

# An empirical study of Chinese university student advisors' dynamic identity construction in the context of individual consultation

Jing Chen and Xin Zhao  
Nanjing University

While extensive research has been done on pragmatic identity construction in various contexts by various social groups, little is known about how and why university student advisors may dynamically construct their pragmatic identity in their interaction with their students. Based on the analysis of naturally-occurring data about 5 student advisors' consultation, this article explores the various pragmatic identities constructed by Chinese university student advisors as well as their underlying motivations. It finds that the identities constructed by the student advisors can be non-professional (such as a student, an individual, a friend, and a family member) and professional (such as an administrator, a tutor and a teacher). It suggests that their pragmatic identity construction may signify their effort to balance their various communicative needs in the educational contexts. Such balance may serve to meet their goal of constructing a new type of Chinese advisor-student relation characterized by equality, democracy, and harmony.

**Keywords:** student advisor, consultation, pragmatic identity, identity construction, Chinese university students

## 1. Introduction

A solidly established view of communicators' identity in the field of pragmatics today is that it is dynamically (de-)constructed and exploited as participants' resource for communicative purposes in and via discourse (e.g., X. Chen 2013, 2014, 2018, 2020, 2022; Feng and Chen 2020; Mao and Zhao 2019; Ren 2014; Shen 2019; Yuan 2020). Previous research concerning identity construction has been almost entirely focused on social groups such as department leaders (Ho 2010), college students (Enyo 2015), fans (Matley 2020), police (Feng and Chen 2020),

doctors (Mao and Zhao 2019), medical consultants (Yuan 2020), and experts at defence meetings (Ren 2014). However, insufficient attention has been paid to how and why fluid and dynamic identities, termed “pragmatic identities” in this paper, are constructed by university student advisors, who play an important role in student development via their interaction with the students. As a response to these knowledge gaps as well as the proposal to study student advisors’ pragmatic identity in interaction from a pragmatic perspective (J. Chen 2017), the present paper reports on an empirical study of Chinese university student advisors’ identity construction in their real-life individual consultations with respect to both the types of pragmatic identities constructed and the underlying motivations.

In China, student advisors at each department of a university play an essential role in assisting college students in all respects such as their study planning, personal development, career planning, and mental development (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China 2006). They might also be expected to take on faculty roles such as teaching a course on college students’ career planning. More often, they serve as advisors for college students on various problems and puzzles about study and life. Of the various channels they provide these services through, individual consultation is their most important venue because it enables them to inquire closely about their students’ personal difficulties. It follows that it is of high value to investigate how student advisors choose appropriate interactional strategies and language resources to talk with and influence their students.

To provide a theoretical foundation and empirical point of departure for our analysis, we will first review some key concepts related to “pragmatic identity” and introduce some empirical research on advisor-student individual consultation. Then, we will outline the research design, data, and procedure of analysis and discuss the results of our empirical analysis. Finally, by analyzing the data from the naturally occurring individual consultations, we aim to shed light on student advisors’ construction of pragmatic identities and their possible motivations.

## 2. Research background

### 2.1 Pragmatic identity

Here we start to address the term *identity* with an observation and a question. An important concept, identity has been studied in an array of disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, linguistics, literature, and education. In particular, how and why identity is constructed through discourse has attracted increasing academic attention (e.g., Archakis and Tsakona 2012; Bamberg, De Fina and Schiffrin

2011; Bucholtz and Hall 2010; J. Chen 2018, 2019; X. Chen 2013, 2014, 2018, 2020, 2022; Chen and Chen 2020; Dolón and Todolí 2008; Dong 2018; Gao, Jia and Zhou 2015; Mao and Zhao 2019; Norton-Pierce 2000; Wedin 2020; Zhong and Zeng 2020). Our observation is that the previous studies related to identity mostly focus on identity-indexing (Ochs 1990), like investigating the interlocutors' construction of social identity belonging to a social class, a group, or the communicators' construction of more fleeting and transient identities. However, these studies focus primarily on the formation of the "speaker", exploring the ways in which interpersonal interactions mold an individual's choice of self. Yet, few studies have offered a theoretical interpretation of the process of identity choices. Our questions in this study do not merely focus on how an interlocutor uses language to index a certain identity but also seek to investigate how a pragmatic account can be offered about why the interlocutors use language to construct (pre)existing or transient identities with the considerations of the hearer. With the prevailing trend of anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist identity research, the Pragmatic Identity Theory (X. Chen 2013, 2018, 2022) departs from the traditional view of a person as a bounded individual with a fixed or essential identity. Instead, assuming a dynamic view of identity construction in the flow of communication, it embodies the view that identity is often jointly constructed by the co-participants (X. Chen 2013, 2014, 2018, 2020, 2022). The theory provides a way to break away from the dichotomy between psychogenic (internal) identity (Bucholtz and Hall 2005) and sociogenic (social) identity (Hecht et al. 1993), but place identity in an integrated, dynamic framework to effectively uncover identity (de)construction as a dynamic process embedded in the ongoing conversation. To be specific, X. Chen (2013, 2014, 2018, 2020, 2022) defined pragmatic identity as the contextualized manifestation of communicators' pre-existing social identity or a temporarily fabricated identity that serves as a kind of participant resource at their disposal for satisfying their communicative needs. That is to say, identity is not merely regarded as an interactional outcome, but can be a discursive dynamic mobilization in keeping with the constant change of context to meet the interlocutor's communicative need or goal, mainly including transactional communicative needs that are achieved through a task-based communication and interpersonal communicative needs that are achieved through a relation-based communication (Feng and Chen 2020; Yuan 2020). Accordingly, with the shift of attention on identity as "a pragmatic turn", the core argument of Pragmatic Identity Theory is that identity construction is a conscious motivated social or interactional practice and should be studied in a given context. That is to say, the interlocutors can (de)construct a certain identity of theirs, or that of others, by employing an array of discursive choices to achieve certain purposes, or being restricted by some influencing factors (X. Chen 2013, 2018, 2022).

