

# A Case Study of Young TAFL Teachers' Social Action in Teaching and Researching

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## Abstract

As higher education systems worldwide shift toward performance-based models, increasing attention is being paid to the role of individual teacher agency in ensuring educational quality. Within this context, exploring how teachers enact high-quality teaching and research has become a key concern in both global and local educational discourses. In recent years, the Chinese government has strongly advocated for the development of high-quality education, calling for improvements in teacher competence and the quality of teaching and research. Arabic language education, as an important part of foreign language education in Chinese universities, has sparked various academic discussions on how to enhance its quality. However, many studies have focused on what teachers should do to improve educational quality while neglecting the teachers themselves. This study employs a qualitative case study approach, using Parsons' unit act framework to analyze the teaching and research actions of an outstanding young Chinese TAFL (Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language) teacher from the perspective of individual teacher actions. It aims to address the research question of how outstanding TAFL teachers engage in high-quality educational actions, thereby providing a data foundation for the study of the TAFL teacher community.

**Keywords:** Case study, Social action, TAFL teacher, China, Teaching and researching

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## 1. Introduction

Arabic language education is a topic of increasing interest globally (Abu-Melhim, 2014; Facchin, 2019; Kong, 2020; Al Aghar et al., 2023). Due to the continuous changes in the world situation, the need to strengthen communication and operations with the Arab world has greatly increased (Abu-Melhim, 2014; Hamzah et al., 2022). Over the past 30 years, the promotion and influence of Arabic education in China have continued to increase, especially in the last 10 years (Xue, 2021). As Arab countries are important partners in the development of China's Belt & Road Initiative, Arabic-speaking talents have become an important part of assisting China in strengthening economic and trade cooperation and exchanges with Arab countries. Against this background, nearly 100 Chinese universities, colleges, technical schools, and high schools have begun to offer Arabic majors (Ding, 2023).

China has always emphasized the development of high-quality education, as an organic component of the construction of new humanities, higher foreign language education is related to the quality of talent training, international exchanges, mutual learning, and China's participation in the reform and construction of the global governance system (Wu, 2019). Teachers are the basic and key factors for higher foreign language education to play an important role in the construction of new humanities (Ma & Ren, 2023). They are the leaders of all educational activities and the practitioners of all educational actions; the development of high-quality Arabic education is inseparable from a high-quality Arabic teacher group. Therefore, we need to devote more attention to the TAFL (Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language) teacher group (Shi, 2022).

However, there is a lack of research on TAFL teachers' group and their stories as individuals are followed narratively, they are a "quiet group" in the education circle and have been neglected (Xue, 2021; An & Zheng, 2022; Liu, 2023). The existing research emphasizes the characteristics of TAFL teachers as teaching executors from a "rational" perspective, focusing on "teaching" rather than "teachers", and ignores the feelings and actions

of TAFL teachers as social individuals. Hence, it is necessary to explore what kind of social actions can make a high-level TAFL teacher and what social actions have been carried out by high-achieving TAFL teachers for the development of high-quality Arabic education in China. This study attempts to fill the above research gaps through a case study to explore how high-level TAFL teachers in China act in their teaching and research work.

## 2. Research Review

Traditionally, in the field of TAFL, the focus of research has been “teaching”. Academics emphasize more on “teaching” rather than “teacher” (Hayton & Spillane, 2024). Thus, when scholars turn their attention to the teachers themselves, similar to foreign language teacher research trends, major branches of research have been instrumental in describing TAFL teachers as executors of teaching work, exploring what kind of teaching methods and tools TAFL teachers should adopt and how to help learners master Arabic better (Al Aghar et al., 2023), but the field as a whole lacks of researches on TAFL teachers through a humanistic and social prism to understand and empathize with them. Similarly, Chinese academic circles also have insufficient research and exploration of TAFL teachers as social beings themselves. The only literature we can see is that commemorating the memory of outstanding scholars who have passed away (Ma, 1989; Li, 1998; Zhu, 2007; Li, 2010; Zhi, 2017).

Additionally, there is a relative lack of qualitative research on TAFL teachers’ social action. In the development of sociology, “action” has become one of the most important research objects and has become the basis of multiple theories (Turner, 1983; McMichael & Weber, 2020). Social action theory is a theoretical framework that aims to analyze and understand human actions and the fundamental motivations behind them (Coleman, 1986). This theory examines how individuals engage in behaviors that hold personal significance to them and the subsequent impact these actions have on society and its established norms (Tuomela, 2012). Hence, it is necessary to explore what kind of social actions can make a high-level TAFL teacher and what social actions have been carried out by high-achieving TAFL teachers for the development of high-quality Arabic education in China.

