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Imagined professional identity: A narrative inquiry into a Chinese teacher's perezhivaniya in life

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Perezhivanie is a holistic unit of analysis of professional identity.
- Teacher identity contains the intellectual-rational and social-political facets.
- Teacher image reflects teacher's construction of professional identity.
- Imagined professional identity has a sense of quixotism in a transforming society.

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ABSTRACT

This narrative inquiry revolves around the changing professional identities of Ping, an experienced Chinese teacher. The concept "perezhivanie" is employed as a holistic unit of analysis for probing the interconnectedness between the intellectual-rational and the social-political facets of professional identity. Using narrative inquiry both as a method and a form, three images reveal Ping's construction of her teacher identities. The analysis foreshadows the impact of Ping's dramatic series of perezhivaniya on becoming and being a teacher. The concept of an "imagined professional identity" emerges from Ping's accounts, with significant implications for teacher education and reform-related policies in a transforming society.

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1. Introduction

"Dust of the times, falling on one's head, is a mountain."

(Ping's notebook, 2017)

The handwritten maxim on the title page of Ping's (萍) notebook attracted my attention during a teacher professional development programme in 2017 at a Chinese primary school where she was employed. Ping told me that the sentence was a quote from Yan Mo, the first Chinese author to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, and that she related to this sentence because it reflected her destiny and that of her generation. These metaphorical words in Ping's notebook signalled me to an awareness of a salient tension between a teacher's personal experience and the contexts in which she lives.

I have known Ping for seven years, thanks to a continuous collaboration with the same primary school since 2013. When I noticed Ping's handwritten maxim, I recalled her life stories—especially those about her experiences of becoming a teacher—that she once shared with me in casual conversation. As her teacher identity emerged as a topic in my mind, I began an inquiry of "world-travelling" in "a loving way of being and living" (Lugones, 1987, p. 3) so that I could understand what Ping's multiple life worlds mean to her.

It is well established in research and academia that the teaching profession requires inner commitment and a strong identity to face the arduous dilemmas often present at work (Craig, 2010; Day, 2017). As teachers' professional identity can be what Akkerman and Meijer (2011) termed as "both unitary and multiple, both continuous and discontinuous, and both individual and social" (p. 309), it is necessary to inquire into the complicated mechanisms of teachers' identity formation. The present exploration of teachers' professional identity issues was driven by my own experience of studying and researching. The traditional positivist approach, focusing on teachers' acquisition of occupational assets, has proven

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a narrow perspective in the context of researching and supporting teachers' authentic professional development. I have focused instead on teachers' personal perspectives and how they make sense of their own roles and teaching practices. In recent successive pieces of work, I (Chen, Wei, & Jiang, 2017, Wei, 2019) have summarised preliminary findings on teachers' professional identity, especially in the Chinese indigenous socio-cultural context. My previous studies show that Chinese teachers subconsciously associate their professional identity to the macro social-political context (Wei, 2019). Meanwhile, Chinese teachers construct their identity in the teaching profession by negotiating with the demands of their work, which also reveals their professional agency (Chen et al., 2017). The present study is an ongoing exploration of Chinese teachers' professional identity focusing on the interactive understanding between Ping and her perezhivaniya across time and space. Considering the tension between teachers' personal experience and the social political contexts in which they work, I conceptualised a novel term "imagined professional identity" to depict a category and characteristics of the formation process of teacher professional identity, especially in our rapidly transforming societal circumstances.

In this paper, I begin by presenting a literature review and the theoretical concept of "perezhivanie" (ПереЖивание in Russian; plural, "perezhivaniya"; Vygotsky, 1994) which helps us to understand the experience of a Chinese teacher, Ping. By using narrative inquiry as both the method and form of this research study (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), three images of the teaching profession, distributed across Ping's three-dimensional life spaces (Xu & Connelly, 2009, p. 223), unfurl in a nested temporal-spatial-social narrative structure. In the midst of Ping's accounts, I further discuss Ping's case by viewing her personal experiences and professional identity as a holistic unity, which shows how a significant ideal in life, i.e., becoming a teacher, manifests as a dramatic series of connected perezhivaniya along with her agentive thinking and actions.

Guided by the methodology of narrative inquiry and the concept of perezhivanie, this paper focuses on two research questions:

(1) What professional identities were uncovered by teacher images in the midst of Ping's narrative accounts?
(2) How were Ping's professional identities as teacher formed in her perezhivaniya in three-dimensional life spaces?

2. Literature review

2.1. Teacher professional identity

Recent research on teacher education has featured numerous discussions of teacher professional identity and offered a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of "how to be", "how to act", and "how to understand" their work (Sachs, 2005, p. 15). As noted by previous scholars (e.g., Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006; Han, 2017; McGregor, Hooker, Wise, & Devlin, 2010), teacher identity is multi-faceted, dynamic, and generated from teachers' engagement in their professional environment and socio-cultural contexts. As a result of the complex negotiation and heterogeneous interaction between teachers' personal experiences and various factors within and outside the school (Clandinin, Downey, & Huber, 2009; Flores & Day, 2006; Wilson & Deaney, 2010), teachers' professional identities are not only intellectual and rational (e.g., concerning critical reflection and knowledge construction) but also social and political (e.g., involving historicity and policy changes) in nature (Kelchtermans, 1996; Zembylas, 2004). While they have been studied separately, consideration of the two facets of teacher professional identity as a holistic unity has largely escaped from the attention of researchers (e.g., Ng & Renshaw, 2019). In their classical review study, Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) recommended that research perspectives of teachers' professional identity should go beyond cognitivist approaches, such as developmental psychological identity theory (Erikson, 1968) and social identity theory (Gee, 2001). In a nutshell, the dichotomy between the sociological and psychological approaches limits the complexity of the concept of identity and overlooks that identities are developed amidst "an interlocking, co-developing, and reciprocal dynamic between the person and society" (Ó Gallchóir, O'Flaherty, & Hinchion, 2018, p. 139).The current study, thus, addresses the limitations of previous research and the recommendations above by using Lev Vygotsky's (1994) concept of perezhivanie to re-tell and fictionalise the 45-year life history of Ping, a Chinese primary school teacher. The concept of perezhivanie and how it incorporates identity as multi-faceted, fluid, and integrated in the series of Ping's life experiences is introduced in the next section.

