
Title	A Chinese learner and her self-regulated learning: An autoethnography
Author(s)	Jiang Heng
Source	<i>Frontiers of Education in China</i> , 10(1), 132-152. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03397056
Published by	Brill

This is the author's accepted manuscript (post-print) of a work that was accepted for publication in the following source:

Jiang, H. (2015). A Chinese learner and her self-regulated learning: An autoethnography. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 10(1), 132-152. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03397056>

Notice: Changes introduced as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing and formatting may not be reflected in this document. For a definitive version of this work, please refer to the published source.

JIANG Heng

A Chinese Learner and Her Self-Regulated Learning: An Autoethnography

Abstract In this paper, I use an autoethnographical approach, coupled with existing research literature on Chinese learners and learning, to reflect upon my own experiences as a junior high school student in order to explore how Chinese students perceive their learning, and how they establish and justify their own sense of self-regulation in learning. I examine how self-regulation is interpreted in Western literature about learning, and how my learning experiences can provide a window to rethink self-regulated learning and learners from an indigenous Chinese perspective.

Keywords self-regulated learning, Chinese learner, autoethnography

Introduction

I encountered an online journal by a 12th grader in Beijing and read it with interest as if I was reading my own diary:

6:45 am: I frown at the passionate music of the alarm clock, and struggle with the choice of sleeping or getting up. The old saying tells me: “Spring gives a good start for a year, and morning gives a good start for a day.” So I choose to get up.

7:00 am: With my eyes closed, I freshen myself up and get ready for a new day. Staring at the CDs

on the desk, I am not sure if I should choose the music CD or those for English conversation drills.

Xunzi said, in my textbook, “Without small steps, you cannot get far. Without rills, there is no river or sea.” So I decide to listen to the English conversations.

7:15 am: Listening to the English news, I come into my classroom. I struggled with the idea of enjoying my breakfast or reciting the textbook. It is said that “Time is like a river, and you should not stand by and let it flow.” So I eat my breakfast while I am memorizing the English vocabulary.

7:20 am–12:10pm: I concentrate on my classes. Perhaps I am too concentrated, or I am used to this schedule. I did not leave myself many choices to think.

12:30 pm: After lunch, I come home. Take a nap? Or continue to study? I am confused again. I am told by a famous man: “Inertia can bury people alive.” So I choose to give up the nap.

13:50 pm: I come to school again. No choice. No struggle.

14:10 pm–16:45 pm: I continue to have classes. There are no other choices.

16:50 pm: Shall I go back for dinner or exercise? The General Zhu De tells me: “People are like machines and need movement to keep from the rust.” So I decide to exercise first and run around the playground five times.

17:45 pm: I come back home and have dinner. I struggle again with the choice between watching TV and study. A novelist, Feng Menglong said: “Plum blossoms get their fragrance from severe cold weather (people succeed with hard working).” So I choose to continue studying and finish homework.

22:00 pm: I rest and wash up.

22:20 pm: I get sleepy now. But I struggle with the idea of reciting some paragraphs. A heroic poet, Yue Fei said, “Do not wait till your hair gets grey and regret on your idle youth.” So I begin to

recite.

22:50 pm: I become thirsty and sleepy. I agree with the psychologist that “An hour sleep before midnight equals three hours’ sleep after.” So I go to bed.

I am grateful for all these famous people sharing their wisdom. They have helped me to march forward.

In this journal, the student implied how s/he was encouraged by traditional idioms and disciplined himself/herself to be a self-regulated learner with an intense schedule. Opening my own diaries, memories of my life as a Chinese junior high school student were revived, represented and reexamined in a new light, now from the stance of an educational researcher trained in Western academic discourses. In this paper, I am going to use the autoethnographic approaches (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Nash, 2004; Reddick & Sáenz, 2012), coupled with existing research literature on Chinese learners and learning, to reflect upon my own learning experiences in order to explore how Chinese students perceive their learning, and how they establish and justify their own sense of self-regulation in learning. In addition, as a student who pursued K-12 and tertiary education in China and later graduate education in the United States, I examine my role when conducting research on Chinese learning by means of crafting my own memories.

I want to emphasize here that this is my personal narrative from a retrospective lens, specific to the contexts where I was situated (Smorti, 2011), and rendering the narrative truth in our “storied lives” (Riessman, 1993). As DeVault (1997) describes,

When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused,

and get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths. These truths don't reveal the past "as it actually was," aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experiences. (p. 261)

The aim of this paper is thus to understand a Chinese learner's lived experiences in retrospect. Specifically, the research questions that guided this inquiry were:

1. How did a Chinese learner regulate her own learning?
2. How does her self-regulated learning reflect the cultural meanings and larger social values?

In sharing my own stories, I hope that I can provide a case to critically examine how a Chinese learner adopted cultural messages from external resources, made sense of her own learning, and adapted her learning to the external expectation, hence contributing to our understanding of multiple cultural meanings about Chinese learners and their learning.

In the following sections, I am going to briefly review the research on Chinese learners and self-regulated learning, explain the use of the autoethnographical method, delineate the narratives for analysis, and discuss the findings.

