



跨文化再定位：在臺灣國際學校中華語教師 角色與策略的類型學

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摘 要

研究目的

受西方影響形塑的國際學校作為跨文化空間，華人教師在其中常面臨對身份建構與專業適應的張力。本研究旨在探討華語教師在臺灣國際學校中，如何在教學、同儕關係與家長互動中協調跨文化的複雜性。

研究設計／方法／取徑

本研究採取雙重理論視角進行分析。一方面，採用 Hofstede (1980, 2011) 之文化維度理論作為外部觀察文化差異的視角；另一方面，結合 Dai (2023) 提出的「文化摺疊」隱喻，從內部視角將文化適應視為一種啟動—固化—延展的循環歷程。兩者結合，有助於全面理解國際學校中的跨文化動態。本研究運用敘事探究法，訪談了來自七所國際認證學校的三十位華語教師。資料依學校群分類，並依三大主題加以歸納：教學法、師生與親師互動關係，以及教師間的專業合作。研究進一步採用主題分析法，以辨識重複出現的模式與新興主題。

研究發現或結論

研究結果顯示，華語教師並非被動接受西方規範，而是積極地詮釋、

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協商並調整文化期待。其適應歷程受到制度架構、認證標準、家長期待與個人能動性的交織影響。本研究提出四種適應角色的類型學：啟動者（Activator）、邊界試探者（Boundary Tester）、安撫者（Comforter）與同步者（Synchronizer），以呈現教師在不同情境中如何重新定位自身，並突破「同化／抗拒」的二元對立框架。

研究原創性／價值

本研究以臺灣作為案例，連結文化理論與教師教育實踐，探討文化傳承如何與西方主導的學校規範交會互動。本研究所提出的角色類型學，為理解跨國教育情境中，文化少數教師的專業策略提供了概念框架。

教育政策建議或實務意涵

本研究對教師專業發展具有啟發意義，能協助設計具跨文化策略的培訓方案，支持教師在多元文化環境中的適應與發展。同時亦為學校領導者提供參考，建立認可華人教師文化優勢並促進包容與合作的支持性結構。

關鍵詞：國際學校、西方影響、跨文化學習、文化適應、臺灣



REPOSITIONING ACROSS CULTURES: A TYPOLOGY OF CHINESE LANGUAGE TEACHERS' ROLES AND STRATEGIES IN TAIWAN'S INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose

International schools shaped by Western influences serve as cross-cultural spaces where ethnic Chinese teachers often navigate tensions in identity formation and professional adaptation. This study examines how Chinese language teachers negotiate cross-cultural complexities in teaching, collegial relationships, and parent interactions in international schools in Taiwan.

Design/methodology/approach

This study adopts a dual-theoretical lens. An etic perspective draws on Hofstede's (1980, 2011) cultural dimensions to frame outsider-oriented observations of cultural difference. In contrast, an emic perspective builds on Dai's (2023) Folds of Culture, a metaphor that conceptualizes adaptation as an iterative process of activation, solidification, and extension. Together, these frameworks support a holistic examination of cross-cultural dynamics in international schools. Applying a narrative inquiry approach, the study interviewed 30 teachers across seven internationally accredited schools. Data were grouped by school cluster and categorized into three areas: pedagogy, teacher-student-parent relationships, and collegial interactions. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns and emerging themes.

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Findings/results

Findings reveal that Chinese language teachers are not passive recipients of Western norms but active agents who interpret, negotiate, and adapt to cultural expectations. Their adaptation is shaped by institutional structures, accreditation mandates, parental expectations, and personal agency. This study introduces a typology of four adaptive roles: Activator, Boundary Tester, Comforter, and Synchronizer. These roles illustrate the diverse ways teachers reposition themselves across contexts and challenge binary notions of assimilation and resistance.

Originality/value

This study bridges cultural theory and teacher education by using Taiwan as a case to examine how cultural heritage intersects with Western-dominated school norms. The proposed typology contributes a conceptual framework for understanding the professional strategies of culturally minoritized educators within transnational education.

Implications for policy/practice

This study informs the design of professional development that equips teachers with intercultural strategies for navigating culturally diverse school environments. It also offers guidance for school leaders to establish supportive structures that recognize Chinese teachers' cultural strengths and foster inclusive, collaborative cultures.

Keywords: international school, Western influence, cross-cultural learning, cultural adaptation, Taiwan

Introduction

The internationalization of education has driven the rapid expansion of international schools worldwide (Bunnell, 2022; Wright et al., 2022). This growth reinforces the dominance of Western knowledge systems and pedagogical practices, often resulting in one-sided learning environments. International schools, primarily shaped by Western ideologies, influence instructional methods, teacher-student relationships, collegial interactions, and teacher-parent dynamics (Baikovich & Yemini, 2023; Lai et al., 2016). While grounded in Western curricula and accreditation systems such as the International Baccalaureate (IB), Council of International Schools (CIS), and Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), international schools are not uniform ‘Western’ spaces. They adapt to local contexts and enroll students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Li et al., 2024). As Wright and Huang (2025) observe, international schools are shaped not only by Western educational hegemony but also by local and national forces, resulting in varied adaptations across contexts. Nonetheless, studies suggest that this transnational trend perpetuates power imbalances and uneven stakeholder contributions (Adams & Velarder, 2021; Bailey, 2015; Bunnell, 2016; Caffyn, 2015; Öztabak, 2022). As Wright (2024) notes, such imbalances also intersect with social stratification, since access to international schools remains closely tied to families’ socioeconomic resources. For ethnic Chinese teachers, these structures can lead to cross-cultural dissonances, shaping their instructional approaches and professional identities (Arber et al., 2014).

Craig et al. (2018) illustrate this phenomenon through the experiences of an Asian-American teacher in China, whose cross-cultural interactions reshaped her perspectives on cultural belonging, professional identity, and teaching philosophy. Similarly, Lai et al. (2016) found that Chinese language teachers in Hong Kong international schools adapted their teaching practices by shifting from traditional, teacher-centered instruction to more interactive, Western-style pedagogy. However, this transition was fraught with challenges, as teachers had to navigate tensions between maintaining cultural deference and asserting their agency among Western colleagues. Xu (2011) further observes that teachers in Western-oriented international schools respond to these tensions in varied ways. Some seek to learn from their Western peers, while others renegotiate their roles to strike a balance between cultural expectations and professional autonomy.

Recent research increasingly highlights the role of culture in shaping teachers' experiences in multicultural international schools. However, most studies focus on how Anglophone teachers adapt to host-country educational environments (Bailey & Cooker, 2019; Poole, 2020; Savva, 2016; Roiha & Sommier, 2021). Howe and Xu (2013), using a self-narrative inquiry approach, explore their transcultural development as educators, with Howe as a Canadian teaching in Japan and Xu as a Chinese educator teaching in Canada. They conceptualize teaching as a reciprocal process of learning across cultures, while also acknowledging the challenges posed by cultural biases within educational systems. Their work calls for the integration of diverse cultural perspectives in education, moving beyond standardized models. Meanwhile, Savva (2016) argues that adaptation in international schools is a complex and context-dependent process shaped by changing school expectations, teacher agency, and evolving cultural identities. Rather than following a linear progression, adaptation is fluid, requiring teachers to recalibrate their practices as they navigate professional and cultural boundaries.

Despite growing interest in cultural adaptation, limited research examines how ethnic Chinese teachers develop and exercise intercultural competence while teaching and socializing in international schools. This study applies a cultural lens to examine the adaptation processes and role establishment of Chinese language teachers in international schools in Taiwan¹. It focuses on Chinese language teachers because language instruction in international schools involves unique cultural and pedagogical challenges. Unlike subjects such as science or mathematics, which are often taught by Western-trained educators using inquiry-based approaches, Chinese language is typically taught by Taiwanese teachers whose own schooling and professional training tend to be rooted in teacher-directed instruction, content mastery, and moral cultivation.

1 Throughout this paper, the term Chinese language teachers is used instead of Mandarin teachers. This terminology reflects the diverse linguistic profiles of students in Taiwan's international schools. In some schools, particularly Ministry of Education (MOE)-registered schools offering international programs for native Taiwanese students, teachers instruct Chinese as a first language (e.g., International Baccalaureate (IB) Group A). In contrast, in foreign-registered international schools, Chinese (i.e., Mandarin) is often taught as a world language or additional language (e.g., IB Group B) for non-native speakers. To ensure clarity and inclusiveness across these instructional contexts, Chinese language teachers refer collectively to educators teaching native, non-native, or both learner tracks.

