

Facing rootlessness: Language and identity construction in teaching and research practices among bilingual returnee scholars in China

What this research was about

This article aims to enrich the understanding of the complexities of the processes of becoming a language education scholar in China, focusing on a group of bilingual returnee scholars in the English language education domain. We explored the relationship between individual agency, capital, and influences from the wider socio-cultural contexts in bilingual returnee scholars' identity construction. Specifically, the present study is guided by the following questions: (1) How do bilingual returnee scholars adapt to English language teaching and research in Chinese universities? (2) How do they construct professional identities in this process? The findings showed a complicated professional identity formation process by which they negotiated the use of English as a teaching language to respond to students' learning needs and the institution's expectations. In terms of research, these returnee scholars were found to feel "rootless" due to their limited local social networks, collaboration and language competency to publish bilingually. However, with accumulated experiences and resources, some scholars could successfully exercise agency to draw on their studying/working abroad experiences and make positive changes in the local Chinese academic environments.

What the researchers did

- The present study recruited 12 scholars (3 male, 9 female) who represented study and work experience backgrounds in a variety of countries.
- They received doctoral degrees overseas and were teaching English to university students in China at the time of the study.
- In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to achieve a nuanced and comprehensive picture of the participants' personal experiences and underlying feelings.

What the researchers found

- Bilingual returnee scholars constructed their professional identities through negotiating English as a teaching language in ways interwoven with students' needs, institutional policies, and their past experiences.
- The bilingual returnee scholars enacted English as the medium of instruction in different ways, including using English only as monolingual English instructors, and using English dominantly and Chinese conditionally as translanguaging instructors.
- The returnee scholars were found to be "rootless" in terms of possessing inadequate social and cultural capital locally, resulting in limited collaboration and difficulties developing sufficiently robust language competency to publish bilingually (English and Chinese).
- Some employed accumulated capital to exercise agency in bringing about changes in their new academic environments. For example, a returnee scholar has vigorously organized research activities to help teachers and students to improve their research abilities and qualities.
- Some are becoming intentional social actors who make valuable research sharing and knowledge transfer contributions for others. For example, a returnee scholar collaborated with the local press, being a lead reader who appreciated British English literature with the readers.

Things to consider

- This study demonstrates the interaction of structure (working environment) and agency in shaping returnee scholars' language choice and identity construction.
- This study uncovers that returnees' agentive behaviors are still constrained by the institutional environment in areas such as teaching language policy, students' needs, and university research evaluation principles.
- The intersection of language use and identity construction among returnee bilingual scholars in both teaching and research practices is mediated by capital.
- This study has implications for worldwide higher education systems that receive returnee scholars.

Materials, data, open access article: [open access article](#)

To cite this summary: Xu, J., & Ou, W. A. (2022). Facing rootlessness: Language and Identity construction in teaching and research practices among bilingual returnee scholars in China. *OASIS Summary of Xu & Ou (2022) in Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*. <https://oasis-database.org>