

The discursive (re)positioning of the foreign teacher: Understanding changing teacher roles in China's internationalised school sector

Abstract

This paper explores the changing roles of foreign teachers in China's internationalised schools in a post-reform era. These transformations have significantly reduced the presence of foreign teachers, giving rise to the dominance of their Chinese counterparts. By employing positioning theory and conducting in-depth interviews with 29 teachers from two internationalised schools, this study brings into focus the complex dynamics of how Chinese and foreign educators perceive and position each other. The findings reveal a paradox: foreign teachers, while increasingly marginalised in professional roles, remain symbolically indispensable for marketing and upholding internationalised schools' international image. This dual perspective sheds light on the intricate interplay of market forces, cultural expectations, and educational policies. The study underscores the crucial need for adaptability and cultural competency among foreign teachers and school leaders to successfully navigate these profound shifts.

Introduction

A unique selling point of international schools, which were originally founded to serve the families of the globally-mobile, is their claim to 'being international' (Bailey & Gibson, 2024). The notion of 'being international' is constructed in terms of a global imaginary (Meyer, 2021) that celebrates diversity, harmony, transcendence and being globally connected (Bailey & Gibson, 2024). However, this global imaginary belies a host of inequalities and inequities, with researchers highlighting how international schools continue to privilege the empowered (e.g., western actors) and marginalise the perspectives and knowledges of non-western actors and countries (Gardner-McTaggart, 2021).

One mechanism by which international schools reproduce a western-centric global imaginary is through their hiring policies, which show a clear bias towards hiring native speaker teachers from the UK and the USA and hesitation to hire non-Anglo, non-native speakers (Bunnell & Atkinson 2020). In this paper, teachers from the UK, USA and other Anglophone countries are referred to as foreign teachers, whilst teachers from the country in which the school is located are referred to as local teachers. This bias exists due to the prevalence of English as the medium of instruction in many international schools. British and American teachers are valued by international schools not just for their professional knowledge, but also for their economic, cultural, symbolic, and social capital, which is perceived to be of higher value than others (e.g., **local teachers**) (Bunnell & Atkinson, 2020). In contrast, local teachers still find themselves playing a marginal role (Lai et al., 2016), as well as being paid less than their expatriate counterparts (Hammer, 2024).

Whilst foreign teachers in traditional international schools continue to play a dominant role, the situation is markedly different in Type C, non-traditional international schools (referred to henceforth as internationalised schools) that offer an international curriculum, such as the IB curriculum, to a largely homogenous local elite (Hayden & Thompson, 2013). Because internationalised schools cater to local students, they are typically less autonomous than traditional international schools, being regulated, to varying degrees, by governments, which,

amongst other things, may require schools to teach the country's national curriculum alongside an international one (Bunnell, Fertig & James, 2016).

Internationalised schools in China

One country which has seen an increase in internationalised schools is Mainland China. In China, internationalised schools come in a variety of guises, including those that offer an American, Canadian and British style of curriculum (Wu & Koh, 2022). This paper, however, primarily focuses on what Poole (2020) refers to as Chinese internationalised schools. These schools do not embrace a distinct foreign identity, but instead emphasise linguistic (Chinese as the lingua franca), cultural (inculcating love for the country and the state) and organisational (top-down) practices that foreground Chinese aspects. Internationalised schools generally have less autonomy than traditional international schools catering to host national students due to varying levels of government regulation, which often require these schools to teach the national curriculum alongside an international one (Cutri, Bunnell & Poole, 2024).

Internationalised schools in China have traditionally employed a mix of expatriate and **local teachers** to deliver international curricula such as the International Baccalaureate (IB) and Cambridge International Examinations. Initially characterised by a heavy reliance on foreign expertise and curricula, emerging evidence indicates a decline in the number of foreign teachers, coupled with an increasing dominance of Chinese teachers (Himes & Bausell, 2024). Whilst the reasons for this shift in teacher composition are multifaceted, emerging research (e.g., Bailey & Gibson, 2024; Clark, 2024; Cutri, Bunnell & Poole, 2024; Poole & Nehring, 2024; Wu & Koh, 2023) has pinpointed two policies that have reshaped the role the foreign teacher: the 2021 educational reform of the private school sector (henceforth the 2021 Reform) and the impact of COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2021 Reform and China's Zero-Covid policy have had profound impacts on the internationalised school sector in China. The 2021 Reform, aimed at addressing issues of educational sovereignty, cultural identity, and equity (Wright, Lin & Lu, 2023), mandates that private schools adhere to the Chinese National Curriculum from grades 1 to 9 and imposes restrictions on the use of foreign textbooks (Liu, 2023). The reform has also led to restrictions on branding and school names, with terms like 'international', 'world,' and 'global' now being prohibited. This policy has also resulted in a significant shift in the operation and identity of internationalised schools, which are increasingly adopting practices typical of local public schools, thereby diluting their international character (Wu & Koh, 2023). It has to be noted that China is not the only country to reform its private international school sector in order to emphasise national culture and identity. For example, Saudi Arabia has dismissed and replaced foreign leaders of international schools with Saudi nationals (Bailey & Gibson, 2024) whilst Indonesia has introduced restrictions on the use of the term 'international school' whilst requiring that international schools cannot be fully owned by foreign stakeholders (Relocate Global, 2018).

