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## Being a Teacher in China: A Systematic Review of Teacher Identity in Education Reform

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**Abstract.** Education reform is expected to change teacher's identity is expected to undergo changes, which in turn may influence various aspects of their professional life. As such, teacher identity in education reform context has received strong attention in the literature in the last decade or so. This article provides a systematic and critical review of the empirical research published after 2010 on Chinese teachers' identity construction. It conceptualizes teacher identity construction in times of education reform and the factors mediating this process. A thematic synthesis was adopted to undertake the review of 28 articles. Teacher identity categories in K12 and tertiary education were extracted from the studies to give a contour of teacher identity trajectory. Teacher identities as thriving, as survival, and as exclusion emerge as the three main teacher identity categories. Guided by Wenger's identity theory, we then discuss three types of teacher identity trajectories: contrive to thrive, adjust to survive, and alienate to wither; and three distinctive factor themes: power relations, agency, and emotion. This contextualized review unfolds stories and mediators of teacher identity construction against the backdrop of education reform in China through which implications for enhancing strong teacher identities are drawn.

**Keywords:** teacher identity; education reform; systematic review

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## 1. Introduction

Education reform has become a global phenomenon. Sahlberg (2016) uses the term Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) to describe the spreading education reform orthodoxy. Neoliberal market principles of decentralization, competition, performativity, and accountability are manifest in GERM (*ibid.*). As GERM spreads and evolves, it exhibits contextually specific nuances created by different jurisdictions and reform drivers. In China, since the market-oriented economic reform launched in the late 1970s, the government has introduced a series of education reform policies designed to foster socioeconomic transformation and enhance the nation's international competitiveness. For example, the 1980s witnessed the decentralization of educational governance, with greater autonomy given to provincial educational authorities and stronger accountability for education institutions and teachers (Committee of the Communist Party of China [CCCCP], 1985). In the 1990s, education reform aimed to shift from exam-oriented to quality-oriented education (CCCCP and the State Council, 2022). From the 2000s onward, training "socialist builders and successors" with "all-round development" and "strengthen(ing) moral education for cultivating people" have been persistently prioritized in education policies (Xue & Li, 2021, p. 135). Focusing on higher education, in 2016, China initiated a plan for building "world-class universities" and "disciplines" to boost its core competitiveness (The State Council, 2015). This strategic decision is "reform-based performance-related" (Peters & Besley, 2018, p. 1075), as the plan writes, "using performance as a lever ... (to) encourage fair competition, strengthen target management ... perfect evaluation system for world-class universities and disciplines". Overall, Chinese education reform is a fusion of GERM features and Chinese characteristics, propelled by the state's need to compete globally and support socialist modernization domestically.

Education reform changes teacher identity (TI) which affects how reform policies "are received, adopted, adapted and sustained or not sustained" (Ball, 2003; Day, 2017, p. 26). Against the ongoing education reforms, considerable attention has been given to how teachers in China, at both K-12 and post-secondary levels, construct, sustain, and enhance their identity over the past decade (e.g., Jiang & Zhang, 2021; Lee et al., 2013; Trent & Liu, 2023). Beauchamp and Thomas' (2009) examined the definitions of TI and the factors shaping it. Over a decade, TI reviews have become increasingly specific in their reviewed aspects (e.g., focusing on approaches to TI inquiry) and teacher groups (e.g., TIs of student teachers) (Liu & Yin, 2022; Rodrigues & Mogarro, 2019), reflecting the growing TI research with sophisticated research paradigm and nuanced understanding of TIs. Yet, no TI review closely related to education reform, a site of TI struggle and tension. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) point out that education reforms "particularly affect" TI "because of the high level of emotion involved" (P180). Moreover, none of the previous TI reviews focus on the Chinese context. Filling these gaps, we attempt to situate the current TI review against the backdrop of education reform in China, providing insights into how teachers construct TIs and what mediating factors are involved. By doing so, this review can contribute to a deeper understanding of the intricate

interaction between education policies, institutions, and teachers; meanwhile, engender suggestions for policymakers, administrators, teacher educators, and teachers for positive TI construction. This review is guided by the following questions:

1. How do teachers in China construct their TIs within times of educational reform?
2. What factors have mediated their TI construction?

## 2. Teacher identity

TI is “dynamic, multifaceted, negotiated, and co-constructed” in social milieux (Edwards & Burns, 2016, p. 735). TI negotiation and construction occur when external forces (e.g., education policies) assign desired TIs to teachers whose claimed, practiced, or imagined TIs may or may not align with those imposed or ascribed by others (Reeves, 2018). Wenger (1998) recognizes identity “as a pivot between the social and the individual” (p. 145) and proposes three sources of identification: engagement, imagination, and alignment. Through engagement, teachers involve in the “mutual processes of negotiation of meaning” (p. 192). Employing imagination, they create unconstrained images of themselves and their teaching trajectories through time and space by extrapolating from their experience. Alignment coordinates teachers’ energy and activities to “fit within” and “contribute to broader enterprises,” such as promoting quality education (p. 174). According to Wenger (1998), policies (e.g., education reform policies) are reifications that require people’s “intense and specific participation to remain meaningful” (p. 67). Within changing education reform discourses, TI “provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of ‘how to be’, ‘how to act’ and ‘how to understand’ their work and their place in society” (Sachs, 2005, p. 15). Therefore, whether and how teachers engage in and align with education reform agenda are shaped by TIs (e.g., Yang et al., 2021b; Ye & Zhao, 2019). As “one of the most powerful theories of identity formation” (Tsui, 2007, p. 659), Wenger’s (1998) theory illuminates the TI construction analysis for the current review.

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Literature search and screen

We aim to understand TI construction within education reform in China. The following inclusion criteria were used to select studies to review: (1) published in English, (2) published in peer-reviewed journals, (3) focusing on in-service teachers, (4) focusing on TI construction, (5) located in Chinese mainland; (6) empirical studies; (7) covering the reform period from 2010 to the present. Confining source type to academic journals or articles, we entered search terms (TI = (teacher identity OR professional identity OR identity) AND Topic (i.e., title, abstract, and keywords) = (China OR Chinese) AND AB = (teacher AND identity)) into three databases in May 2022: Web of Science, Scopus, and ERIC, yielding 316 hits. 186 articles remained for screening after removing duplicates.

The first phase screening excluded 154 articles with reasons listed in Figure 1. 32 studies remained for full-text screening to further appraise their rigor and fitness

for our review. In the second phase, six studies were eliminated. To maximize exhaustiveness, we opted to use Google Scholar to search broadly in the same timeframe, entering the terms “teacher,” “identity,” “reform,” and the like. Only two eligible articles were captured, indicating the comprehensiveness of the current data pool. 28 articles were retained for review. Figure 1 shows the search and screening process, excluded article numbers in each phase, and the reasons for exclusion.

