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# Identity Transformation and Autonomy Development of Female Student English Teachers From Rural China<sup>\*</sup>

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## *Abstract*

Previous studies on Chinese English teachers' identity and autonomy have overlooked the group of female student-teachers (FSTs) from rural areas. Drawing on data from questionnaire responses, narrative frames and semi-structured interviews with research participants, this study first depicts the trajectories of identity construction and autonomy development of nine female student-teachers, and then identifies three main factors that affected their transformation from English learners to student English teachers, and the development of autonomy in such a process. The three factors are gendered ideology, affinity groups and family finance. This study concludes with some implications for policy makers and teacher educators on how to empower female student English teachers from rural China to transform from English learners to English teachers, and how to enhance their autonomy in such a transformation.

***Keywords:*** female student English teachers, rural China, identity, autonomy

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## 1. Introduction

In the early 1980s, “English frenzy” swept China, and the public showed high enthusiasm for English learning, perhaps more so than at any other time (Gil, 2016, p. 61). The unprecedented increase in the number of English learners led to a rapidly growing demand for English teachers. Actions were taken by the Chinese government such as bringing in native-speaking English teachers and sending Chinese teachers and students overseas for advanced study. Those actions were mostly beneficial to teachers and students in urban schools and higher education but did not extend to primary or secondary levels of education and remained very limited in scope (Feng, 2009). The large rural areas in China are still suffering from a serious teacher shortage and attrition (Gao & Xu, 2014), and locally educated teachers who have never studied abroad remain the main force of English teachers in these areas (Chu, 2009; Wang & Gao, 2013). Thus, teacher education is of primary importance for the development of English teaching in rural areas of China.

One feature of the English teacher group in rural (and also urban) China is the unbalanced gender distribution. Females constitute a majority of the group, and this can be revealed by the number of female students in teachers colleges all over China. He (2011) reports that the male to female ratio in teachers colleges is currently 1:18. However, due to the lack of gender research in the context of China (Lu & Luck, 2014), female student-teachers (FSTs) have barely been studied compared to multitudes of studies of English teachers (Tsui, 2007; Gao & Xu, 2014). Informed by research on student-teacher education and autonomy (Benson & Huang, 2008; Huang & Benson, 2013; Izadinia, 2013; Gu & Benson, 2015), this study investigated nine FSTs’ identity construction and autonomy development. Data were collected from questionnaire responses, narrative frames and semi-structured interviews, aiming to explore how those female English learners from rural areas constructed their student-teacher identity in their four years of English learning,<sup>\*</sup> especially in the junior and senior years when they took courses on an English language education program. It is hoped that this research can shed light on a deeper understanding of the teacher identity construction of female English learners from rural China, and can also help improve classroom practices that would promote their learner autonomy to contribute to their transformation from English learners to English teachers.

In the following sections, we first present a review of literature on the interconnected relationship of student-teacher identity and autonomy development, pointing out the neglect of the gender factor in previous studies. We then explain the methodology of the study, including the research approach, the participants in their contexts, and methods for data collection and analysis. Lastly, we depict the trajectories of nine FSTs’ identity construction and autonomy development, in which the interactive relationship between identity and autonomy is revealed. The main factors that attribute to their identity transformation and autonomy development are also discussed.

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\* They all majored in English Language and Literature and specialized in English Language Education in their junior and senior years. This curriculum design is adopted by many teacher education universities in China.

## 2. Student-teacher identity: An autonomy dimension

In their process of adaptively changing from learners to teachers, student-teachers identify themselves professionally, cognitively, and emotionally with teacher identity (Gu & Benson, 2015; Yuan & Lee, 2016). To avoid possible ambiguity, this paper chooses to use the term “student-teacher” to refer to the English learners in China who choose to undertake the English language education program and aim to become teachers after graduation.

### 2.1 Student-teacher identity and autonomy

This study adopts Gee’s (2000) definition of teacher identity as a matter of “being recognized as a certain kind of person by the teacher himself/herself and by others, which provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of ‘how to be’, ‘how to act’ and ‘how to understand’” (p. 99). Current research on teacher identity indicates that it is fluid, dynamic, and multi-faceted (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004), and borne out of their participation and practice in their situated professional and sociocultural context (Yuan & Lee, 2016, p. 821). This corresponds to the prevailing understanding of the nature of identity in SLA field, where identity is defined as “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (Norton, 2013, p. 45).