2.2. Teacher image

Teachers' professional identity is neither an absolutely abstract nor an objective understanding of the self; rather, it originates and grows out of socio-cultural settings. A socio-cultural perspective implies a dialectical and holistic relation between individuals and societies (Ng & Renshaw, 2019). Within this understanding, "image", as a visual representation of human experience (Weber & Mitchell, 1995), is a pivotal tool to examine teachers' professional identity. According to Weber and Mitchell (1995), "images are constructed and interpreted in attempts to make sense of human experience and to communicate that sense to others" (p. 21). Images not only commence from our previous experience but also guide our present actions and even foreshadow our future (George, Mohammed, & Quamina-Aiyejina, 2003).

Clandinin (1986) and Connelly and Clandinin (1988) developed the concept of "image" to reflect teachers' understandings of their often subconsciously held assumptions about teaching, students, and curricula. Teacher images provide an "entry point into rethinking how past experience could guide teacher[s]" and a window for glancing into "the possible bases for [teachers'] intuitive decisions" (Clandinin, 1986, p. 7). In the field of teacher education research, the images of the "teacher-as-curriculum-implementer" or the "teacher-as-curriculum-maker" (Craig, 2012, p. 91), the teacher-as-construct-of-public-interests or the teacher-as-productive-impulse (Grunder, 2016), and the "teacher-as-agent-of-harmonious-society" or the "teacher-as-teacher-maker" (Craig, Zou, & Poimbeauf, 2015, p. 142) have been frequently discussed.

In the construction of images, reflection on the expressed image assist teachers in analysing their innermost beliefs regarding education. In such cases, the concept of the teacher-as-image-maker (Xu & Stevens, 2005) makes it possible to examine the professional identity that underpins and influences their actions. Moreover, image construction helps the teacher consider their self-as-professional and understand that self-as-teacher includes giving attention to others and otherness within the teaching context (Haigh, Kane, & Sandretto, 2012). Hence, the idea that teachers' metaphorical images generate a blueprint for teacher identity within a more extensive narrative is widely endorsed (Palmér, 2016).

Thus, in this paper, I use "teacher image" as external representation of the professional identity of the teacher. Ping's pictorial and metaphoric descriptions of her understandings of the teaching

profession are based on her personal experience, in particular, critical situations in her life. My query on teacher professional identity, based on Ping's sense-making and struggles with certain critical events, brings me to the unfurling of the theoretical concept of "perezhivanie".

3. Perezhivanie

Perezhivanie is a key concept in Vygotsky's educational and psychological theory; however, it receives relatively little attention from teacher education researchers. In his words,

> Perezhivanie is a unit where, on the one hand, the environment is represented, i.e., that which is being experienced; and on the other hand, is how I, myself, am experiencing this, i.e., all the personal characteristics and all the environmental characteristics are represented in a perezhivanie. (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 341)

Furthermore, Vygotsky (1994) stated that "we are always dealing with an indivisible unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics, which emphasised the complex and integral nature of perezhivanie" (p. 342).

Several decades after Vygotsky's original conceptualisation, Fedor Vasilyuk translated the Russian word "perezhivanie" into English as "experiencing", then further interpreted the concept as "experiencing-with-struggling" (1984/1988, p. 18). In relation to "what is being experienced" (Vasilyuk, 1984/1988, p. 28), it should be noted that perezhivanie is not just any experience but rather specific experiences that create personal meaning-making. These specific kinds of experiences are likely challenging or difficult in nature and involve critical situations that have to be "lived through" and then "worked over" (Clarà, 2016) in personal and professional life. Essentially, perezhivanie as experiencing-with-struggling reveals the work that a person initiates in order to maintain equilibrium in life when faced with a seemingly impossible situation (Vasilyuk, 1984/1988, pp. 18–19).

In introducing critical situations of impossibility (Vasilyuk, 1984/1988, p. 32) into personal development, perezhivanie gives primacy to the interrelatedness of the internal and external factors as a holistic unit of analysis in researching the teachers' professional identity formation. Applying the concept of perezhivanie to research on teacher professional identity incorporates identity as multi-faceted, fluid, and integrated in series of teachers' experiences. The concept of perezhivanie features teachers' identity in the throes of educational reform and societal transformation (Craig, 2010); thus, it is important to explore how exposure to critical situations affords teachers' important experiences, how such situations can elicit teacher agency in overcoming social constraints, and how teachers project their meaning-making of the perezhivaniya onto their future life, which may be applied and relived throughout their professional life. Therefore, it is warranted to examine perezhivaniya in peculiar temporal, spatial, and social contexts, and, more significantly, to probe how a specific perezhivanie interacts with those experienced in the past and with ideals projecting into the future.

This paper inquiries into the Chinese teacher Ping's perezhivaniya, focusing on her struggling in life experience, as teacher images mingle Ping's multiple perezhivaniya across temporality, spatiality, and sociality (Xu & Connelly, 2009). To address this query, narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) is employed both as a method and a form to explore Ping's "stories to live by" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p. 4) and the transforming process of her professional identity formation caused by a series of perezhivanie.

