

# Study on the Emotional Labor of Young International Chinese Teachers

## -- An Educational Ethnography Based on S University in Shandong Province

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**Abstract.** This paper uses educational ethnography to examine in depth the emotional labor of the development of the particular professional identity of young international Chinese teachers and the underlying mechanisms behind emotions. The study found that the performance and strategy of young international Chinese teachers' emotional labor was dominated by deep acting, and that professional self-esteem, professional constraint, and cross-cultural conflict were important factors contributing to the emotional labor overload of this professional group. Although emotional labor constructs the meaning of daily life, it also reinforces this group's sense of self-alienation and professional burnout. Based on this, it is important to pay attention to the professional needs of young international Chinese teachers, establish a community mechanism for international Chinese teachers, and improve the professional assessment system for young international Chinese teachers in order to promote the maintenance of emotional labor at a normal and reasonable level, reduce emotional exhaustion, and enhance job satisfaction and professional gain.

**Keywords:** Young international Chinese teachers; Emotional labor; Educational ethnography.

### 1. Introduction

Emotional labor was first introduced by the American sociologist Hochschild, who called it the "third kind of labor" in addition to physical and mental labor<sup>2</sup>. Emotional labor is not only an expression of emotions in accordance with organizational norms, but also a self-expression in social interaction. In January 2020, the Institute of Education, University College London, conducted a study on the psychological state of more than 20,000 teachers and found that "nearly five per cent of teachers suffer from chronic emotional and mental health problems, a five-fold increase compared to the early 1990s, due to increased professional load and uncertainty about their career prospects." <sup>3</sup> Psychological problems are closely linked to emotions and are largely influenced by the emotional exhaustion and depletion of psychological capital that comes with emotional labor.

In addition to the emotional stresses of ordinary teachers, international Chinese teachers are faced with complex and changing educational contexts and cultural backgrounds, as well as teaching audiences with different motivations for learning Chinese, and need to constantly adjust their emotional state and manage their true feelings in order to express their emotions in line with professional norms, school systems and teaching goals. Young international Chinese language teachers face more teaching challenges and management pressures during their career advancement, and are vulnerable to emotional dysregulation due to the implicit emotional rules. How to optimize the emotional labor of this professional group is a key factor in ensuring the vitality of the international Chinese language education system.

How do young international Chinese teachers engage in emotional labor? What are the causes of their emotional labor? What are the effects of emotional labor overload? In response to these questions, this study explores the daily work experiences of young international Chinese language teachers and the environment they work in, in the hope that this will arouse awareness and concern for the emotional labor of young international Chinese language teachers and provide an important reference for the exploration of support mechanisms for international Chinese language teachers' professional development.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Teachers' Emotional Labor

At the end of the 20th century, a number of researchers abroad, including Hargreaves and Zembylas, shifted the focus of their research to the teacher community.<sup>4</sup> In China, this began in the early 21st century. In terms of theoretical research, teachers' emotional labor has been interpreted in the context of affective event theory (Weiss 1996), symbolic interaction theory (Yin Hongbiao 2011) and the job requirement-resource preservation model (Zheng Jiu Hua 2022). In terms of empirical research, the research paradigm is relatively homogeneous, with few qualitative studies, and large-sample quantitative and cross-sectional studies have long dominated, focusing mostly on the antecedent variables, outcome variables, mediating effects and emotional control strategies of teachers' emotional labor.

Emotional labor is a complex and variable activity, and the emotional work produced in the educational process has an emotional undercurrent, which is intrinsically coupled with the emphasis on understanding and interpretation in qualitative research<sup>5</sup>. Thus, it is necessary to use qualitative research methods to investigate the emotional labor in teaching and learning in depth. In addition, the emotional labor of early childhood teachers, university teachers and primary school classroom teachers has been the subject of much research, but the special professional group of international Chinese teachers has not yet been focused on.

