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Why They Kept Committed: Emotional Drives of Rotating Teachers in the Context of Teacher Rotation Policy in China

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine China's teacher rotation policies, which are intended to narrow the urban-rural teacher quality gap. A qualitative approach is used to explore the emotional drives of eight teachers who participated in teacher rotation in Y District, Beijing. This study applies Archer's social theory of emotion, which establishes a link between personal concerns and emotional commentaries. Data reveals four emotional drives or concerns: embodying sender schools, reciprocity with rural school leaders, rapport with colleagues, and conscience towards students. Conscience is viewed as the primary drive for rotating teachers to focus their efforts on teaching and learning in order to avoid shame. Relationships with sender schools, rural school leaders, and colleagues all have an effect on rotating teachers' hybrid self-identity as insiders/outsiders of two social circles, engendering a range of emotions. This study emphasizes the importance of making sense of the emotional structures and dynamics of rotating teachers. Finally, the implications of improving the efficacy of teacher rotation are discussed.

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Keywords

teacher rotation – emotional drive – concerns – education equity – rural education – China

Introduction

Along with the worldwide concern about educational equity, the teacher quality gap is becoming a focus of governmental attention. Confronting the predominant challenge, "redistribution through transfers is a mechanism to bring equity to the system" (Agarwal, Kayina, Mukhopadhyay, & Reddy, 2018, p. 343). Teacher rotation is a unique system of teacher transfer that has been in use in Japan and South Korea for decades (Xue & Li, 2021). Rotation is a term that refers to a deployment strategy in which teachers are periodically transferred from one school to another. According to Jeong and Luschei's (2019) research of TALIS data, South Korea's teacher rotation system leads to teacher quality equality. It is a potentially transformative mechanism for various educational systems. Statistical data, on the other hand, cannot tell how teachers cope with rotation policies. At the moment, the empirical study of how teacher rotation is implemented on the ground is lacking.

Mainland China initiated teacher rotation at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In 1999, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (hereafter as CPC) and the State Council (1999) issued *The Decision on Deepening Education Reform the Regulation of the All-round Quality Education*. As pointed out, local authorities of medium and large cities needed to develop measures to encourage backbone teachers to serve under-sourced schools. In 2004, the Beijing Municipal Committee of the CPC and the People's Government of Beijing Municipality (2004) decided on a set of goals of municipal education development, including narrowing the urban-rural education disparity through teacher rotation. In 2005, the pilot rotation program was launched with 1,010 urban teachers teaching full-time in rural schools. In 2011 and 2016, the municipal government introduced guidelines to local authorities of districts or counties under its jurisdiction, requiring them to develop appropriate strategies to rotate teachers. In August 2021, the Beijing Municipal Education Commission decided to enhance the promotion of teacher rotation (Shi, 2021).

Beijing's associated policies have established a link between rotation and career growth for teachers. Since 2004, teachers must have at least one year of experience teaching in rural or vulnerable schools before they might climb

to the senior professional rank and apply for the title of backbone teacher.[1] Teachers who were eligible (i.e., with a middle rank or higher) but refused to comply with rotation mandates would be denied advancement. Nonetheless, such sanctions would be rescinded once they complied with the rotation mandates (the Beijing Municipal Committee of the cpc & the People's Government of Beijing Municipality, 2004). As a result, rotation was mandatory rather than elective for qualified teachers, which created anxiety (Cui, 2013). Existing research also demonstrated teachers' reluctance toward teacher rotation implementation. Despite this, many teachers maintained a high level of commitment during rotation. This resulted in the study question: Why were they capable of committing? We specifically explored the emotional drives of committed rotating teachers using Archer's (2000, 2002, 2004) theoretical framework.

Literature Review

Rotating Teachers' Emotion

There are two major strands of study on the emotion of rotating teachers. The first strand examines how policy enforcement influenced teachers' emotions. Over 60% of teachers surveyed in Shanghai (Liu & Shen, 2017) and over 50% of teachers surveyed in Beijing (Du, Zhang, & Ye, 2018) expressed an unwillingness to rotate. Existing research has attributed this negativity to two main factors: First, teachers expressed anxiety about probable issues in their new workplace, including inadaptability, increased workload, and a sense of belonginglessness

