

RESEARCH, WRITING, AND CREATIVE  
PROCESS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE  
EDUCATION: TALES FROM THE FIELD

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# 6. Intrinsic Motivation, Agency, and Self-Efficacy: Journeying From “Quasi-University” Student to Steward of the ODE Community

*Junhong Xiao*

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This chapter aims to portray my professional career as a researcher and steward of academic publications. It starts with a brief account of my very humble background in education, before going on to explain the motivation behind my lifelong interest in research and writing. It then describes how mentorship helped me to turn into a full-fledged researcher as well as why and how I left my familiar fields of study in my prime and joined the open and distance education (ODE) research community as a ‘green hand’, eventually becoming an international steward after overcoming sustained adversities. The chapter interprets my journey through the theoretical lens of intrinsic motivation, agency, and self-efficacy and concludes with tips for early-career researchers.

## From a “Quasi-university” Student to a Professor: A Brief Self-portrait

China’s national higher education matriculation examination was suspended during the devastating Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The examination, called 高考 and pronounced as *gaokao* in Chinese pinyin, was resumed in the winter of 1977, and has since then been held in summer once a year. This is the only way to be enrolled in a full-time residential programme at a campus-based higher education



institution in China except during the Cultural Revolution. I sat the 1980 examination and was enrolled as a student at a “quasi-university” (专科学校, pronounced as *zhuanke xuexiao* in Chinese pinyin), a pre-service teachers’ college which offered three-year programmes leading to the award of a junior college (专科, pronounced as *zhuanke* in Chinese pinyin) diploma, instead of an undergraduate degree awarded to graduates of a four-year university programme. I majored in English, learning the basics of the language. There was no writing course or training in research methodology. We did not have a native English teacher; the only authentic English we heard was when listening to the news programmes of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Voice of America (VOA) every evening. The only chance we had to meet a native English speaker was a visit by an American writer whose father was a priest in China before 1949.

Unlike many classmates from politically privileged family backgrounds, I cherished each and every day at college because higher education was nothing but a rosy dream for young people such as me during the Cultural Revolution, a topic I will pick up in the next section. I was soon a “celebrity” for my diligence, becoming the best student and the teachers’ favourite. I did not have to spend much time doing the courses, so I stayed in the library after class, reading whatever English materials I could lay my hands on, from English novels to barely intelligible academic books, for example, Noam Chomsky’s (1957) *Syntactic Structures*. My efforts paid off. It was because of my excellent school record that I was given a teaching position at my alma mater as an exception. I do not have a bachelor’s degree, master’s degree, or doctoral degree. My highest qualification is a Postgraduate Diploma in Professional Studies in Education (Applied Linguistics) from the Open University in the United Kingdom (OUUK). This was the humble origin from which I strove to be a respectable professor and journal/book/conference steward.

## Research and Writing Gives Meaning to My Life

My motivation for research and writing can be traced back to my childhood. My grandfather owned vast tracts of farmland and a large fishing-net-manufacturing company in old China, that is, before 1949. When New China was founded, we were categorized as



members of the exploitative ruling class of the “old” society, hence our transformation from the “ruling” to the “ruled” class in the “new” society. In that historical period, it was not unusual for offspring of the “ruled” class to be discriminated against unfairly, and even brutally in some cases; and to be the target of bullying, among other things, at school. Knowledge became an effective weapon to protect myself and regain my dignity. If I could help my classmates do their daily homework or cheat on examinations by passing answers to them, school life would be less threatening and humiliating for me although the right to higher education was unthinkable due to my family background. Gradually, I found peace, safety, and dignity in the world of knowledge and pure joy in pursuing it, hence becoming more and more curious and even dreaming of sharing new discoveries with other people. This curiosity continues to be a source of motivation and inspiration today, echoing Vygotsky’s (1994) concept of *perezhivanie* (emotional lived experience), which refers to the way one “becomes aware of, interprets, [and] emotionally relates to a certain event” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 341).

Knowledge was the only spiritual home where I could forget everything unpleasant. Ryan and Deci (2000a) state that there are intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Interest in research and writing has always come from the bottom of my heart; intrinsic motivation far outweighs extrinsic motivation in my case. My first paper (Xiao, 1983) was written in the third/final year of college and published in one of the four major Chinese journals of foreign language teaching and research (FLTR) in July of 1983, the same month I graduated. I still feel as excited and thrilled as I was then because this was the first time I researched and wrote to share my new discoveries, thus realizing my childhood dream. In the following four decades, I have published papers every year.

