Discovering Researcher Identity through Action Research – A Transformative Journey across Two Cultures

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

York St John University

School of Education, Language and Psychology

March 2022

Declaration

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

I dedicate my thesis work to my loving parents, Yulan Jiang and Yonglong Guo, who made all this possible. My sister and my brother were also always there for me. Without the financial support of my family, I could not have been able to complete this research.

I also dedicate this thesis to my son, Qianyi Ma. His understanding and love are the most precious things to me. He has been an amazing emotional support to me and has never left me alone.

Acknowledgements

I am very much indebted to my supervisors, Dr Joan Walton and Dr Rachel Wicaksono for their invaluable guidance in writing the thesis. I appreciate their constant support that has given me courage and enabled me to face all obstacles along this frustrating PhD journey. Dr Joan Walton provided me with many brilliant ideas. Her passion for research also influenced me. She treats me as a family member and the thought of her always warms my heart. Without her encouragement and interest in my topic, I would not have the confidence in achieving what I have dreamed about.

I would like to thank my participants for their help and participation in my project between 2016 and 2018. Although the collaborative work did not go as smoothly as I had expected, their reflections provided me with valuable information to re-examine the focus of this study from a new a perspective.

My special thanks go to the security team at York St John University. They treated me with friendliness and kindness. They were always happy to open the door to let me enter the Graduate Centre to study particularly at weekends and on holidays. Without their protection, I would not have the courage to stay in the office alone until after 23:00 p.m. for all those countless nights.

My appreciation would be extended to these wonderful friends; Catherine, who has been there for me through this journey, offering friendship and support; Min Liang, a thoughtful and caring friend. Her generosity helped me out of difficulties when I was in desperate struggle financially.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my family for their strong emotional and financial support.

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Abstract

Having been introduced to Action Research in my home country of China, I was awarded substantial funding to study in the UK, and use knowledge gained to the benefit of my university. Whilst in England, I was inspired by the rich array of research methodologies that were used in academic research, and was excited about the possibilities of presenting new ideas to my colleagues. As a consequence, the initial question guiding my doctoral research was to investigate how I could transform the research culture of my home university, using Action Research as the methodology. Unfortunately, due to factors beyond my control, I was not able to continue with that initial plan, and it appeared that my research project had collapsed. However, Action Research is about learning from failure as much as from success, and from the apparent wreckage, new possibilities arose. Introducing autoethnography as a method, I engaged in a narrative account of my experience, which included an extensive revisiting and analysis of the factors that had led to my present position. In the process, I discovered that, throughout the enquiry, my identity as a researcher had been evolving, the nature of which was influenced by transformative learning experiences, both personal and professional, across two very different cultures in the UK and China. As a consequence of these experiences, and the opportunity to explore them through the lens of Action Research, I have been able to establish a theoretical and experiential understanding of what it means to develop an identity as a researcher. At the core of this understanding is a transformed epistemology of how 'research' can be constructed. My contribution to knowledge is this new understanding of the relationship between doing 'research', researcher identity, and the ways in which knowledge is constructed in personal and professional research contexts.

List of Abbreviations

A & HCI	Art & Humanities Citation Index
B&B	bed and breakfast
CNKI	China National Knowledge Infrastructure
COVID-19	Coronavirus-19
CSSCI	Chinese Social Science Index
Dr	Doctor
EI	the Engineering Index
EU	European Union
MA	Master of Arts
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
SCI	Science Citation Index
SSCI	Social Science Citation Index
STEM	science, technology, engineering, and mathematics
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admission Service
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Setting the scene: an overview of my doctoral study and the focus of three Action Research cycles

My journey of pursuing research started from my first visit outside China to a UK [United Kingdom] university. I arrived at Liverpool Hope University in 2011, having been awarded a scholarship from the Chinese Government to study Action Research for a year. This was a result of Action Research being introduced into China by academics from the USA [United States of America] and UK, which led to universities being interested in learning more about what it had to offer. Up to that time, research, as I had experienced it, consisted mainly of teachers reviewing other people's articles, and writing reports on them. The small amount of first-hand research that took place was quantitative, not qualitative.

Having been assigned Dr Joan Walton as my mentor for the year and becoming involved in her work with academics and professionals, I studied and learned a considerable amount about Action Research and saw for myself how it could transform people's lives. At the end of my scholarship year, I returned to China, enthused about what I had learned. It was a time when my university was recognized as one of the key universities by the Department of Education of China. The university was awarded funding from the central government, which was purposely allocated to encourage and financially support the teaching staff to do research. I seized the opportunity and was successful in my application to undertake an MA at Liverpool Hope University. I returned to Liverpool in 2014, and after a year, was successful in gaining a distinction in my Masters qualification.

The learning I gained on the MA increased my knowledge of the different kinds of research, and my excitement as to its possibilities. I was inspired and wanted to similarly inspire my colleagues at my home university. Throughout this time, because the Dean of my faculty had been fully supportive of my bids for funding, and my applications to spend time studying in the UK, I felt under an obligation to share my

learning with my colleagues. So, I decided that I would do what I could to expand understanding of the nature of research with my colleagues in my home university and hope to inspire them in the same way as I had been inspired. As I was a committed action researcher, I decided that I could use Action Research to pursue the research question: 'How can I transform the research culture with my colleagues at my home university?'

Following that decision, I registered with York St John University, and started my PhD in 2016, with this as my initial question. At that time, there was no reason to think that this was an unrealistic aim. Having the support of my Dean, I, in fact, felt that I had an obligation to, in some sense, 'repay' the commitment that had been made to me. I had been privileged in receiving government funding, and it was my responsibility to make sure that I shared my learning with my colleagues.

I began my enquiry with the first cycle of my Action Research, the aim of which was to engage in a reflective account of how I came to be registering for a PhD. This was important, as my study and chosen question had emerged from my experiences over the previous seven years and had provided the foundation for my chosen question. I had already been on a long journey from my first encounter with Action Research, to the point where I was now beginning my doctorate. During that time, my own sense of who I was as a teacher and researcher had been evolving, although at that early stage, I was not consciously thinking or analysing my identity and roles in those terms. I was more preoccupied with giving an explanatory account of Action Research as a methodology, and what it had meant to me as I grew in awareness and confidence as to its meaning and potential during the time between my first arrival in the UK, and my current situation.

The transition from the first cycle to the second one was made when I was accepted on the PhD programme. I began the practical intervention of aiming to create a 'community of research' with my colleagues, and sharing with them my learning and experience, with the intention of inspiring them with new approaches to research. Unfortunately, the Dean who had been so supportive of me left while I was engaged in undertaking cycle 2, and the working conditions for my colleagues and myself changed. There was no longer the enthusiasm for Action Research that there had

been, and the participants who had agreed to join me in my research study found that they did not have the time to look at different ways of doing research. In addition, when I interviewed them or met with them to understand what the issues were, they did not agree to those meetings being recorded, because they feared unintentionally making comments that might be construed as criticisms of the system. Hence, I had little data to transcribe and analyse.

Therefore, due to my lack of data, and the collapse of the ‘community of research’ that I had tried to establish, I was not able to achieve my research aim. It seemed as though my project was a failure. However, at a supervision session, my supervisors reminded me that Action Research was not necessarily about being successful in an enquiry, but rather the aim was to create knowledge about why the enquiry was not successful. Reflecting on 'failure' is as important to the Action Research process as success is. Hence, it was this supervision session that represented the transition from the second to the third Action Research cycle. In doing so, the aim of the third cycle became an analysis of what had happened in the second cycle that had resulted in me being in my present position; and also, to look back over my enquiry, and reflect on what learning had been gained from the whole process.

When I thought about what had happened, it became clear that, in providing an explanatory account of past events, I needed to recall my own experiences of being a teacher in my university, prior to coming to the UK, and prior to gaining knowledge about research. A major issue that had arisen when talking to my colleagues was that they assumed I was still in their lifeworld, and would understand about the nature of the difficulties; whereas I had moved into a very different place. It was clear to me that due to the opportunities I had been given by my Dean and the Chinese Government, I had taken a different path. I had experienced major transformative learning experiences but had essentially forgotten what it was like to be in the life-space of my colleagues nearly 10 years previously, who still saw me in the same lifeworld in which they had remained.

Furthermore, knowing I was going to have to delve so deeply into my own personal story, and in fact my research was grounded in my own story, I selected autoethnographic narrative as the method of enquiry to use in the third action research

cycle. Autoethnography is an approach to research in which the personal is located within the wider social and political contexts. It allows research and writing to seek to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experiences (Ellis 2004). From this, I believed that creating an autoethnographic narrative would allow me to explore the nature of the relationship between my own experiences, and the educational and cultural contexts in which those experiences had been taking place. I realised that my story would not be complete and authentic if I did not include information about my own family background and experiences, as they were relevant to understanding how I had come to find myself in such a difficult situation. A further factor was the retirement of my former Dean, which played a major role in altering the educational context in which I was working when I returned to China.

Moreover, it was during the telling of this story that I discovered the significance of the idea of researcher identity, and the central part it had been playing, although initially unconsciously, in my research journey. Looking back and reviewing what had been happening throughout my engagement in my Action Research enquiry, I realised that my identity as a researcher had been evolving continually - but it was only at this point that I was able to understand and articulate what this process had been about. Furthermore, I recognised that this theme of researcher identity is indeed a key element of Action Research, and differentiates it from other forms of research. While the learning that emerges is rarely identified as an aim from the outset, it is usually through the process of experience, reflection and conceptualisation, that new knowledge is created in ways that cannot be predetermined or predicted. Yet, having become aware of how powerful that process of my evolving researcher identity has been, I have ultimately identified that as a major aspect of my original contribution to knowledge. My hope is that future researchers can learn from my experience, and so be able to consciously integrate it as a concept and experience from an earlier stage of their research journey.

The following two tables provide an overview of the whole process.

Table 1 overview of Action Research cycles

Action Research Cycle	Focus	Methods of Enquiry	Data Collected & Analysed	Conclusion
1.	To reflect on my journey to PhD level through my study of Action Research.	Reflective practice	**Collected:** • new learning of 'collaborative enquiry' • expanded knowledge of Action Research **Analysed:** • sociocultural and educational context of my research • Introduction to Action Research working with USA PhD candidates • Scholarship year in the UK • MA in the UK	With the support and encouragement of my Dean of Education, I took the decision to transform the research culture in my home university by using the knowledge I had gained from the American researchers and my studies in the UK to develop a 'community of research' within an Action Research methodological approach.
2.	To transform the research culture within my home university by establishing a 'community of research' using an Action Research methodological approach.	• Individual interviews • Paired interviews • Group meetings • Reflective diaries • Collaborative enquiry	**Collected:** • written notes from interviews, group workshops, discussions, etc. • accounts of restrictive institutional issues impacting on research • reflective notes on the issues encountered whilst undertaking the research • extremely limited emails to & from participants **Analysed:** • interpretation • some limited member checking • my reflective notes	With the loss of the endorsement of the Dean of Education and insufficient data collected for a comprehensive analysis, I realised that the initial aim of the enquiry could not be achieved. But through lengthy conversation with my supervisors, I recognised the value of examining failure in research. Also, I discovered that autoethnographic narrative would enable me to investigate this within a wider sociocultural and educational context.
3.	To analyse the failure of my initial enquiry and understand how this and the culmination of my past experiences had impacted upon the development of my researcher identity	Autoethnographic narrative • Reflective practice	**Collected & Analysed** • Reflective notes taken in cycle 2 • Re-examination of data collected in cycle 2 • Personal accounts of experiences	My sense of being a researcher and what that means were transformed. Along with this, my ontological & epistemological assumptions and understanding of my positionality within research were transformed.

Table 2 data collection phases in Action Research cycle 2

Phase of Data Collection	Focus	Methods of Enquiry	Task	Result
1.Initial (2016 –2017): Establishing the study	• Planning & organizing actions • Presentation of Action Research to participants	• 6 individual interviews • 3 collaborative group workshops • reflective diaries	To outline the 'community of research' I intended to establish The tasks were: • furthering my knowledge of Action Research methodology • Developing personal knowledge of research methods in qualitative research	Accomplished
2.Intermediary (2017 –2018): Taking action	• Discussing challenges • Proposing improvements • Transmitting personal knowledge of Action Research methodology and methods in qualitative research to participants	• group meetings •collaborative enquiry • reflective diary	• Collaborative writing to apply for research funds	Failure both in moving forward with the collaborative application and in acquiring the research funds
3.Final: (2018-2019) Reflection & Trial of new approaches	• Reflecting on the previous 2 phases & actions taken • changing the group dynamics	• 3 paired interviews • 2 group interviews • reflective diary	• working through an online 'community of research'	Failed to establish the online 'community of research'

1.2 Original contribution to knowledge

As my research enquiry developed, the nature of the contribution to knowledge I originally envisaged the thesis would make altered. At the outset, I believed that the research would involve the establishment of a 'community of research' that would, in time, transform my colleagues' perceptions about what good research has to offer. My hope was that, with the support of my Dean, and knowing that the Chinese Government were providing funding in order to support new ideas about research, I might even have the opportunity to reach beyond the confines of my own university, and offer workshops and seminars to academics in other universities within my region of China. Both using Action Research as a means of achieving this, and also explicitly demonstrating how it could be integrated into practice as a means of improving teaching and learning, would have allowed me to provide a unique contribution to knowledge within my country and its culture.

However, following the retirement of my Dean, the loss of support for what I was aiming to achieve within my university, and the subsequent impoverishment in data collected, mainly due to my participants' reluctance to be recorded and their premature withdrawal from the project, I was not able to pursue this course. Nonetheless, as I moved into my third Action Research cycle, and began to reflect on the learning I had gained so far, a new, timely and pertinent contribution to knowledge became apparent. This arose from an emergent understanding that the journey I had been on was one in which I discovered that my sense of researcher identity was evolving, and indeed, epitomised the journey I had made so far.

Thus, this contribution to knowledge is an articulation of how the process of Action Research resulted in the discovery of my evolving sense of researcher identity, which was informed by the learning that emerged from my cross-cultural experiences of teaching and research. I did not become consciously aware that this process of my evolving identity was taking place until I began my third Action Research cycle and was reflecting back on the first two cycles. In doing so, the main realisation that came to me, as I looked back to the time when I first heard about Action Research, was how much I had changed in terms of my own awareness of my identity as a researcher.

Moreover, as I considered this within my autoethnographic narrative – that is, locating my own experience within the wider educational and cultural contexts in which I was researching – I realised this had a relevance far beyond my own experience, and constituted an original contribution to knowledge. This knowledge is of increasing value, as we are currently experiencing a period of global, cross-cultural, post-graduate study which has been described in terms such as 'wandering scholars' (The Economist 2005). In other words, the impetus of students to undertake international post-graduate studies is increasing and thereby has become an important trending issue. Furthermore, underpinning this matter is how these students construct knowledge and their researcher identity. Certainly, cultures that are predominantly grounded in rote styles of learning and teaching, and in which knowledge is conceptualised as a purely intellectual activity to be passively absorbed, will produce students with very differing constructions of knowledge and researcher identity to cultures in which learning, teaching and knowledge are seen to dynamically inform each other, in a mutually informing relational process. In addition, exposure from one culture to another invariably promotes reflection and comparison between what was known and what is new. Consequently, in the face of this trending issue, this thesis contributes to knowledge a first-hand account of how one international student, straddling two very dissimilar cultures, formulated a research identity that had at its core a transformed epistemology of how knowledge is constructed. In the process, I establish a theoretical and experiential understanding of what it means to develop identity as a researcher that may be of value to other international students finding themselves bridging two cultures.

1.3 Methodology and methods

The methodology of my project is Action Research conducted across three cycles (see Table 1). Recent studies have witnessed a surge of research on teachers' activities in the classroom, including teaching and research, and its influence on their practice and theoretical beliefs (Richards and Farrell 2005; Sharp 2007; Borg 2013). Much focus has been paid to Action Research, which is believed to enhance teachers' research skills and teaching effectiveness and facilitate their professional learning in their work contexts (Burns 2010). In this way, it is viewed as a significant form of research into practice 'that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work' (McNiff and Whitehead 2006, p.7). Moreover, professionals use it to undertake

research in a specific workplace with those working there, because Action Research 'implies close co-operation and interaction between researcher(s) and subjects' (Hancock 1997, p.12), and 'involves change experiments on real problems in social system' (Sung-Chan and Yuen-Tsang 2008, p.54). Clearly, this infers that Action Research is a research methodology that is problem-centred, focusing on issues that are practice bound and concern either an individual or a group (Cochran-Smith and Lythe 1993). Therefore, Elliott (1991, p.54) concludes that Action Research 'seems to be the best approach for teachers to improve their practice and situations through working with others'.

In the first of my Action Research cycles (Cycle 1), my aim was to relate the experiences and learning that led me to my PhD research question, thereby contextualising the origins of my research. Therefore, in this cycle (see chapter 3), I provide a detailed account of Action Research as a methodology, including its history within China and its different forms.

Next, Cycle 2 outlines the actions I took, with the aim of transforming the research culture in my faculty within my home university in China. These included semi-structured interviews, focus group meetings, and keeping a reflective diary. More specifically, prompted by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestion of their suitability to Action Research, the qualitative data I collated was predominantly sourced from informal and unstructured discussions, participants' reflective logs, and reviews of my own records and reflective diaries.

Regrettably, due to ethically abiding by my participants wishes not to be recorded, I did not acquire sufficient data from these methods of enquiry to enable me to continue with my original research question. Nevertheless, my reflections on this difficulty did lead me to an analysis of why problems had arisen, and this process of reflection and analysis, along with consultation with my supervisors, proved pivotal in the progress of my Action Research project. More specifically, reminded by my supervisors that reflections on 'failure' are an important part of the Action Research process, I was able to transition to my third Action Research cycle. So, the aim of the third cycle became a retrospective appraisal and analysis of what had happened during the process of my

research study, in order to understand what had been learnt and how my learning could contribute to a wider body of knowledge.

With the shift in focus in cycle 3, I adopted autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry, details of which are explained in-depth in chapter 5. In doing so, the data collected in the previous cycles provided the foundation and insights for the final stage of my research. However, I now added to the data, by including an account of those parts of my personal and professional experiences that I needed to draw on in order to fully explore why my original research enquiry had collapsed. Equally, they allowed me to reflect on, and articulate, the part played in this process by my own constructions of teaching and researching within the wider sociocultural roles I hold. Therefore, as Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011, p.272) described, I used autoethnographic narrative as a method 'to research and write' in a way 'that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) to understand cultural experience (ethno)'.

In summary, cycles 1 and 2 of my Action Research study address the planning, progress, and eventual breakdown of the original research project, which had set out to inform and change the research culture within my university, while cycle 3 analyses and discusses how the sociocultural constructions, values, and issues that underpinned them influenced the dissolution of the first research question. Ultimately, by writing my narrative in cycle 3, I came to locate the 'failure' of the Action Research question I set out to answer within the historical and sociocultural contexts surrounding my life. In so doing, the interrelationship between sociocultural and personal experience made the exploration of experience and knowledge a crucial and valuable research method (Gans 1999; Fine 2003).

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The design of this Action Research project is structured as below.

Chapter 1 introduces the readers to the setting of the study. It reflects the theoretical strategy, methodological framework, and methods of enquiry applied in the research. I also outline my original contribution to knowledge.

Chapter 2 further examines the dimensions of the research. The strategy and methodology in the project are investigated but through the lenses of the transforming ontological and epistemological perspectives that underpinned them.

Chapter 3 is the first Action Research cycle, which is a reflective account of how I came to begin my PhD. It culminates in the creation of my initial research question. This extended and deep reflection on the cultural, geographic, and historic contexts in which my research was initially located is an essential starting point for the reader to fully appreciate the reasons underlying the formation of my research question. In doing this, I explain how I came to decide on the value of gaining knowledge about how to transform the research culture in my home institution and influence my colleagues in China.

Chapter 4, the second Action Research cycle, records how I tried to transform the research culture in my home university in China. It includes an analysis of the limited data collected in this Action Research cycle, and explains the reason why the original research aim failed to be achieved.

Chapter 5 continues to outline the process of my Action Research project when it enters the third cycle. In this cycle, autoethnographic narrative was used as a method of enquiry to investigate what I now realised had been taking place over an extended period of time: that is, the development of my researcher identity underpinned by my transforming ontology, epistemology, ethical considerations, and positionality within research. It locates the construction of my researcher identity within the broader social, cultural, and educational cross-cultural contexts in which I had been living and working.

Chapter 6 Synthesizes the reflections, themes, and key learnings from this study and discusses the limitations. Its importance for future work is also suggested.

Chapter 7 Concludes the thesis by summarizing the answers to the research questions. It is my final reflection on the importance and value this study has made to me academically and personally and has the potential to make to others, including those undertaking cross-cultural studies and those involved in their work and care.

Chapter 2

Dimensions of the Research

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I articulated and clarified the theoretical strategy, methodological framework, and predominant methods of enquiry of my research. In doing so, I presented Action Research as the overarching methodology of my thesis and autoethnographic narrative as the method of enquiry, which adopted in cycle 3 significantly influenced the writing style of the thesis.

In this chapter, the strategy and methodologies employed in the project are again considered but through the lenses of the transforming ontological and epistemological perspectives that underpinned them. In doing so, an account of my research planning and conceptualisations, methods of enquiry, data usage and analysis, ethical considerations, and my changing positionality within the project are outlined through the perspectives of my developing, holistic researcher identity, and my transforming constructs of the nature of subject matter suitable for research.

2.2 My ontological and epistemological perspectives

Ontology is the branch of philosophy that studies concepts related to existence and reality. While in a scientific context it includes how humanity has categorised entities into groups or sets, through the lens of the social sciences its parameters include how individuals perceive and construct their worlds. Moreover, these perceptions and constructions form belief systems that reflect an individual's interpretation regarding what constitutes facts and reality. In this way, ontology embraces both sociocultural and individual perspectives. Hence, given that my Action Research project ultimately addresses the development of my researcher identity across two diverse cultures, the significance of both these strands to this study is clear. As Klakegg suggests:

> The researcher should be aware of his or her choices of positions towards the following issues; the relation between theory and practice; research and knowledge; epistemology (theory of knowledge- what is true and what is not true); and ontology (how things really are). On deciding on a specific research strategy for his or her work, an assessment of the protentional positions should be done and a set of choices has to follow as a consequence (2016, p.47).

Meanwhile, epistemology is the theory of knowledge, particularly in terms of methods used, validity, reliability, and the distinction between fact and opinion (Terman 2014; Maynard 1994), or as described by Crotty (1998, p.3), epistemology is as inherent in the theoretical perspectives as ‘a way of looking at the world and making sense of it’. However, in my opinion, while epistemology and ontology are differentiated, they are inevitably intertwined. For example, my belief system reflecting what I constitute as a fact and reality, impacts directly upon what I consider to be knowledge appropriate and worthy of research.

In undertaking my Action Research project, my ontological and epistemological conceptualisation, positionality, and constructs relating to ethical considerations, validity, and reliability were subtly but significantly transformed. While my ontology has consistently remained interpretive with the construction that my life experiences are rooted in my sociocultural perceptions and subsequent responses/actions, this perception has grown in profundity. For example, in cycle 1 when planning my Action Research study, I undertook my project as a singularity, hoping to influence the plurality that was my colleagues. In doing so, I perceived their approaches to research, as mine had been, rooted in our shared sociocultural experiences. Simultaneously, I believed that my exposure to and studies in Action Research with those from different cultures, had placed me outside the world of my colleagues and went into cycle 2 of my research constructing myself as an ‘outsider’. Conversely, this was not a perception that my colleagues shared and the discrepancy in our viewpoints was, in my opinion, a significant part of the collapse of the original enquiry experienced through their eventual withdrawal from my project. Thus, while I maintained an interpretive construction of my life, at the pivotal stage in my enquiry, the impact of the interpersonal dynamic became more apparent and with it, the intrapersonal factors behind it loomed larger. In other words, my belief that my experiences were rooted in my sociocultural perceptions and subsequent responses/actions, moved from a purely sociological construction to one now including the personal and psychological. This progression was evidenced in my reflective diary. For example, in April 2017, when cycle 1 was beginning to transition into cycle 2, I wrote:

> And following closely is the question: Where do I look for my primary source of information? My own inner experience feels far more dynamic, alive, and meaningful than any observation of things I have seen or experienced. People

> live in the external world, being creative and productive, particularly in terms of relationships with others. How can I develop if I focus on the "self'? (15th April 2017)

Inevitably, given the interconnections between ontology and epistemology, the shift in my ontology had a transformative impact upon my construction of the nature of subject matter worthy of research. While my earlier interpretive ontological viewpoint constructed my life experiences as being rooted in my sociocultural perceptions and subsequent responses/actions, my epistemological assumptions were that knowledge was academic and professionally bounded. It was an external, stable commodity to be scrutinized and investigated. Additionally, my construct of a researcher was somewhat narrower because I perceived a contest between being a teacher and a researcher as the demands of satisfactorily fulfilling both roles seemed overwhelming. Yet, prior to my doctoral journey, my exposure to Action Research and its fundamental premise of investigating one's own practice had already begun to enable my perceived division between my professional and academic roles to start moving towards resolution. Knowledge, for me, while remaining both academic and professional, was rapidly expanding to embrace my practice, and becoming a living, developing entity.

In many ways, this shift in my epistemological perspective came to fruition while I was conducting cycles 1 and 2 of my Action Research project. For example, in my reflective diary in October 2016, when I was engaged in the initial phase (phase 1) of cycle 2, I wrote:

> I found myself engaged in actions that were making changes in my own perspectives. (20th October 2016)

I now believe that this occurred in the dissonance I observed others experiencing as they struggled to meet the demands of teaching and researching, while holding the same mindset that had previously been mine i.e., that teaching and researching are combatants competing with each other for one's time and energy. Alternatively, I recognised that in coming to see them as one through the lens of Action Research, practice itself had become the essential arena of research, and in this transformation of perspective, time had been created and my energy enthused. I know now that this was the driving force behind cycles 1 and 2 of my Action Research project. I wanted to identify the obstacles that my colleagues in my university currently face in undertaking research, and the factors that had caused these challenges, because

these had been my obstacles, too. Then, after acquiring some new insights of the varied methodologies used by academia both in the USA and the UK, I wanted to share my newly found enthusiasm for knowledge as a living, dynamic, professional, and academic entity with my colleagues, by creating a research community in my home university. While I believed that this would enable them to theorize and improve their professional practice, I equally hoped that it would diminish many of the challenges they faced by reframing the battle between practice and research as a partnership.

Besides, there was yet another stage in the transformation of my ontological and epistemological perspectives which was to come as I undertook my Action Research project. While this came to culmination in cycle 3 when I adopted autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry, it is clear from reading my reflective diaries that it was a process that was already emerging from my reading and experiences. For example, as early as February 2018, when undertaking the final phase of cycle 2, I had written the following in my journal:

> Although I was specifically following a personal journey of research, I assumed that the knowledge I generated would in some way be separate from my experience. As a result of my enquiry, I would acquire a body of knowledge which would help me place my personal experience in a wider context, with the knowledge being objectively about and separate from the experience. However, what I discovered was that it became increasingly important to integrate experience and knowledge so that the two mutually and dialogically informed each other. (17th February 2018)

Thus, when in cycle 3, my ontology, while still deeply rooted in an interpretative, social-constructivist construction, took on a new dimension, that of my internal, psychological world, I now recognise that the pathway to this transformation was already being paved. In other words, the external, relational world, in which cycles 1 and 2 were conducted, were already preparing, in some way, to be enhanced with introspective investigations predominantly based on self-reflection and reflection upon the events and disappointments of the previous two cycles. This brought about a pivotal step in the transformation of my epistemological perspective. Henceforth, for me, knowledge worthy of research would not only be confined to the boundaries of the professional and academic domains, but would include the personal, acted upon by sociocultural

forces, and acting from psychological drives. In this way, my life and its lived experiences became the worthy subject of enquiry (Marshall 1999).

Thus, as my ontology and epistemology evolved, I went from one situating myself relationally to others within my research, to one introspectively investigating my cross-cultural journey from teacher to teacher-researcher and finally to one for whom my life and its lived experiences are the enquiry (Marshall 1999). With this fundamental transformation, I was able to arrive at a new harmonious and holistic identity in which all my roles, inclusive of all my professional, academic, social, and familial selves, feed and nourish my identity as a researcher.

2.3 Research planning & development: transformative dimensions

There are two equally important dimensions that are inseparably intertwined in this section. The first dimension clarifies how each Action Research cycle of the research journey is articulated with the next and demonstrates the progress of developing an identity as researcher. It does so from the perspective of the researcher as the agent of planning, action, and change. Meanwhile, the second dimension illuminates how my ontological and epistemological perspectives and constructions evolved and ultimately transformed through the phases of my research journey and how this shaped my researcher identity. Hence, the second dimension is depicting the researcher as the one acted upon by the transformative process of conducting Action Research. These two dimensions of my research are illustrated in Tables 1 and 3. Table 1 is presented here again, because it illustrates the first dimension of my research.

Table 3 (repeat of Table 1) Dimension 1-overview of Action Research cycles

Action Research Cycle	Focus	Methods of Enquiry	Data Collected & Analysed	Conclusion
1.	To reflect on my journey to PhD level through my study of Action Research.	Reflective practice.	**Collected:** • new learning of 'collaborative enquiry' • expanded knowledge of Action Research **Analysed:** • sociocultural and educational context of my research • my introduction to Action Research working with USA PhD candidates • my scholarship year in the UK • my MA in the UK	With the support and encouragement of my Dean of Education, I took the decision to transform the research culture in my home university by using the knowledge I had gained from the American researchers and my studies in the UK to develop a 'community of research' within an Action Research methodological approach.
2.	To transform the research culture within my home university by establishing a 'community of research' using an Action Research methodological approach.	• Individual interviews • Paired interviews • Group meetings • Reflective diaries • Collaborative enquiry	**Collected:** • written notes from interviews, group workshops, discussions, etc. • accounts of restrictive institutional issues impacting on research • reflective notes on the issues encountered whilst undertaking the research • extremely limited emails to & from participants **Analysed:** • interpretations and • some limited member checking • my reflective notes	With the loss of the endorsement of the Dean of Education and insufficient data collected for a comprehensive analysis, I realised that the initial aim of the enquiry could not be achieved. But through lengthy conversation with my supervisors, I recognised the value of examining failure in research. Also, I discovered that autoethnographic narrative would enable me to investigate this within a wider sociocultural and educational context.
3.	To analyse the failure of my initial enquiry and understand how this and the culmination of my past experiences had impacted upon the development of my researcher identity	Autoethnographic narrative • Reflective practice	**Collected & Analysed** • Reflective notes taken in cycle 2 • Re-examination of data collected in cycle 2 • Personal accounts of experiences	My sense of being a researcher and what that means was transformed. Along with this, my ontological & epistemological assumptions and understanding of my positionality within research were transformed.

Table 4 Dimension 2-development of researcher identity

through the lenses of changes in my ontological & epistemological perspectives

	Ontological Perspective	Ontological Constructs	Epistemological Constructs	Valid Data Source	Ethical Considerations	Reflections & Conclusions
Pre-AR	INTERPRETATIVE: life experiences are rooted in my sociocultural perceptions and subsequent responses/actions.	Sociocultural influences: The world acts on me and I respond acting back on it.	Knowledge: an external, stable commodity to be studied and investigated.	Academic	As prescribed within academic books	Tensions between academic and professional roles i.e., teaching versus researching
Post-AR Pre-cycle 1	INTERPRETATIVE: life experiences are rooted in my sociocultural perceptions and subsequent responses/actions.	Sociocultural influences: The world acts on me and I respond acting back on it.	Knowledge: an external, stable commodity to be studied and investigated.	Academic & Professional	As prescribed within academic books	Moving towards resolution of tensions between teaching & researching as practice becomes a valid field of research.
cycles 1 & 2	INTERPRETATIVE & RELATIONAL DYNAMIC: life experiences are rooted in my sociocultural perceptions and subsequent responses/actions situated within interpersonal bonds and structures with others.	Sociocultural influences & interpersonal dynamics: The world acts on me and I respond acting back on it within relational bonds and structures with others.	Knowledge: both an external commodity and a living, developing entity.	Academic & Professional	As prescribed within academic books	Teaching and researching now intertwined.
cycle 3	INTERPRETATIVE: with two strands 1. The relational dynamic 2. The internal psychological world	Socioculturel influences & intrapersonal factors - The world and I act on each other within relational bonds and structures that are underpinned by a dynamic inner world.	Knowledge: living, evolving and multifaceted.	Academic Professional Personal	As prescribed within academic books but now infused with a deeper, empathetic appreciation of interpersonal & intrapersonal issues.	Every aspect of life is now the inquiry.

2.3.1 Pre-Action Research

Before Action Research, as shown in Table 1, my teacher and researcher roles were held in a conflicting tension towards each other. The demands of the former made the performance of the latter seem unfeasible. Yet, the requirement set by the Chinese Government (Ministry of Education 2010) that English language teachers should conduct research to improve their practice, and the buttressing of this by most universities with an increase in status, salary, and bonuses for those who successfully published their research, led to an unhealthy research culture within which research can be of poor quality, limited in methodology and content or even fabricated (Xie and Postlethwaite 2019). While this was the socio-political, educational context in which I worked, the sociocultural environment of the China I grew up in had nurtured a Confucian respect for authority. These socio-political, educational, and cultural experiences and mindsets were the foundations in which my ontological and epistemological perspectives were grounded before my initiation to Action Research. As such, they had a significant influence upon my constructions of research and what constituted research knowledge. Indeed, pre-2007 while seeing myself as a teacher, I saw knowledge as purely academic in nature and form. Moreover, in the years when I was a novice teacher, I felt intimidated by the concept of research, believing it a remote entity, far removed from my classroom practice and the occupation of 'the experts'. It was a thing contained in books, passed down from one generation to the next, stable, and rigid.

2.3.2 Post-Action Research: Pre-Cycle 1 straddling identities as a teacher and a researcher

However, as a result of learning Action Research through my engagement in it, my construction of what constituted knowledge expanded to include my lived practice. In other words, I began to straddle both identities as a teacher and a researcher. Furthermore, as I did so, becoming confident and self-assured in my ability to be a researcher, I became more reflective, creative, and open to changing aspects of my practice. Additionally, perhaps inevitably, this led to an increased focus on cultivating my teaching strategies and autonomy in choosing my own research interests rather than on dry transmission of knowledge to either my students or through my research. As shown in Table 3, although with hindsight I can recognise that my ontological perspective, at this stage, remained somewhat static, my construction of what

constituted valid data for research purposes had expanded. So, I began to recognise my interest in Action Research as an opportunity to develop my professional learning. After going through years of struggling as a novice teacher, I realized that I needed more connection with knowledge outside the textbooks and my former, unquestioned practice so that I could expand my vision and promote my teaching competency.

2.3.3 Cycles 1 & 2 merging identities of teacher-researcher with collaborative research leadership

Through my previous Action Research studies, by the time I came to undertake cycle 1 of my Action Research doctorate project, my ontological perspective had shifted from a purely interpretative one to include a relational dynamic. I still held that my life experiences were rooted in my sociocultural perceptions and subsequent actions and responses to external events and circumstances, but now I constructed these as being simultaneously situated within interpersonal bonds and structures with others (see Table 3). From this subtle shift arose my attempt to establish a 'community of research' with my colleagues. Therefore, in my new identity as a unified teacher-researcher, I was now reaching beyond the isolation of a lone researcher to a collaborative role with colleagues.

Consequently, in cycle 2, as my interpretative ontological perspective embraced a relational dimension, I was motivated to share ideas and resources with my colleagues and invite them to respond with frank and open comments and suggestions. Initially the aim of building a 'community of research' appeared to enrich my communication with my colleagues and from their warmth of interest, I was encouraged to reflect on my own research practice and to make changes I considered necessary and helpful. Hence, I engaged in new forms of practice and interaction with other teacher educators, and my sense of identity as a researcher-practitioner flourished.

Furthermore, while my construction of what constituted valid data for research purposes had expanded with my earlier Action Research enquiries, my epistemological viewpoint of the nature of knowledge now also developed. Hence, while, at this early stage in my doctoral journey, I still considered it a book-bound, expert-led commodity, the Action Research focus on practice was forging a new construct of knowledge as a living, evolving entity.

Moreover, the data sourced and collected in the first two cycles of my Action Research project reflect the progression of my altering ontology and emerging new conceptualisation of knowledge. For example, in cycle 1, using reflection as my method of enquiry, my data was collated from academic sources, and consisted of my knowledge of Action Research gleaned from different academic experiences. In cycle 2, both the methods used and the data collated reflected widening and increasingly, relational sources. Thus, while reflection remained an essential aspect of my enquiry, the methods used also included semi-structured interviews, whole group meetings, and collaborative enquiry accompanied by hand-written records because my participants were greatly concerned about actual recordings. I understood this concern to be due to an insurmountable trepidation regarding openly making comments that might accidently criticise the system in which we worked. Although this led to an impoverished collection of data, it was nonetheless professionally sourced and contained the records of my discussions with my participants, our accounts of our institutional restrictions, and my self-reflections on the frustrations encountered that led to the collapse of the first enquiry.

Nevertheless, while this reflects a changing perspective of knowledge with data being sourced from both academic and professional sources, it was still evidencing ontological and epistemological assumptions rooted in a restricted, authoritative worldview. More specifically, the data analysis undertaken exemplifies this as it was limited to interpreting and some member checking where possible. Indeed, even the reflections undertaken were primarily academic, being focused on my analysis of my role and cultural and educational macro events, while the relational issues within my project were bringing it to collapse.

Furthermore, I did not consistently perceive the progression of cycle 2 as positive and encouraging. Given the contextual challenges, such as institutional requirements, priority of time management, and personal interests embedded in the work environment, I felt that my identity as a researcher was sometimes contested. For example, realizing that with the change of leadership within my faculty, little support could now be expected, I found it difficult to exercise my sense of being a research project leader. Conversely, I now realise that this sense of dejection may have also been rooted in my limited constructions of my identity as a researcher and the nature

of knowledge valid for research. In other words, while my professional and academic identities were, at this stage, more or less, intertwined, I was still looking predominantly to outward sources to define and acknowledge my researcher identity, and for data as expounded above. While I reflected on my practice and my research, the personal dynamic was only considered in terms inferior or, at most, touching onto these.

Also, through the emphasis of Action Research on achieving informed planning for future actions through reflection, I now recognise the emergence of contemplative thought processes that would develop more strongly and pronounced in cycle 3, when an autoethnographic narrative was adopted as a method of enquiry. For example, in cycle 1, I analysed my understanding of Action Research through an in-depth reflection on three pertinent academic life events: 1. Participation in an Action Research study conducted by USA PhD candidates; 2. My scholarship year in the UK; and 3. My MA (see Table 1). In addition, in cycle 2, while the meagre data collected and analysed was done so in a prescribed, systematic way, I simultaneously probed the challenges and conflicting roles I held in a way that began to combine academic theory with personal experience. Therefore, it is clear to me that even in cycle 2, I had already begun to develop a more inclusive and holistic sense of researcher identity in which knowledge suitable to be collated and analysed can be drawn from academic, professional, and personal sources.

2.3.4 Cycle 3: arriving at a holistic, inclusive researcher identity

The end of Cycle 2 was a pivotal moment in my Action Research project. In the discussions with supervisors and in-depth reflection undertaken, my entire ontological and epistemological perspectives were to be transformed. The collapse of the original project I had designed and set out to do was devasting, but in examining the causes of the breakdown, it was essential that my interpretative ontology admit the dimension of the intrapersonal alongside the interpersonal. Moreover, given that, in my opinion, one's ontological and epistemological perspectives are interwoven, the transformation in my ontology simultaneously provoked a change in my epistemology. Knowledge was no-longer solely 'out there' to be acquired, observed or even, as in my professional role, experienced. In turning from reporting the story of research, to telling a story researched, knowledge transformed into a living, evolving, multifaceted entity suitable to an autoethnographic narrative method of enquiry. Furthermore, in

conducting my autoethnographic narrative enquiry, I came to know clearly another dimension of the world that had acted upon me, and upon which I had acted, within the relational bonds and structures connecting me to others i.e., my intrapersonal, dynamic, inner world.

So, through my work in cycle 2 with my participants, I had crossed the boundary of my own educational and career background and challenged myself in different research cultures. Then, in cycle 3, to understand the difficulties that had emerged in cycle 2 and the development of my researcher identity, I engaged in a meaningful, constructive journey exploring the nature of knowledge and the meaning of my life as a researcher. Ultimately, in writing the story researched, my life was transformed into the research and the enquiry.

As a consequence, my research sheds light on the researcher's identity construction and professional development through participation in Action Research, while the process of identity construction is participative through engagement, imagination, and alignment; and it is deeply entangled with the issue of negotiability at play. Negotiability refers to the 'ability, facility, and legitimacy to contribute to, take responsibility for, and shape the meanings that matter within a social configuration' (Wenger 1998, p.197), which emphasizes that people make sense of their own experiences and identities through negotiation and reconstruction within institutional and social structures (Veen and Lasky 2005). Clearly, through boundary crossings, I investigated my experiences and ways of thinking, negotiated meanings to improve practice, and created new forms of engagement (Snoek 2013), which had a significant influence on the formation of my identities. Following this line of thinking, holding all my identities within myself, including the familial, professional, and academic alongside gender and ethnicity, I developed a shared form of practice and engaged in identity construction and reconstruction. Thus, my academic, professional and personal experiences have had a transformative impact on me.

2.4 Positionality

The term positionality describes both an individual's world view (Holmes 2020) and 'reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given study'

(Savin-Baden and Major 2013, p.71). It influences how research is conducted, its outcomes, and results (Rowe 2014). As is identified by Foote and Bartell:

> The positionality that the researchers bring to their work, and the personal experiences through which positionality is shaped, may influence what researchers may bring to research encounters, their choice of processes, and their interpretation of outcomes (2011, p.46).

Therefore, within my research, I refer to positionality as the stance I occupied or assumed in relation to the sociocultural and educational context of my study. In doing so, I reflect upon my changing stance with my participant group, and I outline how this change was underpinned by transformations in my ontological and epistemological perspectives and my evolving researcher identity, because at a profound level, these altered how I interpreted my positionality within my study. So, whilst the issue of my positionality within my research is touched upon in chapters 1 and 5 and examined in chapter 6, where my theorising on my insider, outsider, and inbetweener roles is discussed, here it is considered in the light of these transformations.

At the outset, I truly appreciated the impact of my sociocultural and educational roles upon my project. I knew myself to be a divorced, single mother who had risen from an underprivileged childhood in Northern China to become a teacher in a respected university, and then to an aspiring researcher across cultural, language, and land divides. In other words, I knew my sociocultural and educational roles as outlined in textbooks and academic sources, but I had yet to comprehend and appreciate the correlation between these external lenses onto my 'beingness' and my own, personal, researcher lenses, such as my ontological and epistemological perspectives and the theoretical beliefs and values they nurtured.

In this way, I entered cycle 1 of my Action Research project with a perspective of my positionality within my research limited to the external, sociocultural roles I was cast in. Furthermore, it is from this lack of profound insight into my personal constructs and their place in my research that I believe I made a significant error of judgement from the outset. I am referring to the tensions created by my view of myself as, first an outsider in my research and then as an 'inbetweener'. With hindsight, it is evident that the fundamental nature of my initial Action Research project, creating a 'community of research' within my home university, cast me in the role of an insider. Yet, in cycle 1,

approaching my study from ontological and epistemological perspectives that narrowly perceived knowledge and research as the substance of academic and/or professional enquiry and with only an external viewpoint on my positionality within my research, I misconstrued my position within my project as that of an outsider. In doing so, I did cognitively recognise my insider status as one amongst my colleagues and our collective sociocultural context. Regrettably, though, I invested the ideas I brought from a different educational and cultural tradition with greater significance than the relational and personal bonds between my colleagues and myself. I saw myself as one coming back into my home university with research ideas that, originating in a different sociocultural and educational environment, placed me in the position of an outsider. In other words, given my ontological and epistemological perspectives at the time, I was conducting cycle 1 of my Action Research project, the authority of my acquired knowledge and insight into alternative research methodologies held sway over my other considerations.

Following on from this, I went into cycle 2 with the construction that I was an outsider in my Action Research project, and that the social and professional roles I held were the essential substance of my positionality. Then, as the second cycle unfolded, I believe that these perspectives caused relational difficulties that ultimately led to their transformation. Clearly, my colleagues, from the perspective of familiarity, continued to view me as one of them i.e., an insider. However, at this stage, I did not consider familiarity and the shared experiences and meanings it imparts as significant aspects of my positionality within my enquiry. Therefore, I found myself straddling two very different conceptualisations of my place in my study, and holding these two roles simultaneously was incompatible. It created tensions within my relationships and collaboration with my colleagues, in which as the outsider I sought information from them, that as an insider they presumed I already had the answers to. This diminished the data I could collect, reducing it to an inadmissible quantity. Likewise, it was a significant cause of the erosion of my colleague-participants' confidence in me and our joint project.