1 In China, professional ranking and honorable titling (e.g., "backbone teacher") are two-sided systems to incentivize teachers' development throughout careers (Han, 2012). A professional rank is nearly tenured, posing little risk of downgrading. Acquiring a higher rank typically entails a considerable salary increase that is far greater than what would be earned by other ways (e.g., overtime work, being a homeroom teacher, or taking on administrative duties) (Li, Jin, & Jin, 2018; Li, Lu, & Jin, 2017). Besides, advancement in rank results in significant non-monetary benefits (e.g., a sense of pride and recognition) (Huang, Ye, & Prince, 2017). Local authorities usually establish thorough and rigorous conditions for rank promotion, and those who meet the threshold requirements must compete for advancement to the senior rank each year (Han, 2012; Zhang et al., 2012). As a result, "this system provides a bottom-up, manageable mechanism for teachers to pursue higher professional ranks with an increase of benefits" (Huang et al., 2017, p. 26). "Backbone teacher" does not belong to the stratified ranking system, but is an honorable title bestowed over teachers who demonstrate a higher level of professional virtue, competence, and skills. Backbone teachers get much reputation as they play leadership roles at different levels disseminating their expertise to other teachers (Han, 2012). Therefore, tying rotation to teacher career development is a governmental technique to motivate teachers to partake in teacher rotation.

(Du et al., 2018; Wang, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). Second, rotation would disrupt teachers' work-life balance by lengthening their commute (Du et al., 2018; Lo, Zhong, Ye, & Zhou, 2021). In summary, rotation disrupted the stability that China's teachers desired in their job and personal lives, resulting in their more or less unfavorable emotional states (Liao, Liu, Zhao, & Li, 2019).

The second strand focuses on the emotional experiences of rotating teachers "on the ground". Zhang and Liu (2019) reported that certain rotating teachers were viewed as "coolies" assigned to the most challenging workloads because the principal believed "abler people do more work". Besides that, rotating teachers were more likely to experience isolation due to rural teachers' defensive attitudes. According to some studies (Song, 2018; Wang, Ye, & Sun, 2017), a lack of trust and support from rural school colleagues also contributes to rotating teachers' dissatisfaction, anxiety, and irritation. By contrast, individuals who were treated fairly and trusted were more likely to develop a sense of belonging to the school community. Thus, interactions in rural schools affected the emotional well-being of rotating teachers.

However, no specific study systematically examined the mechanisms of rotating teachers' emotional drives, and this study aims to fill the research gap.

Conceptualizing Emotion

A focus on emotion challenges the technical rationalism of teachers' work (O'Connor, 2008). Torres (2020) observes that emotions serve as a "rudder" in the brain, quickly evaluating new experiences; without them, the brain cannot inform our decision-making. Emotional experiences indicate the extent to which a job aligns with an individual's perceived values or efficacy as a teacher. If they are unable to attain their goals, they are likely to experience unpleasant emotions (e.g., frustration, anger, or guilt) and reduce their commitment to the job. Day (2018) argues that "to teach to their best and well requires that teachers are willing and able to draw upon continuing reserves of emotional energy on a daily basis" (p. 66). In this view, teaching is fundamentally emotional work instead of emotional labor, which entails some form of self-deception that depletes such reserves. Therefore, emotion directly constitutes what matters as a teacher.

Archer's (2000, 2002, 2004) theory is consistent with this perspective of teacher emotion. In her view, we have intrinsic powers to achieve a sense of self, the belief that "I am the same self over time". It is a constellation of concerns formed and transformed in our interplays with different orders of reality in the world. Concerns refer to what we care about and direct our courses of action. They transcend the instrumental rationality for personal benefit that the *homo economicus* model assumes. Rather, concerns are constituted by "the

social distribution of resources, the social pattern of normative expectations and the social condition of solidarity" (Archer, 2000, p. 67). Accordingly, they can orientate people's actions for public goods (e.g., voluntary behaviors). Noteworthily, within the constellation of concerns, one always reflexively prioritizes some "ultimate concerns" to guide action while subordinating other concerns.

Emotions function as commentaries upon concerns. They are essentially relational to objects in different orders of reality in the world, indicating how we are satisfied with concerns on these objects (Archer, 2000, 2002, 2004). Therefore, as Archer (2004) concludes, "they are not matters of stimulus and response because they entail cognition about the intentional object" (p. 332). Then, our emotionality as an ongoing commentary "is our reflexive response to the world" (Archer, 2002, p. 194). Archer (2000, 2002, 2004) identifies three orders of reality into which our concerns fall:

(1) The natural order comprises body/environment relations. Emotional commentaries are emergent viscerally from the relationship between the import of environment occurrences and concerns of physical well-being.
(2) The practical order comprises subject/object relations, and our concerns are how well we deal with practical tasks that require our adept performances. Emotional commentaries emerge between us and the import of tasks, hinged on the judgment of (in)competence on handling tasks. They are manifested in a sense of failure (e.g., frustration, boredom, depression) or achievement (e.g., satisfaction, joy, elation).
(3) The social order comprises subject/subject relations, and our concerns are self-worth towards specific projects (e.g., career, family) involving specific normality. These social norms will evaluate our involvement in these projects, leading to our specific emotions (e.g., honor, shame).