### 2.2 International Chinese Language Teacher Development

As front-line practitioners in the construction of an international Chinese language communication system, international Chinese language teachers promote the construction of a professional support system for international Chinese language teachers as an inevitable choice to ensure the high-quality and sustainable development of international Chinese language education.<sup>6</sup> Research related to international Chinese teachers has been developed over dozens of years and has been fruitful so far, mainly focusing on research on teachers' classroom teaching ability and training related to teacher literacy enhancement. For example, Liu Lijia (2019) proposes that Chinese language teacher training should be tailored to the developmental stages of teachers' competence; Li Gui and Zhuang Yaoyao (2021) advocate the inclusion of information literacy into the professional training system to enhance the information competence and information awareness of international Chinese language education practitioners. Most of the relevant studies focus on knowledge and skills, and there is almost no research on the high level of emotional commitment of international Chinese teachers and the impact of emotions on teachers' professional development.

Based on this, this study defines teachers' emotional labor as the process of regulating their emotional feelings and expressions in accordance with professional requirements and teaching goals, focusing on the emotional labor of young international Chinese teachers.

## 3. Research Design

### 3.1 Research Methodology

Educational ethnography is the process of observing, experiencing and interviewing a particular group of people over a long period of time in their workplace or in their lives, in order to describe and interpret the research process of this group of people as a whole and its final findings. Educational ethnography emphasizes the acquisition of first-hand information from prolonged fieldwork and the dual understanding and interpretation of both primary and secondary perspectives.

This study took the School of International Education of S University, a double-class university in Shandong Province, as the fieldwork site, and entered the international Chinese teaching classrooms of young teachers in the school for up to four months to conduct participatory observation and record relevant teaching language and teaching behaviors. At the same time, 15 young teachers were selected

for a three-month-long in-depth interview, maintaining online interaction and offline communication to enrich the qualitative data obtained from the field observation. The sample of qualitative interviews, although small, focused on the exploration of theoretical concepts, deeper descriptions of qualitative data and reflective interpretations, and on gaining a deeper understanding and appreciation of the world of the interviewees' experiences and how to give meaning to these experiences.

### 3.2 3.2 Object of the Study

The study used snowball sampling to select a comprehensive sample of young international Chinese teachers under 40 years old and less than 10 years of teaching experience. A comprehensive sample of 15 respondents was selected and anonymized, and coded with S-1 to S-15 in order of interview time. Some of the interviewees clearly indicated an age range of under 40 years, but their exact age was not disclosed.

**Table 1.** Basic information about the interviewees

No.	Age	Gender	Teaching age	Title	No.	Age	Gender	Teaching age	Title
S-1	31	M	8	Lecturer	S-8	34	F	5	Lecturer
S-2	Undisclosed	F	2	Lecturer	S-10	Undisclosed	F	6	Lecturer
S-3	37	F	4	Associate Professor	S-11	Undisclosed	F	2	Lecturer
S-4	38	M	5	Lecturer	S-12	34	F	3	Lecturer
S-5	Undisclosed	M	3	Associate Professor	S-13	Undisclosed	M	7	Lecturer
S-6	36	F	5	Lecturer	S-14	40	M	5	Lecturer
S-7	40	F	9	Lecturer	S-15	36	F	4	Lecturer

## 4. Research Findings

### 4.1 Performance of Emotional Labor

Even though there are no clear and rigid requirements for the emotional performance of international Chinese language teachers in schools or in the profession, young teachers are particularly concerned about their emotional performance in the classroom and tend to exaggerate positive emotions and suppress negative emotions in the classroom. Positive emotions refer to a range of emotions such as enthusiasm, joy and other emotions that can bring the classroom atmosphere together, bring the teacher and students closer together and facilitate students' language learning, while negative emotions refer to loss and anger.