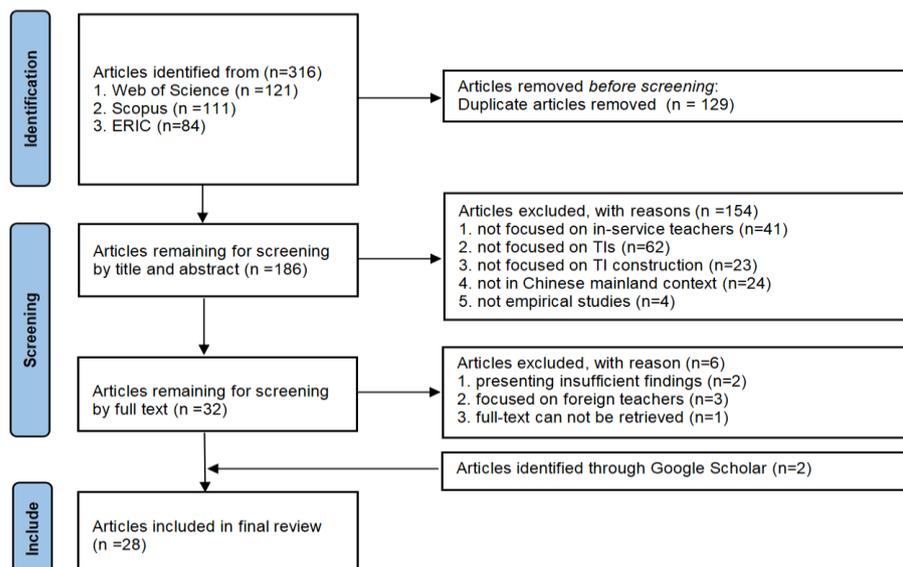


Figure 1: Flow diagram of the study selection process

### 3.2 Data analysis

In vivo codes of TI categories were extracted from articles to generate preliminary contours of TI trajectories. For example, the participant in Huang’s (2019) study began as an “opponent,” transitioned to a “conformist,” and ended as a “pragmatist” towards the exam-oriented teaching model, which embodies a trajectory imbued with adjustment modulated by the external force (i.e., high-stake examinations). We then adopted thematic analysis “for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of” TI construction and its influencing factors (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). Thematic coding in this review is both deductive and inductive, driven by Wenger’s (1998) theory and the empirical data of included study. Wenger’s (1998) three modes of identification provide a theoretical lens and constitute a codebook (Table 1), linking to the first research question. The “codebook” was used as a “structured coding framework for developing and documenting” the TI construction analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 6). Code examples are shown in Table 1. Meanwhile, two authors engaged in inductive coding through iterative reading and analysis of studies’ findings, creating new themes pertaining to TI construction. We then progressed to compare the descriptive synthesis for refined TI trajectory patterns resulting from different TI work. To address the second research question, inductive coding was applied to synthesize the influencing factors by extracting in vivo codes from articles. Codes were then sorted into seven categories: personal, interpersonal, disciplinary, institutional, community, cultural, and sociopolitical

factors.

**Table 1: Codebook for analyzing TI construction in reviewed studies**

Code name	Definition	Examples
engagement	“active involvement in mutual processes of negotiation of meaning” (Wenger, 1998, p. 173)	“Ping started to learn new pedagogical concepts, like constructivism, collaborative learning, and inquiry-based learning, etc. Meanwhile, Ping actively employed new pedagogical methods in her teaching ...” (Wei, 2021, p. 7)
alignment	“coordinating our energy and activities in order to fit within broader structures and contribute to broader enterprises” (Wenger, 1998, p. 173)	“...these policies further increased her enthusiasm for STEM education... Sunjie diligently and enthusiastically explored how to implement integrated STEM teaching ...” (Jiang et al., 2021, p. 12)
imagination	“creating images of the world and seeing connections through time and space” (Wenger, 1998, p. 174)	“... I get depressed wondering if I can really fit back into this school in the long term ... I see myself as displaced...” (Trent, 2020, p. 325)

#### 4. Findings

Table 2 and Table 3 synthesize TI categories teachers had formed at the time of research and their imagined TIs. They fall into three categories: TIs as thriving, TIs as survival, and TIs as exclusion. TIs as thriving are agentive, integrated, and committed, embodying negotiation-oriented TI development. TIs as survival are contradictory, compliant, and expedient, following utilitarianism-orientated TI building. TIs as exclusion are unable, invisible, and silent, orienting towards alienation. How the three types of TIs are constructed is reviewed and analyzed in detail in the discussion section.

**Table 2: TI categories in K12 context**

Studies	TI categories
<b>TIs as thriving</b>	
Lee et al. (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a “reform leader”</li> <li>● “active explorers”</li> </ul>
Xu (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “a learning facilitator” (pre-service imagined TI)<sup>1</sup></li> <li>● “a responsible educator” (in-service imagined TI)</li> </ul>
Yuan and Burns (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a “fishing coach”</li> <li>● a “teacher researcher”</li> <li>● a “collaborator”</li> <li>● a “change agent”</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a teacher “invest(ing) in AR (action research)” and living out values (in-service imagined TI)</li> </ul>
Ye and Zhao (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a teacher “spread(ing) knowledge and love” (pre-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● “a representative of the state’s will”</li> <li>● “a subject teacher leader”</li> <li>● a “municipal-level” “mathematics master teacher” (in-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● head teacher and subject teacher with “relative stability and balance”</li> <li>● a teacher investing time and effort to make “relationship with her students” “special for her” (in-service imagined TI)</li> </ul>
Li and Craig (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “a researcher”</li> <li>● a “peaceful” teacher “fostering inner-self”</li> <li>● “an integrated being”</li> <li>● a “committed teacher”</li> </ul>
Wei et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a “reform-minded teacher”</li> <li>● an “inquiry-oriented teacher”</li> </ul>
Wei (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● an “almighty teacher” (pre-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● a “teacher researcher”</li> <li>● a “learner researcher”</li> <li>● a “reform pioneer”</li> <li>● a “flourishing teacher”</li> <li>● a tree “grow(ing) with the children” (in-service imagined TI)</li> </ul>
Xu and Huang (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● an “agentive practitioner”</li> </ul>
Jiang et al. (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “one of the first STEM teachers in my hometown” (in-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● “a courageous explorer”</li> <li>● “a model STEM teacher in her district”</li> <li>● “an excited but unsatisfied mentor”</li> <li>● “an excellent mentor” of STEM (in-service imagined TI)</li> </ul>
Liu and Sammons (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a teacher without “meaningfulness” (pre-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● an “active problem solver”</li> <li>● a “decision maker”</li> <li>● a “student-centered teacher”</li> <li>● an “assertive self”</li> <li>● “a growing tree” (in-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● “a leader that can help and influence many people and make a change in education” (in-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● “a determined professional”</li> <li>● a teacher who can “exert a positive influence on children”</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a “role model”</li> </ul>
<b>TIs as survival</b>	
Lee and Yin (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “the losing heart accommodators”</li> <li>● “the drifting followers”</li> <li>● “accessories of the reform machine”</li> <li>● “spare part(s) of the reform engine”</li> <li>● “cynical performers”</li> <li>● “an actor”</li> </ul>
Xu (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a teacher valuing “consolidation of the learnt” (pre-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● student’s “spiritual guide” (pre-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● a “teacher busy catching up with the schedule”</li> <li>● a “routine performer”</li> <li>● “a worker working on a machine”</li> </ul>
Lee et al. (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “contradictory performers”</li> <li>● “novice strugglers”</li> <li>● a “manual worker”</li> </ul>
Huang (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● an “opponent” to the exam-oriented education model</li> <li>● a “conformist” to the exam-oriented education model</li> <li>● a “pragmatist” toward exams</li> </ul>
Wei et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a teacher who “follow(s) the crowd”</li> <li>● an exam-oriented teacher who “highlight the testing points”</li> <li>● a teacher “long(ing) for change and innovation” (in-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● an influential teacher “making a difference in the practical work” (in-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● a teacher “constrained by textbooks”</li> <li>● a teacher with “weakened determination” in innovation</li> </ul>
Trent (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a “transformative” teacher (pre-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● a teacher who is “conforming”</li> </ul>
Xu and Huang (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “a common follower”</li> <li>● “passive listeners”</li> <li>● “routine players”</li> <li>● “flexible accommodators”</li> <li>● “test-score pursuers”</li> <li>● “lonely wanderers”</li> </ul>
<b>TIs as exclusion</b>	
Xu (2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a “language expert” (pre-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● a “language attrition sufferer”</li> </ul>
Trent (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a teachers sharing “knowledge and skills with colleagues” (pre-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● “a silent teacher”</li> </ul>