At the transitional stage between being learners and teachers, student-teachers embody a specific identity in the process of their learning to teach, and in such a process, autonomy is proved to be a critical dimension of teachers’ identity construction (Benson & Huang, 2008; Hong, 2010; Huang, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2003). Building upon Holec’s (1981) definition of autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3), Benson (2011) proposes that autonomy can be best defined as a capacity to control one’s own learning, where “capacity” and “control” are tightly combined and regarded as the two key elements in defining autonomy (p. 58). In Huang and Benson (2013), capacity is defined as what a person has the potential to do, rather than what they actually do (p. 8). According to Benson (2011), “control” means having the power to make choices and decisions and acting on them, especially controlling on their learning management, cognitive processes and learning content (p. 9).

In this study, we adopt Benson’s (2011) definition of autonomy. There exists a situation where a female learner’s capacity is high. For instance, she has the potential to become a graduate student at a prestigious university. Despite this potential, she does not have the power to make this decision to learn and to become a graduate student because of some economic constraints from her family. Benson’s (2011) very detailed definition of autonomy proves to be a powerful theoretical tool to help explain such cases, and it also echoes Schmenk’s (2005) point of view that autonomy encompasses “a critical awareness of one’s own possibilities and limitations within particular contexts” (p. 115). What’s more, to describe the features of autonomy of English learners in a foreign language context, Huang (2013) proposed the concept of “proactive autonomy”, which is more purpose-directed, more individualized, more

self-initiated and more self-directed. Since our participants are all foreign language learners of English with the purpose of changing their lives through English learning, we find such a specialized concept more appropriate in describing and analyzing our data.

## **2.2 Relationship between identity and autonomy**

Research by Huang (2010, 2011, 2013) and Huang and Benson (2013) demonstrates that there remains a complex, non-linear relationship between identity and autonomy. Huang (2011, 2013) provides empirical evidence for Benson's (2007) contention that identity conceptualization and construction is a point of origin for autonomy (p. 2), and further proposes that the interaction between identity and autonomy is embedded in a learning context, and self-identity conceptualization and construction might be both an origin and an outcome of autonomy in learning English (Huang, 2011, pp. 242-243). However, the development of identity and autonomy might also be affected by the research participants' conceptualization and construction of future development, such as career orientation, especially in foreign language teaching and development. Ryan and Deci (2003), treating autonomy as a psychological need, contend that "identities can also fulfill the need for autonomy, for they can provide a forum through which people develop and express personal interest, values, and capacities" (p. 254). In investigating how teacher identities are discursively constructed in the course of teacher education, Gu and Benson (2015) find that pre-service teachers show alignment with social discourses, and through alignment, individuals coordinate their activities within broader social structures. It seems that social structure has a shaping power over the construction of student-teacher identity.

In comparison with the ample literature on teacher identity from the autonomy perspective (Benson & Nunan, 2005; Huang, 2010, 2011, 2013; Huang & Benson 2013), there are only sparse studies concerning student-teachers, especially those females from rural areas. This seems a rather important topic when the teacher education program is considered to be a key stage in the development of teacher professional identity (Izadinia, 2013), and gender is found to be one of the major reasons for entry into teaching as a profession (Olsen, 2008). Also, some scholars argue that sexism must be considered in examining the concept of autonomy (Mackenzie, 2000). We thus propose to study nine FSTs' identity from the perspective of autonomy in foreign language education, believing that it can not only provide "a potential site of pedagogical intervention and an area of explicit focus in teacher preparation" (Morgan & Clarke, 2011, p. 825), but also can inform us about which factors positively or negatively impact their identity construction and autonomy development. It is hoped that this study could also help in designing programs to promote the autonomy of female English learners from rural China so as to contribute to their professional identity construction. To meet such research aims, this study tries to address the following two questions:

- (1) What are the trajectories of identity construction and autonomy development of FSTs from rural China?
- (2) What are the main factors that affect FSTs' identity transformation and autonomy development?

