'I Can't Have My Cake and eat it too': A Narrative Inquiry of a Chinese Female Teacher's Gendered Identity

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Abstract: *This paper explores how a female EFL teacher in a public primary school in China negotiates her identity to adapt to the new 'work-life balance' challenge through her narratives. From a post structural feminist perspective, it aims to illuminate the complexity of the female teacher's identity as it is located both in the micro institutional and macro sociocultural contexts. The findings of the study show that our participant's identities tend to be constantly in process, contradictory, fragmented, and much gendered. This study contributes to our understanding of the challenge and pressure that female EFL teachers confront when the traditional family and social culture contradicts their professional development. This study also offers some practical implications for both governmental and institutional administrators on how to help female teachers construct a positive identity under pressure both from work and family to support their professional development and teaching practice in the long run.*

Keywords: *gendered identity, female teacher, narrative inquiry, post structural feminist theory*

1. INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have witnessed an increasing interest in EFL teachers' professional experience and identity construction. Many researchers have observed the dominance of female teachers in primary school and characterized "feminization" of primary schooling as an important discourse in education (e.g. Luk-Fong, 2013). A similar situation has been also observed in the Chinese context, for example, according to the statistic data published by the Ministry of Education of China, percentage of female full-time teachers in primary school has exceeded 67%, and in 12-Year schools - 80%. Despite these numbers, as Luk-Fong (2013) note, most stories of women teachers emerge from the Western contexts, less is known in other cultural settings, for example, in China, where women's traditional identities in "the family realm" as "wives" and "mothers" are under great tension.

In the traditional Chinese culture men play the key role in the society while women are confined to the family chores ("men outside the home while women inside" - *nan zhu wai, nu zhu nei*), with male being superior to female (*nan zun nu bei*) while female being "dutiful wife and loving mother" (*xian qi liang mu*). In such conservative discourse as China, men usually have more power than women, "to be a wife and mother is seen as women's primary role and the source of full self-realization" (Weedon, 1987, p. 38). Although the Chinese government has emphasized gender equity and four selves

("self-respect, self-confidence, self-reliance, self-love") of the independent women since its establishment (Luk-Fong, 2013), such gender ideologies have continued to press women in a prescribed life course. Against this backdrop, the researcher hopes to use a Chinese female teacher's narrative stories to probe into women teachers' tensions in work-life balance, and as well as their multiple, contradictory, and sometimes fragmented identities.

Identity can be used "as an important analytic tool for understanding schools and society" (Gee, 2000, p. 99) and can serve as a "pivot between the social and the individual" (Wenger, 1998, p.145). Thus, people can take on different identities, and there are delicate relationships between these identities. As Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) state, the better the relationships between different identities, the better the 'chorus' of voices sounds (p. 113). Therefore, given that women's identities follow a different trajectory than men's (Tamboukou, 2000), we need to investigate how they "form sense of themselves - identities - in relations to ways of inhabiting roles, positions, and cultural imaginaries that matter to them" (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007, p. 103).

Informed by a post structural feminist theory, this paper looks into the precarious and conflicting identities of female teachers within varied discourses to give voice to their experience and to understand it according to particular discourse (Weedon, 1987). As poststructural feminists (e.g. Britzman, 1995; Weedon, 1987) claim, subjects can well be the tellers of experience, the telling of which is constrained and determined by the discourse and cultural practice they are positioned. To understand this experience, the researcher must become "over concerned with experience as a discourse and with competing discourses of experience traverse and structure any narrative" (Britzman, 1995, p. 232). Therefore, from a narrative inquiry perspective, it aims to illuminate the complexity of a female teacher's identity in a conservative culture and society where women teachers much reconcile conflicting selves to contend with competing demands of home and workplace.

2. POST STRUCTURAL FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE OF IDENTITY

Post structural feminist theorists challenged the notion of self as unified, fixed, coherent that humanist theorists had presupposed, instead, they proposed self as unstable, fragmented, contradictory, ongoing, and constantly being reconstituted (Weedon, 1987; Davies, 1991). For instance, Davies (1991) describes "fragmentation, contradiction and discontinuity" of identity as the focus of post structural feminism (p. 34). Weedon (1987) describes individuals as the "sites of discursive struggle", and with "an already discursively constituted sense of identity", the individuals may "produce new versions of meaning from the conflicts and contradictions between existing discourse" (p. 106). Moreover, Weedon (1987) emphasizes the "conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself, and her ways of understanding her relation to the world", which was defined by him as "subjectivity" (p. 32).

