

Forum / Tribune

Adult Learning and Change: An Autobiographical Portrait of a Chinese Woman in Canada

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ABSTRACT

The themes of adult learning, cross-cultural learning, and transformative learning are common to many continuing educators working at universities across Canada. In this essay, I narrate my experiences as a mature, adult learner returning to university. Following a literature review and discussion of methodology, I begin this autobiographical portrait with a description of my initial education and life experiences in China. From this foundation, I describe and interpret my cross-cultural sojourn as a graduate student in Canada.

This sojourn was both happy and sad, both empowering and disempowering. My story is one of learning—learning as an adult, learning in a cross-cultural setting, and learning that ultimately had a transfor-

RÉSUMÉ

Les thèmes de l'apprentissage des adultes, de l'apprentissage interculturel, et d'apprentissage transformatif sont communs parmi les éducateurs en éducation permanente travaillant dans les universités du Canada. Dans cette dissertation, je fais la narration de mes expériences comme apprenante adulte qui retourne à l'université. À la suite d'un survol littéraire et d'une discussion de méthodologie, je commence ce portrait autobiographique avec une description de mon éducation initiale et de mes expériences de vie en Chine. De cette fondation, je décris et interprète mon séjour interculturel comme étudiante graduée au Canada.

Ce séjour fut à la fois agréable et triste, à la fois habilitant et déshablitant. Mon histoire est une histoire

mative impact on how I view myself and my world. Through exploring my own experiences with learning and change, I hope to offer readers of the *Canadian Journal of Continuing Education* a unique opportunity for insight into personal processes that are difficult to truly understand at a theoretical level alone.

d'apprentissage – un apprentissage comme adulte, un apprentissage dans un milieu interculturel, et un apprentissage qui a eu finalement un impact transformateur sur la façon que je me perçois moi-même et que je perçois mon monde. En explorant mes propres expériences avec l'apprentissage et le changement, j'espère offrir aux lecteurs de la *Revue canadienne de l'éducation permanente* une occasion unique qui leur permettrait de percevoir comment les processus personnels sont vraiment difficiles à comprendre sur seulement un niveau théorique.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2004, I left my job as a college teacher in China to pursue a Master's degree in adult and continuing education in Canada. Although I knew that this process would be challenging, I did not know the extent of the learning and change that I would undergo as a result. Ultimately, what I learned about adult and continuing education through the explicit content of my classes was overshadowed by what I learned about adult learning and change through reflecting on my experiences as a mature Chinese woman pursuing a graduate degree in Canada.

In this article, I narrate and interpret my experience of coming to Canada as a graduate student. The practical and theoretical importance of my essay is likely clear to most *CJUCE* readers. In practical terms, students from China are becoming an important component of Canadian universities—both in terms of degree-credit students and of continuing education students served by programs in areas such as English as a Second Language and business management. In theoretical terms, issues surrounding cross-cultural and transformative learning have raised important questions for scholars and practitioners of adult and continuing education. As such, insight into the experiences of Chinese students in Canada would be useful to many readers of this journal.

The body of this article is an "auto-ethnographic narrative." It explores what adult, cross-cultural, and transformative learning actually look like from the inside. To situate my narrative in existing scholarly work, I begin by presenting a literature review and a discussion of methodology. The literature review is focused on how culture and gender shape processes of learning, specifically, how other writers have interpreted the experiences of Chinese graduate students studying in North America. The methodology section describes auto-ethnography as a particular form of qualitative narrative that is suited to the study of continuing education.

Through telling my story, I have given myself an opportunity to reflect on my life, to learn about myself, and to make my voice audible and my life visible. At the same time, I give the reader an opportunity to look at women's cross-cultural learning from a new perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although rooted in personal experience, this article reflects a growing theoretical literature on the importance of gender and culture in the understanding of continuing higher education. Feminist interpretations of educational experiences have been primarily North American (see, e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Care & Udod, 2000; Flannery, 1994; Hayes, Flannery, Brooks, Tisdell, & Hugo, 2000; Taylor & Marienau, 1995), but several studies have used such interpretations to assess the experiences of Chinese women (see, e.g., Barth, 2003; Rosen, 1992; Zhou, 2003).

