



“Weekday rural teachers, weekend urban spouses and parents”: A Chinese case of how alternative hiring policy influences teachers’ career decisions

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand the reportedly high retention rates of teachers recruited through Special Teaching Position (STP) — an alternative teacher hiring policy in China. Drawing on ethnographic data, this study examines how five STP teachers make career decisions in their sociocultural contexts. The findings demonstrate how a new phenomenon emerges, which I refer to as “weekday rural teachers, weekend urban spouses and parents.” Two factors contribute to its emergence: (1) improvement of transportation conditions, and (2) skip-generation parenting, that grandparents or older relatives raise children on behalf of the parents. The findings suggest implications for researching alternative hiring policy.

1. Introduction

Teachers are a critical policy-maneuverable factor for bettering students’ learning experiences and outcomes (Akiba et al., 2007; Wayne and Youngs, 2003). However, many countries are still facing serious challenges in staffing their schools with sufficient and high-quality teachers, especially the schools in low and middle-income regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and South Asia (Lauwerier and Akkari, 2015; Gajardo, 2014; Goyal and Pandey, 2013). In the past few decades, many governments in these and other regions have formulated and enacted various forms of alternative teacher hiring policies in order to solve this global problem in their respective societies. While there are continuing debates on the definitions of high-quality teachers, teachers’ educational attainment, teaching experience, and certification status are several operationalized indicators commonly used in teacher policy.

Alternative teacher hiring policies refer to initiatives and programs that aim to enhance the supply of teachers by diluting some core elements of standard teacher hiring practices, such as lowering the minimum requirements of applicants’ qualifications (Chudgar et al., 2014). Typical examples of such policies include the Teach For All programs located in 48 countries (e.g., Teach For India), and the contractual teacher programs that are being widely practiced in many developing countries (UNESCO, 2015a). Alternative teacher hiring can help ease the initial difficulties of staffing schools in challenging contexts, but recent studies have consistently found that the quality and stability of the teachers hired through alternative routes are lower than those of their counterparts hired through traditional routes (Chudgar

et al., 2014; UNESCO, 2006).

Throughout their career trajectories, teachers actively make a series of career decisions, such as whether, where, and how long to teach (Liao and Yuan, 2017). These decisions can significantly shape the size, quality, and stability of the teaching force (Engel and Cannata, 2015). Furthermore, as demonstrated by scholarships on teachers’ lives and career development, teachers making career decisions is a long-term and complex process, and the process is often filled with teachers’ constant negotiations with an array of factors related to their work and lives within the particular contexts they are situated (Vavrus and Salema, 2013; Day and Gu, 2010; Arulmani et al., 2014).

To date, the existent studies have successfully uncovered some general characteristics of teachers’ career trajectories, such as that a considerable portion of teachers leave the profession within their first few years of teaching (e.g., Borman and Dowling, 2008). However, little is known about why and how teachers make certain career decisions in their situated institutional and socio-cultural contexts (Liao and Yuan, 2017; Maier and Youngs, 2009), and even fewer studies have focused on the decision-making process of those who enter teaching through alternative routes. As Maier and Youngs (2009) pointed out, the existing research on teacher labor market mainly focuses on teacher and school characteristics, but neglect the socio-cultural contexts in which teachers live and function. To begin to close this research gap, this ethnographic case study investigates five Chinese teachers’ experiences of making their career decisions between 2009 and 2016. These teachers all started teaching in the same rural school in 2009 through a Chinese alternative hiring policy called *Special Teaching Position (STP)*.

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Two research questions guided this study:

- (1) What career decisions did the participating teachers make in the first few years of their careers?
- (2) How did the STP policy, along with other relevant factors, shape the teachers' career decisions?

Guided by a decision-making framework and drawing on multiple sources of data generated through three months of ethnographic fieldwork, this study reveals how these teachers made their *profession selection decisions*, *commitment decisions*, and *mobility decisions* through long-term negotiations with their personal preferences, policy interventions, and sociocultural discourses. This study has theoretical and methodological implications for how to study the interplays among policy, teacher, and context with regard to staffing high-need schools. The research findings also highlight the changing nature of teachers' needs and preferences as their work and lives unfold over time, which opens up discussions on how alternative hiring policies should attend to teachers' changing needs in order to build up an adequate, high-quality, and stable teaching workforce for challenging schools.

2. Literature review

2.1. Alternative teacher hiring policies used in developing countries

Alternative teacher hiring policies are widely used in developing countries to address teacher shortage and attrition (Chudgar et al., 2014). Though alternative teacher hiring policies take different forms, their central goal is to staff schools with sufficient and high-quality teachers (UNESCO, 2015b).

The recruitment practices promoted by alternative teacher hiring policies generally present three features. They *target difficult contexts*, *utilize fixed-term contract*, and *loosen recruitment criteria* (Chudgar et al., 2014). With regard to the first, teacher quality is often unequally distributed across different regions. Generally, schools located in geographically, socio-economically, and educationally disadvantaged contexts within developing countries are more likely to be staffed with fewer and less qualified teachers (UNESCO, 2015b). Thus, alternative teacher hiring policies as a response to such problems are usually targeted at schools located in difficult contexts (Luschei and Chudgar, 2016; Fyfe, 2007). For instance, in Fyfe's (2007) extensive review of developing countries' uses of contract teachers—a primary form of alternative teacher hiring, he pointed out that, contract teachers are mainly tasked to serve “remote rural areas where regular teachers are disinclined to serve” and “post-conflict areas where no teachers are available” (p. 2).

Second, alternative teacher hiring policies rely heavily on fixed-term contracts to recruit teachers for difficult contexts. Generally speaking, teachers are usually recruited through two types of labor contracts: tenure contracts, and fixed-term contracts. The tenured teaching jobs usually come along with greater pay, more stable positions, and better-established development and promotion systems than the fixed-term teaching jobs do (Chudgar et al., 2014). For instance, in Robinson and Yi's (2008) study, they found the average salary of governmental teachers (i.e., tenured teachers) in China was nearly five

times that of their non-governmental counterparts who taught on fixed-term contracts. Similar findings were reached in studies in other developing contexts, such as India and Africa (Chudgar et al., 2014; Goyal and Pandey, 2013; Bourdon et al., 2010).

