

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Our Teaching, Our Narratives: Untold Stories of Four Chinese International Bilingual Teachers in a U.S. Dual Language Immersion School

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Article Info

Received: April 25, 2024
Accepted: June 19, 2024
Published: August 12, 2024

Abstract

The exploration of international bilingual teachers' experiences and perspectives within the United States remains relatively sparse in existing literature despite their growing demand on a global scale. This article narrates the stories of four Chinese international bilingual teachers working in a U.S. dual language immersion school to illustrate their racialized and marginalized experiences and the possibilities for transformative agency. Interview data is analyzed by theoretically engaging within an Asian Critical Theory (AsianCrit) framework. The study findings reveal that linguistic discrimination has led to the de-professionalization of Chinese international bilingual teachers, leaving them in under-resourced and marginalized positions. They also must navigate nativistic racism, evident in restrictive work visa regulations and intricate dynamics of race relations. These teachers strategically enacted agency in subtle ways without openly countering dominant discourses and discrimination at the school. The findings underscore the necessity for tailored programs aimed at addressing the unique needs of international bilingual teachers in both teacher education and ongoing professional development.

Keywords

agency; Asian Critical Theory; Chinese international bilingual teachers; racialized experiences; storytelling

INTRODUCTION

Bilingual education programs are gaining momentum worldwide, including in the United States. Despite the rising demand for bilingual education, there remains a persistent shortage of qualified bilingual teachers (Gauna et al., 2023; Lyster, 2011). While a growing body of research has investigated the challenges they face and the support they require for success (Fee, 2011; Lee, 2015), studies specifically focusing on the context of the United States remain relatively limited. Bilingual teachers, particularly foreign-born and racially minoritized, are frequently depicted as deficient in language proficiency and cultural understanding rather than recognized for their transformative agency and transcultural assets (Faez, 2010). However, research indicates that international bilingual teachers offer valuable perspectives. Their transnational and transcultural experiences and knowledge often diverge from those of native-born and locally educated bilingual teachers (Kim, 2023; Schmidt & Block, 2010). They also play crucial roles as role models and mentors for students from

similar backgrounds (Lee, 2015). Nevertheless, in nations such as the U.S., UK, and Canada, characterized by significant racial stratification and monolingualism, teachers, including international bilingual educators, often lack preparation to navigate and challenge systemic injustices within the K-12 educational system (Anderson, 2010; Fullan, 1993; Priestley et al., 2012). Acknowledging the experiences and agency of international bilingual teachers and providing them with the necessary support is essential for advancing equity and diversity for all students and educators (Beyon et al., 2004).

This article¹ serves a dual purpose. First, it amplifies the voices of four Chinese international bilingual teachers, shedding light on the prejudice and discrimination that underlie their racialized and marginalized professional encounters within a U.S. dual language immersion school. Second, it delves into the potential for transformative agency among these teachers—examining their active, intentional, and contextual actions to challenge prevailing narratives and instigate changes at the school level. In this article, the term international bilingual teachers refer to teachers who identify themselves as having a national origin other than the United States and speak two or more languages. In literature, they may also be referred to as “foreign-trained teachers,” “internationally educated teachers,” “foreign-born teachers,” or “immigrant teachers.”

INTERNATIONAL BILINGUAL TEACHERS IN THE U.S.

The bilingual teacher shortage has long been an issue in the U.S., with more than half of U.S. states in short supply of bilingual teachers (Gibney et al., 2021). Such shortage leads to school districts recruiting bilingual teachers from other countries and/or culturally and linguistically diverse communities through grow-your-own programs (Gibney et al., 2021; Flores et al., 2002). These bilingual teachers speak the language of students and families in schools and understand the specific cultural, educational, and social backgrounds of immigrant students. International bilingual teachers come to the U.S. with a wealth of professional and transnational experiences that can enrich the dialogue on education for all students (Phillion, 2003; Radhouane et al. 2022). However, international bilingual teachers are underrepresented in U.S. bilingual education literature (Rubio et al., 2021). Relevant studies predominantly focus on the contexts of Canada and European countries, such as the UK (Enns-Kananen & Ruohotie-Lyhty, 2023; Fee, 2011).

¹ This article draws upon data from the author’s previously published dissertation (Li, 2022) to describe the study context, participants’ identities, and personal and professional experiences.