### 3. Methodology

This study adopted three sources of data to explore the research questions: Questionnaire responses, narrative frames and, semi-structured interviews. The data collected through narrative frames and interviews complemented and constituted narratives of the participants' learning stories and were the primary focus of our data collection. This made our research largely qualitative in nature.

Recently, narrative inquiry has received increased attention in studying teachers' identity (Barkhuizen, 2016; Simon-Maeda, 2004; Tsui, 2007; Watson, 2006), because it helps to "understand the inner worlds of language teachers and learners and the nature of language teaching and learning as social and educational activity" (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014, p. 2). Also, in its three decades of development, the advocates of autonomy research have gradually accepted that the notion of narrative identity is a ground for individual autonomy and that it has value for work on the development of autonomy through long-term experiments of language learning (Benson, 2007). In this study, we expand the ranges of voices that are heard in teacher identity and autonomy research by highlighting the narratives of those FSTs.

#### 3.1 Research context: English language education as a stream of learning

This study was undertaken in a university in Shandong Province, China. The university was once a teachers college and changed into a research university in 2006, where English language education remained as one of the three streams of learning for students majoring in English language and literature. In general, student-teachers' four-years of English learning can be divided into three phases:

- (1) Language learning coursework: In the first two years, all students take the same English proficiency courses involving listening, speaking, reading and writing to cultivate integrated language competence.
- (2) English language teaching coursework: In the third year, those students who choose the English language education program as their stream of learning are offered more specialized language teaching courses with pedagogical content knowledge alongside linguistic proficiency courses.
- (3) Teaching practicum (TP): In the final year, students in the English language education program are assigned to primary or secondary schools to conduct TP for 10 weeks.

Noticeably, the teacher education program is added to the learning of English language and literature in the third year. This program is similar to the one described by Gu and Benson (2015), but different from the government-funded teacher-education program as discussed by Yuan and Zhang (2017). In the government-funded teacher-education program, student-teachers do not pay tuition but have to teach in primary and middle schools in rural areas for

at least two years; also, they automatically become members of the institutional personnel (i.e., on government payroll). However, students in the program examined by this study have to first pass the Recruitment Examination for Public Institutions (Education section) and then pass interviews to obtain such membership.

### 3.2 Participants

In order to capture the general nature of student-teachers' identity construction and autonomy development, we collected cross-sectional data. Students who graduated over the past three years (2015, 2016 and 2017) were recruited. We first collected questionnaire data through sojump.com. In total, 68 females participated in the questionnaire investigation. We used snowball sampling in choosing our participants in subsequent stages of investigation (interviews and narrative writing). We approached one student from each graduation year who had participated in the questionnaire and was from a rural area, and then asked her to introduce another two students to us on the condition that they participated in the questionnaire as well. This ensured that the participants knew each other and felt relaxed in talking and writing about the fact that they may not be privileged in their family backgrounds and English learning. Altogether, we had nine participants, three from each graduation year, and their profile information is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Participants' profile

Name	Year of graduation	Starting age of English learning	Present occupation
Fen	2015	12	authorized public high school English teacher
Wei	2015	8	un-authorized public middle school English teacher
Qin	2015	12	authorized public high school English teacher
Na	2016	12	full-time graduate student
Juan	2016	8	authorized public high school English teacher
Jie	2016	8	un-authorized English teacher at a language school
Rong	2017	12	senior year student
Jing	2017	8	senior year student
Ting	2017	12	senior year student

In describing their family backgrounds, we divided our participants into two different social classes according to *The Report on Social Stratification*, issued in 2002 by the Chinese

Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) (Lu, 2002). Without any guidance, participants defined their family social strata mainly in terms of their parents' occupations. Six of them (Fen, Na, Juan, Jie, Rong, and Ting) belonged to the lower class by the fact that both of their parents are peasants or one is a peasant and the other is a laborer. The other three (Qin, Wei, and Jing) were classified as the lower middle class because at least one of their parents worked as a teacher or was employed as a worker in a factory, and that ensured that their families have a stable income and have a higher standard of living compared to most families in rural China.