The third feature of alternative teacher hiring policies is its loosened recruitment criteria. While there are no globally shared standards for recruiting teachers, several core qualifications of teacher candidates are often stressed across contexts, such as the level and major of their education degree, and their certification status for teaching (Guarino et al., 2006). Since the schools targeted by alternative teacher hiring policies are often least attractive to teachers, the policies usually loosen these recruitment criteria in order to boost the applicant pool and enhance the odds of recruiting sufficient teachers (UNESCO, 2015b). For instance, in Cambodia and India, alternatively hired teachers for remote or minority areas generally hold much lower qualifications than their traditional-route counterparts do (Govmda and Josephine, 2005; Duthilleul, 2005).

In terms of their policy impact, the alternative teacher hiring policies have eased the shortage of teachers in many developing countries, but they also suffer from a salient problem: high attrition rates, that many teachers hired through alternative routes leave the teaching profession within first years of teaching (Chudgar et al., 2014; Mpokosa et al., 2008). For instance, a significant amount of research has suggested that teacher attrition rates in countries of Sub-Saharan Africa range from 5% to 30% (Mulkeen et al., 2007), and the attrition rates of alternatively hired teachers tend to be even higher (Chudgar et al., 2014). Studies also found that high teacher attrition has exerted negative impacts on the adequacy, stability, and quality of teaching workforce, and further on student learning (Borman and Dowling, 2008).

2.2. China's STP policy

Tegang (特岗), translated roughly to “Special Teaching Position (STP)”, is an alternative teacher hiring policy developed in the context of China. STP aims to recruit teachers for schools located in the most impoverished rural regions in China. Since the late 1970s, China has been significantly developing in many respects including its education, but students' access to educational resources (and especially to high-quality teachers) is unequal across regions (Xue and Li, 2015). Many remote and underdeveloped rural communities in China are still seriously challenged in staffing their schools with enough and high-quality teachers (Peng et al., 2014). To address this problem, the Chinese government has implemented the STP policy beginning in 2006 (Ministry of Education of China, 2006). Table 1 summarizes the key terms of the STP policy.

Similar to the goal of many other alternative hiring policies, STP aims at improving the teaching workforce in China's underdeveloped rural regions. However, unlike policies that target vaguely at underdeveloped regions, STP intends to channel high-quality teachers to specific schools within those regions. STP teaching positions are available only at schools that face the severest challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers. When applying for STP teaching positions, each applicant needs to indicate which specific school he or she intends to apply, and thus, they already know which school they will be teaching

Table 1
Key terms of the STP policy.

Aspects	Terms
Goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To improve the teaching force in the most underdeveloped rural communities in China
Form of labor contract	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fixed-term contract for the first 3 years ● Can be tenured upon satisfactory performance
Applicant eligibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Graduates from teacher education programs (with a bachelor's degree or above), or graduates from non-teacher education programs (with a bachelor's degree or above) but are certified to teach

(Ministry of Education of China, 2006).

if hired.

Similar to many other alternative hiring policies, STP also uses a fixed-term contract to recruit teachers into teaching, but it offers participating teachers the opportunity to be tenured after the first three years of teaching. The recruitment of STP teachers involves multiple levels of governments. The national government creates a special fund to pay STP teachers' salaries for the first three years. Provincial governments take the lead in recruiting STP teachers, including analyzing how many STP teachers are needed, setting up recruitment criteria, and organizing recruitment examinations and interviews. County governments are responsible for managing and developing STP teachers once STP teachers are hired. County governments are also committed to awarding tenured teaching positions to the STP teachers whose performance are considered satisfactory by the end of the third year. That means county governments are responsible for paying tenured STP teachers' salaries starting from the fourth year (Ministry of Education of China, 2006).

According to the policy, STP teachers need to work at their original schools for three full years in order to be eligible for tenure. However, in practice, local governments may still approve teachers' application for transfer during the first three years in extreme cases (e.g., a teacher needs to take care of a family member who is seriously sick). Technically, tenured STP teachers are eligible for transfer to other schools in the same county without losing their tenure, but the decisions are at the discretion of the county governments. Also, the governments may voluntarily move STP teachers from one school to another in order to meet schools' changing needs of teachers (e.g., a new school is open, or an old school is closed).

In terms of recruitment criteria, STP also deregulates the entry to teaching by making those who graduate from non-teacher education programs eligible to apply. However, different from many other alternative hiring policies, STP maintains a high requirement on applicants' education degrees (i.e., bachelor level or above), which is equivalent to the criteria used in the traditional-route teacher recruitment in China (National People's Congress of China, 1993).

As of 2016, over 500,000 STP teachers have been recruited and placed into more than 30,000 rural schools located in the most underdeveloped rural regions of China, which have significantly alleviated the teacher shortages facing those schools (Liu, 2017; Liu, 2016). Furthermore, according to a national survey conducted by *China Education Daily* in 2015, over 90% STP teachers chose to stay in the teaching profession after their first three years of teaching (Liu, 2017). Many other studies (e.g., Li and Wu, 2014; Xu, 2014) have reached similar findings about STP teachers' high retention rates.

While STP as a Chinese case of the alternative teacher hiring policies demonstrates promising results on retaining teachers in challenging school contexts, several important questions still cannot be sufficiently answered by the existing literature, such as why most STP teachers choose to stay by the end of their third year of teaching, and whether they plan to change their decisions as time goes on. These questions would have important implications not only for the STP policy, but also for alternative teacher hiring policies more generally. To begin to explore the answers to these questions, this study examines the career decision-making experiences of five STP teachers who started teaching in one rural school in 2009.

3. Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework (Fig. 1) for this study is adapted from the "preferences & constraints" model of a teacher's job search (Liao and Yuan, 2017; Cannata, 2010; Loeb and Reininger, 2004). The original model posits that teachers decide whether and where to teach throughout their job search process under the influence of two threads of power: the teacher's personal preferences (e.g., their preference to work in well-resourced schools) and the external constraints (e.g., the availability of jobs). However, when applied on its own, this model

appears to have two limitations for analyzing STP teachers' experiences.

First, it cannot reflect STP teachers' potentially changing foci when making decisions at different stages of their career trajectories (Rolls and Plauborg, 2009). The scholarships on teachers' lives and career development have revealed that teachers would face changing challenges and constraints over time, and thus they may have different needs and preferences at different stages of their lives and careers (Vavrus and Salema, 2013; Day and Gu, 2010; Arulmani et al., 2014). For instance, in their study of teachers' lives, Day and Gu (2010) characterized the differing needs that teachers at different career stages may have. While beginning teachers would emphasize the support of schools, mid-career teachers and veteran teachers would respectively put much weight on managing tensions during transitions, and on sustaining their commitment to teaching. The changing nature of teachers' work, lives, as well as their challenges and needs call for conceptualizing teachers' career decisions as a dynamic process rather than a once-and-for-all event. Second, the original model does not explicitly consider the impact that sociocultural factors may exert on teachers' career decisions. Existing studies on career development (e.g., Arulmani et al., 2014; Fouad and Byars-Winston, 2005; Savickas, 2002) suggest that the making of career decisions is not merely a negotiation between an individual's preferences and constraints. Rather, "it consists of constructing a story that engages the larger sociocultural context" (Savickas, 2002, p. 175).

