“We Were Not at School Today”: First-Person Pronouns and Discursive Construction of Identities by Emerging Middle-Class Chinese Parents

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Abstract

In the process of China’s dynamic social changes over the past decades, the young-parent identity construction of an emerging middle class and the resulting changes of social-cultural values in this context have attracted the attention of academic research in recent years. With the focus on the discursive construction of parent identity, this study examines the utilization of first-person pronouns in three different interactional contexts, namely, parent-teacher interaction, parent-parent interaction, and parent-child interaction. The study further explores the patterns of alignment between the parents and their children, parents and teachers of their children, and peer parents during the process of identity construction, followed by a discussion of the implication that young, emerging middle-class Chinese parents fundamentally shape themselves as “concerned” and “involved” parents and the change of values between collectivity and agency. The study not only demonstrates the dynamic and pluralistic nature of parent identity but also deepens our understanding of the indexical roles of first-person pronouns in the discursive construction of emerging middle-class Chinese parent identity and its relationship with the recent social-cultural changes in the Chinese context.

Keywords: collectivity, agency, first-person pronouns, parent identity construction, emerging middle-class

1. Introduction

Identity is discursively constructed and situated in practice. There are many kinds of identities,
such as national identity, gender identity, and professional identity. This study particularly focuses on the less thoroughly studied parent identity and examines how parent identity is constructed amid social changes in the context of China. Parent identity is the belief or perception of being parents and interacting with others in a parenting group. How parents understand their roles has a significant impact on their relationship with their children, teachers of their children, and other parents. Parents’ perception of themselves and their relationship with their children and other social connections is heavily influenced by their social backgrounds, such as social class (Alwin, 1989; Ho, 1994; Keller, 2003; Paguio, Skeen, & Robinson, 1987; Sun, 2008; Xiao, 1999). Parents from different social classes can have a distinct understanding of what it means to be parents. Emerging middle-class Chinese parents, or Chinese parents from broadly middle-class backgrounds, are a unique group of people. Given their social background, economic status, and education level, they are arguably distinct from traditional Chinese parents in general. This group has been emerging amid rapid social changes in China in the past decades, which makes it meaningful to study their language use and identity construction against such social background.

This paper is based on a larger study on the discursive construction of parent identity by emerging middle-class young parents in China. It opens with a premise that identity is not predetermined but shaped and constructed through discourse. For parents, their identity is constantly reminded, constructed, and negotiated in different contexts where parents basically actualize the role of parents. The study as a whole aims to explore different linguistic and discursive strategies employed by parents to construct their parent identity, by collecting data in three of the most common contexts for parents to enact their parent identity, that is, parent-child interactional context, parent-teacher interactional context, and parent-parent interactional context. A variety of discursive strategies have been found to help construct the parent identities of these emerging middle-class Chinese parents, such as using special personal references and (im)politeness strategies (Han, 2015). For this particular paper, we probe into one of these linguistic strategies, namely, the use of first-person singular pronoun I and first-person plural pronoun we.

By examining parents’ significantly different use of these two first-person pronouns in three different interactional contexts, that is, parent-child interaction, parent-teacher interaction, parent-parent interaction, we argue that parent identity is discursively constructed and these two pronouns are very efficacious in decoding parents’ identity construction. We explore to what extent pronouns reveal parents’ alignment with their children, teachers of their children, and peer parents during their interaction. The pronoun use and alignment or nonalignment with others shape parents’ construction of co-parent identity, solo-parent identity, “concerned” parents and “involved parents,” which further reveals parents’ change of values between collectivity and agency. The following paper will start with the background information of emerging Chinese middle class, a brief comparison of parenting in the East and West as well as data collection, and then explore the use of first-person pronouns in three different contexts. The discussion will focus on parents’ identity construction amid the social-cultural changes in China and the indexical roles of first-person pronouns in parents’ identity construction.
2. Research background

This section provides the research background and a review of the research literature on studies of China's emerging middle class, parenting in the East and West and the use of first-person pronouns in the discursive construction of identity.

2.1 Emerging middle class in China

The middle class is emerging and rapidly enlarging in China. Previous discussions have centered upon the nature of the emerging Chinese middle class, what they are like, and how they function (Li, 2006; Zhou, 2005). Giving an authorized or clear-cut definition to the notion of “Chinese middle class” is not easy, since the Chinese government has not yet officially recognized the existence of the middle class in the country, let alone proffering an authorized definition. Due to the political sensitivity of the term, “middle class” is rarely used in official reports in China. Instead, substitutive terms such as “middle-income stratum,” “middle-income group,” or just “middle stratum” are often used in Chinese literature. Given that “the middle class” in China is not fully developed or recognized, the term “emerging middle class” would be more appropriate for China’s situation. However, for the sake of convenience, both terms of “middle class” and “emerging middle class” are used interchangeably in this paper to refer to the same concept. The emerging middle class in China is more about professions, rather than about income, lifestyle, or self-perception (Li, 2006). Thus, it has been considered that people in China working in the following five professions can be broadly conceived as members of middle class, that is, party and state cadres, business managers, private entrepreneurs, professionals, and office staff (Li, 2006; Zhou, 2005).

Chinese parents that belong to the emerging middle class are seen to be distinct from traditional Chinese parents. For example, Chinese parents are traditionally said to embrace collectivistic values. However, emerging Chinese middle-class parents are found to be subject to individualism in their consumption behaviors and anxiety in their choices for their children’s schooling (Hemelryk & Yi, 2008). However, the general divide between individualism and collectivism among parents with different cultural backgrounds has received some criticism (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008). It is proposed that both parents’ developmental goals for their children on individual levels and culture at the macro level should be examined in order to understand middle-class parents (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008). In other words, culture, social background, and interactional contexts all contribute to the understanding of parent identity.