Studies conducted in the U.S. have investigated the personal and academic challenges (e.g., acculturation, assimilation, recertification of degrees) that international bilingual teachers encounter in their teacher preparation programs (e.g., Fee, 2011; Flores et al., 2008; Martínez-Álvarez, 2020; Rubio et al., 2021). They have also delved into language instructional practices and pedagogy development (e.g., Lizárraga & Gutiérrez, 2018; Palmer & Rangel, 2011; Zoeller & Briceño, 2022), as well as their professional identity formation (e.g., Rodriguez & Cho, 2011; Welch, 2015). A few studies have also examined the training of bilingual special education teachers, revealing that they are often inadequately prepared to fully integrate bilingual learners with disabilities into bilingual classrooms (e.g., Gonzalez et al., 2021; Rueda & Stillman, 2012; Wang & Woolf, 2015), rendering English monolingual instructional practices that address disability-related needs only (Lopes-Murphy, 2020).

While research is limited, there is an increasing number of studies exploring international bilingual teachers' power and agency to disrupt dominant discourses and construct inclusive learning spaces for bilingual learners (Kim & Kwon, 2024; Palmer & Martínez, 2013). For example, Wong et al. (2020) examined how a Latina bilingual teacher leveraged resources for agentive language teaching and decision-making through a three-year longitudinal study. They found out that this Latina bilingual teacher encouraged students' translanguaging practices and established shared cultural experiences and trust by leveraging her personal experiences as a bilingual immigrant learner. She also intentionally challenged reductive language curriculum and assessments by tapping into knowledge learned from university coursework. Also, through narrative inquiry, Kayi-Aydar (2019) examined a Hispanic bilingual teachers' agency in professional identity construction. In this study, the Hispanic bilingual teacher repositioned the self as an agentive teacher and reclaimed power and voices to challenge structural constraints in the form of racism and linguistic marginalization to negotiate multiple identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, accent).

International bilingual teachers' experiences of racism are under-examined but are beginning to gain scholar's attention. For example, Rubio et al. (2021) conducted life history interviews of a bilingual teacher born and trained in Mexico. They aimed to understand the development of advocacy and leadership identities while the bilingual teacher navigated the racializing and colonizing experiences of U.S. education. By extensively narrating the teacher's personal and professional stories, they demonstrated the prevalence of deficit perspectives toward international bilingual teachers who are racially minoritized. This study also revealed the importance of developing advocacy and leadership skills to resist cultural

and linguistic assimilation and becoming an agent of transformation for bilingual teachers of immigrant backgrounds. However, this study did not explicitly discuss the impact of race or racism on the transnational and acculturational experiences of international bilingual teachers. Race, ethnicity, and cultural identity are not always interchangeable (Thompson, 2023; Wade, 2010). Race as a social construction has great tenacity and power and thus should be examined as an important analytic concept concerning ethnicity (Mills, 2007).

Furthermore, much of the literature on international bilingual teachers in the U.S. context exclusively focuses on Spanish-English bilingual teachers. There is a lack of voices by bilingual teachers who speak other minoritized languages (e.g., Mandarin, Arabic, Vietnamese), which may contribute to prejudice and discrimination against these other minoritized language-speaking bilingual teachers. To further diversify bilingual education and teacher education research, this article aims to incorporate the untold stories of four Chinese international bilingual teachers who strived to overcome structural challenges with their agency and transcultural assets. Stories center on the racialized experiences of these Chinese international bilingual teachers. Findings inform teacher education preparation programs and professional training on the academic and social needs of international bilingual teachers and promote linkages between bilingual teachers of varying cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To understand the racialized and marginalized experiences of the four Chinese international bilingual teachers, I engaged with the Asian Critical Theory (AsianCrit; Iftikar & Museus, 2018). AsianCrit framework extends critical race scholarship to account for the unique, nuanced, and multifaceted experiences of Asians and Asian Americans beyond the Black/White binary (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Yosso, 2005). Critical scholars studying Asians and Asian Americans in education have pointed out that the model minority myth positions Asians and Asian Americans against other racially minoritized groups (e.g., Black/African Americans); excludes them from racial discourses; suggests monolithic racial constructions of Asians and Asian Americans; and renders perpetual discrimination and oppression of Asians and Asian Americans (Lee, 2006; Museus, 2014; Poon et al., 2016; Yu, 2006). To conduct a deep, nuanced, and holistic inquiry into the racialized experiences and issues of Asians and Asian Americans, Iftikar and Museus (2018) proposed an AsianCrit framework with seven tenants.