Research on Chinese Learners, Chinese Learning and Self-Regulated Learning

Comparisons in learning between Western and Asian children have received much research attention in the past decades (Cai & Cifarelli, 2004; Ho, 2001; Holloway 1998; Menon, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 1999). Asian children have achieved better results in school than their Western peers in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2012, especially in math and science¹. To explain the

¹ Please refer to the PISA results overview: <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-overview.pdf>

persistent “learning gap” that Stevenson and Stigler (1994) identified 20 years ago, a number of reasons have been offered in more recent research: (a) Asian parents have higher expectations and are more involved with their children’s learning (Huang & Prochner, 2003); (b) Asians believe more in effort, whereas Westerners believe more in ability (Tweed & Lehman, 2002); (c) motivation for social mobility through education is stronger for Asian learners than their US peers (Salili, Chiu, & Lai, 2001; Sue & Okazaki, 1990); (d) Asian countries have strict school practices, teacher support, and pedagogy (Cai & Cifarelli, 2004; Kobayashi, 1994; Lau, 2012; Lau & Chen, 2013); and (e) Asian learning models are based on their particular cultural understanding of self-directed learning which is different from the Western models (Gan, 2009; Li, 2002; Marton, Wen, & Wong, 2005; Neber, He, Liu, & Schofield, 2008; Zhu & Leung, 2011). For instance, Marton et al. (2005) explored the interwoven process of memorization and understanding in Chinese learner’s opinion as opposed to the Western notion of separation of understanding from memorization. This type of research that delves into cultural meanings about learning provides more nuanced understandings of meaning systems that not only inform people’s goals for their lives but also serves to motivate and guide people’s behavior in learning.

The above brief review points to an important body of knowledge for explaining learning in Chinese culture. However, the bulk of research in this area still remains largely “etic” (researcher’s view, extrinsic concepts and categories that have meaning for scientific observers). “Emic”² (views of those being studied, intrinsic cultural distinctions that are meaningful to the members of a given society) views of learning have rarely been examined directly. That is, despite the extensiveness of research, researchers seldom explore how learners regulate, construct and make sense of their own learning process, or examine the multiple sociocultural resources and information they incorporate to make their own construal of learning. Thus, cross-cultural studies of Chinese learning and Chinese learners could

² Emic and etic are derived from the linguistic terms phonemic and phonetic respectively.

be strengthened by considering the self-regulated learning process taken by Chinese learners.

Self-regulation in learning has been examined and deemed central in the Western educational research in the past decades to understand how learners make sense of and control the process of learning. Self-regulation was defined as the “self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals” (Zimmerman, 2000, p. 14). The social cognitive perspective regards self-regulated learners as “metacognitively, motivationally and behaviorally active participants in their own learning processes” (Zimmerman, 1986, p. 308). Zumbunn and her colleagues (2011) characterized self-regulated learners as those who are able to sustain self-motivation and who seem to make learning easier for themselves. They often assess their strengths and weaknesses, strategic in choosing and applying different learning strategies, and autonomous to seek help as well as monitoring their own learning (Perry, Phillips, & Dowler, 2004; Zimmerman, 2008). Zimmerman (2002) had established that there is an important correlation between students’ academic achievement and the use of self-regulated learning strategies by American students. It has also been demonstrated that a range of educational and cultural factors may lead to self-regulated learning which tend to affect student achievement in Chinese contexts (Lau & Chen, 2013). Researchers found that Chinese learners do not simply passively memorize knowledge by rote learning, as was stereotypically portrayed in Confucian culture (Ho, 2001). Rather, Chinese students showed a positive attitude towards self-directed learning (Gan, 2009; Lau, 2012; Law, Chan, & Sachs, 2008; Zhang & Wu, 2009).

Although studies on self-regulated Chinese learners are increasing, they tend to assess the characteristics of Chinese students or investigate the classroom environment for self-regulated learning (Law, Chan, & Sachs, 2008; Li & Yue, 2004), there are not many studies explore the cultural meanings

appropriated by the Chinese learners in their narratives in regards to their self-regulated learning.

The intent of this study is not to identify the traits of self-regulated learning in the Chinese context, but nevertheless it is valuable to illuminate the deeper cultural meanings a Chinese student may attach to their school experiences.

Methodology: Autoethnography

The comparative and international education field remains open to alternative paradigms in research including the narratives to unravel the in-depth cultural meanings in different national and social contexts (Klees, 2008). However, cross-cultural educational studies have been traditionally conducted by the objective others, researchers other than the participants themselves. Studies on learning are no exception. Although there are some studies that try to examine the meanings of learning from an insider's view (Li, 2002), most researchers working on Chinese learning and learners tried to keep a distance from their subjects, and heavily rely on Western discourses. However, the personal narrative can serve as a “‘counter-narrative’ to the faceless, de-contextualized research paradigm that has dominated scholarship in the professional schools for much of the past century” (Witherell, 2004, p. vii). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) established the educational importance of narrative that brings “theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived” (p. 3). The personal narrative can be a powerful means to “approximate an understanding of the life-world of social actors as they themselves understand it” (Goodson & Mangan, 1996, p. 43) and “make narrative sense of personal experience,” challenging the scholar “to use the personal insights gained in order to draw larger conclusions for readers” (Nash, 2004, p. 18), and particularly useful for sharing the meaning-making processes in the female educational experiences (Zhang, 2010). It can also put the self

of the researcher in the front and advance our own reflections of the cultural meanings embedded in the learning experiences (Bochner, 2012; Bruner, 1994; Riessman, 2008).