4. Methodology

4.1. Narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry was used as a method and form of both identifying and representing Ping's experiences. The epistemology of narrative inquiry is grounded in Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism and his theory of experience and education (Dewey, 1938), which are deeply intertwined in Ping's stories and storytelling practices. Dewey understood the origin of experience as a resolution of unsettled problems or crises (Dewey, 1938, p. 229), similar to the interpretation of perezhivanie as experiencing-as-struggling (Vasilyuk, 1984/1988). In Connelly and Clandinin's words (1999), teacher professional identity can be understood in terms of "stories to live by" (p. 4), shedding light on the complex and dynamic process of teachers' identity formation in which their experience play a pivotal role, whether positive or negative. Thus, making sense of and working through perezhivaniya is a process of struggling in life experience. Human development in situational interaction in the midst of experiencing, the Vygotskian conceptual instrument of "perezhivanie", and the methodological approach of "narrative inquiry" under Deweyan school all compose internal resonance.

The composition of Ping's narratives is based on a longitudinal relational interaction that began when I met her in 2013 and extended through the writing of this paper in 2020. I used multiple narrative accounts that were collected at different points in time. Over the course of seven years, discontinuous communication, participatory observations, interviews, and Ping's reflective journals were collected as raw data. By reliving and retelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), Ping's accounts present a fluid narrative on a past-present-future continuum in terms of temporality, represent human agents' interactions concerning sociality, and unfurl in a series of authentic contexts. The three-dimensional framework, i.e., temporality-sociality-place and the simultaneous narrative resonance (Conle, 1996), drives this paper as a narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2005).

By analysing the data, I used four of narrative inquiry's interpretive strategies: broadening, burrowing, storying and restorying (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), and fictionalisation (Clandinin et al., 2006).

- Broadening settles the study into an authentic milieu that includes macro-meso-micro contexts. In this paper, sociocultural and historical-political changes account for shaping the contexts of Chinese society since 1970s. The brief introductions to the life backgrounds of Ping and myself constituted endeavours of broadening. Meanwhile, analysis of historical educational reform at the school/district and national/international levels broadened Ping's life experiences.
- Burrowing concerns a closer look at a series of Ping's lived experiences. Interviews with Ping and her colleagues, participatory observation of Ping's teaching, and Ping's reflective journals served as resources to peruse Ping's personal life span. It involves Ping's probing into certain aspects of her life and her constructed images and interpretations of the teaching profession. My mutually interpretive understanding of Ping's perezhivaniya also contributed to this burrowing process.
- Storying and restorying reorganise the narratives in order to rationalise the agent's thinking and actions. In this step, how Ping made meaning of critical situations/perezhivaniya was revisited. Ping's experiences over time and across spaces were reviewed and compared with previously published

works (Gao, 2008; He, 2002; Xu, 2013), and such revisiting unfolded Ping's life process towards becoming a teacher. In addition, Ping's responses to my early draft manuscript helped me to enrich our (re-)storying journey.

- Fictionalisation, the final interpretive strategy, embeds Ping's professional identities into the stories of her family members, her schools, her colleagues, and her students. Using this strategy, I was able to create a tapestry of Ping's perezhivaniya through interaction within the complex social networks across time and space. Furthermore, I was able to mingle all the actors' voices to protect their identities (Craig, 2020) and "to shift events in ways that do not alter their meaning but subtly disguise identities and situations in an institutional context where personal and professional lives continue to unravel" (Craig, 2010, p. 65).

Through criss-crossed broadening, burrowing, storying and restorying, and fictionalisation, this inquiry unravelled the nested narrative accounts behind Ping's life history from a dialectic perspective, mediating secret stories, sacred stories, and cover stories (Crites, 1979). Secret stories draw on teachers' personal images and experiences in order to make sense of teaching and learning. Sacred stories are canonical and embedded in institutional prescriptions and shape individual teacher's horizons of knowing. Cover stories, meanwhile, are constructed when incommensurable gaps between individually secret stories and socially sacred narratives emerge (Olson & Craig, 2005). The tension and conflicts among the three types of stories were given major attention to discern how Ping's teacher identity is "imagined" in a rapid transforming society.

4.2. Trustworthiness of inquiry

The inquiry work with Ping unfurls within a series of narratives, which are "concrete examples elaborated so that members of a relevant research community can judge for themselves their 'trustworthiness' and the validity of observations, interpretations, etc." (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002, p. 20). In terms of trustworthiness, narrative inquiry as a methodology aims to convey "truthlikeness" (Bruner, 1986) instead of absolute objectivism. In so doing, it orients towards resonance among "multiple participants' storied experiences and/or reappear in an individual's accounts over time" (Craig, 2013a, p. 30). Moreover, concerning narrative inquiry as a collaborative endeavour and co-composition process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I shared my understandings of Ping's narrative accounts with her at every stage in the sustained periods of research, the resonance between Ping's narratives and my interpretive understanding thus achieving the narrative truths (Spence, 1986).

In the present study, the perezhivaniya of Ping's life history is presented alongside the trajectory of societal and educational reform. The historical events and encounters thicken Ping's narrative accounts (Geertz, 1983), thereafter allowing readers to judge the extent to which Ping's stories of her life as a teacher have a ring of plausibility and transferability to them. Moreover, the narrative inquiry mediating "the canonical world of culture and the more idiosyncratic world of beliefs, desires, and hopes" (Bruner, 1990, p. 52) resonates and elicits sympathy from readers, especially teachers. Methodologically speaking, readers are also invited to co-compose Ping's narratives to inform their own lives and education and thereby arouse actionable truth in future endeavours (Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002).

4.3. Ethical considerations of inquiry

Narrative inquiry is "a deeply ethical project" and "an ethical work" in which "we cannot separate the ethical from the living of the inquiry" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 30). I laid down my authority to interpret Ping's stories but engaged myself into the co-composition process of telling and re-telling, living and re-living (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which informed me that the ethics of narrative inquiry are essentially relational and full of complexities. Although influenced by the indigenous culture of interpersonal relationships, there is no formal institutional ethical review procedure in China; however, I have taken the following detailed ethical considerations. First, all names of participants and schools in this study are pseudonyms. During the inquiry process, I maintained a friendly relationship with Ping and respected her wishes in the research. This collaborative relationship allowed us to re-tell Ping's narrative accounts and re-live in our own worlds. Last but not the least, our co-composition of the stories was approved by Ping to be published for academic purposes. These practices bestowed this narrative inquiry with not only epistemological significance but also ethical meanings to Ping, to me, and to our readers.