Hence, through my reflections during cycle 2, I academically sought to understand this dilemma. During this aspect of my research, I found the proposal of a state described as the 'inbetweener' which is applicable to cross-cultural research (Arthur 2010;

Thomson and Gunter 2011; Milligan 2014). The proponents of this term recommend that researchers engaged in cross-cultural research should attempt to position themselves between the cultures and the two opposing roles of insider and outsider. Following this advice, I did attempt to do so, but it was my experience that the shifting positions I tried to manoeuvre ultimately had a detrimental effect on my initial enquiry. Equally, now, I would argue that in positioning oneself between cultures and roles, one must admit as essential the consideration of the multiplicity of the fluid, subjective, and relational features that I did not consider in cycle 2 of my research.

Nevertheless, from the devastating impact of the mounting crisis of cycle 2, in which the data diminished, and my colleague-participants withdrew from our collaborative enquiry, I was forced to expand my ontological perspective to accommodate the shockwaves of the collapse of my initial project. My ontological perspective now took on a relational dynamic in which I perceived my experiences, still considered rooted in my sociocultural perceptions and subsequent responses/actions, also situated within my interpersonal bonds/structures with others. Simultaneously, in the conflict between who I academically saw myself to be, and who my colleague-participants saw me as, and even within the tension of trying to straddle them both, my construct of knowledge was obliged to transform, because these cognitive ideas had foundered along with my initial project. For me, henceforth, knowledge could no longer be a purely external commodity, and neither could my positionality within my current or future research be understood solely in the terms of my ascribed roles within society and my profession. The Action Research reflection I undertook in cycle 2 had required a very different type of knowledge i.e., knowledge that was living within experience itself, and as such had a developing, transforming impact upon my entire psyche. This in itself required a reframing of my positionality.

Subsequently, as my ontological and epistemological perspectives shifted, by the conclusion of my second Action Research cycle, I could no longer sustain a singular, linear perspective of my positionality in relation to the sociocultural and educational contexts of my study. In other words, where I had previously understood these contexts predominantly in relation to the external influences from the past, including the historical and traditional aspects of the educational system within China, and as my roles within society and my profession, I now recognised that my current, living

experiences, and their multidimensional relational exchanges across different cultures and educational systems, warranted equal investigation (Holmes 2020; Crotty 1998). From one constructing a researcher identity through lenses that perceived social and professional roles fixed by their historical and sociocultural submersion, I was now aware of a skeleton composed of interpersonal and intrapersonal factors that were part of the hidden structure of my research and that were fluid and dynamic. In my reflective diary, I can trace the naissance of this transformation within the questions I had begun to ask. For example, in May 2017, when phase 1 of cycle 2 was progressing into phase 2, I had written:

> However, faced with uncertainty, I am not able to get answers to fundamental questions, such as changing the culture at home university.
>
> - If I cannot change from the outside, can I change from the inside? What is the "inside" to me?
> - Are they cultural things? Personal habits? Attitudes? Beliefs?
> - Am I able to make things work in practice?
> - What are the standards that I can use to evaluate progress and change? (8th May 2017)

All the same, as cycle 2 concluded and my newly found insights were dawning, I knew that the original enquiry was thwarted. The collected data was too thin and impoverished to sustain either enquiry or analysis. While the changes in my ontological and epistemological perspectives, and my positionality within my research, had widened, embracing broader, more inclusive, fluid definitions, the substance of my enquiry had dwindled and evaporated. Thus, in cycle 3, inspired by the reflections of cycle 2, a new direction in my research process was pursued in which, as my researcher identity developed to encompass the personal dimension alongside the academic and professional, the hidden aspects of my research, such as my world view and epistemological assumptions, were integrated into my positionality within my Action Research project, using autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry.

All in all, during the course of my doctoral journey, my constructs of my positionality within my research were transformed. They went from solely appreciating the impact of my sociocultural and educational roles, influenced by personal circumstances, such

as the fact that I was a divorced, single mother who had risen from an underprivileged childhood in Northern China to become a teacher in a respected university, and then to an aspiring researcher across cultural, language, and land divides, to an awareness and appreciation of the fluid, subjective, and contextual aspects that shaped my final thesis.

2.5 Changing ethical perspective

As my ontology and epistemology were transformed to include intrapersonal and introspective dimensions, so, too, did the scope and depth of my ethical considerations develop and expand. Initially, I solely appreciated the external, sociocultural, and educational concerns of ethical research, and felt I was justified and responsible in all decisions I made regarding these. For example, in recruiting my colleagues from my home university in China with whom I had been working for more than ten years, I genuinely believed that ethically we were on neutral and solid ground. I came to this conclusion because there were no sensitive topics or materials to be included in our work together, and my participants were predominantly involved in academic discussions regarding topics such as methodologies, theoretical framework, data analysis, and evaluation of the present study. More pertinently, as they were only required to reflect on their own experiences when undertaking academic research, I considered these activities easy to manage and flexible with sufficient time allocation during their routine work. Moreover, I concluded that as my participants were only engaged in reflecting on their own professional and academic experiences and giving feedback to help with my data analysis, I was causing no physical or psychological stress.

However, with the collapse of the initial enquiry at the conclusion of cycle 2, the advent of cycle 3's use of an autoethnographic, in-depth narrative as a method of enquiry, and my transforming ontological and epistemological positions, my ethical perspective inevitably also altered. In keeping with the emerging direction of my ontological and epistemological perspectives, my insight into the ethical effect of my research upon relational issues, inner constructions, and the values of my participants deepened. For example, while in cycle 2, I initially came to the conclusion that their interest in undertaking research appeared less critical to them than their ability to produce research, was the result of a limited exposure to different methodologies, methods,

and systematic enquiry per se, by the conclusion of this cycle of my Action Research project, other factors indicating underpinning interpersonal and intrapersonal issues were evident. These included a blanket refusal by all my participants to be recorded, divergent research viewpoints and subject area interests, a preference to remain with familiar methodologies and methods, predominant focus on the demands of teaching alongside loss of interest, and a lack of active participation and collaboration. With hindsight, I recognise that many of these difficulties may have arisen from sociocultural and interpersonal trust issues, and intrapersonal values and assurance that, given the limitations of my earlier ontological and epistemological perspectives, I had not considered or expected.

While undertaking cycle 2, I did make attempts to mitigate some of the issues as they arose. For example, recognising the issue of trust, I stopped interviewing my participants individually, and invited them to form random pairs for my interview sessions. At the time my thinking was that being in a pair would enable my participants to feel more psychologically safe, and thereby more comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions (see Table 3). Inopportunely, this intervention, if it had worked, came too late as participants started to withdraw from the project. With hindsight, I now recognise that I had underestimated their concerns regarding openly making comments that may be inadvertently construed as criticisms of the system. In addition, as I conducted cycle 2, I became acutely aware of a close link between the issue of trust and institutional policy and matters. While my participants were highly concerned about what was said and what was recorded, fearful of accidentally criticizing the system they worked in, there were promotional incentives driving their research, but they were not supported by theoretical support or professional development training. They all felt pressure to write and publish, but they did not have the time to concentrate on researching what they were interested in, nor was the professional development they needed to develop their research skills readily available to them.

At the same time, I underestimated the core values of my participants that made them prioritise their familial, teaching, and institutional commitments above developing new research skills and perspectives. In doing so, with my single-minded focus on my research, I possibly naively trespassed upon how they saw themselves and their lives, asking for attitudinal changes that were, given the demands on their time, simply

impossible and unimaginable to them. Simultaneously, I believe that this unintended intrusion also impacted on how they saw my relationship with them. Certainly, while in cycle 2, equipped with my research knowledge gleaned from another country and culture, and with my constant toing and froing in and out of their lives, I saw myself more as an outsider while I came to realise that they still saw me as one of them, the person they had known for over ten years.

At the time, I concluded that while behavioural changes might be readily made, it is extremely difficult for people to change their beliefs and ideas. Then, when in cycle 3, I moved away from the conceptualisations of research and researcher identity as contained within purely academic and professional fields of enquiry, I gained a different, clearer insight into the intrapersonal, psychological struggles, and conflicts of my participants. This occurred through the combination of the sociocultural and personal enquiry into my own lived experiences. In other words, as I opened to my own humanity within my researcher identity, I was able to open to the personal and sociocultural predicaments of my participants with increased awareness and sensitivity.

Additionally, in undertaking an autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry in cycle 3, I became aware of a different set of ethical considerations. These pertained to what Ellis (2009) described as ‘relational ethics’. As I reflected upon and wrote about the development of my researcher identity across two different cultures in frank, personal terms, I was at the same time implicating others who were part of the stories I related. For instance, when I described myself as a single mother, my child became identifiable. Interestingly, this awareness had a retrospective affect upon how I wrote my previous two cycles when revisiting them. Another example was that I recognised that the details provided regarding my home university and colleague-participants made them identifiable. Moreover, in the case of most of those alluded to in my research, I acknowledged that, on returning to China, I would wish to continue with the relationships we had shared.

All in all, this awareness made a significant impact upon me, what I included and excluded from my thesis, and how certain issues and experiences were presented. Ultimately, I agreed with Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011, p.286) that ‘the essence

and meaningfulness of the research story is more important than the precise recounting of detail'. Thus, my perspective on the ethical considerations of qualitative research developed both in width and depth during my doctoral journey.

2.6 Validity, reliability, and generalisation

Validity, reliability, and generalisation within qualitative research are key aspects of all research (Le Comple and Goetz 1982; Creswell and Miller 2000) and have long been debated with numerous definitions being arrived at. Patton (2002) states that validity and reliability are two factors which any qualitative researcher should be concerned about while designing a study, analysing results, and judging the quality of study. However, in my opinion, although there are myriad definitions available, underlying all of them are ontological and epistemological assumptions. In addition, these underlying perspectives are often viewed as stable and resolute inferring that the researcher's view of validity, reliability, and generalisation within their research remains fixed and constant. Conversely, this was not my experience. It was my experience on my doctoral journey that both my ontological and epistemological perspectives changed, and with them all my notions of validity, reliability, and generalisation.

Initially, coming to Cycle 1 of my Action Research project with ontological and epistemological assumptions biased towards academic constructs, and with a deep-seated cultural respect for authority, I brought conceptualisations of validity, reliability, and generalisation that were in many ways reframed from those forged for quantitative research. For example, regarding validity, in quantitative research it describes the extent to which measurements taken can be considered accurate and for me, in the early stages of my Action Research project, this translated into whether my research was describing authentically all aspects of the project and whether the process of my research was appropriate to what I was setting out to do. Meanwhile, the concept of reliability relates to the consistency of a measure 'for testing and evaluating quantitative research' (Golafshani 2003, p.601) and is considered in terms of whether or not the same results can be successfully replicated. Nonetheless, 'the idea of reliability is most often used in all kinds of research' (Golafshani 2003, p.601). Within my research, it translated to 'would my enquiry consistently produce the same findings if conducted with a different group of colleagues?'

Finally, linking them both, generalisation within quantitative research is understood as a form of external validity, in which the research repeated in a different setting would have the same results. Although generalisation, given the subjective and contextual nature of qualitative research, is not often considered applicable, for me it lay initially within the possibility of an established 'community of researchers' spreading both within and beyond my home university and my participants. Guenther and Falk (2019, p.1028) argue that 'generalization is a process in research, as much or more than it is a product of research'. However, the standards by which I measured the validity, reliability, and generalisation of my research altered, when the focus and question of my research changed with the collapse of my initial enquiry at the conclusion of cycle 2. This change was an integral part of the process of the transformations within my ontological and epistemological perspectives.

In cycle 3, I employed autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry, moving from a relational, transactional focus to an introspective, intrapersonal one. In many ways, this transference of focus did not affect my assumptions of validity. I still measured this in terms of the authenticity of the content of my study and whether the process of my research was appropriate to what I was undertaking. Simultaneously, I would argue that the significance of this deepened, and along with Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), I contend that the autoethnographic narrative style of enquiry I adopted at this point, and that influenced the overall presentation of my final thesis, required validity located in verisimilitude. Although usually considered an essential literary device in fiction, within autoethnographic narrative, the aim of verisimilitude is to write authentically, creating a credible and convincing narrative that evokes belief and a sense of realism for the reader. Similarly, proponents of autoethnography, such as Ellis (2004), have claimed that the validity of an autoethnographic narrative may be judged through the furthering of communication between readers and others who are different or have had very dissimilar life experiences. In this way, the question of the narrative's 'usefulness' is brought under the umbrella of validity by which an autoethnographic narrative should be judged (Bochner 2002). Hence, regarding the validity of my thesis, there was a movement from telling the authentic story of an Action Research project and arguing the appropriateness of the process undertaken, to a validity that extended both inwardly to my worldview and outwardly to the impact of the story shared upon my reader. This was a movement that, for me, encompassed

an intimacy and trust between me and my reader that I had never experienced before within the remit of what I had previously considered research. As such, it shook my ontological and epistemological perspectives to their core even as it transformed them.

Nevertheless, while my conceptualisation of validity appeared to undergo subtle but profound changes as I progressed to cycle 3 of my Action Research project, it was not the same with the issues of reliability and generalisation. Clearly, while conducting cycles 1 and 2, I could make my more traditional perspectives of reliability and generalisation applicable as my standards of academic judgement, I felt unable to base the reliability and generalisation of my thesis in terms of replication and repetition in different settings. Initially this was a challenge coming from a worldview highly respectful of authority and thereby established criteria. Then, from my reading at the start of cycle 3 in which I delved into autoethnographic narrative, I took on the recommended applications for both reliability and generalisation. This meant locating reliability in my own, narrator-researcher's trustworthiness, and generalisation in my readers' responses to my narrative as one that marries with their experience of humanity, while illuminating sociocultural processes and concerns unfamiliar to them (Ellis and Ellingson 2000; Ellis and Bochner 2006).

Evidently, these conceptualisations of reliability and generalisation strongly connected with a validity that extended both inwardly to my worldview and outwardly to the impact of the story shared upon my reader. Furthermore, as they connected, and I opened to the new experience of creating an intimacy and trust between the reader and me, there was also a retrospective impact upon my entire thesis. In other words, in revisiting and rewriting earlier events and processes, my transformed perspectives of the academic standards by which I held my study to account, permeated the final product.

2.7 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have detailed the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpinned and were transformed by the process of undertaking my Action Research project. Alongside these, inextricably linked to them, I have concurrently examined my evolving perspectives regarding positionality and ethical considerations within research. Now, with these thoroughly and candidly revealed, in the next chapter, I

detail all the reflections, actions, issues, and considerations of cycle 1 of my Action Research project.

Chapter 3

Action Research cycle 1 – reviewing my journey to PhD

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the planning, action, observations, and reflections of cycle 1 regarding my aim to create a 'community of research' within my own home university in Northern China. In this way, this chapter is a reflective account of how I came to start my PhD with the research question: 'How can I transform the research culture of my university faculty in China?' I have included it as the first cycle of my Action Research study, because – although this cycle is mainly reflection – it was an essential and crucial element in the early stage of undertaking my PhD. Indeed, as my research progressed, and it became clear that it was not possible to achieve my research aim, reflecting in-depth on the process as to how I had arrived at that situation became even more critical. Moreover, crucially, it was becoming aware of Action Research as a methodology that started me on this journey in the first place; and this, therefore, also supports the rationale for why the first cycle of my PhD is a reflective account of the relationship between me learning about Action Research and, starting on a journey that would enable me to ultimately see my whole 'life as inquiry' (Marshall 1999).

Thus, this reflective account begins in 2007, which is the year I first heard about Action Research, and continues to 2016 when I registered for a PhD. During this time, I attended a workshop in China on Action Research, then gained a scholarship to travel to the UK, where I spent a year in 2011-2012 learning more about Action Research at Liverpool Hope University. One year later, I returned to Liverpool to complete an MA in education, allowing myself to expand my understanding of Action Research through the eyes of different researchers and theorists. Finally, I made the decision to register for a PhD, with the intention of using the knowledge I had gained about research to transform the research culture in my home university, using Action Research as the means to achieve that end.

By the end of this chapter, I intend that the reader will be fully informed about why I became so passionate about Action Research, both as a research methodology and as a way of living my life; how it led me to reflect on the aridness of understandings of

research in the professional culture in which I had been working and encouraged me to become dedicated to the development of my own identity as a researcher; and why I believed that it would be possible to transform the culture of my home institution. Yet, before these can be presented, it is important to define Action Research as I understand it to be, and to outline the overarching sociocultural, educational, and political issues and circumstances pertaining to how I became interested in research methodologies and methods. As a result, I have structured this chapter so that it moves from external issues and conditions, to relate some of the historic academic and professional events that led to me conducting my doctoral thesis. In other words, the contents of this chapter, in which cycle 1 of my Action Research project is presented, contain a narrowing down from the macrocosmic to the microcosmic aspects of my research journey.

3.2 Definition of Action Research

Action Research has many different definitions but can generally be ‘described as a family of research methodologies which pursue action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time’ (Dick 1999, p.3). McCutcheon and Jung defined Action Research as ‘a systemic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by participants in the inquiry’ (1990, p.148). It is also recognized as ‘a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situation in which these practices are carried out’ (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014, p.5). Thus, Action Research ‘aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework’ (Rapport 1970, p.499). Meanwhile, Elliot (1991) placed emphasis on ‘introspection’ and ‘education’, particularly focusing on the concept of ‘action to promote reflection’. He viewed Action Research as an individualistic and special transformation between educational theory and knowledge. In practice, Action Research is a systematic enquiry, which uses research methods for data collection and analysis combined with structured self-reflection (Wallace 2005).

Moreover, within all these definitions there are four basic themes: empowerment of participants; collaboration through participation; acquisition of knowledge, and social change. Grundy and Kemmis (1981) summarized these varied definitions and themes into three minimal requirements:

1. the project takes as its subject matter a social practice, regarding it as a strategic action susceptible to improvement.
2. the project proceeds through a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, with each of these activities being systematically and self-critically implemented and interrelated; and
3. the project involves those responsible for the practice in each of the moments of the activity, widening participation in the project gradually to include others affected by the practice and maintaining collaborative control of the process. (cited by Grundy 1982, p. 33)

Additionally, while definitions of Action Research vary, its fundamental characteristics are widely recognized as a unity of research and actions, an emphasis on the depth of the researchers' participation, ability of self-reflection, and an improvement of practice. Furthemore, there is agreement that the process that the researcher goes through to achieve these themes is 'a spiral of action research cycles consisting of four major phrases: planning, acting, observing and reflecting' (Zuber-Skerrit 1993, p. 46).

3.3 Action Research as a methodology

In this section, I outline my theorized rationale for using Action Research as the methodology of my study from the perspective of a historical review of how it was used to achieve the aim of my research project. In doing so, I include the history, definition, and classification of Action Research. I also include an overview of how it was developed in China to explain what Action Research looked like in my academic context.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle claimed teachers doing research serves the purpose of professional development and makes the improvement of practice an important outcome of teacher research. As a consequence, the activity of teacher research will

ultimately change teachers from the researched to the researcher (1993). The purpose of Action Research includes professional understanding, personal growth, and the political empowerment (Noffke 1997). Teachers' engaging in Action Research is a practical process, through which teachers become familiar with development of knowledge, theories, and research methods. Taking actions, reflecting on actions cycles and seeking improvement provide opportunities for teachers to understand themselves and others. Indeed, Action Research is undertaken in the workplace by a number of professional people, such as teachers, hospital workers, or managers (Orton 1993). So, these professionals conduct Action Research in a specific workplace with those working there. In so doing, Action Research begins with a problem in the practice of a person or group of people making problem-centred research the primary focus of Action Research. In other words, Action Research is concerned with problems which arise in actual situations (Orton 1993). It has, therefore, been argued that it is through Action Research that teachers proactively change their teaching practice, construct their professional identities and position themselves strategically within complex interpersonal relationships (Duckworth 1986; Varghese et al. 2005; Davies, Hamilton, and James 2007).

3.3.1 The history of Action Research

The development of Action Research owes much to an American psychologist Kurt Lewin. In the mid-1940s, he developed the idea that research should take place in social context with action and theory combined (Lewin 1946). According to Masters (1995, p.3), Lewin described Action Research as 'proceeding in a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of planning, action and the evaluation of the result of action'. Lewin argued that in order to 'understand and change certain social practices, social scientists have to include practitioners from the real social works in all phases of inquiry' (McKernan 1991, p.10). Stephen Corey, at Teachers College Columbia University, is known as one of the first to use Action Research in the educational field during the 1950s. Corey (1953), as an educationalist, believed that researchers and teachers should work together, and that teachers involved in both the research process and in the implementation of the resulting outcomes, would prove invaluable to seeing change in the mainstream settings (Ferrance 2000).

However, in the later period of the 1950s, a division occurred between teachers and research. Masters (1995) attributes this to the separation that was taking place between theory and practice. This occurred mainly because Action Research was criticized for not being scientific enough (Burns 1999) and unfortunately resulted in research being redesignated back to the domain of professional or expert researchers in laboratories and/or academia outside of the classroom.

Then, In the 1970s, Stenhouse (1975) propelled a teacher – researcher movement in the UK, which also influenced similar movements in Europe and Australia. His argument was that only by way of developing teachers' critical and creative power could the teaching and administrative work be truly improved. According to McKernan (1991), Stenhouse contended, 'teaching should be based on research, and research and curriculum development were the preserve of teachers' (cited in Masters 1995, p.2). Over periods of change, it has been acknowledged that Action Research is one of the ways in which teachers seek professional development and is simultaneously a tool of 'reconstructing teaching at school' (Sagor and Curley 1991). Furthermore, the belief that Action Research is a process of exploring practice through self-reflection and self-criticism (Taylor 1996) makes it related to interpretative study, whereby teachers become researchers.

Developing these ideas, Elliot (1991) commented that Action Research can be used as a means of narrowing the gap between theory and practice, and its response in the form of practice can be an innovation of culture. Indeed, the fundamental purpose of Action Research is to do research and seek changes to improve practice through action; and such changes can be viewed as the substance of cultural overhaul. Moreover, building on this argument, Lewin (1946) advocated conducting Action Research in everyday practice as the main methodology through which to achieve an integration of theory and practice because it involves change experiments on real problems in practice (Sung-Chan and Yuen-Tsang 2008). Therefore, for action researchers, such as teachers, targeting the problems as the first step is closely related to the process of teaching and researching, making Action Research an important way for teachers to seek professional development.

3.3.2 Types of Action Research

Action Research is very subjective as its methodology is defined by the individual researchers. In literature, different types of Action Research have been discussed. For example, Holter and Schwartz-Barcott (1993) explained three types: technical collaborative, mutual collaborative, and the enhancement approach. Meanwhile, McKernan (1991) listed three modes: scientific-technical, practical-deliberative, and the critical-emancipatory. Alternatively, Mills (2003) described three other modes: teacher researcher, collaborative research, and school-wide Action Research. Furthermore, there are also another three main current schools of thoughts in Action Research. One of these is Kemmis (2010), who argued that it supports and stimulates transformative action, which can be attributed to:

1. Practical Action Research, focusing on the 'how-to' and 'how do I' research questions (Elliot 1991).
2. Technical Action Research, incorporating a scientific approach to problem solving.
3. Critical Action Research, also known as emancipatory action research (Mills 2003), a shared democratic commitment for reform and social improvement (Carr and Kemmis 1986).

In addition, in recent years, Action Research has increasingly been recognized as a viable approach to dealing with the problem of integrating theory and practice (Sung-Chan and Yuen-Tsang 2008). Masters commented that it contains 'four basic themes: empowerment of participants, collaboration through participation; acquisition of knowledge; and social change' (1995, p.3). Moreover, prior to Masters (1995) argument, to emphasize the importance of studying the part action plays in development, McKay (1992, p.19) described Action Research as a six-step cyclical process:

1. Identifying an issue or problem to study;
2. Gathering and reviewing related information;
3. Developing a plan of action;
4. Implementing the plan;
5. Evaluating results; and
6. Repeating the cycle with a revised problem or strategy derived from what was learnt in the first cycle, until the question is answered.

In terms of the methodology of this project, the rationale for using Action Research arose from my understanding of my participants' desirability to learn about their research in a natural social setting, with an aim to improve practice. Consequently, in adopting Action Research as my methodology, I took deliberate action and planned a series of action-reflection cycles as the framework for my thesis. Through these action reflection cycles, I analysed and reflected on the unique concepts, values, and experiences that informed my professional practice. I believed that this methodology would also aid the accurate recollection of contextualized events (Argyris, Putnam, and Smith 1985). Ultimately, I aimed to provide an underpinning rationale and structure to the positive strategies developed throughout my professional practices (Argyris, Putnam, and Smith 1985).

3.3.3 Action Research in China

In the past few decades, an increasing number of studies in social science are addressing the widening gap between theory and practice. In seeking a solution, Action Research stresses that professionals can be instrumental problem solvers whose competence rests on skilfully putting 'objective, consensual, cumulative and convergent' theories into practice' (Schön 1984, p.33). Thus, Action Research has been recognized as a viable way to deal with the problem of the theory-practice gap.

In China, educators are particularly concerned with their professional development by way of applying theories to practice because the conventional belief held by professionals in higher education is that the quality of teachers' academic research theoretically provides the key to successful teaching. The reality, though, is that the study and practice of academic research has long been ignored by professionals in Chinese institutions of higher learning, particularly amongst those who teach English as a foreign language. Teaching is predominantly the focus for most teachers in their professional practice. It is quite common for foreign language teachers to pay much less attention to exploring academic research than to teaching, which turns academic research into their traditional weakness (Liu and Gong 2001; He 2008). Many reasons account for this, with the primary reason being that in Chinese universities, there is no systematic study of research methodologies. Tian and Laidlaw state that 'many Chinese teachers write their papers in the form of a report or a summarized reflection of teaching experiences, without using a specific methodology' (2006, P.127).

Additionally, some teachers choose to ignore research because of the pressures generated by an exam-oriented teaching curriculum. Others are motivated to write journal articles as it will help them to achieve promotion, but the aim is to be published rather than to engage in meaningful research.

Since Action Research was introduced to China, it has been acknowledged as a research approach in exploring varied but effective strategies to improve teaching. Simultaneously, it has not been widely investigated in an educational setting where professionals work together, so there are very few works that have an influential effect on the research culture being developed. According to the study conducted by Li from the Department of British and American English of PLA [People's Liberation Army] Foreign Language Institute, Action Research is used to help teachers reflect on their practice in foreign language teaching so that they can seek professional development (2015). Wang and Zhang (2014) stated that the development of Action Research in China has gone through three stages. These are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, Wang and Zhang (2014) assert that Action Research was first introduced to China by psychologists in the early 1980s, who were keen on studying western psychology, and were influenced by the belief that Action Research identified its roots in social psychology, aiming to promote social action through active participation of practitioners in the research process (Borg 2009). These researchers were followers of Kurt Lewin. Lewin (1948) advocated 'conducting action research in everyday practice as the main methodology through which to achieve an integration of social science and practice' (Sung-Chan and Yuen-Tsang 2008, p.54). During this period, though, their practice was only limited to theorizing the knowledge of Action Research, such as its definition and its application as a research method. Unfortunately, few of them practically employed it as a methodology in their own studies in social science. This absence of application and the underdeveloped educational environment in China at that time made it even harder to encourage more researchers to widely engaged in further study of Action Research (Zhao 2007).

Under Lewin's (1948) influence, the introductory phase, in which Action Research was launched in China, was followed by a start-up phase (Wang and Zhang 2014). In this

second phase, the idea of Action Research was adopted by educationalists. Subsequently, since the mid-1990s, efforts were intensified to promote a deeper examination of Action Research among people from academic communities in China. This coincided with a period in which China entered a new era of developing the economy as part of a national policy. In this, the notion of the market economy inspired Chinese people to re-evaluate development in all walks of life. As a direct result of this policy, educators were more easily influenced by new ideas, such as reflecting on and critically accepting and constructing multiple ways of doing research (Xia 2009). Moreover, the incentive to learn new knowledge laid a positive foundation for the development of Action Research.

Furthermore, arguments on Action Research in this period focused on discussion about theory and practice and their relationship to each other. There were two popular ways of practicing and verifying the application of Action Research in China. One viewed Action Research as a solution to problems by way of explanation. This kind of research was conducted through cyclical steps of finding problems, studying them, and finally resolving them. Researchers argued that it was not right to hypothesize because only theoreticians knew theories. They contended that practitioners could accept theories and convert them to their own theories through practice (Wu and Zhang 2002). A representative case was the experiment conducted by a research team: Alliance of Volunteers in Educational Research organized in No. 1 Middle School on Dahushan Road in Shanghai. They designed a research programme intending to investigate issues regarding psychological safety amongst middle school students. They created their procedures for conducting their research, identifying, analysing, and resolving problems. Yet, their cycles of actions differed from Action Research in that they were a series of actions planned with answers to the research question predicted. It was more like a process of using actions planned to test conclusions, not cyclical cycles of actions focusing on making reflections for improvement, as was required by Action Research theory. Nevertheless, Wang and Zhang (2014) argue that this approach can still be viewed as a primitive application of Action Research in China.

The other approach to the application of Action Research in China at this time was a belief in positivism. This approach consisted of raising a presumption and then

verifying the hypothesis. A typical research project under this theoretical guidance was named, An Exploratory Research of the New Primary Education (1994-1998), led by Lan Ye. She refuted the argument raised by some action researchers that educational research did not need theoretical guidance. The project was designed to create a new foundation of educational theories. In doing so, they adopted the model of Action Research in order to apply and verify the theories they used (Xu 2014). It is worth mentioning that during this period, the first project using Action Research in educational research in China was developed by Professor Qiang Wang from Beijing Normal University, one of the most prestigious universities in China. She also created the module named, Teaching Action Research, and made it a compulsory course for English-majoring students in the Department of Foreign Languages of Beijing Normal University. The objective of the course was to help students improve their research ability and build up their self-confidence in applying theories to teaching practice (Wang and Zhang 2014). Their practice followed the rule that Action Research was a process of raising, testing, and evaluating problems, in which theories were reflected through actions.

The third stage in the development of Action Research in China described by Wang and Zhang (2014) is considered the developmental phase. This dates from the start of the millennium and consists of professionals in foreign language studies conducting extensive and in-depth exploration to promote the study of Action Research in foreign language teaching in China. This had a positive impact on improving the teaching of foreign languages in China. Therefore, the recognition of the idea of ‘teachers as researchers’ by Chinese researchers came to be viewed as the most important outcome of using Action Research during this stage. Equally, Hu (2008) stated that Action Research was applied by teachers of foreign languages as a means of improving their teaching proficiency. For instance, Tian’s (2009) study investigated how Action Research had been widely used while teaching writing to English majors. He believed that it had become a focus for professionals to consider how network technology could be integrated with effective writing by way of systematically planning, implementing, reflecting, and influencing the teaching activities. Tian (2009) also discovered that students’ writing skills could be improved if critical evaluation and reflection were made throughout the process of teaching them. Simultaneously, he found that it played an important role in improving students’ language proficiency.

However, writing is a complicated process. Studying the process of writing, by way of Action Research, has its limitation in that it cannot penetrate each step of the writing process, in which there is a spiral cycle of thinking and reflecting to be constructed (Yan and Zhang 1995). Consequently, it was proposed that the study of Action Research is best used to encourage professionals to try new ways of thinking and practice as a means of realizing the reform of teaching and research in China.

Thus, the practice of Action Research in China during the developmental period proved to be more active and fruitful than in the previous two stages. Moreover, the achievement was acknowledged by the setup of the first Research Centre of Action Research in Foreign Language Teaching in China at Guyan Normal College in December 2003. It was established with the theoretical support from Jean McNiff and with the help of Jack Whitehead and Moira Laidlaw from the University of Bath. Influenced by the living educational theory advocated by Whitehead (1993), this research centre concentrated on exploring how teachers as researchers were the creators of knowledge and how teachers could improve their educational practice. The researchers from the centre followed the general framework of Action Research, and they designed a five-step action cycle: identifying problems in teaching, solving the problems, implementing improvement in teaching, collecting data to evaluate improvement, and identifying new problems through assessment. This experimental centre became a successful example of making Action Research a systematic and theoretical study in China. It has also made many teachers, educators, and graduates from teacher education institutions the biggest beneficiaries of learning how to apply theory to practice through their work and life in their everyday settings (Wang and Zhang 2014).

Following the practice of this experimental centre for Action Research, where teachers were instructed by leading experts from the West, there was another research centre that actively organized research seminars, forums and carried out research projects between September 2007 and May 2009. This centre was again led by Professor Wang Qiang from Beijing Normal University. The project initiated a reform in designing the curriculum of English teaching in the senior high schools in Beijing. Wang and Zhang (2014) emphasized that teachers should not conduct their research by unconditionally following other people's theory, but that they should learn to reflect

through their own actions of teaching and researching and learn to convert theories into strategies to improve teaching. Hence, today, it is considered an acknowledged achievement that over a span of 30 years, the study of Action Research in China had been successfully developed from scratch. Research communities were enlarged, and fruitful achievements were reached, although they were mainly used in the domain of exploring varied methods of teaching.

Nevertheless, currently, it is equally noted that problems exist regarding the establishment of theoretical guidance and the appropriate application of Action Research in China. First, the ability of theoretically critiquing it as a research methodology has not been extensively accepted by educators because the study of Action Research at present is considered to be a repetition of collecting experiences at a low level (Xia 2009). Additionally, some Action Research researchers in China fail to understand how the Action Research cycles should be designed as approaches to address issues they raise in the research project. Second, the wider engagement in Action Research needs to be encouraged and developed. Fortunately, following the success of applying Action Research in the educational area, the researchers from varied subject areas are building confidence in practicing it both as a theory and a methodology, but there are more actions that need to be taken. Third, there is a growing need for professionally trained staff. This is expected to come from researchers with experience who will present their experimental cycles to demonstrate how they used Action Research to facilitate their teaching and researching as professionals. As Wang and Zhang (2014) commented, in China, Action Research is no longer regarded as a tool to seek simple solutions to resolve problems in teaching, and educators and researchers have learned to apply theories to improve teaching and researching.

Clearly, despite the problems, it is encouraging to see that researchers and educators in China are positively seeking professional development through varied applications of Action Research. Moreover, although Action Research is only one of the many qualitative methods in research, I believed that it would make a huge difference in my research practice if I knew how it worked. That is how I decided to undertake and, over many years, persevere with my study of Action Research and ultimately to look for opportunities to make changes to myself as a teacher-researcher.

3.4 Cultural overview of Chinese education and research

In this section, to promote understanding of the forces that drove my ambitions to study Action Research and thereby become a teacher-researcher, I provide an explanatory cultural overview of the Chinese educational and research system in which I lived and worked. Therefore, while the previous section provided a historical overview of Action Research in China, this section discusses Chinese educational philosophy. It is an analysis of the past and offers an understanding of the situation in which I found myself placed, explaining why I initially aimed to influence my participants' beliefs and practice of doing research.

Chinese educational philosophy is rooted in China's early education classics. The literature evidences that Chinese education follows the continuity of the early Confucian tradition. It is argued that Confucian pedagogy rooted in China's early classics has made a significant contribution to the establishment of the Chinese philosophical practice in education (Liu 2001; Bai 2011; Cheng and Xu 2011; Tan 2013). *Xueji*《学记》 (Record of Learning) was viewed as the doctrine of Chinese educational philosophy and practice over 2,500 years (Gao 2008). It was an ancient essay, part of a longer Chinese text known as *Liji*《礼记》 (Book of Rites) out of the Five Classics《五经》(Wujing) in ancient China (Tan 2013). *Xueji*《学记》 documented the essence of Chinese educational philosophy. The old Chinese character in the title *Xue '学'* denotes both 'learning' and 'teaching' (Xu 2017). 'College' in *Xueji* 《学记》, which was recorded as the venue where learning and teaching took place, refers to taixue (imperial academy) in ancient China. It was the highest official institution for academic study during the Han dynasty (202BCE-220CE). As the central college, it enrolled over thirty thousand students into its main campus in the capital city of Changan during the dynasty's most prosperous period (Zhang 2008). The latest translated version of *Xueji* 《学记》was completed in a book titled *Chinese Philosophy of Education on Teaching & Learning: Xueji (学记): in the twenty-first century.* The book was published by *the* State University of New York Press, including eight articles

contributed by Chinese and American educational scholars (Xu and McEwan 2016). Quotations in this writing are mainly taken from this book.

Xuejie《学记》responded to the criticism that 'Chinese education, as well as pedagogies, is an archaic and ineffective system' (Xu 2017, p.443). It was commonly perceived that Chinese educational philosophy and practice are threefold. First, they are rote learning; as Hammond and Gao state, 'Chinese education is characterized by rote learning' (2002, p.236). After China's open and reform policy in the late 1970s, a surge of Chinese students and scholars travelled to the Western world to pursue their studies. Greenspan observed some of these students and compared them to American students. He believed that Chinese students were trained to develop a capacity for memorization, which was very shocking to most Westerners (2006). Thus, rote learning and memorization are believed to be essential aspects of Chinese educational elements and methods. The second perception is that Chinese education is subject-oriented. 'Chinese teaching approaches emphasize knowledge transmission by using textbooks. Students try to absorb and digest what is being transmitted' (Li, Baker, and Marshall 2002, p.139). Chinese students are commonly recognized as being good at a specific subject such as mathematics, physics, or computer science. Chinese students can do well in the exams, but 'they do not possess a broad knowledge of a subject or its context; nor do they have the ability to synthesize and apply their knowledge' (Xu 2017, p.443). The third criticism involves opposition to passive learning. Gardner (1989) reflected on his own experience with his adopted son from Taiwan. He described his observation and impression, 'students are expected to memorize information and then … feedback the information that has been presented or modelled to them'. He commented, therefore, that Chinese learning styles were often considered 'passive,' 'primitive,' or 'oppressive' (cited by Niu 2012, p. 276).

Alternatively, a different picture of ancient Chinese education was demonstrated by *Xueji*《学记》as an ancient classic, refuting the above criticisms. Firstly, Xu, the author, states: 'Those who would respond to questions by the mindless recitation of memorized texts are not worthy of becoming teachers' (paragraph18, in Xu and McEwan 2016, p.15). Xu's view suggests that rote learning is not a viable and sole pedagogy of teaching and learning in Chinese philosophy. It also indicates that teaching is not about subject matter and information only. In *Xuejie* 《学记》, teachers were defined as junzi, which is a term reserved only for exemplary people. As a true junzi, a teacher 'develops openness holistically with teaching, learning and life' (Xu 2017, p.444). Teachers 'gather knowledge from all sources, cultivate themselves with it, immerse themselves in it even during their leisure and respite, and roam freely within it' (Paragraph 8, in Xu and McEwan 2016, p.12). Teaching and learning in ancient China, as described in *Xueji*《学记》, were diverse and inclusive rather than narrow. Secondly, *Xuejie* 《学记》develops a curriculum that advocates the study of a variety of subjects and comprehensive development of human beings. 'The curriculum and processes are vigorous, systematic, rich, deliberate, and holistic, as manifested by the *Six Arts* (Liuyi) taught even long before *Xuejie* 《学记》in the earlier dynasties of Xia (2070-1066BCE), Shang (1600-1046BCE) and Zhou (approximately 1046-256BCE)' (Xu 2017, p. 444). They include:

1. Li (理), the art of ritual that observes and honours the cosmic order and ancestral lineage. It embodies knowledge far beyond the ceremony.
2. Yu (乐), the study of music from nature that connects, enriches, and harmonizes humanity through sound with nature.
3. She (射), the art of archery that cultivates and develops energy and power through the practice of martial arts, in order to provide good health, self-protection, and more importantly, the ability to safeguard a nation through military and war affairs.
4. Yu (御), the mastery of driving skills or ancient forms of transportation. It actually focuses on loyalty and faithfulness with one's beliefs and purposes and

develops the leadership's ability to fulfil one's destiny.

5. Shu (术), the art of calligraphy and exposure to a wide range of books. It requires one to be erudite of ancient classics history and continue to document and create new literature by integrating the essence of all.
6. Shu (数), the art of mathematics. It far exceeds the member calculations and algebra and applies mathematics to astronomy, astrology, cosmic cycles, and spiritual reading (Xu 2017, p. 444).

Xu summarizes that

> In ancient teaching and learning, one is not only required to master one' specialty of one's choice even though he may excel at one or a few particular arts, actually, he is to master all six arts holistically in order to become a master, a scholar, a teacher, or a ruler in the highly esteemed status of junzi (2017, p.445).

Importantly, all the six arts are not the end goals of teaching and learning in themselves. They are the means for the learners to understand the natural world and the universe. Accordingly, it can be concluded that the teaching and learning in Chinese culture described in *Xueji* 《学记》are far from being 'passive' or 'primitive' as perceived by many western scholars (Xu 2017, p.445). Ancient Chinese educational philosophy is not narrow, nor is it merely subject-centred. The real purpose and goal of education, as *Xueji* 《学记》emphasizes, are to 'cultivate' and 'transform' one to be lifelong learners (Paragraph 2, in Xu and McEwan 2016, p.10).

Thus, accepting *Xueji's* 《学记》argument, it is germane to examine the impact of Confucianism, the ancient but abiding philosophy of China, upon the development of education in China. Confucianism has influenced and shaped Chinese educational thought and practice since 200BCE. As stated by Tan (2016), Confucianism was initially a complete ideological system created by Confucius (551-479BCE) but it has evolved and transformed over time. For example, in the Sung Dynasty (979-1279), a new form of Confucianism, neo-Confucianism, was developed, which was a creative

reinterpretation of the traditional Confucian core to address the socio-economic problems of the day and the challenges posed by Buddhism and Taoism (Lee 2000). Meanwhile, new Confucianism, which emerged in the early twentieth century, is another version of Confucian philosophy formed through a creative interpretation of past Confucian heritage with the influence of western and non-Confucian ideas as a response to western modernity.

It was *Taixue* that established the ancient Chinese education system that functioned to train civil servants by ways of Confucian classics, including *Book of Poetry, Book of History, Book of Change, and Spring and Autumn Annals,* and other Chinese literature in 124 BCE, when Confucianism was elevated to be the national educational doctrine. The doctrinal status of Confucianism in Chinese education was not challenged until China opened its door to the outside world and underwent the process of modernization. Wu (2011) described that the development of Confucian ideas and the Chinese modernization of education went through a four-era historical sketch:

1. The late Qing Dynasty (1840-1911). Reform-minded scholars and officials realized the need to reform the education system by borrowing advanced West ideas and adapting Confucianism to western modernity. This sparked debates between reformists and traditionalists over ‘western cultural values’ versus ‘essential Chinese values’ and ‘western utilitarianism’ versus ‘Confucian ethics’. The adopted strategy was to select specific western ideas and models and preserve essential Confucian beliefs and values (Wu 2011). A modern westernized school system was adopted from Japan at the turn of the century (Ding 2001).
2. The Republican Era (1912-1949). Confucianism was challenged and condemned by Chinese intellectuals during the New Culture Movement (1915-1919) and the May 4th Movement (1919) that called for creating a new Chinese culture based on western standards, especially democracy and science. Confucianism underwent a process of modernization in response to the challenges of modernity, as Chinese intellectuals interpreted or reinterpreted and transformed the philosophy of past Confucian thinkers in the light of western and non-Confucian ideas (Tan 2015).

3. Mao's era (1949-1976). Modernization took the form of Soviet and Maoist socialism after the establishment of new China. However, the Cultural Revolution brought a catastrophe to China's education. Political campaigns were launched to attack the old ideas, old cultures, and later, Confucianism, in particular. This 10-year period 'not only eradicated residual Western-style education and the earlier emulated Soviet Union education model but also wiped out any trace of Confucian education' (Yang and Frick 2009, p.31).
4. Reform and opening up (1977-1999). Modernization in the form of westernization resumed and gradually gained momentum after China re-opened itself to the world. A considerable number of western educational theories and models, which were selected chiefly from the US, the UK, Canada, and Japan, were adapted to the particular context of China (Ding 2001). On the other hand, Confucianism enjoyed rejuvenation. 'Cultural craze' and 'national learning craze' seized Chinese people's attention as 'an indispensable cultural force that ushered China into the twenty-first century' (Hon 2009, p.530).

