Learning to Teach Low Socio-economic Pupils: Pre-service Teachers' Understanding about Education and Social Differences in China

Heng Jiang

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University

Abstract

This study examines empirically what pre-service teachers learn from working with students of low socio-economic background during a cross-regional immersion internship in China. Drawing on the theory of *boundary work* in cultural sociology, this study attempts to explore the lived experiences of pre-service teachers and examine the mixture of cultural meanings appropriated by them for shaping their understanding and actions during the internship. It is found that pre-service teachers use multiple cultural resources to draw intellectual, moral, and cultural boundaries among their rural students during their learn-to-teach experiences. A professional supportive setting with expert mentors can help these novices to reflect upon their unexamined perceptions about disadvantaged students and obtain a better understanding of teaching students different from their own.

Extensive research shows that beliefs of pre-service teachers matter (Castro, 2010; Correa, Perry, Sims, Miller, & Fang, 2008; Pajares, 1992). We have little knowledge, however, about beliefs cross-culturally, especially with regard to the complex issues of pre-service teachers' beliefs about social diversity of pupils. In this paper, I intend to study beliefs pre-service teachers (PTs) hold about students from different socio-economic (SES) backgrounds, how they act on these beliefs, and how teacher preparation interacts with them in China. I first position my study in the research literature about preparing teachers for diverse learners (especially low socio-economic learners) in China. Second, I map the theoretical framework of boundary work (Lamont, 2000; 2001), and pose research questions for this study. Third, I describe my research methods in collecting as well as analyzing data. This article ends with the study's limitations and the implications for teaching practicum devised by teacher education programs—what elements of teaching practicum should be included in order to prepare teachers to serve students from low SES backgrounds.

Research Background

A key question in the field of teacher education research worldwide is how to provide high quality teachers for all students, especially those presently underserved by the educational system, including students from low SES backgrounds (Hollins & Guzman, 2005). This problem is shared by Chinese teacher educators as the social-economic gap in Chinese society has persisted and grown in recent years.[1] Researchers both inside and

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[1] According to National Bureau of Statistics of China, in 2008 the per capita disposable income of the rural population was about 4,761 Yuan (about $696.26 in February 2009), growing 8.0% since 2007. The per capita disposable income of urban residents was about 15,781 Yuan (about $ 2,307.87 in February 2009), growing 8.4% since 2007. There were about 40.07 million rural residents under the poverty line (1,196 Yuan, about $174.91, in February 2009) (Resource: http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjgb/ndtjgb/qgndtjgb/t20090226_402540710.htm).

outside China have found that many social classes have been emerging, both in rural areas[2] (Bian, 1996; Lu, 1989;, 2004) and in urban areas (Bian, 2002; Zhang, 2000) since the 1980s,[3] given growing differences of income, social status, education level, and lifestyle. Although researchers found that there are multiple social class strata in Chinese society (Lu, 2004), the *agricultural* and *nonagricultural* sectors (commonly termed as urban-rural divide) divided by the socialist residence registration system *hukou* (户口) is the most important determinant of differential privileges of social classes in China (Wu & Treiman, 2004). In 2010, it was reported that the ratio of average incomes between urban and rural residents was 3.33:1(China Daily, 2010). And such divide reflects Wright's (1985) social class theory: the ownership and control of three productive assets—organizational resources, economic resources, and cultural repertoire (defined as skills and knowledge as recognized through certification). Researchers have also shown that the "enduring significance of geography" has become an "educational stratifier" in China (Hannum & Wang, 2006). Since the economic benefits of development have been realized more in urban than in rural areas, the Chinese government has spent the last decade introducing social and educational reforms in cities and rural areas in an effort to provide more egalitarian

opportunities for all social groups. The reforms are still underway and will extend to following years (Ministry of Education of China, 2010). Recently, teacher education reform has become central to education reforms more generally since the quality of teachers is regarded as a vital factor for the education system in China (Xu, Jin, & Yan, 2005; Zhu & Han, 2006). Supported by the Chinese government, teacher education programs have been recently engaged in preparing PTs to serve students in low SES rural areas (Dai & Cheng, 2007; Liang & Chen, 2007).

Recent studies about Chinese teacher education have examined the teacher education system and its practices as well as how teacher educators, PTs, and in-service teachers think of teacher education programs and teaching practice (Wang & Paine, 2001; You & Jia, 2008; Zhan, 2008; Zhu & Han, 2006). These studies provide information on how teachers learn to teach, but only a few researchers have empirically examined teachers' beliefs about different learners (Correa et al., 2007; Semmel & Gao, 1992). However, these studies mainly focus on the learners' differences in terms of ability, interests, and prior subject content knowledge. Very little research has studied PTs' beliefs about social class differences and how their beliefs influence their learn-to-teach experiences.

Due to increasingly salient social class differences in Chinese society, it is worthwhile to examine how Chinese PTs perceive these social class differences, why they believe what they do, and how their perceptions affect their teaching. Why and how do they tackle the difficulties they encounter when dealing with students from different backgrounds? The data to be reported by this study have the potential to fill a gap in the research and reveal how

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[2] According to Lu (2001), there are at least eight social classes in Chinese rural areas based on data in 1999: peasants work and live on income from agricultural products, 48-50%, migrant peasant workers in cities, 16-18%; wage labor in local private sector, 16-17%; rural cadres and political elites, 7%; household business owners, petty bourgeoisie, 6-7%; professionals, 2.5%; managers of township and village enterprises, 1.5%; private entrepreneurs, 1%.;
[3] According to Bian (2002), there were working class, administrative and managerial cadres, capitalist entrepreneurs, intellectuals (which is an ambiguous class, in Bian's words), and middle class in Chinese urban areas in the 1990s.

social difference[4]—social class in this study—is interpreted and understood by PTs, and how their interpretations and understandings influence their student teaching. The variations of PTs' beliefs about social class differences have been thoroughly studied in the United States (Akiba, 2011; Artiles & McClafferty, 1998; Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007; Castro, 2010; Goodwin, 1997; Hoy, Davis, & Pape, 2006; Hyland and Noffke, 2005; Pajares, 1992; Sleeter, 2001; Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007), but not yet fully explored in the Chinese context. Thus, this study can shed light on the variations of Chinese PTs' cultural beliefs about social class differences and their association with teaching practice.

