Understanding School Stories: A Narrative Inquiry into the Cross-generational Schooling Experiences of Six Current and Former Chinese Students

by

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This thesis research is a narrative inquiry into the cross-generational schooling experiences of six former and current students during a period of momentous social, economic, cultural and political change in China’s modern history, 1949 to the present. It focuses on students’ experience in curricular situations and how they construct and reconstruct curricular meanings. Through this work, I intend to foster a deeper understanding of knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and values about schooling revealed from students’ school experiences.

According to Dewey (1938), Schwab (1978), Connelly and Clandinin (1988), curriculum does not only refer to the content in textbooks, but includes people, things, and processes of a learning environment. I used Schwab’s (1978) four commonplaces of curriculum, student, subject matter, teacher and milieu, to explore students’ curricular experiences in relation to the general field of curriculum studies as framed by Dewey, Schwab, Connelly and Clandinin. “These [four] commonplaces combine in different ways, becoming more or less prominent, and more or less salient, in teaching and learning situations” (Conle,
2003, p. 6). Schwab’s (1978) four commonplaces of curriculum provided an avenue for exploring the curricular meanings my and my participants make of our schooling.

My participants are my parents, my nephew, an old (male) friend from school, a young female and myself. Since we all share a Chinese upbringing, our school stories were told and explored within China’s social, economic and political contexts.

Telling and retelling my and my participants’ schooling experiences and making meaning and significance from them help to convey what has been happening in our curricular situations. Our cross-generational student experiences bring a set of perspectives to explore what it means to be educated in China. By constructing and reconstructing the meaning of our schooling experiences, this study provides space for students’ school stories to be reflectively heard and examined (Olson & Craig, 2005; Richie & Wilson, 2000) in the recent change in China’s educational reforms that seek to promote quality education and engage students’ independent and critical thinking.
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Chapter 1
Why School Stories Matter:
A Personal and Theoretical Background

How I come to be interested in studying students’ schooling experiences

I am 32 this year.¹ Most of my life since age 6 has been spent in schools, first as a student, then as a teacher in an adult English language program, and as a student again in Canadian graduate schools since I came to Toronto four and half years ago. School takes so much of my life that it seems too obvious to just say that school plays an important role in my life. It is obvious that school and schooling are important, but in what ways are they important? I never bothered myself with this question, just as I seldom think about the importance of air and water. It seems that school, like air and water, is something taken-for-granted in my life. But unlike air and water which I feel and notice only when there is a lack of them, schooling has been occupying my thoughts since I took up schoolwork again, after an interval of five years of teaching, as a full-time graduate student in a foreign country.

I spent much of the time on schoolwork, partly because English is not my first language and it takes extra effort to function properly in a Canadian graduate program. Besides, to come to Canada to pursue further studies was to uproot myself from an environment where all was familiar, established and foreseeable. Going abroad to pursue further studies was a big and difficult decision for me to make. I left behind family,

¹ This chapter was first written in 2005.
friends and a well-paid, well-respected teaching job. I could not afford to be carefree in doing my graduate studies. But why did I make the decision to travel across the Pacific Ocean to be a student in a foreign land, struggling with virtually everything, from the daily routines as simple as taking a bus to finishing more than a hundred pages of the weekly reading, when I could be well-off as a non-student? What does it mean to be a student and what makes schooling so important? To try to answer this question or in the first place, to track how it came to be a question, I made another decision – to travel back to the other side of the Pacific Ocean, to the time and place that I started as a student.

**Being a student in China**

I am the youngest child in my family, with one brother and one sister. There is a big age difference between us, eleven years with my brother and eight years with my sister. Seeing my brother and sister’s schoolbags, books, pencil boxes and frequently hearing words like “school,” “classroom,” and “teachers,” the concept of school was not strange to me before I went to school myself. I always wanted to have their schoolbags, books and pencil boxes. But my mother told me that those things were not toys and promised me I would have them once I became a student.

I grew up in a small community where almost everyone worked in the same hospital. Doctors, nurses, other staff and their families all lived in several small apartment buildings in a compound. Two or three families shared one kitchen and one toilet. At that time, neighbors called me “mom’s little tail” because I followed my mom wherever she went – kitchen, bathroom (that was also the place where people hand washed their clothes), grocery stores…. I listened to her conversations with people in these places and one topic always stood out - their children’s education. How well their boys and girls did
at school, who was good at what subjects, who was a trouble maker at school, which teacher was good, etc. And in our home everyday at dinner table, my parents would check with my brother and sister on their school work, asking if they had any difficulty or needed anything. From their talk, I kind of drew a picture of school: there were rooms with desks and chairs; there was a blackboard on which only teachers could write; teachers were in charge of everything and they “decided” who was a good student and who was not. I imagined many times what a school was like and looked forward to being in a school.

I started school at the age of six and I immediately enjoyed being a student. I loved my schoolbag and the colorful pencils my sister picked for me. Being a Grade One student, I felt I was a different person. I was no longer a small child because I did not have to wear an apron every day (all kids in my preschool had to wear one). I met some of my friends in school. They were one or two years older than I and we used to play together. But after they started school, they did not play that much with me, as they had new friends from school.

At school, the first thing I learnt was discipline. My classmates and I were taught to sit up straight with our hands at our back. Talking to each other in class was prohibited. We were told to put books and pencil boxes only in certain place on the desk, but not to touch them until allowed by the teacher. To speak up in class, we had to put up a hand, with the elbow still on the desk, to get the teacher’s permission. I was excited about these new codes of behavior because they made the differences between a small child and a disciplined student! I had no problems with school and I did very well. I obeyed all the rules all the time and I had no difficulty in mastering the school material. I
finished my homework before my parents asked about it, and they soon stopped asking. My exercise books and textbooks were kept clean all the way to the end of the term. I never screamed in the hallway in school or had a fight with other students. At the end of the school year, I got full score for both Chinese and math, the only two subjects I had in Grade One. I felt good about myself.

However, all these things did not get as much attention at our dinner table as I had expected. That year (1979), all my parents’ attention was on my brother who was preparing to take the National College Entrance Exams. At that time, I did not quite understand why everyone was so obsessed with that particular exam. Yet I could just feel the stress in the air. My parents were summoned to my brother’s school once or twice every week to meet the teachers and other parents. They brought home information on various issues concerning taking the exams: how many students entered universities in the previous year; what universities they went to; how good my brother and his classmates were as compared with those students; what their chances to enter university were; the teachers’ anticipation of the difficulty level of the year’s exams; the weaker subject of each student and what parents could do to push a student to work harder and improve; where to buy more reference materials and what food parents should provide so that students could keep up their energy level, etc.

In our neighborhood, several other students were also taking the college entrance exams that year. There was a competition going on among the students and among their parents as well – which student (whose child) was the most hard-working. It was almost a shame if a student’s window became dark first at night. It would mean that the student stopped studying, turned off the table lamp and went to bed. My father used to go out at
night to check the neighbors’ windows, and it was funny that he always ran into other parents. Together with all this, I heard my parents talk about what would happen if my brother failed the exams, when he was not present. There would be no future for him. He would be lucky if he could find a job in a nearby factory. But even that would be very difficult since my parents were just two doctors without any connections to people in charge of assigning jobs.  

My parents’ worried faces stayed in my memory, and I can still see them today as I am writing now.

My brother passed the exams and in August 1979, he got admission to a prestigious university in a major city in Southern China, about two thousand kilometers from our hometown. Many people came to our place to congratulate my parents and they brought presents. People promised me that if I studied hard and followed my brother’s steps, I would also get presents.

Three years later, everything was repeated when it was my sister’s turn to write the college entrance exams. She passed and got admitted to a nice university in our city. This time, when people came to offer congratulations, they asked my parents, “What did you do to succeed in sending two children to universities?”

Seeing my brother and sister go to university and the happiness they brought to the family, I was determined to be a university student myself. To achieve this goal, I

\footnote{University and college graduates were guaranteed a full-time job in government or state-owned enterprises until 1996. High school graduates usually got assigned to temporary jobs. Starting in 1996, jobs were no longer assigned to college or high school graduates.}
worked myself hard, although there was not much required for an elementary school student. I never went out playing or had dinner before I finished the day’s homework. I even asked my parents to give me extra exercises. My neat homework was often shown to all the students in my grade as the example they should follow. Other parents in our community asked their children to act like me. “How come you are playing here? Go home and do your homework. Chao will not come out until she is finished with all her homework.” That was what one mother said, in front of all the children, to her son when she found the boy playing, with his schoolbag on – a sign that he hadn’t gone back home after school.

Actually, in our community, there was no privacy when it came to a child’s learning and school work. Every adult could stop a child and ask about how he or she did at school, from what grades he or she got in exams to what the day’s homework was and if the child was done with that. A child must answer these questions. Otherwise, he or she would be considered impolite and the blame would go directly to the parents, because it was considered the parents’ fault for not fostering proper etiquette in their children. When it was exam time, every school child’s scores were known to the whole community. I always got good grades, but I do not remember my parents ever giving me any rewards for that. This was good enough because my friends got punished if they did not meet their parents’ requirements. They would be punished for getting 92 if their parents required 95. My parents never set such requirements and they did not check my homework. My friends were jealous of me being treated in such a nice way with regard to school work.

My years in elementary school were not taken very seriously by my parents partly because I could do quite well on my own and partly because they had more important
things to take care of – my brother and sister’s college entrance exams. They began to pay more attention to my study when I entered middle school.

I had more subjects to study in middle school. The major ones included Chinese, English, math, physics, chemistry and political studies. I also had lessons in geography, history, music and physical education. Though these were also required courses, they had a secondary status as they were not counted when test scores were added up to rank students. Every student was anxious about this ranking as one’s position in this ranking list decided his or her status in school. The top ranking students were popular and to a certain extent, “privileged.” Teachers would let them collect homework, supervise self-study periods and even check homework when the assignment was to memorize a Chinese poem or an English paragraph. Students would recite to these “good” students and they would report to the teacher who passed and who did not. Moreover, these students had more chances to take part in the after-school activities, whether it was a singing group or the school basketball team. During the time I was in middle school, from 1985 to 1991, my teachers decided who could participate in these activities because they were all organized by the school. There were seldom other places where children could get involved in these extracurricular activities outside school. When the teacher picked students for these activities, the only criterion was test scores. The rationale was that only when a student was good at academic studies, he or she could spare time for other things. Otherwise, time should be devoted to studying the major academic subjects.

In contrast, those whose names were at the bottom of the ranking list often had a difficult time at school. Other students were reluctant to make friends with them because of the fear of a “bad influence” from them. They were often easy targets of blame. During
the self-study period, when a teacher or the principal came to patrol, if two such students were found talking, they would be sent to the staff room and be reprimanded. Usually no explanation would be accepted. But if it was two good students, the teacher would say nothing. Teachers seemed to believe, by default, that there must have been good reasons for good students to talk during self-study period, such as discussing school work. It was unfair, but it was the “rule” I had to live by at that time. I did not want to be looked down upon and I kept working hard to maintain a reasonable status in school, among the top 15 of 55 in my class.

Learning did not come as easily as it used to in primary school. I had difficulties with physics in Grade 8 and with geometry in Grade 9. But I did well at all other subjects, so my place in the ranking list still remained upper-middle. My parents did not specify where I should be in the ranking and they never punished me for not doing well at school. The middle school I went to was one of the best schools in our city. 70-75% of its graduates got university admission every year. My school had a reputation that its “bad students” would be the top ones in other schools. Students like me should have no problem in passing the National College Entrance Exams. But for the people involved, my teachers, my parents and I, passing the exams could never be a sure thing, until one really passed. I wanted desperately to enter a university, but not in the same way as it had been in Grade One when I wanted to be the same as my brother and have gifts. As both my brother and sister went to university, people in our community constantly said that I would absolutely be the third to go. They said it whenever they met me or my parents. Such comments put incredible pressure on me. I feared what a humiliation I would be to my parents if I failed. My parents actually always told me to relax, yet I took it to mean
“work harder.” I did not want my parents to lose face and I did not want to worry them with the consequences of my failure – no future, no job. The college entrance exams were a battle I could not afford to lose.

My parents were extremely supportive in helping me fight the battle. My father liked to watch sports on TV, particularly soccer games. After I started senior high school, he seldom watched TV so that I would not be disturbed by the noise while studying. When there was a soccer game, he would watch, but with the sound turned off. My mother got the previous years’ test papers from a colleague and she timed me while I was doing them. I had a clock, but she just wanted to be my company while I was studying. My parents often brought home “learning tips” from the parents whose children got into university one or two years earlier. They did not force me to follow those tips, but they wanted me to know how others had studied for the exams. They hoped that some of the tips might also work for me, so I did not have to work long hours. I appreciated it and still appreciate all that they did. But at that time, I was so nervous about the exams that my parents’ care and support actually gave me pressure. My parents’ time and efforts would be wasted if I could not pass the exams.

I passed. The day I received the admission letter, my father cried. …Looking at the gifts from my parents’ friends, I was not excited. I just felt relieved. I had the feeling of getting out of something as well as surviving something. I could not and I still cannot tell what I was out of or what I survived.

For many years, July 7, 8 and 9 were important dates in our family because the National College Entrance Exams were held every year on these three days. Before the
exams, I would know who in our community would write the exams that year and we
would take a guess on their chances of passing. During the three days, my father always
had news on the test items and the teachers’ and students’ comments on the difficulty
level. About one month later, we would be talking about the test scores and who got
admitted to which university. After I went to university, the college entrance exams were
no longer a hot topic in our home, though news on the exams still came to my parents.
Sometimes it was only when people came to ask for my used reference books that my
parents realized that their children were preparing for the exams. I did not want to give
away those books because I considered them company during the very stressful time of
preparing for the exams. I was familiar with each of the books and these books were like
my co-combaters – if I “covered” them well, they would cover me in crossing the
“bridge.”3 But my mother said, “These books are useless to you now. What’s the point of
keeping them? Why don’t you give them away to help others and make more room for
your new books? Come on, those people are my friends and how am I going to explain to
them that I can’t let them have my daughter’s used books? Mom would be considered a
terrible person.” I gave up and agreed to give away the books. “Good girl. You are not
taking the exams anyway.” My mother said. Unfortunately, she was wrong. For two
years, I had the same dream again and again. In my dream, I was writing the college
entrance exams, but I did not know how to answer a single question on the papers. I was

3 Metaphorically, the National College Entrance Exams are described as the following: “millions
trying to cross the only narrow bridge”. In 1991, the year I took the exams, roughly one in every one
hundred and sixty of the year’s high school graduates could get admitted to a university or college (Xi’an
Daily, August, 18, 1991).
scared to death and begged the supervisor: “Could you check my record? I have taken the exams and already passed!” The supervisor just laughed… Every time I woke up, I needed two or three minutes to figure out where I was – in the examination room or in my bed in an undergraduate residence. My mother cried when I told her this dream. “Poor thing. It’s over. It’s all over.” She patted my back and reassured me.

I studied and continued to write various tests in university. But my learning or writing tests was no longer my parents’ concern. We talked about the courses I took and the professors I had, and my father would recall the professors in his medical school and tell me funny stories about them. My parents stopped asking about my grades. They cared more about what people I met, who I hung out with….

**I graduated. I became a teacher.**

My university offered me a teaching position in the adult English language program when I graduated with a bachelor’s degree in English language and literature. The department in which I was to work for the next five years was called the “Training Department for Candidates Going abroad”. As the name indicated, its students were those who came to learn English specifically to prepare for an imminent trip to English-speaking countries. I did not have any pre-service teacher education before I stepped into the language classroom. It was assumed that if you knew the language, you could teach it – tell what you knew to those who did not know it yet. My only “practical repertoire” (Conle and Sakamoto, 2002, p. 427) was the memory of my own experiences of being a student – what my teachers did in the classroom? Most prominent in my mind were the images of my teachers who functioned as the “Peking Duck Stuffers”. Xin Li (1998) described them as follows:
Peking Duck is a famous delicacy in Chinese cuisine. It attracts many gourmets, professional and amateur. But if you know how people feed the Peking ducks, you might not want eat it any more. When people feed the Peking ducks, they give the ducks more than they can handle. Meanwhile they confine the ducks in the least possible space to limit their movement so that the ducks grow very fat in the shortest possible time. The meat of a duck thus fed would be very tender and delicate. But the poor duck in his short life could not have any time to swim in the pond, duck into water to catch fish, or even have the right to refuse being stuffed. A traditional teacher in China is called a Peking Duck Stuffer, implementing “Stuffing Duck Teaching method”. And his/her students are like Peking Ducks. (p. 150)

My supervisor told me that I should take my job seriously, understand my students’ needs and prepare the lessons carefully. I should be fine then. These guidelines sounded great, yet they were far too general for a novice teacher and thus not very helpful. I did take my job seriously, prepared the lessons carefully, and talked a lot with my students on what we could do to improve their learning and my teaching. For my students, their need was “to learn” English and they depended on me to guide them on the way. Their trust in me was moving, but put pressure on me at the same time. I was not sure if what I was giving was the best I could give. I did not like the prescribed textbook, and neither did my students. Yet we could not change to a different one because the examinations were based on the prescribed one. Even when my students said that they did not care about the examinations since our program was not a degree program, I could not switch to other books because of the department policy. Besides, as a young teacher, I was considered a “student” myself among the staff. It would be inappropriate for me to raise questions about a textbook compiled and used by my department’s senior members.
In China, teachers, no matter at what level, are called “the teaching craftsmen”. This name is meant to indicate repetition and a lack of creativity and challenge in teaching. Although somewhat derogative, there is a certain truth in this. In the five years I taught in the Training Department, I had to teach the same prescribed textbooks every year. The narrowly specified language instructional content, primarily grammar and vocabulary, was mandated, despite my students’ needs and my views of language teaching. There was little room for me or my students to do things that we believed to be more beneficial to language learning. I had to do the “Duck Feeding” (Li, 1998, p. 150) and I could not offer my students enough space and time to shape and share their learning processes. As a teacher, I had to enforce a very rigid curriculum that meant nothing more than the prescribed textbooks and methodology - the very ones that I myself had experienced as a student. I felt a sense of conflict with such a curriculum in terms of the teaching content and the teaching method. I wanted a better alternative.

Meanwhile, I felt I could only teach English to a limited extent. Those spontaneous questions concerning the target culture were often impossible for me. I was haunted by a doubt: as a non-native speaker and a person who had never stepped on any foreign soil, could I really help prepare students for living in those English-speaking countries?

After teaching in the program for five years, I finally decided to quit my job. I went to Canada to pursue further studies. On the one hand, I was hoping to get knowledge, knowledge in the area of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching that would help me improve my teaching when I came back to China. On the other hand, I wanted to have a sight and taste of an English-
speaking country where there is a very different culture. I was sure that this experience would enrich me as I would experience differences in culture, customs, tradition, way of life, and social-economic system, to name just a few. My experiences would tell me what it was like to live in a different linguistic and cultural environment.

**I am a student again – studying in Canada**

**Studying at York University**

My life in Canada began at York University in Toronto. It took me quite some time to find my way in the new educational situation. I came to study in the field of applied linguistics with the hope that when I went back home, I would have more to contribute to the profession I love – teaching English.

In the university, I enjoyed being exposed to new ideas and learning to think logically and critically. The new environment was stimulating and offered me many choices, as to what courses to take, what books to read and which area of interest to explore. At the same time, such an environment also created feelings of anxiety and posed problems of adjustment. As my study began, I soon found that I had different conceptions of what reading was and how it should be done. In the Chinese context, I believed that printed words carried power. Books are considered embodiments of knowledge, wisdom and truth. Thus, reading is the basis of belief and leads to the attainment of “truth.” It was not my place as a student, to question these sources of authority and I was not expected to think for myself or look elsewhere for alternatives. But in Canada, reading is a means of gathering information aiming at hypothesis formation and critical analysis. There was not a set body of knowledge that I could extract from some prescribed books. Professors did not control closely what students
read. Rather, I was expected to read widely, comparing and contrasting the different opinions and evidence presented by different authors so that I could argue my own points convincingly. Learning was the exploration and evaluation of ideas and problems and was an excellent opportunity for students to develop themselves. Classes were not the place for teachers to hand down knowledge. Instead, they provided a setting for students to have wide-ranging discussion with professors and to ask questions. I felt I was being drowned by the variety of different ideas and views. Learning as using and critiquing massive amounts of information was totally foreign to me. I had thought that teaching and learning were too rigid and not challenging enough in China. But confronted with the differences and challenges in Canada, I was not enjoying them. It was then that I became aware that there were different ways of looking at teaching and learning. What is teaching and what is learning do not mean the same to everyone. But I still believed that there must be a better way, if not a best way, to teach and learn and I was going to find out what it was.

In my master’s study, I admired the scientific nature in the Western social science research (in my case, in second language education research) – the objectivity and accuracy based on statistical methods (Wu, 1993). I appreciated the logical and analytic thinking. When my thesis supervisor encouraged me to write down my experiences in Canada, in my new linguistic and social environment, I hesitated. Why should I tell people about myself? I was not a famous person whose life was of interest to many others. There was no significant drama in my life stories. Even my English was not good enough for readers to enjoy skillful and evocative forms of expression. Then why should I bother writing about myself, an ordinary person’s ordinary life? All these questions
haunted me even after I finished the paper, though I did feel the process of doing a narrative exploration of my own experience was a process of learning and improving. As I reflected in my master’s research paper (Jia, 2001), I would have missed a lot of myself if it had not been for that study.

**Studying at OISE/UT**

The first year of my doctoral study, especially the first semester, was tough. I felt disoriented and lost. In the study plan I wrote for my PhD application, I said that I would like to undertake inquiries into “…the relationship between knowing and teaching; teaching as inquiry or teaching as transmission of knowledge; what are the qualities of a good teacher; how teachers’ concept of education influences their practice; what form life in classrooms and schools should take”. However, neither of the two courses I took during the first term seemed to cater to my initial interests. One was very practical, focused on the “how-to”s in second language teaching and research. The other curriculum foundations course was just too vague for me to make any sense of curriculum development. For the first few weeks, I was always wondering, if it really was a curriculum course. For me, the issues discussed in the class, such as race, gender and ethnicity, had nothing to do with curriculum development. Actually, the word “curriculum” itself was my nightmare. I was amazed to find that there were so many books and papers on understanding curriculum. Yet what on earth does curriculum mean? …To my own surprise, my frantic search for the meaning of curriculum engendered self reflection on my past experiences, my thinking and my doubts as I wrote up puzzles,

4 OISE/UT stands for the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto.
questions and worries in a reflective journal for the course. I found that I tried to make meaning of what was happening in the present in relation to my past. In so doing, I gradually became comfortable with the way the class went and more importantly, I tried to become comfortable with my not feeling comfortable with certain thoughts and ideas. This was an important step in my journey as I stopped being so anxious about getting the “correct knowledge” or the “right solutions to problems.” I realized that I was so used to things being prescribed that I had been looking for better things and better ways to prescribe.

While I was struggling with my studies, people here in Canada often asked me, “Is that fun?” or told me to “Have fun!” Maybe it was just another way to say “How are you?” in a school building, but I still did not get it. Why was studying considered something fun here in Canada? I remember that in China, I was so excited on my graduation day because it would be the last day of my staying in a school as a student! Why did I feel so excited about leaving school? Or I should say why was it not so exciting to be a student in China? I was led to think how I experienced school in China.

In the spring of 2003, I did a narrative project in a narrative research course (CTL 4801, Narrative and Story in Research and Professional Practice). In the course project, I told school stories of two Chinese students, my nephew and me. My attempts to tell, retell, live and relive (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988) my nephew’s and my own schooling stories in that project (Jia, 2003) pointed to a conflict between our educational experience in China and John Dewey’s (1938) emphasis on sound educational experience which involve continuity and interaction between the learner and what is learnt. For me and my nephew, learning was something impersonal. There was barely any connection
between what we got in the classroom and what we experienced outside it, with maybe one exception – the homework, which was given by our school teachers but done by us at home. Our school stories were characterized by competition and pressure. Exams and even the everyday homework assignments were decisive battles that we had to win to prove our worthiness at school – being considered good students, getting the teacher’s favor, having more chances to participate in school activities and not disappointing our parents. Excellent performance, especially in exams, was not only supposed to show how much or how well we had learnt. More importantly, such performance was the “gatekeeper” for upper level education as well as an entry pass and probably the only entry pass to a successful future, as our Chinese society was not that accepting of people who failed their exams. For me, failure in exams, especially in the National College Entrance Examinations would be something unaffordable. It would block the access to decent jobs and put my parents, two doctors without any connections to the job-assigning authorities, in a desperate situation: what were they going to do with a daughter who did not have a school to go to and was not qualified for any jobs? People sometimes asked what I would be doing if I had not passed the college entrance exams. My answer was that I never thought of failure while I was preparing for the exams. Such an answer had nothing to do with self-confidence. Actually, it was the revelation of fear and reluctance to face the question directly. I was like an ostrich burying its head in the sand, comforting myself that I did not apprehend any danger. In the writing of my and my nephew’s school stories of what happened to us in school, of the teachers we liked and the teachers who made our time in school difficult and of our parents who cared deeply about our education, I often used words such as “battle,” “cold war” and “survival” for our
education and school. Those words came to me naturally, but why? If there were really wars, what were we fighting for and with whom were we fighting?

Originally, I had expected that since my course project (Jia, 2003) was an inquiry into my and my nephew’s learning experience in China, it would give me a deeper understanding of teacher-student relationship as our experiences in school, happy or not, had much to do with our teachers. However, I ended up with even more questions than I had at the beginning. As I relived my own and my nephew’s school experiences through telling our stories, I found that we had very similar teachers. Our teachers were all very strict and pushed us hard to learn and be good students. But it seemed that our teachers relied very much on test scores and homework to “categorize” students, and students in different categories were treated differently. It seemed that one aspect of a student’s quality was enough for school life, namely the ability to master what was taught and to fulfill the teachers’ requirements. But why were our other qualities not appreciated and why did our teachers do what they did?

The puzzles generated from doing the course project led me to think about why my and my nephew’s schooling was the way it was. Why were we unhappy about schooling? Was it that we had our individual problems that we were not made for schools or schools were not made for us? Did the student-teacher relationship my nephew and I experienced have something to do with the way in which teachers were trained? With the many questions that I had on teaching, learning, teachers and students, I took a practicum course where I had the opportunity to observe classes in a pre-service teacher training program at OISE.
Various topics were covered in the classes, e.g. co-operative learning, multiculturalism, gender issues, poverty, the ecological crisis and even the health and wellness of teachers and students. Discussions on these issues were interesting, but they were not what I had expected from a pre-service teacher training program: what to teach and how to teach. I was frustrated by the course readings and the class discussion because I did not see any connection between the readings and the curricula I experienced in China. I had thought I knew something about curriculum, but I found I did not know where to locate my understanding of curriculum in the pre-service teacher training program.

As I engaged myself in the personal encounters with the readings, the class discussions, the instructors and the teacher candidates, I started to see the connection between those issues and the curriculum. Meanwhile, I also came to the awareness that the reason I was uncomfortable and frustrated at the beginning was because I was framed by the very rigid curricula I experienced in China. I had thought I became more open-minded in Canada, yet I was still looking for better things and better ways to prescribe.

Observing the pre-service teacher training classes, working with the teacher candidates in the classroom activities, doing the required readings and writing reflective notes provided a springboard for me to see and understand the complexities of teaching and learning. It took me beyond my world by challenging me to see teaching and learning from different perspectives. I developed an enlarged awareness that teaching was far too complex to be seen as something that consisted only of two components – subject matter and methodology. The various aspects of schooling were not detached from certain social issues. Teaching, as well as learning, was not neutral. They reflected the interactions and
contradictions of the system, culture and the society. Teaching could not be separated from the teacher’s knowledge, attitudes and values. Thus teaching was not just the mechanical process of applying knowledge in the form of techniques, skills and strategies that would guarantee results. There were contextual, cultural and structural realities that impinged on the act of teaching and learning. Teaching was more than just what’s happening in the classroom. As I tried to understand the complexities of the teacher training program in connection with my own knowledge and experiences, I interpreted what I saw, heard, read and experienced through my values, frames of reference, knowledge and skills. Meanwhile, my values, frames of reference, knowledge and skills were also expanded by reflection on my own actions, my own bias, and my past experiences and interactions with others (Jia, 2004).

Greene (1988) points out that “One’s reality, rather than being fixed and predefined, is a perpetual emergent, becoming increasingly multiplex, as more perspectives are taken, more texts are opened, and more friendships are made” (p. 23). Telling and reflecting personal school stories was the beginning of the life histories with teachers, families, schools and society. Reflections on the snapshots taken from the past experiences showed that because the meaning of my past was changing in the context of my present life, questions emerged as the once familiar became strange. Though the recounting of past experiences did not synthesize into new ways of understanding, it allowed reinterpretation of lives and experiences. I came up with questions which I never asked before: What are the meanings we (students) make of schooling? What role did school play, and does it still play, in making us who we were and who we are? The
questions challenge me to inquire into students’ schooling experiences and they are the guiding questions of this thesis inquiry.

**Why student stories matter**

Erickson and Shultz (1992) see students as the “ultimate insiders and experts” (p. 480) of their own educational experiences and believe that students have invaluable views on what happens in school. Based on such a rationale, many educators and educational researchers argue for the significance of attending to students’ experiences and perceptions of their schooling (e.g. Caporrimo, 2001; Cook-Sather, 2001, 2002; Erickson & Shultz, 1992; Phelan, Davidson & Cao, 1992; Pollard, Thiessen & Filer, 1997; Thiessen, 2007). Since any decisions about school directly affect students, it is vitally important that students have the opportunity and space to express personal knowledge, beliefs and reflections about their own education.

Pollard, Thiessen and Filer (1997) point out that “taking pupil perspectives seriously can contribute to the quality of school life, the raising of standards of educational achievement and understanding of many important educational issues”, while “…ignor[ing] or underplay[ing] the significance of pupil perspectives can undermine the quality of school life, learning achievement and development of understanding” (p. 1). Cook-Sather (2001, 2002) substantiate this argument by pointing out that students have unique perspectives on what happens in school and these perspectives should be included in the conversations about educational policy and practice.

In a comprehensive overview of background, basis and trends in research on students’ schooling experiences since the 1960s, Thiessen (2007) identified three
interrelated orientations in the study of student experiences in elementary and secondary school: 1) how students participate in and make sense of life in classrooms and schools; 2) who students are and how they develop in classrooms and schools; and 3) how students are actively involved in shaping their own learning opportunities and in the improvement of what happens in classrooms and schools (pp. 8-9). My study examining schooling experiences of six current and former Chinese students as they interact with teachers, fellow students, family and community during a period of momentous sociocultural, political and economic change in China’s modern history, from 1949 to the present, is close to orientation 1. As was discussed earlier, my previous project work (Jia, 2003) demonstrated that there is a big treasure in individual students’ lives and rich research data to be discovered in students’ experiences. My thesis research is an auto/biographical inquiry into the cross-generational schooling experience of former and current Chinese students. The major objectives are to unfold my and my participants’ school stories, to identify the various influences on our educational experiences and to make explicit the student personal practical knowledge embedded in our experiences. I focus on participants’ lived experiences to study and understand their schooling narratives. I study each participant’s experiences in the context of family and community so that student’ experiences outside of school being integrated into experiences within schools.

It is hard to find local educational research studies grounded in students’ schooling experiences in China, where educational research is predominantly problem-solving oriented, “…aiming at solving a specifically identified problem in the educational process by positively intervening and improving the educational process through the
cooperative efforts of educational researchers and practitioners” (Zhou, 2000, p. 12). Although there are statistical sources about student enrolment, course arrangements, student performance at various entrance exams, there appears to be a significant lack of research that has as its primary objective an understanding of the educational experiences as portrayed by the students themselves. Students’ experiences tend to be documented only anecdotally, as an illustration of problems in the discussion of issues in education, often found in newspapers or magazines. For instance, in 2004, stories of seven high school students, from both rural and urban areas, were reported on Zhong Guo Qing Nian Bao (July 21, 2004, China Youth Daily). The stories of the daily lives of these seven students were told to illustrate the gap between the rural and urban areas in terms of educational development (Liu, 2004). On August 26, 2006, there was an interview of four children who were going to attend elementary school in Australia in Nan Fang Zhou Mo (South China Weekly). Why these students were sent to school abroad at a very young age led to a discussion of the problems in the education system, such as long school hours and heavy load of homework (Fang, 2006). How students feel about being students, what it means to be a student, what affects their schooling experiences and what meaning they create from schooling experiences are things not readily found in the research literature in China.

Despite the diverse research methodologies used to frame educational studies on students’ experiences (see Thiessen, 2007), there exist relatively fewer autobiographical/biographical narrative inquiry studies on students schooling experiences. Chan (2004) examined ethnic identity of first generation Chinese Canadian students in their elementary school context. Chang (2007) explored the cross-generational
Taiwanese experiences in learning and teaching. Xu (2006) studied new Chinese immigrant families’ lived experiences in the Canadian educational system and explored their beliefs and values in what is important in their children’s education. Li (2008) studied how four Chinese teachers’ professional identities were constructed and transformed through both “in-school and out-of school” (p. 1) education in various socio-cultural contexts in China. These works are among the relatively few and recent examples of experiential research examining the students’ schooling experiences, using a narrative inquiry approach. They acknowledged the contribution of an experiential approach as a means of informing curricular decisions concerning students and led to a more complete picture of what happened in schools and how life in schools could be improved. I believe my study contributes to this body of research. As in all narrative inquiry, the researcher's experience is included in any study of the experiences of others. I therefore began with myself to examine my own experiences and interweave my school stories with those of my participants. I focus in particular on the schooling experiences of Chinese students because my research interests in students’ schooling experiences in the Chinese context and the research questions of this study emerged from my lived experiences and subsequent reflection on these experiences. I use a narrative approach to study my and my participants’ schooling experiences in modern China’s historical, cultural and socio-political contexts.

In the next chapter, I discuss why narrative inquiry is appropriate for my study. I situate my study within the theoretical framework of experience as education and education as experience (Dewey, 1938), and curriculum as experience (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988) and narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994, 2000). I talk about
who my participants are, why they were invited to this study and how my data were collected.
Chapter 2
Understanding School Stories: Why Narrative?

The choice of narrative inquiry as research methodology for this study did not come naturally, as narrative inquiry was not a methodology that I had explicitly sought out and used in a purposeful way from the beginning. In fact, it took me a long time to come to terms with a narrative approach to educational research. The development of my understanding towards narrative inquiry as a research methodology reflects the change in my epistemological beliefs. It would be difficult for me to discuss why narrative inquiry is appropriate for this thesis research without talking about the journey I went through to understand it. I feel it is necessary to give an idea of how narrative inquiry method fitted my personal experience of becoming an educational researcher and hence informed the formation of this research study. Therefore, this chapter begins with a “narrative” of my growing awareness of the use of narrative inquiry in educational research, followed by a discussion of understanding narrative inquiry as research methodology. The key theoretical and methodological frameworks which underpin this inquiry process will provide a theoretical grounding which I refer to and elaborate on as the inquiry unfolds. I then detail what constituted data in this study and how these data were collected. Understandings achieved and their educational importance will be discussed in Chapters 9 and 10. Issues of validity and authenticity arose throughout the research process and they are discussed where appropriate.