To address the aforementioned two limitations, this study adapts the original "preferences & constraints" model as follows. First, it re-conceptualizes STP teachers' career decisions as entailing three distinct types of decisions that lie at three critical time points along their career paths: *profession selection decision*, *commitment decision*, and *mobility decision*. Profession selection decision refers to the decision that STP teachers make at the very beginning of their careers. The STP policy binds together the participating teachers' decisions on whether (profession choice), where (region choice), and in which school (school-context choice) to teach as a combination. In other words, once a teacher decides to join the teaching profession through STP, he or she has also decided where (rural) and in which school (challenging context) to teach. However, the profession selection (whether to teach) is still the core of this decision, since it is the prerequisite for the decisions on where and in which school to teach. Commitment decision is the second decision that STP teachers need to make by the end of their third year of teaching. This decision focuses on whether the satisfactorily performing STP teachers are willing to make a long-term commitment to teaching in rural schools by accepting the tenure. The third decision is the mobility decision that the tenured STP teachers may make sometime after the third year of their teaching careers. Once a teacher decides to move, he or she could either *transfer* to other schools or *leave* the teaching profession altogether (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009).

The second adaptation of the model is the inclusion of the socio-cultural contexts in which the teachers are situated as influential factors. Specifically, during the data generation and analysis stages of this project, efforts were made to uncover the sociocultural characteristics of the local society and how those characteristics had shaped the participating teachers' career decisions.

4. Methods

This work uses ethnographic case study as the research methodology. Angers and Machtmes (2005) define ethnographic case study as "prolonged observations over time in a natural setting within a bounded system" (p. 777). This methodology blends *ethnography*—"the description and interpretation of a culture or social group" (Holloway et al., 2010, p. 76) and *case study*—an exploration of a bounded system (Merriam, 1998) so as to benefit from the strengths of both methodologies. As several methodologists argue (e.g., Fusch and Ness, 2017; Yazan, 2015), ethnographic case study has a distinctive advantage for researching complex social phenomenon with limited time and

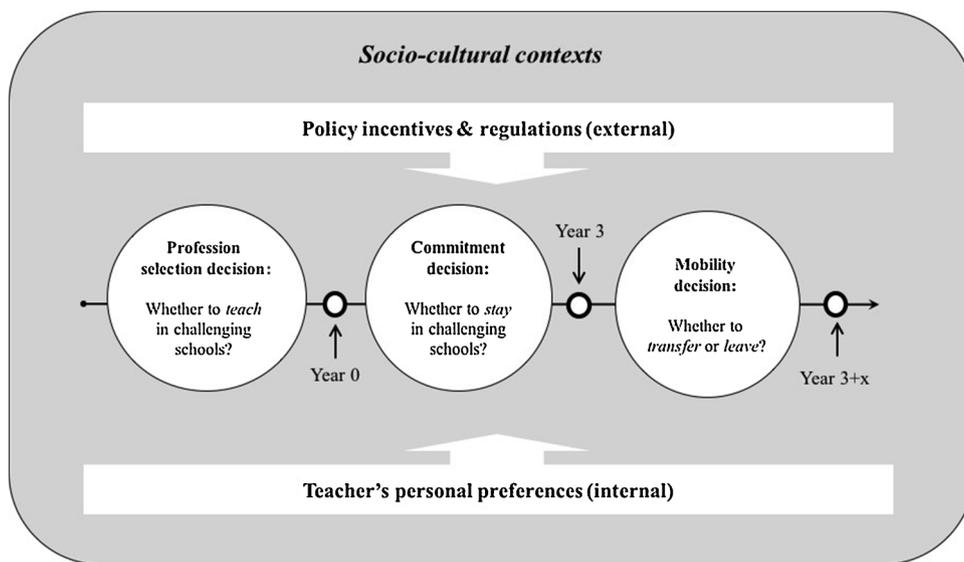


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework.

Table 2
Participant background.

Focal participants (STP teachers)							
	Entry route	School	Starting year	Home-school distance (km)	Educational backgrounds	Subjects taught	Gender
T1	STP	Yellow River Middle School	2009	45	Environmental science	Math	F
T2				76	Biology (TE)	Biology, Math	F
T3				343	Politics (TE)	Politics	F
T4				30	Chinese (TE)	Chinese	F
T5				38	Electrical Engineering	Physics	M
Supplementary participants (Administrators)							
	Title	Institutional affiliation			Roles in implementing STP		
A1	Principal	Yellow River Middle School			Supervise the work performance of T1-T5		
A2	Director	Teachers' Affairs Office, Ning County Education Bureau			Manage the employment affairs of T1-T5		

Note: TE = teacher education.

finances. The present study aims to dig deep into the complex process of how a group of STP teachers make their career decisions under an array of influences. Therefore, ethnographic case study is arguably a strong methodology for this purpose.

4.1. Research context and the participants

Given the dynamic interactions among teachers, the STP policy, and specific contexts, in this exploratory case study, I chose to focus on a small number of STP teachers working in just one rural school, which enabled me to dig deep into the complexities in teachers' decision-making process. The research site was a rural school called Yellow River Middle School (shortened as Yellow River hereafter), and it was selected for several methodological considerations.

First, the internal and external circumstances of Yellow River qualify it as a hard-to-staff school context, one targeted by alternative hiring policies and focused in this study. Yellow River is located in Ning County (pseudonym), a mountainous rural County in Shanxi Province of China. Due to its harsh geographical circumstances for agriculture, lack of profitable natural resources to tap, and limited industrial investment and development, the general work and living conditions of Ning County are nonattractive to many teachers. As a result, Ning County has been facing persistent challenges in staffing its primary and secondary schools. Such challenges are alarmingly severe for schools in even more remote and underdeveloped communities within Ning

County, and Yellow River is one of those most challenging schools, which are targeted by the STP policy.