In this study, to understand female teachers' gendered identity several principles of post structural feminist theory are highlighted. First, identity is constituted through and within multiple and contradictory discourses (Davies & Gannon, 2010). For post structuralism, language, in the form of conflicting discourses, is the place where our sense of ourselves - our identity - is constructed (Weedon, 1987). Second, identity is an ongoing process that is fraught with contradiction and conflicts. As Weedon (1987) notes, subjectivity, which most discourses seek to fix, is constantly subject to dispersal and inherently unstable. To give voice to women, post structural feminism focuses particularly on the specific processes whereby individuals are made into gendered subjects that exist at the intersection of multiple discursive practices (Davies & Gannon, 2010). Third, identity is socially and culturally constituted. Post structural feminism calls full attention to the social and

institutional context to address the power relations of everyday life (Weedon, 1987) and show how "individuals and their social and geographical worlds are made possible in relation to each other" (Davies & Gannon, 2010, p. 312).

Regarding methodological approaches, poststructuralist analysis begins with discursive practices in the texts of literature, philosophy and everyday life to trouble that which is taken as a stable truth, for example, sex and gender (Davies & Gannon, 2010). Stories are how events are interpreted and understood as providing the substance of lived reality (Davies, 1991). This theory allows to explore not only the contradictory and fragmented nature of female teachers' identity in specific sociocultural context but also the necessity of raising gender awareness and critical thinking about gendered society (Yoshihara, 2018).

3. GENDERED IDENTITIES OF EFL TEACHERS

Since the mid-1990s poststructuralists and feminists have problematized the binary oppositions of genders, sexes and sexualities (Mullany, 2010; Rojas, 2012). Bulter's (1990) per formative view, which implies that gender is something we do rather than something we possess, opens the possibility of exploring multiple femininities and masculinities. Coate (2004) notes that "gender is never static but is produced actively and in interaction with others every day of our lives" (p. 217). Litosseliti and Sunderland (2002) state that gender identity "can also be seen as one's sense(s) of oneself/selves as woman or man" (p.7). Based on these previous studies, in this paper gender identity is seen as multiple, unstable, and constantly constructed in relation to others. Furthermore, it is argued that gender identity, reflecting people's understanding of themselves in terms of cultural definitions of female and male, may guide people's particular social behavior (Wood & Eagly, 2015).

A survey of the literature on EFL teacher identity confirms an increasing interest in this area. In terms of research focus, a prominent line of research in this area casts attention on the EFL teachers' identities and their professional development. In particular, researchers have been interested in different contextual factors that may influence the process of identity (re)construction and (re)negotiation (e.g. Liu & Xu, 2013; Chang, 2018). For example, Liu and Xu (2011), from a narrative inquiry perspective, investigate how an EFL teacher negotiates, reconciles, and shifts her conflicting selves to survive the change in the workplace. Chang (2018), by reporting two female teachers' identity struggle with parental and societal expectations who were located in a competitive teacher recruitment system in Taiwan, investigates how language teachers' identities are (re)shaped by social values and beliefs, which further may influence their professional practice and identities. Although in these studies most participants are female teachers, researchers mainly focused on their shifting identity in the workplace with little attention to their gender identity which may affect their professional trajectory (Luk-Fong, 2013).

Another line of research on EFL teacher identity claims that teachers' professional identity is closely linked to their social identities, for example, gender identity (e.g. Simon-Maeda, 2004; Yoshihara, 2018). Simon-Maeda (2004) examines nine female EFL teachers working in higher education in Japan, whose multifaceted identities stories intricately involve the conflict between women's professional and personal lives, gendered inequalities, and cultural norms. The research findings suggest that gender should be seen as one of many components in an ever-evolving network of personal, social and cultural circumstances. A similar concern was expressed in Luk-Fong's (2013) study of women primary teachers negotiated their gendered identities in Hong Kong, where modernization has mingled with the indigenous Chinese culture, where the women teachers are living in an "in-between space". They conclude that professional women are constrained both by the multiple traditions in the

culture and structures in the institutions. Yoshihara (2018) highlights the complex relations between individuals and the gendered social world and hidden issues involving the burden of gender-differentiated expectations through exploring six Japanese women who gave up previous jobs and became EFL teachers. These studies share a common concern about how female EFL teachers negotiate their professional and gendered identities. This paper, which explores the "paradoxical status" of women teachers (Tamboukou, 2000), seeks to contribute to this research agenda.

4. THE STUDY

4.1. Narrative Inquiry as Research Methodology

Teacher's identity is understood as a unique picture of each teacher's stories to live by, which are "multiple, fluid, and shifting, continuously composed and recomposed in the moment-to-moment living alongside children, families, administrators, and others" (Clandinin et al., 2006, p. 9). The stories do not emerge from and "exist in a vacuum" but are shaped and constantly being reshaped by "lifelong personal and community narratives" (Bell, 2002, p. 208). Narrative inquiry has proved notably fruitful in investigating teachers' professional careers and lives (Clandinin & Connelley, 2000; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Moreover, postmodern feminist educationists (e.g., Davies, 1991; Simon-maeda, 2004) have proved narrative as a productive methodology to highlight the ways how female teachers negotiate their identities within the dominant discourses of gender and education. Therefore, the investigation of our participant's identity construction and negotiation was conducted through a narrative inquiry.