In order to reveal the cultural meaning of learning with the personal narrative, I choose autoethnography as the method for this study. Autoethnography is a “research, writing, story, and method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the culture, social and political” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). It is an approach that describes and interprets the researcher’s personal narratives in order to understand the unexamined cultural and social contexts (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Spry, 2001). The benefits of autoethnography are the emphasis on self-reflexivity as well as giving us the insight into the culture. Chang (2008) argues that autoethnography offers a research method that enables researchers to obtain a cultural understanding of the self in relation to others. Ellingson & Ellis (2008) see autoethnography as a social constructionist project that rejects the deep-rooted binary oppositions between the researcher and the researched, objectivity and subjectivity, process and product, self and others, art and science, and the personal and the political.

For autoethnographers, the validity of their research lies in the “conversation” between the reader and the researcher. As Carolyn Ellis (2004) writes, “In autoethnographic work, I look at validity in terms of what happens to readers as well as to research participants and researchers.... our work seeks verisimilitude” (p. 124). Thus, autoethnographic research seeks generalizability not just from the research participant(s) but also from the readers and intends to open up rather than close down the conversation (Ellis, 2004).

The use of autoethnography varies from being evocative and analytic (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). While some autoethnographers are more concerned with writing stories about their lived experiences, others adopt a more analytical approach by framing their experiences around “theoretical and

methodological tools and a research literature” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 4). I will adopt the latter approach in this study to provide an analytical interpretation of my learning experiences.

There are three data sources: 1) personal narratives I wrote about my own learning experiences; 2) the diaries I kept since my junior high school days; 3) dialogues with classmates in junior high school. To begin the inquiry from an “emic” perspective, I used personal narratives to reflect upon how my own learning in junior high school was regulated, and how external cultural meanings permeated my own process of learning and guided my perceptions and practices in learning. I focus on this schooling period because it included the experiences I remembered clearly about focusing on study and managing to improve my academic achievement drastically. I also get more details from the diaries I wrote in the junior high school days. The gathered narratives in my diaries helped me to reach into the past and provided information on my own voice and with my own stance. I shared my narrative with my hometown classmates and my husband who is in the same class; and talked with them about their reactions to the narratives. In this way, I was able to obtain other peoples’ perspectives on my experiences and stay self-reflective when examining and re-presenting the meanings I ascribe to my narratives.

As autoethnographical narratives are holistic in nature, I pay attention to the emerging overall themes within narratives, and preserve “the sequential and structural features that are hallmarks of narrative” (Riessman, 2008, p. 12) in constructing my stories. I also attend to the three commonplaces of temporality, sociality and place, in a narrative inquiry that explores the complexity of the lived experiences (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). In the following, the narratives are organized around two specific aspects of learning, “goals of learning,” and “sense of agency” which involves using various learning strategies and seeking help (Li & Yue, 2004, p. 30),

because they are considered most central to the self in the domain of learning.

My Stories: Between Working Spirit and the Playing Mood

I was born in the late 1970s when the “one child” policy was first enacted in China. During the years before college, I lived with my family at a university in south-central China where my father was an instructor in classic Chinese literature, and my mother was a librarian. I spent most of my childhood with my mother in the library, sitting on a pushcart between the bookshelves, inserting my drawings between books and playing “hide and seek” with the pictures. The first book I read all by myself was a collection of ancient legends after I learned several words and how to use a dictionary in the first grade. I still remember the sunny afternoon when I climbed to lie on the back of the stone lion in front of the library and started to read, word by word, until the sunset, with the book in one hand and a small green-cover dictionary on my belly. From then on, I started to love reading, had conversations with friends I made in the books and imagined all kinds of good deeds I could do with advice from these friends. Just as the high school student cited earlier in his/her online journal, I often cited what book characters said to guide my choices and justify what I did, and I also kept a record of my thoughts in diaries kept since primary school.

Learning Goal: “Challenge the Self”

My parents never pushed me to study too hard. They just told me that they wanted me to be a healthy person with a kind heart and sound reasoning, but that hardworking in studying academics was the prerequisite to these goals. In primary school, I felt little pressure for studying and spent my days

reading novels and essays at the library, made up stories in writing, got high scores in Chinese language and above average scores in math³, and eventually entered a good junior high school attached to the university my parents worked for. When I was not reading, I spent hours wandering in the hills behind our house and enjoyed the contentment of peace in the nature. I was assigned, perhaps due to luck or my competencies in Chinese language writing, to an advanced class in the junior high school. At that time, there was no advanced class for Chinese language writing. The classes were tracked with math and science, which were deemed as more important subjects. About two thirds of my classmates had already won various national or provincial academic competitions in science and mathematics. I was among the minority who seemed to lack the strong merits of most peers.

Our math teacher organized a seminar for advanced learners in math in order to prepare them for a coming national contest. I knew that I was not qualified to attend the contest, but I was very curious about what they would learn. So I asked the teacher if I could attend the seminar. She looked at me as if I was joking, laughed, and said, “Well, I suggest that YOU do not join.” Neither opportunity nor explanation was offered. I was very upset, but soon found my own peace. “No one has a permanent advantage over others and no one is a ‘damn fool’ all the time,” said Yutang Lin, my favorite writer (1937, p. 105). He was the one that used Taoism to teach me how to find uniqueness in the self, see strength in weaknesses, and the simplicity of the truly sophisticated. I told myself in the diary, “It is all right. I can still learn what I like and enrich myself in the daily class.” However, as the competitive reality hit, I could not help feeling disappointed again.

