

Reconstructing Academic Identity in a Chinese Vocational College: A Collaborative Self-as-Data Narrative Study

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Article

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Abstract

This study examines how a doctoral graduate reconstructs academic identity after entering a Chinese vocational college, a non-traditional academic field shaped by academic drift, institutional hierarchy, and changing expectations of doctoral faculty. Using a collaborative self-as-data narrative inquiry, the study draws on the narrator-author's self-narrative and professional records, which were critically examined through dialogue with a peer interlocutor. Framed by an integrated Sen-Bourdieu approach, the analysis traces three phases of identity reconstruction: initial disruption during field transition, negotiation through role relocation and capital conversion, and partial consolidation of a hybrid academic identity. The analysis suggests that, in this case, doctoral capital did not carry stable value across institutional fields. Rather, its meaning depends on field-specific rules of recognition and on the conversion factors that enable or constrain its transformation into valued academic practices. The study offers a case-based interpretation of academic identity reconstruction as more than role adaptation or symbolic loss, but a process of reflexive habitus adjustment and capability expansion within structural constraints.

Introduction

In China, the expansion of higher education since 1999 has driven a rapid increase in doctoral training, creating growing pressure on doctoral graduates seeking traditional academic positions in universities (Shen & Chen, 2018; Zhong & Wang, 2019). China's higher education system is large, hierarchical, and increasingly differentiated. In the context of a saturated academic labour market, growing numbers of PhD graduates are entering teaching-oriented vocational colleges, which differ significantly from research-intensive universities in institutional mission, academic culture, faculty evaluation, and everyday work expectations (Fu et al., 2023). This transition does not merely involve a change of workplace. It requires doctoral faculty to renegotiate what it means to be academic in an institutional field where teaching, industry engagement, and institutional development may be valued more visibly than autonomous disciplinary research (e.g., Laiho et al., 2022; Zhuang, 2021; Griffioen et al., 2013).

This phenomenon can be situated within broader international debates on academic drift and the changing boundaries of higher education. Academic drift generally refers to the tendency of non-university or vocationally oriented institutions to move toward the status, recognition, and practices associated with universities, including changes in curriculum, faculty qualifications, research expectations, and institutional aspirations (Billot & King, 2015; Griffioen & De, 2013; Kyvik, 2009, p. 157–165; Christensen, 2012, p. 145–167; Deng, 2003). International studies have shown that non-university higher education providers often seek to strengthen their research capacity either by professionalising existing lecturers or by hiring staff with stronger research qualifications, including master's and doctoral degrees (Levine et al., 2013). At the same time, academic drift may produce tensions because vocationally oriented institutions do not simply imitate universities; they also attempt to maintain distinctive missions, applied knowledge traditions, student support roles, and close relationships with local communities and industries (Henderson, 2018; Sinclair & Webb, 2020). In this sense, the recruitment of doctoral faculty into vocational colleges can be understood as part of staff drift, but its

consequences are not only institutional (Fu et al., 2023; Zhuang, 2021). It also reshapes the identities, aspirations, and everyday practices of the individuals who move across these fields (Griffioen & De, 2013; Clegg, 2008; Wu & Xu, 2023).

Academic identity provides an important lens for understanding this process. Rather than treating identity as a fixed professional label, this study understands academic identity as dynamic, relational, and contextually negotiated (Sfard & Prusak, 2005; Laiho et al., 2022; Billot & King, 2015). Clegg (2008) argues that academic identity cannot be reduced to formal roles such as teacher, researcher, or manager, because it is embedded in the lived complexity of how individuals inhabit academic spaces and make sense of their work. Similarly, Laiho et al. (2022) show that academic teacher identity is shaped through the interaction between personal and social factors, including agency, structure, disciplinary communities, institutional expectations, and everyday social practices. McCune (2021) further emphasises that academic identities are formed through the dynamic interplay of personal narratives, values, and identification with multiple communities over time. These perspectives are particularly relevant to doctoral faculty in vocational colleges, whose prior academic identity is often shaped by doctoral socialization into disciplinary research communities, but whose new work environment may require them to perform teaching, administration, reform work, student support, and applied research in ways that do not fully align with the research-oriented habitus developed during doctoral training (Billot & King, 2015; Henderson, 2018).

However, few studies have connected macro-level academic drift, meso-level institutional change, and micro-level academic identity reconstruction from the perspective of doctoral faculty working in Chinese vocational colleges. Existing studies have discussed the development dilemmas of doctoral faculty in higher vocational colleges (Fu et al., 2023), the relationship between doctoral graduates and vocational education research (Wu & Xu, 2023), and the broader trend of vocational higher education upgrading (Zhuang, 2021). Yet less attention has been paid to how doctoral faculty themselves experience, narrate, and theorise the reconstruction of academic identity when moving from research-intensive doctoral training into a teaching- and practice-oriented vocational field. This gap is significant because academic identity is not only a subjective issue of self-understanding (Clegg, 2008; Laiho et al., 2022); it is also linked to how individuals exercise agency, convert capital, and seek valued forms of academic life within specific institutional constraints (McCune, 2021; Hart, 2019; Pham, 2019).