Four participants (Wei, Juan, Jie, and Jing) started learning English at 8 years old in primary school, and the other five did not learn English until they entered junior high school at 13 years old. Despite *The New Standard of English Teaching for High Schools* (2005) which attached great importance to students' oral communicative competence, English teaching in rural China still mainly focused on reading and writing because students' English proficiency was evaluated only by their performance in these two aspects. In contrast, students in urban areas could participate in many out-of-class English learning programs and activities to improve their comprehensive English ability. As a result, the nine participants had to work very hard to correct their pronunciation during the first year in university and encountered many difficulties in university given that instruction was mainly in English.

### 3.3 Data collection

The questionnaire was designed to gather information from the FSTs on their perceptions of teaching and the general factors contributing to their choosing to teach. A pretest was made to ensure the questionnaire accurately reflected the participants' understanding of teaching and covered most of the factors driving them to teach. Therefore, the questionnaire included questions on their educational background and factors contributing to their decision to choose the English language education program in their junior year and enter the teaching profession upon graduation.

Based on the data collected from the questionnaire, we made a thorough narrative inquiry about the trajectory of each student-teacher's identity construction and autonomy development. The nine participants described their own learning experience, changes of psychology and behavior with the narrative frame set by the researchers as the main guidance for what they wrote. They wrote two accounts to review their experiences of English learning in the first two years of university and then experiences of learning to teach in the third and fourth years respectively. Each report was two pages long or about 2,300 Chinese characters.

Eventually, a semi-structured interview procedure was used. We interviewed three participants at a time for 1.5 to 2 hours. The purpose of the interviews was to gather more information on the changes in their identity and autonomy to enrich the narrative data based on the narrative frame writing. We raised open questions regarding how they managed their English learning in the first two years, for example, on which subject did they spend most of their time, what factors contributed to their wanting to become teachers in the future (i.e., significant people or events), what attitudes they had towards becoming teachers after



graduation. During the interviews, the participants were encouraged to talk more about their experiences and understanding to provide us with more information, so that we could have a deeper understanding of their identity construction and autonomy development. The interviews were conducted through QQ, an instant messaging (IM) software used in China.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

In the process of data analysis, first of all, we conducted a quantitative analysis of the results of the questionnaire. In analyzing the narrative data, content analysis was applied. We read the data repeatedly, and made a recursive and iterative analysis together to investigate the subject reality (i.e., findings on how “things” or events were experienced by the participants) (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 165). We identified the recurrent motifs that are salient in participants’ narratives. This enabled us to extract themes that are important to those student-teachers but “may not have been reflected in previous scholarship” (Pavlenko, 2007, p. 166). Considering that the trajectory of participants’ student-teacher identity was constructed and reshaped progressively in the four-year learning process, we adopted a chronological order to investigate the changes in their identity and autonomy.

## **4. Research findings**

We first reported the questionnaire findings, which gave a general observation of FSTs’ perceptions of teaching and factors that drove them to teach. Then the trajectories of their identity and autonomy development were depicted through an analysis of the nine female students’ narratives, where the interactive relationship between their identity and autonomy was also identified. A detailed analysis was then made to reveal the main factors that affected their identity transformation and autonomy development.

### **4.1 General observation: Questionnaire findings**

The questionnaire data shows that of the 68 participants, 49 expressed their willingness to become teachers in the future or shows that they have already become authorized teachers. Of these 49 participants, 88.89% planned to go back or already went back to their hometown to teach. The data also shows that 65.8% of the participants portrayed teaching as an easy job, with high security and freedom. However, according to Hong (2010), these perceptions are “naïve and idealistic” due to the lack of real teaching experience. 77.94% of the 68 respondents had the experience of working as English tutors part-time, and all of them chose parents and friends as the most common information resources of employment. This shows that how others looked at teachers greatly influenced their perception of teaching as a profession. When asked what factors affected their decision in teaching as occupation, 41% of the participants chose that “working as a teacher is easier than working in a company”, and family finance ranks the highest (51%) among all the factors that influenced their going back to their hometown to teach.