In the first mid-term examination, I was ranked⁴ 20th out of 46 students, which was the lowest rank in my short life history. When I came home in tears, frightened of being punished, and handed the

³ In 1980s, math and Chinese language were the two key subjects required for junior high school entrance exam. Everyone received nine year compulsory education. But we had to pass a high score in the entrance exam to get in a local high quality junior high school.

⁴ In Chinese junior high schools, publicizing academic ranking was used to elicit competition among peers and let students know where they should position themselves.

transcript to my parents, they comforted me and encouraged me to get to the 19th ranking in the next test. “You can challenge yourself and make small improvements. It is all right as long as you have tried.” This made me feel better. I was tired of being compared with others, but challenging and improving myself sounded like a plausible goal.

In the following years, I worked hard to “challenge myself” and gradually realized that I was more interested in, and hence capable, in subjects such as Chinese language, English, history, politics, chemistry and biology, while math and physics were boring to me and I could not achieve high scores in any related tests. In the beginning, I put a lot of time and effort on math and physics, but the outcomes were about average. Being frustrated, I began to think about my own strengths and what I could do to make up for the weaknesses.

I reduced the amount of time dedicated to math and science courses but kept two hours after class every day to review/prepare lessons and try to understand what teachers expected. This was enough for me to maintain an average score in testing. The rest of my time was spent thinking, reading, and doing drills in the subjects that I loved, and I excelled in these subjects. I called this strategy “excellence in balance,” which made me feel comfortable with my own learning. Eventually, I kept climbing in the class ranking with improved sum scores of all subjects and maintained a ranking among the top three until high school graduation. In retrospect, ranking was not very important as long as I felt satisfied with my own improvement. With the pressure of the College Entrance Examination, I had to get a high sum score in the standardized testing, but I never forgot that learning was part of improving myself, and was about enjoying the process of learning what I really like to learn.

Sense of Agency: “Learn from Others” and “Learn for the Mastery of Knowledge”

When I was very young, I was told by my parents to learn from other people. They used what Confucius said to let me know that I can better myself: “Among three people, there is always a person that you can learn from. You can learn the virtue from him/her and keep yourself from his/her shortcomings.” When I grew older, I read the biography of a scholar, Gu Yanwu (顾炎武), who lived in the beginning of the Qing Dynasty. He traveled with three carts of books as he did research on Chinese cultural geography. Whenever he found discrepancies in material evidences, or contradicting stories from old people from whom he collected first-hand data, he would check them in his books. In this way, he learned from multiple resources and adapted what he already knew while incorporating new information. Inspired by these stories, I assumed that learning from others and from books was a natural process in acquiring strategies, and found that observing how my peers learned was helpful, as well as asking them how they tackled difficult questions, reading tutorial materials, and trying out learning strategies suitable for myself. The key was how to learn from others, and learn how to turn “learning from others” into “learning for the mastery of the knowledge.”

During junior high school, I was frustrated about English vocabulary. One day, I happened to see that a classmate was using a collection of cards with English words on one side and examples of word usage on the other. She was reading the cards during recess. That might be her little secret to her achievement in English vocabulary testing! I learned this from her and began to get interested in shuffling with my own vocabulary cards whenever I had a few minutes to do so. Soon I kept cards with English words, organized new ones, and discarded the old ones when I could use them fluently.

Usually, I preferred to study alone and ask the teacher for help if I encountered difficulties. There were times when I could not solve a problem and the teacher was not available, and I had to turn to

peers for discussion. Physics and algebra were tough for me, and I often resorted to my peers for help on these subjects. Even though teachers often told us that not being afraid of asking questions was a virtue of learning advocated by Confucius (不耻下问, bu chi xia wen), discussing a problem with my peers was still very difficult for me since I absolutely did not want to embarrass myself by asking ignorant questions. I had to evaluate my own perceived level in comparison with others, and select someone with a suitable level with whom to discuss the material. This person was usually the one regarded as a superior learner in physics (or algebra) and was patient with me. In addition, I realized that asking questions without thinking thoroughly in advance was a waste of time since both of us would have to start from a very preliminary understanding of the problem. Therefore, I usually spent quite some time thinking about a difficult physics problem, wrote down my thoughts and specific questions, and then turned to a nice, clever classmate for help. Once, after asking a series of similar questions to a peer, I was told, “You have to pay special attention to the conditions when you try to solve the problems. Every physics theorem has its particular condition. If the condition changes, you have to change your way of thinking about the problem.” I had never thought of this strategy before and found it very helpful.

If peer help did not work out and teachers were still unavailable, I would try to learn from tutorial materials. There were large quantities of tutorial materials for sale in the book store in the beginning of the semester I usually spent half a day at the bookstore reviewing the materials that teacher and peers recommended, and picked one for each subject. The chosen ones were usually not too difficult for me to understand, but provided challenges for my level of learning in terms of depth and breadth of knowledge. My favorite tutorial materials included the important “knowledge points” covered in the textbooks and a little more than that: connections among knowledge points, new concepts that helped

explain these knowledge points clearly, tricky general strategies to solve a type of difficult question, explanations on how to clear erroneous thoughts during problem solving, and drills to practice the problem-solving strategies. These might not be clearly demonstrated in the class, but they seemed indispensable to finishing homework and achieving well on tests.

In addition, there were lots of “learning experience sharing workshops” (学习经验交流会) on campus, and related reports on TV and newspapers. Excellent learners talked about how they learned and from this I gained quite a few helpful tips.