Coming to terms with narrative inquiry

In Chapter 1, I recalled how I first came to know narrative inquiry.
When I first came to Canada to do my master’s study, I admired the scientific character of Western social science research (in my case, in the second language education research) – the objectivity and accuracy achieved through statistical methods. I appreciated the logical and analytic thinking involved. However, when my supervisor encouraged me to write down and explore my personal experiences in Canada, my new linguistic and social environment, as a focus of my master’s research project in order to understand cultural awareness in second language learning and teaching, I hesitated. Why should I tell people about myself? I was not a famous person whose life is of interest to many others. There was no significant drama in my life stories. Even my English was not so good that readers can enjoy skillful and evocative forms of expression. Then why should I bother writing about myself, an ordinary person’s ordinary life?

All these questions haunted me even after I finished the research paper, though I did feel the process of doing a narrative exploration of my own experience was a process of learning and improving. (Chapter 1, pp. 15-16)

Through this autobiographical study, I realized that my life experiences could be more than the life stories of an ordinary person. My everyday life was full of meaningful experiences about the process of finding the way in a new culture and coping with situational demands and personal needs with a foreign language. The research and writing process gave me a bold and satisfying beginning as a novice researcher and writer. However, I still worried about the generalizability of my research. To what extent could a study of my personal experiences be helpful to other Chinese English learners?

I came to know more about narrative inquiry after I started doctoral studies at OISE/UT. I started by reading several narrative theses (He, 2001; He, 1998; Li, 1991 &1998; Wu, 1993). It proved to be very helpful as the authors and their research
participants were all Chinese and thus made it easier for me to follow their track of thinking and understand the background of the research studies. These narrative studies invited me to engage in a rich and complex exploration of experiences, and I began to see the power of narrative and how narrative helped people to gain a better understanding of teaching, learning and social environments and opened up new routes of research. Moreover, reading narrative research studies helped me to understand those more abstract and theoretical discussions on narrative in research and professional practice I was reading (e.g. Conle, 1996, 1997, 1999 & 2001; Connelly & Clandinin, 1994; McEwan & Egan, 1995; Phillips, 1994).

Through reading these autobiographical and biographical theses, I realized that personal changes in learning and teaching are not always quantifiable. Narrative inquiry research offers individual insights into the largely unobservable processes of teaching and learning from the perspectives of the persons involved (Jacobson, W, Sleicher, D. & Maureen, B, 1999), as they as co-researchers put the “contradictions, paradoxes and ambivalence of life into perspective” (Birren, 1987, p. 91). Janesick (1981) also comments that “any scientific understanding of human action, at whatever level of ordering or generality, must begin with, and be built upon an understanding of the everyday life of the members performing those actions” (p. 15). Taking narrative courses, listening to people’s presentations on their on-going research and reading narrative research studies, I came to see how ordinary people’s everyday lives were full of meaningful experiences, suitable for the study of a rich array of topics. For example, second language learning and teaching (e.g. He, 2001; Wu, 1993), acculturation and
enculturation (Conle, 1993; He, 1998), teacher development and identity. Just as Butt and Raymond (1985) comment,

The way of knowing is not visual or auditory, as such, but experimental without impersonal distance. It is personal, a direct confrontation of self, things, and events, therefore it is sensate “hot knowledge” in the broadest sense. It is the opposite of education-by others, in the didactic sense; in the end adults find education-by-others alienating. Autobiography provides one alternate paradigm for the education of adults wherein the power and responsibility belongs to the persons in the process. It also has the property of linking self knowledge to action, through a conscientization process that propels the learner/teacher to action, thereby integrating thought and action, theory and practice. This property is rare among most epistemologies dominant in society today. (p. 87)

Moreover, interacting with this narrative community, especially coming to see and understand the connection between experiences, story-telling and the changes in the researchers’ professional development – changes in their way of experiencing the world led me to reflect on my understanding of knowledge, teaching and learning.

As I have reflected in Chapter 1, I tended to take teaching and learning as an introduction to a body of truths which are the same for everybody. As a student, I expected to be initiated into something to which I was yet an outsider. However, the narrative works (e.g. Paley, 1989; Wu, 1993) showed me that in understanding one’s environment and human relationships, one comes to see from multiple points of views – the perspectives that they bring to bear upon what was/is happening. Thus, people make meaning and knowledge.
Encountering different ways of thinking and different ways of life in these works challenged my assumption of learning and teaching as involving a given body of knowledge to be transferred. In Dewey’s (1938, p. 1) words, I used to think “… in terms of either-ors, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities”. The differences, and sometimes contradictions in research, point out alternative ways of seeing the world. I now believe that everyone is unique in his/her own way of knowing the environment. People choose their own way of learning and living. We all have our own judgments and these judgments are relative and change as social and cultural conditions change (e.g. my understanding towards narrative inquiry).

My learning and teaching experiences in different curricular situations in Canada and China, especially learning to become a narrative inquirer, led me to see the complexity of human experience and thinking. Being aware of diversity in thinking and in what counts as knowledge helped me to get out of thinking in a world of black and white polarities.

**Understanding narrative inquiry as a research methodology**

My interest in students’ schooling experience derives from my experiences as a student in China and Canada and my subsequent reflection, in various contexts, on those experiences. In the previous section of this chapter, I shared stories of my personal process of developing an understanding of narrative inquiry as a research tradition. It is through this process that I came to accept the fundamental assumption of the qualitative paradigm – the existence of multiple realities or truths. Acceptance of the notion of multiple realities leads me to the understanding that each student has unique experiences
in and out of school and that each student understands differently what it means to be a student.

Therefore, I reject the belief that all students hold the same knowledge about the meaning of education and of being a student. Each student constructs a different reality out of his or her schooling experience. Lincoln (1992) believes that these constructions are “socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature, and dependent for their form and content on the individuals who hold them and on the groups to which those individuals belong” (p. 379).

This study looks into the educational experiences of six current and former Chinese students. I seek to understand, from the students’ perspectives, the meanings they make of their schooling. Specifically, what does it mean for me and my participants to be a student and to be successful at school? What is it about schooling that makes us who we were and who we are? Moreover, it seeks to make meaning of our educational experiences as rooted in China’s cultural, socio-political contexts from 1949 to the present.

Given the nature of this inquiry, it is inevitably located in a qualitative paradigm and narrative is the most appropriate approach to the inquiry due to its epistemological, personal and experiential qualities. In the next section, I explore the relation between experience and narrative inquiry, followed by a discussion on how humans make meaning of their experience by telling stories that reconstruct the past and create purpose for the future (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988).
Exploring experience through narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry is broadly understood as the study of the ways human beings experience the world (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, 1994, 2000). It aims at understanding how people think and act in the situated contexts in which they live through their stories. The focus of narrative research is on the individual, and the fact that life can be understood through a recounting and reconstruction of the life story. Narrative is a vital human activity which structures experience and gives it meaning.

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) believe that when individuals note something of their experience, either to themselves or others, they do so in story form. “People live in stories and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them and create new ones.” (p. 415) As people tell their experience, stories are the closest they can come to experience.

Grumet (1988) says that “to tell a story is to impose form on experience” (p. 87). When we think of story as “life as told”, then it is through story that we come to know “life as experienced”. It is in telling that we come to understand.

In my inquiry into the schooling experiences of my participants and me, the telling of our stories is a powerful tool. In this study, my participants and I tell stories of our lived experiences. Whenever I tell my lived experiences, I do so in a story. Later on, when I interviewed my participants, they told their life experiences in stories. Our stories “give shape and expression to what would otherwise be untold about ‘our lives’” (Greene, 1991, p. x).

Essential to using narrative as a research method is the understanding that narrative is a way of knowing (Bruner, 1986). Carter (1993) points out that “the special
attractiveness of story in contemporary research … is grounded in the notion that story represents a way of knowing and thinking that is particularly suited to explicating the issues with which we deal” (p. 7). As “storied narrative preserves the complexity of human action with its interrelationship of temporal sequence, human motivation, chance happenings and changing interpersonal environmental contexts” (p. 7), stories will make my and my participants’ actions intelligible to us as well as to others.

Stories preserve memories, prompt reflections, connect people with their past, and present, and assist them to envision the future (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Kramp, 2004). “As people tell the story of their lives, they create a history and project a future” (Plummer, 2001, p. 195). My thesis inquiry seeks to capture the stories of students, including their values, opinions and reflections about their lived experiences. Students are the “ultimate insiders and experts” (Erickson and Shultz, 1992, p. 480) of their own educational experiences and a narrative inquiry will allow for the authentic expression of my and my participants’ experiences and concerns as students.

That narrative is a way of knowing echoes Dewey’s (1938) words that every experience should have the capacity to prepare a person for “…later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality,” and this is the “very meaning of growth, continuity, reconstruction of experience” (p.47).

According to Dewey (1938), life, experience and education are inextricably intertwined. Dewey (1938) sees that “amid all uncertainties, there is one permanent frame of reference: namely, the organic connection between education and personal experience” (p. 25). From a Deweyan point of view, experiences are neither isolated nor static
moments in time. They are reflections on one’s past and they affect one’s future. The educative value of human experience has two qualities – continuity and interaction. “The principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (Dewey, 1938, p. 35). Every experience grows out of some preceding experience and changes the objective conditions upon which further experience grow. Experiences are also interactions between individuals and their environment. Experience does not go on simply within a person. It grows as a result of the interaction between an individual, the objects and other people in the environment (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988).

In this study, my participants and I tell stories of earlier experiences as we recover the past in present reflection with an intentional future gaze. In Dewey’s word, this is the “continuity” of experience – to learn something from prior experiences and carry it over into the later ones. Narrative allows continuity, which carries over something from prior experience into the later one and brings about what Clandinin and Connelly (1994) call “growth” and transformation”.

Narrative also propels interaction as it connects one’s experiences with those of others. As Clandinin and Connelly (1994) write, “narrative…allows for individual and social change through personal and social stories told and lived over time and across a place or places” (p. 425). The process of living, telling, reliving and retelling stories thus “refigure the past and create purpose in the future” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988).
In the construction of narratives of experience, there is a reflexive relationship between living a life story, telling a life story and reliving a life story. We restory earlier experiences as we reflect on later experiences so the stories and their meaning shift and change over time. To reflect, as Dewey (1938) writes, is “to look back over what has been done so as to extract the net meanings which are the capital stock for intelligent dealing with further experiences. It is the heart of intellectual organization and of the disciplined mind” (p. 72). Through the narrative process of telling, living, retelling and reliving life stories, narrative grows and takes on meaning as narrative inquirers try to think of the continuity and wholeness of an individual’s life experience. Narrative provides a way of understanding how humans make meaning of our lives by the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories of the past, the present and the future (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000). “The narrative insights of today are the chronological events of tomorrow.” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 9) I take this to mean that lived experiences are part of us in a way that all subsequent experiences are viewed in connection to those prior experiences. Conle (2000) sees that the quest for meaning in lived experiences is one of the purposes of narrative and this is the purpose that I pursue in my thesis inquiry. I try to learn about, through my and my participants’ school stories, the meanings we make of and ascribe to our educational experiences.

Dewey (1938) sees education in terms of life-experience and narrative inquiry is one way of translating Dewey’s (1938) notion that education is the reconstruction of experience into practical methods of educational research.

Building on Dewey’s theory of experience, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) develop a framework of narrative inquiry, “the three-dimensional narrative inquiry
space” (p. 49) which includes the temporal dimension, the personal-social dimension, and the spatial dimension. This three-dimensional narrative inquiry space allows inquirers to move in a four-direction space: inward, outward, backward and forward. By inward and outward, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to the personal and social issues. Backward and forward point to the temporality, past, present and future. For my study, I take it to mean that I explore students’ schooling narratives temporally, in terms of their past, present and future; socially, in terms of individuals in students’ lives, such as teachers, peers and family members; and in terms of places, the places where our experiences were lived out. My initial autobiographical narrative (Chapter 1) mostly looked back and my reflections looked inward. The telling of my own stories brought me face to face with the puzzles that I could not recognize until I told the stories. In this thesis study, I travel together with my participants in four-directional space: backward to our prior experiences, inward to our feelings, emotions, and beliefs, outward to the environments we have lived in and forward to the new possibilities of what we may be.

As my thesis inquiry focuses on students’ perspectives, it is inevitably personal and subjective. Narrative inquiry has been criticized for “lacking generalizability” or even being “self-indulged” (Phillips, 1994, p. 13). However, I do not attempt to look for the absolute truth or for a universal law that will apply to everyone. My and my participants’ stories are personal as they have a temporal dimension and are located in specific places. What I seek from this inquiry is the personal and contextual details of living our stories, the linking of our stories with the broader social context where these stories happened and the “resonance” (Conle, 1996) or dissonance readers may have with
our stories such that my readers can enrich their understanding of experience unknown to them and join the dialogue about meanings students make about their schooling.

My thesis inquiry focuses on students’ schooling experience and it consists of experiential stories which are an attempt to give voice to tacitly held knowledge (Polanyi, 1958). This knowledge has a practical function (Schwab, 1970). It is practical in as far as it is a source for deliberation, intuitive decisions, daily action and moral wisdom (Conle, 2000). “Personal practical knowledge” is the term Connelly and Clandinin (1985, 1988) use to capture the idea of tacit knowledge in a way that allows talking about narrative as a way of knowing.

By “knowledge” in the phase “personal practical knowledge” is meant that body of convictions, conscious or unconscious, which have arisen from experience…and which are expressed in a person’s actions. … Personal practical knowledge is knowledge which is imbued with all the experiences that make up a person’s being. Its meaning is derived from, and understood in terms of a person’s experiential history, both professional and personal. (Clandinin, 1985, p. 362)

Personal practical knowledge emerges from experience. As experiences have emotional, moral and aesthetic dimensions, the personal practical knowledge which makes up narratives of experience is an emotional, moral and aesthetic knowledge (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988). Personal practical knowledge is largely tacit (Polanyi, 1958) and Conle (forthcoming) points out that it can not be found by asking direct questions. Rather, in narrative inquiry, teachers’, and in my study, students’ personal practical knowledge is explored by “listening to [people’s] experiences, by having many conversations about many things …and by watching carefully what [people] do, say,
believe, feel, worry about and are exposed to. [Narrative researchers] ask about their past, in and out of school, and their plans for the future” (p. 8). In this thesis, my participants and I will be traveling through our past to explore, define and construct our educational experiences. In seeking out and providing a public space for the experiential stories of students to be told, this journey is to become the validation of our experiences and our personal practical knowledge in the construction of our storied experiences.

Participants

“Who a researcher is, is central to what the researcher does” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 13). Most of my life has been lived in and around schools, as a student in China and Canada and as a teacher in between. Telling and reliving my own school stories crystallized the tensions and puzzles that I had in my education and they became the impetus for me to carry out this inquiry. Meanwhile, I was not alone in my story and as I was asking myself the meaning of my education and schooling, I wondered if those people around me, family and friends, those who have been important to my education, who have been proud of me, who shaped and reshaped the road I have been walking on, have had the same puzzles.

My parents, son and daughter of peasants in poor countryside villages, the only children of their families that could go to school, excelled in school, and became the first and the only children in their peasant families who went to college in the city, and stayed in the city after graduation. They lived a totally different life from that of their parents and siblings. My parents are doctors and worked in the same hospital until their retirement ten years ago. Education changed their life course. My parents are considered successful not only because they changed the generally accepted fate that peasants’
children remain peasants, but also because they sent all of their three children to college. In our small community where most people worked in the same hospital with my parents, there was competition among parents and children about who got into university and what university they were admitted to. The rate of children passing the college entrance exams in our community was much higher than that in the neighboring communities where most parents were factory workers. But having all one’s children become university graduates was still quite an “achievement” in the community. People admired my parents and always asked how they could achieve what they did. For my parents, education was important as children of peasants and as parents to children born and raised in a city. Their way of becoming doctors was paved with success in schools. As parents, they have had profound influences upon me, especially with respect to education. Their personal and educational experience shaped and reshaped my attitudes and understanding towards schooling.

My best friend from primary school, Qian, did not continue in education after high school. When we met, he always told me that he admired what I have been doing - undergraduate studies, teaching in a university and graduate studies in Canada. He regretted that he did not work hard enough and did not try again for university after the first unsuccessful attempt in the college entrance exams. Although he has a decent job and he likes what he is doing now, he always says that he is not as good as I and he would have lived a different life if he had made his way to a university. Why is Qian so concerned about a university degree? What does it mean to him?

My nephew, Yuanyuan was in Grade 7 when my study officially began in 2004. Before I came to Canada, Yuanyuan and I were very close – I lived in my parents’ place
and he came for lunch and dinner almost every day. Yuanyuan was a lovely kid. He loved reading and was a remarkable story teller. He was interested in everything in his surroundings and observed very carefully – why my mom’s plants only “drank” water and did not eat anything, why my dad needed a partner to play chess, what magic was performed on soybeans to change them to Tofu, where his friends – the cartoon-characters went after he turned off the TV… . He was very confident and believed he would find out the answers from books. He learned to read before entering school but could not write. He wanted to become a great scientist in the future. It was a lot of fun being around him.

However, as I remember, he gradually changed after he started school. He did not like the homework – mostly copying and repetitive exercises. He was upset about the punishment for minor mistakes in homework or talking without the teacher’s permission in classroom. He was unhappy about the punishments and he did not want to talk much about school, the place where he spent most of his day. At home, he was bright, curious, an amazing story-teller and eager to learn to read. In school, he seemed to be never good enough at anything. He was frustrated, nervous, upset and sometimes, angry. What happened in his school? What “transformation” did he experience during schooling? I felt sorry for him, but did not know why. I asked myself: is schooling inherently unhappy? Is it that we, the students, have our individual problems that we were not made for schools, or perhaps schools were not made for us?

I have no doubt that education has been important to all of us, my parents, Yuanyuan, my friend Qian and me. I have invited them to join my inquiry. Furthermore, to enrich the case of my nephew’s generation, I have invited a young female, Didi, 13
years of age, to participate. By telling our school stories, I seek to understand more about school and its students. What happened and is still happening in schools? What does schooling mean to these students? And fundamentally, what are schools for?

In this study, six Chinese students, my parents, my nephew, Yuanyuan, my friend Qian, a young female Didi, and I tell school stories that have been developing over a period of more than 50 years, in both China and Canada.

My parents’ school stories started in the villages before the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949 and continued in the city where they settled down after university.

Qian and I started school in the late 1970’s when China just began to open to the outside world. We shared a desk in primary school and we went to the same high school. Our paths diverged after high school. I went to university, taught ESL after graduation and came to Canada to pursue further studies. Qian went to join the Navy in South China, returned to our hometown and worked in the Security Department in a research institute ever since.

Yuanyuan, my elder sister’s son, was born the year I went to college. He is now in Grade 6 and preparing for the entrance exams for a good junior high school.5 Such exams are organized by “key” schools6 – the more academically oriented secondary schools.

5 This section was first written in 2004.

6 The development of key schools in China’s educational system will be further clarified in Chapter 9.
Yuanyuan will get into a junior high school anyway because of the 9-year Obligatory Education policy (see A Timeline in Chapter 3). But if he can not get into one of the key schools, his chances to get into a university will be slim by the time he finishes high school. Being a good student, doing well in exams, working hard to get admitted to key schools are the dominating themes in Yuanyuan’s school life. But is this all that a school can offer to individual students?

All of the participants share a Chinese schooling experience and there should be a common thread in our stories. However, our stories happened at different times in China’s modern history (1949 - present). Among the six of us, my father is the oldest and he started school in 1943. Yuanyuan, the youngest, started school in 1998. There is a span of 55 years which means that our experiences may differ as a result of not only individual variables, but also historical time. Our school stories vary in terms of the socio-political, economic and cultural contexts. What is the common thread in our school stories and how do our stories differ?

Every student’s life is a story from which there is much to learn: about life, about school, about learning and teaching. My parents, my friend from school, Qian, my nephew Yuanyuan and Didi, a young female who is about the same age of Yuanyuan, joined me in this journey of exploration. I invited them to participate in this study because telling and reliving my own school stories led me to their stories – our life experiences intertwined and they were key to the formation of the research puzzle of this study. The next few chapters, chapters 4 to 8, are going to be a journey through my experiences and my participants’ experiences. As the four of us (my parents, Yuanyuan and I) are of an extended family, our personal experiences intertwine. Their experiences
are part of mine and my experiences are part of their lives. It is these relationships that will enable me to extend the concept of schooling from what happens in classrooms and schools to what happens in the home and community as well. Meanwhile, this extended concept of “schooling” that I hope my research will further define will help to establish the relation between our life history and educational experience.

**The journey of my inquiry – data collection, representation and analysis**

In this section, I address issues related to data collection, representation and analysis, with a focus on how my participants and I join together in the process of exploring our lived experiences. How I achieved understanding is discussed in this chapter as well as in Chapters 9 and 10.

**Starting out – ethical permission for this study and getting participants’ informed consent**

I prepared an ethical protocol for this study in 2004 and submitted it to the university’s ethical review committee. After its approval, I went back to China to get consent from participants, conduct interviews, and collect research materials, particularly official and government documents on education. Before I left for China, I contacted Qian via email. I told him how long I would be staying in China and asked him which days during my stay might be most effective for us to meet. I was going to stay in my parents’ place and they assured me in one of our weekly phone calls that they would have time for what I needed to do for my study. I also called my sister, Yuanyuan’s mother, asked about their family schedule during my stay in China and decided possible dates for us to meet for my study. Didi, the young female participant, was recommended by my mother and my elder sister. I contacted her and her parents when I was in China.
The ethical protocol for this study included an information letter for participants. In the information letter, I explained my interests in collaborating with former and current students in studying students’ schooling experiences to help participants understand the nature and purpose of my study. I translated the letter as well as consent (assent) forms into Chinese. I asked a Chinese friend who holds a master’s degree in Chinese Language and Literature from China and was doing doctoral studies in the field of East Asian study in Toronto to go over the Chinese version of the invitation letter and consent (assent) forms to make sure that they sounded appropriate. Once I was in China, I arranged private meetings with each of my participants in person (in case of the two younger participants, together with the parents) to explain to them the conditions for their participating, potential benefits, risks, answer his/her (and the two younger participants’ parents’) questions, and discuss the details of the procedures of my research. Then in our next meeting, they all signed a consent form (assent form for the younger participants) that ensured their confidentiality.

**Data sources**

*Autobiographical writing*

My own school stories, mainly shared in Chapter One were collected through autobiographical writings, including those in my journal, master’s research study\(^7\) and course work at OISE\(^8\). I have been keeping a personal journal since 1995, the year I

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\(^8\) Jia, C. (2003). A narrative inquiry into the learning experiences of two Chinese students. CTL 4801 course project.
graduated from college and became a teacher in an adult language program in China. As I took narrative courses, CTL 4801, *Narrative and Story in Research and Professional Practice* and CTL 4997, *Practicum in Teaching and Learning*, in 2003 and 2004, I learnt to write in my journal, in narrative form, my personal educational stories in both China and Canada, and my reflections on these stories. Part of the course work in both CTL 4801, and CTL 4997 was a weekly reading log. In these logs, I linked the readings on curriculum theory and narrative methodology to my own experiential stories. These logs, together with reading logs from CTL 1000, *Foundations of Curriculum*, taken in 2002, served as a theoretical memo for my study.

My autobiographical writings in journals and reading logs were not about a certain topic. They were about my lived experiences. Questions emerged as I wrote personal school narratives: Why was schooling not supposed to be happy? Why was the thought of leaving school so exciting? Why was I always considered a good student? What are the meanings I make of schooling? What role did school play, and does it still play, in making me who I was and who I am? I lived these questions, but they had been temporarily lost questions (Conle, forthcoming) until I began to tell stories of personal experiences. These questions, as Connelly and Clandinin (1988) conceptualize, are the narrative threads, tensions and themes in experiential narratives.

So my thesis inquiry began with the telling of my life stories. Conle (forthcoming) points out that data collection starts as the researcher is searching for a research topic. Though I was not aware of it while telling my stories and my nephew’s school stories

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(Jia, 2003), the uneasiness that I felt about our lived experiences pushed me to dig deeper and write more about school, about teachers and about students. It was in the process of telling stories, telling my own school stories and telling school stories of people involved in my stories that the research puzzle of this study developed.

**Prior knowledge about participants**

I am family member, school friend and family friend to my participants. Our life stories interconnect and we are part of each other’s lived experiences. I know my participants well. In this study, I brought in my prior knowledge about participants in interviews and follow-up sessions to encourage and prompt them to elaborate and to build on stories that I already knew or had experienced together with them.

**Narrative interviews**

My participants’ school stories were collected mainly through one-on-one, open-ended narrative interviews. These narrative interviews were a means for uncovering and sharing experiences. As narrative inquiry explores “personal and social history for narrative origins and embodied meaning” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988, p. 109), my participants and I shared experiences, uncovered meanings and made connections through our conversations.

During the interviews, I asked narrative questions to prompt school stories. The questions focused on classroom/school activities, opinions about classroom and school activities, favorite school memories, memories about school teachers, opinions about the social contexts, including local life styles, neighborhood activities, family values, and community culture and values. I asked general questions and probed for details about the
narrative components of participants’ stories. These narrative components of my and my participants’ stories included: When did it happen? Who was there when it happened? Where did it happen? What was the atmosphere and how did you (participant) feel as it happened?

In the interviews, I always began with a general question to stimulate participants’ recollection of life experiences. Subsequent questions arose from participants’ responses and my responses to the participant’s stories. These questions sought clarification and the participant’s perspective of the experience. More and more stories were generated through the narrative conversation. Below is an excerpt from the transcript of the interview with my mother to illustrate the narrative conversation we had.

Chao: How did you start school? I thought girls of your time didn’t get to go to school.

Mother: Girls could go to school if their families wanted to send them. The new government actually encouraged girls to go to school. But I was not sent to school by your grandparents. One day a girl in the village came to my house and asked me to go to school with her. I barely had any idea what a school was like and I went with her, so that I could still play with her.

Chao: That’s interesting. How old were you then? How did you like school?

Mother: I was the youngest in the class, 4 and half or five years old. I didn’t know how to count. An older kid in the class told me to use my fingers, but I didn’t even know how to work with my own fingers. I was very frustrated and angry with myself. ‘I am not smart at all!’ I thought. (Laughs) But I was very determined and hard-
working. By the end of the term, I got the first place in my class. It seemed nothing since there were only seven of us. But I was really proud of myself, given that I couldn’t even use my own fingers to count at the beginning.

Chao: So school became easy for you.

Mother: Not really. My school was five *li*\(^9\) in another village. I had to get up really early in the morning to get to school on time. There was no clock in our house and your grandma had to make out the time by looking at the sun, the moon or the stars. Summer was okay, but fall and winter could be really bad, especially when the weather was not good. Sometimes grandma woke me up too early and when I arrived school, no one was there and I had to wait. It was dark and cold. Fortunately, I always went to school with the girl who told me about school. She was two or three years older than I and we lived in the same village. Without her, grandma probably wouldn’t have let me go to school. I was too little to walk the five *li* mountain road to and from school by myself and no one in the family would have the time to walk me.

Interviewing participants was not just a process in which I sought information about their lived experiences. In each interview, I also shared my own school stories with the participant. I expected that sharing my own stories would lead to “narrative echoing” (Conle, 2000, p. 202) in my participants. As Conle (2000) writes, “… one story was an echoing response to a previous story; or certain parts in a story reflected, or echoed, parts of an earlier story… I began to see the relationship among my own experiential stories as

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\(^9\) One *li* is half a kilometer.
resonance” (p. 202). My participants and I encouraged and supported each other to go deep into our memories and to tell more of our school stories. Conle (1996) called this connecting of experiences among participants “resonance”. For example, Didi’s story of how English was taught in her classroom reminded me of how I learnt English in middle school and how I taught English in an adult language program. Then, sharing my stories with Didi prompted her to tell more about how she felt about the difficulties she experienced in English learning and what the ranking of test scores meant to her (see Chapter 7). This connecting of experiences or “resonance” (Conle, 1996) allowed prior knowledge, about ourselves or about each other, to come in and moved the questions in interviews. It was through the connecting of experiences that my participants and I entered into each other’s stories, and learned from each other, as we shared insights and exchanged ideas.

During the data collection period, 2004-2006, I had two two-hour interviews with each of my parents, and one two-hour interview with Qian and Didi. I had two interviews with Yuanyuan, one in 2004 when I was in China and one in 2006, through telephone. With participants’ permission, all interviews were audio taped. I transcribed and translated these interviews from Chinese to English by myself. I have about 220 pages of interview transcripts.

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10 After my first interview with Yuanyuan, there was a period of time that Yuanyuan avoided talking about his schooling with me. For details, see Chapter 8.
**Field notes**

I took notes in the interviews with participants in shorthand. Soon after each interview, I transferred them into field notes after elaboration, without listening to the interview recordings. In my field notes, I described what I observed in the interview and any thoughts, feelings that I had about the interview. I have about 30 pages of field notes.

**Follow-up and feedback**

At the convenience of my participants, I arranged follow-up sessions through telephone conversations, letters or emails to negotiate with each participant my translation and interpretation of the data collected from the interview for further clarifications.

In 2007, all transcripts of interview were provided to participants and personal school narratives that appear in this thesis were also reviewed by the participants. For the younger participants, tapes or transcript of the interviews with them were not shown to their parents. For the data collected from the younger participants, I only included in this study the part that both the parents and the children approved.

Participants approved of how their schooling experiences was presented and discussed in this study. I omitted the part that participants shared with me during interviews, but asked me not to include in the thesis. Before participants consented to their participation, it was made clear to them that they have right to supplement or veto any part of my interpretation in the study that concerned them. For example, my father told me about his experiences in the labor camp during the Cultural Revolution (1966-
1976). After I transcribed and translated the interview, I had a few questions and I called my father so that he could clarify some points he made at the interview. My father did answer my questions, but he told me that he did not want those experiences to be included in my thesis.

My thesis research journey started with the telling of my and my nephew’s school stories. Our lived experiences provided the seminal questions of this thesis inquiry. Telling and retelling our stories led me to the stories of my parents, my school friend and a young girl of my nephew’s generation. Telling stories, sharing stories, and making connections through stories created a very diverse database for this study. I began writing narrative accounts as soon as data collection started and negotiation with participants continually added further data. As narrative inquiry is a process of negotiation, a process in which both the researcher and the participants’ voices are heard through negotiation and collaboration (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), ongoing writing and rewriting of narrative accounts together with clarifying/verifying input from participants will avoid producing “fixed portraits” (Conle, 1999) of participants’ lived personal experiences.

**Research materials related to contexts**

As understanding personal narratives necessarily involves “exploration of contexts and social interactions” (Conle, 2000, p. 191), all the personal school stories will be explored and understood in relation to the changing educational trends and patterns in the period (1949 to the present) during which my and my participants’ schooling experiences have been developing. In this study, there are two components of materials related to contexts: 1) information given by participants about their experiences of China’s cultural and socio-political contexts; 2) research literature focusing on Chinese
education. In the previous section, *Narrative Interviews*, I have discussed how I probed for details about the narrative components of participants’ stories. These details included the contextual details of participants’ experiences. My references to some of the sinological literature that focuses on the vicissitudes of contemporary Chinese education in the next chapter, Chapter 3, function as a backdrop for me and my readers in analyzing and understanding my and my participants’ schooling experiences.

There are many works that look into particular periods and aspects of Chinese education: Kwong (1979) on the interplay between education and economy and its impact in shaping education outcomes, Chen (1987) on two contrasting models as they reflect the nature, aims and processes of schooling and learning; Unger (1982) on differences between pre- and post-Cultural Revolution (1966-1976); Kwong (1988) on schools and students during the Cultural Revolution; Lin (1991, 1992, 1994) on people’s values, beliefs and behaviors in relation to China’s changing political, economic, cultural and educational life; Hayhoe (1999) on classical Chinese culture and epistemology that underpin the core values and patterns of education; Gu (2001) on evolution of changes in education system. These works and many others (e.g. Rosen, 1983, 1992; Ross, 1993; Chan, 1985), illustrate in various ways, how the field of education has related to and been influenced by the larger patterns of socio-cultural, political and economic changes. I will draw on these writings to contextualize my and my participants’ personal schooling experiences in terms of the historical, socio-political and economic influences of time and place to understand the complex interaction between my and my participant’s individual schooling experiences and the broader social and societal conditions so that insights into
the complexities, complications and confusions within the personal schooling experience may be achieved.

Contextualizing personal narratives in a way that the personal narratives are not just illustrations of sociological literature is something that has yet to be established in narrative research (Conle, personal communication). Carola Conle, my thesis supervisor and a narrativist, developed a two-way approach, *inside-out and outside-in*, to situate personal narratives in the relevant contexts. I was one of her research assistants in a funded project (Encounters of ethos: Students' experiences of media narratives and the empirical power of the imagination) and we had weekly team meetings. In one of these meetings, she began to develop a way of moving from the personal to the cultural and social. She illustrated this approach by drawing concentric circles on the board: the centre represents the personal, the inner circle represents the immediate or local context, and the outer circles represent the wider contexts, the political, the socio-cultural and the historical. *Inside-out* and *outside-in* are two possible points of departure in order to contextualize personal narratives —starting with “the personal” and moving to the wider contexts, inside-out; starting with the wider contexts and moving to “the personal.” Preferably, so Carola told us, we were to do this narratively: moving from one circle to the other through story telling.

I used this two-way approach to develop Chapter 3, *Understanding School Stories: Historical and Socio-political Settings of Our school Stories*, in which I provide a background for understanding and analyzing participants’ personal narratives. Initially, I sketched a timeline with the experiences of participants, major changes in China’s development and major changes in education. Participants’ school narratives were my
point of departure: I first plotted significant events in their lived experiences and then I looked for important socio-political and educational changes happening at the times. A timeline is a useful tool in that it provides a chronology of development in both the social and the personal. However, separate columns in a timeline make it difficult to make the connection between the personal and the social and the limited space in each column makes it difficult to elaborate on a particular period or aspect in the relevant contexts.

Then to provide more details needed for the understanding of the historical and socio-political background to participants’ lived experiences, I gave more textual information, in addition to the timeline. Starting from outside-in, I described the historical and socio-political settings against which participants’ experiences developed. I did not give a comprehensive account, but selected details that were relevant to my participants’ experiences.