In terms of analyzing individual social actions, Parsons introduced the concept of unit act to achieve the purpose of overcoming the dual opposition between subjectivity and objectivity, individual and society, action and structure (Turner & Maryanski, 1979). He proposes the constituent elements of social action: actors, directed at certain goals, the close connection between behavior and the external environment, which can be subdivided into controllable means elements, uncontrollable condition elements, and normative orientation (Parsons, 1968). In many ways, it is an analysis of individual action rather than the collective action of corporate units such as groups and organizations (Owens, 2010; Riss, 2023). Although this analytical framework is not widely used in the contemporary educational scene, the researcher believes that it remains useful for analyzing the social actions of individual actors within a particular social structure. Through this framework, we can see what the individual’s social actions are, in what context they occur, and what means are employed. This is very helpful in addressing the research questions of this study.

## 3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative single-case research design, employing purposive sampling to select an exemplary young TAFL teacher (L) in China as the research subject (Yin, 2009; Cresswell, 2013). Utilizing the unit act framework from Parsons’ theory of social action as the analytical tool, the study examines the teachers’ teaching and researching practices over the past five years in order to address the following research questions: How do outstanding TAFL teachers engage in high-quality educational actions?

L is an outstanding young faculty member at University C. He is a TAFL instructor and is renowned in China for his research on the history of Middle Eastern historiography. Since joining the university seven years ago, he has achieved remarkable success in the field of Arab historiography research in China. He operates a social media account where he publicly shares his teaching and researching stories, calling on more Arabic-major teachers and students to engage in the study of Middle Eastern historiography. This study collected a series of articles posted by L on his social media platform over the past five years, which documented his teaching, research activities, and personal reflections. The total corpus amounts to approximately 85,000 words, providing a substantial qualitative data foundation. In addition, two 60-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted with L, generating 10,000 words of interview transcripts. Two one-hour participatory observations were also carried out, resulting in 1,500 words of observational notes. The credibility and trustworthiness of the study were ensured through data triangulation and researcher reflexivity. Ethical approval was obtained from the UPSI Ethics

Committee, and all personal information of the participant was anonymized for confidentiality.

#### 4. Findings

All the data texts were read repeatedly, and in combination with the four elements of the unit act framework, the data were subjected to deductive coding, with the four elements of unit act (actor, goal, situation, norms and values) serving as the main categories, which were then further developed into themes and sub-themes. These four main categories encompass 11 themes.

##### 4.1 Category one: Actor

The main category actor includes four themes, they are: Professional Identity, Self-Identity, Identity within the Academic Circle, and Identity in the Eyes of Students. These four identities help us to have a clearer understanding of the actor.

###### 4.1.1 Professional Identity

First, the theme Professional Identity refers to the role or titles that the TAFL teacher L holds within his occupation. It reflects how actor L is recognized and defined by his career (Rodgers & Scott, 2008). At university C, L holds the position of Associate Professor and Master's Supervisor. He teaches students at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels. In addition to his academic and teaching roles, he is also a Board Member of the Chinese Society of African Historical Studies. Regarding his professional identity, L is not concerned.

*"I am not eager to advance in my professional title, so I declined all appointments to administrative positions. I just want to focus on doing a good job in teaching and research."* (Article 602)

###### 4.1.2 Self-Identity

Second, the theme Self-Identity shows how actor L perceives and defines himself in the university field. L has always referred to himself as a "Cattle-Herding Ph.D.," which is related to his rural upbringing. L was born in 1987 in a poor village in southern China, where villagers have traditionally made a living through farming and cattle herding. When he was a child, he often herded cattle in the village after school to help ease the burden on his parents. This title reflects L's modest character and his identification with his rural background.