4.2. The Participant

Our participant Lily (pseudonym) is an in-service English teacher with seven years of experience (with one-and-a-half years at home with her son) in an urban public school in China. Lily was born and raised in a traditional Chinese family, in which "teacher" was viewed as a respectable, stable, and especially suitable for female profession. With parental expectation and due to individual interest, she gained a BA degree in TESOL from a national key university of foreign studies. After graduation she successfully stood out from the competitive recruitment examinations and became an English teacher in a public primary school. In the fourth year she gave birth to her only son. After that she stayed at home for one and a half years for taking care of her son. When her son was sent to the nursery at the age of one and a half, she returned to the workforce. Having known each other for about three years, the researcher and the participant have established a trust relationship and the latter was voluntary to participate in this study.

4.3. Data Collection

The author explored Lily's living stories through three rounds of in-depth semi-structured interviews and informal communications over six months. All interviews were audio-recorded. The first interview, aiming to tap Lily's growing environment, educational background and her experiences as a novice EFL teacher in primary school, took place only after sharing the research plan and asking her approval. The second interview was carried out in the third week after the first interview, with a focus on the different professional and living stories before and after giving birth to her son. The third interview was conducted at the end of the study, when Lily's son has spent a semester in a public kindergarten. Given that "narrative is an event-driven tool of research", during the whole process of interviews, the author paid special attention to the "key events", which can provide "a valuable and insightful tool for getting at the core of" the research question (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 71).

In addition, the researcher had intensive face-to-face and online conversations with Lily during which Lily shared the key events and new feelings about her private and professional lives. During the informal interactions, the researcher took some notes and enriched them with more details immediately after interactions. Besides, Lily's posts on social media (the Moments on WeChat) were also paid attention and analyzed as supplementary data.

4.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis process, as illustrated by figure 1, was guided by the "data analysis spiral" (Creswell, 2007) and the three-dimensional space approach of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). First of all, the researcher transcribed the interview data and carefully coded the interview transcripts and field notes. Secondly, identity categories were sorted and narrowed according to the identity conflicts that Lily has experienced during different periods of life. Thirdly, given that gender is "culturally constructed" (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015, p. 313), and gender identity involves both "social categories for gender" and "situational roles" (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015, p. 328), during this period the researcher paid special attention to the three dimensions of narrative stories, such as time, interaction and context. Through this process the storyline of Lily's narratives became emerging gradually, and mini-stories were constructed to reshape Lily's professional and daily life. Finally, the researcher interpreted and organized the coded themes, combining the post structural feminist theory of identity and the sociocultural context in China.
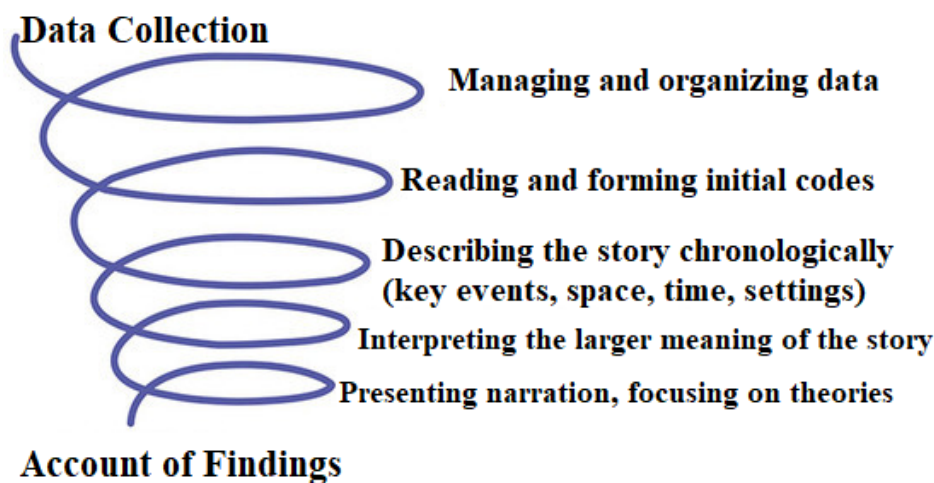
Data Collection

Managing and organizing data

Reading and forming initial codes

Describing the story chronologically (key events, space, time, settings)

Interpreting the larger meaning of the story

Presenting narration, focusing on theories

Account of Findings

Figure1. *Data analysis spiral (Creswell, 2007)*

5. FINDINGS

After listening and relistening Lily's stories, the researcher found that Lily's lived identities were full of tensions and ambivalence, experiencing a series of ups and downs. Her multiple identities were constructed and constantly negotiated in relation to others and the world around them. In this section Lily's story will be described and interpreted chronologically.