This brief historical sketch shows that the modernization of education in China is characterized by an ongoing contestation between Chinese Confucian tradition and western modernity. It likewise evidences that the Confucian tradition was reinterpreted, transformed, and reinvented when interacting with modern western culture (Tan 2015). Therefore, during the process in which western theories and values were followed and adapted to the situation and context of China, they were inevitably transformed by the traditional Chinese mode of educational thinking (Ding 2001; Wu 2011).

Currently, then, China's education policy is a combination of the adoption and assimilation of western ideas into its own culture. In doing so, the Chinese culture has maintained its deep respect for Confucian values. For example, emphasis has been given to 'the ethical and moral orientation on virtue and holistic and qualitative cultivation of learners', which 'constitute the theme in all Chinese educational philosophers such as Laozi, Confucius, Mencius, Mozi, Xunzi, regardless of their ideology as idealists, realists, pragmatists, or existentialists and their different times' (Mao 1984, p.426). Moreover, the Chinese government declared that it desires to establish 'a socialist education system with Chinese characteristics' (Ministry of Education 2007). Though the term 'Chinese characteristics' is not elaborated in the

document, it is evident that the Chinese government desires to strike a balance between borrowing western ideas and preserving the traditions. China has carefully selected theories and modified practices that experts and scholars perceived to be compatible with Chinese traditions. Orleans, in his analysis of the Chinese acceptance of the ideologies and educational practices of the Soviet Union, held the viewpoint that the positive reception by the Chinese was due primarily to the 'many basic similarities between the Soviet and the traditional Chinese systems which made such a shift palatable' (1988, p.194). In terms of the Chinese way of policymaking, Bastid (1987, p.11) states that the Chinese had 'a vivid consciousness of the risk of dependence implied in the ostensible transfer of education policy from the west'; many traditional and deep-seated cultural practices and attitudes endure and, in some cases, are further entrenched (Hayhoe and Zha 2006; Tan 2013). Furthermore, in discussing the aim of education, these authors agree that western education focuses on the development of abilities, while Chinese education pays special attention to the cultivation of morality.

In Chinese culture, teachers are praised as human soul instructors. The heritage of ancient philosophy has modified the Chinese way of educating people as the process of carving precious stones. The purpose of education is to convey the importance of self-cultivation to the learners, which is the overall development of the moral self through a sustained process of craft carving: 'Social responsibility, learned in the way jade is cut and polished, lay at the core of a lifelong formation process as an educator' (Hayhoe 2001, p.346). The ultimate purpose of education in China is 'to make learning an elevated human existence' (Xu 2017, p.446), focusing on 'the highest virtue' (Paragraph 21 in Xu and McEwan 2016, p.16).

As is also recorded in *Xueji* 《学记》*,* teachers are required to carry out their unique role of being junzi, exemplary persons. The teacher's role and qualities are essential to the success and fulfilment of teaching and learning. Therefore, among the researchers' most influential and prevailing cultural heritage, the crucial cultural script reflected in Chinese education is the students' respect for the teacher (Wang and Murphy 2004). Tan (2015, p.431) also commented:

> Because learning in the Confucian persuasion is not limited to academic learning but more importantly to social and moral learning, respect toward knowledge and teacher, who ideally embody the self-perfecting process, is sensible and expected.

Consequently, *Xueji* 《学记》holds the highest standards that teachers are supposed to have:

> Exemplary persons, junzi, who can understand the challenges of genuine scholarship, and who can differentiate virtue from vice are able to develop a broad knowledge and be comprehensive in their teaching. And only by being broad in their understanding and comprehensive in their instruction can they be true teachers. Only after serving as an experienced teacher can one become a true leader, and only after succeeding as a leader can one become a true ruler. Thus, what it takes to become a true teacher is the same path as that needed to become a true ruler. For this reason, we must be circumspect in the selection of our teacher (Paragraph 15, in Xu and McEwan 2016, p.14).

The highest status and respect *Xueji* 《学记》bestowed on teachers or junzi is consistent with Chinese educational beliefs and practices enduring from ancient times until today. Teachers are honoured 'not so much for their content knowledge and expertise, but for their exemplary virtue, role modelling, and impact on the entire culture, people, and state' (Xu 2017, p.448).

In the 21st century, the contestation between Chinese Confucian tradition and western modernity has taken on a new meaning and significance as China is rising to become a global economic power. China not only continues to import different kinds of educational theories from the West but also focuses on its own distinct culture and tradition. As teachers shoulder such huge responsibilities to bring actual teaching and learning outcomes to fruition, they are the vehicles of transformation for knowledge, achievement in science and technology, and cultural changes by way of research. Under the influence of the Confucian tradition, which emphasizes the emulation of teachers, it was not until recent years that Chinese teachers began to think about how

research can be related to teaching in their specific cultural, political, and economic context.

Hence, in modern times, educational achievement in higher education was affected by both the Confucian heritage and 'a range of foreign influences' (Hu et al. 2014, p.610). On one hand, Confucius saw moral education and the cultivation of benevolence as the ultimate goals of education (Niu 2012). He emphasized both the importance of knowledge through reflection (Wang and Liu 2011) and the importance of teaching according to students' abilities and characteristics (Zeichner and Liu 2010). In addition, compared to western educational philosophy, the disadvantage of Chinese education is that more attention is paid to knowledge transformation, narrowing its focus on the final product instead of on the ability to do research. On the other hand, western education, influenced by Greek philosophical thinking, holds an analytical view of the world, and it is typically characterized through empirical investigation (Zhao et al. 2008). According to Plato, learning is the reasoned understanding of causes through what one already knows, in a gradual process, without hasty and compulsory leading on the part of the teacher (Shim 2008). Meanwhile, the Socratic method highlights the necessity of having a matter investigated by the learners themselves rather than relying on hearsay. Learning through empirical investigation and observation was also emphasized by Aristotle. These new innovative educational ideas, shaped by European rationalists' thinking, were first introduced to China in 1902 (Niu and Sternberg 2006) and have since been assimilated and modified by Chinese educators.

Furthermore, the American influence was introduced at the time of Dewey's visit to China in 1919. Since then, his pragmatist views have had an impact on Chinese educators (Hayhoe and Liu 2011). Tao Xingzhi (1891-1946) studied under John Dewey at the Teachers College, Columbia University. Influenced by Deweyan disciples, Tao founded a National Association of Mass Education movement after returning to China in 1917. His concerns for primary education influentially developed teacher education in China. Additionally, Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940), President of Peking University, and the founder of the Academic Association, was an influential educator who introduced China to the unique curricular and reform ideas of the German and French systems, which he had gained from his eight years' study at the

University of Leipzig and Berlin in Germany and another nine years' time in France. Cai Yuanpei had also achieved the highest degree (Jinshi) in China's traditional education. Cai's and Tao's advocates constituted the leading schools of development in framing the educational philosophy in modern China. Moreover, combined they enabled Chinese education to make a giant leap towards modernization under western influence. Then, unfortunately, in the 1950s, as a by-product of the political alliance with the former Soviet Union, Soviet curricular patterns were introduced. These reinforced state Confucian, with European rationalists' patterns being followed. Yet, in the Cultural Revolution the interconnection between the influences from the pragmatist curricula were denied.

Then, when China opened up to the world in 1978, the time finally came for the educators to take the initiative, making an earnest proposal that pedagogy practiced in higher education in China should require theoretical and pedagogical foundations that were grounded in the Chinese context. The development of higher education theory was, in this way, introduced to China borrowing aspects that were consonant with those of China's Confucian tradition. Leading thinkers on China's educational philosophy, including Pan Maoyuan, Li Bingde, and Ye Lan, interpreted and adapted western educational theories, emphasizing practice and learning experience in teaching and learning:

> They developed their distinctive approaches to education with a high degree of autonomy, and direct observation was more significant than the cumulative building of theories and concepts in the formation of their pedagogy (Hayhoe 2001, p.339).

In the 1980s, after a try-out of the soviet model and the Chinese 'go it alone' approach to higher education, significant higher education reform was launched. Still, China remained looking toward the West for ideas (Altbach 2009). Western institutional models were adopted and adapted to the context of China's higher education (Shim 2008). In the 1990s, the government launched the 211 Project and 985 Project, intending to build research universities in China (Hayhoe and Zha 2006; Altbach 2009). Upon realizing the importance of importing ideas and technologies from the West, the Chinese government invested vast amounts of money to financially support large numbers of university graduates and staff members to either study at or pay an

academic visit to western universities. Exchange programmes also created opportunities for scholars and professors from the West to be frequently invited to Chinese universities. Chinese universities are now 'as internationalized in outlook and experience as those in major western universities' (Hayhoe and Zha 2006, p.685).

Another way western ideas have influenced China's higher education is related to the increased presence of western scientific output, mainly textbooks and academic journals (Altbach 2009). China respects western academic journals as presenting standards of academic excellence. As Altbach stated, 'contemporary scientific culture is basically western-done in the West and communicated in western languages. Most of the rest of the world recognizes that they must accommodate this reality (2009, p.27). In China, publications in top-level western journals have become one of the most critical elements, which are viewed as an academic advancement and are used as a criterion to assess the professionals' academic achievement as well. Regrettably, though, only few professionals have made such achievements due to the fact that there is limited access to scholarly websites outside China.

Further to these challenges and demands, in the 1990s, the Chinese government stated their intention to promote quality-oriented education in schools by declaring the issue of three consecutive policies; they were documented as reform and development of education in China (The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council 1993), promoting quality-oriented education in schools (The State-Commission of Education 1997) and improving quality-oriented education reform in an all-round way (The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council 1999). These policies demanded considerable changes in the field of English language teaching. As a significant response to the change, a shift from the grammar-translation approach in English teaching to a communicative one was implemented in universities of higher education in China. The change brought challenges not only to policymakers but also to teacher educators like my participants and me. We had to entirely focus on how we could prepare our students to pass exams to meet such challenges. Therefore, academic research for English language teachers was less critical than exploring pedagogical strategies to teach students to use English for communication purposes.

Such was the cultural background in which teachers, including myself, in higher education in China faced; the challenges of how they could relate research and teaching to their specific cultural, historical, educational, and even political conditions. Moreover, it was this background that motivated me to design a research project to encourage the English language teachers in a Chinese university to attempt to cross over the international boundaries to seek professional development.

3.5 My experience of research pre-2007

While the previous sections have outlined both Action Research and the broader educational culture within China, the following sections elaborate how my interest in Action Research as a methodological field of enquiry came about. Overall, this involves relating the history of the academic and professional events that led to me conducting this Action Research project and describing the impact of these upon me as a teacher-researcher.

Although research practice may seem self-explanatory, research, for the purpose of my study, at this point in my life, and with specific regard to my epistemological perspective, meant the academic enquiries of those who teach English as foreign language teachers. The study of teacher research typically includes teachers' research engagement, attitudes, motivations, perceptions, and the contexts in which their research is situated (Allison and Carey 2007; Barkhuizen 2009; Borg and Liu 2013). Thus, at this stage, the knowledge I had about research was of a traditional model of integrating theory and practice.

Since China opened its door to the world in the 1970s, increasing importance has been placed on English learning throughout the country (Gao, Barkhuizen and Chow 2011). The early twenty-first century in China saw an era in which the consequence of the Open and Reform Policy came to its prime developmental stage. Its influence on economic development speedily expanded the international market for import and export businesses. Hence, the need for people with language abilities, particularly English, increased, given its important international status, because 'English language at the tertiary level is widely accepted not only as an essential skill, but also a prerequisite for graduation and a gateway to better job opportunities' (Yao 1993, p.75). Such increased expectations for English learning imposed higher standards for

university professionals of the English language. Consequently, teachers' research received increasing attention in the field of foreign language education (Borg 2009). It is claimed that being research-engaged provides opportunities for language teachers to improve teaching and learning, to gain a sense of empowerment, and to seek professional development (Barkhuizen 2009; Taylor 2017; Trent 2012; Wyatt 2010;). In China, the National medium and long-term framework for educational reform and development from 2010 to 2020 (Ministry of Education 2010) requires that university English language teachers should adapt themselves to a broader range of teaching reforms and conduct research to improve their pedagogical practices.

One fundamental argument supporting this requirement is that teachers' research engagements and their pedagogical application, informed by research, will benefit both their teaching and their students' learning (Hargreaves 1999). Accordingly, most universities in China have placed stringent requirements for publications by teachers (Wang and Han 2011). The National medium and long-term framework (Ministry of Education 2010), which advocates research as one of the essential obligations for university teachers, has placed external administrative pressure on universities. For example, those with more quality publications are likely to be evaluated by the Ministry of Education as key universities and receive more funding and prestige. As Long and Huang commented:

> In China, due to the centralized administration system from the government of higher education, universities are mainly ranked based on the quality of papers published in high-impact journals, academic books with a reputable publisher, and research grants and awards from the central and provincial governments (2017, p.372).

As a result, many universities tend to place an overemphasis on research productivity. They usually convert the pressure from the government into institutional policies that require teachers to be actively engaged in research (Bai, Millwater, and Hudson 2012). Therefore, Chinese universities mainly structure academic research performance into their promotion system, which decides teachers' promotion in professional titles, an increase in salary, and annual bonus payment portioned according to their research achievements. For example, the newly issued policy within my home university set down the regulations for assessing the teaching staff's academic performance,

including both teaching and research (a translation of the original document can be found in Appendix 8.) In doing so, a full list of the teaching tasks and research commitments each teacher must accomplish was prescribed so that administrative motivation on teachers is now tightly imposed. Moreover, these prescriptive requirements are used as the criterion that decides if the teacher's employment contract can be extended in three years. More specifically, the research positions are divided from one as the highest to seven as the lowest of seven different ranks. Rank one, two, and three are labelled as the most demanding level; rank four and five as the medium level and rank six and seven as the primary level. For all teaching staff, there are different requirements for research specifically made for each group, while teaching responsibilities have remained almost the same. This means that research achievements play a decisive role in accessing the teaching staff's performance in my faculty.

Additionally, the policy requires that there should be differences in salary and research bonus payments according to different ranks. The staff choose the ranking category they wish they could be positioned in based on their own self-evaluation and their determination and confidence of how much they believe they will be able to accomplish in three years' time. Then the administration team, supervised by the Dean of the faculty, uses a tick-check list to assess each applicant's choice. Next, the teacher's teaching commitment and research achievement in the past is evaluated against the criteria. Finally, a decision is reached as to whether the teacher is eligible for the new rank he or she applied for. Those who are found to have applied for a higher rank than they should have are subsequently demoted to a lower grade, while those who applied for a lower level are required to choose a higher rank.

Clearly, these are very challenging obligations for the Chinese English teaching profession, which has a weak research tradition when compared to the research practice of other disciplines in the social sciences (Dai 2009). Thus, research engagement has become something of a 'bottleneck' (Wang and Han 2011, p.44) for many English language teachers' professional development, as their professional career is influenced by their research productivity (Borg and Liu 2013). Moreover, the practical complexity, such as different institutional research traditions, accessibility to data sources, availability of training programmes, and facilities and financial support

provided to English language teachers in different universities, creates a widening gap between the high expectations for English language teachers' research and the stagnating reality of their research practice.

Nonetheless, both the national policy and the newly implemented one within my own university clearly intend to push teachers to do quality research with their high-demanding conditions on research output. However, in actuality, their disproportionate emphasis on publication negatively encourages researchers to seek quick success by adopting malpractices in research, such as 'ghost-writing, plagiarism, falsification or fabrication of data' (Xie and Postlethwaite 2019, p.537). In other words, an 'unhealthy research culture' has been unintentionally established in many universities of higher education in China (Shi and Rao 2010). For example, item two in the research requirements of my home university requires a teacher-researcher to produce and publish five articles within three years. For most teachers in my faculty, the chances of getting five articles published in such journals as SCI [Science Citation Index], SSCI [Social Science Citation Index], EI [The Engineering Index], or A & HCI [Art & Humanities Citation Index] within three years are very small, considering that the number of upper-grade journals for English language teachers' publication is currently very limited within China, even before other factors, such as the quality of writing and the value of the research project are considered. Furthermore, the weekly schedules of my colleagues, requires them to spend most of their time managing teaching-related activities, giving them no choice but to prioritize teaching over research. These, therefore, are the very real challenges that my colleagues and I face.

Historically, my university developed from a teachers' college founded in 1968 into a comprehensive university in 2001. Determined by its teacher education history, the ethos in my university remained rooted in teaching training, teaching practice, and teachers' education. Most of the teaching staff were expected to spend much of their time teaching and fulfilling other teaching-related responsibilities, such as mentoring the graduates in their field practice and giving students support in all kinds of English competitions during the school term, so they had less practical experience with applying for grants, conducting research, and having articles published in scholarly journals. As one of them, I struggled to come to terms with researching, writing, publishing, and producing required research outcomes. Nevertheless, the institutional

requirement of research productivity motivated me to move into academia, but the process was fraught with anxiety, lack of confidence, and helplessness. There were no clear guidance or training opportunities to teach me how to do research

Furthermore, the institutional requirements and policies overlooked practical constraints. Teachers believed that their research efforts were often confined by limitations such as difficulty in publishing, teaching overload, a shortage of resources, a lack of support from mentors, as well as self-efficacy (Xu 2014). Successful publishing was related to honorary titles, bonus payments, and acknowledgement from the faculty and university leaders. Consequently, teachers were inclined to focus on research output rather than the process of conducting research. There was an annual assessment conducted at the end of the year with an aim to evaluate teachers' competence in teaching and research. Hence, apart from the hard work required to fulfil my teaching commitment, I exerted my efforts to meet the requirements for research, endeavouring to have at least one piece of writing published so that I would be assessed as a 'pass' at the end of year. Therefore, as far as research was concerned, at this time, I did not have time for deep thinking, nor did I show any interest in exploring research methodology.

Consequently, considerably more attention was paid to teaching rather than conducting research. In so doing, my engagement in research became less and less frequent because there was a lack of time and motivation. At the same time, my lack of Interest in research limited my understanding of what research was and I found it hard to persuade myself to the belief that doing research could be driven by personal pursuit. As a result of these issues, I accepted the passiveness revealed in my attitudes towards undertaking research and I shared my colleagues' common complaints about the pressure of researching. We would say things such as, 'If it had not been for a promotion, I would not do research' .Thus, this was how I viewed the importance of research engagement during the early years of my teaching career.

Additionally, apart from my personal passiveness, the research culture in my workplace was conventionally discouraging. As a direct result, I was not adequately motivated to conform to professional requirements to do research. Like my colleagues, I believed that I did research in response to the pressure that came from the promotion

review system. When it came to writing about research, I tended to follow the same template as I learned from the journal articles I had read, which were composed of an introduction, literature review, research process, findings, and conclusion. I did not pay any attention to the missing link, methodology, between the research question raised and the discussion of the findings because I did not have the knowledge that in order to test a hypothesis in a research project or experiment, there must be a theoretical framework with appropriate methods adopted as the research tools to resolve the problem. My understanding of undertaking research was a stereotyped procedure. It was composed of choosing a topic I was interested in, doing some reading to find out the key underpinning theory, and then using the theoretical support to defend the argument as discussion. In the end, there was a conclusion to summarize what had been examined. Bearing this kind of one-sided misinterpretation of a research framework in mind, I wrote what was labelled as research, without doing any real research but by giving a report of my understanding of the theory I had learned about and analysing the comments other researchers made on the theory. This way of doing so-called research kept me going for years until I was told about Action Research. When realizing that Action Research was a research methodology, I began to have a new perspective to define the concept of research, which was all about the importance of methodology.

3.6 My Introduction to Action Research in 2007-2011

I participated in an action experiment conducted in my faculty led by two American doctoral candidates in 2007. It was the first time that I heard about the notion of Action Research. After being actively involved in collaborative work with the two American Action Research practitioners, I came to know that it was recognized as a viable approach to dealing with the interrelationship between theory and practice with an aim to improve practice. That was an attractively fresh idea inspiring me to think about how I could do research and how I could improve my teaching simultaneously because up until this introduction to Action Research, I had prioritized teaching as my main job.

In my university context, the key issue in higher education was identifying not only what to teach but also how to educate students with the knowledge they needed so that they would become useful people in their life and in society. Teaching, as an everyday activity for most Chinese teachers in my faculty, outweighed in importance

over that of research, so we believed that we did not need to spend extra time creating a context to do the action experiment. Schön (1987) argued that the practitioner, like a researcher, engaged in an Action Research cycle to actively develop new knowledge. Kemmis (2010) also emphasised that Action Research supported and stimulated transformation. What my colleagues and I needed, then, was some theoretical guidelines and advice on how Action Research involved practitioners in the research process (Heron and Reason 2006). I chose Action Research as the most effective means of engaging participants in the process of taking actions so that the new knowledge or research skills in our professional work could be implemented.

The teacher support group organized by the two Americans aimed to illustrate and demonstrate how an Action Research approach with reflective cycles as the focus could be used to facilitate the teaching and learning process. In view of a need to help train the Chinese teachers participating in their study, they took the leadership in the development of a learning community within the faculty. In doing so, they endeavoured to cultivate a research atmosphere amongst the Chinese colleagues they worked with in which they aspired to develop the ability of these colleagues to think, articulate, and evaluate the use of the theory of Action Research and knowledge. Attracted by their dedicated efforts to help Chinese teachers evolve their perspectives and approaches to professional practice, I became one of the beneficiaries in their action experiment.

A group meeting was held regularly every two weeks at which the two American researchers took turns to run different sessions about Action Research. Based on their knowledge and experience of working in a Chinese university for a couple of years, they introduced an Action Research cycle consisting of four basic steps: (1) analysing the limitations of the existing practice in teaching; (2) constructing a new practice framework; (3) experimenting with new practice; (4) reflecting on the Action Research approach to challenge the old practice and to apply a new framework to study existing concrete problems.

The proposal for the Action Research project, in which I was involved, suggested the use of PowerPoint technology to replace the traditional ‘chalk and blackboard’ approach in classroom teaching. By undertaking this, I was actively playing my role as a participant in assisting an Action Research project. What I regularly did was observe

classes and give feedback for data collection. These experiences provided me with important lessons as I learned about data and how data was collected. For example, in reviewing one of the observations forms I filled in, I realized that the data recorded was genuinely real in its reliability and validity because what was coded was valuable proof and evidence in the testing of how Action Research helped to make improvements in teaching practice. (A sample of the observation form I completed can be found in Appendix 7.) Also, one of my significant learning experiences, at this time, came from my participation in this Action Research project through the process of completing these files. By preparing written reports, I not only learned how to plan actions but also practiced my written English. Moreover, I came to understand that in Action Research, data could be collected through recording and analysing reflective diaries and that reflection on actions taken could help to make improvement to actions envisioned in each cycle's steps.

3.6.1 Implementing Action Research into my practice as a teacher

Thus, Action Research began to stimulate and fascinate me. During my participation in the Teachers' Support group, I enjoyed pondering over theory while attempting to connect it to my teaching practice. Studying the theory of Action Research became something discussed between the foreign teachers and the few colleagues who were showing interest in it. I was then determined to choose learning Action Research as a steppingstone to start my journey of doing academic research.

Furthermore, from my initial, inspiring experiences of learning Action Research, I became very interested in finding a way to improve my teaching techniques, as I believed that would enable me to skilfully work out better strategies to fulfil my mission as a teacher. There were three main outcomes I considered I had gained after learning Action Research. The first was my passion for teaching and learning. I started to think about working for positive change in my teaching career, by promoting an eagerness to learn to do research. I began to realize that many problems were created through ignorance of subject knowledge. Learning to do research provided opportunities for enabling changes in myself and the community in which I was working. For instance, during those times, I worked mainly with first-year English-majoring students, who were faced with specific challenges such as lacking confidence, and experiencing difficulties in listening, speaking, and understanding sessions taught in English. I

gained pleasure from changing my teaching strategies, so that students could be motivated. I was pleased to see that my students started to encourage each other and enjoy learning subject knowledge and new things in a different environment. The second was that I gained some confidence in theorizing teaching practice. Having learned Action Research as a methodology, I wished I could talk about it in our academic community within the faculty; and that, I believed, would enable me to continue and develop my research interests. In other words, I became excited about working with people who had similar interest in developing co-operation and sharing new knowledge with each other. The last outcome I gained was that I became brave and started to challenge the mindset my colleagues and I had about research. Ultimately, this, learning to become critical, allowed me to develop my academic and research interests. Following the example of what the two Americans did, I successfully applied for a small amount of research grant and started a project with an aim of initiating some changes to the teaching curriculum for the first-year English majoring students. It was designed as a teamwork approach, inviting all those who were teaching different subjects to first-year students to make contributions to working out a new practice-based teaching curriculum, instead of adhering to an exam-centred programme.

By the end of the semester, I found I had learned more than I had expected from my participation in the American Action Research project. Primarily, my research interest had shifted from justifying theories that informed my learning to viewing the theory of Action Research as the initial incentive that motivated me to find a way of becoming a researcher. I understood that one of the means to achieve the aims of an Action Research project was taking co-operative and collaborative actions, which would subsequently determine the quality of the reflections engaged in. Also, I had learned that a fundamental stage of carrying out Action Research was focusing on the main areas for reflection, which included identifying and filling in the gaps in acquiring new knowledge. The purpose of doing Action Research was not about aiming to seek a solution to existing problems, but rather it was about learning to make improvement in practice by engaging in such activities as envisioning cyclical reflective cycles and conducting collaborative inquiry.

3.6.2 Action Research and collaborative enquiry, Liverpool in 2011-2012

This section records my experience of going deeper into my learning of Action Research by becoming an academic visitor. In 2011, I was funded by a Chinese government scholarship to pay an academic visit to Liverpool Hope University with the aim of expanding my learning of Action Research. The scholarship year provided me with a rewarding opportunity to have a profounder understanding of the rationale for using Action Research as a methodology.

One of the activities I actively participated in at Liverpool Hope University was to observe collaborative enquiry sessions for early years practitioners. The practitioners had accepted an invitation to join a collaborative enquiry in order to address the question: 'How can we, individually and co-operatively' improve our practice with young children?' (Walton 2011) During their meetings, they discussed with each other the issues they felt needed addressing, and at the end of each session, they went away with an action plan as to how they could make positive changes in their work. Therefore, they were given the opportunity to enquire into questions that they felt were meaningful to them. Some of them were not educated to be teachers, but they were trained to work as early years professionals. While listening to them sharing their stories, I felt I was listening to them talking about their life journeys, as their in-depth conversations were about early experiences that they had had and that now influenced how they perceived and carried out their professional roles. They kept detailed records of what they did at the nursery and shared photos of the teaching aids they used to attract the children's interests. I was moved by the fact that they were researching their practice through creating knowledge of themselves as active practitioners.

One patterned activity was sharing their reflective diaries in group meetings. Those reflections demonstrated how they were influenced to value the challenging work with early years children, how they made decisions to resolve conflicts in learning to work with the young, and what they were expecting to get from the collaborative communities. Some of them liked to trace the events that influenced their practice. I remember a woman who talked about how her feelings that a particular child was experiencing inequality were evoked. She commented that the child learnt what he experienced from the environment. Then she raised the question, '*How do I put those values into practice?'* I fell into deep thought at this question, as she was not only

investigating a social and educational problem which she was facing in practice, but also relating Action Research theory to the method of collaborative enquiry. She said she would always treat parents and families with friendliness, warmth, and respect. As a reflective response, she was asked the follow-up question, '*What have you learned through putting these values into practice?'* She said that through displaying a friendly and caring manner, the child could sense security and calmness. Then another question was asked of her, '*How have you influenced other people in the process?'* to which she replied that she wanted people to learn to be non-judgmental and that people working in partnership would develop mutual respect if they felt cared and valued. Some people discussed negative impacts that would influence their reactions. They also described how communities and educational settings could influence people including young children's perspectives of value and life. Significantly, this project demonstrated to me how collaborative enquiry could best be conducted and revealed substantial and valuable information about the practitioners who were learning to embody values as principles guiding their practice.

Thus, collaborative enquiry was a powerful method for facilitating my learning of Action Research, as it is 'democratic, honours multiple ways of knowing, meets conditions widely held to be necessary for free and open discourse, links learning to lived experience, values action and is often emancipatory in its intent' (Bray et al. 2000, p. 53). In addition, it supports engagement in critical thinking and encourages making meaning from experiences. In doing so, dialogue and communication among the participants is important because only through collaboration can the issues that emerge from practice be tackled.

My understanding of collaborative enquiry rests on the terminology given by John Heron (1996), who identified 'four complementary ways of knowing – experiential, presentational, propositional and practical' and considered that these 'should be in interactive balance as learners engage their whole selves in making meaning from experience' (Bray et al. 2000, p. 94). My traditional academic training focused on building up knowledge by following a pattern of learning. Individual efforts were very much emphasized in acquiring knowledge, so critical analysis and working collaboratively to gain access to new understanding of knowledge was not actively encouraged. Collaborative enquiry did just the opposite; it provided possibilities for me

to engage different ways of learning, absorbing, and digesting new experiences that were gradually presented through cooperation and collaboration.

To enquire is to question, to investigate and to learn in a practical sense. It is a meaning-making activity that goes beyond the learning. That is an essential part of our being human (Lave and Wenger 1991). People working together to deal with concrete problems will come to new understandings, gain new knowledge, and create new meaning. What I really enjoyed was gaining pleasure from interacting with other practitioners and researchers. When we exchanged ideas, we made our discussion or conversation a collaborative process that involved talking, listening, reflecting, questioning, and responding. For people who are engaged in discussing the same topic, it becomes easier for them to communicate with one another. Stenhouse's (1975) definition of research viewed collaborative work as a systematic, critical enquiry. I borrowed his idea to demonstrated how I would invite collaborative enquiry as an approach to generate new knowledge in my study.

3.6.3 Initializing the idea of creating a 'community of research'

It was claimed by Stenhouse (1975) that teacher professionalism could best be enhanced by giving them a research role. In such a way, my experiences during my scholarship year took me to a stage where I needed to conduct research to inform my own professional practice. From this position, I started to have an idea of how to identify the challenges we faced within my home university, with an attempt to encourage my colleagues and other educators to research collaboratively and to improve their educational practice by engaging in alternative research methodologies with professional and scientific reliability and validity. As previously stated, in the process of learning and researching, we were expected to be able to generate knowledge that would be of value to the university in which we worked, and hopefully with lessons relevant to a wider international audience. Hence, my idea was that through collaborative research, my colleagues and I would be able to take responsibility for the contribution we would make to the meaning and the quality of our educational practice and to the lived reality of social formations within which we learned and worked. Using Action Research as an approach in the study, I was beginning to formulate, and borrowing Wenger's (1998) concept of a 'community of practice', I aimed to improve the research practice within my home university by

creating a ‘community of research’. Moreover, in so doing, I intended to make public our knowledge, talents, and expertise of how we could improve our teacher professionalism through improving our research practice.

Action research involves action and is based on practice, so it is ‘a form of enquiry that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work’ (McNiff and Whitehead 2006, p.7). The advantage of Action Research is that it takes place in natural settings, such as classrooms, workshops, and research centres. Clarke (2008) explained, ‘our individual responsibility is not to attempt to impose large-scale change, but to act in our everyday exchange’ (cited by Edge 2001, p.5). Based on this, in responding to my research question, my aim was to develop my own practical theories of practice, through a cyclical process of reflection and action, during which I would address challenges within my work situation and seek to improve my practice with the hope of influencing the practice of my colleagues. In my Action Research, I was looking primarily for two things:

1. Episodes of practice that show the developing educational influence of my own learning.
2. Episodes of practice that show my educational influence in the learning of others (McNiff and Whitehead 2006, p.131).

Therefore, the original purpose of this PhD research project was to explore strategies for developing Action Research in my work practice and to change the research culture by creating a model of intervention.

However, having returned home after my scholarship year, I still felt that I needed to discover the richness and diversity of research methods. By then, I was aware that Action Research was a methodological approach to research and that within action-reflection cycles, I could incorporate other methods. So, I returned to the UK to undertake an MA in Education, to allow myself to expand my understanding of research and education through the eyes of different researchers and theorists. The MA study enormously expanded my understanding of what research was. I became aware of different research paradigms and of a wider range of research methodologies and methods. In doing so, I began to discover an even greater interest in exploring

more qualitative research methodologies other than Action Research. It was that informative and productive learning process that motivated me to become more actively engaged in doing research with excitement and determination. Inspired by an encouraging learning environment, I worked extremely hard and successfully accomplished my MA degree with a distinction between 2014-2015.

My MA project presented an analysis of what Chinese parents' role was in helping their children to construct bilingual identities and how traditional Chinese values shaped the parental involvement in their children's learning progress in a cross-cultural environment. The study was completed through a qualitative methodology for data collection. I conducted observations and interviews as the main methods with two main purposes: one was to evaluate Chinese parents' teaching of their children driven by the motivation of a strong work ethic; and the other was to contribute to the research on the cross-cultural values of Chinese parenting styles, especially, conceptions of expectation and cultural identity regarding their children's bilingual learning.

One valuable and important lesson I gained through my successful MA study was that I learnt what data meant and what to do with data. I benefitted from how I chose my research sample for the project and how the data collected was analysed. More specifically, to collect reliable information to reflect an authentic social phenomenon for Chinese immigrant children in a cross-cultural context, sixteen participants from Chinese families, including immigrants from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong were recruited. For the purpose of studying children's bilingual learning, observations were conducted on six target children who were all between the ages of three to seven years with a consideration that that was a critical period for language development.

Methods applied included observations and interviews for data collection. In order to evaluate Chinese parental styles in a different culture, open questions were designed in interviews. Meanwhile, observations were recorded in clear organized forms with all detailed information included such as date, number of the children, name of the children, age, setting, aim, objectives, conclusion, and reflection. The interviews were mostly conducted with mothers, and I initially narrowed the sample size by recruiting my participants from the new generation of Chinese immigrants with a greater educational background.

Data analysis involved several stages and considerations. What I remember clearly was that it took me a considerable amount of work to recruit participants, as the Chinese immigrants had varying amounts of exposure to education themselves. This had resulted in different degrees of acculturation and familiarity with western ways of thinking. Finally, I grouped participants according to their educational level, overseas experience, and length of stay in a western society, particularly in England. I found recruiting and engaging participants in conversation an interesting process. It was also very exciting to gain a sense of achievement, while analysing the data to look for indications of how my participants would conceptualize the importance of their expectations of their children and their cultural identities throughout the process of educating their children.

Thus, I found the entire process of purposefully designing strategies to collect data to be exciting and inspiring. It was something I had not done before. I had not expected to be interviewing two headteachers from two primary schools in Liverpool. One of the headteachers sent me a prompt reply after receiving my request for doing member checking with her. She confirmed to me that my interpretations of the interview represented her comments and that her opinion was correctly voiced. That was an encouraging moment as it taught me how to make the best use of data, and how cooperation with others could lend itself to collaborative enquiry.

3.6.4 Registering for a PhD in 2016: aiming to transform a research culture through Action Research

Through learning and identifying the importance of Action Research to my research journey, I gradually developed an understanding of my personal needs and existing practice in my workplace. I was particularly concerned about how my studies on Action Research could be related to my own life, as it had already become a meaningful and significant life journey for me. I became even more interested in finding out how I could use it both in the living of my life and in improving my teaching and learning. Therefore, I wanted to register for a PhD project in which I would use Action Research as my methodology, so that I could develop my own practice. Through designing and actively engaging in a cyclical process of reflection and action, I believed that I would address the challenges I had been through in my efforts to improve my practice in teaching and research. In other words, through the action reflection cycles I would undertake, I

would be able to analyse and reflect on the concepts, values, and experiences that informed my professional practice.

Consequently, I arrived at the point in which I decided that I would investigate how I could transform the research culture of my university faculty while working with my colleagues to create a 'community of research'. In doing so, I planned that I would apply what I had learned during my time in the UK and use it to constructively influence my colleagues. I hoped that I could encourage them to develop their sense of researcher identity in a similar way to what I felt was happening to me. In addition, both in the undertaking of my PhD and in the proposal of a 'community of research' within my home university, I had, at the time, the support and encouragement of the Dean of Education.

3.7 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have established the foundations upon which my research was based. In so doing, I have outlined the pre-steps, planning, action, observations, and reflections of cycle 1 of my Action Research project. In essence, they capture the sociocultural, educational, and political contexts from which my thesis emerged. Additionally, and perhaps more significantly, they elaborate upon my academic and professional sense of place in the midst of these settings before and throughout the initial cycle of my research. In other words, cycle 1 of my Action Research project establishes the springboard upon and from which the subsequent elements of my thesis, with all its challenges, twists, and turns, arose.

In the next chapter, in which the second cycle is described, I outline how the planning and reflections of cycle 1, expounded in this chapter, were applied. In doing so, cycle 2 reveals a conventional approach to the application of Action Research methodology in which I explore how I aimed to change the research culture in my home university.

Chapter 4

Action Research cycle 2 - Aiming to Transform a Faculty Research Culture

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I outlined my acquired understanding of Action Research and its place within the sociocultural, educational, and political arenas of China. I also provided an overview account of Chinese education and research, as pertinent to the situation of my colleagues and myself, before providing a reflective account of how I came to register for a PhD. Combined, these accounts constituted cycle 1 of my Action Research project, because they provided the foundations for my study and chosen question. These explanatory accounts of Action Research, and my situation regarding research within this methodological framework, are the substance of what brought me to cycle 2 and the contents of this chapter.

Accordingly, this chapter provides an account of my plan to fulfil my aim of transforming the research culture of my home faculty, and my expectation to work with my colleagues to create a 'community of research'. At this stage, I saw myself as being in the process of becoming a researcher, and I believed that gathering, reflecting, and sharing knowledge was an essential part of constructing my identity as such. The primary motivation that inspired me to have the courage to challenge the existing research culture was an awareness that there was limited knowledge of research methodologies taught and used by my colleagues; therefore, I wanted to share my learning with them and hoped that I could encourage them to develop their sense of researcher in a similar way to what I felt was happening to me. In this aspiration, I was strongly supported by the Dean of Education in my home university. He, too, hoped that if I were able to change my participants' beliefs in doing research and attract their interest in exploring new theories, conveying what I had learned from my experiences in the UK to influence my participants' practice, this would make a valuable contribution to our university and knowledge itself.

4.2 Building a 'community of research'

In the first Action Research cycle, I recalled the story of how I came to see the early years practitioners who were involved in a collaborative enquiry as a 'community of researchers'. I thought that if early years practitioners, who were not academics and

not educated as researchers, could see themselves as members of a ‘community of research’, it would be worth trying to establish a similar learning community with my colleagues, so that I could encourage their participation. My research project, after that, was initially designed to encourage my colleagues to do research collaboratively and to improve their educational practice by adopting research methodologies more professionally and systematically. At this stage in my enquiry, it was my intention that by engaging them in a process of learning and researching, we would generate knowledge that was of value, not just to ourselves but to the university in which we worked, and hopefully with lessons relevant to a broader national audience. Consequently, my colleagues and I would be able to take responsibility for the contribution we could make to the meaning and quality of our educational practice, and the lived reality of the social formations within which we were learning and living. Moreover, in making an effort to investigate the possibilities and challenges involved in research across two different academic cultures and building on Lave and Wenger’s idea of a ‘community of practice’ (Smith 2009), I was seeking to create a ‘community of research’ where my participants would work co-operatively to learn how to improve their academic research.

4.2.1 Research aim

Using Action Research as my methodology, I aimed to transform the research culture in the faculty where I worked and to improve the research practice with my colleagues by creating a ‘community of research’. The intention was to make public our knowledge, talents, and expertise, furthering our teacher professionalism by improving our research practice. As was claimed by Stenhouse (1975), teacher professionalism could best be enhanced by giving teachers a research role. So, I planned that I would ask my participants to identify the challenges they had experienced in their research practice, with an intention to help them improve theoretical and technical skills by engaging in a range of methodologies. They would be learning to adapt and expand their use of research methodologies and methods more professionally and appropriately. Before describing how I worked with my participants to establish a ‘community of research’, an overview of the context in which we work is appropriate.

4.2.2 The context of the research

The institution where I work is a teacher-training faculty. Language learning and teaching are the main courses classified under two modules, foreign languages and linguistics and English language teaching. There are three language majors, English, Japanese, and Russian. Korean, French, and German are also taught but as elective courses. About 500 students major in English; over 100 students study Japanese, and more than 60 students are Russian majors. Altogether there are 123 teaching staff, among which 23 are professors, 59 senior lecturers, and 41 lecturers.

As designed in my action plan, my colleagues were asked to think about how their research might influence their professional growth, and were encouraged to develop cooperation in research activities, to promote discussion and communication of the latest developments in research among the teaching staff. The discussion focused on how teachers with different research capabilities performed in their study, as many researchers raised the issue that overemphasized pressure on publication might stop teachers from doing research out of interest. Similarly, there was criticism regarding research output because it currently is a required component in the annual evaluation of the teaching staff's academic achievement. In this, it is used as a criterion to assess whether a teacher performed in a qualified way both as a teacher and a researcher, to ensure that improved professionalism in teaching and researching are safeguarded. Consequently, within the faculty, developing research competence is the way to achieve recognition of professional capacity. The relationship between teaching and research is thus interpreted as an interlocking cycle; the better one does in research, the more publications might be produced, the easier it is for one to gain promotion. In reality, there are practical obstacles.

Firstly, institutional pressures push teachers to do research passively to meet the requirements on research output rather than for good quality research. In this, a numbers-based assessment was adopted, requiring teachers to have two articles published every year if they wanted to pass their annual evaluation. Publishing four articles, including two in upper-level journals, reached a level of distinction. However, full-time teachers in the universities in China are also busy with numerous teaching-related activities. As Li (2015, p.81) suggested, 'They are expected to assume multiple roles, such as course designers, developers, deliverers, organizers, assessors, and

learner developers'. As a result, teachers argue that they find it hard to accomplish quality research with classes to teach, mountains of bureaucracy to complete, and curricular activities to handle. Besides, instead of doing research out of academic interest, promotion-driven studies have negative impacts on researchers. For example, administrative requirements and career enhancement have led some teachers to seek quick success and instant benefits by paying to have articles published.

Secondly, there is limited support and access to research data sources available to the teaching staff. Access to the Internet outside China is strictly controlled by the government. For example, Google is blocked in China, so there is no easy access to the resources online, which typically represent the latest research developments in the world. The importance of Google is that it is a gateway to a growing category of free abstracting and indexing tools that offer access to scholarly and other materials via the Web, and they offer several advantages over more rigid database search engines that have traditionally been used, including flexible plain-text search and a ranking that indicates general importance.

Hence, China National Knowledge Infrastructure [CNKI] is the only official search engine for people in academia to use in China. It mainly functions as a database to collate academic journals, and MA and PhD theses, and is used as an academic plagiarism checker. Unfortunately, all the articles uploaded on CNKI are in Chinese. A few high-impact journals are listed on China Social Science Citation Index [CSSCI] and edited in English. Still, they are mainly platforms for famous national experts, who represent some authority in learning and teaching English in China, because these journals choose to work only with experts who are renowned for their academic influence on research and studies of the English language nationally.

Thirdly, due to a lack of experience and exposure to the requisite skills and methodologies of research, my colleagues' ability to critique research had limitations. For instance, most of their experience of research was confined to qualitative reviews and descriptive approaches. Indeed, critics have commented that Chinese journals publish articles that read like 'personal experiences and reflections without substantial literature review, purposeful research planning, details of the operational procedure

and solid data' (Gao, Li, and Lu 2001, p.3). Accordingly, the staff needed essential pedagogical and technological training to undertake academic research, but neither within the university nor the faculty were these provided, leaving most teachers to undertake research based on their own subject knowledge gained over years of accumulated experience.

Thus, these were the problems present in my university as I began cycle 2 of my research, but they also posed a national dilemma for most English language teachers in many universities in China. A survey was undertaken by Li (2010) on academic research by language-majoring teachers from 26 higher institutions in Chongqing. It revealed that only 826 articles were published in the leading journals within five years before 2012, and the average number of publications was 6.35 for every college or university annually. The total number of research projects at the provincial and municipal levels was 107. Only 18 research projects, funded by the central government, passed the evaluation process organized by the National Research Committee, which meant an average of 0.14 research projects was undertaken per year by each individual institution. Clearly, then, it is not difficult to imagine the minimal research that foreign language teachers in other small cities achieved if the research environment in Chongqing, a big city with many key universities such as Southwest University, Chongqing University, and Sichuan International Studies University, and many other famous universities, had such little research output. Dai and Zhang (2014) commented that foreign language educators' achievement in academic research was of more inferior quality than that achieved by other educators in science subjects, such as mathematics, chemistry, and physics.