Context of the Study

The locus of this research is the special internship project initiated by Han University (HU),[5] a key university in the province of Hebei, China, which specializes in training middle-school teachers. In 2006, Han University started a *dinggang* project (顶岗计划), which sends juniors to conduct their student teaching in less developed areas in Hebei Province for at least three months. *Ding* means "replace" and *gang* means "position." A *dinggang* project brings interns to schools in low income areas, where they "replace" a few schoolteachers

and engage fully in all teacher-related functions of the school, with the assistance of mentors both in the local school and from HU (Liu & Li, 2007). The idea is to get these PTs immersed in a low-SES setting. These interns live in the school dormitories,[6] observe mentor teachers' teaching, prepare lessons together, teach classes every day, learn to work as class advisors (*ban zhu ren,*[7] 班主任), and get involved in local community activities (*she hui shi jian*, "social practices", 社会实践, such as surveying local social economic settings, taking part in "life enhancement" projects, and so forth) (Dai & Cheng, 2007; Liang & Chen, 2007). Those schoolteachers for whom the HU interns substitute get the opportunity to attend the in-service professional development program jointly sponsored by HU and local educational bureaus.

When I started my fieldwork, the teacher education students were all from the Hope College attached to Han University. This college recruits students with relatively lower scores in the College Entrance Examination (*gaokao*, 高考) and charges high tuitions. Many of the students at Hope College are from cities, which are relatively more well-off areas, and from wealthy families in town and rural areas. When these teacher candidates encounter pupils in low-income areas, the differences of social economic status can translate into cultural gaps. Hence, the *dinggang* internship at Han University in China provides an informative

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[4] In this study, social class difference refers particularly to social economic status. There are a few studies about Chinese perceptions/practices associated with gender differences and ethnic differences. For instance, Zhang, Kao, and Hannum (2007) explored how Chinese mothers and girls perceive gender difference and how their beliefs and perceptions influence girls' aspirations for education.
[5] In China, the secondary-level schools and universities specialized in teacher training are called "Normal Schools" and "Normal Universities." From the 1990s, the teacher education reforms promoted by the Ministry of Education removed secondary-level normal schools, making them expand into colleges or merge into other colleges and comprehensive universities.

[6] Usually, the dormitories were built by the placement schools for the interns. The schoolteachers and students live near the school. The supervising teachers from Han University do not live with interns.
[7] *Ban zhu ren* is the lead teacher for each class, who is responsible for classroom discipline, meeting with parents, and working with subject matter teachers to solve any problems in the class. A *ban zhu ren* usually also teaches one subject area.

case for examining PTs' perceptions about low SES students as different from others.

Theoretical Framework

My study follows the dialogical approach suggested by Britzman (2003). It differs from many previous studies that focused on the linear changes in PTs' attitudes and beliefs regarding teaching for diversity as the result of a fieldwork experience. Instead, it views PTs as actors who actively construct meanings out of their fieldwork experiences and position these experiences within shifting "boundaries" drawn among rural students, as well as between themselves and low-SES students as different "others."

I recognize the complexity of how an individual accepts or rejects "other" people and makes sense of her or his own actions in a culturally diverse context. In order to examine PTs' cultural beliefs in action, I seek ideas from the literature on *boundary work*. The theory of *boundary work* is rooted in the well-established tradition of sociology and elaborated to illustrate the dynamics between boundaries marked by religion, class, and ethnic groups (on the history of the concept, see Lamont, 2000). Recently, researchers developed the classic theory of boundaries and introduced the distinction between *symbolic boundaries* and *social boundaries* (Epstein, 1988; Lamont, 2000). With this distinction, cultural sociologists focus on how boundaries are shaped by context, and particularly by the cultural repertoires, resources, and narratives that individuals can appropriate (Somers, 1994; Lamont, 2000; 2001; Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space (Lamont, 2000). They are tools for individuals and groups to make symbolic distinctions between themselves and "others" in their daily lives (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). People do not use only one single symbolic boundary, but employ a set of such tools available in their accessible cultural repertoire. For instance, in her book *Money, Morals and Manners*, Lamont (1992) teased out three sets of symbolic signals—moral rules, socioeconomic standing, and cultural refinement –when she explored how French and American upper-middle-class members draw boundaries between themselves and people they do not like. *Social boundaries* are objectified forms of social class differences. They are revealed in social inequality in getting resources and social opportunities, and they are translated into patterns of social exclusion and segregation (e.g., Logan, Alba, & Leung, 1996; Massey & Denton, 1993). At the inter-subjective level, *symbolic boundaries* can be solidified into *social boundaries* (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). Symbolic boundaries and enacted social boundaries can help us understand how people think of the social class differences in their daily encounters, what hinders people from proactive interaction with each other, and how such boundaries could be reinforced or crossed (Lacy, 2002; Lamont, 1992; 2000). Educational researchers have also shown that teachers draw symbolic boundaries among students in their teaching and thus distribute resources differently to different students in the classroom. For instance, in her study on the effect of merit promotion policies in Chicago, Anagnostopoulos (2006) used boundary theory to illuminate the moral boundary that the teachers drew between "deserving" students and deemed "undeserving" students. Based on this symbolic moral boundary, the teachers enacted different classroom practices that limited the learning opportunities for demoted students. These teaching practices

eventually create the social boundaries that exclude the demoted students.