In a nutshell, "emotions convey the import of different kinds of situations to us" (Archer, 2002, p. 16). However, a cluster of emotional commentary often emerges in three distinct orders, and we have to organize them reflexively. In Archer's (2004) terms, we have not only a range of concerns, each of which is associated by a corresponding first-order emotion, but also the capacity to appraise them and arrive at the ultimate concern with a second-order emotion. We scrutinize, articulate, monitor, and transform emotional commentary. By doing so, we develop our emotionality (Archer, 2000), which serves as the emotional drive for continuous action. As Zembylas (2014) puts it, Archer challenges the overly "rational" accounts of reflexivity held by some social theorists, and takes account of emotional reflexivity to guide action. In sum, Archer's theory provides a "concern–emotion–action" framework to examine rotating teachers' emotional drives.

Methodology

This research adopted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. According to Larking, Watts, and Clifton (2006), the primary goal of IPA is to gain a better understanding of the world through the eyes of research participants. More crucially, IPA demands researchers to evaluate participant statements by situating them within a larger social, cultural, and theoretical framework. It permits several interpretations of the central phenomenon since "no single, closed, a priori, theoretical assumption about how that insider's perspective may be interpreted" (ibid., p. 1114). Thus, researchers can analyze data using a specific theoretical framework with high explanatory power.

The data for this study were gathered as part of a research project on teacher rotation in Y, a mountainous district on Beijing's outskirts. Nearly 70% of the district's 63 schools were located in villages remote from the district seat. The local authority conducted an investigation of the district's teacher workforce prior to launching the pilot teacher rotation program in 2005. The findings indicated that there was a gap in teacher ability between district-seat and rural teachers, particularly in the ratio of backbone teachers. As a result, thirty urban teachers were sent to teach full-time in rural schools, while fifty rural teachers were placed in urban schools for mentored learning. Then, in 2006, following a year of piloting, Y's local government released a guideline extending teacher rotation from one to three years in order to sustain its effect. Moreover, an honorary award of "Advanced Individual of Rotation" was established to recognize top performance on a yearly basis, enhancing the mobilizing effect. Related provisions were maintained in the 2013 guideline. Teacher rotation was mandatory since every year a certain quota of eligible teachers were reallocated to work in rural schools.[2]

The IPA procedure necessitates a small homogenous sample (Smith, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Sampling began with E Primary School and W Middle School in the district seat, both of which had a track record of academic excellence and had sent many rotating teachers to rural schools. The initial sample criterion was winner of the "Advanced Individual of Rotation" award since it reflected rotating teachers' commendable efforts during rotation. We further referred to the recommendation of the principals, the gatekeepers

2 According to the 2006 guideline, eligible teachers were (1) under a specified age (57 years for males and 52 years for females), (2) had at least five years of teaching experience, and (3) had no prior experience working in rural schools. The upper age limit was reduced to 50 years in the 2013 guideline, and rotation participants should account for one-third of all eligible teachers each academic year.

TABLE 1 Informant Profile

Anonym	Gender	Sender school	Recipient school	Subject	Teaching exp. before rotation (yrs)
Jing	Female	E Pri Sch	DC Pri Sch	English	10
Fang	Female	E Pri Sch	DS Pri Sch	Chinese	5
Fei	Female	E Pri Sch	TS Pri Sch	Mathematics	8
Ying	Female	E Pri Sch	BZ Pri Sch	Mathematics	9
Guo	Male	W Mid Sch	BZ Mid Sch	Biology	22
Mei	Female	W Mid Sch	TS Mid Sch	Moral Edu	24
Nan	Female	W Mid Sch	TS Mid Sch	Chinese	13
Jie	Female	W Mid Sch	DC Mid Sch	English	16

who were intimately familiar with rotating teachers. In particular, the principal of W Middle School recommended Nan as an informant since she had always worked assiduously, despite the fact that she was not named the "Advanced Individual of Rotation" due to some unpleasant stories during rotation. Then potential informants were asked to evaluate their commitment during rotation and provided with an informed consent form to decide whether to participate willingly. Nan stated that she was committed to her classroom but not to the leadership of the recipient school, and she was willing to share her experiences. Finally, this study included eight teachers with three years of rotation experience in rural schools. The informant profile is shown in Table 1.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews (Larking et al., 2006; Smith, 2004; Smith & Osborn, 2003). As Smith (2004) points out, deep interview is an effective research method based on IPA since it let informants tell stories, ideas, and feelings about a central phenomenon.