*"I grew up herding cattle. I refer to my birthplace as Cattle-Herding Village. As the first person from this village to earn a Ph.D., I jokingly call myself the "Cattle-Herding Ph.D." This title serves as a reminder for me to strive hard and remain steadfast in my academic aspirations."* Article 158)

###### 4.1.3 Identity within the Academic Circle

Third, the theme Identity within the Academic Circle refers to the role that actor L holds within the academic community. It is related to his academic achievements and contributions to research and scholarship. Specifically, L is referred to as a "warrior" and a "fanatic": Warriors in the History of Middle Eastern Historiography and Fanatics in the History of Arab Historiography. These are the most prominent identities L holds within the academic circle. This recognition stems from his pioneering advocacy and practice of interdisciplinary research in Middle Eastern historiography among university Arabic teachers in China. After more than a decade of persistent endeavor, his advocacy has begun to yield tangible outcomes. It has not only generated seminal works in the field of Chinese Middle Eastern historiography but has also facilitated the expansion of the research cohort. Additionally, in 2024, University C inaugurated a master's program in Area Studies with a specialization in the history of Middle Eastern historiography.

*"When I wake up in the morning, after having a good meal and sitting down at my desk, I feel great. I sit there until lunchtime, eat something to satisfy my hunger, take a short break, and then continue sitting at my desk until evening. After that, I cook dinner and stir-fry a couple of small dishes. Once dinner is over, I take a stroll around the night market near my neighborhood, picking up some inexpensive, worm-eaten vegetables that are home-grown by local farmers. Then, I return to my desk and sit there until the middle of the night. Every day and every night, it's the same routine, over and over again."* (Article 709)

###### 4.1.4 Identity in the Eyes of Students

Finally, the theme Identity in the Eyes of Students refers to how students perceive and describe the identity of actor L. In the eyes of students, L is a very unique teacher. His teaching style is distinctive, and his way of interacting with people is different from that of other teachers. He often uses coffee and snacks as teaching aids,

which is highly appreciated by students. Therefore, students refer to him as a “Divine Master’s Supervisor”.

L has a very high enthusiasm for teaching, and his voice is sonorous and full of modulation when he lectures. His students generally describe him as highly passionate. Diligence, hard work, passion, and focus are the common requirements he sets for both himself and his students. L not only cares about his students’ academic performance but also their lives and personal growth. He would give his students red packets at the end of the semester to encourage them to study hard, forward books in the group chat, followed by red packets to motivate them to read more, or treat them to a meal after the course ends, so that they can enjoy a good meal. As a result, his students have dubbed him the unique teacher. As one of his students said:

*“I have a very good impression of L. At that time, he had some progress on a project and then treated us to some fruit. When his students made progress on their projects, he treated us to fruit and coffee, and even took us out for a meal at the end of the semester. He is a nice person, extremely hardworking and dedicated, and very kind to his students.”* (Article 500)

## 4.2 Category two: Goal

This category consists of three themes: Teaching Goals, Research Goals, and Personal Goals. Parsons argues that unit actions are regulated by conditions of goals and means. Each action composed of these elements involves a subjective purpose, which constitutes the purpose of the behavior (Parsons, 1968). The goal is an essential component of social action. Without clear goals, actions would be meaningless. By understanding the above three goals, we can see how high-level teachers determine their high-quality teaching and research actions.

### 4.2.1 Teaching Goals

In terms of Teaching Goals, the most fundamental goal of L’s teaching action is to enable students to master the course-related knowledge. When L first started as a TAFL teacher, his main courses were Introduction to Arabic and Development History of the Arabic Language. He asked students to perform famous scenes in Middle Eastern diplomacy to deepen students’ impression and understanding of the course content. This method deepens their impression and understanding of the course content. Additionally, his second goal of teaching action is to improve students’ academic writing skills. Therefore, he always integrates teaching and research activities, making students’ learning and assignment content part of their academic skills training. He assigns regular literature reading and paper-writing tasks to enhance students’ academic writing abilities. As he said:

*“A graduate student who does not take the initiative to do research is not a good graduate student. A supervisor who teaches graduate students like teaching children is not a good supervisor.”* (Interview 1)

This way not only promotes students’ academic research ability, but also stimulates students’ research interest. And it is D’s third goal in his teaching work. He will take this opportunity to invite students who are interested in the study of the history of Middle Eastern historiography to join his research activities, encouraging them to continue their studies and become part of this research field. A strong sense of mission and responsibility, as well as a selfless passion for the history of Middle Eastern historiography, prompted L to set the third goal. In the interview, he explained the reason for this teaching goal:

*“...I fear that I will not live to see the flourishing of the research field of Middle Eastern historiographical theory and the history of historiography. This fear haunts my soul every day, compelling me to diligently study the main branch of Middle Eastern historiographical theory and the history of historiography, namely Arab historiography, while also fervently hoping that more people will join in to revitalize this area of research.”* (Article 306)

### 4.2.2 Research Goals

As for Research Goals, L’s short-term goal is to achieve 50 Kilograms of Publications, and his long-term goal is to make the history of Middle Eastern historiography a world-class discipline. In other words, the short-term goal is his own goal, and the long-term goal is the dream of the entire Chinese Middle East historiography research community.