The concept of *boundary work* is particularly relevant to this study of PTs' beliefs of social differences, because it provides a lens to examine how individuals appropriate multiple cultural resources to evaluate and categorize people from different social backgrounds and how they rank others based on these evaluative criteria. With the plan to send PTs to low SES schools, the *dinggang* internship intends to have PTs cross the boundaries and differences between social classes. Exploring how PTs make sense of these boundaries based on social class can illuminate the multiple meanings that such a learn-to-teach opportunity can hold for PTs. Thus, this study focuses on the symbolic boundaries the interns drew among their rural students as well as between themselves and their rural students (what they think about the students and themselves), and in the meantime discusses how these symbolic boundaries influenced their teaching practices.

Specifically, this research considers three questions:

1. What are PTs' cultural beliefs about students from low SES backgrounds?

2. How do *dinggang* interns' cultural beliefs about students from low SES backgrounds influence their internship experiences?

3. What cultural repertoire do the PTs draw on as they engage in boundary work?

Method

In this study, I shadowed eight *dinggang* interns in one rural middle school throughout their four-month student teaching period. I used "purposeful sampling" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 88) to get a range of data to cover the heterogeneity of the critical cases that can inform the theoretical lenses of boundary work. I engaged in participant selection after the Office of *dinggang* Internship (ODI) in Han University assigned the interns randomly to their placements. I tried to identify one rural school that accommodated PTs fitting the following considerations and agree to have me conduct fieldwork in the school:

(1) These PTs were from middle-class families in the cities or from relatively wealthy families in town and rural areas. (2) These PTs taught different subject areas. By following them, I was able to explore diverse beliefs PTs have across subjects. (3) Both genders were included. Since boys and girls get different school opportunities in rural China (Hannum & Wang, 2006), it seemed important to examine how PTs' beliefs are also influenced by gendered perceptions and their own genders when dealing with pupils from low SES backgrounds.

In the end, the profile of the interns in three rural schools fit the considerations above. One rural school in an economically underdeveloped county, Green Middle School (GMS), consented to take part in this study. All eight interns assigned to GMS agreed to participate in the study. As Table 1 shows, five of the participants were from well-off urban areas, and three were from economically developed rural areas. Two of them taught Chinese, two taught mathematics, two taught chemistry, one taught English, and one taught fine arts. Only one of them was a male, and this represented the general gender ratio of Han University as a teacher training institute.

Table 1
Participants

Names	Chen	Feng	Han	Hao	Jin	Li	Wang	Zhang
Subject areas	Chemistry	Chinese	Chemistry	Chinese	Math	Math	Fine arts	English
Family background	Urban areas						Economically developed rural areas	
Gender	Male	Female						

The main data sources for this study included participant observations, in-depth interviews, and written documents. In summer 2009, I participated in the training sessions for the *dinggang* interns and their supervising teachers at Han University. During this pre-data collection stage, I observed the training sessions, collected documents about the *dinggang* internship, piloted the entry interview with randomly selected interns, and modified the interview protocol. At the end of August 2009, I went to GMS with the eight focal participants. I conducted fieldwork until the end of December 2009.

All transcripts of the interviews and the observation data, along with other qualitative data including PT reflections and official documents, were entered into N-Vivo 7 qualitative data organizing software, allowing me to code responses, create thematic categories, and examine relationships between the categories. Upon completion of each observation and transcription of each interview, I wrote analytic memos that contained methodological decision-making and initial impressions of the data provided by the participants, and described themes that emerged throughout the conversations/observations.

I analyzed the data using the "key incident" approach, in which important events (usually recurrent events, events that have sustaining influence) are identified from the observation notes and placed in relation to other incidents, events, or theoretical constructs (Wilcox, 1982). Further, I classified all the transcripts thematically in order to perform a systematic analysis of all the important themes (nodes in N-Vivo7) that appeared in the interviews, observations, and written documents, approaching these data against which my research questions could be examined. All the interview and observation activities were conducted in Chinese. The observation transcripts were in Chinese to record the raw data. Finally, I went back to the literature and compared the themes I found with the studies of other researchers. At the writing stage, representative quotes from the observation transcripts and other qualitative data were translated into English.

Results and Discussions

By identifying the symbolic boundaries that these interns marked among their students, as well as between themselves and the students, I draw attention to the unexamined *intellectual, cultural,* and *moral boundaries* that the interns constructed and learned to understand their rural students. I also find that the interns used symbolic boundaries to guide their teaching, and they

learned to reshape these boundaries in a professional supportive setting.

Social Class Differences and Symbolic Boundaries

In the placement school, GMS, the tracking system of *putongban* (普通班, general education classes) and the *shiyanban* (实验班，experimental or advanced classes) laid a natural setting for me to examine how PTs evaluate different groups of rural students by identifying who "are more like us" as well as how they generally understand the students from social economic backgrounds different from their own. While learning to teach, the intern participants had goodwill and meant to adapt teaching to their students. However, without careful reflection or guidance, interns often relied on unexamined symbolic boundaries—*intellectual, cultural,* and *moral* — to evaluate their students. These symbolic boundaries were constructed, enacted, and/or dissolved by the participants to evaluate the rural students based on the daily interactions with their students, their mentors, other schoolteachers, and their intern peers.

Intellectual boundaries are drawn on the basis of cognitive quality, such as competence to analyze and solve learning problems, having a solid knowledge foundation, and organized learning habits that ensure clear ways of thinking. For instance, as Vignette 1 shows below, Li Xin stressed that *qian li* (潜力) — a latent competence of analytical thoughts in using knowledge points to solve problems—was an important criterion to identify whether students were worth teachers' extra time and attention.

