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Once a Chinese International Student and Now an English Professor: An Autoethnographic Self-Inquiry of Journeys Against Linguicism and Monolingual Ideologies

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ABSTRACT

Through an autoethnographic self-inquiry, this study captures my journey against linguicism and monolingual ideologies from being a Chinese international student to a junior faculty in English at an American higher education institution. This study contributes to the scarce literature drawing upon an autoethnographic approach to investigate and resolve tensions in identity negotiation, to empower, and to transform knowing into improved teaching and learning practices across individuals' transitional identities over time. In addition to vividly documenting and reflecting on my lived experiences and identity shifts fighting against linguicism and monolingual ideologies throughout my journey as once a Chinese international student and now an English professor, I share two coping strategies including resorting to writing as healing (DeSalvo, 2000; Golombek & Johnson, 2004) and actively seeking role models for empowerment. I argue that while this story is seemingly unique to me, the message is relevant to empowering many culturally, linguistically, and racially minoritized individuals like me.

Keywords: linguicism, higher education, monolingual ideologies, Chinese international students, autoethnographic self-inquiry, identity

The number of international students enrolled in American higher education has exceeded one million, among whom the vast majority speak English as an additional language (Institute of International Education, 2020). Over the past decade, Chinese international students remain the largest ethnic group among

international students in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2020). While Chinese international students should be regarded as competent multilingual communicators with rich and dynamic communicative repertoires, previous research on Chinese international students tends to disregard their fluid multilingual identities and instead (problematically) focuses primarily on their English-learner status (see review in Zhang-Wu, 2018, 2021a, 2021b). Due to this reason, Chinese international students are often studied as research participants and described as having language barriers (Wang, 2016), facing language difficulties (Yeh & Inose, 2003), and being linguistically incompetent (Jiang, 2014).

Yet, beyond being examined by researchers from outsider perspectives which could potentially lead to dangerous (mis)conception that Chinese international students are English deficient by default, it is crucial to get a full picture of their lived multilingual journeys and identity struggles from an insider perspective to fight against linguisticism (also known as linguistic racism) and monolingual ideologies. Autoethnography, which critically and systematically examines one's lived experiences through self-inquiry, is an important research method to understand such personal journeys (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). This method has been found particularly beneficial in examining the transnational, translanguaging, and transcultural experiences of language educators (Yazan et al., 2020).

In this autoethnographic critical self-inquiry study, I draw upon my unique identity as once a Chinese international student and now an English professor at a private research university in the United States to investigate how I sought my multilingual identity and empowered my international students while coping with linguisticism and monolingual ideologies. Specifically, I strive to explore answers to the following research questions:

1. How did my non-whiteness and non-native-English-speakerness affect my identity and self-positioning as a Chinese international student and an English professor?
2. How did I cope with linguisticism and monolingual language ideologies in American higher education and beyond?

MULTILINGUAL COLLEGE CAMPUSES AND MONOLINGUAL IDEOLOGIES

With the internationalization of higher education, U.S. college campuses have witnessed growing cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity. Hosting over one million international students from all over the world (Institute of International Education, 2020), American higher education institutions have turned into “fundamentally multilingual spaces” (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2020). While most existing studies on multilingual international students tend to focus primarily on their difficulties with English (e.g., Jiang, 2014; Wang, 2016), some scholars in multilingual research at the tertiary level consider U.S. college campuses as linguistically superdiverse ecologies, in which the term *international students* itself is “insufficiently robust as an analytical

category” (e.g., Benda et al., 2018, p. 79; Poe & Zhang-Wu, 2020). Zhang-Wu (2021b) draws attention to the within-group variabilities among Chinese international students, proposing a developing continuum to understand their varying degrees of linguistic acculturation based on their previous language and educational experiences. Faced with such within-group variabilities, it is important to view international students as competent multilinguals who can draw upon all resources from their rich linguistic repertoire instead of linguistically incompetent English language learners (Canagarajah, 2011; García & Wei, 2014; Zhang-Wu & Brisk, 2021).

