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The First Child In A Chinese Family Who Could Read Prior To Entry Into Elementary School: A Qualitative Intrinsic Case Study

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THE FIRST CHILD IN A CHINESE FAMILY WHO COULD READ PRIOR TO ENTRY INTO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: A QUALITATIVE INTRINSIC CASE STUDY

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education
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of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
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ABSTRACT

This study is an account of the literacy-related human environment a Chinese girl experienced as the first person in the history of her family who was able to read prior to entry into elementary school. Temporally speaking, the study spanned more than a decade from the initial, tentative research question to the formal, primary research question. Spatially speaking, it crossed three cultures: the Chinese, Korean, and American cultures. The study was inspired by the Zero Project in China, known as the “Project of Quality Education and Implementation for Children Aged Zero (fetus) to Six.” The significance of the content issue in a child’s literacy curriculum was explored in an interdisciplinary way. Case study served as a holistic research approach and provided the researcher with free temporal and spatial distance to pursue the indefinably multi-dimensional intricacies of a child’s early literacy acquisition among generations in the family. Interpretation of the case was based on the relevant concepts within the scope of the researcher’s knowledge of Chinese culture. Major findings revealed that the child’s literacy acquisition was inseparably related to her parents’ background as well as their awareness of and attitudes towards literacy, and that the foundation of all this was the harmony of the family. Through the lens of generational attitudes towards literacy and especially the lens of the researcher’s multicultural life experiences, this study contributes
to the field of curriculum studies in general and early literacy curriculum in particular by stimulating people to reconsider what to read to children, besides how to read to them. It calls attention once again to the classic curriculum question, “What knowledge is of most worth?” as well as what is the most essential spiritual food human beings need besides physical needs. This study suggests that Chinese philosophy should be included in a child’s early literacy curriculum in China and calls for dialogues on the content issue of curriculum to gain a deeper understanding of human nature so that humans might co-live peacefully with all beings in the universe.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“书不尽言，言不尽意，” said Confucius in the “Commentary of the Appended Judgments to the Yijing,” meaning that words and language cannot express thought completely. However I would still very much like, using my limited language, to express my heartfelt thanks to the people who have been indispensable in the completion of my dissertation.

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I dedicate this dissertation to my family into which I feel very fortunate to have been born and lived with: my father, my mother, my elder sister, my younger brother, my husband, and my daughter. All my love for my family is expressed in the Chinese saying, 一切尽在不言中 [All that one wants to express is expressed in wordlessness].
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CHAPTER 1. BACKGROUND

Statement of the Problem

The director general of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), Federico Mayor, made this comment on the centrality of literacy in human life:

Literacy is at the heart of world development and human rights. Its importance lies in what precedes literacy: the words that are the expression of human thought. Its importance lies equally in what can then be done with the written word, which conveys thought across time and across space and makes the reader a “co-author” and active interpreter of the text. An oral society relies on memory to transmit its history, literature, laws, or music, whereas the written word allows infinite possibilities of transmission and therefore of active participation in communication. These possibilities are what makes the goal of universal literacy so important. (as cited in Blake & Blake, 2002, p. 1)

However, in spite of the recognition of the paramount role literacy plays in both individuals’ lives and world development, there are approximately one billion people who are illiterate in today’s world (D. Q. Feng, 2005b). “The widespread illiteracy is a major impediment to economic development and the elimination of poverty in many countries (World Bank, 1988)” (Whitney, 1998, p. 22).

Low Rate of Literacy and Language Reform in China

Although “ever since the Confucian era, literacy has always been highly valued in China” (X. M. Li, 1996, p. 3), the estimated illiteracy rate was more than 95% in the late 19th century (Kuo, 1915). There are various factors contributing to this fact, but it is
mainly due to the unique linguistic characteristics of the Chinese language, among which there has been a separation between written and spoken Chinese since ancient times. The written language referred to here is Classical Chinese, called *wenyan*, the “Classical literary language” (Norman, 1988, p. 136) and purely a written language, as opposed to *baihua*, the “vernacular literary language” (Norman, 1988, p. 136) or the “vernacular-based form of written Chinese” (Norman, 1988, p. 136), which has been used since the Tang and Song dynasties, with a limit only to some particular genres of popular literature (Norman, 1988), and is still used today. Literacy at that time was defined as the ability to understand and use *wenyan*. In the late Qing dynasty, the main material in the textbooks in elementary school was largely selected from the classical works, written in *wenyan* (Wu, 2005). This can be seen from Y.-R. Chao’s (1976) autobiographical part of his book, titled *Aspects of Chinese Socio-Linguistics*, in which he wrote about reading and writing at the “Chinese age” of 7 (the 7th year of birth or 6 years old today) in the family school:

> We did so much reading that we only started writing compositions much later. In those days writing meant writing literature and everything had to be in *wenyan*, in contrast to later times, when in elementary school one could write just as one talked. (p. 6)

The conditions in “later times” that Y.-R. Chao (1976) described represented the outcome of language reform, the necessity of which was clearly recognized in the 19th century, after 1840. At that time, there was a rich and thriving popular literature written in *baihua*, which was widely read and enjoyed but frequently deprecated by the literate elite (Bai, 2005). As the language of the major aspects of Chinese higher culture, such as the Confucian classics, literature, history, and philosophy, *wenyan* was, at that time,
assumed to be the real written Chinese and “the single most important symbol of Chinese
ethnicity and cultural unity” (Norman, 1988, p. 245). This was vividly illustrated in Y.-L.
Feng’s (1948) comments on the popularity of Yan Fu’s (Yen Fu) translation:

In Yen Fu’s translations, the modern English of Spencer, Mill, and others was
converted into Chinese of the most classical style. In reading these authors in his
translation, one has the same impression as that of reading such ancient Chinese
works as the Mo-tzu [Mozi] or Hsun-tzu [Xunzi]. Because of their traditional
respect for literary accomplishment, the Chinese of Yen Fu’s time still had the
superstition that any thought that can be expressed in the classical style is ipso
facto as valuable as are the Chinese classical works themselves. (p. 326)

Liang Qichao, one of the leaders in the political reforms of 1898, and like-minded
scholars who were very much concerned about the high illiteracy rate in China, promoted
the use of baihua in writing textbooks for children in the elementary curriculum reform
(Bai, 2005). But prior to the time of the May 4th Movement in 1919, baihua was
considered fit only to be a vehicle of popular entertainment and absolutely unsuited for
expressing elevated and serious thought and ideas. In short, at the beginning of the 20th
century, wenyan was undoubtedly the most prestigious form of written Chinese (Norman,
1988).

The Xin Hai Revolution in 1911 overthrew the last dynasty, Qing (1644-1911),
and ended the feudal system that had lasted for more than 2,000 years. A new republic
was founded in 1912. The educational tenets of the Republic repudiated the late Qing
educational guidelines that advocated for loyalty to the emperor and respect for the
teachings of Confucius. Subjects, such as reading the classics in elementary school, that
were not compatible with the spirit of the Republic were eliminated (Liao, 2006).

According to Wu (2005), later on, influenced by the literary revolution in the New
Culture Movement, the educational leaders strongly advocated that textbooks in schools adopt *baihua*. In 1920, the Ministry of Education issued a decree that the first and second-grade textbooks be changed into *baihua*, and it was stipulated that by 1922, all the textbooks compiled in *wenyan* in the old times be prohibited and changed into *baihua*. Thus, starting in the 1920s, *baihua* gradually came to take the place of *wenyan* (Norman, 1988) and became the standard form of written medium in China that is presently used. This paved the way for later reforms in language. In sum, since the compilation of the textbooks in *baihua* during the May 4th Movement, there has been a fundamental change in the disunification of written and spoken Chinese (Wu, 2005). As a result, “in elementary school one could write just as one talked” (Y.-R. Chao, 1976, p. 6).

**Language reforms after 1949.** According to Ashmore and Cao (1997), after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, two special goals in education were set up by the government: One was to eliminate illiteracy; the other was to provide universal education for all school-age children. To achieve these goals, a series of efforts ensued. The government endeavored to design and implement literacy classes at all levels and to establish more elementary schools. To ensure education for the majority of ordinary people, important measures were taken by the government: (a) Some of the traditional Chinese characters with complex strokes were simplified; (b) the *pinyin* system was created to facilitate the studying of the pronunciation of characters; and (c) a unified spoken language called *putonghua* was devised by language experts.

To sum up, through language reforms since the late 19th century, *baihua* in simplified characters has become the form of written Chinese, and *putonghua* is the
standard spoken language at the present time in China. These represent the written and spoken forms of Chinese discussed in this study. The criterion for illiteracy elimination, prescribed by the State Council, is that being literate means, for the population in the city, being able to recognize 2,000 characters, and for those living in the countryside, 1,500 characters (D. Q. Feng, 2005b).

**Chinese and Other Languages**

Chinese has the largest number of speakers in the world, as Wilkinson (1971) wrote:

> English is an international language, the most widespread in the world, second only to Mandarin Chinese in the number who speak it. After Chinese and English follow Hindi, Russian, Spanish, German, Japanese, French, Malay, Bengali, Arabic, Portuguese and Italian in that order (Potter 1968). (p. 15)

The same author also discussed the language family to which Chinese belongs in comparison with other languages:

> English belongs to the Indo-European family of world languages. There are other language families – for instance, there is a Semitic group to which Hebrew and Arabic belong; and others, including Chinese, which are quite unrelated to Indo-European or to one another. In Indo-European there are subdivisions, the main ones being: Teutonic (English, German, Dutch, the Scandinavian languages); Italic (Latin – French, Spanish, Italian); Hellenic (Classical Greek – Modern Greek); Celtic (Gaelic, Irish, Welsh); Slavonic (Russian, etc.); and Indian (Hindi, etc.). The original language from which all these are descended was spoken some time before 2000 B.C., possibly round about 3000 or 4000 B.C., by people living, it is conjectured, in Northern or Central Europe. There are no written records of this language, but scholars infer its existence. (pp. 14-15)

**Difficulty of Learning to Read Chinese**

Language reforms in China, discussed earlier, suggest the difficulty of the written Chinese, as Bhola (1994) wrote:
All alphabetical systems are not of the same difficulty level. Arabic letters may be more difficult to learn than Roman letters. Combining Arabic letters into words is more complex. The Chinese ideograms are the most difficult to master even by the native speakers of Chinese. (p. 27)

From a historical perspective, Norman (1988) explained the reason contributing to the difficulty of learning Chinese:

Chinese is only one of a very few contemporary languages whose history is documented in an unbroken tradition extending back to the second millennium BC. At the same time, in its numerous dialectical forms, it has more speakers than any language spoken in the modern world. This vast extension in time and space has imparted to the study of Chinese a complexity hardly equaled elsewhere. (p. ix)

Wilkinson (1971) also commented on the difficulty of learning Chinese and a reason for it:

That languages may come from a common stock is not merely of scholarly and historical interest. The evidence suggests that the closer a language is to one’s own, the easier it is to learn. Chinese, belonging to a different language group, is very hard for a native English speaker. (p. 15)

Whereas Wilkinson only generally expressed the fact that Chinese is hard to learn, DeFrancis (1984) offered a concrete concept of the degree of difficulty of learning Chinese, by distinguishing the Chinese spoken and written language:

Overall, for a native speaker of English, learning to speak Chinese is not much more difficult than learning to speak French. It is in the traditional writing system that the greatest difficulty is encountered. The blanket designation of “Chinese” as a hard language is a myth generated by the failure to distinguish between speech and writing. Perhaps we can put things in perspective by suggesting, to make a rough guesstimate, that learning to speak Chinese is about 5 percent more difficult than learning to speak French, whereas learning to read Chinese is about five times as hard as learning to read French (p. 52).
Difficulty as a Culturally Relative Concept

Ropp (1990) once wrote about the relative nature of the concept of oddness as it pertains to culture:

In studying any culture comparatively one learns more about the range of possibilities in human experience, including the “roads not taken” in one’s own culture. We may start out perceiving another culture’s “oddness” but end up coming to see the oddness of our own. Oddness is by definition a culturally relative concept. (p. ix)

Thus, in view of the close relationship between language and culture, the difficulty of a language is also a culturally relative concept. It depends on numerous factors, such as who the learner is, when one learns it, where one learns it, and how one learns it. It also depends on other unknown factors.

The Zero Project

Despite all the laborious efforts to eradicate illiteracy over the years, however, the rates of illiteracy and semi-literacy in China are now much higher in comparison with those of moderately developed countries (X. F. Wang, 2003). What is worse, the large number of illiterates and the consequent low quality of individual cultural cultivation constitute one of the severe problems that affect the quality of the Chinese population as a whole (D. Q. Feng, 2005b).

Facing this challenging problem, some Chinese educators have been trying to figure out the primary reason for the low rate of literacy and, in turn, effective methods for illiteracy eradication. D. Q. Feng, “father of early childhood education in
contemporary China” (Chen, 2005, p. 9), was one such educator. According to D. Q. Feng (2005b),

For the sake of our country’s modernization construction, the prosperity of our people, and for the sake of the progress of the world civilization, we must face up to the tremendous rate of illiteracy and challenge the place where the light of culture has not been existent. In the advancement of human civilization, I think that early character recognition and early reading in advance prior to elementary schooling will be likely to make outstanding contributions. (p. 7)

D. Q. Feng pointed out that the root cause for the low literacy rate was the lack of early character recognition and early reading, beginning in infancy or even earlier, before formal schooling, and the Zero Project was his solution.

The Zero Project stands for “The Project of Quality Education and Implementation for Children Aged Zero to Six” (S. P. Zhang, personal translation, 2010 in D. Q. Feng, 1990, p. 190). It is an early childhood education project initiated in China by D. Q. Feng in the early 1980s. Its goal is to develop well-rounded children, starting from age zero (fetus) as they are influenced and taught by their families through everyday life activities. One of the major aspects of this project is early literacy, that is, early character recognition and early reading.

Demystification of the myth of the difficulty in memorizing Chinese characters. According to D. Q. Feng (2005b), in recent years, with the in-depth study and analysis of Chinese characters and especially with the breakthrough made in the study of child psychology, early childhood education theories and practices, and early character recognition and reading, the myth of the difficulty in the memorization of Chinese characters has been demystified. Under the guidance of D. Q. Feng’s method of
early character recognition and early reading in everyday family life, a child’s acquisition of written language and spoken language can develop simultaneously. Therefore, young children can naturally recognize characters through everyday life activities and games in their family—the only right way for young children to acquire character recognition and reading. As a result, 3 and 4 year olds can become literate and read independently and extensively.

The magical Zero Project. Under the guidance of the Zero Project, a great number of young children in China are able to recognize thousands of characters at 2 or 3 years of age and become literate at age 3 or 4. What is more important, these children are talented in various other ways, such as literature, music, drawing, athletics, arts performance, and natural science. Numerous successful cases of early readers were reported by D. Q. Feng and his associates. (Please note that D. Q. Feng’s associates refer here and elsewhere in the this dissertation to all the people who worked with him, including Long, his colleague, as well as the parents and journalists who were usually the real reporters of these cases; and later on, some of the parents became his associates.) In the brief case studies of successful early readers, two main factors were salient in their achievements: (a) All had very rich life experiences since their infancy and various kinds of learning activities; and (b) all learned to recognize characters at a very early age, became literate at around 3 or 4 and began reading extensively ahead of the usual time (D. Q. Feng & Long, 1993). D. Q. Feng’s research findings from the project held up much hope and inspiration for young parents, educators, and others who were concerned about early education in general and early literacy in particular.
**Limitations of the Zero Project.** However, limitations were also salient in these case studies. First, focus was mainly on the concrete methods used in teaching the children how to recognize characters and read; none of the cases provided a detailed account of the whole picture of the case as a system. Although the methods used were diverse and adapted uniquely within each family, all the children in the case studies became very early readers and had outstanding academic ability or other talents, much more so than did their peers. Moreover, each case story had the beauty of simplicity: The child was born, the methods were used, the child became an early reader at 1, 2, 3, or 4 and was talented in a well-rounded way, becoming a young celebrity at either the provincial or national level. Second, related to the first limitation, all the caretakers were loyal to D. Q. Feng’s methods, and all the children were eager to cooperate with their caretakers, becoming voracious readers at an early age. The families were harmonious with one common goal: to produce an early reader as well as cultivate a well-rounded person.

I do believe that the cases represented are true stories. But the best that can be said about the successful cases included in D. Q. Feng’s research findings is that they are representative of one group of children in Chinese families in which all family members reached a consensus at the theoretical level, and the children themselves have particular characteristics; therefore the method took effect. The generalizations they made were somewhat far-fetched. The detailed account of a particular case study was needed to show the real picture behind an ordinary early reader, because the unique family
environment represents, for each child, a critical aspect of the total picture. Within the same culture, each family is different and each child is different.

D. Q. Feng and his associates have made great contributions toward eliminating illiteracy by presenting unusually successful cases in which a great deal of useful methods were introduced. However, ordinary cases that do not belong to this “unusually successful” category as a living, integrated, and complex system have been left with little exploration in such areas as the detailed background of the caretakers and their relationships, and the source of their attitudes. In other words, the human factors in the environment in which the cases lived are not adequately taken into consideration. In sum, to the best of my knowledge, there has been no detailed case study in this area in China that focused on the human environment a child experienced in developing into an early reader, from the perspective of a parent in China who was inspired by the Zero Project.

**Purpose of the Study**

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to present, from a mother’s perspective, an account of the interpretation of the literacy-related human factors and activities in the environment that a Chinese girl experienced in developing into an early reader prior to her entry into elementary school, from 1994 to 2000 (birth to about six) in China. As the researcher, my goal is to understand the process of the creation of the first early reader in the history of my family.

**Research Questions**

Temporally speaking, my study has spanned more than a decade from the initial, tentative research question to the formal, primary research question. Spatially speaking, it
has crossed three cultures: The original idea of the study started in China, some data was collected, and the initial but ongoing analysis was done. The idea was then confirmed in Korea when I, the author, was teaching there, and the major work of data collection, analysis, and interpretation reached termination in the United States. My multicultural experiences helped to modify the major research question and two sub-questions. The major research question that guided this study is as follows:

- In the history of a particular Chinese family, what are the major human environmental factors that helped form the first early reader (i.e., reading before elementary school)?

The following two sub-questions provided greater specificity about the study’s direction:

1. What are the literacy-related experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and values of the people that directly and indirectly influenced the first early reader?

2. What are the immediate literacy-related environments and activities that the first early reader experienced at home?

**Significance of the Study**

First, early character recognition and early reading are regarded as one wing of a bird by D. Q. Feng (1990). The other wing signifies the rich life experiences and various aspects of learning to which the child has been exposed since infancy. That is, in order to cultivate a well-rounded person, becoming an early reader prior to formal schooling is a crucial aspect in early childhood education, so that after entering elementary school, students can learn in an active way. In the same vein, “over the years language and literacy have been the subject of more research than any other aspect of education” in the
United States (Strickland, 1983, 8th page). Many cases of early readers were reported to be inspired by the Zero Project in general, and the aspect of early character recognition and early reading in particular. However, little research has been conducted using the strategy of a qualitative case study to provide parents and early childhood educators with a whole picture of the crucial role of human factors in the environment that formed an early reader. An exploration of both the distal and immediate human environments in this study will deepen and broaden the overall understanding of the formation of an early reader.

Second, the literature review section is organized so as to bring to the fore a common Chinese cyclical concept, teaching that “both history and reality operate in cycles” (Chan, 1963, p. 153), as is manifested in the field of early childhood education in general and early literacy in particular. To understand any aspect of China, understanding her past is one of the prerequisites.

Third, in the methodology section, this study also makes a contribution, in an interdisciplinary way, by stressing the similarities between the constructivist paradigm and Chinese thought. Moreover, the introduction of Chinese philosophy into the field of educational research will help to disseminate the following idea proposed by the famous Chinese philosopher, Y.-L. Feng (1934):

We are not interested now in criticizing one civilization in the light of the other, as the intellectual leaders of the first and the second periods did, but in illustrating the one with the other so that they may both be better understood. We are now interested in the mutual interpretation of the East and the West rather than their mutual criticism. They are seen to be the illustrations of the same tendency of human progress and the expressions of the same principle of human nature. Thus the East and the West are not only connected, they are united. (para. 8)
The connecting, interrelating, and complementary aspects between Western science and those in Chinese thought can be viewed as developing, in different stages, into one system of the evolution and progress of human thought.