## 4.2 Trajectories of identity transformation and autonomy development

Our data show that the nine FSTs demonstrated very similar trajectories of identity construction: They identified themselves as language learners rather than English teachers in the first three years of learning. Teacher identity was only constructed in the TP in their senior year. They demonstrated great proactive autonomy (Huang, 2013) in preparing for different tests, for example, the English level tests and the Recruitment Examination for Public Institutions. Confirming the findings of Ryan and Deci (2003), Benson (2007) and Huang (2011), we also found an interactive relationship between autonomy and identity, where identity acted as both an origin and an outcome of autonomy in their learning to become teachers. The following part gives a chronological analysis of their identity construction and autonomy development.

### 4.2.1 The first two years: Identity uncertainty and autonomy loss

All nine participants experienced similar identity transformation in the first two years—from good language learners to unprivileged language learners (Darvin & Norton, 2015), and they all experienced a loss of autonomy in this period of time. At the very beginning, they all showed great interest in English learning and great enthusiasm for English teaching as a profession. Consider the following extract:

#### Extract 1

At the beginning, I felt English to be very “holy” and I respected and admired those English teachers. ... I distinguished myself in English learning by getting the highest mark in my class before I came to university. (Fen, narrative frame)

Gu and Benson (2015) found in their study that the inclusion of subject expertise in the conception of English teacher identity is spread all over the world (p. 188). Our analysis of students' narratives also showed a close relationship between English competence and English teacher identity construction. We found that believing themselves to be good English language learners did contribute to their construction of an imagined identity as English teachers. However, once their English learning at college began, the nine participants all experienced an identity crisis. Compared with those students from urban areas, they felt inferior in pronunciation and listening given the limited English learning resources in rural areas, such as the lack of native-speaker English teachers and English listening materials (Feng, 2009; Gil, 2016), and started to position themselves as unprivileged learners (Darvin & Norton, 2015). This uncertainty of self-identity (Benson & Huang, 2008, p. 233) came with a loss of autonomy: They had little control over their learning and were not sure about their capacity in learning. The following excerpt indicates such a situation:

**Extract 2**

When I found that some of my classmates had really beautiful pronunciation, and they could write really brilliant essays, I realized that I was not as good as I thought. Afterwards I became sort of self-abased, and there was a time when I was, to be precise, under a lot of pressure and depression. (Jie, semi-structured interview)

Not knowing what to do and what they were capable of, the imagined identity of English teachers changed from an enthusiastic pursuit to more of a guaranteed stable, if not ideal, job. The following excerpt gives more detailed information on such a change:

**Extract 3**

For me, teaching as a profession is stable, and it has long vacations and relatively simple social relations. I just want an ordinary and unchallenging job. (Ting, narrative frame)

These words show that to Ting, teaching is not where her talents and passions lie but just “an ordinary and unchallenging job”. In defending her low expectation, Ting elaborated on the stable nature of teaching, which is appreciated by many girls as our questionnaire data indicated.

**4.2.2 Reviving good learner identity through proactive autonomy**

Such uncertainty in identity and loss in autonomy continued to the end of their sophomore year when they had to choose their streams of learning. All nine participants joined the English language education program and this is a key stage for their identity transformation from learners to teachers. However, a close examination of their narratives indicated that they still identified themselves more as “English learners” than “English teachers” (Gu & Benson, 2015).

In the semi-structured interviews, when asked “What event impressed you most in your learning process?” their answers indicated preparing for and taking the English Level Tests, the Recruitment Examination for Public Institutions (Education section) and the graduate entrance examination were the most significant events in the four years of learning. They demonstrated a high level of proactive autonomy in preparing for such high-stakes examinations. Passing those tests and getting the certificates showed that they were taking greater control of their own learning and personal life, and their “good learner” identity revived because of those certificates. The following excerpt demonstrates such a change of psychology:

**Extract 4**

My college life has never been so fulfilling and meaningful as it was in the several months preparing for the Recruitment Examination for Public Institutions (Education section), especially the last two months. (Fen, semi-structured interview)