## 2.2 Studies on advisor-student individual consultation

Individual consultation is an important venue for the communication between Chinese college students and their advisors as it plays a critical role in enhancing optimal student psychological wellbeing by guiding them to solve their own educational, emotional, personal or interpersonal problems (Brunner, Wallace, Reymann, Sellers and McCabe 2014; Goodwin, Behan, Kelly, McCarthy and Horgan 2016). The existing literature on advisor-student individual consultation has contributed to what can be considered as the discussion of communicative strategies or verbal tricks from a macroscopic perspective (Kahn 2006). For instance, Li and Yang (2011) held the view that student advisors should bear in mind that the individual consultation with college students should be characterized by student-centeredness, equality, and co-creatorship. They further maintained that student advisors should also pay attention to body language and personal reputation (good teacher image and positive mental state). Shan (2011) maintained that university student advisors should pay attention to their consultative language, including the use of encouraging and comforting language, positive language, and administrative language while avoiding verbal bullying. Wang (2012) put forward three pragmatic principles to guide college student advisors in carrying out the daily work, including the interaction principle, harmony principle, and politeness principle. Most relevantly, previous studies related to student advisors' identity construction often describe student advisors as advocates, counsellors, teachers, coaches, supporters, and friends, among other roles (Anderson and Shannon 1988; Johnson 2003). However, these studies stop short of discussing how the student advisors' identity choice-making and identity adjustment can serve as a kind of interactional resource to meet their communicative needs. Moreover, they are defective in their research methods in that these are mostly intuitive rather than empirical. In addition, while the above literature mostly concerns identity construction in English-speaking contexts, few studies address student advisors' identity construction in individual consultation in the context of China, where social cultural conditions differ significantly from those in the West. Therefore, in response to these aforementioned knowledge gaps, this study draws primarily on X. Chen's (2013, 2014, 2018, 2020, 2022) aforementioned ideas of pragmatic identity and focuses on the choices of pragmatic identity/identities made by university student's advisors in real consultative contexts, to examine how and why they choose appropriate pragmatic identities to adapt to the ongoing educational context, thus providing implications for optimizing college student consultation work.

### 3. Research design

#### 3.1 Research questions

To fill the knowledge gaps identified above, we attempt to address the following research questions in this study:

1. What types of pragmatic identities do Chinese university student advisors construct for themselves in their individual consultation with their students?
2. What might motivate their construction of these pragmatic identities in the educational context?

#### 3.2 Participants

This study was carried out to explore the various pragmatic identities chosen by university student advisors for themselves when working with their consultative students. To be specific, a total of ten college students and student advisors (five each) from a top university in China took part in the study. All the students and student advisors participated in the study voluntarily. Since the service of individual consultation was open to all students enrolled in this university, all the consulting students involved in this study were randomly chosen instead of selected according to any pre-assigned criteria. They happened to visit the student advisors when the data collection began. In contrast, the five student advisors were specifically invited not merely because one of the authors in this study was familiar with them, but more crucially because they were experienced student advisors with many honors or awards for their work. Additionally, they had different educational background and professional background, with different length of working experience.

For ethical reasons, we call the participants of student advisors in this study Mei, Juan, Hong, Ding, and Lei (all pseudonyms), and the participants of consultative students in this study Cui, Lin, Wang, Du, and Liu (all pseudonyms). Table 1 and Table 2 provide some necessary background information for each participant.

**Table 1.** The background information of student advisors involved

	Age	Gender	Education background	Professional background	Length of working experience	Full time or not
Mei	30	Female	Master	Computer	5	Full time
Juan	36	Female	Master	Law	10	Full time
Hong	36	Female	Master	Mathematics	10	Full time
Ding	31	Male	Master	Computer	5	Full time
Lei	28	Male	Master	Philosophy	2	Full time

**Table 2.** The background information of the students involved

	Age	Gender	Major	Grade	Relation with advisor
Cui	19	Female	Foreign languages	2nd year	Mei's student
Lin	21	Female	Law	3rd year	Juan's student
Wang	19	Male	Mathematics	1st year	Hong's student
Du	20	Male	Computer	2nd year	Ding's student
Liu	20	Male	Finance	1st year	Lei's student

### 3.3 Data collection

After the participants' approval had been obtained (all of the participants who agreed to participate in this study signed a consent form), five pairs of student and student advisors' consultation ranging between about half an hour to three hours long were recorded at each student advisor's office room (the consultations recorded varied much in length because they naturally occurred without being stopped prematurely). Before they consented to having their consultations recorded, all participants were informed that the contents of the data collection did not include sensitive topics, such as cheating in exams and romantic relationship problems, because sensitive topics have the potential to cause harm to participants, eliciting powerful emotional responses such as anger, sadness, embarrassment, fear, and anxiety (Elmir, Schmiel, Jackson and Wilkes 2011).