Fourth, this research study touches on the issue of what to read to children as one of the literacy-related activities in the curriculum, in the hope that due attention could be re-called to the contents of early reading besides the overly heavy focus on discussion and research of the methods related to reading aloud to children. The content dimension of reading aloud to children is greatly under-researched in the West, as Teale (2003) explained:

An in-depth understanding of the effects of classroom read-alouds on children’s literacy development can only come from careful consideration of content. Surprisingly, this topic has been examined in relatively few studies to date, and has received virtually no attention as a potential variable in quantitative analyses of the relation between reading aloud and emergent literacy/reading achievement (cf. the research examined in the Scarbrough & Dobrich [1994] or Bus et al. [1997] review)…. [The few studies show] what is read aloud matters. Such work indicates that the choice readings can have a profound influence on children’s literacy learning, but, overall, this dimension of reading aloud is greatly under-researched and in need of deeper insights. (pp. 124-125)

Although Teale is discussing English literacy, it is interrelated with the Chinese language in regard to the content of reading, because human languages are similar in essence and different in form. So this study concerning Chinese early literacy might contribute to the Western literature in the sense that it will stimulate people to reconsider what to read to children, besides how to read to them, from the perspective of “one of the innate desires of mankind,” that is, “the craving for what is beyond the present actual world” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 4). Applied to reading, this perspective will ask people to
rethink what is the most essential spiritual food human beings need besides physical needs. Applied to curriculum, this perspective makes the classic curriculum question, “What knowledge is of most worth?” (Spencer as cited in Doll, 1993, p. 1) worth rethinking. The author suggests that Chinese philosophy should be included in a child’s early literacy curriculum in China and calls for dialogues on the content issue of curriculum from the perspective of a further understanding of human nature so that humans might co-live peacefully with all beings in the universe.

Finally, this study might contribute to immigration education, especially bilingual education in the sense that it provides a small window to see a child’s acquisition and development of literacy in her native language before she came to the United States to acquire English literacy.
CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

When discussing 20th-century linguistics in America and Europe, Joseph (2002) emphatically pointed out the importance of knowing the past in understanding the present:

In order to evaluate and understand the 20th century with any sort of objectivity, we need to extend our perspective backward in time. Historical continuities with the 19th and earlier centuries give a firmer grounding to judgments concerning the 20th. For linguistics, such continuities are undeniable. (p. 47)

In actuality, such continuities are existent not only in linguistics. Michael, in his 1986 book, *China Through the Ages*, commented that “of all great cultural traditions, the Chinese is perhaps the most historically minded” (p. xiii). The reason is that “Chinese civilization displays a unique continuity” (Mote, 1971, p. 112) and “China has the longest continuous history of any civilization” (Michael, 1986, p. xiii), and there has been “the accumulation of a tremendous and unbroken body of historical literature, extending over more than three thousand years, such as is unequalled by any other people” (Bodde, 1981a, p. 135). Because of this “unbroken continuity of Chinese culture” (Baynes, 1967, p. xlii), it has been truly said that “to understand China, one must start at least as early as Confucius” (Moore, 1974, p. 4) in the pre-Qin period (prior to 221 BC). In the same vein, to understand early literacy in China today, one must start as early as the pre-Qin period. In short, the importance of the past and the unbroken continuity peculiar to China is
impossible to bypass if one wants to achieve meaningful understanding of any of the contemporary issues, including early character recognition and early reading in the field of early childhood education.

As to the importance of the past, Sima Qian, the famous Chinese historian, known in China as “the father of Chinese history” (W.-B. Zhang, 1999, p. 26), wrote about two thousand years ago, “He who does not forget the past is master of the present” (Keightley, 1990, p. 54). Some two thousand years later, Santayana wrote, “Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it” (as cited in Keightley, 1990, p. 54). Be it Sima Qian’s more optimistic saying on the past or Santayana’s more negative aphorism on it (Keightley, 1990), the virtues of the past are brought to the fore, because “by studying the past one might learn how to conduct oneself in the present and future” (Bodde, 1981a, p. 135).

“The understanding reached by each individual will of course be to some degree unique” (Stake, 1995, pp. 101-102). To my way of thinking, the conjunction of several research literatures is necessary to set the entire background for my study. This literature review is mainly from a historical perspective. It starts with fetal education and early character recognition and reading in early childhood education in ancient China and ends with fetal education, early character recognition, and early reading in early childhood education in the Zero Project in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which was influenced by early readers and famous educators in Chinese history but mainly theoretically based on the research findings of Western science. Because this study was inspired by the Zero Project, a brief history of the path that has led to the Zero Project is indispensable to
situating my study. In the course of this history of early childhood education, one large circle seems to have emerged in early childhood education in general, and early character recognition and reading in particular, from the pre-Qin period in ancient China to the end of the 20th century.

This chapter includes the following sections: Early Child Education and Early Literacy in Ancient China; China Encountering and Learning From the West; The New Early Childhood Education China; The Zero Project; The Status Quo of Early Childhood Education and Early Literacy in China; and Relationship Between Chinese Culture, Family, and Language. These sections represent essential components of the path that led me to the undertaking on this study.

**Early Childhood Education and Early Literacy in Ancient China**

**Human Nature and Deep Belief in the Importance of Education and Learning**

In China, the definition of human nature is one of the most fundamental issues in Confucianism. The deep belief in the importance of education and learning is related to the theories of human nature by three important Confucianists in the pre-Qin period: Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi. Confucius said, “By nature, near together; by practice far apart” (as cited in Waley, trans. 1938, p. 209). Although Confucius seemed neutral in terms of human nature, he emphasized that we, as human beings, are very much alike at birth in nature; it is “practice” after birth that makes us so different. The implication is that even if we were not born perfect, it is possible for us to become perfect through cultivation and education. Mencius, who represented the idealistic wing of Confucianism (Y.-L. Feng, 1948), held that human nature is originally good. But “he does not mean that
every man is born a Confucius, that is, a sage” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 69). Education is necessary to make this possible. Xunzi, who represented the realistic wing of Confucianism (Y.-L. Feng, 1948), put forward a theory of human nature that is precisely opposite from that of Mencius; that is, human nature is evil. However, he maintained that human beings can be taught goodness. To use Xunzi’s own words: “The nature of man is evil; his goodness is acquired training” (as cited in Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 145). Xunzi noticed that “children born among the Han or Yue people of the south and among the Mo barbarians of the north cry with the same voice at birth, but as they grow older they follow different customs. Education causes them to differ” (as cited in Bai, 2005, p. 8).

Despite the existence of three different views on human nature, Mencius’ view has been dominant in Chinese cultural tradition, as explained by Bodde (1963):

Though both Mencius and Hsun Tzu enjoyed great prestige in their own time, in the end it was Mencius’ optimistic view of human nature that gained universal acceptance, whereas the pessimistic view of Hsun Tzu was decisively rejected. (p. 3)

In his article, titled *Dominant Ideas in the Formation of Chinese Culture*, Bodde (1981a) provided a summary of the Chinese belief regarding the good and evil of human nature:

The moral basis for this [Chinese] society was the belief, shared by the majority of Chinese thinkers, that man is by nature fundamentally good; that there is no such thing as original sin; and that therefore any person, even the lowliest, is potentially capable of becoming a sage. Evil, according to the Chinese view, does not exist as a positive force in itself; it is simply the result of a temporary deflection from the essential harmony of the universe. (pp. 136-137)

With this deep belief, it is understandable that the Chinese attached an importance hardly paralleled elsewhere upon the value of learning. “Wisdom” was included by them among the five cardinal virtues, meaning by this an understanding of right and wrong and of moral principles
generally. Hence the Chinese stress upon their classics, which they regarded as containing deep moral truths; upon history as an instrument whereby man may be taught to avoid the mistakes of his forefathers; and eventually upon all humanistic scholarship. (Bodde, 1981a, p. 137)

Therefore, the importance of education and learning has been elaborated in countless essays and books in Chinese philosophical works. The following is an excerpt of one from The Analects of Confucius:


With a deep belief in education and learning, in China, “a family having ‘a tradition of studying and farming’ was something of which to be proud” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 18). This phenomenon was also noticed by authors of foreign countries, as Cheng (1946) stated in his book, titled China Moulded by Confucius: “In China a person is not esteemed or honored on account of his origin or birth or riches, but solely on account of his knowledge and learning” (Grotiana as cited in Cheng, 1946, p. 95). “‘A Chinaman,’ says the author of John Chinaman at Home, ‘is fond of money, but he respects learning and literature far more…. The most notable men in a neighborhood are not the wealthy, but the learned’” (Cheng, 1946, p. 95).

The Aim and Principle of Early Childhood Education

Chinese views on human nature imply that no matter whether human nature is viewed as neutral, good, or evil, it is possible for everyone to become a sage through
education and learning (Y.-L. Feng, 1948). This was the aim of early childhood education in ancient China, that is, to cultivate the child into a sage. The most important or the most fundamental principle of early childhood education at that time, which was included in the *Yijing* (commonly translated as the *Book of Changes*)—“the very foundation of the whole Chinese culture” (J.-L. Liu, 2006, p. 26), was “蒙以养正，圣功也,” meaning that we may cultivate a child’s pure and un-depraved character, beginning in early childhood, which is the successful way to make sages. In order to implement this principle, according to Liao (2006), some concrete measures were proposed: (a) Be cautious in the choice of teachers and people around the child; (b) be careful in the choice of environment; (c) provide a positive model and education for children without lying to them; and (d) exchange children among families for teaching purposes in order to avoid hurting the feelings between fathers and sons and better educate the children with the right way. In actuality, these measures can be boiled down to one word: environment. This notion of environment stressed the human aspect; that is, the people surrounding the child represented the crucial factor in the child’s education. Thousands of years later in the late 19th century, the principle was still applied to a child’s education, as shown by Y.-R. Chao (1976) in his book, titled *Aspects of Chinese Socio-Linguistics*:

Our teacher, Lu K’o-Hsuan, was specially engaged to come from the south to teach us. Grandfather took much trouble to get a teacher from the south because, first, his official duties kept him too busy to teach us; second, according to the saying, “In ancient times, families exchanged children for teaching” the teaching was taken very seriously; and third, it was important to keep the pronunciation of the home locality. (p. 5)
Fetal Education

When should this all-important education start? According to Liao (2006), ancient Chinese people tended to attach great importance to the root and inception of things. In a human life, the fetal period was viewed as the root and beginning. Therefore, a child’s education was deemed, in a broad sense, to ought to start from the fetal stage. The ancient Chinese believed that the fetal environment exerted significant influence both on the growing fetus and on the child’s temperament and moral character after birth and later in life (Bai, 2005). This is called taijiao, commonly translated as fetal education or fetal instruction. The so-called Dao (Tao), or “the way,” of fetal education held that during pregnancy, all the factors that might constitute stimuli to the fetus, such as what the pregnant woman ate, what she saw, what she heard, and her conduct and psychological state, all should be normal and in harmony, so that such stimuli would exert positive influence on both the physical and mental development of the fetus (Liao, 2006). To the fetus, the mother was the most immediate and important environment, and she was influenced by her environment both internally and externally. Therefore, the pregnant woman needed to live in a harmonious environment and keep a peaceful mind and healthy body.

According to Liao (2006), when fetal education specifically originated is beyond investigation, but it started to be practiced in the pre-Qin period. According to the chronicles of ancient literature, the mothers of the two sage kings, King Wen and King Cheng in the Zhou dynasty, were the earliest people to practice fetal education in China (Liao, 2006). King Wen acquired his admirable virtues not only from formal education
and his mother’s exemplary behavior throughout his early childhood, but also from “the spiritual purity and equanimity of the king’s mother during her child’s development in utero” (Kinney, 1995a, p. 19). The great philosopher Mencius’ mother is also famous for carefully practicing fetal education when she was pregnant and also famous for her moving the household three times in order to find a better environment for Mencius’ education in his early childhood years (Liao, 2006).

With the development of medicine and education in subsequent dynasties, theories on fetal education and the care of pregnant women became richer and richer. This tradition lasted until the Qing dynasty, during which people had learned to fully recognize the relationship between the health of parents and the fetus’s growth, as well as the direct relationship between pregnancy and the spirit of men and women (Liao, 2006).

According to Chinese cosmology, the theory of *yin* and *yang* explained the origin of the world, and the theory of the Five Elements interpreted the structure of the universe (Y.-L. Feng, 1948). Beginning in the pre-Qin period, ideas of fetal education were related to these two theories (Bai, 2005). After 1840, with the large-scale introduction of Western culture to China, nothing was left unaffected, including fetal education and people’s views on it. Although people still believed in fetal education, the nature and interpretations of it seemed changed. For example, one of the main leaders of the notable political reforms of 1898, Kang Youwei, wrote a book in 1884, titled *Da Tong Shu*, [Book of the Great Unity] (title translated by Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 324). In this book, he envisioned an ideal world where education is highly valued and the government will rear and educate children through public funds. He conceived of a complete educational
system in which every child’s education starts from the fetal stage until college level and the place where fetal education is practiced is called the Humanist Institute (Liao, 2006). To borrow a term used today in the field of education, it is a “P-16” educational system with “P” standing for prenatal stage, or fetal stage.

However, China’s national crisis in the late 19th century made such reform-minded intellectuals as Liang Qichao, Yan Fu, and Kang Youwei extremely enthusiastic about Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution. They borrowed the traditional Chinese idea of fetal education to interpret, in Chinese terms, this Western theory. Their deliberate interpretation in their own way was to support their planned reform and “help to explain China’s weakness and awaken the Chinese people to the grim reality of the situation” (Bai, 2005, pp. 185-186). With the progress of the Westernization Movement and the modernization of China along Western lines, learning from the West took place at every level. Fetal education, in terms of its original meaning in China, gradually moved into history.

**Early Character Recognition and Early Reading**

With some of the knowledge about the long history of fetal education in ancient China, readers will not feel surprised to learn that Chinese people also attached great importance to early childhood education as soon as possible after a child’s birth, which is the continuation of fetal education. Fetal education advocates were also in favor of early childhood education.

There are many aspects of traditional early childhood education. The salient aspect was early character recognition and early reading. The reason was political,
because emphasis on political affairs was one of the characteristics of Chinese culture, and every aspect of the culture was dependent on politics (Y. D. Wang, 1996a). With the unification after the Qin and Han dynasties, but especially in the Han dynasty, Confucianism became the orthodox belief for the unification of thought (Y.-L. Feng, 1948). As a result, the Confucian classics, especially the six classics, became the curriculum for education and study of the classics has been the mainstream ever since.

What is more important, for the purpose of consolidating the supremacy of Confucianism, the famous Civil Service Examination system, the method for selecting government officials, began to take form in the Han dynasty. This examination system was formally established in the Sui dynasty and was abolished in 1904, when the government attempted to introduce a modern educational system (Y.-L. Feng, 1948). This system lasted for over 1,300 years. The Confucian classics were the contents prescribed by the government for the exams. The supremacy of the dynastic governments of China was ensured through this examination system. According to Y.-L. Feng (1948), since the Song dynasty, the *Four Books*—the *Confucian Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*, and the *Great Learning*—came to be the main texts used in the exams until the abolition of the examination system. This undoubtedly set the guidelines and direction for early childhood education and determined the curriculum for young children. To be successful in the Civil Service Examination, starting children early in classics reading was the way, and character recognition constituted the foundation for reading these classics. Bodde’s (1981a) words might help readers better understand why success in the exams was such a high motivation for children, or rather, families:
In China, ever since the creation of the first long lived empire in the second century B. C., entry into the bureaucracy that governed the country was limited to those who succeeded in passing a series of every strict governmental examinations, based upon a thorough knowledge of the Chinese classics. Service in this official bureaucracy was the highest goal which one could attain, and therefore success in the examinations was the highest aim. (p. 137)

According to D. H. Wang (2003), in the Han dynasty, children entered school at 8 years old. However, long before entry into schools, they were taught in their families to recognize characters and read classics, and they had already mastered thousands of characters before they sat in front of the teachers. The tradition of early learning was carried on in the subsequent dynasties. In the Qing dynasty, according to Liao (2006), character recognition education was universally valued in society, and there were more and more primers for young children. Many character recognition methods were proposed by educators, based on their educational practice. The tradition of emphasizing education of the classics, history, and literature was also carried on in the Qing dynasty. The famous early childhood educator, Tang Biao, at that time thought that both the idea and practice of children entering school at age 8 was wrong. He proposed that children be taught to recognize characters in an intensive way at 2 or 3 years old and should enter school and receive formal and systematic education at 4 or 5 years of age. As a result, in the early Qing dynasty, many young children became early character recognizers and early readers. Those from families of scholars could recognize and write several thousand characters at 7 or 8 years old, well ahead of today’s illiteracy-elimination standards (Liao, 2006).
Generally speaking, the content of the curriculum for children can be seen from Y.-L. Feng’s (1948) comments:

In the old days, if a man were educated at all, the first education he received was in philosophy. When children went to school, the *Four Books*, which consist of the *Confucian Analects*, the *Book of Mencius*, the *Great Learning*, and the *Doctrine of the Mean*, were the first ones they were taught to read. The *Four Books* were the most important texts of Neo-Confucianist philosophy. Sometimes when the children were just beginning to learn the characters, they were given a sort of textbook to read. This was known as the *Three Characters Classic*, and was so called because each sentence in the book consisted of three characters arranged so that when recited they produced a rhythmic effect, and thus helped the children to memorize them more easily. This book was in reality a primer, and the very first statement in it is that “the nature of man is originally good.” This is one of the fundamental ideas of Mencius’ philosophy. (p. 1)

Overall, according to D. H. Wang (2003), in the character recognition education that existed for over two thousand years in China, it had been the established model that young children could recognize 2,000 characters in 1 year and could read and, as a result, they could finish reading the Thirteen Classics within about four or five years. D. H. Wang (2003) stated that Ouyang Xiu, the famous man of letters, historian and poet in the Song dynasty, said that learning was the first thing to do if one wanted to establish oneself and reading books was the root if one wanted to learn. A student with medium talent could read classics made up of 479,000 characters, plus the enormous amount of notes explaining these works in 4½ years (D. H. Wang, 2003).

In sum, the general characteristics of early character recognition and early reading in ancient China are the following: (a) Starting very early; (b) focusing on “what” to read, that is, philosophy, especially the Confucian classics since the Han dynasty; and (c) as to “how” to read, mechanical memorization was the classical pedagogical approach for
children, without stressing understanding. Children under the age of 15 were encouraged to memorize as much as they could through rote learning (Bai, 2005).

This is the brief history of ancient early character recognition and early reading up to the early Qing dynasty, prior to 1840. According to Liao (2006), although China was quickly thrown into a semi-colonial and semi-feudalist country after 1840, there were only slow changes in culture and education, especially in early childhood education. So, the late Qing dynasty was similar to the early Qing in terms of the form and methods of early childhood education. That is to say, prior to the establishment of the Gui Mao School System in 1904, traditional early childhood education was predominant in the field of early childhood education. Young children in China at that time usually received education in their own families. The few intelligent ones received education in sishu, or private schools. But in the meantime, the germ of the new early childhood education had already appeared, due to the gradual introduction of Western culture.

Incidentally, to be a little digressive but helpful to the reader’s understanding, it is important to know that

[the American] form of compulsory, public education has existed for a little less than 150 years. Prior to the 1850s, education was primarily a family responsibility….Public education became widespread in the late 1800s and early 1900s….As the American educational system became more bureaucratized, parents found themselves shut out of the educational process. (Stein & Thorkildsen, 1999, p. 2)

Two early readers in the late Qing dynasty. The early readers in different dynasties made great contributions to the whole of Chinese culture. Listening to what the early readers themselves have said about early reading is the best way. In order to help
readers understand in a more concrete and vivid way how early readers in ancient China learned to recognize characters, read, and write, excerpts of autobiographies of two early readers who were born in the late Qing dynasty are presented in the following section.

There were numerous early readers who made great contributions to Chinese culture, but the rationale for choosing Hu Shi (1891-1962) and Y.-R. Chao (1892-1982) is threefold. First, both of these individuals were born in the late Qing Dynasty, which was similar to the early Qing in terms of the form and methods of early childhood education, as stated earlier. That is to say, their education is representative of the typical early childhood education in general and early character recognition and early reading in particular in ancient China. Second, both of them were sent to the United States to study, as is discussed in the later section on the movement of studying abroad in modern China, which made a great contribution to the cultural and educational exchanges between the two countries. Third, when the first Western philosophers, John Dewey and Bertrand Russell, came to visit China in 1919, Hu Shi served as the main interpreter for Dewey, and Y.-R. Chao was the interpreter for Russell.

The following is an excerpt by Hu Shi (1920), written in his autobiographical article entitled 九年家乡教育 [Nine Years’ Education in Hometown]:

My mother hoped me to go to school. So I went to school in my Uncle Jieru’s private school when I was three years and several months. I was too little, and had to be held by others on a chair. After reading, they had to put me down from the chair. Yet, I was not the lowest grade in the school, because I had already learned almost one thousand characters before I went to school. The first book I read was the one written by my father. It was a rhyme, with four characters in one line, about how to be a moral person. After that, I memorized a lot of books from beginning to end that I did not understand.
There were only two students in the school: My uncle’s son and me, and he was several years older than I was. His mother was very permissive with him, so he often went out to play. My mother was very strict with me, and I did not feel reading was a difficult thing, so oftentimes I was the only one who stayed in the school and read until it was dark.