We transcribed all interviews after the data collection. A two-step data analysis procedure was adopted (Smith & Osborn, 2003). First, the interview transcript for each case was open-coded, and a set of themes idiographic to the case were developed. Specifically, following Larking et al.'s (2006) suggestion, we categorized the themes into informants' "objects of concern" (i.e., the sender school, rural school leaders, colleagues, and students) and "experiential claims" (i.e., rotating teachers' experiences, emotions, and ideas in terms of the object). For example, Nan had two main objects of concern: (1) "the rural school

leader," with experiential claims of "unfair treatment," "disillusionment," and "indifferent to the school's enterprise"; and (2) "students," with experiential claims of "conscience," "disliking the strict time management," and "self-motivated". Second, we conducted cross-case analysis by comparing themes of each case. Convergence or divergence between cases was identified. For example, while Nan's unfavorable experiential claim about "the rural school leader" differed from those of other informants, it served as a counter-example to rotating teachers' concerns on reciprocating the leaders' proper treatment; that is, we formed the master theme of "reciprocity with rural school leaders". Nan's experiential claim regarding "students" was highly consistent with other rotating teachers. Her negative feelings toward the recipient school's strict time management mirrored her inner motivation to exert control over her efforts toward student learning. We used the in vivo code of "conscience" as the master theme to depict the emotional drive. Finally, four master themes were identified: embodying sender schools, reciprocity with rural school leaders, rapport with colleagues, and conscience towards students. Each emotional drive was identified on at least five informants as Table 2 shows.

TABLE 2 Master themes emerged from informants

Anonym	Embodying sender schools	Reciprocity with rural school leaders	Rapport with colleagues	Conscience towards students
Jing		■	■	■
Fang	■	■		
Fei	■		■	■
Ying	■	■		■
Guo	■		■	
Mei	■	■	■	■
Nan		■		■
Jie	■		■	■

Findings

The majority of informants stated that rotation brought difficulties in their work and personal lives. The first sort of difficulty was in the natural order. For instance, Jing recalled that she had a severe cough at the start of rotation due to her inability to adjust her physical condition to the new environment. Mei also said, "Though I said I was not afraid of being tired at work, but sometimes it's really hard to adjust my body and I felt uncomfortable." The second sort was in the practical order, and was particularly associated with rural students' disadvantageous learning status. For instance, Fang observed that rural students struggled with sentence structure and phrasing in Chinese, which she attributed to a lack of reading. Jie also found that some instructional strategies were ineffective in the English classroom because students lacked the necessary knowledge and skills. Despite the difficulties, informants maintained a strong commitment to rotation work due to the following emotional drivers.

Embodying Sender Schools

As informants observed, local teachers and principals would naturally recognize rotating teachers as good ones, such as "teachers from E Primary School were different" (Ying) and "*visiting monks chant scriptures better*"[3] (Fang). Jie explicitly realized how the rural school positioned him. As she put it,

> *The DC Secondary School where I rotated was especially focused on utilizing the talents of rotating teachers. I went there as a resource, and the school would make use of me. The school's philosophy was simple: whether you were the best teacher or not, you were treated as such.*

The majority of rotating teachers made an intuitive connection between their performance and the image of sender schools, which held advantageous positions in the local school hierarchy. For example, as Ying stated, "Although we rotated there as a part of them, we were embodying an E school teacher." Additionally, Fang said, "At that time, I thought I still represented E Primary School's teacher quality when I was in DC Primary School." Their statements indicated that the sender school served as a "reference group"[4] (Zhai, 2011,

3 It is a Chinese proverb implying that local people always value opinions from outside rather than their fellows, because they believe these outsiders can bring new knowledge and skills to impact existing ways of doings.

4 According to Zhai (2011, p. 234), Confucian people's identification as insiders is not actual or concrete, but psychological in terms of Merton's notion of the reference group as an orienting point for action. That is, an individual might identify with a social group as an insider even if

p. 234) within which they identified as insiders (*zijiaren*). Mei said, "At the beginning of the rotation, I was like an outsider (*wairen*); I felt I was someone just rotating there rather than part of that school." According to her account, communicating with local teachers was difficult due to her lack of familiarity with the local teaching culture. She developed a sense of communal identification and belonging over a year later. As a result, rotating teachers created complex, dynamic identities that encompassed both insider and outsider perceptions of the sender and rural schools (Song, 2018; Wang et al., 2017).