Despite the increasing linguistic diversity among the student population, the faculty body in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in the United States remains dominated by White, monolingual speakers of English (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Such a lack of diversity in the faculty body is especially present in the field of English, where monolingualism and nativeness is often the unspoken norm (Nigar & Kostogriz, 2019). Monolingualism and nativeness, which considers “standard” English spoken by the so-called native speakers as the only acceptable form of communication, has its roots deeply in the *zero point of English* (Mignolo, 2009). Having its history in coloniality, the zero point epistemology of English considers the mastery of English a social capital, which “colludes with many of the pernicious processes of globalization, deludes many learners through the false promises it holds out for social and material gain, and excludes many people by operating as a segregational class dialect” (Pennycook, 2019, p. 180). Under the zero point of English, monolingualism and nativeness is the norm and gold standard in global communication, othering other languages as well as non-standard varieties of English (Mignolo, 2009). Consequently, multilinguals are often subject to the deficit portrait as forever “English language learners” who speak English with accents, without recognition of their home language and literacy skills along with their rich multilingual communicative repertoires. Functioning as the *hidden curriculum* (Brisk & Zhang-Wu, 2017; Zhang-Wu, 2021c) in American higher education, English often serves as a gate-keeper for academic publication in higher education (Hartse & Kubota, 2014). Furthermore, “English monolingualism is manifested not simply in the language(s) of the scholarship produced but the language(s) of scholarship cited” (Horner et al., 2011, p. 272), further reinforcing the status of English as the zero point.

Failure to perform to native-like proficiency in English (e.g., accents in spoken English, occasional grammatical errors in writing) often makes multilingual faculty subject to linguisticism (or linguistic discrimination), resulting in biased teaching evaluations as well as psychological stress and lowered self-esteem. This has exerted far-reaching impacts on multilingual, nonnative-English-speaking university professors of color, posing substantial challenges to their professional development, instructional practices, and identity negotiation. While some existing studies have been conducted on multilingual faculty’s experiences navigating academic publication (Lillis & Curry, 2006) and teaching in American higher education (e.g., Braine, 2012, 2013; Ilieva, 2010; Reis, 2011), these studies tend to examine nonnative-English-speaking professors from outsider

perspectives without taking an insider examination of their lived experiences navigating monolingual ideologies and challenges in today's multilingual college campuses.

Recently, a small yet emerging body of scholarship has taken an emic view to examine multilingual scholars' experiences wrestling with the zero point of English using autoethnographic self-inquiry methods (e.g., Kim, 2020; Lawrence & Nagashima, 2020; Motha, 2006; Yazan, 2019). Reflecting on the complexity and lived experiences of multilingual scholars from insider perspectives from doctoral students (Kim, 2020), English language teachers (Lawrence & Nagashima, 2020; Motha, 2006), and teacher educators (Yazan, 2019), these studies shed important light on promoting equity and inclusion in academia. Drawing upon storytelling and counter storytelling informed by Critical Race Theory, Kim (2020) captures a Korean doctoral students' experiences navigating academic imperialism and calls for systemic change in American higher education to be more inclusive and culturally, racially, and linguistically responsive. Similarly, Yazan (2019) conducted an autoethnographic inquiry to explore identity and ideology issues among multilingual teacher educators. Shifting the focus beyond the United States, Lawrence and Nagashima (2020) adopt autoethnographic methods to investigate the intersectionality of native-speakerness, race, gender, and sexuality by critically reflecting on their experiences as English language teachers working in Japan.

Despite the importance of such emerging scholarship in critically examining multilingual scholars' lived experiences across various contexts, most existing studies (e.g., Kim, 2020; Lawrence & Nagashima, 2020; Motha, 2006; Yazan, 2019) tend to focus primarily on participants' current professional identities as educators or graduate students without capturing their transitions from student to teacher. Yet, because language is a social practice (Canagarajah, 2011), it is important to examine multilinguals' languaging experiences over time, especially across their transitions in professional identities. To fill the void in research, this study aims to draw upon autoethnographic methods to initiate an emic investigation of my journeys fighting against linguisticism and monolingual ideologies as once a Chinese international student and now an English professor in an American university.