Data representation

In constructing participants’ school narratives, my hope was to create profiles of the five Chinese students’ lived experience that would be understood in their own terms, as the way their lives unfolded. I first told participants’ stories in chronologic, third-person narrative. Yet I found that these third-person narratives seemed unnatural and gave me little sense of my participants. For example, my mother’s story first read like this:

My mother was born into a poor peasant’s family in the mountains in Shaanxi. When she was about five years old, she had no idea about what a school was, but went to school so that she could still play with her friend. There were only seven students in her class and mother was the youngest among them. At first, school was not easy for my
mother. She could not even count with her fingers. But mother did not give up. She worked hard and by the end of the first school term, she was the best student in her class.

I know my participants well, as I am their family member, school friend and family friend. When I read their words, I could “see” and “hear” them. It then occurred to me that in composing participants’ school stories, it was important to stick to the words of participants. In the subsequent writing and rewriting of the narrative accounts of participants’ schooling experiences, I became mindful of “seeing” and “hearing” them and I let their words to be heard verbatim as much as possible. What follows is the above version of my mother’s school story as presented in this thesis:

[...]One day a girl in the village came to my house and asked me to go to school with her. I barely had any idea what a school was like and I went with her, so that I could still play with her. … I was the youngest in the class, 4 and half or five years old. I didn’t know how to count. An older kid in the class told me to use my fingers, but I didn’t even know how to work with my own fingers. I was very frustrated and angry with myself. ‘I am not smart at all!’ I thought. (Laughs) But I was very determined and hard-working. By the end of the term, I got the first place in my class. It seemed nothing since there were only seven of us. But I was really proud of myself, given that I couldn’t even use my own fingers to count at the beginning. (Chapter 4)

“Seeing” and “hearing” my participants in my writing became “the point of connection between the story as told and the story as represented” (Will, 2001, p. 134). In the research text, my participants’ stories moved across life as they remembered and revealed them. Also, I learnt from my supervisor, Professor Carola Conle, that it was important to give contextual details in the research text. In this way, readers can
understand and will likely interpret a story differently, from their own divergent contextual frames.

**Data analysis**

Conle (2000) sees that “data collection and data analysis are one continuous process. They integrally construct the whole process of narrative inquiry” (p. 191). Preliminary data analysis began when I transcribed and translated the interviews. Questions and ideas were noted down, highlighting aspects which stood out for me and eventually were themes I explored to understand and interpret participants’ schooling experiences.

My and my participants’ personal schooling experiences, meanings we make of our school stories, are revealed through my interpretation. In the process of understanding and interpreting our life stories, I start with “the personal,” that is to say, let the data speak for itself, and weave the theoretical literature with my and my participants’ stories (Conle, personal communication) “to create a seamless link between the theory and practice embodied in the inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 41). In order to keep the flow of participants’ life stories and for participants’ school narratives to be read and understood in their own terms, I kept my interpretation and discussion of the school stories to the last two chapters in the thesis, Chapters 9 and 10. In the brief discussion after each participant’s school narrative, I highlight puzzles and themes that stood out and will be further explored. How I achieved understanding will also be discussed in Chapters 9 and 10.
My and my participants’ lived experiences are not closed or static (Connelly & Clandinin, 1994). For example, at the beginning of this chapter, I told my story of coming to terms with narrative inquiry. My story evolved as my understanding of narrative inquiry developed and my epistemological beliefs changed. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) put it, my narrative is “a continual unfolding where the narrative insights of today are the chronological events of tomorrow” (p. 9). The stories my participants and I told have the potential to be told and retold, lived and relived (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). This open-ended quality of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) provides us possibility and opportunity to search for meanings in our lived experiences and reflect on understandings of our own values and beliefs. This is what Dewey (1997) sees as the basis of all education, which he described as "reconstruction or reorganization of experiences which adds to the meaning of experience and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experiences” (p. 80). We learn from our experience in the continuous process of reorganizing and reformulating past experience in light of new experiences. Meanwhile, I hope that this thesis inquiry can be an invitation to my readers to experience our experiences vicariously (Conle, Li, & Tan, 2002) and set out to make meanings and understand their own values and beliefs. The value of narrative inquiry lies in that “interpretations can always be otherwise. There is a sense of tentativeness, usually expressed as a kind of uncertainty, about an event’s meaning” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 31).
Chapter 3
Understanding School Stories: Historical and Socio-political Settings of Our School Stories

In the previous two chapters, I have provided personal and theoretical backgrounds to this study. I focused on the puzzles and tensions that led to the current research topic, research questions and the methodological choice of narrative inquiry. This thesis study is an exploration of the cross-generational schooling experiences of six current and former Chinese students whose school stories happened at different times in China’s modern history, from 1949 to the present. Conle (2000) points out that understanding personal narratives necessarily involves “exploration of contexts and social interactions” (p. 191). In her view, personal lived experiences need to be positioned in the wider contexts and the reason to do so, in Carr (1986)’s words, is that “such a narrative context, connecting the individual with a larger social past, can be seen as contributing essentially to the sense, for the individual, not only of what he or she is doing but even more strongly of what the individual is” (p. 115).

In this chapter, to lay out the background of my and my participants’ schooling experiences, I first present a concise overview of the educational development under different social and political circumstances at different times in China’s modern history. Then I draw a timeline of the major events in China’s modern history, from 1949 to the present. This timeline serves as a reference guide to the events, changes and ideas useful to an understanding of participants’ personal and educational experiences in relation to
the changing socio-political and educational trends in the period during which my and my participants’ educational experiences have been developing.

1949 and the 1950s: Constructing the new China

On Oct. 1, 1949, Chairman Mao Zedong\textsuperscript{11} declared in Beijing that the People’s Republic of China was founded. The Communist Party made the official claim to have constructed an entire new society, as China ceased to be a divided country, prey to Western and Japanese imperialism. From that time until China started to open up to the outside world in 1978, China was shut off from the world except for its actual or potential allies in the communist and developing world (Fairbank, 1998).

Soon after 1949, the Chinese Communist Party began to reconstruct and build a national system of education. Educational institutions at various levels, including private schools and schools previously controlled by the Nationalist Party, were nationalized and new schools were built (Tsang, 2000). Chairman Mao emphasized the importance of educating those people who had been denied access to education in the past: women, poor peasants, workers and their children. His desire was to liberate China’s masses, peasants and workers, through education. He made them the major focus of educational policy (Kwong, 1979; Chen, 1987). Both my maternal and paternal grandparents were poor peasants in the countryside. They never went to school and were illiterate. But their

\textsuperscript{11} Mao Zedong (1893-1976) led the Chinese Communist Party in the civil war against the Guomindang Party (the Nationalist Party) and was the leader of the People’s Republic of China from 1949 until 1976. Known as “a revolutionary, political strategist, and military mastermind” (Short, 2000, p. 630), Chairman Mao is officially held in high regard in China. However, Mao is also blamed for his socio-political movements and programs, such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, which caused severe damage in culture, society, economy and the deaths of many Chinese people (Unger, 1982; Lin, 1991; Short, 2000).
children, my father, my mother and their siblings, were able to go to school, because of
the expanded access to education after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in
1949.

Priority was given to expanding and universalizing basic education, from Grade
One to Grade Six. A series of policies and programs against illiteracy was started among
the population in which an estimated 85 percent were illiterate. A major strategy was to
“walk on two legs”, meaning providing primary education by both government and non-
government groups and employing different forms of primary schooling, i.e. night
schools and work-study schools in the countryside (Unger, 1982). Since 1949, especially
after the issuing of the Compulsory Education Law in 1986 which stipulates that all
children over six years of age should have 9 years of schooling, the Chinese government
has made ongoing efforts to eradicate illiteracy and great progress has been achieved in
expanding access to basic education. The literacy rate rose from an estimated 15% in
1949 to a recorded 68% in 1982 (China Education Year Book, 1984). According to
educational statistics published by the National Bureau of Statistics of China in 2007,
basic education has been achieved among 94 percent of school-age children and youth,
48 percent of whom have completed nine-year compulsory education (the National

While priority was given to expanding access to basic education, the new
government also made vigorous efforts to accelerate secondary education and expand
access to higher education. In 1949, there were 832,000 secondary school students and by
1959, the number of secondary school students was 7,743,000. In November 1952, the
Ministry of Higher Education was set up to oversee admissions, placements of students,
management and finances. 20 new polytechnical colleges and 26 new engineering institutes were established by 1953 (Ministry of Education, 1998).

From 1949 to 1960, when China severed its political and economic ties with the (former) Soviet Union, China vigorously followed the (former) Soviet model of education. This model stressed central planning and the specialized training of personnel in practical subjects, especially natural sciences. Following the Soviet practices, teaching plans, teaching materials and textbooks and grading procedures were all regularized and prescribed from the central government. Many comprehensive universities were broken into specialist colleges and institutes, each of which was under the direct administration of the central ministry in the field. A large translation program was set up to publish the Chinese editions of Soviet textbooks for use in schools (Lin, 1994) and the teaching of English as a second language gave way to the teaching of Russian in schools.

In 1958, Chairman Mao Zedong launched the Great Leap Forward movement to transform China from an agrarian country to a modern communist society. Chinese people were mobilized in nation-wide efforts to simultaneously accelerate the country’s industry and agriculture development to catch up with and even exceed the capitalist countries such as the Great Britain and the United States. The zealotry for increases in production led to unrealistic targets and false statistics sent to the central government. The requisitions of grain from the villages were increased and collected just at a time when the farmers had had trouble getting in harvests because of the diversion of labor

12 The Great Leap Forward was certainly a move away from the Soviet model, though formal relations may only have ended in 1960.
power as well as poor weather (Fairbank, 1998). Tragically, the movement resulted in economic disaster and famine. From 1958 to 1961, millions of people\(^\text{13}\) died of hunger and malnutrition.

During the period of the Great Leap Forward, the political and ideological function of education was emphasized and there was a substantial expansion of access to education for children with peasant and working-class background (Chen, 1987). To make education available to the masses, thousands of new schools were established on a work-study basis. In these schools, regular curriculum was reduced from 12 years to 10 years and textbooks were rewritten to simplify the content of education. These schools operated on flexible schedules so that children with work at home or in the field could attend. There were half-day schools and schools with special morning, afternoon or evening classes. Many peasants and workers with only a few years of schooling were brought into teaching positions in these schools. Inevitably, these work-study schools had a lower academic standard (Unger, 1982; Fairbank, 1998). Meanwhile, to maintain standards and continue to train skilled personnel in the regular school system of middle schools and universities, key schools were established, where the best students, teaching staff and equipments were concentrated. Since then, key schools in the educational system have been considered superior to regular schools, mainly because key schools usually have a high admission rate to colleges and universities. The middle school Qian and I went to was such a key school and it boasted that its students already had one foot

\(^{13}\) China’s official record of the deaths during the Great Leap Forward years (1958-1961) was 14 million. But scholars (e.g. Peng, 1987; Yang, 1996) have estimated the number of famine victims to be between 20 and 43 millions.
inside university doors. The younger participants in this study, Yuanyuan and Didi, have been trying hard to get into a key school at the next higher level ever since they started school to increase their chance to pass the college entrance examinations when they graduate from high school. The development of key schools in China’s education system and their role in the current push for Chinese students to pursue academic excellence will be further explored in Chapter 9.

It has been noted that from the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 to 1965, the educational policies and innovations were characterized by efforts to expand Chinese people’s access to education and thus bridge the centuries-old gap between the ruling class who worked with their brain and the masses who worked with physical strength (Kwong, 1979; Chen, 1987; Lin, 1991, 1992).

Traditionally, China had had an Imperial Civil Examination System that lasted for 1300 years, from the 7th century to 1905 (Ren & Xue, 2003). Through this system, individuals entered the imperial bureaucracy and became scholar-officials. These scholar-officials were privileged and respected. They were considered superior to the masses with little education and no official appointment. Even after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, which was officially claimed to be a totally new country, the entrance to universities was still based on examination scores, much the same as in the old times. The result of the new effort – trying to bring education to the vast masses in

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14 The traditions of examination and their lingering influence on parents and students’ attitudes toward education and experiences of schooling will be further discussed in the rest of the thesis, especially Chapter 9.
the new work-study schools while continuing to train the “necessary elite” (Fairbank, 1998, p. 377) in the established system where advancement was based on meritocracy, was that by the mid-1960s, China’s educational system became bifurcated, consisting of work-study schools and regular schools. Regular schools, including key schools, had higher academic standards and could lead to college education. The work-study schools, mostly attended by children of peasants, had the reputation of being inferior channels for advancement, as students and their families realized that attending work-study schools could lead only to an “educated peasant status” (Fairbank, 1998, p.377) and social mobility had to be achieved through the regular school system.

**1966-1976: The Cultural Revolution**

After the Great Leap Forward, there was a brief period (1961-1965) called the Adjustment Period when Chairman Mao relinquished his control of the party to Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. Liu and Deng introduced policy adjustments in both the economy and education. Their approach to national development was much less political and ideological than it had been during the Great Leap Forward, with more focus on the development and application of science and technology (Tsang, 1997). In 1966, Chairman Mao got control of the party again and stayed in power until his death in 1976. He returned to his emphasis on ideological conformity and egalitarianism (Unger, 1982; Chen, 1987) as he saw “the achievement of political consciousness, ideological devotion to communism and human liberation as the primary goal of the development of Chinese people and the education system should serve for promoting social equality” (Tsang, 2000, p. 4). Mao alleged that liberal bourgeoisie elements were dominating the party and insisted that they needed to be removed through post-revolutionary class struggle.
(Fairbank, 1998). He launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966. The Cultural Revolution period, 1966-1976, was a period of widespread social and political upheaval. Mao’s political opponents, such as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, who held critical opinions on his social movements and mass-mobilization tactics, were purged, peasants and workers were elevated and intellectuals were oppressed. Millions of people, identified as spies, bad elements, capitalist-roaders or anti-revolutionaries, were subject to persecution. Much economic activity was halted, with revolution and class struggle as the primary goal of the country. In education, the whole system came to a halt. Elementary and secondary schools were closed for three years and universities were closed down for six years (1966-1972). The mass movement in the Cultural Revolution featured the participation of millions of the Red Guards, teenage students and youths, mobilized and manipulated to support the revolutionary attack on the “Four Olds” – old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits, through destructive activities. Then in 1968, when the chaos created by the Red Guards became violent and out of control, Chairman Mao disbanded the Red Guards and sent the students to the countryside to be re-educated by the peasants (Chan, 1985; Jin, 1991). This led to an entire generation of inadequately educated people. When the Cultural Revolution was underway, the party made “two estimations” on education from 1949-1966. It declared that: 1) Chairman Mao’s proletariat education policy was not implemented because education in those 17 years

15 The intelligentsia in China referred to the scholars who passed certain levels of the Civil Examinations, whether they held an official appointment or not. After 1949, intellectuals referred to people with high-school education and above.

16 For the political socialization and activity of the Red Guards, interested readers can go to the original sources.
before the Cultural Revolution had been controlled by the capitalist roaders; 2) the majority of intellectuals were bourgeois intellectuals and had a capitalist world view (Grieder, 1981). During the Cultural Revolution, many intellectuals were denounced, publicly humiliated and sent to labor camps in the countryside.

Universities started to reopen in 1972 and major changes took place in university admission, curriculum development and students’ involvement in administration and management. The college entrance examinations that had been in place from 1949 to 1966, were cancelled and the entrance procedures changed to facilitate the admission of workers, peasants and soldiers. Admissions were based upon political attitudes and work background. University candidates could be considered only when they had at least two years experiences in the factories, countryside or the military and were recommended by authorities. University study was shortened from the former 4-5 years to 3 years and most examinations were abolished. Because the “worker-peasant-soldier students” (工农兵学员) were considered the best from the various sectors of the working class, they were included in the university administration and played an active role in running the universities. These changes led to a popular attitude that despised serious learning of academic subjects and a seemingly prevailing belief that academic knowledge was useless (Lin, 1992).

1976 – the present: The period of reform and opening-up

Mao Zedong died in September 1976 and the Cultural Revolution officially ended in October 1976 with the arrest of the four most important figures of the movement, including the late Chairman Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing.
On December 18, 1978, the Third Plenum of the 11th Chinese Communist Party Congress was held. It marked the formal beginning of the reform era and the reversal of Mao Zedong’s policies. The classic party line calling for class struggle was officially exchanged for one promoting the Four Modernizations. Four Modernizations refer to the modernizations of agriculture, industry, technology and national defense.

Deng Xiaoping was elected vice Chairman of the Party and hence led China on to a course of opening up to the outside world and economic reform that welcomed profit-incentive systems and private enterprise. With a focus on economic development, China was “transformed from an isolated, poor, rural, and politically turbulent country into a relatively open, stable, urbanizing, and modernizing nation” (Goldman, 2006, p. 424).

In education, the college entrance examinations were resumed in 1977, key schools reappeared in the education system, and the government started to send students for graduate studies in the United States and other Western countries.

The persistent major goal in education since 1978 has been to provide expanded access for children and adults of various backgrounds and prepare skilled personnel for the developing economy. But many secondary vocational schools were converted to general secondary schools, closed down or turned into factories during the Cultural Revolution because the diversified structure of secondary education was thought to promote social differentiation and elitism. The purpose of eliminating vocational schools was to make students equal by providing every student the opportunity to receive liberal arts education (Lin, 1994). When the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, only less than 1 percent of upper-secondary students were in vocational education (Yang, 1997). In 1985,
the Party Central Committee issued the “Decision on the Reform of the Education System”. This document called for re-vocationalization of the upper-secondary education to meet the increased demand of skilled workers and technicians created by sustained economic growth (Tsang, 2000; Yang, 1997).

The document also called for changes in higher education, including more autonomy at the university administrative level. The document stated that

…under the prerequisites of abiding by the state policies and law and carrying out the state plan, universities have the rights to recruit students outside the state enrollment plan, such as training students on the basis of contracts with work units and self-supported students; to readjust the orientations of service of specialties, work out their own teaching plans and teaching programs, and compile or select presidents at the school level and other officials at lower levels; to make detailed plans on the utilization of the capital investments and operational funds earmarked to them by the state; to allocate the self-collected funds. (The development of education in China, 1986, cited in Lin, 1994, p. 73)

These policy directives gave more flexibility and decision-making power to the university.

In 1993, the Party Central Committee issued the Outline of Education Reform. This document emphasized the implementation of nine-year compulsory education and the eradication of youth and adult illiteracy. It also proposed Project 211:17 to make some 100 key universities world-class universities by the 21st century. Project 211 is an

endeavor aimed at strengthening about 100 institutions of higher education and key disciplinary areas as a national priority for the 21st century. Universities included in the project have priority in getting funding from the central government and matching funding from the local government.

In 1999, the State Council\textsuperscript{18} issued an *Action Plan for Education Development and Decision on Furthering the Education Reform and Promoting Quality-Oriented Education*. It was intended as the fundamental blueprint for governments at all levels and parties involved in education to speed up education development and reform. This document called for the implementation of quality-education at all levels and the reform of pedagogy to encourage students’ independent thinking and creativity. Its policy goals were straightforward: to cultivate students’ creativity and problem-solving abilities over fostering the abilities to memorize rote-knowledge and achieve high scores in examinations.

\textsuperscript{18} The State Council, namely the Central People’s Government, is the highest administrative authority of China. It is chaired by the Premier, and includes heads of each of the governmental ministries.
## A Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>PARTICIPANTS</th>
<th>SOCIO-POLITICAL EVENTS</th>
<th>EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1949-</td>
<td>Father and Mother went to schools in the countryside of Shaanxi Province.</td>
<td>On Oct. 1, 1949, Chairman Mao Zedong declared in Beijing that the People’s Republic of</td>
<td>The party expanded education in the country, aiming to eradicate illiteracy. Old-style</td>
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<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Father’s family fell into the category of “lower middle peasant” and mother’s</td>
<td>was founded. Land reform in which land was redistributed to the poor and the landless was</td>
<td>style schools, many of which still taught Confucian classics, were common. Higher</td>
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<td></td>
<td>family was categorized as “Poor Peasant”. Both father and mother’s Hukou</td>
<td>carried out nationwide. During land reform, the rural population was classified according</td>
<td>education was remolded, along the Soviet Russian lines. Secondary and postsecondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>registration said they were classified as “Agricultural”.</td>
<td>to class categories, landlord, rich peasant, poor peasant…. These class categories</td>
<td>graduates received mandatory job assignments from the state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>were allocated to families based on how much land they used to own. The categories</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>became a fixed part of the family’s status for decades to come and they were inherited</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>in the male line. Such class-designation was highly consequential for the life chances</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>of the subsequent generation since “bad-class” families were discriminated and</td>
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</table>
scapegoated and “good-class” families were favored (Hutchings, 2000). Meanwhile, a Hukou system (resident registration) was established. The system identified every member of the population as either “agricultural” or “non-agricultural” and the approved location of their residence, classified as “rural” or “urban”, in a specific city, town or village. Housing and the right to send children to school depended on such registration. Urban and rural registrations have been hereditary, inherited from the mother.
| 1950’s | Father went to medical school in Xi’an, the provincial capital. Mother went to the nursing school affiliated with the medical school. Their tuition and living expenses were covered by the state. They received job assignments in the same hospital in Xi’an upon graduation. Mother and father had urban residential Hukou since then. They were categorized as “cadres”. In 1959, Mother was recommended to attend medical school because of her excellent performance. | Chairman Mao launched the Great Leap Forward movement. The whole nation was mobilized in efforts of unparalleled magnitude to produce grain and steel to catch up with and even exceed the capitalist countries such as the Great Britain and the United States. (Gittings, 2005; Hutchings, 2000) | Intellectuals who criticized party policies in the “one hundred flower” movement in 1955 were labeled “bourgeois intellectual”. Mass education, especially in the countryside, was designed to end illiteracy and to educate a new type of worker-peasant intellectuals to take the place of those politically damned bourgeois intellectuals (Hutchings, 2000). |
| 1966-1976 | Because of father’s lack of enthusiasm and different opinions of the Cultural Revolution, father and mother were labeled as ‘rightist’. Father’s family in the countryside was reclassified as “Rich Peasant”. Father was not allowed to see patients for almost ten years. Mother was | The Cultural Revolution was a ten-year political campaign aimed at rekindling revolutionary fervor and purifying the party. Much economic activity was halted, with “revolution” being the primary objective. Government administrations were paralyzed. Millions of Chinese suffered and were forced in manual labor | The whole education system was paralyzed and suspended formal operations. Students became the “Red Guards” and attacked the experts, technocrats, the so-called “intellectuals” who were criticized for “taking the
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>The national college entrance exams were reestablished.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>My friend Qian and I were both born in 1973. We were to start elementary school in 1979. Father was rehabilitated and got his job back in the hospital.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>On December 18, 1978, the Third Plenum of the 11th Chinese Communist Party Congress was held. It is considered a major turning point in China’s political history. The classic party line calling for protracted class struggle was officially exchanged for one promoting the Four Modernizations. “The fundamental task of the party in the new historical period is to build China into a modern, powerful socialist country by the end of the twentieth century.” (Ethridge, 1990, p. 135)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The party’s development strategy, the Four Modernizations, required experts in all fields. Many bourgeois intellectuals disgraced during the Cultural Revolution were rehabilitated and sent back to work. The government started to send students to study overseas.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Deng Xiaoping was elected vice Chairman of the Party and hence pointed China on to a course of reform and opening to the West, welcoming profit-incentive systems and private enterprise. The **one-child-policy** was enforced in 1979.

| 1980’s | My friend Qian and I finished elementary school in 1985, passed tests to a key secondary school and again did well enough in the tests to stay in the same school for high school in 1988. Father and mother got promoted and were assigned a new apartment in 1985. |
| Party Chairman Deng Xiaoping calls for political reform (Gittings, 2005). Special economic zones where new and flexible economic policies were carried out to attract foreign investment were founded in four cities in Southern China. Free market reforms were carried out first in China’s rural economy, and then extended to industry. |
| In 1985, the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued “Decision on the Reform of the Educational System” as a guideline for educational reform. The document pointed out serious shortcomings in the system, including lack of compulsory education, shortage of schools and qualified teachers, and outdated textbooks. In 1986, the National People’s Congress adopted a |
| 1990’s | I passed the college entrance exams in 1991. My friend Qian went to join the Marine in South China later that year. I chose a teaching job in a college in 1995. Qian earned a Bachelor’s degree in 1999. Didi and my nephew Yuanyuan were born in 1992. They started elementary school in 1998. Father and mother retired from the hospital in 1999. | Hong Kong and Macau were reunited with mainland China in 1997 and 1999 respectively. China’s economy started to increase in two digits in 1992. Legislative infrastructure for legal protection of the right of all to education has been developed, starting with the Act on Protection of Rights of Pre-adulthood in 1991, the Regulations on Education for the Disabled in 1994; and in 1995 China’s Education Law. The job assignment system for college graduate ended in 1993. University students began to pay |
| The new millennium | I went to Canada to do graduate studies in 2000. Qian was promoted to be the department manager at work in 2002. Didi and my nephew Yuanyuan finished elementary school in 2004. They finished junior middle school and passed the exams to the senior middle school in 2007. They will take the college entrance exams in 2010. Father has been working in a hospital for mine workers in the countryside since 2006. | China came through the SARS epidemic in 2003. China held the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. In 2005, China announced its Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2006-2010), which shifts the economic emphasis from strengthening large cities to a plan for national economic and social development aimed at rural areas (Hom and Mosher, 2007). | According to a special plan, college enrollment expanded and university students accounted for 15 percent of school students in 2005. Over 90 percent of children in the age group entered junior high school in 2005. |

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Since the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949, educational changes have been inextricably linked to the changes in the larger society. There has been a substantial gain in literacy and considerable expansion of the education system. There was also the loss of education of a whole generation during the Cultural Revolution. There were times when intellectuals and professionals were highly respected and considered contributors to the construction of new China. There were also times when the same intellectuals and professionals were denounced and sent to labor camps to be reeducated through heavy labor. China’s education development in the past six decades has been characterized by big changes, reversals and controversies. These changes reflected the efforts of the different policy-makers’ different approaches to China’s educational development in modern China’s changing socio-political and economic environment. Radical as these changes might be, they did not really break away from certain ideas and practices that have been part of China’s cultural and educational tradition for thousands of years. For example, historically, examinations have played a crucial role in education in that the Civil Service Examinations were an important path for upward social mobility. Though the Imperial Civil Service Examinations were abolished in 1905, its influence on Chinese culture, education, and people’s behavior and thinking still continues. The College Entrance Examinations, which are considered the modern variation of the Imperial Civil Service Examinations, remain the most important aspect of a student’s education because they are thought to be the bridge to a successful life. Being able to pass the College Entrance Examinations is a symbol of a student’s success. The form of examinations has evolved to be different in modern China, but the function of the examinations remains the same - it is pretty much the only criterion for
advancement in the educational system. Consequently, liberal arts subjects, such as Chinese Language Arts and Mathematics, which are tested at all levels of examinations, are emphasized in school curricula to an extent that the purpose of schooling becomes examination preparation. My data present convincing personal testimony that test scores determine a student’s future from an early age. Educational reforms and policies (i.e. the 1985 reform that called for a diversified education system and emphasized the importance of vocational education, as well as the 1993 and 1999 reforms that called for the implementation of quality-oriented education at all levels) have been targeting the negative consequences of China’s test-oriented education, such as overemphasis on rote knowledge, knowledge transmission and the heavy coursework burden on both teachers and students. Yet as my participants report, the problems have persisted, as academic excellence is still valued and rewarded by people around them. The narratives in my study suggest that there seem to be discrepancies between what the policy-makers perceive to be important and how Chinese culture values and evaluates education.

It was in the social and historical settings I briefly outline above that my and my participants’ schooling experiences developed. What happened in our educational situations? How do we make meaning of our educational experiences in these social and historical contexts? These questions are not only questions of interest to my and my participants’ personal concerns, they are questions linked to the social concerns in the wider contexts. With these questions, I turn to my participants’ school stories in the next few chapters and hope to find the “connecting threads” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 35) that link our personal experiences to the “larger questions of social significance” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 121).
Chapter 4  
My Mother’s Story

Coming out of a village hiding in the mountains

The music took me back to the village where my aunt and her family live. It was the place where my mum lived before she moved to Xi’an to attend medical school. We went for there in the summer of 1998. … In my mother’s words, the village was hiding in the mountains. It was true. After a thirteen-hour train ride and one hour bus ride, mother and I still walked about two hours in the mountains to get to my aunt’s house. … My aunt’s house was surrounded by trees. It had been raining heavily before and there were several mud slides. People in the village were helping each other repair houses. My aunt’s house was in a place like a basin and all I could see from her yard were trees. Aunt and uncle would not let me go out because it was still slippery. I could hear people talking, singing and their dogs barking on the mountain road, but I could not locate where they were. (Jia, 2004)

I was transported to the mountain village in Hanzhong where my mother came from by a piece of music I heard as part of a class exercise in 2004 in OISE. My mother’s village in Shaanxi is locked in the Qin Mountains lying in the south of the province. Two big rivers, the Han River and the Jialing River wander through the area. Potentially one of the richest areas in the province, with large reserves of water, forest, precious stones, medical herbs, and a wonderful biosphere with about 15 national reserves, the area has remained poor and underdeveloped. Its economy has been based on farming, tea and fruit

\[\text{20 Xi’an is the provincial capital of Shaanxi.}\]
Among the 30 provinces in mainland China, Shaanxi has never ranked higher than 27 in terms of farmers’ annual household income from 1978 to 2004 and Hanzhong has always been at the bottom of the province’s own ranking list (The People’s Government of Shaanxi Province). In my mother’s village, electricity became available only a few years ago and there was no paved way to the outside. Literally, it is difficult to get out of the village. Fifty years ago, how did my mother, the younger daughter of a poor peasant’s family, walk out of the mountains to become a doctor?

Of course it’s because of schooling and education. If I hadn’t gone to school, I would have stayed in the village, got married at the age of 15, 16 and never got the chance to know what the world outside the mountains was like.

Mother is the younger daughter of her family. Both her parents were illiterate. In the poor village, if any youngster got to go to school, it had to be the son. In the old days, girls were expected to stay at home, learn to do various kinds of housework and help in the fields until the time they were married out. It did not matter whether a girl could read or write. It was more important that she knew how to cook, sew and take care of crops in the field. Though my mother has no brother, it was still quite unusual for her parents to send a daughter to school. How did mother manage to start school?

I was not sent to school by your grandparents. One day a girl in the village came to my house and asked me to go to school with her. I barely had any idea what a school was like, but I went with her so that I could still play with her.

It was in the middle of the school year and all together there were seven children in mother’s class.
I was the youngest in the class, four and half or five years old. I didn’t know how to count. An older kid in the class told me to use my fingers, but I didn’t even know how to work with my own fingers. I was very frustrated and angry with myself. ‘I am not smart at all!’ I thought (laughs). But I was very determined and hard-working. By the end of the term, I got the first place in my class. It seemed nothing since there were only seven of us. But I was really proud of myself, given that I couldn’t even use my own fingers to count at the beginning.

Mother liked school and began to do well at school work. However, going to school was not at all an easy task for her.

My school was five li\textsuperscript{21} away in another village. I had to get up really early in the morning to get to school on time. There was no clock in our house and your grandma had to make out the time by looking at the sun, the moon or the stars. Summer was okay, but fall and winter could be really bad, especially when the weather was not good. Sometimes grandma woke me up too early. When I arrived school, no one was there, and I had to wait. It was dark and cold. Fortunately, I always went to school with the girl who told me about school. She was two or three years older than I and we lived in the same village. Without her, your grandma probably wouldn’t let me go to school. I was too little to walk the five li mountain road to and from school by myself and no one in the family would have the time to walk me.

In a peasant’s family, everything revolved around the work in the field, with the changes of seasons. Everything a family needed depended on what they could get from the land. The peasants in my mother’s village had no modern machines or tools, such as

\textsuperscript{21} One li is half a kilometer.
combines or tractors. They had only their hands and some very primitive tools, like hoes and sickles. To just feed themselves and their families meant that they had to work from sunrise to sunset in the fields everyday. This has been one of the reasons why the rate of school enrollment in rural areas is always much lower than that in the city. Children, even at a very young age, are counted on as help for the heavy labor in the fields as well as at home (Thogersen, 2002). Children usually start with work at home, baby-sitting younger siblings, feeding chickens and ducks and cooking. When they get a little bit older, they will go out to pick firewood in the nearby woods and learn to grow crops in the fields. Usually, a family cannot afford the cost of school, plus a child not helping at home or in the fields. If a child is going to be a peasant anyway, there is no point “wasting” time and money in school. It is kind of risky if a child goes to school, spends all the time and money, yet cannot do well enough at school to continue to a point where she or he will be able to pursue other careers. In the rural areas, it is not uncommon that children drop out of school at the elementary level after they learn to write their names and do some basic calculation. I wondered why mother got the chance to be schooled for what must have seemed to be too long for a girl. How could her family afford to have her in school?

At that time, it hardly cost anything to go to school. There was no tuition fee. We [students] brought our own desks, stools and oil lamps to use at school. I don’t remember if we even had any textbooks. I didn’t buy any exercise books. I made my own. I bought a large piece of paper for just a few cents and cut it into small pieces. Now with the stapler, it’s just one punch, and you have an exercise book. At that time, I had to make holes along one side of the sheets with a big needle. It was not an easy task, especially if you wanted to make it look neat. I stitched those pieces together and I got an exercise book. It was cheaper than buying exercise
I was only five at that time. Now, it’s hard to imagine that a five-year-old would take care of her own schooling. What else did I need? Just a brush pen and some ink. …You know that your grandparents didn’t know how to read and write. Though they didn’t count on me to be of any help at home, they didn’t know or care much about what was happening at my school. It didn’t matter how well I did at school.

Mother was not discouraged by the initial setbacks at school and did better and better. In elementary school, she had three subjects – Chinese, math and one called “the comprehensive”. In the comprehensive class, mother was taught to make things. She remembers that she learnt to cut hairs from the pigs my grandmother raised and make a brush. She also learnt knitting and embroidery in that class. Moreover, students were also taught some farming skills in that class. There was a vegetable patch in the school yard. Once all students were asked to bring a hoe from home and learn how to plant vegetables. At that time, mother was shorter than a regular hoe, so her teacher suggested that she should bring a small one. Mother went home and asked grandma to give her a small hoe to take to school. Grandma had no such hoe and mother used tears as her weapon, to force grandma to get her one. Grandma went from door to door in their village to see if anyone had a child size hoe. She did find one and borrowed it for mother.

For me, there was nothing more important than a teacher’s words. I felt that I had to do exactly what the teacher said. My teacher liked me and I didn’t want to disappoint him in even the smallest way. It wouldn’t matter at all if I could work with a regular hoe. But if my teacher said a small one, I had to bring a small one. I was a silly kid (laughs).