5.1. "Teaching is a Suitable Job for Girls"

> My high school English teacher was very charming. I admired her very much, that's why I got to love English. My parents always thought teaching is a suitable job for girls because of the summer and winter holidays. With this subtle influence from my parents, I also thought being an English teacher like my English teacher is not bad. Moreover, the environment at school is simple. (Lily: 1st interview, 10 June, 2019)

From primary school to university, Lily had always been excellent in English. The consistency between parents' expectations and her desires allowed her to choose TESOL as the major of university. In most peoples' eyes, women are more suited to do some jobs which are convenient for them to fulfill the naturally equipped social functions, primarily those of wife and mother. Lily represented a great number of girls in China whose decision on their future job is influenced by others' (e.g. parents, teachers) expectations and their own utilitarian considerations. For example, such a "stable" profession "with summer and winter holidays" and "simple working environment" as the teaching profession.

> Talking about the future career, she [Lily's supervisor] said, "If you choose translator as your profession, you may not have enough time to take care of your family and child. While if you choose to be a teacher, life will be relatively easier". (Lily: 1st interview, 10 June, 2019)

During university Lily worked part-time as a translator, the unpleasant and frustrating working experience made her more determined to be an English teacher. In contrast with the "high level of difficulty" and "constantly demanding for improvement", in Lily's eyes, teaching seemed to be easier and more suitable for her. Besides, her supervisor also advised her to choose teaching profession which may ensure "enough time" to take care of the family and child in the future. Therefore, she started the journey of "kao bian(zhi)" [taking recruitment examinations for becoming a teacher with a formal contract of civil-servant status] since the last year of her university.

> From April to August, one round examination or interview was conducted every month. In the daytime I worked in the private tutoring institutions, in the evening I studied for the examination. You see, how suffering this experience was! But when looking back, this was a precious experience for me. Without this experience I wouldn't have a stable job now, maybe I would have been working in a private tutoring company, where the job is usually overloaded. (Lily: 1st interview, 10 June, 2019)

Although Lily's uncle, who works in X district (pseudonym) and has some "guanxi" [connections] there, suggested she apply for a position with X district, the way of hunting a job in a public school was not smooth, sometimes even 'suffering' for Lily. During this period Lily underwent both physical and mental stress trying luck in several highly competitive recruitment examinations. Reflecting on this experience, Lily reinterpreted it as "precious" rather than "suffering", as Weedon (1987) comments, "language offers a range of ways of interpreting our lives which imply different versions of experience" (p.87).

Lily's story provides a glimpse of the agonizing journey of many prospective teachers. It is worth noting that there is a strict recruitment process and fierce competition to get a position in the public school of China. On the one hand, most people like Lily think teaching is a respectable and stable profession; on the other hand, "bianzhi" [being employed as a full-time teacher with civil-servant status in a public school] means similar welfare standards as the public servants.

5.2. "Only Make myself Stronger"

As a novice teacher, Lily encountered great difficulties and pressure. Her classes were under scrutiny and observed by the experienced teachers and school managers. Worse for her, there was no systematic training for novice teachers and peer support from her colleagues was limited, as a result, she felt less competent in teaching practice ("very nervous and stressed), isolated in colleague relationship ("not friendly"), and painful emotionally ("miserable"). Reflecting on this period when she was 'at breaking point' every day, Lily's eyes were filled with tears.

> In the beginning, I was the only rookie in the office, each of my classes was observed by experienced teachers. When my teaching was considered no good, they directly pointed out and even stopped me before my students. This made me very nervous and stressed. In the office the situation was not good as well, they [experienced colleagues] were not friendly to the novice, and even showed some feelings of superiority as experienced teachers. At that time, I cried almost every day. You don't know, how miserable I was! (Lily: 1st interview, 10 June, 2019)

The process of integrating into the new workplace was even harder. The distinction between "rookie" and "experienced", the pressures in establishing equal relations with the "experienced" teachers, which Lily experienced during the first month, made her realized the shortages and deficiencies. The experienced colleagues "never comforted" her from a novice teacher's position, instead, they "directly pointed out" her incompetency and showed a sense of superiority.