My perseverance in research and writing was further strengthened by two early-career events. In 1986, I happened to learn about an exchange programme between Simmons University (previously Simmons College) in the United States and China. Unlike similar programmes, interested scholars submitted applications directly to the representative of the university, David Perry, who was sent to teach at Wuhan University at that time. I did not have a bachelor’s degree



essential to the application, so I wrote a long letter to him, explaining my situation and sending him several papers that I had published in major journals.

He gave me an opportunity. After an interview of about one hour (it was supposed to be twenty minutes), Professor Perry gave me Ernest Hemingway's short story "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" and asked me to write an English review of one thousand words within two hours. I analyzed the use of stream of consciousness from a linguistic perspective, which, together with the interview, clearly left a good impression on him. With his recommendation, I was awarded a full scholarship to study for MA degree. However, I was not permitted to obtain my passport because my employer did not want to take political risks for this "private" exchange.

The following year, I planned to sit the national postgraduate matriculation examination and enrol at a full-time MA programme with the encouragement of several professors from the Guangzhou Institute of Foreign Languages who knew me through my publications. To my despair again, my application for approval to register for the examination was denied, this time "due to shortage of teaching staff." Honestly speaking, I could not have recovered from these heartbreaking blows if I had not seen their positive side. I came up with the theory that such opportunities would have been unthinkable but for my dedication to research, a belief which greatly promoted my agency and enhanced my perceived self-efficacy.

My zeal for research and writing has remained unabated today, even after I was promoted to professorship in 2009. In my case, even if I do not conduct any new research or publish any new paper, I will be entitled to my professorship until my retirement. But I continue to research and to write as an active member of the international community of open and distance education (ODE) because this is part of me, giving meaning to my life. For me, teaching, researching, and writing are the three most meaningful activities in my professional career through which I can realize the value of my life. Believe it or not, what sustains my lifelong academic pursuit is more intrinsic than extrinsic. I research; I write; I contribute; I share; and I rejoice. This is who I have always wanted to be and who I really am.



## Meeting a Mentor Who Re-defined My Identity

I did not receive any training in research methodology and academic writing at college. As mentioned above, I researched and wrote purely out of curiosity in the first place. Without systematic training, I had to grope my way to be observant, analytic, deductive, and inductive in order to grasp the required skill. My early research interests were linguistics as well as applied linguistics and my readings were mostly related to these disciplines. With what I learned from linguistics, I was able to identify features of a good paper and imitate them in my own writings. Nevertheless, I soon found myself stuck on a learning plateau, feeling at my wit's end, and desperately wanting to break through it. I was experiencing frustration and pains, getting lost and doubting myself. It was around this time that I met my first and life-changing mentor, Guowen Huang, a linguist.

I first met Huang at a summer workshop on applied linguistics run by a group of professors, including him, in 1986. He was an editor of a major Chinese FLTR journal. I was a contributor to this journal and we had known each other through letters. But this was the first time that we had met in person. A pleasant surprise from this meeting was the discovery that we were from the same area of China, speaking the same dialect and feeling an immediate sense of kinship. He was, and remains, my model and mentor. In 1988, when he won a scholarship to the University of Edinburgh to do a PhD, we were just beginning a collaborative study on the grammar of the English complex sentence. Not long after he started his PhD studies in the UK, we resumed our research and began to publish research findings in Chinese journals. This collaboration lasted eight years until 1996 when our research culminated in a monograph entitled *Aspects of English Complex Sentences: From Sentence to Text* (Huang & Xiao, 1996) in addition to a dozen Chinese journal publications. It was throughout this collaboration that I received systematic "training" in research and writing.

In terms of research methodology, whenever we moved on to a new topic, my mentor would tutor me, for example, on how to identify an issue worthy of exploration, search for and review relevant



literature, collect data, analyze the data collected, interpret findings, and avoid pitfalls. Whenever I was confused, I would write to him for advice. Bit by bit, I learned how to do research in accordance with the established practice of the academic community. Many friends found it hard to believe that I learned research methodology not from formal education, but from my mentor. It was the same with learning to write. If he wrote the first draft of a paper or chapter, I would use it as an exemplar and conduct a thorough analysis of its generic structure, coherence, language, citation/reference format, and so on. If I wrote the first draft, I would always stick to the citation/reference format he taught me but try something slightly different in other aspects. My mentor gave me feedback each time, so I wanted to take advantage of such opportunities to test my creativity and originality. I found that many authors evolved their idiosyncratic style and I longed to develop mine, an ambition which might have been unrealistic then but was definitely a sign of perceived self-efficacy.