> *Vignette 1:*
> Chen Xiaofei, a shy boy in grey, walked into Li Xin's office. He handed in a piece of paper with a few problem-

solving procedures and asked for extra exercises. Li reached for a reference book in her desk drawer, *Preparing for the High School Entrance Exam in Math*, scanned it, checked two problems, and lent it to Chen. "Come with your answers to these two [problems] tomorrow. I will talk with you about your last piece of work this afternoon," she said. Then she turned to me and pointed to Chen, "He is one of my seed students. He has the *qian li* to achieve very well." She said that she did not have much time and energy to pay attention to every student in this class of forty. Therefore, she had to adapt her teaching to yield the most desirable outcomes for the students that were most likely to succeed. She said, "Some students cannot learn. They work really hard, but they just do not get it. You cannot ask too much from them. I usually give them relatively simple work for them to master the basic knowledge points. Students with *qian li* are different. They may not always get the right answer, but they have a good brain. You can tell that when you look at the type of 'exploratory problems' you assigned to them. They use right procedures to think through the problem even though they may not have the right answer. A student without *qian li* may 'memorize problems' correctly, but s/he rarely solves the 'exploratory problems' correctly unless they master the method of solving these kinds of problems. They simply do not get the point." (Field notes taken in Li Xin's office and interview with Li afterwards, October 2, 2009)

Moral boundaries are drawn based on such qualities as diligence, steadiness, honesty, discipline, and ambition. Diligence (*qin fen*, 勤奋）is the key word that permeated most moral characteristics the

interns described. For example, in Vignette 2 below, Zhang Rui valued the characteristics of honesty and steadiness since these traits reflected and ensured hard work.

Vignette 2:
Sitting beside a high stack of exam papers, Zhang Rui looked frustrated about what some of her students had presented in their latest exam. She said: "They simply do not work. You can tell that they did not spend time memorizing the spelling or the conventions. These students are not stupid. If you work hard, learning English should not be difficult. It is certainly more difficult for rural students than it is for city kids. Rural children do not have access to native English speakers or even a recorder that can show how to pronounce the words correctly. But this does not hinder them from achieving high scores in English exams. Speaking and listening are only small parts of English learning. I am from a rural village. My middle school teacher led me through English learning and now I am an English major in college." (Interview with Zhang Rui, September 27, 2009)

Cultural boundaries are drawn on the basis of manners, language, and appearances. For example, Chen Bing in Vignette 3, describing his own classmates in middle school as more sophisticated and confident, drew cultural boundaries. Language, postures, and dressings were also used as labels to signal differences.

Vignette 3:
Looking downstairs, Chen Bing pointed to several students walking in the playground. "I did not wear my glasses today. But I can tell those are my students in *putongban*. They have this sloppy way of walking. My *shiyanban* students do not walk in this way….They are more upright, steady. They appear totally different. " Graduated from one of the best middle schools, the No. 43 Middle School in *shijiazhuang* City, the capital of Hebei Province, Chen Bing also liked to compare what he remembered about his experiences in his Alma Mater with what he observed in GMS:

I have to say that the *putongban* students in the No. 43 Middle School are better academic achievers than *shiyanban* students in Green [Middle School]. They not only have a more solid knowledge foundation and more learning resources, but also a wide horizon to ensure a sophisticated character. You know, city kids dare to challenge what the teacher is teaching. We Google online and get whatever we want to know. We are not intimidated by the teacher. When I think about my classmates, they look quite different from children here…they appear active, sophisticated, and much more confident [than my GMS students]. Yet, my GMS students are more polite. It makes me feel like a teacher here [laughing]. (Interview with Chen Bing, September 21, 2009)

These three sets of symbolic boundaries influenced how the interns understand rural students as the boundaries enabled or constrained interaction between the interns and the students. They also manifested what the valuable characteristics the interns expected in their students who were worthy of attention and teaching resources. To be more specific, they used intellectual boundaries to differentiate students with or without intellectual potential. For students with the potential, PTs were willing to assign more advanced learning tasks. For

students without the potential, PTs tended to assign simple learning tasks and gave less attention than those with the potential. This distinction resided both between *putongban* and *shiyanban*, as well as within these classes. When the intellectual boundary was considered along with the moral boundaries, PTs tended to re-chart their boundary drawing. For instance, Cao Lin, the student regarded as having minimum intellectual potential, demonstrated a strong work ethic. This moral quality of hard work invited his intern teachers to provide extra attention and effort to help him improve academically.

For some interns, cultural boundaries seemed to signal the intellectual potential of students. As Chen Bing and Hao Ying pointed out, a "sophisticated" and "urban-like" student appeared more intellectually refined and confident. This cultural boundary making could be dissolved quickly; however, as Li Xin found that a "simple" rural student could solve advanced learning problems after s/he mastered the key to tackle this type of learning problem.

Therefore, the symbolic boundaries provided criteria for interns to evaluate their students and mark distinctions among their students: *putongban* students versus *shiyanban* students, good students versus bad students. The interns made these symbolic distinctions among their students and followed up with differentiated teaching practices. The interns tended to give complex learning tasks, use interactive learning activities, and employ instructional monitoring to work with students on the preferable side of the symbolic boundaries, that is, students who appeared smart, interactive, and hardworking. By contrast, interns provided easy learning tasks, used direct instruction, and attempted supervisory monitoring in teaching students on the other side of the symbolic boundaries. For instance, Chen Bing set teaching expectations lower for his *putongban*

students than those for his *shiyanban* students because he worried that:

> (S)peaking too much and making too many connections in the class [*putongban*] may confuse them before they even got an idea of what chemistry is. If I do not push them to start from these basics, they do not even care to memorize the knowledge points. However, in Class 1[*shiyanban*], students are quick to understand the basics and giving more responses to the teacher so that I am confident—and comfortable—enough to give them more instruction on how to explore using the experiments to test hypotheses. Also it's easier for these students [in *shiyanban*] to understand if I teach them how to make connections among the knowledge point and solve the problem. (Observation and follow-up interview with Chen Bing, November 6, 2009)

In sum, it seems that Chen adapted his teaching to different groups of students based on what he thought about them. Intellectual boundaries ("quick"), cultural boundaries ("giving more responses to teachers"), and moral boundaries ("not even care to memorize the knowledge points") were manifested in his understanding of different groups of students and influenced what and how he presented in the class. He thought that his teaching met different needs and current levels of his students in *shiyanban* and *putongban*, and that his different approaches of teaching could benefit both groups. He was not alone in making his decisions in teaching based on symbolic boundaries. Almost all the participants, at some point in their internship, demonstrated how these boundaries impacted their decision-making in the name of "adapting teaching to students' levels." The result is that the

favored students have better opportunities to learn and excel in the tests which will eventually lead them into key high schools in the city. By contrast, those students categorized on the less favored side of the symbolic boundaries have limited chances to get into the key high schools let alone to later become residents in the city.