It has been observed that little effort has been made to understand the beliefs, values, social and cultural function of the emerging Chinese middle class (Shen, 2008). This might be due to the fact that there exists no unified middle-class identity or value system in China (Li, 2006). Despite the inadequate literature on emerging Chinese middle class, researchers have argued that the emerging middle class in China has not only been influenced by Chinese traditional and modern values but also continuously instilled by Western values (Shi, 2014). Thus the emerging Chinese middle class tends to integrate traditional Chinese values and...
Western values, and this may result in coalition and conflict between different values (Shi, 2014). Some of the important values or characteristics held by the emerging middle class include 1) having a strong desire for freedom, 2) being conscious of their individual self and need, and 3) sticking to the social rules and regulation (Ma, 2009). However, little insight has been shed on how these important values or characteristics are expressed through the use of language in discourse.

2.2 Parenting in the East and West

Parents (or caregivers) from different societies or cultures are found to construct their identity in distinct ways (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Yasumoto, 2010). Those in collectivistic cultures are believed to be more controlling and emphasize more interdependent self, whereas those in individualistic cultures are said to be more affectionate and put more emphasis on children’s independence (Lin & Fu, 1990). As a result, parents in collectivistic countries attach more importance to social norms and physical relationship with their children than to independence skills (Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). In Japan, for instance, parents perceive themselves as the role model for their children, and they believe parents should be closely connected with their children (Yasumoto, 2010). Conversely, in America, parents believe that parents and children are two different and separate categories (Yasumoto, 2010).

The contrast between collectivism and individualism is captured and explicated by Hofstede’s (1994) cultural dimensions theory, which examines the influence of a society’s culture on the values that members share, and to what extent these values affect behavior. In East Asian countries, it is Confucianism at work. With such a philosophical foundation, harmony is regarded as the most fundamental aspect of social function. Collectivity is highly valued. Each individual in society is supposed to act out multiple roles according to social expectations by forming an alliance with others. High power distance and context dependence are two other features in these countries. In Western countries, however, it is the Greek belief that has impacted people’s mindsets. Individual agency is broadly embraced. Being unique and standing out from the group is not judged unfavorably. Low power distance and context independence are often observed. The conceptualization of collectivism and individualism is helpful, but it lacks insights from analysis of micro interactional contexts.

Apart from cultural background, social or economic background of parents can also exert a strong influence on their understanding of parenthood or parenting (Keller, 2003; Paguio et al., 1987). Previous studies have revealed that middle-class parents, despite their different cultural backgrounds, cherish the notion of “independence” in children (Goh, 2006; Harkness, Super, & Keefer, 1992; Xiao, 1999, 2000). According to these studies, it may be suggested that middle-class parents in China may share a similar idea of parenting with parents from Western countries. However, no evidence from discourse studies has been provided to show such a tendency for parenting roles or identities among Chinese middle-class parents.
2.3 First-person pronouns and identity construction

Pronouns are susceptible to various identity construction studies (Van De Mieroop, 2005). Among the list of pronouns, first-person pronouns, especially first-person plural pronouns are most widely documented. Traditionally, first-person plural pronoun we is categorized into inclusive we and exclusive we, with the former signifying solidarity or similarity and the latter distance. This pronoun is powerful in indexing otherness, especially when it is harnessed together with the third-person pronoun they. However, Mühlhäusler and Harré (1990) point out that this traditional description of inclusive we and exclusive we may not capture the meanings of all naturally occurring instances of we. Given the right context, the pronoun we can “encode any of the six persons usually distinguished in English” (Mühlhäuser & Harré, 1990, p. 177). In fact, Helmbrecht (2002, p. 33) regards we as the “most complex category of all person categories.”

The first-person singular pronoun I and first-person plural pronoun we perform different functions. The former resonates with an individual speaker (writer) and the latter is premised on institutional or group (Van De Mieroop, 2005). In other words, I helps construct individual agency, whereas we helps build collectivity (Pavlidou, 2014). Individual agency and collectivity are part of identity. Identity shapes and is shaped by discourse (Meinhof & Galasinski, 2005).

Studies in the field of cultural psychology have shown that the use of these first-person pronouns in a language can reflect individualism and collectivism in that specific culture (Kashima & Kashima, 2003; Twenge, Campbell, & Gentile, 2013; Uz, 2014). The more frequently the first-person singular pronoun I is used in a culture, the more likely individualism is prized by speakers of the culture because first-person singular pronoun can indicate the individualistic self-representations (Gardner, Gabriel, & Lee, 1999). Take China as an example. Between 1949 and 2008, the use of first-person singular pronouns in China rose sharply (Yu et al., 2016). This resonates with the social reality that China, a traditionally collectivistic country, is now witnessing more individualism in people’s life. In comparison, we is to encode various collectivities or associations with other different parties. As can be seen from the above introduction, first-person pronouns are closely knitted into and related to identity construction.

3. Data and methods

3.1 General settings

Three kindergartens which enroll children whose parents are broadly classified as middle class in Guangzhou, a southern metropolis in China, were carefully chosen. The first kindergarten is known by the general public as “kindergarten of government offices.” It usually recruits children whose parents are working as cadres. The second kindergarten is subsidiary to a key university, which mostly enrolls children whose parents are teaching or working at that university. University teachers are professionals and elite, who can also be perceived to be middle-class.
The third kindergarten is situated in a residential area where one of the authors once lived a few years ago and it generally takes in children living in this neighborhood. Parents of these children are also broadly middle-class, considering the above-city-average housing price of the neighborhood, the high tuition of schools, and the professions of many neighbors one of the authors had been acquainted with. The selection of three different types of kindergartens is believed to best reflect the emerging middle class who work in different sectors in the city.