Such a sense of self-identity motivated rotating teachers to work diligently in order to preserve the face of their sender schools. They sought to mold the self-images in the locals' expectation, in order for striking a psychological equilibrium between their own desires and the audience's veneration (Han, 2016; Zhai, 2011). When rotating teachers viewed local teachers as "insiders", they tended to do credit to the sender schools—the collective face that extended beyond the individual's personal face (Han, 2016; Kinnison, 2017). For example, Fang said, "I always used E's spirit to push myself, to behave steadily and consciously, to work surefootedly." Fei said, "I couldn't lose E primary school's face, and actually my leader had never mentioned this." Her words implied that sustaining the face of the sender school was spontaneous. She further demonstrated her acts:

> *Foremost, we must set a good example. We were rotating there, regardless of what we had previously accomplished. We must make efforts in all areas, including teaching and research. Regardless of how well we had done, when local teachers saw you coming here to give lessons and conduct teaching research steadfastly, they would all follow you.*

The statement demonstrated that she based her assessment of face issues on how the audience perceived and felt her act. Her persistent practices earned the admiration of local teachers and earned her a sense of honor. Rotating teachers would be delighted to lend their respect to their sender schools, but would feel ashamed if their actions undermined the collective face (Han, 2016). Notably, self-identification as an embodiment of sender schools elicited a sense of modesty rather than superiority. Ying said, "There was no bickering between factions, like us E teachers and you BZ teachers." She further said that she shared her designed mathematics exercises with other teachers for collective advancement. Guo also commended, "There is neither lowliness

he or she is not a member. In comparison, an individual who is a member of a social group may not identify as a member of the group.

nor nobleness among us teachers. We did the actual work, teaching forty-five minutes by forty-five minutes." As it were, their concerns of embodying sender schools, whose emotional commentary was social honor-shame, directed their action diligently.

Reciprocity with Rural School Leaders

According to the interview data, another significant emotional drive for rotating teachers' acts was reciprocity with rural school leaders. Fair and reasonable treatment of rotating teachers would generate pleasant emotions. Jing promoted an English language learning project in DC Primary School. She received sincere support from the principal and worked to improve the school's project-based language learning in order to reciprocate his trust. She said, "Without hesitation, the school's principal backed me up. He provided financial support when we wanted to do a project involving materials such as display panels. This made me so happy." Fang, who began her career teaching physical education but later switched to Chinese, felt herself less skilled to teach the Chinese. The principal of the recipient school gave ample opportunities for training and demonstration lessons, and she eagerly experimented innovative teaching in the new context. Ying's experience of assigning classes at the beginning of rotation brought her positive emotions as well:

> *Previously, I assumed that the local ones would certainly penalize us by assigning us to the poor classes. They were, however, very fair. They first let us choose which grade to teach; then, among the three Grade 2 classes, we drew lots to determine class, and regardless of the outcome, we were blameless. As a result, I felt pretty fair. They didn't treat me as an outsider, but rather as an equal, and I owe it to them from the bottom of my heart to work hard for them.*

In contrast, unfair treatment might develop negative feelings in rotating teachers. As Jing concluded, "If the principal couldn't treat everyone equally favorably, if s/he couldn't treat rotating teachers sincerely, rotating teachers' moods will definitely be affected." Several informants expressed concern about the "localism" that rural school leaders might harbor. They might make distinctions between rotating and local teachers in order to concentrate benefits on locals rather than sharing them with "borrowed talents". Despite the fact that Mei had not experienced any related discomfort, she believed such "localism" to be understandable:

> *For example, in the case of applying for titles, for us rotating there, no matter how well we did, they would never take account. They would prefer to*

> *nominate someone of this school who might be less competent than us in many aspects.*

In Nan's instance, she had an unpleasant experience of unfair treatment:

> *About a month after I arrived, there was an exceptional opportunity to apply for the title of backbone teacher. My original school leaders said they would encourage me to apply. However, the rural school principal refused. I inquired if it took up their quota. No, he said. I inquired, "Why not help apply?" He stated that I knew very little about you. "If you didn't know me well, why did you let me be the homeroom teacher?" I inquired. He said because of my subject. I couldn't say anything… My original school encouraged teachers to apply, but they appeared to be impeding the process. I couldn't understand.*

Nan was profoundly disillusioned and candidly confessed that her passion during rotation was lower than it was in the sender school. This "localism" compelled her to identify as an outsider, a "sojourner" (Wang et al., 2017). "I didn't want to work for there," she explained, "and I was only there for three years." She maintained a sense of disconnection from the leadership and indifference to the school's enterprise, despite her strong commitment to her classroom.

The above episodes established the following: First, the degree to which they were treated fairly, transparently, and supportively indicated the school leaders' attitude toward them as insiders or outsiders. For instance, the lot-drawing ritual not only ensured that rotating and local teachers had an equal chance of being assigned classrooms, but also reflected the recipient school's values of equality, galvanizing rotating teachers' self-identification as insiders. If rotating teachers thought they were being treated unequally, they were more likely to lose trust in the school's leadership and posture themselves as outsiders. Second, concerns of reciprocity motivated rotating teachers to provide a reciprocating gesture for the "favor" of leaders' appropriate treatment. For "borrowed talents," reciprocity's mutual rights and obligations with local leaders, infiltrated rotation life as "implicit but forceful guidelines for proper behavior inherent to any social situation" (Westwood, Chan, & Linstead, 2004, p. 373). Concerns about reciprocity among rotating teachers would influence their enthusiasm or indifference for the rural schools' collective endeavor.