Later on, there were more than ten students, and we moved to a big room called New School. There was one student, called Sizhao, who often played truant and was often spanked by the teacher. I often wondered why he would rather have corporal punishment than reading. When I was a little older, I realized that his parents had business in Jiangxi Province, and he read books with very heavy dialect and often got beaten on the head by the teacher. It was the teacher’s mistake.

There was another reason. The tuition was too low and therefore the teacher’s pay was too low—two yuan (monetary unit in China) for each student every year. Because of this, the teacher had no patience with these students and just asked them to memorize and never explained anything to them. In the beginning, the kids were interested, even if they did not understand, because the poems rhymed. Later on, when they read the essays, their interest was gone without understanding what they were reading. So many of them played truant. They would get beaten up when they were caught. The more they got beaten, the more they played truant.

I was the only one who did not belong to the two-yuan class. My mother really wished me to read, so she gave the teacher six yuan for the first year and then increased to twelve yuan. Such a high tuition broke the record at that time in our village. Maybe my mother remembered my father’s will and asked the teacher to explain the book to me, every word and every sentence. So, I understood several sentences everyday. I often helped the other students to read.

The following excerpts are from Y.-R. Chao’s (1976) book titled *Aspects of Chinese Socio-Linguistics*:

In learning to read, I was taught single characters as early as (Chinese) four years old. My mother first taught me the character squares, with a character on one side and a picture of the meaning on the reverse side. For example, one side would have the character for ren, and the reverse side would have a picture of a man. Another card would have the character for shuh, and the other side would have a picture of a tree. But for characters with more abstract meanings, such as yeou ‘have’ or hao ‘good’, or even such words as jy (possessive particle), hu (interrogative particle), jee ‘he who, that which’, yee (affirmative particle), there was nothing on the reverse side. That was why I never liked to learn those words, nor could I remember them easily. (p. 4)
My grandfather first taught me to read books. My father did not teach me at first, probably because he was busy preparing for the civil service examinations (he received the degree of jeu. ren, corresponding to the M. A. degree). In those days children were usually first taught to read the Three-Word Classic, The Hundred Family Surnames (actually 438), and the Thousand Character Text. But grandfather started me and Big Brother at once with Dahshyue The Great Learning, the first of the Four Books. Then at the age of (Chinese) seven, I entered the family school, which I attended from morning until late afternoon. There were only three pupils in the school---Big Brother, a son of a distant relative, and myself. (p. 4)

Our teacher, Lu K’o-Hsuan, was specially engaged to come from the south to teach us. Grandfather took much trouble to get a teacher from the south because, first, his official duties kept him too busy to teach us; second, according to the saying, ‘In ancient times, families exchanged children for teaching’, the teaching was taken very seriously; and third, it was important to keep the pronunciation of the home locality. (p. 5)

Our teacher was rather strict, but we liked him because he explained the lessons and the new words. In those days “reading books” was just to read books. The teacher did not always explain, nor did the students understand; there was just the practice of dwu shu bu chyou shenn jiee (du shu bu qiu shen jie), ‘reading books without trying to understand much’. But after a while, even as long as several years, the meanings in the books began to become clear. This traditional practice was really quite close to what in recent years has been called the audiolingual approach, first emphasizing listening and reading, and letting the meaning gradually come later. So it was quite unprecedented when our teacher first explained the text, and afterwards let us read. (p. 5)

As for the order of reading, since we had already finished The Great Learning, next of the Four Books should have been Jong Iong or The Doctrine of the Mean, but because this was very hard, we went on to The Confucian Analects and Mencius. I liked Mencius best, since it was closest in style to the modern wenyan or classical Chinese one reads and writes today. After the Four Books came the Five Classics. (p. 5)

After school was over, around four o’clock in the afternoon, we could play as we pleased. But after supper we usually read poetry, which was taught by my mother. (p. 5)

We did so much reading that we only started writing compositions much later. In those days writing meant writing literature and everything had to be in wenyan, in contrast to later times, when in elementary school one could write just as one talked. (p. 6)
Ding (2001) provided a good summary of the development of Chinese society and culture before 1840:

From the earliest times down to the middle of the 19th century, Chinese society went through three stages: primitive society, slave society, and feudal society. The Xia dynasty ruled over a slave society. In the Shang period there was definitely a slave system, as inscriptions on oracle bones showed how slaves were used and ill-treated. During the Western Zhou (1066-771 BC) or Eastern Zhou (770-256 BC) Chinese society entered the feudal stage. This social system was to last more than 2,500 years until it was shaken by foreign cannons during the Opium War. (p. 282)…Chinese society and culture developed along their own path until the outbreak of the Opium War in 1840. (p. 289)

The beginning of what is now called the modern era is “usually associated with the period of European history known as the Enlightenment, which commenced sometime toward the end of the sixteenth century and lasted until the French Revolution in 1789” (Surber, 1998, pp. 7-8). In China, it was the late Ming dynasty (1368-1644) and the last dynasty, Qing (1644-1911) when the modern era began in Europe.

At the end of the Ming dynasty, that is, in the latter half of the 16th century and early part of the 17th century, Jesuit missionaries from the West began to preach Christianity in China, which marked the time when the Chinese first came into contact with Europeans (Y.-L. Feng, 1948). The missionaries brought to China Western scientific and cultural knowledge, along with Western Christianity (He, 1996b). Western culture began to take root in China at this time. What impressed the Chinese more about these missionary scholars was not so much their religion as their attainment in mathematics and astronomy (Y.-L. Feng, 1948). Later on, missionaries ran schools, built hospitals, published various documents and articles, and in particular, translated books, which
gradually impacted Chinese culture. However, on the whole, this impact was not salient prior to 1840 (He, 1996b).

**Three Debates on the Issue of Chinese and Western Culture**

The year 1840 marked the beginning of large-scale Western influence on Chinese society, “when China was forcibly ‘opened’ by the West” (Bodde, 1963, p. 2), totally unprepared and was quickly thrown into a semi-colonial and semi-feudalist country. According to Bodde (1963), the modern age in China officially began in 1912 with the founding of the Republic, but it actually started at least in the early decades of the 19th century. Y.-L. Feng (1948) incisively commented,

> The advancement of science has conquered geography…. It is not correct to say that the East has been invaded by the West. Rather it is a case in which the medieval has been invaded by the modern. In order to live in a modern world, China has to be modern. (p. 27)

Therefore, “since China’s defeat in the Opium War in 1840, advanced Chinese people took great pains to seek for truth in the Western countries” (Mao as cited in Shan, 2001, p. 480). This also holds true in the field of culture and education. According to Y.-L. Feng (1988), intellectuals and scholars all admitted that China should learn from the West their advantages and strengths in order to save the country; however, as to what were the strengths of the West, there were differing opinions, hence the appearance of divergent political schools. According to He (1996b), there appeared three heated debates on the issue of Chinese and Western culture in the fields of politics and culture, indicating that the Chinese people were learning and adopting Western culture at an increasingly higher level.
Three Movements of Studying Abroad in Modern China

The defeat of the second Opium War (1856-1860) not only provided an opportunity for Chinese modernization, but it also started the modernization of Chinese education. Under these circumstances, the movement of studying abroad in modern China began.

Sending young children to America and students to Europe. Because the 19th century saw “the growing military, industrial, and commercial predominance of Europe, and the coincidental decline of China’s political strength” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 323) under the Qing government, the Westernization Movement emphasized Chinese military modernization in the 1860s and 1870s, and focused on the construction of modern industrial enterprises in the 1870s and 1880s (Bai, 2005). According to He (1996b), besides the establishment of military and civil industries, reformers also established new schools to implement education innovation. Curriculum in schools became similar to the West, such as courses in algebra, geometry, trigonometry, chemistry, astronomy and foreign languages. In addition, the history and geography of foreign countries were included. The schools took on the characteristics of modern schools at the incipient level.

At the same time, reformers decided to cultivate new-style talents through sending children to America to study and sending students to study in Europe, hence the real rise of the education of studying abroad in modern China (Xie, 2006). According to Xie (2006), from 1872 to 1875, a total of 120 children were sent officially by the Qing government at four different times to America. Undoubtedly, this “unprecedented event” had great significance at that time. Not only did it serve as a prelude to the movement of
studying abroad in modern China, but it also contributed to the history of cultural and educational exchanges, although these children ended up being prematurely called back by the government due to the impediment of Chinese traditional ideas and the strong feudal force. In the meantime, from 1877 to 1886, the Qing government sent altogether 81 students to Europe (Xie, 2006). Yan Fu, a student in one of the first groups destined for Europe during the Westernization Movement, was sent to England where he studied naval science.

**Sending students to Japan.** The failure of the 1894 Sino-Japanese war, in a sense, declared the end of the Westernization Movement. Reformers came to the realization that the Westernization Movement alone was not enough to bridge the gap between China and Western countries. A new generation of reformers realized that reforming China’s political and educational systems was the only way to deal with the Western countries and Japan (Bai, 2005). The defeat of the war in 1894 made people recognize that the reason why Japan could become prosperous so fast was that it was good at modernization, taking in the Western culture, reforming education, and implementing constitutional monarchy. Hence in the political reforms of 1898, reforming traditional Chinese education was a very important item on the agenda. According to Xie (2006), the atmosphere of emulating Japan permeated all levels in China, and sending students to study in Japan was thought to be one of the important avenues. So, at the end of 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, under the guidance of the slogan, “saving the country through education,” the movement of studying in Japan began, the scale and number of students of which were unprecedented. Wang Guowei, who made a
great contribution to the introduction of Western thought and Western educational ideas, went to study in Japan in 1901.

**Sending students to America.** During the rise of the movement of studying in Japan, there was also a less-noticed rise in studying in Europe and America. According to Xie (2006), the “Geng Zi Indemnity” enabled 3 groups of Chinese students (altogether 180 people) to be sent to America to study at the end of the Qing dynasty. This was another large-scale movement of officially sent students to America, after children had been sent to America earlier in the Westernization Movement. Hu Shi and Y.-R. Chao, the two selected young readers whose autobiographies were presented earlier, were among the second group sent to America in 1910. In 1914, Chen Heqin and Tao Xingzhi, who made great contributions to the new early childhood education and provided inspiration to D. Q. Feng, founder of the Zero Project that inspired my study, were also sent to the United States to study. It was some of these students who studied with John Dewey that later invited him to visit and lecture in China in 1919.

**Introduction of Western Thought and Western Educational Ideas in China**

The introduction of Western thought to China was closely related with the movements of studying abroad. A very important cultural phenomenon between 1840 and 1919— the modern times in Chinese cultural history—was the publication of news, articles, other documents, and especially the translation and publication of Western books (He, 1996b). According to Y.-L. Feng (1948), Yan Fu was the greatest authority on Western thought at the beginning of the 20th century, due to his translations of major Western works, because, on the whole, there were very few people in China who knew

In Yan Fu’s time, a famous scholar, named Wang Guowei, who went to study in Japan, played a major role in the introduction of Western education to China. According to Shan (2001), the journal, *Education World*, was initiated in Shanghai in 1901, and Wang served as its editor-in-chief, evaluating and disseminating Western educational theories and systems in a more systematic way, thereby taking the lead in the study and research of Western educational theories in China. This was the first professional journal in the field of education in China and focused on translation from the very inception of the journal, introducing educational theories, histories, and updates on the current situation in Japan, Europe, and America. This journal included almost all the schools of thought in the history of the development of education all over the world. At a later stage, this journal published numerous articles commenting on foreign educational theories and systems, a great many of which Wang authored. Although *Education World* stopped publishing in 1908, with 166 issues altogether, it was an education journal that enjoyed the largest circulation and exerted great influence, making a significant contribution to
the dissemination of Western educational theories and systems, and the modernization of Chinese education (Shan, 2001).

In addition to *Education World*, in 1909, another professional education journal in the field of modern Chinese education, called the *Education Journal*, was created and continued publishing until 1948. It also played a significant role in the dissemination of Western educational theories and systems, particularly in the American educational system and the dissemination of John Dewey’s pragmatic educational ideas in China (Shan, 2001). After the beginning of the 20th century, and especially after the founding of the Republic in 1912, John Dewey’s educational pragmatism represented an important educational theory among the Western education theories that were disseminated in China (Shan, 2001).

**The New Culture Movement**

As stated earlier, after 1840, although all the reform-minded intellectuals and scholars admitted that China should learn from the West its strengths to save the country, a consensus was not reached as to what specifically should be learned from these strengths. After more than half a century’s exploration and experiences, according to Y.-L. Feng (1988), by the early years of the Republic, these intellectuals and scholars had come to have a more comprehensive and profound knowledge concerning what were the true strengths of the West that China should actually learn from. Despite the numerous aspects of the West’s strong points, the consensus was that the root of the West’s strength lies in its culture; and the concrete contents of Western culture are democracy and science. So, what Chinese people needed to do was to endeavor to create a new Chinese culture.
Therefore, in the beginning years of the Republic, some Chinese scholars advocated for “Democracy” and “Science” (Shan, 2001). Actually, since 1915, the slogans of “Mr. Science” and “Mr. Democracy” were prevalent among the liberal reformers (Keenan, 1977).

To be more exact, the effort to create the new Chinese culture was manifested in what was called the “New Culture Movement,” the origin of which dated back to the days in early 1917 when Cai Yuanpei became President of Beijing University (Y.-L. Feng, 1988). Cai Yuanpei, the first Minister of Education in the new Republic, was regarded as “the greatest educator” (Y.-L. Feng, 1988). He hired Chen Duxiu, founder of the New Youth in 1915, to be Dean of Liberal Arts and Hu Shi, Li Daozhao, Qian Xuantong, and Lu Xun, along with others to be professors and lecturers, all of whom advocated for scholarship and democracy, and for supporting the New Culture Movement.

In sum, prior to and after the May 4th Movement in 1919, the New Culture Movement, which advocated for “Democracy” and “Science,” began in the Chinese cultural field; and Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Lu Xun, Hu Shi, and others launched a heated attack on Confucian ethics, which had confined the Chinese people for over 2,000 years (He, 1996b). Incidentally, all of these advocates had received Confucian classical education at a very early age, but now were leading a revolt against Confucian culture, which had been dominant since the Han dynasty. They attempted to create a new Chinese culture based on Western standards, especially in regard to democracy and science. According to Y.-L. Feng (1988), the general belief is that the May 4th Movement was synonymous with the New Culture Movement. In fact, the May 4th Movement was one
phase of the New Culture Movement, which reached its climax by the May 4th Movement in 1919.

It was precisely under the slogans of “Democracy” and “Science” that various Western ideas, especially John Dewey’s philosophy and pragmatic educational ideas, were introduced to China. It stands to reason that against the background of the New Culture Movement and the May 4th Movement, John Dewey’s democratic educational ideas, aimed at criticizing traditional education, were naturally attractive to scholars in the field of education in China who not only were extremely against the traditional education they themselves had experienced since an early age, but also cherished the subjective hope reflected in the common slogan, “saving the country through education.”

**John Dewey’s Visit to China and the American Influence on Chinese Education**

According to Shan (2001), through the efforts of some of his students at Columbia University in the United States, such as Hu Shi, Jiang Menglin, and Tao Xingzhi, Dewey was invited to lecture in China in 1919. He stayed in China from April 30, 1919 to July 11, 1921, (2 years, 2 months and 12 days); visited 11 provinces and the three cities of Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin; and presented more than 200 lectures (Shan, 2001).

John Dewey and Bertrand Russell were “the first Western philosophers to come to China, and from them the Chinese for the first time received an authentic account of Western philosophy” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 329). What is more important, Dewey’s visit came at the right historical time in China: The famous anti-tradition May 4th Movement took place in Beijing on the fifth day of his arrival. Therefore, “John Dewey received a thunderous welcome in China,” commented Keenan (1977, p. 10). Dewey’s “personal
commitment to reform and progress and his authority as a philosopher of modern education and scientific thinking put him in tune with the interests of his large audiences” (p. 10). Hirsch’s (1999) following words seem to be an apt summary of the reason why Dewey’s visit in China was so well received: “To paraphrase Matthew Arnold: For an idea to be heard, ‘two powers must concur, the power of the [idea] and the power of the moment, and the [idea] is not enough without the moment’” (p. xvii).

According to Shan (2001), Dewey’s lectures were wide in scope, but most of them related to education, as indicated by their titles. Due to Dewey’s visit to China in the early 1920s, the dissemination and influence of pragmatic educational thought had reached its climax. Similar to the activity-centered curriculum or experience curriculum, with Dewey’s pragmatic educational ideas as their theoretical foundation, the curriculum standard guidelines of the new school system introduced to China were modeled on the American school system. The corresponding textbooks naturally placed an emphasis on “child-centeredness” and suited the child’s interest and needs. In short, the American educational model had basically been accepted by the Chinese educational field. It indicated that the modern Chinese educational system had turned toward emulating America from emulating Japan, together with the integration of the efforts of Chinese scholars and educators in the field.

**The New Early Childhood Education in China**

The late Qing period after 1840 was regarded as the beginning of the new early childhood education (Liao, 2006). Since its inception, Chinese new early childhood

**Reform of Children’s Curriculum and Promotion of Baihua**

In the deep national crisis in the late years of the Qing dynasty, the necessity of educational reform was recognized besides the critical need to reform the political system. In the field of children’s education, Liang Qichao, among others, made great contributions in the establishment of the new early childhood education as opposed to the traditional early childhood education (Liao, 2006). Liang’s proposed curriculum reform of education for children in elementary school reflected the viewpoints of a number of educators and reformers in the late 19th century (Bai, 2005).

Similar to all the other scholars and leaders mentioned in this review, Liang himself was an early reader: He read the *Four Books* intensively at the age of 4; finished reading the *Five Classics* by 6, and became successful in the Civil Service Examination at age 11 (D. Q. Feng, 2005b). China’s defeat in the Sino-Japanese war of 1895 had already revealed the inadequacies of the Civil Service Examination system in terms of providing the right education to meet the challenge of modern technology, which the West and Japan had mastered (Keenan, 1977). According to Bai (2005), Liang pointed out that the aim and content of education for children was, in large measure, guided by this examination system as well as the benefits thereby coming from succeeding in these examinations. Young children were forced to learn the Confucian classics at an early age through rote learning without understanding, rather than being taught knowledge closely related to their everyday life. Liang found an alternative to this traditional Chinese
education in the schools created by the missionaries who, since their entry into China, had actively gotten involved in secular education in China by the late 19th century. To Liang, the characteristics of these schools were typical of those of Western education: In terms of content, textbooks were written in the colloquial language, which was easier for young children to read; as to the teaching methods, children were taught in accordance with their physical and intellectual developmental stages, and their ability to understand was stressed. Moreover, Liang thought that the low literacy rate at that time was also related to the model of traditional Chinese education. Thus, one of the most important contributions Liang made was to promote the use of baihua in writing textbooks for children (Bai, 2005). This undoubtedly paved the way for the promotion of baihua and literacy later on.

**Westernization of the New Early Childhood Education in China**

With the efforts toward modernization of education in the Westernization Movement and the political reforms of 1898, a more complete modern educational system, called the “Gui Mao School System,” was formally established in 1904 (Liao, 2006). According to Liao (2006), one important aspect of this school system was the establishment of the early childhood educational system. So, the Gui Mao School System marked the formal establishment of the new early childhood educational system in China.

Thus, the field of early childhood education was very much influenced by the progress of the movements of studying abroad in Europe, Japan, and America, together with the introduction of Western educational ideas and Dewey’s visit. According to J. H. Liu (1996), in the 1920s, scientific child psychology was introduced in China. Chen
Heqin, one of Dewey’s students at Columbia University in the 1910s, was the earliest person to lecture on child psychology. In 1925, he compiled a textbook on child psychology, entitled *The Study of Child Psychology*, which chronicled the outcome of his observation of his son for the first 3 years of his life, using the method of journaling. From then on, such child psychology theories and research as the schools of experimental psychology, psychoanalysis, behaviorism, and gestalt psychology were introduced in China.

According to Liao (2006), based on an analysis by Chen Heqin and another early childhood educator, called Zhang Xuemen, of the types and general characteristics of the kindergarten at that time, there were three types of kindergartens: religion-style kindergartens run by the churches, Japanese-style kindergartens that resembled elementary schools, and common-style kindergartens that were characteristic of the Montessori method and the reformed Frobel method. These latter kindergartens were the result of the introduction of the educational ideas of Montessori and John Dewey.