One of us contacted the headmaster of each kindergarten around October, 2013. With the help of the headmasters, one class was randomly picked from each kindergarten. Research notification, including the purpose of the study and the ethic issues, as well as socio-demographic questionnaires, including the age and educational background of parents, age and gender of their children, household income and so on, were passed out and filled in. Among all the families in our study, only two families identified themselves as single-parent households.

### 3.2 Three interactional contexts

Data are collected in three interactional contexts: parent-teacher interaction, parent-parent interaction, and parent-child interaction. These contexts represent the three most common and typical interactional situations for emerging middle-class Chinese parents. As for parent-teacher interactional context, that is, interaction with teachers, we chose parents’ feedback comments on their children written in the *Jiayuan Lianxi Shouce* “Handbook for Communication between School and Family” (“Handbook” hereafter) as the source of data collection. We did not choose parents’ face-to-face interaction with teachers as the source of data collection because official meetings between parents and teachers occur only once or twice each semester and parents generally do not get the opportunity to talk to teachers on a one-to-one basis, which makes it hard to collect on-the-spot data. In comparison, kindergartens in many cities of China require parents and teachers to write down in the Handbook their feedback comments on children. The purpose of the Handbook is to facilitate communication and cooperation between parents and teachers, who can exchange their viewpoints on children. These comments are often written on a weekly basis. Parents and teachers take turns in writing the feedback comments in the Handbook, which practically becomes a written conversation between the two parties. It can provide us with valuable information on parents’ understanding of their parenting roles and how they interact with teachers.

The Handbooks were copied at the end of the semester and transcribed into a textual electronic format and stored in the computer. The gender of the parents who contributed to the discourse data is not considered as a variable in this study. First of all, parents’ comments in the Handbook could be written alternatingly by the mother or father. It is not easy to demarcate the gender of parents by looking at their written discourse. Besides, it has been shown that the gender effect on parents’ perception of children is not significant (Shek & Chan, 1999). Fathers and mothers are strongly correlated with each other in terms of their perceptions of parenting (Shek & Chan, 1999).

As for the second interactional context, that is, parents’ interaction with peer parents, we
chose parents’ online discussion with other parents. Each of the three classes had an online chat group on the social media platform QQ. Online interaction with other parents has become indispensable for young parents in Chinese cities. Parents share information about the school and children in chat groups. They heavily rely on such a means of communication and interact online on a very frequent basis. How they interact with other parents can offer insight into parenting in a less formal context. Online discussion in the three chat groups for the duration of one semester was collected.

In addition to the above two interactional contexts, parents from three families recorded their conversations with their children on an irregular basis. Parents’ interaction with their children in the family contexts has already been given lots of attention (cf. Tannen, Kendall, & Gordon, 2007). How parents talk to their children would enlighten us on how they perceive their parenting roles and negotiate their relationship with children in the family context.

Our final data include parents’ feedback comments from 83 Handbooks, which amounts to 33,426 tokens, and a total of 98,851 tokens from parents’ online discussion groups, together with 26 recorded conversations with each lasting from 2 minutes to 12 minutes. An integrated approach of both quantitative and qualitative analysis (Van De Mieroop, 2005) is adopted in the present study. Parents’ referential meaning for first-person pronouns were coded after careful reading. For any unsure identification, a second coder’s opinion was supplemented.

In this particular paper, attention is paid to the use of two personal pronouns, that is, I and we in these three different contexts, with the following research questions in mind:

1) How do emerging middle-class young parents in China use I and we when interacting with teachers, peer parents and their own children?
2) What parent identity is discursively constructed in different contexts?
3) To what extent are collectivity, agency and social change reflected in parents’ discursive construction of identity?

During the analysis, the discourse data from each interactional context would be scrutinized for instances of first-person pronouns, including wǒ (我) I, zán (咱) I, wǒmen (我们) we, zánmen (咱们) we, with the help of AntConc 3.2.1, a corpus analysis tool. With a close reading of the contexts, these first-person pronouns would be further classified into different categories according to the types of referents. Although bàba (爸爸) “dad” and māma (妈妈) “mum” are not traditionally considered as first-person pronouns, they are frequently used in parent-child interaction to mean I and we. They are also included in the analysis. On the whole, the analysis of parent identity construction is largely based on the general trend of pronoun use in each particular interactional context.

4. Research findings

The findings are organized according to the three interactional contexts. We begin with the formal school context, that is, parent-teacher interaction, and continue with a less formal...
context, that is, parent-parent interaction, before finally coming to the family context, that is, parent-child interaction. The main themes in each context would be summarized by repeated reading of pronoun use and discourse in contexts.

4.1 Interaction with teachers

The analysis of the first-person plural pronoun we in parent-teacher interaction primarily reveals parents’ construction of co-parent identity and collectivistic ideology.

Co-parent identity

The construction of co-parent identity is uncovered by both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Quantitative analysis shows that young, emerging middle-class Chinese parents utilize many more we’s than I’s, with the former occurring 119 instances and the latter 54 instances. This can indicate that alignment is more salient a theme than an individual agency in the context of parent-teacher interaction. The first-person plural pronoun we signifies group membership and indicates how people perceive their alignment with others (Pavlidou, 2014). With the significantly higher proportion of we in the data, the parent-teacher interaction is, therefore, more about us and less about me.

Further analysis of these 119 instances of we reveals that the referential deixis of we fall into two broad categories, inclusive we and exclusive we, with the former occurring 7 instances and the latter 112 instances (see Table 1).