With a background in Arabic language studies and further education in international relations and world history, L has developed a deep interest in the history of the Arab region. Through extensive reading of historical documents from China and abroad, he discovered that Chinese research on the historiography of the Arab world is significantly underdeveloped, lagging about a century behind the Western world. Therefore, he began to delve into this field, focusing his doctoral dissertation on the historiography of the Arab world during the medieval

period. He is determined to conduct in-depth research in this area to help bridge the gap and contribute to the development of Chinese Middle Eastern historiography.

*“Since my doctoral graduation in June 2017, I have been fully dedicated to the study of Middle Eastern historiographical theory and the history of historiography. It is actually a rather obscure field that has not yet gained widespread recognition. It is currently germinating in the icy wilderness.”* (Article 306).

Based on this cognition, one of his research goals is to complete 50 kilograms of publications on Middle Eastern historiography theory and the history of historiography within his lifetime. He believes that the theories and historiography of Middle Eastern studies in China are essentially still in a dormant state. Chinese scholars occasionally make some noise in this field of research, but they have never truly awakened. Thus, publishing 50 kilograms of works is the foundation of this discipline. After obtaining his Ph.D. and embarking on an academic career, he continued to work diligently in his own research while advocating for greater attention to this field and encouraging more people to join the study of the history of Middle Eastern historiography, thereby developing the discipline of Middle Eastern historiography in China.

*“I have become the Chinese person who has done the most to publicize the history of Arab historiography and the history of Middle Eastern historiography. Over the past decade, all the academic activities I have participated in have been aimed at promoting the cause of Middle Eastern historiography research in China. This is my true intention, and my actions reflect it. Therefore, I would not miss any opportunity to call on more scholars to actively support the cause of Middle Eastern historiography research.”* (Article 698)

He has said countless times that “taking Chinese Arab historiography to the world is my dream.” With his continued advocacy and appeal, this research field has gradually attracted attention from the academic community, and the National Social Science Fund Project has funded some related research. This indicates the theories and historiography of Middle Eastern studies in China are beginning to awaken. On this basis, making up for the deficiencies in China’s historical theories and the discipline of historiography, and to elevate China’s Middle Eastern historical theories and historiography from their current marginal status to a world-class level become his and the entire China Middle East historiography research community’s long-term goal.

#### 4.2.3 Personal Goals

L’s major goal in his daily teaching and researching work is also the ultimate purpose of all his efforts: to expand and elevate his research field, making Chinese Middle Eastern historiography studies a significant player on the global stage. From a personal perspective, he expressed his personal goals as: Life should not be lived in vain; leave a valuable legacy for future generations.

L believes that one must know the purpose of their existence and not waste their time in this world. Thus, his personal goal is to live meaningfully.

*“The most important thing is to feel that you haven’t lived in vain. The greatest fear in life is to be lost, not knowing why you exist. Many people live their entire lives without knowing why, and it’s as if they never existed. My life needs a purpose, and my research is that purpose. The most important thing is not to have lived in vain; everything else is secondary.”* (Interview 1)

Additionally, another significant life goal of his is to leave behind some spiritual wealth and academic legacy for future generations, which he believes is what a scholar should do.

*“I persist in this research work, hoping to leave behind some works that can withstand the test of time. If there is still an academic community in the 22nd century, at least people will remember this person (allowing future generations to view these studies from a historical perspective), and then my work will not have been in vain. There are now about twenty to thirty research programs involved in this field, which was not the case before. So, I see myself as a banner, constantly waving and shouting, in the hope of laying the foundation for research in this area.”* (Article 797)

#### 4.3 Category three: Situation: Conditions and Means

This main category includes two themes: conditions and means. Situation is the environmental factor for achieving the goal, which is divided into two aspects: the conditions and the means of action. The former is beyond the control of the actor and difficult to change, while the latter is controllable (Ormerod, 2020). Action takes place in the situation, that is, to a certain extent, in the social reality outside the actor. The situation here refers to the material factors that limit the individual’s initiative. Due to the role of effort, some situational



constraints may be weakened and become means of action. But some constraints cannot be changed, so they become conditions of action (Parsons,1968).