5. Ping's narratives over time

This section scrutinises three images of the teaching profession, as constructed by Ping during different periods of her life. The emergence of each image of the teaching profession was interconnected with several perezhivaniya, which Ping endowed with meanings and transformative enactments.

5.1. An almighty teacher in Ping's childhood memory

I met Ping for the first time on the morning of March 18, 2013, when I worked for a school-university collaborative project to implement lesson study at a primary school in Beijing. The vice principal and coordinator of the project, Ms Lee, recommended an experienced Chinese language teacher—Ping—as a participant. Consequently, I happened to observe Ping's class teaching for the first time. Her teaching appealed to me; she demonstrated clear logic, a calm tone, and was kindly caring towards her students. My first impression of Ping's teaching inspired my later inquiry into her personal life history of pursuing the teaching profession.

The temporal narrative dimension takes my inquiry from Ping's present-day class teaching back to when she was five, 40 years earlier. In re-storying Ping's childhood, she was born in the winter of 1974, in a remote county in Hebei Province, located in the middle-north part of China. Ping's parents were both farmers who made their living from corn and wheat. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) in China, schooling was in a state of disorder, and farmers, workers, and soldiers with little education were regarded as representatives of the proletariat. In traditional Chinese socio-cultural discourses, in particular those influenced by Confucianism, intellectuals are considered prestigious and have high social status. For instance, as Chinese pre-Qin philosopher Hsun Tzu said, "The possession of a teacher and ideals is a person's greatest treasure, and the lack of a teacher and ideals is his greatest calamity." (Dubs, 1970) Teachers in ancient China was regarded as sages. However, during the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards disparaged and attacked Chinese intellectuals, including teachers (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006). Until the national policy of Reform and Opening in 1977, scientific and cultural knowledge regained prestige in Chinese society (Dooley, 2001), and a new public discourse took shape, marked by the phrase "knowledge could change your destiny", which frequently appeared on posters in rural Chinese communities. When Ping reviewed her life from

the age of five onwards, she realised that only being educated could help her *"find a way out of the rural areas"* (Perezhivanie 1).

Fortunately, Ping's aunt was a teacher in the village at that time, and it was she who imprinted the original image of the teaching profession in her little heart. Ping storied:

> She [My aunt] was a music teacher. And, she was able to teach science. And that's not all. She could teach Chinese language and mathematics as well.
>
> She continued
>
> I respect and even worship her very much. It's so clear for me why I wanted to be a teacher [like her], which was always my ideal before I went to middle school. (Perezhivanie 2)

We discussed the memory of her aunt in an interview:

> Ping: I actually had four aunts in my early childhood.
>
> Ge: Oh …
>
> Ping: One of them [my eldest aunt] was a school teacher, who influenced me more than the others. When I was a little girl, not yet attending school, I remember that my relatives asked about my dream. I answered without any hesitation, "I want to be a teacher." The image of my eldest aunt was highly esteemed.
>
> Ge: Why?
>
> Ping: It is partly also related to the social atmosphere of re-respecting teachers and re-emphasising education at the end of the 1970s.
>
> Our dialogue continued
>
> Ge: At that time, general teachers, teaching all subjects, were common.
>
> Ping: Exactly!
>
> [A second's pause]
>
> Ping: You know, she was also an administrator in her school … She was president of the teacher union in the village school.
>
> Ge: Wow!
>
> Ping: When I graduated from middle school, I chose two special secondary schools. I didn't hesitate at all. My first choice was a normal school, and the second choice was a nurse school. I only gave myself two options …
>
> Ge: You think you made a good choice?
>
> Ping: Aha, yes. Thanks to my aunt, an almighty teacher! (Perezhivanie 3)

"An almighty teacher" was an image deeply imprinted in Ping's early childhood. Ping's eldest aunt is a person who was able to teach all subjects and her character preliminarily formed Ping's identity as a teacher. In fact, the image of the "almighty teacher" was socially and contextually accepted in China at that time, manifested in teachers' work, and implicated their professional identities.

Broadening the grand narrative of the late 1970s, the Chinese national policy of Reform and Opening cast a new light on educational enterprise and teacher education. However, restrained by the under-developing economy of the time, Chinese teacher education did not achieve at the university level. Due to urgent demands for teachers, general teachers were mostly educated through pre-service teacher training programmes. At the end of the 1970s, after the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, the centre of gravity of the Party's work shifted from class struggle to economic construction for socialist modernisation. Yet overall, school teachers were still recovering from the Cultural Revolution. According to historical records, by the end of 1979, it still worried primary and secondary school teachers that less than 20% of them had high-school certificates (He, 1998). The shortage of qualified teachers and the unbalanced teacher-student ratio resulted in general teachers like Ping's aunt being very common in China at that time.

As to Ping's lived experiences, her perezhivaniya of deciding to make her way out of the rural areas, observing and respecting her aunts, and deciding to enrol in secondary normal schools, were interconnected with the social environment from the late 1970s to the early 1980s in China. In interaction with her family, Ping also expressed her dream of becoming a teacher. In Ping's narratives, she not only regarded her aunt as a close family member, but also as a professional role model to emulate in the future. Thus, Ping's first teacher identity had strong connections with a valued person, her aunt. Her identity emerged by imagining what a teacher should be, and projected the same to her future life. Imagination, the way Ping constructed her identity, is like "looking at an apple seed and seeing a tree, […] playing scales on a piano, and envisioning a concert hall."(Wenger, 1998, p. 176) By fictionalising Ping's initial construction of teacher identity, the image of the almighty teacher emerged to reflect her experience and vividly holistic understanding of the teaching profession. It could be summarised as an approach to identity formation originating in daily life, in which a very specific person, a role model—Ping's eldest aunt—was imagined as an abstract image of the profession, alongside a certain group membership, i.e., to a social class of educated people.