Two insights from feminist literature particularly influenced my interpretation of my graduate student experience in Canada. Hayes et al. (2000) argued that "women's learning is intertwined with who we are, with our conceptions of ourselves, with our multiple identities" (p. 238). Their insight helped me understand why I experienced considerable conflict and tension while participating in graduate school. Jiao (1994) stated that "to take the standpoint as women means to recognize that women's lives differ systematically and structurally from those of men" (p. 21). Even though Chinese women have made great progress in seeking equal educational opportunities in the past two decades, women's issues are not sufficiently addressed, especially at the university level. Women are seeking continuing higher education and this influences their occupational choices, as well as their social and personal development. The current educational system has resulted in female students facing many problems. Female mature students, particularly those with roles of mother, wife, and student, struggle between the tasks of pursuing education and domestic responsibilities.

In addition to feminist literature, a number of concepts from cross-cultural literature are important to the understanding of my experiences as a Chinese

graduate student in Canada. Classic concepts such as “culture shock” (Adler, 1975; Oberg, 1960; Smalley, 1963) and “cultural adjustment” (Lysgaard, 1955; Searle & Ward, 1990) have obvious relevance to the experiences of international graduate students, as do contemporary theorists of curriculum (Aoki, 1996) and language learning (Guiora, 1998; Kramsch, 1993). Particular insights have been offered by research on the cross-cultural “sojourning” experiences of international students (Ashbury, 1991; Fretz, 1998; Fu, 1994; Klineberg & Hull, 1979). Taylor (1994) claimed that “as a sojourner travels to another culture, she often experiences a transformation . . . This transformation requires the sojourner to look at his or her world from a different point of view—a perspective of the world that is often in conflict with personal values and beliefs” (p. 155). Taylor added that “becoming interculturally competent consists of changing values, greater self-confidence, and a change of perspective” (p. 167).

My work has been most influenced by existing studies that bring together the variables of gender and culture in the study of international students in North America. A number of unpublished theses have been written about the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese graduate students in North America (see, e.g., Frank, 2000; He, 1998; Jiao, 1994; Liang, 2003; Lin, 2004; Qin, 2000; Su, 1995; Zhang, 1991; Zhu, 1996). Despite the existence of this literature, few published studies of female Chinese graduate students in Canada exist. There is little research on how female graduate students make meaning of their experience of crossing geographic, cultural, and psychological boundaries. My article builds on the insights from the existing literature and uses the form of autobiographical narrative to explore what adult, cross-cultural, and transformative learning actually look like in the first person perspective. As such, it contributes a unique case study of relevance to feminist and cross-cultural literature in continuing higher education.

METHODOLOGY

I have written this article as an auto-ethnographic narrative because I believe this method is a powerful way to study people, explore meaning, and engage readers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ellis & Brochner, 2000). The appeal of narrative methods in education was summarized by Connelly and Clandinin (1990):

The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are story-telling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the way that humans experience the world. (p. 2)

By exploring my personal cross-cultural experience through narrative methods, I invite readers to take part by interpreting my experiences and comparing them with their own.

Auto-ethnography is a particular type of narrative method that combines autobiography and ethnography (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Writing a story of yourself is autobiography. When you describe a cultural group, you are writing ethnography. When self-narrative is put into a larger social context with you, the researcher, as an insider of your own culture, it becomes auto-ethnography. Ellis and Brochner (2000) defined the term as follows:

Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (p. 733)

Auto-ethnography allows the reader (and the writer) to experience something new—to feel, to learn, to discover, to co-create (Ricci, 2003; Sariyant, 2002). It is an attempt to relive experience with readers, as each provides their own interpretation, understanding, and lens. I believe that auto-ethnography presents a unique source of evidence from which to understand human experience and is a method particularly suited to feminist and cross-cultural work. As Belenky et al. (1986) noted, writing in this form can be an important step in the developmental journey of establishing identity and recognizing the power of one's own voice.