METHOD

Autoethnography, which "look(s) inward into our identities, thoughts, feelings and experiences—and outward into our relationships, communities and cultures" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 46), is a helpful approach to systematically explore one's personal experiences from unique cultural perspectives (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Critical self-inquiry is an essential research methodology to investigate tensions between belief systems and about identities (Larriee, 2000; 2008). Autoethnographic critical self-inquiry allows exploration of lived experiences from an insider stance while acknowledging the dynamics of identity shifts and interaction (Adams et al., 2015). This autoethnographic critical self-inventory study focuses on my journeys as once a Chinese international student pursuing

doctoral studies (2014-2019) and later an English professor (2019-current) in American higher education.

Following the critical self-inventory model (Adams et al., 2015; Allard & Gallant, 2012), data were collected to reflect both my on-going self-reflections (my teaching journals and diaries from September 2014 to September 2021) and my conversations with others, including recordings and documentations of my interactions with colleagues and students from August 2019 to September 2021. My on-going self-reflections, totaling approximately 1,100 hand-written pages, covered a variety of topics including but not limited to my teaching during graduate school and as a faculty member, my job-hunting experiences, and my participation in the professional community. These informal journals were composed in a translanguaging manner at least twice per week, using English, Chinese, or a free combination of both to facilitate my meaning-making and identity expression (Canagarajah, 2011). In other words, my choice of mixing Chinese in journaling had nothing to do with my English language proficiency, but instead was made based on communicative purposes (in this case, I myself was the only target audience of my writing). For instance, when it came to Chinese proverbs such as “万事开头难” and “授人以鱼不如授人以渔,” the meaning of which could easily be lost in translation, I intentionally chose to keep them in their original language forms.

Data were analyzed following the coding procedures of applied thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012) to explore important storylines in order to bring “readers into the scene” through showing and telling (Ellis, 1993, p. 711). Given the translanguaging nature of my journaling (an example of code-mixing when journaling see above) and the complexity of multilinguals’ meaning-making in relation to their unique identity expression and lived experiences (Canagarajah, 2011), I decided to follow Blair’s (2016) method to analyze my data in its original translanguaging format without first translating them into English to “preserve the nuance” (p. 112). Indeed, my insider positionality has made subjectivity unavoidable. To allow more comprehensive interpretation and increase credibility of the data, I adopted Guest et al.’s (2012) recommendation to read and re-read my data with a two-week interval. Firstly, I followed the coding procedure in applied thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012) to separate meaningful data from irrelevant information (data reduction). After close reading of my data, I assigned 14 codes: identity, accent, non-whiteness, nonnative-English-speakerness, self-positioning, Chinese international students, English professor, coping strategies, linguisticism, legitimacy, empowerment, multilingual advantage, self-doubt and stereotype. After closely examining these codes, three themes emerged including: influence of nonwhiteness and nonnative-English-speakerness on me as once a Chinese international student, influence of nonwhiteness and nonnative-English-speakerness on me as now an English professor, and coping linguisticism and monolingual ideologies.

RESULTS

The findings section is organized based on the three themes identified above. Preliminary findings show that while my non-whiteness and nonnativeness have posed challenges to my initial self-positioning as a legitimate member in American higher education, I gradually transitioned my self-perceived “otherness” into my unique advantage as a multilingual expert with lived experiences as a means to fight against linguistic and monolingual ideologies. Consequently, I was able to draw upon my lived identities to serve as a role model to empower my students which in turn empowered myself.

Influence of Non-whiteness and Nonnative-English-Speakerness on Me as Once a Chinese International Student

Nanjing born and Nanjing bred, I did not come to the United States until after finishing my undergraduate studies in China. In 2014, I started my doctoral studies in Curriculum and Instruction at the School of Education in a private catholic university on the east coast of the United States. My main research interests were teaching English to speakers of other languages. Back in China, I had always taken pride in my high English proficiency. Throughout my secondary and tertiary education in Nanjing, I have won multiple national prizes in English competitions. Additionally, I held advanced certificate in Chinese-English interpretation and translation and had taught English in China for over four years by the time of my college graduation. All these experiences made me interested in the teaching and learning of English as a second language, which prompted me to apply for graduate schools in the United States with English as a second language education as my concentration. As part of my graduate school application, I took TOEFL and yielded near-perfect scores, which according to this standardized assessment demonstrated my high proficiency in English and my strong likelihood to be linguistically competent participating in American higher education. I had been confident in my English proficiency and my previous achievements in English.