Concurrently, the Zero-Covid policy, implemented in early 2020 to contain the spread of COVID-19, imposed strict lockdowns, mass testing, and quarantines, causing an 'exodus' of foreign teachers due to the harsh living conditions and mobility restrictions (Hall, 2022). China's Zero-Covid policy has retrenched national boundaries and also emphasised national contextual factors, including local culture, regulations, politics and resources (Bailey & Gibson, 2024). Covid-19 policies have accelerated shifts in the composition and roles of teaching staff in internationalised schools, with Chinese teachers now assuming a dominant position and

foreign teachers playing a supplemental role (Himes and Bausell, 2024; Poole & Nehring, 2024).

Studies on foreign teachers in internationalised schools

Recent studies focusing on foreign teachers in China (Bunnell & Poole, 2022; Golis, 2024a, 2024b; Himes & Bausell, 2024) suggest that recent changes have greatly impacted teachers' professional identities and status, relationships, and mobility choices. For example, in terms of professional identities, Bunnell and Poole (2022) found a discontinuity between how foreign teachers see themselves as 'real' or 'qualified international school teachers' and how they think they are seen by their colleagues and Chinese leaders as being undervalued and, in the words of one participant, 'just a white guy' (Bunnell & Poole, 2022, 9). Golis (2024a, 2024b) builds on Bunnell and Poole (2022) by highlighting the diminished role of foreign teachers against a backdrop of education reform whilst acknowledging individual teacher agency in order to negotiate a range of interactions, even if the majority of the interactions are somewhat negative.

The above studies contribute significantly to the growing literature on international schooling by charting the changing role and status of foreign actors, who previously played a more central and dominant role (Li, 2023). However, the empirical basis for these studies could be expanded. Whilst the Chinese teachers' perspective can be partially ascertained via the foreign teachers' accounts of their experiences and, to a certain extent, verified through inter-group triangulation (i.e., comparing foreign teachers' perspectives), it is still not clear how Chinese teachers perceive foreign teachers' roles within a post-regulation/post-Covid era. As such, a methodological limitation of current studies is the absence of Chinese participants' perspectives, creating something of an echo chamber, where the voices of foreign teachers reinforce the negative discourse of feeling marginalised and under-valued.

Emerging studies (e.g., Bunnell & Poole, 2024; Clark, 2024; Clark & Terrett, 2024; Cutri, Bunnell & Poole, 2024), however, have started to provide the missing piece of the perceptual puzzle. For example, Poole and Bunnell (2024) interviewed eight Chinese teachers in an internationalised school in order to understand the foreign teachers' role. Interestingly, the study underscored the marginal role of the foreign teacher against a backdrop of regulation, with the participants generally holding negative views of the latter's integrity and professional ability to teach Chinese students.

However, more studies are needed in order to capture the dual perspectives of both groups. In order to offer a more nuanced perspective on the changing role of teachers in internationalised schools, the voices of both foreign and Chinese teachers need to be included in one study, not just in terms of how they see each other, but also how they see themselves in relation to each other. Whilst there have been a number of studies comparing Chinese and foreign teachers' perspectives of each other (Clark & Terrett, 2024; Kostogriz, Adams & Bonar, 2022), these studies have focused on curriculum and professional learning respectively, and do not shed much light on how Chinese teachers perceive their foreign counterparts within the context of education reform and increased government regulation.

This study

This study addresses the issue of a lack of comparative studies by exploring the changing role of foreign teachers in internationalised schools from the perspective of both Chinese and foreign faculty. In order to do this, this study utilises positioning theory, which emphasises the

discursive processes by which people are ascribe/ascribed, take up, refuse, and contest self and other positionings. In this paper, discourse is defined as a system of representation that is constituted by both language and practices that produce meaning (Hall, 1997) and shape what a teacher can and cannot be and do. Focusing on the discursive – i.e., how the foreign teacher is discursively produced by Chinese teachers - moves the academic conversation forward by considering how perceptions and positionings are shaped by wider policy discourses.

In seeking to deepen our understanding of this issue, this study employs a qualitative methodology, utilising in-depth semi-structured interviews with 29 participants (n=18 Chinese teachers and n=11 foreign teachers) from two internationalised schools in China. This study is underpinned by the following research questions:

How do Chinese and foreign teachers perceive and position themselves and each other within the context of internationalised schools in China?

What implications do these positionings have for internationalised schools in China and globally?

Theoretical framework

As this paper focuses on how Chinese teachers perceive themselves and their foreign counterparts, positioning theory was selected as a commensurate theoretical framework. Positioning theory has been embraced by researchers in non-western contexts, such as China, to explore teachers' professional identities (Huang and Wang, 2024). It has also been utilised by researchers to identify differential capacities and agency within the same context. For example, we may we share a common world or environment (i.e., the internationalised school), but relate to it in different, multiple and conflicting ways due to who we are (e.g., Chinese or foreign teachers), which can be signalled through discursive positioning and thereby reveal something about an individual's role and status (Schiller, 2016). These previous studies suggested that positioning theory would be a good fit for this study, as it sought to understand the changing role and status of foreign teachers from multiple perspectives.

Positioning theory

Positioning theory has been developed as a framework for exploring and explaining how people construct themselves and their worlds—and are constructed—through discourse (Green et al., 2020). That is, how individuals recognise themselves and others as certain types or kinds of people (Kayı-Aydar, 2019). Positioning theory has also been defined as:

A cluster of rights and duties recognized in a certain social milieu has been called a position. The corresponding act by which a person claims certain rights and opts for certain duties, or has them thrust on a certain social actor is the act of positioning. Sometimes, positioning is a deliberate act of which the actors are aware—more often it crystallizes out of the background of social practices within which people are embedded (Harré, 2011, ix).