EARLY EXPERIENCES IN CHINA

Family Life

I am a child of a worker's family. I grew up in a suburb of Shenyang, in Northeast China. I have one brother and two sisters, and I am the youngest in my family. Since they grew up during the Cultural Revolution, my brother and eldest sister did not go to college. My sister Lily, who is five years older than me, was the first member from our extended family to complete an undergraduate degree. My mother was proud of the fact that both Lily and I were hard working and excelled in the fierce competition in college entrance exams, becoming the "God Chosen," the expression for those who were lucky enough to become college students in the 1980s.

There is a good reason why my mother was so proud of Lily and me. My mother was from an old feudal family, and girls in old China, especially from rural, traditional families, usually had no access to education because

of family beliefs rather than financial considerations. Although my mother's brothers all had basic schooling, my mother received no education at all as the eldest child and daughter of her family. She was an illiterate household woman in a real sense. In contrast, my father, as the only son in his family, had the absolute privilege of education (taught by both traditional and modern teaching methods).

The expectation of success from my parents, especially from my mother, was high. I remember that whenever I reported to my mother that I was "No. 1" in my class, she would express a kind of victorious and gratified smile. I felt happy when I could make her feel proud.

I always regard my father as having the greatest influence on my life. I wish I could be as intelligent and wise as he was. He taught me genuine love and affection for family members, especially for parents, and how this feeling could be extended to others. When I was still a child, he was the first one to lead me to ponder the meaning of life as a human being. He was kind, honest, knowledgeable, and good tempered. I remember there were always people visiting our home, seeking help or advice from my father because he was reliable and always ready to help. I used to seek help from him whenever I couldn't solve math or language problems and enjoyed the times when he could teach me. He always taught me the methods of solving the problem rather than the answer itself. He seemed to always have more to teach me, even though I just wanted one question to be solved. Whenever I was anxious to know what the answer was, he remained at ease and in an unhurried manner explained why we chose this method rather than the other, always focusing on why. I couldn't quite understand his special way of educating us, but there is no denying the fact that he had a major influence on my life.

Becoming a Teacher of English

How did I turn out to be a teacher? Almost all of us remember a special teacher who taught us something we could carry throughout our lives. Thinking of the incredible power a teacher can bring to a child's life, I was lucky that I met several good teachers whom I regarded as committed and dedicated. They helped me excel at learning and motivated me in every possible way. I still remember when I first met my teacher Miss Wang. She was slender, with neatly cut short hair, and was a new teacher when she became my math and Chinese teacher in grade 4. She had all the bearings of a good teacher: caring, kindness, and intelligence all rolled into one. She inspired me to believe in myself, dared me to excel in both Chinese and math, and directed me to realize my potential. Her hard work, patience, and understanding guided me in a positive direction and moulded me into the person I became. From that time on, my personal goal in life was to be a teacher like

her, to shape minds, stretch imaginations, challenge thinking, and influence the character of children.

I began to learn English when I was still at primary school. At that time, in the early 1980s, students usually didn't start to learn English until they reached middle school. I began to learn by myself under the influence of one of my family's neighbours who was teaching himself English by listening to the radio. I was fascinated by the beautiful foreign language coming from the radio. The influence of my sister was also important. Lily was learning English for college entrance exams when it became a compulsory foreign language after the end of the Cultural Revolution. It was fascinating to turn on the television to watch the most popular foreign language program, "Follow Me," which was made in Britain. Very few foreign films or programs had been introduced to mainland China, and this English program was indeed a window on the Western world. At that time, learning English was fun to me. I still remember Lily's first gift to me—an old English-Chinese dictionary, which was so precious to me because it was rare and expensive and none of my peers had one.

It was in junior middle school that I formally started to learn English. Since I had already begun self-directed learning, I felt at ease in English class compared with those who were hearing it for the first time. I was good at it and I could win favour from the teacher easily, which gave me satisfaction. At that time, I didn't know how useful it was; I just felt great when I was the only one who could answer the teacher's question or stand in front of the class to read aloud as a model, or when I got the highest mark in a test. I felt respected and admired by my classmates.

In fact, from junior middle school to senior high school, we only used English in class or in tests. However, that didn't stop us from being enthusiastic about English, because, as most of us knew, it was one of the most important subjects on which we would be tested in the national college entrance examination. Unfortunately, English was a headache for most of my classmates, who, although they tried many means, just couldn't learn it well enough and had to give up. In the Chinese testing system, failing English tests has prevented many talented people from furthering their academic learning and has actually marginalized many talented college applicants. Maybe that is the main reason why nowadays many young parents start their children's English education at a very early age.