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Xu and Huang (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a “rejected” teacher</li> <li>● an “integrative” teacher (pre-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● an “excluded” teacher</li> <li>● a “displaced” teacher (in-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● an “invisible middleman without functions”</li> </ul>
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1. Some included studies track and examine TI construction spanning between pre-service and in-service periods. Imagined TIs in pre-/in-service periods are marked in parentheses; the rest not marked are TIs constructed.

**Table 3: TI categories in tertiary education context**

Studies	TI categories
<b>TIs as thriving</b>	
Liu and Xu (2011)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a “self-motivated” teacher</li> <li>● a “free thinker”</li> <li>● an “innovative researcher”</li> </ul>
Xu (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “a self-contented established researcher”</li> <li>● “a productive associate professor”</li> </ul>
Huang and Guo (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a “capable college English teacher-as-researcher”</li> <li>● “an educator who cultivates the ‘whole person’”</li> <li>● “a researcher who conducts ‘real’ research”</li> </ul>
Yang et al. (2021a)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a teacher who “keeps innovating”</li> <li>● “a real expert teacher” (in-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● a teacher who is “constantly changing”</li> <li>● “a conscientious life coach”</li> </ul>
Gao and Cui (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● a “boundary explorer” and “connector”</li> <li>● “a pioneer fearlessly jumping across hurdles and ditches”</li> <li>● “a giver with an empty container or a big bucket”</li> <li>● “a learner”</li> <li>● “a self-trainer who engaged in agentive self-cultivation”</li> </ul>
Jiang and Zhang (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “a boundary-crosser”</li> <li>● “collaborator”</li> </ul>
Yang et al. (2021b)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “the strenuous accommodator”</li> <li>● “the fulfilled integrator”</li> </ul>
Bao and Feng (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “a prolific ‘academic’” (in-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● “a famous scholar” (in-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● “fulfilled research practitioner”</li> <li>● “agentive researcher-teacher”</li> <li>● “confident teacher-researcher”</li> </ul>
Jiang (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “an expert ESP teacher” (in-service imagined TI)</li> <li>● “a learner and a cross-boundary collaborator”</li> </ul>

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**TIs as survival**

- Xu (2014)
- “a struggling periphery research practitioner”
  - “a passive would-be researcher”
  - a teacher who is “forced to do research”
  - “a researcher” (in-service imagined TI)
- Long and Huang (2017)
- teachers who “struggle with whether to do research or not”
  - conformist to “the university’s promotion benchmarks”
- Tao and Gao (2018)
- a teacher who “make more contribution to the society” (in-service imagined TI)
  - teachers ““caught in the middle” between ESP teaching and mainstream language research”
- Wang (2020)
- “a mechanical clock”
  - a “teaching robot”
  - “marginalized teachers”
- Yang et al. (2021b)
- “the miserable follower”
- Zeng and Fickel (2021)
- “inferior CE teachers”
  - “marginal pedagogic researchers”
  - “illegitimate, second-class researchers”
- Yip et al., (2022)
- “an independent teacher” (in-service imagined TI)
  - a teacher who “have more freedom” (in-service imagined TI)
  - “a follower of the leaders’ wish”
  - “lower-level factory worker”
  - “a technical worker”
  - “a score monitor”

**TIs as exclusion**

- Liu and Xu (2013)
- an “overwhelmed teacher”
  - a “torn” teacher self-excluding from the community
- Xu (2014)
- “a disheartened non-researcher”
- Huang and Guo (2019)
- a teacher “being excluded in the field”
  - a teacher “being thrown out of the right track”
  - a member of “the most invisible group in the department”
- Yang et al. (2021b)
- “the disheartened performer”
- 

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 TI construction

Consistent with three types of TIs, three patterned TI trajectories emerge: contrive to thrive, adjust to survive, and alienate to wither. Three different trajectories manifest three distinct TI construction process: teachers contriving to thrive engage in meaningful negotiation, aligning their actions with broader communities or enterprises; teachers adjusting to survive engage in restricted or wavering actions regulated by the dominant discourses in situated contexts;

teachers alienated or self-alienating themselves in communities fail to adjust, engage, and align. In what follows, we delineate the three scenarios of TI construction.

### **Scenario 1: constructing TIs as thriving - contrive to thrive**

Nineteen studies report cases of TIs as thriving (See Tables 2 & 3). Their construction is first and foremost through engagement. Engagement entails meaningful negotiation arising from “participation and reification,” the interplay of which supports alignment and constructs robust TIs (Wenger, 1998, p. 52). Participation refers to the process of doing. Reification means participative “experience and practice are congealed into fixed forms,” such as textbooks or awards (ibid., p. 59). Literature shows that teachers who thrived exerted agency to learn, to experiment new education theories and resolve the gaps arising therefrom, and to do research. These actions “produce, interpret, and use reification” (ibid., p. 66).

The new teaching philosophy and requirements brought by education reform demand and direct teacher learning that contributes to sustainable and robust TIs. Within times of reform, teachers engaged in learning new education theories and policies (e.g., Wei, 2021), cross-disciplinary knowledge (e.g., Jiang & Zhang, 2021), and (teaching) research methods (e.g., Bao & Feng, 2022) to weather and adapt to the changing education environment. Constructing vigorous TIs, teacher learning is not static but “the very process of being engaged in, and participating in” teaching and researching (Wenger, 1998, p. 95).

Experimenting reform or innovative ideas in teaching is the at the core of spiral-up TI construction. Reviewed studies indicate that teaching experiments initiate the iterative processes of teachers’ experiencing, exploring, and erasing the gaps between theories and actualities, driving reforms forward and constructing vigorous TIs. For example, a STEM teacher, in experimenting the integrated STEM teaching advocated by the MoE, met mismatches between STEM features (e.g., inquiry-based learning) and teacher-centered classroom culture (Jiang et al., 2021). This teacher bridged the gap through reflection, regulation of negative emotions, and continual exploration informed by the expert advice, students’ needs investigation, and students’ feedback. The process of “persistent climbing” to reify strategies to push STEM teaching reform forward shored up her TI as “an enthusiastic explorer” and deeper alignment with the STEM reform enterprise (p. 12). Another study (Wei, 2021) reveals a similar storyline. School teacher Ping (Wei, 2021), a “pioneer” in experimenting new pedagogies, experienced the gaps between reform ideas and high-stakes exams. She negotiated the gaps through reflecting upon her TI as an “agentive subject,” upholding her morality of responsibility, and conducting the “research-informed exploration” which reified into a “school-based curriculum” (p. 7). The process of using agency to experiment theories and close the gaps—claiming the ownership of meaning—not only advances the local interpretation of policies but also confirms and consolidates her TIs as a “reform pioneer” and “learner researcher.”