Table 1. We in parent-teacher interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References in our data</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive we</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusive we</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I + spouse</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>85.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I + the child</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I + spouse + the child (family)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows that building collectivities is the main theme in parent-teacher interaction, but the collectivities largely leave the teachers out of the picture. We is mostly used to refer to the couple (the parent together with his or her spouse) (102 out of the 119 instances of we). Parents’ alignment with their spouses far exceeds their alignment with teachers, children or the whole family. By frequently aligning with their spouses, parents signal their membership in the co-parenting team. Contextual and qualitative analysis confirms this observation (see Excerpt 1).
Thanks for your kind words. We parents are also working hard to improve his manners. It is hoped that teachers can keep an eye on him and criticize him when he misbehaves.

In Excerpt (1), we is used to refer to the parent together with his or her spouse. We combined with the appositive “parents”, clearly conveys the message that we as a parenting team will surely shoulder together the responsibility of providing proper parental guidance to “our” child. In many other excerpts in our data, parents frequently use we to signify their cooperation or alignment with their spouses. It is one of the indicators of alignment with one’s spouse or “shared parenting” (Sunderland, 2006). Such alignment often takes place when parents are responding to teachers’ negative comments on their children. Chinese parents have a strong sense of parenting responsibilities, and they consider it their duty to raise well-behaved children (Wu et al., 2002). When they learn from teachers that their children do not behave themselves at school, they, feeling guilty and anxious, use we to signal the responsibilities of both the mother and father and reassure teachers that both the mother and father would strive for the well-being of the child. They shape themselves as concerned or involved couples with the frequent use of we. To include one’s spouse into the conversation indicates the parent’s desire to add a particular “social actor” (van Leeuwen, 1995, p. 83) into parenting. Being a member of the parenting team can imply “joint parental responsibility” (Gunnarsson, Hemmingsson, & Hydén, 2013, p. 451). Joint parental responsibility for young Chinese parents is distinct from the traditional Chinese conceptualization of parents’ roles in the family that men should go out to work and women should look after the house and kids.

Parents’ frequent use of we and less frequent use of I indexes parents’ awareness of their co-parenting roles during parent-teacher interaction. A father or mother is not a mere individual, but a member of the “parenting team” (Gordon, Tannen, & Sacknovitz, 2007). Consequently, “co-parent identity” (Stueve & Pleck, 2001) is salient in this context. To a certain extent, the interaction between parents and teachers is an interaction between family and school, which also partly elucidates why parents use we more frequently to position themselves as a member of a parenting team, instead of a single individual when interacting with teachers.

4.1.2 Collectivistic ideology
Parents not only frequently align with their spouses, but also construct solidarity with their children and teachers. This may be related to their collectivistic ideology. There are 8 instances of such alignment or solidarity between parents and their children and 7 instances between parents and teachers. Here are two excerpts:

(2) a. 她每天坚持刷牙，主动和爸爸妈妈聊天，讨论我们身边发生的事情。(1203)
She brushes her teeth every day, takes the initiative to talk to Dad and Mom, and discusses what is happening around us.
The pronoun we (in its objective case us) in (2a) refers to both parents and their child. In this excerpt, “Dad” and “Mom” are used to refer to parents, which reflects not parents’ perspective, but their children’s perspective (Tannen, 2007), since “Mom” and “Dad” are address terms commonly used by children. By taking children’s perspective, parents intend to show their closeness with children. In the second excerpt (2b), the pronoun we is an addressee-inclusive we, used to include both the addresser (parents) and the addressee (teachers). It is a way of building solidarity and alignment with teachers. However, the solidarity building seems to be mixed with the power maneuver (Tannen, 2007), as has been indicated by the imperative structure of the sentence. Such an assumption is further confirmed by the many other imperative sentences parents use when addressing teachers. It shows that emerging middle-class parents in China often display their power and strive for an equal footing with the teachers. This is quite remarkable, considering the traditionally detached and unequal relationship between parents and teachers, with much more power on the part of teachers.

The above analysis of first-person pronouns during parent-teacher interaction has illustrated that we and I are disproportionally deployed and that the first-person plural pronoun we is helpful in indexing how parents perceive their relationship with their spouses, their children and teachers of their children and how they position themselves during parent-teacher interaction. It has been shown how sameness and difference surrounding parents’ relation with others is constructed through discourse. Sameness or alignment is the central theme in parent-teacher interaction. In this context, parents are more prone to integrating themselves into different groups than displaying their individual agency. As noted by Hofstede (1994), the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups demarcates individualism on the one side and collectivism on the other side. In relation to the parent-teacher interaction in our data, it is obvious that collectivism is more salient since parents are frequently integrated into varied groups.

4.2 Interaction with peer parents

The occurrence and the context of the first-person singular pronoun and the first-person plural pronoun in parent-parent interaction are carefully examined and analyzed. Results show that solo-parent identity instead of co-parent identity has been predominantly constructed. Apart from the solo-parent identity, emerging middle-class Chinese parents sometimes use a first-person plural pronoun to align with their family and other parents and shape themselves as active parents in the community. Furthermore, a few other instances of the first-person plural pronoun we with a third-person singular referent reveal parents’ construction of parent-child collectivity.
4.2.1 Solo-parent identity

In our data, there are 658 instances of I in total used to refer to the speaker and 316 instances of we in parent-parent interaction, with the former accounting for 67.6% and the latter 32.4% of all first-person pronouns in this context. The first-person singular pronoun I blatantly outnumbers the first-person plural pronoun we. This is in stark contrast with the parent-teacher interaction, with I taking up only 31.2% (54 instances) and we 68.8% (119 instances) of all first-person pronouns in that context. The much higher frequency of I voice instead of “we joint” voice seems to indicate “solo-parent identity” (Stueve & Pleck, 2001). Solo-parent identity is related to the interior me and emphasizes the independent role in parenting, whereas co-parent identity lays stress on the role of marital partner me.