> They [experienced colleagues] never comforted me, instead, just said "If you want to be a public school teacher, you must be a qualified and excellent public school teacher. If you think you are incompetent in this job, you should check yourself. (Lily: 1st interview, 10 June, 2019)

Her previous learning experience as a good student of English and her imagined professional identity as an excellent EFL teacher has triggered Lily's courage to overcome temporary difficulties. In Lily's words, to break the powerless situation, what she can do is "only make myself stronger". Hoping to "be a qualified and excellent public school teacher" as her experienced colleagues said, Lily spent a considerable amount of her spare time practicing teaching skills from the second month. More importantly, she became more rational in dealing with criticism and blows from other experienced teachers, considering the stable nature of her job as a teacher in the public school.

> In the second month I stopped crying, instead, I seized every moment to practice everywhere, at school, on the bus, at home, before the mirror, before my friends and my family. I know the shortages and deficiencies of myself, to break these deficiencies, only make myself stronger. (Lily: 1st interview, 10 June, 2019)

Lily's changing experience from being criticized to striving for recognition illustrates that a positive sense of (desired) identity is essential to maintaining self-esteem, commitment to, and a passion for teaching (Diane, 2011). Reflecting on this frustrating experience, Lily gave her comments - "Without all kinds of blows, I would not be more excellent self afterward".

5.3. "I Came to Love this Job"

Her strong determination and passion for professional development have won the recognition and encouragement from her colleagues, which made Lily become more engaged in her teaching practices and establish more positive relations with other colleagues. For instance, she showed more autonomy and confidence inside classroom even under observation. More importantly, she dared to express her ideas and sometimes different opinions about teaching plans.

> As a novice teacher, I had to teach quite a number of open classes observed by the school management and parents. The parents thought my class was interesting and showed great approval. My leaders encouraged me to keep up the good work…Receiving the acknowledgment of the principal and educational manager; I became more confident in teaching. Finally, my efforts were paid on gains. (Lily: 1st interview, 10 June, 2019)

Lily's identity as a qualified public-school teacher was constructed and reshaped through interaction with others, such as experienced colleagues, school managers and parents. What people, especially her experienced colleagues, think about her, shaped the process of her teacher identity construction. Differing from her experienced teachers, Lily, as a newcomer, had to make much more effort to prove herself. Although she had received temporary recognition, Lily also pursued an equal power to freely express her voice in the workplace. Seeking to 'achieve a qualitative leap' in her teaching, Lily did not relax in her first winter holiday in her teaching career.

> I can't relax. I have to achieve a qualitative leap. I can't let them [colleagues] think that I cannot do this job well. I always think that if you want to find a foothold in someplace, you have to prove your ability and strength. [...] During the whole holiday, I just stayed at home and researched the textbook. I spent almost all the time except sleeping and eating in making teaching plans, making repeated practice. Then I lived with my brother, and he said I was crazy and even speak in English in my sleep. (Lily: 1st interview, 10 June, 2019)

Lily's endeavor to exercise and constant practices signify her identity as a passionate beginning teacher, which was gradually observed and recognized by her institutional colleagues, managers and students' parents. For instance, her experienced colleagues "stopped finding fault and picking holes", instead, they had observed her advantages in teaching activities design and keeping the active atmosphere of the classroom. Sometimes the experienced colleagues even asking for her advice, consequently, relatively equal colleague relationship was initially built.

> In the office I don't need to look at other colleagues' face and temper any more. In contrast, they started to discuss the teaching plan with me, my relations with them got better. Consequently, I came to love this job. (Lily: 1st interview, 10 June, 2019)

When reading through this excerpt, I could not help but think back to a critical incident which indicates the importance of maintaining harmonious social relationship. The story started with the annual national teaching skill competition held in Beijing, which is a good opportunity for professional development. When the school principal wanted her to take part in this competition, Lily hesitated and wanted to recommend another colleague to "keep good relations" with her colleague. Despite hesitation and struggle, Lily took part in this competition on behalf of her school and won the second prize, which paved her way to be a 'star teacher' at school. After the incident, she took part in this competition every year. She had grown to a secondary teacher within three years [from 2012 to 2015], for which other people usually took five to eight years to achieve. As Lily's case shows, achievement in teaching practice and harmonious relationship with colleagues jointly make her "love this job".

5.4. "I Experienced a Huge Psychological Gap"

The birth of her son changed her life tremendously both at home and at work, which shows how one's life and work are interdependent and inseparable from each other, especially for women. "Without support from extended family", Lily had to care for her child by herself. Although her husband is considerate and often help her with the household chores, childcare and family affairs still sucked up much of Lily's time and energy. As Lily mentioned, it seemed that her life had worsened shapely in some time, during which she experienced "a huge psychological gap".