#### 4.3.1 Conditions

The theme conditions contain two sub-themes: Social Condition and Academic Condition. In terms of the time and space in which L is located, the social conditions that L cannot control include the following: China's higher education policies and laws, and the University's support. As for the academic condition, there are three influencing factors: the academic evaluation system, research hotspots and trends, and the research group's interest and persistence.

As far as China's higher education policies and laws are concerned, there has been a steady development in recent decades. Over the past decade, the scale of higher education in China has continued to expand, with a more equitable and comprehensive financial aid system. Innovations have also been made in talent cultivation, running schools, management systems, and support mechanisms. Educational evaluation reforms have been continuously advanced to improve the quality of higher education and meet the needs of economic and social development. Therefore, current Chinese education policies and laws protect teachers' legitimate rights to conduct teaching and research activities and provide multi-faceted support. L has received full support from the relevant departments at University C. For L, these factors are all favorable conditions for his teaching and research actions. L's research has certain distinctive features that align well with China's area studies and historical research.

The academic evaluation system is the most important factor affecting academic conditions. The current higher education evaluation environment in China is highly conducive to the development of academic research. Universities support and encourage teachers to actively take the initiative in teaching and research to achieve more academic accomplishments. As a result, academic research in Chinese universities is very active, with universities becoming important bases for scientific research. The quantity and quality of academic research achievements have significantly improved, and the academic evaluation system is also constantly being reformed and perfected. Research hotspots and trends are influenced by the development situation and needs of the country's economy, politics, culture, and other fields, and are also affected by funding. The current characteristics of academic research in China include a clear trend of interdisciplinary integration, a balance between internationalization and localization, and research trends and hotspots closely linked to the country's strategic development and foreign affairs.

#### 4.3.2 Means

In action theory, means refer to the strategies that actors can choose in a situation. The purpose of taking means is to link the actor's goal with the situation in order to achieve the predetermined goal (Ormerod,2020). This theme contains three sub-themes: Teaching Work, Research Work, and Discipline Construction. Since L is a young teacher who has only been working in higher education for eight years, he does not have a substantial amount of work experience accumulated. In order to achieve his action goals, the primary means L has adopted are teaching and research work. In addition to these, he has also engaged in a small amount of disciplinary construction work.

After joining the university, L mainly took on undergraduate and master's courses, and two years ago, he also started teaching doctoral courses. L has a profound academic background, with in-depth research in Arabic language and literature, law, and history. This extensive knowledge makes his classroom content rich and diverse, providing students with a broader perspective. He places great emphasis on reading and translating original texts, encouraging students to translate ancient Arabic documents to gain a deeper understanding of Arab culture and history. This teaching method helps cultivate students' academic literacy and cross-cultural communication skills.

L's classroom is very distinctive. He treats his students like his own children, often distributing yogurt, sunflower seeds, and fruits in class to create a relaxed and enjoyable learning atmosphere. Sometimes he even moves the classroom to a café, where he teaches while sipping coffee with the students. If he achieves any new academic results or if the students' assignments show improvement, he would invite them to his home for coffee. He calls this teaching method the Coffee Teaching Method. He really enjoys using coffee as a medium to communicate with students, hoping to convey through coffee a pure, hardworking, enthusiastic, and focused attitude towards life.

*"The Coffee Teaching Method is a pedagogy of great love... I want to pass the magic of coffee on to my students. Hahaha... the magic of coffee is not about drinking coffee to play magic games, but rather a way of life."*

*Specifically, in teaching, the magic of coffee means purity, hard work, passion, and focus. This is the biggest secret of my journey from being a clumsy cowherd boy who was bullied by village thugs to becoming a warrior in Chinese Middle Eastern historiography theory and historiography. I believe this attitude towards life is contagious!” (Article 800)*

In addition to being diligent and friendly in the classroom, L places great emphasis on students’ after-class assignments and practice. He is very strict with both himself and his students. He only sleeps for six hours a day, and the rest of the time is spent either on work, such as teaching and attending meetings, or on reading and writing. To encourage his students to practice writing more, he requires them to complete several thousand words of writing exercises each week.