I became an English major in Shenyang Teachers' College in 1989, after fierce competition in college entrance exams. Although being a teacher was not always the best choice for most high school candidates, it was a good choice for me in light of my family's financial situation and my personal love of English. As a college student and an English major, I began to learn English in a more integrated way. Making progress made me feel great. I will

never forget the moment my classmates and I discovered we could speak with Americans or watch TV in English, and how I enjoyed the fact that every hour I spent got me closer to perfection.

I spent four years of college life in an amazing English world. I learned English speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. I also read original novels in English, studied British and American culture and literature, and developed translation skills. We were lucky to have foreign teachers for two years to teach us oral and written English. In order to practise our listening ability, we listened to Voice of America and BBC broadcasts on radio. We also went to some English corners or clubs to practise our oral English.

My Teaching Career

In the early 1990s, China prospered economically and one result of this was that being able to speak English became highly desirable for trade purposes, careers, study, and overseas travel. This development led to a great need for English teachers, especially at higher learning institutes, and I was very lucky to have the opportunity to teach in a college upon graduating in 1993. At that time, graduates from majors other than English were not so fortunate, because normally to teach at the college level, you needed at least a Master's degree.

It goes without saying that my job was admired by many people, but I felt both fortunate and pressured. I think I must have been very nervous in my first class, although it might not have been evident from my appearance because I always try to behave confidently. Since my students were very close to my age (only one or two years younger than me), my role was naturally expected to be more of a friend than a teacher. My first two years of teaching were very challenging, as I had to learn to be as competent and to perform as effectively as the other teachers. At the same time, as a young teacher, I needed to stay on good terms with both my students and my colleagues. In addition, because my students were prospective middle-school English teachers, the challenge of being a "teachers' teacher" was also great. Undergraduate programs in language training focused on listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Such "four-skill" training was an essential part of the curriculum, especially during the first two years, and the students' practical ability to communicate in English was emphasized.

For the most part, I taught basic-skill courses like integrative reading, extensive reading, listening, and pronunciation. During my last four years, I began to teach the more challenging advanced-level courses. However, I found that although the year-by-year repetition of teaching made me experienced and skilful at teaching techniques, it did not guarantee self-improvement in professional knowledge. I felt a strong desire to update my knowledge of English and further my education. I tried in-service continuing

education in China, but I quit quickly because it served mainly for accreditation, which was the current trend in many academic areas. I dreamed of the opportunity to go to an English-speaking country to experience and learn English, and my wish to change and to advance my teaching career by improving my English competence urged me to act. It took me nearly two years to prepare for admission to graduate school in Canada, including taking TOFEL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System) exams, and to apply for a visa.

On the day I got my visa, I felt a mixed sense of joy and worry. Like many other international students, I was not sure what this studying experience would mean to me. The thought that I had to quit my current job and leave my four-year-old daughter and my family behind made me sad and frightened. I was also uncertain as to whether I would have a smooth and rewarding learning journey.

ADULT LEARNING AND CHANGE IN CANADA

Encountering Difficulty in Academia

In my first class in Canada, I was shocked by the atmosphere. The class was like a discussion, which was totally different from my university experience in China. There was no designated textbook but rather a lot of handouts and reading materials. In class, when the professor started a topic, the students were expected to respond and participate in the discussion period. It was common for one student to cut in or to pick up the thread and lead the discussion the way he or she liked. My classmates were usually teachers or other professionals working in specialized areas, so when they discussed a certain topic, they related the content to what they knew about. The professor rarely drew conclusions about the discussion; instead, he offered a few words in response to it. The students were expected to speak up and challenge the ideas of both their professor and their classmates.