Finally, I developed my own ways of reviewing each subject based on advice from teachers, peers and books, as well as my own practices. For instance, I had piles of notes drawing conceptual frameworks for chapters in the politics and history textbooks, with additional history materials and news that I read after class, an extract notebook to record whatever interesting materials I found in readings so that I could find ideas and concise sentences for writing, pictures and stories for geography, records of general problem solving techniques for difficult math and physics questions.

I interpreted these personal learning experiences as a process that I used to self-regulate according to meanings I sifted from external cultural resources. In the remainder of the paper, I discuss how I appropriated multiple cultural messages to construct my learning experiences.

Discussion: Self-Regulated Learner, Researched and Researcher

Researchers contend that self-regulated learning is proactive, employing various strategies and self-reflective (Zimmerman, 2000). This is a self-motivated process that includes setting specific goals for oneself, adopting powerful strategies for attaining the goals, monitoring one’s performance selectively for signs of progress, restructuring one’s physical context to make it compatible with one’s

goals, managing one's time efficiently, self-evaluating one's methods, attributing causation to results and adapting future methods (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 66). Looking at my own experiences as a Chinese learner, it seemed that I fit into what Western researchers term the "self-regulated learner." However, encompassing categories may mask the nuanced cultural understanding which has to be closely read through a perspective that has access to both "indigenous" Chinese cultural understanding and some Western knowledge.

In the following, I shall examine how my learning experiences could provide a window to rethink self-regulated learning and learners, and how the positioning of myself as a cross-cultural researcher makes specific meaning visible out of my learning experiences in this study and shapes the interpretation of the data and my memory. In this way, both the content—what is told in the story—and the form—how it is told—are examined to enrich the understanding of my learning experiences.

Internalized External Expectations and Use of a Hybrid of Cultural Meanings

There are two themes that stand out from the narratives above. Firstly, I motivated myself with the internalized external expectations. Secondly, I tried a hybrid of cultural meanings from Confucianism and Taoism to strike a balance between success and failure.

1. The internalized external expectations made me challenge myself in learning and try to improve myself through the mastery of the learning content. I have to feel the pressure from the teachers, peers competition, and parents' expectation, internalize these external stimuli and then actively employ strategies to respond to these requisites. The key is self-awareness amid external expectations and the surrounding settings. Instead of trying to work against external situations, adjusting my own learning

strategies in accordance with the academic standards, while working along with the external expectations set by the goal, provide direction and guidance for a proactive effort. In addition, this conformity to the external academic requirement does not hinder my capability to challenge myself and make progress. It actually provides a feeling of self-control that enhances my performance.

Li argues that Chinese learners view learning as a process of moral striving called self-perfection based on Confucian philosophy (2002). This is largely based on the interpretation of Neo-Confucianism that “the perfectibility of human nature is predicated on the assumption that learning to be human involves a lifelong commitment to and a continuous process of self-education” (Tu, 1984, p. 379). The goal of this continuous process is to be a moral learned person searching for higher meanings of life beyond practical and utilitarian ends. This goal is largely defined by the existing moral and behavior codes. In this process, the inside control is not separated from external expectation. In contrast, this inside control for the sake of self-perfection starts from the internalized moral expectations learned from personal experiences.

The discussion above resonates with the recent studies conducted by the cross-cultural researchers who teased out the nuanced differences between the understanding of motivation in the West and the East Asia. They found that, whilst in the West, extrinsic motivation is associated with the non-desirable pragmatic reasons for striving, in East Asian societies, extrinsic motives are important and legitimate driving forces behind the pursuit of knowledge (Laschke, 2013). And in East Asian societies that have been influenced by the Confucian philosophy, the intrinsic motive is connected to finally achieving moral perfection and wisdom while in the West it is associated with the content of knowledge (Zhu & Leung, 2011).

2. The motivation for learning in Confucian perspective, therefore, is to become a person that is

accepted by the external environment, and this adaptation to the external expectations became incorporated in my learning process to uncover my own abilities during the goal-specific process. However, Confucianism was not the only source for me to regulate my learning. There was a hybrid of ideas I could use to make decisions in learning. I did not stretch myself too hard to get the highest academic achievement. I also learned that I was limited in learning math and physics, and had to make a peace with the embarrassing experience with the math club teacher. And I also spent much time doing what I truly enjoy, such as reading and taking a walk in the mountain.

It seemed that what I have learned from Taoism, which is also an important philosophical underpinning of Chinese culture, was part of my self-regulated learning. It was in early 1990s when I was in junior high school. That was a time when socio-economic reform had been enacted for more than a decade, and various ideas, including traditional classic ideas and Western theories, thrived after the Cultural Revolution when intellectuals in exile and diverse ideas had been blocked. The aftermath of the 1989 movement did not hinder the revival of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. I remember that I could find many classical books on my father's bookshelf and the library that my mother worked at. There was always a section of *gu wen* (古文), ancient classical essays written in traditional Chinese, in my Chinese textbook every semester. Besides beautifully written short literatures, many of these *gu wen* were about how Confucius, Mencius, and other highly respected historical figures perfected their morals and improved their learning. Teachers would walk us through these readings word by word, explain the meanings, and encourage us to learn from them in our own studying process.