To address this gap, this study adopts a collaborative self-as-data narrative inquiry. Consistent with self-study scholarship (e.g., LaBoskey, 2004, p. 817–869; Loughran, 2007; Ai, 2019; Arnold, 2011), which treats inquiry into one's own experience and practice as legitimate when it is systematic, interactive, methodologically transparent, and oriented toward trustworthiness rather than detached objectivity. The empirical basis of this study is the first author's (hereafter the narrator-author) narrated experience and personal professional records as a doctoral graduate entering a vocational college in Chongqing, southwestern China. Following Arnold's (2011) view that the "I" can become both data and methodology when self-experience is made visible and analytically situated within scholarly discourse. So the narrator-author generated a chronological self-narrative and assembled relevant personal data, including

professional records, reflective notes, publications, correspondence, and documents related to key professional events. To avoid treating this narrative as self-evident evidence, the second author (hereafter the peer interlocutor) served as a critical friend (Walker-Gibbs, 2016, p. 55–71), a strategy commonly used in self-study to strengthen trustworthiness by bringing alternative perspectives to the interpretation of self-generated data, reading the narrative and supporting materials against the literature on academic identity and the Sen-Bourdieu framework, and questioning interpretations that appeared overly linear, self-affirming, or insufficiently connected to institutional conditions. The analysis was then jointly refined through dialogue between insider narration, documentary traces, and theoretical interpretation. Such a design is consistent with self-study scholarship, which emphasises interaction, trustworthiness, triangulation, and the need to move beyond the self through alternative perspectives (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 817–869; Loughran, 2007; Walker-Gibbs, 2016, p. 55–71). It also resonates with collaborative self-study practices in which dialogue, questioning, affirmation, and reflection between researchers are used to examine subjectivity and generate professional knowledge (Kline & Soejatminah, 2016, p. 157–178).

Sen-Bourdieu Framework

From Sen to Bourdieu

Amartya Sen's Capability Approach offers a normative framework for evaluating human well-being, inequality, and development through the lens of capabilities and functionings. (Robeyns, 2005) The distinction between capabilities and functionings is whether they are achieved and realised (Robeyns, 2005). Sen particularly points to the heterogeneity in people's abilities to convert the same bundle of resources into valuable functionings under different personal and social circumstances, namely, conversion factors. (Sen, 1985; 1999, p. 70 – 1) However, he does not fully theorise how socio-cultural and institutional structures concretely influence individuals' choices. (Lemistre & Ménard, 2019) Bourdieu's theory explains social practice through the interplay of habitus as embodied dispositions, capital as accumulated resources, and field as the structured social arena where individuals employ their capital according to ingrained habitus (Bourdieu, 2022, p.52–65). This socio-cultural conceptual toolkit accounts for the implicit mechanisms through which a person can or cannot exercise certain actions.

Application of the Sen-Bourdieu framework in educational research

The integration of Sen's Capability Approach and Bourdieu's theory of practice has emerged as a robust framework in the field of education. The research theme encompasses the full spectrum of the educational ecosystem—from learners to educators, from general education to vocational education, and from micro-level classrooms to macro-level policies (Lemistre & Ménard, 2019; Gokpinar & Reiss, 2016; Powell, 2012; Buckler, 2016; Pham, 2019; Hart, 2019). The integration of the Sen-Bourdieu framework revolves around how individuals navigate educational systems and the broader social contexts that influence their opportunities and outcomes, which is essentially a combination of

sociological structural analysis and philosophical evaluation of freedom (Hart, 2019; Buckler, 2016). Researchers have integrated the theories of Sen and Bourdieu in three significant ways. First, they have progressively combined the two theories to elucidate the capital-capability-wellbeing conversion chain (Gokpinar & Reiss, 2016; Powell, 2012). Second, a synergistic model has been developed that merges the fundamental concepts from both theoretical paradigms, emphasising the mutual shaping of capitals and capabilities (Hart, 2019; Pham, 2019). Third, the theories have been adapted at the micro level to investigate the contextual alignment of individual capital and capability (Lemistre & Ménard, 2019; Buckler, 2016). In sum, this synthesised framework aims to illuminate the dual structural and agential roots of educational inequality while proposing comprehensive solutions that span from policy to individual levels. Differences arise from the scale of analysis (macro/meso/micro) and central concerns (structural reform or capacity building). Notably, variations in the scale of analysis (macro/meso/micro) and central concerns (structural reform versus capacity building) reflect both the adaptability of the Sen-Bourdieu framework and the persistent tension between structural analysis and freedom-oriented evaluations in educational equity research.

Combining Sen and Bourdieu in the analysis of academic identity

Building on identity scholarship and the Sen-Bourdieu framework proposed by Hart (2019) and Pham (2019), this paper conceptualises academic identity reconstruction as both a social process of recognition and a capability process of expanding what one is substantively able to do and become. Identity theory helps explain how doctoral faculty narrate, negotiate, and revise their sense of academic self, while the Sen-Bourdieu framework explains how this process is conditioned by capital, habitus, field, and conversion factors. Together, these perspectives make it possible to examine identity reconstruction not only as an internal psychological adjustment but also as a structurally embedded process in which the value of academic capital is redefined within a new vocational field.

Socio-cultural studies underscore the interplay between personal and social factors in identity formation, emphasising the dynamic and socially embedded nature of academic identity (Laiho et al., 2022). This identity evolves continuously through individual narratives and social communities, influenced by broader cultural and historical contexts (McCune, 2021; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). The Teaching-Research Nexus supports this identity, integrating research-informed teaching and collaborative knowledge production (La Velle, 2019; Douglas, 2013). In vocational colleges, which tend to be non-research-intensive, faculty often experience tensions between their research habitus and institutional priorities centred on teaching and productivity (Levin & Aliyeva, 2015).