The divergence between pedagogical traditions and cultural meanings embedded in language teaching requires Chinese language teachers to engage in ongoing negotiation of their roles and instructional approaches. In addition, international schools often operate under Western-oriented standards imposed by accreditation bodies, further shaping the ways Chinese language teachers experience and respond to institutional expectations. These complexities make their cross-cultural adaptation particularly worthy of focused investigation.

Unpacking Teachers' Cross-cultural Learning in International Schools: Etic and Emic Approaches

There are two approaches to observing cultural phenomena: Etic and emic (Pike, 1966). From an outsider's perspective, an etic approach addresses cultural behaviors using external criteria and compares them across diverse groups. On the contrary, an emic approach examines the human behavior of a particular culture from an insider's perspective, often employing metaphors to identify specific cultural elements. To understand culture holistically, Triandis (1972) applies both etic-emic approaches by initially identifying certain dimensions that appear to have universal status and subsequently defining an emic representation to explore specific values in a particular society in depth.

This section first employs an etic approach, using Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions to examine the broader cultural contexts of international schools. It then applies the Fold of Cultures metaphor to explore the emic perspectives of Chinese language teachers, capturing their cross-cultural experiences in international schools.

An Etic Lens: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

To explore the broader cultural context of Taiwan's international schools, this study uses Hofstede's (1980, 2011) cultural dimensions as a comparative, etic framework. Despite critiques of its essentialist tendencies and limited external validity (Graves, 1986; Olie, 1995), Hofstede's model remains widely used in international education for its systematic classification of national cultural tendencies. In schools influenced by Western-oriented accreditation bodies such as IB and WASC, Hofstede's framework helps surface institutional expectations that may differ from locally embedded values. These cultural dimensions offer a macro-level lens through which to identify areas of potential cultural dissonance,

particularly around authority structures, interaction styles, time management, uncertainty tolerance, and value orientations². These etc observations are not treated as behavioral determinants but serve to contextualize the institutional logics that Taiwanese teachers interpret and respond to. They are complemented by an emic perspective grounded in teacher narratives, which reveal how adaptation unfolds in situated, culturally meaningful ways.

Power Distance. Classroom management often reflects power dynamics. Power distance, defined as how much inequality is accepted, varies across cultures (Hofstede, 2011). Wubbels (2011) notes that cross-national classroom management practices are shaped by cultural differences. In high power distance contexts such as China and Japan, classrooms are structured and teacher-centered. In contrast, lower power distance countries, including many Western ones, promote student voice and collaboration (Parker et al., 2022). Students in these environments are less likely to view teachers as ultimate authorities (Li & Guo, 2012).

Individualism vs. Collectivism. Western and Chinese teachers differ in socialization. Individualism emphasizes autonomy, while collectivism values group harmony and hierarchy (Hofstede, 2011). Western teachers, such as those in Switzerland, often share ideas and contribute to school development (Rechsteiner et al., 2022). In contrast, Chinese teachers emphasize group consensus and harmony (Wei & Li, 2013; Peters, 2022), leading to deference to authority.

Uncertainty Avoidance. Cultures vary in tolerance for ambiguity (Hofstede, 2011). Western pedagogies, such as inquiry-based learning, often embrace uncertainty, encouraging adaptability and critical thinking (Rosen, 2019). In contrast, high uncertainty avoidance cultures rely on structured curricula and discourage speculative responses (Lai et al., 2016).

Time Orientation. Time perception reflects cultural values. Americans tend to follow monochronic time with linear task progression and punctuality (Hall, 1959). Chinese teachers often show polychronic tendencies, multitasking and flexibility, which can lead to mismatched expectations in international schools.

2 There are six Hofstede cultural dimensions. The sixth dimension, masculinity versus femininity, describes how societies differentiate gender roles by privileging competition and achievement over quality of life and caring (Hofstede, 2011). As gendered values and their implications did not emerge in the data, this dimension is not analyzed in this study.

Indulgence vs. Restraint. Indulgence refers to the extent to which societies allow for free gratification of desires related to enjoyment and leisure (Hofstede, 2011). Western teachers often value work-life balance and personal fulfillment. Chinese teachers typically adhere to Confucian ideals of self-discipline and academic dedication (Duan et al., 2022).

Table 1 summarizes these perspectives using Hofstede’s cultural scores for the U.S. and Taiwan. Given that six of the seven participating schools in this study are accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), the cultural index scores of the USA and Taiwan from Hofstede’s model are used for comparison. While offering a macro-level lens, a more context-sensitive emic approach is needed to understand teachers’ lived cross-cultural experiences.

Table 1

Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions in an Educational Context, Using the USA and Taiwan as Examples

	Cultural Dimension	Description	USA Score	Taiwan Score	Western-bounded Perspectives	Taiwan-bounded Perspectives
1	Power distance	PDI: The extent to which the less powerful members of institutions within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally	40	58	- Student-centered education - Teachers treat students as equals	- Teacher-centered education - Teachers expect student’s obedience
2	Individualism vs. Collectivism	IDV: The degree to which individuals integrate into groups.	60	40	- Personal opinion expected - Stress on the right to voice	- Opinions and votes determined by a group - Stress on social belonging and group harmony
3	Uncertainty Avoidance	UAI: The extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations.	46	69	- Inquiry-based instruction - Teachers may say I don’t know. - Rely on informal norms - Willing to present opinions even without the clear answers	- Textbook-based instruction - Teachers are supposed to have all answers. - Prefer to do things with a prescriptive structure. - Reluctant to share opinions until more certain
4	Long-term vs. Short-term Orientation	LTO: The society values future orientation, adaptability and pragmatism STO: The society values past or present orientation, and the fulfillment of immediate obligation.	50	87	- Monochronic time management: Divide time into units so that tasks can be carefully planned - With clear-cut units of time	- Polychronic time management: Enjoy performing multiple tasks simultaneously - With a much more casual attitude toward time

5	Indulgence vs. Restraint	IVR: A tendency to allow relatively free gratification of basic and nature human desires related to enjoying life and having fun	68	49	- Value work-life balance - Promote personal enjoyment	- Value self-cultivation and endure strict social norms - Believe in self-restraint for future achievement
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Note. The masculinity/femininity dimension is not discussed as it does not empirically lend itself to this study.

An Emic Lens: The Folds of Culture

An emic approach examines cultural phenomena from an insider's perspective, often using metaphors to illuminate key cultural elements. Chinese language teachers, as cultural insiders, provide firsthand insights into their cross-cultural learning experiences. Inspired by Deleuze's (1993) concept of The Fold in art appreciation, Dai (2023) coined the Folds of Culture to conceptualize the complexity of cross-cultural adaptation.

According to Dai (2023), cultural learning is an iterative process akin to folds that stretch and contract through phases of folding, unfolding, and refolding. She introduces cross-culturalness as the gradual layering of cultural pigments acquired through intercultural experiences. This development is shaped by both internal factors (e.g., nationality, personality, life history, education) and external ones (e.g., relationships with colleagues, parents, students, and institutional norms). Teachers continually integrate new cultural elements into prior understandings, allowing past and present experiences to interact and reshape their cross-culturalness. This recursive process enhances their capacity to navigate cultural complexities, meet institutional demands, and position themselves within international school contexts.

Three Stages of Teacher's Cross-Cultural Learning in International Schools

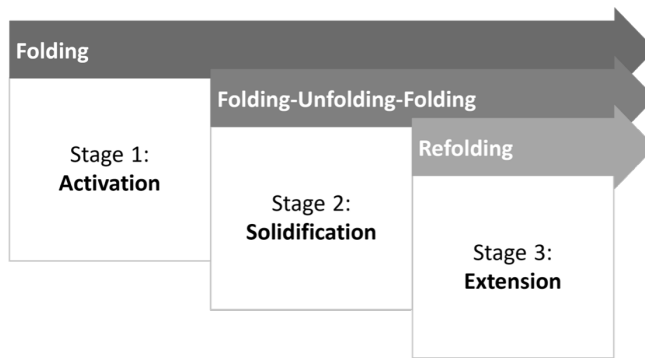
This study integrates etic and emic cultural lenses to examine how Chinese language teachers navigate cross-cultural learning and role establishment in international schools in Taiwan. To capture the cultural paradoxes they face, it conceptualizes three stages of cross-cultural learning: Activation, Solidification, and Extension, based on Dai's (2023) folding-unfolding-refolding model.