5.2. A vulnerable teacher in Ping's life-work transition

Contrary to Ping's beautiful dream of becoming a teacher, her secondary normal school attendance brought her unexpected challenges. From the difficulties encountered during the period of schooling, to the shocks of reality in the early stage of her teacher employment, to the bottleneck-like difficulty she faced when attempting to advance her career development, each perezhivanie changed her initial image of a teacher.

The spatial narrative dimension brings my inquiry from Ping's personal life space to a public political space. At the beginning of the 1990s, China's Ministry of Education proposed a nationwide reform of normal schools through upgrades, mergers, and eliminations. In line with the Soviet model of teacher education, Chinese primary school teachers had been trained at secondary normal schools since 1952. The state initiatives to upgrade primary school teachers' academic qualifications from senior secondary to tertiary sub-degree level (Ye, Zhu, & Lo, 2019) reflected the rapid changes in teacher education in the 1980s and 1990s and influenced Ping's studying in normal school. The shift resulted in the following, in Ping's words,

> When I went to the secondary normal school, we were required to be "versatile". Every day, we learnt singing and dancing. There were all kinds of interesting activities, but studying the subject matter was underestimated … One day, I suddenly heard that the secondary normal school was going to be withdrawn, and then we had to take the college entrance examination if we wanted to continue our studies.

Ping sobbed as she shared her experience,

> Faced with the college entrance examination, I was so miserable because I was so bad at physics, chemistry, and all science. I thought I might not be able to pass the examination. I was so angry that I almost jumped into the river … One day I was standing by the water, and I felt an impulse to jump. In that moment, I felt that there was really a hand dragging me down there. (Perezhivanie 4)

I was touched by Ping's narration and her tragic experience and her attempt to burrow her shifted teacher identity. With the improvement of the degree system and the establishment of the new higher normal education system, the secondary normal school students were able to obtain professional competitiveness only if they passed the examination, called "upgrading from secondary schools to colleges". The college entrance examination tested Chinese, Mathematics, English, and Arts (Politics, History, and Geography) or Sciences (Physics, Chemistry, and Biology). However, the above subjects were not set up systematically in secondary normal schools. In order to continue her study, unfortunately, Ping had to draw up the lessons herself.

Broadening the historicity, a number of institutions were adjusted in accordance with the mandates of the state policy that secondary normal schools were to be merged with sub-degree normal colleges (Zhou, 2014, p. 514). According to the data in yearbooks, in the eight-year period between 1999 and 2007, the number of secondary normal schools in China decreased from 815 to 196, while normal universities and sub-degree normal colleges increased from 87 to 97 (Guan, 2009, p. 5). Shifting educational policies and regulations are potential threats to teachers' sense of the security of their profession (Gao, 2008). From then on, I began to understand why Ping appreciated Yan Mo's maxim, "*Dust of the times, falling on one's head, is a mountain*", which represents the challenge that the suddenly shifting policy presented for Ping's career.

It is gratifying that Ping was not knocked down by the education policy shifts and instead rose to the challenge. She told me that for the six months prior to the exam she studied daily, devoting all her time to the endeavour. Exerting agency in the context of the reform, thus, helped her regain her faith in becoming a teacher.

As I turn from my re-storying to Ping's storying, Ping told me that she married a businessman in 1999. Influenced by her husband, she began noticing various social professions other than teaching. Compared to her spouse, Ping told me that she "*earned a low salary but did much work*":

> In the first two years of teaching, I felt good. Later, I faced a major "bottleneck" … I began to doubt myself … For a while, I felt that teachers were very tired and busy every day … Compared with them [people in my husband's profession], our working conditions were not good.

Ping storied again,

> Take a particularly straightforward example. One day, a traditional Chinese medicine doctor came to my school to supply compulsory massage, which aims to relieve the fatigue of teachers. The ridiculous result was that almost no teachers visited the doctor [because] we had to correct students' homework and supervise the class. How could I [have time to] enjoy the massage? Some teachers visited a while and had to work overtime at night … I felt that my life was so vulnerable. (Perezhivanie 5)

Unravelling Ping's sense-making turned towards instances of dissonance between teachers' prior imagination of what it is to be a teacher and their lived experiences in real schools, and these sources of dissonance challenged Ping's ongoing construction of teacher identity (Ó Gallchóir et al., 2018). Burrowing when juxtaposed with the historical situation of the late 20th century—when Chinese teachers' salaries were relatively low—explicates her perspective. Ping's comparison between her and her husband's work revealed an imbalance in effort and gain. She described her life as vulnerable, a situation stemming from the inferior social and economic status of the teaching profession (Kelchtermans, 1996). The market-oriented reform in China popularised a notion of knowledge and study as worth less than business. As a result, many teachers and intellectuals gave up their professions in favour of business careers, which was metaphorically called "going to sea" in Chinese jargon.

The "business boom" of the 1990s tempted Ping, who suffered from the typical risk symptom of abandoning her teaching profession. However, thinking is not automatically transferred into actions. When Ping encountered the real point of deciding whether to stay or leave, she found that "*behind (her) complaint, there were difficulties in letting go*".