Most of the textbooks were about Confucianism, but I adopted Taoism out of my extracurricular readings. This emotional affiliation to Taoism and deviation from Confucianism may have come to my mind because my mother always told me not to “destroy” myself as a workaholic but find a suitable

way to excel as myself. I found that Confucius' ideas were too serious for me to feel comfortable with since the Confucian ideal of working very hard and doing everything perfectly seemed to be the reason that my father was stressed. As Lin (1938/2002) said,

Life under the Confucian code of decorum would be unbearable without this emotional relief (Taoism). For Taoism is the playing mood of the Chinese people, as Confucianism is their working mood. That accounts for the fact that every Chinese is a Confucianist when he is successful and a Taoist when he is a failure. The naturalism of Taoism is the balm that soothes the wounded Chinese soul. (p. 115)

From a Taoist perspective, we can find that reacting to external settings and holding back from assertive progress is a way to maintain a psychic health and balance which eventually will lead to a preferable result (Yip, 2004). According to Taoism, one should be integrated into the "law of nature." This is good for an individual's self-preservation in facing changes as well releasing one's natural potentials. As Lao Tzu said,

The ways of an exquisite man is like of water which benefits all things without contention. He is content to keep which is discarded by the multitude. Hence he is close to the Truth. He adapts himself to any environment; he attunes his mind to what is profound; he associates himself with the virtuous; his words inspire confidence. (1995, p. 21)

In other words, Lao Tzu valued an individual of excellent nature as being able to adapt to every kind

of social environment and take (and not take) actions according to the innate potential of the self.

Hence, there are multiple meanings underlying self-regulation in learning, which are adopted from larger sociocultural settings as well as my own experiences. I am not quite sure now which one was the dominant one that guided my learning in the first place, though I do realize that my own personal experiences shaped my choice of ideas in regulating my own learning. However, as I reflect upon my learning, I find that all the indigenous knowledge of Chinese culture that I have obtained helped me to understand how I made decisions in learning back then. Here, “indigenous” knowledge exists only because I can think of them as I compare what I read, experienced and observed back in China with what I read, experienced and observed in the Western academia.

Researcher’s Role: Insider vs. Outsider

While reflecting upon my personal experiences, I realize that myself as a researcher can be an important “inside” resource for indigenous knowledge since I was immersed in Chinese culture as a Chinese adolescent learner. However, I am also an “outsider” since I realize that I possibly view my past learning experiences, sometimes without awareness during writing, from perspectives largely adopted from Western research literature. Furthermore, only when I think of Chinese cultural meaning compared to the Western research literature can I get the familiar, tacit knowledge revealed to myself.

As I wrote the narratives for this study, two strands of information came into play: my own life stories as a sifting conceptual membrane consisting of implicit cultural understandings and what I have gathered from both Chinese and Western research literature about Chinese learners. For instance, I wrote about my parents’ *laissez-faire* policy towards my learning. It seems that I was unintentionally

against the stereotype of “tiger mom” and the researchers’ views on Chinese parents’ behavior control over their children, *guan* (that parents should “govern” and “train” children through close monitoring, firm directives, and high demands and the belief in “shaming” (Fung, 1999; Wang, Pomerantz, & Chen, 2007). I selected to describe my tendency to work alone and strengthen independent thinking before peer discussion as opposed to the literature about Chinese learner’s group orientation in learning strategies (Menon et al., 1999). My noticing that I believed in my lack of talent in math and physics, putting less effort on these subjects while getting higher overall score by excelling in the subjects that I loved seemed to originate from thinking about the academic debate on effort vs. ability, which argues that Asian learners believe in hard-work and the malleability of abilities (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Researchers found that Chinese learners not only value effort over ability but also regard effort as a stable cause for academic achievement based on their Confucian understanding of learning (Hau & Salili, 1991), while their Western counterparts view ability as a stable cause (Weiner, 1986). This is an insightful finding; however, it does not discuss other cultural meanings embedded in Chinese mind. For instance, as we discussed above, Taoism holds that all personal endeavors are in vain compared to the “law of nature.” Accordingly, progressive endeavor in terms of assertiveness in personal pursuit is not preferable. Rather, holding oneself to do whatever is natural for one’s potential is better for a peaceful mind and likely to produce a favorable result. As I experienced family tragedy and felt a need to protect myself from meeting many high standards, emotional affiliation with a more naturalistic Taoist attitude toward learning was adopted. However, I did not totally give up the working ethic of pursuing self-improvement through learning, but the approach was less strictly defined and resituated more comfortably with who I am and what I can do.

The above are some examples from my reflection on how cultural meanings and research literature

influenced the narrative about my own learning experiences. It seems that “inside” and “outside” views are intertwined to shed light on a way of exploring Chinese learning. If researchers can cross the border between so-called “insider” and “outsider” with constant reflection on how they construct their interpretation of the research, they may yield a deeper understanding of the cross-cultural meanings by their honest sense-making in the field. The aim is, as William Blake wrote in his *Auguries of Innocence*, “to see a world in a grain of sand,” to illuminate the general through the particular.

Conclusion

This paper experimented with an autoethnographical approach to providing a close look at how one Chinese learner regulated her learning in light of both indigenous views and Western scholarship. The narrative about my learning experiences is examined from a self-regulated learning perspective to uncover the hybridity of cultural meanings underneath the learning experiences. In addition, I discussed the researcher’s stance as both an “insider” and an “outsider” of what is studied, and suggested that the reflection of the researcher’s positionality was vital for such a study.