The data collection was carried out in the student advisors' office, with one student each time. The whole process of each consultation was recorded and later transcribed for analysis. We did not inform the participants of our research aim before and after the consultation to guarantee the authenticity of data, thus decreasing the participants' potential conscious reactions. The specifics of the consultations are summarized in Table 3. Concerning the topics emerging from our data set, we adopted content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) to generate categories out of each consultation.

**Table 3.** Information on student advisors' consultations

	Student advisor	Topics	Duration	Characters
Consultation 1 (C1)	Mei-Cui	Study planning, self-management, study habits, etc.	106 minutes	12,752
Consultation 2 (C2)	Juan-Lin	Part-time jobs, professional learning, future planning, etc.	37 minutes	4,484
Consultation 3 (C3)	Hong-Wang	Exam performance, future plans, interpersonal relationships, etc.	131 minutes	15,659
Consultation 4 (C4)	Ding-Du	Exam performance, course learning, daily life problems, etc.	186 minutes	22,335
Consultation 5 (C5)	Lei-Liu	Student clubs, adapting to college life, education streaming, getting along with others, etc.	62 minutes	7,518

### 3.4 Data analysis

The transcribed text of all the five recordings included 62,778 Chinese characters in total. After the transcription, two independent researchers read these texts and marked segments closely related to the research questions (i.e., sentences which may indicate what type of identity the student advisors constructed for themselves). As for data analysis, we mainly used grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1900), namely a constant-comparative analysis proposed by Charmaz (2006). For the first step, we began with an open coding that broke our data into discrete parts and created “codes” to label them, i.e., the types of identity constructed by all the university student advisors for themselves in their ongoing consultation with their counseling students. We examined how university student advisors claimed, negotiated, constructed, and deconstructed their identities as they consulted with the students. To be specific, a code consisted of a few sentences, a short paragraph or a phrase on one single identity label, mainly manifesting as two taxonomies. One is explicitly confirmed through identity metadiscourse (X. Chen 2021). For instance, university student advisors would directly claim or deny their identities, like “when I was a *college student*”, “we are *not only the teacher and student* but also we are *friends*”, “as a *teacher*”, and “as *parents*”. The other category which was inferred by relying on the coding schemes proposed by X. Chen’s (2013, 2018, 2022) discursive practices of identity construction as shown in Table 4. For instance, the codes for various instructional and advisory practices in answering students’ questions and those for providing emotional support emerged in the course of open coding (e.g., “I appointed you as”, “I still hope

you can”, and “I suggest that everyone try”). It is important to pinpoint here that no one-to-one mapping was found between discursive strategies and the types of identity construction, which meant that one type of identity perhaps was simultaneously constructed by more than one discursive practice. For instance, the student advisor might construct a teacher identity through discourse features which implied self-identity or by performing a speech act that indicated the attributes of a teacher. Therefore, similar codes that captured the major features of university student advisor’s identities were categorized. Note that the two authors (one is a student advisor and the other is a pragmatics researcher) categorized the codes separately. When there was a difference in opinion during categorization coding, we discussed the information from the context and some related indicators until an agreement was reached. We also invited a researcher who has published research on pragmatic identity to give the final judgement. In this way, we were able to identify salient types of pragmatic identity constructed by student advisors for themselves.

We will present each example in the following format, preserving as much of the original’s version as possible without embellishment or omission: (1) the advisee’s question and the advisor’s answer; (2) the English translation, with important analytical points being underlined. The original Chinese version is omitted to save space.

In the next part, we will illustrate the various types of student advisors’ pragmatic identity construction on the basis of a detailed analysis of the authentic data from the individual consultations and interpret its possible motivations.

#### **4. Results of the study**

After a thorough examination of the above five pairs of advisor-advisee’s individual consultation, our analysis of student advisor’s pragmatic identity construction yielded two broad findings: (1) non-professional identities that do not accord with institutional settings, such as a student, an individual, a friend, and a family member; and (2) professional identities that characterize their work activities as professional personnel, such as an administrator, a tutor, and a teacher.