The Sen-Bourdieu framework is particularly apt for exploring the identity reconstruction of newly appointed doctoral faculty in these settings, as it accounts for both individual agency and structural constraints. Within this research context, the framework assesses how faculty navigate their roles, focusing on the valuation, devaluation, and conversion of research-oriented capital.

Methodology

Research setting and data scope

The study was conducted in Chongqing, China, in the context of an agriculture-oriented higher vocational college. The empirical materials relate to the narrator-author's transition from doctoral training into this vocational college and cover the period from the job-seeking stage before institutional entry to subsequent teaching, research, administrative, and reform-related work within the college. No students, colleagues, or institutional managers were recruited as research participants. The study draws on self-generated narrative data and professional records produced or retained by the narrator-author, together with collaborative analytic dialogue between the narrator-author and the peer interlocutor.

Collaborative self-as-data narrative inquiry

This study was conducted as a collaborative self-as-data narrative inquiry. In self-study research, inquiry into one's own experience is considered rigorous when it is systematic, interactive, grounded in multiple qualitative materials, and validated through trustworthiness rather than detached objectivity (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 817–869; Loughran, 2007; Arnold, 2011). It aligns with analytic autoethnography, which requires researcher visibility, analytic reflexivity, dialogue beyond the self, and commitment to theoretical analysis (Anderson, 2006; Hayler, 2011, p. 25). These principles are important because autoethnographic work is often challenged on issues of representation, data quality, legitimacy, ethics, and objectivity (Wall, 2008).

Data analysis

The primary data consisted of the narrator-author's chronological self-narrative and supporting professional records, including academic CVs, reflective notes, publications, correspondence, grant and postdoctoral application materials, teaching-related documents, and records of significant professional events. These materials were treated as narrative and documentary traces rather than as neutral records of experience. They were used to anchor memory, sequence key events, and situate personal episodes within concrete institutional practices. This approach follows self-study scholarship in which personal experience becomes researchable when it is systematically documented, interpreted, and connected to wider professional and social contexts (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 817–869; Loughran, 2007). It also reflects the view that autoethnographic and self-narrative work must move beyond personal storytelling by linking lived experience with theory, documentary evidence, and broader cultural or institutional questions (Arnold, 2011; Wall, 2008).

The analysis proceeded through an iterative and collaborative process. First, the narrator-author reconstructed the self-data into a chronological narrative, identifying critical episodes related to career choice, institutional entry, role relocation, teaching work, research engagement, and administrative participation. Second, the peer interlocutor read the narrative and supporting materials as a critical analytic interlocutor, focusing on recurrent moments of identity disruption, role negotiation, capital revaluation, habitus-field friction, and emerging agency. This collaborative procedure is consistent with self-study research that emphasises interaction, dialogue, questioning, reflection, and trustworthiness in

the interpretation of self-generated data (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 817–869; Kline & Soejatminah, 2016, p. 157–178). Third, both authors refined the interpretation by moving between the narrative evidence, academic identity literature, and the Sen-Bourdieu framework. The analysis combined thematic narrative analysis with Hayler’s adaptation of Sartre’s progressive-regressive method: events were interpreted progressively by examining how particular decisions and actions shaped later identity reconstruction, and regressively by tracing the biographical, institutional, and structural conditions that made those actions meaningful (Hayler, 2011, p. 26–27). Finally, the concepts of field, habitus, capital, conversion factors, and capabilities were used to theorise how academic identity was disrupted, negotiated, and reconstructed within the vocational college context (Bourdieu, 2022; Hart, 2019; Pham, 2019; Sen, 1985).

Credibility and trustworthiness

Credibility was pursued through analytic accountability rather than through claims of neutrality. In self-study and autoethnographic research, subjectivity is not treated as a defect to be eliminated, but as a condition that must be made visible, disciplined, and open to critique (Arnold, 2011; LaBoskey, 2004, p. 817–869; Wall, 2008). Since the narrator-author was both the narrator and the person whose academic identity was examined, the main methodological risk was unexamined self-justification. To address this risk, the peer interlocutor served as a critical analytic interlocutor from a comparative insider-outsider position, a notion useful here because qualitative researchers may occupy a space between shared experience and analytic distance rather than a fixed insider or outsider position (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). As a doctoral cohort peer of the narrator-author, the peer interlocutor shared a similar academic training background and had also faced the same early-career job-market moment, including receiving but declining an offer from a local normal university. However, unlike the narrator-author, she chose to work in the school of education of a local comprehensive university in a coastal city, where she continued her research in teacher education. This parallel but divergent trajectory enabled her to understand the narrator-author’s academic aspirations and job-choice tensions while also questioning interpretations that appeared overly coherent, self-affirming, or insufficiently grounded in the vocational college context. This use of an alternative interpretive perspective is consistent with self-study’s emphasis on interaction, trustworthiness, and moving beyond the solitary self (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 817–869; Loughran, 2007). It also resonates with collaborative autoethnography, in which researchers use dialogue, shared analysis, and multiple subjectivities to strengthen interpretation rather than to claim detached objectivity (Chang et al., 2016, p.17). Trustworthiness in this study thus rests on the disciplined dialogue between insider narration and critical co-analysis, the theoretical grounding of interpretation, and ethical caution in representing people and institutions involved in the narrative (Wall, 2008).