In the *Activation* stage, teachers encounter new cultural elements within the school, which interact with their pre-existing cultural pools. They undergo self-differentiation (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998), navigating acquiescence, cultural collisions, and settlement, gradually shifting from a monolithic to a more differentiated self (Dai, 2023). During Solidification, teachers test their evolving identities, unfolding cultural inner pleats and observing how their self-projections are received. Through ongoing interaction, they negotiate boundaries, opting for assimilation (integrating new practices) or dissolution (modifying or resisting previous norms).

In the *Extension* stage, teachers synchronize integrated cultural elements and extend their adapted identities into the wider school context. This dynamic exchange with school administration involves navigating diverse norms, policies, and expectations. By aligning with institutional cues, they apply their expertise to balance challenges and skills, fostering deep professional fulfillment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Figure 1 illustrates these three stages.

Figure 1

Three Stages of Cross-Cultural Learning



This study focuses on ethnic Chinese teachers working in international schools in Taiwan that operate under globally recognized accreditation systems (e.g., WASC, CIS) and implement curricula such as the International Baccalaureate or U.S.-based programs. While these schools share a broad orientation toward Western educational models, the degree to which Western-centric values are institutionalized varies across school types. As shown

in Table 2, differences in legal registration, governance structures, and administrative composition result in nuanced school environments that shape teachers' experiences. These contextual differences influence the forms of cultural adaptation teachers undergo and inform the three-stage model analyzed in this study.

In this study, the role of Chinese language teachers is understood as shaped through dynamic interactions within three key domains: instructional practices, relationships with students and parents, and professional engagement with colleagues. These domains reflect not only functional aspects of teaching, but also the social and institutional spaces where cultural negotiation occurs. While teacher roles are often defined by curricular and administrative expectations, they are continuously reconstituted through these everyday interactions, particularly in cross-cultural school settings. This study builds on this understanding by examining how Chinese language teachers interpret, adapt to, and reshape their roles across these domains in international schools.

Moreover, existing research suggests that cross-cultural instructional strategies among Chinese language teachers often include code-switching, scaffolding through cultural analogies, managing linguistic heterogeneity, and balancing traditional and inquiry-based approaches (Lai et al., 2016; Xu, 2011). These strategies serve as both pedagogical tools and cultural positioning behaviors, helping teachers maintain authority while navigating institutional norms. This study draws on and extends these insights to examine how such strategies unfold within the culturally diverse and structurally varied contexts of Taiwan's international schools.

By combining *The Folds of Culture* with Hofstede's cultural dimensions, it explores how teachers negotiate cultural dynamics and establish professional roles. Concentrating on pedagogy, teacher-student-parent relations, and collegial interactions, it addresses two questions: (1) How do Chinese language teachers engage with the school community and define their roles? (2) What strategies do they employ to navigate cross-cultural learning in these settings?

Methods

The study was conducted in Taiwan, where considerable effort is underway to promote bilingual Chinese-English education, aligning with the objectives outlined in the *Blueprint for Developing Taiwan into a Bilingual Nation by 2030*

(National Development Council, 2018). Both central and municipal governments have collaborated to implement policies that advance international and bilingual education in primary and secondary schools. As a result, the number of schools offering such programs has significantly increased.

There is no specific definition of international schools in Taiwan. This study defines them using two criteria: first, the school offers international curricula such as American, British, or International Baccalaureate (IB); second, it is accredited by international bodies such as the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) or the Council of International Schools (CIS). Twenty-one schools met these criteria in Taiwan. These schools are further categorized into three clusters: foreign-registered (F), ministry-registered (M), and ministry-registered experimental (X) schools. Due to accreditation requirements, these schools tend to follow Western-imposed policy and practice standards, making them ideal for observing the cross-cultural experiences of Chinese language teachers.

Seven schools participated in the study: two from Cluster F (schools A and B), two from Cluster M (schools C and D), and three from Cluster X (schools E, F, and G). All schools operate as not-for-profit organizations under Taiwan's school laws. Cluster F and M schools are privately governed by independent boards of trustees, while Cluster X schools are public institutions under the Ministry of Education. Administratively, Cluster F schools have exclusively foreign administrators, Cluster X schools have all Taiwanese administrators, and Cluster M schools adopt a mixed model with both Taiwanese and foreign administrators. Regarding teacher ratios, Cluster F schools have an average of 8.5% Taiwanese teachers, Cluster M schools 34.5%, and Cluster X schools 61.67%. Table 2 shows the detailed characteristics of each school cluster.

Table 2*School Clusters, Descriptors, Participating Schools, and Their Characteristics*

Cluster	F	M	X
Descriptor	International schools for foreign nationals with international accreditation	International schools for Taiwanese nationals with international accreditation	Experimental schools for Taiwanese & foreign nationals with international accreditation
Total number of the schools in each cluster in Taiwan	15	3	3
Total number of participating schools	2	2	3
Type of school	Private	Private	Public
Legal registration	Foreign school Not for profit	MOE school Not for profit	MOE experimental school Not for profit
Accreditation body	International -WASC	International WASC/CIS & Domestic MOE	International WASC & Domestic MOE
Head of school's appointment	Board of Trustees	Board of Trustees	Ministry of Education
Administrative team	100% foreigners	Mixed foreigners & Taiwanese	100% Taiwanese
Ratio of Taiwanese: Foreign Teachers	School A – 8:71 (10%) School B – 15:220 (7%)	School C – 37:97 (27%) School D – 51:70 (42%)	School E – 45:23 (66%) School F – 17:13 (56%) School G – 12:7 (63%)
Approximate student number	School A – 800 School B – 2000	School C – 1300 School D – 620	School E – 520 School F – 160 School G – 120
Financial support & funding	Self-funded & donation from board members and parents	Self-funded & donation from affiliated business or educational groups	Ministry of Science and Technology & Ministry of Education
Student enrolment & criteria of admission	Require students to hold non-Taiwanese passports	Primarily enroll Taiwanese nationals	Serve students from science park families or children of diplomats or officers returning from overseas

MOE: Taiwan's Ministry of Education, WASC: Western Association of Schools and Colleges, CIS: Council of International Schools

Remark: School G is in the process of obtaining WASC accreditation, while others have been fully accredited by WASC or CIS.

These structural differences across the three clusters also extend to the curricular positioning of Chinese language. In Cluster F schools, which are foreign-registered and not bound by Taiwan's MOE subject-hour requirements, Chinese is typically offered for approximately four hours per week in primary school and becomes an elective world-language option in secondary school. This configuration places Chinese in a relatively peripheral position compared with Western core subjects. In Cluster M schools, which are MOE-registered and must comply with national curriculum guidelines, Chinese holds a more central curricular role: all students are required to study Chinese, and teachers often negotiate between MOE content expectations and the skill-based frameworks

of international accreditation systems such as IB or WASC. Cluster X schools, while also MOE-registered, operate under “school-type experimental” status (MOE, 2018). Chinese is required but can be implemented with more flexibility in proficiency levels and instructional arrangements, reflecting teachers’ accounts of adapting to diverse cohorts – Taiwanese, East Asian, and international families – and accommodating wide variations in language background. Although this study did not collect quantitative data on instructional hours, teachers’ narratives reveal clear variation in the curricular positioning of Chinese across clusters. These micro-level curricular, demographic, and institutional differences correspond with the distinct role perceptions and adaptive strategies illustrated in the findings, shaping how teachers engage in cross-cultural learning in their respective school contexts³.

This qualitative study is based on interviews with 30 full-time Chinese language teachers: 8 from Cluster F, 10 from Cluster M, and 12 from Cluster X. Teachers participated voluntarily, and consent was obtained before interviews. Among the participants, 28 were female and 2 were male. Their average years of experience in the current school varied: 9 participants had 1-5 years of experience, 7 had 6-10 years, 7 had 11-15 years, and 7 had over 15 years (Table 3). All participants were Chinese teachers who earned their undergraduate degrees in Taiwan, except for one who obtained her degree in Australia. Twenty-three teachers held master’s degrees, with six degrees earned from English-speaking countries.