The contextual analysis shows that the use of the first person singular pronoun I is closely linked with the exercise of parents’ individual agency. For instance, in Excerpt (3a), the mother who identifies herself as married talks about her effort in the cultivation of good behaviors in her child. By using I instead of we, the mother conveys the message that she is responsible for instilling good learning habits into her child. She does not use we to refer to the couple or the parenting team, as she would have done in the parent-teacher interactional context. Similarly, in (3b), the first mother started by saying that she was going to take her son to ski in Chengdu. The second mother followed the conversation by saying that she herself was also planning to visit Chengdu (with her child, revealed by the following pronoun we). These mothers prefer to use I to talk about their personal agency or their initiative in the activity or trip planning for their children. Solo-parent identity appears to be the norm during parent-parent interaction. Given the fact that the most active participants in the online chat group are mothers, it can mean that mothers are shaped as more involved than fathers. In comparison, fathers who are generally not active participants in parenting communities might not be adequately addressed or represented (c.f. Sunderland, 2006), since mothers interacting online focus more on their own actions than the actions of the father or the couple.

(3) a. 我现在努力地给她养成每天做作业的习惯。
   I am now trying to cultivate in her the habit of doing homework every day.

   b. ——我上周带他去成都滑雪了都不行。
   ——啊，我准备也去成都啊，不好么？我们去年去的哈尔滨。
   — I wanted to take him to ski in Chengdu last week, but he refused.
   — Oh, I am also planning to travel to Chengdu. Isn’t it a good place? We went to Ha’erbin last year.

Parents’ construction of solo-parent identity in parent-parent interaction may be accredited to three main reasons. First, parents are more liable to display their individual agency in less formal situations than in formal situations. Individual agency is magnified with the frequent use of I in the less formal parent-parent interaction than the more formal parent-teacher interaction. Second, purposes of communication also play an important role. Parent-
teacher interaction, aiming to facilitate communication between family and school, features institutional discourse, with the teacher representing the school and the parent representing the family. It might be inappropriate to represent the family with *I*. Parent-parent interaction features non-institutional discourse. Parents are interacting on an individual basis. Third, the means of communication may have an impact on the way first-person pronouns are used. Data for parent-parent interaction was collected from online chat groups, which stand for an informal and non-traditional way of communication. Such a means of communication seems to be acentric rather than endocentric. Consequently, parents’ positioning of themselves in this context appears to be more individualistic or subjective. In comparison, data for parent-teacher interaction are collected from the written Handbooks, which represents a formal and traditional means of communication. With this traditional means of interaction, parents are apt to construct their identity in a more traditional way by displaying collectivism. The much higher frequency of the first-person plural pronoun in such an interactional context shapes the many collectivities.

### 4.2.2 Community collectivity and family collectivity

Apart from the exceedingly large proportion of *I* in parent-parent interaction, which indicates the individualistic self-representations (Gardner et al., 1999), parent-parent interaction is also coupled with the construction of family collectivity, community collectivity, and parent-child collectivity. These different collectivities are shaped by the use of *we*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Referents</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive <em>we</em></td>
<td>121</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusive <em>we</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I</em> + the family</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I</em> + spouse</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I</em> + the child</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The child only</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As is shown in Table 2, there are a total of 316 instances of *we* in parent-parent interaction with various referents. Approximately 2/5 of them (121 instances) are inclusive *we*, used to refer to the speakers and other parents interacting in the online chat groups. These *we*’s help build solidarity among parents.

(4) 哦，那改天我们一起去了。

Oh, we can arrange another time to go together.
Excerpt (4) contains an addressee-inclusive *we*. Parents in this excerpt have been planning a certain activity together for their children. The addressee-inclusive *we* builds alignment between the addresser and the addressee. These parents shape themselves as actively involved in their children’s afterschool activities.

The many instances of addressee-inclusive *we* indicate the necessity or desire for emerging middle-class parents to associate with their peers and share their resources and experiences. These parents identify themselves as being members of the parenting community. They are industriously planning and carrying out activities for their children. By sharing all their ideas of parenting, these emerging middle-class Chinese parents are developing a more convergent understanding of being parents in the Chinese context.

In addition to these 121 instances of addressee-inclusive *we*, most of the first-person plural pronoun *we’s* are categorized as addressee-exclusive *we*. Altogether, 151 instances of these addressee-exclusive *we’s* are used to refer to the whole family of the speakers, which account for 47.8% of all the instances of the first-person pronoun *we* in parent-parent interaction. In Excerpt (5), the addressee-exclusive *we* refers to the speaker and her family as a whole, thus constructing the family collectivity. It helps shape parents as caring and involved parents. With family collectivity, parents align with their family members and position themselves as members of the family rather than a single individual. In our data, *we* is usually used to refer to the nuclear family, rather than the extended family, and this is shown by the context, such as, “two adults and one child” and “three persons of the family”. This indicates emerging middle-class Chinese parents’ divergent conceptualization of family from the traditional conceptualization which features the extended family.

(5) 丁文妈妈，我们报名，两大一小。辛苦啦！谢谢！
Dingwen’s Mom, we want to sign in for the activity, two adults and one child. Thanks for your hard work.

(6) 你们教育得真好，看样子我们也平时多努力努力了。
You have a very good way of teaching children. It seems that we should also make an effort to teach our child.