Based on an analysis of the kindergartens by Tao Xingzhi, another of Dewey’s Chinese students at Columbia University and the most innovative one, kindergartens at that time in China suffered from what he metaphorically called three kinds of diseases: foreign disease, money-spending disease, and rich disease. *Foreign disease* refers to the verbatim copy of foreign countries: The kindergarten children played foreign pianos, sang foreign songs, told foreign stories, played with foreign toys, and ate foreign cookies—everything in the kindergarten was foreign. *Spending money disease* means that everything in the kindergarten depended on foreign countries, and sometimes the tuition
was several times higher than that of the elementary schools, which made the popularization of kindergartens difficult. *Rich disease* means that kindergartens became the specialty of the rich people, due to the high expenses, thereby preventing poor people from access to the kindergartens. Overall, there appeared a complete Westernization of early childhood education in China. Kindergartens at that time tended to completely copy the models of foreign countries in every aspect.

As far as early literacy is concerned, from the late 1800s, the period of “modern research,” to the 1920s, “not much of anyone was addressing the issue of, much less researching, pre-first-grade reading and writing” (Teale & Sulzby, 1986, p. viii). That is to say, from the late 1800s to the 1920s, the research on early literacy in the West primarily concentrated on the elementary school years. This trend undoubtedly influenced the new early childhood education and early literacy in China that was learning from the West. Simply put, scholars of developmental psychology in the West initially limited their interest to school children; and until the latter half of the 20th century, attention was next paid to pre-schoolers, then infants, and then fetuses (J. H. Liu, 1996). In China, especially after Dewey’s visit and lectures in China, his pragmatic educational ideas were widely disseminated, and this influence surpassed any other Western educational thought in the first half of the 20th century. The focus on what in children’s curriculum in traditional early childhood education shifted to the focus on who. The child became the center of the curriculum (Shan, 2001).

Despite the influence of Western educational theories and systems, due to the series of wars before the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, early
childhood education, which was privately funded and run by individuals, was very backward. In 1946, with a population of 400 million, China only had 1,300 kindergartens (X. F. Wang, 2003).

The New Early Childhood Education After Founding of the People’s Republic of China

In the 1950s, the influence of Dewey’s educational and political thought in China was denounced (Keenan, 1977). Instead, the 1950s marked the stage of learning from the former Soviet Union. The textbooks on child psychology were mostly translated from those in Russia (J. H. Liu, 1996). According to D. H. Wang (2003), with the advent of 1958, the guidelines for early childhood education were criticized for having a bourgeois direction and for promoting the reactionary or counter-revolutionary theory of child-centeredness. Three years later, the Department of Early Childhood Education, responsible for the management of kindergartens in the Ministry of Education, was revoked, and as a result, early childhood education lost its unified national leadership. In 1962, the only five departments of early childhood education existent in the teachers’ colleges stopped recruitment consecutively. In the 10-year Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the research on child psychology was stopped or left behind (J. H. Liu, 1996). Kindergartens were run by the local governments until the adoption of economic reform policy and China’s opening up to the outside world in 1978, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping (X. F. Wang, 2003), when Western science and technology began to reenter China.
The Zero Project

Theoretical Foundations of the Zero Project

It was under these circumstances that D. Q. Feng began to do research on theory and design the methods for the Zero Project in the late 1970s. Subsequently, he founded the Wuhan Children’s Development Research Center in Hubei University in 1984 (D. Q. Feng, 1990), advocating for fetal education and early childhood education in general, and early character recognition and reading in particular. However, the Zero Project did not represent the revitalization of the tradition of fetal education and early childhood education of ancient China; rather, its theoretical underpinnings were the latest Western scientific achievements in anthropology, physiology and brain science, psychology, and education (D. Q. Feng, 1990). According to D. Q. Feng (2005a), fetal education was both a very ancient and a young science: The record of fetal education has a history of thousands of years, but the research on its theory and scientific experiment was at its inception. D. Q. Feng (1990) thought that there had been quality early childhood education in ancient China, but modern Chinese early childhood education began in the 1970s. In a sense, some of the modern Western scientific theories and research findings seemed to have provided scientific evidence for what ancient Chinese people practiced thousands of years ago, based on their world view in terms of fetal education and early childhood education.

Connection Between Western Literature and the Zero Project

D. Q. Feng’s method indeed sounded revolutionary at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s in China, considering the fact that it was only several years after the 10-year
Cultural Revolution—“the unprecedented cultural desert” (D. Q. Feng, 2005a, p. 6)—when traditional Chinese culture was completely destroyed as the “feudal poisonous tumor” (He, 1996b, p. 12) and Western culture was absolutely excluded as “imperial stuff” (He, 1996b, p. 12). By that time, the tradition of early learning in ancient China had been excluded from, or had never been existent in, the ordinary Chinese people’s mind, and Western culture seemed too new to accept. Therefore, the Zero Project was discriminated against by prejudice since its infancy, and over the years, D. Q. Feng encountered countless obstacles, misunderstandings, and pressure from society (D. Q. Feng, 2005a).

But D. Q. Feng did not give up, because he had faith in the project, based on his own experiences and his unceasing research over the years. He was aware of the development of early childhood education and the attention given to it in Western countries after the year 1957. “Early” was the trend, and it was supported by scientific evidence in various disciplines. Actually, the emphasis on “Zero” in the Zero Project was to bring the word “early” to the fore (D. Q. Feng, 2005a). As stated earlier, new Chinese early childhood education had been greatly influenced by the Western countries since 1840. Part of D. Q. Feng’s (1990) awareness in terms of the necessity of early childhood education was reflected in the following description in Durkin’s (1966) book, titled *Children Who Read Early*:

The launching of Sputnik I, on October 4, 1957, produced a variety of repercussions in the United States. One was criticism that pounced on public school education, increasing the tempo of the already existing debate about the quality of instruction in American school….The debate now stressed the inferiority of our education endeavors compared to those of Soviet
Russia….Resulting from the clamor was an atmosphere best characterized by the cry of “Let’s have more and let’s have it sooner.” These demands, coupled with new messages from psychologists, were bound to have an effect on early childhood education. (p. 71)

D. Q. Feng (1990) also discussed the efforts made in early childhood education in general, and in the cultivation of early talents in particular, in such countries as Britain, America, the former Soviet Union, and Japan in the 1960s and 1970s.

In addition to the political factor, “the rationale for the push toward earlier, as well as more, education probably also stemmed in part from increased research on young children” (Teale & Sulzby, 1986, p. xii). According to Gauvain and Cole (2005), much of the dramatic change in the understanding of the biological contributions to psychological development took place in the latter half of the 20th century and was based on progress in two areas of research: neuroscience and genetics. This research redefined people’s understanding of human development and called for a new appreciation for the newborns’ wondrous capabilities. They are no longer considered the little ones who are “helpless, reactive beings”; rather, infants are now viewed as “active, information-seeking organisms that are ready to learn about and interact with the world” (Gauvain & Cole, 2005, p. 57). Therefore,

infancy research was becoming widespread among psychologists by 1960. Kagan, Bruner, Brazelton, and others at Harvard, for example, were all studying very young children. The infant research was demonstrating that preschoolers knew more than they had generally been given credit for and that during the early years children could be learning many skills. (Teale & Sulzby, 1986, p. xii)

Then there came a “renewed interest in the first few years of life as a period of critical significance in development” (Teale & Sulzby, 1986, p. xiv).
D. Q. Feng (2005a) included the concept of the “optimal age for education” (p. 43) as one of the supporting pieces of evidence for his Zero Project. This concept was originated by the Austrian zoologist, Konrad Lorenz, and was introduced in China in the early 1980s (D. Q. Feng, 2005a). D. Q. Feng also discussed Bloom’s research on young children, which was very similar to the following description:

Bloom’s (1964) analysis of a multitude of longitudinal studies of development… concluded that the majority of human intellectual development takes place before the age of 5, with 50% of the intelligence measured at age 17 being developed by age 4 (Bloom, 1964, p. 88). (Teale & Sulzby, 1986, p. xii)

In the field of early literacy, according to Gillen and Hall (2003), “the notion of readiness in association with reading appears to have been used first by Patrick (1899), was supported by Huey (1908) and remained a dominant concept in young children’s reading for the next 60 years” (p. 4). That is to say, for about 60 years, it was widely assumed in the West that children’s literacy development did not begin until formal schooling. The reading readiness paradigm gradually shifted toward the paradigm of emergent literacy in the mid-1980s (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Today, a great number of educators in the field of early literacy place a high premium on the paramount importance of supporting young children’s emergent literacy as it occurs from birth through 5 years of age (Jones & Crabtree, 1999). Although the term, reading readiness, did not appear in D. Q. Feng’s work, the similar assumption in China that children do not develop literacy until formal schooling, or rather elementary school, was one of his targets of criticism.

In sum, some of the latest scientific research findings in Western countries were reflected in D. Q. Feng’s (1990, 2005a, 2005b) theoretical base for his Zero Project.
Therefore, the Zero Project explicitly proposed that human beings re-appreciate fetuses, newborns, infants, and young children, all of whom have huge potential, and it systematically introduced a whole set of basic methods to develop this potential. What is more important, D. Q. Feng (1990) maintained that the early childhood education that starts from zero is applicable to every child, can most effectively enhance the population quality, and is also the fountainhead of the appearance of early talents.

**Theoretical Guide of the Zero Project**

Tao Xingzhi’s educational principle, “life is education,” served as the theoretical guide to D. Q. Feng’s emphasis on the daily activities and play in families (D. Q. Feng, 2005b). In D. Q. Feng’s (2005b) own words, “Using Mr. Tao Xingzhi’s theory of ‘life is education’ to guide the educational practice of infants and young children is the most appropriate” (p. 23).

What is worth mentioning is that Tao Xingzhi and Chen Heqin, the two Chinese students of John Dewey mentioned earlier, were the same two famous Chinese educators from whom D. Q. Feng got inspiration for his Zero Project, in addition to the influence of the ideas of Montessori and some Japanese early childhood experts (D. Q. Feng, 2005a). Tao Xingzhi came up with the principle, “life is education,” when he came back to China and found the inapplicability of Dewey’s ideas to Chinese society. Keenan (1977) wrote regarding this,

By the end of the 1920s Tao found himself turning many of Dewey’s principles upside down in a somewhat drastic reformulation of Dewey’s educational philosophy. In 1929 Tao criticized the hitherto popular slogans of Dewey’s thought such as “the school is society,” and “education is life,” by arguing that educators in China accepted them uncritically and refused to acknowledge their
inapplicability. “Now I am going to give it ['education is life'] a half-somersault and change it into ‘life is education,’” said Tao, as he transformed Dewey to conform with social conditions so unlike those in the United States. The change was based on much painful applied experience during the 1920s. His whole attitude towards Western models for Chinese education had, in fact, undergone a transformation by the end of the 1920s. A volume of his own essays edited in 1928 noted in the preface: “As I was selecting from my old manuscripts, I suddenly had a realization. All those [manuscripts] written about Western educational systems pulling an Eastern cart were being eliminated forthwith. Those which remained were those [ideas] which had been personally tried.” (pp. 82-83)

So in a certain sense, the Zero Project still reflected the influence of Dewey, an American model, but it was all the more instilled with Chinese characteristics. In fact, this was precisely the educational ideal that Tao Xingzhi and Chen Heqin cherished and practiced regarding the new early childhood education after they returned from the United States, in view of the complete Westernization of early childhood education at that time. They endeavored to create the new early childhood education with Chinese characteristics. This was also the case with the Zero Project.

Although the theoretical foundations were based on Western scientific research and theories, D. Q. Feng (2005b) was also inspired by the children who could recognize characters and read the classics in ancient China, listing a number of early readers in different dynasties in Chinese history. He also mentioned the fetal education of thousands of years ago. Therefore, in a sense, the Zero Project was a combination of Chinese cultural spirit and modern Western scientific research findings and educational theories.

The Centrality of Mastery of Written Language in the Zero Project

Among the 15 educational dimensions, together with over 100 educational activities that constitute the Zero Project, early character recognition and early reading
represent only one dimension. However, D. Q. Feng (2005b) emphatically pointed out the centrality of written language in Chinese culture:

No matter whether in the past, at present or in the future, the script has been the most important and most fundamental tool of civilization in the transmission and creation of human culture. It has always been accompanying and creating the history of human beings. Over thousands of years, it is an indisputable fact that Chinese script has made indelible historical contribution to the dissemination and development of Chinese culture, the introduction of foreign civilization, the safeguarding the unity and stability of our country. (p. 15)

He also compared the mastery of written language to one of the two wings of a bird, without which a child could not develop into a well-rounded person. D. Q. Feng wrote,

The early talents excel in a variety of dimensions such as literature, music, drawing, athletics, performance arts and sciences….However, no matter which aspects they have talents in, all of them have an indispensable nutrition-rich “dish” of character recognition and reading in their early years of spiritual nutrition upon which they depend to develop. (p. 45)

To support his argument, D. Q. Feng quoted the famous former Soviet Union educator, B. A. Cyxomjnkhcknn: “Thirty years of experience made me deeply believe that the students’ intellectual development depends on good reading” (p. 42). The foundation for this “good reading,” that is, the ability to read, the interest in reading, and the formation of a reading habit, according to D. Q. Feng, needs to be laid as early as possible in a child’s life. He deeply believed that a child’s written language can develop simultaneously with her or his spoken language. What parents need to do is speak to their child from day one, or even earlier in the fetal stage. Parents need to tell their child everything they know, without thinking about whether she or he is able to understand. D. Q. Feng used the
Chinese idiom, “对牛弹琴 [playing the musical instrument to the ox],” to illustrate his point.

Deleterious Consequences of the Absence of Training in Early Character Recognition and Early Reading

D. Q. Feng (2005b) emphasized the importance of early character recognition and early reading before entry into elementary school. He thought that elementary students’ lack of interest in reading was due to their delayed education of character recognition and reading. The most deleterious thing is that because of being deprived of early character recognition and early reading, children have no self-taught abilities and reading habits after entering elementary school. This forces children to listen in class in a passive way from the time they enter elementary school. As a result, they lose the motivation to learn in an active way. So, in the whole process of schooling, it is impossible for teachers to get rid of the instructional method labeled as the “cramming model.” This is one of the primary reasons for the backward education in China. The famous Chinese linguist, Lu Shuxiang, made the incisive comment: “It is really an odd phenomenon considering the fact that children spend ten years’ time, more than 2,700 class hours, learning their native language and end up with the majority performing below the standard” (as cited in D. Q. Feng, 2005b, p. 42). The root for this “odd phenomenon,” according to D. Q. Feng, is the loss of training in early character recognition and early reading as early as possible, before elementary school.
The Highest Ideal and “Only Right Way” for Early Character Recognition and Early Reading

D. Q. Feng (2005b) called attention to the close relationship between early literacy and China’s prosperity and the progress of world civilization. As discussed earlier, he advocated that early childhood education in general, and early character recognition and reading in particular, should start from the day babies are born or even earlier. The highest ideal for early character recognition was to enable infants and young children to recognize characters naturally and begin reading without knowing it, just like they learn to recognize objects, speak, walk, and listen to music. In this way, both their spoken language (“audial language”) and written language (“visual language”) (D. Q. Feng, 1990, p. 1) would develop simultaneously without knowing the effort. D. Q. Feng (2005b) believed that “the only right way” (p. 99) for young children to acquire character recognition and reading was through everyday life activities and play in which young children can naturally recognize characters and read. On the importance of play for young children, Chen Heqin, who was Dewey’s student and who influenced D. Q. Feng, as stated earlier, made the observation: “Play suits the age-specific characteristics of young children and play is their life” (as cited in D. Q. Feng & Long, 1993, p. 214).

As a matter of fact, about five hundred years ago, Wang Yangming, one of the most dynamic and innovative thinkers and educators of the Confucian tradition in the Ming dynasty, “reshaped the structure of Confucian thought in a fundamental way” (Tu, 1976, p. ix). He proposed the “epoch-making theory that knowledge and action are one” (p. ix). Incidentally, Tao Xingzhi was greatly influenced by Wang’s theory of the “unity
of knowing and acting” (Tu, 1976, p. 1) and even made a change in his name based on it. According to Liao (2006), Wang’s ideas on early childhood education are an important component of his whole educational thought and the essence of his educational ideas. Wang maintained that education should start from early childhood. He criticized the then early childhood education that required that young children read and recite books from morning till night, severely injuring their health. He “advocated that experiential understanding of the classics through self-cultivation must take precedence over book learning” (Tu, 1976, p. ix). Wang and the followers of his school of Neo-Confucianism “have been particularly sensitive to the natural proclivities of children by forwarding an educational philosophy that, unlike more conventional attitudes toward instruction, allowed for a child’s desire to play and move about without restraint” (Kinney, 1995b, p. 5).

Using “the only right way” in everyday life, 3 or 4 year olds can become literate and read independently and extensively. What is more, young children can achieve this in a natural and relaxing way, according to their interest. This has epoch-making significance in the history of Chinese character recognition education (D. Q. Feng, 1990).

**Optimal Age, Principles, and Methods for Early Character Recognition and Early Reading in the Zero Project**

Facing up to all the misunderstandings and ingrained beliefs, D. Q. Feng (2005b) boldly proposed that the optimal period for children to learn to recognize characters and reading is before the age of 3, starting from infancy. Moreover, the focus should be on guiding the infants and toddlers to look at characters, listen to characters sounded out, get
access to books, and make friends with the script so that they will form what he called “character recognition sensitiveness” (D. Q. Feng, 2005b, p. 117). When infants become interested in the script, they will recognize about 2,000 characters and build the ability to both recognize characters and read sentences, so that they will gradually read independently. D. Q. Feng came up with the disturbing and unsettling conclusion that children would find it hard to recognize characters after 3 years of age.

The following are the three stages for character recognition that D. Q. Feng (2005b) proposed: (a) preparation stage—6 months to one year and 4 months (there are no concrete requirements for infants within this age range) in which the creation of the life environment of character recognition and reading is needed so that infants will like to look at characters and get into the habit of looking at this special kind of “object”; (b) formal character recognition stage—around one year and 4 months during which infants and toddlers formally begin to recognize characters, which parallels the development of infants’ recognition of objects, so the corresponding big characters can be put on the objects (e.g., a big character for door is hung on the door); and (c) recognition of compound characters stage—about two years of age in which children will be able to recognize the compound characters, as for example, dian shi ji (TV) or zi xing che (bike).

The three ways D. Q. Feng (2005b) proposed for teaching infants character recognition and reading are as follows: (a) environmental osmosis: All the things related to literacy will gradually be imprinted on the infants’ brains; (b) perception accumulation style: Teach infants only in daily life, not in the classroom; and all the sentiments, knowledge, and behavior acquired in the first years of life are the result of the
accumulation of countless, unconscious, ephemeral attention; and (c) “activity and play”:
Activity and play can arouse infants’ interest, stimulating their attention, memory, and
perception. In general, play is the optimal mechanism of early character recognition and
reading (D. Q. Feng, 2005b). For infants, play constitutes their entire spiritual life and is
pervasive in all their behaviors. Actually, children are always learning when play is the
medium of their learning.

D. Q. Feng (2005b) proposed 10 principles of early character recognition and
early reading: the principle of starting early; the principle of life; the principle of osmosis;
the principle of habit; the principle of step-by-step; the principle of happiness; the
principle of encouragement; the principle of wholeness; the principle of concurrent oral
language, observation, and thinking; and the principle of recognizing characters in
reading. To put theory into practice, D. Q. Feng summarized nine methods of early
character recognition and early reading: the method of environmental osmosis; the
method of habit formation; the method of role model emulation; the method of life
experience; the method of play in life; the method of character recognition through
comparison; the method of character recognition through radicals; the method of
character recognition through reviewing and solidification; and the method of character
recognition through reading.

Successful Cases of Early Readers From the Zero Project

Under the guidance of the methods of the Zero Project, thousands of children became
early readers and well-rounded children. In time, some of the successful early readers and
case studies were reported in a series of books by D. Q. Feng and his associates. As
examples, one case was about a 12-year-old college student who recognized more than 200 characters at 1½ years of age; began to read at 2, recognizing more than 1,100 characters; mastered *pinyin* at a very early age; and mastered the Chinese character radicals and could consult dictionaries also at a very early age. Another case concerned a boy who began to learn Chinese characters at the age of 1 year and 4 months and could read all the articles in the first graders’ textbooks at 1 year and 10 months. He became literate at age 3 and began to read widely at 4. Another successful case was reported by a girl’s grandmother: The girl could read the table of contents independently at 1½ years of age. The time frame from age 2 to 4½ was the peak of her avid reading, and by then, she was able to recognize 3,000 characters. Some of the early readers appeared on TV, and some were reported in the newspapers; all were called “little prodigies.”

