals its emotional significance: efficiency gains were not merely convenient but also emotionally restorative.

The competence confirmation and confidence building pathway describes how successful AI use validated teachers' professional judgment. When AI outputs aligned with teachers' pedagogical intentions, they interpreted this as external confirmation of their expertise, enhancing professional confidence. This aligns with research demonstrating that positive emotions contribute to teachers' self-efficacy (Burić & Moè, 2020)<sup>[2]</sup>. However, this study adds nuance by revealing that competence confirmation is not a one-time event but an iterative process. Each successful interaction incrementally

reinforced teachers' confidence, creating a reinforcing cycle where positive emotions generated further engagement, which in turn generated more opportunities for competence confirmation.

The role evolution and identity negotiation pathway captures a deeper form of professional impact. Positive AI experiences prompted teachers to critically examine and renegotiate their professional identity. They grappled with tensions between AI as a source of support and AI as a potential challenge, ultimately developing a more nuanced, agentic stance. This finding resonates with research on teacher identity construction in times of technological change (Gao & Luan, 2020)<sup>[8]</sup>, but extends it by highlighting the affective dimension of this process. Identity negotiation was not purely cognitive; it was also shaped by emotion and driven by positive experiences with AI.

### **5.3 Designing for Human-AI Synergy: A Layered Framework for Technological Support**

Addressing the third research question, the insights gathered from teachers' direct experiences suggest that technological support may be most effective when it follows a hierarchical, layered design logic that prioritizes and preserves professional agency. At the foundation lies operational reliability, which should be understood not as a binary feature but as a multidimensional construct encompassing speed, stability, and iterative flexibility. For educators, these technical attributes are essential prerequisites for maintaining what one participant described as cognitive "connectedness" during complex instructional tasks.

Building upon this foundation, the pedagogical core requires domain-specific optimization that addresses the nuanced demands of International Chinese teaching. Teachers' accounts highlighted the intertwined importance of content richness, logical clarity, creative inspiration, and—most critically—cultural sensitivity and terminological consistency. Accuracy in this layer remains non-negotiable, as teachers overwhelmingly emphasized that functional precision must precede any affective or stylistic embellishment.

Finally, a customization layer is necessary to accommodate divergent individual preferences for interaction style. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, AI tools should offer adjustable levels of interaction, including the option for purely functional exchanges devoid of simulated empathy. This layered framework helps ensure that the technology remains a scaffold for professional growth that enhances, rather than encroaches upon, the teacher's central role as the ultimate pedagogical authority. This perspective aligns with calls for human-centered AI in education (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Hwang et al., 2020)<sup>[31,16]</sup>, shifting the focus from what technology can do to what it should do in support of educators' professional lives and emotional well-being.

## **6 Conclusion**

This study investigated International Chinese Language Teachers' positive emotional experiences when using generative AI for teaching preparation and assessment.

Drawing on qualitative interview data, the analysis showed that teachers' positive emotions unfolded across three phases—before, during, and after use. Before use, anticipation and apprehension coexisted; during interaction, teachers reported a range of positive emotions, including surprise, satisfaction, happiness, relief, gratitude, and clarity; and after use, reflection helped consolidate these momentary emotional experiences into more durable professional resources, such as trust, critical awareness, and refined strategies. Across the trajectory, four turning points captured key shifts in teachers' appraisals of control and value. These positive experiences were also associated with longer-term professional outcomes through three pathways: efficiency gain and cognitive release, competence confirmation and confidence building, and role evolution and identity negotiation. Finally, teachers' accounts suggested a layered design logic for AI support: operational reliability as the baseline, pedagogical quality and contextual fit as the core value, and customizable interaction as a personalization layer that enriches the user experience while preserving functional effectiveness.

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