In the first term, I liked to sit in an inconspicuous place, listening to the discussion painstakingly and often becoming drowsy by the end of it. I was uncomfortable with this way of learning and was often surprised at the behaviour of my classmates. My culture and beliefs did not allow me to ask questions directly because it was considered both impolite and shameful. This difference in belief and teaching philosophy made me feel confused and troubled. I was used to the Chinese way of teaching and learning. In China, education and training traditionally involve learning from teachers, and the teacher is to be respected like a father who can order his children to do anything he thinks is right. The role of the teacher is to give knowledge to people who do not have the knowledge; the teacher talks in front of the class, and the students listen and write down what the "knowing" teacher says. I

was used to this pedagogical model and didn't know what I should do in the early months in Canada. As I now understand it, the goal of Western methodology is to promote an exchange of ideas and information between students. The ideas of participatory and collaborative learning dominate classes. Although I liked the democratic class because the teachers did not impose their ideas on their students, with my strong traditional cultural background and beliefs, I found I just couldn't fit in. Exposed to a new institution with different educational expectations, I found it hard to switch to a new student role, and I continued to rely on my previous college experiences as both student and teacher, where attending class meant professors lectured and students listened, and rote memorization and repetition were the norm.

I was not accustomed to presentation and group discussion methods in class. Sharing and discussing subject matter in a second language is demanding, and I found it difficult to read, understand, analyze, and share topics with my classmates. However, everyone was expected to make a contribution to the discussion. I felt nervous when speaking, not only because I couldn't express myself very well but also because I was worried that others would either not be interested in what I said or not understand me since they had little knowledge of Chinese culture or came from different social backgrounds. Many concerns hindered me from asking questions, actively participating in the class discussion, and giving speeches.

Cultural Differences and Language Deficiency

The language problem came to light just when I thought I had adjusted to the Western way of teaching. I had tried to convince myself that, as an English teacher, I shouldn't have the same language problems as most other Chinese students studying in North America. But the truth is that it was a problem. Although I had been well prepared for the linguistic and cultural differences, I still could not avoid culture shock when I first came to Canada. The transition from one language to another means going from one culture to another. Being a language teacher, I know clearly what learning a language means to everyone. Without embracing cultural learning, a person is unable to learn the host language in its full sense. Sometimes I found myself stuttering while communicating with my fellow Canadian students. It was not because I had inadequate proficiency, but because most of the time I couldn't follow their unfamiliar cultural references. For example, sometimes I couldn't understand their jokes, and I would sit there unmoved while they were all dying of laughter. Other times, lack of vocabulary and inadequate language skills deterred my full participation in debates or my ability to keep up with the flow of discussion. I found that the English I spoke reflected the books in use when I had learned and taught in China, but there is a difference between the English learned in China and the English actually used in

Canada. In addition, I encountered difficulty in keeping up with course readings. I often felt burdened by intensive reading assignments, which were very time consuming and challenging for me. It usually took me longer than my peers to read, understand, and digest the material. Very often, I needed to learn the vocabulary first in order to understand what I was reading.

Writing is the most challenging and intimidating act for most international Chinese students. It is not simply about choosing the correct and appropriate word to use; it's more about how to convey your ideas in a coherent, organized way. For me, like many other international students, finding proper ways to cite sources and following editorial guidelines were difficult. Back home, little if any attention is paid to citing the author's name and the page numbers of quoted material. In fact, in China, students are encouraged to recite the most beautiful expressions, sentences, or paragraphs of some famous writers and use them in their own compositions, and so I had no idea what an APA format was when I handed in my first term paper. Having not sought proofreading help for my paper beforehand and knowing nothing about citing sources caused me to receive a very low mark in my first course.

Psychological Frustration as a Female Graduate Student

As a female Chinese graduate student, I faced a number of acute obstacles, problems, and difficulties. In my perception, in addition to a sense of academic alienation (not fitting in the classroom, curriculum, and system), I had a feeling of being undervalued and confused—of having not only lost my individuality and identity but also my status as a responsible teacher in my previous teaching job in China. Similar to the experiences of other Chinese female graduate students, I suffered the pain of separation from my family, including my aged parents, my husband, and my beloved daughter. Emotions such as loneliness, homesickness, anxiety, and especially a sense of guilt added difficulty to my cross-cultural transition.