Findings and Narrative Analysis

Identity disruption: From doctoral academic aspiration to vocational college entry

Navigating the uncharted: Reimagining academia beyond the university

This phase spanned from the job-seeking period before completing our doctorate through the first three months in the new position (late 2023 to September 2024). During our job search, the limited recruitment at our well-regarded university hinted at a challenging academic job market. The narrator-author applied to several institutions in Chongqing and received interviews from two local normal universities. Both proceeded smoothly to the university-level review. However, in May, the preferred normal university—a local normal university in Chongqing—rejected the application of the narrator-author. Shortly after, the second university offered us a position contingent upon graduation.

Meanwhile, a senior colleague of the narrator-author invited her to work at a vocational college in her hometown, close to her parents' home. After graduation, the narrator-author hesitated intensely between this and the university offer. While the offered university position was a local undergraduate institution in the main urban area, partially aligned with her research focus (teacher education), the vocational college option defied the expectations of most around her—except for her parents and supervisor. A peer even phoned to criticise her consideration of the vocational path as a *“professional compromise”* and *“a choice driven merely by the substantial relocation allowance”*. Wrestling with internal and external doubts, she ultimately chose the vocational college, driven partly by a desire to carve a distinct path.

The months following her entry into the vocational college in July coincided with the summer break. During this time, she applied for a municipal-level research grant and, with institutional support, initiated a postdoctoral research project jointly supervised by her alma mater and new institution, focusing on the history of rural vocational education. Her doctoral supervisor played a pivotal role in connecting me with a co-supervisor specialising in Chinese history. As an introduced doctoral faculty member enjoying an associate professor-level salary, she faced a teaching load of 143 hours per semester. Assigned to the School of General Education, what she could teach was limited to public courses like Mental Health Education and Aesthetic Education. Although teaching would only begin in October, she started preparing in September due to her unfamiliarity with the content and the challenge of large classes of around 100 students. Thus far, she has managed these demands to meet the teaching requirements.

Tracing the structural conditions that shaped the dilemma and choice

Here, the first traces and dissects the historical and structural factors that limited the career options of the narrator-author and gave rise to identity tensions. From the perspective of the macro-structure of the academic labour market, a structural contradiction has gradually emerged between the oversupply of doctoral graduates and the contraction of traditional faculty positions in undergraduate institutions (Shen et al., 2025; Zhong & Wang, 2019). This issue has also been widely discussed in public and social media discourse. Furthermore, the higher education field, and even Chinese society at large, maintains a long-standing and entrenched prestige hierarchy. This hierarchy, which places MOE-affiliated normal

universities above provincial normal universities, followed by local undergraduate institutions and finally vocational colleges, defines what constitutes a “successful” career trajectory for PhDs in education through a value ordering of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2022, p.131–132). At the meso-level of local structure, the personal preference of the narrator-author for limiting the job search to “Chongqing” or my “hometown” significantly narrowed an already constrained set of academic career options, representing a key structural constraint. In China, besides economically developed regions or tech-intensive regions, familiar regions such as the location of one’s alma mater or hometown are common geographical preferences for doctoral graduates’ employment (Shen & Xu, 2024). At the micro-level, her career choice was influenced by the support of family capital and the specific nature of my academic capital. On one hand, the proximity to her parents’ home offers potential social capital (a supportive network) and economic capital (reduced commuting and living costs), providing a pragmatic foundation for choosing a vocational college. On the other hand, her portfolio of academic capital, a PhD in education and research expertise in rural adult education, was partially misaligned with the needs of the local normal universities. In contrast, this academic capital appeared to have greater relevance within the vocational college context, particularly in relation to rural and vocational education. Her doctoral dissertation focused on rural adult and vocational education, and the institution where she is now employed is an agriculture-related vocational college. She is, in fact, the first PhD in Education to be hired there.

Looking forward progressively, the initial academic trajectory of the narrator-author was designed to secure a position within a research-intensive normal university that would allow her to maintain her doctoral research traditions and symbolic attributes. Following conventional pathways, she applied to local normal universities in the hope of replicating her established academic habitus within a familiar type of field. However, after being rejected by her first-choice university and receiving only an offer from a less preferred institution, she came to a vague yet growing realisation that the possibility of fulfilling her academic aspirations within this traditional track was lower than she had anticipated. Consequently, she pursued a strategic shift by entering a vocational college field with different demands. Within this new context, she leveraged its material advantages to preserve and opportunistically develop her core academic identity and research agenda. This transition may be interpreted as an agentive and flexible strategy within the constraints of available career options. Her active engagement after joining the vocational college concretised this repositioning. Applying for research grants and engaging in postdoctoral research suggest that she continued to seek academic possibilities within the vocational college context. For instance, her current postdoctoral research on the history of rural vocational education represents a deliberate effort to creatively integrate her academic capital with the needs of this new field.

Capital rupture and strategic conversion: Theorizing the initial identity shock

The initial identity shock can be interpreted as a moment of field transition in which the value of previously accumulated academic capital became unstable. Doctoral training had equipped the narrator-author with a research-oriented habitus and forms of cultural and symbolic capital that were meaningful

within the university field. However, entry into a vocational college exposed these resources to a different field logic, where practical teaching, institutional service, and applied contribution carried stronger immediate value (Henderson, 2018; Sinclair & Webb, 2020; Wu & Xu, 2023). From a Bourdieusian perspective, this was not simply a subjective feeling of disappointment, but a case of habitus-field dislocation. While dispositions formed in one academic field encountered a new field in which the rules of recognition were partially different (Bourdieu, 2022, p. 55–57; 2008, p. 80–86). This also helps explain why academic identity was disrupted rather than merely adjusted. Because academic identity is socially and institutionally negotiated, a change in the field of recognition can unsettle the narrative through which the academic self had previously been organized (Clegg, 2008; McCune, 2021; Laiho et al., 2022).