#### 4.1.1. Ubiquitous Deep Acting

The process of suppressing negative emotions in order to express positive ones and the process of translating internal perceptions into external actions is the use of emotional labor strategies. Classical emotional labor strategies include both surface acting and deep acting. "The former is a false presentation of emotion after hiding the real emotion; the latter is an internal adjustment to align the individual's emotional experience with the expression".<sup>7</sup> In recent years, Defender and other scholars have combined the original theoretical framework to propose a third category of emotional labor strategies, namely natural expression (expression of naturally felt emotion), that is, the natural expression of emotions without adjustment. Young international Chinese language teachers combine both surface acting strategies and deep acting strategies in their emotional labor regulation, and the deep acting strategies are more frequent.

The use of surface play strategy of the Young International Chinese Language Teacher's is mainly reflected in the expressions and language used when pointing out students' shortcomings. "Sometimes I am angry at some of the students' behavior, but if I express my anger directly, the students may not come to class the next day, so I will suppress this anger and use a 'sandwich-style' expression to tell them what I think, that is, praise them first and then point out the problems (Interviewer S-3). then

point out the problem (Interviewer S-3)." Previous research on emotional labor has tended to suggest that surface acting strategies are used more frequently and will deplete more emotional resources than deep acting strategies. However, the use of deep acting strategies by the YI teachers was almost ubiquitous. "Language learning is inherently boring, so it is important to show positive emotions in the classroom to stimulate students' interest in language learning." "I would constantly tell myself that negative emotions are firmly not to be shown, and negative information about the country It is also important not to reveal negative information because international Chinese language teachers are not just 'teachers' jobs, but also a job that involves foreigners and has more industry requirements." (Interviewer S-7) These thoughts and beliefs reflect the invisible professional and social statutes and expectations of international Chinese teachers' emotional performance, and moreover, the internalization of these implicit statutes by young teachers, that is the use of deep acting strategies.

#### **4.1.2 The Silent Structural Dilemma**

Most teachers believe that it does not matter what emotions they have in the classroom, but that it is important to express the emotions needed by the organization and those that are conducive to students learning Chinese, and some even believe that negative emotions should not exist as long as they enter the classroom as a field. It is evident that the essence of the deep acting strategy is to dissolve the authentic emotional experience, and that authentic emotions are contained by internalized statutes before they can be produced, leaving teachers in a structural dilemma instead over time. When their own authentic emotions are in tension with the emotions required by the organization, they are unable to make accurate distinctions and regulate them appropriately.

### **4.2 Causes of Emotional Labor**

#### **4.2.1. Professional Self-esteem: The Need for Rewarding Teaching**

Young international Chinese teachers have a stronger need for self-fulfillment and self-esteem than experienced older teachers, and want to be treated with equality and respect in the teaching process. "I used to teach a class of six students from different countries, who were completely uncooperative and silent in class. I felt very overwhelmed but couldn't show it. I can't pull those students in." (Interviewer S-13) Young international Chinese teachers' expectations of the effectiveness of their work are highly idealized, and when teachers are not respected and rewarded for their teaching efforts, and their sense of professional value is not met, this inevitably leads to internal imbalance and anxiety. This creates a high level of emotional work.

#### **4.2.2. Professional Constraint: Respect for the Rules of Teaching**

National strategic policies and the rapid development of technology have created unprecedented opportunities for the development of international Chinese language education. As the backbone of the development of international Chinese language education, international Chinese language teachers have been elevated to a higher status. This constant elevation of the status of international Chinese language teachers has, to some extent, become a professional constraint for international Chinese language teachers, resulting in young international Chinese language teachers becoming accustomed to using deep acting strategies for emotional regulation and overloading their careers.