**The Status Quo of Early Childhood Education and Early Literacy in China**

According to X. F. Wang (2003), early childhood education in China has expanded rapidly since 1978. “By 1999 there were 181,100 kindergartens in China, enrolling 23,262,600 children. Over 43.8% of the 3- to 6-year-old age cohort were enrolled in kindergartens and preschool classes attached to primary schools” (p. 130). According to D. Q. Feng (2005b), nowadays, in the working rules and regulations for early childhood education prescribed by the National Ministry of Education, it is pointed out that early childhood education should regard play as the basic activity, and education should be integrated into every kind of activity. It was also expressly prescribed in the Management Statutes and Regulations for Kindergartens:
Play should be the basic form of activity…[and] the contents and methods of education may be arranged and chosen based on the actual circumstances of a particular kindergarten, but those activities that are against the nature of early childhood education and deleterious to young children’s physical and mental health [must not be conducted]. (p. 148)

As to early character recognition and early reading, according to D. Q. Feng (2005b), many people take issue with infant character recognition and reading. They think that the kindergartens that teach young children to recognize characters and read should not be accredited, and character recognition and reading before 3 years of age should be disdained. The Chinese government is officially opposed to writing instruction for pre-schoolers (pre-school in China means pre-elementary school and is also called early childhood education). For example, the Beijing Education Department discourages the teaching of Chinese characters to young children until their entry into elementary school, and families’ emphasis on literacy acquisition for pre-school children is not encouraged either (McBride-Chang, 2004).

Whether or not it can enter the mainstream of early childhood education, the Zero Project has progressed in its own way and inspired many parents and early childhood educators. In the words of Schopenhauer (n.d.), “Every truth passes through three stages before it is recognized. In the first it is ridiculed, in the second it is opposed, in the third it is regarded as self-evident” (p. 1)

**Relationship Between Chinese Culture, Family, and Language**

This study revolves around the acquisition of a child’s early literacy in a Chinese family. Due to the centrality of interpretation in qualitative case studies and the close relationship between interpretation and one’s tradition, which is part of the content of the
next two chapters, it is necessary, before my presentation of the case study, to briefly discuss some aspects of Chinese cultural tradition in order for readers to get a better grasp of my understanding and interpretation of the case study. This discussion is inevitably highly selective and is restricted by my limited scope of knowledge about Chinese culture.

There is an unusual phenomenon in human society: The most simple is the most complex and vice versa. The concept, culture, is such an example (Y. D. Wang, 1996b).

**Definition of Culture**

In the West, as to the etymology for the word culture, Shaul and Furbee (1998) wrote,

> Our English word, “culture,” comes from Latin *cultura*, “cultivation, agricultural field.” The idea is that human beliefs (as opposed to the organizations of humans that articulate them in a given social group) form a basis for everyday behavior. (This refers to automatic, unconscious behavior.) (p.16)

In the Middle Ages, the meaning of the concept of culture was overshadowed by theological notions (Y. D. Wang, 1996b). In the 19th century, “with the rise of the various social or human sciences, some of these disciplines have taken culture (or some aspect of it) as their particular area of investigation” (Surber, 1998, p. 5). More than two hundred definitions of culture have been hitherto offered by scholars, racking their brains (Y. D. Wang, 1996b), among which the British anthropologist, Edward Burnett Tylor, proffered a well-received definition in 1871 in his famous work, titled *Primitive Culture*: “‘that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’ (p. 42)” (as cited in Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008, p. 4).
Language, Culture, and Family in Western Literature

Although “history has left us no generally consensual definition of culture, nor could any completely satisfactory definition be given” (Surber, 1998, p. 4), that culture is a seemingly simple yet complex concept is an indisputable fact. In terms of the illustration of the inexplicably intertwining relationship between culture, family, and language, a more relevant definition of culture is this: “Culture is the distinctive life-way of a people, whether tribesmen, townsmen, or urbanites, who are united by a common language” (as cited in Lafayette, 2003, p. 55). As to the relationship between language and culture, Shaul and Furbee (1998) explained,

Language holds an intuitive relation to other aspects of culture. At the very least, language is the means by which we talk about culture. In formulations that relate the two more closely, language can be thought of as a part of culture, not just an entity closely related to culture. (p. 1)

“Culture is interwoven in all aspects of human development” (Razfar & Gutierrez, 2003, p. 35), including literacy development. “Written language is one expression of language, and is the major medium through which literacy is represented” (Goodman, 1986, p. 1). With the paradigm shift in early literacy from reading readiness to emergent literacy, the importance of culture in the acquisition of literacy has been increasingly recognized (Razfar & Gutierrez, 2003).

I concur with Leichter that “the family is an arena in which virtually the entire range of human experience can take place” (as cited in Taylor, 1983, p. 1). “For many years, anthropologists and sociologists have studied the family’s role as educator, in societies ranging from nonliterate to highly literate” (Wasik & Herrmann, 2004, p. 6).
“With the growing importance of culture and context in the study of early literacy came the recognition that the literacy practices of the home were essential to children’s literacy development” (Razfar & Gutierrez, 2003, p. 37).

The Force of Chinese Culture

According to Tang (1991), ideologically speaking, in China’s history there have been three occasions when foreign cultures were introduced into China. The first was a little after the first century A. D. when Indian Buddhism spread into China. The second was in the middle of the 17th century when missionaries brought along with them the civilization of the West. The third was at the time of China’s Fourth of May Movement in 1919 when various trends of thought of the West, especially Marxism, were brought into China. (p. 169)

However, none of the Western philosophical systems “has yet become an integral part of the development of the Chinese mind, as did Ch’an Buddhism” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 329). Ding (2001) further emphasized the power of the Chinese culture:

“During the period of Southern and Northern Dynasties and the Yuan and Qing, China was partly or wholly under the rule of national minorities for about 600 years. Invariably the military conquerors were conquered by Chinese culture. They learned to rule China in the Chinese way and accepted Chinese culture. This fact showed that advanced Chinese culture was more powerful than military or political forces. (p. 286)

The Central Place of Family in Chinese Culture

“Emphasis on the family is a well-known feature of Chinese thought” (Higgins, 2001, p. 107). Schaaf (2001) observed, “It is useful to begin at home, literally, to understand any culture. Chinese cultural tradition is centered in, and radiates from, the family” (p. 164). On the centrality of family in Chinese culture, Ames (2001) wrote,
Stephen Pepper in his *World Hypotheses* advanced a set of “root metaphors” around which Western philosophy has posited its several alternative hypotheses regarding the definition of world order: “formism” (Plato), “organicism” (Hegel), “mechanism” (Hobbes), and “contextualism” (Dewey). The Chinese variation on this notion of “root metaphor” is the family. (p. 1)

As to Chinese thought, which “departs so completely” from Western ways of thinking, Carl Jung (1967), in his foreword to the *Yijing*, wrote,

> I do not know Chinese and have never been in China. I can assure my reader that it is not altogether easy to find the right access to this monument of Chinese thought, which departs so completely from our ways of thinking. In order to understand what such a book is all about, it is imperative to cast off certain prejudices of the Western mind. (p. xxii)

Regarding the same topic, Keightley (1990) began his article, titled “Early Civilization in China: Reflections on How It Became Chinese,” this way:

> If we are to understand how the culture of China differs from that of other great civilizations, two fundamental and related questions need to be addressed: How did China become Chinese and how do we define “Chineseness”? (p. 15)

The answers are beyond the scope of this study, but a concise answer to the second question seems to have been given by Giskin and Walsh (2001) in that the family is “the very heart of China and Chineseness” (p. xi).

Actually, the original corpus of the book the *Yijing* “consists of what are known as the eight trigrams, each made up of combinations of three divided or undivided lines….By combining any two of these trigrams with one another into diagrams of six lines each…, a total of sixty-four combinations is obtained which are known as the sixty-four hexagrams” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 139). “The eight trigrams of the *Yijing*... are also visualized as a family” (Pickle, 2001, p. 12), as Y.-L. Feng (1948) explained:
In the trigrams, the undivided lines symbolize the *Yang* principle, and the divided lines the *Yin* principle. The trigrams Ch’ien and K’un, being made up entirely of undivided and divided lines respectively, are the symbols par excellence of the *Yang* and *Yin*, while the remaining six trigrams are supposedly produced through the intercourse of these primary two. Thus Ch’ien and K’un are father and mother, while the other trigrams are usually spoken of in the “Appendices” as their “sons and daughters.” (p. 141)

“One of the most interesting and often commented on aspects of the Middle Kingdom’s culture is the role played by family. For over four thousand years, family has served as a metaphor by which to discuss China’s particularity” (Walsh, 2001, p. 195).

Bodde (1957) wrote,

> Throughout the world, of course, the family has always been basic to society, but in China it became elaborated to such a point that we may fairly speak of it as “the Chinese family system.” (p. 43)

**The Chinese Family System**

The development of the Chinese family system had a lot to do with China’s being a farmer’s society due to her unique geographical and economic condition. Y.-L. Feng (1948) has presented a good summary of the family as a social system in China:

> The farmers have to live on their land, which is immovable, and the same is true of the scholar landlords. Unless one has special talent, or is especially lucky, one has to live where one’s father or grandfather lived, and where one’s children will continue to live. That is to say, the family in the wider sense must live together for economic reasons. Thus there developed the Chinese family system, which was no doubt one of the most complex and well-organized in the world. (p. 22)

The family system was the social system of China. Out of the five traditional social relationships, which are those between sovereign and subject, father and son, elder and younger brother, husband and wife, and friend and friend, three are family relationships. The remaining two, though not family relationships can be conceived of in terms of the family. Thus the relationship between sovereign and subject can be conceived of in terms of that between father and son, and that between friend and friend in terms of the one between elder and younger brother. So, indeed, was the way in which they were usually conceived. But these are only the major family relationships, and there were many more. In the Erh Ya, which is
the oldest dictionary of the Chinese language, dating from before the Christian era, there are more than one hundred terms for various family relationships, most of which have no equivalent in the English language. (p. 22)

For the same reason ancestor worship developed. In a family living in a particular place, the ancestor worshiped was usually the first of the family who had established himself and his descendants there on the land. He thus became the symbol of the unity of the family, and such a symbol was indispensable for a large and complex organization. (p. 22)

So, “it is not an exaggeration to say that in the Chinese world, all relationships are familial” (Ames, 2001, p. 1) and the society is similar to “a magnified family” (Kaltenmark, 1969, p. 46).

Confucianism

Confucius, “China’s first teacher” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 48), “can truly be said to have molded Chinese civilization in general” (Chan, 1963, p. 14). “Still, the works of Confucius have been the main philosophical shaper of an entire culture for nearly twenty-five hundred years” (Cope-Kasten, 2001, p. 50). “Put simply, the Confucian tradition is the Chinese world” (Schaaf, 2001, p. 165). However, Chan (1963) wrote,

Chinese civilization and the Chinese character would have been utterly different if the book Lao Tzu [Laozi] had never been written. In fact, even Confucianism, the dominant system in Chinese history and thought, would not have been the same, for like Buddhism, it has not escaped Taoist influence. No one can hope to understand Chinese philosophy, religion, government, art, medicine—or even cooking—without a real appreciation of the profound philosophy taught in this little book. (p. 136)

In actuality, as an agrarian country, the two main traditions of Chinese philosophy, Confucianism and Daoism (Taoism), “rivaled one another, but also complemented each other” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 22). They are “poles apart from one another, yet they are also the two poles of one and the same axis” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 19). Confucianism and
Daoism differ “because they are the rationalization or theoretical expression of different aspects of the life of the farmers” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 20). “Confucianism emphasizes the social responsibilities of man, while Taoism emphasizes what is natural and spontaneous in him” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 22). Confucianism “roams within the bounds of society” while Daoism “roams beyond the bound of society” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 22).

In a more vivid way, Yu (2006d) commented on Confucianism and Daoism: Simply put, one is within the 8 working hours; one is outside those 8 hours. Within the 8 working hours, we all require ourselves to have professionalism and idealism to contribute our bit and good continence. The time outside the 8 hours is what the Daoist (Taoist), Zhuangzi, focused upon. Confucius and Zhuangzi have always been, as a certain element, living in every way of Chinese life. In this regard, Yu (2006d) said that according to Lin Yutang, a famous Chinese scholar, in a certain sense, all Chinese are Confucianists in terms of their social roles and Daoists in their life roles. So, Chinese philosophy is “both of this world and of the other world” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 8). What Chinese philosophy has striven for was well stated in the description of Chinese philosophy given by one philosopher when talking about the Neo-Confucianism of the Song dynasty: “It is not divorced from daily ordinary activities, yet it goes straight to what antedated Heaven” (as cited in Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 8).

Due to the unique geographic and economic background of the Chinese people, it can be said that since the feudal society—to be more exact, since Qin and Han dynasties—a culture of ethics with Confucianism as the dominant teaching has been formed. Confucianism became “the orthodox philosophy,” beginning in the Western Han
dynasty and “remained so until the invasion of industrialization from modern Europe and America changed the economic basis of Chinese life” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 22).

According to Tu (1990), “Confucianism, a generic Western term that has no counterpart in Chinese, is a worldview, a social ethic, a political ideology, a scholarly tradition, and a way of life” (p. 112). Ding (2001) wrote about Confucianism this way:

The core of Chinese culture was Confucianism. It was made the state thought in the Western Han. After that most scholars, officials, and even emperors, professed to follow it, and some truthfully followed it, in their conduct and work. As Confucianism laid special emphasis on moral principles, humane government and education, its influence was mainly positive. It also stressed the importance of loyalty to the ruler and filial piety to one’s parents. These ideas were helpful to the stability of feudal rule. Confucianism valued ancient traditions, such as the institutions of the Western Zhou, and gave great respect to ancient sages like Yao, Shun, Yu, King Wen, King Wu and the Duke of Zhou, taking their rule as the model for all ages. In other words, it taught people to look backwards. This may have fostered the conservative tendency of the Chinese people. (pp. 286-288)

Tu (1990) seemed to agree with some of Ding’s arguments, saying that “the history of Confucianism is in many ways a history of the continual quest for the rediscovery, revitalization, and adaptation of the living traditions of the Chou [Zhou] dynasty” (p. 113). However, the vitality of Confucianism has always been there, as Tu observed:

Throughout East Asia the Confucian tradition, deeply rooted in over twenty-five hundred years of history, is being modernized and revitalized. The Confucian tradition remains a vital force that can touch our hearts, stimulate our minds, and enrich our lives, even in the late twentieth century. (p. 137)

Actually, this vitality of Confucius is refreshing for China in the 21st century, as is discussed in a later section.
Confucianism as a Theoretical Justification for the Family System

“Confucianism gave a theoretical justification for the family system which has been the backbone of Chinese society” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 214). Y.-L. Feng (1948) gave this explanation:

A great part of Confucianism is the rational justification of this social system, or its theoretical expression. Economic conditions prepared its basis, and Confucianism expressed its ethical significance. Since this social system was the outgrowth of certain economic conditions, and these conditions were again the product of their geographical surroundings, to the Chinese people both the system and its theoretical expression were very natural. Because of this, Confucianism naturally became the orthodox philosophy and remained so until the invasion of industrialization from modern Europe and America changed the economic basis of Chinese life. (pp. 21-22)

Cope-Kasten (2001) gave this definition of Confucianism:

A philosophical world view in which the idea of the family is central to an understanding of the nature of reality and of how to live. Its origins are attributed to Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.), and it has survived in China, often very influentially, to the present day. (p. 55)

The same author defined Daoism as “a philosophical world view roughly as ancient as Confucianism, in which the idea of nature is more central than the family (which is seen as part of nature) and which points to spontaneity as the key to harmony” (p. 56).

Obviously, family is central in Confucianism.

Confucianism as the Core of Chinese Culture

Confucianism is “the core of Chinese culture” (Ding, 2001, p. 286). When talking about the nature of Chinese society, Bodde (1981a) commented on the emphasis upon family in China:

What was the nature of the society that the Chinese thus took such pains to record? It was not one that believed in what we would call rugged individualism. Rather,
Confucianism aimed at teaching each individual how to take his place with the least possible friction in his own social group, and how to perform his allotted duties within that group in such a way as would bring the greatest benefit to the group as a whole. The basic and most important unit of Chinese society was the family or clan, to which the individual owed his first allegiance, and which he served, first by sacrificing to the ancestors who were dead; secondly, by caring for the elder generation who were still living; and thirdly, by rearing descendants of his own who would carry on the family line. In return, the family acted as a protective group of mutual aid, shielding the individual from an often hostile outer world. Through its cohesiveness, it succeeded in maintaining the fabric of Chinese life and culture even in times of almost complete social and political collapse. (p. 136)

Beyond the family, nevertheless, lay the nation, which was regarded simply as an enlargement of the family unit. Thus even to-day the term for “nation” in Chinese, literally translated, means “national family,” while it was common in the past for the emperor to refer to himself as “the parent of the people.” (p.136)

Thus, family is “the most central Chinese social and cultural unit” (Pickle, 2001, p. 10). In Confucianism, although the members of society, similar to an enlarged family, differ “in their status and functions, all work in harmony for the common good” (Kaltenmark, 1969, p. 46). Confucianism is “centrally concerned with creating harmonious order, in ourselves and in society” (Cope-Kasten, 2001, p. 55). Cheng (1946) said,

To the Chinese the family is a social factor for peace, as no one who has a family would think lightly of war, and is the happy medium through which nature breeds in man the sense of love, affection, duty, and responsibility. (p. 186)

Over the last several decades, there have been a great number of changes occurring in the ecological settings of families throughout the world (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008). China is no exception and actually has undergone many changes since the encounter with Western culture. However, “despite the weakening of the Chinese cultural traditions during the past century and a half, the old ideas and attitudes continue to exert their influence, even in the China of Mao Tse-tung” (Bodde, 1957, p. 83). My
own childhood experiences are proof (see Chapter 4) that Bodde was quite right, illustrating that even in the China of the Cultural Revolution, when Confucian thought and all the old ideas and traditions were the target of severe criticism, the essence of Confucianism was still pervasive in the family. Tu (1990) provided a good summary:

> It is an exaggeration to characterize traditional Chinese life and culture as “Confucian,” but for well over two thousand years Confucian ethical values have served as a source of inspiration as well as the court of appeal for human interaction at all levels—individual, communal, and national—in the Sinic world. (p. 112)

Despite the gradual erosion of Chinese intellectuals’ faith in the viability of Confucian culture in the modern era, the modern Chinese intelligentsia has maintained unacknowledged, sometimes unconscious, continuities with the Confucian tradition at every level of life: behavior, attitude, belief, and commitment. Indeed, Confucianism is still an integral part of the “psycho-cultural construct” of the contemporary Chinese intellectual as well as the Chinese peasant; it remains a defining characteristic of the Chinese mentality. (p. 136)

Family is still the ideal place to understand Chinese culture. Literacy as a cultural phenomenon cannot be studied independent of a people’s culture; so family is also the ideal place to understand the development of a child's literacy in China.

**The Relationship Between Chinese Written Language and Culture**

Tradition has it that Fuxi, China’s first legendary ruler, invented the eight trigrams, and the Chinese attached great importance to the eight trigrams and sixty-four hexagrams (Y.-L. Feng, 1948). To be more relevant to this study, the Chinese written script is very closely associated with the eight trigrams of the *Yijing*. It is said that Fuxi originated the Chinese writing system, as stated in the following:

> History relates that, at the moment Fu His [Fuxi] was seeking to combine the characters properly to express the various forms of matter, and the relation between things physical and intellectual, a wonderful horse came out of the river,
bearing on his back certain signs, of which the philosophic legislator formed the eight diagrams which have preserved his name. (as cited in Pickle, 2001, p. 10)

“These signs were the eight trigrams of the *Yijing*....Within the Chinese tradition, the trigrams are considered to be the forms from which the script developed” (Pickle, 2001, p. 10). The myth of their invention shows the “central significance of written Chinese within this ancient culture” (Pickle, 2001, p. 10).

In discussing the closely intertwined relationship between Chinese language and Chinese culture, Pickle (2001) also connected it with family by writing the following:

Few languages reflect the cultural heritage to which they belong to the extent that Chinese does, particularly in its oral nature and the traditions associated with its script. Moreover, this is only partly the result of the language and the script having received the imprint of cultural forces. To an extent difficult to assess, the written characters that non-Chinese find so enigmatic both shaped and were shaped by the linguistic qualities of the language they represent. And probably no other tradition of written language had influenced a people’s culture as profoundly. Chinese language and culture are so closely intertwined as to make it difficult to say which has influenced the other more. (p. 9)

“Therefore their literate history, the Chinese have been much more interested in the written than the spoken word” (Bodde, 1981b, p. 39). In actuality, “history proper, in China and elsewhere, is considered to begin with written materials” (Mote, 1971, p. 7).