At the same time, the narrative suggests that the vocational college did not simply devalue the narrator-author's academic capital. Rather, it required its conversion into forms that could become recognizable within the new field. The doctoral degree, research training, academic networks, and emerging vocational education research agenda began to acquire value when they were linked to institutionally supported projects, teaching preparation, and the college's need for educational reform capacity. Read through Sen's Capability Approach, this conversion process mattered because resources do not automatically become valued functionings; their effects depend on personal, social, and institutional conversion factors (Sen, 1985; 1999, p. 70–71; Robeyns, 2005). The identity shock therefore marks the beginning of a reconfiguration of the narrator-author's capability set, namely, the freedom to pursue a valued academic life was constrained by the vocational college's field conditions, yet also reopened through new routes for research, teaching, and institutional participation. In this sense, the first phase is best understood not as the loss of an academic identity, but as the beginning of a hybrid identity project in which academic capital had to be reinterpreted, converted, and made meaningful under new institutional rules (Hart, 2019; Pham, 2019; Billot & King, 2015).

Identity negotiation: Role relocation, capital conversion, and institutional recognition

Between two fields: Balancing institutional drift and personal agency

From October 2024 to May 2025, the narrator-author was transferred from the School of General Education to the Academic Affairs Office to lead the cultivation of the "Teaching Achievement Award" — a key quality indicator for vocational colleges (MOE, 1994). Recognizing that this new role would not only allow her to quickly understand the college's overall operations but also closely align with my postdoctoral research. Specifically, the dean of the Academic Affairs Office promised the chance to teach education major courses. She then accepted the position. The initial workload was manageable, focusing mainly on familiarization with the overall reform and specific planning of the college. she benefited greatly from the guidance of an experienced vice president, who provided detailed feedback on everything from writing the award application to refining case studies, meeting with her once or twice weekly.

A significant shift occurred in the new semester. As the submission deadline approached, the college brought in an expert team from her alma mater for guidance. It became clear that a PhD in Education and, more importantly, her specific alma mater connections were the underlying reasons for her reassignment. This meant frequent collaboration with a team led by the dean of the Faculty of Education from our alma mater, which included a senior colleague and a former classmate of ours. This situation made the “university-vocational college” academic hierarchy palpably clear, particularly as her peer relationships transformed into supervise-supervised, which brought a sense of frustration. However, the work also provided a new research focus. she immersed myself in college-related education reform research, completed a research paper highly relevant to the award, and found her personal research agenda aligning with the college’s core mission for the first time. Furthermore, the publication of three papers written during her doctoral period served as a crucial affirmation that “*research can be done anywhere*,” becoming an emotional outlet amidst the identity tensions.

Unpacking the Conditions of Relocation

This reassignment was not a random administrative act but a strategic move shaped by the interplay of multiple structural forces and the narrator-author’s own agentic calculations. At the macro-level, the national policy emphasis on the Teaching Achievement Award as a paramount indicator of quality has reconfigured the internal priorities of vocational colleges (Mi, 2023). At the meso-level, the college’s pursuit of this award is a clear manifestation of academic drift, an effort to gain legitimacy and prestige by mimicking university-like achievements (Fu et al., 2023; Zhuang, 2021). At the meso level, the vocational college where she is employed is actively pursuing academic drift, seeking to enhance its academic legitimacy by recruiting doctoral graduates and cultivating high-level teaching achievements. Her identity as a PhD in Education, and particularly her connection with a top normal university, became a crucial strategic resource for the institution to secure external expert support and compete for provincial and even national awards (Ai, 2019). Consequently, the transfer was a rational choice by the institution to maximize the value of her specific capital. At the micro-level, while the academic capital she accumulated during her doctoral studies partially aligned with the requirements of the new position, a profound tension arose between her research-oriented habitus and the practice-oriented approach required for work in the Academic Affairs Office.

From the perspective of personal strategy, the narrator-author’s acceptance and commitment to this transfer were based on forward-looking cost-benefit analysis and strategic planning (Shen et al., 2025; Fu et al., 2023). Although the shift from a teacher in the School of General Education to a teaching reform researcher implied a significant role transformation, she identified the unique opportunities embedded within it. This new position allowed her to move from the periphery of teaching public courses into the core circle of the college’s reform and development, providing a holistic perspective for understanding the operational logic of vocational education. (Mi, 2024) More importantly, it unexpectedly provided an ideal field site for her postdoctoral research, creating a valuable intersection between my theoretical interests and the institution’s practical needs. She regarded participation in cultivating the Teaching Achievement Award as a profound form of immersive learning, aiming to master the ability to

translate complex educational practices into impactful narratives. While it might require setting aside some pure theoretical research in the short term, in the long run, it was intended to build a more resilient and comprehensive professional identity within the vocational education field — one that can meet institutional demands while simultaneously realizing her personal academic value.