For example, Ping viewed her students as her "kids" in her "story to leave by" (Clandinin et al., 2009, p. 146),

> That year, I was a head teacher (Banzhuren), and I was going to have a baby, so I went home for maternity leave … When I got home, I felt very sad and cried for a long time. I was very reluctant to leave that class. A student without a head teacher is like a kid without a mother … I suddenly found out that what I was facing was [students'] lives … [I then recognised that] I was very suitable for this profession … and I love it … I can't give it up. (Perezhivanie 6)

Teacher identity is strongly influenced and modified by the unforeseen and disruptive and is transformed by external social pressures at both the micro and macro levels (Billot, 2010). The distress made it possible for Ping to develop her "stories to leave by" (Clandinin et al., 2009) in addition to her stories to live by. Since teacher identity is fluid and in-the-making, "living" and "leaving" narratives can simultaneously exist in teachers' personal practical knowing (Craig, 2013a). But why Ping did not transform her stories to live by into stories to leave by? Answering this query from the perspective of her perezhivaniya may contribute to evoking the global challenge of teacher attrition (Ingersoll, 2001).

Looking back at Ping at a younger age, her imagination of the teaching profession was as simple and pure as the idea of her family's origins (i.e., the social class of famers' during the Cultural Revolution). However, faced with societal and economic transformation, Ping was abandoned by the traditional education system of normal schools. The only way to pursue her dream was to stimulate her own agency to enrol in college. Later, during her marriage, the contradiction between individual benefits and the responsibility to educate her students made her identity of the teaching profession complex and ambiguous. "A vulnerable teacher" emerged as a new image for Ping in describing her professional identity.

According to Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wethrell (1987), when an individual belongs to multiple social groups, critical situations motivate choices that lead to new and emerging identities. The new identity is closely associated with the critical situation, which is, in turn, aligned with Vasilyuk's (1984/1988) framing of perezhivanie. The "bottleneck" that Ping faced was embedded in the tense relationship between social structure and agency (Archer, 2003). As a result, Ping reframed her imagined teacher identity

from “almighty” to “vulnerable”, while her emotional experience, an important dimension of perezhivanie, allowed her to rediscover her commitment to her “kids” and to the teaching work. We may say that the vulnerable image made the teaching profession more real and socially connected for Ping. Teachers are not estranged from the social context or isolated working in the classroom: their in-the-making identity is the result of negotiation, even compromising, with transforming society (Chen et al., 2017).

5.3. A flourishing teacher in Ping's professional learning

The year of 2009 marked Ping's 15th year working as a teacher. The integration of her self-evaluation, emotional experience, and action commitment contributed to her professional identity. With increasing engagement in various activities, Ping formed multiple teacher identities as an experienced teacher, a mentor, a teacher researcher, and a learner researcher. Teachers like Ping naturally gravitate towards teaching what Schwab called “their best-loved selves” (Schwab, 1954/1978, p. 124). When Ping enacted and exuded her “best-loved self” as part of her “story to live by”, she was more apt to learn from curricula, teaching, and research (Craig, 2013b) and grew like a tree, in Ping's words, "*grounding into the earth and elongating into the sky*".

Ping was one of the pioneers who implemented the teaching reform at the previously mentioned Chinese primary school, which was launched by the 2001 national curriculum reform in basic education. School-based curriculum was a completely new term to Ping; however, with the encouragement and trust of the then-director, 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, although sometimes the results would not meet her expectation. It was the gap between the idea and reality of teaching that facilitated Ping's reflection on her identity in the context of educational reform in China.

Generally speaking, reform has become the trend of the time and has reconstructed traditional teaching in the classroom. However, the high-stakes exam system has become the major vehicle to screen students for higher levels of learning and the main criteria for teachers' accountability. I probed Ping's teacher identity against a backdrop of accountability in the new curriculum reform. As an administration tool for external accountability, Ping acknowledged that the uniformed exam system is a harsh reality that all Chinese teachers must face. However, she recognised that teachers are agentive subjects of teaching. Ping opined in her journal that it is her responsibility to create “private plots” in her classroom where she and her students could enjoy learning instead of getting stressed over exams. She held the educational belief that, as a Chinese language teacher, she should introduce her students to the world by highlighting the significance of Chinese language in teaching. In Schwab's way of thinking, “only as the teacher uses the classroom as the occasion and the means to reflect upon education as a whole (ends as well as means), as the laboratory in which to translate reflections into actions and thus to test reflections, actions, and outcomes, against many criteria is he [sic] a good … teacher.” ((Schwab, 1959/1978), p. 182–183). In a nutshell, Ping's teaching and her “best-loved self” were part and parcel of her “stories to live by” and her identity-in-the-making.

Meanwhile, Ping began to try research-informed exploration. As a result, in 2009, Ping and her colleagues developed a school-based curriculum, “Sinology and Chinese Culture”. Ping used academic reading to explore approaches in developing a school-based curriculum and thus collected materials from Chinese philosophy, history, and literature, to construct a teachable knowledge landscape of Sinology for her students. This kind of bottom-up exploration of designing curriculum crossed the limitations of being a Chinese language teacher and enabled the rebirth of Ping's professional career. Ping's image of the teaching profession unfolded in one interview:

> Ping: I really thank Ms Lee, my director back then. She trusted me and gave me opportunities.
>
> Ge: Right …
>
> Ping: Although I am always busy with my teaching, my students, and their parents, which resulted in an ambiguous boundary between life and work, I think that I could grow with the children and keep the enthusiasm for learning. I think that is the most valuable thing in my work.
>
> Ge: You once complained …
>
> Ping: Oh, I have. But now … I talked with my friends who are officials some days ago. They even complained to me that they are too idle to get something meaningful out of life. I reflected on their words and agreed afterwards. If you stay in an idle position for long, you will lose your creativity and imagination.
>
> Ge: You did great work in this curriculum reform.
>
> Ping: In terms of this, I should thank my students as well. My students teach me that a teacher is not a candle burning by itself. Teaching and learning are co-developing processes.
>
> [A second's pause]
>
> Ping: I would like to say that a school is a forest. The teacher is tree, and the student is grass. Teachers and students grow together in the sunshine. I, as a teacher, just grew earlier [than my students] … We should not look down on the children, who bring their own experience to school as very important curriculum resources. (Perezhivanie 7)