Mother took her school seriously and she finished primary school in four years. Primary school used to take 5 years and starting in the middle 1980’s, it became a six-
year program. Mother said that it was because she was in a small village, and the rules were not taken so seriously. Moreover, she had a new teacher every year. When the new teacher came, he or she would rearrange the classes according to students’ proficiency. Since mother was one of the best students, she was “up-graded” a couple of times by different teachers.

The nearest middle school was fifty *li* (25 kilometers) away from home in a small town. Mother had to live in school and eat in the school canteen. Students had to pay the school for food and lodging at school, in rice or cash. Mother went back home once a week to get rice for the next week. At the beginning, she was still too young to walk the 50 *li* home. She had to find a horse cart going from the town to her village. When there was no horse cart going, she had to stay and ask a friend to take a message home so that her sister, who was only three years older, would bring the rice to her school. Going to school became harder and cost more.

*If I ate at home, I could always eat potatoes, yams when there was not enough rice. But to eat at the school canteen, I could only pay in rice. Grandma and grandpa didn’t get much rice from the commune and then they had to give most of the rice to me to bring to school. But I still had to pay for the dorm and the books. They [the school] didn’t charge much for books and lodging, but it was hard for your grandparents to get the money because they hardly had any way to get cash. Their labor in the commune was paid in potatoes, yams, rice, vegetable oil, and a little pork for the Lunar New Year. At that time, your aunt really helped me a lot. She knew how to make shoes from a very strong type of grass. She made grass shoes in the evening, sold them in town on market days and gave all the money to me. She couldn’t spend the whole day making shoes. She had to cook, clean the house, wash clothes in the river, and feed our ducks and pigs*
first. She then went to the woods to cut the grass, dry it and make shoes whenever she had time away from house work. She could make ten to fifteen pairs of grass shoes a month and get one yuan [currently about 20 cents of a Canadian dollar] for them. She was only three years older than I.

Though it was extremely difficult for their family to support mother, grandpa and grandma never asked mother to drop out of school. It was mother who felt guilty about making their already hard family life harder by going to school.

*It was stressful when I was in middle school. It was not because I got stuck with any school subjects or because school work was heavy. I was still the top student and well liked by my teachers. I felt uneasy because my schooling became my father, mother, and sister’s burden. They never complained or asked me to quit to save money. But knowing that they had to save rice for me and work extra hard to get me tuition fee was like having a big stone on my heart every day. I felt guilty. They were laboring in the field day after day to make money for me to sit in a classroom, doing ‘nothing.’ Though I did well at school, I didn’t know if it was worth my family’s hard work and sacrifice. I didn’t know what my schooling would give them in return.*

Middle school was different. Not only did it cost more and was far from home, but also it had diverse students, in terms of their family background. Some students had one or both parents working in the town government or in a factory in the nearby city, Hanzhong. Some students were from families that owned small businesses in town. These students did not have to worry about tuition fees or other costs of school. They dressed better, and their family could always get them enough and good food. They were better off and they only needed to take care of their studies.
In my primary school, everyone was from a similar background. What
made the difference was the school work. But in middle school, there were
differences in what one wore, what pen one used, and if one always got
snacks. I was one of the poorest students. I didn’t think I was jealous of
those who had more. But looking at them made me feel even guiltier about
my family. I knew what it took for my family to support me in school. It
was a huge sacrifice for my mama, papa and sister. How could I feel at
ease to sit in the same school with those for whom going to school was
almost nothing financially to their family?

Mother did not know how long her family could support her. If they could no
longer afford her schooling before she graduated and got a salary-paying job in town or
in the nearby city, she would have to go back to her village to be a farmer, like her
parents and sister. If that was what she was going to do anyway, there was no point for
her to stay in school. She did not need Chinese, math or geometry to be a peasant. To
earn her living as a peasant, mother needed a whole other set of skills which she could
learn from her parents and other villagers. Mother was struggling everyday with the
question whether or not to continue with school:

Finally, I decided to quit. I felt sorry because I couldn’t help your
grandparents and aunt with anything and I was a burden to them. The
pressure that all the time and money I put into schooling could end up
with nothing was too much to bear. I didn’t tell anyone and I just left
school.

Mother came back to her home in the village. It was in her third year in middle
school. Grandpa and grandma did not encourage her to go back and continue. As mother
said, her schooling was totally up to her. When she wanted to go to school, grandpa and
grandma let her. When she decided to come back, they understood. Grandpa and grandma
were loving parents. They let mother decide what was best for her and supported what she was doing. Mother loved her parents and did not want to add to their already heavy burden of raising a family. She was not forced to leave school. It was uncertain in what way her education would do good to herself and to her family. She made the choice of leaving school because that would give some immediate relief to their family’s financial situation.

_I was lucky that my teacher really cared about me. He was my Chinese teacher. He noticed that I left school and came to my home to persuade my parents to let me go back to school. Can you believe that my teacher walked 50 li to a student’s house to get her back to school? I was not home when he came. I forgot what I was doing at the time. Your grandma and aunt were home. He told them that I had been doing great at school. It would be a waste of my talents if I just quit and farmed at home. He assured your grandma that I would achieve much more than being a peasant if I could go on with my school. He promised that he would talk to the principal and get me a bursary to help with the cost of books and food._

The teacher’s visit was breaking news in my mother’s village. By the time mother got home later that day, almost everyone in the village knew that she did so well at school that her teacher walked 50 _li_ to ask her to go back to school.

_That teacher’s words were powerful. Everyone thought that mother should go back to school and she did. The teacher’s visit became almost a legend in mother’s village. For many years, it was remembered and mentioned to mother whenever she went to visit her family._
Mother got a small bursary soon after she returned to school. The bursary was a tiny amount of money, but mother was really happy. In her situation, that money was a big help. At least she did not have to worry about the tuition fee. It was then that mother made up her mind to concentrate on finishing middle school and to later use her education to improve the living conditions of her family.

I had liked school all the way before I decided to quit. I can’t tell exactly why I liked school. Maybe it was because what we did at school was different from what I saw your grandparents do at home and in the fields. Anyway, the better I did at school, the better I liked it. But I had little idea how I could use my education or why one needed to be at school. At first, the reason I wanted to continue was because I wanted to continue to do what I was good at. Your grandparents seldom encouraged or pushed me to be good at school work. Though at that time, the early 1950’s, kids, especially girls were encouraged to attend school because of the new government’s policy, people in the village didn’t take their children’s education very seriously. If their children did okay at school, fine. If their children didn’t do very well, or wanted to stop, it was all right as well. Your aunt went to school for a short period. She felt she was not ‘school material’ and just quit. No one thought that was a big deal. You don’t need a formal education to be a peasant. But if you don’t want to be a peasant, you must take school seriously. I heard your grandma and other village people talk about her father, my grandfather. He was a learned man and worked as an official of some kind in the Guo Min Dang (the Nationalist Party) government. He passed away before I was born. But I could tell from the way people talked about him that they admired him and

22 The People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, after the Communist Party won the civil war with the Nationalist party.
respected him: ‘He didn’t have to labor in the fields as us. He just did things.’ I never really know what things my grandpa had done, but I kind of admired him too and wanted to become a person like him.

Though mother wanted to be like the grandfather she never met, she could not see any connection between going to school and becoming a person like her grandfather. When she first started school, mother did not have a goal about learning. Then having experienced dropping out of school and going back, she became determined that she would pursue education until she had a better life. She would “do things” as her grandfather had done.

That my Chinese teacher walked 50 li to my house instilled in me a lot of confidence. I felt I had the ability to change my fate through school because my teacher believed in me, or he wouldn’t just walk those 50 li. It’s 100 li round trip on the mountain road. If I could get into a technician program, after I graduated from high school, I would be able to work in a factory and earn a salary. I wanted a better life. At that time, a better life meant having an ‘easy’ job – a job easier than laboring in the field all year round and a job that could give me and my family enough food.

Mother graduated from high school with honor. She did not take the university entrance exams. No one doubted that she could have passed the exams. But mother did not want to spend another four or five years in school. She knew that every university student had a bursary that could cover all the cost at school, textbooks, paper, pen, etc. Food and bed were free. But that was not enough for mother. She wanted to be of help to her family. She wanted a salaried job that could help her family.
Mother was admitted to several programs, among them a nursing program in Xi’an, the provincial capital and an apprentice program in a factory in the nearest city, Hanzhong. Without too much thinking, mother picked the apprentice program. It was a paid program and the factory was not very far from home. Her plan was that she would save money from the pay and go home to help with their crops on weekends.

But everyone thought that I should go to Xi’an, to the big city. At that time, I had never been to any city. The nearest city to my village, Hanzhong, sounded good and big enough for me. But one of my teachers, I forgot what subject he was teaching, had been to Xi’an and described Xi’an to me. I did want to have a look at the city, the wide, paved streets, the big buildings, the cars, and much more. Moreover, being a nurse was better than being a worker in that the work environment in a hospital would be nicer. But still I wanted to do something to get paid as soon as possible.

When grandma and grandpa learnt that mother had the chance to study in the big city, they encouraged her to go.

Your grandparents said that I didn’t have to worry about them. We had been poor all the time and my going to school in Xi’an wouldn’t make the situation any worse. It was a great opportunity that not everyone could have. They were proud of me because I was the first one in the village who graduated from high school. They wanted me to go for better things.

Mother packed up for her trip to Xi’an: one old blanket, some clothes, and 5 yuan that her family saved from selling rice and grass shoes for a train ticket. She was fifteen.

A nursing student in Xi’an

Mother came to Xi’an and began her life there as a student.
I was very nervous and afraid that people would look down upon me. It’s funny that I didn’t even know how to walk in the city. I had always walked on the bumpy mountain roads and I had been fine. But on the flat, paved city streets, it felt like I would trip over something. I had no idea of the directions in the city. I didn’t know how to take a bus or where to go. I stayed at school all the time. … My school was affiliated with a medical school, and all the students in the nursing program were girls. Six of us shared a dorm. There was no tuition fee. Food and lodging were free. Food in the school canteen was much better than that at home. I could have some meat every day. And the school canteen staff were extremely nice. When a student was ill, they would come to the dorm to ask what she wanted to eat, cook something separately and then bring the meal to the bed.

Mother loved her school. She felt that there was no reason not to study hard.

In my school in Xi’an, I had sufficient and good food. I lived in a warm dorm room. I even got two yuan of pocket money from the school every month. There was really no excuse not to work hard. I studied really hard. Actually, everyone studied hard, especially those who were from the countryside. For girls, going to school was almost the only way to get out of the village. Your grandparents never said that I had to succeed in the city. Before I left home, they said that it was worth a try, but if I didn’t like it or found that the program was not my cup of tea, I could always come back. But at that point, I felt that I couldn’t afford to fail at school. What could I do in the village? I was already fifteen and it was almost too late to start to learn to be a farmer. Fifteen-year-olds in the village were already good farmers working in the fields on their own.

In the nursing program, mother’s teachers were doctors and professors from a hospital and the medical school. They were nice but strict.
The courses were challenging and it was not easy to get 5\(^{23}\) for each one of them. My teachers were very strict. They always said that it didn’t matter that much if we made a mistake in the exams. It was only a matter of a deduction of a few points. But if we took the mistake to patients, that could mean life or death to a human being. We were to deal with human life at work. As always, I took my teachers’ words seriously. I put almost all my time into studies and I stood out in the physiology class. In my physiology class, after my professor called several students and still didn’t get a satisfactory answer, he would call my name. You could tell from his voice when he called me that he was sure I got the right answer. I never disappointed him. And the more such things happened, the harder I studied. It felt good to be liked by a teacher and you don’t want to let him down.

Mother maintained her record as a good student. Life in school in the city was better, but still hard. At the end of the first term, mother found that she had saved enough money for a train ticket home. She missed home badly, but she decided to send the money back and stayed at school.

Of course I wanted to see your grandma, grandpa and aunt. I was only fifteen. But that money was too precious to be spent on train tickets. I could take a train home and see them. But then what? It would be of no help to their life. But if I sent the money back, they could buy some rice, pork or cloth to make new coats.

Mother did not go home for the winter vacation that year. She was not alone. Several girls from the faraway countryside also stayed at school. On New Year’s Eve,

\(^{23}\) It was the former Soviet Union grading system with 5 as the highest and 1 the lowest.
they cooked their holiday dinner together in their dorm. Then they all cried. Nobody ate anything.

**Working in Xi’an**

Mother graduated from the nursing program and began to work in the children’s hospital in Xi’an.

*I had not expected that I would stay in Xi’an after graduation. I just wanted to finish the program and get a job. It didn’t matter where the job would be. Actually, I had wanted a job close to home. But the city was good. The pay was higher.*

Mother was eighteen when she started nursing in the city’s children’s hospital. Because of her excellent performance, she was recommended to attend medical school two years later.

*I was really grateful. It cost me and my family nothing to finish the nursing program, and I had a good-paying job in the city. I wanted to give back to the society. In the children’s hospital, nursing involved a lot of mothering. In the morning, kids just cried at the sight of my plate. They were afraid of taking pills and getting injections. You couldn’t just force them. It needed a lot of talking, persuading, patting and storytelling to get them take their medication. In the evening, it took another round of talking, patting and storytelling to put them to bed. At night, when a child woke up and cried for mom, you had to be with him or her right away before the other children would be waken up by the crying. Besides, you also needed to feed them, change them, take them to washrooms many times a day and bathe them once a week. I was young and it seemed that I never felt tired at all. When I worked a night shift, I could have the next*
day off, which I seldom did. I often worked as usual the next day. There was no pay for working overtime. I was just glad that I could work more.

Mother saved many of her vacation days and used them to visit her family during the Lunar New Year, the first time in four years after she had left for Xi’an.

Mother was received in the village as if she were a guest, a distinguished guest.

Your grandma and your aunt cried. We all cried. I hadn’t seen them for four years. It was tough for all of us. … My coming home was big news in the village. Almost everyone came to our house to greet me. In their eyes, I was no longer just the younger daughter of my family. I was different and important because I had attended a school in the city and was now working in the city. For many of them, the farthest place they had been to was the town where I went to middle school. They were interested in what life was like in the city. I tried to tell them everything about the city: the department stores, the buses on the streets, the brick buildings, the running water and the coal-burning stoves for cooking at home, the bath houses in people’s work place… Everyone admired my parents because they had a daughter who became a ‘city person’. Your grandpa and grandma were really happy for me. They said that now that I was in the city, I would never need to labor in the fields like them and my sister.

Grandma and grandpa were wrong. Mother was sent to farms both before and during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

It [doing physical labor job] was only for short periods, though. The first time was during the Great Leap Forward Movement. I was a medical student at that time. It was decided that all students would go to the countryside to help the peasants to speed up the Great Leap Forward in the countryside. Many students were from the countryside, but you couldn’t go to where your family was. When I went to the farm, it was time
to harvest wheat crops in the summer, the busiest time of the year. Three
of us went to the same farm. The farmers were nice and they only gave
easy jobs to us – help in the commune kitchen and pick up grains in the
already harvested fields. These things usually were done by children and
older women. We were not unfamiliar with those things as we were all
from the countryside. But it was still not easy for us. Staying in a kitchen
with a giant stove burning from morning to night in the summer was hard
enough, and we needed to cook three meals for about two hundred people
every day. The whole village ate together during the harvest season to
save time. …And picking up grains in the fields was not easy either. You
had to bend and pick up grains hundreds of times a day. Working a shift in
the hospital was really nothing compared with the work on the farm.

Then during the Cultural Revolution, mother was sent to work on a farm again.

This time, it was a punishment.

I finished medical school before the Cultural Revolution started in 1966. I
still worked in the children’s hospital, but now as a pediatrician. The
hospital was in the charge of a team of workers from nearby factories. All
the staff had to listen to them. Most of the time was spent on learning and
reflecting on newspaper articles about the Cultural Revolution and on
Chairman Mao’s works. From time to time, you had to go to see those
workers in charge to report what you thought about the revolution and
what new insights you got from studying Chairman Mao’s works. Then the
workers would give you comments and urge you to study even harder. I
didn’t like such learning. It was so hollow and up in the air. Soon, the
situation became even ridiculous. Along with the long hours of learning,
there developed a set of rituals. A work day started with everyone
gathering in the canteen, saying good morning to a huge portrait of
Chairman Mao and reading aloud a few verses from his works. Then at
the end of the day, people gathered again, giving thanks to Chairman
Mao’s portrait for having a revolutionary and fruitful day. On Saturday nights, everyone had to go to a dancing party and do this funny dance called ‘the loyalty dance’ to show that you supported the Cultural Revolution and you were loyal to Chairman Mao.

Mother would rather spend more time with her little patients. She was bored with the endless political meetings and began to read books at those meetings. There were people smoking, knitting, or chatting. Some even brought their small children to the meetings. She thought it should be all right if she was just reading work-related books. But she was wrong. For the first time in her life, she was to be punished for loving reading and her profession.

Someone reported me. It was not just that I was doing something else instead of concentrating on listening to the reading of newspaper articles. It showed that my priority was the knowledge of the specialized area when nothing should be more important than learning about the newest development of the revolution. It [reading professional books] was considered an act against the revolution.

Mother was ordered to criticize herself in public, but she refused. She argued that she was learning and her learning was to serve patients better. However, she was not supposed to argue.

What was revolutionary and what was counter-revolutionary depended on the interpretation of those people in charge. If I had admitted that I was wrong and done the self-criticism, I should have been fine. But arguing with those in charge was considered a challenge to their authority, the authority of the working-class. During the Cultural Revolution, the working-class was the leader of everyone, especially the intellectuals....
That’s how I got expelled to a farm, to realize my mistake as I did heavy labor. Of course it was unfair. But in those years, things could be worse.

“It could be me.”

Mother returned to her work three months later. It was because my father was to be locked up in a “study camp” (see Chapter 5) and my elder brother and sister, four and one at that time, were not old enough to take care of themselves.

But I never regretted that I left my village. When I was forced to be separated from your brother and sister, I wished that I hadn’t gone through the nursing program or medical school. That way, I should have been able to be together with my family in the village. No one would bother what a peasant woman thought about the Cultural Revolution. But in the long run, I still think that life is better with an education. Look at your aunt. I would be living like her, if I hadn’t gone to school outside the mountains. It could be me.

What was my aunt’s life like in their village hiding in the mountains? I recorded what my mother told me in my journal:

Mom just came back from her visit to aunt and uncle in the village. I know that aunt and uncle were in poor health. Aunt had cancer ten years ago and uncle has serious lung problems. When I asked mom how they were doing, mom cried, ‘Not very well, Not very well.’ When she calmed herself down, she told me that aunt was very weak and barely ate anything the whole day. Uncle still had to work in their land up in the hills. With his lung problems, walking could be a big task, and sometimes dangerous. It’s hard to imagine how he managed to get to the hills to work on his field. And aunt couldn’t rest at home. She had a pig, a dozen chickens and twenty ducks at home. Feeding them is not an easy task for her, a tiny woman with cancer. I’ve been to their place once. I can still picture their
house and their yard. I remember how aunt cooked five meals a day for mom and me, from before dawn to dark and still worried that she had nothing good to offer to her guests. …Mom stayed with aunt and uncle for a week. She gave aunt medications to help her have some appetite. Mom sounded very emotional on the phone while telling me the life of aunt and uncle. It must have been heart-rending to see an only sister live in poverty, in poor health. Mom did what she could to help them, yet there was only so much she could do. Aunt and uncle lived in the mountains all their life. They wouldn’t feel comfortable living anywhere else. They are used to the place and bound to the place. They can’t live without their potato field, their pig, chicken and ducks. But years of hard work didn’t even give them access to basic medical care and they had to suffer from the pain of illness. They never complained, but would they want their life any other way? At the same time, would mom think that ‘It could be me’? (Personal journal, dated November 8, 2004)

A few thoughts

Without her family’s hard work and sacrifice, mother would not have been able to walk out of her village in the mountains. Her family’s understanding and support were a source of inspiration and hope for mother. Coming from a family with very limited means, mother pursued education while balancing personal development and family obligations. Family was an important factor influencing the decisions she made about her education. Mother once decided to leave school because she did not want her schooling to be the family’s financial burden anymore. Her choice of the nursing program with financial aid over preparation for university was from practical considerations of her family’s situation. For mother, education was not only a personal pursuit. It was a family thing.
Mother’s perception of what it meant to be educated seemed paradoxical. Being formally-educated meant to be able to “do things” and “sit in the classroom doing nothing” at the same time to mother. Mother aspired to be like the well-educated grandfather that she never met because people thought of him respectfully as he was someone who could “do things” other than working in the rice field. Compared with her parents and sister who had to endure the hardships of laboring in the field, mother was sitting in her classroom and really not helping with anything. Moreover, what she learnt at school would have little use if she eventually had to return home to farm. The meanings mother made of her schooling reveal, on the one hand, the deep-rooted cultural values placed on education and on the other hand, raise question about the relevance of the particular form of knowledge offered in the uniform curriculum. These issues will be explored in Chapters 9 and 10.
Chapter 5  
My Father’s Story 

An only son

Father was born into a peasant’s family in Sanyuan, a town 33 kilometers from Xi’an. When I was young, father often took me to visit my grandparents in Sanyuan. I remember being impatient with the one-and-half-hour bus ride and asking from time to time if we were already there. Father told me that if I saw “33” on a stone beside the road, we could get off the bus. We then walked for about half an hour on a dirt road. I remember there were crops on both sides of the road. Father would tell me what crops they were and what the peasants were doing in the fields – applying manure, weeding or getting rid of the pests. Then we would turn right and start to walk on the bank of an “irrigation ditch”. Once on the bank, I could see my grandparents’ village down the terraced slope. Many things were planted on the slope – cotton, pumpkin, squash and other vegetables which I do not remember now. If father saw people he knew working somewhere down the slope, he would call out hello loudly and invite them for a cup of tea in my grandparents’ house later that day.

Down the slope, the third house on the right was my grandparents’ house.

I was curious about everything in their place and in the village. There was no water tap. They had a well in the yard. Their bed was built directly from the floor with mud and brick. There was a tunnel in the middle of the bed. In winter, wood or hay was burnt in the tunnel to keep the bed warm during the night. I was fascinated by the bed! Each time we came, many people came to say hello. I vaguely remember that they always expressed
admiration for grandma and grandpa because they had a son who was a doctor in the city. People asked about what presents had been brought to grandma and grandpa from the city. Whatever the presents were, people praised them with admiration. Villagers consulted with my dad on various health issues and other issues since he was the doctor from the city. They nodded at whatever my dad said. I had the impression that my dad was the superman in their eyes. Children also came to see us. They were shy and would not come in the house when my dad invited them. They just stood in the yard and looked from the open door. Then, their parents would say things like, ‘Wild village kids! They don’t know how to say hello to you city people.’ Those village people, my grandparents, their houses, the crop field, the dams, and the unpaved country roads, all looked very interesting to me. But I knew I didn’t want to live in such a place. People spoke a local dialect which sounded to me not as good as the standard mandarin spoken in the city. They dressed differently and I didn’t like the style. The children looked dirty. The food cooked in my grandparents’ kitchen tasted weird (I later learnt that it was because of the water.). There was no bathhouse in the village. I feared if I lived there, I would not be able to take a bath for years and I would look as dirty as those kids. Apart from the lack of conveniences in the village, the way we were treated in the village made me feel that it was better to be a city person than a farmer.

(Jia, 2004)

I still cannot tell when it was that the word “farmer” acquired a connotation of ignorance, bad taste, and inferiority. In the newspaper and on television, there were many reports on how the farmers and the migrant workers from the rural areas were ill-treated. Father always sighed when he read such reports. He said that the city people were cruel. The farmers did not look as good as the city people. But that was because they work in the field in the sun, in the wind and in the rain. They did not wear fancy clothes. They could not afford them and even if they could, those styles were not suitable for working
in the field. Without them, we, the city people, would not have food or clothes. Father would become very emotional when he said this. He was born and grew up in the village. He knew how hard life was for people in the village. They worked hard all year long in the field and they could barely support their families. No one seemed to care about them. Peasants did not have appropriate medical care and their children’s education was often sacrificed for the need of labor in the field or in the house (Thogersen, 2002).

Father was the only boy of his family and therefore definitely going to be “the pole that holds up the whole house”, meaning he was expected to be the support of the house. He knew this at a very young age. He knew that his sisters would marry out and he would be the man of the house and take the sole responsibility of taking care of my grandparents when they could no longer grow their own food. He would inherit everything my grandparents had, the land, the shabby house…. What happened that he became “the son in the city”?

**Going to school**

Unlike mother, father knew what school was like before he started school. He told me his story of starting school:

*I kind of tried to avoid starting school. I heard that in the school, you had to be really disciplined and recite a lot of chapters from books. Or the teacher would spank your palms with a bamboo ruler. I saw the bruised and swollen palms of the students and I feared for my palms. Though I had no idea how disciplined I should be in school, I didn’t want to be disciplined with a bamboo ruler. It felt good to play all day outside, climbing trees, swimming in the pond... I didn’t want to go to school at all.*
Though father had hoped that grandpa would be too busy to send him to school, grandpa did not forget. Father was taken to school when he was seven.

_Though father had hoped that grandpa would be too busy to send him to school, grandpa did not forget. Father was taken to school when he was seven._

_Almost every kid in our village was sent to school when they were seven or eight. Primary school didn’t cost anything at that time. There was only one teacher in the school and he taught some 30 or 40 children. Before Grade 4, everyone was in the same class, learning to read and write the classics^{24} and some simple calculation. The teacher was paid 900 jin^{25} of wheat a year. Our family didn’t have to do anything for the teacher’s pay. But all the students’ families took turns to invite the teacher home for a meal, at least once a semester. It was a big thing for my family when my teacher came over for a meal after school. Our house was tidied up and everyone was dressed in their best clothes. Of course the food was the best we could offer. Your grandma would trade wheat for some Tofu and grandpa would buy ‘pork-in-clay-pot’^{26} from the only restaurant in town. To have the teacher at home for a meal was the way farmers showed respect and thanks to the teacher._

Father told me he started school in his village. The rhythm of school coincided with the rhythm of life in the village. Early in the morning, 5 or 6 am, depending on when the sun rose, father went to school for morning classes for two or three hours while grandpa worked in the field and grandma cleaned the house and cooked breakfast. When the school bell rang, grandpa and father came home for breakfast. After the breakfast, grandpa and father left the house again, and grandma started to work at her loom at home.

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^{24} The classics refer to the classical Confucian texts, Four Books and Five Classics.

^{25} One jin is half a kilogram.

^{26} It is a famous local delicacy in father’s hometown.
School ended at about two in the afternoon. When father got home, he babysat his younger sisters so that grandma could go take care of the vegetables she grew at the back of their house. Father usually did not have much time for his homework when he got home. Grandpa and grandma always needed him for some chores at home. Father had to finish homework quickly at school. He could not leave it for after supper.²⁷ It would be dark and grandpa would not allow him to “waste” oil²⁸ on homework.

Though I was sent to school, your grandparents never asked how I did at school. For them, school was over the time I came home. They were all illiterate. They couldn’t check my homework or whether I memorized passages in my books. Most of the people in our village had little education and they couldn’t help with any of the schoolwork. The peasants respected the teacher and they believed that the teacher would take care of their children at school, teaching them and disciplining them. If a child got spanked at school by the teacher, his or her parents would never go to school to complain or argue with the teacher. The teacher must have had a good reason for punishment. In the families that really cared about how well their children did at school, a child usually got a ‘matching spank’ at home if he or she got punished by the teacher at school.

Father said that it was difficult for him to tell if he liked school at the beginning. He did alright at school. He was neither the top student nor the very naughty one who always got spanked on the hands. His parents never asked him to get high scores in the exams or punished him at home because he did not do well at school. Like the seeds that

²⁷ In father’s village, people had two meals a day. One was at 9 or 10 in the morning and the other one was at 3 or 4 in the afternoon.

²⁸ There was only one oil lamp at father’s house. Cooking oil had to be added to light it.
were planted in the spring, father was sent to school when he reached the age. But unlike the seeds grandpa planted in the spring, there was no tangible loss or risk, if father did not get anything from his schooling.

We used to live together with my uncle’s family. Your grandpa thought that I did well and had enough education when I could do bookkeeping for him. Though your grandpa did not ask me to stop going to school, he didn’t think that the more the education, the better the life. Your grandpa only believed in hard work in the field and always said that one could only rely on his land. The land would never betray you. The more time and work you put in your land, the more it gave you in return. But what could you get from reading a book?

For grandpa, my father said, it would have been ideal if father could graduate from high school and teach in a school near home. This way, father would get paid and have time to help with the work in the field. At that time, a high school graduate was considered very well educated and could definitely get a teaching job if he or she wanted one. Father was grandpa’s only son. Grandpa and grandma would be depending on father when they were too old to work on the land and take care of themselves. Grandpa did not want father to be too far away from their land. Perhaps it would not be a bad thing at all if father could not continue going to school because of unsatisfactory test scores. Father could always come back home and work on the land.

For the peasants in our village, it really didn’t matter how well their children did at school or if their kids could make it to the higher grade. It was more important that a child was honest, hard-working and learnt the skills of taking care of the crops. Usually, knowing how to do things at home and in the field would make parents more proud than getting red
circles\textsuperscript{29} from the teacher. And parents would be seen as spoiling parents if their children just went to school and didn’t help in any way with the household.

No one pushed or encouraged father to study hard. He helped on the land more and more as he grew up. School was neither very interesting nor boring to father and his performance was mediocre at school. He was not interested in any particular subjects, he said, until he had geometry in junior high school.

\textit{I immediately loved geometry. It was interesting to me because I felt challenged. It was not just doing what the teacher told you to do. After the teacher taught something in class, I had to think about it, and very often think hard. It felt good when you finally solved a problem after thinking hard. And I liked my geometry teacher very much. He didn’t look like a teacher at all. He came to class with ungroomed hair and buttons in the wrong place. But you would stop laughing and forget all the lack of grooming once he started class. He talked very fast and almost nonstop in class. At the same time, he kept writing, drawing graphs on the blackboard. Some students found it was hard to follow him in class, but his enthusiasm for what he taught was irresistible. Also, my teacher loved to spend time with us students whenever we had questions. He would stop whatever he was doing and look at your question. He always said, ‘That’s easy. That’s easy’ and then walked you through the problem. That he called any question you brought to him ‘easy’ didn’t make you feel that you were stupid. Actually, you’d feel very relaxed. I don’t know how to describe that, but he made you feel that he was willing and eager to help}

\textsuperscript{29} In China, it has been the teachers’ privilege to mark students’ work with red ink. Father’s schoolwork included practicing Chinese calligraphy. Teacher circled some characters with red ink to show that those were good writing.
you with any difficulty you might have. He always said ‘That’s easy. That’s easy’, but actually he made you feel nothing was too simple, or too small to bring to him for help. He was amazing.

Now, even though father does not remember a thing he learnt in that teacher’s geometry class, he still remembers him vividly. He says that whenever he thinks of that teacher, he feels that he was in the teacher’s class again.

By the time father finished junior high school, he had two choices – going to a high school or going to a vocational school. Father got admitted to three vocational schools and a senior high school.

I picked a vocational school to be trained as a technician in civil engineering. At that time, I had no idea of what I wanted to be and going to school was not very important to me. I was not sure if I wanted to go to senior high school and then try to get into a university or, as your grandpa hoped, teach in a school near home. I chose the vocational school because I could live and eat at school for free. I was sixteen at that time. Usually a sixteen-year-old boy would do much of the work to take care of the crops. I always helped grandpa whenever I was home for weekends or holidays. But that was not enough. I had four younger sisters. It was not easy for your grandpa to raise a big family. I just thought that I’d save them food if I could eat for free in the vocational school.

But father was not happy in that vocational school. He could not tell what was wrong with the program. He just did not like it. He studied for one term and quit.

Though I didn’t like that school particularly, I didn’t want to just stop there and go back home farming. I wanted to give school another try. I changed my name and lied to enroll myself in a different junior high school where no one knew me. I told people there that I took leave for a
semester to help my family and I wanted to continue with them because their school was closer to my home. Of course this was not allowed. Once you left a school, you didn’t have the chance to change your mind and come back. Luckily, at that time, schools didn’t exchange information on students and the new school didn’t ask for my previous transcript. I guess that the school system was not very organized because the new country was established not long ago.

Father studied for half a year in that junior high school and again he faced the choices of senior high school or vocational school. This time, he decided to go for senior high school. Through a difficult entrance exam, father got into the best high school in town.

I began to study hard in senior high school. On the one hand, to go to senior high meant you had college or university in mind. On the other hand, everyone studied hard and you would stand out if you didn’t…. I had been to the town of Xi’an once when I wrote entrance exams for one vocational school there. It was my first time to the city and I was fascinated. Everything was new and of interest to a village boy. I didn’t have much time to look around and I wished I could. Though sightseeing in the city was not my sole inspiration to study hard at senior high, I was often excited at the thought that if I could get into a university in the city, I would be able to go to all the interesting places in the city. Don’t laugh at me! I was a village boy and didn’t have high expectations of life. My parents were illiterate and they had never been to the city. I was already contented when I could graduate from a high school and visit the city. Not many students made it to the high school. Quite a few dropped out when they finished Grade Four. At that time, a high school graduate was considered well-educated and was respected.
Father’s high school was about 20 kilometers from his home. He could not afford to eat at the school canteen and he brought food to school every week. He came home for steamed buns every Saturday. He had to walk home, since he had no money for the bus fare. Walking home and coming back to school on foot took most of his weekend. Besides, he was the only boy in the family and he had to help in the field every time he came home.

One Saturday, when father was going to rush home, he realized that he hadn’t handed in one weekly assignment, a journal entry. The journal entry was to be about important happenings during the week and writing such a journal was intended as a writing exercise for students. He could not stay in school to do the work properly, or he would not have anything to eat the next week. He thought for a while and wrote a line in his journal, “Nothing worth writing down this week.” Father handed it in and went home. The following Monday, his Chinese teacher gave back students’ journal entries and made comments on them. His teacher was mad at father’s entry and yelled at him in class, “Nothing worth writing down? Who do you think you are to give your teacher a one line comment? What kind of big figure do you think you are?” … The class roared with laughter and father got very embarrassed. He had not thought that his entry would make his teacher so angry. He felt that his teacher did not understand what a Saturday meant to a student like him. He hated his teacher for making it such a big deal and decided to take his “revenge.” Father’s high school was near a railway and that week, his weekly journal entry was entitled “On seeing the passing train”. In his journal, he said that how fast a train ran depended on how the front car (where the engine was) worked. Father meant to imply that how a student behaved depended on what kind of teacher the student had. He
wanted to make the point that it was not always the student’s fault if he or she made mistakes. The teacher should take some responsibility. Father did not dare to say this explicitly and he came up with his “train” metaphor. When father came back to school with his steamed buns, another storm was waiting for him. His Chinese teacher saw through his trick in the journal and understood his writing. “‘On seeing the passing train?’ Did your old man pay to have you sit there idly to look at the passing trains?” … Again, father was laughed at by his classmates and because he was considered disrespectful to his teacher, he was failed in “Morals and Behavior”. “Morals and Behavior” was not a course. But a teacher gave students a grade on that based on their behaviors in school. Students who failed “Moral and Behavior” were not allowed to take the college entrance exams. This failing grade gave father his lesson, and he went to his Chinese teacher to apologize. The teacher gave father a long lecture, made sure father had gotten his mind straightened and gave father a passing grade on his “Morals and Behavior”.