Playing the New Game: Capital Conversion and the Remaking of Academic Habitus

This stage can be interpreted as a deeper process of identity negotiation in which the narrator-author had to learn a new “game” within the vocational college field (Bourdieu, 2022, p. 66). The relocation to the Academic Affairs Office did not simply add administrative responsibilities. Instead, it placed her academic capital within a field where recognition was mediated by institutional reform agendas, award-oriented quality indicators, and practical knowledge production. From a Bourdieusian perspective, this shift altered the exchange value of her capital, including doctoral training, writing ability, educational research expertise, and alumni networks became meaningful not primarily as markers of disciplinary scholarship, but as resources that could be mobilized for institutional development and cross-field translation (Shen & Xu, 2024; Bourdieu, 2008, p. 122–123; Billot & King, 2015). This episode can be interpreted as that academic identity is not reducible to formal role labels such as teacher, researcher, or administrator, but is negotiated through the changing value of academic work within specific institutional contexts (Clegg, 2008; Laiho et al., 2022; McCune, 2021).

Theoretically, the role relocation illustrates how habitus is not simply reproduced but gradually reworked through practice. The narrator-author’s research-oriented habitus initially came into tension with the pragmatic logic of teaching reform work, where academic knowledge had to be translated into institutional narratives, project texts, and applied reform solutions. Yet this tension did not only constrain agency; it also created conditions for capital conversion and capability expansion. Read through the Sen-Bourdieu framework, the new position functioned as a conversion context in which previously accumulated academic resources could be transformed into new functionings, including institutional writing, reform mediation, and the production of practice-oriented knowledge (Sen, 1985; 1999, p. 76; Hart, 2019; Pham, 2019). The remaking of academic habitus in this phase therefore lay not in abandoning research identity, but in learning to inhabit a hybrid academic position that connected scholarly aspiration with vocational college priorities. In this sense, the second phase marks a movement from defending an inherited doctoral identity toward constructing a more flexible academic self capable of operating across research, administration, and institutional reform (Levin & Aliyeva, 2015; Zhuang, 2021; Fu et al., 2023).

Identity consolidation: Reflexivity, role multiplicity, and the emergence of a hybrid academic self

Experiencing role multiplicity: Weaving meaning from fragmentation

From June 2025, the narrator-author's work diversified after the award application. In addition to regular teaching duties, undertook temporary business trips, drafted documents, and took on new tasks arising from personnel changes within the new department. The dean of the Academic Affairs Office encouraged her to attend lectures and conferences related to vocational education reform, with the institution covering the expenses. She participated in three training sessions, the most memorable being a seminar on "AI Empowering Vocational Education" held at Tsinghua University. While visiting their advanced basic industrial training center, she *"felt both inspired by the vision of AI in vocational education and a sense of despair at the vast gap in facilities and teaching staff between top universities and vocational colleges — how could we find our comparative advantage?"* During the same period, she used the relatively ample time to actively apply for postdoctoral research projects and a MOE planning project, while also preparing her postdoctoral research proposal under her supervisor's guidance. Before the summer break, as her college collaborated with a university in Guangdong province on the Teaching Achievement Award application, she was sent to Guangdong to assist. Her role was to align her college's educational practices with the partner institution's focus, refining and enhancing the application content. The intensive discussions and collaboration helped her find common ground between the practical educational models of an agriculture-focused vocational college and a local undergraduate university.

Returning to Chongqing for the summer break, the narrator-author concurrently progressed with research for an already-approved project and the writing of the postdoctoral proposal. Additionally, she gladly accepted an invitation to contribute an article to an academic journal familiar to her, completing a paper on the integration of vocational and continuing education. This journal has supported her greatly during her master's and doctoral studies. At the start of the new semester, she took over the responsibility of managing college-wide teaching and research projects, a task left by a transferred colleague. The process was cumbersome, with no handover. Simultaneously, she needed to draft the Academic Affairs Office's "14th Five-Year Plan Summary" and the "15th Five-Year Plan." Fortunately, building on insights gained from the earlier award application, drafting the plan was attainable. On a positive note, she taught an Educational Research Methods course, a subject she was comfortable with, to early childhood education majors in the new semester, though she continuously adapted her teaching methods for vocational college students. Just as she prepared the proposal defense for her postdoctoral research, she was again sent to Guangdong to support the partner university's award application, with a tight deadline, requiring late nights during the business trip. Returning from Guangdong, exhausted yet thoughtful, she realized her role could no longer be simply defined as teaching or research. It had transformed into a peculiar hybrid. She taught research methods to pre-service teachers, helped shape the college's five-year development plan, collaborated across provinces with experts to refine materials, and managed teaching research projects for the faculty college-wide. These seemingly unrelated tasks were strangely interconnected through the context of vocational education.

Embedding Agency within Structural Constraints

At the macro level, national vocational education policies continuously emphasize quality-oriented discourses such as the "Double High-Level Plan" — high-level vocational colleges and high-level majors

(Zhuang, 2021) This places indicators like Teaching Achievement Awards and institutional planning at the core, not only shaping the strategic priorities of vocational colleges but also creating institutional space for doctoral faculty to participate in high-level projects (Wu & Xu, 2023; Fu et al., 2023). Simultaneously, the deeply entrenched hierarchical structure within the higher education system acts as a constraint, but also conversely fosters unique possibilities for vocational colleges to seek differentiated development and for doctoral faculty to engage in cross-tier collaboration (Mi, 2023). At the meso level, the institution where she is employed actively promotes academic drift through strategies such as recruiting doctoral graduates, competing for provincial-level and above awards, and engaging in cross-institutional and inter-provincial collaboration. The fluidity of the internal management structure (e.g., personnel changes) provides the organizational context for frequent role transitions at the individual level. At the micro level, the narrator-author's personal capital portfolio, particularly her doctoral degree, alumni network, and research background related to agricultural vocational education, can help connect the college with high-end resources and assist in carrying out comprehensive strategic tasks.