Yellow River serves a remote and impoverished township in the southwestern corner of Ning County. When the data was collected in 2016, 737 students were enrolled in Yellow River. The students were mainly from rural families in adjacent villages, and most of them were the so-called "left-behind children" (see Chang et al., 2011), whose parents were making livings in well-off urban regions while leaving them in rural homes with their grandparents or elder relatives. As parental support was barely present, schoolteachers at Yellow River took the primary, if not all, responsibility in educating these rural youths. In 2016, Yellow River had 60 teachers. Most of them were originally from nearby rural communities. The teachers' average age was 38, with high percentages of mid-career and end-of-career teachers. 35% of them held a high school diploma or associate degree only, and none of these teachers had a graduate degree. Compared to many better-resourced schools within and beyond Ning County, Yellow River's teaching workforce was weak in terms of both adequacy and quality.

The second reason for choosing Yellow River was because five STP teachers with diverse backgrounds started teaching at Yellow River in 2009. Table 2 provides an overview of these teachers' backgrounds. The five STP teachers worked in the same institutional and social contexts, under the influence of the same alternative hiring policy, and developed their career trajectories together from the beginning of their careers.

Such a cohort of teachers formed an interesting case for understanding how certain external factors would influence teachers' career decisions. Meanwhile, these teachers had diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, home-school distance, educational background, and subject area—factors which have been found to be consequential to teachers' career decisions (Boyd et al., 2005; Guarino et al., 2006). These personal variations allowed for meaningful individual-level analysis, and would enhance the implications of this study's findings to a broader teacher population.

Third, Yellow River's five STP teachers and school administrators showed great support to the research when I approached them. They all agreed to participate in this research on a voluntary basis and allowed me to conduct several months of fieldwork at their school. Thus, I was able to immerse myself into the local community, observed and participated in the teachers' lives on a daily basis, and generated a rich set of data for exploring my research questions.

To enhance the validity of the research findings, I also recruited two administrators as supplementary participants. They were the principal of Yellow River who supervised the five participants' teaching performance, and the director of the Teachers' Affairs Office at Ning County's Education Bureau who was responsible for managing and developing STP teachers in the county.

4.2. Data generation

Three sources of data, namely participant interviews, local teacher workforce datasets, and field notes were generated through three-month ethnographic fieldwork in the summer of 2016. Table 3 summarizes the key information of the data generated.

First, both individual and focus group interviews were used to generate the data about the teachers' career decisions and the rationales behind each decision. I interviewed each of the teacher and administrator participants twice. Each interview lasted one to two hours, and was audio-taped and transcribed by myself. The first round of interviews took place during the second month of the fieldwork, after I had acquainted myself with the participants in educational and social settings for one month and established mutual trust with each of them. In my first interviews with the teacher participants, I invited the teachers to review their career trajectories since 2009, and elaborate on their rationales behind each of their career decisions. In the first interviews with the two administrators, the participants shared their knowledge of and perspectives on the STP policy and its influences on the local teacher workforce. The second round of interviews occurred in the middle of the third month. I shared with the interviewees the emerging themes from my ongoing analysis of the first round of interviews, sought their comments on the preliminary findings, and probed the places that were insufficiently addressed. Before leaving the field by the end of the third month, I hosted a focus group interview with the five teacher participants. The group interview provided an opportunity for the five participants to collectively circulate their experiences and perceptions about how the STP policy had shaped their career trajectories.

Second, two local teacher workforce datasets were collected to validate the interview findings. The first dataset is a spreadsheet which includes the biographic backgrounds (e.g., gender, age) and

professional backgrounds (e.g., subject, highest degree, experience) of all 60 teachers working in Yellow River in 2016. The second dataset includes the 2009–2016 employment information of all 45 teachers who joined Ning County's teaching force through the STP policy in 2009 (including the five teachers in this study). The variables in this dataset include in which school they taught, whether a tenure was awarded, which professional title was held, and several other employment-related indicators.

Third, as indicated in the theoretical framework, sociocultural context is an influential factor that can qualitatively shape teachers' career decision-making. In order to capture the sociocultural characteristics of the local society, I immersed myself into Yellow River for three months by living in a student dorm, communicating with teachers, students, parents, and other residents in the rural community on a daily basis. I also travelled around the county to observe the educational, social and cultural activities (e.g., teachers' after-school lives) taking place within the local society. I wrote daily logs to record my observations of events, conversations with people, and reflections on these experiences. Finally, a total of 82 logs (35,443 words) were generated and included as the third source of the data for this study.

4.3. Data analysis

To answer the first research question, I first extracted from the teacher interview data all the career decisions reported by the five teachers. Then, I used the administrator interviews and the two teacher workforce datasets to validate these decisions. For instance, T3 said in her interviews that she transferred to an urban school in 2013. I checked T3's employment information in the STP teacher workforce dataset as well as the principal interviews, and thereby validated T3's self-reported mobility decision. Third, using the theoretical framework as a reference, I visually represented these validated career decisions in a figure that portrays the career trajectory of each of the five teachers. Finally, in order to explore the pattern of teachers' career decisions at a broader scale, I used the two workforce datasets to compare the participants' backgrounds and career decisions with the other teachers working at Yellow River and the 40 other STP teachers who started teaching in Ning County in the same year as the participants did.

Four steps constitute the analysis for answering the second research question about how these decisions were made. First, I open-coded the interview data by focusing on the factors behind each of the career decisions made by the five teachers. This analysis led to a set of initial codes, such as "the draw of home," "simple lifestyle," "better pay," "professional (dis)satisfaction," "better roads, easier commute," "for the sake of my own child," and "skip-generation parenting." Second, I read the interview transcripts again to refine the initial codes, and merged similar codes into a few parent themes. For instance, the initial codes "the draw of home," "for the sake of my own child," and "skip-generation parenting" were all combined under a parent theme titled "family influence." Third, I conducted a cross-unit analysis (Yin, 2013) to compare and contrast the rationales behind each career decision. This analysis revealed several rationales shared by most of the teachers. Fourth, guided by the theoretical framework and supplemented by the teacher workforce datasets and my field notes, I further refined the

Table 3
: Data information.

Type	Description	Size
Interview	Individual interview with T1-T5, A1, and A2	2 times with each participant
Teacher workforce data	Focus group interview with T1-T5	1 time
	Biographic and professional information about all teachers in Yellow River (as of 2016)	1 set
	Biographic and employment information (2009-2016) about all 45 teachers (including the five teachers in this study) who joined Ning County's teaching workforce through STP in 2009.	1 set
Field note	Observational and reflective notes about institutional, social, and cultural characteristics of the research site	82 logs (35,443 words total)

codes and themes and finally generated assertions about how different factors shaped the teachers' profession selection decisions, commitment decisions, and mobility decisions.