Unlike most of the students from the villages, I was not a very obedient at school. Maybe it was because I was the eldest and only son at home, your grandpa always asked for my opinions at home and my younger sisters all listened to me. I respected my teachers but I was not afraid to express my ideas. I knew I was naughty over the journal entry, but I didn’t know what would be a better way to handle it when I found out that I would have to miss an assignment. …To be frank, very often I didn’t have much to say for the journal. It was called a journal, but it was written for my teacher. A lot of what happened during the week was not ‘meaningful’ for the journal. It was just everyday stuff. My teacher always said that one could only write good articles when one felt like writing. How could I feel like writing when I worried about getting my food for the next week? I should
have got the assignment done earlier, but it was not that big a deal to forget once or twice. I began to think about university and studied hard in senior high, but I was not a good student when it came to listening to my teachers. I thought that my math teacher gave too much homework which involved a lot of repetitive exercises. I didn’t think it was necessary to finish all of them and I wanted to have some time to play. I then found that my teacher gave too much homework that she herself didn’t remember exactly what homework she asked students to do. I felt it was my chance. The next time, I did the first few easier exercises, omitted some in the middle and did the more difficult ones at the end. When the teacher was marking, she found both the easier ones and the more difficult ones and thought I did all the assignments! Your papa is really smart, eh?

Father graduated from high school and got admitted to the medical school in Xi’an. Father had no idea of what a western-style medical school in the city was like, but he wanted to be a doctor.

For the peasants, getting sick was both devastating and yet nothing at the same time. It had to be nothing because they didn’t have money or they didn’t want to spend money for a doctor. It was a big deal if one was struck by a serious illness; it meant bankruptcy. Peasants depended on their hands for everything they needed. If one couldn’t work in the field, one had nothing. For small illness, a peasant did nothing to get better. It would go away in a few days. When someone was too sick to farm, he or she would stay at home for a day or two. When peasants were ill, they didn’t think of a doctor first, they worried about their crops and that they would miss the best time to weed or something like that. Doctors or medications were only for the very small children or for the rich families. But people respected doctors, even more than they respected teachers. Doctors were learned people as the teachers and they could also save lives.
There was only one doctor within the 50 li radius of our village, Mr. Liang. To get him to your house to see a patient was almost as complicated as getting engaged to someone (laughs). You had to hire a donkey-wagon and send it to Mr. Liang’s house the day before. Then the next morning, one family member had to meet Mr. Liang on his way, greeting him and asking what he would like for breakfast. Mr. Liang would think and then say ‘Six dumplings, small.’ Then the guy would run back home and tell the women in the family to prepare dumplings for Mr. Liang. I don’t remember if I ever met Mr. Liang, but everyone knew his ‘Six dumplings, small’ anecdote. I thought that Mr. Liang was really cool when I was a kid and I wanted to be like him. When I grew up, I still wanted to be a doctor, but not just to appear cool; I really wanted to help people.

Father was the only one in his village, and several nearby villages, who got into university that year. The news spread quickly. However, when father came home with his admission letter, he found that the house was unusually quiet.

Your grandpa was smoking his pipe and your aunts were all quiet in the kitchen. Your grandma told me that grandpa was unhappy. He didn’t want me to go to Xi’an. He thought that I had had enough education and instead of spending more time and money in school, it was time for me to work and support the family. It was unthinkable for your grandpa that a grown-up man would sit in a classroom doing nothing.

Father understood very well what grandpa’s silence meant. But he still collected his courage and asked grandpa to allow him to go to Xi’an. Father told grandpa that he would be a doctor in five years and could support their family with his salary. Grandpa got really angry. He said that father had been wasting time. If father wanted to be a
doctor, he should have gone to be Mr. Liang’s apprentice when he finished Grade Four.

Father would have been a doctor already!

*I was really upset. At that time, it was not uncommon for people to give up university and get a job first. But I didn’t want to do the same. It was not that I didn’t want to be a farmer. I knew that for a village boy, going to a university was the only opportunity to see the outside world. I wanted to see what a university was like and how it felt to be a university student.*

*Your grandma supported me. She asked grandpa’s uncles to come and persuade grandpa. In front of his seniors, your grandpa didn’t say anything. But after they left, he got even angrier. He said that he had no money for me to attend medical school in Xi’an.*

People came to say congratulations to grandpa and father. Everyone said that going to medical school in the city was too good a chance for father to give up. Father was the only son and it was no doubt that grandpa would want the best for him. But grandpa could not give father a straight “yes”. He was the authority of their family and he had to mean what he said. Thus came his “no money” declaration. It meant that if father could get the money himself, grandpa would let him go. Grandma borrowed money from her aunt. Grandma thought really hard about from whom she could borrow money. There were not many of the relatives who would have that money and she could not borrow from the relatives on grandpa’s side. Though grandma knew that the money had to be paid back by grandpa, she had to pretend that grandpa did not know and would not allow her to do so.

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30 For a long time, doctors practicing traditional Chinese herbal medicine were not trained at formal schools. They worked as apprentices in a doctor’s clinic and learnt from the doctor.
Your grandpa pretended that he didn’t know that grandma was preparing for my trip to Xi’an. Grandma bought me a washing basin, a pair of new shoes and a thermos bottle from the store in town. She also made a new blanket and a new jacket for me. She had no idea what the life was like in the city and she tried her best, so that her village boy wouldn’t be laughed at in the city.

That summer before father went to Xi’an, he worked in the field every day with grandpa. On the day when father left for Xi’an, grandpa did not say a word when father said good bye and slammed the door shut after him.

A medical student in Xi’an

In 1953, father took a bus to Xi’an and he was greeted by a group of people from the medical school at the bus station. They were teachers and senior students.

They were nice to me. They helped me with the registration and with settling down in the dormitory. Then they took me to the canteen. The food was amazing! It was even better than what I had at home for the New Year’s dinner! I thought that it must have been the university’s courtesy to new students. But the food was like that every day and we could have dumplings once a week. I grew 5 centimeters during the first two years of university. I was thinking that it was true that people always said ‘City is good’. For a village boy, city was good, at least in terms of food.

In the university, there was no tuition fee, but food and the dorm room were not free. Students got a bursary from 9 yuan to 17.5 yuan, to help cover their expenses. The bursary was not the same for everyone. How much a student could receive depended on his or her family background. The poorer a student’s family was, the higher the bursary
he or she would get. Father’s family was classified as “lower middle peasant” and his bursary was 9 yuan a month.

*Your grandma had borrowed 50 yuan and there was about 30 yuan left after she had prepared the luggage for me. With the bursary, I had about 15 yuan a month for the first term.*³¹ It cost 13.5 yuan a month to eat at the school canteen and I had 1.5 yuan left. At that time, to take a bath in the school bathhouse was 10 cents³² and a movie in the school auditorium was also 10 cents. With 20 to 30 cents, I could have a decent meal in a restaurant outside school. I did okay and I even saved two yuan by the end of the semester. I bought a blouse for my youngest sister, who always wore the outgrown clothing passing down from the older ones.

Though it was only 33 kilometers from home, father did not come back home until the end of the term. The school kept him busy and he did not have money for bus fare. Father walked home for the winter break.

*After five months, your grandpa was no longer angry with me for disobeying him. He had given grandma money to pay her aunt back immediately after I left home. When I told him that I managed to live with just 30 yuan a semester and could even save some money to buy a blouse for my youngest sister, grandpa was moved. It was not yet the Lunar New Year, but grandpa asked grandma to make steamed buns from pure wheat flour for me.*

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³¹ In China, the fall term is usually five months, from September to January or early February depending on where the Lunar New Year falls.

³² 1 Chinese yuan = 100 cents. In 2000 when I first came to Toronto, the exchange rate between a Canadian dollar and Chinese yuan was approximately 1:6.
Grandpa was no longer mad at father and had wanted to give him more money for the next semester. However, because it rained too much in the fall, grandpa got significantly less cotton.

*We depended on cotton for cash to buy things that we couldn’t grow or make by ourselves, such as cooking oil, utensils and tools. Your grandpa only had 30 yuan in hand. He planned to sell all the wheat to get money for me. I didn’t let him. If the wheat was all sold, they would have to eat corn for the whole year and they would not have anything to trade for Tofu and pork. Your aunts were still small and I couldn’t let them eat corn for the whole year. I took 10 yuan from your grandpa and decided that if I couldn’t manage to live through the semester, I would quit.*

Fortunately, father’s family difficulty was taken into account in the bursary evaluation and he received a higher bursary for the next semester.

*The administration was really nice. They wouldn’t let any student quit for financial reasons. Many of the students were from the countryside and their life in school depended much on how much their family got from the land. My bursary was raised to 14.5 yuan a month. It covered my food. So I mailed the 10 yuan I took back home. That semester was difficult for me and I had to be even more careful about money. You could never imagine how hard I squeezed to get the last bit of toothpaste. I didn’t go to any movie, though it was only 10 cents. I barely left school that term. I spent almost all my time to study since I couldn’t afford any entertainment and I became one of the top students (laughs). In the medical school, the courses in the first two years were fundamental ones and involved a lot of memorizing. It was certain that the more time you spent on studying, the better grades you got. And strangely, the better grades I got, the more interested and motivated I became.*
When father graduated from medical school, he was offered a residence post in the medical school’s hospital, the best one in the city. He got the offer because of his excellent performance during his practicum.

*I had gone to the Drum Tower Hospital in Nanjing*[^33] *to do my practicum. I didn’t know how it happened, but the students of my year were lucky. We got to go to different cities to do our practicum and everything was paid for by our school. I had no idea where Nanjing was. A friend had been there and he told me that it was a nice place, and we could go to Shanghai from there, which was only two hours train ride away. So I went with him to Nanjing. I never had the time to tour the city, let alone Shanghai. Now besides the Drum Tower Hospital, all I remember about Nanjing is the unbearable heat in the summer and the unbelievably big mosquitoes! ...In Nanjing, I was assigned to work with the doctors in the Intensive Care Unit. Those doctors had all been trained by American missionaries before the liberation (1949, see Chapter 3). They were all perfectionists and extra fussy about everything and anything in the ward. There was never a thing too small about a patient. Absolutely zero tolerance for any mistakes. I virtually worked around the clock with the doctors. We were in the ward from six in the morning to midnight. I was dead tired every day. *But I got good training and I admired the doctors.***

**A doctor in Xi’an**

However, father did not take the offer to work in the medical school’s hospital. He chose to work in a newly-founded hospital in the suburb of Xi’an after graduation. The working conditions in that hospital were not as good as they were in the university’s hospital. But father thought that he was young and should take up some tough job.

[^33]: Nanjing (Nan King) is a city in Southeast China, about 1300 kilometers from Xi’an.
Maybe it is hard for you young people today to understand. But at that time [1958], people ‘fought’ to get the hardest job to express their love for the [communist] party and the new country. I would have asked to be sent to places with the harshest conditions, such as Tibet or Qinghai if it had not been for your grandparents. I was their only son and I should be around when they were getting old. Whether I could stay in the city or not was not an issue with me. Of course the city was better with all its conveniences and chances for professional development. But for a doctor, it made no difference whether a patient was cared for in the city or in the countryside. Actually, a doctor would be of more help in the countryside, as the peasants hardly had any access to decent medical care. ...Anyway, it was said that doctors were needed to staff this new hospital and off I went.

Father worked as a surgeon in the hospital for more than 35 years until his retirement ten years ago. The hospital was built to serve the 10,000 workers in a company that manufactured equipments for power plants.

Everyone in our hospital was enthusiastic and hard-working. We didn’t just treat patients. The hospital was new and short of hands. We needed to do a lot of extra work, such as buying equipments, cleaning and even gardening, on top of the endless meetings for studying the [communist] party’s policies. I was over-worked, under-paid, but I was still grateful. I was grateful that without the government’s subsidies, there was no way that I could have become a doctor. My salary was low, but it was enough that you kids always had enough to eat. If I stayed in the village, the work in the field would have been a lot harder and whether I could feed you would have depended on the weather!

Father loved his work but ironically, he was forced to leave his work because of this love.
When the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) started, father was not a target at the beginning because of his family background. He was fine with the political movement as long as he could see his patients. But as the movement became more heated and the hospital management was handed over to workers from nearby factories, father could not bear it anymore, especially when those workers tried to tell father what to do in his ward.

I guess I was arrogant in the eyes of those workers. But they were not health professionals. How could I listen to them as to what to do with my patients? It was ridiculous that they wanted me to believe that people were capable of doing anything once they were equipped with the Mao Zedong Thoughts (laughs). That was just impossible. I couldn’t let them mess up my patients and they resented me. They first attacked me for not being ‘red’ (revolutionary) enough. But what was wrong with a doctor curing people? I was a poor peasant’s boy and the new society had made it possible for me to have the education to become a doctor. I was grateful and I wanted to do whatever the party asked me to do, to make my country a better one. Being a doctor, helping patients was the best way I knew to give back to the society.

Now that father continued to do what he thought was right and refused to admit he was wrong, he was considered “anti-revolutionary”. Even his family background was changed to create trouble for him. Some people went to my grandparents’ village and found out that the family used to live together with my grandpa’s brother. They put together the land that used to be owned by both families all under my grandparents’ name. Then their class status (see Chapter 3) changed to “landlord” and father was accused of having cheated on reporting his family background and having cheated to get subsidies at university. Father argued, but this only made things worse. How dare a landlord’s “dog-son” argue with Chairman Mao’s revolutionary people? Once he lost the
protection of his “preferable” family background as “poor peasant”, he became the “anti-revolutionary bourgeois intellectual”. He was not allowed to work as a doctor and was locked up in a “study group” to get his mind straightened. It was painful that a doctor could not work, for almost 10 years.

*I was depressed that I was fenced outside the job I loved. I lost the ten golden years for a surgeon. But if there was another cultural revolution, I would do exactly the same. You have to be honest to be any good.*

We are lucky that there was not another cultural revolution. As I am writing this chapter, father is working in a mine’s hospital in the countryside, about 100 kilometers from Xi’an. He is thrilled that he can help his people, the miners, most of whom are peasants from nearby villages. Father came back to the countryside 50 years after he had left, with the training and experiences he got from the city.

**A few thoughts**

From a village boy to a doctor in the provincial capital city, schooling and education played a vital role in father’s life. Yet what struck me was that going to school or pursuing academic excellence was hardly a priority in his village where seasonal change and weather dictated how lives should be lived. Though the educated and the professionals (e.g. father’s school teacher and Mr. Liang, the doctor) were admired and highly respected, generally there lacked models of educated people in father’s life. Instead of being encouraged to reach for the highest possible academic opportunity, father did not have the necessary support to do well in school. In his house, the use of an oil lamp for school work was considered a waste because it was not for any work for the family’s livelihood. It did not take a high school education to be a farmer. The message
father received about the value of schooling was that “what can you get from reading a book”? In father’s village, knowledge meant more than what was taught in school. It was far more important that father learnt how to make a living by farming. My grandparents had a very strong work ethic that was driven by the practical needs and responsibilities of their family. They fulfilled their responsibilities to family, over their individual interests and needs. My grandparents, like many of the peasants in their village, firmly believed that hard work would bring the family financial security. For my grandparents, especially my grandfather, personal destinies should be subsumed within the family. This was expected and valued in the traditional Chinese culture.

As the eldest and the only son in a peasant’s family, father knew from a young age what was expected from him: provide for the whole family as his parents were getting old; get married and have at least one son of his own to carry on the family line; and stand up for his family on all matters to make sure that no one took advantage of his aging parents and his married sisters were not abused by their in-laws. Father’s family had to come first whenever he considered any options for himself. The bottom line was that his pursuit of study could not put a strain on the family’s already tight budget. But that was not enough. Since farming relied heavily on manual labor, father’s limited help in the fields meant that his parents and younger sisters had to work even harder to make up for his absence. Father faced a persistent dilemma in making decisions about whether or not to continue schooling: to shorten his years of education so that he could be more available in his family’s farming work or explore other options through further schooling? His desires seemed at odds with one another.
Father lacked access to adults who would promote the importance of education and provide necessary support. On the one hand, unlike many students today, father did not have to worry about getting good grades in school to make his parents happy and proud. On the other hand, his schoolwork could not compete with family obligations. His focus of energy on schoolwork could not happen without pressures and responsibilities of taking care of his family. I wonder what it was in his schooling that made him aspire to further study in the difficult circumstances of life? What made his educational endeavors meaningful and valuable? What did he want out of school? These questions will be further explored in the context of the changes that came about in China as father lived his life, from a village boy to a doctor in the city, in Chapters 9 and 10.
“Look at you… If only I had gone to a college.”

It has been 10 years since I graduated from college and my friend Qian came home after serving in the Navy in South China. “Look at you… If only I had gone to a college.” Qian says it every time we meet.

I have known Qian since we were six years old. Qian and I went to the same primary school and middle school. We were always in the same class until Grade 11 when the classes were reorganized based on the students’ choice of the type of College Entrance Exams they would like to write: Arts or Science. I chose Arts and Qian took Science. Our paths diverged after high school. Qian went to join the Navy in South China, and I went to a college in our home town. After graduation, I got an offer to teach in a university’s adult language program. When Qian was discharged from the navy, he came back to our home town to work in the security department in a research institute. He was getting married when I was leaving for Canada to pursue further studies. Qian got a promotion and became the youngest manager in his department when I started to do a doctorate in education.

As friends that go back to primary school, we are happy to see the important steps taken in each other’s life paths and are proud of each other’s achievements. Yet Qian always adds that his success is no match for mine. I have the feeling that not passing the College Entrance Exams fifteen years ago and not giving it another try have always been
a “thing” for Qian, and he has not got over this “thing.” I cannot help wondering what is so important about the college entrance exams 15 years ago, especially now that Qian has just received a bachelor’s degree in business management. Qian explained it me:

It is different. Everyone could have got my degree because you don’t need to take any exams to get into the program. You just needed some work experience to get in and finish 18 courses to get out.

Qian finished the program in two years while working full-time. Besides, it is really not that everyone could get into the program. One has to get “excellent” for his or her annual review for three consecutive years and get the employer’s recommendation to be considered for the program. Thus, it was hard for me to understand why all these achievements were still not enough to “even out” the one failure in exams more than 10 years ago. Of course, I admit that the College Entrance Exams are not just any exam. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the importance of the College Entrance Exams can never be overstated. But with a successful career and a happy family, Qian is living a life not any less full than anyone else’s. Why is it that not going to a college at age 18 still seems to be an issue with him? Having heard him saying that “If only I had gone to a college” many times in the past ten years, I felt compelled to ask the question as I interviewed him in 2004. What if you had gone to a college?

I don’t know. I guess I wouldn’t be living a life any better than the one I am living now. Just … It’s just that I felt like a total loser at that time and I hated myself for not making it [passing the exams]. I still remember the day on which the [exam] results were announced. On the day at school, the scores were a clear line of demarcation that separated those who were to go to college and those who were not to. I know that students were
always separated by test scores in school. But this time, it was different. …
I kind of knew that I was not going to make it to college. I was never a
good student and I was fine with any scores over 60. But it was harder
than I had thought to take the news of not passing [the College Entrance
Exams]. The atmosphere in school… I felt… It was like I was… I felt I was
just nothing, or even worse. Those who passed suddenly stood taller and
talked louder. Of course I had nothing to say to those college-student-to-
be (laughs) and nothing to say to my fellow ‘losers’. At that moment, I
hated myself for having spent time just fooling around, or I could have had
a happy face that day too.

Though not passing the college entrance exams was something that Qian had
anticipated, it was still hard to deal with the bad feelings coming with the first major
setback in his first 18 years. It was even harder to take the news home. Qian recalled:

Actually it [not passing the entrance exams] was something my family also
had anticipated. But I put my father on the spotlight. I made him the only
one with a child who failed the entrance exams that year. You know my
father was the head engineer of his group. I feared that people would
respect him not as much because of me. I even wished that I were someone
else’s son (laughs) so that my dad would not have to take the humiliation
of my failure.

Qian was sorry that he did not make it to college, but he did not repeat Grade 12
to try again in the entrance exams in the following year. He explained it to me:

\[34\] For most exams in China, the full score is 100 and 60 is the passing one. In the college entrance
exams, the full score for Chinese and Math is 120.

\[35\] High school graduates can write the College Entrance Exams until they reach the age of 22.
Whether or not I could go to a college had not been an issue for me until the day I learnt that I had failed. I had never pictured myself as a college student, a good student. But the experience on the day that gave students the mark of either ‘to-be’ or ‘not-to-be’ [college student] gave me a lot of stress. I did not want to spend another year under such stress doing something I didn’t really want to do. I did not feel good about failing the entrance exams, but I shuddered at the thought that I might fail again and humiliate my family again and even more.

Qian then joined the Navy three months after he failed the College Entrance Exams. Why did he choose to join the navy?

I wanted to see what the outside world was like and I wanted to go to places far away from home so that people wouldn’t refer to me as XXX’s [Qian’s father] son. I was the one who failed the exam, not my father or my family. You know how everyone discussed everyone else’s business in the community, especially after the entrance exams. Actually my parents didn’t show any disappointment or anything like that. They told me that it didn’t matter that I failed the first time. They would support me whether I wanted to try again or wanted to do something else. But the more understanding they were, the more sorry I felt about my failure. It was not difficult for me to picture how embarrassed they would feel when their colleagues asked about my test scores. And in front of me, they still had to look as if nothing upsetting had happened. I felt I was the dark cloud over my family. … Anyway, I decided to join the army, especially after I learnt that I would be trained and serve in a base in the South China Sea, 2000 kilometers from home. Don’t think I just wanted to escape and then chose the army. I had wanted to be a soldier since I was a little boy. So joining the army was a dream come true.
Four years later, Qian was discharged from the army and was assigned a job in the security department of a research institute. Qian talked about why he decided to come back to our hometown:

*I could have stayed in the army. But I’m the only son and I didn’t want to be too far away from my parents when they were getting old. … I had thought that the job [assigned to me] would be boring, just patrolling around to make sure no one broke into the buildings (laughs). Patrolling was part of my job and now I still patrol the buildings when we are shorthanded. … But I soon found that there was a lot to learn on the job. We have been shorthanded for, well, forever. I was kind of ‘forced’ to learn to do every job in the department, so that I could fill in whenever I was needed. The more I learned on the job, the more I felt I needed to learn. That was when I decided to enroll in the business management program. Besides, I also wanted the degree to be part of my job security. It’s not that a bachelor’s degree itself is necessary [for the job]. But with the expansion of university enrollment, it seems that everyone is getting a degree or diploma. I guess when they start to lay off people, they will start with those without a degree (laughs). Anyway, I can’t afford to lose the job and I want to make myself competitive for the job market. Now, I have a degree, but I also got an education (my emphasis). What I learned in the program is useful for my job. I don’t regret being extremely sleep-deprived in those two years (laughs). I was doing what I wanted to do. I wish I was as hard-working when I was in high school, or I could have made it to university then.

It seemed to me that Qian was not very motivated in trying to get into college back then in high school. In the last few months before the college entrance exams,

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36 Starting from 1999, university programs in China have been significantly expanded.
everyone was preparing for the exams, even those who did not think they would have much a chance in passing. In class, even the most naughty ones became quiet. Anything that was not directly related to the exams, such as the Physical Education class and the music class, was cancelled. When everyone was using every minute to get prepared, Qian was seen playing basketball almost every day. Qian’s schoolbag looked unusually flat. I remember my schoolbag was stuffed with so many reference books and work sheets that it looked like a camel’s hump on my back. Why Qian appeared so uninterested when everyone was at least trying to do something? He explained:

_I was not trying to be cool at that time (laughs). I guess I was just too silly to see the importance of getting into a university. Colleges did not sound attractive at all because I had no clue what I could do or what I wanted to study in a college. I was not interested in anything particularly. No, I like to work with my hands. I like to ‘play’ with the electronic parts. I could assemble a radio when I was in Grade 5, all by myself. Don’t laugh at me, but I thought I could be a carpenter, a car mechanic or an electrician. But you know, I can’t tell anyone about it. Everyone was aiming for university and they would laugh their heads off at my ‘ambition.’ My parents, though they never said that I had to go to college, I knew they had hoped that I could make it. I am their only son. … And what would people think about my father if I really became a carpenter? A Head Engineer’s son wanted to be a carpenter? I don’t want people to laugh at me or my family, but I really didn’t see any point in doing schoolwork to get into a college. Our teachers acted like they were waving a invisible whip, pushing us to do more exercises, to memorize more of the textbooks and to get into a college. It seemed like that you would have everything and you would be something once you got into a college. Too bad I didn’t believe it in high school (laughs). But I didn’t really enjoy playing basketball at that time. It didn’t feel right. I couldn’t tell anyone what I really wanted to do. I didn’t_
want to prepare for the exams. Deep down, I knew that I probably should study more to give it [the entrance exam] a try. Anyway, going to a college can’t be a bad anything.

I learnt in my own family that well-educated parents cared about their children’s education very much. In China, personal achievement has traditionally been measured by academic excellence. It has always been expected that education would make a positive difference at the personal level, such as to promote upward social mobility (Thogersen, 2002). This is the very reason many parents encourage, insist and push their children to reach the highest possible educational level.

Like my parents, Qian’s father was from a peasant’s family and was one of the first college graduates after the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949. He worked in a research institute and was promoted to be the Head Engineer. It is safe to assume that having experienced how education could change a person’s life path, Qian’s father would want Qian to pursue higher education. Then how did the family respond to Qian’s indifference to the college entrance exams? Qian recalled:

Of course my parents wanted me to have the best, such as going to college, having a decent job… But I didn’t make it. It was my own problem. My parents, they were actually very good role-models for me. They are honest, upright and made their success by working hard. They had no one to depend on in the city. My mother, though she didn’t go to college, worked her way up from a worker to be the sales department manager. My father was working, like non-stop. He had set up a small lab at home and worked in it when he was off work. It was not because he had to. He loved his job and always said that he must catch up for the years lost in the Cultural Revolution. I think my interest in electronics came
from seeing my father work at home. He taught me some of the basics of physics and chemistry as I watched him working at home. My parents were very focused on their work, but they were caring parents. My mother’s job required a lot of traveling. When she was not home, my father cooked for me and made sure I had something hot and nutritious to eat for every meal. But for my schoolwork … I’m sure my father would help me out with difficult schoolwork if I asked. It was me. I never bothered to ask him for any help. I did ok in the subjects that I was interested in, such as Chinese and math. For the subjects that I didn’t do well, I did not feel like asking questions or trying hard to improve. For me, the better I did, the more interested I became. And if I didn’t do well, I would lose interest. My parents never blamed me or punished me for bringing bad grades home. They were not like those parents who required that their children study a certain number of hours a day and checked their children’s homework every day. My parents would ask me if I had done my homework when they found me watching TV. They provided everything I needed for school. I never lacked money for reference materials or school supplies. For good or bad, they sort of put education in my own hands. My parents never required that I had to get good grades and they never even pushed for university. They always told me to try my best, but I just gave up on things I was not good at. I guess I don’t have the quality of a good student. I don’t think a student can be interested in everything school offers, but good students hang on and do whatever they are required to do.

Qian and I went to one of the best middle schools in our city. Though not every graduate from our school could get into college, students from our school were believed to have a higher chance to pass the college entrance exams. This was because our school
only took the first 300 students in the entrance exams to its senior high school section.\(^{37}\)

To be able to study in the school’s senior high section was considered one step further on the way to college. In senior high, passing the college entrance exams was every student’s only goal. Aiming at passing the exams, every student was giving out the most to be good at all the subjects that were going to be tested. One could not afford to give up on a subject merely because of a lack of interest. Under such circumstances, Qian’s reliance on his interest to decide whether or not to study was incongruous to the environment. Qian said:

But I just can’t force myself to study something that I had no interest in. I liked writing and I was doing quite well in Chinese. My Chinese teacher, he was born to teach and he knew so much. I looked forward to his classes and I would sit for hours to do his writing assignments. I enjoyed writing, so it was not just something that had to be done for school. My biggest headache was English. The whole thing [English] didn’t make any sense to me. The vocabulary, the pronunciation and the grammar just felt funny to me. I think I have a good memory, but I was never able to bring myself to memorize any English. And it was not just English. I guess I didn’t lay a good grounding for my study when I was in junior high. I was just lucky to pass the exams [to senior high] and continue to study in our school. In senior high, everyone was ‘running’ and I was left too far behind to keep up with them. Teachers and other students, they couldn’t just wait for me to get things right at my own pace. It was my problem. I shouldn’t have been so fussy about my own interest. We had the same teachers, the same books and wrote the same tests. Many were able to pass. It had to be my

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\(^{37}\) In 1988, Qian and I took the tests together with about 1000 other students. In 2004, 2000 students took the tests to compete for 450 positions in the school (Yearbook of the Education Bureau of Xi’an).
problem, but I didn’t know how to fix it. College is a good thing. At that time, I guess I was weird because I didn’t see it as the best option. …I actually wished that I had not made it to our senior high. In our school, the expectation for everyone was college admission. If I were not in a key school, I would not have been under so much pressure. I was kind of torn apart by not being dedicated to study for college and feeling guilty about it … anyway, I felt bad about failing the [college entrance] exams, yet I was also relieved at the same time. Everyone just had to accept that I was not a good student.

A few thoughts

Qian’s relief at finishing high school and leaving the college entrance exams behind rang true for my own experience, even though I passed those exams and went to a college. It would be unfair to say that school does not leave any fond memories for us. Yet it is sad that the relief felt about leaving it is still strong fifteen years later.

During the time we talked together, Qian told me many stories of his life. I have experienced, in similar and dissimilar ways, some of his stories. One of these stories is attending high school and getting prepared for the college entrance exams. It is a story that had an emotional impact, for Qian and for me.

Qian made repeated reference to his failure in the college entrance exams. What struck me was that he put all the blame on himself. The “repetitive refrains” in his story (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) seemed to be “It was my problem”. I wonder what exactly his problem was. Playing basketball when other students were studying? Not being interested in studying what the school had to offer? Not seeing himself as a college student?
It seems to me that there are apparent contradictions in Qian’s attitudes towards the college entrance exams and getting a college degree. I remember him as an uninspired high school student who was not prepared to be self-directed and motivated as expected. I could not understand, from my perspective, why Qian took his failure so hard. He did not really want to go to a college, yet he regretted that he did not try harder to pass the exams. He was not really interested in most of his school subjects, yet he seemed to think highly of the exams that tested the contents of those subjects. Because admission to his B.A program was decided on qualifications other than scores of certain exams, he did not think the program was as good as those programs that students need to pass the college entrance exams to get admitted.

Qian learned at home, in the army, at his work and in the business management program. The most obvious recognition of his excellent performance at work is the promotion to be to the youngest manager. Yet Qian still perceives that “I'm not a good student” and “I don’t have the qualification to be a good student”. But why does he think this way? I cannot help wondering what makes a good student? Passing the college entrance exams?

These puzzling points in the meaning Qian ascribed to the events in his life became the source of further inquiry, particularly the socio-cultural and historical perspectives within which his meaning-making was embedded. Our lives are not context-free. Thus for me as a researcher to understand and interpret how Qian ascribed meaning to the pivotal experience in his life, it is necessary that I take into account contextual and theoretical perspectives beyond the immediate personal experience. In Chapters 9 and 10,
I will further explore the themes that stand out from Qian’s and the other participants’ stories.
Chapter 7
Didi’s Story

Meeting Didi and her family

Didi was born in 1991, the year I began college in China. Her paternal grandparents were colleagues with my parents and they now all live in the same apartment complex. Didi lives with her parents in an apartment in the same building. Actually, the apartment belongs to Didi’s aunt, who used to work in the same hospital but moved to Shenzhen, a city in south China to take up a new job a few years ago. Didi’s father, his elder sister (Didi’s aunt) and my elder brother and sister were close in age and they were good friends in their teenage years. Didi’s other aunt is two years older than I and we went to the same middle school. I remember that it was this aunt who showed me around the school campus and told me about the teachers that I was going to have, such as which ones gave less homework and which ones had zero tolerance for talking in class without permission.

Both my mother and my elder sister recommended Didi to me when they learnt that I needed a girl about Yuanyuan’s (my sister’s son) age in my study. At first, I felt it was strange that I could not think of seeing any teenage girl in the neighborhood that matched my mother’s description of Didi: “She’s about your height, thin. Short hair, thick glasses and a big, red schoolbag.” I lived with my parents before I went to Canada in 2000 and I have visited them almost every year since then. I should have seen Didi around since we lived in the same building. My mother sighed before answering:
You would not see Yuanyuan if he did not come to our place for dinner. The school kids now have crazy schedules. Look at Yuanyuan. He leaves for school before seven in the morning and when he comes home, he has tons of homework to do and he doesn’t leave the house until the next morning. How could you see him outside the house? Kids now don’t play outside and they probably want to watch TV if they have some spare time after they finish their homework. Maybe they still have those after-school classes, such as calligraphy, dancing or piano. (Personal communication with my mother in June 2004)

I met Didi for the first time when I went to her house to tell her family about my study and to invite her to participate in my study. Didi’s parents welcomed me at the door. As I came in, I felt that their apartment was bigger than my parents’, but I knew that all the units in the building were of the same square footage. I then realized that it was because there were very few pieces of furniture. A sofa, a small coffee table and a TV set were all that was in the big living room. All the walls were white and barren.

Didi’s parents insisted that I sit on the sofa. Didi’s mother took one chair and two small stools from the dining room and the four of us sat around the coffee table. Didi’s mother apologized that their home was not comfortable for guests: “You know this place is not ours. It’s Didi’s aunt’s house. It is very kind of her [Didi’s aunt] to lend us the place. She could have rented the place out. We moved in so that Didi can have a good learning environment. We lived in a small place not far from here. But most people in the neighborhood are factory workers like us. It’s not that they are bad people. But they don’t seem to care much about their children’s studies. You hear people play Mahjong all the time. We will decorate our house once we can afford a place in a better neighborhood.”
Didi appeared to be shy; she barely spoke anything the whole time, but she listened attentively as I talked with her parents.