Some participants specialized in teaching Chinese as a second language, while others taught both native and non-native learners.

Interviews were conducted in English or Chinese based on participants’ preferences between August 2023 and January 2024, lasting approximately 60-90 minutes each. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed and approved through a formal ethical review process. The protocol guided the interviews and included open-ended questions that explored participants’ experiences across professional, cultural, and interpersonal domains. Core questions focused on

3 School-type experimental schools are regulated under the School-type Experimental Education Implementation Act (學校型態實驗教育實施條例). The Act encourages flexibility in “educational ways and content” but does not explicitly specify subject-specific instructional hour requirements, allowing schools to design Chinese language instruction with greater adaptability while still fulfilling the obligation to provide it.

role perception, instructional adaptation, collegial relationships, value conflicts, and evolving identity. Sample prompts included: “How would you describe your role in this international school?”, “Are there times when you felt a clash between your values and the school’s expectations?”, and “Have you adapted your teaching or interaction style over time?” Follow-up questions were used as appropriate to encourage elaboration and clarify context.

Employing a narrative inquiry approach, broad questions explored the complexity of experiences from a human-centered perspective, capturing long-term sequences of actions that reflect individual and communal experiences (Carr, 1986). Participants recounted personal stories and experiences retrospectively, engaging in collaborative interpretations with the researcher (Coulter & Smith, 2009). Follow-up questions delved deeper, especially when discussing critical events impacting their professional views or roles (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Data collection, transcription, and analysis were ongoing processes (LeCompte & Preissle, 2008). Interviews were manually transcribed and analyzed using MAXQDA software throughout the six-month data collection period (John & Johnson, 2000). Data from interviews were initially grouped by school clusters and categorized into three key areas: teaching pedagogy, teacher-student-parent relationships, and collegial interactions. Thematic analysis identified emerging themes and patterns (Bernard & Ryan, 2011). Codes and conceptual categories were iteratively refined, referencing across the three school clusters. Data interpretation was determined by its theoretical relevance in both etic and emic approaches of cultural examination.

To enhance the credibility of the analysis, triangulation techniques were applied at multiple levels. The cross-cluster design facilitated comparative analysis of teacher experiences across institutional contexts, supporting the robustness of findings. Theoretical triangulation was employed by drawing on complementary frameworks to interpret cultural tensions and adaptation processes. The researcher also engaged in reflexive memo-writing throughout the analytical process (Saldaña, 2016), critically examining how prior experiences and assumptions may have shaped interpretation. As an overseas Chinese with over a decade of leadership experience in an international school in Taiwan before transitioning into the role of a university-based researcher, the researcher occupied a dual position as both insider and outsider. This background allowed for sustained engagement with teachers and access to informal discourses and institutional norms that are often less visible in studies

conducted from monocultural or external positions. To mitigate potential bias, reflexivity was actively maintained, ensuring that analysis remained grounded in the participants' narratives rather than shaped by the researcher's professional history.

Table 3

Participant List and Information

School	Participant	Cluster	Degree	Administrative Position	Years in school	Years in other schools	Gender	Area(s) of Expertise	Subject(s) taught
E	XHS-01	X	BA-Domestic	Curriculum coordinator	18	1-int'l	F	Chinese Secondary Education	G4, 5, 6 Chinese G7 Social studies & culture G9 Homeroom
	XHS-02	X	BA-Domestic MA-USA	none	25	5-local	F	Chinese Literature	G7, 8 Chinese
	XHS-03	X	BA-Domestic	Scheduling supervisor	4	3-local	F	Chinese Secondary Education	G5 Chinese G8 Chinese G8 Homeroom
	XHS-04	X	BA-Domestic	Sanitation coordinator	15	4-local	F	Primary Education	G6, 7, 8 Chinese G9-12 Chinese Calligraphy
	XHS-05	X	BA-Domestic MA-England	Academic dean	8	9-local	F	Chinese Secondary Education	G9-12 Chinese
	XHS-06	X	BA-Domestic	none	4	5-local	F	Applied English	G1-12 CSL
C	MKC-07	M	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	none	1	0	F	Chinese & Teaching Chinese as a second language	G7-10 Chinese G7 Homeroom
	MKC-08	M	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	none	4	1-local	F	Chinese & Teaching Chinese as a second language	G10, 11 Chinese G8 CSL G11 Homeroom
	MKC-09	M	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	Activity coordinator	10	5-local	M	Chinese	G7, 10 Chinese G11, 12 Chinese G12 Homeroom

	MKC-10	M	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	Curriculum coordinator	11	7-local	F	Chinese & Educational leadership	G8, 12 Chinese G12 Homeroom
F	XNK-11	X	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	Discipline coordinator of student affairs	15	1-local	F	Chinese Literature	G10, 12 Chinese G12 Homeroom
	XNK-12	X	BA-Australia MA-Australia	none	19	3-local	F	Bilingual education & Linguistics	G9, 10 CSL G6 Chinese
	XNK-13	X	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	Director	15	none	F	Chinese as a second language & Mathematics	G12 Statistics
A	FKH-14	F	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	Chinese teacher leader	9	2-Int' 1	F	Chinese & Chinese as a second language	PreK-K Chinese G1 CSL G4, 5 Chinese
	FKH-15	F	BA-Domestic	none	7	1-local	F	Chinese secondary education	G4, 6, 7 Chinese
	FKH-16	F	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	none	10	none	M	Chinese as a second language	G7, 8 CSL
	FKH-17	F	BA-Domestic	none	6	5-Int' 1	F	Chinese literature	G8, 9,10 Chinese
B	FTA-18	F	BA-Domestic	none	1	1-local	F	Early childhood education	KG, G1, 3, 4 Chinese
	FTA-19	F	BA-Domestic MA-USA	Chinese curriculum coordinator	23	14-local	F	English & East Asian studies	none
	FTA-20	F	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	none	12	1-local	F	Early childhood education	G1, 3, 4, 5 Chinese G2 CSL
	FTA-21	F	BA-Domestic MA-USA	none	21	1-int' 1	F	Chinese literature & TESOL	G9-12 Chinese Advanced Mandarin G11, 12 Chinese
	MIS-22	M	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	Chinese subject chair	8	1-local	F	Chinese & Chinese as a second language	G10, 11, 12 Chinese

D	MIS-23	M	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	Academic coordination Supervisor	15	3-local	F	Chinese language & Business	G8, Chinese G11, 12 TOK
	MIS-24	M	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	Scheduling Supervisor	12	10-local	F	Chinese language & Business	G7, 8, 9 Chinese
	MIS-25	M	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	Chinese subject chair	18	1-local	F	Special education, curriculum development & Chinese as a second language	G6 Chinese, G7 CAL
	MIS-26	M	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	CAL subject chair	5	0	F	English & Chinese as a second language	G7, 8, 10 CAL
	MIS-27	M	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	Chinese subject chair	18	5-local	F	Chinese language	G10, 11, 12 Chinese
G	XTC-28	X	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	none	5	1-local	F	Chinese language	G5, 6, 8, 10 CAL
	XTC-29	X	BA-Domestic MA-USA	Foreign teacher liaison	4	10-local 1-Int'l	F	Language education & Human resource development	G3, 4 Chinese
	XTC-30	X	BA-Domestic MA-Domestic	Registrar supervisor	3	12-local	F	Primary English education	G1, 2 Chinese

CAL: Chinese as an Additional Language

CSL: Chinese as a Second Language

TOK: Theory of Knowledge

Note. While most participants were actively teaching Chinese at the time of the interview, a few exceptions were included due to their prior classroom experience and continued involvement in curriculum or instruction. For example, XTC-30, originally trained as an English teacher, was assigned to teach lower-elementary Chinese; FTA-19, although currently in an administrative role, previously served as a senior Chinese teacher and continues to oversee language curriculum development.

Findings

The empirical findings are structured around Dai's (2023) three developmental stages of cultural learning, with each stage encompassing distinct sub-themes: (1) Activating change -Engaging with new methods and expectations, (2) Solidifying roles and relationships -Navigating cultural conflicts and collaboration, and (3) Extending professional and personal growth - Going above, pausing, and beyond. The variation in curricular positioning across the three clusters also surfaced in teachers' narratives. Teachers in Cluster F frequently conveyed experiences consistent with the peripheral status of Chinese, while those in Clusters M and X discussed negotiating expectations tied either to the mandated role of Chinese (Cluster M) or flexible implementation (Cluster X).