Several months after coming to Canada, I experienced a period of frustration, depression, and confusion. I couldn't express my feelings during this difficult time. I wept and buried myself in my apartment for a few days and didn't want to see anyone. At that time, I was overwhelmed by a strong sense of self-blame and guilt. As a mother, wife, and daughter, I couldn't help thinking of all the roles I should be playing but in fact was not fulfilling at that moment. I dared not put my four-year-old daughter's photo on my wall because it might make me miss her even more. I felt guilty for having left the burden of child care to my husband and for failing to perform my filial responsibility to my parents, especially my mother, who has been in poor physical health for many years. It is part of our traditional culture for children to take care of parents when they are old and in special need. Thus,

as a married graduate student studying overseas, my failure to fulfill these multiple roles caused stress in both my academic and my private life. At the same time, as an international student, I had to exert extra effort in order to keep up with the Canadian students.

As a self-sponsored student, I also suffered from financial pressure while supporting myself in Canada. Total tuition and fees for two years of graduate study plus living expenses were about \$20,000, equal to several years of income from my previous job in China. In order to lessen my financial stress, I tried many kinds of part-time jobs, including those of graduate research assistant, caregiver, berry picker, babysitter, kitchen helper, waitress, and interpreter. Because the law in Canada does not allow international students to work off campus, I had a very limited choice of low-paid casual jobs. I feel fortunate that my loss of self-esteem due to my changed status from a respectable college teacher to an unskilled, unlawful labourer did not destroy my self-confidence.

Academic Adjustment

In order to adjust to Western teaching methodology, I started to become involved in class discussions as much as possible, and gradually I came to accept the Western philosophy of teaching and learning. It took me some time to get used to the instructional pattern in Canada, which is less structured and more self-directed, permissive, and collaborative than the more authoritative and disciplined Chinese style. Over time, I came to appreciate its merits—the teachers' focus on individual learners' ability, their creativeness, and their critical thinking skills, rather than just their provision of information and knowledge. I also came to realize that collaborative learning is very useful for adult learners.

I still remember that during my first year I spent almost all my time in the library or computer lab, searching for references, reading assigned materials, looking up new words, preparing for presentations, getting ready for class discussion, and working on writing assignments. I used to spend all day at school, with two lunch boxes for the day.

Social Adjustment

Like most Chinese students, my academic stress came mainly from problems with the English language, so I devoted myself to conscious language learning. By reading extensively, I enlarged my vocabulary and although it continued to take me much longer to complete assigned readings than my Canadian classmates, gradually I was able to catch up with the professor and better understand the lectures. I also learned to ask for help, either from a

Canadian friend or directly from the instructor, in proofreading my papers, which was a particularly good learning experience for me.

After a while, I began to take every opportunity to expose myself to the English environment rather than just sitting in front of a computer or burying myself in books. In order to improve my listening and oral English, I made several Canadian friends. By frequent contact with native speakers and through casual communication, my oral English improved. Watching TV and participating in more activities were also very helpful for improving my listening and speaking skills. In my spare time, I went to church and sometimes joined in a Bible study that had been especially designed for international students. I found that actively interacting with people outside the university community was beneficial to improving my language proficiency and getting to know the Western way of life.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

I have narrated my lived experiences in both China and Canada in an auto-ethnographic style. I started by giving an account of my early experiences with my family and schooling, my initial interest in English, and how I became a college English teacher in China. I then focused on my cross-cultural experiences in Canada, experiences that included difficulties in academics, culture, and language. I also described my feelings of confusion and alienation in non-academic situations, the psychological frustrations of being a female graduate student, and my gradual process of adjustment to life and studies in Canada.

When I reflect upon my cross-cultural learning sojourn, I tend to regard it as a process of many changes. Through coming to Canada, I experienced major changes in status (from instructor to student), language (from Mandarin to English), lifestyle (from working mother to student), and pedagogical environment (from teacher-centred to learner-centred). In addition to these external changes, I believe that something changed inside of me, something subtle yet significant. Although I once believed that my changing roles were the hardest thing to accept, my learning experience in Canada helped me to understand my life more fully and deeply.

Indeed, I believe that my cross-cultural learning experience changed me in several ways. I have more confidence than before. Living alone, facing and overcoming difficulties in a foreign setting, and solving problems without the help of friends and family made me stronger. Moreover, I gained not only confidence but also an increased independence during my Canadian sojourn. As I developed the ability to speak freely in class, participating confidently in the discussion, and received the same grades as Canadians, I could see my potential. I believe that consciously encountering and strug-

gling with challenges and difficulties is a necessary part of the process of personal growth and is good for building a strong character and personality.