I learned techniques and skills of research and writing from this hands-on experience. I noticed the transformation happening to me: I had more confidence in my research and a clearer mind when writing up a paper. But it was an ensuing mentorship programme that catalyzed my growth into a more rigorous researcher. After staying for eight years in the UK and gaining a second PhD degree from the University of Wales, Cardiff, my mentor accepted an invitation to be a full professor at Sun Yat-sen University and returned to China in 1996. With his assistance, I went to this university as an academic visitor, studying functional linguistics under his supervision for a semester. He would give me a batch of books to read every week, asking me to write down my interpretations, puzzles, and queries. Every Saturday evening, he would be waiting for me in his study and listening to my report on the week's reading, explaining to me what had been misinterpreted, solving my puzzles, clarifying my queries, and discussing controversial issues. Soon I was able to read and argue through a logical and critical lens, an essential attribute and highly desirable mindset for a rigorous researcher. What I learned from my mentor has become part of me as a researcher/writer and has accompanied me to the evolving field of ODE.



## Moving into a New Field of Study

After being denied the requests for permission to obtain my passport and to register for the national postgraduate matriculation examination, two events that still hurt sometimes, I left my teaching job at my alma mater in August 1988, and joined the Open University of Shantou, a local branch of the Open University of China (formerly known as China Central Radio & Television University). However, I continued to research and write as an (applied) linguist until 2000 when I decided to shift my research interest to ODE. Again, it was curiosity that aroused my enthusiasm in this new area. I found that papers in Chinese ODE journals seldom cited English-language literature and that if they did, the studies cited were mostly Chinese translations some twenty years ago and might be out of date. I wanted to make a difference because I believed I could. So, despite the fact that I had published over thirty journal papers and several monographs and edited books on linguistics and applied linguistics, I decided to move into this new field, to the bafflement of colleagues and friends, including my mentor.

An opportunity came in 2000 when the China Scholarship Council (CSC), a non-profit organization funded by the Chinese Central Government, accepted individual applications for scholarship to academic visits outside China (government-funded opportunities of this kind used to be allocated to designated institutions which then recommended their candidates). I submitted my application with a research proposal on ODE in the UK; to be honest, I did not have much confidence because of the intense competition. It took me quite a while to believe that I was among the lucky few winners when I saw my name on the list released at the CSC website in July 2000. Needless to say, the OUUK was the destination of my choice. Learning from my experience as a researcher of linguistics and applied linguistics, I knew the first thing to do when stepping into a new field was a systematic mastery of its foundational theories and seminal works. So, during my stay at the OUUK from 2001 to 2002 as a Visiting Research Fellow, I read those foundational theories, including its Master of Arts in Open and Distance Education modules, taking copious notes, meeting many ODE



researchers and writers of the modules for further advice, and reflecting on directions of my future research.

However, when I returned to China one year later, I was less confident and optimistic. There was no way for me to access new book and journal publications in the international community via the university library. As a matter of fact, the local branch where I worked did not even subscribe to any Chinese academic databases. I bought Chinese books and subscribed to Chinese journals with my own money. But it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to personally purchase or subscribe to publications outside China, not to mention the likelihood of losing the package in the process of delivery because not all postal workers know English. Luckily, open-access publications were increasingly available. I also tried whatever I could to acquire these resources. For example, I signed up for Academia.edu, ResearchGate, and LinkedIn and stayed connected with colleagues around the world, the majority of whom were always happy to share. Later, as I became a board member of journals in the field and a contributor to and editor of books, I had more and more access to new publications. When I was adequately resourced, I started to write for an international readership.

This transition to a new area of study was an agentic endeavour underpinned by intrinsic motivation and perceived self-efficacy.

## Becoming a Steward

I published my first paper written in English in 2005 (Niu et al., 2005). Since then, my writings have mostly been published in international journals. Meanwhile, I acted as a reviewer for journals and conferences. My thorough and rigorous attitude to reviewing also contributed to my reputation as an ODE researcher. In 2013, I was invited to be on the editorial board of *Distance Education*, and the following year on the editorial board of *System: An International Journal of Educational Technology and Applied Linguistics*, two high-impact journals listed in Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). From 2014 to 2022, I was the associate editor of *Distance Education*, and on the editorial boards of several other international journals. In January 2021, I joined Insung Jung and Olaf Zawacki-Richter as Co-Editors of the *SpringerBriefs in Open and Distance Education* series.