*“To my great relief, the most diligent graduate student completed five paper drafts within three months and is now working on the sixth. Although these drafts are still very immature, they form an important foundation for writing excellent papers in the future...” (Article 799)*

His approach serves two main purposes. First, it aims to equip students with strong academic capabilities, enabling them to not only complete their studies but also achieve notable accomplishments. On the other hand, he hopes to encourage more young people to join the field of Middle Eastern historiography research, thereby expanding and strengthening the research community in this area.

L’s primary research work is writing books. History is a very challenging discipline, and Arab historiography is even more so. Researchers must have a solid foundation in both language and historical theory. L’s greatest joy is reading ancient Arabic texts that are thousands of years old. Since starting his doctoral studies, his dormitory was filled with historical books piled nearly two meters high. After entering the workforce, he has accumulated thousands of e-books on history on his computer. Many of these books are works from hundreds or even thousands of years ago, which are obscure and time-consuming to read. However, L is utterly fascinated by them. He works until midnight every day. Sometimes, after going to bed, if a sudden thought occurs to him, he will immediately get up and start writing until all his ideas are captured.

*“To understand a single issue, it’s common for me to go to bed at two or three in the morning. If a thought occurs to me in the drowsy state of sleep, after hesitating for a while, I get up in the middle of the night, accompanied by a cup of coffee, and work until dawn.” (Article 611)*

As mentioned earlier, his goal in writing books is to complete 50 kilograms of publications on Chinese Middle Eastern historiography theory and the history of historiography within his lifetime. This idea came about because, in his view, while China has conducted extensive research in Western historiography and world history, the study of Arab historiography remains very limited. He has been researching Middle Eastern historiography theory and the history of historiography for ten years now. Over these ten years of exploration, he has launched two series of books, each of which has a pioneering significance in China’s academic community.

*“Everyone’s time is limited. I don’t know how much I can write here, especially since I’ve recently seen many people, not very old, passing away at a young age. This sense of crisis is even stronger. So, I live each day as if it were my last. If I can do a little more on my last day, it counts. All my work revolves around this, mainly focusing on writing more books.” (Interview 1)*

Moreover, compiling textbooks seems to be a necessary task for every advocate of a discipline, and L is no exception. In his graduate teaching, one major challenge is the lack of existing textbooks. He has to design his own lecture notes, collecting and organizing all teaching materials in advance and sending them to students for preview before class. During the class, he distributes printed materials to the students. Currently, he is working on compiling Twelve Lectures on Middle Eastern Historiography as a doctoral student textbook and collaborating with a renowned scholar to write the historiography-related content for a graduate student textbook. Although the work on compiling textbooks has just begun, the outcomes will also contribute to his goal of publishing 50 kilograms of academic works.

*“The idea of compiling a textbook on the history of Middle Eastern historiography for graduate students has been lingering in my mind for many years. It is also a necessary task to strengthen the research team in the theory and history of Middle Eastern historiography in China. In the second half of 2024, this idea was finally put into practice thanks to two opportunities. At present, I have completed the first draft. However, I still need to read more, think more, and revise it for some time before I can truly complete this work.” (Article 700)*

As for disciplinary construction, L has regarded Middle Eastern historiography as a new discipline. After joining

academia, he has been committed to advocating for the establishment of the discipline of Middle Eastern historiographical theory and the history of historiography. Although he is not a leader and does not undertake administrative work, he has been using his methods to make more people see and recognize this new research field, calling on more scholars to participate in the disciplinary construction of this field and striving to build Middle Eastern historiographical theory and the history of historiography into a new discipline recognized by the academic community.

*“Over the past decade, I have repeatedly emphasized that I am engaged in a significant academic endeavor within a discipline, which is the theory and history of Middle Eastern historiography. During my doctoral studies, I had already begun to pursue this important academic field.”* (Article 458)

From 2017 to 2024, he attended more than 30 academic seminars over nearly seven years; all the academic activities he has participated in have been aimed at promoting the cause of Middle Eastern historiography research in China. In recent years, through his continuous promotion, several scholars have joined this research field, and the National Social Science Fund has also begun to support projects in this area. L has successfully obtained two National Social Science Fund grants.

