

## **Breaking the Earthenware Pot: Opening-Up to New Possibilities for Chinese Teachers of EFL**

**My research is inspired** by more than two years' of challenging, frustrating, but always rewarding experience training teachers of English in Chinese public schools. In addition to the everyday difficulties of living in a radically different culture, I have been challenged by the disjuncture between rhetoric that ascribes to Chinese educators high social status and an air of disempowerment that surrounds the teachers themselves. In my ongoing work with these teachers, I continue to note significant dissatisfaction with and resistance to change (see also Otto-Steenburgen, 2004; Wu & Spilchuk, 2003). This observation suggests that, despite popular belief and official rhetoric, teachers' actual status in the educational hierarchy remains tenuous and unclear. Hence, my primary research question: what do Chinese teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) perceive to be their role in the process of educational reform? From this basic question arise others: to what extent do they perceive themselves to be 'empowered' in their work? If so, what personal and/or professional factors help them to achieve this condition? If not, what limits them? From a cultural and linguistic standpoint, do they desire something called 'empowerment'? And finally, questions related to the theoretical and methodological orientation of this study are also important: to what degree might Chinese teachers claim agency through a process of reflection, theorization, and action? What are the methodological and ethical implications for a 'foreign expert' investigating matters of a political nature in the Chinese context?

**The current literature on educational reform in China** confirms that policy since the 'opening-up' has been a top-down process (Huang, 2004), though this is not to suggest that these policies are ill-intentioned: numerous scholars note the government's recognition of a need to improve teachers' professional, financial, and social status, as well as the quality of their training (Guo, 2005; Li, 1999). Overall, though, researchers have investigated neither teachers' own goals for their work, nor the underlying "mechanisms of domination and power" (Maguire, 1987, p. 15) within the educational system, focusing instead on questions of policy development (Law, 2002), funding (Chan & Mok, 2001; Kai-Ming, 1994), the teacher training infrastructure (Guo, 2005; Gu, 1999), and teachers' adaptation to mandated curricula (Cheng & Wang, 2004; Wang & Paine, 2003). These approaches too often employ a tacit conception of teachers as inadequate—as *objects* in need of reform, thus limiting educators' opportunity to contribute existing knowledge(s) to positive change. I argue that the difficulties facing reform could be alleviated by re-constructing teachers as *subjects* and agents of change.

**As a first step toward realizing this goal**, it must be recognized that Chinese early middle school English teachers occupy a complex subject position. First of all, it cannot be ignored that the majority are female, and that China, while professing an egalitarian, non-sexist ideology, remains a fundamentally patriarchal society (Bian, 2002). This gendered aspect of a stubbornly stratified social order (Bian & Logan, 1996) is reflected in the conferral of greater 'expertise' and authority upon teachers at higher levels in a school system notably more 'male' as grade levels advance (Zhang, 2000). Add to this to the questionable status derived from the occupation itself, and it may be concluded that few descriptors of the study's participants—female, early middle school teachers—would normally be considered indicators of power. One must not, however, assume these teachers to be powerless pawns of officialdom, but current studies offer little documentation otherwise. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that they can and do resist in the spaces available to them. What advantage, for example, do they realize from a much-valued ability to teach English?

**The design of this research**, then, will suit its initial purpose—to investigate teachers' perceptions of their role in the reform process, the premise being that local actors have the ability to express and further develop an "understanding [of] their own reality" (Maguire, 1987, p. 22). But the broader goal is to go beyond self-reflection to the development of "critical knowledge" (p. 14)—to encourage inquiry that creates spaces in which participants seize opportunities for "transformative praxis" (Lather, 1984, p. 50). As Lather (1986) insists, discovery of emancipatory knowledge demands researcher-respondent relationships based on *self-reflexive reciprocity*. Thus, a critical component of this research will be the complete integration of the researcher and participants as co-researchers in a *dialogic* process inclusive of data generation, interpretation, and theorization (p. 51).

**To facilitate this process, data will be generated in three ways:** focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and fieldnotes. As is appropriate in a study that seeks transformative knowledge, sampling will be purposive (Guba, 1981, p. 86): a minimum of five female, middle school teachers of EFL—all native speakers of *Putonghua*

(Mandarin) in typical urban, public schools in north-central China—will be invited based on their ability to express themselves in English, as well as their willingness to explore these issues with a group of colleagues. Furthermore, these teachers are desirable as participants due to their significant experience with reform in recent years, including their dealings with a new curriculum (Huang, 2004) and increasingly disruptive processes of management reform and marketization (Cheng, 1994). Most critical to recruitment, however, will be my pre-existing professional relationship with each of those to be invited, connections established through “commitment acts” (Feldman, Bell, & Berger, 2003). In this case, I have undertaken acts of commitment through visits to these teachers’ classrooms over a period of two years.

**Participant involvement in the interpretation and reporting of data** is vital to reciprocity. In recognition of this, “negotiation of meaning” (Lather, 1986) will occur during data generation, with emergent themes (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996, p. 454) providing material for discussion, verification, and modification in subsequent meetings (Guba, 1981). Also, transcripts of group sessions and interviews will be returned to participants following the data generation phase for the purpose of member check, as will my thesis document prior to submission (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314).

**Significance of the Study**—What might it mean for a *waiguo zhuanjia* (foreign expert) and a group of female, Chinese, English teachers to discuss and possibly challenge the ‘rightness’ of educational reform as currently conceived? As Smith (1987) implies, micro- and meso-organizational formations (i.e. schools and school districts) are congruent with the ideologies and epistemologies of macro-political structures (i.e. Chinese Communist Party) (p. 6). Thus, for (predominantly female) middle school teachers to interrogate the gendered hierarchy of the educational system is to question a fundamental organizing principal of the Chinese state and society. Beyond this local implication, the study has the potential to present a detailed and contextualized self-portrait of an important group of social actors in contemporary China, thus enabling a previously unheard voice to contribute to an international understanding of Chinese society as a whole. I believe that accounts of this kind are vital in order to overcome a number of dominant images of China. The first is of a stately, traditional China grounded in a historical context that bears little resemblance to the modern nation. The second is of an iron-fisted, Communist China in which everyday people live in fear of expressing dissent. Finally, and perhaps the greatest frustration to a greater understanding of the present social context, is a binary conception of China as either “constructive partner or emerging threat” (Carpenter & Dorn, 2000), an image created by a preponderance of dehumanizing economic and geo-political analyses.

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