The metaphor of the “school as a forest”, where teachers and students develop together, further revealed Ping's professional identity. Born in the 1970s, Ping was familiar with the traditional metaphors pertaining to the teaching profession in the Chinese context. For example, the image of “soul engineers” suggests that teachers' major work is to cultivate students' morality, while the metaphor of “silkworms” portrays teachers' working as the worm that eagerly produces silk until its death. Teachers are also depicted as “candles”, generously burning themselves to afford light to their students (He, 2002). These metaphorical images, which foreground self-sacrifice and altruism, present the Chinese public's traditional perceptions on teachers and the teaching profession. Such socially constructed images of teachers have contributed to a perceived high social position attributed to practitioners of the teaching profession. However, it has been found that, to some extent, these stereotypical images of teachers have dispirited potential candidates, especially in modern times (Gordon, 2000). The solemn and stirring images of the teaching profession were not appreciated by Ping and her colleagues in the 21st century. Teachers need lifelong professional development and one important way of achieving this is by learning from their students.

In October 2017, sponsored by new research funding, I had a chance to collaborate with the primary school again. A new project, “Developing teachers by learning-centred lesson study”, was launched for the autumn/winter semester. Ping, as an experienced teacher, joined this teachers' group to mentor novice teachers in learning to design instruction. After a five-month collaboration, I had the following dialogue with her:

> Ge: What do you think of this lesson study project?

Ping: Our novice teachers learned a lot. Thank you!

Ge: Apart from the novice teachers …

Ping: Yes … Of course that includes us "old" teachers.

Ge: Oh …

Ping: The activity of lesson study makes me a flower that blooms again. (Perezhivanie 8).

Ping's image of "flourishing", like a "flower that blooms again", was a metaphor about subjectivity and human growth (Levinas, 1969). The pace of educational reform has been increasing at the global level, and teachers have roles to play in such reform movements. The success of such movements will depend, at least in part, on the degree of the match between teachers' perceptions of the teaching act and their role and the demands of the reform. Teachers' perceptions of their roles are likely to be shaped by their core beliefs and images of teaching. Ping, a primary school teacher, like the teachers in Western countries, intuitively created metaphors and images to convey her reform-related experiences and reconstruct her subjectivity (e.g., Craig, 2020).

Up to now, Ping's narrative came full circle. After 25 years of becoming and being a teacher, Ping's professional identity transformed from a versatile "almighty teacher", to a struggling "vulnerable teacher", then to a "flourishing teacher", co-developing with her colleagues, students and university researchers. During the relived experiences in this process of looking-back-and-forth and outward-and-inward, Ping's series of perezhivanie were found to shape her professional identities across time and space.

6. Discussion

This narrative inquiry into Ping's history shows her active engagement in the life project of becoming and being a teacher. In this section, I discuss the findings of the inquiry trajectory developed around the two research questions.

Being acquainted with Ping for seven years, as a project collaborator then a critical friend, I go back and forth, inward and outward (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) together with Ping in her life worlds. Ping's shifting images of a teacher express the subjective-objective-interactive construction of the professional teacher identity. Since she was a little girl in rural China in the 1970s, Ping imagined her professional identities in the form of three major images, an almighty teacher, a vulnerable teacher, and a flourishing teacher. Unfurling Ping's teacher identities through images stems from the pictorial and metaphoric nature of the Chinese language. Image as language is a part of Chinese culture that helps Chinese teachers live out their professional identities. In fact, the Chinese speak about life metaphorically and acknowledge images as a way of conveying ideas that adds to their depth of meaning (Xu & Stevens, 2005). The emerging images enhance teachers' vocabulary and develop their voice, thus enabling them to articulate their teaching practice for themselves and to others.

On the other hand, image-based teacher identity is not fixed. It is substantiated that the formation and transformation process of teacher's professional identity begins when one chooses his or her educational and professional objectives and this process unfolds consistently throughout one's life (Han, 2017). For instance, over 45 years, Ping's teacher identities have developed in a continuous and discontinuous manner (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011) as she struggled to adapt within the context of China's rapid social transformation since the 1980s. In a nutshell, teacher's, like Ping's, identities have been transforming due to both external and internal factors (Day et al., 2006).

In this vein, I used perezhivaniya to capture critical changes in Ping's teacher identities, and I integrated the multi-level factors of the personal, the interpersonal, and the institutional (Day et al., 2006; Day & Kington, 2008). It is found that Ping's perezhivaniya were situated in concrete events, in which both inter- and intra-dimensions of personal development were hidden. For example, the residual problems from the Cultural Revolution activated Ping to find a way out of rural areas in Hebei (perezhivanie 1). Ironically, the national policy of merging and upgrading secondary normal schools forced Ping to relearn unfamiliar courses (perezhivanie 4). In spite of that, the national curriculum reform of basic education became a positive lived experience: the policy of developing school-based curriculum and adopting new pedagogical methods provided a foundation for Ping to be a lifelong learner (perezhivanie 7, 8).

Meanwhile, it can be discerned that lived experiences are inherent in Ping's professional identities. In Blunden's (2016) interpretation, perezhivanie is a unity of affect and intellect. Through a critical series of perezhivanie, a person develops intellectual and emotional facets, which apply to the whole personality and humanity of the person. In Ping's life history, the simple sense of worship for her eldest aunt (perezhivanie 2), her steadfast volition to enrol in normal school (perezhivanie 3), and the negative emotions of frustration and helplessness, described as being stuck in a bottleneck (perezhivanie 4, 5), all composed her "story to live by" and her "story to leave by" (though the latter was temporary) (perezhivanie 6). These emotionally intertwined moments and events were impossible to predict, so Ping had to construct and reflect rationally each time.

The other concern of this paper could be the "how" of Ping's perezhivaniya in terms of shaping her professional identities across temporality, spatiality, and sociality (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry as both the method and form has helped us find the liminal spaces (Turner, 1987) between grand narratives and local narratives. This disjunction is reinforced by the characterisation of the different stories: secret stories, sacred stories, and cover stories on the landscape of teacher knowing (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995).