Construction of the co-parent identity is not common in parent-parent interaction. Only 18 instances of *we* are used to refer to couples in a family, which accounts for 5.7% of all occurrences of *we* in parent-parent interaction. This is in stark contrast with parent-teacher interaction, in which 85.7% of *we’s* are used to refer to the couple of a family. In Excerpt (6), the mother praises another couple’s method of teaching kids and alleges that they would improve their own method. The pronoun *we* is manipulated to construct the co-parent identity. In this excerpt, she positions herself and her spouse as “concerned” or “involved” parents (Tannen, 2007). This is similar to parents’ alignment with their spouses in parent-teacher interaction in which the first-person plural pronoun shapes them as involved and concerned couples.
4.2.3 Parent-child collectivity

The parent-parent interaction data witness a few instances of addressee-and-addresser exclusive *we*. They are used to refer to neither the addressers nor the addressees. It is used to refer solely to the child of an addresser who is not present during the parents’ interaction. There is scant research examining the pronoun *we* that refers exclusively to a third party, except in the work of Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985). Quirk et al. explain that the English pronoun *we* can occasionally refer to a third person (=he, she). They do not, however, go into details or implication of such use. Our discursive analysis shows that such use shapes the parent-child collectivity and implies that parents and their children are spiritually unified into one entity (see Excerpts 7a, 7b, and 7c).

(7) a. 其他宝宝呢? 我还以为我们是男孩子，所以不爱唱歌呢。
   How about other children? I thought that we are boys and thus have no interest in singing.

   b. 我们也差不多这个时间才睡觉，但小朋友睡得很好。
   We also went to bed around this time but slept very well.

   c. 我们没上学啊。不是说发烧不能上学吗?
   We were not at school today. Doesn’t the school forbid children with a fever to go to school?

In each of Excerpts (7a), (7b) and (7c), the pronoun *we* is used to refer to the “child” and helps construct solidarity and closeness between the parent and the child. Using *we* to represent the child reinforces the intimate family bond among family members. Parents and children, bound together, become a parent-child collectivity and they are part of each other. Although it might be festinate to allege that this use of *we* reflects the mindset of middle-class parents, it can provide certain linguistic evidence for the previous research that argues for a close bond between parents and children in Asian countries (Yasumoto, 2010).

Apart from the construction of parent-child collectivity, this special use of *we* may also involve parents’ certain power dominance over their children. For instance, parents are in control of the child’s bedtime in Excerpt (7b). Parents’ involvement, power, or permission has resulted in the child’s going to bed at a certain time. Things are quite similar in Excerpt (7c). When the parent said “we were not at school,” she actually meant that her child was not at school. The parent might have told the child not to go to school due to the fever. It also seems to confirm the speculation of Tannen (2007) about the mix of solidarity maneuver and power maneuver in family communication. Solidarity maneuver, or closeness among family members, is displayed by the construction of parent-child collectivity, while power maneuver, or parents’ control over their children, is revealed by the contexts. In other words, the language used in the family context often shows both closeness and control both at the same time.

In addition to the construction of a close bond between parents and children, the first-person plural pronoun *we* in the above three excerpts also helps parents to construct solidarity with their peers. If *we* is replaced in these excerpts with “my child” or “our child,” the sentences still make sense, but they sound different. Both “my child” and “our child”
emphasize the ascription or belonging of the child, implying that this child belongs to “me” rather than to “you.” They are objective and formal, but at the same time, they sound cold and detached, excluding the addressees from the conversation and failing to build solidarity with them. In contrast, the first-person plural pronoun we seems to have the power to draw the addressees into the conversations, although it is an addressee-exclusive we. The secret may lie in the fact that this addressee-addressee-exclusive we blurs the boundary between my child and your child and turns it into our children in the community of practice. This is a good demonstration of integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups (Hofstede, 1994, p. 212). Parents’ implicit involvement with other parents in the online context partly reflects parents’ collectivistic perception of parenting in the modern world.

To conclude, the use of pronouns we and I in parent-parent interaction discloses how agency is mingled with different collectivities. Parents’ agency or individuality is repeatedly displayed, disguising, or concealing the role of their spouses. Parents’ sense of community collectivity and family collectivity is repeated again and again. In addition, parents’ construction of the parent-child collectivity is rather significant. It deciphers parents’ collectivistic perception of the parent-child relationship on the one hand and the solidarity building between parents and other parents on the other.

4.3 Interaction with children

The most significant fact about parent-child interaction is that the first-person singular pronoun I is often substituted by baba “Dad” or mama “Mom.” As Table 3 shows, there are 79 instances of baba (Dad) or mama (Mom) that are utilized in parent-child conversation to replace the first-person singular pronoun I and there are two instances of baba (Dad) or mama (Mom) that are used to mean we. By referring to themselves as “Dad” or/and “Mom,” parents have assumed the perspective of their children (Tannen, 2007).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References in our data</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Baba” or “mama” as I</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Baba” and “mama” as we</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In (8a) and (8b), when two mothers utter “Mom loves you a lot” and “Mom really has no clue,” they literally use “Mom” to mean I. Since “Mom” is a term children use when addressing their mothers, to call themselves “Mom” is actually to mimic their children’s way of addressing mothers, thus taking the perspective of the children. Parents’ adoption of their children’s
perspective reflects parents’ intention to build solidarity with their children (Tannen, 2007). Mothers in these two excerpts both intend to build the bond with their children.

(8) a. 什么叫爱民如子？你爱下面的人就像你爱你自己的孩子一样。妈妈是怎么爱你的呢？妈妈很爱你，是吧？ (0104)
   Loving the subjects as if they were his own children. You love your guys as if they were your own kids. How does Mom love you? Mom loves you a lot, right?

b. 这个什么花？妈妈真的还不知道。 (0201)
   What is this flower called? Mom really has no clue.

By taking up the perspective of their children, the mothers shaped themselves as loving parents who were considerate towards children’s feelings. Such an identity construction implies the solidarity maneuver in parent-child interaction instead of power maneuver. Emerging middle-class Chinese parents who frequently take up the perspective of their children and build solidarity with their children seem to be different from traditional Chinese parents who are alleged to adopt “authoritarian parenting” (Chao, 1994; Chen, Dong, & Zhou, 1997; Harkness, 1988). Authoritarian parenting refers to the parenting style of parents who act as the rulers, controllers, and tyrants of their children. In contrast, authoritative parenting involves the parents who see themselves as the guardians, guides, and friends of their children. The discovery of baba (Dad) and mama (Mom) provides linguistic evidence for emerging middle-class Chinese parents’ understanding of their roles in parenting.