In this paper, milieu refers to the internationalised school, which, despite marketing itself as offering a fusion of international and national elements, emphasises national/Chinese aspects, such as catering for Chinese middle-class families and adhering to national policies that are designed to inculcate a patriotic attachment to the Chinese Communist Party and the country (Poole, 2020). Within this discursive nexus, the positioning of the foreign teacher is likely to

be circumscribed in terms of their professional role (being valued for their native-speaker ability rather than their subject and pedagogical knowledge) and their role in promoting a global perspective. Duties, meanwhile, refers to the role and purpose of a teacher within this setting, such as what they teach and what they bring to the school in terms of value and marketing. The issue of marketing is that is starting to be explored in the literature (e.g., Golis, 2024a) and suggests that foreign teachers may be valued symbolically for their embodiment of the international.

According to Green et al. (2020), Harré's definition above foregrounds three fundamental components of positioning theory – namely, positions, story lines and acts. Positions are dynamic and evolving clusters of norms and expectations that people in particular developing storylines perform (or reject) in varied and unique ways. Following Harré and van Langenhove (1999), this paper identifies two main positions: self and other. Whenever an individual positions themselves, this discursive act always implies a positioning of the one to whom it is addressed and constitutes a self-position (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, 22). An example of this from this study included one foreign teacher's statement that 'we are props basically, there for the purpose of the marketing material.' Similarly, when somebody positions somebody else, that always implies a positioning of the person themselves, and constitutes an other-positioning (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, 22). A further example from this study is when a local teacher described the foreign teacher as 'not necessarily the best, only the truly good ones are needed to teach students to achieve our teaching goals.'

This paper primarily focuses on the components of self-position, other-positioning and storylines. Self-positions and positionings often manifest in images, metaphors and storylines, which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned (Davies & Harré, 1990, 46). As this paper focuses on how Chinese teachers perceive the foreign teacher and their role in the internationalised school, the primarily focus of this paper is on the former's other-positionings of the latter. However, in order to nuance the analysis and to create points of triangulation, both the foreign and Chinese teachers' self-positions are drawn on. Doing so highlights congruity between other and self-positionings, as well as instances of dissonance, which shed light on the changing role of foreign teachers in internationalised schools in a post-regulated/post-Covid era.

Storylines, meanwhile, refers to an 'unfolding narrative' (Davies & Harré, 1990) where discourses constitute one or more positions within a storyline or storylines. The notion of a storyline or narrative is important in order to nuance the metaphor of position, as such positions and positioning are not static or acontextual, but are embedded in cultural and organisational practices and are therefore ongoing and involve negotiation, including the potential for refusing to embracing other (i.e., imposed) positions. In this study, storylines provide context for understanding and interpreting the participants' self and other positionings and help to make links to wider cultural and structural factors, such as education reforms and return migration.

Methodology

As this study focused on the perceptions of Chinese and foreign teachers in order to analyse self-and-imposed positionings, a qualitative methodology was selected as most commensurate. Following on from this, in-depth semi-structured interviewing was employed as the main method for data collection (to be discussed below).

Participants

The study employed purposive sampling to identify foreign and local teachers who worked in internationalised schools before 2021 and had experience teaching an international curriculum (e.g., the IB or Cambridge international curriculum). Subsequently, 11 expatriate teacher participants who all worked/previously worked at an internationalised school a few hours' drive from Shanghai (pseudonym, International Hope) and 18 Chinese participants who worked in an internationalised school in the south of China (pseudonym, International Joy) were recruited. The 11 foreign participants (10 of whom were male and just 1 female) came from a variety of Anglo-speaking western countries, including the USA (n=4) UK (n=3), Australia (n=2), Ireland (n=1) and Canada (n=1) and ranged in age from their early thirties to late forties. The 18 Chinese participants (15 of whom were female and just 3 male) were all from Mainland China and were all in their early thirties to early forties. Table 1 offers biographical information about the participants whose interview excerpts are drawn on in this paper.

The sample purposively recruited more Chinese participants, as the ratio of Chinese to foreign teacher has changed in recent years, with Chinese teachers now playing a more commanding role (Himes & Bausell, 2024). Moreover, this study sought to collect more evidence of Chinese teachers' perceptions, as the foreign teacher perspective continues to dominate the academic discourse (Poole & Bunnell, 2023) and has driven recent research on internationalised schools in China (e.g., Bunnell & Poole, 2022; Cutri, Bunnell & Poole, 2024; Golis, 2024c, 2024b; Himes & Bausell, 2024), as well as other global contexts, such as Vietnam (Bright, 2022) and Switzerland (Rey, 2024). Access to foreign participants at International Hope was facilitated by a former teacher in the school (now an academic). Access to International Joy was facilitated by the author's academic network at their current institution. Ethical consent was sought and given by the author's institution whilst informed consent was employed throughout the data collection process.

The study aimed to recruit both foreign and Chinese participants from the same school for comparative analysis, but this proved impractical. International Joy had only 3 foreign teachers and the Chinese participants from International Hope declined to join the study. Despite these challenges, comparative analysis was possible as both groups worked in the same type of school - internationalised schools. Moreover, the study's focus was on the participants' perceptions of themselves and their counterparts as two distinct groups of teachers, allowing for a nuanced perspective by combining self and imposed positionings. Additionally, the geographic diversity of the schools—one in a tier-2 city near the eastern seaboard and another in a southern metropolis—provided a broader view of the changing role and status of foreign teachers in a post-regulation period.