Other studies (Hu 2008; Dai 2009; Hu 2009; Wang and Han 2011) were also conducted to explore the challenges faced by Chinese language educators in universities. The findings suggested that in most universities in China, professionals were hampered in their efforts to maintain an improved quality of foreign language education and personal development, because they had limited abilities in doing academic research (Li 2008). Therefore, emphasis should be laid on improving research skills for teachers in higher education in China, because university educators need to reconsider the importance of, and explore approaches to, academic research to enhance their professional development.

Thus, I was determined to examine the possibility of engaging my participants in more appropriate ways of doing research by encouraging them to apply varied methodologies and methods in carrying out their research, with a bold aim that the research culture practiced at my institution would be gradually changed as others witnessed our endeavours.

4.2.3 Developing the idea of a 'community of research'

Academic research is perceived to be an essential and integral part of teachers' academic life in both the UK and Chinese higher education (Hu et al. 2014). Teachers' research at the university level is assessed through various academic achievements, including publications, speeches at conferences, teaching at postgraduate level, successful doctoral supervision, peer-reviewing journal articles, and even completion of books (Li and Wang 2012). The ability to research is necessary both to achieve academic success and to demonstrate that achievement (Liu and Gong 2001). Academic research requires producing written work, and the process involves researching, reading, planning, writing, and demonstrating the research outcomes. Closely associated with these processes are issues to do with the perception of academic research, application of research methodologies, and writing strategies.

However, the study and practice of academic research have long been ignored by professional educators in higher education in China. Due to unfavourable academic contexts, most Chinese foreign language teachers' research engagement is greatly constrained by their limited knowledge and competence to do research (Barkhuizen 2009; Borg 2009). Many other objective reasons account for that. For example, the enhanced requirements on research outputs, black publishing market, promotion-driven purpose, and research grants- winning motivation (Nana and Jing 2017) became overwhelming for the teachers. They had to choose to prioritise teaching over research in order to ease the stress between work and personal life, simultaneously making academic research the predominant area of professional weakness (Liu and Gong 2001; He 2008). The barrier emerging in my home institution is that the study of research methodologies was not systematically included in the curriculum as a required subject. As a result, both teachers and students were not versed in using research methodologies in their studies and research.

Therefore, I decided to introduce Action Research as a research methodology to my participants. Teachers can use Action Research to evaluate and improve their teaching and research through practice. My action plan at the initial stage included helping my participants to expand their understanding of it through their engagement in my research. More specifically, the study aimed:

- to identify the challenges Chinese English language teachers faced in undertaking academic research, and the factors that caused these challenges.
- to explore how I could create a research environment in my university faculty, which would encourage university educators to engage in research methodologies and methods that would enable them to theorize and improve their professional practice.

In the beginning, with the backing of my then Dean of Education, the research was designed to focus on a comparative study of different research cultures in the UK and my home institution. I intended to follow the action plan to influence the research culture in the faculty where I had worked. In discussing the different approaches under the influence of varied social, ideological, and academic cultures, I ambitiously decided that if my project could introduce my colleagues to a broader knowledge range of research methods and Action Research methodology, I would be able to bring about changes to the research culture in the faculty by addressing one of the major priorities: the overriding need for research support in my university faculty. I personally was making progress through my research trips between China and the UK, so I wanted to use my experiences in the service of my home university in China in a transformative way. I aimed to achieve this by building our own ‘community of research’ with my participants, which would, over time, influence other university colleagues.

When the study began, the questions included in the initial action plan were narrowed down to three aspects so that the focus would be put on why there was a lack of application of research methodologies in the research practice of my colleagues:

- Was there training necessary for the faculty staff to acquire the ability to do research?
- What were the motivations for academic staff to engage in research?
- Were there opportunities for them to do research? For example, how much time could they use to do research every week or every month? Were there any

platforms such as seminars or conferences for the teaching staff to share their ideas and to ask for support upon encountering difficulties?

I believed there were some areas that could be improved, as they constituted the objective obstacles that had prevented professionals in my faculty from consciously thinking about their practice in doing academic research. I felt that these questions would lead to a discussion about transforming the traditional academic attitudes and practice in my faculty as an institution of higher education. I was expecting that I could use what I had learned to help my colleagues expand their research ideas and improve their professional practice. As I had been encouraged to develop as a researcher through an in-depth study of research methodologies, so I believed that I could be in a position to help to create a research community with my colleagues.

The research also included a bold expectation that I would strengthen my personal qualities and ensure my professional development to set up a 'community of research'. Then, in generating knowledge that would be of value to my colleagues, my research project would help implement a change in the research culture in my faculty. Therefore, throughout the second cycle of Action Research, I purposefully explored the differences in attitudes, beliefs, motivation, and likelihood that my colleagues would be influenced and theoretically supported to apply appropriate research methodologies in their practice.

The conceptual framework of a 'community of research' follows Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory. Wenger himself described a community as a group of people, who came together in sharing their concerns for practice-based issues, problems, or an interest in a topic, and 'who enhance their knowledge and skills through continual collaborative and critical interaction' (1998, p.98). Communities of practice proved to be very effective for teacher learning and professional development (Thang et al. 2011). Thus, the concept provided theoretical support for my project, which sought to build a 'community of research' by involving interaction and reflection from my participants. I believed the collaborative work with would enable us to grow more academically professional in our practice both as teachers and researchers.

4.2.4 Recruitment of participants and ethical considerations

Ethical approval for my Action Research project was given by the chair of Faculty Research Committee (see Appendix 1) and from this, I went on to recruit my participants. My participants were all volunteers recruited from my home university in China. We had been working together for more than ten years, and we shared the same interest in widening our knowledge and improving our research skills. Recruitment was undertaken through personal communication. After the participants verbally agreed to participate in the project, an email invitation was sent out to staff within the faculty (see Appendix 2). At this time, it was well known that I was acting with the sanction of our Dean of Education. In the email, I introduced myself and made them aware of the nature and aims of my intended study. I also included a consent form in which they were asked for their written consent (see Appendix 3). In this, they were reassured that their confidentiality and anonymity would be safeguarded, both within the thesis and in any future write-ups and/or publications. Likewise, they were informed that all data collected would be solely used for research purposes and discussion within the team, and that it would be destroyed after the completion of the thesis. At the same time, all participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the project, and when being interviewed individually or in pairs/groups, their right to ask for respite breaks was verbally mentioned at the start of each session.

At the start, all participants were hoping to improve the proficiency of their academic research and thereby ensure their professional development. Accordingly, there were no sensitive topics or materials included, with participants mainly involved in discussions about research-related topics, including methodologies, theoretical framework, data analysis, and evaluation of the present study. This only required them to reflect on their own experiences in doing academic research, giving evidence to explain what methodologies they had used in their writings, and revealing what they had found useful and how they might improve their research. I took time to make these activities manageable and sufficiently time flexible to be undertaken during their routine work. Moreover, with the support of the Dean of Education, the work they contributed to my research was considered part of their professional work in the university. In this sense, my project functioned as a workshop in which we discussed our academic activities. Given the geographical factor, my plan was to travel back to China to do field research and to collect data bi-annually, depending on how much

data I needed for the project. During this time, my participants were engaged in reflecting on their own experiences over time, and giving feedback to help with my data analysis, so again I considered that there was no physical or psychological stress caused to them.

4.2.5 Methods

Most qualitative methods can be used in Action Research. I used methods such as reflective diaries, semi-structured interviews, whole group meetings, and collaborative enquiry as the means of gaining data. Qualitative data included notes taken from informal and unstructured discussions, participants' reflective logs, and field notes. Data analysis suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) was considered suitable for Action Research. Recording is a standard method of collecting data in fieldwork research but, although I asked for my participants' permission to record our talk throughout the interviewing process, they always declined, because they felt uncomfortable with the prospect of accidently making what could be construed as a negative criticism of the system within which we work. Accordingly, I made hand-written notes, so that I could retain at least some of the information for later analysis.

Moreover, I included my participants in the data processing. According to the literature, Action Research is critical, collaborative, and communicative (Orton 1993). Therefore, by including them in the critical analysis and interpretation of the data we collected, it was my intention that the research methods I used would encourage participant dialogue and cooperation. I wanted to help my participants to reach their goal of increasing confidence in their use of different methods while building up academic skills. I believed that this process would influence their beliefs, motivate their working practices, and encourage them to explore meaningful methodologies and methods in their own academic research, so that they could achieve their goal of developing their professional competence and career prospects.

4.3 Data collection and process

As I had registered on a full-time PhD programme, I spent most of my time in the UK making at least an annual research trip back to China. The best time for these trips was July to September when my colleagues were on their summer vacation. I tried to make the best use of these two and a half months, arranging interviews and group

work so that I could collect as much information as possible. The plan was to undertake the data analysis after I returned to the UK.

Interviews and group meetings were held from 2016 to 2018. The action plan designed for each phase of the project to accomplish our task was discussed in those meetings. Information sheets were used to inform participants of the details of the plan. At the outset, an agreement was reached with the participants that they supported the project, and that they were happy to reflect on and share their own research experiences. They were aware that they would be expected to describe the difficulties and challenges they had encountered in their academic research through collaborative work. Member checking with each participant was included as a formal confirmation given by the participant that they would let me use the information provided anonymously to complete my thesis. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested using member checking as a means of enhancing rigour in qualitative research, and I learned to use the method when I was completing my MA study. In that instance, I had undertaken it with the Headteacher following my interview with her. She responded promptly and confirmed that my interpretation of her opinions of the Chinese parenting style was correct. Moreover, through this process, she recognized the importance of my work, and kindly introduced the headteacher from another school to me. The second school had the largest population of Chinese immigrant children in Liverpool, and I was thus able to conduct another critical interview that was not initially planned but collected precious data. Subsequently, building on this previous success, I undertook member checking to validate, verify, and assess the trustworthiness of my data (Doyle 2007) I was able to collect. I followed the traditional way of member checking which ‘covers a range of activities’ (Birt et al. 2016, p.1803) and requested approval from my participants (see Appendix 5). This involved returning the interview transcript to the participant, asking for confirmation of the accuracy of the summary of their answers, and then asking for permission to use the interpreted interview as data.

Furthermore, the data collection of this cycle was implemented in three different phases. The timeline, focus of each stage, and methods applied are summarized as follows in Table 2, as previously shown in chapter 1.

Table 5 (repeat of Table 2) data collection phases in Action Research cycle 2

Phase of Data Collection	Focus	Methods of Enquiry	Task	Result
1.Initial (2016 –2017): Establishing the study	• Planning & organizing actions • Presentation of Action Research to participants	• 6 individual interviews • 3 collaborative group workshops • reflective diaries	To outline the 'community of research' I intended to establish The tasks were: • furthering my knowledge of Action Research methodology • Developing personal knowledge of research methods in qualitative research	Accomplished
2.Intermediary (2017 –2018): Taking action	• Discussing challenges • Proposing improvements • Transmitting personal knowledge of Action Research methodology and methods in qualitative research to participants	• group meetings •collaborative enquiry • reflective diary	• Collaborative writing to apply for research funds	Failure both in moving forward with the collaborative group written application and in acquiring the research funds
3.Final: (2018-2019) Reflection & Trial of new approaches	• Reflecting on the previous 2 phases & actions taken • changing the group dynamics	• 3 paired interviews • 2 group interviews • reflective diary	• working through an online 'community of research'	Failed to establish the online 'community of research'

4.3.1 The initial phase of cycle 2: establishing the study

In phase one, undertaken between 2016 – 2017, six interviews and three collaborative group meetings were conducted. The task for this phase was the furthering of my knowledge of Action Research methodology and the development of my personal knowledge of research methods in qualitative research, to outline clearly and successfully the prospect of the 'community of research' which I hoped we would establish. For the initial interviews with my participants, I used six sub-questions from the action plan I had designed to investigate why, within my home institution, there was only a limited awareness of different research methodologies. These were:

- What are their motivations for joining the project?
- What makes it meaningful to them?
- What are their time priorities in balancing their work and research?
- How does applying appropriate methods affect the research process?
- How is writing influenced by wider exposure to research methodologies?
- How possible it is to work with one of the participants to co-create a piece of writing?

These questions had also been presented on the information sheet sent out to my participants before the interviews and had been raised to identify the obstacles existing in my faculty. I expected that by addressing these questions, I would discover how these hurdles hindered my colleagues from consciously thinking about their research practice. Also, I thought that I would be able to resolve these problems by inviting my participants to expand their ideas about research and improve their professional training in the same way that I felt mine had been enhanced. At the time, I believed that this would result in us working together in community, sharing our knowledge, and becoming more academically proficient in our research.

Our community was to be research process-oriented, so the next step was to disseminate knowledge of research methodologies and to make further learning activities happen with members of our research community. My colleagues all had articles published, so I decided that to justify the theoretical rationale for establishing the research community, we would start with clarifying the concept of research methodology. I suggested my participants use their own academic writings and papers

as examples. I reinforced this by asking them to focus in their reflective journals on finding out what methodologies they were familiar with, and how they were used in their research. Then, later in the process, I supported this by sharing articles I purposefully selected on varied methodologies in research, and asking them to find out what differences there were between what they read and their own writings. I hoped this approach would play a developmental role, provide us with a space to talk about experiences, and draw lessons from each other. I also asked my participants to do a self-evaluation, which might be revisited at the end of the project or in a few more years' time, so as to assess the changes they had made.

Interviews were conducted between the group meetings, as they created opportunities for me to work closely with each participant and gather information objectively. The interview questions for the first phase between 2016-2017 were divided into five categories as below:

1. Perception of academic research: clarifying types of research methodology, the importance of academic research, the concept of 'community of research', and the prospect of setting up a research community with the participants.
2. The practice of an action plan: designing actions and taking the first step towards setting up a 'community of research'.
3. Reflections on the process: discussing strategies applied, problems identified, and support analysis.
4. Supervisors' feedback: suggesting actions to improve our experiment based on the advice given by the supervisor to see what co-operative work could better serve the purpose.
5. Research support: providing support, such as in-depth group discussion, analysis of cases studied, a guest speaker invited to give talks (if possible).

Conteh (2018, p.19) explained that 'personal and professional experiences were valid starting points for the research', so these questions, asked in phase one, focused on collecting information about my participants' perceptions of academic research. I wanted to invite them to begin to understand the problems they faced, by evaluating our actions. Thus, I asked them to summarize their replies to these questions in their reflective diaries and then bring them to the group meeting. In that meeting, I shared with them the knowledge I had learned in the UK to let them know that doing research

was about exploring the complicated interrelationship between problems raised, and the process of making reflections and seeking solutions. They were invited to exchange their opinions and share their responses to the questions. Then, I collected copies of the journals that they were happy to let me use in my paper writing. I also analysed their reflections and worked out a plan for the second phase between 2017-2018.

Phase one was a good beginning, as the participants were indeed attracted by the idea of building our own ‘community of research’. In our group meetings, they were communicative while listening to me talk about what I had learned, and interested in trying a new methodology and methods and thereby challenging their traditional way of doing research. As it was the first time for my participants to be invited to work together to establish a research community as participants, not as learners, they all reacted responsively. They were willing to share their thoughts, although they were more interested in discussing the frustrations that they had experienced in engaging in research, rather than sharing what had gone well and giving suggestions for improving our practice. They notably cared about what differences doing Action Research with me would make to their research output, such as to publish more journal articles, and to be able to present at conferences. In contrast, the methods of doing research itself appeared less important to them.

I encouraged participants to keep their reflective diaries while I continued to keep my own field notes. As Conteh (2018, p. 29) suggests, field notes are important because they help ‘develop a critical stance as you write them and adapt the process of writing accordingly’. This was described as being ‘like performing on the stage: you have to be aware of your own performance and simultaneously free of it’ (Copland and Creese 2015, p.98). I enjoyed reading the notes I took, as I could always track back to the moments that I remembered as being impressive. I put down events or conversations with my participants which I believed would reveal the challenges I faced. As my participants apprehensively declined to be recorded, I had to keep as many notes as possible. On returning home, I added any additional events or contributions to the conversations that I could remember.

Furthermore, on revisiting the notes I had taken after my first two field trips in 2016 and 2017, I recognised that the interaction with the participants was presented in a didactic manner, with me asking questions and them responding. However, building a 'community of research' is a participatory process, requiring the involvement of all participants. Therefore, I started to consider how I could make each round of interviews become a collaborative discussion, so that I could invite group discussion. I came to the conclusion that if we worked together on the same topic, a 'community of research' could be constructed.

4.3.2 The intermediary phase of cycle 2: taking action

Thus, in phase two of cycle 2 between 2017 – 2018, the focus was to engage in reflective practice, to identify the challenges my participants encountered so that we could take measures to resolve these issues. Simultaneously, in proposing improvements, I intended to transmit to my participants relevant aspects of knowledge about Action Research methodology and methods in qualitative research that I had gained. I specifically wanted to discuss how qualitative methods were applied in research in the subject areas such as language learning, teaching English as a second foreign language, and research on language teachers' professional growth. I intended to do this because I had planned to try the collaborative enquiry model, using reflective diaries to keep records of how my thoughts changed throughout working with my participants. I believed that that would provide important information to use as data to describe, reflect on, and analyse the action cycles.

In addition, in this phase, I wanted the participants to take the lead in collaborative group meetings, so I asked them to initiate conversations and formalize thinking about doing research. In terms of my role, I wanted to take responsibility for providing them with the support they expected from our 'community of research'. We spent time exploring issues involved in changing ways of doing research. As was required by the university staff handbook, every year there was an opportunity for teaching staff to apply for some funding to conduct a research project in which they were interested. I suggested working out a project proposal that we all could participate in if the application were successful. They agreed, so the second phase of our group work took the form of collaborative enquiry. In other words, we planned a collaborative

writing process for the submission of a proposal focusing on the rationale underpinning our research project and methodology.

The participants, in the beginning, responded co-operatively, with each of them contributing ideas and suggestions. Then, when the time came for us to decide what the research focus of our proposal should be, their views diverged. Their research interests were different, due to the fact that they had different MA degrees in three subject areas: translation, teaching methodology, and a comparative study of Chinese literature and American literature. One was a new academic who said she had not previously applied for any research funding. The other two were experienced, and both were engaged in research and writing their own research paper. They welcomed the idea of working together, but practically could not find a subject area with which they were all familiar. Finally, we decided to work on a project on teaching strategies, investigating how discourse analysis could help teach Intensive Reading more efficiently. It was the most important module for all English-majoring students, and my participants and I all had the experience of teaching the module. Consequently, my participants had more knowledge of discourse analysis than that of Action Research, which unfortunately shifted their interest away from Action Research to discourse analysis. I was disappointed that the Action Research I had initiated was not the focus anymore. Still, the positive outcome was that we started to work on a project as a team, and that was exactly what a 'community of research' did. Therefore, as a reflection on the second phase of data collection, I considered a mixture of Action Research and discourse analysis as a progressive step towards making our first joint work successful. In so doing, I was expecting that the mutual interest of connecting discourse analysis to Action Research would be a way of encouraging the active involvement of my participants.

Accordingly, I set about encouraging each of them to write a few paragraphs. Then, the writings were reviewed in a way that was developmental rather than critical. By this, I mean that as our purpose was to obtain funding and then undertake the project collaboratively, I encouraged a 'brain storming' of ideas, trying to develop the project as quickly as possible. However, due to my participants each having their own proposal, as they specialised in different fields, a project of shared interest turned out not to be possible. As the last step, I had planned that the proposal would be

completed by putting together all the paragraphs, then modified and revised by each of us. That piece of writing would be framed as our case. Data that could have been used to support our case included three retrospective interviews and three group discussions, in which analysis of the collaborative writing practice conducted by the participants was the main action taken. In actuality, though, the collaborative writing turned out to be disjointed, and only parts of it were when starting to complete the application for research funds, leaving it unfinished.

The partially completed application was made on a set form, written in Chinese, and included personal information, such as the ages and the annual assessment reports of the participants. Clearly, given these issues, the form could not be accessed or reproduced without the consent of the participants, and without contravening my ethical commitments to my participants, I was unable to include it in my appendices.

Furthermore, at this time, having set the agenda to conduct a collaborative writing project, I undertook a series of group meetings. At one, I asked my participants if we could view ourselves as an advisory group. I knew that they might not be very keen on providing advice to others at this early stage, because they were a little dubious of the popular procedure of asking their views about research. However, I was looking for ways of sustaining their interest. Nevertheless, understandably, they were not keen on this suggestion.

Subsequently, the next time we met, I did not ask them questions but invited them to advise me on the entire project's construction, paying more attention to the outcomes that they were expecting. To my delight, they not only suggested additional areas for inclusion in the interviews, which I had designed around the change of their beliefs in-line with their general practice, but they also trialled it with other colleagues and suggested modifications to the upcoming action cycle we would have. This was one of the few rewarding and positive feedbacks given by my participants, and I duly wrote a report to inform them of the findings (see Appendix 4). The report was presented at another group meeting, at which I summarized the practical difficulties we faced. I also attempted to theorize what they had reflected by emphasizing that Action Research was a model for improvement. I stated that our aim of establishing a ‘community of research’ would motivate us to keep exploring what would make the research they

were doing achievable. In particular, I explained that the project was designed as a model which aimed at creating a collaborative enquiry to investigate the problem we agreed on, integrating individual roles and motivation, and expecting all participants to have confidence in a collaborative research process.

Then, when collaborative writing started, my participants welcomed the idea of choosing discourse analysis as the topic, but they were more interested in researching it from a linguistic perspective, such as analysing the syntactic function and pragmatic competence of discourse analysis. Halfway through, the group work hit an impasse for a while, because the discussion shifted from the topic of using Action Research as a methodology, to analysing a piece of prose or a novel using discourse analysis as a method. At that point, through my reflections, I realized that changes in research might take place at different levels. I believed that what I was trying to achieve was the most straightforward kind of change, which involved only a minor modification of how the participants could understand their situation. Behavioural change was relatively easy, but it was more difficult for people to change their beliefs and ideas about their values. For my participants, digesting new knowledge of Action Research and expanding learning of discourse could only bring about minor changes to their learning, but asking them to creatively theorize discourse analysis and Action Research, and enable their integration, was beyond what they could undertake at that time. Unfortunately, before we could finish writing the proposal, the new semester started. My participants had to refocus on their teaching commitments, and I also needed to return to the UK. The geographical difficulty and time difference made it hard for me to push my participants to continue writing the proposal for the application. Finally, I had to give it up as an unfinished job.

The experience was both frustrating and encouraging. As a reflection on the action taken, and also as there was a need to gain approval from the participants to use the interpreted interviews in the thesis, I sent a member checking information sheet to my participants. In it, I listed what we did in the second phase, and asked them to let me know whether the information stated represented their opinions. Then, I proceeded to think about the next step, and envisioned what actions to plan for the third phase in the year 2018-2019, because I believed that I needed to work out a better way of

enabling participants to engage more fully with the improvement of our ‘community of research’ for it to meet my planned aims.

Although I was starting to realize that practical difficulties were not within easy control, I did not want to give up. I thought the idea of continuing our collaboration in a ‘community of research’ could be worth trying online. A ‘community of research’ is based on regular interaction with the members involved, but establishing a ‘community of research’ in a cross-national project was greatly challenged by geographical distance, which made the quality of communication with my participants constrained by time differences, infrequency of talk, and the nature of the information shared. Such collaborative work was not interactive by nature, as Anderson (cited in Swan and Shea 2005) pointed out that social presence was related to knowledge–building through enquiry and reflection. As a solution, I suggested continuing co-operation with my participants in our ‘community of research’ online. Zhu and Baylen (2005) described the online community as virtual spaces where members meet, exchange experiences, and work collaboratively to create a spirit of community. Swan and Shea (2005) created a model of a virtual learning community. Their model aimed to develop online communication with the aid of modern electronic media such as blogs, Skype, WeChat, QQ, and other online tools to provide the participants with a safe online environment so that they were willing to exchange information and to share thoughts and feelings for professional learning. I described this journey of discovery in my reflective account recorded on 15th April 2018.

> One of the key blocks is that my participants require a considerable amount of time to well manage their time spent in teaching, looking after the family and freeing time to work with me for my PhD project. The concern of how I can work efficiently with my participants arose since I made my first field trip during the summertime in 2016. I must depend on the limited time while staying in China, but my participants each had a lot of teaching commitments and other business to take care of. They found it hard to work with me on regular basis. I had to depend on their availability to arrange the meetings, so it is not easy getting my participants actively engaged as much as possible. I am worried that I may possibly run a risk of being unable to get sufficiently convincing amount of data for a PhD project. The idea of working through online community after I return to

the UK can be a good gesture to let my participants know that I continuously need support from them.

4.3.3 The final phase of cycle 2: reflection and trial of new approaches

Thus, in the third and final phase of cycle 2, between 2018 – 2019, I adopted what I considered to be a corrective strategy. I wanted to bring into focus how researchers understood themselves and their work in a community where they did the research for personal growth and professional development. The third phase aimed to address the issues that had so far been identified while we worked together to build a research community. Hopefully, this would involve discussion about how Action Research modified the way of constructing a 'community of research' in this study. An important factor was to enable my participants to recognize that, in this process of involving changes in practice, they were being asked to willingly undertake sufficient attitudinal change so that in our 'community of research', they would work co-operatively to learn about how to enhance their academic research. Equally, I expected that my participants would take a more active participatory role in completing the project. The more the Action Research process involved collaborative work, the more involved all participants should be as co-researchers (Dillenbourg 1999). I wanted the learning that took place for all my participants to be meaningful to their participation in my Action Research project, so that they would benefit from the experience of establishing a research community that encouraged the engagement of methodologies in academic research within the faculty.

The plan for this phase was as follows. As the leading researcher, I would work as a support facilitator, taking the responsibility of collecting information, sharing ideas, and providing readings when necessary. As the reflection on the previous phase suggested we should continue our co-operation online, I would organize online interactions on a regular basis, which could be followed by giving feedback on what had been discussed and asking for suggestions for further improvement. After that, I would arrange a follow-up field research trip and continue to develop collaboration with my participants through face-to-face interaction. The belief was that if my participants and I could overcome the geographical difficulties and maintain regular communication, the 'community of research' would be established by way of evolving

collaboration from virtual space (an online communication) to real space (face-to-face interaction). We could carry on working out a new research proposal and apply for funding in the coming year.

However, the online community did not go as smoothly as I had hoped, but I still managed to make a research trip in 2018. Argyris (1980) and Schön (1984) discussed the importance of trust in cross-cultural research. They elaborated Goffman's viewpoint of Theory of Interaction Order, which suggested 'setting out procedures with an intention to maximize trust among the practitioners' (1983, p.11). To encourage trust with each other, in the third phase, I stopped interviewing my participants individually, and I invited them to form pairs at random to attend the interview. Three paired interviews, and two group interviews were conducted with the aim to find out what research support the teaching staff in my faculty needed. I chose to have two participants being interviewed at the same time. Having this kind of paired interview was to create a psychologically safe environment for the participants so that they felt comfortable sharing their honest thoughts. The open-ended questions were prepared, and they took the form of semi-structured interviews. For the group interviews, I invited a vice-dean of the department, an academic support staff, and a research award-winning colleague to join, with a specific focus on the following questions:

1. How to measure the changes I wanted to bring about to the research culture by building our research community?
2. Was it possible to encourage more staff to join the community?
3. How could the progress and achievement that my participants made in research be assessed?
4. What had they benefitted from joining my PhD project with the aim of building a 'community of research'?

I asked them to share what they had learned from doing research by adopting a new methodology, and to think about how they might define a 'researcher'. At this stage, the interviews were directed to explore issues of becoming researchers, as well as meaningful collaboration, and the possibility and their confidence in continuing to establish the research community that I had proposed. In analysing the data, I read through the notes and particularly identified discussions dealing with collaboration in a research community, such as 'I want to be part of a research community, and I am

expecting to find out how I can do research with people showing similar interests co-operatively and collaboratively'. Although few interviewees considered themselves a researcher, I was pleased to find that what motivated them to join me in the project was an interest in enhancing their research capabilities. They clearly expressed a strong desire to expand their knowledge of qualitative methodologies and methods and thereby improve their research techniques, just as I had been doing.

Nonetheless, it is important to add that while I stopped interviewing my participants individually to nurture their trust and encourage freer, more candid conversation, this placed greater stress upon my note taking. As previously stated, the participants had, all declined to be recorded, and I was ethically bound to adhere to their wishes. Unfortunately, as a direct result of this, at the end of all interviews and group sessions, there were no transcriptions. I only had the notes I had taken to rely upon, which had an devasting impact on the amount and quality of data collected. Indeed, it meant that thematic analysis and coding were impossible, and the data that was available was limited and sketchy.

4.4 Summative reflections on cycle 2

Therefore, due to many institutional, cultural, and personal constraints, the ambitious aim of influencing the research culture in my faculty proved to be unrealistic. I was unable to reach the objective of constructing a 'community of research'. In my research trip back to China in 2019, I could not carry out the plan as had been arranged. This was partly due to health reasons, due to my experiencing an extended period of sickness and inability to work. More significantly, though, was that the Dean of the faculty, who had supported and encouraged my Action Research from the outset, had suddenly retired, and the change in management brought new priorities and changes in funding. Action Research was no longer included in either of these. Yet another cause was that my participants gradually lost interest, perhaps influenced by the shift in leadership, with the consequence change in priorities, within the faculty. At the same time, for them, the standard progress was constantly interrupted by my trips back and forth between the UK and China, so they were not confident that the community could be established, even though I had been trying to arrange meetings online remotely. To be more specific, the reasons are here now summarised. They are the

considerations that arose from my literature searches and subsequent reflections when trying to delve into why my Action Research project was collapsing.

First, the process of how cooperation with my colleagues might be implemented was not initially planned with all details and possible interruptions being considered. The data collected in this second Action Research cycle was limited and the aim of the project was not realised in practice. As well as this, when I reflected on the ways in which cooperation was sought for data collection, I realised that there was, in reality, a lack of active collaboration among the participants. I speculated that this was primarily caused by the participants not knowing how to link subjective experiences with relevant theories. Similarly, I felt that my participants, being unfamiliar with Action Research, preferred to stay within the safety of their known beliefs and understanding of research. They were, at that time, due to administrative changes and my long absences, unable to embrace a new methodology, unless they saw and felt an evident impact on their research ability. They were expecting to see some improvement in their research by participating in the project, such as successful journal publications. By October 2018, the recorded interviews for data collation with my participants added up to no more than ten hours, and for these there were no transcriptions, merely notes taken at the time. Thus, there was not sufficient data to provide the basis for a PhD project. This frustrating process had a destructive impact on me. For a few months, I failed to regain enough confidence to continue the project, and instead used that time to re-evaluate what I was doing.

Second, there was no strong establishment of trust. Qualitative research requires establishing trust between the researcher and the participants, but trust will not be created simply because the researcher avows good intentions (Orton 1993). Thus, while my intentions may have seemed good to me, I was, in my enthusiasm and passion for my research, not tuning into the situations and needs of my participants. In my opinion, this oversight cost me their trust. In my reflective diary in March 2018, I had written:

> My identity for most interviews was labelled as an organiser of a PhD project, I presented myself as someone who wanted to do meaningful research, but I was selectively ignorant of the existing context. That became the reason why there was a lack of trustworthiness in the meaning of establishing a community of

> research because the participants believed that I was talking about an unreachable aim and leaving behind all the practical difficulties we had experienced together. (8th March 2018)

Equally, in regard to trust, the biggest obstacle for data collection was my participants' concern and subsequent refusal to be recorded during their interviews. The possibilities of open frank recorded interviews were limited because of their fears of openly making comments and inadvertently criticizing the system. In order to help my participants to overcome, what I saw as their cultural fear of being recorded in interviews, I explained to them how vital their co-operation was so that interviews could proceed as arranged. I expected them to be candid and share the information I needed to deal with the problems raised. Indeed, after sharing an analysis of their needs at the group meeting in 2017, the participants seemed to feel much safer expressing their views. Therefore, I tried paired interviewing as a technique to collect data, expecting to establish their psychological safety further. In this, the three participants did not need to come individually, and they could choose to form random pairs at their own convenience for each interview. For a short while, the paired interviewing proved an effective way of encouraging them to speak more freely. Inopportunely, as an intervention, it came too late, because the participants had already begun to express their wish to withdraw from the project. Equally, it had placed added pressure on my ability to attend, respond, and take notes during interviews, increasing the imprecision of my records.

Third, through talking with my participants, I discovered that institutional problems, such as promotion-driven incentives for doing research, a lack of theoretical support, and limited professional development training plans, were critical reasons that failed to motivate the professionals in the faculty to engage in long-term planning for their career development. They all felt pressurised to write and publish, but they did not have the time to concentrate on researching what they were truly interested in.

Fourth, my participants' values seemed to prioritize workload, family responsibilities, and organizational commitments. In other words, heavy workloads forced them to choose to teach and to take care of the family as their time priorities. Consequently, doing research was a less critical part of their life routines. That made their collaboration in the project challenging. It also meant that they may have joined the

project for reasons other than were encapsulated in the aims I had established. Inevitably, these issues caused them to show less and less interest in undertaking something new in their research activities, especially as the endorsement of the management had been withdrawn and the unfamiliar by its very nature can require more time and effort. Clearly, and perhaps cathartically, they enjoyed talking to me about their difficulties in doing research, but attempting to change it might have been too much at the time.

Ultimately, these blocks stopped me from achieving my original research aim. The initial enthusiasm of my participants, when my Action Research project had had the endorsement of the then Dean of Education, gradually waned, and with it their interest in exploring an alternative methodology and collaborative methods. The data I had collected was limited, and the hope of collecting any more meaningful, and valuable data, was non-existent. All my efforts to facilitate further improvements and build a research community came to a dead end.

4.5 A turning point: final supervision session of cycle 2

As I went to attend the final supervision session at what I recognised as the unsuccessful conclusion of cycle 2, it seemed to me that my project was a failure. My lack of success in establishing a ‘community of research’, and the difficulties I had gone through, made me realise that the project's initial aim to transform the research culture in my faculty was too ambitious. However, at a supervision session, my supervisors reminded me that Action Research was not necessarily about being successful in an enquiry, but rather the aim was to create knowledge about why the enquiry was not successful. Reflecting on 'failure' is as important to the Action Research process as is success.

From this, I took heart and decided not be defeated simply because I was not able to resolve the problems that arose. I was determined to make changes that would enable me to complete my doctoral study. By reflecting on my research journey so far, I realized that I was making use of the process of reflecting on myself becoming a researcher. As was identified as a stage of researcher development by Akerlind (2008), a discovery of myself could help me to make sense of how the collapse of my planned research had come about, while simultaneously helping me to understand

how this had impacted upon my evolving identity as a researcher. Therefore, I saw myself as embarking upon a personally transformative stage in my research. One in which I would unravel the sociocultural, educational, and political threads that had contributed to the collapse of cycle 2, and one in which I could further construct my cross-cultural research identity from the ashes of my original project.

These considerations enabled me to start upon a process of re-evaluation and candid self-awareness. I am Chinese, but I have now experienced a western form of education. On the one hand, I have been educated in a research culture in the UK, where people were full of enthusiasm to make positive changes in their practice as professionals and researchers. The people I was surrounded by, were equipped with sophisticated theoretical knowledge, academic insights, bravery to challenge authority, and the modernized Internet space full of meaningful, up-to-date information. Their enthusiasm for making contributions to knowledge and seeking professional improvement encouraged me to be a persistent pursuer of research. On the other hand, the environment in which I academically grew up and worked towards furthering my career, appeared conservatively poor in its possession of general knowledge, methodology, and sources of data. As a product of Chinese education, I felt that I lacked fresh ideas, critical ability, and creativity. In addition, although I had the fortune to be educated in an advanced international research culture in the UK, I had still had difficulties bringing about changes to my colleagues, who were struggling with the inadequacy of academic resources and an absence of theoretical and practical support, but were still working diligently towards growing into experienced researchers. Such dissonance between my past and the present provided me with an opportunity to transform again, but this time, it was going to be a transformative discovery of myself as a researcher and the nature of the sociocultural, educational, and political issues that had impacted upon me, bringing me to the doctoral journey on which I had embarked.

Hence, on returning to the UK in September 2019, I had further discussions with my supervisors, and an agreement was reached. The suggestion was to alter the aim of the project. To make the project achievable, I would explore what I had learned from my ‘failure’ to transform the research culture in my home faculty, and investigate how my researcher identity had gradually been established as an evolving process. So, the

next chapter, cycle 3 of my Action Research project, uses an autoethnographic narrative as a method of exploring and explaining to the reader the personal, as well as the professional, experiences I have lived through, with the focus on how I, as an individual practitioner, have come to be a researcher straddling two very different cultures while employing a research methodology underpinned by an ontology and epistemology that were transformed by my journey. In so doing, it tells a story relevant to a time when many others are crossing cultural, national, and language borders to seek international academic advancement.

4.6 Chapter summary

This chapter described what my Action Research project aimed to achieve, the actions taken, the types of data I attempted to collect, and my ongoing reflections throughout this cycle. In so doing, Action Research was used to theorize the relationship between my project and the context in which my research took place. Also, a collaborative learning process was explored with the aim of building a community of research through three different phases. However, the project was severely challenged by institutional problems, unexpected management changes, cultural fear and inhibition, geographical issues, and the practical difficulties my participants faced in balancing their time priority between teaching and research. As described in the chapter, these challenges culminated in the cessation of the original project but lent themselves to the exploration of the developmental process of researcher identity that had been occurring concurrently. Thus, in the next chapter, in which Action Research cycle 3 is presented, this evolving process of researcher identity is analysed using autoethnographic narrative as the method of enquiry.

Chapter 5

Action research cycle 3 – making sense of my journey towards researcher identity: an autoethnographic narrative

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter gave an account of the obstacles that prevented me from achieving my initial research aim of transforming the research culture in my home faculty. My experience during the second Action Research cycle of trying to establish a 'community of research' within my work setting in China, and failing to achieve that for the cultural, organizational, and educational reasons that I identified, was devastating for me as well as for my sense of identity as a researcher. On sharing this with my supervisors, I was reminded that Action Research was about learning; and learning did not always include successful outcomes. Instead, Action Research could be studying how failure came about, how it impacts upon those involved, and the issues being investigated. For me, therefore, the failure of my original project became an enquiry into what brought me to the present and what I had come to understand the nature of research and my researcher identity to be.

I had tried to maintain contact with my colleagues and involve them in interviews and group discussions, but they had found it challenging to participate actively and sustain engagement in the project. They gave reasons related to the academic context in which they were working, and I appreciated that had I remained in China, I would very likely have responded in the same way to someone who appeared with such 'radical' ideas of changing the research culture, especially at a time when interest in such matters had waned within my faculty due to the unexpected retirement of the Dean of Education. Moreover, because I had been away from that culture and immersed in a very different academic culture for some considerable time, I had undergone a transformative shift in my understanding of research, teaching, and learning, but it was not enough for me to return home and simply tell others about it. My experiences in cycle 2 had taught me that the learning I had gained could not be imparted to my colleagues by didactic communication; it needed to be experienced first-hand. As I continued the conversation with my supervisors, it became clear that I had been developing a sense of researcher identity that was very different from what I had

experienced before I left China. Consequently, it was agreed that, for my third Action Research cycle, I should explore how I had been progressing as a researcher despite the hardships. In so doing, I aspired to reveal the challenges and barriers that had compromised my original enquiry, and contextualise these within the transformative impact of developing a researcher identity while straddling two very different cultures.

Furthermore, employing an autoethnographic narrative as my method of enquiry took me into new and unfamiliar terrain. Reconciling my understanding of the project with this new approach challenged my perceptions of what 'research' could be. I raised the question as to whether this was research, because it was focusing only on my experience. Happily, as the project progressed, it grew to be an inspiring implication that an explanatory account of failure could be of value to researchers, who themselves may not achieve intended research outcomes. In particular, students who study in different countries may well encounter similar tensions because of differences in expectations and ideas about knowledge. I can reflect in-depth on what has happened in my individual experience and, in doing so, I will identify issues that are relevant to others who find themselves in similar situations. To make the study of failure meaningful and to find out how, nevertheless, I continued to develop a sense of researcher identity, I introduced autoethnographic narrative into the third Action Research cycle because this method of enquiry allows me to investigate these issues within a broader sociocultural context.

5.2 Autoethnographic narrative: a method of qualitative enquiry

While maintaining Action Research as the framework of my project, in this third cycle I have turned to autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry into how my researcher identity has developed, and along with it how my epistemology has been transformed. This approach was supported by Laslett's findings that, when considering the strength of the use of personal stories in a sociological study, the unique contribution to social science made by personal narratives is that they can 'address several critical theoretical debates in contemporary sociology: macro and micro linkages, structure, agency and their intersections; and social reproduction and social changes' (1999, p.392). Therefore, my purpose in writing my autoethnographic narrative was to consider my personal motivations, and investigate how I had dealt

with problems that emerged from the cultural, educational, and political challenges I met while conducting my research.

A rationale for autoethnography is that it provides 'highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding' (Sparkes 2000, p.21), and 'lets you use yourself to get to culture' (Pelias 2003, p.372). So, in exploring what it meant to me to continue to evolve my own sense of researcher identity despite the collapse of the original research question, I knew that I would have to explore that dynamic interaction between my individual experience, and the educational and sociocultural contexts within which my Action Research project had arisen and had been based. In doing so, I believed that I would also develop and contribute new knowledge to help me and others cope with similar challenges. In other words, the challenges I had faced were associated with my unique identity, being a Chinese student, and wanting to create a researcher identity, while straddling universities in two very different countries and cultures. Yet, while my identity is unique, the experiences and challenges I had had along my journey, and my desire to become a well-informed researcher, are certainly not unique. At a time when there is a rising tide of international students seeking academic advancement across borders, ‘extending sociological understanding’ (Sparkes 2000, p.21) and using my autoethnographic narrative to illuminate the culture and cultural differences behind my experiences and challenges is relevant to many.

Moreover, enquiring into how my research identity had and was developing, even in the face of failure, meant that all the data collected in the previous cycles provided the foundation and insights for the final stages of my research. However, there was a fresh richness and poignancy to this data that made it, in my opinion, more powerful and of greater significance, because it now included my personal experiences used to explore how I, as an individual, had been trying to understand my status as a teacher and a researcher within the wider sociocultural roles I held, such as mother and divorcee. Indeed, looking back over the times since I started my PhD project, I can see that reading, writing, researching, and becoming a researcher were all practical, intertwined pursuits. The more I read, the better I wrote. My ideas developed while I wrote. The more I was exposed to a wider variety of viewpoints and methods, the closer I grew towards a mature, holistic understanding of myself as a researcher.

Undoubtedly, in adopting autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry in cycle 3, the interaction between reading, reflection, and writing was heightened, because it provided me with an opportunity to look more profoundly at the interplay between the development of my researcher identity, and the challenges of my research through the spectrum of two very different cultural lenses.

Autoethnography emerged from postmodern philosophy, in which 'the dominance of traditional science and research is questioned, and many ways of knowing, and inquiring are legitimated, autoethnography offers a way of giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding' (Bochner and Ellis 2006, p.118). Autoethnography is a style of autobiographical writing and qualitative research that explores an individual's unique life experiences concerning social and cultural institutions. Jones, Adams, and Ellis described this eloquently:

> Autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, reflexively. It asks that we examine our lives and consider how and why we think, act, and feel as we do. Autoethnography requires that we observe ourselves observing, that we interrogate what we believe, and have penetrated as many layers of our own defenses, fears, and insecurities as our project requires. It asks that we rethink and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who and how we want to be. And in the process, it seeks a story that is hopeful, where authors ultimately write themselves as survivors of the story they are living (2013, p.10).

In this way, the autoethnographic approach encourages the researcher to research themselves to 'uncover many different feelings within the writer'. It can be joyful, sad, revealing, exciting, and occasionally painful. Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p.9) write 'because many autoethnography studies relate to painful experiences, the researcher may encounter difficult moments during the research and writing'. It is not easy to relate to what kind of person we were in the past and understand how past experiences transform into our identity today. All the same, to find the relationship between the past and the present is worthy of effort to gain new comprehension of personal experiences generated by reflectivity and introspection. 'This was looking into the mirror' and it requires 'radical honesty with oneself with the need to be forgiving,

compassionate, and understanding, and find meaning from horrific, painful, or troubling events' (Custer 2014, p.7). Hence, using autoethnographic narrative as an analytical method of enquiry to consolidate my practice as a researcher, I began an in-depth introspective and reflective investigation into my own experiences during the first two Action Research cycles, in order to connect my past with my present.

Additionally, as outlined briefly in the introduction chapter, autoethnography is an approach to research and writing (Ellis 2004; Hayler 2011). It has been described as 'the process by which the researcher chooses to make explicit use of (their) own positionality, involvement and experiences as an integral part of ethnographic research' (Cloke, Crange, and Goodwin 1999, p.333). Therefore, autoethnography can radically alter an individual's perception of the past and inform their present. According to the definition, autoethnography is perceived as a particular way of doing ethnography self-reflectively in the research process (Ellis and Bochner 1996). Thus, in using autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry, it is both a process and the product.