I didn't realize what it was really like in Canada until I came in person. In North America, you not only need to learn how to cope with the dominant Euro-centric system but also to become open to encounters with other cultural groups. As I began to understand and accept the strangeness and differences of other cultures, I found that I tended to value and appreciate my culture more than I had in the past. By doing so, I accepted my everyday life and myself too. I learned to be tolerant of those who are different from me and not to judge others through my (Chinese) values, but rather to try to understand them through their values.

As a Woman Learner: Gender and Voice in Academic Context

I have come to regard my cross-cultural learning experience as a process of continuing growth and maturation. In my case, my continuing education abroad involved a change of role from teacher in China to student in Canada. It seemed, at least to some people, that this change would involve a loss of social status and increased hardship in the learning process. However, I believed that studying for an advanced degree in a Western country would win me long-term benefits, and I regard my learning experience in Canada as something valuable and rewarding. It is not about the respect and personal status this experience will bring me in my future career or about certain knowledge or content that I learned; it's more about the challenge to my personal capability.

"Cultural norms for communication can also affect women's and men's participation in classroom talk" (Hayes et al., 2000, p. 87). In Chinese culture, keeping silent and listening respectfully are valued as much as speaking out. When I began my studies in Canada, I was always the only non-Canadian in the class. As I listened to students, both male and female, loudly asserting their opinions in class, I felt a sense of being pushed out of the discussion. I wondered if I was really incapable of intellectual conversation or if I was expecting a different form of discussion. Was this happening because of my language inadequacy or because of my gender identity (the assumption that women should be passive and dependent, while men should be assertive and independent).

In the end, I decided I would not allow myself to keep silent or lose my voice as a way of self-protection. I wanted to give an "authentic" voice, since "giving voice to ourselves is a process of identity development itself" and this "voicing of self ... may develop as we become increasingly responsive to change, to new understanding of ourselves, to overcoming the limitations

of our previous identities, and to creating new means of self-expression" (Hayes et al., 2000, p. 99).

Final Thoughts on Learning and Change

In relating my cross-cultural experience and choosing auto-ethnographic narrative as a research method, I feel that I have grown into an autonomous learner. By using this qualitative method, I hope that I have given a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of learning in cross-cultural settings than is found in previous research. Wang (2004) described pursuing graduate education in Canada as an experience of "grappling with a series of challenges to overcome language deficiency and adjust culturally and socially to a different educational system" (p. 69). In this article, I recounted that even though I had been an ESL teacher in China, I found that language difficulties were still the major challenge I confronted in my new learning setting. Meanwhile, my conflicting cultural norms for classroom behaviour and my cultural notions about what learning is and how it happens all contributed to my difficulties and uneasiness in cross-cultural learning. In a certain sense, my adjustment process was difficult and painful.

Being an international Chinese woman graduate student in a new land was an ever-changing process of self-understanding. Sojourning across the borders of culture, language, and psychology was a contradictory and challenging learning experience for me. Although I experienced cultural marginality in the host culture, I also gained knowledge through intellectual pursuits. Meanwhile, the cross-cultural experience expanded my vision of myself and the outer world. I experienced greater self-understanding and self-awareness through this cross-cultural experience.

The journey of writing down my cross-cultural experience has come to an end, but my inner sojourning is ongoing. Sometimes I still question the meaningfulness of my cross-cultural experience, but for the most part I see it as experiential and transformative learning. My hope is that this article will involve others intellectually and emotionally by helping them to share in my experiences and in the meaning that I have made of my cultural border crossing and learning.

My cultural heritage, my strong belief in hard work, and my education gave me the courage to seek a dream in another culture. As a female adult learner in a cross-cultural learning setting, I became more self-aware. I now recognize that I have changed by being more self-reflective about what I have experienced. I believe this experience has and will have an impact on my professional and personal life. I hope other students and educators read my sojourning story and are able to identify with my experiences. By facing and recognizing difficulties and challenges, fears and doubts, we become confident and self-fulfilled.

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