**Table 4.** Discursive practices of identity construction (X. Chen 2013, 2018, 2022)

Discursive practices	Description
Code choices	Language (e.g., Chinese, English), dialect (e.g., Cantonese), jargon which implies self-identity or other-identity
Style choices	Style (e.g., formal style or informal style) which implies self-identity or other-identity
Discourse features	Discourse or conversation features (e.g., turn-taking) which imply self-identity or other-identity
Discourse content	Discourse content (e.g., topic, information, perspective, presupposition) which implies self-identity or other-identity
Discourse method	Discourse method (e.g., degree of directness or indirectness and degree of engagement)
Speech act	Speech act (e.g., criticizing, praising, suggesting, declaring) which implies self-identity or other-identity
Address form	Address form which implies self-identity or other-identity
Grammar choices	Grammar feature (e.g., personal pronoun, tag question) which implies self-identity or other-identity
Lexical feature	Vocabulary (e.g., discourse marker) which implies self-identity or other-identity
Prosodic feature	Phonological feature (e.g., pitch, speed) which implies self-identity or other-identity
Paralinguistic feature	Paralinguistic means (e.g., gesture, distance, expression in one's eye) which implies self-identity or other-identity

#### 4.1 Student advisors' construction of non-professional identities in the individual consultation

Sometimes, student advisors would turn to his or her ordinary being, such as constructing themselves as a student, an individual, a friend, and a family member.

##### *A student*

In the individual consultation, students generally follow the traditional trains of thought that position the student advisor as a giver of both textbook-style preaching and mental stimulus in the form of telling a Chicken Soup story (i.e., a narrative story that cheers people up). However, in our data, a student advisor might often talk in a way that shifts his or her professional self towards a non-

professional self, that is, positioning himself or herself as a student or a graduate student. Here is an example of Lei and Liu's individual consultation.

**Extract 1.**

**Lei:** So, you are suitable to study finance! When I was a college student, though older than you, we were both the only child. As we grew up, there were many problems in the entire Chinese society, and the fickleness of mind is around us with the changeable press in the noisy world. I think there are a lot of problems that are caused by society and our family, instead of our problem. Although it was the same case in college, there is a little bit of difference. Some college classmates did a great job and what I did is to follow their example. Fortunately, I met some friends who would teach me, and then they would tell me, where I did not do very well. Also, you need such a kind of friend and I can tell you that you also need self-reflection. You have this ability.

**Liu:** So, you said you imitated when you went to college. Did you just say imitation?

**Lei:** Take them as benchmarking and example.

College students' consultation with their student advisors is an increasingly popular practice of humanistic care in Chinese universities, allowing the student advisors to interact with college students and help them solve their psychological problems, like anxiety (Kuang 2004). In Extract 1, in this consultation, seeing Liu was unsatisfied with his current major, Lei shared his personal story by using an explicit identity indicator ("when I was a college student") and then he used inclusive "we" to position himself as the same identity as Liu. In contrast to exclusive "we", inclusive "we" concerns the use of first-person plural pronouns (we, us, ours, ourselves) to evoke a sense of commonality and rapport between a speaker or writer and his or her audience (Schiffrin 1994). After he finished, Liu asked him to say more ("So, you said you imitated when you went to college. Did you just say imitation?"). Thus, Liu's question further reinforced the fact that he was convinced by Lei's experience as a college student.

*An individual*

By "an individual", we here refer to a kind of a pragmatic identity chosen by the university student advisors for themselves in their consultation that is opposite to the kind of identity pertaining to an institution, organization, social group, etc. It is a type of identity that is not bound by institutional or organizational stance. When a student advisor positions himself or herself as an individual, he or she would convey the message that he or she would speak as a social individual rather

than as institutional personnel. Consider Extract 2, which also occurs between Lei and Liu in.

**Extract 2.**

**Liu:** I don't think I have studied well after I went to college. I think I should explore some different fields, which is also very interesting.

**Lei:** Yeah, liberal education is an essential part of higher education, instead of limiting you in a specific field from the beginning. Personally speaking, I appreciate the pyramid-like process of knowledge accumulation, and especially when you are a freshman or sophomore, you should read books extensively to lay a solid foundation. When you are a graduate student, you had better specialize in one area. In fact, as for the undergraduate at home and abroad, when they are employed, most of them had nothing to do with their major.

**Liu:** Thank you! I have heard the same idea from my lecturer and my parents.

In Extract 2, Lei used the explicit identity indicator, “personally speaking” to imply that he is positioning himself as an ordinary member of society, which might give Liu freedom to make his own judgment and decision based on Lei's suggestions. In this vein, Lei not only informed Liu of his understanding of higher education (“I appreciate the pyramid-like process of knowledge accumulation...”) but, by presenting himself as an average individual, he also reduced the potential self-presentation of being over-decisive (Barone and Lazzaro-Salazar 2015) and avoided imposing his own values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours onto Liu. From Liu's response (“Thank you! I have heard the same idea from my lecturer and my parents.”), it is evident that he recognized Lei's choice of the pragmatic identity as an ordinary individual.

### *A friend*

Our data shows that constructing the pragmatic identity as a friend with consulting students is commonplace for many student advisors, as with some psychotherapists to their clients. Although a power differential existed in the student advisor's individual consultation, student advisors might intend to mitigate the asymmetric relationship by presenting themselves as the consulting student's friends, in order to elicit the student to say more about his or her psychological problems (Bates 2021). Consider the individual consultation between Ding and Du in Extract 3.