Young international Chinese teachers are also motivated to engage in emotional labor by a reverence for the rules of teaching. For young international Chinese language teachers, career development and professional prospects are generally the most important concerns for this group, so the expression of one's true emotions always gives way to the constraints of professional rules. "No matter what the students do, I have to suppress my emotions, because I have to get through the lesson, otherwise it is a teaching accident. Teaching accidents are like the sword of Damocles, they can have an incalculable impact on a teacher's career and I feel like a donkey being whipped by the rules in these situations." (Interviewer S-5)

### 4.2.3. Cross-cultural Conflict: Collectivist Discipline

Intercultural sensitivity is the most important characteristic that distinguishes international Chinese language teachers from other groups of teachers, as well as from the emotional labor of other groups of teachers. Even if they have received some training in intercultural communication and cross-cultural adjustment, young international Chinese teachers will inevitably experience shocks and discomfort in real-life situations, which they cannot express and can only suppress or dissipate through surface play or deep acting. "For example, one of the M students walked in through the front door late and the T students were always very casual in class. At the time I found this quite offensive, but later on other teachers told me that this was a normal phenomenon in their country." (Interviewer S-8) In addition, the ways of regulating emotions and expressing emotions differed greatly from culture to culture "because different cultures have different rules for emotions." This is also evident by the higher frequency of the use of deep acting strategies by young international Chinese teachers, whose emotional labor is characterized by an implicit, relationship-oriented nature. Whereas students from other cultures may express their emotions in a personally oriented, extroverted manner, directly expressing their dissatisfaction with the teacher's teaching, teachers' emotional expression and emotional labor is often built in, while being influenced by collectivist cultural rules, consciously taking into account the feelings of others or the bigger picture of the classroom, ignoring their own emotional state, and the emotional struggle triggered by the discrepancy between their real emotions and those required by the emotional rules<sup>9</sup> to some extent exacerbates the intensity of emotional labor.

## 4.3 The Multiple Influences of Emotional Labor

Emotional labor is the unity of the teacher's emotional and affective purpose and regularity. As a professional need and a professional feeling, emotional labor is an implicit contribution to the achievement of teaching goals and the optimization of the teaching process.

### 4.3.1. Constructing a Sense of Everyday Value

Interviewees who had been teaching for five years or more reported that the longer they worked in the profession, the more they found that they had developed a sense of professional inertia and professional outlook: smiling a lot, speaking slowly, being tolerant, etc. This has, to a certain extent, become an important part of the young Chinese language teachers' professional life. This has become an important part of the professional development of young international Chinese teachers. It is evident that the ability to labor emotionally at a normal level is also a necessary professional quality and professional discipline for teachers, and even contributes, to a greater or lesser extent, to other aspects of daily life and interpersonal interactions, and to a certain extent promotes a sense of self-identity among young international Chinese teachers. "These habits that this profession makes us develop are actually helpful for us to do things as a person in general, and are a reflection that we have better qualities; after all, people are in a society or a group, and they have to consider the emotions of others in everything they do and in any social activities they conduct." (Interviewer S-11) If you didn't have these characteristics, people might still think you are a bit strange or not suitable for our line of work." (Interviewer S-13)

### 4.3.2. Reinforcing a Sense of Self-detachment

No teacher can remain emotionally charged and emotionally regulated on the basis of interest, emotion and will alone. According to the author's research, young international Chinese teachers are under increasing pressure to meet rigid criteria for appointment and promotion, and they are often overloaded with emotional work as they jump back and forth between teaching practice and research projects. "This has had a great impact on my mental state and the way I deal with people. I am full of energy in the classroom, but afterwards I am so tired that I don't want to say a word and just want to lie down and rest." (Interviewer S-5)

The depletion of psychological resources caused by high levels of emotional labor reinforces teachers' internal feelings of self-alienation and allows for a build-up of internal imbalances. "At the college, young teachers who take on many language teaching tasks are actually often very tired,

sometimes with six or seven classes a day, but our efforts are often easily overlooked and we young language teachers are rarely noticed. As a result, we rarely participate in other activities of the faculty and always exist as marginal people." (Interviewer S-1)

### **4.3.3. Leading to Burnout**

When emotional labor is in a state of overload, young teachers face more serious physical and psychological challenges. Failure to compensate for depleted emotional resources and psychological capital in a timely manner not only affects the quality of work, but also leads to lower job satisfaction and reduced self-efficacy, which in turn can lead to career anxiety and reinforce feelings of burnout. Some interviewees suggested that emotional overwork may also be an important reason for the high rate of young teachers and brain drain in this sector.