5. Findings

5.1. Overview of the teachers' career decisions

Fig. 2 portrays the five teachers' career paths between 2009 and 2016 aggregated from a series of career decisions they made.

For the profession selection decisions, in 2009 all the teachers chose to enter the teaching profession through STP, and started their teaching careers at Yellow River Middle School. Three years later in 2012, all of them chose to accept the tenure. However, less than one year after being tenured, three teachers left Yellow River. T3 and T4 transferred to better-resourced urban schools, and T5 left the teaching profession and took a job in the county government (Trade and Business Bureau). Only T1 and T2 still remained at Yellow River in 2016 when the data were generated.

The career decisions of the 40 other STP teachers who started teaching in Ning County in the same year (i.e., 2009) were similar to those of the five participants. By the end of 2012, 33 teachers stayed in their original schools, while six teachers transferred to better-resourced schools within the county and six teachers left teaching. By the end of 2016, only 15 teachers stayed, and 19 teachers transferred and 11 teachers left the teaching profession altogether. These findings suggest that the retention rates of STP teachers were decreasing over time and relatively low when the scope of analysis was extended beyond the teachers' first three years of teaching.

5.2. How the career decisions were made

5.2.1. Profession selection decision: choose a job both preferable and available

Two major reasons appear to have led all five teachers to enter teaching through STP: first, the STP teaching jobs possessed several preferable features; second, they seemed easy to get.

Among the five teachers, T2, T3, and T4 were trained in 4-year teacher education (TE) programs while T1 and T5 came from non-TE programs. The three TE graduates barely considered finding a non-teaching job, because they had already developed certain degrees of commitment to the teaching profession during their pre-service education. The synchronization of their educational background and the teaching profession led them to focus on teaching jobs during their job searches. For instance, T2 said,

I haven't thought of looking for a job outside of teaching. I wanted to become a teacher since I was little. That's why I applied for teacher education programs [for my college education]. I also thought I was most competitive for teaching jobs because I had a degree [in teacher education], right? It is always wise to "to use the best steel to make the knife's edge."¹ (T2, 1st interview)

Due to their different educational backgrounds, T1 and T5 did not have strong attachments to the teaching profession when they started searching for jobs. But, some other features of teaching (e.g., simple collegial relationship) attracted them to consider teaching as an option. For instance, T1, who majored in environmental engineering in college, said,

When I was looking for jobs, the market was already very competitive. It's unlikely that we could find a good job with a college degree only. Many of my classmates, including myself, were trying

to obtain different kinds of credentials to enhance our competitiveness. A teaching credential was a popular one indeed, especially among my female classmates. Compared to companies and government branches, the interpersonal relationship in school is much more "danchun (单纯, simpler)". And teachers have two long and paid vacations each year. That was an attractive bonus for sure. (T1, 2nd interview)

Similarly, T5 also considered teaching as a career option because he then perceived teaching as a "relatively less labor-intensive job with a high reputation [in the local society]" (T5, 1st interview). In short, drawn by either the work content of teaching or some externally perceived benefits associated with this profession, all five teachers considered teaching at least as one option for their future careers.

According to STP's combination policy design, once applicants decide to enter the teaching profession through STP, they also agree to teach in targeted rural communities on a three-year fixed-term contract. Thus, the five teachers' profession selection decisions were interwoven with their decisions on *where* to teach and *how long* to teach initially. The teachers presented limited to no preference for working in rural schools on a temporary labor contract. However, the *geographical proximity* between Yellow River and their original homes enhanced their likelihood of accepting the job offered by STP. All of the teachers grew up in rural communities similar to the one where Yellow River was located. While T3's home is over 300 km away from Yellow River, the four other teachers' original homes are within 80 km only. Since family-centeredness remains a salient characteristic of the Chinese society today (Dong et al., 2012), the four teachers felt drawn by their homes when deciding where to teach. For instance, T5 said,

After I graduated, I went to work in a company in Taiyuan [the capital city]. But one year later, I quit and came back to my hometown to search for a new job. I am the only child in my family, and my parents are aging and I hoped to stay closer to them so that I could take care of them when needed. My parents were very happy after I told them I was coming back. (T5, 2nd interview)

T1, T2, and T4 expressed similar thoughts about how the proximity of the school to their home contributed to their decisions to take the STP jobs. T3 was the only teacher coming from a community distant from Yellow River. Like the other teachers, T3 also desired to work close home at the beginning of her job search. She applied for several schools within or adjacent to her home community, but all those efforts failed. Then, she saw Yellow River was hiring STP teachers. She decided to apply because she completed a six-month student teaching in another school close to Yellow River. During her student teaching, she had familiarized herself with the local community where Yellow River was located. She even had known several teacher friends working at Yellow River. Thus, she considered the local community as her second hometown (T3, focus group interview), which contributed to her acceptance of Yellow River's offer.

Another reason for these teachers taking an STP teaching job was simply because it was nearly the only offer they received. Due to the challenging work conditions of the schools targeted by STP, the competition for an STP teaching job seemed less fierce than that for a job in well-resourced urban schools or for a tenured position. For instance, T4 said, "Before I got this job, I had attended eight other examinations [for tenured teaching positions], but all failed. Then I applied for this one [the STP job in Yellow River], and I got it." (T4, 1st interview). Similarly, T5 said after he decided to find a job in his hometown, he attended interviews and examinations for a series of job positions, such as civil servant, banking teller, and teacher. T5 said,

I have to say, the recruitment examination [for the STP positions] was quite easy. I only spent two weeks preparing for it. I was surprised when I knew I got this job. (T5, 2nd interview)

To recap this section, the alignment between personal preferences

¹ "好钢用在刀刃上," an idiom used by the residents in the county. It is used to indicate strategic uses of energy or resources for maximizing intended outcomes.