Besides contextual gaps, knowledge gaps within teachers emerged as an evident tension during experiments. All studies about TIs in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) reform highlight CE (College English) teachers' deficiency in subject-specific knowledge and ESP teaching skills, triggering emotional tensions and feeble TIs as an "unqualified teacher" or "an active giver without much to give" (Gao & Cui, 2021, p. 6; Jiang & Zhang, 2021, pp. 278-279; Jiang, 2022; Tao & Gao, 2018). Lacking institutional support for ESP reform exacerbates the gap (Jiang & Zhang, 2021). Teachers who constructed solid ESP TIs took parallel actions to narrow the gaps. Besides self-learning, they crossed the boundary and engaged in a "collaborative" and "expansive" learning process involving CE teachers of different specialties, disciplinary colleagues, and students as "knowledge co-constructors," compiling teaching materials, doing ESP research, and experimenting improved ESP pedagogies (Jiang & Zhang, 2021, p. 277; Jiang, 2022, p. 7). This process "eliminated the conflicting elements" (e.g., emotional turmoil) and built TIs as boundary crosser/collaborator/explorer vital to the success of ESP reform (Gao & Cui, 2021; Jiang & Zhang, 2021, p. 278; Jiang, 2022, p. 6). TIs are, thus, constantly strengthened in the process of experiments and narrowing emerging gaps, a process of alignment through participation in meaning negotiation.

Apart from teaching, engaging in research has become indispensable in higher education which is now infused by a research-output-oriented culture (Huang & Guo, 2019). Three studies (Bao & Feng, 2022; Huang & Guo, 2019; Xu, 2014) demonstrated that CE teachers constructed confident researcher identities through participating in doctoral or visiting scholar programs, not in an institution-based way. It confirms the "under-recognized status" of CE teachers in Chinese higher education academic system, where they act as "isolated members" and "have limited access to research resources" (Yang et al., 2021b, p. 250; Zeng & Fickel, 2021, p. 651, p. 662). By building solid researcher identities, teachers maintained "intrinsic motivation" and firm belief in the "mutually reinforced relationship between teaching and researching," aligning their research actions with teaching practice, which elicited positive emotions, facilitated the congruence of institutional demands and professional development, and integrated teacher and researcher identities (Huang & Guo, 2019, p. 6; Yang et al., 2021b, p. 247). Reifying research endeavors, such as getting papers published, fed CE teachers' imagination of connections with the academic world, and motivated them, provided a sense of achievement, and experience of "regimes of competence," strengthening their TIs as teacher-researcher and legitimate members of the academic communities (Xu, 2014; Wenger, 1998, p. 251).

In times of reform, reification, "tokens" of teacher agency, competence, and alignment, is from participation (Wenger, 1998, p. 61). One distinctive theme about reification is "recognition." In Chinese sociocultural context, recognition by students, experts, institutions, and the state through reifications, such as awards, model lessons, quality courses, and designated roles as "a model reform

teacher," "teacher leader," "mentor," "backbone teacher," or "teacher's representative" has become an integral part of TIs as thriving (Lee et al., 2013, p. 279; Wei, 2021, p. 7; Ye & Zhao, 2019, p. 42, p. 44). It sustained and nourished teachers' agency and motivation in continual engagement and alignment with reforms (e.g., Ye & Zhao, 2019). Moreover, using such reifications, teachers crossed the boundary, accessed, constructed, or led communities of practice, further advancing their thriving trajectories. A schoolteacher in Ye and Zhao (2019) reified her TI as a "math teacher leader" by participating in various related practices, such as teaching competitions. The reification provided her with the "membership of a community for pursuing excellence in teaching" and more resources for professional development (p. 44). Four studies documented that teacher with recognized reifications engaged peers in the reform enterprise and shared their resources and expertise (Jiang, 2022; Jiang et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2013; Wei, 2021). The experiences of constructing and leading communities of practice brought them growing recognition, fresh insights, and like-minded peers, and prompted them to learn more, reflect more, reify more, and influence more, sustaining fulfilled and vigorous TIs, as one teacher said being in the community as an "old" teacher and mentor "makes me a flower that blooms again" (Jiang et al., 2021; Wei, 2021, p. 8). The mutuality of "giving and receiving" in communities of practice thus reaches into thriving TI construction (Wenger, 1998, p. 193).

Interestingly, few studies reported cohesive and transformative institution-based communities of practice. Instead, institutional communities are often associated with high accountability (Li & Craig, 2019), "unsupportive and non-collaborative," "obedient" and "collectivistic culture" (Lee & Yin, 2011, p. 41; Yang et al., 2021b, p. 246), or "a tool of enslavement" (Liu & Xu, 2013, p. 179). One telling example is from Liu and Xu (2011), which reported that a CE teacher constructed strong TIs only when she was excluded from the workplace community of practice where meaningful negotiation was denied. The exclusion engendered liberation for her to reify the meaning of pedagogical reform with greater motivation and autonomy. Therefore, it is not uncommon nor surprising that some teachers traversed situated communities to construct desired TIs in "boundary trajectories" (Wenger, 1998, p. 154). Nine studies demonstrate that teachers crossed the boundary to construct robust TIs. Such communities are accessed through teachers' participation in Ph.D. or postgraduate programs (Huang & Gao, 2019; Xu, 2014; Ye & Zhao, 2019), visiting scholar programs (Bao & Feng, 2022; Yang et al., 2021), AR projects (Yuan & Burns, 2017), extramural training activities (Xu & Huang, 2021), research groups or projects (Liu & Xu, 2011; Ye & Zhao, 2019), or virtual online communities (Bao & Feng, 2022; Li & Craig, 2019). Teachers' active engagement in communities created "an experience of identity" and strengthened "the identity of participation," enabling desired TI construction (Wenger, 1998, p. 215). For instance, having joint doctoral or visiting scholar programs, CE teachers formed burgeoning researcher identities to defend their value "within the managerial context" by investing themselves in relations with members of academic communities, participating in the "knowledge construction and academic practice" in the

communities, and learning how to do research through doing it (Bao & Feng, 2022, p. 8; Huang & Guo, 2019, p. 6).

All the mentioned engagement reflects and supports some alignment. Three kinds of alignment were identified: aligning with teachers' "telos" (i.e., "ultimate goal" "of teachers' teaching selves"), such as self-growth (Jiang, 2022, pp. 8-9; Li & Craig, 2019); aligning with the values of broader teacher or teaching communities, such as "improving language teaching and learning" (Yuan & Burns, 2017, p. 740); aligning with the ideals of reform policies, such as quality education (e.g., Ye & Zhao, 2019; Wei, 2021). These alignments direct teachers' engagement in a larger spatiotemporal context, fostering and sustaining integrated and committed TIs (Wenger, 1998).