Though I know Didi’s father, I know him mostly as my elder brother’s friend. I remember seeing him, my brother and other neighborhood boys play basketball, table tennis, Chinese chess, and other games in the summer days when I was little. Didi’s father went to a vocational school after he finished junior high school and worked as a technician in a nearby factory. My brother attended college in Guangzhou, a city in the southern part of China. He later worked in Beijing. I had a feeling that Didi’s father and my brother were close. They would talk for long hours whenever my brother was home for holidays. They must have lost touch after my brother moved to Canada a couple of years ago.

I was not surprised that the first thing Didi’s father asked was how my brother was doing in Canada. I told him that my brother was doing postdoctoral research work in a university. Didi’s father asked, “Are you studying in your elder brother’s university?” I told him that my brother and I lived in different cities in Canada, with a four-hour flight distance. He then asked what I was doing in Canada.

Neither Didi’s father nor her mother asked any questions as I told them about my studies in Canada and my thesis research. After I finished, Didi’s father commented, “Look at your brother and you! Kids in your family are all good students!”

It was the first time I met Didi’s mother. She made tea and served fruits. Like Didi, she mostly listened as I talked with her husband, checking from time to time to
make sure that my tea cup was full. Didi’s mother was in the same class with Didi’s father in the vocational school, but now they do not work in the same factory.

At the end of our meeting, Didi’s parents consented to her participation. Didi agreed to give time for my interview after the school year was over.

As her parents showed me out, her mother asked, hesitantly, if it would be all right for Didi to ask me questions she might have about her study of English. “Her dad and I hardly remember any English we learnt at school. We could help with her schoolwork when she was in elementary school but now she’s a year from the big examinations to senior high school. We’re really frustrated that we cannot help with her schoolwork anymore. We’d really appreciate it if you could check up on her English,” she said. I assured her that I would be glad to tutor Didi.

“But what about now?”

It was early August when I received a call from Didi. She told me that she had time for my interview. We made the arrangement that she would come to my parents’ place the next morning. I reminded her to bring her English textbook so that we could work on the problems she might have.

On the following morning, our interview started with Didi’s English textbook. I asked if she could walk me through her textbook and tell me how her teacher would go through each lesson:

*Each [English] lesson consists of vocabulary learning, several short conversations and a short paragraph. My [English] teacher asks us to preview the vocabulary list before class. I use my dictionary to get the*
meaning of each word. In class, my teacher goes through the short conversations with us. We listen to the tape [of the texts] in class and read aloud together. When we come to the short paragraph, my teacher reads it and translates it into Chinese. Usually homework assignment is to copy each word in the vocabulary list 10 times and copy each of the short conversations five times. We don’t have to copy the short paragraph, but we need a parent’s signature to prove that we have read it aloud ten times at home. Every two or three weeks, my teacher picks a short paragraph from the lessons and asks us to recite it. She checks by asking some of us to recite it in class.

Didi’s English textbook looked much more interesting than the ones I used in middle school. Instead of learning grammar and vocabulary from sample sentences such as, “This is a pen. That is a pencil,” which was what I had in my textbook, Didi’s English textbook consists of genuine, everyday conversations and interesting short stories. The copy of new vocabulary, the repetition, the parents’ signature all sounded familiar though. I did the same at school and I used to sign on my sister’s behalf for my nephew, Yuanyuan, on his English assignments before I left for Canada. But Didi had something that I never had in my middle school English class. Didi told me excitedly:

*When a unit is over, my English teacher asks us to write a short story or a short play and perform it in class. We can do it together with two or three classmates. It is a lot of fun. My teacher doesn’t give us topics to write about. We pick whoever we want to work with and we get to write whatever story we feel like. You know what is the best about this? It is not graded! So it doesn’t matter if we make mistakes or make the class laugh. It’s fun.*
I could tell from the excitement in her voice that Didi loved English, not just the part that was not graded. It turned out that I was right. When I asked Didi if there was anything that she did not understand, any questions she might have in her English assignments, she shook her head, with a smile on her face, and told me: “No. I don’t have any questions in this book. I have already finished all my assignments!”

I was quite surprised to hear this because I knew that Didi had school in July, when it should have been the official summer vacation. I wondered when she found time to do her English assignments. She explained it to me:

*My [English] teacher had given summer assignments at the end of the semester, before the summer classes started. The other teachers had done the same. I decided to focus on the English assignments and leave the others until the summer classes are over.*

I assumed that Didi must love English the most, because she finished all the assignments while she had to go to school and do homework everyday in July. She thought a little before speaking:

*Yes, I like English but I don’t always do well. Like in writing my weekly [English] journal entries, I always forgot that I should use the past tense. When I used the present tense where I should have used the past tense, points were deducted. I really hate the past tense. Why couldn’t the verb changes be more consistent? Some words need you to add -ed, some don’t change at all and some change to totally different words. I always make mistakes with the past tense in assignments and in exams.*

As a former English teacher, it was not the first time that I heard complaints about the irregularities of English grammar. I went through the lesson on the simple past tense
with Didi and assured her that she should find this particular tense easier as she got exposed to more English. But she was not satisfied:

*But what about now? Your ranking [of the test scores] decides which class you are in and where you sit in the classroom. Among all my school subjects, I like English the best and I get my highest scores from English. I count on English [test scores] to keep my ranking on the top. Every point is precious. I wish there was no past tense in English.*

I can understand, from my own experience in middle school, the anxiety caused by the ranking of test scores. Test scores could really be the most important factor that decides what life a student lives in school, influencing how he or she is treated by teachers and fellow students. But Didi was in the second year of her junior high, four years away from the fateful College Entrance Exams, and there should be plenty of time for her to catch up with anything she might not get at the present time. Didi disagreed with me:

*No, that is not the case. There is no time for you to catch up with something that you don’t get right away, unless you want to repeat a grade. Do you know why we still had school in July? We were studying what should be taught in the next semester. We are always ahead of the official schedule. This way, we save time for the preparation of the big tests next year that will decide which senior high school you are going to. Many of my friends have a private tutor at home to help. But I don’t want any more private tutors. My parents are workers and they don’t make much money. They have already spent a lot of money for my after-school classes. I don’t want them to spend all the money for my schooling. What if they spend all their money and I still cannot get into a college?*
I feel I can really relate to Didi about her anxiety. After both my elder brother and sister went on to college, my parents’ colleagues and friends began to call me “the third college student”, when I was only in junior high at the time. Now I can understand that calling me “the third college student” was a way to express their best hope for me. But at that time, it gave me pressure. I wanted to escape when I sensed that people might talk about my school work and me going to college (see Chapter 1 for more details). In China, children are often seen as the extension of parents’ lives. They are given the best, very often even beyond their parents’ financial means, to live a better life and achieve at a higher level. I wondered if this was especially true with Didi. Didi’s father and mother finished junior high school, went to a vocational school and then worked in factories. Didi’s aunt went to night school for six years to get a bachelor’s degree while working as a nurse. She is now working in the administration of a hospital in Shenzhen, one of China’s most developed cities, in terms of economy. Didi’s other aunt, with whom I went to the same high school, had written the college entrance exams four times when she finally passed. What are their expectations for Didi? Didi sighed as she told me:

You know my dad’s education was the lowest of all my grandparents’ kids. He is working in a factory, but both my aunts belong to the ‘white collar’ class. I can feel that he is not very happy about himself because he is the only son. I heard others say to my grandpa that he could surely count on his daughters to take care of him in his old age.\(^{38}\) I guess my dad heard the same thing. He never says that I must go to college, like my aunts did. But I can tell he was disappointed when my scores were not high enough

\(^{38}\) Traditionally, it has been the son’s responsibility to take care of parents in their old age. A son would be looked down upon if he can not or will not take care of his parents.
to get into a better middle school. He never said that he was disappointed. He just said that I still had a chance to get into a good senior high school. My mom and dad never require that I have to rank in the first 50 in my grade or things like that. But after I started junior high, they never asked me to help with any chores in the house. I had helped with housework since I was in Grade 3. My mom used to be proud that I could help in the house, doing things such as taking out garbage, washing vegetables… But now …I know they want me to focus on my schoolwork. When I get good grades, I can tell that they are really happy. The three of us watch TV together. My dad watches those ‘silly’ TV series that he usually does not watch with mom and me. When I don’t have good grades, they tell me: ‘Never mind’, ‘It’s ok and try hard next time’. But it feels different in the house. My dad would be very quiet and my mom would check his facial expression from time to time. I envy those [students] who can always get good grades. Their parents must have nothing to worry about and they must be happy in their homes all the time.

It seemed that Didi worried more about her parents’ feelings than anything else.

At this point, I ask her if she liked any other subjects, besides English:

*Um… I don’t know. I like to write stories. I don’t always feel like writing on the topics my Chinese teacher gives, though. …I am ok with math. For political studies, history and geography, I’m fine if I memorize the contents of the textbooks. For example, to prepare for a history test, I spend four or five days memorizing the important dates and events. Other than that, I don’t have to spend any more time on it. I do the same with political studies and geography. Um… I like math. I really do. It is interesting. But I don’t like my math teacher. She speaks too fast in class. It is as if she was speaking to herself and teaching herself. And you can’t ask her questions. She would be upset and blame you for not listening carefully to what she just said in class. She’s been with our class for a*
year now and we learnt not to raise any questions in the first month. Hope she won’t be with us the next semester.

Then who would Didi and her classmates go to when they needed help in math? Some parents may be able to tutor. But Didi’s parents can not tutor her math. What if she could not understand something in her math class? Didi explained it to me:

*I have another math teacher outside school. I go to his house every Sunday morning. He is a retired high school math teacher. He is very nice. I can take my questions to him. I want to go to a good high school. I must do well in math because it is an important subject in the [entrance] exams. It is a pity that he won’t be able to tutor us anymore. He is going to have a grandchild in October and he will help take care of the new baby in his daughter’s house. My parents are looking for a new teacher for me.*

Didi saw this math teacher only on Sundays. What if she had questions with her homework from Monday to Friday? Didi told me confidently:

*Usually, the math homework assignment is the exercises in the textbook. They are not very difficult. I review the lessons in the [math] book and I can finish my homework without help.*

I remember that when I was in middle school, math homework was more than just the exercises in the textbook. My math teacher always gave extra exercises for homework. Those exercises were from reference books only my teacher had or sometimes, my teacher would design exercises for us to do. I asked Didi if her teacher ever gave such extra exercises:

*Sometimes, my [math] teacher will leave some difficult exercises on the blackboard for us. But those are optional. It doesn't matter if we can’t
finish them. Those exercises are for Saturday class. We have school on Saturdays: advanced English and math classes. Actually, there are different Saturday classes. Everyone has to go to school on Saturday morning. But only the first 200 students in the mid-term and final exams can go to the advanced math and English classes on Saturday afternoon. You will be kicked out of the advanced class if you don’t make it to the first 200 in any of the mid-term or final exams. There is change in the students who go to advanced classes every time after the exams. It is humiliating if you don’t have school on Saturday afternoon.

There were about five hundred students in Didi’s grade, organized into 10 classes. Isn’t it unfair that only two hundred students get to study more on Saturday afternoon while three hundred others are denied the chance? They are students in the same school. Why make such a distinction? On what ground? While I was puzzled, Didi seemed to be fine with such an arrangement:

But it’s fair. It’s decided by the [test] scores. I mean even if a teacher likes you and wants you to take those advanced lessons, he or she can not just put you in the advanced class. …In the middle school entrance exam, some students did not have scores high enough to be admitted to my school. But their parents had connections, and they got admitted. But you can’t do the same to get into the advanced classes. So it’s fair. Besides, even if one [student] could find a way to get into the advanced class, it would be a waste of time. If you can’t make it to the first 200 in exams, you probably won’t understand the lessons in the advanced classes. Um… there is a remedial class on Saturday afternoon that anyone can go to. It is for those [students] who need help to keep up with their schoolwork. Just… Just it has an ugly name. It’s called Bu Cha Ban [补差班, the make-up class for the bad students]. I know that some of my friends refused to go to this class because they hated the name. They would rather go to a similar class
outside school or beg their parents’ for a private tutor. They say that

going to the class would make them feel inferior.

I asked Didi why she still needed private math tutoring on Sunday, as she already
had advanced math class at school on Saturday:

Because most of my classmates have at least one tutor, for math, English
or Chinese. You know, they are the major subjects tested in all the
entrance exams. Even if you don’t have any problems with school work,
you still have to have extra classes outside school. My mom and dad say
that they would love to let me have Sunday off. But everyone else is doing
more exercises or having more advanced classes outside school. It’s not
enough to just finish school work. I have to do the same to compete with
the others.

It seemed that school occupied all Didi’s time. She had school from Monday to
Saturday and private tutoring on Sunday. Was she under stress with such a schedule?

Didi admitted she experiences stress:

I can’t say that I am not under any stress. Sometimes, it’s fine. Sometimes,
I feel more stressed. I’m most stressed during the mid-term and final
exams. If I cannot make it to the first 200 in my grade, I will be kicked out
of the key class39 I’m in now. …After the mid-terms last semester, two
boys were removed from my class. One of them failed math. The key
classes do not take students who fail a subject. The other boy, I guess he
didn’t study hard enough. He had already been asked to sit in the ‘special
seat’ before the mid-terms, but he still didn’t work hard or behave himself.
He didn’t belong to the key class.

39 In Didi’s school, students were organized into “key classes” and regular classes. Students with
better academic performance were placed in key classes where their lessons are more advanced.
Didi then told me what a “special seat” was:

*It is a seat right beside the teaching podium. The teachers can monitor closely whoever is sitting there. Actually, one would be under everyone’s stare while sitting there. It is a punishment for those who don’t listen attentively in class, swear or call names in class, or do poorly in exams. I have never been put to sit there. But I can imagine how uneasy it must be to be there. Everyone in class is watching you. It really is ‘special’ to sit there. The special seat is kind of scary and even the naughtiest student tries not to be seated there. Besides the special seat, the teachers have other ways to punish. There are fines for being late for school, for turning in homework late. If you miss one homework assignment, you pay a fine and will be put to sit in the back row of the class. It doesn’t matter if you are too short to see what’s on the chalkboard from the back row. It’s a punishment. But of all these punishments, the special seat is the harshest.*

**I will have time to paint and write my novel when I’m in college.**

As Didi and I talked, I had the impression that her schooling operated in a complicated way: criteria for who went to which class on Saturdays, the ranking of students, the punishing and the awarding systems. How does she like school? What does she do besides her schoolwork? Didi thought for a while and then hesitantly provided an answer:

*I don’t know. Everyone goes to school and all my friends are in school. I don’t know where to go if I don’t go to school. My parents would be worried if I didn’t have a school to attend. I know they want me to go to college, even though they never say it directly. ...You know my little aunt. My parents always talked about how she took the [college] entrance exams four times and finally passed. I want to go to university, even if it’s just for my parents. ... I like school. ... I like English, Chinese and*
geometry. I like my English teacher. She always smiles and she listens to you. Um... She'd ask you what’s wrong if you looked unhappy or worried about something. You can tell her what you really think, not just the ‘correct answer’. ...I had difficulty with the simple past tense when we first learnt it and I kept using the present tense in my homework assignments and pop quizzes. She noticed and offered to help me with it after school. I could tell her that I thought the verb changes were stupid. She just smiled and then worked together with me on those verbs. She’s nice. And she would apologize to you if she wronged you. There was this time that she thought I copied a classmate’s homework. She was really upset about it and she scolded me in front of the whole class. I cried in class because I did the assignment myself... It was so humiliating. But later she gave me a chance to explain. She believed me and she apologized to me. She’s not like some other teachers who are always right and have an explanation for everything they say, right or wrong. She admits it if she’s wrong. We all like her. ...We don’t like our biology teacher. Her class is boring. There is no rise or fall in her tone. You have to try really hard not to fall asleep in her class (laughs). ...I don’t really have much time to do other things besides my schoolwork. ...When I was in elementary school, my mom and I went to Hong Kong one summer. We also visited my aunts in Shenzhen and Wenzhou. My mom said that I could visit my uncle in Japan after the college entrance exams. ... I like to paint and I used to go to arts classes when I was in elementary school. But I don’t have time for that now. ... Um, I like to write. I wrote the beginning of a novel. I will finish it once I go to university.

Didi was too shy to show me her novel. Didi seemed sorry that she did not want to show me her writing. She kept saying “It [the novel] is not good at all. I just wrote down something I imagined. It is not serious writing. It is just for fun.” She promised that she would give me a copy if her novel gets published. Though I did not get to read
Didi’s manuscript, I sensed the pride and confidence in her promise. I am happy for her that she has fun in writing.

**A few thoughts**

Though Didi and I did not meet each other until she became involved in my research, our “storied lives” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1994, p. 413) are related in terms of family, school and community. She is now growing up in the neighborhood where her father, her aunts, my siblings and I grew up. Her family made it possible for her to live in this neighborhood so that she can study in a favorable environment.

In our conversations, Didi shared with me many details of her experiences, both inside and outside school. As detailed as her stories might be, they provide only snapshots of the life of a teenage school girl. Yet the experiences captured in her stories tell that her schooling is not just personal. It is an interaction of the experiences of school, family, teacher, student and parents. Complex situations and interaction are in Didi’s schooling experiences.

In my observation, Didi is a polite, respectful and well-behaved child. She cares about her studies and tries to meet the requirements, whether it is to finish homework or to maintain the status of being in the first 200 in the mid-term and final exams. She does not make any trouble at school and she works hard, in the hope that she can get into a good high school and then a good college. On top of all this, Didi cares about her parents. She knows that her good schoolwork makes her parents happy and she tries to live up to their expectations.
Like many Chinese families, Didi’s family put children’s education as a priority, supporting and making sacrifices so that the children can reach for the highest academic success. Didi’s aunt gives up the rental income of her apartment so that Didi can have a nice learning environment. Didi’s parents expect that Didi has what they could not have, higher education, and a job better than the “blue collar” jobs they have been doing. They care about Didi’s learning environment and move to live in Didi’s aunt’s place, a place where they do not feel comfortable doing any home decorating. When they are not able to help with Didi’s schoolwork, they send her to tutoring classes and seek possible opportunities to get help for Didi’s study, such as asking me to check up on Didi’s English study. They take care of all the housework and everything else so that Didi can stay focused on her studies.

Didi’s school offers extra Saturday classes at different levels and classes during summer and winter holidays. That is to ensure that their students are well-prepared in the examinations, because the results can decide a student’s future. Didi’s teachers work out all kinds of rules to discipline students and more importantly, to motivate them to concentrate on studying hard and reaching for academic achievements.

Didi is well aware of the efforts her parents and her school make for her to achieve academic excellence. Though she has yet to decide what she will want to study in a university, she seems to align herself with her parents and her school as to what is best for her: a good high school and then a college. She accepts what is offered in school and does what she is required to do.
With all the efforts geared toward college, it seems that a college education is the best that a student can aim for. But is it? All the colleges and universities in China can admit only a certain percentage of high school graduates each year, and certainly not all jobs require a college education. I wonder why anything other than attending college has to be perceived as less desirable.
Yuanyuan, my elder sister’s son, inspired me to start this thesis study. His experiences in elementary school intrigued me to inquire into the schooling experiences of Chinese students of different generations (see Chapter 1). By the time I finished the proposal for this research study, Yuanyuan had passed the entrance exams to middle school with high scores and was going to begin in a reputable key junior high school, one of the best in Xi’an. As an aunt, I was happy for him, proud of him and expected him to continue to do well in high school.

However, what has happened to Yuanyuan in the past two years is out of everyone’s expectation, himself included. Among all the things he had talked about that he would do in high school, Yuanyuan never thought that he would leave the school he tried hard to get into and go to a school in another city.

Yuanyuan has avoided talking about school with me on the phone for quite a while. Although I always know what is going on with him in school from my parents and his parents, I have not wanted to push him when he did not feel like talking. It had been such a long wait that I began to think about leaving Yuanyuan out of this study. I was frustrated that in a study of students’ perspectives on their curricular experiences, the one that kept silent was my nephew. I anxiously waited and hoped that Yuanyuan would feel comfortable talking about school with me again.
Yuanyuan did not forget about my thesis. One day in June 2006, after checking up on my progress in thesis writing, he asked me on the phone: “When are you going to write my chapter?” And here I am, writing a chapter on Yuanyuan, a junior high school student.

“Why do I have to copy these characters five more times?”

Yuanyuan was born on New Year’s Day, 1992 and he has been fondly called Yuanyuan by the family because of this birth date. Yuan, 元, according to XinHua Dictionary (2004, 10th edition), has the meaning of the beginning, the first, the great and the good.

As an only child in his family and as the first grandchild to my parents, Yuanyuan was brought up with love, care, attention and best wishes. It is hoped that he will grow to be an upright and responsible person who makes the best out of his life. His name itself shows the affection and good wishes of those who love him.

As Yuanyuan grew up, his interest and curiosity in exploring the world grew. He began to ask questions, many of which we adults never thought of asking nor knew how to answer. Yuanyuan was encouraged to find answers from books and he was taught to read Chinese characters at a very young age, when he was three years old.

Yuanyuan was encouraged to read and he enjoyed the company of books. Before he was taught how to write Chinese characters, he could read about five hundred Chinese characters by the time he started school.
Like many children, Yuanyuan was excited about starting school. He looked forward to meeting teachers and making new friends in school. Like many children, Yuanyuan was told to listen to his teachers and try his best to be a good student at school.

Everyone had thought that elementary school should be easy for Yuanyuan, since he already knew so many Chinese characters and some simple math. It was a surprise that Yuanyuan’s mother was called to meet his classroom teacher in school during the first month of Grade 1. In China, a parent being called for a meeting with a teacher usually indicates that the child has some trouble in school. But what trouble could a six-year-old get into?

Two things. First, Yuanyuan reasoned with his Chinese teacher why he should play under his desk instead of listening to her in class. He said: “It is boring and I want to play with my toy. Why should I listen to you? I don’t always listen to my aunt. She is a university teacher.” Second, his Chinese homework was five times shorter than it should have been. Yuanyuan wrote each of the Chinese characters only once when the homework was to copy each character five times. “But why do I have to copy these characters five times? I have learnt how to write them. Why do I have to write them so many times?” Yuanyuan asked his teacher.

It was almost amusing to think how Yuanyuan challenged his teacher in front of some 40 other six-year-olds in his class. But still, Yuanyuan’s parents had to hold back their laughter when they talked with Yuanyuan about the essentials of being a good student at school. First and the foremost, respect the teachers and do what the teachers say.


“But he is my friend!”

It seemed that Yuanyuan gradually got tuned into his school life. School became more interesting, when what was taught in class started to go beyond what Yuanyuan had learnt at home. Though Yuanyuan still complained about the amount of homework from time to time, he finished what was assigned to him anyway. I can still remember Yuanyuan’s serious little face as he explained to me what would happen if one did not finish the homework.

… [Yuanyuan told me that] If you do not hand in your homework the first thing in the morning, you are not allowed to attend classes. You will be asked to finish the homework outside the classroom, in the hallway. There is no desk or chair and you have to write against the wall. Your arms get sore soon. But you have to finish before the first recess period. Or everyone comes out and teases you. It is terrible. (Personal journal, dated September 27, 1999)

Yuanyuan is a bright child and he tried hard to do his best in school. As he gradually found his way in school, he began to make friends. Most of his friends were in the same class. Once or twice in a week, Yuanyuan would bring a few friends home after school to do homework together and play together when the assignments were all done. And he got the same “study-and-play” invitations from his friends.

Yuanyuan became particularly close to a boy whom I will call XiaoWu in this thesis. I met XiaoWu several times when I went to pick up Yuanyuan at school and when Yuanyuan invited him to my parents’ place for their study-and-play. XiaoWu had a chubby face and he was bigger than many of the boys his age. He was shy and did not talk much. But he was respectful to adults and had very good manners. He greeted
everyone when he came to our house and he made sure he said “good-bye” to everyone when he left. He put back toys when he did not play anymore. We all liked XiaoWu and he was very welcome in both my parent’s place and Yuanyuan’s own home.

Yuanyuan and XiaoWu soon became each other’s best friends. They shared a desk at school and they did everything together. I heard about XiaoWu this and XiaoWu that when Yuanyuan came to my parents’ place for lunch. I learnt from Yuanyuan that XiaoWu was not doing very well in school and often got punished for things such as not memorizing an ancient poem or making too many mistakes in math homework. I was not worried at all. XiaoWu and Yuanyuan, they were only first graders who just started to get familiar with the school environment. They had plenty of time to catch up.

One day Yuanyuan came home upset. He could no longer share a desk with XiaoWu because XiaoWu was put to sit at a single desk in the back row. Yuanyuan told us at the dinner table: “Our teacher said that XiaoWu came last in the mid-term exams and had to sit in the back row by himself to be reminded that he was the last in exams. Our teacher said that XiaoWu has to sit there until he makes improvements in the next exams.”

XiaoWu was not making any improvement in the back seat as he was supposed to. On the contrary, he seemed to totally shut down. I remember hearing about him from Yuanyuan: “XiaoWu did not say anything when our teacher asked him to answer a question in class today. Then he was not allowed to sit down the whole period”.

“XiaoWu did not turn in his homework and wrote nothing while in the hallway. Our teacher got mad and would keep him in school until his parents came”. Yuanyuan was
worried that he would not get to sit together with his friend XiaoWu again. XiaoWu was moved to sit at a single desk in the front of their classroom so that the teachers could often keep an eye on him.

There was still no sign of improvement in XiaoWu’s behaviors in school. XiaoWu was always silent when his teachers tried to talk him into a change. Finally, their home room teacher got so mad that she asked the whole class not to play or talk with XiaoWu. She warned that anyone who failed to obey this rule would be treated as another XiaoWu. Yuanyuan was facing a dilemma. He has been told again and again to listen to the teacher in school to be a good student. In this case, it meant not to talk or play with XiaoWu.

“But he is my friend!” Yuanyuan said sadly.

“We are the exams guerilla!”

Yuanyuan started to take Chinese martial arts lessons when he was in kindergarten. He also took a weekly traditional Chinese calligraphy lesson. He loved learning and practicing martial arts because it made him felt like “the heroes in the Kung Fu movies”. He always looked forward to his martial arts lessons. Yuanyuan was not particularly interested in the calligraphy lesson, but that was all right with him because the weekly lesson was only 45 minutes. In Grade Three, Yuanyuan stopped going to the calligraphy class because it took place at the same time as his Olympiad math class.

Yuanyuan’s Olympiad math class was named after the International Mathematics Olympiad (IMO), an annual mathematics competition for high school students worldwide. China started to send teams to the competition in 1985 and started to win gold
medals in the 1990s. These gold medal winners were very highly honored at home.
Government officials went to the airport to welcome them back and stories of how they
came to be the International Mathematics Olympiad gold medal winners were featured in
major newspapers and magazines. Perhaps most importantly, all the medal winners were
admitted to the most prestigious universities, such as Tsinghua University and Beijing
University, without having to take the college entrance exams. Originally, the Olympiad
math classes were organized by schools to prepare their top students to qualify for the
national IMO team. Then as the competition for getting admitted to good schools
intensified, students tried to get into the Olympiad math class, not to qualify for the actual
IMO competition, but to take it as an advanced math class and get the chance to do more
exercises outside their regular math classes. Thus the Olympiad math class became
popular in schools at all levels and many reference and exercise books have been
published, especially for use in these Olympiad classes.

Then in 1999, because of the burden the Olympiad class put on the already heavy
workload of both the teachers and the students, the Ministry of Education put in place a
policy which stipulated that schools at all levels should no longer organize Olympiad
math classes. However, this policy was never really carried out. Yuanyuan’s school no
longer organized any Olympiad math classes. But Yuanyuan and other students started to
go to private classes offered in some teachers’ homes at weekends. Yuanyuan said:

*I’d rather go to the calligraphy class because there was no test for how
well you can use the brush to write. But mom said that I had to take the*

math tutoring or I would lag behind. Everyone else was taking the class and I won’t be able to compete with them in the middle school entrance exams if I don’t know what others have learnt or do as much exercise as they do. If I want to go to a good middle school, I need to take the Olympiad math class.

Yuanyuan kept going to these tutoring sessions until Grade Six. He got admitted to a key middle school and was really happy about it. It took more than excellent performance in entrance exams for things to finally work out this way. The story behind this success seemed quite hilarious to me.

I called my mother on a Saturday in April 2004. I casually asked if my sister or Yuanyuan was with her, since they often came to visit during weekends. Mother told me that they were out somewhere to write an admission test for a particular middle school. Mother said:

*It’s [the policy] said that admission to middle school should be based on where you [students] live and there should not be any exams. …It’s [the policy] just on the paper. All parents want their kids to go to a key middle school, and key schools want good students to keep their good reputation. But a school can take just so many students. Schools want to give entrance exams and parents want their kids to write those tests. Tests have to be given, unofficially of course because they are against the policy. No one knows exactly when or where the tests will be given. The poor parents had to use all their connections to get information. It’s crazy. Like last Saturday, your sister got a tip that this school would hold a test on the east side of city [My parents and my sister’s family all live in the west part of the city.]. I went with your sister and Yuanyuan to see what it was like to write such an exam. When we got there, no teachers from the school were present. We and other parents waited for almost an hour and then*
someone got a phone call from someone from the school, saying that there was a change of location because the local Bureau of Education seemed to know about the test and would send people here to call it off. Everyone literally ‘escaped’ from the scene and hurried to this new place for the test. After a lot of asking for directions and taxi fares, it didn’t work out and the test was rescheduled to today. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. As for Yuanyuan, he was excited. He said that he felt like a guerrilla soldier, always on the move to fight his battles. And today’s exam is just for one school. He [Yuanyuan] will have to write tests for a few more key schools to make sure that he gets admitted to at least one. You know, you can’t put all your eggs in one basket. (Personal communication with mother on April 22, 2004)

Yuanyuan did pretty well on almost all those “underground” tests and he gained admission to several key schools. He chose the one that was close to his home, so that he would not spend too much time commuting.

“Why do teachers hate me?”

In middle school, Monday to Friday, Yuanyuan had four periods in the morning, three periods in the afternoon and two more periods in three of the evenings. Saturday mornings were designated time for additional math and geometry classes in school. Yuanyuan had no problem with such a hectic schedule and loved his new school.

For him, life as a middle school student was exciting, busy and full of challenges. He described his school to me:

Our school is much bigger and nicer than my primary school. There is an air-conditioner and a water cooler in my classroom! And the sports ground is huge! We have more than two thousand students in the school. The teachers are stricter and very serious because we are no longer small
children in primary school. My English teacher is the one in charge of my class. She always says that we should not be too proud of being able to pass the entrance exams to our school. It’s already in the past. From now on, everyone we are competing with is a good student and we must do even better to win. And that’s not enough because in the entrance exams to senior high school and to colleges, we will be competing with all the good students in our city and in the whole country.

Yuanyuan started English lessons in Grade 3, and it became a big advantage for him in junior high because many of his classmates did not learn any English while they were in primary school. Therefore, Yuanyuan’s English teacher asked him to help with their class’ English learning, doing things such as collecting homework and checking on other students’ recitation of the assigned English paragraphs. Yuanyuan felt greatly honored by his teacher’s trust and the responsibility she put on him. Much of his attention was focused on English class. However, Yuanyuan’s interest in English learning was not increased accordingly. On the contrary, he began to lose it. He explained it to me:

They [English lessons] were too simple and boring. The lessons were for beginners. I already learnt them in primary school. My teacher asked me to hold back the answers to her questions in class so that the other students would have a chance to think and practice. That’s fine. But I still had to do the homework assignments, practicing stuff I already knew and doing exercises I had already done many times while in primary school. My teacher insisted that I finish all those assignments because she did not want the others to think that someone in the class could get special treatment. She said that as her ‘aid’, I should be a model for other students. But I was bored. There were no new things in class.
It was not possible to make arrangement for students like Yuanyuan to go to a more advanced English class in school. Yuanyuan lost his patience. He began to miss his homework assignments. He started to read other books or do assignments from other subjects in English class. His English teacher warned him. He still ignored the class work. His English teacher called his parents. He still could not bring himself to finish his homework. His English teacher became annoyed and began to use more severe disciplinary acts towards him.

First, his English teacher announced in class that Yuanyuan was no longer her aid because he failed to obey the rules. Then the punishments became more physical. Yuanyuan would be asked to stand the whole period if he was found not listening attentively in class. He would be asked to stand in the hallway if he could not produce his English homework. The other students were asked not to speak with him in or out of classroom so that Yuanyuan could concentrate on “reflecting” on his mistake of not being obedient.

It was hard for Yuanyuan to take the change, from being a proud, “model” student to someone others officially were warned to avoid.

*It’s unfair that she [Yuanyuan’s English teacher] treated me like this. I know it was not right for me to skip homework, no matter how boring it was. But that [not finishing homework] did not make me someone with a contagious disease or a criminal. Why should she ask the class to not to speak with me? It’s unfair. I will have to ‘fight’ with her.*
Yuanyuan, a thirteen-year-old junior high student went into this childish “war” with his English teacher. He had only one move: not to do anything his English teacher asked students to do.

Yuanyuan’s rebellion was totally “crushed.” With support from other teachers, his English teacher made it that Yuanyuan could not attend any classes unless he finished his English homework. Yuanyuan’s parents were informed about this decision and asked to support it. His mother told me:

_We felt that his [Yuanyuan’s] teacher was a little bit too harsh on him. He is just a kid and he still needs time to figure out what is going on in school. It’s really not necessary to treat him as a bad child. But we had to agree with the teachers and push Yuanyuan to do what they asked. There are so many students in Yuanyuan’s class, and it’s not practical for the teacher to take care of everyone’s needs or let everyone do things at their own pace. Besides, we don’t want Yuanyuan to think that he has our support to contradict his teachers. It will confuse him. He has always been told to listen to his teachers to be a good student._ (Personal communication with Yuanyuan’s mother)

Yuanyuan gave up his battle against his English teacher. He finished his English assignments and was allowed to attend other classes. “But why do I have to listen to you [teachers and adults] each time? Why can’t anyone care what I think?” Yuanyuan asked.

Since then, seemingly Yuanyuan was back on track by doing what he was told to do. But he still tried to challenge his English teacher from time to time to get back at her. When called to read or recite an English paragraph in class, Yuanyuan would read aloud in a funny accent to get the class roaring in laughter and his teacher angry. He would call
out an answer before his teacher finished asking a question to disrupt the rhythm of her class.