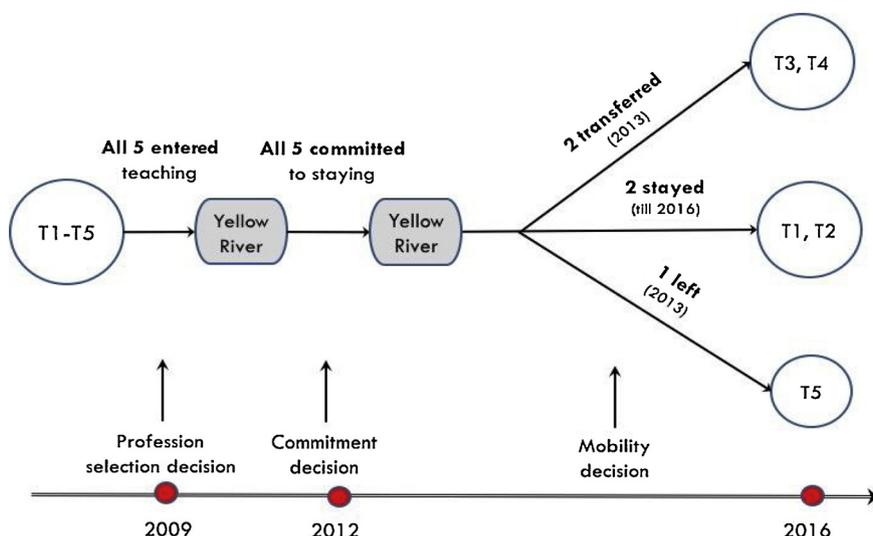


Fig. 2. The teachers' career trajectories (2009–2016).

and job features along with the availability of jobs together led the five teachers to choose to start a teaching career in Yellow River through the STP policy.

5.2.2. Commitment decision: take the “iron rice bowl”

According to STP’s “fixed-term now, tenure later” design, all the satisfactorily performing STP teachers can be tenured after the third year. All the five teachers in this study were rated by the local education authority as satisfactorily performing, and they all took the tenure.

How did the local education authority evaluate STP teachers for the consideration of tenure? The two administrator participants shared their experiences and perspectives. A1, the principal of Yellow River, said he was responsible for evaluating the five teachers by filling out an annual evaluation report for each of them and then submitted the forms to the county’s Education Bureau. A1 said,

The evaluation form is quite brief. It asks me to evaluate four major aspects of the teachers’ performance. These are morality (德), capacity (能), attendance (勤), and achievement (绩). In terms of morality, as long as the teachers did not break the law, I gave them a good grade. All of them are college graduates. Many of our teachers had high school diplomas only. These teachers brought the most advanced pedagogical ideas and strategies to our schools. So, I barely doubted their capacity [for teaching]. In the meantime, they showed up for classes and staff meetings on time, so I gave them high ratings on attendance as well. For achievement, I mainly used student test scores as a reference for the evaluation. The five teachers did a very good job in elevating the students’ test scores. So, overall, I was very satisfied with my STP teachers’ performance. I spoke highly of them in the evaluation forms. (A1, 1st interview)

The Yellow River teacher workforce dataset substantiated what T1 said. In 2016, the average age of all the 60 teachers in Yellow River was 38 years old, and 35% of them held high school diplomas or associate degrees only. The school faculty’s age and education degree profiles have remained relatively constant over the past few years (T1, 2nd interview). In contrast, the five STP teachers all held a bachelor’s degree, and their average age was 23 years old when they joined the faculty in 2009. Though the empirical relationships between a teacher’s biographic and educational backgrounds and his/her work performance are still under debate (Wayne and Youngs, 2003), the principal seemed to perceive the STP teachers’ youth and college attainment as an asset to Yellow River. As a result, A1 recommended to the county’s Education Bureau that all five teachers should be tenured, and finally, his recommendations were approved.

However, then, how did the teachers themselves think of the tenure award? As mentioned above, all five teachers chose to accept the tenure in 2012 after they had taught in Yellow River for three years. A reason they all pointed to was the idea that they wanted to seize the “iron rice bowl (铁饭碗)” —the tenured teaching jobs. In China, the salary and benefit disparities between tenured teachers and fixed-term teachers are enormous (Robinson and Yi, 2008). In general, compared to their fixed term counterparts, tenured teachers can enjoy greater job stability, more salaries, better health and retirement insurances, and higher levels of social status and job satisfaction (Han et al., 2010). That is why tenured teaching positions, along with the tenured jobs in other state-controlled or state-funded occupations (e.g., governmental branches, state-owned corporations), are colloquially called “iron rice bowl (铁饭碗)” (Lu and Perry, 1997). Thus, the tenure offered by STP presented a strong stimulus to the teachers— one which significantly shaped their commitment decision. For instance, T2 said, “I have to say, in small places like where we live, teaching is still a stable and decent job, especially when you are tenured” (T2, focus group interview).

Furthermore, before these teachers made their commitment decisions, they had already spent three years teaching in the rural school. As a result, many of them enhanced their sense of attachment to the teaching profession, to the rural schools, and to the local community. The elevated sense of belongingness shifted their job preference from exploring to stabilizing. For instance, T4 said,

I felt increasingly accountable for the rural students. Education means a lot to them. Every time when I walked into the classroom looking into their eyes, I wished I could do more to help them succeed in their future lives. (T4, 1st interview)

Similarly, almost all the teachers enjoyed the simple and close collegial relationships in the school community. For instance, T2 said, “it’s a harmonious community indeed. I think it’s partly because we did not have many conflicts of interest like people in business or politics. Another reason was because we saw each other as companions in this remote rural community” (T2, focus group interview). My observation of how teachers got along with each other in the school further confirmed what these teachers said. In my field notes, I wrote,

There are limited recreational choices available in the rural community. Only a few small grocery stores and restaurants scattered along a 500-meter long street outside the school. Thus, as their primary ways of relaxation, teachers always walk together to the nearby crop fields, cook and dine together, and help each other with some domestic chores. (field notes, 25 June 2016)

In short, all teachers chose to stay teaching in Yellow River by the end of their third year of teaching, incentivized by the “iron rice bowl” and a growing preference for stability.

5.2.3. Mobility decision: “escape” the rural school when possible

Driven by intrinsic preferences for better career development and living conditions, these teachers were persistently seeking chances to escape Yellow River from the first day. It is true that these teachers had developed a greater sense of attachment to the local community after teaching there for three years. However, such an influence was quickly counteracted by the teachers’ greater family needs, which powerfully kept driving them to leave. Furthermore, these teachers were entitled to transfer among schools in the same county after they were tenured in 2012— though such chances were rare and difficult to get (A2, 2nd interview). In other words, as long as tenured teachers can find a job in other schools within the same county and the transfer is approved by the county’s Education Bureau, the teachers could transfer to other schools without losing their tenure. These two factors together resulted in T3 and T4 transferring to better-resourced urban schools soon after being tenured and T5 leaving the teaching profession altogether.