Rapport with Colleagues

Informants expressed that they cared about developing rapport with their colleagues, which provided them with pleasant feelings to engage in professional work. As Jing described, when she promoted the English language learning

project, she was also motivated by colleagues' cohesion and collaboration. Although she encountered a variety of difficulties as a result of rotation, both professional (e.g., rural students' limited knowledge base in English language) and personal (e.g., health issues), rapport with colleagues supplied her with the emotional energy necessary for resilience. As she put it,

> *We all came from different places and formed a bond at that school. Such an interpersonal relationship felt warm and welcoming to me. As a result, we rotating teachers not only worked hard, but also had fun at work. There was a sense of gradually finding happiness in the midst of hardship.*

Fei encountered difficulties in commuting after attending TS Primary School, which was located 35 kilometers from the district seat. However, she viewed the shuttle bus ride with colleagues as a pleasurable experience. She said, "Sitting in the soft seats, we could grumble about work, chat or play cards. This kind of relaxation was pretty good." Guo also said,

> *We were colleagues working together whether we were there for a year or three years. We all pitched in to help if someone needed it. In terms of the job, we newcomers found it difficult to manage the children because some of them were extremely misbehaving. Local teachers sometimes advised us on how to handle these situations. Suppose a teacher fell out with others, we would feel uncomfortable—after all, we were working together. So we were all willing to help each other.*

His words reflected that maintaining a harmonious relationship was pivotal to maintaining a good emotional state for Chinese (Zhai, 2011). Furthermore, providing assistance can have both instrumental and emotional functions (Qi, 2013). Indeed, the desire to maintain rapport with colleagues prompted rotating teachers to take action. Jie, for example, said that in the rural school, "there were not many teachers, only within a small social circle, so we could easily to form a sense of collaboration." She emphasized that she shared her resources, such as lesson plans, to her rural colleagues to form a harmonious atmosphere. Mei did some organizational citizenship behaviors to enhance the emotional bond among teachers. She explained,

> *Because I didn't teach major subjects, I was free in the first lesson slot. However, I would arrive at the office as early as possible to clean or fetch water. I had no qualms about doing so. They major subject teachers were extremely very busy, and I acted as a strong supporter for them. They said it was inap-*

> *propriate at times, but I thought it was fine. I stated that we worked together to achieve happiness… The whole day, we were all doing things for students. Given the difficult and exhausting nature of the job, it is preferable to be cheerful.*

As demonstrated in the interview data, rapport with colleagues provided rotating teachers with a range of good emotions (e.g., joy, fun, happiness), which helped alleviate perceived hardship during rotation. Additionally, rapport issues would motivate rotating teachers to contribute to a collaborative working environment.

Conscience Towards Students

Rotating teachers' essential emotional drive was their conscience towards students. Many of them expressed "working hard no matter where I go" (Ying) and "doing what I should do as a teacher" (Jing, Fei, Mei, Jie). These creeds emphasized their profession's moral concerns, namely the priority of caring for students regardless of the work situation. Rotating teachers determined that such issues as conscience are their responses to moral demands (Sun, 1991). As Fei stated,

> *Teaching is something that comes from the heart. I frequently say that being a teacher is a job of conscience, the result of years of introspection. We are not like laborers. Even if we have good skills, we can't present what we've done quickly. Teaching is a labor of love—"it takes ten years to grow a tree, but a hundred years to raise a person". Education is not something we can achieve overnight, but rather requires long-term effort.*

It reflected her prime concern about students' sake (Zhao, 2013). She viewed teaching as a long-term endeavor with delayed effects on students' growth, despite the fact that such effects were rarely visible during the rotation years. Thus, conscience served as an "immediate inner evaluation system" (Cai & Liu, 2010, p. 9) for monitoring and evaluating her identity as a teacher. It can also be seen in Nan's words:

> *Actually, being a teacher is a work of conscience. Even if the school had strict time management, it would have no effect when teachers did not do well. That school* (*the recipient school*) *focused more on controlling time institutionally. For example, if we wanted to leave school out of office hours, we had to get the signature of the Faculty Office Director. Here* (*the sender*

> *school*) *is more humane. They focus more on letting you feel self-motivated to work hard. There are different ways of management.*