This study has several implications for culturally sensitive research on Chinese learner/learning:

First, my stories of a Chinese learner cannot be generalized; however, they inform us about the multiplicity of cultural meanings underlying a learner’s self-regulation of her learning. It is dangerous to use “Chinese culture” in a holistic way.

Second, this study suggests that Chinese researchers writing about the Chinese learner/learning in Western culture need to reflect upon their own stances as cross-cultural beings that convey multifaceted cultural meanings. Within a Chinese cultural context, individuals who are exposed to multiple cultures may have internalized two or more cultural frames in which they can interpret different cultural

meanings from different cultural traditions. That means traditional Chinese culture, including Taoism, Confucianism (including different interpretations of Confucianism, such as traditional Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism), or Buddhism, may be only one of those cultural frames internalized by the individuals.

Finally, it is important that studies on Chinese learners/learning can use self-narratives to critically examine the discourses used in Western research literatures (including those written by Western researchers and Chinese researchers writing using Western discourses). In proposing this view of research, I hope that I am not construed as being opposed to various genres of research about Chinese learners and learning. This study is only an initial exploration of using autoethnography and cross-cultural explanation to examine the cross-cultural discourses about Chinese learners/learning. Further research is necessary to pursue a better understanding in this area.

References

- Bochner, A. (2012). On first-person narrative scholarship: Autoethnography as acts of meaning. *Narrative Inquiry*, 22(1), 155–164. doi: 10.1075/ni.22.1.10boc
- Bruner, J. (1994). The “remembered” self. In U. Neisser & R. Fivush (Eds.), *The remembering self: Construction and accuracy in the self-narrative* (pp. 41–45). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Cai, J. F., & Cifarelli, V. (2004). Thinking mathematically by Chinese learners: A cross-national comparative perspective. In L. H. Fan, N.-Y. Wong, J. F. Cai, & S. Q. Li (Eds.), *How Chinese learn mathematics: Perspectives from insiders* (pp. 71–107). River Edge, NJ: World Scientific.
- Chang, H. (2008). *Autoethnography as method*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

- Clandinin, J. Pushor, D. & Orr, A. (2007). Navigating sites for narrative inquiry. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 58(1), 21–35. doi: 10.1177/0022487106296218
- Connelly, M., & Clandinin, J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(5), 2–14. doi: 10.3102/0013189X019005002
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative inquiry. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli, & P. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (3rd ed., pp. 477–487). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum
- Ellingson, L., & Ellis, C. (2008). Autoethnography as constructionist project. In J. A. Holstein & J. F. Gubrium (Eds.), *Handbook of constructionist research* (pp. 445–466). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, MA: AltaMira Press.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1), 1–18.
- DeVault, M. L. (1997). Personal writing in social research: Issues of production and interpretation. In R. Hertz (Ed.), *Reflexivity and voice* (pp. 216–228). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fung, H. (1999). Becoming a moral child: The socialization of shame among young Chinese children. *Ethos*, 27(2), 180–209. doi: 10.1525/eth.1999.27.2.180
- Gan, Z. D. (2009). “Asian learners” re-examined: An empirical study of language learning attitudes, strategies and motivation among mainland Chinese and Hong Kong students. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 30(1), 41–58. doi: 10.1080/01434630802307890
- Goodson, I. F., & Mangan, J. M. (1996). Exploring alternative perspectives in educational research. *Interchange*, 27(1), 41–59. doi: 10.1007/BF01807484

- Hau, K.-T., & Salili, F. (1991). Structure and semantic differential placement of specific cases: Academic causal attributions by Chinese students in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Psychology*, 26(2), 175–193. doi: 10.1080/00207599108247885
- Ho, I. T. (2001). Are Chinese teachers authoritarian? In D. A. Watkins & J. B. Biggs (Eds), *Teaching the Chinese learner: Psychological and pedagogical perspectives* (pp. 99–114). Hong Kong, China: Springer.
- Holloway, S. D. (1988). Concepts of ability and effort in Japan and the United States. *Review of Educational Research*, 58(3), 327–345.
- Huang, J., & Prochner, L. (2003). Chinese parenting styles and children's self-regulated learning. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 18(3), 227–238. doi: 10.1080/02568540409595037
- Klees, S. (2008). Reflections on theory, methods, and practice in comparative and international education. *Comparative Education Review* 52(3), 301–328.
- Kobayashi, Y. (1994). Conceptual acquisition and change through social interaction. *Human Development*, 37(4), 233–241.
- Lao Tzu. (1995). *The works of Laozi: Truth and nature* (8th ed.; L. Cheng, Trans.). Hong Kong, China: The World Book.
- Laschke, C. (2013). Effects of future mathematics teachers' affective, cognitive and socio-demographic characteristics on their knowledge at the end of the teacher education in Germany and Taiwan. *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education*, 11(4), 895–921. doi: 10.1007/s10763-013-9423-y
- Lau, K.-L. (2012). Instructional practices and self-regulated learning in Chinese language classes. *Educational Psychology*, 32(4), 427–450. doi: 10.1080/01443410.2012.674634