Yet, upon arrival, I noticed that I immediately started self-doubting because of my non-whiteness and nonnative-English-speakerness. Soon upon arrival, I was frustrated to notice that my glorious English proficiency back in China was no longer my strength. For instance, walking down the street, I was frustrated to realize that even a 5-year-old American kid spoke “better” (accent-free) English than me. When I went to the shopping mall to buy essentials for my dormitory, I was shocked to realize that my high English proficiency as measured by TOEFL did not quite translate into my successful linguistic functioning. While I was able to effortlessly choose the correct answers in multiple-choice questions in the standardized English assessment, it took me a long time to figure out the differences between “sham” and “pillowcases” and the meaning of “comforter.” To make matters worse, although the U.S. National Center for Education Statics (2021) largely portrays international students as seemingly raceless “non-resident aliens,” a separate category aside from eight common racial groups such as American Indian, Asian, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and White, I was subject to xenophobia stemming from the intense political relationships

between China and the United States as well as hostility due to racial discrimination in American society. As alerted in a recent NPR news article, xenophobic sentiment against Chinese is now present in academia with “U.S. intelligence agencies... encouraging American research universities to develop protocols for monitoring students and visiting scholars from Chinese-affiliated research institutions” (Feng, 2019). Furthermore, with the global pandemic and former U.S. President Donald Trump publicly referring to Covid-19 as “China virus,” such hostility and discrimination against people of Chinese descent has further aggravated, leading to a national increase in hate crimes against Asian Americans (Yam, 2022). In small talks, I often heard somewhat offensive comments such as “Oh, you are a Chinese international student. I heard lots of Chinese international students are spies who try to steal *our* technologies in the United States. Do you know anyone like this?” and “Hey! You are Chinese. I heard there are tons of street dogs out there in China. Do you guys really often eat dogs and cats for dinner?”

Such xenophobic comments gradually swallowed my confidence in English and my self-perceived legitimacy and capability to be a researcher and teacher educator training English teachers to better support multilingual students. At school, whenever I opened my mouth to speak, I was hyperconscious about my differences, racially, linguistically, and culturally. As a result, I became nervous and sensitive about my accent and foreignness. English, which used to be my biggest strength, had turned into my self-perceived weakness. In my diary during my first semester as a doctoral student back in 2014, I documented my insecurities and self-doubts:

Sometimes, I am the only non-white student in class. I’ve never felt so different before. I am intimidated by my classmates as they speak—their English is so fluent, they are so smart, and they can express their ideas so well. Should I raise my hands when I have questions or when I know the answer? But I don’t know if I can do this. It is so scary to hear my own accent in a quiet classroom as I speak. What if my peers judge me? What if the professor cannot understand me? What if I get the answer wrong? (diary, 9/18/2014)

Such self-doubts persisted even though I was a straight A student in my PhD program and even when my course paper was chosen as a model essay by one professor to be shared among many of my white, native-speaker classmates. In my diary, I described my excitement and nervousness to be acknowledged as a role model in class. Rather than proudly embracing this incident as a moment of empowerment, I was worried about whether any nonnative English writer features would negatively influence my peers’ perceptions of my qualification and intelligence as an apprentice researcher:

When that happened, I was incredibly proud and nervous at the same time. I am proud because despite my nonnativeness in English, my paper was selected as the model essay for the whole class. But I was nervous and scared—will my peers catch any grammatical mistakes in my

writing as they read it? Will they all think it is good enough to be a model essay? (diary, 3/21/2015)