She was not only displeased with the rural school principals' unfair treatment, but also with the administration at that school. According to her, TS Middle School managed teachers' time in a technical-rational, monochronic manner, anticipating that strict control of timetables would result in increased teacher productivity. She deemed it problematic, as "doing well" was deemed irrelevant in the face of such external manipulation. Rather than that, conscience-driven behavior was frequently polychronic. That is, she desired control over the description and evaluation of undertakings and placed a premium on their quality rather than completion (Hargreaves, 1990). Conscience was Nan's primary emotional drive, eliciting a strong sense of obligation, despite some disruption of negativity brought about by the unfair treatment and rigid administration. Additionally, Mei demonstrated that conscience, as an internalized ethical rule, created a sense of obligation. As she put it,

> *Though we are paid, our job of cultivating people is different from planting trees. We can chop down trees if they are not good, but it's impossible for people. For any family, children are everything. So, make an all-out effort.*

She realized the irreversibility of students' growth and thus the importance of practicing diligently in order to avoid troubled conscience. Theoretically, conscience is embodied, governing teachers' actions to discharge the internally voiced obligation. If they cannot fulfill it, their conscience will not be in peace (Zhao, 2013). As Jing put it,

> *I sought a clear conscience with no shame* (*wen xin wu kui*) *at least. I really put in efforts there. Teachers, parents, and children there appropriated me considerably. And the leaders of that school appropriated me considerably as well.*

Discussion

The current study revealed four emotional drives based on Archer's "concern–emotion–action" framework: embodying sender schools, reciprocity with rural school leaders, rapport with colleagues, and conscience towards students.

First, rotating teachers in this study held concerns of face involving emotional commentaries of social honor or shame. As the embodiment of the sender school, they spurred themselves on in front of witnesses in the rural workplace. Maintaining face in this way was "not only an individual's business but a collective concern" (Kinnison, 2017, p. 39). As Liao et al. (2019) observed, rotating teachers' unprofessional behavior was the sender school's collective shame in its principal's view due to face's distributing or sharing effect among insiders (Kinnison, 2017). Furthermore, rotating teachers in this study acted in a relatively modest approach to "strengthening and expressing the harmonization of human relationships" (Cheng, 1986, p. 340). They focused on the quality of classroom teaching and influenced others "in quiet and unassuming ways" (Lo et al., 2021, p. 236). It showed their modesty as a gesture of empathy and further enhanced their feeling of face due to respectable performance (Han, 2016). Therefore, self-identification as the embodiment of sender schools primarily functioned as a productive emotional drive for rotating teachers' engagement.

Second, rotating teachers cared about the reciprocity with rural school leaders. In particular, they weighed how leaders treated them. Our data revealed that they would feel indignant due to unfair treatment and act dispassionately for the organization. Conversely, they were likely to feel recognized and reciprocate endeavors for the leaders' kindness and support. It echoes Song's (2018) observation that leaders' lack of trust and respect would lower rotating teachers' motivation for the collective affairs. As some studies (e.g., Qian & Walker, 2021; Shi, Yu, & Zheng, 2020) point out, as paternalistic leaders, Chinese school principals' care and protection can actuate teachers to reciprocate in beneficial ways and form emotional well-being in the workplace. In sum, for the particular group of rotating teachers, evidence in this study suggested that in the principal-teacher relationship there was an emphasis on reciprocal obligations (Tsui & Farh, 1997). Moreover, rotating teachers were highly concerned about how they were treated by comparing local teachers, thereby positioning themselves between insiders and outsiders of the rural school community.

Third, rotating teachers expressed concerns of developing rapport with their colleagues, which involved emotional commentaries of enjoyment, happiness, and fun. Additionally, evidence indicated that a harmonious environment facilitated rotating teachers' actions for the common good. It was consistent with Wu and Chen's (2018) observation that Hong Kong teachers, who were under the influence of Confucianism, enjoyed a caring and collegially supportive atmosphere, while feeling upset about the competition between colleagues for appraisal and promotion. As Chin (2014) points out, the degree of harmony

in a Chinese organization significantly affects individuals' affective commitment. In general, Confucian individuals view themselves as interdependent with their environment (Tsui & Farh, 1997), which causes them to devote efforts to maintain relationships with colleagues.

Fourth, rotating teachers in this study held strong conscience towards students. They prioritized student development as the primary moral demand and mission, which was coherent across working context. It directed their efforts toward teaching and learning to keep conscience in peace. Otherwise, they would be ashamed for actions that violated such ethical rules. In particular, most informants encountered personal and professional obstacles or even administrative discrimination, while these obstacles had "the effect of revealing teachers' tacit assumptions about their work" (Santoro, 2011, p. 5), providing opportunities for teachers to reflect on their ethical commitments and the moral rewards associated with teaching. Conscience as ethical powers propelled them to address difficulties, tensions, and uncertainties in order to approach the ethical imagination of helping students learn (Chen, Wei, & Jiang, 2017).