**Extract 3.**

**Ding:** What is about other things excluding study?

**Du:** About life?

**Ding:** In terms of life, do you have any difficulties? We are not only the relationship between teacher and student but also we are friends. If you have any difficulties, you may as well tell me directly.

**Du:** Yes, I think, um...

**Ding:** Or if you have any difficulties with entering into society and finding a job, etc.

**Du:** Actually, I feel very disappointed about my life. You know, I live in a normal family and my family is neither rich nor poor. I cannot meet my parents' expectations.

**Ding:** There is no need for us to cater to the expectations of our parents, instead, we should ask ourselves what we want.

In Extract 3, Du was not willing to engage in this individual consultation, because it seemed that he would not like to talk about his problems concerning personal life. Ding constructed the identity of a friend with him, by explicitly downplaying his pre-existing identity as a teacher (“we are not only the relationship between teacher and student”) but meanwhile constructing a pragmatic identity as Du’s friend (“but also we’re friends”), thus intending to soften Du’s nervousness and to encourage him to engage in the current conversation. Although he still seemed reluctant to talk about his life stressors as shown in Du’s response (“Yes, I think, um...”), Ding further positioned himself as a friend to solicitously animate as repeatedly caring about Du’s problematic status (“Or if you have any difficulties with entering into society and finding a job, etc.”). From Du’s final response (“Actually, I feel very disappointed about my life.”), it is obvious that he ultimately spoke up his mind to Ding.

*A family member*

For many Westerners, especially English-speaking people, 关系 (*guanxi*, relationship) is an alien concept with Chinese characteristics, because it is the basis of mutual trust in the Chinese context (Zhao and Mao 2019). To be specific, *guanxi* in China stems from a secure relationship or a more intimate relationship, like a family relationship, a couple in a romantic relationship, etc. From our data, we find the some student advisors constructed their pragmatic identity as a family member in the flow of consultation for the sake of building trust and narrowing down the psychological distance with the consulting student. Consider Extract 4.

**Extract 4.**

**Juan:** You are a freshman now.

**Lin:** Yeah, but I think I am mature enough.

**Juan:** Oh, but the problem is that you haven't done any work-study activities. You didn't have any plans, right?

**Lin:** Yes, right!

**Juan:** But pay attention to safety when doing part-time jobs. As parents, we are anxious for your safety.

**Lin:** Um.

Although trust must be earned over time instead of through one-shot consultation, student advisors usually began by establishing rapport with a student. In Extract 4, Juan explicitly constructed her pragmatic identity as a parent ("as parents") at the end of the consultation, in order to show her concern for Lin. The choice of the identity naturally conveyed a sense of humanistic care in an acceptable manner, as evidenced by Lin's agreement ("Um").

#### 4.2 Student advisors' construction of professional identities in the individual consultation

By "professional identities", we refer to those of student advisors that are associated with their specialized knowledge or authoritative power over a student, including an administrator, a tutor, and a teacher. Such pragmatic identities are consistent with their workplace, work time, and job duties assigned by the departments, schools, and country. Our data suggest that the student advisors involved constructed the following professional identities.

##### *An administrator*

According to relevant documents of college student advisors' job duties (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2006), they are obliged to instruct their students on national laws, school rules, department rules, class regulations, moral orders, etc. Also, they have the right to give awards and implement punishments. For instance, they can have a say in the appointment of student leaders, scholarship evaluation, and political evaluation of employment. Naturally, in our data, in individual conversations with students, the student advisors sometimes constructed their pragmatic identities as administrators, allowing them to manipulate the process of consultation and put forward various requirements. Consider the following individual consultation between Mei-Cui in Extract 5.

**Extract 5.**

**Mei:** Do you have any other questions? Today, we are talking about some learning problems. I still want to further discuss student work. I saw that you are commissary in charge of the organization in the Communist Youth League, and I also heard that you stop doing all student work related to student clubs for the sake of squeezing in more time for studying. Do you think it is worth discussing this issue next time or next semester?

**Cui:** Yeah.

**Mei:** I appointed you as commissary in charge of the organization in the Communist Youth League at that time, because you are qualified to do this kind of work. But now you suspend the student work because studying comes first. If our plan can be effective, I still hope you can return to the student work, okay?

Holmes (2005) maintains that, for identities constructed in the workplace, power is “a very relevant consideration” and it is “a dynamic and systemic characteristic of any interaction” (679). In Extract 5, Mei constructed her pragmatic identity as an administrator by using the salient expressions of professional identity (“appoint” and “you can return to the student work”), legitimizing herself to advise as an administrator.

*A tutor*

In China, a large number of university student advisors are certified psychology counsellors, which means that they can draw from a variety of psychological theories they have learned during on-the-job trainings to steer college students out of trouble. Additionally, most university student advisors today can act as a guide or tutor for college students, to provide them with guidance on methods of adaptation to new environments, study problems, career planning, emotional problems, interpersonal problems, psychological problems, etc. Therefore, at times, they offer professional guidance that displays the strength of their expertise, implying their rich working experiences and thus convincing students to follow their suggestions. Consider the following individual consultation between Ding-Du in Extract 6.