> At that time, I felt a huge psychological gap, you know, I got a lot of achievements before that. I constantly asked myself, "you see, now you don't have income, every day wear either T-shirts or pajamas, so what's the difference between you and a full-time housewife?" (Lily: 2nd interview, 4 July, 2019)

Recalling this period, Lily described it as "boring" and "depressive" due to "being disconnected from the society". The sizable gap between a "full-time housewife" and a "professional woman" threatened her successfully constructed identity as a 'star-teacher' and her relationship with her husband.

> During the first year of giving birth to my son, I was diagnosed with "depression". The psychologist told my husband that I'm not suitable to be a full-time mother. (Lily: 2nd interview, 4 July, 2019)

Although she tried to adapt to this situation and hired several babysitters, Lily considered that her son was too young to leave him alone with babysitter. Therefore, she applied for another half a year after one-year's maternity leave in order to take good care of her son. During that time, Lily's experience was clouded with constant self-doubt, which, consequently, caused contradictions at great emotional cost - being diagnosed with "depression". In hearing herself described as "not suitable to be a full-time mother" by the psychologist, Lily's experience was constituted as such that she understood as a desirable way of being.

> Every morning I sent my son to the nursery, he cried, and I cried too. Sometimes, when I finished my teaching, I picked up my mobile phone and watched how my son lived at the nursery through the online video, and weeping. A month past, the situation did not improve. I decided to take my son with me to school. When I taught in the classroom, my colleagues helped me take care of him. That was a really tough period for me. (Lily: 2nd interview, 4 July, 2019)

When her son was one and a half years old, Lily returned to the workplace with her son sent to the nursery. At the beginning she found it difficult to adapt due to the long-term leave, as a result, she needed to re-acquaint herself with the workplace and teaching. Meanwhile, she felt guilty about leaving her son alone in the nursery at such a young age. As Lily said, she had failed in both. There was a "huge psychological gap" between what she have achieved before giving birth to the child and how she identified herself afterwards. To close this gap, Lily used different strategies and resources, for example, asking for temporary leaves from the workplace, taking her son to the workplace, changing class hour arrangement.

> If I did not give birth to my son, I would have acquired a senior job title. There were great differences before and after becoming a mother. Now I often come to work late and leave early, you know the time-table of kindergarten.   (Note, 28 June, 2019)

There was a constant struggle going on in Lily's mind, pulling her back-and-forth between a teacher and a mother. When childcare and housework took up much of her time and energy, Lily "thought about quitting" to relieve herself. However, when she sacrificed working hours and professional development to take care of her son, Lily experienced regret, self-doubt, and even fear of the future.

> I thought about quitting. But I also told myself, my son will grow up somehow, if I quit and become a full-time housewife, what should I do when he grows up? It will be much harder to find such a stable job. (Lily: 2nd interview, 4 July, 2019)

Recalling the experience of this period, Lily reflectively said, since childcare is her "duty and responsibility", she should have adjusted her attitude towards the conflicts between work and home.

5.5. "I Can't have my Cake and Eat it too"

Running in between childcare and work obligations, Lily has to succeed in the exhaustive use of time. As Lily said, she has to keep running even if she fells down, without checking the wound. Despite all

this, it is difficult to achieve a work-life balance. For example, she goes to work late and leaves early in order to pick up the child from the kindergarten; she firstly meets her son's needs at home and then work to late night after he falls asleep; she stops caring about bonus and title at workplace in order to get support from other colleagues when necessary.

> I do not care about the bonus; I do not compete with other teachers in title assessment. Because I need their help, I need to switch classes with them sometimes (Note, 28 June, 2019).

When she realized that tension between identity as a mother at home and identity as an EFL teacher at school became an integral part of her daily routine, Lily has learned to accept her competing roles, which was described as 'the unavoidable part of a female teacher's life'. Temporally, Lily's identities conflicts seemed to be resolved by legitimating her naturally given role - mother and wife.

> Sometimes I feel very upset and overwhelmed, I thought my career was severely affected after giving birth to my son. Anyhow, good education for him makes everything worthy. Although this process may be very difficult, it is the unavoidable path of a woman's life. (Lily: 2nd interview, 4 July, 2019)

Despite the professional development was "severely affected" by the family responsibilities, Lily expressed a sense of happiness and satisfaction with the current situation. Her statement - "I can't have my cake and eat it too" - vividly demonstrate that there are constant contradictions and competitions between what she wanted to be and what she was forced to be, which can be under control only by recognizing their existence.

> Now I have learned to be adaptive. I know that I can't have my cake and eat it too. While it's difficult for me to balance work and family, the family should be prior to work. A good education for my son is much more important than my career. If you lose your job, you can find another one. The ultimate goal of hard-working is the pursuit of a happy family and a good life. (Lily: 3rd interview, 5 Jan. 2020)

As a language teacher, she pays much attention to her son's education, especially language learning, for example, she often shares video about how her three-year-old son fluently reads English dialogues on the We Chat Moment. These videos often remind me of her reflective comment - "to be a good mother is much harder than to be a good wife or teacher". Giving a higher priority for family over individual professional development, Lily mentioned that she is thinking about leaving from the classroom and choose a relatively easier job to have more time in educating her son. Nevertheless, she refused to be a full-time housewife, considering the pains and self-doubt she had experienced during the first year of being a mother.