Hence, as it is illustrated in the Figure 1, in the context of the social class distinctions between rural and urban areas in China, the symbolic boundaries the interns marked among their students could be translated back to the social class boundaries between rural and urban residents, and then reproduced the social class distinctions between the rural and the urban. Generally speaking, *shiyanban* students were deemed by the interns "similar like us": smart, sophisticated in interpersonal interaction, and aspirational, which made them deserve more advanced learning tasks, more interactive classroom activities, a faster pace of learning deeply, and instructional monitoring. They were expected, and in many ways supported, to excel academically, later to get into a key high school in the city, and eventually to become college students or even employers and residents in the city. In other words, for some interns from the city, *shiyanban* students would become one of "us," people in the city. The interns from cities may have found affinity in the "urban identity" they ascribed to the future urban residents, the *shiyanban* students.
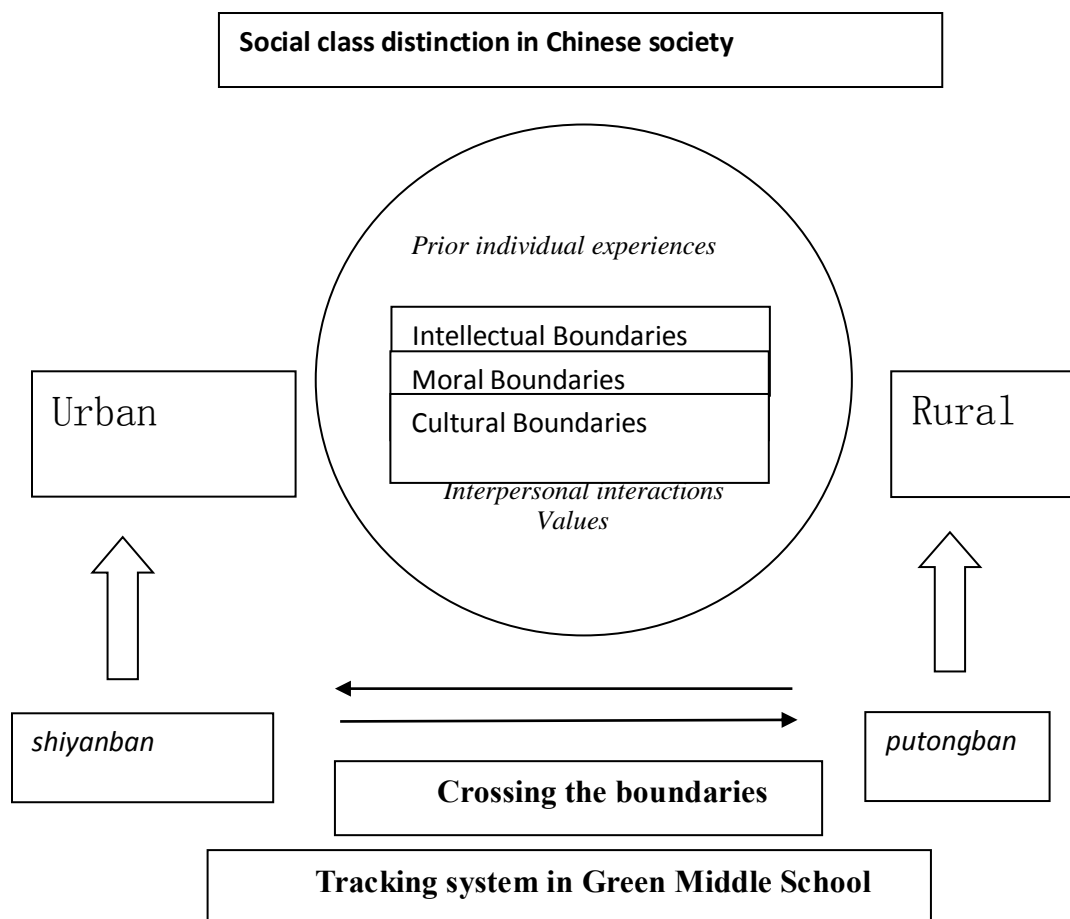

Figure 1. Social Class Differences in China and Symbolic Boundaries GMS Interns Made

By contrast, *putongban* students were described by the interns as "typical" in demonstrating assumed common characteristics of rural children, hardworking but not competitive, simple, and less confident than their *shiyanban* peers.

They were not expected to excel in learning or later to get into a key high school in the city. Generally, the schoolteachers and interns predicted that most *putongban* students would work after graduating from middle school on the farm or would become migrant workers, not legitimate urban residents, in the city.[8]

Both groups of students were boxed into different social identities and taught according to their presumed characteristic, which seemed to predetermine their future. The distinction between them started from that once-for-all entrance examination scores, got elaborated into symbolic boundaries, and eventually became reinforced or challenged by teachers' differentiated teaching. For example, some interns were limited to their own sense of honor as someone from the cities (as with Han Mei's and Chen Bing's cases) or confined by their mentors' negative comments against the lower achieving rural students (as with Jin Lin's and Zhang Rui's case). These interns learned to relegate *putongban* students or lower achievers in *shiyanban* to lower demand and restricted learning tasks. In this sense, they might have played the role to reproduce the life cycle of the lower achieving rural students and hold these students back from more educational opportunities.