From a forward-looking perspective, her response to these structural conditions embodies an exercise of agency that shifts from passive adaptation to active integration. She no longer view teaching, research, administration, and cross-institutional collaboration as separate burdens, but instead attempt to weave them into a meaningful sequence of professional practices under the common theme of vocational education. For instance, by drafting institutional plans, she systematically developed her macro-level perspective; by leading teaching-research project management, she deepened my understanding of front-line teaching practices; through cross-institutional and inter-provincial collaboration, she honed her ability to translate and negotiate across different fields. The core of this role integration strategy lies in redefining what constitutes valuable academic work. She has gradually come to realize that in this field, the metrics of success have expanded beyond solely publishing papers to include improving practice and acting as a bridge between the vocational and higher education systems. Faced with the triviality of daily administrative tasks and the drain of role-switching, she employs time planning and emotional adjustment to strive for a sustainable balance amidst inevitable tensions. She views short-term tasks as opportunities to accumulate unique experiences, thereby continuously carving out her own agentic space within structural constraints.

From structural negotiation to agentic freedom: Consolidation of a hybrid identity

The third phase can be interpreted as the consolidation of a hybrid academic identity through the narrator-author's growing capacity to integrate fragmented roles into a coherent professional narrative. The significance of this phase lies not in the accumulation of more tasks, but in the redefinition of what counted as meaningful academic work within the vocational college field. Teaching, research, administrative writing, project management, and cross-institutional collaboration gradually ceased to appear as disconnected obligations and became narratively organized around vocational education as a

shared field of practice (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). This process reflects the narrative and relational nature of academic identity that academics sustain a sense of self not simply by occupying formal roles, but by constructing meaningful connections among values, communities, practices, and institutional expectations (Clegg, 2008; Laiho et al., 2022; McCune, 2021). In this sense, identity consolidation was not a return to the narrator-author's original doctoral identity, but the formation of a more flexible academic self capable of working across the boundaries of research, teaching, reform, and institutional service.

Read through the Sen-Bourdieu framework, this movement from structural negotiation to agentic freedom was enabled by the development of a reflexive habitus and a reconfigured capability set (Adams, 2006; Pham, 2019). The vocational college field continued to impose constraints through its local rules of recognition, quality indicators, and applied reform priorities, yet these same conditions also created new conversion contexts in which doctoral capital, writing capacity, research training, and academic networks could be mobilized differently (Hart, 2019; Billot & King, 2015). The narrator-author's agency therefore did not emerge outside structure, but through an increasingly reflexive engagement with it. This supports Adams's (2006) argument that reflexivity can mediate between habitus and changing social conditions, while also aligning with Sen's view that freedom depends on the conversion of available resources into valued functionings (Sen, 1985; 1999, p. 86; Robeyns, 2005). The hybrid identity consolidated in this stage was thus not a passive compromise with institutional demands, but an agentic attempt to expand the range of academic lives that could be valued and pursued within a non-traditional academic field (Hart, 2019; Pham, 2019).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how academic identity was disrupted, negotiated, and reconstructed when a doctoral graduate entered a Chinese vocational college, a non-traditional academic field shaped by academic drift, institutional hierarchy, and changing expectations of doctoral faculty. The findings suggest that academic identity reconstruction in this context is not adequately explained as either passive adaptation to institutional demands or simple persistence of a pre-existing doctoral identity. Rather, it is a dynamic process through which the narrator-author reinterpreted the value of doctoral capital, adjusted a research-oriented habitus, and sought to expand a capability set within a field that recognized different forms of academic work. Across the three phases, identity reconstruction moved from initial field dislocation, to role-based negotiation, and finally to the partial consolidation of a hybrid academic identity.

The first tentative contribution of this study lies in offering a case-based explanation of academic identity reconstruction. Existing academic identity research emphasizes that identity is socially situated, narrative, relational, and formed through participation in multiple communities and practices (Clegg, 2008; Laiho et al., 2022; McCune, 2021; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). This study extends that discussion by illustrating how identity may become unsettled when the symbolic value of academic capital shifts across institutional fields. The narrator-author's doctoral training, research expertise, and academic networks did not carry stable value across contexts; instead, they had to be reinterpreted and converted

within the vocational college field. In this sense, academic identity reconstruction was not only a matter of “who I am” as an academic, but also a matter of what forms of capital were recognized, what practices became possible, and what kind of academic life could be valued under new institutional conditions.

The second contribution concerns the generative role of habitus-field friction. The findings suggest that the mismatch between a research-oriented doctoral habitus and the practical, reform-oriented logic of the vocational college did not only create discomfort or identity loss. It also generated reflexivity and strategic action. The narrator-author gradually learned to translate research training into institutional writing, teaching reform, project work, and cross-field mediation. This supports a Bourdieusian reading of academic identity as shaped through the relation between habitus, capital, and field, while also showing that habitus is not mechanically reproduced but can be modified and reoriented through new experiences and practical engagement with changing field conditions (Bourdieu, 2022, p. 61). The concept of reflexive habitus is useful here because the narrator-author did not merely internalize the rules of the new field; she began to examine those rules, assess her own resources, and seek workable forms of agency within them (Adams, 2006).