6. DISCUSSION

This paper has illustrated the contradictory, fragmented, and shifting nature of identity of a Chinese female EFL teacher in striving for work-life balance. The main argument is that during this process gender plays as a core dimension of a female teacher's identity work. As Vandrick (2017) indicates, there are two major aspects of language teachers' identities - identities as EFL teachers and identities as "whole and complex" individuals in regard to gender, race, class, sexual identity (p. 230). In Lily's case, it is apparent that her gendered identities were an inevitable part of her ongoing identity work.

6.1. Gender Identity as Culturally and Socially Constructed

According to Wood and Eagly (2015), gender consists of the meanings ascribed to male and female

social categories within particular culture, thus, when people incorporate these cultural meanings into their own "psyches", "gender becomes part of their identities" (p. 461). Through these gender identities, people understand themselves in relation to the culturally feminine and masculine meanings, and may think and act based on these gendered aspects of their selves (Wood & Eagly, 2015). In Lily's understanding, for example, it is natural that her mother-in-law should help with childcare because the child adopts father's surname; it is a mother's inevitable responsibility to work more at home; it is necessary to prioritize family over work because "the ultimate goal of hard-working is the pursuit of a happy family and a good life". Lily's positioning may reflect many female teachers' notions about women's role. These notions and understandings, referred to as common sense, constitute what is socially and naturally accepted as normal and fixed truth which puts social pressure on individuals to accept them and act based on the consensual acceptance of meaning (Weedon, 1987). Weedon calls into question the claim of "fixing meaning once and for all", in contrast, argues that experience is open to contradictory and conflicting interpretations (p. 75).

From a post structural feminist perspective, the difficulties, problems and inadequacies that most women have experienced should not be interpreted as the effect of personal failings, but as the result of socially produced power structures and particular norms of femininity (Weedon, 1987). Because of the physiological characteristics of childbirth and nursing, many cultures (e.g. Chinese cultures) consider the family role of a woman to be a primary life role whether she works or not. Meanwhile, in Lily's case, her understanding of herself in terms of the traditional Chinese cultural definition of female seems to predict a social particular behavior (Wood & Eagly, 2015), for example, she chose the teaching career which is stereotypically viewed as "suitable for girls". Besides, it is worth noting that gender identity is constantly being performed and constructed through interaction with others (Mullany, 2010). Lily's ongoing identity work is closely related to and influenced by the critical others, such as parents, teachers, colleagues, child and husband, during this process, feeling good about herself is linked with "the sense that one is in harmony with the wishes of the groups to which they belong and meeting the groups' expectations" (Luk-Fong, 2013, p. 40).

6.2. Gendered Identities as Existing at the Intersection of Multiple Discourses

As Lily's experience shows, engaging in different practices, female teachers inevitably construct different aspects of themselves and gain different perspectives, thus, "no matter how distinct" they "can interact, influence each other, and require coordination" (Wenger, 1998, p. 159). Hence, female teachers' identities tend to be fragmented, contradictory, and sometimes precarious and difficult to be coordinated in these diverse discourses. The changing discourse requires female teachers to constantly shift and reconstitute their identities, rather, to make effort and adapt to this kind of conflicting situation to construct and reconstruct a preferable identity. Poststructuralist feminist theory indicates that the contradictory discourses constitute conflicting versions of social reality, which in turn serve conflicting interests, therefore, "not all discourses will carry equal weight or power" at any point of time and place (Weedon, 1987, p. 35). In Lily's case, during the first years after graduation, Lily devoted most of her time and energy to actively construct an "excellent public-school teacher". After giving birth to her son, in contrast, Lily gave higher priority to the family over job. Further, as the subject of a range of competing discourses, Lily was subjected to their contradictions at great emotional cost, for example, she was diagnosed with "depression" when caring for her son in the first year, she experienced "a huge psychological gap" after returning to the workplace.

In the analysis of gendered discursive practices, Davies and Gannon (2010) caution that "gendered experience (one's own, and that of others)", which is constituted through multiple discourses and give

rise to ambivalent understanding and affects, should be understood "through the recognition of ambivalence and contradiction" (p. 314). Lily's experience makes a good case for Davies and Gannon's claim. For Lily, as the subject of a range of competing discourses (e.g. workplace, home), Lily was subjected to their contradictions primarily at great emotional cost, for example, she was diagnosed with "depression" when caring for her son in the first year, she experienced "a huge psychological gap" after returning to the workplace. Recognizing the constant existence of the contradictions, she became relieved and more adaptive to the competing discourses.