Bodde (1981b) proffered a good summary of the importance of Chinese written language in Chinese culture:

Our word “civilization” goes back to a Latin root having to do with “citizen” and “city.” The Chinese counterpart, actually a binom, *wenhua*, literally means “the transforming [i.e., civilizing] influence of writing.” In other words, for us the essence of civilization is urbanization; for the Chinese it is the art of writing. (p. 39)
Bodde (1981c) continued:

In the present age of rapid change and uncertainty, it is not amiss to investigate what may be some of the factors that have given Chinese civilization that remarkable continuity and vitality which make of it the oldest of the world’s living civilizations. These factors are, of course, many, but one of the most fundamental is probably the peculiar nature of the Chinese language, and especially of its script, which sets it so sharply apart from our own types of language. (p. 43)

So “the Chinese language, especially in its written form, has always been one of the most powerful symbols of [the] cultural unity” (Norman, 1988, p. 1). “Because each Chinese ideograph carries from its cultural past its own distinct connotations, the acceptance of Chinese writing by others meant, to a considerable extent, their acceptance of Chinese cultural and moral values as well” (Bodde, 1981b, p. 39). Continuing this thought, Cope-Kasten (2001) wrote,

Written language has bound the Chinese civilization together for longer than we have had the Roman alphabet to work with. And even today, people from different parts of the vast country of China who cannot understand each other’s speech can communicate by their shared written language. (p. 42)

The following 1929 quote expresses the indispensable relationship between Chinese script and culture: “The Chinese script is so wonderfully well adapted to the linguistic condition of China that it is indispensable; the day the Chinese discard it they will surrender the very foundation of their culture (Karlgren as cited in Ramsey, 1987, p. 143).

The Relationship Between Confucianism and the Chinese Language

In the early years of the Republic, Qian Xuantong, a famous Chinese scholar, published an open letter to Chen Duxiu, one of the leaders in attacking Confucianism
(Ramsey, 1987). The letter is as follows:

Dear Mr. Chen:
In an earlier essay of yours, you strongly advocated the abolition of Confucianism. Concerning this proposal of yours, I think that it is now the only way to save China. But, upon reading it, I have thought of one thing more: If you want to abolish Confucianism, then you must first abolish the Chinese language; if you want to get rid of the average person’s childish, uncivilized, obstinate way of thinking, then it is all the more essential that you first abolish the Chinese language. (as cited in Ramsey, 1987, p. 3)

The inseparable relationship, expressed in the above letter, between Confucianism, the core of Chinese culture, and the Chinese language will help readers understand the revitalization of the Chinese classics in China in the beginning of the 21st century.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to give an account of the literacy-related human environment a Chinese girl experienced as the first person in the history of her family who was able to read prior to entry into elementary school. An intrinsic qualitative case study strategy was employed to conduct this research from the perspective of a mother. I am the mother, and the Chinese girl is my daughter. Incidentally, in qualitative research, “it [is] okay to talk in the first person!” (Meloy, 1994, p. 28). “When the case is a person, home and family are usually important contexts” (Stake, 1995, p. 63). So, the emphasis was placed on the role of the case’s immediate caretakers and those who exerted great influence on me, her main caretaker, in the distal environment.

Research Questions

The major research question that guided this study is as follows:

- In the history of a particular Chinese family, what are the major human environmental factors that helped form the first early reader (i.e., reading before elementary school)?

The following two sub-questions provided greater specificity about the study’s direction:

1. What are the literacy-related experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and values of the people that directly and indirectly influenced the first early reader?
2. What are the immediate literacy-related environments and activities that the first early reader experienced at home?

This chapter presents an overview of the procedures that were adopted in this study. It consists of the following sections: Choice of Paradigm; Research Design; Procedures of Data Collection; Data Analysis; Trustworthiness; Limitations of the Methodology; Ethics; and Plan for the Case Study. Because methodology refers to “underlying principles of inquiry rather than to specific techniques” (Wolcott, 2001, p. 93), I begin with the research paradigm.

**Choice of Paradigm**

Whitehead (1978), the renowned English philosopher in the 20th century, emphasized the enduring influence of Plato in Western philosophy by stating,

> The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. I do not mean the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from his writings. I allude to the wealth of general ideas scattered through them. His personal endowments, his wide opportunities for experience at a great period of civilization, his inheritance of an intellectual tradition not yet stiffened by excessive systematization, have made his writings an inexhaustible mine of suggestion. (p. 39)

In the same vein, on the relationship between Western philosophy and science, Snelbecker (1974) wrote,

> The roots of any science can be traced back into philosophy, in most cases at least as far back as the Greeks. In the writings of such men as Aristotle, Plato, and other Greek philosophers it is often possible to find the beginnings of ideas which, in the hands of later generations of thinkers, were to become the central ideas of Western philosophy and science. (p. 46)
This explains why in scientific research today, “although philosophical ideas remain largely ‘hidden’ in research (Slife & Williams, 1995), they still influence the practice of research and need to be identified” (Creswell, 2003, p. 4).

Since the term “paradigm shift” was employed by Kuhn (1962) in his influential book, titled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, the word “paradigm” has become widely applied to the social sciences and humanities. *Paradigm* is defined by Guba and Lincoln (1994) as “the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways” (p. 105). The main reason for a researcher to identify her or his research paradigm is that “only problems that can be stated meaningfully in terms of one’s scientific community’s shared paradigm are acceptable for investigation, and the paradigm dictates what type and in what ways methods of solution will be employed” (Pratte, 1977, p. 78). To be more concrete, “a paradigm determines the types of questions that are legitimate, how they will be answered, and in what context they will be interpreted” (Gliner & Morgan, 2000, p. 17).

Guba and Lincoln (1994) posed the following three interconnected fundamental paradigm-defining questions so that a researcher’s basic beliefs or worldview can be known:

1. **The ontological question**: What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it? (p. 108)

2. **The epistemological question**: What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known? (p. 108)
3. The methodological question: How can the inquirer (would-be knower) go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known? (p. 108)

Four paradigms—positivism, postpositivism, critical theory, and constructivism—were proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1994), based on a summary of the answers given to these three questions.

My Hesitation in Choosing a Paradigm

The worldview issue, often called the Whorfian hypothesis and also known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, wherein one’s native language determines how one perceives reality or prescribes one’s worldview (Shaul & Furbee, 1998), has not been without its critics. However, in view of the “quite unrelated” (Wilkinson, 1971, p. 14) nature of the Chinese language from other languages, including English, and the fact that these paradigms are within the scope of Western philosophy, I took a pause on how to answer these three questions in order to define my paradigm or worldview. Mote’s (1971) comments concerning the Western understanding/misunderstanding of the Chinese worldview justifies my pause:

The manner in which cultures become aware of other cultures, and the extent to which persons in one culture insert elements of their own culture into their understanding of others, can nowhere be better illustrated than by noting the Western failure to understand the basic nature of the Chinese worldview. (p. 17)

The accuracy of Mote’s statement is quite another matter. However, what is obviously suggested in his comment is that there is a great difference between the Chinese worldview and the Western one.
Chinese Philosophy Is Different From Western Philosophy

The esteemed Chinese philosopher, Y.-L. Feng (1948), provided a definition and explanation for philosophy:

Philosophy is systematic reflective thinking on life. In thinking, the thinker is usually conditioned by the surroundings in which he lives. Being in certain surroundings, he feels life in a certain way, and there are therefore in his philosophy certain emphases or omissions, which constitute the characteristics of that philosophy. This is true of an individual, as it is also true of a people. (p. 16)

As a continental country, China’s geographical background, which determines her economic background, conditioned the formation of her philosophy. This holds true for Greek philosophy, which is the primary reason why there is a fundamental difference between Chinese and Western philosophy (Y.-L. Feng, 1948). In this sense, it is understandable that Cope-Kasten (2001) began his article, “Meeting Chinese Philosophy,” this way: “Is Chinese ‘philosophy’ really philosophy?…This question seems reasonable to many of us in the West” (p. 41). In the ending paragraph, Cope-Kasten concluded predictably: “Therefore, to answer the question with which we began, Chinese philosophy is philosophy….Chinese philosophy is different from Western philosophy” (p. 55).

Chinese philosophy is the theoretical foundation of Chinese culture (Y. D. Wang, 1996a). That is to say, understanding Chinese philosophy is the prerequisite to understanding Chinese culture. No wonder Schaaf (2001) made the following comment: “Chinese culture is distinctly ‘other’ to most Westerners, a recognition that can strongly persist through one’s improving familiarity with Chinese history, culture, and place” (p. 163). Actually, “there is nothing ‘inscrutable’ about the Chinese or Chinese mentality.
However, there is much that is subtle, at first unclear, and, to a Westerner, sometimes even enigmatic and paradoxical” (Moore, 1974, p. 2). Cope-Kasten (2001) also said that Chinese philosophy is “understandable—with some effort at times—by Westerners” (p. 55). Over time, many efforts in this regard have been made. Cope-Kasten (2001) wrote, “Chinese thought at least seems very different in many ways from our modes of thinking, which derive philosophically and scientifically from the ancient Greeks” (p. 41).

Schaaf (2001) made the following comparison between the two different modes of thinking:

The humanist tradition in the West trains in the belief that human nature transcends the local and specific, that there is fundamental human experience that people from all cultures, and with every variety of personal history, share. Although the Chinese share a cultural experience that is among the most encompassing and ancient in the world, their ways of knowing the world unmoor them from this kind of certainty. Reason, dichotomy, classification, empirical knowing, the idea of the given—features of Western thinking—do not characterize Chinese apperception. The coherence of a Chinese world is aesthetic rather than logical, and its values comparatively anarchical. The usual Western approach to understanding the unfamiliar, to compare it with what one knows and what one believes to be alike, will thus not work well to give one a sense of a Chinese world. As one scholar of Asian culture puts it: “In a Chinese world, most acorns become squirrels, not oak trees” (Ames). And even the squirrels seem different. (p. 163)

Obviously, the focus of the difference is on the ways of thinking between Chinese and Westerners. The “way of thinking” is a significant epitome of the uniqueness of a people (He, 1996a). As a researcher, my Chinese way of thinking, embedded in traditional Chinese philosophy, runs deep within my consciousness, reflected implicitly or explicitly at a conscious, subconscious, or unconscious level, throughout the entire study. This way of thinking guided me in the process of choosing the research paradigm
and methods accordingly, because “questions of method are secondary to questions of paradigm” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). A very brief introduction of the skeleton of the Chinese way of thinking is in order before discussing my choice of paradigm.

**The Way of Thinking**

According to He (1996a), the way of thinking means the mode that the thinking subject or the thinker employs to reflect and grasp the object according to certain concepts or frames of reference and methods. That is, the difference in concepts influences the way of thinking. Not only is the way of thinking a long-standing, stable, universal habit and method of thinking of a people, which has been formed during a long period of time in history, it is also the indirect reflection of a people’s mode of production, its social and political structure and quality of consciousness. The defining difference between cultures is the cultural ideology and way of thinking. The way of thinking is extremely pervasive and penetrative and is embodied in a people’s every spiritual realm, such as philosophy, religion, arts, and literature. As a concept, it penetrates into a people’s politics, economics, military affairs, foreign affairs, and daily life and exerts significant influence on the creation and formation of their form and attributes. In addition, the way of thinking has the attributes of stability and inheritance. Not only is it inherited from generation to generation as a conventional concept, but also, it does not change in a radical way with the flux of history.

**The Chinese Way of Thinking**

China has a history of about five thousand years and has her unique traditional way of thinking, just like every other nation in the world. The unique way of Chinese
thinking is the philosophical fountainhead through which Chinese people know the world and think. It is the foundation and soul of traditional Chinese culture. The traditional Chinese way of thinking began in the pre-Qin period, took form in the Western Han dynasty, and has become a way of thinking characteristic of the Chinese people, with subsequent constant consolidation, strengthening, and perfection, from dynasty to dynasty until today (He, 1996a).

As stated earlier, beginning in the Han dynasty, the Confucian classics became predominant, and the study of these classics has become the mainstream ever since. The *Yijing*, which largely embodies the Chinese way of thinking, ranked as the most important among all the Chinese classics and is “a unique blend of proto-Confucian and proto-[Daoist] ideas” (Fleming as cited in J.- L. Liu, 2006, p. 26). That is to say, the *Yijing* was the main source of inspiration for such great minds as Confucius and Laozi (Jung, 1967). In other words, it is the foundational source of Chinese philosophy, because the two main trends of Chinese philosophy, Confucianism and Daoism, derived their key concepts from this monumental work. As the primary theoretical foundation of the entire Chinese culture (J.-L. Liu, 2006), the thought expressed in the *Yijing* is reflected at every level of Chinese culture and significantly influences such aspects as science, religion, literature, architecture, art, and the field of traditional Chinese medicine. Before China encountered the West, the Chinese people depended on studying the *Yijing* to cultivate their thinking (Q. Z. Yang, 2009).
Two Main Characteristics of the Traditional Chinese Way of Thinking

According to He (1996a), the traditional Chinese way of thinking has two main characteristics on the whole: In terms of the content and method of thinking, the first characteristic focuses and distinctively contemplates human beings and their relationships, with an emphasis on the issues of social and political ethics. In terms of the logic in philosophy, the second characteristic emphasizes dialectical logic and de-emphasizes formal logic.

**Human beings and human relationships.** The first characteristic of the traditional Chinese way of thinking has two aspects. These aspects include human beings and their relationships.

**Human beings as the core.** Human beings have always represented the core in the Chinese way of thinking (Q. Z. Yang, 2009). In the *Yijing*, human beings are regarded as one of the three basic materials that can manifest the Dao, with the other two being heaven and earth. Between heaven and earth are the human beings. They are part of the universe and make the universe meaningful. In short, Confucius focused on human beings, as Chan (1963) explained,

> He [Confucius] did not care to talk about spiritual beings or even about life after death. Instead, believing that man “can make the Way (Tao) [Dao] great,” and not that “the Way can make man great,” he concentrated on man. (p. 15)

Laozi, the founder of Daoism, also celebrated the status of human beings. Laozi said,

> “Tao is great. Heaven is great. Earth is great. And the king is also great. There are four great things in the universe, and the king is one of them” (as cited in Chan, trans. 1963, p. 152). The “king” here is representative of human beings (Chan, 1963).
In discussing the “dominant ideas in the formation of Chinese culture,” Bodde (1981a) proposed three categories: the world of the supernatural, the world of nature, and the world of man. He emphatically pointed out the “intense preoccupation with human affairs” by making the observation that when turning to the world of man, “we find ourselves at the heart of the greater part of the Chinese philosophical speculation” (p. 135).

**Human relationships.** In terms of the emphasis on human relationships, the *Analects* actually is a kind of moral article, with human relationships as the basic departure point (Yu, 2006a). In the pre-Qin period, the Confucianists, represented by Confucius and Mencius, provided the theoretical thought for the way of thinking, emphasizing human relationships in order to keep a normal order in society. Confucius and Mencius are the major advocates for this kind of human relationships, and the entire *Analects* and *Mencius* are full of the exploration of, and arguments for human relationships. The “relational way of thinking” of Confucius and his immediate disciples shows that “meaning is found in one’s position and actions with regards to others, and not in a unique, ‘atomic’ essence” (Cope-Kasten, 2001, p. 49). Bodde (1981a) said, “How to get along equably with one’s fellow man: This is the problem that Confucianism set itself to answer, just as Taoism [Daoism] posed for itself the problem of how man can adjust himself to the outer universe” (p. 135). Bodde (1981a) gave further illustrations regarding the importance of human relationships in Chinese thought:

The Chinese, with sound common sense, have from very early times realized that unless there can be a solution to this central problem of human relationship, material power and progress will but serve to increase the afflictions of mankind.
Being a practical, realistic, and pragmatic people, they launched their frontal attack upon this vital question, and in so doing have produced a great mass of ethical and political philosophy. (p. 135)

So, emphasizing the relationship between human beings is the basic point or center and the important content structure of the traditional Chinese way of thinking.

**Emphasis on the issues of social and political ethics.** Considering the social and political nature of human beings, it is easy to understand that the traditional Chinese way of thinking put an emphasis on the issues of social and political ethics. As to social ethics, the three *gang* (ethics of society) and five *chang* (virtues of the individual) (Y.-L. Feng, 1948) are essential, because *lunchang*, human relationships, and an individual’s five virtues comprise the highest principle for human behavior (Y. D. Wang, 1996a). One of the important aspects in the Chinese way of thinking in terms of the relationships between humans is the emphasis on the moral cultivation of the individual. Chinese culture is the culture of ethics, with an emphasis on one’s inner cultivation. Actually, individual moral cultivation is the starting point of Chinese ethical and moral cultivation. W.-B. Zhang (1999) wrote,

> For Confucius the main purpose of learning is self-cultivation. But this self-cultivation is not supposed to lead to a non-active life. Confucius believed that the self-cultivation of one’s own inner world is the basis for one to deal wisely with human affairs. Since Confucius did not despise political power, in Confucius’ doctrines there should be no conflict between self-cultivation and the pursuit of power. In theory the two are reconcilable: the inner cultivation of the self is not only an end in itself but also a means toward ultimate self-fulfillment in the world of action. Confucius considered knowledge and action to be complementary. (p. 55)

More specifically, for an individual, there are the five constant virtues—five *chang*—of Confucianism: *ren*, human-heartedness; *yi*, righteousness; *li*, the propriety,
rituals, and rules of proper conduct; zhi, wisdom; and xin, good faith or honesty and credibility. Confucius put an emphasis on ren and yi, but especially on ren (Y.-L. Feng, 1948). If one character were to be used to summarize the core of all Confucian ethics, it would be “ren” (Yu, 2006c). “Confucius says: ‘Human-heartedness consists in loving others.’ (Analects, XII, 22)” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 42). Simply put, truly loving other people is ren. Ren is the highest moral principle demanded by Confucius and the Confucianists (He, 1996a), and Confucius’ ideal for society simply is letting the world be filled with love (Yi, 2006). According to Y.-L. Feng, (1948), yi means “the ‘oughtness’ of a situation.” The author explained, “It is a categorical imperative. Every one in society has certain things which he ought to do, and which must be done for their own sake, because they are the morally right things to do” (p. 42). Yi is the highest spiritual state of mind that Confucianists pursue (He, 1996a).

The three gang, representing the ethics of society, were the creation of Dong Zhongshu, a famous Confucian philosopher in the Western Han dynasty. Y.-L. Feng (1948) explained that based on the Confucianists before the Han dynasty, there were five major human relationships in society—the five traditional social relationships stated earlier. With the unification after the Qin and Han dynasties, and especially in the Han dynasty, in order to unify thought, Confucianism became predominant. Dong selected three out of these five human relationships and labeled them, the three gang. Continuing his explanation, Y.-L. Feng wrote,

The literal meaning of kang [gang] is a major cord in a net, to which all the other strings are attached. Thus the sovereign is the kang of his subjects, that is, he is their master. Likewise the husband is the kang of the wife, and the father is the
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*kang* of the son….The five *ch’ang* [chang] are the virtues of an individual, and the three *kang* are the ethics of society. The compound word *kang-ch’ang* meant, in olden times, morality or moral laws in general. Man must develop his nature in the direction of the moral laws, which are the essentials of culture and civilization. (p. 197)

Therefore, the Confucian social ethics of the 3 *gang* and 5 *chang* (interpreted by Dong, who purposely misinterpreted Confucius), became the unchanging prescriptions for feudal ethics and morality.

However, in Chinese thinking, it is the function of the government to help individuals and society to develop (Y.-L. Feng, 1948). So, in terms of the political ethics, many scholars think that the predominant characteristic of Chinese culture is political ethics, and all the other aspects of culture are subordinate (Y. D. Wang, 1996a). In sum, Confucius’ “primary concern was a good society based on good government and harmonious human relations” (Chan, 1963, p. 15).

**Emphasizing dialectical logic and de-emphasizing formal logic.** The other characteristic of the traditional Chinese way of thinking is that, philosophically, the Chinese way of thinking emphasizes dialectical logic and de-emphasizes formal logic. In ancient China, there were two ways of logical thinking: formal logic and dialectic logic. According to He (1996a), in the pre-Qin period, formal logic, represented by Mo Jia or the Mohist School, had achieved a rather high level, encompassing almost all the major issues of formal logic. Formal logic in the West was directly associated with Aristotle, and his deductive method of logic has been well received in modern science and mathematics. In his article, titled “Types of Chinese Categorical Thinking,” Bodde (1981d) wrote the following:
One of the criticisms leveled by westerners against Chinese philosophy is that it has failed to develop a system of logic. Like most sweeping criticisms, this is not absolutely true, for during the fourth and third centuries B.C., the followers of the Mohist school do appear to have experimented with methods of thinking in many ways comparable to our western logic. The statement remains true, however, to the extent that this school did not long survive, and that it failed to leave a lasting impression on Chinese thought. (p. 141)

Since the Han dynasty, when the Confucian classics became predominant, formal logic in China gradually became weak and forgotten, and dialect logic made much progress (He, 1996a). Following China’s encounter with the West, Western philosophy greatly influenced the Chinese way of thinking; however, none of the Western philosophical systems “has yet become an integral part of the development of the Chinese mind” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 329).