It is indicated in the above narrative that Fen’s autonomy has the typical feature of being proactive as it was very purpose-directed, and passing the test was her main goal. She showed

effective control of her learning management and content. She used the words “fulfilling” and “meaningful” to describe her learning, which demonstrates that the “good learner” identity had revived. However, we failed to find evidence that coursework aiming at cultivating teaching skills contributed to FSTs’ teacher identity construction. One reason for this might be the lower status of the teaching skill courses (account for only 14 credits) in comparison with the language competence courses (22 credits). It seemed that the university still positioned the students as language learners rather than prospective teachers.

#### **4.2.3 Constructing English teacher identity in the teaching practicum**

In the fourth year, all the student-teachers were sent to primary or middle schools, mostly in rural areas, to conduct the TP for 10 weeks, and it was during this practicum that their identity actually transformed from English learners to English teachers. Many participants acknowledged that TP facilitated their teaching competence, and they showed great autonomy in learning to teach. They also acquired a strong sense of honor and self-fulfillment from students’ feedback, which helped them to construct their teacher identity. Jing described how her teaching competence was improved through TP:

##### **Extract 5**

I devoted all my time to learning to teach. On weekends, I made PPT for the following classes and polished it over and over again. And in my free time, I discussed with my mentor about my students. What made me feel satisfied was that all my students made great progress in the mid-term examination. It was indeed the affirmation of my teaching and all the efforts I had made. When I returned to the university, I received my students’ messages online saying they missed me, which gave me heartfelt delight. (Jing, semi-structured interview)

The above narrative shows that, during the TP, Jing demonstrated great autonomy in learning to teach. She began to construct a teacher identity and the praise from the students bolstered her identity construction. However, to become a legitimate member of the English teachers’ group, Jing still needed to pass the Recruitment Examination for Public Institutions to be included as members of the institutional personnel. Once becoming members of the institutional personnel, teachers enjoy high social status and comparatively high and stable salaries. Those who are not included in the institutional personnel are just referred to as “substitute teachers”. Eight of our nine participants prepared for the test in their TP and again demonstrated great proactive autonomy. The only exception was Na who was busy preparing for the graduate entrance examination. She planned to teach after getting a master’s degree.

#### **4.3 Factors that affect FSTs’ identity transformation and autonomy development**

We then conducted a content analysis of the nine FSTs’ narratives to further identify the main factors that influenced their identity transformation and autonomy development. Three themes emerged in our analysis of the narrative data: Gendered ideology, affinity groups and

family finance. Affinity groups and family finance have already been revealed in the analysis of questionnaire data, while gendered ideology, which was quite pervasive in the narrative data, remained implicit in the questionnaire. We would like to point out that although the three factors are discussed separately, they actually interact with each other and are closely intertwined.

#### **4.3.1 The pervasive gendered ideology**

Darvin and Norton (2015) define ideology as “dominant ways of thinking that organize and stabilize societies while simultaneously determining modes of inclusion and exclusion, and the privileging and marginalization of ideas, people and relations” (p. 44). It is believed that through an interrogation of ideology, one can examine more closely how a learner is included or excluded in contexts such as the classroom, workplace, and community. Our data indicate that gendered ideology has a profound influence on the nine FSTs’ identity transformation and learning autonomy. Upon graduation, male English learners are much more privileged in the job market and are regarded as more suitable in coping with harsh competition and complex social relationships in the business world. As a result, very limited social roles are allotted to female learners. In rural areas, females are still confined to home and teaching is regarded as an ideal job because of the stable salary and long holidays, and so teaching allows women to take care of their families while earning an income. Analysis of narratives showed that all the nine girls built an explicit connection between their gender and their joining the English language education program. Consider the following narrative:

##### **Extract 6**

As a girl, I don’t want to struggle in the business world, and I don’t like the drinking–negotiating culture. If I choose business English or translation, I’ll face more pressure and competition than if I become a teacher. (Ting, narrative frame).