Four tenets of AsianCrit are of particular relevance to the current study. Tenet one—Asianization—emphasizes the role of White supremacy and nativistic racism in positioning Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners. Tenet two brings to the fore the transnational contexts where global economic, political, and social relationships shape Asian American experiences. Informed by the fifth tenet—intersectionality—this study also intentionally examined the interaction of racial identities and other social identities (e.g., linguistic and citizenship status). The sixth tenet—story, theory, and praxis—centers on counter-narratives and storytelling to “challenge dominant, White, European epistemology and offer an alternative and empowering epistemological perspective that is grounded in the realities of people of color” (Iftikar & Museus, 2018, p. 941). As such, this study explored the following research question: What insights do the four Chinese international bilingual teachers’ stories tell us about their racialized and marginalized experiences as well as possibilities for transformative agency?

METHODS

Narrative inquiry methods were used because the broad conceptual lens of this study—AsianCrit—values storytelling as a means of expressing, understanding, and conveying one’s changing experiences from culture to culture, language to language, and place to place (Carr, 1986). Narrative inquiry also brings attention to counternarratives “to disrupt or to interrupt pervasive discourses that may paint communities and people, particularly communities and people of color, in grim, dismal ways” (Milner, 2012, p. 29). Furthermore, by articulating and evaluating their daily life and practices, one can develop transformative agency (Biesta & Tedder, 2007), gain critical insight into structures of power and privilege, and create more democratic and meaningful experiences for themselves and others (hooks, 1994). A narrative inquiry approach also allows a relational and contextual understanding (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) of the international bilingual teachers’ everyday agentic practices within the sociocultural context of their work and the resources made available to them through their previous experiences and school contexts (Li & Ruppard, 2021).

Context

The K-5 Mandarin-English dual language immersion (DLI) charter school under study is the only public Mandarin-English DLI school in a U.S. Midwestern city. At the time of the study, the school enrolled 113 students. The racial makeup of the student population was 62.8%

White, 14.2% two or more races, 13.3% Asian, 8.0% Hispanic or Latino of any race, and 1.8% Black or African American. 8.0% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and 6.2% receive special education services. Most students speak English only at home, with a small number of students from Mandarin-speaking households. Additionally, there are five teachers and staff members who are Mandarin-English bilingual, while the remaining teachers and staff are all identified as White and English-monolingual.

Participants

This study focused on four Chinese international bilingual teachers who all received K-12 formal education in China, moved to the U.S. as adults, and developed bilingualism in Mandarin and English. All names were pseudonyms selected by the participants.

Fei was a kindergarten and first-grade Mandarin classroom teacher with seven years of teaching experience at the DLI school. She taught Chinese language arts, math, science, and social-emotional learning. Fei described her teaching as centering on community building, a growth mindset, and positive reinforcement.

Lola was a second and third-grade Mandarin classroom teacher with five years of teaching experience at the DLI school. She taught Chinese language arts, science, and social studies. Lola described herself as caring and collaborative.

Lillian was the one and the only special education assistant at the DLI school for five years. Back in China, she taught English in early childhood. After coming to the U.S., she worked in multiple childcare centers. Lillian described herself as a coach providing one-on-one support to bilingual learners with disabilities.

Yun was a Confucius Institute teacher at the DLI school for less than two years. In China, she taught Chinese language arts at a public high school for nine years. She then became a Confucius Institute teacher and went to Indonesia to teach Mandarin in a private Mandarin-English immersion school before coming to U.S.

Data Generation and Collection

The current study utilizes interview data derived from a larger ethnographic study examining teacher agency for inclusive education. The three-interview series approach (Seidman, 2013) was used to explore (1) these teachers' personal life and schooling histories, (2) their present teaching practices, and (3) their interpretation of their teaching methods, school policies, and

environments. Sample interview questions include: Can you describe your current working environment, such as collegial relationships, school culture, and school policies? What are the challenges you have encountered so far in teaching emergent bilinguals with disabilities? What do you think should be changed about the education system or teaching in general? How would you define teacher agency? Due to scheduling constraints amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the shortest interview spanned 23 minutes, while the longest extended to 2 hours and 36 minutes. On average, each interview lasted for approximately 75 minutes. All participants used their heritage language—Mandarin—for the interviews. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and were audio-recorded, after which I transcribed and translated them.