6.3. Identification as a Dual Process of Imposition and Active Take-Up

> Subjectification involves the simultaneous imposition and active take-up of the gendered conditions of existence (Bulter, 1997). Discourses do not originate in the subject, yet each subject takes them up as her own, defends them, desires their maintenance, and understands herself in terms of them. (Davies & Gannon, 2010, p. 314).

It is argued that post structural feminist theorists Davies and Gannon's statement above can apply to the conceptualization of identification process. In other words, identification can also be seen as a dual process of imposition and active take-up. As Lily's experience shows, when she was diagnosed as "depression" and described as "not suitable to be a full-time mother" by the expert, she experienced herself as willingly embracing the description. When Lily's son was at the age of one-and-a-half, she decided to send him to the nursery and take him to the workplace afterwards, although her husband, worrying about her health, advised her to resign. These experiences show that she actively took up the constitution of herself inside the "not suitable to be a full-time mother" that she understands as a desirable way of being, despite constant existence of conflicts and contradictions. In addition, "the burden to gender-differentiated expectation" (Yoshihara, 2018, p. rooted in the traditional Chinese culture has been imposed upon women whether they work or not. In turn, as Lily's case and the female teachers in some studies (e.g. Luk-Fong, 2013) show, they did not challenge this "expectation" but to embrace and actively take up dual roles both inside and outside home despite constant the tensions, confusions and ambivalence.

7. CONCLUSION

Drawing on the post structural feminist theory, this study sheds light on how a female EFL teacher (re)constructed, (re)negotiated and reconciled her professional and gender identities across the boundaries of home and work. Specifically, this study demonstrates how a mother-teacher tried to pursue the life-work balance to maintain the coexistence of her identity as an EFL teacher and her gender identity as a mother. Lily's story illustrates the complexity of the experience of a female language teacher who plays the roles of mother and wife as well. Her experience has shown that in times of change and within both professional and domestic discourses, identity is not fixed, unified but necessarily fragmented, contradictory and discontinuous (Davies, 1991). As Wenger (1998) states, engaging in different practices, we construct different aspects of ourselves, and gain different perspectives, thus, "no matter how distinct" they "can interact, influence each other, and require coordination" (p. 159). By connecting her personal lived experiences with professional discourse and sociocultural contexts, the research has discussed the hegemonic expressions of gender roles that oppress female teachers.

The research foregrounds the phenomenon of "the paradox of being a women teacher" (Tamboukou, 2000) that characterizes the dilemma faced by the women teachers who are striking the "work-life" balance. Although only one female teacher's life story was explored in this study, through reviewing

the relevant previous literature (e.g., Luk-Fong, 2013), it is not difficult to find that the constant negotiation and navigation process experienced by Lily is not individual or specific. Although in this paper the phenomenon is illuminated and interpreted within the Chinese context which was deeply influenced by the Confucian cultural heritage, it echoes the situation in some other contexts, for example, Japan (Yoshihara, 2018; Simon-Maeda, 2004), UK (Tamboukou, 2020), Nepal (Schulz, 1998), South Korea (Chesnut, 2020). Lily's stories can be relevant to female teachers with similar experiences both in the Chinese context and in the other social and cultural settings across the world. Hence, it is worth considering for policymakers and school managers about how to help the female teachers maintain a positive emotional status at critical transitional stages of their lives, how to "safeguard the well-being of teachers' lives to ensure the well-being and education of the children under their care" (Luk-Fong, 2013, p. 158). For example, policymakers may consider to appropriately extend the maternity leave for female teacher; school managers could set flexible working hours for those women teachers whose child is at a young age.

Theoretically, this study illustrates the significance of a post structural feminist perspective in exploring female teachers' gendered identities and narrative stories. For post structural feminist, language, in the form of conflicting discourses, constitutes us as conscious thinking subjects and allows us to give meaning to the world around and act to transform it (Weedon, 1987). As Weedon pointed out, this theory offers a way of conceptualizing the relationship between language, identity (subjectivity), social contexts which "focuses on how power is exercised and on the possibilities of change" (p. 19). In addition, feminist post structuralism, troubling the binary categories male and female, focuses particularly on the specific processes whereby individuals are made into gendered subjects (Davies & Gannon, 2010), which is consistent with the purpose of this study.

This study is not without limitations. For instance, there was a lack of observational data on Lily's identity construction through her actual engagement in the classroom and relations with colleagues. Further research can be conducted through field observation except for self-reported data. Besides, more narratives and stories from more female teachers might be needed to attract more attention from the policy makers and school managers, as well as researchers.

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