These findings echo Kwong, Wang, and Clifton's (2010) conclusions that both Chinese and Western teachers prioritize student learning and place a premium on congenial relationships with colleagues and leaders. For rotating teachers, conscience with its emotional component centered on shame, serves as a "steadfast inner power" (Chen et al., 2017, p. 536) that principally motivates rotating teachers to meet the moral obligations of teaching regardless of where they work. Interestingly, their emotional drive was also strongly related to their dynamic identification as insider/outsider in relation to the sender and rural schools, in congruence with theoretical observations (Kinnison, 2017; Zhai, 2011): On the one hand, rotating teachers' desire to maintain the honor and reputation of their sender schools was motivated by their positioning as outsiders to rural schools. On the other hand, by framing themselves as rural school insiders, they would like to foster harmony in the school community. The configuration of concerns of students, the sender school, and rural school leaders and colleagues have the second-order emotionality to direct courses of action. As Archer (2004, p. 350) puts it,

> *The committed person can never be literally carefree* (*in excess of those first-order concerns that are part of the human condition*)*, because they have acquired a prism on the world which refracts their first-order emotions. Their responses are sieved through their caring and little is untinged by it.*

Furthermore, as Sun (1991) argues, emotionality in a Confucian society is not individualistic but involves paired interactions (e.g., rotating teacher–local

teacher, rotating teacher–rural school principal), which contrasts with Archer's framework's social order. Theoretically, emotions in the social order emerge from the relationship between an individual's concerns and society's normativity. Although the emotional commentary is primarily motivated by moral judgments from the social order (Archer, 2004), rotating teachers in this study appear to be evaluating their concerns by whether they "meet the requirement of propriety (to attain mental harmony)" (Zhai, 2011, p. 152) rather than by any pre-existing norms. Propriety (*Li*), the underlying principle of interaction in a Confucian society, is an abstraction of various concrete rituals that pervade a person's life, governing his or her participation in social activities (Zhai, 2011). Such propriety is reflected in rotating teachers' reading of their insider/outsider identity in relation to different stakeholders, and involves emotions more than the cluster of "shame, remorse, pride, envy, jealousy and guilt" as Archer (2004, p. 339) identifies. As an explorative study, this study identifies the main emotional drives of rotating teachers, and further research is encouraged to elucidate the emotional structure and dynamics of this special group of teachers within the particular cultural context.

Implications and Limitations

This study makes several implications in light of teacher rotation as a potentially effective technique for narrowing the teacher quality gap.

Firstly, in the implementation of the teacher rotation policy, rotating teachers should be viewed as more than inputs; they should also be viewed as emotional beings. Their emotional state will affect their work engagement and commitment in recipient rural schools and ultimately affect the realization of the policy goals. Indeed, an emotionally caring environment can bring teachers' satisfaction and thus more willingness to work for schools that serve disadvantaged communities (Johnson, 2012). In this sense, local authorities and school leaders are expected to create an emotional milieu that fosters rotating teachers' satisfaction.

Secondly, local authorities and school leaders from both sender schools and recipient rural schools should be aware of the emotional drives that keep rotating teachers committed in the recipient school and take according actions to support teachers. In particular, as the "conscience towards students" serves as the primary emotional drive for the rotating teachers' endeavor in rural schools, the local authority and school leaders should strengthen the selection of rotating teachers, and pay attention to protecting and maintaining their internal moral purpose.

Under China's policy background that the rotating teachers will return to the original school after the rotation expires, support from both sender and recipient schools are important. Practically, the sender school can build the "school as community" (Bryk & Driscoll, 1998) and continue to support the rotating teachers by giving them learning opportunities or teaching resources after the teachers are sent, so that they can feel the warmth of their "mother school". Especially in the early stage of rotation, this warmth will alleviate the loneliness of the rotating teachers and maintain their collective responsibility for student learning and professional development. The recipient rural school should also endeavor to develop a trusting, fair, supportive and collaborative school culture in order to facilitate the rotating teachers' quick adaption and sense of belonging. The small size of China's rural schools can be taken as an advantage in developing this culture.

Finally, it should be emphasized that the study's findings are subject to some limitations. To begin, this is an exploratory study with a small sample of Chinese teachers, so the findings should not be overgeneralized. Besides, the sociopolitical and cultural context of China's teacher rotation shapes the unique characteristics of rotating teachers, and the findings cannot be freely generalized to other contexts, though some scholars believe that the mechanism of teacher rotation is promisingly transferable to other education systems (Jeong & Luschei, 2019). Nonetheless, this study highlights the importance of being conscious of the cultural foundation of teacher emotion. Additionally, we welcome international scholars to investigate the emotions of teachers who partake in regulated teacher transfers in different educational systems.

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