- Lau, K.-L., & Chen, X. B. (2013). Perception of reading instruction and self-regulated learning: A comparison between Chinese students in Hong Kong and Beijing. *Instructional Science*, *41*(6), 1083–1101. doi: 10.1007/s11251-013-9265-6
- Law, Y. K., Chan, C. K. K., & Sachs, J. (2008). Beliefs about learning, self-regulated strategies and text comprehension among Chinese children. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, *78*(1), 51–73. doi: 10.1348/000709907X179812
- Li, J. (2002). A cultural model of learning: Chinese “heart and mind for wanting to learn.” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *33*(3), 248–269. doi: 10.1177/0022022102033003003
- Li, J., & Yue, X. D. (2004). Self in learning among Chinese children. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, *104*, 27–43. doi: 10.1002/cd.102
- Lin, Y. T. (1937). *The importance of living*. New York, NY: Reynal & Hitchcock.
- Lin, Y. T. (1938/2002). *My country and my people*. Beijing, China: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Marton, F., Wen, Q. F., & Wong, K. C. (2005). “Read a hundred times and the meaning will appear ...” Changes in Chinese university students’ views of the temporal structure of learning. *Higher Education*, *49*(3), 291–318. doi: 10.1007/s10734-004-6667-z
- Menon, T., Morris, M. W., Chiu, C.-Y., & Hong, Y.-Y. (1999). Culture and construal of agency: Attribution to individual versus group dispositions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *76*(5), 701–717.
- Nash, R. J. (2004). *Liberating scholarly writing: The power of personal narrative*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Neber, H., He, J., Liu, B.-X., & Schofield, N. (2008). Chinese high-school students in physics

classroom as active, self-regulated learners: Cognitive, motivational and environmental aspects.

International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education, 6(4), 769–788. doi:

10.1007/s10763-007-9110-y

Perry, N., Phillips, L., & Dowler, J. (2004). Examining features of tasks and their potential to promote

self-regulated learning. *Teachers College Record*, 106(9), 1854–1878. doi:

10.1111/j.1467-9620.2004.00408.x

Reddick, R., & Sáenz, V. B. (2012). Coming home: “Hermanos Academicos” reflect on past and

present realities as professors at their Alma Mater.” *Harvard Educational Review*, 82(3), 353–380.

Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Salili, F., Chiu, C.-Y., & Lai, S. (2001). The influence of culture and context on students’ achievement

orientations. In F. Salili, C. Y. Chiu, & Y. Y. Hong (Eds.), *Student motivation: The culture and context*

of learning (pp. 221–247). New York, NY: Plenum.

Smorti, A. (2011). Autobiographical memory and autobiographical narrative: What is the relationship?

Narrative Inquiry, 21(2), 303–310. doi: 10.1075/ni.21.2.08smo

Spry, T. (2001). Performing autoethnography: An embodied methodological praxis. *Qualitative Inquiry*,

7(6), 706–732. doi: 10.1177/107780040100700605

Stevenson, H. W., & Stigler, J. W. (1994). *The learning gap: Why our schools are failing and what we*

can learn from Japanese And Chinese education. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Sue, S., & Okazaki, S. (1990). Asian-American educational achievements: A phenomenon in search of

an explanation. *American Psychologist*, 45(8), 913–920.

Tu, W.-M. (1984). Pain and suffering in Confucian self-cultivation. *Philosophy East and West*, 34(4),

379–388.

- Tweed, R. G., & Lehman, D. R. (2002). Learning considered within a cultural context: Confucian and Socratic approaches. *American Psychologist*, *57*(2), 89–99.
- Wang, Q., Pomerantz, E., & Chen, H. C. (2007). The role of parents' control in early adolescents' psychological functioning: A longitudinal investigation in the United States and China. *Child Development*, *78*(5), 1592–1610.
- Weiner, B. (1986). *An attributional theory of motivation and emotion*. New York, NY: Springer-Verlag.
- Witherell, C. (2004). Foreword. In R. J. Nash, *Liberating scholarly writing: The power of personal narrative* (pp. vii–viii). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Yip, K.-S. (2004). Taoism and its impact on mental health of the Chinese communities. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, *50*(1), 25–42. doi: 10.1177/0020764004038758
- Zhang, L. J., & Wu, A. J. (2009). Chinese senior high school EFL students' metacognitive awareness and use of reading strategies. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *21*(1), 37–59.
- Zhang, S. L. (2010). Narrative research of female educational experiences in China. *Frontiers of Education in China*, *5*(4), 596–616. doi: 10.1007/s11516-010-0118-7
- Zhu, Y., & Leung, F. K. S. (2011). Motivation and achievement: Is there an East Asian model? *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education*, *9*(5), 1189–1212. doi: 10.1007/s10763-010-9255-y
- Zimmerman, B. J. (1986). Becoming a self-regulated learner: Which are the key sub-processes? *Contemporary Educational Psychology* *11*(4), 307–313. doi: 10.1016/0361-476X(86)90027-5
- Zimmerman, B. J. (2000). Attaining self-regulation: A social cognitive perspective. In M. Boekaerts, P. R. Pintrich, & M. Zeidner (Eds.), *Handbook of self-regulation* (pp. 13–39). San Diego, CA:

Academic Press.

Zimmerman, B. J. (2002). Becoming a self-regulated learner: An overview. *Theory into Practice, 41*(2), 64–70. doi: 10.1207/s15430421tip4102_2

Zimmerman, B. J. (2008). Investigating self-regulation and motivation: Historical background, methodological developments, and future prospects. *American Educational Research Journal, 45*(1), 166–183. doi: 10.3102/0002831207312909

Zumbrunn, S., Tadlock, J., & Roberts, E. D. (2011). *Encouraging self-regulated learning in the classroom: A review of the literature*. Richmond, VA: Virginia Commonwealth University.