My involvement with *Distance Education in China* (DEC), a peer-reviewed Chinese journal, deserves an additional note. In March 2013, I was commissioned to launch and chair its International Forum where invited papers from international researchers were translated into Chinese and published in each issue of the journal. From the March 2013 issue to the July 2022 issue, 121 papers contributed by 155 researchers from twenty-eight countries were published by the journal, an unprecedented “marathon” undertaking in the history of Chinese journal publication. I had sole responsibility for everything, from inviting colleagues to contribute, reviewing and giving feedback, to translating and writing a scholarly commentary for each paper. I experienced frustration, anxiety, and even despair working in this time-consuming capacity. However, all my sacrifices were worthwhile because these papers were well received by Chinese readers and I myself have matured into a better researcher by learning from an expanding network of international colleagues.

Being a steward is an altruistic commitment to maintain the quality of publications and assist contributing colleagues in honing their skills. Therefore, it requires not only unselfish devotion but also adequate research literacy. Meanwhile, being a steward is more than a gesture of “giving/paying back” what you had taken from other stewards or knowledgeable others before; it is also a valuable opportunity to learn from other researchers and keep improving yourself as a researcher/writer. Therefore, I have always taken this job very seriously, an experience from which I have learned a great deal and which has greatly enhanced my perceived self-efficacy.

## Resolving Identity Conflict

China is a collectivist culture favouring group interests over individual goals or desires. In such a culture, one is not defined by personal uniqueness but rather in terms of those common qualities of the group one belongs to. Hence, uniformity and conformity are the expected norms while expression of personal ideas and disagreement should be cautiously handled, if unavoidable. Authorities are to be respected and not to be challenged. However, constant exposure to and immersion in more individualist-oriented cultures has fostered my aspiration to make a difference in the world, including research and writing, in



my own way. I have always felt more comfortable getting along with international counterparts than with domestic colleagues. Therefore, it was a hard decision to make whether to align my identity with my ought-to self, i.e., what other people in my local community expect me to be; or my ideal self, i.e., what I would like myself to be (Higgins, 1987). This dilemma was far more challenging to resolve than lack of skills, resources, and opportunities because I had to face it every day. After balancing the pros and cons of either choice, I decided to follow my ideal self which was obviously in conflict with a collectivist culture. On the one hand, I continued my engagement with the international ODE community, gradually gaining my acceptance as a full-fledged researcher in this circle and later even becoming a steward, or academic caretaker. On the other hand, I did not give up the domestic stage. Especially after I was put in charge of the DEC International Forum, I constantly had my voice heard, a voice which is often not in harmony with the “mainstream” discourse of China’s ODE community. I wrote a scholarly commentary for each invited paper to highlight its relevance to the Chinese context, emphasizing the importance of listening to different voices and embracing a diversity of perspectives. Gradually, my voice could no longer be ignored by other Chinese ODE researchers, most of whom I believe are impressed by the uniqueness of my perspectives on many ODE issues in the Chinese context.

### Intrinsic Motivation, Agency, and Self-efficacy: My Secrets to Success

Looking back on my forty-year career trajectory, intrinsic motivation, agency, and self-efficacy have played a key role at each stage, especially in decision-making and decision-implementation.

Dörnyei’s (2005) theory about teacher motivation is equally applicable to my motivation as a researcher when he argues that the intrinsic component is a main constituent of motivation and “related to the inherent joy of pursuing a meaningful activity related to one’s subject area of interest, in an autonomous manner, within a vivacious collegial community... ” (p. 160). From the perspective of self-determination theory, intrinsic motivation is also “an inherent tendency to seek out



novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn" (Ryan & Deci, 2000b, p. 70). Although my pursuit of new knowledge originated from an extrinsic motivation "in order to attain a separable outcome" (Ryan & Deci, 2000b, p. 71), for example, for self-protection and dignity; it gradually developed into something that gives me inherent joy and curiosity, both of which have been motivating and inspiring to me throughout my entire professional life. Moreover, because of my strong and persistent intrinsic motivation, I do research and writing out of my own free will and take advantage of every possible opportunity to establish a "vivacious collegial community"; that is, my personal network of researchers around the world. I never retreat from whatever obstacles come my way and never stop exploring and learning. This is because intrinsic motivation stays when one can be in control, overcome challenge, and believe what one does is of social value and significance (Ryan & Deci, 2017). For me, research and writing are genuinely satisfying experiences which result in what Csikszentmihalyi (2008) refers to as a state of flow.