Engagement and alignment spring from, boost, or actualize TI imagination. Nine studies show that positive imagination is the constituent of TIs as thriving (See Tables 2 & 3). Yang et al. (2021a) elucidated the mechanism with empirical evidence that imagined TI provided "self-related goals" within current TI and "signal(ed) the direction" for actions (p. 8). The gaps between imagined and current TIs, while triggering emotional tensions, drove constructive engagement and alignment to achieve congruence. There are studies corroborating this analysis. For instance, a teacher actively participated in activities deemed useful to realize her imagined TI as a "master teacher" and devoted herself to "nurturing and educating students," a policy requirement "internalized well" by her (Ye & Zhao, 2019, p. 43). Engagement and alignment recognized, in turn, drew her closer to the imagined TI. Bao and Feng (2022) testified that the discrepancy between practiced TI (e.g., a "worker bee") and imagined TI (e.g., "a prolific 'academic'") became a driving force for teachers' investment in the academic communities (p. 9). One study (Liu & Sammons, 2022) illustrated how a teacher's negative imagined TI transformed into positive TIs through reflection and solving conflicts, which suggests the fluidity of TI imagination shaped by actions and experiences.

In brief, TIs as thriving arise out of the combination of engagement, alignment, and imagination in a reciprocal and integrated manner. Their construction is strenuous process of meaning negotiation, consequential of teacher agency. Scope for negotiation exists; otherwise, "coordinated, relevant, or generative meaning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 65) would not be produced, and desired TIs could not be constructed. Agency, communities of practice, recognition, and positive imagination are proven significant to TIs as thriving.

### **Scenario 2: Constructing TIs as survival - adjust to survive**

Fourteen studies report cases of TIs as survival (See Tables 2 & 3). TIs as survival imply asymmetric power relations in alignment through stiff reification, such as "top-down mandates" (Yang et al., 2021b, p. 245). The implementation of policies is mediated by teacher factors (e.g., teacher beliefs) and cultural factors (e.g., exam culture, resulting in teachers' restricted or wavering actions in TI construction).

One recurring theme portraying TIs as survival is teachers' "powerlessness" towards reforms and the institutional system they were stuck in. Teachers suppressed desired TIs, adjusted their "roles," "minds, emotions, and behaviors," forming TIs as "followers" or "accommodators" of the dominant discourses to survive (e.g., Lee & Yin, 2011, p. 37; Huang, 2019, p. 315; Wang, 2021, p. 12). Discursively, they positioned themselves as teachers who "could not make any difference," "had no power in decision making" (Lee & Yin, 2011, p. 36, p. 38), "got no (other) choice" (Huang, 2019, p. 315; Xu, 2013, p. 83), "don't have any power to change" (Trent, 2020, p. 324), or "'forced' to do research" (Xu, 2014, p. 252). Besides, they compared themselves to "a technical worker" (Yip et al., 2022, p. 8), "a worker working on a machine" (Xu, 2013, p. 84), or a "manual worker" (Lee et al., 2013, p. 279). Metaphorically, teachers used inanimate objects to express their TIs, including "parts" or "accessories" of the reform machine" (Lee & Yin, 2011, p. 37), "a mechanical clock" or "a teaching robot" (Wang, 2021, pp. 9-10). Teachers' emotion (i.e., powerlessness), belief (i.e., having no power), and self-images (i.e., obedient) give us a revealing glimpse of the context where their TIs were constructed – the context "with little opportunity for shared experience and interactive negotiation" (Wenger, 1998, p. 65). Within it, teachers' actions in TI construction fall into two main categories: restricted actions and wavering actions, shaped by varied internal and external factors.

Seven studies documented that teachers' determination, passion, and action for innovation or desired TI construction were frustrated by different institutional constraints, including stipulated daily routines, assigned heavy workload, fixed teaching arrangements, standardized textbooks, rigid evaluation system, and obeying school culture (Trent, 2020; Wang, 2021; Wei et al., 2020; Xu, 2013; Xu & Huang, 2021; Yang et al., 2021b; Yip et al., 2022). Particularly depressing were teachers' innovative actions or ideas incurring leaders' criticism and denial, such as "disrupting the normal teaching order" (Wei et al., 2020, p. 694) and "teachers are irresponsible for discussing teaching issues related to the reform" (Xu & Huang, 2021, p. 105). "With coercion being the dominant mode of alignment" (Tsui, 2007, p. 673), this cohort of studies found that for "utilitarian purposes" (e.g., "academic rank," securing the job), teachers had to make adjustment, such as abandoned their valued beliefs and practice, minimized "communications with leaders," stifled their idealistic imagined TIs, and performed new roles to "follow the crowd," the rule, and the told (Wei et al., 2020, p. 691; Yang et al., 2021b, p.245). Being compelled to engage in restricted actions "based on compliance rather than participation in meaning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 187), they, consequently, formed passive TIs such as "routine performer" and "miserable follower" to get by (Xu, 2013, p. 83; Yang et al., 2021b, p. 235).

Admittedly, in some cases, aligning with institutions' discourses requires strong agency, but alignment driven by imposed rules tends to be vulnerable. For instance, the research-output-oriented appraisal system constantly reinforced CE teachers' belief in the equation of research and researcher TI with high-ranking

publications. Their engagement in research and alignment with institutional discourses were thus easily undermined and undervalued when they failed to publish. Xu (2013) observed that not having any publications impeded CE teachers' academic journey and promotion, giving rise to TIs as a "passive would-be researcher" (p. 252) or "struggling periphery research practitioner" (p. 250). Similarly, Zeng and Fickel (2021) reported that, lacking publications, CE teachers self-positioned as "illegitimate, second-class researchers," despite their active engagement in pedagogical research (p. 664). Trapped in power relations, teachers imagining to be researchers to survive in the performative evaluation regime in higher education restricted their actions to those beneficial for the construction of TIs required and recognized by institutions, such as obtaining doctoral degrees and focusing on publishing papers (Long & Huang, 2017; Xu, 2013; Zeng & Fickel, 2021). These findings confirm that aligning with institutional discourses is "a very profound aspect of how we define ourselves," and certain TIs can be frustrated or belittled when meaning is owned, interpreted, and imposed by institutions (Wenger, 1998, p. 196).

Another strand of research reveals that teachers embroiled in conflicts between reform mandates and practical constraints engaged in wavering actions. Overwhelmed by the gaps, teachers were found to swing between the required and the desired practices. State-level education policies, as Ye and Zhao (2019) rightly noted, are "numerous and mostly remain symbolic," leaving "ample room" for identification, interpretation, and exploration (p. 47). Thriving TI cases prove that entering that "room" to experiment and negotiate the gaps is essential for TIs to blossom. Nevertheless, squeezed between reform ideologies and high-stakes exams, teachers working "baselessly without support" (Lee & Yin, 2011, p. 37) experienced mass unresolved confusion in their TIs and teaching, and thus adopted an uncertain stance and wavering actions in terms of reforms. Lee and co-researchers (2011, p. 38; 2013) described that teachers "pa(id) lip service" and deliberately performed the policies for utilitarian purpose — impressing external inspectors and administrators, then swung back to exam-oriented teaching practices in regular classes. Such superficial engagement in reforms stemmed from teachers' beliefs in the decisive role of exams and their insignificant role in reforms. Even the teachers embracing reforms wavered in their actions for practical reasons. Huang's (2019) ethnographic study demonstrated that a schoolteacher, implementing her education ideal of "all-round-development" "with a low-key attitude" (p. 322), gradually became a pragmatist engaging in test-oriented practices and aligning with exam-oriented ideology, fear of losing the trust and support from parents and the school when her class's test performance repeatedly ranked the bottom. These findings reveal that ostensible alignment with reforms, forming TIs as "actors" or "pragmatists," was mediated by the baton of exams, the power of external supervision and recognition, accountability, and teachers' beliefs and experiences (Lee & Yin, 2011, p. 39; Lee et al., 2013, p. 277; Huang, 2019).