Data Analysis

Guided by methods of qualitative analysis (Saldaña, 2016), I conducted a thematic analysis (Schiffrin, 1996) of the narrative data in three phases, using Nvivo. First, I read through the transcripts several times to gain initial insights into each teacher's experiences as a change agent in the local context (e.g., school). Meanwhile, I also used open coding (Saldaña, 2016) to identify internal codes and narrative segments for further exploration. Examples of open codes included "professional development," "seeking collaboration," "sense of unbelonging," "professional identity," and "language ideology." Second, I read the data deductively against the AsianCrit framework and literature regarding the experiences of international bilingual teachers. Examples of deductive codes included "linguicism," "nativistic racism," "immigration policy," "change-oriented practices," and "power struggle." Lastly, I used pattern coding and focused coding (Saldaña, 2016) to identify patterns and cluster themes by moving back and forth from within and across interviews.

Positionality and Trustworthiness

To achieve trustworthiness when analyzing the data, I aimed to be transparent and reflective about my personal experiences and shared identities as a Chinese international bilingual teacher and researcher. At the time of the study, I was a doctoral student in a White dominant institution, having great difficulty finding a community and developing a sense of belonging. My sociolinguistic identities shaped my everyday experiences and self-perception. Every single day, I was reminded that I look, speak, and think differently and that my differences are a deficit. However, for this study, my sociolinguistic identities helped me develop a close relationship with the four teacher participants, with whom I shared many similar transnational experiences.

I also had the privilege of being an insider of the school community. During the data collection for the larger ethnographic study, I was hired as a full-time building substitute teacher, working closely with the four teacher participants. Therefore, I was able to read the data from the teacher participants' perspectives to some extent. In addition, I conducted a member check by emailing them a copy of the interview transcripts and conducting follow-up conversations. By doing so, I enhanced the trustworthiness of this study and accomplished the triangulation of the data (Seidman, 2013).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A focus on Chinese international bilingual teachers' professional voices was foregrounded to illustrate their racialized and marginalized professional experiences and possibilities for transformative agency. Their narratives revealed that linguicism and nativistic racism were major professional barriers that these teachers faced when integrating into U.S. workplaces where they were positioned as perpetual foreigners with deficient accents. These teachers strategically enacted agency in subtle ways to cope with professional barriers, although they did not openly challenge unjust and exclusionary practices at their school.

Linguicism Dominates Everyday Work Life

The four Chinese international bilingual teachers experienced linguicism differently but shared the same feeling of marginalization due to the dominant role of English in their everyday workplace. Linguistic discrimination has been repeatedly evident in literature as a professional barrier among international bilingual teachers (Fotovatian, 2015; Rubio et al., 2021). For example, Yun, the Confucius Institute teacher, spoke English with a strong accent. She was assigned as a school aid, performing minimal to no instructional duty. She spent a lot of time helping in the cafeteria, playground, and school entrance. She was barely included in staff meetings about work arrangements and thus had limited decision-making power over her everyday work. Yun shared:

就是你生活在这样一个国家，真的，语言这一关过不了的话，根本就融入不了这个社会！就算是语言关过了，你要融入都是比较难的事情。 Living in a country like this, seriously, if you cannot speak their language, there is no way to be included in the society! Yet, even with fluency, inclusion remains challenging. (March 14, 2021)

Comparing her current teaching experiences to her previous experiences at a Mandarin-English DLI school in Indonesia where she independently led a classroom teaching Chinese language arts, Yun felt a sense of “委屈 [grievance]” and “伤心 [sadness].” Boyce et al. (2007)

and Pollock (2010) have pointed out that temporary teachers, like Yun, often encounter a high degree of uncertainty and powerlessness, and difficulty in establishing relationships with colleagues, school staff, administrators, and families. In Yun's case, linguicism rendered her temporary and de-professionalized work arrangements, which further marginalized her in the school community.

Lillian, the bilingual special education assistant, also encountered similar disrespect and neglect. When Lillian was supporting a bilingual learner with a disability in a White English-monolingual teacher's classroom, this teacher never spoke directly to her as if she “没有存在的 [did not exist]” (March 21, 2021). Lillian's experience reaffirmed the existence of linguicism towards international bilingual teachers who are often viewed as deficient English speakers and underqualified workers (Cook, 2016). Cook (2016) advocated for an asset-based perspective that views international bilingual teachers not as deficient or failed native speakers, but as multicompetent individuals who possess greater linguistic and cognitive abilities than monolinguals. Moreover, as emphasized by AsianCrit (Iftikar & Museus, 2018) and other critical race frameworks, linguicism does not exist in isolation; it intersects with other forms of oppression, impacting international bilingual individuals who are also racially minoritized. For Yun and Lillian, their experience of marginalization is not simply a temporary issue that will be resolved once they get rid of their accent, because one's language practices are closely intertwined with racial stereotypes (Yeo, 2023). Rosa and Flores (2017) contend that “racialized subjects are perpetually perceived as linguistically deficient even when engaging in language practices that would likely be legitimized or even prized were they produced by white speaking subjects” (p. 628).