Such a statement indicates that the molding power of ideology led the FSTs in choosing the English language education program with the hope that they could avoid the harsh competition and complex social relations in the business world. Gendered ideology also influenced their autonomy development by limiting their capacity in imagining other possibilities. At the same time, it also made them overtly aware of their limitations in classroom learning. Their defining teaching as “less competitive” and as an “easy” job manifested their lack of autonomy in realizing their potential and in controlling their own learning. However, gendered ideology meanwhile strengthened their autonomy during TP. When asked in her interview why she worked so hard to pass the Recruitment Examination for Public Institutions, Fen pointed out that teacher identity increased girls’ value in the marriage market.

##### **Extract 7**

Those girls who work as authorized teachers are very popular in blind date arrangements; they

enjoy higher social status than those who are doing other jobs in rural areas. (Fen, semi-structured interview)

All these echo with Holliday's (2003) statement that "autonomy resides in the social worlds of the students, which they bring with them from their lives outside the classroom" (p. 117). The analysis of narratives showed that the FSTs' identity construction and autonomy development were both mediated by gendered ideology embedded in their family and social discourses. By explicitly connecting working as a teacher with ideal identity for girls, gendered ideology excluded FSTs from other possible choices in English language learning, and pushed them to focus on learning activities that would help the construction of an authorized teacher identity and to act according to the virtues of rural areas.

#### 4.3.2 Affinity groups

A close reading of the nine FSTs' narratives indicated that their student-teacher identity was overshadowed by group-affinity identities (Farnsworth, 2010; Gu & Benson, 2015). Most of them constructed their student-teacher identity under the influence of their parents, relatives and close friends. Jie's narrative demonstrated this fact:

##### Extract 8

My family played a role in my wanting to become a teacher because many of our relatives are teachers, and my sister is also a teacher. (Jie, narrative frame)

In addition to parents and relatives, their identity construction was affected by participation in a critical friend group in which they could establish an affinity relation. Their narratives indicated that their classmates and roommates influenced them significantly in their student-teacher identity construction. Qin stated in the semi-structured interview that it was her classmates who influenced her decision to become a student-teacher:

##### Extract 9

Actually, my classmates had a great impact on me because they all chose the English language education program. So did I. (Qin, semi-structured interview)

This "so did I" reflects how deeply they aligned with their affinity group identity, while at the same time indicates the FSTs' lack of capacity in controlling their own learning. In the shadow of affinity group identity, they lost control of their own learning and followed others in choosing the content of learning.

#### 4.3.3 Family finance

Besides gendered ideology and affinity groups, another factor that emerged in the narratives was family finance. In tracing the trajectory of the nine FSTs identity construction and autonomy development, lacking imagination of other possibilities (Gu & Benson, 2015) is one

very prominent feature of our research participants. Their identities were constructed rationally by considering mainly whom they were (a girl from a rural area), while the imagination of whom they could become was rather limited. The following narrative of Fen depicts how family finance limited her in imagining other possibilities:

**Extract 10**

When I heard the news that those students who go back to teach in rural areas might end up working there all their lives, I felt repulsed and depressed. But considering my family finance and the fierce competition in the job market, I gradually accepted the fact that I may spend my whole life in a rural school. After all, if I work in a rural school near my parents, I can take care of them, and the cost of living there is not high. (Fen, narrative frame)

It seems that although Fen was not keen to teach in rural areas all her life, she still persuaded herself to accept the idea rather than making a different plan. Her autonomy was thus mainly constrained by her obligation rather than exploring her potential. Obviously, she lacked the economic capital to support her in investing in the kind of learning that could realize her potential (Norton, 2013). In other words, she lacked the power to free herself from the social determination to give her the kind of autonomy so that she could “imagine herself otherwise” (Mackenzie, 2000, p. 114). This echoes the statement made by Schmenk (2005) that educators should admit that “autonomy is not a universal and neutral concept and that it encompasses a critical awareness of one’s own possibilities and limitations within particular contexts” (p. 115).