Another distinct case of teachers' dilemma leading to wavering actions was illustrated in Tao and Gao's study of ESP teachers (2018). Engaging in ESP

reform made teachers feel fulfilled by virtue of their firm belief in the usefulness of ESP. Yet, their ESP TI negotiation was undermined due to the peripheral status of ESP discipline in the institution and mainstream language research, cutting off their sense of belonging. Under the pressure of publication and promotion, they chose to engage in ESP teaching while disengaging in ESP research, a “subtle mix of participation and non-participation” (Wenger, 1998, p. 196).

In a nutshell, alignment with dominant discourses can be coerced, ostensible, or optional, mediated by asymmetrical power relations, entrenched exam culture, teachers’ beliefs, experiences, and multiple utilitarian purposes. Restricted actions based on compliance, rather than meaning negotiation, led to passive TIs. Wavering actions reflecting teachers’ confusion and predicaments in education practices and professional development resulted in simulated or fragmented TIs. Imagined TIs can be crushed by stiff reifications, but dominant discourses can also yield imagined TIs subscribing to those discourses, such as TIs as researchers.

### **Scenario 3: Constructing TIs as exclusion - alienate to wither**

Seven studies report cases of TIs as exclusion (See Tables 2 & 3). TIs as exclusion signal TI crises caused by teachers’ unwillingness or failure to engage in and align with the dominant institutional discourses, leading to alienation in communities and bleak extrapolation of TI trajectories.

Xu (2013) and Liu and Xu (2013) noted that unfair experiences regarding granting awards and opportunities—reifications of recognition, demoralized and disillusioned teachers. A teacher in Xu’s (2013) study felt “indignant” because awards and opportunities to participate in competitions were based on seniority rather than competence and performance (p. 83). She was unwilling to align with such organizational culture, which completely contradicted her belief and imagination in the teaching profession, so she quit. Similarly, teacher Feng, who engaged in and chaired the pedagogic reform, was rejected in the nomination of the best teacher award and the opportunity to study abroad due to the lack of publications and age bias, making her feel “betrayed” and disappointed (Liu & Xu, 2013, p. 187). Such experiences dissolved her “designated alignment” with reforms (p. 184), replaced by her “self-selected exclusion” from the reform community and “non-participation” in reforms (p. 190). These studies corroborate the significance of fair recognition, the absence of which might frustrate engagement and put teachers on “an outbound trajectory,” such as quitting or retreating from the reform stage (Wenger, 1998, p. 154). Besides emotional needs, Chinese teachers’ care for external recognition resides in its associated resources and opportunities for moving upward professionally and personally, as shown in the thriving TI cases. Another form of unfairness leading to feeble TIs was revealed in Xu’s (2014) study, where a contracted teacher was treated unfairly compared with tenured ones. Not allowed to apply for the associate professor as a contracted teacher, he “alienated himself from research,” becoming “a disheartened non-researcher” (p. 253). Shared among these cases are teachers’ experiences of rejection

operationalized in power relations, stifling their passion and actions in meaning negotiation on imagining a miserable picture if aligning with the dominant discourses, such as “more sacrifices” with little return (Liu & Xu, 2013, p. 187) and “a waste of time” doing research (Xu, 2014, p. 253).

Situated in contexts performance and accountability, two papers illustrated that CE teachers were torn between TIs as researchers and teachers (Huang & Guo, 2019; Yang et al., 2021b). Institutions’ research-oriented discourses clashed with their self-position as ordinary teachers with limited roles and exposed their incompetence in research, leaving them both unwilling and unable to participate in research activities and align with academic communities. Feeling “depressed,” “helpless,” and “hopeless” results in teachers’ “reaction of dissociation and a consequent identity of non-participation” (Huang & Guo, 2019, p. 7; Wenger, 1998, p. 195; Yang et al., 2021b). Teachers were then forced or opted to exclude and detach themselves from organizationally desired TIs, meanwhile living with constant burnout, tensions, and self-doubt.

Lacking negotiability in TI building engenders no alignment, resulting in an “inability to adapt to new circumstances” (Wenger, 1998, p. 206). Trent’s (2020) longitudinal research reported that teachers taught in schools where their meaning contributions were never accepted, developing “an identity of non-participation that progressively marginalizes them” (Wenger, 1998, p. 203). Unwilling to compromise and align with institutional discourses triggered self-alienating actions such as “never try to share,” and TIs as “rejected” or “excluded” teachers (Trent, 2020, pp. 324-325). Similarly, one teacher in Xu and Huang’s (2021) study changed from an active physics teacher to an “invisible middleman without functions” in reforms when the leader detailed and decided the things to do for test-taking purposes, which contradicted his beliefs in physics teaching.

Overall, when institutional discourses and practices grossly violate teachers’ beliefs in and imagination of teaching and TIs, they stir strong emotional responses and block further engagement and alignment. Unwilling or unable to adapt to the dominant discourses, teachers are alienated in or self-exclude from situated communities, developing an identity of non-participation and dim imagination of their TIs.

## 5.2 Influencing factors

Table 4 lists identified influencing factors in TI construction from the studies that we reviewed. Enabling factors include internal properties (e.g., agency) and external support from others, institutions, communities, or policies, the absence of which might constrain TIs. In many cases, however, it is difficult to label a factor as enabling or constraining. For instance, negative emotions (e.g., frustrated) can drive teachers to grow or compel teachers to go, resulting in strong or feeble TIs (Jiang, 2022; Trent, 2020). Therefore, TI influencing factors work together intricately, and a single factor’s nature is hard to define. Three salient themes surfaced from data analysis (i.e., power relations, agency, emotion), which are intertwined with one another and with other factors listed

in Table 4. The remainder of this section discusses these factors.

**Table 4: Influencing factors of TIs**

Categories	Sub-categories
personal factors	agency, belief, competence, career phases, disposition, emotion, experiences, imagination, morality, motivation, qualification, role, employment status (i.e., contracted teacher or <i>bianzhi</i> teacher <sup>1</sup> )
interpersonal factors	teacher-students, teacher-parents, teacher-colleagues, teacher-models, teacher-mentors, teacher-experts, teacher-leaders, community members' relationships (e.g., supporting, indifferent)
disciplinary factors	status of the teaching discipline, cross-disciplinary collaboration
institutional factors	institutional discourses (e.g., policies, regulations), institutional management, institutional leadership
community factors	existence/absence of communities, support/recognition/rejection from communities
cultural factors	exam culture, institutional culture, publication culture, Confucian culture, cultural artifacts
sociopolitical factors	national education policies, power relations, life pressure

1. *bianzhi* refers to the number of established posts in all state-financed schools, colleges, or universities.