The integrated Sen-Bourdieu framework further helps explain why identity reconstruction should be understood as capability expansion rather than only role adjustment. Bourdieu’s concepts make visible the field-specific valuation of capital, while Sen’s Capability Approach clarifies that resources do not automatically lead to valued functionings; they must be converted through personal, social, and institutional conditions (Sen, 1985; 1999, p. 109; Robeyns, 2005). In this case, doctoral capital became meaningful when it was connected to institutional reform, teaching development, postdoctoral research, writing practices, and cross-institutional collaboration. The narrator-author’s agency therefore did not emerge outside structure, but through the conversion of available resources into new academic possibilities. This finding is consistent with Sen-Bourdieu scholarship that emphasizes the interaction between structural constraint, capital conversion, and the pursuit of valued educational and professional lives (Hart, 2019; Pham, 2019).

The study also contributes to the literature on academic drift by shifting attention from institutional transformation to lived academic experience. Existing research has discussed academic drift in terms of institutional status, research capacity, staffing, curriculum, and sectoral hierarchy (Griffioen & De Jong, 2013; Kyvik, 2009, p. 135–137; Zhuang, 2021). This case suggests that academic drift may also be experienced at the level of academic identity. In this case, the narrator-author appeared to become a strategic resource for institutional reform and legitimacy-building, yet they also experience the tensions of moving across hierarchical academic fields. The narrator-author’s hybrid identity emerged from this dual position: she was both shaped by the institution’s pursuit of academic legitimacy and able to use that pursuit as a space for reconstructing her own academic trajectory. This suggests that doctoral faculty in vocational colleges are not merely carriers of university-style academic norms, but active interpreters and mediators of changing academic work.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates how self-as-data research can be strengthened through collaborative narrative inquiry. The narrator-author's experience provided access to the affective, practical, and institutional textures of identity reconstruction that might be difficult to capture through external observation alone. At the same time, the peer interlocutor's comparative insider-outsider position introduced critical distance, alternative interpretation, and analytic questioning. This design does not claim neutrality in a positivist sense. Rather, it treats trustworthiness as a disciplined process of moving between insider narration, documentary traces, peer critique, and theoretical interpretation. In doing so, the study responds to concerns about representation, self-justification, and legitimacy in autoethnographic and self-study research (Arnold, 2011; LaBoskey, 2004, p. 817–869; Wall, 2008), while showing how collaborative interpretation can help transform personal experience into public and theoretically informed knowledge.

The findings have implications for doctoral graduates and vocational institutions. For doctoral graduates and early-career academics, the study suggests the importance of recognizing academic careers as increasingly diverse and non-linear. Entering a vocational college need not be understood only as a downward movement from the university ideal; it may also become a space in which research expertise, teaching work, institutional service, and applied reform are recombined into new forms of academic practice. For vocational colleges, this case suggests the need to consider doctoral faculty recruitment not only as the accumulation of symbolic capital, but also as a process requiring institutional support for capital conversion. Institutions need to create conditions that allow doctoral faculty to convert research training into meaningful contributions to teaching, curriculum reform, institutional development, and knowledge production.

This study has limitations. First, this study is based on a single self-as-data narrative case and therefore does not aim for statistical generalisation. The findings should be read as an analytically transferable interpretation rather than as a representative account of doctoral faculty in Chinese vocational colleges. Second, because the narrator-author is also the main source of data, the analysis is inevitably shaped by selective memory, retrospective interpretation, and the narrator's own sense-making. Although professional records and peer interlocation were used to strengthen trustworthiness, they cannot fully remove the partiality of self-narrative. Third, the peer interlocutor provided critical distance, but she shared a similar doctoral training background with the narrator-author. This shared background enabled interpretive understanding, but it may also have shaped what both authors recognised as meaningful academic tension or identity reconstruction.

Based on this single collaborative self-as-data narrative case, this study suggests that academic identity reconstruction may be understood as a process of hybrid identity formation through capital conversion, reflexive habitus adjustment, and capability expansion. The vocational college is not simply a peripheral academic site or a diminished version of the university. It is a field with its own rules of recognition, constraints, and possibilities. For the narrator-author in this case, the challenge was not only to preserve a prior academic identity, but to reconstruct an academic life that could remain meaningful across research, teaching, practice, and institutional development.

Declarations

Ethical approval

This study involved self-generated narrative data and professional records of the narrator-author, together with collaborative analytic dialogue between the authors. No students, colleagues, or other external participants were recruited. Ethical approval or exemption was granted by Academic Ethics Committee of XX Vocational College, All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed consent

The narrator-author consented to the use of her self-narrative and professional records for this study. The peer interlocutor consented to participate in the collaborative analytic process. Any references to other individuals or institutions were anonymised or removed to protect confidentiality.

Author Contribution

Xueer Chen conceptualized the study, generated the self-narrative data, assembled supporting professional records, conducted the initial analysis, drafted and revised the manuscript. Xiaorong Xie served as a critical analytic interlocutor, contributed to the interpretation of data through dialogue and questioning, refined the theoretical analysis using the Sen-Bourdieu framework, and revised the manuscript critically. Both authors approved the final version.

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Data Availability

The materials underpinning this study include the narrator-author's anonymised chronological self-narrative, an identified data inventory of professional records, and the coding framework. These materials are provided as supplementary files for editorial and peer-review purposes. Some raw materials, including personal correspondence, employment-related records, and institutionally identifiable documents, cannot be made publicly available because they contain personal, professional, and institutional information that could compromise confidentiality.

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