**The three main characteristics of Chinese dialectic logic.** These three main characteristics include (a) the holistic interrelationship; (b) *ti* (substance) and *yong* (practical use), which are one; and (c) the harmony of contradictions. The first and the third characteristics are more relevant in this study.

The holistic interrelationship. Simply put, this first characteristic regards all the things in the entire universe as an interrelated, interdependent, and intimately correlated organic whole. Geoghegan (2002) made this observation:

> The holistic interconnection of all things is expressed in the first verse of Poem #42: “The Dao gives birth to One./One gives birth to two./ Two gives birth to Three./ Three gives birth to all things.” This verse expresses Taoist cosmogony or vision of world-creation. Everything and everyone has its source in the Tao. (p. 68)

This holistic interrelationship is manifested by two modes of thinking: (a) the wonderful unison of *yin* and *yang* and the five elements, and (b) the interaction between heaven and
man. The Theory of Yin and Yang explained “the origin of the world,” whereas the Theory of the Five Elements “interpreted the structure of the universe” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 138). Y.-L. Feng (1948) explained,

The word yang originally meant sunshine, or what pertains to sunshine and light; that of yin meant the absence of sunshine, i.e., shadow or darkness. In later development, the Yang and Yin came to be regarded as two cosmic principles or forces, respectively representing masculinity, activity, heat, brightness, dryness, hardness, etc., for the Yang, and femininity, passivity, cold, darkness, wetness, softness, etc., for the Yin. Through the interaction of these two primary principles, all phenomena of the universe are produced. This concept has remained dominant in Chinese cosmological speculation down to recent times (p.138)….Later, the theory of the Yin and Yang came to be connected primarily with the Book of Changes. (p. 139)

As stated earlier, Confucius, who “can truly be said to have molded Chinese civilization in general” (Chan, 1963, p. 14), concentrated on human beings. However, despite human beings as the core of Chinese thinking, their ideal is not to conquer nature but to unify with the universe into one, coexisting harmoniously with the universe and helping it to develop its characteristics, so that they can also develop themselves. In this regard, Chan (1963) said,

If one word could characterize the entire history of Chinese philosophy, that word would be humanism—not the humanism that denies or slights a Supreme Power, but one that professes the unity of man and Heaven. In this sense, humanism has dominated Chinese thought from the dawn of its history. (p. 3)

In other words, according to Q. Z. Yang (2009), the core issue of Chinese philosophy is the relationship between heaven and man, which characterizes Chinese philosophy whereas the core characteristic of the Western philosophy is the relationship between thinking and existence. Actually, traditional Chinese philosophy has three basic propositions that represent the point of view concerning the true, the good, and the
aesthetic: the unity of heaven and man, the unity of knowledge and practice, and the unity of feelings and scenery (Tang, 1991).

The harmony of contradictions. This characteristic of Chinese dialectic logic views the world as one, which is full of contradictions yet develops in a harmonious way. According to Q. Z. Yang (2009), the core of the *Yijing* is harmony. Harmony is a harmonious unity that keeps individuality and respects individuality. It is a unity of contradictions and differences. Actually, *yin* and *yang* are contradictions and they are everywhere. The Chinese think that the existence of every contradiction and every aspect of a contradiction is reasonable. Under this condition of being reasonable, we, as Chinese, seek for something that is embraced by all. Confucius advocated “和而不同 [seek harmony not sameness]” (As cited in Ames & Rosemont, trans. 1998, p. 169). Y. D. Wang (1996a) made the distinction that as the theoretical foundation of scientific European culture, European philosophy puts more emphasis on the conflict between the opposing sides; as the theoretical foundation of the Chinese culture of ethics, traditional Chinese philosophy has a tendency toward the unity and oneness of the opposites.

**The Chinese Way of Thinking and the Constructivist Paradigm**

After examining each paradigm, in want of a more apt term that could convey and capture in a more accurate way the essence of my Chinese worldview, I thought that the paradigm of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which was later labeled as constructivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), bore similarities to the Chinese worldview and therefore appeared to be the most fitting research paradigm for this study.
More specifically, it is necessary and essential that, first and foremost, I explain why, as a Chinese, I chose to employ a paradigm based on Western philosophy to guide my study, considering the fact that Chinese thought “departs so completely” (Jung, 1967, p. xxii) from Western ways of thinking. This choice was based on the similarities I have found between Chinese thought and constructivism. “When one encounters new ideas that are unfamiliar, it is only natural that one should turn to familiar ones for illustration, comparison, and mutual confirmation” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 331). This was precisely the case when I came across such new and unfamiliar ideas as various kinds of paradigms.

The first premise for understanding similarities or contrasts is to know something about both sides that are being compared or contrasted. On one hand, “the movement of educational and social research toward a constructivist view has been led by Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln (1982)” (Stake, 1995, p. 99). That is, constructivism as a research paradigm has had a history of legitimacy for over two decades and is very familiar to readers in the research community, albeit at different levels. On the other hand, something about the Chinese way of thinking has been provided above to the readers. In the next section, some of the similarities between constructivism and Chinese thought are presented.

**Similarities Between the Paradigm of Constructivism and the Chinese Mind**

The three paradigm-defining questions, posed by Guba and Lincoln (1994), are stated again as follows:

1. *The ontological question:* What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it? (p. 108)
2. *The epistemological question:* What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known? (p. 108)

3. *The methodological question:* How can the inquirer (would-be knower) go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known? (p. 108)

For each of these questions, respectively, the similarities between constructivism and the Chinese way of thinking are discussed below.

**The ontological question.** Ontologically speaking, what most differentiates the paradigm of constructivism from the other three paradigms—positivism, postpositivism and critical theory—is its ontological position (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), that is, its view of reality. Constructivism is similar, at a certain level, to the Chinese way of thinking in terms of the view of reality. Guba and Lincoln (1994) maintained that constructivism “denotes an alternative paradigm whose breakaway assumption is the move from ontological realism to ontological relativism” (p.109). This ontological relativism means “local and specific constructed and co-constructed realities” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 193).

As mentioned earlier, Confucius’s “primary concern was a good society based on good government and harmonious human relations” (Chan, 1963, p. 15). Therefore, as to reality in China, “much of early Chinese philosophical concern with reality is with social reality and especially with social order” (Cope-Kasten, 2001, p. 45). Also stated earlier, the notion of human relationships is central in Chinese thought, and Bodde (1981a) contended that this is the reason that natural science has not developed in China:

For the same reason they rejected both the abstruse metaphysical speculations of the Hindu, and the explorations into logic that have been one of the major contributions of occidental philosophy. This practical concern with the immediate
exigencies of human life helps once more to explain, perhaps, why the Chinese, although they have contributed to the world many inventions of the highest practical value, such as paper, printing, porcelain, and the mariner’s compass, have not developed a theoretical natural science. (p.135)

Needham (1983) also contemplated the reason why natural science did not develop in China:

The sixty-four dollar question for us always is, of course, why distinctively modern science should have developed in Europe, and in Europe only, at the time of Galileo and the Scientific Revolution; and many of us do not believe that intellectual factors alone will explain the difference. (p. xiv)

Similarly, Whitehead (1925) explored this issue in his work, titled *Science and the Modern World*:

There have been great civilizations in which the peculiar balance of mind required for science has only fitfully appeared and has produced the feeblest result. For example, the more we know of Chinese art, of Chinese literature, and of the Chinese philosophy of life, the more we admire the heights to which that civilization attained. For thousands of years, there have been in China acute and learned men patiently devoting their lives to study. Having regard to the span of time, and to the population concerned, China forms the largest volume of civilization which the world has seen. There is no reason to doubt the intrinsic capacity of individual Chinamen for the pursuit of science. And yet Chinese science is practically negligible. There is no reason to believe that China if left to itself would have ever produced any progress in science. (pp. 8-9)

By finding evidence in the *Yijing*, Jung (1967) came to the same conclusion that natural science did not develop in China. As is stated in the previous section, the *Yijing*, the foundational source of Chinese philosophy, mainly embodied the Chinese way of thinking. Jung wrote the foreword to this ancient book and made incisive comparisons between the Chinese view of reality and that of the Western mind. He concluded that due to this peculiar view of reality, “such a gifted and intelligent people as the Chinese has never developed what we call science” (p. xxii).
Jung (1967) illustrated what science is by saying, “Our science…is based upon the principle of causality, and causality is considered to be an axiomatic truth” (p. xxii). Doll (1993) strengthened this view: “Jacob Bronowski (1978) points out that this postulate of causality has ‘been elevated to the rank of the central concept of science’ (p. 40), becoming modern science’s ‘guiding principle,’ the very ‘centre of scientific method’ (p. 59)” (p. 36). Doll continued his elaboration on the notion of causality:

The concept of causality, present in pre-modern thought in terms of proximate causes, efficient causes, necessary causes, and the ubiquitous First Cause, received a new formulation in the hands of Newton—a formulation that remains with us today as our natural way of looking at change. For every effect there must be a prior cause; effects do not happen spontaneously and the same cause will always produce the same effect. In his “Second Rule of Reasoning,” Newton (1729/1962) says: “To the same natural effect we must…assign the same cause” (p. 398). In a closed, mechanistic universe this has meant that same effects will always follow same causes. Predictability is not only assured, it is complete and absolute. (p. 36)

Jung (1967) then interpreted the Chinese view of reality, reflected in the Yijing:

The Chinese mind, as I see it at work in the I Ching [Yijing], seems to be exclusively preoccupied with the chance aspect of event. What we call coincidence seems to be the chief concern of this peculiar mind, and what we worship as causality passes almost unnoticed. (p. xxii)

The manner in which the I Ching tends to look upon reality seems to disfavor our causalistic procedures. The moment under actual observation appears to the ancient Chinese view more of a chance hit than a clearly defined result of concurring causal chain processes. The matter of interest seems to be the configuration formed by chance events in the moment of observation, and not at all the hypothetical reasons that seemingly account for the coincidence. While the Western mind carefully sifts, weighs, selects, classifies, isolates, the Chinese picture of the moment encompasses everything down to the minutest nonsensical detail, because all of the ingredients make up the observed moment. (p. xxiii)
Obviously, whereas causality is the basis of Western science, it is ignored by the Chinese mind. So there is a fundamental difference concerning the views of reality between Chinese and Western thought.

**The problematic condition of the Western view of causality.** Jung (1967) pointed out the problematic condition of this viewpoint of causality:

But a great change in our standpoint is setting in. What Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* failed to do, is being accomplished by modern physics. The axioms of causality are being shaken to their foundations: we know now that what we term natural laws are merely statistical truths and thus must necessarily allow for exceptions. We have not sufficiently taken into account as yet that we need the laboratory with its incisive restrictions in order to demonstrate the invariable validity of natural law. If we leave things to nature, we see a very different picture: every process is partially or totally interfered with by chance, so much so that under natural circumstances a course of events absolutely conforming to specific laws is almost an exception. (p. xxii)

Schultz and Schultz (2004), in their book, titled *History of Modern Psychology*, wrote on the changing *zeitgeist* in physics:

When we find a major shift in the evolution of a science, we know it is reflecting changes that are already part of its intellectual *zeitgeist*. We have seen that a science, like a living species, adapts to the conditions and demands of its environment. What intellectual climate fostered the cognitive movement and moderated behaviorist ideas by readmitting consciousness? Once again we look to the *zeitgeist* in physics, long psychology’s role model, for it has influenced the field since its beginnings as a science. (p. 482)

Early in the 20th century, a viewpoint developed within physics arising from the work of Albert Einstein, Neils Bohr and Werner Heisenberg. They rejected the mechanistic model of the universe stemming from the days of Galileo and Newton, the prototype for the mechanistic, reductionistic, and deterministic view of human nature embraced by psychologists from Wundt to Skinner. The new look in physics discarded the requirement of total objectivity and the complete separation of external world from observer. (pp. 482-483)

Physicists recognized that any observation we make of the natural world is likely to disturb it. They would have to attempt to bridge the artificial gap between observer and observed, between inner world and outer world, between mental and material. Thus, scientific investigation shifted from an independent
and objectively knowable universe to one’s observation of that universe. Modern
scientists would no longer be so detached from the focus of their observation. In a
sense, they would become “participant observers.” (p. 483)

As a result, the ideal of a totally objective reality was no longer considered
attainable. Physics came to be characterized by the belief that objective
knowledge is actually subjective, dependent on the observer. This idea that all
knowledge is personal sounds suspiciously like what Berkeley proposed 300 years
ago: Knowledge is subjective because it depends on the nature of the person
perceiving it. One writer noted that our picture of the world, “far from being a
genuine photographic reproduction of an independent reality ‘out there,’ [is]
rather more on the order of a painting: a subjective creation of the mind which can
convey a likeness but can never produce a replica” (Matson, 1964, p. 137). (p.
483)

The physicists’ rejection of an objective, mechanistic subject matter and
their concurrent recognition of subjectivity restored the vital role of conscious
experience as a way of obtaining information about our world. This revolution in
physics was an effective argument for again making consciousness a legitimate
part of psychology’s subject matter. Although the scientific psychology
establishment resisted the new physics for a half century, clinging to an outdated
model by stubbornly defining itself as an objective science of behavior, it
eventually responded to the Zeitgeist and modified itself sufficiently to readmit
cognitive processes. (p. 483)

As is known, the concept of causality is fundamental to all natural sciences,
especially physics “from which the social sciences have, rightly or wrongly, borrowed
this mechanistic conception of reality (and of the knowledge that seeks to describe it)”
(Glossop, 1988, p. 7). “Yet today, even physics…has abandoned the notions of causes
and of discrete, isolatable, independent essential ‘things’ or phenomena” (Glossop, 1988,
p. 7). In this regard, Jung (1967) continued,

The ancient Chinese mind contemplates the cosmos in a way comparable to that
of the modern physicist, who cannot deny that his model of the world is a
decidedly psychophysical structure. The microphysical event includes the
observer just as much as the reality underlying the I Ching comprises subjective,
i.e., psychic conditions in the totality of the momentary situation. Just as causality
describes the sequence of events, so synchronicity to the Chinese mind deals with
the coincidence of events. (p. xxiv)
Alternative paradigm---constructivist paradigm in research as opposed to causality. Reflected in scientific research, today “there is considerable disagreement among scholars as to what is necessary to prove that a causal relationship exists” (Lincoln & Guba as cited in Gliner & Morgan, 2000, p. 82). In the considerable disagreement among scholars, “those professing the constructivist paradigm do not believe that a causal relationship can be determined” (Lincoln & Guba as cited in Gliner & Morgan, 2000, p. 82). On the possibility of causal linkages, the constructivist view is that “all entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 38). This is similar to what Jung (1967) termed as “synchronicity, a concept that formulates a point of view diametrically opposed to that of causality” (p. xxiv).

In short, the constructivist view of reality at the ontological level, which questions “the metaphysical assumptions undergirding the conventional paradigm (the ‘received view’) ” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 105), similar to that of the Chinese worldview at a certain level, pays little attention to causality, whereas the Chinese ignore it. Constructivism, at the ontological level, “assumes multiple, apprehendable, and sometimes conflicting social realities that are the products of human intellects, but that may change as their constructors become more informed and sophisticated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111).

The epistemological question. Whitehead (1978) said, “Every science must devise its own instruments. The tool required for philosophy is language” (p. 11). At a more detailed level, Phenix (1958) said, “The instruments by which the philosopher does
his work are concepts and words and their organized forms in language” (p. 4).

Epistemologically speaking, the fact is, “epistemology has never developed in Chinese philosophy” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 25). To initially make sense of this statement, two kinds of concepts must be discussed. According to Y.-L. Feng (1948), the fundamental difference between Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy has been grasped by Northrop, a professor who made a distinction between two major types of concepts: the concept achieved by intuition and the concept achieved by postulation. Y.-L. Feng went on to explain,

“A concept by intuition,” he [Professor Northrop] says, “is one which denotes, and the complete meaning of which is given by, something which is immediately apprehended….A concept by postulation is one the complete meaning of which is designated by the postulates of the deductive theory in which it occurs. (pp. 23-24)

Y.-L. Feng (1948) agreed with Northrop that Western philosophy started with the concept by postulation, whereas Chinese philosophy started with the concept by intuition.

Y.-L. Feng stated the three possible types of concepts achieved by intuition and their connections with Confucianism and Daoism:

Northrop also says that there are three possible types of concepts by intuition: “The concept of the differentiated aesthetic continuum. The concept of the indefinite or undifferentiated aesthetic continuum. The concept of the differentiation.”….According to him, “Confucianism may be defined as the state of mind in which the concept of the indeterminate intuited manifold moves into the background of thought and the concrete differentiations in their relativistic, humanistic, transitory comings and goings form the content of philosophy.”….But in Taoism, it is the concept of the indefinite or undifferentiated aesthetic continuum that forms the content of philosophy. (p. 24)

The concept of the aesthetic continuum forms the content of Chinese philosophy. Y.-L. Feng also discussed the distinctions made by both Greek philosophers and Chinese
philosophers between the concepts of Being/Non-being and the limited/the unlimited.

“Greek philosophers held that Non-being and the unlimited are inferior to Being and the limited. In Chinese philosophy the case is just the reverse” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 24). The reason for this difference, according to Y.-L. Feng, is as follows:

Being and the limited are the distinct, while Non-being and the unlimited are the indistinct. Those philosophers who start with concepts by postulation have a liking for the distinct, while those who start with intuition value the indistinct. (p. 24)

Along these same lines, Schaaf (2001) said, “Reason, dichotomy, classification, empirical knowing, the idea of the given—features of Western thinking—do not characterize Chinese apperception. The coherence of a Chinese world is aesthetic rather than logical” (p. 163). Y.-L. Feng (1948) thought that this explains why “epistemology has never developed in Chinese philosophy” (p. 25). Accordingly, he explained, “Epistemological problems arise only when a demarcation between the subject and the object is emphasized. And in the aesthetic continuum, there is no such demarcation. In it the knower and the known is one whole” (p. 25).

Similarly, the constructivists make the epistemological claim that “no sharp distinction can be drawn between knower and known, between accounts of the world and those doing the accounting” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 131). The constructivists’ view of the relationship of knower and known is that “the inquirer and the ‘object’ of inquiry interact to influence one another; knower and known are inseparable” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37). More than a decade ago, Schwandt (1994) made the observation:

The future of interpretivist and constructivist persuasions rests on the acceptance of the implications of dissolving long-standing dichotomies such as subject/object,
knower/known, fact/value. It rests on individuals being comfortable with the blurring of lines between the science and art of interpretation, the social scientific and the literary account (Geertz, 1980). (p. 132)

Actually, from a Chinese perspective, He (1996a) thought that Chinese intuitive thinking is the reason that caused science to fall behind in China, and this was a flaw. He thought that the general intuitive perception about things impedes the preciseness, accuracy, and clearness of thinking. Chinese intuitive thinking is manifested in the trend of the inseparableness of the subject and the object in Chinese philosophy. The images, attributes, and features of the object are integrated into a whole with the experience and mysterious feelings of the subject, which constricts the thinking of the subject in his/her identification of the objective reality and its image. As a result, the subject tends to stop at the observation of the objective world in a holistic way and lacks the analysis, organization, abstraction, and deduction regarding the perceived materials. The backwardness of modern science in China was, in large measure, caused by this flaw. In addition, mysterious intuition took the place of rational thinking.

As discussed, Chinese culture is the culture of ethics, with an emphasis on one’s inner cultivation. The reflective and introspective moral cultivation from within to without is regarded as the highest state of knowing (He, 1996a). The epistemology existent in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism attaches great importance only to sensing or perceiving by insight spontaneously (意会), without emphasizing the explicit explanation in words (言传), which undoubtedly affects the grasp and mastery of the object and the truth (He, 1996a).
**The methodological question.** At the methodological level, a constructivism paradigm is “hermeneutical/dialectical” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 193). Hermeneutics is “understood as the theory of interpretation” (S. Gallagher, 1992, p. ix), and it “involves the study of the methodological principles of interpretation (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman, 1995, p. 423). That is to say, regarding the methodological issue of “how one conceptualizes the entire research process” (Creswell, 1998, p. 77), interpretation is central. In this regard, Guba and Lincoln (1994) explained,

> The variable and personal (intramental) nature of social constructions suggests that individual constructions can be elicited and refined only through interaction *between and among* investigator and respondents. These varying constructions are interpreted using conventional hermeneutical techniques, and are compared and contrasted through a dialectical interchange. The final aim is to distill a consensus construction that is more informed and sophisticated than any of the predecessor constructions (including, of course, the etic construction of the investigator). (p. 111)

“The ‘hermeneuticist’ is such a messenger, as she or he labors to interpret other texts, often ancient, sometimes sacred, for our understanding in the present” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 423). In this sense, it is similar to Chinese thought.