## **5. Countermeasures and Revelations**

For the particular professional group of young international Chinese teachers, both the macro aspects of national policies and cultural contexts and the micro aspects of individual resistance form a complex picture for the study of emotional labor. Such a complex picture is difficult to fully explain from a single perspective of alienation theory, where the emotional labor of individuals is under multiple and complex power structures and discourse systems. How to maintain the emotional labor of young international teachers at a normal level and how to promote the healthy development of young international Chinese teachers' emotional states are important issues that need to be addressed. This study can provide insights into the following responses.

### **5.1 Paying Attention to the Professional Needs of Young International Chinese Language Teachers**

In addition to their teaching responsibilities, young international Chinese teachers also need time for independent research and emotional regulation. Faculty administrators should give this group freer time, allocate reasonable course assignments to teachers, and improve the external work management mechanism for teachers. At the same time, young international Chinese teachers should be aware that the key to maintaining a normal level of emotional work is not to overcome or suppress negative emotions, but to accommodate and release them and to minimize their negative impact, and to actively regulate emotional expression and feelings, such as through confession and recreation, as appropriate.

### **5.2 Establishing a Community Mechanism for International Chinese Teachers**

The group emotional climate and the sense of organizational support have an important influence on young international Chinese teachers' individual emotional expression and emotional presentation, so it is important to pay attention to the establishment of an international Chinese teachers' community for young international Chinese teachers to reasonably perform emotional labor. Faculty administrators should fully mobilize resources, invite professional psychologists, hold relevant salons or group training, and provide timely emotional and psychological assistance from the acquisition of positive emotions and the handling of negative emotions<sup>10</sup>. This will enable young international Chinese teachers to regulate their emotional labor in group support and interaction, and to master more ways and techniques to maintain a reasonable level of emotional labor in mutual communication, thus forming a mutual support atmosphere. In turn, it creates a sense of organizational support and promotes the natural expression of emotions.

### **5.3 Improving the Professional Evaluation System for Young International Chinese Teachers**

Emotional labor has not yet been truly incorporated into the professional performance appraisal of international Chinese teachers, so that after a long period of emotional labor, it is difficult for teachers to replenish the depleted resources from their organizations, which to some extent forms a vicious circle of continuous depletion of emotional resources. The professional appraisal system of

international Chinese teachers should be improved, and certain organizational support and organizational compensation should be given in terms of emotional payoffs to promote young international Chinese teachers to play a positive role in individual emotional labor, so as to enhance job satisfaction and professional gain and happiness, form a healthy emotional state, and maintain a reasonable level of emotional labor.

## 6. Conclusion

Research on emotional labor is still in the exploratory stage for this particular group of young international Chinese teachers. It is worthwhile to conduct more precise and detailed observations and discussions in this area, and to expand the sample size and scope to broaden the applicability of the research findings. In addition, this study aims to use the qualitative research method of educational ethnography for understanding interpretation and deeper description of experience, and mainly adopts a cross-sectional research design method. In future research, on the one hand, it can be combined with longitudinal research to reveal the dynamic change process of international Chinese teachers' emotional labor through longitudinal comparison and quantitative analysis. On the other hand, we can actively promote the interdisciplinary integration of medical, psychological, and sociological research to comprehensively reveal the mechanisms of emotional labor and influence mechanisms of this special group of international Chinese teachers, so that the emotional labor of international Chinese teachers of all age groups can be noticed and cared for by policy makers, teaching administrators, and learners. As a result, international Chinese teachers of all ages will be able to maintain their emotional work at a normal and reasonable level, and effectively promote healthy and stable emotional states and enhance their sense of professional gain.

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