Autoethnographers believe that personal experience is infused with political and cultural norms and expectations. They aim to show ‘people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles' (Ellis and Bochner 2006, p.435), as they engage in rigorous self-reflection. Yet, there still exists a view that 'the intimate and personal nature of autoethnography can make it one of the most challenging qualitative approaches to attempt' (Sparkes 2000, p.39). What makes writing autoethnography questioned is that it tends to overemphasize the writers' subjectivity, so there are always debates about the quality of data, validity, and ethical doubts, which are all crucial elements to the reliability of scientific research (Ellis and Bochner 2006).

Nevertheless, my autoethnographic narrative includes my personal story. It tells the story about my own evolving establishment of researcher identity through my pursuing a PhD degree across two academic contexts culturally and educationally. At the same time, it examines what contributed to the collapse of my original, intended research. In doing so, it illuminates how an autoethnographic narrative can enable a researcher

to analyse the different realities experienced while learning and researching in a socio-educational-culture dissimilar to their own.

Hence, I came to autoethnographic narrative considering it to be a useful and powerful method that could transcend boundaries and showcase the interaction of my identity and society (Collins and Gallinat 2010) because 'autoethnography texts reveal the fracture, sutures, and seams of self, interacting with others, in the context of researching lived experience' (Collins and Gallinat 2010, p,94). Moreover, such ideas gave me the courage and confidence to believe that I could write about the emotional moments of my life in research. Meanwhile, Ellis and Adams' (2014) suggestion that writing narratives may help us understand the world and society around us gave me hope that I would come to understand the causes of the collapse of my initial enquiry and the development of my researcher identity across two very different cultures. Ultimately, both my belief and my hopes were realised.

5.3 Reflecting on failure

The starting point for cycle 3 is my in-depth reflection upon the collapse of the research aim and question of the previous two cycles. In my initial reflections on the issues that created difficulties in my pursuit of my research, I recognised two main reasons that, in my opinion, contributed to the breakdown of the original research. These are - 1. I failed to predict the practical challenges; 2. I had awkwardly constructed that I was both an insider and an outsider in my research. In the following section, I elaborate my reflections on both these obstacles.

Regarding the first, as previously stated in cycle 2, I had envisaged a collaborative learning process that would involve several stages. To briefly summarise these stages, the first step was a request to my participants who were under pressure to write and publish to use journals to study how methodologies were used to research and produce writing. This was achieved by sharing articles I purposefully selected on varied methodologies in research and asking them to find out what differences there were between what they read and their own writings. The second step involved discussions about how qualitative methods were applied in research in subject areas such as language learning and teaching English as a second foreign language. There were also discussions regarding research on language teachers' professional growth.

The third step was introducing Action Research. For this, I had tried to involve them in my research process so that we could build our own ‘community of research’. The final step was reflecting on what we had done and evaluating the findings, with the intention of encouraging my participants to reflect on how applying appropriate research methods would be relevant to the way they perceived doing academic research. I had hoped that this would encourage them to interpret research differently from their old beliefs and practices. Similarly, I had hoped that our work together would attract more colleagues to show an interest in joining our research community. Subsequently, from this, I envisioned that we would be able to make building a ‘community of research’ a sustainable project among the colleagues in the faculty so that we could continue conversations about doing research, and formalize our thinking of becoming researchers in our careers as teachers.

However, on reflection, I realized that although the ‘community of research’ was not a new concept for me, I did not have any experience of running such workshops for academic purposes. Consequently, I did not know what was the most efficient way of enabling my participants to be actively engaged in collaborative work. The methods I initially used were interviews and small group discussions that were conducted during my annual research field trips back to China. The theme of the interview questions was incorporated into the focus of each stage of my action plan. Questions asked concerned my participants' research activities, difficulties and changes they experienced, personal perspectives they held about research, and suggestions they would propose. Although I was reliant on handwritten notes as my participants had all declined to be recorded, I read and reflected on what I had managed to write and found that there was generally an inaccurate understanding of Action Research as a methodology. Overall, there was a common construction of it as a report of the teaching experience. Therefore, I presented cases as reflections to illustrate what kind of methodology Action Research was in actual practice.

Nonetheless, it is now clear to me that I saw myself as primarily a teacher, who was learning to become a researcher, and that I was unable to predict the challenges that would arise during the process of seeking to influence my participants. Practically, the geographical distance made it difficult to maintain regular contact with them. Technically, I did not work out a detailed backup plan to deal with the situation, in

which I became relatively passive in organizing following-up group activities. Culturally, my participants declined to be recorded during the interviews, indicating their fear of making comments public, although they had been notified that all information would be processed anonymously. Politically, there was a sudden change in the hierarchical structure of my home university, with the Dean of Education being replaced by a new Dean whose interests and support was invested elsewhere rather than in Action Research.

Equally, in terms of the practical challenges, from the outset, I had known that the vital, in-depth reflection on how improvement could be made was dependent on my considerations of how I would evaluate the changes that my participants would experience during their participation in the Action Research project. In other words, I had recognised that this process would require me to critically examine how participants engaged in the project, and gain insight into any changes in the pedagogical and epistemological viewpoints that informed both their teaching and researching. Simultaneously, I had postulated that if they were actively involved in seeking improvement in their research practice, they would be more able to better analyse the multiple processes at play, and then selectively use whatever method appeared useful to them. In this way, I had believed that the purpose of influencing my participants and transforming knowledge could be achieved. Unfortunately, with hindsight, I now recognise that these were also very personal experiences, and this lack of insight made it difficult, at the time, to work out a simple measurement to assess to what degree the participants had been motivated to seek changes in both their attitudes and actions. Thus, ultimately, I found myself without the necessary empirical evidence to guide my leadership through the ambitious project I had set out to run, and my aim of transforming a deep-rooted research culture was, therefore, thwarted.

Regarding the second obstacle, considering myself as both an outsider and an insider, while my participants saw me as an insider in the project had, with hindsight, a detrimental impact upon my project. Being part of the group with whom I used to work, my participants allowed me to enter their space, and I had insider awareness of what their concerns were. Also, their responses were always in-line with my expectations. This meant that there were no surprises in the data collected. I initially asked the participants to do a self-evaluation, which might be revisited at the end of the project

or in a few years, so as to assess changes. When I first led the meeting after individual interviews in March 2017, I was viewed as an insider, but from within my stance as an outsider, I sensed an awkwardness in my situation. My participants consciously saw me as one of them, in that I shared similar research experiences when I was working in China and held almost the same viewpoint of research. They did not share my perception that my experience in the UK had taken me to a different place, both literally and metaphorically, and so they did not notice the subtle change that I had intended to move myself out of their context. Thus, having worked with them for over ten years, their responses to my questions did not always satisfy me because they perceived that I already knew the answers to many of the questions that I asked. Moreover, the same questions could also appear to make my participants frustrated with what they considered as known clichés. For instance, they would become impatient if I asked them questions about research methods, and they tended to keep quiet when asked how they managed their time priority between research and work, because they assumed I knew from my own experience within the university.

Indeed, this had a particularly detrimental effect upon the amount and candidness of the data collected. I made clear from the outset that we were to work together, and that I was asking them to provide a complete and frank set of data, including their experiences and perspectives of doing research. Regrettably, I had omitted to state in written form as a clear rule that we were expected to talk about our experiences in an honest and genuine way as researchers. Therefore, perhaps inevitably, given their perspective of me as an insider with insider insight combined with our sociocultural diffidence regarding public criticism of authority, my participants were challenged by my need for honest data. To them, I remained an insider in possession of privileged information about the university, its research tradition, and culture, and I believe that this made it difficult for me to lead the innovative change I was proposing. In truth, I recognised this dilemma at the time, but did not have the clarity of insight to alter it. Instead, I held on tightly to my own construction of myself as an outsider, and this, in my opinion now, only exacerbated the situation. This erroneous persistence in holding onto an inappropriate construction of my positionality within my research is evidenced in my reflective diary in March 2017. In it, I wrote:

> I know what the general practice was like among my colleagues, who are in the same age group as I am. We were all challenged by the same problems such as

> teaching commitment, family responsibilities, and worries about career development. I need to solve the issues with the unfavourable situation in which I am treated as an insider. (10th March 2017)

Undeniably, I valued the expectation that my Dean of Education and my colleagues had placed on me, and in so doing, I was trying to provide a challenging opportunity to encourage my participants to engage actively with events designed to successfully complete my project. In doing so, right from the start, I saw possibilities for my participants to act, not only as my research informants, but also as practitioners who could be transformed by the process. I understood both these were dependent upon frank and open, in-depth conversations with my participants. Without this, I knew I would be unable to successfully complete my project and influence change, and yet this was the situation I had found myself in at the end of cycle 2.

Moreover, from the outset, I have to admit to sharing in part the participants' construction of me as an insider. For example, I understood their reluctance to be recorded during interviews as our shared cultural fear of making speech public. Nevertheless, understanding from an insider perspective their predicament, I still felt frustrated when despite signing their consent forms, I had to repeatedly promise that no personal information would be used every time we met. Such intense conflicts of feelings were described in one of my reflective memos:

> I find it so challenging to get specific answers from them. When I asked participant B how much time she spent doing research-related work every month, such as reading journal articles and surfing the Internet to keep updated with the latest development in the field she was interested in, she didn't answer my question. After pausing for a while, she asked me, instead, 'how much time did you spend (on research) during the time when you were teaching?' I answered: 'well, it depended on what I was doing then. If I had plans to publish articles, I would read and write more frequently, maybe one to one and a half hours every other day. If I was driven by the need for publication or for presentation at seminars or conferences, I probably did nothing'. She smiled and said, 'you see, you know everything. What I do is the same as you did. Only when it is necessary to do research-related work will I read, think and write'. I don't think this is a satisfying conversation I am expecting. I cannot complain because what she said

> was true- I know what the general practice was like among my colleagues, who are in the same age group as I am. We were all challenged by the same problems such as teaching commitment, family responsibilities, and worries about career development. I need to solve the issues with the unfavourable situation in which I am treated as an insider (10th March 2017).

Thus, unwisely, I attempted to approach the project of establishing a 'community of researchers' as an outsider. This arose because I believed that my viewpoint of research had been redefined because of my learning in England. Outsiders have criticality by virtue of being 'fresh eyes', but can also miss essential phenomena, and in doing so, seriously misinterpret local meanings and practices (Shah 2004; Hellawell 2006; Arthur 2010). Contrary to outsiders' perspectives, insiders are believed to have a disadvantage in gaining a critical understanding of the real problem, due to a lack of insight caused by a closer distance and perspective on everyday taken-for-granted events (Delamont 2009). In recent years, this has been challenged under the influence of postmodern literature theories. Some researchers suggest that we are all outsiders to each other (Brodsky and Faryal 2006; Denzin 2014), and empirical research has demonstrated that in undertaking doctoral research, insiders often have and need to have outsider perspective and vice versa (Thomson and Gunter 2011). Regrettably, I had explained the details of my research design to my participants before I had considered what impact attempting to interweave the role of the insider/outsider position would have.

Another instance was our disagreement about how we could evaluate the research project. I suggested a conference could be held with English language teaching staff from three other key local universities. We have many English language teachers across the province; 29 from a medical university, 55 from a school of foreign studies, and 68 from another two universities in the southern part of the province. If all these teachers were encouraged to have their opinions and experiences of doing research shared and heard, the chances of organizing a conference, or at least a seminar, were high. Unfortunately, none of my participants showed confidence in running a forum, especially if the theme was about promoting a discussion to encourage the application of alternative research methods which they were still learning:

> It was a frustrating discussion going on today. My participants did not seem to show much confidence in my proposal of hosting a conference at some point, which I suggested as a way of assessing the feasibility of the project. I said: 'I am looking for an opportunity to work more closely with other language teachers so that we are able to assess how the project makes an impact on our beliefs of research'. The reason for such a proposal was based on a general understanding of the other three local universities. I believe that we are in the same situation as we have almost the same research resources considering geographical differences, research practice, and research culture. Now I look back at the discussion we had, and I realized that the problem was that I viewed myself as an outsider in making such a proposal, but I am not an outsider at all. Their views were already known to me and vice versa. We were in a working relationship, but it was one imbued with personal dimensions. It was also one which brought expectations and complications I did not first envisage, although perhaps I ought to have (12th August 2017).

Accordingly, I revised my request, asking instead if we could view ourselves as an advisory group. I did this to sustain the interest of my participants, although I had recognised that they lacked confidence, and being dubious regarding their research skills, were not keen on providing any advice at this stage. Simultaneously, while gathered together, I resisted asking questions and instead invited them to advise me on the entire project's construction, paying more attention to the outcomes that they were expecting. To encourage them to become more actively involved in the research process, I invited them to contribute their part for the purpose of building our own community of research. I outlined my research process at the earliest stage, encouraged them to reflect on what we had done and evaluated the findings (see Appendix 4), with the intention to influence their practice by transforming what I had learned to their research activities. Focus was placed on a discussion of how applying appropriate research methods would be relevant to the way they perceived doing academic research. I was hoping that my participants would be able to interpret research differently from their old beliefs and practices. Also, I raised the topic of how we could attract more colleagues to join our research community. Thus, we would be able to make building a community of research a sustainable project among the colleagues in the faculty, so that we could continue conversations about doing

research and formalize our thinking of becoming researchers in our careers as teachers. In this sense, I was not acting as an external evaluator but rather as a critical colleague engaged in a changing process of mutual interest and concern. Additionally, I recognize that I had expected that this approach would somewhat shift the position of the study from being simply about the creation of a 'community of research', to one in which all those involved in constructing the 'community of research' would focus on a collaboratively agreed project.

However, they were not active in responding, and I was not sure if they would continue to assist me. Nevertheless, I felt a sense of obligation to them, which was not part of our agreed cooperation but came from my research ethics. I thought I had a moral duty to continue. Whether or not it was successful joint work, I felt, at the very least, I needed to offer the opportunity to my research participants to be informed of the research results, to discuss their implications, and to reward their contribution to the completion of my PhD research project. Although I understood their practical situations, which let them choose to prioritize their own teaching commitment and family responsibilities over full participation in my research, I asked them to trust me again. To ensure that they felt able to do this, I said I would keep them updated with my progress.

I now recognize that I did not particularly consider how my participants might see our relationship. However, as I explained to them, I viewed their participation as offering a unique opportunity to let me hear their voice and as an attempt to start to make improvements to the Action Research approach we had adopted to carry out the project. Undoubtedly, I wanted to continue with the project and therefore decided that rethinking the theme of the thesis might enable this, because it had created a chance to talk about new concepts and beliefs about research with others who were also interested in doing better research. Unfortunately, I was not sufficiently able to enthuse my participants with my passion for transformative change, and ultimately the initial project collapsed.

Boyd and Myers (1988) asserted the significance of the interpersonal context in transformative learning. My study took place within an organisation where experiences were shared to promote learning. The people involved, including my participants,

myself, and other colleagues, were already working within an environment of pre-existing interpersonal relationships. Clearly, within this situation, I was an insider. However, now with hindsight, it is also clear that trying to play both an insider and an outsider role while I was working with my colleagues on my Action Research project led to relational difficulties. The conflict was between my presumption of being an outsider initiating a learning transformation, with knowledge acquired from a foreign education system, and the fact that my colleagues considered me an insider who had invited them to participate in a study. Thus, I found myself an ‘inbetweener’ astride two different cultures and constructions of my role but without the essential consideration of the multiplicity of the fluid, subjective, and relational features that I now recognise such a stance requires.

Nonetheless, the very passion that may have clouded my recognition of the perceptions and challenges of my participants enabled this in-depth reflection on the failure of the initial aim of my project because equally in its collapse, I now understand Mezirow’s (1991) inclusion of autonomy within his conceptualization of transformative learning theory. The meaning of my Action Research project echoes with his emphasis that 'the acquisition of knowledge or attainment of competencies will somehow automatically generate the understandings, skills, and dispositions involved in learning to think autonomously' (Mezirow 1991, p.9). Moreover, the understanding, skills, and dispositions will necessarily become ‘critically reflective of one's own assumptions’ as will the drive to ‘engage effectively to validate one's beliefs through the experiences of others who share universal values’ (Mezirow 1991, p.9). Thus, applied to my context, the capacity for me to influence the participants' ideas and beliefs was limited due to us lacking shared values of the meaning and practice of doing research. In other words, I no-longer shared the life-space and lifeworld of my participants, nor they mine. Yet, to reflect critically on the part which I played in not achieving my initial aim -- the transformation of my faculty research culture -- became the very drive that motivated me to investigate how I could articulate an understanding of my evolving sense of researcher identity.

Furthermore, from this, I now realise that I have, from the outset of my doctoral journey, been reflecting on myself becoming a researcher. Thus, through in-depth reflection on the failure of the original project, I identified a hardly attended

background rumination that had been the constant, ‘hidden agenda’ of my doctoral journey. I am Chinese, but I have now experienced a western form of education. On the one hand, I have been educated in a research culture in the UK, where people appeared enthusiastic to make positive changes in their practice as professionals and researchers. Certainly, the people I was surrounded with were equipped with sophisticated theoretical knowledge, academic insights, bravery to challenge authoritative opinions and ideas, and the internet, which allowed them to access up-to-date information. Their enthusiasm for making contributions to knowledge and seeking professional improvement encouraged me to be a persistent pursuer of research. On the other hand, the environment in which I academically grew up and worked now seemed conservatively poor in its application of methodologies and sources of data. As a product of Chinese education, I felt I had been permeated with traditional values that had steered me away from fresh ideas and creativity. Hence, after being educated in an international research culture in the UK, I struggled with my inability to bring about changes to my colleagues who had not had this experience. All the same, I observed that as they struggled with theoretical and practical inadequacies in academic resources, they were still working diligently towards growing into experienced researchers regardless of the measure of support. Such dissonance between my past and the present provided me with an opportunity to transform again, but this time, it was going to be a transformative discovery of myself as a researcher.

5.4 Researcher identity in an autoethnographic narrative

Central to this final cycle of my study is a focus on my own experiences and stories, which places my researcher identity within an autoethnographic narrative. The shift to focus on examining how my researcher identity is established using personal storytelling emerged from a reflective analysis of why the original aim of building a ‘community of research’ was unable to be achieved. As a transition to link the failure of the original research project and the construction of researcher identity, autoethnographic narrative is introduced as a method of enquiry.

Some people use autoethnographic narrative as a way of telling a story that invites personal connection rather than analysis (Donnelly 2015), exploring issues and events of personal importance within an explicitly acknowledged social context (Sparkes 1996;

Holt 2001). Hence, in my autoethnographic narrative, my reflections were unique to my own interpretation of what I had experienced, with implications of my interweaving identities as a mother, a divorcee, a teacher, and an international student across two different cultures. As an academic, I have experienced the difficulties and challenges that emerged from the complex intersection of different beliefs and practices of research. Thus, I approached my autoethnographic narrative with a desire to converse with the literature while positioning it within the diverse social contexts from which it arose.

Furthermore, in studies located in a cross-cultural setting, a researcher's identity can be a significant factor affecting the result of qualitative research (Pelzang and Hutchinson 2018). Therefore, being positioned betwixt the Chinese and UK cultures, I believe that my personal connection to the study is worth enquiring into. Hence in this, the third Action Research cycle, I investigate how I established a researcher identity, journeying through two very different cultures, and using autoethnographic narrative as the method of enquiry to give testimony to the value of the living self above and beyond any theory (Hayler 2011). As Park beautifully intimates:

> Time would pass, old empires would fall, and new ones take their place. The relations of classes had to change before I discovered that it's not quality of goods and utility that matter, but movement, not where you are or what you have, but where you come from, where you are going, and the rate at which you are getting there (2014, p.179).

Additionally, underlying the creation of an autoethnographic narrative, drawn from my own life experiences, are my fundamental beliefs that researcher identity is situated, relational, and shifting in an evolving process (Duff and Uchida 1997), as has been reflected in my learning of Action Research through studying and researching in two UK universities. Furthermore, within and acted upon by these cross-cultural experiences, there exists the multiple selves that I identify as me. In other words, I am a Chinese English language teacher, an international student, a mother, a daughter, and a divorced woman - all roles and identities held within the tensions constructed by educational and socio-cultural practices, which have been identified as part of a transformative learning process (King 1998).

In this way, the autoethnographic narrative of my academic growth becomes what Cranton describes as a change by education, because 'education leads to change - changes in the amount of knowledge people have, changes in skills and competencies, changes in the way we communicate and understand each other, changes in our sense of self, and changes in our social world' (1994, p.160). Mezirow also elaborates that the essence of transformative learning lies in its importance of helping 'the individual become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her own values, meanings, and purposes rather than uncritically acting on those of others' (1997, p.11). Whilst I was working hard to influence the ideas and beliefs of my colleagues, I also found that the cultural context could not be ignored, especially when an evaluation of the self was challenged, because 'culture can impede or facilitate the development of self – consciousness and the ability to make symbolic representations' (Mezirow 1991, p.147). The interactions with my development shaped my views of the academic world in which I lived, and in so doing, constructed my researcher identity. Meanwhile, autoethnographic narrative became, not only the method of enquiry, but the form and substance of illuminating the development of my researcher identity and my transformed epistemology.

5.4.1 Reflections on researcher identity

There are various ways to describe a person's identity, and the concept of identity is shaped by broader interests - political, historical, social, and cultural. Gardner (2008), cited by Mertkan and Bayrakli (2017, p.319), discusses that 'with the influence of differentiated experiences embedded in diverse institutional and disciplinary cultures marked by differentiated dynamics, researcher identities constructed are bound to be different'. In this final cycle of the Action Research study, the construction of my researcher identity became the essential focus of my autoethnographic narrative, from the perspective of a Chinese postgraduate researcher, who was positioned across two diverse sociocultural contexts.

In writing my autoethnographic narrative, the work of Abdelal et al. (2001), which emphasizes that the concept of identity is critical to understanding many of the essential issues of the social sciences in our time, was instrumental. However, as noted by Abdelal, there is not much consensus on how to define identity, nor

> is there agreement on where to look for evidence that identity affects knowledge, interpretations, beliefs, preferences, and strategies; nor is there agreement on how identity affects these components of action (Abdelal et al. 2001, p.74).

Similarly, knowledge about the types and nature of experiences conducive to researcher identity in the PhD process is limited, so it is vital to examine how individuals value their unique expertise in developing a researcher identity. Some research indicates that academic development takes place in multiple processes (Barnacle and Mewburn 2010; McAlpine 2012), so the development of PhD students is demonstrated through such processes as conference presentations, research group meetings, peer discussions, and writing practices (Archer 2008; McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek and Hopwood 2009). As the most significant way of assessing the success of the PhD researcher's overall research capacity, many researchers have stated that thesis writing is particularly conducive to research identity formation (Lee and Aitchison 2009; Kamler and Thomson 2014). The objective assessment of identifying a researcher's academic performance is equally accepted as a way of defining a researcher's development, such as becoming more confident as a researcher, gaining external recognition, becoming more productive in academic activities, and more mature techniques applied in research writing (Akerlind 2008). Studies also point to the importance of individuals' emotions and feelings about themselves as researchers in their development and identification as a researcher (Akerlind 2008; Turner and McAlpine 2011; Sinclair, Barnacle and Cuthbert 2013). Meanwhile, Kiley (2009) recognizes the identification of a researcher from a more practical point of view, suggesting that the process of learning to be a researcher is facilitated by understanding specific research concepts, such as framework, theory, methodology, data, and data analysis, and the competence of applying these theoretical concepts to achieve the aim of the research project. Furthermore, there is the view that social networks are necessary in the formation of researchers, including peers, families, and friends, as they help strengthen a sense of belonging (Curtin, Stewart and Ostrove 2011). Therefore, while knowledge is expanded through research, the researcher's identity is developed in a socially constructed setting.

In addition, in the discussion of social, political, and economic issues, 'identity has been used to explain individual behaviour, as well as collective action' (Norton 2000, p.92) and, as a consequence, identity-based research has aroused much interest.

That said, despite this interest, knowledge about the types and nature of experiences conducive to researcher identity in the PhD process is limited (Mantai 2017). Existing research recognizes that academic development takes place in multiple processes, which are diverse in nature and usually happen in traditional and non-traditional sites of learning (Barnacle and Mewburn 2010; McAlpine 2012). Alongside this, Akerlind's (2008) research reveals different ways of defining researcher development: becoming confident as a researcher, gaining external recognition, becoming more productive, and becoming more sophisticated with time. Moreover, it cannot be denied that doctoral students face many emotional and intellectual challenges (Gardner 2010), and that, as they do, their emotions and feelings about themselves impact upon their development and identification as a researcher (Turner and McAlpine 2011; Sinclair, Barnacle and Cuthbert 2013). With this in mind, I believe it is worthwhile, not only for me, but also for other cross-cultural doctoral candidates following in my wake, to study what I have experienced, and analyse how those experiences have influenced my learning and my evolving researcher identity.

Undertaking a PhD was the most important choice I had made in my life. It took enormous courage, sacrifice, and resilience for the dream of changing my life and career journey to come true. I recognise that the quest for a balanced control of my life and professional activities was rooted in my culture, education, ideology, experience, beliefs, and needs. I also acknowledge that it was powerfully interwoven into my desire to identify as a researcher, because learning to do research and to be a researcher, are essential elements of doctoral education (Barnacle 2005; Barnacle and Mewburn 2010; Richards 2015). Thus, my strength and resilience throughout the PhD journey arose from a determination to find a suitable way to proceed, regardless of the challenges I encountered, so that I could become a good researcher and lead a life filled with meaning, hope, and value.

The PhD is commonly recognized as an intense process that offers a profound learning experience and is likely to transform the individual (Barnacle and Mewburn, 2010). In becoming a researcher, PhD students need to 'negotiate new identities and reconceptualize themselves both as people and professionals' (Hall and Burns 2009, p.51), in addition to acquiring research skills. A typical example in the description of my identity as a researcher was the change in terminology to the title I was given from

a 'postgraduate research student' to a 'postgraduate researcher' at York St John University. It was proposed in April 2017 as a strategy to encourage doctoral students to be actively involved in whatever subject discipline they were studying, so that they would contribute to augmenting the research undertaken in their research community. The proposal was finally sent to Academic Board for approval in April 2018. The change was initiated with broad support from the postgraduate community in the university. It was argued that the title 'postgraduate researcher' better reflected the important contribution they had and could make to both the institution's research culture, and the volume of research output produced by postgraduate researchers, mainly PhD students. The focus on 'researcher' acknowledged the level of independence required for those studying at PhD level to meet the requirement to create 'new knowledge'. Postgraduate researchers were encouraged to see themselves primarily as researchers with work to be disseminated and put to social use. In this official change of the identification of doctoral students, I began to feel that, as a postgraduate researcher, I would be expected to negotiate with my evolving development of self-efficacy and researcher identity, so that I could be actively engaged in the research culture and move on with learning a more comprehensive range of transferable research skills.

Furthermore, the identity that the researcher holds about themselves plays a vital role in collecting and gaining access to data. Therefore, when the initial research aim came to an impasse, I started to reflect on the research process from a different perspective by considering how my own identity had affected the data. In doing so, I saw that the frustrating experiences I had in setting up a ‘community of research’ had questioned the positioning of my identity. If I had had a mature understanding of how I perceived myself as a researcher, the ‘community of research’ I proposed might have been a more realistic proposition. Equally, honesty with the subject knowledge is essential, so the researcher should address any issue that might cause distrust to the participants. From these retrospective insights, I realised that in undertaking my reflective preparations in cycle 1 of my Action Research project, I had failed to understand the nuances of my positionality within my research and, perhaps more significantly, to my participants. Moreover, this had made it impossible for me to predict the practical difficulties I encountered in cycle 2. As a result, I believe the participants were not encouraged to hold a strong belief in the feasibility of the project, especially

after there was a change in the leadership of the faculty and a subsequent loss of management support.

From this, I deduced that in the previous two cycles, my researcher identity appeared to develop along two dimensions. These were professional and contextual (Pennington and Richards 2016). The professional basis of my researcher identity included my past learning experiences and cross-cultural experiences. My personal experiences and insider-ness within my home university made it challenging to persuade my participants to reconsider their traditional ways of doing research. More specifically, being aware of my identity as a former colleague, I tended to advise on how to research within a given context, because I knew what my participants needed. Also, looking back on my own experience, I inferred what stage they were at. Meanwhile, learning to do research through three journeys to the UK - an academic trip, my MA study, and my PhD programme - had been significantly transformative in providing me with a cross-cultural perspective of my researcher identity, which, to me, had infused my research with an outsider-ness. However, these cross-cultural educational experiences equally provided the contextual dimension of my developing researcher identity. The researchers I observed and worked with in the UK showed me how they presented themselves as researchers. I was impressed by their passions and conscientiousness in research, as they pursued research to make their ideas thrive, and devoted themselves to seeking the meaning of truth and life. Such inspiration, respect, and accumulated theoretical knowledge were valuable assets I had gained from my research journey, and I felt I should, in turn, use them to benefit both my professional growth and my contribution to knowledge. So, although I was aware of my own limitations as a researcher, I was determined to explore any possibility that would positively impact upon my personal and professional development, and allow me to influence the learning and knowledge creation of others.

Moreover, undertaking a PhD across sociocultural, educational, and language boundaries not only presented many challenges, but also illuminated the importance of a cross-cultural learning process, the significance of research situated within divergent contexts, and the meaning of a life of ever-deepening research. In my opinion, my professional growth so far has been derived from the cross-cultural relations between investigating the meaning of research for my identity construction

and living a meaningful life. Consequently, to help explore the connection between my own academic development and researcher identity, I drew upon Akerlind's (2008) viewpoint of researcher development, although his focus was upon post-PhD and early career academics. He found that researcher development includes a focus on feeling about oneself (identity), one's performance (collaboration, development of community, networking), and outcomes (productivity) (McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek and Hopwood 2009; Sinclair, Barnacle and Cuthbert 2013). Thus, given that the traditional purpose of a PhD degree is the training and development of professional researchers, with students eventually becoming independent scholars (Mantai 2017), I felt that all the factors identified by Akerlind were pertinent to my doctoral journey and the development of my researcher identity. Moreover, I equally wanted to concentrate on how my understanding of myself as a researcher contributed to my academic development through the evolving process of establishing a researcher identity because 'being able to recognize and negotiate one's identity as a researcher is an important reflexive tool at all stages of the research process' (Frost and Holt 2014, P.91).

Furthermore, the concept of researcher identity helped me make sense of my own experience and provided a theoretical framework for my ongoing experience and learning as a researcher. When looking back at this long journey to find the meaning of doing research, there were so many emotional experiences that haunted my mind. From these, I have come to realise that my sense of identity emerged interweaving with my other identities, and the different, occasionally conflicting, social rules in my roles, such as a mother, daughter, divorcee, language teacher, and international postgraduate research student. This whole interweaving process required that I should theorise on how my sense of identity was and had been genuinely challenged and transformed as I attempted to traverse the different cultures of China and the UK.

In the writing of Bronfenbrenner (1989), I found some direction. Bronfenbrenner (1989, p.226) defined his bioecological theory as ‘an evolving theoretical system for the scientific study of human development over time’. In his theory, he identified that there are various ways in which people deal with stress and challenges in their lives. The theory also gives similar evidence that defining researcher identity occurs in multiple practices, which is an internal integrating process of personal and academic

experiences in social contexts. The ecological theory basically demonstrates the interconnection of everything. In my case, developing my researcher identity to gain knowledge of research and to complete a PhD thesis took place within a personal context, including physical health, mental condition, and financial hardship, and a social context which included institutional practices and cross-cultural differences.

Hence, with the clarity that identities are influenced by various factors associated with biographical and professional backgrounds and cultural transmissions (Block 2007) and that 'identity is not context-free but is crucially related to social, cultural, and political context - interlocutors, institutional setting, and so on' (Varghese et al. 2005, p.23), I acknowledge that the development of my cultural and social identities, separate to my researcher identity, began long before this study commenced, and that they have continued to evolve. At the same time, it is equally clear that the unique aspects of my personal circumstances, perceptions, and multiple selves are inseparable from how my professional growth is accomplished. Therefore, given the interconnection between the different dimensions of my self-identity, it seemed necessary to revisit my life experience before reflecting on how I developed my own identity as a researcher.

In addition, these considerations led me to appreciate that how I viewed my identity could influence my research. This reinforced my practice of narrative writing, with the intention of recognising and addressing some of the issues that constituted my unique meaningful individuality. Adams (1999) and Tsang (1998) showed interest in the ways 'in which 'self' both influences and has been influenced by/in the research process and how this can be a positive /negative influence on the research' (Thomson and Gunter 2011, p.17). Some researchers showed interest in the notion of unstable, multiple, and dialogical identities, and they had concerns about how these identities might influence discussion and the practice of research (Lucius-Hoene and Depperman 2000; Piper 2004; Skies 2006). Thus, there raised the methodological question about how internal experiences might challenge the perception of the role of identities and impact research.

Clearly, becoming a researcher does not happen in social isolation. Throughout the PhD research journey, researchers interact with different individuals, develop their

own research community, learn with and from others, and deal with people within the research environment and beyond (Hopwood 2010). It is believed that the PhD is a learning process with varied individual experiences playing essential roles in complex social and cultural contexts. Some researchers show evidence that research students' relationships influence their professional development in the PhD studies (Anderson 1989; Richards 2015). Therefore, when my research question altered to addressing how I experienced the process of becoming a researcher, I began to present the instances when I identified myself as a researcher, based on stories of, and the impacts from, my early life and work experiences. In doing so, I was trying to find out how my researcher's development was embedded in the social settings that had defined my life. Accordingly, the reflective account focused on describing the moments when I performed and identified myself as a researcher, highlighting my experiences in research practice in China and in the UK to articulate and communicate the context within which I was attempting to engage in research that was inevitably constructing my researcher identity.

My realisation that the creation of researcher identity was influenced by the different contexts in which one lived was further informed when I reflected on the first two research visits that I paid to China in the summertime of 2016 and 2017. I presented myself as a host, inviting and starting the interview with questions, and then summarising my participants' responses about the community we were developing. These questions included whether they understood the concept of the ‘community of research’ I had proposed. In that context I became a listener showing interest in my participants’ views, and they responded with varying degrees of enthusiasm. To gain as much information as possible, I invited them to contribute more actively to the conversation. I also related stories about my own life and experiences in the UK, to facilitate open and personal discussion in a comfortable situation where there was trust and a willingness to participate. I genuinely thought from my experiences in the UK that if people felt comfortably engaged in a conversation, they would be more open and share their honest thoughts. However, perhaps given our cultural reservations, it took a long time for my participants to demonstrate their trust in the feasibility of the project, so in practice, the interviews turned out to be question-and-answer sessions. Nevertheless, I continued struggling to find a better way to engage my participants co-operatively. As discussed in the second Action Research cycle, I focused on using

collaborative enquiry to increase active participation in data collection. Dewey's (1910) way of viewing knowledge lay in his consideration that knowledge was derived from experience, and 'truth' was to be found in the consequences of actions (Walton 2011). Hence, I was hoping to work with my participants as a researcher, relating knowledge to the actions we planned. In reality, they continued to see me as a colleague with a teacher identity, and this made the process problematic. Evidently, my older, established identity with which they were familiar held sway over the identity I had been developing out of their sight in another culture and context.

Nevertheless, at that stage in my original enquiry, I felt at a loss to know what to do to motivate them to talk more freely and join a collaborative discussion in the way I was hoping that they would. Equally, I was concerned that if I led the workshop as an organizer, I would be positioning myself as an outsider. Meanwhile, as I pondered what approach to take, it was evident that my participants were uncomfortable because my attempts to act as a listening researcher had left them feeling that they were being 'researched on'. I had to explain to them a few times that I was not researching 'on' them but instead researching 'with' them. The mode of 'researching with people, not researching on people' was specified by Heron and Reason (1986) in their work on co-operative enquiry. They argued that co-operative enquiry was better than traditional research, as 'traditional research is the kind of thinking done by the researcher, is often theoretical rather than practical. It doesn't help people find how to act to change things in their lives' (Heron and Reason 2006, p.148). Co-operative research allows all those involved to work together as 'co-researchers and co-subjects'. Thus, 'everyone involved can take the initiative and exert influence on the progress' (op.cit. p.148). Unfortunately, I did not have enough time to develop the idea with my participants, and their reservations persisted. Ultimately, I lost confidence as my frustration with being unable to navigate the project as I expected grew.

Akerlind (2008) claims that researcher identity increases with gained confidence and validation as a researcher. Initially, as I experienced the challenges that inevitably led to the collapse of my original enquiry, I would have to agree, from the standpoint that, as my confidence dwindled and my endorsement as a researcher felt challenged, my researcher identity foundered. Alternatively, Jazvac-Martek (2009) proposes an oscillating development in becoming a researcher. Again, with this, I would have to

agree, because while the failure of my original enquiry diminished my confidence and sense of researcher identity, investigating the breakdown ignited a new and more comprehensive construction of researcher identity that has embraced all that I am - my roles and identities. Subsequently, I have come to understand research identity and development as a holistic, continuous, but vacillating process, that is not a guaranteed final product of a PhD (Archer 2008). This is because it is only through the failure of my initial research aim that I came to the ownership of mine. Hence, the critical meaning of my study is an acknowledgment that, while developing an identity as a professional researcher may be implicit in the very nature of doing research, awareness of the researcher 'self' requires an in-depth reflective, cognitive process, much as Freire argued in the statement: 'Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information' (1970, p. 53). He further proposed that 'Education makes sense, because women and men learn through learning that they can make and remake themselves' (2004, p.15).

Thus, whereas my early education and studies were based on 'transferrals of information', increasingly throughout my PhD, my efforts to discover meaning in my research relied on an in-depth, cognitive reflection of the interrelationship between the different cultural contexts in which I lived and my experiences across cultures. In doing so, I was able to examine the logical process that brought me to understand my reflective and recursive Action Research processes, allowing me to sculpt the meaning of my research, including experiencing 'failure' as a pivotal and essential part of my overall study. However, my personal growth as a researcher started within a community with a conventional research tradition. Situated within this community as a teacher educator for about fifteen years, I witnessed how research impacted teachers' lives, including their knowledge and beliefs and their relations with the institutional guidelines about research, students, colleagues, the education system, and the broader social context in China. Nonetheless, even with a brief experience of collaborative learning in a teachers' support group in 2008, I experienced isolation, challenged by the tension felt between being a teacher educator and a researcher. Then, with the original aim of my PhD to establish a 'community of research' across geographical boundaries with participants, who were English language teachers in my home institution, my role shifted from a teacher educator learning to do research, to a beginner researcher leading a research project. To help develop a theoretical

atmosphere for my colleagues to explain, articulate and understand research in this context, I envisioned Action Research cycles and invited my participants to participate. In doing so, I intended to shed light on how teachers could cross sociocultural boundaries to cope with research challenges by adopting appropriate methodologies and methods and promoting research for ourselves and our colleagues. In actuality, despite my attempts to encourage collaboration with my colleagues, I still felt isolated because I was dealing with the old, familiar workplace challenges, especially in the context of the national educational policy of prioritizing teaching over research, and the loss of the endorsement of the Dean of Education.

With these unforeseen obstacles, my workshop prioritizing research turned out to be an inappropriate one. I was trying to create an atmosphere of intensive dialogues to investigate how we could improve teaching by doing research. For instance, I explained to the participants that I had found similarities between what we were doing and my experiences in the UK during my scholarship year. My learning had extended my understanding of teaching and researching from different perspectives. I purposefully pointed out that doing research was not a simple repetition of explaining theories that other people used. It was a reflective process of finding similar voices, shared values, and making connections. Still, I was disappointed to receive the feedback that my participants still felt unready to apply new theories to their practice. My workshop invited them to contribute ideas for the development of a ‘community of research’, but they were unaccustomed to openly sharing their reflective diaries. After each discussion, I encouraged them to keep in touch by sending me emails to keep reflective notes, but they were unable to embrace this, because email is not a popular means of communication for most people in China. They preferred using WeChat, which is similar to WhatsApp, for sending messages, pictures, and files instantly. The challenge for me was to create an environment that would encourage my participants to enquire and exchange ideas about teaching, learning, and research. I believed that exchanging information and communication would expand their learning and help them resolve challenges they might encounter. I was positive that working co-operatively would benefit their professional practice, but the way the workshop was organized, and the idea of changing the research culture, failed to inspire them to embrace change. When I reflected on these fruitless efforts to encourage criticality and creativity, I concluded that building a ‘community of research’ required sustainable

interest across cultural and ideological boundaries, and that this had been missing. At the same time, I recognised that running the workshop had given me a deeper understanding of the importance of the researcher's role, and an opportunity to investigate how my own perception of researcher identity was formed.

Over years of learning to do research in a community where there had been limited knowledge of research methodologies, despite a persistent sense of isolation, I knew I was not alone in my struggle as a teacher-researcher. Therefore, I had hoped to unite with colleagues whom I perceived were experiencing similar challenges. Action Research did not simply focus on solving practical problems in teaching and learning. Instead, it aimed at making improvements to practice by reflecting on the ability to resolve issues raised. As a result of this unfamiliarity, my voice was not echoed in my home faculty, and we failed to agree on any shared principle that could guide the progress of our group activities. Likewise, we were unable to collaboratively enquire into our research and teaching as researchers. Nevertheless, while I was trying and seemingly failing to encourage my participants to go beyond the established practice of transmitting knowledge and learning skills, I was coincidentally expanding my own learning of research methodologies and processes, gathering experiences of transforming learning to influence practice. In addition, questions regarding my researcher identity pulsed through this process, as my 'self' and my epistemological constructions were renegotiated, shifted, and reconstructed. In this way, my difficulty in establishing a ‘community of research’ was more than a cognitive process. It was challenged by the requirements that socially constructed practice-based networks required, because it was a process both individually and socially situated in specific contexts (Euerby and Burns 2012). Additionally, although unwittingly at first, this emerging perspective made identity construction central to my investigation.

In the global educational reform movement, teachers must cope with numerous challenges of targeted changes. As pointed out by Butler (2006, p.227), teachers are expected to 'keep improving their practice to match changes in social structure, values, policies or resources, implement teaching practice with evolving learning theories, update current professional literature, and integrated practice with research'. Furthermore, in China, these global challenges may be considered multiplied, due to enormous demands made on teachers in terms of provision for teacher training,

ongoing professional development, and the prioritising of research capabilities. In addition, the inappropriate curriculum in teacher training universities, the ineffective research practices, and the lack of research-based support for teachers cited by Li (2008), Hu (2009), and Zhuang (2009) remain unaddressed. Additionally, these challenges are underpinned by Chinese cultural roots in which knowledge transmission and passive learning are characteristics of learning (Xu and Connelly 2009). Hence, when teaching and research were carried out in a situation where teachers were experiencing isolation in teaching, practice, and professional learning, alongside inadequacies in training opportunities and pressure to publish research, there was little hope in my efforts to initiate a shift from a familiar, conservative research culture to an unfamiliar, interactive, and supportive model of professional development within a community, especially when managerial endorsement had been lost.

Nevertheless, despite the collapse of my initial enquiry, I was aware that in the last two decades, research revealed a tendency for teachers and teacher educators to work collaboratively, or in the community, to share and reflect on their teaching practice and their lives as teachers for professional learning. Such collaborative efforts include school-based organizational learning (Rover 2003; Sim 2006), online communities (Wubbels 2007), and teachers' professional communities across different schools and institutions (McFarland and Stansell 1993). These collaborative models emphasized the importance of making the best use of a learning community where teachers could try new ideas, reflect on outcomes, and construct knowledge through working and doing research together. However, how can a research culture be created simply through dialogue in the community? Research in a community setting is a complicated process of social participation with the different people involved. Building up a community is a process of generating and acknowledging shared values and beliefs. It shapes individual senses of belonging and acknowledgement in particular contexts. Through my study, I found that learning to establish a ‘community of research’ became a process of obtaining new identities and transforming identities in a context 'where learners' previous identities are respected and leveraged in the service of acquiring new ones' (Barton and Tusting 2005, p.34). Therefore, in my study, the idea of researcher identity was implicitly embedded in the initial aims of building a ‘community of research’ and the transformation of my identities.