Activating Change – Engaging with New Methods and Expectations

Chinese language teachers in international schools navigate a complex cultural environment shaped by innovative teaching practices, diverse self-directed students, and high expectations from affluent parents. This dynamic context demands constant adaptation and pedagogical flexibility.

Adopting Novel Teaching Approaches

Transitioning into international schools presents significant challenges, particularly for teachers accustomed to local education systems. These schools often promote collaborative and inquiry-based learning, which contrasts with the exam-driven pedagogical culture of many local schools (Lai et al., 2016). As a results, Chinese language teachers are expected to adapt toward more student-centered approaches, requiring adjustments in both educational values and instructional practice. Many teachers struggled to meet these expectations while responding to diverse student needs and implementing flexible teaching strategies.

New teachers, such as FTA-18 (School A, Cluster F), initially observed and adapted before asserting their own teaching styles. In contrast, experienced teachers (MKC-09 and MKC-10 from School C, Cluster M) found the shift mentally exhausting, requiring a departure from their ingrained instructional methods.

One of the greatest difficulties lies in differentiating instruction for students with varied language abilities, particularly in Chinese as an Additional Language (CAL) classes. This challenge is especially pronounced in Clusters F and X, where student demographics are more diverse. For instance, XTC-28 (School G, Cluster X) managed multiple phonetic systems: pinyin and zhuyin (two distinctive Chinese phonetics systems used in China and Taiwan) across grade levels, requiring significant adaptation. Likewise, FTA-19 (School B, Cluster F) noted the need for individualized learning materials, manually adjusting phonetic systems to support students with varying proficiencies.

Teachers also developed multi-dimensional assessments to accommodate diverse skill levels, as highlighted by XNK-11 (School F, Cluster M), who stressed the importance of flexibility and innovation. Many participants described self-reliance and creative problem-solving as key to fostering independent learning, a stark departure from rote-based approaches in local schools.

Students as Self-Directed Learners

Participants consistently emphasized the unique experience of interacting with highly independent, globally aware students. Unlike their local counterparts, these students actively engage in political and global discussions, such as the Russia-Ukraine war (XHS-06, School E, Cluster X). This type of topical engagement was typically embedded in thematic units or vocabulary discussions that integrated current events into reading or oral practice. For instance, teachers might introduce age-appropriate news stories or prompt reflective writing exercises to connect students' global awareness with language use. Some teachers observed that students were well-informed, eager to debate, and confident in expressing opinions (XNK-11, School F, Cluster X), fostering an environment where critical thinking and open dialogue thrived.

In contrast to exam-focused local schools, international schools promote collaborative and inquiry-based learning. FTA-21 (School B, Cluster F) noted that, at times, students may challenge teachers' perspectives, making pedagogical flexibility crucial. Across all clusters, teachers emphasized that student independence and critical thinking were defining characteristics of these learning environments.

Parents: High Socio-Economic Status with Varying Expectations

Affluent and well-educated parents set high expectations for their children's education, often investing heavily in tuition and expecting frequent communication and progress updates. As a result, teachers experience pressure to meet these diverse demands (MIS-25, School D, Cluster M; MKC-07, School C, Cluster M). However, some teachers find that despite parents' financial standing, those with strong educational backgrounds, such as overseas degrees, professional careers in academia, or international business, tend to be more supportive and understanding when pedagogical reasoning is clearly explained (FKA-14, School A, Cluster F).

An additional challenge stems from cultural differences among parents, particularly in Cluster X. Teachers must balance competing expectations. East Asian parents often emphasize academic achievement in Chinese language learning and value language mastery. As XHS-03 (School E, Cluster X) explained: "Japanese and Korean parents feel that if their children can speak Chinese, it's a pride. These students sometimes perform even better in Chinese than Taiwanese students." In contrast, parents from more Westernized or international backgrounds tend to prioritize broader developmental goals. XNK-12 (School F, Cluster X) remarked: "They all have different expectations on their learning goals." XHS-03 further noted that "Chinese background parents want more homework or academic challenges," often viewing international school education as a step toward future academic pursuit. Meanwhile, she observed that "foreign parents usually want their children to enjoy learning and have a happier school life," preferring a less pressurized environment.

Across clusters, many parents still perceive Chinese language learning as secondary, with greater emphasis placed on English proficiency and preparation for study abroad (XHS-04, School E, Cluster X; MIS-26, School D, Cluster M; FTA-20, School B, Cluster F). Consequently, teachers must navigate these expectations while ensuring students develop functional Chinese language skills. These varied expectations also point to the ways international schooling remains a space shaped by families' socioeconomic standing, with resources and educational privilege influencing both demands and interactions with teachers.

Solidifying Roles and Relationships – Navigating Cultural Conflicts and Collaboration

As Chinese language teachers settled into international schools, they solidified their roles by testing cultural boundaries and determining whether to assimilate, resist, or negotiate school expectations. Some sought to balance assimilation with their cultural traditions, while others confronted tensions between Western and Chinese values, navigated subtle divides with Western colleagues, and adapted to mandated collaboration.

Testing and Negotiating Cultural Boundaries

Most participants regularly engaged in boundary testing, exploring cultural limits and social expectations as they established their roles. Some asserted their cultural identity by introducing students to local customs and norms. For example, XHS-03 (School E, Cluster X) insisted that students adhere to Chinese cultural expectations of respecting teachers, which contrasted with the more informal, student-centered interactions common in international schools. Despite adapting to these new environments, the teacher continued to reinforce traditional values of respect.

Other teachers faced resistance to cultural norms in practical settings. XNK-12 (School F, Cluster X), for instance, encountered student reluctance toward classroom cleaning duties, with some arguing that such chores were typically handled by household helpers at home. By reinforcing the practice, the teacher framed it as a learning opportunity that emphasizes collective effort and social responsibility within Taiwanese culture.

Boundary testing also extended to communication styles. Teachers had to adjust to the more assertive, discussion-driven environments of international schools. FKH-14 (School A, Cluster F) described the challenge of overcoming initial hesitation in expressing opinions, as silence could be misinterpreted as disengagement. Over time, some teachers learned to articulate their perspectives confidently, as seen in MIS-25 (School D, Cluster M), who reported that consistent participation in pedagogical discussions eventually earned respect and recognition from colleagues.

In some cases, boundary testing also influenced pedagogical approaches. Teachers experimented with incorporating Western instructional strategies while

attempting to preserve traditional Chinese methodologies. In School B, Cluster F, teachers reflected on their efforts to integrate Western essay writing techniques with Chinese rhetorical structures, as illustrated by FTA-20:

In the past, students did two different things. One Western, one traditional [Chinese] writing. The cognitive flows are different. In Chinese, students [previously] had to do qichengzhuanye [起承轉合 introduction, elucidation, transition, conclusion]. Seven years ago, we adopted balanced literacy, trying to incorporate Western essay writing structures [Narrative, Informational, and Opinion]. It has been many years, but I'm still testing. (FTA-20, School B, Cluster F)

Similarly, teachers had to modify literacy instruction to align with Western educational frameworks:

The school uses TC [Teachers College], an American literacy system. Foreign teachers follow their materials, and we adapt them for our classes. We use a five-step Western process of story retelling, starting from yi kaishi [一開始, beginning], and zai lai, [再來, then], jiezhe [接著, after that], houlai [後來, afterward], and zuihou [最後, in the end]. Sometimes, I wonder if there are better ways to teach this. It is not how we retell stories in Chinese. (FTA-18, School B, Cluster F)

These ongoing experiments highlight the complexity of cross-cultural teaching, as teachers continuously negotiate between established traditions and new pedagogical expectations.