### Power relations

Reviewed literature reveals that coercive power relations discourage self-desired and coherent TI construction by imposing rigid rules on teaching, research, and promotion; nevertheless, teacher engagement as a “dimension of power” potentially enables TI negotiation and reconstructs power relations (Wenger, 1998, p. 175). Cases of TIs as survival and exclusion display suppressive power relations in which decision-making and ownership of meaning are largely or totally at the hands of institutions, squelching teacher agency, triggering negative emotions, and blocking robust TI construction (e.g., Trent, 2020; Wang, 2021; Xu & Huang, 2021). Whereas, in cases of TIs as thriving and some cases of TIs as survival (e.g., Tao & Gao, 2017), despite constraints in institutional power hierarchy, teachers' agentic actions were clearly observed to defend and align with their values, ideals, or enterprises within the structure (e.g., Bao & Feng, 2022; Jiang et al., 2021). Particularly, agency was activated when national education policies added “new discourses and power dynamics” to teachers' situated contexts and became an external power they could effectively harness for professional development (Jiang, 2022, p. 3). Some flourishing teachers received support and recognition from leaders and experts for their agentic reification endorsed and advocated by policies, accessing, or constructing communities of practices and altering the power relations by accumulating and gaining “competent interpretation” and “ownership of meaning” in terms of reforms (e.g., Jiang et al., 2021; Wenger, 1998, p. 201; Wei, 2021; Ye & Zhao, 2019). Yet, if institution leadership adopts policies superficially and uses power to force unified policy implementation for more political resources, it frustrates TI

construction, as some teachers described their leaders acting as “social climbers” rushing through the curriculum reform like “a political mission” “to please the official,” shaping TI as a “follower of leaders’ wishes” instead of an agentive explorer (Wang, 2021, p. 13; Yip et al., 2022, p. 9).

Cultural factors add complications to TIs developed in power relations. Shared cultural norms in teachers’ beliefs influenced their behaviors. Positively, culturally influenced beliefs in teachers’ duties, such as caring about students, enhance teachers’ allegiance to the state’s discourse emphasizing the moral aspect of education, which was used to justify their values within the increasingly harsh neoliberal discourses (Huang & Guo, 2019). Negatively, cases reported that the entrenched cultural norm of being subservient to the senior and collective interests made teachers lead or implement reform in power-laden environments, even though they lacked competence and understanding in it, leading to ostensible alignment and fragile TIs (e.g., Liu & Xu, 2013; Wang, 2021). Chinese institutional culture valuing balance (Xu, 2014), harmony (Wang, 2021), or collectivism (Lee et al., 2011) could evoke feelings of powerlessness as individual teachers and further trap them in the system, resulting in conformity and subordination to dominant discourses with potential TI vulnerability and crisis. One recurring theme relating to power relations alludes to the publication culture at home. The unfavorable publication culture (e.g., the necessity of connections) implicating the unseen power relations keeping the gate of core journal publication, discouraged teachers’ research engagement, and were at a disadvantaged when it came to meaningful negotiation within institutions prioritizing high-ranking publications in teacher appraisal linked with promotion (e.g., Long & Huang, 2017; Xu, 2014; Zeng & Fickel, 2021).

### **Agency**

Agency anchors in teachers’ engagement, alignment, and imagination. Ye and Zhao (2019) remarked that Chinese teachers’ agency “is fully embedded in the institutional structure of the state” (p. 48). Indeed, institutional discourses shaped by and aligning with national education policies have proven to influence the direction of teacher agency, orientation of TI construction, and development of TI trajectories in a significant and distinctive way (e.g., Bao & Feng, 2022; Jiang, 2022; Wei, 2021). When teachers’ beliefs and value aligned with policies or when teachers strived for self-development within the system, they exerted agency to construct a “self-institutionalized self” (Ye & Zhao, 2019, p. 46) by doing what the institutions and policies desired and required them to do. Notable examples include university teachers’ engagement in research and imagination to be researchers to align with institutional discourses regarding research shaped by the national initiative of building “world-class universities and disciplines” (e.g., Long & Huang, 2017; Yang et al., 2021b). Whatever institutional system, scope, and opportunities for exercising agency are indispensable for robust TI construction. As immediate contextual influences, suppressive and obedience-oriented institutional discourses and practices that lacked negotiability are observed as the most direct factor in eroding potential thriving TIs by constraining teachers’ agentive actions (e.g., Trent, 2020; Xu &

Huang, 2021).

Two facets emerged as closely linked with agency in TI construction: imagination and emotion. As evidenced in cases of thriving TIs, positive imagined TIs which function as “goals,” “direction,” or “driving force” energized teacher agency in practice to negotiate the gaps between imagined and current TIs (e.g., Bao & Feng, 2022, p. 9; Yang et al., 2021a, p. 8). Besides, agency is a resource and means to foster emotional resilience when tensions and challenges arise (Yang et al., 2021b). Cases of TIs as thriving illustrated that agentive actions could alleviate or eliminate negative emotions, making it possible for teachers to develop and sustain strong TIs (e.g., Huang & Guo, 2019; Jiang & Zhang, 2021).

### **Emotion**

Emotion has been increasingly recognized as central to TI construction, supported by the reviewed literature. Teachers wrapped in the changing educational environment and competing discourses experienced mixed emotions in flux, informing TI construction (e.g., Lee et al., 2011). Strong emotions that transform TIs were triggered by critical events in teachers’ professional lives, such as the enactment of relevant education policies (e.g., Wei, 2021); and they could also be stirred by daily experiences and pervasive discourses in the workplace, such as heavy workload and stringent performativity evaluation (e.g., Long & Huang, 2017; Wang, 2021). Teacher emotions touch off and bridge teachers’ judgment, thoughts, imagination, and actions toward their situation and teaching lives, reframing TIs. For instance, CE teachers’ experiences within neoliberal institutional discourses engendered heterogeneous emotions (e.g., anger, shame) that prompted their reposition, revaluation, imagination, and actions regarding their TIs, forming a non-participation TI or striving for an organizational-desired TI as a teacher-researcher (e.g., Huang & Guo, 2019; Yang et al., 2021b). Congruence between external requirements and teachers’ beliefs, competence, and agentive actions brought positive emotions, facilitating integrated and confident TIs thriving (Ye & Zhao, 2019); whereas dissonance between external and internal forces evoked negative emotions that discouraged engagement, contributing to weak TIs with tensions (e.g., Yip et al., 2022). It is noteworthy that growing research demonstrates that negative emotions induced by demanding socio-institutional environments could be conducive to teachers’ agentive actions for survival, self-growth, and success, enhancing TIs (e.g., Jiang et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021a).