In the final analysis, Miles (2007, p.513) argued that teachers should 're-equip themselves for enquiry in a collaborative culture to facilitate professional teacher learning in the community of practice'. Yet, my project had failed to establish a collaborative culture, even as I fluctuated between identifying as a learner and a researcher; and here perhaps was the crux of failure. As I had, in the early years of my teaching, perceived a tension between my identities and roles as a practitioner and a researcher, as I conducted cycle 2 of my Action Research project, I had positioned myself between learning to do research and being a researcher. This positioning betrayed an epistemology that considered knowledge ‘out there’ to be ingested and assimilated rather than a process in which the ‘self’ could act upon it uniquely and creatively. Perhaps this was a product of the educational culture of my homeland in which I was steeped, but regardless of origin, it had resulted in a construct of researcher identity that was clothed in external acquisition, including reputation, collegiate regard, and academic renown. While within the academic world and many traditional methodologies, these are the trophies related to the successful outcomes of research, my initial enquiry had failed, distancing me, in my mind, from the identity I so craved. Alternatively, Action Research is a methodology that embraces challenges, and in doing so, sees failure as an opportunity for learning rather than a reason to abandon an entire study. Likewise, this unique and vital approach enables a different, holistic form of researcher identity to emerge; one in which the cognitive, creative, resilient, often hidden ‘self’ in which all life experiences, roles, and identities are infused and transmuted to enrich a researcher identity that proclaims, I am the enquiry (Marshall 1999).

5.4.2 I become the enquiry

Thus, while I was experiencing the failure of not being able to achieve the project's initial aim, I started to experience a diversity of significant moments that, over time, contributed to the development of myself as a researcher. For example, participation in various academic activities enabled me to understand the nature of research better. At such times, I felt motivated to meet the research standards required, and enthused about doing research in ways I had not previously known. Those activities happened unnoticeably but constantly throughout my PhD journey, with learning happening in random, unscheduled moments, such as when I went to the library to browse books, read journal articles, and/or discuss what was happening with friends. It could be a

chance to talk with the librarian, or a session on a topic that I was interested in. Additionally, my research skills were enhanced after I was shown how to use Endnote. Preparing annual reviews also created an opportunity for me to examine my 'self' - assessment of the academic performance was an indispensable part of doctoral study. Hence, research-related activities encouraged me to feel that I was a researcher.

My sense of being a researcher could equally occur while I was collecting data. One of the most striking moments that I remember came during the field trip in 2017. Although the 'community of research' I had designed sounded unrealisable to my participants, the group meeting was informative. I prepared copies of the journal articles I wanted to share with them. After they were all seated, I expressed my gratitude that I felt positively supported, because they were willing to come and join me during their vacation. They all replied politely that they were happy to see me. I suggested each of us briefly introduce what we had been doing, but this seemed to be followed by a long, unsettling silence. They looked at each other, and unanimously agreed that they were exactly where they had been previously. After a long, busy spring and summer term, I understood that they were feeling tired and wanted to rest, and that even on holiday this was compromised by familial responsibilities. The topic of the meeting faded away, and instead, the conversation focused upon life's pressures. However, after hearing about the variety of databases I could use in the UK to find articles and references, they became interested and started to ask questions. To my gratification, their questions were precisely my questions when I first started my PhD. I then realized that they needed to hear what was different from what they were used to. So, we talked about accessibility to the Internet. In alliance with government regulations, the Internet in China is under strict surveillance. For example, my participants spoke about how Google is blocked, which results in limited access to websites outside China, making it hard for Chinese academics to obtain journal articles in English. I was aware of the situation but was still shocked to see the admiration and even the jealousy in their eyes. I had felt the same way as they did, educated in the same environment with minimal resources. They were surprised that there were so many search engines available in the UK universities and that I did not need to spend money on reading and downloading articles, whilst in China, there was only one official database, named CNKI, for professionals to use for searching academic journals. Furthermore, they needed to pay for downloading and subscribing to the site to access

articles. Then, suddenly, their attention was attracted to the article I wished to share with them. I suspected that they wanted to see what free articles I had acquired. Nonetheless, from this, we continued to talk about methodology as I had planned for the meeting.

Likewise, as the failure of the original enquiry could be transmuted into the life of a new one, my sense of researcher identity did not always develop from positive events. There were disappointing times when interviews did not proceed as planned. For example, this might occur when my participants were not interested in the topic presented to them or did not know how to respond to my questions. Nevertheless, whether it was a satisfying or disappointing group meeting, I believed that researcher competence in taking control of the research activity was critical. Therefore, I asked myself what competence a researcher should have to maintain such necessary control. Initially, I could only perceive what I lacked. For example, I considered that these disappointing interviews had occurred because I was not well versed in the procedure and organization of group activities. Inevitably such musings increased my anxiety. I saw only that the expensive international research visits were not efficiently carried out. My confidence and belief in my identity as a researcher was depleted. Then, after realising that I would not be able to continue the group work, I knew that I could not possibly gather more data. All the same, surprisingly, at this lowest of points in my doctoral journey, I still knew that I did not want to give up. I have come to know this resolve to be the essential, sustaining force behind my researcher identity. From this place, still within the focus of my original research project, arose the proposal to set-up an online ‘community of research’, so that we could maintain communication and group work after I returned to the UK. I was to feel this force again at the end of cycle 2 when, for all intents and purposes, my study looked in ruins. Hence, this force is the life-blood of my researcher identity, and as such, it is powerfully compatible with Action Research, using problems and challenges to redefine and transform practice and the practitioner – researcher herself.

Thus, the process of research was frustrating, but even through the most challenging of times, my sense of researcher identity grew stronger. In investing significant efforts to make the online community work, I proudly felt like a real researcher. It was the first time that I reflected on my attempt to address the genuine issues identified in my

project. I also recognized that, in the process of applying changes in practice and suggesting improvement, my participants were expected to willingly undertake sufficient attitudinal change, so that in the 'community of research' I had designed, they would work collaboratively to learn about how to enhance their academic research. I was so delighted to see an improved solution to the problem emerging in the second cycle, as that was precisely what Action Research required: to look for improvement through reflection. Unfortunately, the geographical difficulties made the attempt to continue building the online research community also fail.

Such acts of doing research proactively did impact and shape the way that I viewed myself. When I was a teacher, the role of teaching came to be closely related to being a teacher-researcher, with the focus placed on teaching. When I was learning to do Action Research as an academic visitor, and learning qualitative research methods on the MA programme in Liverpool, I started to feel more like an academic who was learning research. To accomplish a PhD by coping with all kinds of difficulties, located me in a broader research environment that was extending beyond my PhD research. My role as a researcher became clearer. I was attracted to engagement with all that was happening in different theoretical areas, integrating them, and thereby continuing research, increasingly perceiving myself as a researcher rather than a teacher.

As I reflected on my journey, I realised that my perceptions of myself were not straightforward, nor did they evolve in a linear way. In my first year of the PhD, I would occasionally see myself as a researcher. In general, on the other hand, I felt it was more appropriate to address myself as a postgraduate research student. In addition, initially when faced with many difficulties but still determined to carry on the journey, I doubted that I could actually achieve the status of an established academic researcher. When I could not write productively and did not want to read for long periods, my motivation to become a 'real' researcher decreased. All the same, these times sharply contrasted with the occasions, when being actively involved in a range of research activities, I became excited about experiencing new things and identifying myself as a researcher. Moreover, external validation from my supervisors and fellow doctoral candidates gave me the confidence to consolidate my trust in myself, because at those times, I could see the gradual progress that was taking place. Hence, while undertaking cycles 1 and 2 of my Action Research project, I existed within a tension

between doubting my ability to be a researcher and being enthused to persevere with the development of my researcher identity. Also, as already described, the drive that sustained my pursuit of the latter was powerfully aligned to the concepts of Action Research, in which solutions to problems that bring improvement are the essence of successful research. Therefore, as cycle 2 ended in apparent failure, both my inner resolve, and the methodology within which I was working, prompted my endurance in the face of devasting calamity.

Furthermore, the hardships I had experienced and was overcoming were neither purely research-based nor minor. I was also facing financial and personal difficulties. To locate experiences within the broader social, political, and cultural contexts in which one lives is a tenet of autoethnographic narrative. Clearly then, for me, undertaking an autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry into the failure of my original project and the development of my researcher identity across diverse cultures, became a solution to the situation I found myself in at the end of cycle 2. At the same time, it was a solution that alleviated the conflicts in my perception of myself as a researcher, as it enabled my epistemology to expand from its narrow construct of knowledge worthy of study, to include the 'self' situated within its many roles and identities.

With this new perspective, I like to describe my PhD journey as a monster, because I encountered all kinds of frustrations and hardships. Simultaneously, though, I equally acknowledge that, in enduring all the difficulties I met, I learned to become more adaptable to changing conditions. I here describe a few of the challenging situations I experienced, as one means of identifying the personal as well as the professional influences on my evolving researcher-identity journey.

One of the hardest challenges were accommodation difficulties. During the first three years, I was flat sitting for an older woman while she was working abroad. It was her practice to return to York twice a year in the summertime and at Christmas, and during her visits I had to find alternative accommodation. Hence, since 2016, I had spent most of my Christmas holidays at the Graduate Centre in the university. Moving from house to house has not been a pleasant experience, especially at Christmas. However, it was an acceptable situation, because I still had a stable, low-cost place to stay after

the landlady returned to her work. Unfortunately, eventually she decided to sell the property, and my tenancy came to an end, leaving me needing to find alternative accommodation.

Then in 2021 when the COVID-19 pandemic was changing the whole world, during the first lockdown when letting agencies were closed, my flatmate at the time suddenly terminated the lease. I had less than ten days to move and lost the rent already paid in advance. Unavoidably, this resulted in me facing yet another severe challenge to be overcome, because without any steady income, estate agencies would not accept an application form. Hence, my only recourse was to the private sector, but social distancing rules made it impossible to view the property. In the end, I moved six times between May and September before the university offered me a room. In this way, packing, moving, and unpacking became a weekly routine job filled with stress and distress. I was crying all the time. I worried about my safety and health when I had to go out to view the house. My mind was filled with anxiety, worries, and pressure. I lost my mobile phone; I forgot to turn off the hob, letting the food burn and setting the fire alarm ringing; I lost track of the days and dates during those times, and I even forgot my shift. It was a devastating time in which I was overwhelmed by anxiety and depression.

Simultaneously, my health deteriorated. I was hospitalized twice and had to undergo surgical procedures. Naturally, these periods of hospitalisation and recovery adversely affected the progress I was able to make with my thesis, so I requested a suspension. Detrimentally, this caused a change in my status brought about by the suspension and extension of studies, and I found myself needing to apply for a new visa, which is an expensive and complicated process requiring a plethora of documentation. I overcame the financial burden by working overtime in a large supermarket where I had found employment, but this also reduced the time available to me to work on my thesis.

Thus, the difficulties both in my research and my personal life were overwhelming. However, I was not defeated. For a while, my confidence was eroded, especially when I lost the endorsement of the Dean of Education due to his unexpected retirement and my project’s implosion at the end of cycle 2. However, the thought of my son, and the

implications of what I was living for, pushed me forward to fight against every challenge I met. Then, my academic difficulties found resolution in a pivotal change of research direction, and my personal troubles began to dissipate one by one. I received a new passport; my visa application was successful, and I secured more regular employment in the supermarket after receiving my new visa.

It may appear inappropriate to the traditional positivist researcher to include such personal details in an academic doctoral thesis. But as Bronfenbrenner (1989) makes clear, it is not possible to understand a situation separate from the context in which it takes place. Autoethnography also understands that all aspects of one's story play an important role in a research narrative, as the personal, professional and cultural are interconnected (Jones, Adams, and Ellis 2013). What was happening to me at a personal level impacted my perception of myself, and contributed to the context within which my sense of researcher identity was evolving, and hence has a relevance within an autoethnographic narrative.

So it is, that after experiencing the highs and lows of my PhD journey, situated within the events that were unfolding within my personal life, I am confident that I have become stronger. I may not see myself a researcher in the way I initially envisaged, when interpreting it within a relatively narrow understanding of the term. However, I am aware that, whereas before I needed success, unique to myself, to nurture my confidence and to value my existence in this world, along with external recognition from the wider audience of my family, my university, my colleagues, and my peers, I now recognise that internal validation is critical to achieving my self-belief and self-efficacy as a researcher. Clearly, the more I learn, the more I figure out the meaning of the research and myself in the process. Moreover, this process has not been short and is still ongoing. It must be so, because as my epistemology has grown to include the professional along with the academic and the personal, so have I understood that my identity as a researcher is in a continual process of renewing and becoming. It is a process full of frustrations and challenges, in which I keep moving back and forth. The critical point is, I never stop, because life itself has become the enquiry, and as long as there is life, there is no ultimate arrival. In Ellis's words, 'at times until death, we are in the middle of our stories, with new elements constantly being added' (2009, p.166). Hence, while others may look to a turning point when a doctoral candidate

thinks about themself as a researcher, which is described by Kiley (2009) as a 'threshold concept', or the transformational moment when the researcher acknowledges their identity as a researcher, for me the recognition now is that research is my life, and my life is the research. My researcher identity abides in all that I am and all that I do. In other words, I carry it within all my identities and roles.

5.5 A new journey for meaning in life and research

Subsequently, now standing within a holistic and continuous sense of researcher identity, I know that it, my transformed epistemology and the insights I have gained about what it means to succeed in life as a woman who was born in one country in a lowly position and wanted to demonstrate her worth as a researcher in a different country, is worthy of being valued and recognized, especially at a time when others are increasingly crossing language and sociocultural borders seeking academic advancement. In addition, in the cross-cultural context, the pursuit of finding the meaning of connections is an important theme (Pelzang and Hutchinson 2018). Finding meaningful connections between the self, and the experiences in wider social and cultural contexts, has allowed me to achieve a new level of understanding of my own identities. With a strong desire to make my PhD study successful, and to make my life meaningful, I connect my personal experiences from the time when I started to learn Action Research with my repositioning from teacher to researcher, from a divorced woman coming from a disadvantaged background to an international student doing a PhD. I then realise that what has motivated me to face and deal with never-ending difficulties along this challenging PhD journey is the call of finding the meaning of my life. Just as Charlotte Buhler states, to answer the question 'how does a human being go about finding meaning' is responded to by Frankl, when he says, 'All we can do is study the lives of people who seem to have found their answers to the questions of what ultimately human life is about as against those who have not' (Frankl 1964, p.136).

During one of my lowest moments when I felt vulnerable and confused, and I did not question anybody as to why I did not deserve to be treated kindly, I was strongly recommended to read Frankl's (1964) book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, which tells the story of the survival of prisoners in a concentration camp in the Second World War, and their motivation to live being inspired by identifying what was meaningful to them.

On reading it, I thought, if a person can find meaning in life in that situation, then they can survive anything. At that moment, I decided to embrace rather than resist the darkness in my life. From that initial embrace grew this autoethnographic narrative, that has finally completely liberated me from subjugation to ideas and constructs regarding research and knowledge, that I started to outgrow on the day I walked into my first meeting with the American Action Researchers all those years ago.

All my life experiences have told me that people's identities are framed within complex and changing social contexts across the life span. It is vital to comprehend that those experiences shape all individuals. In integrating the meaning of my life stories into my research, I not only gained a better understanding of myself, but I also started to find ways to change my present situation. Recognising that my life is the research, and that my researcher identity is part of every identity and role that I am, has been like a light penetrating the darkness, bringing about a transition from the past to the present and a transformation of my epistemological assumptions. I know I cannot change my life to achieve my ideal blueprint, but at least I have survived every challenge I met, and in doing so, allowed two very different cultures to find a nestling place within me.

Furthermore, in that nestling place, my thoughts turned to how I could show the relevance of all parts of my life, as my sense of researcher identity evolved and transformed through the Action Research cycles. The answer was the use of autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry which is in keeping with the idea of 'life as enquiry' (Marshall 1999), and permitted me to explore the interweaving and mutual relevance of my personal story and experiences within the wider cultural and institutional contexts in which my first-person experiences were taking place. In so doing, I was aware that I was using my own experience to seek meaning, just as Frankl (1964) did. So, on this learning journey to do research, it was revealed to me that an opportunity to contribute to researcher identity can emerge in any situation as research is about gaining new knowledge, and can also be about finding meaning in life.

Throughout all the adverse events I experienced, I kept thinking about how well or inadequately I was coping with the different situations. My reflection was that I was better at dealing with change when I was young. As I am growing older, I have found change to be more complicated. That said, my aim is that a major outcome of my

enquiry is that I have, influenced by Frankl (1964), learned to cope with change and difficult circumstances with greater resilience. Undesirable events happen, but it is up to me to continue to strive for more positive opportunities to be created. One lesson that I learned when I was traveling annually between the UK and China was that wherever I travel, I take myself with me. The 'self' is unique to me, including my habits, characters, values, and life perspectives. I thought that I could become radically different and that I could become a better person. I found it quite dispiriting, as that transformation seemed to take longer than I wished. Nonetheless, looking back, I can see that change was indeed happening within me, although it was gradual and subtle.

Along the way, I heard the phrase that 'it's going to get worse before it gets better' . I have understood how hard it is to remain positive when the strain is mentally and emotionally tremendous. I recall how I was feeling when I realized that I could not achieve the aim of changing the research culture in my home university. I was crushed by despair, combined with frustration, worries, and doubt. These feelings were overwhelming, but I saw hope when my supervisor told me that failure could be part of the research. When I almost became homeless, I wondered who could help me. When I realized that no-one was in a position to do so during such dangerous times, I stopped complaining about how awful I felt, and simply kept going. I thought seriously about how I could live differently in times of frustration and depression when I had to learn to tolerate living in an even lonelier world, when everybody was socially banned from seeing each other. The fact is that I had been living a life in isolation for so long, that I had actually trained myself to look for hope in everyday life. Discoveries and surprises made a huge difference. They changed my sense of self for the better. It could be a new paragraph I wrote well, or some excellent quotations in a journal article. It could be experienced in a friendly conversation with a regular customer in the supermarket in which I worked, or in the discovery of a missing page of important notes. So, as lockdown continued and extended, I could only seek the things that brought me little moments of joy. As these moments added up, I appreciated that there was, indeed, light and hope in my life. I should not be defeated by frustration and difficulties; I should be confident and hope for good things. Frankl (1964) in his account of his own distress and survival, provided me with the strength and resilience to retain hope, despite my fear of personal disintegration. It is my intention, that in sharing my

own autoethnographic account of my PhD journey, I will, in turn, influence others to retain determination and hope in difficult times.

All this has put me in mind of the way in which I need to hold faith in the value of life experience. People cannot control their futures, but they can learn from experience and decide where their paths will take them. I have given myself a good start by doing a PhD, and I take responsibility for my choices. Determination and perseverance are necessary to accomplish a doctoral study successfully. This path is all about confidence in myself, perseverance, resilience and the gratification of that final achievement. In recalling all the changes that have happened to me, I think belief in meaning teaches me something more profound. It can be easy to feel pressure to seek more and more purpose in life, especially when experiencing traumatic ups and downs, and then become overwhelmed with how much there is to do. Hence, what is important, is the belief that the smallest things can make a considerable difference and bring about meaningful changes.

Although I may have grown in more intangible ways, too, during this unprecedented time, despite the extreme stress, anxieties, and uncertainties about the future, I have found, in the relaxing moments alone with myself when I reflect upon all I have experienced, that I am more aware of using the term ‘resilience’. I realise that this has become an important sustaining term in my life. Moreover, I believe that this has emerged through an exploration of the concept of 'meaning', and what this has meant and means, to me as I continue to push my way through these difficult times. I believe that my resilience strengthened as a consequence of my search for meaning. I tell myself that I might be far happier in my own world than I ever thought I could be. I have lived through illness and the risk of being homeless, and I know that there may well be more misfortune ahead. What am I worrying about? What is making me stronger? Which bits of my life need cherishing, and what needs to be removed entirely from my heart?

I have also proved to myself that I can live, possibly even thrive, through a period of deprivation and fear. I have found I am capable of spending sustained periods alone without crashing. I have equally found I can handle some demanding customers while being rudely treated in retail. Also, I have looked for ways to help others through their times of crisis, although I am seeking help constantly. At the same time, I am realistic,

and it might only be my anxiety, stress levels, or overdrafts that have grown! There is too much that is sadly negative coming out of the pandemic, and too many people have seen their family or friendship circle becoming smaller, as the virus has taken their loved ones away. People are all changed by their experience, but it will take extra efforts to carry on development and change and to move forward. That is the meaning of life I am seeking.

Thus, in conclusion, through the reflective gathering of my thoughts here laid out for the reader, I have shown the layers of my journey and the depth of my understanding to this point in my life. This has embraced transformative learning and the search for the meaning of life. In so doing, I hope that the layers of my learning journey have been clearly reflected through the narrative account adopted to recall the steps I have taken and the emotional understandings I have felt. Bateson discusses the impact of female researchers as a source of power, as women have sustained attention to diversity and independence, which

> may offer a different clarity of vision, sensitive to ecological complexity, to the multiple rather than the singular. Perhaps we can discern in women honoring multiple commitments a new level of productivity and new learning possibilities. (1989, p.16)

My journey as a researcher has evolved and changed, partly as my understandings of the process of conducting Action Research has grown, and my academic interests and ideas have developed. Also, equally, I have grappled with numerous commitments, challenges, and personal realisations. Ultimately, somewhere along the journey on which I initially and consciously started, a new phase of the journey began, that included me looking for meaning in research and in life. It is a journey which continues still.

5.6 Chapter summary

Within this chapter which consists of cycle 3 of my Action Research project, I have openly and frankly described my response to the challenges I have been through academically, professionally, and personally. In doing so, I have provided an in-depth reflection on their implications, both on my understanding of what research is, and on my identity as a researcher. Thus, using autoethnographic narrative as my method of enquiry allowed me a significant and candid space in which to explore how the failure

of my initial enquiry informed and ultimately transformed my researcher identity and epistemological constructions. As was noted by Frankl, 'between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom' (1964, p.77).

In the next chapter, I provide a synthesis of the reflections, themes, and ideas that emerged while undertaking this Action Research project. Together these constitute the key learnings of this study, and as such, they illustrate its importance for future research. Alongside these, the limitations of the study are discussed with reference to the standards of judgement intrinsic within it.

Chapter 6

Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter draws together the reflections and ideas that emerged while undertaking my Action Research project and in which I explored how I identified my researcher identity. My journey has been complex, full of tension, stress, and challenges, and therefore, alongside the issues examined and illuminated in my thesis, in this chapter, I will reflect upon some of these, too, as outlined in the previous chapter. However, with hindsight, in many ways, my life experiences and research journey now feel inspiring and enlightening, because an authentic and lasting transformation in myself and my ontology, epistemology, ethical assumptions, and positionality within research has been generated. The change, I believe, has come from my efforts to construct understandings, form my own beliefs, establish confidence, and adapt to a changed sense of self. I feel this research journey has enabled me to learn to complete research despite failure, understand myself and my roles and identities, and explore the meaning of life. Moreover, I recognise that with the current global movement of doctoral candidates across national and language divides, this carries much relevance and validity for others. Accordingly, with this in mind, in this chapter I bring together all the themes and elements of my doctoral journey, particularly focusing upon their significant, transformative impact.

6.2 Themes: researcher identity and transformative learning

Throughout my Action Research project, there were two pervasive and intertwined themes of identity and transformation. While, in relational and institutional terms, the latter was an integral part of my initial plans, it took on a more profound and identity-significant role as I entered my third cycle. Likewise, while the former had formed a major part of my personal ‘hidden agenda’ in my initial project planning, by the onset of the third cycle, it had become the focal point of my enquiry.

6.2.1 The principal theme: researcher identity

Although it was not how I initially envisaged the substance of my PhD to be, out of the hidden agenda that drove my ambition to become a researcher, and the failure of my original enquiry, the theme of researcher identity emerged as the principal one of my

research. In doing so, I came to profoundly appreciate that both the nature of research and the definition of ‘a researcher’ are neither singular nor exclusive. There is a spectrum of interpretations for these words, and my positionality on that scale has dramatically shifted from the start to the conclusion of my Action Research project. Most significantly, I have come to understand that both the nature of what one considers research, and the definition one gives to the role of a researcher, are locked into one’s ontological and epistemological perceptions, and that from these, one constructs one’s sense of researcher identity. In other words, describing research as systematic enquiry, and a researcher as one who engages in such, fails to capture the essence of either terms. The nature of research, and the definition of a researcher, are many (Brew 2001), and one’s construction of both is probably best evidenced in the methodological choices one makes. Even then, this merely overlies the underpinning perceptions and the identity these have carved out. In other words, it is in my understanding of my researcher identity that my constructions of the nature of research and my definition of a researcher can best be made known.

Moreover, I have come to theorise that how a researcher’s identity emerges through the process of undertaking research is intertwined into the development of the research. As already stated in the previous chapter, Akerlind (2008) asserts that researcher identity increases with gained confidence and validation as a researcher, while Jazvac-Martek (2009) proposes an oscillating development in becoming a researcher. Interestingly, during the course of my doctoral journey, I came to agreement with both these ideas from a negative perspective of one whose original enquiry had imploded, initiating a new necessary but painful, reflective enquiry into the nature and causes of that failure. In other words, had my initial enquiry been successful, my researcher identity would have continued on a smooth and steady path but would never have attained either the depth or the transformation I now believe it has. Yes, identity development can be understood as a continuous or incremental process, but it does not mean a research identity is acquired as a final product at the completion of a doctorate (Archer 2008), or that that identity holds within it a profound and authentic insight of the self and one’s constructions. Thus, as argued previously, in my experience, developing a researcher identity should require more than the doing of research. As Freire (1970) claimed, learning that truly liberates and transforms is more than the acquisition of knowledge, it must be a process of persistent, responsible,

authentic cognitive reflection in which the researcher assumes accountability to the very meaning, value, and purpose of their life.

6.2.2 The underpinning theme: transformative learning

As my project was situated across two different cultures and educational contexts, I was aware that the ideas of transformative learning theory were relevant, because it theorised the interrelationship between a researcher's experience and practice. However, at the outset, the transformation I directed my attention to was that of my home university and my colleagues. I believed that I had already, in many ways, experienced the transformation I was then seeking for my place of work, and those working within it, due to my exposure to communities of researchers in the UK and my expanded knowledge of qualitative research, and in particular Action Research methodology. Nevertheless, as already revealed, there was a 'hidden agenda' which formed the backdrop of my Action Research project. This was that in the process of influencing the research practices of my colleagues and generating knowledge that would be of value to them, I would simultaneously strengthen my personal qualities, ensure my professional development, and come to see myself as a researcher. In other words, in determining my planned Action Research project, whilst I envisioned that my research would help implement a change in the research culture within my university faculty, and encourage cooperation and collaboration in research among the professional staff, I imagined that it would also develop my identity as a researcher. What I could not and did not anticipate was that my development as a researcher would include a profound transformation in my worldview and constructions. Now, upon in-depth reflection, I candidly admit to a lack of insight into the nature and profundity of transformative learning and research. In many ways, my previous constructions reflected my sociocultural and educational heritage in which knowledge is an external, acquired commodity, because the researcher development I envisaged had all the trimmings of something 'put on', rather than being seen as a process of deep, intense transformation.

According to Mezirow (2006), transformative learning is defined as the transformation of the learner's meaning perspectives, frames of reference, and habits of mind. Therefore, unlike my earlier perceptions, it is a 'deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, actions' (Custer 2014, p.9), brought about by experience. In

addition, based on the assumption that a learner's current perspective and consequent approach to life derive from their experiences, thoughts, values, knowledge, and skills (Taylor 1997), ‘it holds at its core the conviction that as a defining condition of being a human being, we must understand the meaning of our experience’ (Mezirow 1997, p.5). Transformative learning occurs when learners critically examine their newly developed perspectives, and question whether their current approach to doing things is correct. Hence, it is evident that this self-reflection functions in a similar way to that advocated by Action Research. More specifically, as an Action Research enquiry undertakes reflective, data collecting and analysing steps towards the development and revision of action plans, transformative learning equally occurs through a process of reflection and observation, in which improvement is achieved through the consideration of new and different practices. Thus, with them both, researchers engage in self-reflection to examine their practice and arrive at actions they can take to improve it.

Meanwhile, the traditional educational approach was described by Freire (1970) as a ‘banking’ model of education. In this model, the aim is to assist learners to acquire knowledge with the transfer of knowledge usually occurring in a static exchange. However, both Freire and Mezirow (1970,1997) who took the women's liberation movement in the United States in the 1970s as the original background for the development of his theory, argued that new educational theories, such as transformative learning, which promoted increased self-awareness and freedom from constraints, were necessary to help the actual learning to occur. Also, in this literature, it is claimed that an empowered sense of self and an increase in self-confidence in new roles and relationships are outcomes of transformative learning. Similarly, it is asserted that there are fundamental changes in the way learners view themselves, and that they consider their life changes as being functionally strategic in helping them gain more control over their lives and insight into life’s meanings (Holliday 2002; Taylor 1997). Furthermore, both theorists and researchers contend that transformative learning occurs through social processes, in which learners gain a new understanding of how social relationships and cultures have shaped their beliefs and feelings (Sokol and Cranton 1998).

Clark (1993) also argued that educational programmes that lead to transformative learning create significant life changes for participants as a result of them seeking ways of achieving progress in a way that is better for them:

> produces far-reaching changes in the learner than does learning in general, and… these changes have a significant impact on the learners' subsequent experiences. In short, transformative learning shapes people; they are different afterward, in ways both they and others can recognize (p.54).

With all these arguments, I have to agree. For me, my thesis not only reflects upon my research experiences while completing my doctoral studies, on which I spent five and a half years, but also on who I was before I started on this journey and who I have become; and from whatever perspective I look, these are very different people. Indeed, there was a moment, when writing my autoethnographic narrative, that I realised I was actually writing about how I spent my forties, and how different the woman, doctoral candidate, researcher, and all my other roles and identities had become from she who first encountered the two PhD American researchers in 2007. My journey has been long and tangled. In searching and exploring the unknown along the trip, alongside all the challenges and overwhelming hardships, I have discovered that it is full of moments to treasure. I want desperately to forge my way ahead, as I feel a growing awareness of the meaning of life. At the same time, as my journey flows, my mind keeps sliding through layers of memories I hold, and within them I wonder if perhaps the one constancy within me is that I am still seeking. However, whereas this was once a powerful driving force taking me across borders, it has transmuted into my source of confidence, because I now recognise that it does not merely drive an academic hunger, but also it constantly encourages me to look for perspective and insight from all angles of the life experiences I go through. Thus, looking from the perspective of Clark's (1993) transformed self, the 'different' me has drawn back to what is most important to me. In other words, the more I engage with myself as a researcher, the more I want to demonstrate clarification and understanding of the meaning I create for myself.

Following from the arguments outlined above, there emerged an avid discussion regarding issues pertinent to transformative learning, including the varied definitions of participants; for example, the person, the individual, the learner and the self, and meaning perspectives (Mezirow 2009). Hence, as the idea of transformative learning

was, from the outset, an integral part of the theoretical base of my study, it naturally lent itself to conceptualisations of self and identity, naming and describing the target areas of the transformative learning within my research before I had even grasped their significance, because I was focusing more on the transformation of my university and colleagues.

In terms of the self and identity, Illeris (2014) states that the term 'identity' clearly indicates the participation of the social environment and interaction with the individual, as in Mezirow's (2009) concepts of meaning perspectives. Meanwhile, prior to Mezirow, Erickson (1968) had argued that identity includes self-perception in an integrated way in relation to an individual's interaction with their surrounding world. Thus, from these perspectives, the term 'identity' appropriately captures how I, faced by persistently changing conditions and the ultimate collapse of my initial enquiry, whilst straddling two different cultures, perceived the impact of the interplay between myself and my sociocultural settings upon the development of my researcher identity. Moreover, while Erikson (1968) provided a further definition of identity as 'a combination of the personal experience of being the same in all the different situations of life and how we wish to present ourselves to others' (Illeris 2014, p.154), the British sociologist, Anthony Giddens (1991), claimed that identity requires the constant necessity to change. He argued that this demanded balancing oneself against changing oneself to maintain the feeling of being oneself. Indeed, in today's changing world, the task of preserving identities and changing identities has grown increasingly topical, with identity development becoming a central issue in the theory and understanding of transformative learning (Grabove 1997). Therefore, I believed that relating transformative learning to changes in my identity would enable a more profound and detailed insight into how the development of my researcher identity took place.

In doing so, I had to reflect upon the impact transformative learning had had upon my ontology, epistemology, ethical perspectives, and positionality (see Chapter 2). As outlined in Table 3 (see Chapter 2), although my ontological perspective had always been an interpretative one, in which I saw my life experiences rooted in my society and its culture and my subsequent responses and actions, nonetheless, this viewpoint was still somewhat insular and restricted. In many ways, I saw myself as 'acted upon'

and ‘reactive to’. In other words, I had not yet perceived my own agency or indeed that of others. My first step to this took place as the reflections of cycle 1 became the instigators of actions in cycle 2. Faced by the challenges of my identities and roles, such as researcher-practitioner amongst researcher-practitioners, researcher leader, insider, outsider, inbetweener, etc., there emerged a new perspective of a relational dynamic, in which my previous interpretative worldview was relocated within interpersonal bonds and structures shared with others. This explained and illuminated the interpersonal challenges and defeats I experienced. I came to believe that its absence from my worldview contributed to the collapse of my original enquiry, because it had resulted in a plan of action that did not consider the interpersonal dimension until it was too late, and then initially, I only framed it in academic terms.

However, I yet had some way to go to fully grasp the implications of my new perspective for future research. Surprisingly, this came in Cycle 3 when I adopted autoethnographic narrative as my method of enquiry. With this, another dimension was added to my interpretative worldview, that of the intrapersonal, psychological, inner world of self and personal agency. What is more, it was in admitting the significance and validity of this dimension ontologically that the interpersonal dimension was better understood. In other words, in acknowledging the importance of the inner world of myself as a researcher, the psychological lives and agency of future participants could and would be better seen, acknowledged, and given due regard.

As my ontological perspective expanded, my epistemology was transformed (see Chapter 2). I had moved from a perspective of knowledge as an external, stable commodity to be studied and investigated, to one in which it is a living, multifaceted force in the search for meaning and value in life. This change came about after working extremely hard to overcome difficulties both in my research and my personal life, revealing to me, through the method of autoethnographic narrative, their inseparable nature. When my life became the enquiry (Marshall 1999), the entire expanse of knowledge worthy of enquiry became boundless, and what I thought I was looking for in life and my research came into question.

I had always asked myself about my values, what was important to me in my life, and what I hoped the effect of my research would be on my career. I know that, in the early

stages of my working life, I did not have the ambition to be called a researcher, nor did I believe collegiate regard and academic renown possible, but at the very least, I wanted to become a good teacher-researcher. However, I now feel as though I have finally found where I am supposed to be. I wanted to provide myself with a consistent source of power which would enable me to recognise my potential. I tried to comprehend how I could challenge myself. I felt desperate when I was frustrated at the thought of being unable to value myself, but when my epistemology admitted the value and significance of internal knowledge making, I gradually realised that it was my attitude and mindset that have restricted my development. There are many things I cannot change in my sociocultural 'thrownness' (2011), as the German philosopher Heidegger (1889 -1976) called it, but I have found a relentless drive to achieve the best I can to reach my full potential, and this has changed me. The changed me is dedicated to creating meaning through education, communication, cooperation, and the transformation of knowledge.

Furthermore, along with my ontology and epistemology, my ethical considerations and positionality when conducting research now stand transformed (see chapter 2). As with my ontology and epistemology, they are no-longer merely the external, prescriptive considerations set down by the academy. In terms of my ethical considerations, once again, a new, more expansive dimension has been reached, in which the agency of self is visible through a deeper, empathetic appreciation of the interpersonal and intrapersonal, in which all aspects of those partaking in research must be seen, acknowledged, and given due regard.

Meanwhile, with regard to my positionality, as already stated in chapter 2, I had previously understood cognitively my sociocultural and educational roles, but like pieces of a jigsaw, not yet pieced together, I had not framed them within my own worldview and constructions. I believe this led to the purely cognitive perceptions of myself, first as an outsider, and then as an inbetweener, that failed to appreciate the perspectives of my participants and the reality of my situatedness. However, by the conclusion of cycle 2, with the shift in my ontology and epistemology, I could no-longer sustain a predominantly external viewpoint of my positionality that was simply set in a sociocultural historic and traditional past. Instead, I recognised a dynamic fluidity located in present, living experiences, and their multidimensional relational exchanges

across cultures and systems. In other words, my perception of my positionality within research was transformed from one that solely acknowledged my sociocultural and educational identities and roles, to one that now owns the fluid, subjective, and contextual aspects that, in my opinion, are the skeletons of all research.

6.3 The overarching methodological framework: Action Research

At the same time, the study of how researchers accomplish their identity development through Action Research has attracted little interest from researchers. Action Research can be defined as a spiral or cycle of movements between practitioners' action and research (Burns 1999; McNiff and Whitehead 2009). Whereas the action refers to interventions into existing practice in a particular social context (e.g., classroom and school) to bring about understanding, improvement, and change, the research involves the systematic reflection and analysis of the change (Burns 2010); and it is this systematic reflection that is significant in the development of researcher identity because as it contributes to the 'independent professionalism' (Noffke 1997) of teachers, they develop their teaching practice and competency, and ultimately expand and enrich their identities (Meyers and Rust 2003; Noffke 1997). Ideally, these are achieved in relational circumstances with teacher-researchers conducting Action Research studies collaboratively.

In choosing to use it as the framework for my enquiry, the following considerations were my primary reasons. Firstly, it is viewed as a significant form of research into practice. ‘Action research involves action and is based on practice’, so it is ‘a form of enquiry that enables practitioners everywhere to investigate and evaluate their work' (McNiff and Whitehead 2006, p.7). Secondly, it is undertaken in the workplace by a range of professional people, such as teachers, hospital workers or managers (Orton 1993). In other words, professionals use it to undertake research in a specific workplace with those working there. Thirdly, it is a problem-centred form of research beginning with a problem in the practice of a person or a group of people which, in its undertaking, can take on a variety of forms and be an individual or collaborative enterprise (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993). Combining these insights, I appreciated that its focus was upon real problems arising in actual situations (Orton 1993). Equally, I understood that the practitioner conducting the research is expected to be the agent who applies the existing knowledge to different contexts systematically.

Meanwhile, based on Clark's (1993, cited in Edge 2001, p.5) explanation that 'our individual responsibility is not to attempt to impose large-scale change, but to act in our everyday exchange', in responding to my research questions, my original intention was to develop my own practical theories of practice through a cyclical process of reflection and action, during which I would address challenges within my work situation and seek to improve my practice, with the hope that this would influence the practice of my colleagues as well. Additionally, aware of Lewin's (1948) promotion for conducting Action Research in everyday practice as the principal methodology through which to integrate social science and practice, I aimed to create a 'community of researchers' with my colleagues and expand the boundaries of our epistemologies. As a means of enhancing our research competences, and improving our research skills, Action Research was undeniably the most appropriate methodology available to my study. Furthermore, when in the second cycle of my Action Research project, I was forced to revise the aims of my research, bringing to the fore the objectives of helping myself to critically reflect on my research practice and generate new knowledge of my identity as a researcher, the Action Research framework continued to support and sustain my progress.

Additionally, in the case of this thesis, perhaps the primary advantage of using an Action Research methodology was that it takes place in natural settings, such as the classroom, workshops, and research centres. In my research, I initially planned to situate my study within my home university. However, with the change in focus from a relational to an introspective one, in which the story of the research became the story researched as I sought to explore the development of my researcher identity, the scope of the setting broadened to encompass the two socio-cultural environments in which my identity was being forged.

Also, another significant advantage of using Action Research as my methodological framework, was my awareness that most qualitative methods can be used within its remit. Therefore, I used methods, such as reflective diaries, semi-structured interviews, whole group meetings, and collaborative enquiry as the means of gaining data. More specifically, prompted by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestion of their suitability to Action Research, the qualitative data I collated were predominantly sourced from informal and unstructured discussions, participants' reflective logs, and reviews of my

own paperwork. Moreover, in cycle 2 of my research action plan, when my original research project collapsed, I was able to draw upon yet another qualitative method, that of autoethnographic narrative.

In so doing, the project in a revised form continued into cycle 3. The reflective, problem-solving nature of Action Research transformed the conclusion of cycle 2 from the end-point it would have been with many other methodologies, into a pivotal one in both how the study was presented and what it ultimately contained. More specifically, the implosion of cycle 2, and the subsequent adoption of autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry, led to the research question being refined to address what lay behind my motivation to undertake research in the first place. In other words, it shifted me to explore how I had constructed my researcher identity while learning and applying Action Research methodology, and forced me to confront my constructions of what constituted knowledge worthy of academic study. Thus, ultimately, the use of qualitative methods within an Action Research framework helped me to contribute to knowledge a first-hand account of how one international student, straddling two dissimilar cultures, formulated a research identity that had at its core a transformed epistemology of what constructs knowledge.

In addition, while teacher-researchers perform Action Research projects, either in ‘a community of practice' or independently, they inevitably encounter practical difficulties as I did. However, these, more commonly, are insufficient resources, lack of research knowledge and skills, institutional restrictions, and cultural and educational disagreement. When these problems cannot be resolved, some people lose confidence and some people's motivation is damaged (McLaughlin and Black-Hawkins 2004). On the contrary, there are people who enjoy being challenged, and are determined to overcome the difficulties they meet. To do so, they may make systematic changes to their practice, and this may impact on the construction of their teacher-researcher identity. Indeed, the positive impact of Action Research on the increase in researcher knowledge and improvement in practice has been confirmed (McKay 1992). Yet, simultaneously, the study of how researchers accomplish their identity development through Action Research remains under-investigated. Therefore, my study now fills this gap by focusing on how my Action Research study facilitated the evolving process of my researcher identity construction.

In doing so, I propose that my study also powerfully illuminates alignment between the development of a holistic and authentic researcher identity, and Action Research methodology, in which solutions to problems are the essence of successful research, rather than significant findings of unchallenged, smooth studies. In other words, Action Research readily and appropriately lends itself to researchers who can muster the inner resolve to meet both failure and success with dedication and commitment to their craft.

6.4 A transformative method: autoethnographic narrative

With the shift in focus in cycle 3 came the adoption of a new method into my research. While maintaining Action Research as the framework for my project, I turned to autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry into how my researcher identity had developed, and along with it, how my epistemology had been transformed. This meant that all the data collected in the previous cycles provided the foundation and insights for the final stages of my research, while imparting a fresh richness and poignancy to this data that made it, in my opinion, more powerful and of greater significance. It now included my personal experiences, used to explore how I, as an individual, had been trying to understand my status as a teacher and a researcher within the wider sociocultural roles I held.

For this shift to occur, Akerland's (2008) viewpoint of researcher development was drawn upon but refined through the use of autoethnographic narrative. Given, as Mantai (2017) stated, that knowledge about the types and nature of experiences conducive to researcher identity in the PhD process is limited, and that existing research recognizes that scholarly development takes place in multiple processes, which are diverse in nature and usually happen in traditional and non-traditional sites of learning (Barnacle and Mewburn 2010; McAlpine 2012), it was clear to me that the study of how experiences and emotions on the doctoral journey construct researcher identity are worthy of investigation, and an autoethnographic narrative seemed the most appropriate method for such an enquiry.

Moreover, while learning to do research and becoming a researcher is a critical element for doctoral education, the identity of the researcher and how significantly their feelings and experiences impact their viewpoints of research, is usually ignored

(Hazen 2000). Although the literature has witnessed more interests in the study of the interrelations between research and personal experiences and stories, as written up by anthropologists, educationalists, and sociologists (Coate 1999; Cheung 2000), there has been little focus on autoethnographic research examining the actual process experienced by the individual researcher. This less investigated area is especially marked when considering those who have been educated and trained to be researchers through the process of living and studying in two different cultures. Hence, I was aware that such stories were waiting to be told and heard, and have in this thesis provided an original example of how this can be done. Furthermore, the interaction between reading, reflection, and writing was heightened when I adopted autoethnographic narrative in cycle 3 of my project, because it provided me with an opportunity to look more profoundly at the interplay between the development of my researcher identity, and the challenges of my research through the spectrum of two diverse cultural lenses.

Cummins (1998) notes that direct interaction with a second language and its culture can trample one's original identity and worldview, because the experience can be ‘deeply uprooting’ and ‘self-transforming’ (Casanave and Schecter 1997, p.58). As a female, Chinese, international student, I found it challenging to negotiate my identity in a different context, both culturally and educationally. As Confucianism is the predominant philosophy of Chinese cultural traditions (Tan 2017), it framed my social expectations and cultural values. For example, in keeping with my Confucian education, I make great efforts to create harmony, because it is considered the aim of human interaction (Deng 2011). Also, influenced by the Confucianism tenet to respect authority, I was able to adapt with ease to the norms and expectations of the dominant host culture in daily life in the UK. Nonetheless, my home culture equally presented disadvantages when I found myself studying in a different cultural environment. For example, my drive for harmony and my respect for authority made it difficult to summon up a critical mindset. Therefore, when narrating my autoethnographic story, I had to frame it within the sociocultural and academic perspectives of both my home and study environments to analyse and illuminate the struggles I underwent to develop my identity as a researcher. Moreover, in doing so, my conceptualisation of my researcher identity, and my construct of what is worthy matter for research, were transformed.