Weighing Dissolution and Assimilation: A Cultural Dilemma

Many teachers struggled with tensions between traditional teaching practices and institutional expectations, particularly those influenced by parental demands and school policies. The challenge of dissolution, or abandoning traditional methods, was difficult, as seen in XHS-03 (School E, Cluster X), who defended the necessity of mechanized Chinese writing practice, despite parental objections. Meanwhile, MKC-10 (School C, Cluster M) described the inevitable collision between different teaching approaches, acknowledging that compromise does not always satisfy both sides:

There is no right or wrong. It's a matter of choice. Sometimes, we can convince each other and be happy with the result. Sometimes, we cannot convince, and everyone remains a little dissatisfied. (MKC-10, School C, Cluster M)

Others, however, chose assimilation, adjusting their practices to align with school expectations. FTA-20 (School B, Cluster F) adapted to the school's homework policy, limiting assignments to 15 minutes daily, while XHS-03 (School E, Cluster X) conformed to changes in daily routines, such as eliminating nap time. These examples illustrate how adaptation became an integral part of their work life in international schools.

Reconciling Tension Between Chinese and Western Educational Values

As teachers solidified their roles, many grappled with the dilemma of whether to fully embrace Western educational models or retain traditional Chinese teaching values. This dilemma was often deeply personal, shaped by both their cultural heritage and the expectations of international schools. For instance, FTA-21 (School B, Cluster F) expressed discomfort with completely adopting Western teaching methods, despite recognizing the importance of creativity and critical thinking in Western evaluation systems:

After teaching it for a long time, I still feel some things that do not fit with Chinese language teaching. I understand that IB [International Baccalaureate] values analysis, organization, and creativity, but as Chinese language teachers, we still care about certain fundamentals like pronunciation, glyph structure and annotations. These are essential to the Chinese language, yet they have been de-emphasized in Western teaching frameworks. (FTA-21, School B, Cluster F)

Similar tensions extended to student behavior management. XHS-04 (School E, Cluster X) reflected on the lack of attitude-based rewards and punishments in international schools, a common practice in Taiwanese education. Without these systems, she faced challenges in managing classroom discipline, feeling that she lacked effective tools to guide students' behavior.

Cultural clashes also emerged in curriculum policies, such as child protection regulations required by the Council of International Schools (CIS). MIS-26 (School D, Cluster M) highlighted the Western-centric approach of the Australian Keeping Safe program, which emphasizes children's rights in ways that contrast with Taiwanese societal norms, where parental authority is more pronounced. As a result, teachers had to mediate between institutional policies and local cultural expectations to ensure that both students and parents could reconcile these differing values. These examples demonstrate the ongoing tension between assimilation and resistance, with teachers negotiating their professional and personal identities within the Western-dominated frameworks of international schools.

Acknowledging Subtle Divides Between Western and Chinese Teachers

Participants often experienced an invisible divide between themselves and their Western colleagues, often due to language barriers, cultural differences, and subtle forms of exclusion. For instance, FKH-14 (School A, Cluster F) recounted a seemingly minor but impactful moment when a Western colleague commented, "Sorry, I don't quite understand your English." She perceived this as a form of micro-discrimination, reinforcing a sense of otherness.

Some teachers felt socially distanced from Western colleagues, as XHS-05 (School E, Cluster X) noted, where interactions remained mostly transactional. Similarly, MKC-08 (School C, Cluster M) shared an incident in which a Western colleague failed to recognize her in a hallway, despite working together for nearly two years. Such an incident underscores a subtle exclusion many participants experienced.

Differences in work-life balance and time perception also reinforced cultural gaps. XHS-06 (School E, Cluster X) observed that Taiwanese teachers tend to be more flexible with time, while Western teachers prioritize strict adherence to schedules. MKC-09 (School C, Cluster M) shared a notable experience that reflected this contrast:

When I first arrived, I would meet with students to check their emotional well-being before sending them to class. One day, an international teacher messaged me, saying, "You shouldn't have stolen my time." In my previous experience, I considered my students my responsibility and wanted to address their needs first. I hadn't realized that foreign teachers placed such high value on maintaining their schedule (MKC-09, School C, Cluster M)

Language proficiency further deepened the divide. FKH-15 (School A, Cluster F) found that limited English fluency hindered conflict resolution, while MKC-08 (School C, Cluster M) noted that even after adjusting to international school systems, she continued to struggle with nuances in humor and social interactions. These experiences reveal the complex interplay between adaptation and social distance, in which assimilation into school culture does not necessarily translate to full inclusion.

Mandating Collaboration Through School Structures and Policies

Collaboration between Western and Chinese teachers is commonly institutionalized in international schools through accreditation requirements, planning sessions, and interdisciplinary units. However, while these structures facilitate engagement, they also impose challenges related to scheduling, participation, and integration. For instance, XHS-02 (School E, Cluster X) described the WASC accreditation process, which required teachers to observe each other's classes and exchange feedback. While this fostered professional learning, teachers found it difficult to coordinate schedules. In a similar vein, FKH-14 (School A, Cluster F) noted that scheduled collaborative planning sessions provided opportunities for foreign and Chinese teachers to interact, particularly during whole-school workshops. However, these interactions often remained formalized rather than organically developed.

Some teachers found interdisciplinary collaboration particularly challenging. MKC-08 (School C, Cluster M) described the demands of cross-disciplinary projects in the IB Middle Years Programme (MYP), where Chinese language teachers were expected to align their curriculum with subjects like physical education and foreign languages. Although this approach promoted curricular integration, it often required significant adaptation of teaching methods to fit within broader school policies, a process that was not always seamless. While school policies mandated collaboration, they did little to address underlying cultural and pedagogical divides. As a result, collaboration was structured but not always effective, with its success hinging on teachers' ability to navigate both institutional expectations and cross-cultural dynamics.

Extending Professional and Personal Growth – Going Above, Pausing, and Beyond

Chinese language teachers extend their professional and personal growth by adapting to Western norms, balancing challenges with opportunities, and redefining their roles. Some teachers find fulfillment when their skills align with professional demands, while others face cultural saturation or reverse encounters.

Survival Through Adaptation: Conforming to Western Norms in Professional Practices

Among the 30 participants, only two teachers expressed a high level of comfort in their roles. FTA-19 (School B, Cluster F) described a culturally blended environment where both administrators and teachers integrated Western and Eastern perspectives, fostering long-term cross-cultural engagement. Similarly, MIS-23 (School D, Cluster M), with 15 years of experience, reported no major conflicts with values or pedagogical practices. However, for many others (XHS-02, MKC-09, FKH-16, FTA-16, MIS-27), the challenges of adaptation were ongoing. They felt pressured to conform to Western expectations of assertiveness, competitiveness, and vocal participation, which are qualities that often clashed with Chinese values of modesty and relational harmony. This dynamic contributed to a sense of professional inferiority, prompting some teachers to modify their behavior in order to fit into the dominant school culture.

MIS-22 (School D, Cluster M) described how she consciously abandoned her natural observant habit, learning instead to speak up and assert herself:

Western culture encourages us to be competitive and outspoken, but in Chinese culture, we are taught to observe first and not rush to speak up. Even when you know something, you don't need to say it. Chinese people prefer harmony over confrontation. But here, being too friendly instead of competitive does not work. I had to learn to speak up to survive. (MIS-22, School D, Cluster M)

Similarly, MIS-25 (School D, Cluster M), a teacher coach, explained how cultural norms in self-reflection shape teachers' reticence in professional settings:

When we were young, we were taught to self-review fanxing [反省], which is different from Western reflection fansi [反思]. Fanxing is about admitting your mistakes, not just analyzing them. So, we hesitate before speaking, fearing we might say something wrong. This makes us appear less confident, but in reality, we are just processing our thoughts carefully. (MIS-25, School D, Cluster M)

After 18 years in international schools, MIS-27 (School D, Cluster M) still considers herself a learner, embodying a humility-centered approach to professional growth:

Confucianism teaches us “pride invites loss, humility brings gain.” If your heart is full, you cannot absorb new things. But if you keep an open mind, there’s always room for growth. (MIS-27, School D, Cluster M)

Beyond interpersonal adjustments, teachers also adapted their instructional practices. In Cluster M schools, where both Taiwan’s Ministry of Education and the International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum coexist, MKC-10 (School C, Cluster M) and MIS-27 (School D, Cluster M) had to reconcile the Ministry’s content-focused curriculum with IB’s skill-based approach. Their experiences illustrate the perpetual negotiation between different educational paradigms.