*“To my great relief, in recent years, academic seminars on the history of Middle Eastern historiography have been held multiple times. This indicates that as an emerging discipline, the history of Middle Eastern historiography is gradually gaining attention and support from the academic community.”* (Interview 1)

#### **4.4 Category four: Norms and Values**

In the selection of means to achieve a goal, there exists a form of normative constraint. This involves the actor's thoughts, ideas, and behavioral orientations (Parsons, 1968). The term norm refers to any factor that influences the actor's choices, including both the social norms of the field in which the actor is situated and the individual's personal values (Turner, 1979). Therefore, this main category consists of two themes: social norms and personal values.

##### **4.4.1 Social Norms**

The social norms of this period require teachers to be firm in their political direction, adhere to the guidance of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, be loyal to the motherland and the people, abide by the principles of the Constitution, abide by laws and regulations, and perform their duties as teachers following the law (Wu, 2019). Secondly, in terms of professional ethics, teachers should be loyal to the people's education cause, love their jobs, care for students, teach students under their aptitude, be rigorous in academic research, be brave in innovation, abide by academic ethics, spread the excellent Chinese culture, set an example, and establish a good image of teacher ethics. These regulations provide clear guidelines and norms for the behavior of university teachers, aiming to guide teachers to continuously improve their quality and make greater contributions to the development of higher education and the growth and success of students.

##### **4.4.2 Personal Values**

L is a very pure and simple person. He loves history and is indifferent to fame and fortune. He is extremely persistent and determined in what he does. He has always taken “regarding history as home and not pursuing luxury” as his motto. In his view, reading history makes one wise. Through reading historical books, one can be inspired, continuously elevate their understanding, and free themselves from the pursuit of material pleasures to engage in more meaningful endeavors. Faced with his ideals, he believes that life must have a purpose and should not be lived in vain. *“Through my work, I feel that I have not lived in vain, and my life is fulfilling.”* (Interview 2) Purity, diligence, passion, and focus are the words he most frequently mentions in his teaching and researching work, and these four words also truly reflect his character and approach to life.

The second motivation for his research in the history of Middle Eastern historiography stems from his sense of social responsibility as a scholar and teacher. He has repeatedly expressed that establishing a Chinese-characterized research specialty in Middle Eastern historiography is his mission, and developing it into a world-class discipline is his contribution to his country and people.

*“The value of my life lies in making more people aware of the significance of Middle Eastern historiographical theory and history. To bring Chinese Arab historiography to the world is my dream.”* (Interview 2)



## 5. Conclusion

The above themes analysis elucidates the specific content and characteristics of Actor L's teaching and researching actions to address the research question of how outstanding TAFL teachers engage in high-quality educational actions. From the perspective of the actor, L possesses four identities, which help us more clearly understand how L, as a young teacher, perceives himself in his teaching and researching activities, as well as how the academic community and students perceive him. These four identities construct a vivid image of the actor L (McCune, 2021). Regarding the action objectives, L's goals include engaging in high-level teaching and researching activities, both of which serve his personal goal of pursuing a meaningful life. In terms of the context of action, L's context encompasses the conditions for action and the means employed. The current social context provides positive support and assurance for L's teaching and researching actions (Wang & Fang, 2024). Under favorable circumstances, L achieves his action goals through means such as teaching activities, research activities, and discipline building. Finally, the research analyzed the social norms and personal values that guide L's actions.

The study found that L has noble academic ideals and great academic enthusiasm. His experience of arduous rural life has shaped his character of being unafraid of difficulties and willing to take on challenges. His high-level teaching and research actions are driven by his academic ideals rather than by career advancement or material rewards. Under the university management system guided by new managerialism, choosing idealistic teaching and researching actions over utilitarian ones is by no means an easy task (Mantai & Marrone, 2023). L's case provides a window for us to gain a deeper understanding of the life world of Chinese TAFL teachers and how they develop high-quality education.

However, this study also has certain limitations. It is difficult to summarize the overall action patterns of the TAFL group based solely on the social actions of one teacher, L (Cresswell, 2013). Future research should expand the scope of investigation to include more TAFL teachers and more regions. It indicated that mixed-method approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses, could be employed to enhance the validity and reliability of the study (Morse, 2016). Additionally, international comparative studies between China and Arab countries or between China and Western contexts could provide a broader understanding of how high-level TAFL teachers act in their teaching and research work (Adamson, 2012).

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