Although symbolic boundaries were made as criteria for some interns to stick with when they evaluate their students, some

interns were able to cross the symbolic boundaries they themselves previously made and to provide support to all students. For instance, Feng Ming used to withdraw her attention from students who "did not learn to be good (*bu xue hao*, 不学好)" in her class. She drew a moral boundary between these students and their peers, followed by practices such as ignoring them. After several conversations with her peers and mentor teachers, she changed her perception about these students and learned to observe that "their nature is not bad and they deserve attention from the teachers, too." Thus, moral boundaries that were once defined by the behavior (acting out in class and hanging out with gang members) were later re-defined as the quality and nature underneath these behaviors. Thus, the *symbolic boundaries* and the follow-up social boundaries were not static, but fluid in some circumstances. In the next section, I am going to illustrate how the interns learn to either reinforce or cross the boundaries.

In summary, social class differences were not simply revealed as differences in socio-economic status only, but implicitly existed in student teachers' perceptions about their rural students in the form of symbolic boundaries. For the interns, the varied levels of students' academic achievement were attributed to these distinctions in intelligence, culture, and morality, which in turn led some students to cultivate an "urban identity," get higher education in the city, and eventually become mainstreamed in the urban areas.

Impact of Cultural Resources upon the Symbolic Boundaries

In this study, boundary work was found occasionally to be fluid in a particular setting when the interns interacted with each other, with rural pupils, and with schoolteacher mentors. The boundary work was constructed and was prone to be

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[8] Because of the "*hukou*" policy in China, it is very difficult for the migrant workers from rural areas to get a "*hukou*" and become a resident in the city.

modified by the interns when they appropriate various cultural resources to make sense of their learn-to-teach experiences.

The theory of *boundary work* holds that a reservoir of cultural resources (e.g., conceptual distinctions, interpretive strategies, cultural traditions) plays a key role in "creating, maintaining, contesting, even dissolving institutionalized social class difference (e.g., class, gender, race, territorial inequality)" (Lamont & Molnar, 2002, p. 168) during interpersonal interactions in daily lives (Jackson, 2001). During my field work in GMS, I learned that *dinggang* intern participants actively used multiple cultural repertoires available at different levels to draw or dissolve two sets of symbolic boundaries: the ones they made among their students and the ones they made between themselves and their students. Among these cultural repertoires, there are three layers, as Figure 1 above showed: individual life experiences in the past, interpersonal encounters in the current internship setting, and institutional societal factors. The first layer centers on the individual intern's personal experiences in family and school. This proximate layer is situated in interpersonal and societal features. As Lamont (1992) and others pointed out, "individuals do not exclusively draw boundaries out of their own experience: they borrow from the general cultural repertoires supplied to them by the society in which they live, relying on general definitions of valued traits that take on a rule-like status" (p. 6). The second layer of interpersonal resources the interns drew on involves people and interactions at the school and the teacher education program. Mentors in GMS, pupils, intern peers, and teacher educators all exerted influence upon my participants' boundary work. The third layer consists of a larger cultural repertoire to trace the resources

contributing to *dinggang* interns' boundary drawing. I use "repertoire" instead of "maps" or "scripts"[9] because the latter metaphors imply a rigid set of rules for teaching practice. As Charles Frake writes, "Culture does not provide a cognitive map, but rather a set of principles for map-making and navigation" (1977, p. 45). Accordingly, I define this layer as the shared cultural meanings underlying what is seen by an intern as common sense. In the following, I am going to discuss the first two layers—individual experiences and interpersonal interactions—as they were more mostly often referred to by the participants.

The following Tables 2 and 3 represent patterns in the frequency of mentioning the cultural repertoires during the interviews about the differences the interns perceived in students. The data comes from the participants' responses to the interview question "When you try to understand your students and adjust your teaching, what source of information do you use and how? Please specify." This question was asked in each of the three rounds of individual interviews with eight interns. When the interviewees mentioned a source of the information, for instance, the Internet, I coded it as "institutional/cultural-Internet" and then coded the intellectual, cultural, and moral boundaries in the follow-up examples that they used to specify how this source of information helped them understand their specific groups of students in GMS. When the Internet was referred to as a source that contributed to making cultural boundaries among pupils, I marked M-CB (Making cultural boundaries). If it was mentioned for changes in thinking about drawing intellectual boundaries, I marked C-IB (Crossing intellectual boundaries). These

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[9] Some cross-cultural studies on teachers' instructional practice view teaching and teacher's work as culturally scripted (Hiebert & Stigler, 2000).

sets of codes were mapped together using the query-matrices function in N-Vivo7 to produce two tables that include the frequencies of mentioning cultural resources when talking about making or crossing boundaries. I made minor adjustments to group these resources into three categories—prior individual experiences, interpersonal interactions, and institutional, societal and cultural values—and made the following Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 2
How Many Times The Cultural Repertoire Factors Were Mentioned When Talking About Making Boundaries?

	Prior individual experiences			Interpersonal interactions				Institutional, societal, and cultural values			
	Family	School	Perceptions on different others	Pupils	Intern peers	GMS mentors	HNU teacher educators	GMS school	*Dinggang* internship	Internet/TV/ books	National policy & Cultural values
Intellectual boundaries	0	3	2	6	9	12	1	2	0	2	1
Cultural boundaries	2	2	5	6	7	6	0	0	3	3	0
Moral boundaries	5	7	2	9	5	11	3	3	2	2	3

Table 3
How Many Times The Cultural Repertoire Factors Were Mentioned When Talking About Crossing/Resolving Boundaries?