Staying for Growth: Balancing Challenges with Opportunities

Despite feeling pressured to conform, many teachers chose to stay in international schools because the benefits outweighed the difficulties. Higher salaries, professional autonomy, and diverse work environments were key incentives. For instance, FKH-15 (School A, Cluster F) cited financial remuneration as a major factor. Others, including XHS-04 (School E, Cluster X), FTA-20 (School B, Cluster F), and MIS-27 (School D, Cluster M), cherished opportunities for professional growth, access to global networks, and exposure to innovative teaching methodologies as motivating factors.

Some teachers valued the autonomy that international schools provided. MKC-08 (School C, Cluster M) appreciated the freedom to design lessons without the pressure of teaching to national exams. Similarly, MIS-27 (School D, Cluster M) and XHS-02 (School E, Cluster X) emphasized how the dynamic

nature of international education kept their work engaging, in contrast to the repetitive and exam-driven curriculum in local schools.

Moreover, supportive relationships played a significant role in teachers' decision to remain. MIS-22 (School D, Cluster M) admired the high level of professionalism among her international school colleagues. FKH-14 (School A, Cluster F) and FTA-19 (School B, Cluster F) found the mix of Western and Eastern educational styles enriching, broadening their perspectives and pushing them to challenge themselves professionally.

Experiencing Deep Enjoyment When Challenges Meet Skills

Some high-achieving teachers thrived in their roles, finding fulfillment in overcoming challenges. XHS-02 (School E, Cluster X) reflected on how teaching Chinese as a second language required her to learn pinyin, a system unfamiliar to her. Although initially overwhelming, she found the experience rewarding, eventually mentoring younger teachers. This sense of fulfillment was also evident in MKC-09 (School C, Cluster M), who felt that his personal philosophy matched the school's values, particularly in fostering diversity and holistic education. MKC-09 (School C, Cluster M) felt that his personal philosophy aligned with the school's values, particularly in fostering diversity and holistic education. As a CAS (Creativity, Activity, Service) program leader, he oversaw student-led community initiatives, feeling a strong sense of purpose in guiding students toward well-rounded development. This alignment between personal values and professional responsibilities strengthened his commitment to his school.

Embracing Cultural Saturation and Reverse Encounters: The Fluidity of Cross-Cultural Adaptation

For some teachers, long-term engagement in cross-cultural settings led to emotional fatigue, a phenomenon referred to as cultural saturation. MKC-09 (School C, Cluster M), an experienced educator, acknowledged that after years of striving for excellence, he began shifting his focus toward mentoring rather than continuous self-improvement:

Continuously pushing for excellence can be exhausting. I now see my role as fostering a sustainable team. I mentor younger teachers so they can grow and contribute. MKC-09 (School C, Cluster M)

Others experienced reverse cultural encounters, finding themselves out of place when re-entering local educational settings after adapting to international schools. MIS-25 (School D, Cluster M), a teacher coach, explained how her assertiveness and open communication style, once seen as an asset in an international school, was perceived as overbearing in traditional Taiwanese educational settings:

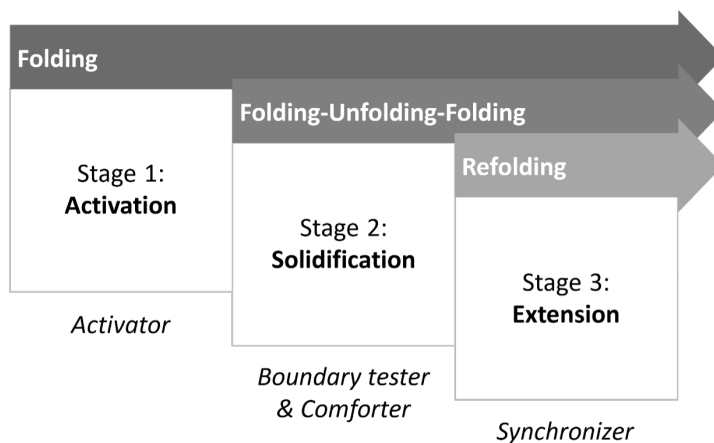
In international schools, I'm expected to speak up. But when I enter traditional Taiwanese spaces, I have to tone it down, or I come across as aggressive. It's about adjusting between two different cultural expectations. (MIS-25, School D, Cluster M)

This constant negotiation of cultural norms underscores the fluid and non-linear nature of adaptation. Teachers do not simply assimilate into one educational system. Instead, they navigate between different cultural worlds and recalibrate their professional identities based on the changing contexts.

Discussion

This study examines how Chinese language teachers navigate cross-cultural dynamics in their teaching practices, collegial relationships, and interactions with parents in Taiwan's international schools. While Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions offer a useful entry point for examining cultural differences, they fall short of grasping the fluid, context-specific nature of these teachers' adaptive strategies. The findings challenge the rigidity of Hofstede's cultural categories by revealing that Chinese language teachers engage in boundary testing, selective assimilation, and strategic negotiation. Their approaches reflect an ongoing and dynamic process of cultural adaptation.

Building on Howe and Xu's (2013) self-narrative inquiry, which portrays transcultural teachers as active agents reshaping pedagogy through experience, this study extends their perspective by emphasizing the iterative and multidirectional nature of teacher adaptation. It introduces a typology, Activator, Boundary Tester, Comforter, and Synchronizer to describe the diverse ways teachers navigate intercultural spaces. This framework challenges binary assumptions of assimilation versus resistance and captures the subtle transitions teachers make across varying institutional contexts. As illustrated in Figure 2, adaptation occurs in stages, progressing from Activation to Solidification and, for some, toward Extension when sustained efforts are made.

Figure 2*Chinese Language Teachers' Roles in Their Cross-Cultural Adaptation Process*

The findings reinforce that Chinese language teachers are not passive adopters of Western educational norms. Instead, they actively interpret and respond to cultural expectations, exercising professional judgment in how they integrate or resist certain practices. Some experienced teachers in Cluster X, for instance, described symptoms of cultural saturation, a state of emotional exhaustion brought on by prolonged intercultural negotiation, mirroring Craig et al.'s (2018) observation of transnational educators fluctuating between engagement and withdrawal. Others, across various clusters, encountered reverse cultural encounters when, after adjusting to international school environments, they felt alienated upon reentering traditional Taiwanese educational spaces. These experiences echo Savva's (2016) view that adaptation is shaped by evolving social and professional demands. These examples highlight the fluidity of teacher roles, illustrating how even highly integrated educators may reconfigure their stance in response to shifting institutional or personal conditions.

Teachers' cross-cultural adaptation is highly contextual, influenced not only by personal agency but also by institutional frameworks, parental expectations, and accreditation mandates (e.g., WASC, IB, CIS). Unlike previous studies that assume teachers must "fit in," this study suggests that teachers actively negotiate their roles, adapting to certain expectations while maintaining their professional

identity. They seek a balance between autonomy and institutional demands rather than fully assimilating into Western-centric pedagogical models.

These findings suggest that cultural adaptation is shaped not only by contextual differences but also by broader cultural hierarchies, where Western colleagues and frameworks often carry greater symbolic capital. This dynamic is evident in Mandarin teachers' interactions with their Western peers, and resonates with research in Hong Kong, Macao, and Guangdong, which shows that international schools are sites of negotiation between cosmopolitan and national forces (Wright & Huang, 2025). It is also important to note that some aspects of teachers' experiences reflect not only cultural differences but also class factors. Families in international schools generally have higher socioeconomic status, and their expectations often mirror broader stratification patterns. As Wright (2024) argues, the implications of international school expansion extend beyond cultural adaptation to broader patterns of inequality. In this study, such dynamics were visible in how affluent families' expectations shaped teachers' work, illustrating that international schools function simultaneously as cultural and classed spaces.

By applying Dai's (2023) cultural folding framework, this study contributes to broader discussions of teacher identity and cross-cultural learning. The typology reflects the recursive and fluid nature of adaptation. Teachers accumulate "cultural pigments" over time, yet the movement between roles is neither fixed nor linear. Institutional constraints and individual agency influence how teachers pause, move, or extend their adaptation. This challenges models that assume a steady trajectory toward cultural integration and reinforces the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in professional identity formation.