As it can be predicted, more disciplinary actions were taken to deal with Yuanyuan’s behavior. Yuanyuan told me how he was disciplined at school:

*She [Yuanyuan’s English teacher] ordered me to write a letter promising that I would obey the school rules, finish homework, respect the teachers … anyway, promising to be a good student. She then asked that the letter be signed by my parents. She said that my parents’ signatures meant their words to her that they would be strict with me and help me become a good student. She said that if I couldn’t keep my promises, I would not only humiliate myself but also humiliate my parents. So my parents signed [the letter]. Still she was not satisfied. She watched me as if I were a time bomb or something like that. If I was five seconds late for class after the recess, she gave me this nasty look and reminded me of the letter I wrote. If I ever made any sound in class, like moving something on my desk or adjusting my chair, she would snap, accusing me of disturbing the class. I guess she just hated me and in her eyes I could never be a good student.*

The tension between Yuanyuan and his English teacher kept rising to a point where they could not bear each other’s presence in the same classroom. Yuanyuan again refused to do anything his English teacher asked because “she will punish me no matter what. Why bother”? The English teacher sent Yuanyuan to the principal’s office, declaring that there was nothing she could do about Yuanyuan and she did not want him in her class.

How did things finally work out between Yuanyuan and his English teacher? It was quite dramatic. Yuanyuan found himself a new school in another city.
Yuanyuan went on a road trip with his parents to a famous monastery in a nearby city during a holiday in October, 2006. The temple has been long famous for its association with Chinese martial arts and has become a major tourist attraction with the popularity of Kung Fu movies that were based on the temple’s legends and mysteries. Around the temple, there are quite a few Kung Fu schools where students are trained in martial arts, perform for the tourists and even travel the world to perform the martial arts of the temple.

Yuanyuan and his parents happened to have a chance to visit one of these schools and Yuanyuan would not leave until his parents agreed that he could stay there for a month to give it a try.

No one, not even Yuanyuan himself, can say clearly what exactly it was in that school that made Yuanyuan want to stay. Seemingly, Yuanyuan would have a hard time in the Kung Fu school. There was no heating in the classrooms or the dormitories. Yuanyuan shared a dorm room with eleven other boys. There was only one bathroom on the whole floor. Students could have one hot shower and watch TV for an hour every week. It would be difficult for a boy who has had the modern conveniences all his life to adapt to such living conditions. But surprisingly, Yuanyuan actually enjoyed the life in that school.

We get up at 5 in the morning. Then we spend the whole morning running and training. It is hard. Aunt, I bet you would not last even one morning there. You can’t get up at 5 and you are not strong enough to run for an hour (both of us laughed). Academic studies are in the afternoon and
evening. The [academic] stuff is really easy for me. I have already learnt most of it in my junior high in Xi’an. There is not much homework because everyone has to go to bed at 9:30. The teachers really don’t push you hard. I guess they [the teachers] understand that students don’t come here to pursue academic excellence. I am not the best when it comes to playing Kung Fu, but no one beats me in the academic stuff. My teachers like me and I get picked a lot to perform [Kung Fu] for visitors. I am popular in school because my classmates always come to me when they have questions in homework. I know that I am a good student there mostly because other students don’t really care about doing well in tests and I have been more advanced from the very beginning. But it [being able to be a good student] still makes me feel good.

As much as Yuanyuan enjoyed the life in the Kung Fu school, he came back to the city four months later. Yuanyuan told me why he made the decision to come back:

I like Kung Fu, but I don’t think I have a future in performing Kung Fu. I am fourteen and already too old to try to be a Kung Fu star (laughs). I still want to go to college and I definitely can’t make it if I stay in the Kung Fu school. I decided to come back when the spring semester began.

Yuanyuan refused to go back to the middle he had left. His parents had to transfer him to another school which had a lower rating in terms of students’ academic achievement.

A few thoughts

Through this thesis and particularly in this chapter, I have presented many details of Yuanyuan’s stories, both in and out of his schools. I experienced some of these stories as a family member and gathered some as a researcher. As fragmented as these stories
might be, they reveal many aspects of Yuanyuan’s life that seem to be in dissonance with everyone’s efforts and best wishes for his education and future.

The turns and twists of Yuanyuan’s school stories give me a strong sense of frustration.

Unlike his grandparents whose pursuit of education were often constrained by a limiting environment, in terms of their families’ financial situations and the broader social environment (see Chapters 4 and 5), Yuanyuan grew up in homes, his own home and his grandparents’ home, where his education has been the family priority from the very beginning. Yuanyuan’s parents made every effort to make sure that he gets the best education and thus a better future. Yuanyuan’s grandparents provided support and help with his childcare and early education. In such a supportive environment, there were times when Yuanyuan was excited about school and enjoyed it. But more often Yuanyuan struggled in finding a balance between his understanding of being a good student and meeting his teachers’ and school’s expectations of doing well at school. Yuanyuan’s school experiences revealed complex curricular situations and interactions and his school stories tell the differences between an individual student and the education system in terms of homework, teaching and learning, discipline, and the notion of being a “good student”. While these differences frustrated almost everyone involved, Yuanyuan, his teachers and his parents, they reveal that we as educators are not always knowledgeable about our students’ needs and experiences in school. Yuanyuan’s school stories raise many issues in how to take students as knowing individuals, honor their practical knowledge and understand how they make sense of their experiences at school.
They show the needs of improving communication and understanding between the school and its students.

Yuanyuan’s life goes on in school, the third one in his three-year junior high. I have my best wishes for him to find his way in adapting to school life.
Chapter 9
Understanding School Stories:
Exploring Students’ Curricular Experiences by Using Schwab’s
Four Commonplaces of Curriculum

Schwab’s four commonplaces of curriculum

Through Chapter 4 to 8, I have provided a detailed account of my participants’
cross-generational curricular experiences by telling “school stories”, happening in their
different personal and social circumstances and happening at different times and places.
As my inquiry unfolded, I came to see how complex situations and interactions were in
my and my participants’ schooling experiences. Our school stories illustrated ways in
which students’ experience of living in the midst of school, peer and family influences
interacted.

In narrative inquiry, curricular issues are explored and understood from the
perspective of “personal and social narrative history” (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988,
p.109). Clandinin and Connelly (1994) state that “one learns about education from
thinking about life, and one learns about life from thinking about education” (p. 415).
According to Dewey (1938) and Connelly and Clandinin (1988), curriculum does not
only refer to the content in textbooks, but includes people, things, and processes of a
learning environment. These elements always interact and change. Education is
embedded in experience, and to study education is to study experience (Connelly and
Clandinin, 1988; Dewey, 1938). In my study, the broadened notion of curriculum as life
experience in the context of narrative inquiry provides me a way to illustrate the
complexity of processes, events and occasions in my and my participants’ different curricular situations.

Schwab (1971) states that, “Theories of curriculum and of teaching and learning cannot, alone, tell us what and how to teach, because questions of what and how to teach arise in concrete situations loaded with concrete particulars of time, place, person, and circumstances” (p. 322). Thus, Schwab (1973) emphasizes that four commonplaces of curriculum should be taken into account in the discussion of curricular issues: learner, teacher, subject matter, and milieu. These four commonplaces, as Conle (2003) points out, “…combine in different ways, becoming more or less prominent, and more or less salient, in teaching and learning situations” (p. 6).

In what follows, I use Schwab’s four curriculum commonplaces to explore my and my participants’ curricular experiences. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) point out that:

The commonplaces are as empty of meaning as possible. Meaning is filled in as texts are read. The assumption is that a comprehensive curriculum argument is one that has something to say about the learner, the teacher, the subject matter, and the milieu. What the author has to say about those matters is the way in which the commonplaces are “filled with meaning”.(p.85)

The four commonplaces of curriculum are the lenses that make it possible for me to understand the multitude of student experience. Using the four commonplaces helps me organize the meaning of the student narratives by putting together narrative threads and by discussing how each of the four commonplaces is related to the others.
The learner

Learn to respect

All the participants in this study were/are students. Before we started school, we had certain ideas of what to expect in the school as well as what was expected from us at school. Grandpa took father, his only son, to their village school so that he would learn to read, write and calculate, skills that would be useful in running their family farm. I learnt what school was like from my older siblings and was eager to start school to be a big kid who “learns” instead of playing all day. Didi and my nephew Yuanyuan spent a whole year in primary school learning what to do and what not to do in school, how to be a student before they started Grade One. An only exception is my mother, who had no idea what a school was like but went there so that she could still be together with her friend.

At school, we first learnt to respect school rules which meant that we followed the set of school regulations about how to sit in class, how to raise a hand when we wanted to answer a question, how to arrange books and stationary on the desk, together with many other school “do’s and don’ts,” such as do finish your homework and don’t talk in class without the teacher’s permission. I remember that I was to some extent fascinated by such rules and felt that they were important in making me different from a preschool child who only knew play (see Chapter 1). On the contrary, my father feared these school rules, or actually the consequence of failing to obey the rules: hand-spanking (see Chapter 5 for details). He had known and feared those school requirements that he would have to meet before he started school. Father had hoped that my grandpa would forget to enroll him in their village school. Didi and my nephew Yuanyuan learnt to follow the school regulations through examples: examples of how students were punished when
they fail to obey the rules. Mostly, both Didi and Yuanyuan feared the public humiliation associated with the punishment, such as a special single seat in the front of the classroom (see Chapter 7) or completing unfinished homework in the hallway (see Chapter 8).

It seemed obvious that as students, our major responsibility was to learn and learning school rules was an unusually important part of our education.

As a student, I welcomed and readily followed the school regulations to be a “big kid” and a good student. My father, though he did not like the constraint of the school rules, obeyed them anyway so that he would not get corporal punishment. Students of younger generation, Didi and Yuanyuan, were given a year to familiarize themselves with the school norm.

At the beginning, my nephew Yuanyuan had questions about why he had to do what he had to do at school. As a small child, he did not ask his questions directly. He ignored the rules. When his teacher asked him to stop the activities that were not allowed by the rules, such as playing with toys in class, he reasoned with his teacher. Even though his assumption that he could disobey his teacher because he could disobey me, also a teacher at that time, was not right, his teacher did not explain why to him. Yuanyuan was simply told to listen to the teacher and do what the teacher said. It seemed that in respecting the school rules, the respect was only one-way. As students, we had no say in deciding what behaviors were desirable or undesirable and were not involved in creating the school rules. We were expected to accept and conform to the rules unconditionally. Otherwise punishment would be inflicted on us. As shown in Yuanyuan’s story, it was considered the student’s problem if he or she did not understand the importance or
necessity of the school rules. Rules were rules and had to be enforced no matter what. I obeyed and even welcomed the rules because they were the code of conduct that made me feel different from the little kid I had been before I started school. For others, such as Yuanyuan, Didi and my father, they followed the rules for fear of punishment. Though Yuanyuan was upset when he was asked not to talk or play with his friend XiaoWu in school, he did what he was told to do because he did not want to get XiaoWu’s treatment: being isolated at school (see Chapter 8). My father was reluctant to make an apology to his teacher to admit that he was wrong, but he did it anyway so that he could pass the “moral education”\(^{41}\) class and graduate (see Chapter 5). In their stories, students’ perceptions of whether or not the rules were fair did not count for much and the rules appeared to be rigid as they did not allow for individual student’s unique situations.

**Who is the good student?**

Among the participants, my parents and I attended universities. My parents became doctors and practiced medicine in a big city; I taught in a college and went to Canada to pursue graduate studies. We are thus considered “good” students and successful at school. My friend Qian did not pass the college entrance exams at his first and only try. Though he later acquired a college education while working full-time, he still never thought he was ever a good student. My nephew Yuanyuan was considered a

\(^{41}\) Moral education is a required subject in China, from elementary school to graduate school. Moral education is always closely associated with politics in China and the term “moral education” is often interchangeable with “political education” (Lee & Ho, 2005). The content of moral education takes on “heavy political tones” (Qi & Tang, 2004, p. 466), with emphasis on commitment to nationalism, patriotism and devotion to the party. The aim of moral education class is to promote the political agenda of the time and certain traditional values, such as honesty, thrift, responsibility and diligence (Zhu, 2006; Clark, 2008).
“good” student at some point when his grades were good and when he obeyed the school rules. Then the relationship between him and his junior high school English teacher became so strained that they could not bear each other in the same classroom. Yuanyuan had to leave and he briefly attended a martial arts school in another city. Yuanyuan was a “good” student at that martial arts school because he was more advanced in academic subjects than most of his classmates. But being a good student in the martial arts school was not enough. Yuanyuan realized that though he loved martial arts, he did not want to pursue a career in performing martial arts. He decided to come back to a regular high school in his home city so that he could take the college entrance exams once he graduated from high school. Is he going to be a good student in his new school? It depends. It depends on whether he makes trouble at school, how well he does at various exams and most importantly, if he can pass the college entrance exams. The same holds true for Didi, the young female participant of Yuanyuan’s generation. Though she always obeyed school rules and did not make any trouble, she only considered herself “good” when her grades were good and when she could make it to the advanced weekend classes reserved for students with certain scores in exams (see Chapter 7).

From my and my participants’ experiences, it seemed that to be considered a good student at school, first and foremost a student had to have good grades in various exams, especially those “gate-keeping” ones, such as the one that will decide whether a student can go to a “key” middle school or not. Students’ placement and advancement to the next grade were determined by the results of exams taken at the end of each school year. When a student’s test scores were high enough to allow him or her to enter a good school in the next upper level, he or she was considered a good student. It seemed that a student
cannot be a good student without good test scores. Good academic performance and good academic performance itself can make a student considered a good student.

Since the 1950’s, the guiding principle of China’s education has been to cultivate students’ all-round development, namely the moral development, the intellectual development and the physical development (Lin, 1992). My participants’ experiences showed that their intellectual development, mainly measured by their performance at exams, was the first priority of schooling. Our schooling was organized hierarchically with emphasis on academic skills. Music and arts classes were offered in both primary and middle schools, but their scores were not counted when ranking students for their placements. I remember that these classes always became self-study periods near the end of each term to give students extra time to prepare for tests. Low grades, even failing grades in these classes would not affect a student’s “good student” status as long as he or she got good grades in those major subjects, such as math and English. PE (Physical Education) was mandatory and the policy was and still is that failing it alone will result in repetition of a grade. Yet hardly anyone I know had to repeat a year because they failed PE. Whether a student passed PE with a full score or just a passing score carried little weight in deciding whether a student was good or not.

Outside school, in our community (my parents worked in a hospital and all the staff and their families lived in several low-rise apartment buildings in a compound.), I remember that the only praise for a child was “s/he studies very well”. Other things, such as “helps with house work” “good at singing/dancing/painting/sports” were not for children and their parents to be proud of as much. They were secondary and even could have the connotation of “spending too much time on other stuff /playing other than
learning” if the child did not have satisfactory academic achievements. The overemphasis on academic adequacy put everything else in secondary place.

Academic skills were valued above students’ other talents and interests. Qian loved to work with his hands and he wanted to become a carpenter or an auto mechanic. Instead of being proud of his talents and interests, he was so ashamed that he felt he could not talk about what he really wanted to do to anyone (see Chapter 6). Meanwhile, there was no way that his talents with machines and electronics were recognized and developed in the key middle school Qian and I attended. As our schooling was organized around college preparation, there was no room for Qian’s mechanical aptitude in the curriculum. The academic purpose of schooling seemed to become the only purpose of schooling and it drove everything.

The historical roots of a hierarchy of talents can be traced to the Confucian tradition that to learn with the pursuit of excellence to become an official scholar (学而优则仕, The Analects, 19.13); those who work with their brains rule and those who with their hands are ruled (劳心者治人，劳力者治于人), and to be a scholar official is to be on top of the society, (万般皆下品，唯有读书高). Chinese culture highly respects formal education. The Chinese value education more than money, and scholars are highly respected and admired (Chao, 1996; Zhang, Ollila & Harvey, 1998). Chinese

42 These were Mencius’ words. Mencius was a 4th century philosopher who is most famous for his interpretation and development of Confucius’ thoughts.

43 This is part of a poem entitled “Poem of gifted child”, written by Wang Shu of the Song Dynasty (960-1279). It has become a popular saying in China to stress the importance of pursuing academic excellence.
education is profoundly intertwined with the tradition of examinations as China has long maintained a unique education system that is strongly test-driven (Bakken, 2000). The Civil Examination system in China that lasted for 1300 years, from its founding in the Sui Dynasty in the 7th century to its abolition at the end of Qing Dynasty in 1905, had been an important path to become scholars and enter the imperial bureaucracy. Civil Examinations were an important path for individual advancement for the system was built to judge on candidates’ merit and learning rather than their wealth or social status (Ren & Xue, 2003). The aim was to select the best through the Imperial Examination System so that they may serve the state for the good of all. Such a tradition has created a high respect for education, for the educated and an unwavering belief in the power of education. While at the same time, this examination system and its tradition created learners who carried with them high expectations as well as pressure from family and society, to pursue the dream of becoming educated (Li, 2001). Academic excellence is valued and rewarded in Chinese society while a lower education level is often accompanied by poor life opportunities. People who did manual labor were considered intellectually inferior to people who could master an academic curriculum. As a young child, I watched how my parents supported my brother and sister while they were preparing for the college entrance examinations. I also watched how my parents, behind my brother and sister, worried about their future – what if they did not pass the examinations? My parents’ worrying faces stayed with me and became both my impetus and pressure when I was preparing for the college entrance examinations (see Chapter 1).
Moreover, there has been substantial disparity in economic development between the urban and the rural areas in China, and the Hukou\textsuperscript{44} (resident registration) discrimination against rural Hukou holders instituted since the 1950’s widened the disparity to a large degree (Chan & Zhang, 1999; Pye, 1999). For many rural students, such as my parents, at least part of their aspiration was to move up the education ladder to have the chance of getting a desirable non-farming job. In China, for most people working on the land, the financial return was usually uncertain, depending largely on Mother Nature. My father almost had to drop out of school the year my grandfather lost his cotton crop to bad weather (see Chapter 5). For students like my father and my mother, a desirable job meant a non-farming job that would give them a stable income, such as a teaching job that my grandfather had wanted my father to have in a nearby town (see Chapter 5) or a nursing job my mother had worked at before she went to medical school (see Chapter 4). The examination system enabled learners who were good at academic subjects to come out on top and became socially and economically privileged. It is thus especially true to the Chinese that education can mean social and economic mobility. For many Chinese people and for a very long time in Chinese history, as Wong (1995) points out, “Education is an only available channel for social mobility” (p. 231). The “good” students are those who are able to move to the top of the educational ladder.

\textsuperscript{44} Since the 1950’s, the Hukou system has categorized Chinese citizens into agricultural and non-agricultural residents, according to both place of residence and eligibility for certain socioeconomic benefits. The government provides non-agricultural and urban residents with greater job opportunities, food rations, subsidized housing and free medical care. Parents pass Hukou status to their children. One important way to change a person’s Hukou status is by going to post-secondary institutions in the urban area (See also A timeline in Chapter 3).
Labeling and self-image

The hierarchy of capacities within the school curriculum made Qian feel uncomfortable even embarrassed about his special interests in doing things that were outside the existing disciplines in school curriculum. Similarly, Didi had to save her interests in drawing and writing for the future, after she has made it to college, so that she can now devote all her attention and energy to school studies. Yuanyuan had to cut back on his calligraphy and martial arts classes to accommodate an additional math class. The deep-rooted cultural values about formal education and school’s concentration on academic goals gave students very definite and restricted ideas about success and my study shows that students have internalized the values and perspectives of the Chinese educational culture. To be a good student and to succeed in school is equal to attaining excellent standing on formal examinations at all levels of education. Grades played an important part in shaping students’ sense of self and self-worth. As all the students are held to the same standard, students’ self-worth largely depended on their success in academic subjects.

In school, good grades brought attention, status and certain privileges, while poor performance meant loss of them. When Qian and I were at middle school, only those students with good grades were allowed to attend the extracurricular activities organized by school. In Didi’s school, test scores determined who could attend what weekend classes on which day (see Chapter 7). The reward for doing well was the privilege for attending more and harder classes. My nephew Yuanyuan and all his classmates were told not to talk with a classmate, XiaoWu because XiaoWu was not a good student and
needed to focus all his attention on studying rather than talking with anyone (see Chapter 8).

Ayers (1998) points out that in institutional settings of hierarchy students are labeled according to categories and “…the language of schools is a language of labeling and reduction” (p. 35). The lived experience of my participants reveals that in the test-driven school system where only certain abilities got recognized and were valued more highly, students were labeled as good, bad, excellent, successful, or mediocre according to their examination results. Such labels had consequences for students to see themselves in certain ways as they were forced to think in terms that are associated with learning performance in academic subjects. Failure to pass the college entrance examinations haunted my friend Qian, making Qian feel like a loser. A successful career and college education cannot make up for the failure. Yuanyuan and Didi are not always sure if they can see themselves as good students. They were good students when their grades were good and when they did not have issues with the school rules. They firmly believe that a good student is the one that can pass the college entrance examinations. Whether they are good students eventually is to be determined by the college entrance examination results.

**Learners and their families**

读书郎 A student

小嘛小儿郎啊， I am a small kid
背着那书包上学堂，

Going to school every day with my book bag

不怕太阳晒，也不怕那风雨狂，

I am not afraid of the scorching sun or storm

只怕先生骂我懒哪，

Only afraid of my teacher’s reprimand that I am not hardworking

没有学问, 无颜见爹娘

How could I face my parents if I failed at school

This Chinese folk song has been popular among students since it was written in the 1930’s. My mother taught this song to all her children, my brother, sister and me when we were little and I remember my sister taught it to her son, Yuanyuan, when he was about four or five years old. This song vividly illustrates the student’s perceived expectation about his or her academic achievement: a student fears nothing but failure at school. The song conveys the message that education is most important in one’s life and a good education is vital for obtaining family pride.

Lin and Liu (1999) point out that the Chinese value loyalty, obligation and responsibility in family life. Each family is supposed to work hard to bring honor to the family and not to disgrace or “lose face” for the family. The student narratives in this study show that though the participants’ educational experiences varied across historical, socio-economic and geographic landscapes, a common thread in their lived experiences is that schooling was experienced as a family thing.
My father and my mother were from underdeveloped rural areas. They are the only ones in their poor peasants’ families who received a college education. Their educational pursuit would not be possible without the support and sacrifice of their families. They were motivated to work hard at school to make their family’s support and sacrifice worthwhile. It was their responsibility to succeed at school so that they could reap the social and economic benefits brought by academic achievements and use them to help their families.

In Chapter 1, I described how the parents in our community cared about their children’s education and how children’s school success or failure was linked directly to their family’s honor or shame. My parents were praised and admired because all three of their children passed the college entrance examinations and went to college. Our successes in examinations brought public recognition of my parents’ merits and virtues in parenting. My friend Qian experienced the pain of failure in the college entrance examinations, but more noticeably the shame of losing face for his family. He felt that his failure not only humiliated himself, but also his parents. Such an emotion was so disastrous that Qian did not want to give the college entrance examination another try, for fear that he might bring more shame to his family if he failed again.

There is support for my participants’ feelings and experiences in the literature (e.g. Chao & Tseng, 2002; Ho, 1994; Lee, 1989). Lee (1989) observes that “to many Chinese, academic achievement is the ultimate goal that will bring glory and respect to the family” (p. 41). China’s one-child policy (see Chapter 3) makes the parental expectation on education even higher. Both Didi and Yuanyuan are an only child in their families. In their school stories, their parents, grandparents and relatives are caring,
supportive and never pushy. Yet they can feel what is expected from them in terms of their schooling. Didi’s aunt gave her apartment to Didi’s parents so that Didi could have better conditions for her study. When Didi’s school work became much heavier in junior high, her mother took over the house chores that used to be Didi’s responsibility to give Didi more time to study. Didi’s parents never blamed her for the occasional unsatisfactory examination scores, but Didi could sense the different family atmospheres coming with her good or not so good grades. Didi’s two aunts worked very hard to get a college education and they both work in white-collar jobs. Didi’s parents are high school graduates and work in a factory. All this clearly pointed out to Didi her parents’ expectations. Didi gave equal attention to her school subjects, but not because she was interested in them all. She worked hard on all of them to make sure that her ranking in school would be good and she would not disappoint her parents.

Like Didi, my nephew Yuanyuan is growing up with parents and relatives who care about his education. People close to Yuanyuan are all well-educated. His maternal grandparents (my parents) are doctors, his parents went to a prestigious university and his uncle (my elder brother) and aunt (me) hold advanced degrees from Western universities. With these role models, it is natural that Yuanyuan wants to measure up to their achievements and add honor to his extended family. Yuanyuan’s formal schooling experienced a detour, but now he is back on the original track (see Chapter 8). Like Didi, he is now working really hard so that he can obtain personal advancement and family pride by passing the college entrance examination.

The student narratives in my study reveal that schooling was not just a student’s personal concern, but was closely related to parental expectations and a family’s pride.
High academic achievers are valued and rewarded in Chinese society (Ho, 1994). Out of the belief that a good education is vital for obtaining personal advancement, parents held high educational expectations for their children, although they did not always show such expectations explicitly. To a great extent, parents’ care, support and sacrifice for their children’s education were perceived as both aspiration and pressure to pursue academic excellence. Students, regardless of their personal interests, abilities and plan for the future, felt obligated to protect their family from dishonor by doing good school work. Both the students and parents focused on pursuing excellence in academic learning, the highly valued and the allegedly most desirable form of learning that made all other forms of learning seemed inferior. Yet as Noddings (1992) points out, only students who are best endowed with certain capacities and are interested in developing them can succeed in such academic curricula. Students, such as my friend Qian, with other capacities, inevitably felt inferior and rejected. Still other students, such as Didi and me, are so preoccupied trying to do what was supposed to be the best for us by meeting the requirements of the prescribed curriculum that there was little room left for us to think about or to explore other possibilities.

The teacher

What is the teacher to students?

The teacher is highly respected in Chinese tradition. When I first started teaching, most of my students were older than I and some of them were of my parents’ age. Every one of them called me Teacher Jia, 贾老师, in and out of the classroom to show their respect for me. Years later, when I bumped into a few of my students in the streets in Toronto, they still insisted calling me Teacher Jia, 贾老师. In my memory, whenever my
parents mentioned one of their teachers, they never once called them by name. Even when they forgot some teachers’ last names, they referred to them as “my math teacher” or “that grey-haired professor”. For Chinese, teacher is not just a job title. “Teacher” has been a respectful term used to refer to someone not only knowledgeable but also influential in transforming learners personally and socially. To be a teacher means to 教书育人: transmit knowledge and cultivate humanity so that the students become knowledgeable and socially-responsible human beings (Kwong, 1988). To Chinese people, a teacher is like a parent, as the saying goes: 一日为师，终身为父 Being a teacher a day, one becomes a father figure to the students the rest of their lives. Learners respect their teacher the way they respect their parents. At the same time, the teacher is expected to take care of their students’ well-being, particularly their learning. The teacher assumes responsibility in the learning that does or does not occur in their students. The student’s attitude toward the teacher is the one of respect, obedience and reliance.

**Guan – Teacher’s role and authority**

With the culturally driven respect for education and the teacher, Chinese parents, especially those with little or no formal schooling, depend heavily, if not solely on teachers for their children’s schooling. Teachers are considered as people who know and who know what works best for their students. Parents, such as my illiterate grandparents, trust the school and the teacher as the source and authority of knowledge and as the ones who know better as to how to educate their children. What is expected from the teacher is to **Guan**, 管. **Guan**, has a dual meaning of 1) disciplining students’ minds and character and 2) being responsible for students’ learning (Stewart et al., 1998). Confucianism also stresses the importance of guidance in children’s growth (Watson, 1991). A child or
student must be nurtured to greatness and it is the fault of the parents and the teacher if a child does not grow up to be a good person. Holding a superior responsible for the performance of people under his or her care is a tradition of long standing in China (Stewart et al., 1998). Like that a child’s school success or failure is always related to his or her family, the success or failure of the student’s schooling is the reflection of the teacher’s teaching. As it is emphasized in the famous Three Character Classic, 45

To feed the body, not the mind – fathers, on you the blame!
养不教，父之过

Instruction without severity, the idle teacher’s shame!
教不严，师之惰

(Giles, 1972, p.26)

Such a teaching philosophy of Guan assumes that the teacher has the legitimacy of right and responsibility to exert authority over the students. In my father’s village, besides taking turns treating the school teacher with the best food they could afford, the farmers were not very participatory in their children’s education. The farmers showed their trust, respect and support for the teacher’s way by giving a “matching spank” at home if their children were punished by the teacher at school. Similarly, though Yuanyuan’s parents did not always agree with his teacher’s way of doing things at school, they never let Yuanyuan know. To maintain consistency in school and at home,

45 The Three Character Classic was developed in South Song Dynasty (1127-1279) and has since become a popular children’s literacy book in traditional Chinese schools. Its content covers Chinese history, geography, and ethical values.
they persuaded Yuanyuan to listen to his teacher. My father’s and Yuanyuan’s school stories showed that the teacher’s authority was unquestionable to both the teacher and the students and it was recognized and supported by parents at home.

It was shown in various studies (e.g. Guo, 2003; Li, 2001; Walters, 2005) that for many Chinese teachers, obedience and submissiveness are signs of good students. Being quiet in class, never challenging the teacher and receiving whatever is given by the teacher are considered virtues of students. Some students, such as Didi and me, accepted such standards and tried hard to meet the teacher’s expectations. We kept different opinions to ourselves so that we would not get into trouble. Moreover, deeply down, we knew that it would not make any difference whether we agreed with our teachers or not. The “special seat”, a single seat in the front of Didi’s classroom (see pp. 148-149) clearly showed what would happen if a student did not listen to the teacher or did not do what the teacher said. In the conventional hierarchical relationship between the teacher and the student, we as students virtually were not in the place to disagree with our teacher. Thus, those students who held a different opinion were easily considered mischievous or uncultured. Such students needed Guan from the teacher, meaning to be disciplined by the teacher. Yuanyuan’s traumatizing school experiences with his teacher resulted from the fact that there was a mismatch between him and his teacher in terms of teaching and learning. It did not make sense for Yuanyuan to embrace his teacher’s way of teaching and learning, such as copying the English words that he already knew how to spell. He was not always in tune with the prescribed direction to satisfy the requirement of the authority, his teacher. To put him back on the “right” track, Yuanyuan’s teacher even used ostracism as a means of discipline – Yuanyuan was not allowed to attend classes or
to be spoken to by his classmates unless he did what his teacher asked him to do.

Yuanyuan finally was completely excluded – he went to a martial arts school and then returned to the city to attend a different high school.

In summary, in our stories, the teacher was considered senior to us students and was the authority in the class who decided what students should do and how they should do it.

**Guan – The teacher’s care**

In the students’ narratives in this study, teachers left an indelible impression in our schooling experiences. Our teachers cared about our learning and wanted to make us good students through their teaching. In the daily interactions with students, teachers’ care was manifested in many different ways.

My mother’s teacher walked a long way, 50 li (25 kilometers), to her home in the mountains to persuade her not to quit school. If it had not been for this teacher’s sympathy and help for a student who was about to leave school because of family financial difficulties, my mother would not have had the chance to become a doctor in the city. Mother’s teacher not only helped her out in a difficult situation, but also showed his belief in her potential and that a little setback should not prevent her from realizing her potential.

Because of his teacher, my father developed a strong interest in geometry. In my father, the student’s eyes, his geometry teacher knew the subject matter well. He was confident and he reaffirmed his students’ confidence in their abilities by telling them “It’s easy. It’s easy” (see Chapter 5) while working together with them through their
questions. Unlike the geometry teacher who seemed to be immersed in the wonderful world of geometry and attracted his students to the world with his enthusiasm about the subject matter, my father’s Chinese teacher seemed to believe that “practice makes perfect” by insisting that students finish their homework no matter what. He had zero tolerance for a student such as my father who did not finish schoolwork. My father did not have a chance to explain why he failed to write the weekly journal in a satisfactory way. When father tried to hint that the teacher should be more understanding of the students’ circumstances in guiding them in their learning, he was ridiculed by the teacher’s humiliating remarks in front of the whole class. Father eventually had to apologize to his teacher as a way to show that he realized his own mistake and recognized that his teacher was right.

In the students’ narratives in this study, our schooling experiences were interactions of teacher, student and parents experiences. Our teachers lived the cultural image of the Chinese teacher who considers that it is the teacher’s responsibility to nurture the students’ growth: to make learning happen in students. But very often the nurturing was framed in a hierarchical relationship between the teacher and the learner: guidance passing from the teacher as authority to the learner, the knowledge receiver who was expected to show respect and gratitude to the teacher by doing what the teacher said. Though the centrally planned curriculum gave little room for teacher autonomy and

46 What “learning” means for the participants in this study will be further discussed in the next section: subject matter.

47 See Chapter 1, pp. 12-13, for story and discussion of lack of teacher autonomy in my teaching experience.
teachers mostly had to teach to prepare students’ for various examinations, the authoritarian tradition of Guan put teachers in the position to regulate and control what and how students learn. Strictness, teacher’s control and supervision in teaching and learning characterized the practice of guan, which has traditionally been considered a trait of good teachers, as reflected in the Chinese saying, 严格出高徒, strict teachers make for good students. Thus, strictness, toughness in teaching, sometimes in the form of physical punishment, sarcasm, public humiliation and ostracism as shown in the students’ narratives in this study, became acceptable and were even supposed to be viewed and received as a reflection of the teacher’s care and love for students. As revealed in this study, especially in Yuanyuan’s story, with all the good intentions, the teacher’s practice of guan could have negative effects. Without listening to what the students were going through and what they were thinking, teachers did not make students feel trusted and respected. What seemed to be lacking between our teachers and us was “…the kind of interaction which maintains an environment in which human desire and choice count for something” (Dewey, 1964, p. 67).

**Guan – The ethical teacher**

In my and my participants’ schooling experiences, our teachers cared about our academic learning as academic excellence has always been valued and rewarded in our Chinese society. Our teachers wanted us to have a promising future. However, as Campbell (2003) points out, teachers’ actions have more than academic consequences.

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48 Curriculum planning and teaching as preparation for examinations will be further discussed in “subject matter” and “milieu”.
For students, teachers are role models of what educated people should be like, especially for students like my parents, whose teachers were the only educated people in their lives. In her research, Campbell (2003) gave many examples of how teachers make ethical decisions on a daily basis, whether or not the teachers themselves are aware of them. Similarly, the teachers in our stories were constantly making ethical decisions, whether it was throwing the wrong homework away (see Chapter 1, my learning stories) or walked a long way to a student’s home to help her stay at school (see Chapter 4, my mother’s story). Students not only learn from their teachers the content of a certain subject matter, students learn lessons from their teachers’ actions and decisions. The students’ experiences in this study provided another set of lenses, the students’ perspectives to explore the teacher’s role and influence. The small things teachers did could have consequences for the student’s life and leave a lasting imprint on their sense of self (O’Reilly Scanlon, 1992). The school stories in this study led me to think about the ethical questions of how we as teachers and educators should live with students in the classroom and how we should deal with them in particular and practical curricular situations. I hope that the students’ narratives will provide an opportunity for teachers to think differently as to how we as teachers nurture our learners’ growth, with heightened awareness and sensitivity to the decisions we make in the daily interactions with our students.