In 2017, as part of my graduate assistantship as a PhD candidate, I started to teach undergraduate and graduate courses. By then, I had already taught English to second language learners of all ages in China and the United States for almost 10 years, which positioned me as an experienced language teacher. Yet, I was extremely nervous and shaken to the core when I walked into the classrooms to teach undergraduate and graduate pre-service teacher candidates who were in my class to learn how to teach multilingual students instead of to learn English as a second language. Despite my extensive content-subject knowledge and first-hand experiences as an English language teacher and learner, I could not stop self-doubting. While I had no difficulties expressing myself during teaching and was lucky enough to consistently yield satisfactory teacher evaluations, I was always aware of the linguistic and racial differences I have brought into the classroom—in many cases, I, as the instructor, ended up being the only non-white, nonnative English speaker in class. This was nothing surprising to me as an education major, since the demographics of my undergraduate and graduate level pre-service teacher candidates resembled the general lack of diversity in the U.S. public school teaching force (Sleeter, 2008). Nevertheless, I was concerned that my non-whiteness and nonnative-English-speakerness might reduce my credibility and authority as a college instructor. During my conversations with my close peers in the PhD program, I shared my self-doubting moments, which sometimes discouraged and frustrated me while simultaneously functioning as a catalyst for self-improvement (Johnson & Worden, 2014). Similar with the emotional contradictions as documented in Gile's (2018) study of an English language teacher, I found my position as a college instructor itself "full of irony." I recalled venting to my close peers about my constant self-doubting:

Sometimes I feel my life as a PhD student full of irony. I am a Chinese who speaks English with an accent and who makes grammatical mistakes here and there. But I am also the instructor in the classroom, and the person who is supposed to have the most expertise. How ironic is this?! I am a lifelong English language learner myself, yet I am teaching how to effectively teach English to a full class of undergraduate and graduate education majors who are White, native-speaking American folks and whose English seem 1,000 times better than me. (diary, 12/18/2017)

Influence of Non-whiteness and Nonnative-English-Speakerness on Me as Now an English Professor

Soon after graduating from my PhD program in 2019, I was fortunate enough to land a tenure-track assistant professor position at the Department of English in a private, research-intensive university in the northeast United States. This officially marked my transition from once a Chinese international student to now

an English professor. I was extremely blessed to be able to survive the notoriously fierce academic job market and land a dream job upon graduation. For the first time since I had come to the United States, I felt proud of myself and my English proficiency. I wrote in my diary soon before the official start of the semester: “Yay! Can’t believe my English is good enough for me to transition from an English learner and Chinese international student to finally an English professor! A new identity, a new start.” Yet, such excitement did not last very long.

On the first day of my official start as an English professor, I attended the university-wide new faculty orientation event, during which new faculty members across the disciplines were invited to a networking social hour. To facilitate the networking event, all new faculty were asked to wear a name tag introducing their full name as well as which department they were from. As I was holding the wine glass and cheerfully walking across the room wearing a name tag displaying my name above the word “English” in enlarged, bold font, a young White, male professor came towards me and initiated a conversation: “Hi, my name is XYZ. I just joined the Mechanical Engineering program. Which engineering program are you in? I figured we should probably grab coffee sometime and chat about research.” Out of astonishment and confusion, I replied bluntly while pointing to my name tag: “Excuse me? I mean... nice to meet you, but I am not an Engineering professor. You see, I work at the English Department.” The engineering professor carefully and quickly re-examined my name tag before apologizing with an awkward smile:

Uh...sorry. That was completely my bad. I thought you were with us in engineering. You know... Just now I heard you talking [with a Chinese accent] over there, and I saw your [Chinese] face and your [Chinese] name, and the starting letters ‘ENG’ on your name tag. So, I immediately thought it was engineering. Hahaha... It looked like I misread **English** as **Engineering**... (private communication, 8/26/2019)

This incident has vividly reminded me of the long-held stereotype in American society: (mis)perceiving all Asians as STEM professionals who are always hard-working, good at math calculation, yet whose English is never good enough, contributing to their seemingly forever foreigner status (Tuan, 1998). In fact, this stereotype has been so rampant in society for decades that back on August 31, 1987, *TIME*, one of the most prestigious magazines in the United States, chose to design its cover with a picture of a group of glasses-wearing, somewhat nerdy-looking Asian students in front of books and a computer. Along with the cover picture and right under the highlighted magazine title “*TIME*” in red, were the four words: “Those Asian-American Whiz Kids.” In this incident, it was my Chinese appearance, accent, foreign looking/sounding name and the first three letters “ENG” of my department information that jointly prompted the engineering professor to jump at the conclusion that it must be impossible for me to be an English faculty member and what follows ENG must be “ineer” instead of “lish.”