**Extract 6.**

**Du:** Actually, we don't know much about these things and we just know that there are some activities.

**Ding:** Well, I will share this topic in the next semester. That is why I say that I will share more topics by myself in the next semester. As for the third point which I just mentioned, there are many resources on the Internet. For

example, the innovative projects I just mentioned, mathematical modelling. You can look for more information from the online course selection system. Such things are presented on your online system of course selection. That is [jw.nju.cn](http://jw.nju.cn). As for the fourth point, when you are sophomores, I think, maybe you can attempt to participate in various kinds of competitions, such as Baidu, Tencent competition, Microsoft competitions. I suggest that everyone try to participate in these competitions. So, apart from the course study, we should broaden our horizons and make a career plan, which is very helpful for your college life.

**Du:** I think I have learned much today.

In Extract 6, although Ding said “I will share more topics by myself in the next semester”, it was obviously a guide, which can be of great benefit to Du’s study and career planning. Ding continued to offer Du two points of guidance: one was how to use the online system of course selection to find related mathematical requirements, prepare to apply for innovative projects; and the other was how to participate in various professional competitions and what attitude the student should take to participate in these competitions (“I suggest that everyone try to participate in these competitions”). Finally, Ding clearly pointed out that all his suggestions could be seen as a portion of “career planning” and the purpose was to make students have a clear goal throughout the four years. Ding constructed his pragmatic identity as a tutor in suggesting that his giving and advising would be a useful guideline and references to a certain extent for Du’s development (Bradley 2000).

### *A teacher*

Within the context of China, university student advisors are considered as belonging to the category of teachers, and the students usually address them as “Teacher + (student advisor’s last name)”. However, this identity is different from that of a regular teacher who teaches major courses with the aim to impart specialized knowledge to students. Student advisors constructing themselves as teachers might highlight the attributes of teachers’ professional obligations and weaken the profile of administrators. Consider Ding-Du’s individual consultation in Extract 7.

#### **Extract 7.**

**Ding:** As a teacher, I have talked so much and it seems that you don’t have a chance to speak. Do you have any questions that you want to ask?

**Du:** Question, wait a minute. Since this is an informal talk, I want to ask some casual questions. People are different. Some people excel at learning by them-

selves and others are suited to studying under the teacher's instruction. I prefer the latter. For me, I will study efficiently with the teacher's instruction and if I study by myself, I will feel that the efficiency is very low. And now, you know, as for college students, we should study by ourselves in most cases. I have no idea about how to improve.

In Extract 7, Ding used a non-conventional self-mention "as a teacher" instead of a normative "I" in the individual consultation. The pragmatic identity thus constructed explicitly demonstrated a relationship between teacher and student, which was conducive to serving as a valid indicator of the identities constructed by Ding as a teacher and revealing his stance as a teacher with the benevolent intention for student's development.

It is worth noting that while we tackled the identities constructed by the student advisors separately, the same student advisor might shift their pragmatic identities at any moment during the consultation. For instance, consulting with the same student, Lei constructed different non-professional identities at different points of the conversation (e.g., a student in Extract 1 and an individual in Extract 2) and Ding constructed a non-professional identity (e.g., a friend in Extract 3) and a professional identity at different phases of the consultation (e.g., a tutor in Extract 6 and a teacher in Extract 7).

## 5. Discussion

From a close examination of the various identities that the student advisors fluidly constructed in the course of individual consultation, another question naturally follows: what might have motivated the student advisors' construction of the various pragmatic identities? This could be answered through the lens of the Pragmatic Identity Theory. Specifically, the student advisors' communicative needs that arose in the educational context of their work might have motivated them to construct the various identities we uncovered and sometimes shift between them.

In alignment with the Pragmatic Identity Theory, communicators construct the various identities with a view to meeting their communicative needs in the ongoing conversation. These needs in the current educational context could be transactional or interpersonal. The "Provisions on the Team Construction of the Student Advisors in Higher Education" that were issued by Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China on September 1, 2006 explicitly stipulated the requirements and duties of student advisors in China's colleges and universities. Specifically, student advisors have at least the following communicative needs during the individual consultation:



- a. Help students solve the problems at hand;
- b. Act in accordance with the school and department rules and regulations;
- c. Maintain a good image and build rapport with students;
- d. Self-protection is occasionally involved.

Student advisors may sometimes fall into what Tracy (2002) terms “an identity dilemma”, whereby “the communicative actions that ensure that one is attending to the first part of the ideal are just the communicative actions that endanger the second part of the ideal” (Tracy 2002, 35). If they only consider one of the communicative needs in the individual consultations, they might fail to satisfy other needs. For instance, they might fail to help the student solve their current problems if they act strictly in accordance with the school and department rules and regulations; or they might fail to maintain a good image or build rapport with students if they only think of protecting themselves. This communicative dilemma or struggle motivates Chinese university student advisors to regard identity construction as a kind of interactional resource that enables them to choose an appropriate one to balance their transactional and interpersonal communicative needs. Such balance may serve to meet their goal of constructing a new type of Chinese advisor-student relation characterized by equality, democracy, and harmony, as opposed to the traditional relation featured by the advisors' absolute dominance and control.