The interplay between motivation and agency — "the power to originate actions for given purposes" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3) — is self-evident from the accounts above. There is an obvious element of motivation, especially intrinsic motivation in any agentic engagement. According to Bandura (2006), human agency has four core properties: (1) intentionality, (2) forethought, (3) self-reactiveness, which "involves not only the deliberative ability to make choices and action plans, but also the ability to construct appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their execution"; and (4) self-reflectiveness, wherein "people are not only agents of action. They are also self-examiners of their own functioning" (p. 165). Each of these properties is motivation-related.

I received my higher education at a "quasi-university." International colleagues might not be able to imagine the scarcity of learning resources and qualified staff at the lowest-level higher education institutions in China over forty years ago. Looking back, I myself can hardly believe how I have managed to master English even without a native English teacher, not to mention becoming an active researcher and member of the international ODE community. I can hardly imagine how much I have overcome, and how much I have sacrificed, to be what I am today.



But beyond any doubt is my point that my agentic engagements are not so much externally driven as inherently motivated. When an extrinsic motivation is satisfied or if it remains unsatisfied for too long, agency may wane and die out. However, an intrinsic motivation may last as long as one's life and remain an endless source of agency while successful agentic engagements reinforce intrinsic motivation in turn, so that you aim higher and higher. This is a lesson learned from my personal experience, echoing the argument that motivation is a mediator of personal and contextual characteristics and actual performance (Trigwell et al., 2004). The importance of agency is also demonstrated in the mentorship with which I was blessed.

Perceived self-efficacy — “people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives” (Bandura, 1994, p. 71) — has a direct impact on one's motivation, affect, and agency. I was vaguely aware of my self-efficacy when I “helped” my classmates do their homework and cheat on examinations in my childhood. However, it was not until I published my first paper in a major journal as a student at a “quasi-university” that I had a keen awareness of self-efficacy. And my perceived self-efficacy has become an important asset when making my decision at each turning point of my career. For example, it was because I had full confidence in my capabilities to make a difference in the field of ODE that was new to me that I resolutely gave up my research interest in the familiar disciplines of linguistics and applied linguistics, a choice which was favoured by none. It was also because of my perceived self-efficacy that I decided to follow a path which led to what I *wanted to be* rather than what I was *expected to be*, a choice which was paved with adversities and therefore required stronger motivation and higher agency. My experience echoes Bandura's (1989) theory that people “readily undertake challenging activities and select social environments they judge themselves capable of handling” and that “efficacy-activated processes... enable people to create beneficial environments and to exercise control over them” (p. 1178).



## Advice to Early-career Colleagues

- Identify your intrinsic motivation for research and writing. It is alright to conduct research out of external motives from time to time. However, intrinsic motivation is critical if you want to sustain your interest and become a researcher in a strict sense.
- Find a good mentor and exercise your agency to foster a productive mentorship. Mentors will not take you seriously unless you yourself are serious about your pursuit.
- Have faith in yourself. Needless to say, this faith should come from your past and/or current actual performance, rather than the result of pure imagination or assumption.
- Learn to think critically. Always challenge what you read instead of blindly accepting what is presented to you. To challenge what other people say is to better understand them, not to disbelieve them. A critical mindset is the source of creativity, innovation, and originality.
- Be well versed in key theories and seminal works in your chosen field of study and keep updated on new research outputs regularly. Making a last-minute effort to catch up on the knowledge base of your study is not an effective strategy.
- Show your respect for stewards by following to the letter the author guidelines set by your target publication outlet. As is the case with mentorship, unless you present yourself seriously, including as a stickler for formalities, others may, subconsciously, take your work less seriously.
- Be happy to give back when you are ready. Giving back is a win-win transaction. You are improving yourself as a researcher when you are helping other people to improve their research.

## Concluding Words

In summary, intrinsic motivation, agency, and self-efficacy interact with each other in turning someone such as me from a very humble background to a steward, a caretaker, within the international ODE community. Intrinsic motivation may be the source of agency at the



beginning, both of which interact to lead to self-efficacy. Nevertheless, as one stays on track, all three are so intertwined that it is impossible to tell which one is the result of the other or other two. Their interplay results in a synergy conducive to sustaining motivation, boosting agency, and enhancing self-efficacy. These are the three proven keys to success, at least in my case.

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