Closely connected to the emotion theme, interpersonal relationships acting as a buffer or generator of emotions, are found to have a direct bearing on TIs. Interpersonal relationships that alleviate negative emotions and elicit positive ones feature cooperation, communication, support, affirmation, trust, and shared vision (Bao & Feng, 2022; Gao & Cui, 2021; Jiang & Zhang, 2021). In the process of constructing desired TIs amidst constraints and setbacks, such relationships became a source of emotional support to sustain teachers’ agentive

endeavors and strengthen solid TIs (e.g., Yuan & Burns, 2017). In contrast, interpersonal relationships that stirred negative emotions are characterized by estrangement, competition, surveillance, denial, and distrust, frustrating actions, and eroding TIs (Huang & Guo, 2019; Li & Craig, 2019; Trent, 2020; Wang, 2021). Particularly, the pervasive neoliberal discourses are observed to have complicated and jeopardized interpersonal relationships in which teachers and leaders “live an existence of calculation” (Ball, 2003, p. 215). It is reported that some teachers experienced negative feelings (e.g., anger, fear, anxiety), seeing colleagues’ (academic) achievements, being judged by students’ test performance, or being forced to implement certain practices, which triggered actions such as compliance, compromise, and struggle (Huang, 2019; Li & Craig, 2019; Wang, 2021; Yang et al., 2021b). This finding resonates with Ball’s (2003) view that institutions’ neoliberal demands affect relations and engender individuals’ negative feelings.

Taken together, power relations, agency, and emotion stand out from the reviewed studies as central mediators in TI construction, which can be combined as a triangular prism to understand the complexity of TIs in reform contexts.

## 6. Implication

In this review, we made a crucial observation that teachers’ agentic, strenuous, and fruitful participation aligning with policies and dominant education discourses is implicit in thriving TIs with more positive emotional experiences. Underneath is the power of the state and institutions, embedding alignment with system’s regulations and enterprises in teacher evaluation and promotion, profoundly shaping the direction of teacher agency and orientation of TI development. Not exclusive to Chinese teachers, teachers around the world “face unprecedented national pressures to comply with policy agendas through increasingly interventionist systems of surveillance” of the orientation, quality, and impact of their professional work (Day, 2017, p. 2). A more dialectical view of education reforms is perhaps desired, as thriving TI cases have verified that teachers’ actions initially driven externally brought a sense of fulfillment when they developed competence, gained ownership of meaning, and received recognition (e.g., Bao & Feng, 2022; Jiang, 2022; Wei, 2021). It was the process of exerting agency and reifying certain TIs, albeit externally motivated, that brought fresh perspectives and meaningful experiences to teachers, reinvigorating their passions, inspiring their imagination, and promoting their TIs. However, greater sensitivity should be given to the affordance of teacher agency that is largely contingent upon their situated environments and internal competence and beliefs. Several studies reveal that institutional environment forbidding space for negotiability and agency deprofessionalized teachers with fragile TIs (e.g., Wang, 2021); while the clash between external requirements and internal forces tormented teachers by feelings of insecurity, vulnerability, inferiority, and indignation, damaging their TIs (Huang & Guo, 2019; Yang et al., 2021b; Zeng & Fickel, 2021). Therefore, we argue for teacher empowerment that enhances strong TIs in such a turbulent era when teachers are wrapped in ever-changing reform discourses and socio-institutional environments.

Teacher empowerment—“teacher’s power to participate in decision-making” (Zembylas & Papanastasiou, 2005, p.432)—is essential since TIs are constructed “as a lived experience of participation” (Wenger, 1998, p. 151). The leadership and sociocultural environment valuing and allowing teacher participation in decision-making should be fostered and guaranteed in the first place. At institutional and national levels, besides offering support to develop teachers’ understanding and competence in reforms, engaging teachers in (collaborative) learning, reflection, articulating frontline experiences, feelings, and suggestions, exerting agency, and critical thinking is crucial. In other words, teachers’ knowledge, thoughts, needs, experiences, emotions, agency, judgments, and expertise should be respected by the top and produce genuine impact on the decision-making outcomes in the end. Without teachers’ sufficient participation, their relations to the reform enterprises “tend to remain literal and procedural” (Wenger, 1998, p. 187) out of innermost resistance and oftentimes mechanical compliance and implementation, portending TI conflicts, bringing little changes on education practices, and even counteracting the improvement of teaching and researching quality if teachers use “cunning manoeuvres” for survival (Huang & Guo, 2019, p. 10). Further, empowering teachers emotionally is necessary since reforms are found to intertwine with teacher emotions. Institutions’ humane attitude and practices for facilitating teacher growth, recognition from significant others, and positive interpersonal relationships yield emotional strength that nurtures agency and enables TI development (e.g., Bao & Feng, 2022; Xu, 2014; Ye & Zhao, 2019).

Despite the necessity of external empowerment, teacher empowerment—the “process that generates growth and enablement” (Carl, 2009, p. 3)—is truly activated when teachers believe their abilities and possibilities to participate, to change, and take actions to navigate and balance the conflicting identities and demands in reforms (e.g., Gao & Cui, 2021; Wei, 2021). One important caveat we would like to add is that teachers’ passion and action for excellence within neoliberal discourses encapsulating teachers’ values in a set of auditable criteria should be viewed critically (Ball, 2003). While some teachers or scholars perceived such discourses as opportunities to activate agency, facilitate development, and build powerful TIs (Huang, 2019; Huang & Guo, 2019), the fear, anxiety, TI tensions, ethical dilemmas (e.g., whether to publish papers via agencies), and obsession with external recognition (e.g., awards) experienced by many teachers call for sober judgment and closer examination as to whether and how the neoliberal culture might enable teachers or cripple them in the long run and from the perspective of the whole education ecology.

Given the complicated education environments, teacher empowerment—developing “competence to take charge of their own growth and resolve their own problems” (Myrick Short et al., 1994, p.38)—starts from the pre-service period via “identity-oriented teacher education” that allows student teachers’ experience of negotiating identities, bridging gaps between theory and practice, and claiming ownership of meanings through identity-oriented activities, such

as critical autoethnographic narrative, and reflective pedagogy (Meihami & Hussein, 2020; Yazan, 2019). Moreover, as a critical mediator in TI construction, teacher emotion sees relevance to teacher education. Training sessions on emotional intelligence are necessary and can be effective in developing student teachers' awareness, management, and regulation of their emotions (Vesely et al., 2014), which were proven essential capacities to sustain agency and enable TIs negotiation and integration in the reviewed literature (e.g., Jiang et al., 2021).

## 7. Conclusion

Drawing from Wenger's (1998) identity theory, our systematic review has taken stock of empirical studies focusing on Chinese teachers' TIs in times of reforms since 2010. This review has shown that education reforms could result in both challenges and opportunities for teachers, constraining, enabling, or orienting their TIs. Under the three scenarios of TIs are teachers' unique professional stories, the development of which are constantly mediated by myriad factors, such as emotions, beliefs, agency, moral stance, institutional environment, culture, and power relations. How these interrelated factors interact to shape TI construction and reconstruction under education reform policies warrants further investigation from multiple perspectives. Particularly, TI conflicts and crises caused by neoliberal reform discourses call for more research. Suggestions for enhancing strong and positive TIs are put forward, which point to the necessity of teacher empowerment from the broader socio-institutional context, teacher themselves, and teacher education. We hope to see more contextualized TI reviews and enlightening TI research against the global education reform trend in the future since different sociopolitical, economic, and cultural environments influence countries' education policies and teachers' responses to them.

## 8. References

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