Such unintentional stereotyping based on my non-whiteness and nonnative-English-speakerness also extended well beyond the college campus. For instance, when I engaged in small talks with my eye doctor during my annual check-up or ran into a newly-arrived neighbor down the street, I was constantly reminded of my (misperceived) illegitimacy as an English professor and conflicting identities as a Chinese woman who works at the English Department. When interlocutors heard that I worked in higher education, they often assumed that I was in the STEM field, where native-like, high English proficiency was seemingly less important compared with the skills to juggle with numbers. “Let me guess,” my eye doctor was eager to predict my field of expertise based on his brief interaction with me during the routine examination, hearing my Chinese accent, seeing my Asian face, and noticing my foreign-looking name in Chinese Pinyin: “You are a professor of Data Science... No? Okay, Computer Science? ... Still no? How about Electronic Engineering?” After being presented an almost exhaustive list of STEM disciplines, I told him that I in fact am an English professor. “Oh, really?” My response clearly surprised my eye doctor who continued with his racial and linguistic stereotyping, further rejecting the fact that a Chinese woman with an accent was qualified to teach English as a subject to American college students at the English Department: “What do you teach at the English Department?... Wow, I didn’t know they offer **Chinese** classes there?!”

Similar incidents questioning my credibility as an English professor also occasionally occurred at the English Department, where I work every day. For instance, soon after I started my faculty position, I ran into a colleague down the hallway. We were chatting casually about how our teaching and research was going when that colleague suddenly made an unexpected comment: “I have to say that your English is really good. We talked for around 3 minutes just now, but you did not make a single grammatical mistake!” While my colleague, a white senior scholar in English, was intending to provide me with a good-intentioned compliment, I felt extremely uncomfortable and embarrassed. Apparently, despite my doctorate, publications, career potentials, years of experiences in teaching, and most importantly my current position as a junior English professor, I was still under the influence of the zero point of English, subject to the so-called native-speaker superiority fallacy (Arnold, 2020; Nuske, 2018; Zhang-Wu & Brisk, 2021) and was (mis)conceived as linguistic incompetent by default along with countless Chinese international students (Zhang-Wu, 2018).

During my short journey so far working as an English professor, I have already encountered similar incidents many times, both on and off campus. While I was lucky enough to never have had any student who made offensive comments straight to my face based on my non-white and nonnative-English-speaking backgrounds, these repeated events somewhat reduced my confidence in both my proficiency in English as a language and my capacity to conduct research on English communication. Furthermore, given the unique political tensions between China and the United States, research activities of Chinese faculty working in American higher education institutions are often subject to additional scrutiny to ensure national security (Feng, 2019), adding to my nervousness as an early-career Chinese scholar. Despite my identity transition from once a Chinese

international student to now an English professor, my self-doubting continued. As I noted down in my diary:

It has been super fun to work with my talented graduate assistants. Yet I am nervous to be a graduate advisor, despite my content expertise. Sometimes in those research meetings with graduate students, I was kind of nervous. I hope I did not make a grammatical mistake or mispronounce a word at our standing meeting yesterday. That would totally make myself a fool in front of my grad students. (diary, 6/12/2021).

Coping Linguicism and Monolingual Ideologies

Recognizing the negative influences of my self-doubting and insecurity stemming from the many incidents of stereotypes and hostility regarding my non-whiteness and nonnative-English-speakerness, I initiated two coping strategies to fight against linguicism and monolingual ideologies. Firstly, I started to systematically document these experiences in writing as a means to heal, reflect, and empower myself. DeSalvo (2000) has drawn attention to the importance of rethinking writing as a method of healing and critical reflection. Narrative writing, in particular, has been found beneficial to facilitate faculty growth (Golombek & Johnson, 2004), especially in enhancing transnational language teachers' identities development and pedagogical practices (Yazan et al., 2020). By documenting my life events in narrative written forms such as diaries, I was able to discover patterns, facilitate healing, and engage in personal growth through constant thinking and reflections (DeSalvo, 2000; Golombek & Johnson, 2004). Years ago, I used to think that my self-doubts and insecurities originated from my incompetence, both linguistically and academically. Back then, I used to be unaware of the strong grip of monolingualism on people's minds (myself included) and how my deviation from the "standard" English norm has led to biased assumptions of my intelligence and capability, regardless of my identities as a Chinese international student or an English professor. Yet, thanks to my routine journaling as healing and active reflections, I was able to discover the patterns behind those incidents—perhaps it was not my incapability, but rather the rampant influence of linguicism and monolingual ideologies in society that have positioned me in constant self-doubts and insecurity.