Figure 3 conceptualizes these dynamics through a two-dimensional typology, mapping the effort exerted for adaptation (X-axis) and cultural pigment accumulation (Y-axis). The X-axis distinguishes the degree of conscious effort teachers invest in negotiating expectations, ranging from minimal adjustment to sustained, deliberate strategies. The Y-axis captures the extent to which teachers internalize or accumulate cultural pigments over time, reflecting how their professional identities become layered through repeated folding, unfolding, and refolding. These two axes were derived inductively from the data as the dimensions that most clearly captured differences in teachers' trajectories. They also map onto the stages of cultural folding outlined in Figure 1. In the activation stage, teachers often show low pigment accumulation but begin

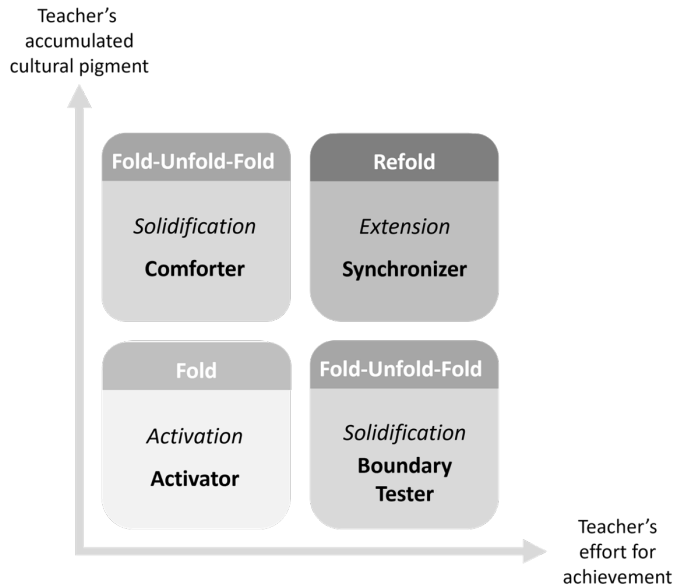
to exert adaptation effort. In the solidification stage, both effort and pigment accumulation intensify. In the extension stage, teachers may display high pigment accumulation alongside sustained, effortful adaptation that is more autonomous in orientation.

Selected narratives illustrate how teachers move dynamically across these positions. For instance, a new teacher described a phase of cautious observation and effortful adjustment before establishing her own teaching style (FTA-18). Over time, sustained participation in collegial discussions became a more embodied practice (MIS-25), with teachers' exertion of effort becoming more naturalized and seamlessly embedded in daily practice. Others highlighted ongoing negotiation, such as balancing Western essay writing with traditional Chinese structures (FTA-20) or compromising without full consensus (MKC-10), showing that adaptation cannot be reduced to assimilation or resistance. In later stages, accumulated cultural pigments enabled some teachers to adapt more seamlessly and even guide peers, as when XHS-02 shifted from struggling with pinyin to mentoring colleagues. Yet not all trajectories move forward; MKC-09 described fatigue and withdrawal, illustrating that recalibration can also involve moving backward. These examples demonstrate that cultural folding is not linear but iterative, with teachers exerting, pausing, and recalibrating effort as their pigments accumulate.

This framework also highlights the limitations of the adaptation-resistance binary. In the activation stage, teachers' practices may appear closer to this dichotomy, as they cautiously test whether to conform or hold back. However, in the solidification stage, their strategies move beyond such categories. Teachers engage in boundary testing, compromise, and selective incorporation, practices that blur the line between assimilation and resistance. In the extension stage, the binary becomes even less adequate, as teachers shift from negotiating cultural expectations to actively expanding their roles, mentoring others, or reframing their professional identities. Cultural folding thus offers a more dynamic lens to understand these iterative processes than a static binary model.

Figure 3

Typology of Chinese Language Teachers' Roles and Strategies in International Schools



To further clarify these roles, Table 4 outlines four types of teachers' adaptation strategies and typical actions in international school settings. This typology highlights that teachers do not move linearly from one role to another but instead flexibly shift roles depending on school expectations, professional aspirations, and personal values.

Table 4*A Summary of Chinese Teacher's Roles, Strategies, Possible Actions, and Related Findings*

	Teacher's role	Strategy	Action	A Summary of Findings
1	Activator	Activation - Acquiescence - Collision - Adjustment	- Observe - Abandon prior practices - Adapt to new expectations	- All teachers enter international schools as cross-cultural learners. - Participants encountered a steep learning curve, requiring them to relearn instructional practices not covered in their teacher education programs. - Teachers exhibited different levels of effort and strategies in responding to cross-cultural challenges.
2	Boundary tester	Solidification - Boundary testing - Negotiation	- Experiment - Observe - Challenge cultural norms - Seek balance	- Once familiar with the school environment, most teachers tested cultural and professional boundaries. - Some actively adjusted to expectations, while others negotiated their roles to balance personal and institutional demands.
3	Comforter	Solidification - Selective assimilation - Strategic disengagement	- Conform - Internalize norms - Distance from conflicts - Maintain stability	- After years in international schools, most teachers reached a comfort zone where they felt professionally stable. - However, they continued to navigate cultural encounters, either by adapting, ignoring tensions, or selectively engaging with institutional expectations.
4	Synchronizer	Extension - Attunement - Integration - Professional flow	- Leverage cross-cultural competencies - Assume leadership roles - Harmonize challenges with expertise - Pause or reassess professional trajectory	- Some teachers advanced into leadership roles, demonstrating mastery in bridging cultural differences. - High-achieving teachers reported deep enjoyment when their skills aligned with professional demands. - A few teachers experienced cultural saturation or reverse cultural encounters, leading them to reassess their engagement in international school settings.

While this study draws on a diverse range of teacher experiences across different school types, certain limitations should be acknowledged. In particular, the participant sample was predominantly female (28 out of 30 teachers), which may influence the perspectives shared. This gender imbalance reflects broader hiring patterns in Chinese language education but should be considered when interpreting the findings and assessing their transferability.

Concluding Remarks

This study calls for a more dynamic and reflexive understanding of cultural learning in international schools. Moving away from deficit models that imply Chinese teachers must adapt to Western norms, the study reframes adaptation as an active, context-sensitive process. Teachers do not simply assimilate into

dominant pedagogical and professional cultures. They assess, negotiate, and recalibrate their roles shaped by institutional demands, interpersonal dynamics, and professional agency. At the core of this cross-cultural process is an unspoken ideological dissonance, as teachers reconcile long-held educational values with the normative expectations embedded in international school environments.

Situated at the intersection of Sinophone studies, teacher professional development, and international education, this study empirically illustrates how Chinese language teachers in Taiwan construct professional identities amid competing cultural expectations. Drawing upon Dai's (2023) cultural folding framework, it conceptualizes teachers' adaptation as recursive and responsive, resisting linear models of acculturation.

The proposed typology, Activator, Boundary Tester, Comforter, and Synchronizer, illustrates the varied and context-dependent pathways teachers traverse. While some teachers achieve a level of synchronization, others may pause, reassess, or reconfigure their strategies. The cases of cultural saturation and reverse cultural encounters further affirm the complex and negotiated nature of adaptation, challenging the assumption that cross-cultural learning leads to a permanent state of integration.

Theoretically, this study bridges cultural theory and teacher education by using Taiwan as a case to explore how cultural heritage interacts with international schooling. It provides empirical insight into the ways Chinese language teachers redefine their professional roles and strategies in response to Western-hegemonized international school expectations. The proposed typology serves as a framework for future inquiry into how educators with cultural minority backgrounds navigate cross-cultural tensions, contributing to future discussions in Sinophone studies, global teacher mobility, and transnational education research.

Practically, the study provides valuable insights for teacher training programs, particularly in pre-service and in-service professional development. By highlighting the strategies teachers employ to navigate cultural dissonances, it offers a framework for fostering intercultural competence in international educational settings. School administrators can use these insights to craft more inclusive policies, such as mentorship schemes, intercultural dialogue initiatives, and support systems that affirm and leverage the cultural capital of Chinese language teachers. These efforts can improve teacher retention, satisfaction, and collaboration between culturally diverse groups of teachers.

As international schools continue to grow and diversify, understanding the multifaceted nature of teacher adaptation becomes increasingly important. Educational leaders should move beyond expectations of assimilation and recognize the pedagogical value that culturally grounded teachers bring. Supporting their agency and cultural expertise contributes not only to teacher well-being but also to building more inclusive and responsive school environments.

Competing Interests

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

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Ethical Clearance

This research project received ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee at National Cheng Kung University under Certificate No.113-341.

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