Increasing family needs and responsibilities were a powerful force driving the teachers to leave for a better place. The five teachers all stepped into marriages between 2009 and 2012 (T1-T5, focus group interview). Their spouses either worked in the county seat or in other townships. Due to the limited job opportunities in the rural community and the challenging living conditions, none of the teachers planned to settle there permanently. Furthermore, in order to ensure that their own children could receive high-quality education, they all settled their homes in well-developed urban regions, such as the county seat or the prefectural city. They chose to commute weekly between school and home, which meant they had to stay apart from their spouses and children from Monday to Friday. All the teachers hoped to be reunited with their family in some better-developed urban regions without losing their tenured teaching jobs. For instance, T3 who transferred to a high school located in a better-resourced urban region said,

As a teacher myself, I know how important the quality of education is to the development of children. After I gave birth to my daughter in 2010, I started seeking teaching opportunities outside. Once I got the offer in 2013, I left immediately. (T3, 2nd interview)

T5 also suggested that pursuing better educational opportunities for his child was an important reason for his leaving. Additionally, as the only male participant, T5 seemed to feel greater pressure than the other four female teachers when it came to income opportunities because in the local society men are still regarded as the obligatory breadwinners (field notes, 27 July 2016). T5 said,

Nowadays it costs a lot of money to raise a child. After my son was born [in 2011], I felt it was difficult to make ends meet. That’s why I decided to find another better-paid job. Another reason [for my leaving] is that my wife works in the county seat. We lived apart for about two years after we got married [in 2010]. We both thought such a situation would have harmed our relationship and should be stopped. (T5, 2nd interview)

T5 characterized his family needs as a “gang xu (刚需, demand as strong as the steel)” which led him to even give up the “iron rice bowl” he had already earned in the teaching profession and take a new job in another profession in order to meet his economic and familial duties better.

T1 and T2 were still at Yellow River in 2016 when the data were collected, but this did not necessarily mean that the choice to stay was wholeheartedly embraced. Like the three other teachers who left Yellow River, T1 and T2 also wanted to leave. For instance, T2 said,

I struggled to get out since the beginning. I applied for graduate schools in the first two years, but unfortunately, I didn’t make it.

Every time when I heard my college friends talking about their full and glowing lives in big cities, I felt like I was “a frog in dead water.” (T1, 1st interview)

Due to the lack of success in finding a better job, T1 and T2 still stayed at Yellow River. However, as time went on, T1 and T2 eventually developed a sense of family-work equilibrium, which made them begin to envision a long-term teaching career in the rural school. Two factors mainly contributed to the realization of this equilibrium: the cultural practice of skip-generation parenting and the recent development of transportation infrastructure in the region.

T1 has a 4-year-old daughter and T2 has a 1-year-old son and a 3-year-old daughter (as of 2016). However, neither of them brought their children to the rural school with them during weekdays. Instead, it was their parents or parents-in-law who have looked after the children in their urban homes since the children were born. Skip-generation parenting is a pervasive cultural practice in China nowadays (Chen et al., 2011). Because of this cultural practice, T1 and T2 were able to keep a work-family balance for some time. On the one hand, they could still keep their tenured teaching jobs in the rural school. On the other hand, they could still have their children raised in better-resourced urban regions with the support from their parents or parents-in-law. For instance, T1 said,

After my daughter was born, I did think of dropping everything here and became a full-time mother to take care of her. But, nearly all my family members discouraged this idea because they thought it was difficult to get this job. Like many other Chinese parents would do, my parents and my in-laws all said they could look after my daughter for us. Without their support, I cannot imagine how I could manage my teaching here [in the rural school] and my parenting duties [in the county seat]. (T1, 2nd interview)

The rapid development of transportation infrastructure in the region has also significantly eased the teachers’ commute between school and home. China’s urbanization process is in full swing (United Nations, 2014). An important layer of that process is the development of infrastructure, including buildings, roads, and power supplies. China’s underdeveloped rural regions, including the rural community in this study, are also significantly benefiting from the urbanization process (Shin, 2015). In my field notes, I wrote,

Based on my early life experiences in rural regions, I was expecting to see some narrow and winding dirt road on my way to the Yellow River school. But the road is actually well paved, wide, and new, and it took me 40 min only from the well-developed county seat to this small rural community. These really subverted my original impressions about rural regions. (field notes, 2 June 2016)

Both T1 and T2 compared their commute between the rural school and their urban homes with that of their friends who were living in China’s top-tier cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai. T1 said,

You know Beijing has 6 rings, right? My friend working there needs to spend more than two hours commuting from the sixth ring where he lives to the first ring where he works, every single day! But, it takes me only 40 min to get from Yellow River to my home in the county seat. (T1, 2nd interview)

Principal A1 said because of improved transportation conditions and teachers’ personal pursuit of better living conditions for their families, a growing number of Yellow River school teachers settled their homes in adjacent urban regions, such as the county seat or the prefectural city (A1, 2nd interview). The analysis of the dataset of Yellow River teachers’ backgrounds confirmed what Principal A1 said. As of 2016, 18 teachers (or 30% of the total 60 teachers) commuted between their homes located in urban regions and Yellow River during weekdays. A2 also pointed out that this was a recent and pervasive phenomenon occurring in many rural schools in Ning County (A2, 2nd

interview).

In short, because of family support and improved transportation conditions, T1 and T2 managed to maintain a temporary balance between their rural teaching work and family obligations. But such a balance has cost the teachers a high price: they had to be away from their families for five days a week. The status of being constantly apart from their spouses and children had already caused some problems in their familial relationships. For instance, T1 said she always felt guilty for not being able to accompany her daughter. Though T1 believed that her parents devoted their hearts and souls to taking care of her daughter, she also worried whether the skip-generation parenting would spoil her daughter and create distance in their mother-daughter relationship in the long run (T1, 1st interview). Similarly, right before the second interview with T2, she had had a quarrel with her husband over the phone. I did not know this until she started sobbing during the interview after I asked her about how she felt about the status of being separate from her families. It was apparent that her status of being “weekday rural teachers, weekend urban spouses and parents” had challenged the ecology of her familial relationships and continued to influence her career decisions.

6. Discussion and implications

The research findings suggest several conceptual and methodological implications for how to study alternative hiring policies. First, the findings indicate that alternatively hired teachers’ career decision-making is a long-term, intense, and contextualized process. Teachers’ career decision-making is filled with teachers’ constant negotiations among their intrinsic preferences, policy interventions, and contextual influences (Liao and Yuan, 2017; Arulmani et al., 2014). Because alternative teacher hiring policies often deregulate the entry to boost the applicant pool, graduates with limited preparation in teaching (such as T1 and T5) would enter the teaching workforce. Compared to their traditional-route counterparts, these teachers often need greater time and effort to develop a sense of belonging and commitment to the teaching profession. This point can be well supported by T1’s persistent struggles about whether to leave or stay in the profession—struggles she engaged with since her first day in teaching.