Fei and Lola, both lead teachers in Mandarin classrooms, encountered linguicism through the prevalence of English hegemony in teaching practices. Fei expressed her frustration about Mandarin bilingual school staff shortage and the school's lack of commitment to providing Mandarin language instruction for bilingual learners with disabilities:

这个中文，它就是一个漏网之鱼。第一，明文没有规定说你这个中文要放在它的这个 IEP 里面，然后要去 check in 要去这个 document。第二个没有人懂，就那些 special educator 就不懂这个中文。他本来是要去跟我们 collaborate，教我们要怎么去教这个东西，去适应这个 special education 的学生，但她都不会说这门语言。... 而且你说别的方面都有各种各样的 specialist，你有 reading specialists，这个 math 也有，然后还有这个 OT, PT，都有这种专门的 specialists 去辅助。那你说中文，我们啥也没有。

Mandarin language learning often falls through the cracks. First, there is no written policy saying that an individualized education plan (IEP) should indicate Mandarin learning goals, and someone will check in and document related learning progress. Second, nobody, such as the special education teacher,

understands Mandarin. They are supposed to collaborate with us and teach us how to work with bilinguals with disabilities. But they do not even speak Mandarin. ... There are various specialists, such as reading specialists, math specialists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists, who could provide additional support. But we have no Mandarin-speaking specialists in these areas. (March 21, 2021)

Similarly, Lola criticized that her White English-monolingual colleagues and families treated Mandarin language learning as an “extra benefit” that can be compromised at any time. For instance, she noted that math for second to fifth graders was taught solely by English-monolingual teachers due to concerns from both the school and families regarding standardized math tests administered in English. In addition, the school principal did not set high standards for Mandarin language teaching and never actively required Mandarin classroom teachers to attend professional development (PD) in bilingual instruction. Lola commented: “我们学校的 pattern 是这样，就是她看到 resource 会发给你，问你要不要去。 [Here is our school principal’s behavior pattern. She would forward relevant PD resources to us and kindly ask if we are willing to attend]” (April 17, 2021). In other words, attending PD in bilingual instruction was just a kind recommendation, not a requirement. Lola also criticized the lack of acknowledgment of Mandarin language and culture in the school building: “你走廊里面怎么能没有一些中文字呢？或者是中国文化元素有关的东西呢？但我们现在走廊里什么都没有。 [How come there are no Chinese characters or Chinese culture-related decorations in the hallway? Right now, we have nothing.]” (April 17, 2021).

Both Fei and Lola’s comments revealed that not all languages are in equal status in the U.S. sociopolitical context (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017). Teachers and service providers who work with bilingual learners with disabilities, such as special education teachers, reading interventionists, and occupational therapists, are not required to be bilingual (de Jong & Howard, 2009). The mandatory standardized achievement testing is administered in English and therefore leads to administrators, teachers, and families’ neglective or indifferent attitudes toward minoritized language learning (Lee & Oxelson, 2006). This dominant role of English made Fei and Lola’s bilingual teaching difficult and rendered their marginal position at the DLI school.

Nativistic Racism in Forms of Work Visa Regulation and Complex Race Relations

The four Chinese international bilingual teachers described dealing with work visa issues as a stay-or-leave problem that significantly impacted their lives. Studies have shown that negotiating legal positions and maintaining work visa status is a primary challenge that

international workers must face (Foote et al., 2008; Gabor, 2016). For example, Fei worked under a temporary work visa for seven years until she obtained a permanent resident card that allowed her to live and work permanently in the United States. The temporary work visa must be renewed every three years. During those seven years, Fei never considered changing jobs, as any professional transition could potentially entail the risk of leaving the United States.