**Subject matter**

Major subjects and minor subjects

Going back to the commonplaces of “student” and “teacher”, I found that for me and my participants, learning to become a good student was the major task of our
schooling and the organization of learning activities was largely subject based, with an emphasis toward studies of subjects that would be tested in major examinations.

Though in China it has been advocated that the objective of education is the all-round development of students in the domains of intellect, ethics and physique and the school curriculum include subjects such as music and arts, the school subjects are divided into two categories: major subjects, 主科 and minor subjects, 副科. As indicated in the names, major subjects are those of more importance and dominate the study hours on the timetable.

Generally speaking, in primary and secondary schools, major subjects are academic subjects that will be tested in various examinations that determine a student’s ranking and advancement. These subjects include Chinese language, mathematics, English and political studies (moral education). Physical Education is also a major subject, but its grades are not counted in students’ ranking and a passing score is good enough. Minor subjects are those offered to students, like music, arts, history, and geography, but a student’s test scores in these subjects are not counted in deciding his or her placement or advancement.

What does learning mean?

As has been discussed in the previous section, the significance of education stands out in the Confucian tradition, and China has long maintained a unique educational

49 History and geography are offered in primary school and junior high school as minor subjects. Starting from Grade 11 in regular high school, students can choose to study in two streams: arts and science. History and geography become major subjects for students in the arts stream because they are tested in the national college entrance examinations.
system that is strongly test-driven. Competition for educational excellence dominates and is still thought essential for personal and social mobility as it is the case with the ancient Chinese (Law, 2003). Inevitably, the examination-driven education decides and limits the educational value of how and what the students learn (Popham, 1990). Moreover, the excessive reliance on examination for educational and personal advancement makes school learning largely examination-oriented. Learning is oriented towards good test performance and examination outcomes.

I reflected on what learning meant to me as a student in China in the report of a practicum course (CTL 4997) on teaching and learning that I attended at OISE in 2004 to help me develop a better understanding of teaching and learning. This course involved observing classes in a pre-service teacher training program. What follows was prompted by a discussion on how to help students develop an understanding of literary texts in one pre-service class.

I don’t think the classroom learning in primary and secondary school involved the interchange of interpretations between my teachers and me. The teacher basically presented the understanding of the subject matter and made sure we got that and could produce the right answers in exams. Teachers may vary in how they presented such understanding, but it had to be the “official” version of the subject matter understanding given by the Ministry of Education. This left little room for the teacher’s presentation of his/her understanding. Moreover, the “official understanding” was vital as it was the “gatekeeper” for exams at all levels. This mechanism sent the message that the right way was to get what the teacher gave and anything beyond that was not preferred as it would do no good to passing the exams. I was an obedient student and was happy to do whatever the teacher asked me to do. I was not so smart as to be always inspired in a
different or unintended direction by the teacher. Actually, question asking was not encouraged in the classroom. I had the impression that those who didn’t get or listen carefully to what the teacher explained in class had questions because students were seldom asked to ask questions in class and only those who couldn’t answer questions were asked to come to the teacher during the recess or after school to get the unanswered questions done. I was okay with this because I saw that it was absolutely necessary to get myself into a college or university. I also developed a discomfort with ambiguity. A good student was the one who would make every effort to make everything clear in his/her learning. Keeping up with ambiguity was a sign of laziness – you didn’t want to make the efforts to seek the right answers. In fact, I couldn’t afford to be comfortable with ambiguity – I must be able to produce or to be more exact, reproduce the right answer to demonstrate I learnt something and to pass the exams. (Jia, 2004)

My learning experiences revealed that books and teachers were sources of knowledge and such knowledge was not regarded as a matter open to interpretation or discussion by students. Meanwhile, neither my teachers nor I, the student, had the authority or responsibility to decide what to learn, as the curriculum was prescribed in a top-down way. Almost all students in China used the same textbooks compiled by the Ministry of Education and took tests that were based on the contents of these textbooks. As a student, I got the message that learning led to something definite and complete and such learning was to be checked by whether or not I could give clear and correct answers in examinations.

50 How my notions of learning and schooling changed in different curriculum situations in China and Canada was explored in Chapter 1.
51 Starting in 1998, high schools in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong Province use textbooks compiled by the local Bureau of Education.
In our school stories, especially Yuanyuan’s and Didi’s, things not related to examinations were considered useless, impractical and thus not worthy of students’ time and efforts. Yuanyuan had to give up his martial arts and calligraphy lessons for extra math classes and Didi stopped writing and painting to give more time to study the academic subjects. Our schooling was narrowly focused on materials that would be tested in all kinds of high-stake examinations. Such materials provided information necessary for writing exams, but they did not always connect us in a personal way. For example, Qian loved to work with electronics and machines, but his interests and aptitudes could not be connected to what was taught in physics and chemistry classes at school. Yuanyuan was eager to learn new Chinese characters so that he could read more story books before he started school. He soon lost his keenness in learning Chinese because the textbook and the teaching seemed to be distant from what he cared about.

Memorization and repetition to accumulate knowledge played a very significant role in learning as traditional Chinese beliefs and conceptions of learning embody hard work and efforts. Didi’s description of how English was taught and learnt in her class is illustrative of such teaching and learning characterized by rote memorization, lesson drilling, preview and review.

Each [English] lesson consists of vocabulary learning, several short conversations and a short paragraph. My [English] teacher asks us to preview the vocabulary list before class. I use my dictionary to get the meaning of each word. In class, my teacher goes through the short conversations with us. We listen to the tape [of the texts] in class and read aloud together. When we come to the short paragraph, my teacher reads it and then translates it into Chinese for us to know the meaning. Homework
usually is to copy each word in the vocabulary list 10 times and copy each of the short conversations five times. We don’t have to copy the short paragraph, but we need parents’ signature to prove that we have read it aloud ten times at home. In every two or three weeks, my teacher picks a short paragraph from the lessons and asks us to recite it. She checks by asking some of us to recite it in class. (Chapter 7, pp. 140-141)

In Didi’s description, her homework was exercises that were repetitive and did not sound very stimulating. Chen and Uttal (1988) observed that the Chinese believe that persistent efforts are imperative in reaching goals and regard efforts as an explanation of success or failure. Practice is believed to be most effective in learning and that efforts compensate for lack of intelligence, as the Chinese saying, 勤能补拙, goes. Thus, regardless of where the students’ capacities and interests lie, they were pushed, tutored and given a heavy load of homework\textsuperscript{52} to ensure the absorption of curriculum contents so that they were able to move up in the educational ladder to succeed. In my father’s school experiences, one of his teachers gave so much homework that even she herself lost track of it. Homework as part of teaching practice seemed to be used to a degree to be excessive. In Yuanyuan’s story and in my father’s story, in the matter of homework, dissonance and clash were evident between the teacher and the student. Homework appeared to be not only the way for students to reinforce what had actually been learnt in school, but also a way for the teachers and the parents to monitor and discipline students, to instill certain values in students, such as hard-working and respect for the teacher’s authority.

\textsuperscript{52} See chapters 1, 7 and 8.
In summary, in our Chinese culture, the importance of education is always valued, respected and academic endeavors are always encouraged and supported. However, in pushing students to pursue what is supposed to be best for them, an education, education itself ironically becomes a means to an end, a preparation for future living. Such end-means dichotomy makes it hard for education to be an activity that produces further activity (Dewey, 1964; Noddings, 2006). For example, Qian and Yuanyuan, they either finished or left school with fear and even loathing of certain subjects or certain teacher. Students schooling experiences in this study call for serious questioning of thinking about education as pursuit of academic success associated with power and privilege and it will be further discussed in the socio-economic and cultural context of China’s school system in the next section.

**Milieu**

In this study, the participants’ schooling experiences have been developing from around the time the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949 to the present, during a period of momentous socio-economic, cultural and political change in China’s modern history. Educational change is inextricably linked to the changing national-development contexts (see Chapter 3).

My parents went to school and college in the 1950’s, not long after the founding of the nation in 1949. From that time to 1978 when China shifted its focus from “class struggle” to economic development, “the approach to national development is

53 The end-means continuum in education will be further discussed in the next chapter.
characterized by continuing class struggles and revolution to transform the social relation of production and by having communist politics and ideology at the core of social life” (Tsang, 2000, p. 9). Education played an important role in political and ideological development of the Chinese people and served to promote social equality. Stratification and elitism were opposed in the education system. As the power struggle within the party intensified and mass political campaigns (e.g. the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, see Chapter 3) became unrelenting, the political and ideological function of education began to gain dominance over acquisition of expertise for economic production (Tsang, 2000). During the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the whole education system was paralyzed. Intellectuals and professionals were denounced, oppressed and many of them were dislocated to be “re-educated” by the workers and peasants. During the Cultural Revolution, my father lost his privilege to see patients because he expressed his opinion that hospital management should not be in the hands of those “red” people, people with favorable “class status” (see A timeline in Chapter 3) but not medical professionals. Father was locked up in a “study group” where he and other “anti-revolutionary bourgeois intellectuals” were forced to study Chairman Mao’s works to get their minds straightened. During that time, university entrance examinations were discontinued and college admission was based on a person’s class background and recommendation from the place where a person worked.

In the late 1970’s and 1980’s when Qian and I went to elementary and middle school, the policies of the Cultural Revolution were reversed when China was under the new leadership of Deng Xiaoping. Economic reforms and the open-up policy were initiated. As the education system was reconstructed and the emphasis of education
development was to be in line with national economic development. The persistent major goal of education has since been to prepare skilled personnel for the developing economy. It was at this time when the cultural beliefs about educational goals and values, as manifested in the Confucian ideal - Learn with the pursuit of excellence to become an official scholar (学而优则仕, The Analects, 19:13) were quickly restored. Pursuit of higher education became the educational goal of many people. As a young child who just started school, I watched how the National College Entrance Examinations, which were resumed in 1977, were everyone’s focus of attention in our community when both my brother and sister were preparing for the examinations. My siblings’ success at the exams and the happiness and honor their success brought to our family provided space for me to envision my own future: to become a university student (see Chapter 1). During this era, sustained economic growth has created increased need for skilled personnel and thus an expansion of the education system. Over time, the scale of the education system has been enlarged substantially to provide expanded access for children and adults of all backgrounds (Tsang, 2000). It was also at this time the key schools, which were shut down during the Cultural Revolution period, reappeared and were developed at all levels.

Key schools date back to the early 1950’s to concentrate China’s scarce educational resources on the training of professional talents desperately needed for building the new nation. Key schools were developed to produce more qualified graduates for higher-level institutions in order to meet the immediate growing manpower demands of China’s rapid economic development. They were given priorities in teacher assignments, funding, equipments and most importantly, recruiting top-achieving students (Wang & Zhou, 2002). The government aimed to reconstruct the education
system to prepare people for a diversified workplace and different roles in the developing economy. However, with economic progress, improved material resources in post-1978 China, when key schools reappeared in the education system, they attracted both students and their parents. The middle school Qian and I went to were one of the key schools in our city. Because its high rates of graduates entering college, it even boasted that its students already had one foot inside the college door. Some students would repeat Grade 6 so that they could try again to get into our middle school.

As has been discussed in the previous sections, historically and traditionally Chinese society places high value on education. Having learning is a source of esteemed social status (Law, 2003). I believe that the high cultural value that families place on education is an important source of social support for education. Moreover, as shown in Yuanyuan’s and Didi’s stories, China’s one-child policy in urban areas further intensifies people’s interest in giving their children the best education from the beginning. For example, Yuanyuan’s Hukou (resident registration) was moved to my parents’ place so that he could go to the elementary school in their district, the one considered the best in the city. To Yuanyuan’s parents and many other parents, a good school was one with

54 In 1985, there was a systemic reform of education that called for the vocationalization of upper-secondary (senior high) education so that, over time, upper secondary education would change from a predominance of general education to an equal mix of general education and vocational-technical education. By increasing student enrollment in vocational schools relative to that in general secondary schools, the reform attempted to alter the structure of secondary education from a monolithic to a diversified one. By 1997, vocational and technical education actually accounted for 56% of total enrollment in upper-secondary education. (Ministry of Education, http://www.moe.gov.cn/edoas/website18/en/vocational_v.htm, viewed on April, 24, 2008) However, many of these schools lacked qualified teachers, were under-equipped, did not have facilities for practical training, and were not well received by parents and students.
high student academic achievement and high transition rates to the next schooling level, especially a high percentage of its graduates admitted to colleges.

Rosen (1987) points out that the dual-track system in China with the coexistence of key schools and regular schools is a bifurcated system with a small sector (key schools) for the elites and large sector (regular schools) for the masses. Such educational differentiation is prevalent in China’s education system, from kindergarten to university.

Taken together, the examination-oriented schooling, the designation of key schools, and the esteemed social status associated with academic achievements led to an irrational distribution of public resources, with high-quality teaching staff and better facilities going to the key schools, and created a fervor for pursuing paper credentials (Wang, 2006).

Being aware of the “state-sponsored inequality” (China Daily, Feb.27, 2006) caused by the dual-track system, the State Council issued The Outline of Educational Reform and Development in 1993 and states in Article 31 that entrance examinations to junior high school should be cancelled and students should go to the junior high school nearest to their home. In 1996, Li Lanqing, then Vice Premier in charge of education declared that “We must, from now on, no longer promote key middle schools or continue contributing all of our human, physical, and financial resources and all of our subsidies and donations into such schools” (cited in Wang & Zhou, 2002). Then in 1999 when Didi and my nephew Yuanyuan were in Grade 2 in elementary school, the State Council issued the Action Plan for Education Development and Decision on Furthering the Education Reform and Promoting Quality-Oriented Education. In this important
document, the central government provided guidelines for implementation of well-rounded quality education at all levels and for pedagogy reform to encourage students’ independent thinking and creativity. It also clearly stated that ranking of students as well as schools (in terms of percentage of their graduates entering college) should be banned. In 2001, the Ministry of Education issued “The Outline of Basic Education Curriculum Reform” and “Actively Pushing Forward the Reform on the Assessment and Examination System in Elementary and Secondary Schools”. It provided guiding principles for the curriculum reform to shift “from a narrow perspective of knowledge delivery in classroom instruction to a perspective concerned with learning how to learn and developing positive attitudes; from isolation among subjects to a balanced, integrative, and selective curriculum structure; from out of date and extremely abstruse curriculum content to essential knowledge and skills in relation to students’ lifelong learning and from students learning passively to students developing capacities to process information, obtain new knowledge, analyze and solve problems, and communicate as well as cooperate with others” (cited in Feng, 2006). In terms of evaluation, it stated that identification and selection should no longer be the exclusive function of evaluation and assessment. Evaluation should take various forms to promote student growth as well as teacher development.

These documents and policies reflect the ongoing efforts to improve the test-oriented educational system in China. However, the actual practice in school is still contradictory, as shown in Yuanyuan and Didi’s narratives. In their schooling experiences, hierarchies of school tracking stayed the same; exams stayed the same and
continued to play a decisive role in their future. It seemed that the promising and inspiring policies did not make much difference in my participants’ school life.

In this chapter, I explored the curricular meanings that students made from their schooling experiences as culturally and socio-politically rooted in China’s modern history, from 1949 to the present. Then in the next chapter, I use Dewey’s notion of the continuum of end-means and Crites’ (1971) notion of “cover story” to understand and interpret the themes which unite the various strands of my and my participants’ school narratives.
Chapter 10
Understanding School Stories: Story within the Story

Articulating my growing awareness of themes that emerged from school stories

The genesis of this thesis inquiry lies in the attempts and efforts to understand my and my nephew’s schooling experiences. Telling and reliving our school stories crystallized the puzzles and tensions that led to the current research topic, research questions and the choice of narrative inquiry as the research methodology (see Chapters 1 & 2). I started this inquiry with the puzzle of why we tried so hard to be good students while at the same time, perceived education as ties and responsibilities that otherwise constrained us. We did what were expected to do, we were well-supported in what we did, we worked hard and sometimes struggled to meet the requirements to be “good students”. But what was the purpose? In Chapters Four to Eight, my participants and I traveled through the past to explore, define and construct our educational experiences. Stories moved across my participants’ lives as they remembered and revealed them. Some stories stood out for me because as a family member, a school friend, a student who had schooling experiences grounded in the Chinese contexts, I was part of and experienced my participants’ stories, in similar and dissimilar ways. These stories

prompted me to ask questions and think differently. I needed a means to organize
the themes that emerged from these stories.

Then in Chapter 9, *Understanding School stories: Exploring Students’ Curricular
Experiences by Using Schwab’s Four Commonplaces of Curriculum*, Schwab’s four
commonplaces of curriculum, the learner, the teacher, the subject matter and the milieu,
structured my discussion, and allowed it to focus on important aspects of my and my
participants’ schooling experiences. Our schooling experiences were fusion of life
histories with teachers, families, schools, the larger society and were associated with
emotions, such as pride, shame, guilt and sometimes fear. There were complex situations
and interactions of people, places and things in the students’ personal narratives
(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In this analytic process in which I made efforts to construct and reconstruct the
meanings we students make of our schooling, I found that my beginning research puzzle
appears to be the “repetitive refrains” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) of our stories.
The seemingly apparent contradiction in my initial research puzzle – why we as students
put so much time and energy in our schooling, while we also experienced constraints in
expressing ourselves, in terms of why, what and how to learn has actually, become a
point of connection that unites the various strands of my and my participants’ schooling
experiences. Trying to understand and interpret such a “group phenomenon” (Conle,
1996) that emerged from my and my participants’ life experiences brings me to Dewey’s
conception of continuum of end-means and Crites’ (1979) notions of cover stories and
sacred stories in educational context. Thus, in what follows, I use these notions to explore
and understand the tensions, contradictions and conflicts in the personal and social narratives in this study.

**The end-means continuum**

Dewey (1938) believes that educating a child centers on the development of his or her experience. He suggests that education should begin with and remain closely tied to the actual experience and concerns of students. However, in my and my participants’ educational experiences, I have seen quite a different picture. In most cases, there is what Dewey (1964) calls and criticizes in the following way: “Conformity then becomes the criterion by which the pupil is judged” (p. 6). As students, my participants and I tried to satisfy standards set for us to be good students. Whether we enjoyed it or not, we conformed to the rules and tried to finish what we were required to do. Our desire and choice, unless they coincided with what was in the school curriculum, hardly counted for anything.

In our school narratives, academic excellence in terms of good test scores and higher education were the precise results that were to be achieved through our schooling process. Grades were an important acquisition in school. In our stories, high scores were constantly stressed and grades became rewards and punishment. Good grades were rewarded with praise and privileges, and punishment for bad grades came in the form of loss of privileges, public humiliation and eventually, students’ feeling of guilt. To a great extent, doing homework and cramming for examinations were equaled to learning when actually grades took the place of learning. Knowledge was limited to the knowledge needed for the examinations. There seemed to be no need to search for greater fulfillment beyond grades and college admission. Learning was not about exploring ideas. It was
about doing what was necessary, and only what was necessary, to get good grades and to
get to the next higher level of education. To some degree, our schooling was
characterized by the quest for good grades. This is very different from the Deweyan
educational thinking. Dewey (1897) sees that education is life and life is growth.
Education is not a preparation for future living but is a process of living. I take it to mean
that the moment of sitting in class and studying is an experience and this experience itself
is part of life, not a preparation for better living in the future.

Dewey emphasizes experience as both a means and end in education. Ends are
continuous with means, which he refers to as the continuum of “ends-means”. Dewey
(1997) writes,

In contrast with fulfilling some process in order that activity may go on,
stands the static character of an end which is imposed from without the
activity. It is always conceived of as fixed; it is something to be obtained
and possessed. When one has such a notion, activity is a mere unavoidable
means to something else; it is not significant or important on its own
account. As compared with the end it is but a necessary evil; something
which must be gone through before one can reach the object which is
alone worthwhile. In other words, the external idea of the aim leads to a
separation of means from end, while an end which grows up within an
activity as plan for its direction is always both ends and means, the
distinction being only one of convenience. Every means is a temporary
end until we have attained it. Every end becomes a means of carrying
activity further as soon as it is achieved. We call it end when it marks off
the future direction of the activity in which we are engaged; means when it
marks off the present direction. Every divorce of end from means
diminishes by that much the significance of the activity and tends to
reduce it to a drudgery from which one would escape if he could. (pp. 105-106)

Dewey sees no distinction between ends and means as he believes that ends and means are of the same nature – end constantly loses its position as an end and becomes a point of change, the means in the ongoing learning process. Archambault (1964) further explains this point by noting that “Ends are projected consequences of action in real experience, not separate states belonging to a future and different experience” (p. xix).

Therefore, the chief aims of education must be stated in terms of processes – the promotion of reflective behavior, the promotion of growth, rather than static states. Yet for the Chinese students in this study, the process of learning/schooling was not meant to be open-ended. Our school was very similar to what Dewy (Dewey, 1897/1964) described as the “old, traditional school”, where “…certain information is to be given, where certain lessons are to be learnt, or where certain habits are to be formed. The value of these is conceived as lying largely in the remote future; the child must do these things for the sake of something else he is to do; they are mere preparations. As a result they do not become a part of the life experience of the child and so are not truly educative” (p. 431).

Wood (1999) echoes Dewey’s (1964) criticism of the “old, traditional school” (p. 431) by pointing out that “the role of traditional schooling includes ‘a package of rules and expectations’ for its students” (Wood, 1999, p. 35). The school stories in my study seem to be consistent with such an observation. For us, school is the place for both knowledge and discipline, where we are expected to become good students and change from ignorant to being knowledgeable.
My participants and I were encouraged, sometimes forced, to accept and pursue what was thought to be good for us with diligence and persistence. Despite our various capacities and interests, there seemed to be only one notion of an ideal of being successful at school: mastering the academic curriculum to make it to college. Our schooling was characterized by practices critiqued by Noddings (1992): there were “lots of tests, lots of memorizing, great emphasis on conformity, little time devoted to ‘meaning’, and plenty of homework for discipline” (p. 32). In the uniform curriculum, there was little room to think and ask why the particular form of knowledge should be important to us all. As students, we were not supposed to be responsible to make judgments or explore what were important to us as individuals.

This static notion of what it means to be educated is in contrast to Dewey’s dynamic conception of education. He sees education as “a continuing reconstruction of experience” (Dewey, 1964, p. 434). The ends of education are not fixed. Education must provide for the development of the individual and it cannot do so by forcing rigid patterns of socially-approved behavior, for if it does, it will prevent the student from being creative, and hence block the only avenue for his eventual contribution to society (Dewey, 1964). Dewey emphasizes the continuity and reciprocity between means and ends, stating that ends, if they are to be at all meaningful, must be defined in terms of the means which would be used in their attainment (Archambault, 1964). Without such a description, ends are empty.

According to Dewey, education is not a matter of unconditionally accepting something. It is a matter that involves experiencing things with the help of teachers, of choosing, comparing, revising, and communicating. In a way, Dewey (1997) sees that
there is no end or finished product – an ideally educated person, but a person showing signs of continuous growth. Yet in our school narratives, schooling was a means to an end, to the next higher level of education, to obtaining a credential to ensure upward mobility. As schooling was narrowly focused on promoting academic excellence, school became just a passage, a period of preparation, and a particular place students stay and then leave (Kaplan, 1997).

**Sacred, secret and cover stories**

In this study, my and my participant’s personal school stories are intertwined with China’s changing political, economic, cultural and educational life. The complexities and confusions within our personal schooling experience revealed the complex interaction between our individual schooling experiences and broader social conditions. As Randall (1995) says, “our life, it turns out, is not one story, but many, a plethora of stories in fact, both stories within us and stories we are, in turn, within” (p. 185).

Polkinghorne (1988) points out that “at the individual level, people have a narrative of their own lives which enables them to construe what they are and where they are headed. At the cultural level, narratives also serve to give cohesion to shared beliefs and to transmit values” (p. 14). Crites (1971) calls these socially constructed narratives the “sacred stories”. Sacred stories are powerful in setting limits on what counts as authorized knowledge, what can be known and how people come to know it (Olson & Craig, 2005).

In our school stories, the socially and culturally authorized story appeared to be the pursuit of formal education. Historically and culturally, education is respected and
highly valued in Chinese society (see Chapter 9). The universality and taken-for-grantedness of the pursuit for academic excellence gives it the quality of a sacred story (Crites, 1971).

Crites (1986) sees that a sacred story is not consciously created, but “forms the very consciousness that projects a total world horizon” and determines the “intentions by which actions are projected into that world” (p. 171). Sacred stories “lie too deep in the consciousness of a people to be directly told, but they live, so to speak, in [our] arms and legs and bellies” (Crites, 1971, p. 295). Sacred stories are internalized within us and they inform and guide our actions (Conle, personal communication). In our experiences, education in the form of formal schooling that was focused on academic studies appeared to be necessary and desirable in itself, as we were supported, encouraged, and sometimes pushed to achieve academic success. The hierarchical order in classrooms where teachers held power over students through the teaching philosophy of Guan (see pp. 186-191), compliance expected from students in terms of what to learn and how to learn, and the duel-track and curriculum differentiation with the academic curriculum considered the best in the education system, could be considered as the manifestation of the sacred story, the historical and societal expectation in terms of educational achievement.

Bruner (1991) names the feature of the canonical, or sacred stories (Crites, 1971) as canonicity and breach. Canonicity refers to the culturally accepted stories of a group of people. For example, in my and my participants’ school stories, there are certain behaviors expected from students and teachers in school, such as teachers’ Guan, and students’ respect for the teachers’ way of doing things (see Chapter 9).
Some of the stories my participants and I told are stories that aligned us with the sacred story. For example, we all worked hard, at least at some points in our schooling, to meet the requirements to be good students. Some of the stories we told are stories that breached the sacred stories. These stories are “secret stories” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1996, p. 25). That Qian saw little relevance of the school curriculum or a college education to his interests in becoming a car technician or electrician, and that my father and Yuanyuan had different opinions about learning and homework from those of their teachers could be considered secret stories that breached the sacred stories. These breaches put students, such as my father, Qian and Yuanyuan, in conflict with the larger story, the socially constructed narratives.

Sacred stories are not generally told or even recognized, but tensions occur and cover stories are created and lived by individuals to come to terms with the contradictions between the socially and individually constructed narratives (Crites, 1971; Olson & Craig, 2005). In the student narratives in this study, at the same time when my participants and I tried hard to fulfill the “externally prescribed roles and responsibilities” (Huber & Keats Whelan, 2001, cited in Olson & Craig, 2005) as students, we initiated and even lived the cover story that we believed and accepted that what was provided for us in school was valuable and best suited to our needs now and in the future. “A cover story”, according to Crites (1979, in Olson & Craig, 2005, p. 164), is the story individuals live and tell so that their personal narratives fit in with the expectations of the perceived sacred stories. My friend Qian’s admiration and compliment of me as a doctoral student, and his belief that his failure in the college entrance examinations was “[his] my problem” may be perceived as a cover story. Also, Qian never questioned or complained
that there was no place for his talents and goals in the school curriculum. He just felt too ashamed to tell that he had a different aspiration other than going to college (see Chapter 6). He did not perceive the curriculum as inconsiderate to students’ goals and talents. The cover story lay in the attitude that things were just the way they had to be.

With educational policies that aimed at merging the duel track and implementing quality-oriented education at all levels (see Chapter 9), my participants also lived the cover story that education is improving, when examination and competition are actually intensified (for example, see Yuanyuan’s story in Chapter 8, “We are the examination guerrilla”). Schooling still put tremendous pressure for academic success on students, as well as on their teachers and parents.

In the school stories in this study, secret stories and cover stories existed alongside sacred stories. The interactions between the sacred, secret and cover stories could be complicated as well as confusing. It is not always possible to consciously know or distinguish these stories in personal experiences, yet acknowledgement of their existence would be very valuable. Richie and Wilson (2000) believe that “the interplay of multiple and often conflicting narratives of professional and personal history…can provide the catalyst for reflection, critique, and ‘re-vision’” (p. 7). I too believe that acknowledgement and examination of the existence and interaction of the multifaceted stories of students’ experiences have the potential to inform and improve teaching practices and policy making. Moreover, Olson and Craig’s (2005) research into the cover stories told and lived by teachers reported on a safe place provided for teachers to become aware of and talk about cover stories in their professional knowledge landscape.
In a similar way, this study provided a setting for the cover stories in students’ lived experiences to be recognized and reflected.

The conflicting narratives of how students experienced curriculum situations and how education was intended by the teacher, the school and the education policymakers reveal that the narrow and uniform expectations for success alienated, rather than engaged students in the educational process. Schooling became a sorting process and a means to a later and better end (Kaplan, 1997). For example, in this study, students, such as my father, Yuanyuan and Didi, did their schoolwork because it was what was expected of them, not necessarily because it was interesting, meaningful and worthwhile.

Dewey (1997) sees educational process as providing conditions that continually “interact with personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities” (p. 50). In the Deweyan tradition, educational experience is meaningful in that it is connected to students’ prior experience as well as to a widening future experience or growth. Noddings (1992, 2006) echoes him by calling for a change in the way curriculum is conceived. “We need to give up the notion of an ideal of the educated person and replace it with a multiplicity of models designed to accommodate the multiple capacities and interests of students” (Noddings, 1992, p. 173). Students need to be understood, received and respected. Instead of a single standard, it should be possible for students to succeed in school in more than one way.

**Envisioning a different curriculum**

It was a sense of incongruence with my schooling experiences that put me on this thesis journey. From the exploration of my own schooling experience and those of my
participants, I have come to realize how my and my participants’ curricular experience was shaped by the deep-rooted Chinese educational tradition that emphasizes academic achievement as the only way to success. My and my participants’ schooling experience centered on a recurring theme – gaining access to the higher levels of schooling. A standardized and uniform curriculum simplified and reduced our curricular experiences to receiving and reproducing the transmitted information. Students were not treated as individuals. Instead, every student was held to the same standards and handled the same way.

Conle (2003) points out that:

One of the greatest curricular results to keep an eye on is the capacity of narrative to bring before consciousness what might be. Visions of what can be – or of what should not be – are important factors in decision making, and narratives put those visions before our eyes and ears. (p. 11)

Through the lenses of the cross-generational student narratives, I now envision “what might be” a different curriculum. I can imagine a different curriculum for students in China.

We can give up the singular notion of what it means to be educated and what it means to be successful at school. Schools could get rid of the hierarchy of programs and competitive ranking of test scores, so that individual students with differing strengths may have opportunities to pursue multiple possibilities. Education would be relevant to the students’ life experiences and feelings. Students could be provided the opportunity to be their whole selves. They would not be categorized, compared to and judged against one another (Noddings, 1992). It is my wish that this thesis could play a role in
developing curricula in China that would accommodate individual students’ purposes, interests and abilities.

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) see that “the possibility of transformations and growth” lies in “a middle ground where there is a conversation among people with different life experiences” (p. 425). In my study, the participants’ life experiences reveal their personal understanding of their educational values, beliefs and attitudes, and of the meaning of their lives. Narrative exploration of participants’ lived experiences enabled me to create a vision (Conle, 2003) of how students’ curricular experiences might be different. It is my hope that my readers can in turn create new visions of how China’s education can be improved through the reading of the narratives of students’ schooling experiences in this thesis.

**Concluding thoughts – What I have learnt from this inquiry**

Telling and retelling my and my participants’ schooling experiences and making meaning and significance from them help to convey what has been happening in our curricular situations. Through this thesis project, I have learnt to begin my search for the meaning of schooling with an examination of my own schooling experiences, in a narrative way. In doing so, I relived my past, reconstructed it, and discovered more about myself. Both this experience itself and the reflective process through which I made sense of past experiences are educational. By personally engaging in this inquiry, I have learnt to treat curricular issues “not from an abstract, previously defined position of what ought to ideally be, but rather from a concrete estimate of deficiencies that actually existed” (Handlin, 1966, p. 27).
Through examining my personal school stories, I was able to form a picture of what happened in my educational situations. And in the same way, I formed the pictures of my participants’ schooling experiences. I have learnt that to ensure the authenticity of my and my participants’ school narratives, I needed to present our school stories with as much detail as possible – details about our families, social, cultural and political backgrounds, and the environments in which our stories were lived. It is through these details that opportunities for resonance (Conle, 1996) are created. The possibilities seem endless as one story relates to another and people connect with each other.

Through the narrative process of resonating (Conle, 1996) in which my participants and I connected stories of schooling experience with each other, I have learnt that telling, retelling, living and reliving our stories (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988) is an ongoing process that allows for deeper understanding of each other’s educational situations. Through telling my parents’ stories, I came to understand why they cared so much about their children’s education. Through conversation with Didi, I began to see why she was frustrated at what seemed to me minor problems in her English learning. Now this ongoing process also includes my readers who will join me and my participants in exploring the meanings of our school stories.

I have learnt that “narrative inquiry is the study of people in relationship with people, places and things by researchers who are also in relationship with people, places and things” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995, p. 4). Through our telling and retelling each other our lived stories, we relived what had been ignored before – “the experience of the moment” (Conle, 2003, p. 15) – what happened in encounters with people and things in curricular situations. Moreover, I have learnt that a story can be understood from
different perspectives. Thus in my telling of students’ school stories, I have learnt to present detailed accounts of our experiences to make it possible for my readers to read and interpret our stories differently.

Through narrative inquiry into our lived experiences, I have learnt that our stories are multilayered. Our stories are embedded within the stories of the others, and the bigger stories that have been constructed socially and culturally. I have learnt to recognize and acknowledge the existence of the different, sometimes conflicting stories in our experiences. I have become aware that it was sad and painful that students, such as Qian, had to live in other people’s perceptions, to live cover stories. Through this thesis inquiry, I have learnt that it is necessary to create a space for all stories to be reflectively heard (Olson and Craig, 2005) and I have begun to envision a curriculum that would allow students to bring in their own stories.

Our cross-generational student experiences bring a set of perspectives to explore what it means to be educated in China. By constructing and reconstructing the meaning of our schooling experiences, this study provides space for students’ school stories to be reflectively heard (Olson & Craig, 2005; Richie & Wilson, 2000) and examined in the recent change in China’s educational reforms that seek to promote quality education and engage students’ independent and critical thinking.

In this study, I explored the themes that stood out for me in the twists and turns in my and my participants’ personal narratives. Throughout the thesis, especially in Chapters 1 and 2 and the beginning of this chapter, I also explored and articulated my own awareness and understanding of how and why these themes illuminated the ways in
which my participants and I make meaning of our schooling experiences. I expect that readers with different backgrounds and experiences grounded in different contexts will come to our stories with different contextual frames and different perspectives. Thus different themes might stand out for my readers. I hope that this open-ended quality of narrative inquiry will enable my readers to be active participants in the knowledge construction process. I hope that my readers can find points of “resonance” (Conle, 1996) in our stories and my interpretation of them. I hope that narrative encounters with our stories can open up many visions about what school is about.
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