International Joy

International Joy (IJ) was established in 2004 and comprised four departments: kindergarten, primary school, junior high school, and an international high school department (the focus of this paper). The International Department primarily offered ICCSE and A-Level courses authorised by the Cambridge University Examinations Committee. Students, who were Chinese and primarily came from the south of China, planned to apply to universities abroad, including those in Hong Kong and Macau. The high school had 38 local teachers and just three foreign teachers, who hailed from Britain, America and Canada. The teachers in IJ were highly qualified, with, according to the principal, 80% holding master's and graduate degrees, 20% undergraduate degrees, and a 50/50 split between teachers holding overseas and domestic degrees.

Previously, the school had employed more foreign teachers (approximately 12), but, in the words of Wang¹, the principal, ‘we can't find so many suitable foreign teachers; the number and quality of foreign teachers have decreased compared to before the epidemic, which is an objective reality.’ This was echoed by another senior manager, Li, who observed that the shortage of foreign teachers was not unique to IJ, but affected all internationalised schools: ‘Other schools also have such problems, it is difficult to recruit suitable foreign teachers, which may be due to the tightening of policies and the impact of the epidemic in recent years.’ In line with emerging research (Himes & Bausell, 2024; Poole & Bunnell, 2024), the decline in foreign teachers in China can be attributed to the impact of the global pandemic.

International Hope

International Hope was established as a K-12 private internationalised school located a few hours’ drive from Shanghai offering the IB PYP (Primary Years Programme), MYP (Middle Years Programme) and DP (Diploma Programme). The students and faculty were primarily Chinese nationals, with the school having seen a decline in the number of foreign teachers since 2020. As one participant observed, ‘At this point it's mostly Chinese teachers. There are very few foreign teachers left. Probably about 80% local teachers and about 20% foreign. Zero COVID policies drove a lot of people away’ (Brandon).

The participants also noted that the foreign teacher composition had changed: ‘there are fewer and fewer British teachers; now, there are quite a lot of Indians at the school’ (Chris). Whilst the school had been established as a bilingual school authorised to offer the PYP and MYP curricula, the impact of the 2021 Reform had resulted in its transition into what the participants described as a ‘local school’. There was a perception that the IB curriculum had become ‘squeezed out’ due to the necessity to teach the Chinese National Curriculum during the compulsory years of schooling from grades one to nine, which had limited their roles as educators.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviewing was employed as the main method of data collection for its flexibility and potential to yield insights into the participants’ perceptions of themselves as a group (e.g., Chinese teachers) and those of others (e.g., foreign teachers).

Both interview sets were collected as part of a larger project examining the impact of the 2021 Reform on internationalised schools in Mainland China. These interviews delved into participants’ reasons for selecting China and minban schools, their interactions with Chinese/foreign colleagues, their understanding of the 2021 Reform and its impact on the school and their daily practices, and their future intentions regarding international school teaching. The questions aimed to generate ‘thick description’, covering not just the Reform, but also including contextual information such as the participants’ perceptions of their experiences of working in internationalised schools and professional and social interactions with co-workers. The insights explored in this paper derive from a sub-set of these interview questions focusing on participants’ perceptions of and interactions with foreign/Chinese colleagues.

¹ All participant names are pseudonyms.

Interviews with foreign participants were conducted in English by the author from March to April 2024. The interviews lasted between 60 to 120 minutes, and were all conducted remotely via Zoom. Interviews with the Chinese participants were conducted in Putonghua via Tencent by a Chinese speaking research assistant from April to June, 2024. A differentiated interviewing strategy (e.g., foreign teachers being interviewed by the author who himself is British and Chinese teachers being interviewed by a Chinese-speaking research assistant) helped to elicit candid and in-depth responses from the participants. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed and translated (in the case of the Chinese interviews), by the research assistant. The transcriptions were checked against the audio recordings to ensure accuracy.

Data analysis

Data analysis was informed by positioning theory and Braun et al.'s (2023) approach to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used to identify positionings whilst discourse analysis was used to explicate those positionings.

The interview transcript was first analysed to identify explicit references to either foreign or Chinese teachers. This was typically signaled at the beginning of a sentence followed by a copula verb (is/are/were) and a subject complement, such as 'Our foreign teachers are the embroidered flowers on the beautiful brocade.' Synonymous terms, such as 'domestic teacher', were also included. Then, the data were further analysed to identify positionings signalled via metaphors and images. As this process only yielded a handful of positionings, I re-analysed the parsed data for more explicit references to foreign and Chinese teachers – such as 'foreign teachers are not necessarily always the best.'

Once parsed, these segments were then inductively analysed. This process resulted in the identification of an over-arching storyline – what I refer to as 'teacher as adornment' – which was comprised of two metaphorical positionings – 'Our foreign teachers are the embroidered flowers on the beautiful brocade' and 'front-gate.'

Further analysis identified more explicit sub-positionings: 'foreign teacher as oral English expert' and 'foreign teacher as marketing tool.' This process also identified a number of self-positionings – such as 'bilingual is best' or 'foreign teacher as prop' which were then folded into the sections exploring the other positionings of foreign teacher as oral English expert and foreign teacher as marketing tool. The positionings presented in this paper were chosen for their frequency (mentioned the most by the participants) and their salience to previous studies, which have highlighted the shrinking role of the foreign teacher in internationalised schools.