Furthermore, teachers’ career decision-making is highly embedded in the sociocultural contexts in which the teachers are situated (Arulmani et al., 2014). For instance, in this study the five teachers’ career decisions were qualitatively shaped by various sociocultural characteristics of the local society: the urban-rural disparity led the teachers to prefer urbanicity; the cultural practice of skip-generation parenting enabled them to leave home for rural teaching; and the recent development of transportation infrastructure encouraged them to dislocate their homes from their workplace. In short, these findings together propose a conceptualization of alternatively hired teachers’ career-decision making that highlights the ongoing, turbulent, and socio-culturally relevant features of that process. Such a conceptualization can serve as a theoretical reference for future studies on teachers’ decision-making and career development in other alternative hiring policies and/or socio-cultural contexts.

Second, the findings also suggest that ethnographic case study, which has been scantily used in teacher labor market research, has the potential to unpack the complexities inherent in teachers’ career decision-making processes. The long-term, intense, and contextual natures of teachers’ career decision-making pose several methodological challenges for researchers (Maier and Youngs, 2009; Honig, 2006). For instance, teachers’ career decisions are mediated by a set of factors (Liao and Yuan, 2017). This study shows that while some of the influential factors (e.g., preference for urbanicity) could be easily detected by interviewing the participants, some other factors (e.g., the skip-generation parenting, the marriage challenge facing T2) would not have been disclosed by the teachers if the researcher had not established mutual trust with the teachers through sufficient pre-interview

relationship-building.

Another challenge is how to validate teachers’ self-reported data through large-scale surveys or de-contextualized interviews. The ethnographic approach enabled me to immerse myself in the research site, hearing the accounts of the same decision-making process from different perspectives (i.e., teachers, administrators, and the researcher), in different settings (i.e., individual and group interviews, daily interactions), and in different formats (i.e., interviews and archival documents). These together helped enhance the validity of the research findings. Thus, ethnographic case study could be an option for future studies that aim to explore the nuances and complexities in teachers’ career decisions. However, this study does not intend to suggest that the ethnographic approach should replace other methods that are now used in this field (e.g., quantitative analysis/synthesis). Instead, the ethnographic approach should be used as a complement for exploring factors that later could be scaled up in policymaking.

The findings cannot have direct implications for how to devise alternative-hiring policy due to the smallness of the study’s focus and the uniqueness of the research site. However, the persistent tension between the participating teachers’ work and lives have raised some important questions that policymakers should consider. These questions revolve around the teachers’ decisions on selecting the teaching profession, making a commitment to teaching, and moving for better lives.

It was apparent that for all of the participants, choosing to teach in the Yellow River school was not their first choice, and for some, it was a fall-back solution to employment. This finding raises questions about whether the STP approach can attract genuinely motivated teachers to choose teaching as their profession. For example, is the cost-benefit calculation done by teachers signing up for STP going to attract the teachers who wholeheartedly consider teaching as a long-term profession? Is the STP scheme only a short-term palliative for the particular “challenging” rural schools? Furthermore, as compared to teachers already existing in China’s rural schools, STP teachers may have higher degrees in education, but that does not necessarily mean STP teachers will do a better job in terms of helping rural students to learn, because the relationship between teachers’ educational attainment and student learning is still under debate (Wayne and Youngs, 2003). Though the principal of the five participating teachers spoke highly of the STP teachers’ performance, his evaluation was mainly based on students’ test scores and has not yet been validated by data collected from the teachers’ classrooms or their students. Thus, future studies could dig deeper into questions about STP teachers’ motivation for entering the teaching profession, such as whether they are motivated to teach, how their motivation transforms over time, and in what ways their motivation for teaching influences their instructional performance and student learning.

Another set of questions focuses on STP teachers’ commitment to teaching. While the retention rates of STP teachers appeared to be high in the first three years, as time went on, a growing number of STP teachers in Ning County were moving to better-resourced schools, or even leaving the teaching profession altogether. On the surface, the teachers seemed to have developed a sense of commitment to teaching in the rural schools before they were tenured. However, the sustainability of the commitment was constantly susceptible to the disorientation of teachers’ intrinsic preferences and the external socio-cultural contexts (Kavenuke, 2013). That all the teachers had persistently strong desires of leaving, regardless whether they realized it or not, reveals the central role that teachers’ intrinsic preferences play in their post-tenure mobility decisions (Liao and Yuan, 2017; Honig, 2006). This phenomenon raises an important question for policymakers: Are STP teachers wholeheartedly committed to teaching when they accept tenure at the end of the third year or, are they just preparing to leave with their tenure when opportunities show up? STP’s design of “fixed-term now, tenure later” alone seems far from sufficient for staffing high-need schools with a stable teaching force. Instead, it should be more necessary, if not more, to nurture teachers’ intrinsic

commitment to teaching in high-need schools. That offering course experiences about equity and social justice in the teachers' pre-service and in-service education could be an attempt worth pursuing further (Liao and Yuan, 2017; Wang and Gao, 2013).

Finally, the emerging phenomenon of "weekday rural teachers, weekend urban spouses and parents" raises questions about the work-life balance of STP teachers who still stay in rural schools. Whether and how long can they maintain such a temporary work-life balance? What costs do the teachers need to pay? What consequences would their status of being away from family cause to their teaching and student learning? Benefiting from China's rapid urbanization process in the past few decades, the transportation conditions in underdeveloped rural regions have been significantly improved (Shin, 2015). This improvement makes it possible for teachers to teach in rural schools while at the same time settle their homes in well-developed urban regions. However, the family issues facing T2 and T5 revealed the high emotional costs of this decision (e.g., losing the time to accompany their children, becoming distrustful of spouses) and the high emotional debts they owed to their parents in order to maintain a work-life balance. In the long run, whether such a balance is sustainable and what consequences it may have on teachers' work, life, and families still need further examinations.

This study has several limitations. First, the data was drawn from a small number of teachers from one rural school in China, but China has millions of elementary and secondary teachers working in very diverse school and regional contexts. The findings may vary if teachers from different schools, alternative hiring programs, or sociocultural contexts were investigated. Thus, readers should interpret the findings as empirical evidence for exploring concepts and theories rather than for testifying statistical assumptions. Second, this study only captured the teachers' career decisions in the first seven years of their careers. How and why their trajectories would unfold in a longer timeframe cannot be answered by the present study. Future studies could consider investigating teachers from other institutional or socio-cultural settings to refine the findings reported in this study. Researchers who are interested in teachers' longer-term career decisions could track teachers' career paths for a decade or even longer.

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