This prompted me to think deeper about the problematic issues of monolingualism within today's increasingly linguistically superdiverse higher education institutions, which has subsequently altered my research trajectory from focusing primarily on how to better support English language learners to master the "standard" English norm (Brisk & Zhang-Wu, 2017) to paying close attention to the intersectionality of language, power, race, and identity in society (e.g., Motha, 2005, 2006; Motha et al., 2012; Zhang-Wu, 2018, 2021a, 2021b). For instance, in my recently published article in *College English*, a prestigious refereed journal in the field of English (Zhang-Wu, 2021a), I pointed out the often-overlooked colonial history and social power behind the English language

and used the verb “tweet” as an example to illustrate that “English is neither neutral nor universal but rather an artificial construct created to maintain the imperialist legacy and to preserve the power of those who are considered mainstream” (p. 123). Similarly, in my book focusing on Chinese international students’ communication experiences during their first semester in American higher education, I focused on how they leveraged their cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2006) to navigate the unspoken English-only rules in college and debunked commonly held stereotypical misconceptions of Chinese international students, such as relying solely on TOEFL results as criteria for linguistic support (details see Zhang-Wu, 2021b). Recently, reflecting on my lived experiences with racial and linguistic discrimination, I wrote a commentary to debunk commonly held misconceptions in society stereotyping Chinese international students as both *raceless* and *linguistic incompetent* (Zhang-Wu, 2021d). Through all these endeavors fueled by my lived experiences as once a Chinese international student and now an English professor, and more importantly, my constant writing as healing and reflection, I was able to fight against linguisticism and monolingual ideologies through my research and academic publications. In this process, I sought my pen as my weapon to document and question the status quo, which in turn empowered myself as well as other culturally, racially and linguistically marginalized individuals.

My second coping strategy was to actively identify role models and seek support from them. I have been extremely fortunate to receive enormous support, guidance, and mentorship from my previous professors, cohort members, and peers during my PhD studies as well as my current colleagues at the English Department. These mentors and peers were always there to cheer me up when I was trapped in self-doubts due to linguisticism and monolingual ideologies. Yet, I was also aware that not all these supportive mentors and peers shared my lived experiences with non-whiteness and non-native-speakerness. To seek empowerment and find directions of my endeavors, I felt the necessity to actively seek role models who directly share my experiences of being racially, linguistically, and culturally minoritized. To realize this goal, I took advantage of fellowship opportunities within national and international professional organizations to get to know peers and mentors beyond my local contexts who have lived experiences seeking their professional identities as scholars of color who speak English with accents. These opportunities have made it possible to form safe professional communities based on our shared differences and marginalization in society to uplift and support each other.

Furthermore, thanks to my active search for role models who used to be just like me, I was able to shift my attention from how to accept my identity as a life-long English language learner and co-exist with my forever English with an accent to how to cherish my differences, especially my unique multilingual and multicultural backgrounds. I started to recognize that if my research intended to tear down the English-only wall and to re-imagine pluriversality in academic and social communication (Zhang-Wu, 2021a), I must embrace my entire identity and linguistic repertoire. To realize this goal, one of my close mentors and role models who had first come to the United States as an Argentinian international student

decades ago suggested that I listen carefully to my very own students and see what my non-whiteness and nonnative-English-speakerness meant to them. After reviewing comments from my teaching evaluations and private email correspondence, I was amazed to find that my students claimed that they enjoyed my teaching not because I was near-native in my English proficiency or assimilated enough to be just like a typical English professor; instead, they appreciated how *different* I have been, racially, linguistically and culturally.