On the one hand, the identity of university student advisors is both a product and a process that is not fixed but is dynamic and ongoing, and on some occasions, student advisors choose to deviate from their default identities by opting to speak in the capacity of non-professionals, like a student, an individual, a friend or a family member in an attempt to satisfy their interpersonal communicative goals, like shortening their distance from the students and establishing a close rapport with them. Speaking with a non-professional identity is a paramount way for student advisors to build a democratic, equal, and trusting relationship and sustain a positive relationship with consulting students in the long term, because it “makes their identities tangible and accessible” (Kanno 2003, 287). Thus, it could be expected that the student advisors' adoption of such non-professional identities in conversing with the students may prove effective in alleviating the students' psychological problems. According to a report of China's mental health from 1997 to 2019 issued by China's National Health Commission and the Ministry of Science and Technology in 2019, China's college students suffering from depression account for 23.8% (Ma and Ren 2019). Additionally, on July 24, 2019, China Youth Daily launched a survey on college students' depression in Sina Weibo. Among 300,000 votes, more than 20% of college students believe that they have serious depressive tendencies. To cope with the psychological problems as well as many

other problems, student advisors devote a lot of their time to individual consultation and proper use of conversational strategies plays a key role. For example, in Extract 1 and Extract 2, by virtue of constructing himself as a student and an average individual respectively, Lei avoided using his authority as this might make his consultative discourse imposing and indifferent. Instead, he left Liu to make a decision by himself, thus maintaining Liu's negative face, i.e., an individual's need for freedom of action, freedom from imposition, and the right to make one's own decisions (Tanaka 2015). Moreover, he managed to support his persuasive intention by presenting his personal past experiences (Schubert 2010). In Extract 3 and Extract 4, Ding and Juan placed themselves in a certain relationship, namely a friend and a family member respectively. In Chinese society, trust is much stronger among intimates and families than among strangers or mere acquaintances, because social relations are largely regarded as the extension of intimate relationships (Zhao and Mao 2019) or even family relationships (X. Chen 2019), and the mutual relationships prioritize the affective or emotional meaning of trust (Barber 1983). Moreover, all the findings in our study resonate with the previous argument that student advisors' perspectives about their role influence their work's effect (Urzúa and Vásquez 2008), and testify to the view that college student advisors are expected to act as support in order to form a new and equal teacher-student relationship while they should also undermine their professional role to avoid the excessive emphasis on the differences in social roles between teachers and students (Qin 2006).

On the other hand, we found that the student advisors still maintained their default identities (i.e., professional identities), like an administrator, a tutor, and a teacher. After all, apart from interpersonal communicative goals, university student advisors also need to fulfil their transactional goals, that is, to solve the students' problems related to study, life, and career planning. As opposed to some Western universities which are equipped with well-established student counselling systems, like couples counselling, mental health outreach, trauma support, and vocational counselling, Chinese college students mainly resort to counselling with their student advisors who are expected to shepherd the college students' course selections and career planning as well as monitor and assess their mental health status. This might explain why in most cases, the student advisors concerned opted to construct their default identities in line with the current educational context, which endowed them with the legitimized power to display their institutional identities, professionalism, and authority. Specifically, in Extract 6, Mei used the performative verb "appoint" to construct her pragmatic identity as an administrator, and then she expressed her powerful endorsement of Cui's capabilities and style of student work. The recognition from a professional and authoritative person profoundly enhanced Cui's positive face, i.e., the desire of a

person that his/her personality or competence is appreciated by others (Tanaka 2015), multiplying the effects of her persuasion (Yip 2020). In Extract 7, Ding constructed himself as a tutor by means of displaying his professional knowledge, echoing the point in previous research that demonstrating the knowledge of the self is a crucial element in the way tutors construct the nature of their work (Day, Kington, Stobart and Sammons 2006; Kelchtermans and Vandenberghe 1994), in attempt to guide Du to start a well-thought-out college career planning process early, offer Du the best possible resource to seek useful information, and encourage him to positively participate in diverse competitions and build up a compelling profile for becoming more competitive in the future. In Extract 7, Ding explicitly incorporated the identity “teacher” into his individual self-image by addressing himself as “a teacher”, implying the teacher-student relationship and possibly doing the interactional work of accounting for or apologizing for dominating the talk. Originally, the institutional identity, “a teacher”, served to increase the extent of power and facilitates the transactional goals of persuasion. However, Ding’s following utterances reflected his communicative need: eliciting Du to talk out his anxieties, which indicates that Ding noticed the equal communication among teachers and students. Different from a typical equal relation between student advisor and student in Western societies, the role of Chinese college student advisor was tied up with spiritualistic and moralistic concerns that pertain to Chinese culture. For instance, ancient educators regarded the teacher as the father or master (*shi fu*). *Shi* means teacher and *fu* means father, which implies that the relationship between teachers and students is established as a kind of family relationship. To be specific, according to the traditional Chinese student-teacher relationship, teachers are obligated and responsible for students’ development, and students are required to show their respect to teachers. A salient problem that often occurs in Chinese student-teacher conversation is that the hierarchy between the teachers and students also makes students refrain from communicating frankly with their teachers (Xu and Stevens 2005). As previous research mentioned, Chinese teachers’ turn-length is much longer than that of the students’, because Chinese students’ greater respect and desire to please their teachers make them reluctant to oppose their teacher’s opinion or interrupt their instruction (Ma, Du, Hau and Liu 2018). However, the relation between teachers and students in modern education is increasingly undergoing a transformation from the authority-obedience type to the equal democracy type (Li and Yang 2011), as evidenced by Ding’s choice of the pragmatic identity as a friend. In so doing, he weakened his profile as an administrator and considerably offered Du a chance to speak his mind, thus establishing an approachable consultative climate.