There is limited doctoral research discussing an author's narration of their identity as a researcher, although it inevitably influences the way a doctoral thesis is presented. Instead, the focus is more on the research aims, objectives, and structures (Norton and Early 2011). Yet, for me, my researcher identity did emerge as a priority, especially when the focus of my enquiry altered under the duress of collapse at the conclusion of cycle 2. At this point, it became the force that propelled my research on, and the motivation behind my decisions as to how my thesis was ultimately shaped. Indeed, the more frustration I experienced, the more I recognised how events and my developing sense of researcher identity added value and meaning to my PhD project.

As outlined previously, the content of my thesis describes two seemingly divergent directions of research within an Action Research framework. However, they are only seemingly divergent when viewed from the perspective of the explicit aims to create a 'community of researchers' with my colleagues, and expand the boundaries of our epistemologies, enhancing our research competences, and improving our research skills, that were established in the first planning stage of the project. Simultaneous to these expressed aims were a backdrop of aims that were to rise to prominence as the research progressed. These involved improving my own practice and constructing an evolving process through which I would establish a researcher identity. Hence, the first part of my thesis addresses the planning, progress and eventual breakdown of the original research project, which had set out to inform and change the research culture within my university. The second part discusses how the perspective of researcher identity is constructed and developed in the process of analysing blocks that hindered the achievement of the original aim. For that reason, in the latter half of my thesis, I was trying to find a way not only to tell my lived story and personal experiences, but also to relate these in an evocative and meaningful way to the sociocultural constructions, values, and issues that underpinned them.

The pivotal moment between the two halves of my Action Research project came when I was confronted by practical difficulties while having to travel regularly between the UK and China to collect data. It was a time filled with physical exhaustion, financial hardship, and depressing emotional states such as fear, anxiety, stress, and uncertainty. I had to profoundly reflect on the blockages I was experiencing regarding my project and my life per se. In doing so, I realized that this was the right time to

express my feelings and search for meanings for what I had done beyond and throughout the research process. Ellis and Adams (2014, p.261) noted that writing autoethnographically might move oneself 'into emotions and actions with an intensity that surprises' and Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011, p.282) described autoethnography as 'an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) to understand cultural experience (ethno)'. Hence, with reference to both of these viewpoints, I found that writing personal experiences enabled me to critically evaluate my cultural practices relevant to the aims and objectives of the research, while exploring my identity in a manner that transformed my epistemology, especially with regard to what constituted valid research approaches and the subject matter thereof. In other words, in adopting autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry, I gained 'insights into the meaning of my own life' (Denzin 1997, p.11), and coming to know my own story situated in the socio-cultural constructs that I had absorbed, I experienced a transformational sense of identity as a researcher.

Thus, by writing my autoethnographic narrative, I came to locate my lived experiences within the historical and sociocultural contexts surrounding my life. Within autoethnography, identity and experience are 'uncertain, fluid, open to interpretation, and able to be revised' (Jones, Adams and Ellis 2013, p.110). This fluidity between cultural and personal experience, for me, made the exploration of experience and knowledge a crucial, valuable, and transformative research method (Fine 2003; Gans 1999). In addition, when writing up the final drafts of my thesis, I was so powerfully influenced by it that much of the body of my thesis was predominantly written in an autoethnographic narrative style. Besides, given the pivotal shift in the direction of my Action Research project that occurred at the conclusion of cycle 2, from a relational quest to establish a 'community of research', to an introspective enquiry into the development of my researcher identity, a narrative style of writing appeared appropriate and fitting.

Still, as a final note, I must admit that I struggled with this method because it seemed even further removed from traditional social science forms of enquiry than Action Research. Indeed, I struggled even more when I started writing an autoethnographic narrative, as the terminology, complex theories, and beliefs were challenging. It was

only after I began to glimpse the transformation its use had upon my constructions of knowledge, that I began to see the value and critical importance of fully exploring this method. The awareness of the impact autoethnographic narrative was having upon me was especially acute when reflecting on my journey of constructing a researcher identity. Therefore, I now believe that more international students should be encouraged to research their practice, and its impact on their lives, using reflection in the form of an autoethnographic narrative. I believe that this would improve their practice, illuminate their standards of knowledge, and enrich their lives, infusing them with meaning.

6.5 The meaning of life: the transformed self

Whereas in the previous sections I have examined and illuminated the issues that arose while undertaking my doctoral journey, in this section, in particular, I describe in detail some of the more personal challenges that, as an international student studying in a different sociocultural environment, I simultaneously had to overcome. Once again, in doing so, I use an autoethnographic narrative style as, in my opinion, it is the method most suitable to illuminate how the self was transformed through the journey taken and the methodology chosen.

As already described, using Action Research as my methodology, I planned a series of action-reflection cycles (see chapter 2: Table 2), so that I could investigate how I could influence ideas about the nature and practice of research amongst university educators of English language, and create a 'community of research' in my university faculty. By encouraging English language educators to engage in research methodologies that would enable them to theorize and improve their professional practice, I initially aimed to create a research environment with my colleagues and expand the boundaries of our epistemologies, enhancing our research competences, and improving our research skills. Still, there was another backdrop layer of aims underpinning these that were to rise to prominence as the research progressed. These were:

- to develop and improve my own practice through a cyclical process of reflection and action, during which I would address the challenges I had lived through on the research journey. This would involve in-depth analysis and reflection on the

concepts, values, and experiences that informed my academic and professional practice as I undertook my action research cycles.

- to construct an evolving process through which I have established a researcher identity.

Many of my friends asked me why I chose to do a doctorate. It seemed to them that the most important thing for me was to find a new life partner and remarry, because I was already classified as a leftover woman (Chinese character 剩女). The term was first introduced 'in the Media by the All-China Women's Federations in the year 2007' (Fincher, 2014), and it was officially listed as one of the neologisms by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China in the same year (Li and Li, 2013). The term 'leftover woman' is used to define an 'unmarried female, usually older than one who is expected to get married' (Li and Li 2013, p.307). The leftover woman phenomenon indicates that Chinese women are pressured to marry. The finding of the survey undertaken by a popular speed-dating televised show presents that 'the majority of news articles (92.5%) focuses on leftover women's relationships and sexuality, but not so much on their career and other life skills' (Yu 2019, p.371). Collins argues that 'increasing evidence shows that a single woman faces constant stereotyping, marginalization and discrimination from the interlocking system of gender and marriage status' (2002, p.43), and Chinese single women face more pressure about marriage from their families and society (Gong, Tu, and Jiang 2015). Clearly, however, with my backdrop layer of hidden aims, I did not think that way.

I am not an ambitious woman dreaming of wealth, fame, and power. I am just an ordinary woman. When I was young, my parents were everything to me. They never pushed me or challenged me, and they just loved my siblings and me. I never had anything to prove to my parents because I never disappointed them. They never tried to control or dictate my life journey either. After I became a divorcee, my son was and is still the only entity I treasure in this world. He makes me become a brave woman but with maternal gentleness to treat people around me. At the same time, I carry

much guilt for not being in my son's life in the past several years. He has complained about my long absence from his life. Nevertheless, what I can do is to prove to my son that he can trust me, because all my efforts and sacrifice are being made for a simple but beautiful wish that he will lead a healthy, stable, and happy life after I return to China. I want to make him feel proud of me because I am a strong-minded and hard-working woman. As a middle-aged woman, I have lost so many things, youth, marriage, family, responsibility, but I am still here, fighting the battles to reach the destination.

Yet, now in the recalling and telling of these hardships and challenges, while I cannot deny the emotional wounds they carved in my psyche, I believe that the sense of researcher identity that emerged from my transformed ontological, epistemological, ethical, and positionality perspectives have enabled me to accept all the frustrations and hardships calmly with relief and trust in the transformed self. This resilience and strength come from the firm belief that, as all my efforts have already altered my worldview and mindsets, no matter how small a step I take to move forward in the future, something lasting and pervasive has begun.

Overseas life and study experiences have expanded my horizon of the outside world, transformed my ontology, epistemology, ethical perspectives, and sense of positionality both within my research and with regard to others involved in it. Equally, they have developed my sense of being an independent woman and my resilience in the face of challenge and severe hardship and here, for me, lies the fundamental value of the study – it's relevance to the lives of other international, cross-border students. In other words, the value of my study lies in a broader context for other people. I find myself asking if my story will make sense to anyone else? It is our own experiences that shape us into the person we become. I feel the excitement of the journey and the moments I need to hold for myself, but now I realize some of the energy comes from sharing the discoveries, the excitement, and ultimately the knowledge. Writing for myself and sharing will build the link to connect with others.

Morse (1992) explores in detail the idea that our research as practitioners is deciphered by ourselves; we draw our conclusions, which in turn are reviewed and considered by others. In the broader international context, the growing mobility of people, particularly professionals and international students across countries, has

contributed to cultural and educational exchange. People from varied backgrounds learn from each other through reflection upon their understanding and interpretation of the knowledge shared. Within this array of people, there will be some who are in a similar situation as I have been, and with them in mind, I contend that my study gives first hearing to a story that will resonate with them, and with their lives, ambitions, and hopes. Also, in doing so, it offers them, these other professionals, adult students, and international women researchers, a platform from where they can talk about the impact of their personal experiences within current educational contexts. Moreover, I hope this discussion now begun will lead to suggesting a new perspective on how researchers evolve. If researchers stay authentic to what they have experienced, and critically acknowledge and record their views, values, and beliefs, then the chances are that many others will be influenced by various ideas and positive attitudes that will make sense to them. They may become motivated, as I was, and start to see new and deeper meaning in their lives. For me, this has increasingly happened during the process of writing this thesis.

Thus, the further I travelled on this research journey, the more I felt myself developing ideas, creating new understanding, and finding new meaning in my life and research. I now enjoy the expanse and freedom of linking ideas and leading myself down paths of enquiry ‘less travelled’ (Frost 1915), as I learn and understand more about the nature of my research identity which as been emerging from my cross-cultural experiences of teaching and research.

6.6 Contribution to a trending phenomenon

Across the globe, doctoral theses are required to provide an original contribution to knowledge within their field of research. As previously stated, whilst my research enquiry progressed, the contribution to knowledge I had envisaged making altered. Given the opportunities and funding to study that the Chinese Government had granted me, and the supportive encouragement of my Dean, I had hoped to ‘pay back’ the investment and regard shown to me by initiating a transformation of the research culture within my home university. My original idea was that, by establishing a ‘community of research’, my colleagues’ perceptions about research would be transformed, and that this might have a domino effect, reaching beyond my home university to others within my region of China. In imagining this, I believed it could be

a significant contribution to my colleagues, my university, region, and possibly China itself.

However, as cycle 2 of my thesis outlines, this plan of action with all its intentions and hopes failed due to many factors, including the loss of endorsement by the Dean following his retirement and data so limited, that both thematic coding and analysis were impossible. Nevertheless, as cycle 3 of my thesis outlines, the collapse of my original aims became the source and substance of a new one, in which I investigated the reasons behind the failure. At the same time, I learned what I had come to understand to be the nature of research and my researcher identity, as they evolved out of my cross-cultural experiences of teaching and research.

From this, given that within China, there is an increasing need for educators professionally trained in Action Research to present their research demonstrating how they used Action Research to facilitate their teaching and researching, I believe that my research offers a unique and valuable insight into the process of analysing and resolving problems and failure within an Action Research framework. As previously stated, Wang and Zhang (2014) observed that educators and researchers in China have come to recognise that Action Research is not merely a tool with which to seek simple solutions to resolve problems in teaching, but also a profound means by which theories can be applied to improve teaching and researching. Clearly, my study identifies how complex adaptations and resolutions can transform not only the research project, but simultaneously the researcher her/himself.

Furthermore, as autoethnographic narrative was employed as my method of enquiry, my experiences were located within the wider educational and cultural contexts. From this, I was able to recognise that the relevance of my research went far beyond my own experience, to touch upon those of the increasing numbers of international students seeking academic and professional advancement away from their homelands. In realising this, I also became aware of a different contribution to knowledge that these changes made possible. This was an authentic first-hand testimony relating to the global experience of the masses of international students who have been described as ‘wandering scholars’ (The Economist 2005).

Indeed, in 2016, The Kauffman Foundation in the USA published a report regarding international STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics] students, in which they predicted that 'if the current trends continue, international students will comprise half of the U.S. science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) PhD graduates' (Han and Appelbaum 2016, p.2). Meanwhile, in the *University World News,* Maslen (2013, front page) referred to a report prepared by Dr Les Rymer for eight research driven universities in Australia, in which it was noted that 'the population of international students starting a PhD jumped from 21% in 2002 to 37% in 2011, when more than 4,000 international students joined 7,000 locals to start a PhD programme'. The situation in the UK is similar. In 2020, international students made up 20.7% of the entire student population, with 37.1% undertaking postgraduate study (Universities UK 2021).

Besides, while the global population of international students may have declined somewhat in recent years due to the Covid pandemic, with countries, such as Australia, reporting a 17% drop in international students (Australian Government 2021); and this may also be seen to be further decreased in the UK with Brexit and the loss of numbers of EU students with UCAS [Universities and Colleges Admission Service] reporting a 56% drop in 2021; neither of these may have severely impacted upon the trend for students to undertake PhD studies abroad. For example, Dr Janet Ilieva, the director of Education Insight, a UK based research consultancy, was quoted in the *University World News* as stating that both China and India had significantly large postgraduate students 'studying in the UK and these students are not covered in the UCAS figures which look at trends in undergraduate recruitment' (Mitchell 2021).

Therefore, this thesis realistically makes a contribution to the literature available on research experiences, identity, and transformative learning for current and future international PhD students. More specifically, the theme of transformation is hugely relevant for students coming from cultures in which rote styles of learning and teaching are not merely the norm but are institutionally revered. In my lived experience, this learning-teaching style often constructs knowledge as an intellectual activity to be passively absorbed, as in Freire's (1970) 'banking' model of education. Moreover, in doing so, it will undoubtedly produce students with epistemologies very different from cultures in which learning, teaching, and knowledge itself, are seen to be dynamic,

living forces, informing and transforming each other in a relational process. Invariably, exposure from one culture to another stimulates comparison between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar. Hence, this first-hand account of how I, one international student, straddled two very dissimilar cultures formulating a research identity that had at its core a transformed conceptualisation of the nature of knowledge that is worthy of enquiry, makes an original and trending contribution to knowledge and the literature in this field.

In addition, alongside the trending nature of this issue, and the underpinning themes and questions regarding how one international student constructed knowledge and her researcher identity, there is also a scholarly issue that arose out of failure. As Baptista et al. (2015) stated, 'Along with the expectation of originality, doctoral research is strongly associated with creativity, commonly as a way in which students engage in the research process'. In my opinion, there are key ideas that emerge from the creative nature of my thesis that were only made possible by Action Research's methodological approach to failure and problem-solving. Thus, from initiating change, there was a creative movement to reflection on the failure of that change, which ultimately led to an examination of research identity across diverse cultures. In doing so, there was evidence of creativity in which Action Research took on the sense of a living entity, transformed by collapse, and capable of adopting and assimilating an alternative, qualitative method in the form of autoethnographic narrative. Moreover, the creativity of this shift was illuminated by the experiences and data of the previous enquiry, providing the foundation and substance of the second. Finally, this enabled a unique, creative methodological scenario in which the story researched, as seen in cycles 1 and 2, became the story of research in cycle 3.

Pope (2005, p.11) defined creativity as:

> the capability to make, do or become something fresh and valuable with respect to others as well as ourselves, and that this process involves 'a grappling deep within the self and within one's relations with others: an attempt to wrest from the complexities and contradictions we have internalised.

Meanwhile, Baptista et al. (2015) argue that this means going 'beyond creativity in the thesis production and process, to creativity of the person' and that this 'positions

creativity as including the full realisation and expression of a person's potential'. From this argument, I believe that both originality and creativity are evidenced in my thesis through all aspects of the creative shifts undertaken. I equally assert that the ultimate transformation of my ontology, epistemology, ethical considerations, and perspective of positionality within research conform with Pope's (2005) definition and Baptista et al.'s (2015) argument. For these reasons and on these arguments, I contend that my thesis makes a valuable contribution to knowledge and literature in the field.

6.7 Limitations

The limitations of research in the qualitative field are well-documented. They include issues concerning subjectivity, generalisability, and the replication of findings. The limitations associated with qualitative research appear to increase when Action Research is the methodological framework, due to new knowledge emerging from the research process, often unpredicted as in this doctoral enquiry, rather than being the subject of an initial hypothesis, tested out through systematic investigation.

In this thesis, there is a high degree of subjectivity, especially when autoethnographic narrative is adopted as the main method of enquiry in cycle 3. This subjectivity, and the uniqueness of the narrative in which it is presented, defy generalisability, and make replication of the study impossible. Also, there is evidence of a merging of action and reflection, which is perhaps particularly striking in cycles 1 and 3. In cycle 1, the action related is historic and presented through in-depth reflection. In cycle 3, the action is that of the previous cycle viewed retrospectively, again through in-depth reflection, then communicated through autoethnographic narrative. Furthermore, while the project did not suffer from delays in the completion of cycles, it did encounter severe data collection difficulties that prevented thematic analysis and coding from taking place. Indeed, this inevitably contributed to the original enquiry arriving at a pivotal moment of collapse. This in the quantitative field, or in using a different qualitative methodological approach would, most probably, have resulted in the cessation of the study. That it continued, transformed in direction and aim, whilst seen as integral to Action Research as a methodology, and actually identifiable as a strength in this approach to research, may instead appear to those coming from a different methodological tradition as representing a lack of rigour.

Thus, while it is hard to deny these limitations per se, the standards of judgement from which they arise are not the standards of judgement upon which this thesis stands. Subjectivity in this thesis is not seen as a negative attribute. Rather, it is the illuminating force by which one person's experiences sheds light, and potentially will guide those of others. It is a voice that otherwise would not be heard and in the hearing, hopes to enable others to speak. Therefore, whether one person at a time, or a group of international students gathered to discuss the content of the thesis, its generalisability lies not in numbers, but in the inspiring of others. Equally, the merging of historic and past action with in-depth reflection, is a powerful cognitive approach for investigating what was, in order to transform what is. In the same way, the failure from which a pivotal, transformative alteration in the thesis comes about illuminates knowledge as a living, dynamic, and transformative force. The rigour that demands rigid adherence to establish forms and formats may not be able to support such a construction of knowledge.

Ultimately, the standards of judgement upon which this thesis stands, and which I believe enable it to step outside the boundaries of its limitations, are those of authenticity; relevance and transferability to others through the illumination of wider cross-cultural issues for international students; meticulousness and candour in accounts of external events and internal reflections; and determined dedication to the advancement of Action Research methodology both within China and the world.

6.8 Implications for future research

This Action Research project has several implications for future research. First, there is building on the finding that more international students should be encouraged to research their practice and its impact on their lives, using reflection in the form of an autoethnographic narrative. As previously stated, in my opinion, this not only has the potential to improve their practice, identifying their ontologies, epistemologies, ethical and positionality perspectives, and their standards of academic judgement, but also to enrich their lives by infusing them with meaning.

Additionally, there is building on the platform this study has created. Research is a dynamic process, with multiple strands to how researchers perceive their identities (Braidotti 2013). Although autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry for

examining the process and dynamics experienced by individual researchers has not been further investigated (Coate 1999; Cheung 2000; Everton, Galton, and James 2002), writing autoethnographic narrative can transcend boundaries, and can showcast the interaction between researcher's identity and society (Spry 2001). Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) also suggested that writing narratives may help the researchers to analyse some of the significant events in their lives, to help them appreciate the research experience more, and to come to a deeper understanding of the world and society around them. More recently, research literature has emerged that offers more findings about the interrelations between research and personal experiences and stories (Brew 2010), and these stories are waiting to be heard and included in what we consider to be valid academic sources of knowledge and insight.

Then, there is my personal and professional need to address the failure of my initial enquiry. I believe with great conviction that the establishment of a 'community of research' within my home university remains an important and valuable undertaking. Therefore, given that I successfully complete my doctorate and return to China with the acknowledgement that will endow me with; and given that I have learned the necessary and vital lessons that will enable me to attempt this enterprise with greater wisdom and insight, I will commit myself to once again seeking to encourage my colleagues to collaboratively work together to further our knowledge and expertise in research, sharing and reflecting on our teaching practice and lives as teachers for professional learning. What I take forward, from this study, is the insight that building up a community is a process of generating and acknowledging shared values and beliefs that shape individual senses of belonging and acknowledgement in particular contexts. I know now that this is a process of obtaining new identities and transforming identities in a context 'where learners' previous identities are respected and leveraged in the service of acquiring new ones' (Barton and Tusting 2005, p.34). Accordingly, I now hold myself accountable, not only to undertaking this enterprise but doing so in a manner in which those who choose to become involved will be heard and respected for where they are, not where I want them to be.

Also, in terms of the UK recruitment of future international PhD students, my documented experiences might be a case worth studying by research committees. By this, I am suggesting that there is an argument for encouraging forms of evaluation of

cross-cultural projects, which include a personal dimension alongside academic and professional factors. Additionally, alongside this suggestion, my study highlights the kinds of issues that might arise for others who similarly come from a disadvantaged social position in radically different cultures, and as such, it may not only strengthen and guide others who might find themselves in a similar situation, but it may be a means of creating awareness in those responsible for the welfare and wellbeing of international, cross-cultural students across all levels of academic study. Clearly, understanding the nature of the challenges that might face individuals coming from very different backgrounds might lead to improved support mechanisms being put in place.

Finally, offering other professionals, adult students, and international students, especially women researchers, a platform from where they can talk about the impact of their personal experiences within current educational contexts, leads to a new perspective on how researchers evolve, and this needs further enquiry. Perhaps this is best undertaken in the form of case studies, in which researchers like me are encouraged to stay authentic to what they have experienced, while critically acknowledging and recording their views, values, and beliefs, ultimately coming to know and own their ontologies and epistemologies. In finding a solution to my own challenges, I became aware that I was using my own experience, as well as theory, to gain new knowledge. The learning I gained from my situation, and the battling against many internal and external adversities conscientiously, may illuminate what others may experience and might show how they can positively respond to their own experiences, but in their doing something similar, the themes, issues, and ideas contained in this thesis may be re-examined and further developed.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

My doctoral journey has come to its end. It is not the journey I envisioned making and then mapped out. Despite my attempts, I was unable to establish a 'community of research' within my home university in China, nor did I transform the research culture within my own faculty. Yet despite the appearance of failure and defeat, I believe that what was lost, and what failed to work out, are minor in comparison to what was gained, transformed, learnt, and most significantly, what now can be offered as signposts to others.

For some, the limitations of this Action Research project are considerable, and expose it to criticism. As explained throughout, cultural obstacles, administrational changes, geographical barriers and personal hardships meant that the collection of rich data, its coding and analysis were impossible to do. However, it is the metamorphosis that the research itself underwent that is the significant factor - transforming an inter-relational enquiry into an introspective one. This was an enquiry in which the causes of failure were examined against the backdrop of my evolving researcher identity and deepened understanding of the perspective I was taking. The Action Research methodology I employed enabled this with its own distinctive approach to problem-solving, including its characteristic of seeing 'failure' as a valid and normal aspect of experience that was as crucial to learning as was success. This allows an intrinsic creativity to be built into the research process in which a project, although designed and planned with great care, is permitted to find its own path through whatever it encounters. It is vital, dynamic, and living, reflecting reality as it is, not necessarily a smooth story of self, but permitting the inclusion of traumatic and painful events as valid data. In many ways, it recommends itself as being free of bias and preconceptions, because one goes where the research leads, not where the researcher thinks it should go, or wants the end product to be.

As previously stated in this thesis, international, cross-cultural doctoral study is set to grow in future years, as an increasing number of students from developing countries seek academic advancement outside their homelands. International communication in

science and technology, economy, culture, education, and research will become more essential for people worldwide wishing to engage in various forms of international development. There will be more people like me traveling overseas to study and to communicate with the outside world. My thesis presents one unique story, one particular voice, but it is a story and a voice that signposts the ups and downs of my research journey. It illuminates the darkness of failure with the hope of an emerging, satisfying sense of a holistic researcher identity, born from transformed constructs of the very nature of what constitutes research and knowledge.

In conclusion, I have been able to answer the question of what is a researcher, and I have reached an understanding about the evolution of researcher identity. Now, for me, a researcher using Action Research as a methodology is not one merely conducting research, but one who allows their research to transform them. Likewise, researcher identity within Action Research is not, for me now, simply made up of doing research and telling that story. It is an identity that holds life itself, and its problems, as the enquiry. This knowledge and understanding can be shared in order to benefit others. In other words, I have been changed by the research process itself. Standing back, observing others, reporting their views and opinions, testing their reactions and responses, and attempting to introduce them to change, is no longer my way. I have been fortunate in my doctoral journey to ‘live my life as enquiry’ (Marshall 1999) and I believe that this thesis has the innate value of inspiring others like me, international students straddling continents, cultures, languages, and ideas, to walk a similar path. Their stories are waiting to be told and studied, and it is my hope that that my research story might help others create their own.

Closing Reflections

This section provides further clarification in relation to questions about the precise claim to knowledge contribution of my study, the central theme of the transformation of my researcher identity, the interrelationship between methods and methodology, and data analysis. A particular focus is given on autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry in the third action research cycle, which makes my study a worthy investigation into how autoethnographic approach can be integrated into an Action Research study. An explanation of interrogation and integration techniques is also offered so that an analysis of the evolution of my researcher identity and transformed construction of knowledge as the result of the development of my ontological and epistemological perspectives is presented in a summative way.

1. Methodology: process of collecting and analysing personal experience as data sources in the third action research cycle

In autoethnography, it is the researcher's own life that provides the main sources of data. This can come from many sources. The data that I collected in cycle 3 were predominantly reflective journaling, which is an established form of data collection for autoethnographic narrative. These data included the lived experience of my doctoral journey, the academic reading I had absorbed, and the academic research I undertook in the previous cycles. They were the foundations of the research.

Throughout my research, I was engaging in a critical analysis of the literature to enable me to shine a light on my experiences and to help make sense of what I was learning. In this respect, the academic literature was both a source of data, and contributed to an analysis of the data. My reflective accounts included self-reflective data, in which I journaled about my experiences and perceptions of those experiences. They included my thoughts, feelings, and memories about what had happened to me (see Appendix 6).

In the writing up of my autoethnography, I recorded major events in my life that were relevant to the focus of my research. This involved me in a form of cultural self-discovery, as I became aware of issues that were specifically significant to me, while

I was attempting to research across two cultures. It was a form of cultural self-discovery, and my aim was to explain the importance of them both for my life and my research. Autoethnography provides the means by which one's life becomes one's research.

The important element that differentiates autoethnography from autobiography is that, although I am researching myself and my own experience, it is not just personal, but it is locating that experience within the wider educational, social, and cultural contexts in which I am living and researching – there is no separation between the two. I am exploring the relationship between the two, and in my case across two cultures and languages. These linguistic nuances can be significant for a researcher.

There is the danger that, in exploring these issues, there are included some issues that appear too personal, or involve others in an ethically inappropriate way. I have had to edit my personal account quite carefully to ensure that, although I stay true to my experience, I only include data that are relevant to my goal of enabling a wider cultural understanding through the telling of my own narrative.

The strategy that I used to analyse my data can best be described as interrogation and integration. Interrogation and integration are established practices when analyzing personal experience within the field of autoethnography. In writing the autoethnographic narrative, and revisiting my previous experience from that perspective, I was telling my own story which became a source of data in itself. Story telling plays a crucial role in making meaning out of experiences, provides a rich source of data to be interrogated, and within which meaning and new knowledge and awareness can be integrated.

Interrogation, as defined in the dictionary, is a process of asking someone many questions for a long time in order to gain information. In autoethnography, it is the researcher who is continually asking questions of themselves and their own lives in relation to their educational, social, and cultural contexts. Specifically, I interrogated the data I had collated during the first two action research cycles, and revisited their significance from a new, autoethnographic lens. I also interrogated my personal lived experience, the social and educational values of my home culture; the institutional

barriers that were created that led to me from being in a situation where I had line management support, to receiving no line management support; the collapse of the initial enquiry and the reasons for this, which included the loss of management support; and the different methods of data collection that I used through the three action research cycles. The overall aim was to describe, interpret and critique the development of researcher identity whilst straddling two very different cultures.

Following this sustained process of interrogation of the data I had collated, I then focused on a process of integration. This allowed me to bring together the diverse elements of my data analysis, and present that analysis coherently, to show who I had become during the totality of the research process, aware of how I had been transformed through the process.

Most importantly, in cycle 3, through an interrogation of the enquiry I engaged in to investigate the collapse of my initial inquiry, I integrated new knowledge about my identity as a researcher, which included my academic, personal, and professional identities. Previously, I had seen these different identities as separate – in other words, I had been a 'divided self', where I compartmentalized different aspects of my life, different roles that I played. However, as a consequence of my research, and the integration that emerged from my self-interrogation, the divided selves became one. In addition to integrating my academic, personal, and professional selves, I was also integrating the sense of being both the researcher and the researched.

I was also integrating my various constructions of knowledge. Before I was aware of Action Research methodology, I had a narrow construction of knowledge as an external, stable commodity to be studied and investigated. Through the methodology of Action Research, I recognized the value of the lived experiential knowledge of a practitioner. As teaching and the classroom became the field of enquiry, professional knowledge that is living and developing became worthy of research. However, there was one field of knowledge with two strands that was not yet integrated at this stage. The field was the personal or introspective seat of knowledge. The two strands of this field were, in my experience, relational and intrapersonal. I had not previously considered this field a worthy source of knowledge or insight. I constructed that subjectivity and writing in the first person had no place in research or academic writing.

The way I had been taught to write in research was to analyse and critically state my understanding, including in narrative writing when I stood behind others keeping myself at a distance. Thus, in many ways, personal writing, whether based in the relational or introspective, became my greatest challenge when in cycle 3 autoethnographic narrative was adopted as my method of enquiry. However, through the undertaking itself, my construct of knowledge underwent a transformative integration in which knowledge, now seen as a living, evolving, dynamic construct is multifaceted, embracing academic, professional, and personal sources alike as valid sources.

Also, my integration included revisiting the data I collected during the first two action research cycles into the third cycle in which I was using autoethnography as a method. This was reflected in my analysis by maintaining a focus on my own storytelling, paying attention to both the 'told' and the 'telling' (content and structure) of my stories. In my analysis, I was respecting my own voice and focusing on the ideas and knowledge that I was aiming to convey. I was recognising that stories played a crucial role in meaning-making, and in aiding analysis of those experiences.

In doing all of this, the cumulative outcome of my data collection and analysis was the evolution of my researcher identify, and the transformation of myself and my understanding of research that was the outcome of the whole research process.

2. Claim to new knowledge: interrelationship between cross-cultural experiences, the transformed construction of knowledge and evolution of researcher identity

My exact claim to new knowledge is an articulation of how Action Research, as a methodology, allowed me to investigate an evolving sense of researcher identity across two different cultures. I have not discovered anyone else who has used Action Research to explore both the idea and the experience of an evolving researcher identity across two such diverse cultures and languages. Moreover, by using autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry in the 3rd action research cycle, I was locating my own experience within wider social, educational, and cultural contexts. This has relevance beyond my own experience, as the cross-cultural study is a trending issue involving an increasing number of international students. I establish a

theoretical and experiential understanding of what it means to develop an identity as a researcher, which may be of value to those finding themselves bridging two cultures.

Therefore, my claim for new knowledge is located in a new understanding of the influence of cross-cultural experiences as a teacher and a researcher on the formation and development of researcher identity, and the connection of this to the processes of knowledge construction and the nature of research. In this process, my idea of what is a researcher has changed. What I now consider as a researcher is not what I started out with when I began my PhD. Before I started my PhD programme, research was a one-way process, in which the researcher observes, gathers data, analyses, and explains a focus of research which exists independently of self. So, the researcher is seen to be separate from that which they are researching. This was the stance I took whilst doing my master's qualification. Although on looking back (which I finally did when engaged in my third action research cycle), my identity as a researcher was evolving, it was not something I either thought about or was aware of at the time of undertaking the study. I was a student registered for a postgraduate degree, who was committed to researching others, with my focus being on the external world. In this respect, there was no recognition of the personal and subjective dimensions of myself as a researcher. As far as I was concerned, knowledge was external and static. Knowledge consisted of data that were already in existence, were fixed, and was just waiting to be discovered. It was certainly new personal knowledge for me to understanding that knowledge was incarnated in me. In China this would certainly count as 'new knowledge', perhaps less so in the UK.

Also, at the outset of my enquiry, prior to me coming to the UK on the scholarship to study Action Research, the roles of teacher and researcher were in conflict, with each one making demands on my time and commitment that it felt impossible to meet. Again, I saw teaching and research as two separated activities, with little or no connection between the two. Now I see life very differently. I consciously understand my role as teacher and researcher to be mutually and transformatively informing. This is even more the case when I realise that I cannot separate out my personal experience, and instead, I explicitly integrate that into my narrative. Now, I view research as being inclusive of all the divided selves – the teacher, the researcher, and even the person who is both of these. In this way, the nature of the inter-relationship

between the elements of personal, academic, and professional identities are now holistically connected.

Moreover, these new views of research and researcher identity are inseparable from changes and transformations in my constructions of knowledge. To have arrived at these new views of research and researcher identity, I had to undergo changes and transformations in my ontological and epistemological perspectives. These in turn impacted on my understanding of positionality within my research and my understanding of research ethics. The divided selves could not have been incorporated, had I not come to see the meaning, value, and purpose of knowledge that was not merely external, academic, and book bound. This transformation happened in shifts that coincided with the cycles of my action research. For example, cycle 2 with its relational challenges saw a movement toward the construction of knowledge in which it had an interpersonal, living, developing nature. This movement did not come to fruition until cycle 3 when the intrapersonal was embraced and knowledge became living, evolving, and multifaceted.

Along with my constructions of knowledge, my positionality and ethical perspectives changed. My positionality within my research was no longer bound to a recognition of my social, educational, and cultural roles. My positionality altered when I brought in the interpersonal and the introspective. For example, the internal introspection of the third action research cycle enabled me to understand that my participants and I were not just our external social roles. My positionality went from being based on social roles to a personal, deeper understanding of the relationship and emotions of human beings. Therefore, from a viewpoint of positionality as social roles within research, relationships and their complexities became paramount, especially in relation to how I and my research could affect the lives of others. As this occurred, a change in my ethical perspective took place. I now hold Ellis's perspective of 'relational ethics' (2009) in which I appreciate the need to be mindful to protect anyone involved in the research whether directly or indirectly referring to them.

In my opinion, the claim is specifically related to an Action Research approach with its change and reflection orientation, as implied on pp. 154-155: 'My study now fills this gap by focusing on how my Action Research study facilitated the evolving process of

my researcher identity construction. In doing so, I propose that my study powerfully illuminates alignment between the development of a holistic and authentic researcher identity and Action Research methodology'. Action Research enabled my construction of what is traditionally considered a 'failure' to be overturned with its intrinsic focus on problem-solving. Not only have I come to appreciate the value that the collapse of an initial enquiry can have in research, refocusing the study, but the flexibility of the Action Research problem-solving nature allowed me to adopt an autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry in the last cycle of my study. I believe that this unique feature of Action Research methodology – that is, to turn the experience of an apparent obstacle of the research process into a problem to be solved - can then transform the failure into a new focus of enquiry. Being more specific, in the case of my thesis, this enabled the story of research to transform into the research story. I further believe that - through reflection and enquiry into the collapse - an outcome with greater significance for research has been achieved. As I summarized in my thesis (p.171), a researcher using Action Research as methodology is not one merely conducting research, but one who can allow their research to transform themselves, their construction of knowledge, and the research itself. There is an essential holistic union or unity among these facets of research and the researcher.

While it is true that the development of a doctoral student's identity as a researcher might be something to be expected during the course of their journey through the PhD, whereby they gradually come to see themselves as researchers, generally, an acknowledgement of this, and what it means or what has contributed to it in practice is not included as an explicit element of the research. In addition, coming to see oneself as a researcher is not the same thing as coming to have a transformed construction of what researcher identity is and what one considers worthy knowledge for research. Perhaps it is more common during the journey through the doctoral study to add to and refine practical skills and techniques according to a framework provided by the university, and much less common to have one's perceptions totally challenged, overturned, and reframed.

In my opinion, the latter journey, which I would describe as authentic and leading to a holistic perspective of researcher identity and what constitutes knowledge, makes a significant contribution to those undertaking cross-cultural study and thereby

undergoing researcher identity development. I especially refer to doctoral candidates, who like me, come from cultures where education is dominantly rote learning and research. While this is required for monetary purposes, career advancement, and institutional status, it is overall limited to the reviewing of the writing of others. The new knowledge my thesis contributes to those undertaking a cross-cultural journey similar to mine is:

1) firstly, a unique articulation of an unprecedented journey relevant to theirs. In doing so, it offers a roadmap that may guide them not only to refine the skills and perspectives they brought with them, but move them through what I have come to know as the three stages of transformation that I moved through – first there was the stage of my 'thrownness' as coined by Heidegger (2011) , in which I received as Freire (1970) described the 'banking' model of knowledge. In other words, I was invested with the external, static, book-bound knowledge of my society and culture.

2) The second stage, I would describe as a stage of antithesis in which, meeting with new ideas regarding Action Research methodology, I began to experience conflict in my construction of research. This stage was extensive, stretching over several years and not meeting any resolution until the collapse of my second action research cycle. However, what could have been the end of my study, became the beginning of the third stage.

3) The third stage was the one at which a synthesis took place. This synthesis of ideas, cultures, and even the divided selves I was experiencing was made possible because of the principle of problem-solving built into Action Research as a methodology.

This idea of stages of development in the research identity of cross-cultural students that can be transformative is at the core of the contribution my thesis makes about the influence of cross-cultural experiences on researcher identity development and coming to see yourself as a researcher with a transformed construction of what researcher identity is and what one considers worthy knowledge for research.

In my thesis, I use the term 'authentic' to describe the impact of the transformative process I underwent during my doctoral journey on my researcher identity, and how I came to express myself within my thesis. It includes not telling a smooth story of self or the research but permitting the inclusion of traumatic and painful events as data, especially factors pertaining to the collapse of my initial enquiry. As I understand and

use ‘authentic’ in my thesis, I come to own my values, resilience, constructions, writing, etc., through a synthesis of all the divided selves I was before the journey.

Also, in describing my journey as one in which my researcher development came to integrate all the divided selves, I use the term ‘holistic’. In doing so, I understand and use ‘holistic’ to describe how intimately interconnected all aspects of a researcher’s identity are and how they can only be truly understood, owned, or explained in reference to each other.

3. Significance of the study: impacts of the unique personal journey on the trending issue of cross-cultural research for international students

I argue that the study has wider significance beyond my own experience and learning, for three major reasons.

Firstly, in relation to the methodology I employed. I have demonstrated, in a way not previously done as a research study, how the process of Action Research can lead to new knowledge, through a discovery of an evolving sense of research identity as a result of cross-cultural experiences. My study has provided evidence that Action Research is not only a methodological way of conducting the research, but it is also a means of allowing the process of research to transform the researcher in ways that can be explicitly demonstrated and explained.

Secondly, it has stepped outside the subjective and personal limitations in its authenticity. Therefore, it has relevance and transferability to others. Cross-cultural study is a trending issue involving an increasing number of international students. I located my personal experiences within a wider educational and socio-cultural context in ways that are not unique to me. I believe that the kind of issues that happened to me could happen to any researcher. Through the illumination of wider cross-cultural issues to international students, my study goes far beyond just one’s personal experience, so that they have cross-cultural relevance. Of course, the nature of the personal experience may be different but, using Action Research as a methodology, and showing the interrelationship between personal experiences, and the wider educational, social and cultural contexts in which those experiences are located, and the kinds of issues that might arise as a consequence of living and researching across

two different cultures, allowed me to offer a process of data collection and analysis that has not been offered in any other research study.

Finally, my study offers a roadmap to other international students. They can clearly see the entirety of my experience, so that they can navigate themselves through the research while straddling two contrasting cultures. This roadmap has the potential to guide others to formulate a researcher identity that has at its core a transformed epistemology of the construction of knowledge. It could be said that I have role-modelled a way to achieve this; the journey they take will be different, but it still has the potential to show how a transformation of self, knowledge, and sense of researcher identity is possible, and offers others a way to carve out their own unique journey of consciously engaging in an evolving sense of researcher identity.

What I experienced during my research when my line manager resigned, and I was not able to gather sufficient data to achieve my original research aim, was a personal and professional crisis. I do not feel that a crisis of that nature is unique to me. Others also face and will face blocks in their research, and they will not be able to achieve what they set out to achieve. What I was able to show is that, when using Action Research, instead of that being seen as the end of research, it can in fact be transformed into a learning process, which stimulates a new focus for the research. In this instance, writing an autoethnographic narrative as my third action research cycle allowed me to explore my own individual research experiences, but locate them within the wider educational, social, and cultural contexts in which I was undertaking my research in order to enhance my understanding of what was happening. Through writing the thesis, I realised a desire to find answers for myself. In reflecting on my research journey, I have discovered a voice and energy to transform and share my learning. I believe that my research has social values relevant to others and offers a roadmap to other people straddling two cultures, facing similar challenges in their research.

The autoethnographic narrative includes personal and subjective information, so there were many personal obstacles to overcome. Both the breakdown of the original research design and the hope of becoming a researcher have nurtured confidence, inner strength, and hopefully greater wisdom. In the last decade, and particularly over

the past five years since I started my doctoral studies, my understanding of research has transformed, my attitudes about the role of adversity in life has become positive, and through facing up to that adversity and refusing to give way to it, my life prospects are revitalized with hope, and a sense of a deeper meaning of life. The learning I gained from my situation, from battling against many internal and external adversities conscientiously, may illuminate what others may experience, and how they might positively respond to that experience. Victor Frankl's (1964) account of his time in concentration camp achieved that for me – just reading his account, and the development of his theoretical ideas concerning logotherapy provided me with the hope and means of seeing how I could move forward. It is my hope and belief that researching my experience and learning can offer the same to others, such that they can build on what I have produced as they too, as with Judi Marshall (1999), and with myself, see and approach 'Life as Inquiry'.

Autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry can enable a researcher to analyse the different realities experienced, so telling my story and writing a narrative helped me understand the world and society around me and gave me hope to appreciate the development of my researcher identity across two contrasting cultures. Researcher identity has become an identity that holds life itself and its challenges as part of the enquiry. In seeking that transformation, I have also altered my ontological, epistemological perspectives and I have come to a different research identity through cross-cultural aspects. This knowledge and understanding are especially useful for people coming from diverse cultures.

4. Researcher identity: transformed perspectives of ontology and epistemology

The significance of autoethnography as a method of enquiry has impacted my sense of researcher identity in the action research process. Autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry allowed me to see myself as both a researcher and the researched. My construction of researcher identity has been transformed. That was highlighted for me as I discovered that my identity of researcher was different from the beginning. I have seen it differently in the UK and in China. That let me see where the idea of researcher evolves in two different cultures. In cycle 1 & 2, I was doing the traditional research, in which I was examining others. By the time I got to cycle 3, I used autoethnography as a method to investigate myself, everything has altered. I was not

only the researcher but also the participant in the study. I see my action research process as three connected but separated coaches of the train.

The first coach is action research cycle one. In that coach, I reflected on where I was, and investigated the educational and cultural background which provided the historical context for the creation of my doctoral research question. My data were reflective accounts of my experiences that led me to register for a PhD, and the learning I had gained about Action Research along the way. Prior to discovering Action Research, my identity had been as a teacher. My sense of myself as a researcher was underdeveloped. Through engaging with the action research process, and being inspired by it, I was – with the encouragement of my Dean who supported me throughout – motivated to inspire my colleagues to engage in new forms of research, by transforming the research culture of my home university. This decision led me into action research cycle 2.

The second action research cycle is represented by the 2nd coach, in which Action Research opened my mind and practice, and became the rich source of my research. However, I was unable to gain sufficient data, partly because of the cultural anxiety that my participants experienced, which meant they did not allow me to record their interviews. In addition, my Dean left, so there was no longer support for involving my colleagues in the research study.