To be specific, some of my white students who have spent their whole life in American education systems reported that they found my international perspectives “eye-opening” and “incredibly interesting.” One student who self-described as someone who grew up in a typical middle-class White neighborhood wrote in the teaching evaluation comment that he felt having a non-white, nonnative-English-speaking professor teaching a graduate class on multilingualism and multilingual education had added to the “authenticity” of the content subject; this was because I not only had the subject knowledge, but also “lived it.” Similarly, multiple of my students who are different from the mainstream in many ways in their sexuality, language or racial backgrounds, told me that they felt “amazed,” “inspired” and “empowered” by “how brave” I was to transition from once a Chinese international student to now an English professor. One Asian American student wrote in her email:

Thank you for being an inspiring role model. You made me understand that I should never say never. If a Chinese girl has the courage to come to the United States and fight for her spot in a White-dominant space, I must do the same. (private communication, 12/8/2020).

It turned out that as I was striving to embrace my non-whiteness and nonnative-English-speakerness, I have to some extent influenced my students in various ways. Their words have in turn empowered me to accept and appreciate my racial, linguistic and cultural differences. Consequently, I started to enjoy being atypical as an English professor and draw upon my differences in my teaching and professional engagement. Nowadays, I frequently find myself sharing my own lived experiences during teaching and presentations as once a Chinese international student and now an English professor who faced and is still facing linguisticism and monolingual ideologies in my everyday life yet have learned to cherish my differences and fight against stereotypical assumptions.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this autoethnographic critical self-inquiry, I explored the many negative influences from my non-whiteness and nonnative-English-speakerness throughout lived experiences as once a Chinese international student and now an English professor. Like most research adopting an autoethnographic method, this study is limited by its subjectivity, small sample size and highly contextualized nature. However, it is worth clarifying that the purpose of this study has never been to seek generalization and prescribe a one-size-fits-all portrait of the languaging journeys of multilingual scholars. Instead, this study represents an

effort to learn from self-reflection and share my story to multilingual students and teachers like me who are battling through the zero point of English (Mignolo, 2009) while seeking their unique identities.

In my years of soul-searching, I went through the paradigm shift in my understanding of multilingualism and being multilingual—from eager to assimilate and acquire native-like proficiency, to identity awakening, and finally to taking concrete actions to cherish my linguistic, cultural, and racial differences to fight against linguistic and monolingual ideologies. My journey has echoed the dynamics of language as a social practice (Canagarajah, 2011) which is sophisticatedly intertwined with identity, race, power, and many other factors in society (Motha, 2005, 2006; Motha et al., 2012). Yet, more importantly, it has made me realize that my differences in cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds can be my biggest asset and strength as a researcher and educator. In my navigation and reflection as once a Chinese international student and now an English professor and during my battle against linguistic and monolingual ideologies in American higher education and other social spaces dominated by unspoken native English superiority fallacy (Arnold, 2020; Nuske, 2018; Zhang-Wu & Brisk, 2021), my differences have inspired and influenced my students which in turn has empowered myself.

This study contributes to the scarce literature drawing upon an autoethnographic critical self-inventory approach to investigate and resolve tensions in identity negotiation, to empower, and to transform knowing into improved teaching and learning practices across individuals' transitional identities over time. In addition to vividly documenting and reflecting on my lived experiences and identity shifts fighting against linguistic and monolingual ideologies throughout my journey as once a Chinese international student and now an English professor in American higher education, I share two coping strategies including resorting to writing as healing (DeSalvo, 2000; Golombek & Johnson, 2004) and actively seeking role models for empowerment. While this story is seemingly unique to me, the message is relevant to many culturally, linguistically, and racially minoritized individuals like me. When faced with linguistic, we should not let it defeat us. Once we take active actions to fight against it, we can retell the story, seek support and empowerment, and even advocate for other marginalized people. Taking such actions will in turn empower us. The key is not to see differences as inferior and reason for emotional insecurity. Instead, it is important to adopt a new way to understand our racial, linguistic and racial differences so as to move away from self-doubting and bravely seek meaning and find our unique position to shake and reinvent the English-only world.

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