5. Discussion

The above analysis shows the use of first-person pronouns I and we in three interactional contexts, namely, parent-teacher, parent-parent and parent-child interaction, and explores the linguistic patterns in these interactions. The parent-teacher interaction sees the overwhelming utilization of the first-person plural pronoun we to refer to the speakers and their spouses, constructing co-parent identity (Stueve & Pleck, 2001) or couple collectivity. The parent-parent interaction witnesses a significantly higher proportion of I than we. It indicates parents’ sense of agency and their eagerness to display how active and how involved they are with their children. Solo-parent identity is primarily constructed in this context. The parent-child interaction witnesses parents’ frequent address of themselves from the perspective of their children. It reveals parents’ concern with their children’s feelings. It shows parents’ construction of “concerned” or “involved” parents (Tannen, 2007).

Parents’ construction of different identities via the use of first-person pronouns in the three interactional contexts demonstrates that parent identity is dynamic and pluralistic. This is in line with the general discovery that identity, being complex, fluid and dynamic, shapes and is shaped by discourse (Antaki, Condor, & Levine, 1996; Cerulo, 1997; Meinhof & Galasinski, 2005; Woodward, 1997). In the present study, the discourse that indexes or shapes parent identity is first-person pronouns. Even for parents of the same social class and culture,
their identity construction can vary to a certain extent in different contexts and with different discourse.

The construction of different parent identities also reflects the change of values between collectivity and agency. Collectivity and agency are displayed to different extents in various contexts. Just as Pavlidou (2014) speculates, different contexts shape different we collectivities. Collectivity deals with the “formation of social configurations of various types, from the local (families, communities, groups, networks) to the global (states, social classes, associations, social movements, organizations)” (Wenger, 1998, p. 14). It is related to solidarity, commitments, common interests and affinity. In parent-teacher interaction, we is largely used to shape the parenting collectivity of couples. Then, in parent-parent interaction, the collectivity of family and community is frequently shaped, and we is seldom used to refer to couples. Another collectivity is revealed by parents’ use of the first-person plural pronoun we to refer exclusively to their children. It helps build a close coalition between parents and children on the one hand, and to construct an alignment between parents and peer parents on the other. Emerging middle-class parents and their children are perceived as a unified entity. This finding is in support of Yasumoto’s (2010) study which has found that parents and children in Asian countries are closely connected. The parent-child collectivity is reaffirmed in parent-child interaction by parents’ use of baba (Dad) and mama (Mom) to substitute I or we. The above mentioned different forms of collectivity are the most vital for emerging middle-class young parents in China. They are not isolated but interrelated in the parenting community. Parents interact and align with teachers, peer parents, and their spouses and children, and at the same time, learn from them in the “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998). The identity of these emerging middle-class Chinese parents is being constructed in relation to such a community, and their identity is predisposed to dominant ideology for the emerging middle class in China. These various collectivities confirm the common existence of collectivism among Chinese parents. In comparison, agency is frequently displayed in parents’ online interaction, indicated by the much higher proportion of I and few instances of we used to refer to the couple. It is also implicitly expressed by the rare occurrences of addressee-inclusive we in parents’ interaction with teachers. Power is exercised by emerging middle-class Chinese parents by the imperative structure coupled with addressee-inclusive we. It also indicates these parents’ more agency in their children’s education and less dependence on teachers. Furthermore, it confirms Ma’s (2009) speculation that the emerging Chinese middle class are conscious of their individual self and need.

The present study demonstrates the indexical roles of the first-person pronouns in the discursive construction of emerging middle-class parent identity. First-person pronouns index various identities constructed by these emerging middle-class Chinese parents, ranging from co-parent identity and solo-parent identity to parent-child-unified-as-one identity. In relation to social research on parent identity (Stueve & Pleck, 2001), results in the present study have provided linguistic evidence for the construction of parent identity and demonstrate that co-parent identity and solo-parent identity do interchangeably exist. These two contrastive identities are both indispensable for emerging middle-class Chinese parents. In this sense,
parent identity for them can also be a site of struggles. First-person pronoun analysis in this study opens the door to glimpse into the dynamic and struggling nature of parent identity.

Our study also illustrates that the cross-cultural and psychological approach to the study of pronouns and individualism/collectivism between different cultures (Kashima & Kashima, 2003; Twenge et al., 2013; Uz, 2014) might be too general to notice the subtle difference between different groups or the impact of contexts. As this study has demonstrated, the proportion of we is significantly higher in the more formal parent-teacher interaction than in the less formal parent-parent interaction. Parent-parent interaction witnesses a dramatic increase in the use of I. This presents us with the question of to what extent culture predetermines the way we use language. Or is it plausible that culture prescribes the contexts people of a culture will be in and that it is contexts that really contribute to the different ways of language use?

In relation to the significance of studying emerging middle-class Chinese parents, the present study indicates that as China is undergoing drastic social change, Chinese parents’ comprehension of their parenting roles may have changed. As has been specified by Davis (2000), the destabilizing and uprooting power of modern life has created a new change in identities. These identities must be “constructed and situated amid competing cultural discourses and social practices” (Davis, 2000, p. 2). Our study has revealed how parent identity is shaped and constructed amid the recent social-cultural changes in the Chinese contexts. The young emerging middle-class parents in China are stuck between traditional Chinese values that feature collectivism and Western values that feature agency. Emerging middle-class Chinese parents cherish the traditional Chinese values, such as collectivism, building solidarity and alignment with different interactants involved, especially in more formal situations. On the other hand, they embrace agency in more private or informal contexts. Although they are said to value the attribute of autonomy or independence in their children (Goh, 2006; Xiao, 1999, 2001), they fundamentally crave for closeness with their children and perceive parent-child as a single entity. The economic and familial social practices of the emerging middle class contribute to their unique identity construction in contemporary China.