Similarly, Lola experienced significant insecurity, anxiety, and frustration about the temporary work visa renewal process. At the time of the study, she had to find a new teaching position because her school district failed to renew her temporary work visa. Lola mentioned that she began compiling materials for work visa renewal and reached out to the human resources office nearly three years in advance. However, despite her efforts, for three years, no one in the human resources office took her request seriously. As a result, she had to explore the possibility of securing a new position in a different school district or even a different state where obtaining a work visa would be feasible. Lola shared:

但是学区这么多年来一直没有去重视。... 而我待了五年，终于感觉上手了，有了一点点自己的体系，却因为 HR 不把我的签证问题放在心上。就 very frustrated。像校长自己也是完全不懂中国老师办理工作签证方面的任何知识。很多情况下，老师自己为了留下来，都应该办好的自己办好了，尽量不给校长或者学区添麻烦，然后会把接下来需要的都讲清楚。学区的 HR 其实只要把事情放在心上，只要多 follow up 一下就没问题的。

But for all these years, the school district never paid attention to the work visa issue. ... I taught at the school for five years. I became more skilled and developed my Chinese teaching philosophy and pedagogy. But just because the human resources office did not pay attention to my work visa issue, I must leave. I am very frustrated. The school principal did not have any relevant knowledge either. To stay, Chinese teachers often take care of things as much as they can and try not to bother the school principal and the school district. They also provide clear information about the steps to take for a work visa application. As long as the human resource office pays attention and conducts follow-ups, there will be no problem. (April 26, 2021)

To become a legal presence, these four Chinese international bilingual teachers must tirelessly navigate the complex work visa and immigration regulations alongside the administration's ignorance of and indifference to relevant policy and procedure. AsianCrit does not clarify the role of nationality and race in shaping the experiences of international Asian immigrants, because for international Asian immigrants, "navigating an Asian American identity comes with the double-edged issue of race and nationality. ...the term 'American' places an added emphasis on the necessity of citizenship for their experiences as Asian to be valid" (Chowdhury 2017, p. 63). Hence, to comprehensively understand the experiences of these four Chinese international bilingual teachers, who were consistently treated as perpetual foreigners, it is imperative to adopt an intersectional lens to encompass

their diverse backgrounds, nationality, race, language, culture, class, religion, and gender (Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Yeo, 2023).

Navigating complex race relations was another difficult issue for these four Chinese international bilingual teachers. They conveyed that news of racist and xenophobic attacks targeting Asians and Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic triggered numerous fears and traumas within them. Lola, in an interview following the Atlantic shootings, expressed her appreciation for participating in a mandatory district-wide professional development (PD) focusing on African American history. She expressed her hope that one day, teachers could also undergo a similar mandatory PD centered on Asian American history. Yun mentioned the closing of several Confucius Institute programs due to a U.S. law passed in 2019 that prohibits universities hosting Confucius Institutes from receiving federal funding for Chinese language studies (Cole, 2019; Fisher, 2019; Fuchs, 2019). Yun shared:

最近的新闻看到说，他们在街上打骂华人，然后侮辱华人。只要我们长着这张脸，就可以看出来。... 因为不了解就会产生隔阂，然后隔阂就慢慢的，有的时候发生一些事情，就会变成仇恨，然后仇恨就慢慢的再往大的酝酿，可能就会变成战争。

In recent news, I learned that some people attacked and insulted Chinese Americans. People can tell who we are just from our physical appearance. ... Misunderstanding happens because of not knowing. Then, due to some incidents, misunderstanding grows into hatred and maybe even leads to war. (March 14, 2021)

Discussion on the controversy over the impacts of the Confucius Institutes in the academic and political sphere is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, the closure of numerous Confucius Institutes further heightened Yun's feelings of not belonging and insecurity. She considered leaving the U.S. soon. Qiu et al. (2023) described all the present-day anti-Asian violence as “prime examples of the fluidity of the Asian (American)s’ racialization and the partial and conditional status of Asian (American)s” (p. 2).

These four Chinese international teachers’ racialization and partial, conditional status can be explained by the AsianCrit framework. On one hand, Asians and Asian Americans are framed as the model minority, which elevates them in contrast to other racially minoritized populations, especially Black or African Americans, to uphold Whiteness and legitimize anti-Black racism (DiAngelo, 2006; Poon et al., 2016). On the other hand, Asians and Asian Americans are characterized as inherently and physically different and therefore perpetual foreigners impossible to assimilate (Lee, 2006; Takaki, 1998). The closure of many Confucius Institutes and the restrictive work visa regulation also speak to the material and psychological impacts of transnational mechanisms, such as U.S. immigration policies and

global political relationships, on Asian and Asian American experiences (Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

Possibilities for Transformative Agency

These four Chinese international bilingual teachers all evidenced an awareness of power struggles, racial inequity, and discrimination. In response, they exercised agency through subtle and strategic means rather than openly confronting structural injustices. For instance, Lillian mentioned that her overseas credentials and teaching experiences were not valued, and thus, she was often treated as incompetent. As a bilingual special education assistant, she wished to have more decision-making power when working with White English-monolingual special education and general education teachers. She shared:

我觉得特教老师其实可以给我们这样的角色更多的这个决定权。... 因为我们毕竟都是受过高等教育。很多东西你给我们一看就懂，而且我们可能会有自己的想法。... 然后她可以把一个很简单很小的事情跟你可能花5分钟讲。... 我们在教这个数学的时候，你可以告诉我们美国是用什么方式教。但是可能我们在教学的过程中会发现有更好的方法，或者可以多选的方式。我们还是可以尝试。但是有时候我就不能够说多，因为我只要提出来了一点，她就觉得哪个地方有点不对。

I think the special education teacher can give people like us more decision-making power. ... We received higher education. We can understand the information and instructions given right away. And we may have our own insights and perspectives. ... The special education teacher often spends maybe five minutes just explaining one small simple thing. ... Also, when we help students with math, she can teach us instructional strategies used in the U.S., but we may find better or alternative ways to teach math as we work with students. We can try out different strategies. But I cannot share much. Whenever I suggest an idea, she consistently seems to find fault with it. (March 21, 2021)

Lillian's experience was not unique. Studies have shown that international bilingual teachers' overseas credentials and teaching experience are often not recognized, which can impede their professional integration (Ng & Shan, 2010; Soheili-Mehr, 2018). To obtain more agency and autonomy in her everyday work, instead of speaking directly to the special education teacher, Lillian conveyed her concerns and emotions to their mutual supervisor, who was African American, with whom she felt a stronger connection compared to the White English-monolingual special education teacher. Seeking support and resources from leadership is a demonstration of agency and can impact teachers' working conditions (Li & Ruppap, 2021; Wang et al., 2017).

Different from Lillian and Yun, Lola and Fei's position as the lead teacher granted them more decision-making power. They chose to enact agency in their everyday classroom teaching and development of professional skills. For example, Fei actively developed knowledge in translanguaging and inclusive education philosophy and pedagogy to best

support culturally and linguistically diverse students and cultivate their interests in Chinese language learning. She also encouraged Chinese heritage students to develop their own methods for memorizing Chinese characters and sentence structures and to share these strategies with their peers. Additionally, she actively involved bilingual students with disabilities in selecting books for shared reading, voting for class activities, and fostering leadership and peer support among themselves.

Similarly, Lola spent a lot of time after school doing individual research on culturally and linguistically responsive practices. She was creating a Chinese language arts curriculum and teaching materials that would not reinforce or reproduce stereotyped and essentialized images of Chinese culture. She also actively sought resources and support from colleagues. Lola shared:

首先我是从我自己身上去找问题，就是看我怎么能变得更加的好。对于我自己的专业我首先要把握好，就是怎么把这中文教好。我一点点去抓住这些 resource。... 我去找周围能找到的所有老师跟他们一起备课。... 我希望我们的学校是一个真的能让孩子们从小培养的是一种能够接受各种各样的不同。包括更好的对中国和中国文化有更进一步的了解。

I first reflected on my own shortcomings in teaching to see what to improve. I should first be competent in carrying out my work, that is, teaching Mandarin well. I also slowly collected the necessary resources. ... I asked all the teachers that I could find for collaboration. ... I hope that our school can truly commit to preparing students from an early age to embrace differences, including having more knowledge about China and Chinese culture. (May 8, 2021)

The agency demonstrated by Fei and Lola underscores the statement that agentic teachers are more likely to identify and seek collegial and environmental support to improve professional skills ultimately (Pantić et al., 2022; Wong et al., 2020). Their agentic efforts also echo the dedication of other racially minoritized bilingual teachers to translanguaging pedagogy that seeks to nurture children's bi/multilingual identities, full linguistic repertoires, agency, and belonging (e.g., García-Mateus & Palmer, 2017; Kim & Kwon, 2024; Martínez et al., 2015; Tian, 2022).