It thus could be contended that the university student advisors regarded the construction of professional identities as a kind of interactional resource in the

course of the individual consultation. Regardless of whether a college student advisor used his or her craft from the vantage point of expertise and knowledge, the attainment of solving students' problems was a significant goal of the individual consultation that engaged them. Even though college student advisors embarked upon the individual consultation with already established professional identities, it was only in the process of consultation that they activated them to persuade the students. By means of the invisible method of "talking cure", their institutional power was embedded in the process of identity construction and finally influenced the effect of the individual consultation.

It is worth noting from our data that the university student advisors constructed not just one particular identity in the individual conversations, but multiple identities over time. Such dynamic identity switching could be found in the case of Ding, who adopted different identities at different points in time during the consultation, as shown in Extracts 3, 6, and 7. Indeed, all the aforementioned examples reflect the influence of the subject matter of the conversation on the student advisors' identity choices and foreground the dynamics of their identity construction.

## 6. Conclusion

As Renga, Peck, Feliciano-Semidei, Erickson, and Wu (2020) maintain, being a student advisor or a teacher cannot be isolated from who one seeks to construct in communication. In this connection, this study has explored the identity construction by five pairs of Chinese college students and their advisors in their individual consultation. Based on the analysis of naturally-occurring data, the findings reveal that the transactional and interpersonal communicative goals and needs significantly influenced the student advisor's pragmatic identity construction, mainly including non-professional identities (a student, an individual, a friend, and a family member) and professional identities (an administrator, a tutor, and a teacher). Also, it is pertinent to indicate that the diversity and dynamicity of student advisor's pragmatic identity construction reflects their awareness of identity as a kind of interactional resource, and their choices of non-professional identity give rise to not only fluidity and utility of pragmatic identity construction in institutional settings but also solidarity with the advisee. This could contribute to the building a new type of Chinese advisor-student relation characterized by equality, democracy, and harmony.

The results detailed in this article may have a far-reaching impact on both a theoretical and practical level. Theoretically, all the results challenge the essentialist view that student advisors' identities are fixed or static (see J. Chen 2017)

but further testify to the argument that “identity is a matter of doing rather than being” (Jones 2016, 136). In addition, it is found that student advisors could demonstrate various potential identities and they are changeable through ongoing consultation, which can be seen as powerful empirical evidence for the Pragmatic Identity Theory. Practically, while it is acknowledged that there is a real lack of linguistic diversity in many university counselling systems (Redden 2019), the results of this study could inspire student advisors to consciously choose or switch to a more appropriate identity in advisor-student individual consultation, which will be very effective in helping college students solve their emotional or stress-related psychological problems and contribute to international students' quick adaptation to the new environment, pacifying their psychological and physical disorientation when they come to study in China (Chang and Chang 2004).

However, our study has many limitations. First, although the most significant and salient aspect of a student advisor's identity constructed during an individual consultation in our data is his or her non-professional identity, it cannot be denied that when one type of constructed identities is highlighted, other identities are subdued. In a similar vein, we must acknowledge that it seems unclear whether student advisors' identity construction is influenced by their personality, their working experiences or their personal preference for language usage, since our study was merely based on five pairs of advisor-student individual consultation. Second, since our data were obtained from an individual consultation without informing the participants regarding our research aim, it is difficult for us to draw any definite conclusions about what type of identity is better or most effective in the course of individual consultation. Thus, future studies might need to adopt a triangulation of methodology (Morse 1991), which can add interviews between the student advisor and researcher/observer, thus compensating for potential problems caused by the analyst's subjectivity and uncertainty. Or to put it in another way, since our study examined student advisors' identity construction in the individual consultation from an etic perspective of the researchers, future studies may try an emic perspective of the college students and student advisors with the help of verbal reports or retrospective interviews to shed light on their rationales of constructing different identities and their considerations of identity and relation in such settings. Third, follow-up studies can be tentatively launched to explore a general analysis of professional and non-professional identity in that more specific categories may be identified and involved. Despite these potential shortfalls, our findings have extended previous research on student advisors' consultation on the strength of the Pragmatic Identity Theory and provided a useful window into how such consultation takes place in the context of China. Informed by the results of this study, we hope that university student advisors or even pre-service college student advisors can raise their awareness that identity is

a resource to make college students more willing to consult them on their academic life as well as psychological problems.

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