## 5. Discussion

Adopting three sources of data, this study depicts the trajectories of nine FSTs’ identity construction and autonomy development in their four years of learning, and the three salient factors, gendered ideology, affinity groups, and family finance, are also discussed. Our findings showed the interactive relationship between identity and autonomy (Benson, 2007), and supported Beijgaard, et al. (2004) in claiming that the nature of teacher identity is fluid, dynamic, and multi-faceted. What is new in this research is that our analysis foregrounds the intersectionality (Block & Corona, 2016) of FSTs’ identity construction, which means that identity cannot be studied in isolation from its other dimensions, for example, gender and social class (Block, 2007, p. 36). Gender was not only one of the major reasons for the nine girls’ entry of teaching as a profession (Olsen, 2008) but also influenced their identity construction and autonomy development through the gendered ideology in their living context. Social class worked on their identity construction and autonomy development through limiting them in imagining other possibilities and exploring their potentials. This calls educators’ attention to a feminist perspective on autonomy, where the impact of social and political structures, especially sexism and other forms of oppression in the lives and opportunities of individuals must be taken into account (Mackenzie, 2000). This intersectionality points to the complexity

of female student-teachers' identity construction and autonomy development, since their learning to become teachers is a process "where their past, present, and future are set in dynamic tension, and a time of scrutiny into what they were doing and who they can become" (Britzman, 2003, p. 8).

Consistent with previous studies (Gu & Benson, 2015; Roness & Smith, 2010; Yuan & Zhang, 2017), our findings also illustrated that TP constituted a critical period for their becoming teachers (Huang, 2013). During the TP, they applied the theoretical knowledge from the coursework and their personal learning experience into practice, and their teacher identity was then constructed. Also, previous studies accentuate the positive impact of teacher education courses on student-teachers' identity construction. For example, in the study by Gu and Benson (2015), 69% of their participants commented that curriculum design influenced, to some extent, their identities as English learners and teachers. Liu and Fisher (2006) reported that change in conception of classroom performance and teacher identity is common among their three student-teachers, and both the performance and identity show consistent positive change over the course. However, our data revealed a very limited impact of teacher education coursework on our participants' identity construction (see also Huang, 2013). In their learning of teaching skills in the third year, they still identified themselves more as English learners. What's more, our analysis of the influence of affinity groups on FSTs' identity construction revealed that the identity formation of these participants was enacted more socially than individually, while Gu and Benson (2015) found in their study that teacher identity formation of their participants involves a continuous interweaving of the individual and the social engagement. Our participants' construction of student-teacher identity was more an imposition of socio-cultural conditions, that is, their family economic conditions and gendered ideology in their living context. Also, their constructing of student-teacher identity was not to make sense of what it means to be a teacher (Yuan & Lee, 2016), but what it means to become a good learner through becoming a teacher in the Chinese institutional personnel system.

## 6. Implication and conclusion

By examining the nine FSTs' identity construction in relation to their autonomy development, this study has shed light on the experiences in their transformations from English learners to student English teachers. It also revealed the main factors attributed to their identity transformation and autonomy development. Our findings enable this study to generate some implications for policy makers and teacher educators on how to empower female English student-teachers from rural areas in their identity construction.

First, both language teachers and teacher educators should try to transform their classroom from a learning site into a site of empowerment. Our analysis showed that female English learners from rural China lack the autonomy to make a difference; this made their choice of teaching a rational and realistic decision rather than a realization of their potential through education. Thus, how to empower them in negotiation with social determination imposed by the patriarchy in rural areas, to "afford them a sense of power over their learning



context and their imagined future environment” (Gu & Benson, 2015, p. 202), is a topic not only for policymakers but also for both language teachers and teacher educators. In addition, to address the economic difficulties those student-teachers encountered in their identity construction, policymakers need to formulate and implement more favorable and flexible policies with regard to student-teachers from rural areas. For example, the Free Teachers Education Program issued by the Chinese government needs to expand from top normal universities to local universities all over China.

To conclude, by depicting the trajectory of identity construction and autonomy development of nine FSTs from rural China, this study presented the constraints those FSTs encountered in their experiences of identity construction and autonomy development. It also discussed factors underlying those constraints. In the future, more empirical studies can be conducted to explore how to empower their identity transformation and autonomy development, and action research could be a good research method in fulfilling such a task.

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