Ping's professional teacher identities were formed in the narratives nested among secret stories (personally authorised stories that teachers publicly claim not to know [or show] but that they do know as favoured interpretations), cover stories (those teachers actually do know but not as favoured interpretations), and sacred stories (canonical stories that teachers publicly claim to know or show). Ping's secret stories were her personal creations. They drew on her personal images of teachers in order to make sense of teaching and learning. The sacred stories originated from China's social transformation to marketisation, and modernisation constitutes a tremendous force for teachers to be accepted as authorised knowledge. These stories entered into relationships of competition, conflict, and harmony but remained disconnected stories that teachers live by (Philpott, 2013). Thus, the cover stories in Ping's life were consciously created to hide the secret story and keep balance with the sacred stories. Teachers' cover stories (Crites, 1979) are a helpful narrative lens to illuminate how some of the tensions and entailments that ensue are initiated and perpetuated rather than interrogated and discussed. Emanating from institutional prescriptions, situated at the juncture between teacher stories and school stories, and arising from the conflicting philosophies of educational change (Olson & Craig, 2005), the cover stories that teachers need to cope with the tension between selves and society are composed. Teachers' narrative authority thus represents a way to create spaces for all stories to be reflectively heard and examined, and to address inherent challenges in the three-dimensional narrative spaces (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Furthermore, Ping's narratives and her perezhivaniya show that her professional identity is mainly imagined, especially in a rapidly transforming society where less affordance is supplied to teacher development. Wenger (2000) explored identity constructions as a processual experience, concerning "imagination" as an approach to construct an image of ourselves in certain communities. The "imagination" approach allows teachers to create unlimited images of themselves based on limited experiences. By imagining identities, "who they are, will then depend on not only who they are in reality but also who they imagine themselves to be" (Xu, 2013, p. 80). In so doing, we could reflect on the situations existentially and then explore more life orienting possibilities. Nonetheless, this paper is in better agreement with Tsui (2007) regarding the stance that it is necessary to evaluate the risks and advantages of using only imagination in the construction of teachers' professional identity. Recently, researchers have discussed Chinese teachers' exertion of agency in developing their identities in a reform context (Ye & Zhao, 2019). However, it may be with a sense of quixotism that teachers practise their agentive imagination to maintain relevance in an increasingly market-oriented and competitive educational context.

As the OECD (2019) said, "a flying start" in teacher development not only concerns knowledge and skills but also being and identity. In terms of the social significance of this study, on one hand, Ping's not uncommon experience is a mirror that reflects the role of teachers like her in modernising society, where role-modelling, critical incidents, and self-agency have significant influence on teachers' identity formation. It could easily be a story about any neophyte teacher across the globe. On the other hand, the social significance of this narrative inquiry could be understood as its implications for teacher education and reform-related policies for teacher development. For example, teacher education needs to intentionally provide more opportunities and affordances for both pre-service and in-service teachers to understand the teaching profession from a more realistic perspective rather than purely based on imagination.

7. Conclusion

Ping represents today's main teaching force in China, that is, teachers who grew up after the reform and opening-up of the country in the 1980s. Ping's life history and the construction of her teacher identities shed light on the common characteristics of Chinese teachers. With the help of narrative inquiry into Ping's life history over more than 45 years, I have tried to identify the reasons she chose to be a teacher, and to understand her current situation, emotions, and attitudes, and the meanings of her perezhivaniya. Through an interactive approach, I tried to tell and re-tell the secret stories, cover stories, and sacred stories nested in her narration as well as in my own reflection.

Ping constructed three different images of the teaching profession through her agentive imagination; however, her imagination and the external environments constituted contradictions. Consequently, Ping must adjust her teacher identity according to the rapid transformation of society. Yet, Chinese teachers like Ping do not play a passive role in the constant state of adaption but actively cast an ideal image of teachers within the scope of their own enactments. The contingent of ordinary teachers in China imagines the bright future of their profession in a rigid educational reality and seeks balance between the self and society with the help of this endless inner imagination. Their understanding of teaching and the teaching profession, their construction of their relationship to the students, and their positioning in the diverse social community are constantly changing, which is revealed by their perezhivaniya and supports the stories they live by. Narrative layers of secret stories, cover stories, and sacred stories, all come together in shaping imagined professional identities, which are necessary but limited in response to the challenges of contexts in transformation. It suggests that teachers need to uncover the links between these three kinds of stories and bolster reflective practice, which has facilitating effect on teachers' flourishing of subjectivity.

This study has also significant implications for teacher education. The image teachers hold directs their actions and becomes the goal in order to achieve their professional identity development; thus, we need to be more effective when addressing identity as a component in teacher education. In particular, novice teachers tend to have a stereotypical view of teachers and teaching that results in a mismatch between their expectations and the reality they are confronted with. As such, teachers' image of their future profession ought to be included in teacher education to make it more visible for both pre-service teachers and in-service teachers.

In addition, this paper also highlights the need to understand the social-political dimension of teachers and their work in a climate of educational reform. Specifically, teachers in a transforming society are likely to be confronted by the dilemmas of the disjuncture between the reform ideal and the harsh realities. The narrative inquiry into Ping's life may offer possibilities for enhancing an understanding of teacher identity and commitment to the profession globally and across cultures, which is especially important given that teacher attrition is an increasingly troublesome phenomenon worldwide (Ingersoll, 2001; OECD, 2005). Moreover, this paper contributes to the concept of "imagined professional identity" arising from the tension between strong personal agency and weak social affordances for teachers in a society pursuing modernisation. The case of Ping's narrative accounts suggests that teacher education and policy should give teachers more career security and social leverage in a modernising society. More stories like Ping's need to be re-told, by way of narrative inquiry, in order to make teachers' voices heard.

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