Finally, discourse analysis was utilised to tease out the deeper meanings of the other and self-positionings. Discourse analysis is a method used to examine how language is used in texts and contexts to construct meaning, identities, and social realities and is frequently employed by researchers utilising positioning theory (Green et al., 2020). Discourse analysis in this study was informed by Cap (2020) who underscores language and representation, focusing on the language choices made by the participants. Accordingly, the chunked data was re-analysed to identify language choices made by the participants, which included metaphors, adverbial disjuncts, and pronouns. This approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how individuals navigate and construct their social identities and relationships through linguistic choices. Moreover, it enabled the identification of cultural and temporal dynamics (e.g., the role of the teacher over time) present in the interview excerpts, providing a richer, more layered interpretation of the data.

Insights

Foreign teacher as adornment

The foreign teacher as adornment does not refer to a specific positioning as such, but rather captures an over-arching *storyline* which informs the construction of subsequent positionings (e.g., oral English expert and marketing tool). This storyline was conveyed in two interconnected metaphors – ‘embroidered flowers on the beautiful brocade’ and ‘front gate’:

Overall foreign teachers *will give us a feeling of embroidered flowers on the beautiful brocade*. We don't have too many or too few foreign teachers, because some of our students may not fully understand the courses taught by foreign teachers, but our Chinese teachers will help them. *Our foreign teachers are the embroidered flowers on the beautiful brocade* (Wu)

Embroidered flowers on the beautiful brocade (锦上添花/Jīnshàngtiānhuā) can be translated in English as ‘icing on the cake’. Icing on the cake generally refers to something or someone who is an attractive but inessential addition or enhancement or something extra that makes a good thing even better.

The second metaphor of ‘front gate’ conveys a similar meaning as the first metaphor:

To be honest, firstly, foreign teachers *are a front gate for international schools*, because it is absolutely impossible for an international school to have no foreign teachers (Tan)

Front gate’ (门面 Ménmiàn) corresponds to the notion of a façade. A façade is the exterior or the principal front of a building, that faces on to a street or open space. Additionally, façade in English, also takes on a slightly more insidious meaning as a false appearance that makes someone or something seem more pleasant or better than they really are. The phrase ‘to be honest’ is an example of an adverbial disjunct, which indicates a speaker’s attitude towards what they are about to say and is often used to preface a statement that they believe is candid and may cause mild offence. In this instance, Tan is sharing an uncomfortable truth, expressing what everyone knows, but rarely acknowledges openly.

Overall, the interconnected metaphors of ‘icing on the cake’ and ‘façade’ create a storyline that positions the foreign teacher as non-essential, but paradoxically indispensable within certain prescribed positionings. I next explore these prescribed positionings, starting with oral English expert and then marketing tool.

Foreign teacher as oral English expert (or only the truly good ones are needed)

In previous years (from about 1990 to 2010), Chinese international school actors (e.g., school leaders and teachers) played a supporting role in setting up and running international schools in Mainland China (Li, 2023). This period could be described as an unbalanced phase of cooperation, with foreign actors adopting a somewhat paternalistic attitude towards Chinese actors (Mansfield, 2022). In recent years (from about 2019), however, these roles have been reversed, with foreign teachers now playing a supporting role. This reversal was vividly illustrated by the Chinese participants discussing the kinds of subjects that foreign teachers are now best suited teaching within a regulated international school sector. Whereas previously,

foreign teachers might be expected to take a lead in teaching subjects such as maths, chemistry and physics, these subjects are now increasingly being taught by Chinese teachers:

Slowly, we also find that foreign teachers are not necessarily the best, only the truly good ones are needed to teach students to achieve our teaching goals. Spoken English is certainly a necessary ability, but when it comes to subjects like physics, mathematics, and chemistry, do we really need to hire foreign teachers to teach? (Tang)

Tang's rhetorical question suggests that foreign teachers are no longer needed to teach so-called hard/content-based subjects, such as maths and chemistry, as their Chinese counterparts are more than capable of doing so. Despite this, the Chinese participants still felt that the foreign teachers had an important role to play in offering support for Chinese students' oral English:

In terms of professional skills, foreign teachers are currently playing a supportive role in international schools. They are more likely to undertake teaching tasks related to oral English. In terms of professional skills, they are still matched from the perspective of oral teaching (Gu)

The positioning of 'supportive role' resonates with the metaphor of 'icing on the cake' and positions the foreign teacher as an assistant of sorts, albeit providing something that the Chinese teachers cannot. Whilst Gu's positioning of the foreign teacher as playing a supportive role might be interpreted somewhat negatively as limiting the scope of what they can teach, their view is more likely informed by a pragmatic response, which prioritises student learning for Chinese students (whose English is not always of the standard required to access international curricula) whilst still accommodating the marketing realities of for-profit international schools (to be discussed later).

Despite oral English being the one subject where foreign teachers were considered to be superior to Chinese colleagues, some foreign teachers still felt that this advantage was fast being undermined by the growing professional competency of Chinese teachers. For example, Mallory observed that: 'You've got that many Chinese people who can speak English perfectly, perfectly good enough to teach the Chinese National Curriculum anyway. If that's going to happen, there must be hundreds of thousands or hundreds of millions of people who could teach that just as well as I can.' This was echoed by Lisa, who felt that 'If these internationalised schools are doing a good job, they will eventually make it so you don't need to import foreign teachers anymore.'