6. Conclusion

This study has construed the identity construction of emerging middle-class young parents in China by examining the use of first-person pronouns I and we in three interactional contexts, that is, parent-teacher, parent-parent, and parent-child interaction. It has been observed that the use of first-person pronouns varies accordingly in different interactional contexts and that they help construct different parent identities, that is, “co-parent identity” vs. “solo-parent identity.” Co-parent identity is salient in a formal or institutional context, whereas solo-parent identity is salient in an informal or personal context. Apart from co-parent identity and solo-parent identity, emerging middle-class Chinese parents frequently use the first-person plural pronoun to shape their alignment with their children, teachers of their children, and peer parents, which results in an assortment of collectivities. One distinguished and rarely
discussed collectivity is revealed by the first-person plural pronoun we used to refer exclusively to the child during parents’ interaction, which indicates parent-child collectivity and Chinese parents’ close bond with their children. Furthermore, parents often take up the perspective of their children and construct solidarity with them by using baba “Dad” and mama “Mom” to substitute I and we when communicating with their own children. These varied parent identities in different contexts demonstrate that parent identities are dynamic, pluralistic, and discursively constructed.

The above-mentioned interactional contexts and distinctive first-person pronoun use showcase parents’ interactional patterns with children, teachers of their children, and other parents, which further reflect the change of values in collectivism and agency. Parents’ ideas on collectivism are not stabilized or fixed, while fluctuated and displayed to a different extent in various contexts. So is the agency. It has demonstrated the indexical roles of first-person pronouns in discursive identity construction. It has also shown how parent identities of young, emerging middle-class Chinese parents are subject to social change.

Future study can focus on discursive strategies other than first-person pronouns used to construct parent identity. A closer examination of parents’ insider views about parent identity is also needed. Despite its limitations, the present study has offered one valuable glimpse into the discursive construction of parent identity by emerging middle-class young parents, provided linguistic evidence to the related sociological research and peeped into the parent identity of emerging middle-class parents against the backdrop of social change in China.

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Yanmei HAN & Jianping CHEN

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中文提要

第二语言发展回顾与展望：扩大我们的研究视野
黛安·拉森-弗里曼 密西根大学 ................................................................. 267

本文追溯了第二语言习得/发展（SLA / SLD）研究领域的发展历程。SLA / SLD起源于语言学思考，随后研究范围扩大到心理语言学，期间受到不同学科和多种理论的影响。SLA / SLD随着人类学和社会学的发展而进一步发展。最近，新的认知理论已对SLA / SLD产生影响。本文讨论了近期学界对跨学科研究方法的呼吁。具体一点地说，作者提倡采用复杂动态系统理论，以便与非简化系统思维保持一致。这种社会认知理论不仅是跨学科的理论，而且还强调了第二语言发展的动态、可变、非线性的性质。它是在生态发展观的构架上进行的，生态发展观强调情境的相关性。这一观念还坚持认为，SLA / SLD并不能简单归结为输入转为输出，而是要考虑到语言使用者感知到的语言功能，语言模式是语言使用者交流互动的过程中出现的。本文最后讨论了几个与教学有关的问题。

关键词：第二语言发展；第二语言习得；语言学；心理语言学；人类学；社会学；认知理论；跨学科方法；复杂动态系统理论

第一人称代词与中国新兴中产阶级年轻父母身份的话语建构
韩艳梅 陈建平 广东外语外贸大学 ............................................................ 285

在当今中国社会变迁过程中，新兴中产阶级年轻父母的身份建构及其反映出的价值观变化是学界关注的研究热点之一。本文试图从身份话语建构研究入手，重点考察父母在三种语境中如何借助第一人称代词在语篇中建构身份：父母—教师互动语境、父母—父母互动语境、父母—孩子互动语境。文章对不同语境中建构的不同的父母身份以及父母、孩子、教师和其他父母之间的互动关系模式进行了深入探讨，对中国新兴中产阶级年轻父母建构的“关心孩子”，“积极参与”的父母形象背后所折射的“集体主义”与“个人能动性”价值观之间的“变”与“不变”展开讨论，突出了父母身份的动态性和多元性，深化了人们对第一人称代词在身份话语建构中的指标性作用的理解，并进一步增强人们对对新兴中产阶级年轻父母身份建构与社会变迁互动关系的认识。

关键词：集体主义；个人能动性；第一人称代词；父母身份建构；新兴中产阶级

应试而教，随试而教，反试而教：新自由主义机构语境下的语言教育及教师身份构建
黄恩谋 广东外语外贸大学 ........................................................................... 307

新自由主义现已成为描述近年来全球经济和教育改革中一些核心特征的关键词。本文从社会语言民族志研究的视角探究了一位语文教师在课堂内外如何应对和利用语言教育中的新自由主义话语，以展示新自由主义语境下语言教育的复杂性。本文的分析显示，案例中的语言教师在一个以应试话语为核心的新自由主义语境下的身份认同轨迹里，共展现出作为应试话语的反对者、服从者和实用主义者三种显著身份认同；本文亦细致展示与这三种认同相对应的应试话语相关的各类课堂互动及其达成的不同目的。基于此，本文认为，为超越目前主流的“决定论新自由主义”以充分展现新自由主义话语与语言教学和教师身份的动态关系，我们应尝试采用本文中的非预测