However, when it comes to the absence of collaboration between Mandarin and English classroom teachers in the form of co-planning or co-teaching for bilingual instruction, both Lola and Fei expressed that they attempted to initiate collaborative efforts but faced challenges due to the lack of support and willingness from their White English-monolingual colleagues. For instance, Ms. Lola said:

我之前就是教那个 social study 的时候，我去找过我搭档。我跟她说我要做什么，但是她就不会去跟我一起合作做这个。她有她自己一整套的 unit 她不能去打破，她也不愿意去打破。

Once I was planning for my social study lessons, I reached out to my English classroom partner, sharing what I was planning to do and asking for collaboration. She was not willing to collaborate. She had a set of curriculum units that she could not and did not want to change. (April 17, 2021)

Fei and Lola shared their frustration with this strict language separation approach (García & Lin, 2016). This approach focuses on teaching two individual languages separately, resulting in the “two solitudes” assumption that exclusively relies on monolingual instructional approaches (Cummins, 2008). As a result, English classroom teachers find it unnecessary to collaborate with Mandarin classroom teachers. Fei and Lola failed to lead a collaborative team and change the school culture of teaching bilingualism as two monolinguals in one (Grosjean, 2019). Their failed attempt speaks to Pantić et al.’s (2022) argument that “teacher agency may not always be about instigating change, but rather, a responsive behavior embedded in daily practice” (p. 170). In other words, teachers may tend to exercise their agency, at an individual level, in their own daily teaching practices and less to challenge dominant discourses or initiate school and systemic reforms.

These teachers’ agentic action and advocacy operate in a more subtle and strategic means (e.g., daily teaching practices), but their transformative aim or power is undeniable. Hale et al. (2008) pointed out that “having the courage to look deep inside oneself and make the necessary changes it takes to become a more caring, passionate, and democratic educator is not an easy task” (p. 1423). Lillian’s comment also powerfully illustrated their transformative aim:

我感觉对于中国人来说吧，其实是我们的文化决定了我们不是很喜欢惹事儿。... 但是如果没有去争取自己的权益，我可以这样说，没有人会关注你和为你发声。
... 你得让别人觉得你的声音很重要。你得 **speaking up**。

I think as Chinese; we are shaped by our culture in ways that we do not like initiating confrontations. ... But if you don’t stand up for your rights, it’s unlikely anyone else will advocate for you. ... Our voice matters. It’s crucial to **speaking up**. (March 21, 2021)

The four teachers actively reflected on their daily teaching practices and social contexts. This process empowered them to envision alternative approaches to teaching and cultivate a more dynamic school environment.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Racism is pervasive and permanent in the U.S. and across the globe in this global neoliberal era (Christian, 2019). The four Chinese international bilingual teachers in the current study were not immune from racialized experiences either. In fact, they experienced extra layers of

marginalization due to their linguistic, ethnic, and citizenship status. Global economic, social, and political relationships also shaped their identities and experiences in the United States. Therefore, teacher education and professional development should help all international bilingual teachers navigate their racialized identities that come with the double-edged issue of race and nationality (Chowdhury, 2017). Furthermore, teacher education programs should work with local school districts to learn work visa and immigration policies and procedures to support international bilingual teachers throughout the certification and employment process. Professional development and mentorship programs should also be tailored to the needs of international bilingual teachers and address stereotypes and prejudice about international bilingual teachers (Foote et al., 2008; Su-Russell & James, 2021).


Findings also revealed the possibilities for agentive work through subtle and everyday actions. These Chinese international bilingual teachers' agentive work, such as seeking leadership support, self-reflection, and continuously improving teaching skills, should be acknowledged and encouraged. However, to confront systemic injustices such as linguicism and nativist racism, international bilingual teachers should further develop and embrace their advocacy and leadership identities (Palmer, 2018; Rubio et al., 2021). Therefore, teacher education and professional development should help international bilingual teachers understand their role as teacher leaders who can expand their responsibilities beyond teaching in their siloed classrooms. As Rubio et al. (2021) defined, "teacher leaders are those who take an interest in and advocate for policies, curricula, and programs in their schools, districts, and state and national education systems" (p. 47).

The current study revealed stories of only four Chinese international bilingual teachers about their racialized and marginalized professional experiences and agency for change. However, these stories allow a holistic and nuanced understanding of international bilingual teachers' professional experiences and structural barriers that rendered them a sense of uncertainty, un-belonging, powerlessness, inferiority, and discrimination. Stories can help people see themselves and others as part of a collective whole rather than marginalized and isolated strangers (hooks, 1994).

By recounting these stories, I tried to demonstrate that the racialized and marginalized experiences faced by international bilingual teachers are not isolated incidents. Moreover, my hope was to highlight how their subtle yet strategic actions can have a meaningful impact, serving as a source of inspiration and validation for others in similar situations. Additional research, such as life history and participatory action research, is still needed to re-center

international bilingual teachers' voices and agency and resist deficit narratives of them as deficient English speakers and underqualified teachers.

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