The perceived redundancy of foreign teachers might be attributed to recent reforms to China's private school sector from grades 1 to 9 (years where the IB PYP or MYP might be taught) which prohibit the teaching of international curricula and mandate the teaching of the Chinese National Curriculum (Liu, 2023). The redundancy of foreign teachers might also be attributed to the growing professional competency of Chinese teachers in internationalised schools, many of whom have previously studied and/or worked in English-speaking countries, such as the UK or US (Mansfield, 2022). Not only do these teachers return with advanced qualifications and high levels of English proficiency, they are also able to utilise their bilingual skills to mediate Chinese students' access to international curricula in English.

Foreign teacher as native-speaker (or not inclined to choose those with heavy accents)

Being fluent or possessing native-like speaker ability was not enough to be considered a professional oral English teacher. Foreign teachers also had to embody the international in appearance and accent:

We are not inclined to choose foreign teachers from India, Japan, or Asian countries, including those with heavy accents. Why? Because this will cause parents to question in multiple ways (Tan)

Whilst Tan's statement might be interpreted as discriminatory, he acknowledged that he had had no issue with foreign teachers from non-Anglophone backgrounds. Rather, the market-oriented nature of the for-profit internationalised school sector necessitates a pragmatic approach in order to appeal to Chinese parents (the paying customer), who bring with them their own imaginaries of the international. In this instance, this imaginary conflates international with western whiteness, one aspect of which is having the 'right' accent. This phenomenon has been acknowledged in previous studies on foreign migrants in China, where the Chinese construction of foreigners has been associated with whiteness due to China's ever-changing imagination about the West (Liu & Croucher, 2022). The conflation of whiteness, foreignness, Westernness and native-speaker ability has further solidified since the late 20th century, when the majority of foreigners in China were white-skinned Westerners (Farrer, 2014).

Bilingual is best

The reason why Chinese teachers positioned themselves as superior content experts was attributed to the uneven language abilities of the Chinese students, as illustrated by Lai:

Bilingual teaching by domestic teachers may be more helpful for children with relatively moderate or lower-middle-level foundation. Because domestic teachers can help children better understand and teach them some learning methods, summarise some methods, and children are more likely to accept them (Lai)

This self-position might be described as 'bilingual is best' and was held by many of the Chinese participants. However, many of the foreign participants felt constrained by this positioning, as illustrated by Steve, who acknowledged that 'I have to work within those boundaries [...] to put on a show, to teach English' but also rejected this other-positioning:

As an individual, I don't necessarily take it the way others do. I've got friends who just go 'I don't need to teach anything then.' I actually do try and teach. For the most part, it's accepted and welcomed (Steve)

Foreign teacher as marketing tool (or you are an artefact of legitimacy)

If the foreign teacher no longer plays a significant pedagogical role in the internationalised school, they are still very much needed to maintain a global imaginary (Meyer, 2021) or 'a beautiful façade' (Golis, 2024a, 8). One consequence of Chinese teachers assuming a dominant role is how internationalised school should be marketed to Chinese parents, whose global imaginary conflates international with western whiteness. Traditional international schools rarely struggle to be accepted as international as they sell themselves as being international according to a global imaginary that emphasises diversity and inclusion. In contrast, internationalised schools may struggle to legitimate themselves, as they do not embody obvious markers of the international (e.g., diversity and foreign teachers) that are found in traditional

international schools (Bunnell, Fertig & James, 2016). Consequently, foreign teachers' value to internationalised schools becomes less about what they bring to the school in terms of their professional knowledge and competency (aside from English language competency) and more about marketing and bolstering international legitimacy (Golis, 2024a).

Within the positioning of a marketing tool, the Chinese teachers considered the foreign teachers to be indispensable. For example, Tan felt that 'If a normal international school does not have foreign teachers, it cannot actually be called an international school.' Fan and Yang also underscored the foreign teachers' indispensable role in helping to sell the school:

Although our Chinese teachers' teaching ability is also OK, if there are no foreign teachers at all, it may have a certain impact on our students' enrollment. We definitely need to have some publicity (Fan)

It is also helpful for the publicity of the school. After all, we are an international school. If you have no foreign teachers in an international school, it is definitely not particularly competitive or persuasive (Yang)

The foreign teacher might be said to be the key ingredient that adds the elusive 'international' element to a school, which otherwise would be just 'normal' and therefore unappealing to prospective parents. At the same time, the positioning of the foreign teacher as a marketing tool strips them of agency and values them for their performance of arbitrary attributes (such as skin colour) rather than professional competence.

It has to be noted that not all of the local teachers considered foreign teachers' main contribution to the school to be symbolic in nature. Others, such as Jing felt that there were not enough foreign teachers and this might weaken the school's claim to be a legitimate international school:

I think it would be better to increase the proportion of foreign teachers. Because the international department still needs some teachers with international thinking and this school needs multicultural integration, otherwise it cannot be called international (Jing)

Significantly, the foreign teacher here is not valued for their embodiment of the international in terms of their physical characteristics, but for the way they think, which is seen as more international in orientation. Despite some local teachers, like Jing, emphasising the more substantive role that foreign teachers could play in the school, the foreign teachers considered themselves to be 'redundant other than for marketing, as a marketing tool' (Mallory). Similarly, Brandon, likened the foreign teacher to a prop:

We are props basically, there for the purpose of the marketing material, for the purposes of saying, 'look at all these white faces that are gonna be in front of your kids all day.' We're there to serve a purpose, to attract a specific constituency, but not much more than that (Brandon)

A prop is a movable or portable object actors use on stage or screen during a performance. Brandon seems to be suggesting that the foreign teachers are positioned as to be moved by others for the purposes of appealing to Chinese parents, whose imaginary of the international (e.g., 'white faces'), needs to be pandered to in order to attract a specific clientele.