As a result of lacking convincing data, I moved into the 3rd coach, with the initial aim of gaining and analysing data as to what had created the difficulties. I was introduced to autoethnography as a method, realising that my personal experience – located within the wider educational, social, and cultural contexts in which that experience was located - was a relevant source of data, I found that my idea of what was a researcher was evolving. So, in this third coach, the idea of research, and a sense of myself as researcher, were integrated. My research then began to include a process of researcher identity integration.

Thus, over the timescale of my whole research study, I moved through three different notions of researcher identity in the three different action research cycles. In so doing,

I was able to demonstrate how an action research process did for me – and can for others – contribute to an evolving sense of researcher identity.

Ontology and epistemology are integral dimensions of the construction of knowledge. The construction of knowledge for me has become a living dynamic force, which is inclusive of the personal alongside the academic, and the professional, including the intrapersonal, the social, and interpersonal.

Before I was introduced to Action Research, my knowledge about the external world was rooted in my sociocultural perceptions. My mindset about the world was very much influenced by Chinese culture. My epistemological construct of knowledge was all about the external world and it was static and professionally bound. I did not have much sense of being a researcher, so I viewed myself simply as a teacher. There was tension between teaching and research, and teaching was my primary task.

In cycle 1 & 2, my ontological perspective had the feature of having a relational dynamic because I was examining my experiences situated within interpersonal bonds and structures with others, such as my participants and the institution. My epistemological construct of knowledge was not only about the external world but also about me and my participants. At this stage, teaching and researching intertwined, and I was investigating the relationship between them as a researcher.

In cycle 3, I experienced profound changes, and I gained a new understanding of the nature of knowledge. My ontological construct was influenced by the integration of sociocultural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal factors. My dynamic inner world spoke for the first time, and I began to become the owner of this knowledge, rather than have knowledge transmitted to me by others. My epistemological construct of knowledge became that of a living, evolving and multifaceted. I integrated my various ideas of knowledge, and my identities as both a researcher and participant became one, allowing me to embrace my academic, personal, and professional identities.

As my ontology and epistemology changed, my positionality changed. My positionality within my research was no longer bound to a recognition of my social, educational, and cultural roles. My positionality altered when I introduced introspection. My

positionality went from seeing only external social roles as significant to acquiring a deeper understanding of the relationship and emotions as human beings when I bring in interpersonal and intrapersonal factors into the research.

My colleagues are definitely experiencing the same challenges as I did ten years ago, such as a culture driven to produce research for promotion, monetary pursuit, or mere survival within an institution. Within a system where authoritarian management is in control of teaching and research activities, my own experience suggests that it is indeed essential to have the senior management of my faculty supportive of me if I am to effect change in my university.

However, although that support is not currently present, I will not give up. My current Dean does not know me well, nor know much about what I have learned whilst in the UK. Over the next few months, my aim will be to develop a good relationship with her and hope to share with her what I feel would be the advantages of expanding our understanding of research in our university. As part of my own developing research, I will seek to influence her views, and request her support to re- form a community of researchers in my faculty. My colleagues were expressing interest in being involved when the in necessary line management support was in place, and they were allocated time to do so. Perhaps this situation can be recreated with my current Dean. With this in mind, I will continue to research my own practice and work towards eventually achieving my research aim within my own university.

Furthermore, what I have mainly learned from cycle 2 that would encourage me to continue to form a community of researchers in my own faculty in China is the importance of the relational factors of researching with colleagues. Before, I saw the research ideas and constructs I brought from another culture as the defining aspect of our relationships. Now, I know the value of our shared lived experiences, shared constructs, common and agreed values, and emotional commitment to common goals.

5. Methods: interrogation and integration techniques applied for data analysis

My thesis investigates the ways in which Action Research as the overarching methodology contributes to an evolving sense of researcher identity across two

different cultures. There are three action research cycles, and varied methods are used in each of them for data analysis.

Action research cycle 1 was a reflective account on my journey to PhD level through my study of Action Research. I used reflective practice as the method and analysed the data, which examined the historical and educational background prior to my early study of Action Research, new learning of 'collaborative enquiry' during my scholarship year in the UK and my expanded knowledge of Action Research as a result of gaining a master's degree with a distinction. With the support and encouragement of my Dean of Education, I made the decision to transform the research culture in my home university by using the knowledge I had gained on Action Research to develop a 'community of research'. That became the initial drive for me to set my research aim, and I was motivated to become a researcher, although there was tension between teaching and research. Action Research encouraged me to carry that sense of identify and took me to start action research cycle 2.

During the second action research cycle, practice became the rich source of my research because Action Research kept opening my mind. As traditional research, I applied Action Research methodological approach with an aim to transform the research culture in my home university. Methods of enquiry I used at this stage were individual interviews, paired interviews, group meetings, reflective diaries, and collaborative enquiry. The date analysed included my written notes from interviews and group discussions, accounts of restrictive institutional issues, reflective notes on issues impacting on research (see Appendix 6), and very limited email exchange with my participants. Because of the cultural anxieties, my participants did not allow me to record the interviews, so I was not able to get enough data. Also, the resignation of the Dean led to my losing support to continue the process. However, at this stage, I began to view myself as researcher and my attitudes towards research grew different. As a consequence of not gathering sufficient data to warrant a PhD, my focus was directed to find out what had caused the block. Then, I moved into the third action research cycle to find out how the culmination of my past experience had impacted upon the development of my researcher identity.

Therefore, in the third action research cycle, I was introduced to autoethnography. That gave me permission to explore my experience as a means of gaining knowledge.

Autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry took me to the area of what research is and who I am as a researcher. I began to investigate the significance of my own personal experience within a wider, social, political, educational, and cultural context. As well-established form within the field of autoethnography, interrogation and integration were the methods I used in cycle 3 for data analysis.

The words ‘interrogation’ and ‘integration’ have been intertwined into autoethnographic narrative. While ‘interrogation’ has been associated with power and resisting oppression (Hepworth Clarke 2018; Calafell and Moreman 2009; Jones 2005; Warren 2001; Denzin 1997), ‘integration’ has been seen as the drawing together of ideas, identities, roles, etc. For example, Bishop (2021) interrogated colonialism within the Australian academy and Wiley (2022) explored the integration of teaching and research in the contemporary classroom. In my thesis, while maintaining the established approach regarding integration, I responded to Edwards’s (2021, p.3) call for ‘self-interrogation, deep reflection, and a responsibility of integrity’ when applying interrogation as my initial strategy of analysis in cycle 3. Furthermore, from the experience of engaging both these strategies, I would argue that the integration aspect of my thesis was totally dependent upon the interrogation undertaken. In other words, there would have been no integration without the strategy of interrogation.

Previously, in my answer to viva question number 1, I named interrogation and integration as the strategies I used when analysing my personal experiences as both a researcher and participant in cycle 3. In doing so, I explained that a researcher using autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry, was continually asking questions of themselves and their own lives in relation to their educational, social, and cultural contexts. Also, I outlined the data that were interrogated. These included my personal lived experiences as recorded in my reflective journals, the data collated in the first two action research cycles, the social and educational values of my home culture, the institutional issues that underpinned my loss of management support within my home university, the collapse of my initial enquiry, and the methods I had employed throughout the three cycles of my Action Research study. Also, I stated that the overall aim was to describe, interpret, and critique the development of researcher identity whilst straddling two very different cultures. However, I did not expand on the process I called interrogation or what constituted this process. Therefore, I will now do so.

The process I call interrogation was based on an unrelenting pursuit of answers to critical questions that I asked of myself. These were raised and responded to in many ways, such as through my reflective journaling, my critical reading, and reflections on the relevant literature, through asking and responding to the questions raised by my supervisors, and through conversations with critical friends. I also interrogated the comparison between my own values, those of my colleagues in my own culture, and those of colleagues I had met in UK universities. This in itself led to conflicts and tensions primarily between my past and present constructions and ideas, arising from different aspects of my experiences and that of others both in my home and study universities. This was particularly evident in regard to the nature and content of research and what constitute knowledge worthy of research. It was also strikingly evident in how I came to question what others could describe as failure in a research study. Ultimately, from this comprehensive interrogation, a diverse range of data from many sources was compiled and investigated.

As the process of interrogation drew to a close, I turned myself to the second strategy of analysis. As outlined in the response to the viva question number 1, this allowed me to bring together the diverse elements of the data analysis undertaken during the interrogation process, and present it coherently, to show the researcher what and who I had become during the totality of the doctoral journey. In doing so, I outlined that I had integrated a new awareness of my identity as a researcher, which included my academic, professional, and personal identities, all of which I had previously seen as separate selves of a ‘divided self’, However, as a consequence of the integration that emerged from my self-interrogation, the divided selves became one. I also stated that in integrating my academic, professional, and personal selves, I was also integrating the sense of being both the researcher and the researched. Furthermore, I asserted that this process of integration included my various constructions of knowledge. My narrow construction of knowledge as an external, stable commodity to be studied and investigated had transformed into the lived experiential knowledge of a practitioner through conducting Action Research. However, that had left one more source of viable knowledge yet to be integrated. This was the personal or introspective seat of knowledge that had never been considered a worthy source of knowledge or insight. This integration occurred when Action Research methodology enabled the adoption of autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry. Therefore, in my opinion, I was

also able to claim that I had integrated autoethnographic narrative as a method of enquiry into Action Research.

Thus, as I had moved naturally from the process of interrogation to the process of integration, I consciously sought to achieve a synthesis by bringing to the surface all the conflicts, tensions, and divisions between the different ideas and cultures I had imbibed. This led to the integration of my thinking, experience, and learning in which I was the owner of what was synthesised. In other words, my constructions and ideas were no longer the product of my home cultural 'thrownness' (Heidegger 2011) or my study country's submersion – they were products born from both. This then was the end product of the process of interrogation and integration that I had used to analyse my personal experiences on my doctoral journey.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Confirmation of Ethical Approval Code

From: Esther McIntosh (E.McIntosh)
Sent: 20 July 2016 13:12
To: Jelena Erstic (J.Erstic)
Subject: RE: research proposal

Happy to approve this as Chair's action, Jelena, but please ask Jihong to add a line about right to withdraw. Approval code REF ET/20/07/16/JG.

Dr Esther McIntosh
Lecturer in Religion, Philosophy and Ethics
and Chair of Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Education and Theology
York St. John University
Lord Mayor's Walk
York YO31 7EX

'John MacMurray as a Scottish Philosopher: The Role of the University and the Means to Live Well', in G. Graham, ed., Scottish Philosophy in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (OUP, 2015)
'Issues in Feminist Public Theology', in Anita Monro and Stephen Burns, eds, Public Theology and the Challenge of Feminism (Routledge, 2015)
'Belonging without Believing: Church as Community in an Age of Digital Media' (2015) http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/journals/10.1163/15697320-12341389
'Why We Need the Arts: John MacMurray on Education and the Emotions' (2015) http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00131857.2013.866533#.VTTv7yFViko
John MacMurray's Religious Philosophy: What It Means to be a Person
http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9780754651635
Kindle edition also available

From: Jelena Erstic (J.Erstic)
Sent: 20 July 2016 11:43
To: Esther McIntosh (E.McIntosh) <E.McIntosh@yorksj.ac.uk>
Subject: research proposal

Hi Esther
Attached please find research proposal for one of our education research students. Jihong's supervisors are Joan Walton in Education and Rachel Wicaksono in the Business School.

Jihong's first review meeting was held today, and her research ethics proposal came up for discussion during the meeting. I was sent Jihong's proposal on the 6th of July but never really looked at it but it is a full proposal and needs approving by chair's action.

Hope you are well
Jelena

Ms Jelena Erstic
Research and Erasmus Mundus Social Economy Project Administrator
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www.yorksj.ac.uk/sseconference
www.yorksj.ac.uk/researchwithschools

"With the support of the Erasmus Mundus programme of the European Union" Project highly commended: UK Times Higher Education International Collaboration of the Year 2013
www.yorksj.ac.uk/socialeconomy
blog.yorksj.ac.uk/socialeconomy

For all Research related enquiries please contact: researchET@yorksj.ac.uk

Appendix 2 Letter of Invitation to the Participants

Jihong Guo
School of Education and Theology
York St John University
Lord Mayor's Walk
YO31 7EX
j.guo@yorksj.ac.uk
00447918598703

August 2016

Dear Participants,

I am a PhD candidate at the School of Education and Theology at York St John University in the UK. I am under the supervision of Dr Joan Walton and Dr Rachel Wicaksono. I have gained consent to start my data collection for my PhD project. I am delighted to invite you to participate in my research so that we will work together to explore the possibility of establishing a community of research in our faculty.

My research project is designed to identify the challenges and encourage you and other educators to research collaboratively and improve our educational practice by engaging in research methodologies more professionally and scientifically. In this process of learning and researching, we will generate knowledge that is of value to our institution, and hopefully with lessons relevant to a broader national audience.

In applying Action Research as my methodology, I will take deliberate actions and plan a series of action-reflection cycles as the framework for my thesis. Through these action-reflection cycles, I will analyse and reflect on the unique concepts, values, and experiences that inform our professional practice.

My fieldwork will take place in the summertime when I return to China for data collection. I will conduct a series of interviews with you at least three times every year. I will then analyse the information you share with me and then choose critical information for my study. Each interview will last no more than 60 minutes. The time and place will be arranged at your convivence. The interviews will be recorded by using a digital recorder upon your permission. Your participation is entirely voluntary

and anonymous, and you can withdraw any time from the research without giving any explanation.

The data will be only used in my research. I will only translate the most helpful information that I will use into English. I will also ask for your permission to use anything you will share with me.

Please feel free to contact me at j.guo@yorksj.ac.uk or on 00447918598703; if you any enquires about my research project and your participation in this study.

Thank you very much.

Yours sincerely,
Jihong Guo

Appendix 3 Consent Form

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Title of study

Transforming the research practice of English language lecturers in a Chinese university

Please read and complete this form carefully. If you are willing to participate in this study, ring the appropriate responses and sign and date the declaration at the end. If you do not understand anything and would like more information, please ask.

I have had the research satisfactorily explained to me in written form by the researcher.

YES / NO

I understand that the research will involve the completion of an electronic survey on the topic of research development issues in health librarianship.

YES / NO

I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time without having to give an explanation.

YES / NO

I understand that all information about me will be treated in strict confidence and that I will not be named in any written work arising from this study

YES / NO

I understand that any data collected will be used solely for research purposes and will be erased on completion of your research. YES / NO

I understand that the data will only be discussed within the research team.

YES / NO

I understand that survey participants and their respective organizations will not be named in subsequent write ups and material submitted for publication

YES / NO

I freely give my consent to participate in this research study and have been given a copy of this form for my own information.

Signature: ……...

Name (capital letters) ……

Date: ……

Contact details: (include address, email and telephone number)

……
……
……
……
……

Thank you for your interest in the study.

Appendix 4 Report of Findings

Section A

Factual evidence provided to identify the challenges that we face in undertaking academic research, and to analyse the reasons.

Some Facts about Our Faculty

1. Research output as a judgement to measure how qualified teachers are

2.Teachers' essential responsibility: teaching commitment & a certain amount of research work for the guaranteed improvement in teaching and professionalism

3. The reality: the research output is not as productive as it is supposed to be http://sflc.nxu.edu.cn/kxyj/kycg.htm

Issues Found (See table below- Selected Journal Article Titles)

1. lack of expertise in choosing topics: over-generalized topics such as

Study of Explicit of China Education through News in English (No. 7 in the table below)

An Analysis of *The Study of American Language Policy* by Mr Zhang xx (No. 14)

A Study of the Bible Traditions and American and British Literature (No.15)

An Analysis of Interpreter's Role in liaison interpretation (No. 10)

Analysis of Cultural Metaphor from the Perspective of Intercultural Management (No.22)

Enlightenment on English Teaching in the Primary and Secondary Schools in China through the Study of Reading and Writing Abilities in Early Years in America (No.23)

2. promotion-driven work V.S. doing research out of interest

mechanical pressure resulting in the teaching staff seeking quick success and instant benefits, such as year-end bonus and promotion of professional titles result: a distorted belief in the value of doing research.

Evidence

1.library system is imperfect: not enough resources available for the staff to use. building take a rest around a huge table during the break.

2. internet access strictly controlled: Google is blocked

The most popular search engine that Chinese people use is Baidu (http://www.baidu.com), which holds about a 70% of the share in the Chinese search engine market (assessed via http://www.chinainternetwatch.com/category/search-engine/ on 16th June 2021

3. limited data sources in English

Identification of the Challenges

1. no access to resources needed

2. no training necessary for the staff for academic research purposes

3. limited application of research methodologies

4. institutional problems, such as heavy workload, huge class-sizes, stress from assessment on professional proficiency, focus on research output rather than quality

Selected Journal Article Titles

	Title	Language
1	A study of the strategy of exporting XX Culture from a perspective of translation	Chinese
2	Psychological cognition in the conflict of nature and rationality – a study of the film Against Christ	Chinese
3	A comment on Chinese translation of *Jane Eye* by XXX	Chinese
4	A study of the subject of translation based on aesthetics theory	Chinese
5	Study of explicit of Chinese education in *News in English*	Chinese
6	Symbolism of Parrot in *Hunger Game*	Chinese
7	Study of domesticating strategy in translation	Chinese
8	Study of Egyptian myth in *Watching God*	Chinese
9	Change between image and background and sublimation of the theme in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*	Chinese
10	An analysis of interpreter's role in liaison interpretation	Chinese
11	A study of world of texts in *Zoo Story* from stylistic perspective	Chinese
12	*An analysis of The Study of American Language Policy by xxx*	Chinese
13	A study of the Bible traditions and American and British literature	Chinese
14	Pure Ethnicity in Hybridization: a returnee's quest for Chineseness in Love *in Dallen City*	Chinese
15	A study of the development of the future of *College English* in China	Chinese
16	Themes of the movie - *The Pursuit of Happiness*	Chinese
17	Multi-dimensional study of cultural metaphor	Chinese
18	Expression of tragedy colour in *Childhood Sweetheart* by Higuchi Ichiyo	Chinese
19	Stereotyped image of the Chinese and the popularity of *Pink Tears* by Zhang Ailing	Chinese
20	An analysis of the development of portraying female characters in British literature	Chinese
21	The use of metaphor in English names in Hollywood movies	Chinese
22	Analysis of Cultural Metaphor from the Perspective of Intercultural Management	Chinese

23	Enlightenment on English Teaching in the Primary and Secondary Schools in China through the Study of Reading and Writing Abilities in Early Years in America (No.23)	Chinese

Section B Summary of Group Discussion

Questions discussed

1) Where did you learn about research methods?
2) How important are research methods for you?
3) How was my project designed?
4) What do you expect from being part of this study?

Focus of the discussion

To investigate the possibilities and challenges involved in engaging in research in two different academic cultures

Phases of Research	**Theoretical Framework**
My experience as an academic in China	
My engagement with action research in China and the UK	In depth exploration of action research – how it was developing in China. It's significance in my project.
My experience of a wider approach to research in the UK	Different ideas of knowledge Priorities of researcher in China and the UK **In the UK** - need of a more in-depth knowledge of research methodologies **In China** – no systematic training to learn wider range of research methodologies
Signing up for a PhD to introduce new ideas about research into my university faculty in China, and to transform the existing research culture	Transformative learning theory
An analysis of the challenges involved in transforming the research culture in our faculty; and even in achieving the lesser aim of influencing the attitudes and practice of three colleagues.	Our difficulties in critical analysis – locating this in the wider context of Chinese philosophy and education

Findings of the discussion

- To expand knowledge of a wider approach to doing research
- To learn to apply appropriate research methods relevant
- To find out if there are possibilities to attract more colleagues to join our research community

Appendix 5 Information Sheet of Member Checking

Participant's Approval for Member Checking

Thank you so much for your help with my interviews. I'd really appreciate if you could please check the summary of your answers. It is my interpretation of what you said during the interview, so I want to make sure it represents what you said, and your opinions are voiced correctly.

Purpose of the research

The purpose of the research is to collect as much detailed data as possible, with an intention to find out practical difficulties my participants have and to analyse the challenges they face.

Focus of the research

How will I improve the practice and develop understanding with my participants in the second action research cycle?

Outcomes expected

- to create more opportunities to help my participants understand how Actin Research is used as an approach in my PhD project
- to increase both the size and quality of data to be collected for the project

Actions to be taken

1. Identifying areas of focus (February 2018)
2. Collecting data (March 2018)
3. To analyse and interpret the data (April-May 2018)
4. To reflect on action planning (May-June 2018)
5. To continue writing (June 2018 ---ongoing)

Appendix 6 Selected Reflective Diaries

1. 20th Oct 2016

When I first registered onto this PhD programme, my initial aim was to influence my colleagues' ideas and beliefs of doing research. I focused on the progress I had made in responding to my research question and Action Research. The task for me was to pursue a more focused and dedicated process of examination to enable me to reach the aim.

Although I knew that this would not be easy, I did not realize exactly how challenging the process would be. Firstly, I had not thoroughly understood what Action Research would be like in my project. One of the challenges concerning the practice in my home university is that there is confusion about what research methodology is exactly about. I need to examine the implications of this situation in the following conversation with my participants. Secondly, I assumed that the knowledge I had had would in some way be separated from my experience. I am not sure if my personal experience would be meaningful in my cultural context at home. However, I know that it is important to integrate experience and knowledge.

Experiences emerge over time. When reflecting on the decision I made to do a PhD and to challenge the research culture, I discovered that the further I could go, the more meaningful the task would be. I found myself engaged in actions that were making changes in my own perspectives.

2. 17th Nov 2016

There would be times in my everyday life when I would doubt. I sometimes become cynical. At such times, I would remind myself that my experience would make a change to my life. I have already made an important decision in my life by choosing to study in the UK, I should place trust in myself. I always asked

what gave me strength and courage. So, being true to myself would be the belief and the context which supported and nourished me. The source of faith came from my experiences and strength gained through difficult times.

My next challenge is to observe and evaluate how I have changed and how my participants would be influenced by me. I found the following information useful. I discovered it from the notebook that I used while visiting Liverpool Hope University.

1. A different way of understanding reality
2. A different way of experiencing reality
3. An evolution of consciousness

I wonder if these are useful in my project. They seem interrelated to each other.

3. 18th Dec 2016

Accepting the idea of 'change'

There are limits to the reality that people can change. I don't know what is going to be the result of the change for me, either to become better or to be worse. But I am aware that something transformational will happen to me as long as I keep going. I need to carry on life despite of the difficulties I have been through; and I must complete my doctoral study so that in the future something positive will happen to me. I believe that the "change" will be light and hope of my life in the future.

Sometimes, I **feel** that there is a power, which can help me to live a meaningful and productive life, but I do not know what that power is yet. So I feel this with a passion that I cannot describe.

- When I allow myself to be still, to internally surrender, the sensation of the Power is great; it is as though I am enveloped in a warm, loving, vibrant energy field.

How can I tell whether my experience is giving me some indication of a reality that exists to create meaning for me?

4. 10th March 2017

I find it so challenging to get specific answers from them. When I asked participant B how much time she spent doing research-related work every month, such as reading journal articles and surfing the Internet to keep updated with the latest development in the field she was interested in, she didn't answer my question. After pausing for a while, she asked me, instead, 'how much time did you spend (on research) during the time when you were teaching?' I answered: 'well, it depended on what I was doing then. If I had plans to publish articles, I would read and write more frequently, maybe one to one and a half hours every other day. If I was driven by the need for publication or for presentation at seminars or conferences, I probably did nothing'. She smiled and said, 'you see, you know everything. What I do is the same as you did. Only when it is necessary to do research-related work will I read, think, and write'. I don't think this is a satisfying conversation I am expecting. I cannot complain because what she said was true- I know what the general practice was like among my colleagues, who are in the same age group as I am. We were all challenged by the same problems such as teaching commitment, family responsibilities, and worries about career development. I need to solve the issues with the unfavourable situation in which I am treated as an insider.

5. 15th April 2017

I am reading literature about Chinese philosophical roots, to find that
the methods of traditional western science are based on the discussion of matter. I think science has been very successful in explaining how the physical world works, it has had little or no success in explaining or predicting human behaviour. So what I can use to answer the kind of questions I want to explore.

If I admit that problems can be resolved in some way, either by using western philosophy, or by Confucius explanation. I am still faced with the challenge: that is how do I best develop my understanding of those? I don't know? And following closely is the question: where do I look for my primary source of information? My own inner experience feels far more dynamic, alive, and meaningful than any observation of things I have seen or experienced. People live in the external world, being creative and productive, particularly in terms of relationships with others. How can I develop if I focus on the "self'?

That might be why my colleagues would not change their ideas easily, because they also hold that self within. Action Research is something they have never seen or done, how can I influence them?

The link between habit and meaningful change is not simply replacing one by another.

Joan had asked me to read Dewey. His theory of action is about o a *theory of experimental learning*. He claimed that humans "are capable of establishing and maintaining a dynamic, coordinated transaction with its environment". This learning is, to prove that the world becomes more differentiated, so change or transformation will never be an easy thing to do.

6. 8th May 2017

So what is action? What is Action Research?

'An experiment of finding out what the various lines of possible action are really like. It is an experiment in making various combinations of selected elements of habits and impulses, to see what the resulting action would be like if it were entered upon' .

Is this action or thinking?

We need to have ability to think, and then able to transform action into creation. IS that what Action Research is about? It is not about creation basically; it is about making improvement. However, faced with uncertainty, I am not able to get answers to fundamental questions, such as changing the culture at home university. I cannot change from outside, but can I change from inside? What is the "inside" to me?

- Are they cultural things? Personal habits? Attitudes? Beliefs?
- Am I able to make things work in practice?
- What are the standards that I can use to evaluate progress and change?

If, through Action Research as my methodology, I can only gain some understanding, but I cannot transform them into practice. That is the difficulty. It is meaningful for me to pursue a doctoral study, but what meaning can I create by doing Action Research? I need to find the connection between my action and the way of finding meaning.

7. 12th August 2017

It was a frustrating discussion going on today. My participants did not seem to show much confidence in my proposal of hosting a conference at some point, which I suggested as a way of assessing the feasibility of the project. I said: "I am looking for an opportunity to work more closely with other language teachers so that we are able to assess how the project makes an impact on our beliefs of research." The reason for such a proposal was based on a general understanding of the other three local universities. I believe that we are in the same situation as we have almost the same research resources considering geographical differences, research practice, and research culture. Now I look back at the discussion we had, and I realise that the problem was that I viewed myself as an outsider in making such a proposal, but I am not an outsider at all. Their views were already known to me and vice versa. We were in a working relationship, but it was one imbued with personal dimensions. It was also one

which brought expectations and complications I did not first envisage, although perhaps I ought to have.

8. 13th Oct 2017

I found the word individualism, and definition of learning.

* Learning is a cognitive process, and it is embedded in human action and interaction.

* Dewey offers a theory of experiential and experimental learning – It is a theory in which learning is closely related to practical problem solving.

- Dewey's views on learning is based upon a **transactional** view of the **relationship between human beings and their environments.**

"Complete knowledge may not be possible for us – that which remains shrouded in mystery may be inevitable – because, as the sceptical point of view in philosophy suggests, as we are not able to get outside of our own minds, we are not able to know what if anything exists outside of our own minds. '(Popkin 1979 Nozick 1981 pp161-171)

Thus, the contradiction emerges: Action Research is not about problem solving. Dewey's claim is about resolving problems.

So, I need to understand the context in which I develop understanding. This way I understand the world is how my knowledge is created. This has also shaped my understanding of the way in which learning is understood.

Richard Bernstein refers to a way of thinking he calls the 'Cartesian Anxiety' – the idea that there is either 'a fixed foundation for our knowledge', or we cannot escape 'the forces of darkness that envelop us with madness, with intellectual and moral chaos' (Bernstein 1983, p. 18).

Is it possible for me to relate the learning and practice?

Dewey

- “a knower who is purely individual or ‘subjective’, and whose being is wholly psychical and immaterial …and a world to be known which is purely universal or ‘objective’, and whose being is wholly mechanical and physical” can ever reach the other (Dewey 1911b, p 441).
- nature itself is understood as a ‘moving whole of interacting parts” (Dewey 1929 p. 232)
- Dewey’s self-confessed ‘Copernican turn’, in which ‘the old center was in mind’, whilst ‘the new center is indefinite interactions’ (Dewey 1929, p. 232).

Dewey starts with ‘experience’. Experience refers to the transactions of living organisms and their environments. Experience is ‘a means of penetrating continually further into the heart of nature’. (1925 p 15)

> The organism acts in accordance with its own structure, simple or complex, upon its surrounding. As a consequence, the changes produced in the environment react upon the organism and its activities. The living creature undergoes, suffers, the consequences of its own behaviour. This close connection between doing and suffering or undergoing forms what we call experience. (Dewey 1920 p. 129)

Dewey sees knowing as the mode of experience that ‘supports’ action. Knowing is concerned with grasping the *relationship* between our actions and their consequences. “Where there is the possibility of control, knowledge is the sole agency of its realisation (Dewey 1925, p.9**)**

Dewey’s claim that knowing “facilitates control of objects for purposed of non-cognitive experience”.

Differentiates between habit and meaning – that is how I was challenged.
People learn through making experiments and making mistake
Dewey talks about the intervention of *thinking*. The ability to think can transform action into positive change.

I am still very confused. I cannot fully comprehend Dewey's theory.

9. 8th Jan 2018

For a long time, I have been depressed and unhappy. I was looking for some source of power that will provide me with strength, resilience, and hope to carry on, not give up. when things were going well, there is joy and confidence. When new difficulties arise, I feel stressful. This mainly comes from my being unable to communicate well,

The conversation with the percipients cannot procced.
The talk with my son is interrupted by time difference
The chat with my parents is interrupted by poor internet connection
To adapt to the environment is not a happy experience.

The problems are that my sense of confidence has not been built-up. What explanation can I use to describe perceptions of my existence?

- the moment I was able to absorb information, *
- new book I enjoy reading
- As I grow older, it becomes easier to understanding an behaviour, beliefs, feelings and emotions.
- I gain knowledge about research methodologies and methods
- Ready to accept a set of regulations and policies
- To know how to deal with pressure
- To accept decision made even though it was wrong,

To find, they all have something to do with belief of how I live my life, including my doctoral study. The feeling of challenge and excitement seemed inevitable, but I need power and belief to force myself to be committed.

10. 17th Feb 2018

I have used Action Research methodology throughout. It provides a framework that encourages me to integrate theory and practice, reflection and experimentation. –.

- What do I need to know to enable myself to take active actions?
- What ways will lead to the success of the project?

As an interactive process in carrying on my PhD project, different parts of the Action Research process are identified. That is why three Action Research cycles are described to explain different research events, but they follow in a cyclical process taking place within my particular context. In my study, the original aim was forced to give up, but the Action Research process continued to move on, and diverted to a different cycle of action, as Elden and Chisholm (1993, p.135) suggests that the very process of visioning followed by action "enables participants to envisage a possible future they previously had not considered and then set into action to achieve it".

Although I was specifically following a personal journey of research, I assumed that the knowledge I generated would in some way be separate from my experience. As a result of my subjective experience, I would acquire a body of knowledge which would help me place my personal experience in a wider context, with the knowledge being objectively about and separate from the experience. However, what I discovered was that it became increasingly important to integrate experience and knowledge, so that the two mutually and dialogically informed each other.

11. 8th March 2018

Another unfavourable barrier that stopped the participants' active involvement was that I was encouraging them to try a new way of doing research. That was like asking them to question the ways they had been used to. In most interviews I went to great lengths to explain my ~~p~~urposes, but barely could I make them believe that adopting appropriated research methodologies was an important means of improving the quality of research.

These were also subjective blocks to accessing data, but what really mattered was how I, as an interviewer, made use of my identity to better fit a given situation, where participants were not actively involved in establishing a community of research for the mutual aim to do better research? By the time any interview started, I had explained to my participants that I was one of them in this community of research, but I had still been classified by them as whomever they viewed. My identity for most interviews was labelled as an organiser of a PhD project, I presented myself as someone who wanted to do meaningful research, but I was selectively ignorant of the existing context. That became the reason why there was a lack of trustworthiness in the meaning of establishing a community of research, because the participants believed that I was talking about an unreachable aim and leaving behind all the practical difficulties we had experienced together.

12. 15th April 2018

Working with participants who are not enthusiastically motivated is a challenge. One of the key blocks is that my participants require a considerable amount of time to well manage their time spent in teaching, looking after the family and freeing time to work with me for my PhD project. The concern of how I can work efficiently with my participants arose since I made my first field trip during the summertime in 2016. I must depend on the limited time while staying in China,

but my participants each had a lot of teaching commitment and other business to take care of. They found it really hard to work with me at regular basis. I had to depend on their availability to arrange the meetings, so it is not easy getting my participants actively engaged as much as possible.

Considering the situation, I need to either design a plan with dates deliberately arranged according to my participants' schedule. That is not an ideal solution. Realizing that this is an important stage where all possible data should be ready for the writing. Therefore, the more data is collected, the more evidence I can use to analyses the challenges that we face.

I also realized that, the ideal way of obtaining first hand evidence is to have the participants complete very personal reflective diaries, in which they describe:

- What are their motivations for joining the project?
- What makes it meaningful to my participants?
- What are their time priorities in balancing their work and research?
- How does applying appropriate methods affect research process?
- How is writing influenced by wider exposure to research methodologies?
- How possible it is to work with one of the participants to co-write a piece of writing?

However, this can be challenging because of their unwillingness to spend more time writing. It has been an existing practical difficulty as I cannot make the participants feel obliged to sacrifice their valuable time. It is meaningful if I can find out what has made my participants become less confident in exerting their contribution to the project. That can also be part of the date. Therefore, I need more evidence to articulate the influence of this on the cooperation with my participants. I tried to liaise with all my participants to encourage their trust in

the environment in which we were working, and to deliver clear message that they were included in the success of this project.

I am still worried that I may possibly run a risk of being unable to get sufficiently convincing amount of data for a PhD project. The idea of working through online community after I return to the UK can be a good gesture that I continuously need support from them.

13. 15th May 2018

One of the key blocks is that my participants require a considerable amount of time to well manage their time spent in teaching, looking after the family and freeing time to work with me for my PhD project. The concern of how I can work efficiently with my participants arose since I made my first field trip during the summertime in 2016. I must depend on the limited time while staying in China, but my participants each had a lot of teaching commitment and other business to take care of. They found it really hard to work with me at regular basis. I had to depend on their availability to arrange the meetings, so it is not easy getting my participants actively engaged as much as possible.

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14. 25th May 2018

During the period of my divorce, I was suffering from loss, loneliness, and stress of the responsible and demanding life that I had. However, I cherished my child, and was encouraged to face life with bravery and trust as I continue to do today, because I was taught to be caring, loving with responsibility for others. What would have happened, if I hadn't had these values instilled in me, could I have spiralled into depression?

I empathize with myself completely, struggling to cope. For example, English was not my first language. I became very upset, living through my isolation, problems with housing and struggling with my living expenses due to my financial situation.

By the time I travelled to the UK for the first time, I had reached some sort of equilibrium. I certainly felt that I had emerged from the years of gloom. I was learning to do Action Research which I found interesting, although I was studying and living in a foreign country.

Connolly and Clandinin, (1988, 1995) explore the relevance of a teacher's life experiences and life stories in effecting and improving practice.

> "Increasingly, as our work progressed, we came to see teacher knowledge in terms of narrative life history, as storied life compositions. These stories, these narratives of experience, are both personal, reflecting a person's life history - and social – reflecting the milieu, the contexts in which teachers life."
>
> (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995, pp.4-5)

The more I read of this research, the more it resonates with the style and form my research is progressing. I feel a deep resonance with my writing, a reflection of my journey and heartfelt understandings, a recognition of my qualities as a postgraduate researcher and of my perspective of value of life.

Appendix 7 Observation Form in An Action Research Project

Action Research Cycle 1

Classroom Observation Form

Course Title:

The Society and Culture of Major English –Speaking Countries ----- an Introduction

Instructor: XXXX Length of observation: 90 minutes

Observer: Guo Jihong Date: April 21, 2009

Subject Matter in This Session: Religion and Literature

Part 1: Organization and Management

~ Objectives for this presentation were made clear.

~ Teacher made an extremely full use of class time, prepared to conduct class confidently.

~ Presentation was well planned and organized.

~Teacher moved around the classroom with ease as interacted with students. Therefore, a warm, accepting, and open classroom atmosphere was created.

~ Teacher demonstrated enthusiasm for teaching and learning

Part 2: Instructional Delivery Method

~ Seat work:

Teacher re-seated the students, asking them to find their new seats according to name tags at the beginning of the class. Students reacted to it excitedly as if they were playing games. That to a larger extend aroused students' interest in what would be going on in the coming lesson. However, at other times, students usually sit with their friends or those familiar with, and they get easily distracted by talking with their desk mates instead of concentrating on teachers' lecture.

~ Appropriate and effective use was made of web-based resources, PowerPoint to support presentation objectives throughout the class sessions.

For example, cassette player was used as an aid to replace teacher to read a Bible story ---crucifixion. This part of presentation was made diversified and attractive. Meanwhile, students were actively involved in class activity by hearing the story carefully.

~ Note-taking:

Students spend much time taking notes, which related information easily with students and ensured that students were engaged in the learning activities planned for the class.

Part 3: Knowledge of Subject Matter

~ Teacher's mastery of subject matter was clear and thorough. He explained concept clearly. For instance, in dealing with literature knowledge, the teacher used very simple but to the point explanations to make the concept "Transcendentalism "clear to the students. I taught literature years ago, and I had much trouble in expressing the idea accurately to my students when I came across Transcendentalism as a school of literature.

~ Teacher gave "real –world "examples to illustrate concept to students with the help of pictures.

For example, students got to know what churches were like in ordinary people's lives' when the teacher showed them a picture and said:" This is the church where xxxx and I used to worship." I noticed that students were fairly interested.

Part 4: Encouragement to Engage in Critical Thinking

~ Teacher has spent an amount of time and money working out handouts with very much useful and detailed information connected with the presentation for students to use in class. The handout served as not only an efficient technical tool but also a perfect reference for those poor in listening to review out of class.

~ Ideas and information were organized clearly in form of gap-filling on handouts so that students know what to follow and what to emphasize. Gradually students learn how to focus on important issues in a systematic way like this. As second language learners, the prime difficulties for students derive first from vocabulary and then from culture itself. If teacher helps them to tackle the word problems purposely and strategically, students will get to the cultural problems easily. Hence, teacher's hard work is rewarded.

~ HOMEWORK was listed clearly on handout as assignment at the end of class. Students were required and prepared deliberately in out-of-class learning activities.

Part 5: Possible Alternatives:

As a local teacher, I teach intensive reading, which is rather a comprehensive course dealing with grammar, reading, writing, and speaking. what I usually do is to focus on students' mastery of the overall information I am required to cover according to the teaching syllabus as well as what I think important. That is different from the teacher's presentation not only because we teach quite different course but because the teaching style and strategies' we apply are varied. The teacher's class is very encouraging and informative !!And I do learn something instructive and inspiring from him.

The teacher has tried successfully to use modern techniques to reflect an awareness of efficient and creative teaching model. He is able to interact with individual student by asking questions and creates an engaging learning experience for students. The following will be some ideas I think possible for the teacher to think about so that his students will learn from him more efficiently.

(1.) Students spend too much time taking notes. They have missed a lot of important information when their attention is paid to putting down notes. To some extent, I 'm better than students in understanding because I taught

literature and the students as sophomore have not started learning literature. But in class when I did as students, trying to put down what I saw from computer screen, I found I also ignored some information the teacher had explained. Therefore, I conclude students missed more than I. I suggest the teacher cover less information in each class session.

(Of course, I know, the teacher, as a foreign teacher, is also required to follow the teaching syllabus. He has no way but to deal with quite a lot of information within a short time limitation. So, in order to settle this living contradiction, the teacher needs to think about asking for permission and cutting down the amount of information planned for class.)

(2.)This is caused as a consequence of (1.). Students had less time to get involved in discussion and digestion. Because they didn't listen actively, they concentrated on writing, instead. It will be better if the teacher encourages questions immediately after his presentation and students will reinforce their memory of the related information by participating in class.

(3.)I am shocked to see the teacher has arranged his class time so perfectly!! If he is able to leave some time each session to do some revision, students will benefit a lot more from the summary. That is to say, summarizing the major points at the end of class is necessary and helpful for students to get a better understanding of the lecture given.

(4.)If students are required to prepare the lesson and some activities beforehand, the efficiency will then be achieved through their co-operation with teacher in class. When the real lecture begins, students' already-known information will help them to understand teacher better and they just need to focus on doubts they had while preparing for the lesson. Teacher organizes students to work in small groups to share with other classmates their findings about a certain topic assigned as homework. Thus, most students will be actively involved. In order to display in front of their classmates the best they have prepared, students will be motivated to work harder than before. Step by step their creativity is built up.

(5.) *Introduction to culture* is a flexible course, so students' understandings are usually based on their point of view subjectively. Teacher needs to provide feedback that gives students direction for improvement. Very often, teacher's guided work will help him or her to discover students' misunderstandings and misconceptions. For example, a lot of Chinese students cannot tell Christianity from Catholicism, though it's a matter of common sense. When the teacher displayed pictures of churches, it's a good opportunity to ask students such questions as:' Is there any difference between Christianity and Catholicis.

Appendix 8 Institutional Requirements on Research

Institutional Requirements on Research Output

(Issued in 2018)

Categories	Items of the Requirements	Ranking of the Research Post						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Proportion (out of the total staff number)		3%	7%	12%	15%	28%	25%	10%
Comprehensive requirements	Ideological, political, and professional ethics approved Focus on theoretical knowledge in the subject matter comprehensively and systematically High attainment in academic study In-progress research projects of high academic and economic values Capability of leading important research projects at the national level and the provincial level Annual evaluations all assessed as "pass"	Mandatory criteria						
Teaching Requirements / per year	Leading 1 or more modules for undergraduate students Mentoring 1 research project by the undergraduate students Supervising undergraduates' dissertations Teaching an elective course open to all the students in the university	Required commitments						

		Number of requirements to meet						
Research Requirements / within 3 years	1) 1 honorable intellectual title at the provincial level 2) 5 first- author published articles in SCI, SSCI, EI or A& HCI journals (excluding conference paper) or 5 articles in source journals of CSSCI or 8 articles in CSCD journals or 4 research reports approved or used by the government, equal to or above provincial level or 4 articles in the Journal of Renmin University of China 3) 1 authored or first-author published book or 2 first- translator translated books 4) Leading AND completed 1 research project at the national level, or Leading 1 research project at the national level + 1 at the provincial level or Leading AND completed 2 projects at the provincial level or Joining AND completed 2 projects at the national level or Joining AND completed 3 projects at the provincial level 5) Awarded with national research bonus 6) the first patent applicant for a national project (approved and converted to use) 7) Leading projects which have obtained grants	5	4	3				

	8) Subject leader in national disciplines construction in top-class universities, or in disciplines construction of key subjects at the provincial level 9) Appointed as the president or the vice-president of the national professional associations, with achievements in other relevant subject areas or in public services							
	1) 1 honorable intellectual title at the provincial level 2) 5 first- author published articles in SCI, SSCI, EI, A& HCI journals (excluding conference paper) or 5 articles in source journals of CSSCI or 8 articles in CSCD journals or 4 research reports approved or used by the government organization equal to or above provincial level or 4 articles in the Journal of Renmin University of China 3) 1 first- author published book or 2 first- translator translated books 4) Joining AND completed 1 research project at the national level or Leading 1 research project at the provincial level or Joining AND completed 2 projects at the provincial level or Leading AND completed project at the provincial level 5) Awarded with first-class research bonus 6) the first patent applicant for a national project (approved and converted to use) 7) Leading a project with grants awarded				4	3		

	8) Leaders of other disciplines construction recognized by the university 9) Appointed as the president or the vice-president of the national professional associations, with achievements in other relevant subject areas or participation in public services							
	1) 1 first- author published articles in SCI or CSSCI, or 2 articles in CSCD journals 2) Joining AND completed 1 project at the national level or Leading AND completed 1 project at the organizational level 3) 1 published authored book or translated or co-authored book 4) Appointed as the president or the vice-president of the national professional associations, with achievements in other relevant subject areas or participation in public services						2	1
Notes	1)Published article written by the student can be counted as the teacher's achievement, as he/ she supervised the work. 2)Only the highest-level award counts in the same achievement category.							
	SCI (Science Citation Index) SSCI (Social Science Citation Index) EI (the Engineering Index) A & HCI (Art & Humanities Citation Index) CSSCI (Chinese Social Science Index) CSCD (Chinese Science Citation Database)							