	Prior individual experiences			Interpersonal interactions				Institutional, societal, and cultural values			
	Family	School	Perceptions on different others	Pupils	Intern peers	GMS mentors	HNU teacher educators	GMS school	*Dinggang* internship	Internet/TV/ books	National policy & Cultural values
Intellectual boundaries	1	2	4	9	12	11	4	1	1	5	2
Cultural boundaries	3	0	2	6	9	5	1	1	2	3	1
Moral boundaries	3	0	5	11	12	13	3	1	2	9	1

The interns had many cultural resources for boundary work. It is found that GMS mentors and intern peers were the most frequently mentioned information resources especially when the interns were using moral boundaries as the evaluative criteria. HU teacher educators were among the least frequently mentioned resources, almost comparable to the remote resources as institutions and policies. Prior individual experiences, especially the interns' schooling experiences, served as fair cultural repertoire for interns to make boundaries. Surprisingly, encountering rural pupils before and during *dinggang* internship could be used to reinforce the boundaries they draw between rural and urban students as well as among rural students.

One set of cultural repertoire may contribute to making one kind of boundary, and at the same time help to dissolve other boundaries interns had made. For instance, as Table 2 and 3 both show, the HU teacher educators were used as a resource to strengthen the moral boundaries interns made, but seemed to have been utilized by the interns as a resource to dissolve intellectual boundaries they set. Different individuals had their own approaches to jigsaw various cultural repertoire and develop a unique combination of evaluative criteria for their own use in teaching.

Among these cultural resources, personal experiences prior to the internship and the interpersonal interactions during the internship were the most frequently mentioned. The first prior personal experiences were often referred to by the participant interns in order to confirm their initial perceptions about rural students. Young people from comparatively affluent urban areas, Chen Bing, Han Mei, Jin Lin, and Hao Ying expected their students to appear like their urban counterparts, being confident, audacious, and refined in their manners. The appearance seemed to ease

their interaction with these rural students as well as signal these students' competitiveness and brightness. For them, *shiyanban* students demonstrated these desirable characteristics, which ensured the access for them to get into a key high school in the city and eventually become urban residents if they could make it to college. In contrast, most *putongban* students were not like these urban PTs. The *putongban* students seem to be typical simple rural children who were carefree without worrying about competition to get into a key high school in the city, and instead lying back without hard work. For Li Xin and Zhang Rui, who were from a similar background to their rural students (small town and rural village), they tend to emphasize the moral boundaries, especially hard work. They themselves strived to leave their rural hometown and enter a distinguished college in the city by hard work. They expected that their rural students, no matter how they appeared or whether they were very smart, to study hard. Hence, the moral boundaries for Li and Zhang seemed firmer than other boundaries for them. The only exception was the intellectual boundary—if a student could not get the point no matter how hard s/he worked, this student was largely excluded from the group that could move upward academically. Both groups of PTs, with either rural or urban backgrounds, tried to understand their rural pupils out of their own experiences but ended up with various perceptions.

In addition, the data also shows that mentoring from the schoolteachers and peer interactions were deemed important by the PT. However, it does not necessarily support PTs' effort to become aware of or even shift the boundaries they made among their students. Direct interaction with rural students and explicit discussion with professional peers and experienced mentors

could increase such awareness and provide alternative thoughts to modify the symbolic boundaries if the interns did not believe that these boundaries were fixed, and if their peers and mentors presented open attitudes towards low academic achievers among rural students.

Therefore, interpersonal interaction not only increases people's awareness of the symbolic boundaries, but also has the potential to countervail these symbolic boundaries in action. As this study shows, some interns, such as Feng Ming and Li Xin, learned from their peers and mentors to challenge their precepts about rural students, and they eventually came to actively seek teaching techniques to help their *putongban* students learn. However, not every intern made such a move. How the interns constructed their own understanding out of multiple information resources is hard to portray. As DiMaggio (1997) argued over a decade ago, much remains unknown about how influences stemming from disparate experiences, relationships, ideologies, and situations together work to shape belief and action. This study shows that boundary work is contingent on a professional supportive setting, which in this study involved teaching in a disadvantaged rural school under the guidance of veteran schoolteachers. Boundary work is continuously in the making and getting crossed in such a professional supportive setting where actors directly address encounters with people different from themselves and deliberately seek understanding. As rural pupils changed Han Mei's perception of students' inability, and Wang Chen and Hao Ying changed Li Xin's bias towards students with behavioral problems, interns were exposed to enriched life stories and different perceptions. Teacher Shan, Teacher Li, Teacher Wang, Teacher Ru, and Teacher Xu guided Hao Ying, Li Xin, Feng Ming, and Chen Bing to go through the process of explicit discussion about teaching and students.

During the process of explicit discussion about their students, the interns communicated their student-related perceptions with their peer interns and mentor teachers. As a result, they were reflecting upon their use of symbolic boundaries and chose to either reinforce or change their original thoughts about their students. For instance, Li Xin said that she learned from her mentor, Teacher Li, to challenge her prior assumptions about the pupils and adapt her instruction for students' educational readiness:

She [Teacher Li] is always very patient with her students, helping them to figure out a way to solve the problem. You know that it is really hard to get some *putongban* students motivated to learn math. But her students in class 5 of the 8th grade [a *putongban*] are very active participants in her math lessons. I go to observe her class whenever I can and her students surprised me at their interest in solving math problems. They are also making progress in monthly math tests. When some students got 50 compared to prior test score of 20, she sincerely praised them. She told me that even gaining 5 points is a progress worth highlighting. She also told her students that "not being able to learn well is only an excuse for not learning." This is striking to me since I thought that some students could not learn well because they were not smart. If I can get them to study hard, all of them should be able to make progress. I used to scold my students, saying "How come you make such mistakes on simple questions like this!" Now I learned from Teacher Li and begin to tell my students, "It is OK to make mistakes if you already learn from them. Then you will make fewer

mistakes next time." Then I go to details of explaining the problems in a way that makes sense to them. (Conversation with Li Xin after a math class, September 18, 2009)

Li was later able to learn how to make her math class accessible to her *putongban* students, and successfully made her students improve their learning outcomes. However, some interns' judgments against *putongban* students were strengthened by their mentors. For instance, ever since the first month of the internship, Zhang Rui began to feel helpless with Teacher Yang's passive view against *putongban* students:

[Teacher Yang] is quite persuasive. She is correct that many *putongban* students do not want to learn. But some of her words seem too harsh. She said that *putongban* students are stupid or something like that. Teach them like teaching morons and speak with repetition in a slow pace, she said. Some students might be very slow, but I found some are quite smart. They just do not work hard enough, as my brother did in his middle school. The methods she suggested me to do in the class seemed to work sometimes. Well, working to some extent as long as they increase their test scores. But I feel myself unhappy and anxious when I heard myself repeating single words for ten times in a class and having the students copy the correct answer to the test items. Some of the good students get bored as I do, while those students lacking interest in English get even further aloof from it. Why don't they just study hard? (Conversation with Zhang after her English class, September 9, 2009)

Zhang was trying to figure out how she could best work with her students based on

Teacher Yang's views about the students as well as her feedback on Zhang's teaching. However, given Teacher Yang's opinion of *putongban* students, Zhang could not think beyond the boundaries drawn on students' intellectual and moral qualities. She combined the intellect attributes Teacher Yang made with the moral boundaries based on her family experiences, especially how her brother had failed school due to lack of effort.

Thus, explicit discussion among peers and between mentor and mentees may help pre-service teachers to reflect upon their evaluative criteria for their students and possibly led to changes or no changes in using the criteria. During this process, the interns learned to view these distinctions either as fixed or as fluid and changeable. In the former case, the interns would use discriminative teaching to reinforce the boundaries they started with. In the latter case, the interns would learn how to attend to students' learning needs, and therefore to challenge the static boundaries and devise pedagogical techniques to suit students' different needs. And in this latter case, a professional supportive setting matters and may meaningfully influence student teachers' boundary work and understanding of students from different backgrounds. This idea of boundary work in the making within a professional supportive setting is helpful for expanding Lamont's (1992, 2000) theory of boundary work, which has yet to explicitly consider the issue of boundary work in action and in change.

Implications and Limitations

Although the findings of this study are of interest in a Chinese context, they can also raise questions as well as offer implications for teacher education practices both in China and the U.S. since this study addressed the common concern of how to prepare PTs to teach underprivileged

students. The findings may not be directly transferable to a different national and cultural context, but they may provide alternatives to understand PTs as resourceful learners in a professional supportive setting.

Lowenstein (2009) pointed out that there is an unexamined conception in the United States suggesting that most white teacher candidates are deficient learners who lack resources for learning about diversity. She claimed that "just as we want teacher candidates to view their K–12 students as bringing resources to their learning, teacher educators must also view teacher candidates as bringing resources to teacher preparation" (Lowenstein, 2009, p. 165). Following Lowenstein's work, the results of this study challenge the assumption of PTs as monolithically insensitive to the disadvantaged pupils' learning needs. It demonstrates that interns can mobilize multiple symbolic evaluation criteria based on various cultural repertoires to understand their students in a rural middle school. Their learn-to-teach experiences in the field are rich, meaningful, and carefully interpreted by themselves.

Further, simply exposing interns to the field experiences may not necessarily lead them to reflectively use their cultural repertoire to understand and teach students different from themselves. All these participants conducted their internship in the same school. However, only a few of them developed the specific understanding and skills to work with rural students expected by the teacher education program. These interns' experiences of learn-to-teach were mediated by intern teachers' sense-making during classroom teaching and were filtered through their collegial interactions. Meaningful mentorship and deliberate discussion among interns in the professional setting functioned as the catalyst for some to activate the use of cultural repertoire for

teacher candidates to better understand and teach their rural students.

In addition, I also noted that not all mentorship and discussion among peers were helpful in forming a fuller understanding of rural students. For instance, Zhang Rui was not satisfied by her mentor, Teacher Yang's, biased view against the *putongban* students, and she felt trapped in Yang's negative perspectives. Researchers in the United States have already found that a mentoring relationship could become a conservative force that helps reproduce the existing culture and practice of teaching instead of transforming it (Cochran-Smith, 1995). This implies that mentors in a school may need to be trained or selected prior to guiding interns. The specific ways of supervising the interns and providing the scaffolding to student teaching should be carefully designed. In addition, Li Xin's approach to learn from many schoolteachers shows the possibilities in a supervising practice that includes a few mentor teachers for one intern.

The teacher educator's role in mentoring was not salient in this study. It might be that the remote rural areas were difficult for the teacher educators to visit and observe student teaching. But the teacher educators may have to consider how to modify the teacher education curriculum to meet the practical needs of the student teaching in the rural areas as well as providing necessary theoretical resources.

Several limitations of this study and implications for future research must also be mentioned. Firstly, building from the findings of the current study, questions for further investigation should focus on how teacher education programs can devise a carefully guided and mentored field teaching experience for PTs to better understand and teach disadvantaged students. What kind of mentor should be selected for PTs? What are

effective mentoring schemes? What is the influence of intern's gender influence his or her boundary work? Limited data in this study does not fully show how teacher educators from the university might have played a mentoring role during the *dinggang* internship. In addition, the partnership between the teacher educators and the mentor teachers in the school was not fully explored. For instance, some interns mentioned that the teacher education curriculum was somewhat helpful, but it is not clear how such help could be implemented systematically along with the internship.

Secondly, going beyond the immediate empirical concerns of this study, future work is needed to extend the idea of how different cultural sources together shape symbolic boundaries. Following DiMaggio's (1997) perspective, a key challenge is to explain "the interaction between two distributions— of the schemata that constitute people's cultural toolkits [e.g., value system to draw from], and of external cultural primers that act as frames to evoke (and, in evoking, exerting selection pressures upon) these schemata" (p. 274). What happens when information from different cultural repertoire stand in opposition to one another? What social conditions make participants choose one instead of another? Although this study found that positive mentoring and peer collegiality could elicit changes in interns' thoughts about rural students, how they reacted differently in sorting and choosing from competing ideas remains unknown.

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