The positioning of the foreign teacher as a prop for marketing material was echoed by another participant, Steve, who, when asked to reflect on the positioning of the foreign teacher as a foreign language expert offered the related metaphor of the artefact:

At this point, the foreign teacher at a Chinese internationalised school is there, nothing more. I would say not even to be a language expert. They are nothing more than an artefact. You are an artefact of legitimacy just by being a foreigner (Steve)

The phase, ‘at this point’ adds a historical dimension to the positioning of marketing tool, suggesting that previously teachers had a more substantial role to play. This is indeed supported by historical analyses of the international school sector (e.g., Li, 2023; Poole & Bunnell, 2024), which indicate that from about 1990 to 2010 foreign teachers played a leading role, but since 2019 this relationship has been reversed, with foreign actors now playing a supporting role (Mansfield, 2022). The image of the artefact positions the foreign teacher as a curiosity, akin to an exhibit on display in a museum for prospective parents. Like the image of the prop, the teacher as artefact is a tool used by others for a limited purpose, but its value is largely arbitrary. If the Chinese teachers’ role is constructed by metaphors of presence, substance and weight (e.g., they are the ‘cake’ and teach content-based subjects, and form a majority), then the foreign teachers’ role is constructed in terms of metaphors of absence, passivity or lightness (e.g., ‘just being there’, an artefact or oral English teachers).

Discussion

How insights relate to previous studies on internationalised schools

The study indicates a growing professional competency among Chinese teachers, many of whom possess advanced qualifications and international experience. This finding reflects previous studies and commentaries (Clark, 2024; Kostogriz, Adams & Bonar, 2022; Mansfield, 2022; Poole & Bunnell, 2024), which identify a repositioning where Chinese teachers are increasingly seen as capable of delivering both content-based and English language education (with perhaps oral English as an exception), thereby challenging the traditional dominance of foreign teachers in these areas. The positioning of ‘bilingual is best’ underscores the perceived advantage of Chinese teachers in bridging language barriers and enhancing Chinese student comprehension.

This study also finds that the symbolic value of foreign teachers remains potent, particularly in the marketing and legitimisation of internationalised schools, which need to compete in a shrinking, regulated, for-profit market-place. The positioning of foreign teachers as a ‘marketing tool’ underscores their role in constructing a global imaginary that appeals to Chinese parents. Within this imaginary, the foreign teachers’ value is not necessarily based on what they do, but in their passivity and embodiment of the international, particularly their performance of western whiteness. The foreign teacher could be described as a ‘privileged yet marginalised Other’ (Liu & Croucher, 2022). They are privileged by their white skin, which is inscribed with symbolic value. The foreign teachers’ value to the school is inextricably, arbitrarily and even precariously tied to their ethnicity – white foreigners – which can be harnessed as a marketing tool. Yet, they are also a marginalised Other, as what a foreign teacher can and cannot be is shaped and constrained by the ‘adornment’ storyline, which itself is comprised of the other-positionings of ‘foreign teacher as oral English expert’ and ‘foreign teacher as marketing tool.’

The market-driven imperative creates a contradictory situation whereby foreign teachers are simultaneously positioned as professionally redundant yet symbolically essential for internationalised schools' branding and enrollment strategies. This finding has also been highlighted by previous studies (Golis, 2024a; Kostogriz, Adams & Bonar, 2022; Soong & Stahl, 2023), although how foreign teachers felt about such a positioning had yet to be explored, something which this study addresses. Whilst the foreign teachers in this study accepted their role as commercial assets (Golis, 2024b, 2), they nevertheless felt dehumanised and objectified, as indicated in the metaphors of the 'prop' and the 'artefact.'

This finding also echoes findings from a recent study by Golis (2024a), which explored foreign teachers' experiences of marketisation in internationalised schools in China and also identified similar imagery, such as 'façade.' In the study, the foreign teachers' expectations of employment (i.e., being valued for their professional knowledge) were 'inflated by the institutions' "beautiful façade", involving a carefully crafted image of professionalism, credibility, and elitism' (Golis, 2024a, 1), which resulted in high workloads and the diminished role of expatriate teachers, with some teachers feeling duped or deceived. This paper extends Golis' (2024a) work by suggesting that teachers are not necessarily being duped by internationalised school leaders who are looking to maximise profits. Rather, behind the beautiful façade of the internationalised school, we find a complex space where school leaders and teachers are forced to adopt a pragmatic response to competing top-down and bottom-up forces.

Top-down forces include policies, such as the 2021 Reform and the Zero-Covid response, whilst bottom-up forces include the demands of parents and competition from other schools. These forces contribute to the construction of the discourse of what it means to be a foreign teacher in internationalised schools. As regulated, private entities, internationalised schools need to legitimate themselves to different stakeholders in often incompatible ways. Schools need to demonstrate conformity to the 2021 Reform by foregrounding national aspects, such as the national curriculum, whilst backgrounding international aspects, such as international curricula and foreign teachers (Wu & Koh, 2023). These reforms clash with the expectations of Chinese parents, whose perceptions of an international school are predicated upon an imaginary of the international that equates international with white and western.

Whilst this study offered some evidence for foreign teachers still enjoying a substantive role in terms of integrating multicultural perspectives, the majority of participants viewed the foreign teachers' role in largely symbolic terms. This contrasts with Cutri, Bunnell and Poole's (2024) study of foreign leaders' experiences in internationalised schools, which presents a balanced view of foreign teachers' symbolic and practical roles, suggesting that foreign teachers' roles can still be interpreted more positively as not just circumscribed, but reimaged in terms of possibilities within constraints. The reason for this difference might be attributed to the absence of foreign leadership voices in this study, which might have offered a more nuanced or balanced perspective on the discursive repositioning of the foreign teacher.

How insights relate to studies from other countries

Whilst this paper indicates that local teachers have become more dominant in internationalised schools in China, this is not necessarily the case for foreign teachers globally, where they remain a significant body within the international school workforce (Bright & Heyting, 2024). Significantly, the international scholarship on foreign international school teachers from other

countries, such as Vietnam (Bright, 2022) and Switzerland (Rey, 2024) presents a more positive picture of teachers' roles. Whilst there is evidence of precarity (Rey et al., 2020) and acculturation issues (Savva, 2017), the scholarship does not include situations like the one described in this paper, where foreign teachers are perceived as playing a supplementary and largely symbolic role. The reason for this difference might be because teachers work in countries which are less regulated which allows for greater continuity with their previous schooling and working experiences, allowing them to become reskilled and authentic teachers (Walker & Bunnell, 2024). This difference suggests that the type of international school, as well as a country's specific regulatory policies, play a significant role in shaping the scope of teachers' roles.

Conclusion

This paper offered a contribution to the literature on foreign teachers in international schools by examining both Chinese and foreign teacher perspectives in China's internationalised schools. It extends the literature on foreign teachers' experiences by exploring the issue of positioning from a dual perspective from both Chinese and foreign teachers. Whilst previous studies have highlighted the diminishing role and status of foreign teachers in China, often based on foreign teachers' accounts alone, this research incorporates the viewpoints of Chinese teachers to offer a more nuanced understanding. Theoretically, this paper extends positioning theory to dynamic, politically influenced environments, thereby expanding our understanding of China's changing international school sector whilst foregrounding the interplay between market forces, cultural expectations, and educational policies.

Implications for foreign teachers

The findings of this study raise implications for both foreign teachers and school leaders working in internationalised schools in China. Foreign teachers need to go into internationalised school teaching with their eyes firmly open in order to manage expectations and have a clear idea of their role. Teachers new to China, or other countries such as Indonesia or Saudi Arabia, that emphasise national aspects, may believe they are being offered a job in a 'traditional international school' because it markets itself as such, yet in reality, it may be internationalised in nature. Prospective foreign teachers should be aware of this potential disjuncture, and utilise job interviews and school visits to get an idea of the school's identity and whether it is likely to be a good fit. At the same time, teachers seeking to work in countries where the international school sector is highly regulated, need to understand, and perhaps even accept, that their roles may be somewhat different from previous postings in countries with little or no government intervention. This awareness may help them navigate their professional environment more effectively and identify areas where they can still contribute meaningfully beyond oral English instruction or marketing tools.

Implications for school leaders

School leaders also need to be aware that many prospective foreign teachers will be experienced and bring with them established identities of what it means to be an international school teacher. If there is too much dissonance between foreign teachers' self-positions and other-positionings, they may become disillusioned and leave the school. This was certainly the case for some of the foreign participants in this study, such as Evan, Steve and Lisa, all of

whom left International Hope to work in traditional international schools as they felt they would have more autonomy and scope to exercise agency and professional judgment.

Although the role of foreign teachers may be limited, it is incumbent upon school leaders to find meaningful ways to draw on foreign teachers' expertise and experiences so that they feel valued as educators and not just as marketing tools or oral English experts. Hiring foreign leadership and incorporating their perspectives and practices would be invaluable in this regard, as suggested by Cutri, Bunnell and Poole (2024), as they are in a position to see the big picture and to advocate on behalf of the foreign teacher in order to negotiate a more substantial role.

Implications for international audience

The findings also have implications for an international audience. Firstly, the increasing emphasis on local teachers' competencies and the changing roles of foreign educators underscores the importance of adaptability and cultural competency in the teaching profession worldwide. Moreover, the symbolic and market-driven roles attributed to foreign teachers in China resonate with wider neoliberal forces that have reshaped the education landscape, highlighting the growing trend of education being intertwined with economic and branding imperatives. Teachers globally, regardless of context or type of school, increasingly find themselves balancing educational goals with institutional marketing strategies, necessitating a more strategic and multifaceted approach to their professional roles. Teachers must, therefore, be equipped to navigate these dual demands, ensuring that their pedagogical integrity is maintained whilst also contributing to broader institutional objectives in a competitive market place.

Future research

Future research could expand the comparative analysis offered in this paper to include internationalised schools in other regions of China and countries. This would help to understand how regional policies, cultural contexts, and socio-economic factors influence the positioning of foreign and local teachers. Conducting longitudinal studies to track changes in the roles and perceptions of foreign and local teachers over time would also provide a dynamic view of how educational reforms and global events (e.g., post-COVID-19 recovery) have impacted internationalised school. Finally, exploring the perspectives of school leaders, including principals and administrators, on the role and integration of foreign teachers could offer valuable insights into strategic decision-making processes.

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