In terms of the importance of interpretation in China, Beauchamp (2001) wrote,

> Ironically, Whistler saw Asian art as “decorative” or “realistic” in ways that did not need interpretation, but there is a very old tradition in Chinese/Confucian literature, going back to the very origins of Chinese writing, that words need to be carefully interpreted (p. 140)

This same author uses the *Yijing* to further prove the importance of interpretation in Chinese thought:

> In the *Yijing*, an early work of divination, each trigram signifies a natural image; each image has a symbolic meaning….The *Yijing* helps a person to be conscious of an “unrealized thought” or desire, according to the psychologist Carl Jung
(Wilhelm, xxxix). Even though each image—light, earth—has a fixed symbolic meaning, interpretation still depends on the interpreter. There is a message—the image is not just decorative or realistic; its meaning, however, is deeply ambiguous. (pp. 140-141)

Actually, “the original Eight Trigrams did not have the philosophical significance until the Ten Appendices were added to them, and subsequently the Eight Trigrams were extended to Sixty-four Hexagrams” (W.-B. Zhang, 1999, p. 36). That is to say, the Ten Appendices comprise the work that interpreted the *Yijing*. They provide the key to understanding this ancient philosophical text. Without an interpretation of the symbols in the *Yijing*, one cannot understand it.

In addition, the formation of Chinese philosophy, art, and literature shows that Chinese philosophy is itself interpretation. China is an agrarian country. The two main trends of thought in Chinese philosophy, Confucianism and Daoism, “both express, in one way or another, the aspirations and inspirations of the farmer” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 19). But farmers themselves could not express themselves; thus the landowning scholars expressed their feelings for them, as Y.-L. Feng (1948) wrote,

> Although the “scholars” did not actually cultivate the land themselves, yet since they were usually landlords, their fortunes were tied up with agriculture. A good or bad harvest meant their good or bad fortune, and therefore their reaction to the universe and their outlook on life were essentially those of the farmer. In addition their education gave them the power to express what an actual farmer felt but was incapable of expressing himself. This expression took the form of Chinese philosophy, literature, and art. (p. 18)

In this sense, it is clear that Chinese philosophy is the interpretation of the scholars on behalf of the farmers regarding their outlook on life.
Confucius had a profound faith in cumulative ancient culture and regarded himself as a “transmitter” rather than a “creator” (Tu, 1990, p. 113), meaning he was only transmitting the cumulative culture of the past without creating anything new. Y.-L. Feng (1948) commented,

His [Confucius’] primary function as a teacher, he felt, was to interpret to his disciples the ancient cultural heritage (p. 40)….While transmitting the traditional institutions and ideas, Confucius gave them interpretations derived from his own moral concepts (p. 40)….Likewise when teaching the Classics, Confucius gave them new interpretations….In this way Confucius was more than a mere transmitter, for in transmitting, he originated something new (p. 41)….By his work of originating through transmitting, he caused his school to reinterpret the civilization of the age before him. (p. 48)

Furthermore, according to Y.-L. Feng,

This spirit of originating through transmitting was perpetuated by the followers of Confucius, by whom, as the classical texts were handed down from generation to generation, countless commentaries and interpretations were written. A great portion of what in later times came to be known as the Thirteen Classics developed as commentaries in this way on the original texts. (p. 41)

Obviously, “the Chinese were keenly interested in the act of interpretation” (Beauchamp, 2001, p. 144). Interpretation has always been active in Chinese people’s understanding of the world. Actually, in the revitalization of the ancient classics in China in the 21st century, for example, Yu’s (2006c) lectures on the *Analects* represented her own interpretation of Confucius, which actually aroused a debate in academia among the experts on whether Professor Yu’s interpretation of Confucius was “right.” But the fact is, her interpretations are extremely well-received.

Today, in the research field, “all research is interpretive; it is guided by the researcher’s set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood.
and studied” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 22). In constructivist research, the researcher is “the agent of new interpretation, new knowledge, but also new illusion” (Stake, 1995, p. 99). As to the readers, I think Yi’s (2006) words are apt when he said that literary theory tells one that if there are a thousand readers, there are a thousand Hamlets; if there are a thousand readers, there are a thousand Confucius.

Fusion of ontology and epistemology and the human role. Constructivism differs most from other received paradigms in that it stresses the human role in knowing the world, which is the most important similarity to Chinese thought. This human centrality leads to the fusion of ontology and epistemology in constructivism, which is similar to the oneness of ontology, epistemology, and ethics in Chinese philosophy.

Within the paradigm of constructivism, “the conventional distinction between ontology and epistemology disappears” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). That is, there is a fusion of ontology and epistemology. The human element is central in this fusion at the ontological and epistemological level, and social construction is stressed.

In actuality, Protagoras, the first humanist in the West, made the statement: “Of all things, human being is the measure” (as cited in Roochnik, 2004, p. 68). That is, the universe is not outside of human influence. With this single sentence, Protagoras “altered the course of Ancient Greek Philosophy” (Roochnik, 2004, p. 68). Cope-Kasten, (2001) explained,

Following Plato and, especially, Aristotle, we have come to think of philosophy as a kind of thinking in which reason or evidence is given in support of the truth of a statement: if this thinking meets certain criteria, we call it logical or reasonable or, even, a proof. (p. 42)
Aristotelian logic became widely accepted in science, in which causality is the basis. Over the past 200 years, “science has become virtually synonymous with academic prestige” (Joseph, 2002, p. 47) and “a steady elimination of human will from the object of study [is] the necessary condition for any ‘science’ in the modern sense” (p. 47). With the development of science and the progress of history, Polanyi (1974), “a chemist and philosopher” who “attempts to bridge the gap between fact and value, science and humanity” (as cited on book jacket), stated the following in his book, entitled *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*,

In the Ptolemaic system, as in the cosmogony of the Bible, man was assigned a central position in the universe, from which position he was ousted by Copernicus. Ever since, writers eager to drive the lesson home have urged us, resolutely and repeatedly, to abandon all sentimental egoism, and to see ourselves objectively in the true perspective of time and space….It goes without saying that no one—scientists included—looks at the universe this way, whatever lip-service is given to “objectivity.” Nor should this surprise us. For, as human beings, we must inevitably see the universe from a center lying within ourselves and speak about it in terms of a human language shaped by the exigencies of human intercourse. Any attempt rigorously to eliminate our human perspective from our picture of the world must lead to absurdity. (p. 3)

Today, a term with more or less the same meaning as the statement of Protagoras, labeled “human-as-instrument,” is preferred by constructivist researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 193). Human beings become “the measure” again.

In sum, according to Guba and Lincoln (2005), constructivists hold that the world does not have a “real” reality “out there,” outside of human experience; instead, they think that their primary field of interest is “precisely that subjective and intersubjective social knowledge and the active construction and co-creation of such knowledge by
human agents that is produced by human consciousness” (p. 203). The human influence in constructivism has been emphasized by Stake (1995) as follows:

The world we know is a particularly human construction. Infants, children, and adults construct their understandings from experience and from being told what the world is, not by discovering it whirling there untouched by experience. In schools, they study science, memorizing the answers and doing experiments. What they know of reality is only what they have come to believe, not what they have verified outside their experience….No aspects of knowledge are purely of the external world, devoid of human construction. (pp. 99-100)

The central place human beings have taken in Chinese thinking has been elaborated upon earlier. In actuality, it is not too exaggerated to say that the whole Chinese philosophy is the study of human beings (Q. Z. Yang, 2009). Hegel, who was amazingly well-informed on Chinese philosophy, gave lectures in Heidelberg on Confucianism, Daoism, and the Yi Jing in 1816 (Chang, 1970). In his lectures on the history of philosophy, Hegel (1955) provided a good summary of Chinese philosophy by commenting, “The teaching of Confucius…is a moral philosophy…and that teaching is the authority most esteemed in China” (p. 120). Bodde (1981a) made the confirmation: “It is ethics (especially Confucian ethics), and not religion (at least, not religion of a formal organized type), that has provided the spiritual basis of Chinese civilization” (p. 132). Ethics is also known as moral philosophy. The question arises: Does a moral philosophy necessarily include ontology and epistemology?

If one has to apply the terms ontology and epistemology in the Western sense to Chinese philosophy, according to He (1996a), the important characteristic of traditional Chinese philosophical thinking is that epistemology is integrated into ethics. As discussed earlier, Chinese culture is the culture of ethics, with an emphasis on one’s inner
cultivation. Moreover, the reflective and introspective moral cultivation from within to without is regarded as the highest state of knowing. Epistemology is integrated with ethics in traditional Chinese philosophical thinking (He, 1996a). The theory of ethics is fused with ontology. So, in the traditional Chinese way of thinking, the theory of ethics is integrated with ontology and epistemology. In other words, ontology, epistemology, and the theory of ethics are one in the Chinese mind.

Similarity implies differences. The differences between constructivism and the Chinese mind are beyond the scope of this study. However, suffice it to say that the constructivist paradigm is similar to the Chinese mind at the ontological, epistemological, and methodological level, and in both cases, the human role is central.

As a researcher, born and educated in China, I concur with the constructivists’ view of the nature of reality, that “there are multiple constructed realities that can be studied only holistically” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37) because “people perceive things differently” (Stake, 1995, p. 43). There is a similar expression in the Yijing, “仁者见之谓之仁，智者见之谓之智 [The kind man discovers it and calls it kind. The wise man discovers it and calls it wise]” (as cited in Wilhelm & Baynes, trans. 1967/1950, p. 298). The derivative meaning is that on the same issue, different people have different perspectives from different standpoints or angles. This holds true even in the same family where every member has her or his own unique “developmental niche” (Super & Harkness, 1994). There does not exist one single reality lying out there waiting to be discovered; there are multiple realities constructed, negotiated, and shared, with a more
informed consensus being reached among idiosyncratic individual family members. Each voice should be respected and as written in the *Analects*, “和而不同 [seek harmony not sameness]” (as cited in Ames & Rosemont, trans. 1998, p. 169) is my principle. With this in mind, I have presented the background rationale for having conducted this study according to the constructivist paradigm.

**Research Design**

**Qualitative Research**

In actuality, “both qualitative and quantitative methods may be used appropriately with any research paradigm” (p. 105). However, researchers employing different paradigms will have a preference for different research approaches or methods. For those who believe in the conventional paradigm (the “received view”)—or scientific or positivist paradigm of inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1994)—“a major goal of scientific research is to be able to identify a causal relationship between variables” (Gliner & Morgan, 2000, p. 82). “Quantitative research methods have grown out of scientific search for cause and effect expressed ultimately in grand theory” (Stake, 1995, p. 39). On the contrary, the constructivist view of reality stresses human construction without paying much attention to causality. Within the constructivist paradigm, “qualitative methods are stressed,” according to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 198). The reason is not because the constructivist paradigm is “antiquantitive but because qualitative methods come more easily to the human-as-instrument” (p. 198). With humans as the instrument, interpretation is unavoidable and data is treated from different perspectives. So,
qualitative research is not only distinguished by “its orientation away from cause and
effect explanation and toward personal interpretation [but also by] its emphasis on
holistic treatment of phenomena (Schwandt, 1994)” (Stake, 1995, p. 43).

In short, the fundamental distinction between quantitative and qualitative research
is that quantitative inquiries search for causes, whereas qualitative ones search for
happenings (Stake, 1995). “Happenings” are not dissimilar from what Jung (1967) called
“coincidence,” which is confirmed by Stake (1995) when he said that the epistemology of
qualitative researchers leads to “an expectation that phenomena are intricately related
through many coincidental actions (p. 43). “Qualitative researchers…more often tend to
perceive events as Tolstoy did in War and Peace—multiply sequenced, multiply
contextual, and coincidental….They describe…the sequence and coincidence of events,
interrelated and contextually bound, purposive but questionably determinative” (Stake,

As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) pointed out, qualitative research means different
things in each of the eight historical moments in which these authors divided the history
of qualitative research. At the present time, qualitative research is in the eighth
moment—the fractured future—starting from the year 2005:

The future, the eighth moment, confronts the methodological backlash associated
with the evidence-based social movement. It is concerned with moral discourse,
with the development of sacred textualities. The eighth moment asks that the
social sciences and the humanities become sites for critical conversations about
democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalization, freedom, and
community. (p. 3)
Based on the fundamental differences between Western and Chinese philosophy and the similarity of constructivism to Chinese thought, it seemed natural for me to employ the qualitative approach to conduct this research study.

**Case Study**

In accordance with Stake (1995), “understanding as the purpose of inquiry” rather than explanation is the first of the three major distinctions between qualitative and quantitative inquiries (with the other two being the personal role of the researcher rather than an impersonal one and the belief that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered). The aims of quantitative and qualitative inquiries, which are quite different at the epistemological level, emphasize a difference between quantitative case studies, which seek “to identify cause and effect relationships [and qualitative case studies, which seek an] “understanding of human experience” (Stake, 1995, p. 38).

Creswell (2003) introduced five strategies of inquiry associated with the qualitative approach: ethnographies, grounded theory, case studies, phenomenological research, and narrative research. Despite the differences between these strategies, they all share the essential characteristics of qualitative inquiry: “the goal of eliciting understanding and meaning, the researcher as primary instrument of data collection and analysis, the use of fieldwork, and inductive orientation to analysis, and findings that are richly descriptive” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11).

The qualitative case study strategy was used in this study. The rationale for choosing a case study strategy was also inseparable from my Chinese way of thinking, some of the characteristics of which fit me naturally in regard to this method of research.
To be more specific, the following key characteristics, germane to the case study strategy, were taken into consideration:

First, whereas it is distinguished from all other qualitative inquiry strategies because what is studied and focused on is one single case, in a broad sense, the case study is the umbrella procedure under which all other research strategies may be subsumed (Rothney, 1968). “As a form of research, case study is defined by interest in an individual case, not by the methods of inquiry used” (Stake, 2005, p. 443). So, any methods which are suitable can be used; it is inclusive. Because qualitative researchers “have pressed for understanding the complex interrelationships among all that exists” (Stake, 1995, p. 37), the case study serves the purpose best. This all-encompassing characteristic suits my way of thinking in that there is no clear-cut demarcation or distinction between strategies of qualitative inquiry; and all of them are complementary with each other, with an eye towards the common purpose of understanding a particular phenomenon, although each strategy has its own focused dimensions that are suggested by its name. Moreover, “case study is a basic design that can accommodate a variety of disciplinary perspectives, as well as philosophical perspectives on the nature of research itself” (Merriam, 1988, p. 2). I think any research concerning human beings should not only be approached from various orientations, it also should be inter-disciplinary, cross-cultural, inter-national, and keep the whole human world in mind. So, this characteristic of case study justifies the way I conceptualize the whole study, based on my Chinese way of thinking.

Second, “the case is a system” (Stake, 2005, p. 444), a unified whole. “As a holistic approach which preserves the subject’s dignity, the case study investigates the
internal dynamics of a living system (Diesing, 1971)” (Baghban, 1984, p. 6). “Systems are about connections” (Wasik, 2004, p. 618), interrelationships, and interdependence, and suggest complexity. “The case to be studied is a complex entity located in a milieu or situation embedded in a number of contexts or backgrounds” (Stake, 2005, p. 449). “Good (1941) maintains that the case study is particularly adapted to the analysis of complex phenomena under real life” (Baghban, 1984, p. 6). “The case is singular, but it has subsections…groups…occasions…dimensions, and domains…. Each of these may have its own contexts, and the contexts may go a long way toward making relationships understandable” (Stake, 2005, p. 449). It is impossible to separate the case (in this case, a child) from her context or environment. “William Goode and Paul Hatt (1952) observed that it is not always easy for the case researcher to say where the child ends and where the environment begins” (Stake, 2005, p. 444). That is, the case and its contexts are unified into a whole. The case study is “the method of choice when the phenomenon under study is not readily distinguishable from its context” (Yin, 2003, p. 4). The idea of the holistic interrelationship, one of the three main characteristics of Chinese dialectic logic (He, 1996a), regards all things in the whole universe as an interrelated, interdependent, and intimately correlated organic whole, which leads me to gravitate towards the case study method.

Third, qualitative case study, commonly guided by “questions about process” and “questions of understanding” (Merriam, 1988, p. 44), is “characterized by researchers spending extended time on site, personally in contact with activities and operations and meanings of what is going on” (Stake, 2005, p. 450). Not only is this characteristic
compatible with my Chinese background in the sense that Chinese cosmology emphasizes a dynamic and process view of the world, it also serves the purpose of my research best. The focus of the research questions in this study is on understanding both the literacy-related environment, with an emphasis on people in the immediate and distal environments that influence the case directly and indirectly, and the literacy-related activities the case experienced, from birth to about age six, in the process of developing into a reader before elementary school. Understanding the case as a complex system takes a long time. Therefore, the case study method is a desirable choice of design. It enabled me to capture, from a holistic perspective, the complexity of the interrelated factors that played a key role in the process of the case’s becoming a reader prior to entry into elementary school, thus gaining an in-depth understanding of the case. Trying to understand the case did take me a long time. Since my first encounter with the Zero Project that initiated this study, I began to have a mission: It has been my labor of love to attempt to understand the case. Thus, I have devoted almost all my efforts to this task, no matter what the outcome might be and how long it might take. I just wanted to understand the case. To me, understanding the case is Confucian “righteousness” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948).

Fourth, Stake (1995) explained,

The case researcher recognizes and substantiates new meanings. Whoever is a researcher has recognized a problem, a puzzlement, and studies it, hoping to connect it better with known things. Finding new connections, the researcher finds ways to make them comprehensible to others. (p. 97)
This characteristic implies and emphasizes the continuity between the “known” and the “unknown;” that is, it recognizes one’s past, tradition or history and its importance in understanding the present, which is the base for the future. Actually, “elements of historical research and case study often merge” (Merriam, 1998, p. 35). In this case, the “known things” are my deeply-ingrained culture. The case study method allowed me to have more space to make connections. My cross-cultural experiences provide me with the background knowledge to make the connection between my knowledge about Chinese culture and tradition and the Western culture. During the entire research process, the “new connections” I have found, among others, are the connections between the Chinese way of thinking, the constructivist paradigm, the qualitative case study strategy, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory as the base of the “boundedness” of the case, and Vygotsky’s emphasis on the role of culture in learning and his theory of ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) (Gauvain & Cole, 2005). The unity of these interrelated categories in the Western literature, threaded by aspects of Chinese philosophy and culture, constitutes the spirit of my whole conceptual framework for this study.

Fifth, my interest has long been in early childhood education, and qualitative case study is a desirable strategy in the field of early childhood education, with a focus on the everyday experiences of young children, whose worth was stated by Walsh, Tobin, and Graue (1993) in their article titled “The Interpretive Voice: Qualitative Research in Early Childhood Education”:

No other issue so clearly distinguishes interpretive researchers from others than their confidence in the worth of case studies….Interpretive researchers make sense of the world by thick description and narrative. As Donmeyer (1990)
pointed out, case studies have the virtues of being accessible (most readers find narratives more interesting and intelligible than statistical studies) and interpersonally meaningful: When reading a good case study, we get a chance to experience the world through the eyes of the author as well as the subject of the study. (p. 468)

Finally, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed, in their influential work, titled *Naturalist Inquiry*, that within a constructive paradigm, a case study should be used in reporting.

**Intrinsic case study.** There are three types of case study: the intrinsic case study, the instrumental case study, and multiple or collective case study (Stake, 2005). I chose an *intrinsic case study* design for the following reason, as suggested by Stake (2005):

The study is undertaken because, first and last, one wants better understanding of this particular case. It is not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but instead because, in all its particularity and ordinariness, this case itself is of interest. (p. 445)

“Intrinsic casework regularly begins with cases already identified….The cases are of prominent interest before formal study begins” (Stake, 2005, p. 450). In this study, my own daughter, a single case, together with her main caretakers, was identified to address the main research questions, because this is what I, at heart, longed to do. That is, the study was undertaken because of “an intrinsic interest” in this one particular case. Conducting a single case study is worthwhile because the description alone may serve a revelatory purpose (Yin, 1994).

As the first child in the history of my family who was able to read before entry into elementary school, the case, with both her commonness and particularity (Stake, 2005), has motivated me to achieve an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon, rather than deploying it as an instrument to be used to understand something else or obtain a
general understanding, which is the goal of the type of inquiry, labeled an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995). The aim of intrinsic designs is to “develop what is perceived to be the case’s own issues, contexts, and interpretations, its ‘thick description’” (Stake, 2005, p. 450). “The more intrinsic the interest of the researcher in the case, the more the focus of study will be on the case’s idiosyncrasy, its particular context, issues, and story” (Stake, 2005, p. 460) in order to complete the primary task of the intrinsic case study: “[to] come to understand the case” (Stake, 1995, p. 77). As a Chinese, doing research in my own family, with the case being my own daughter, represented the ideal way for me to have an in-depth understanding of the case. “Anything the researcher sees fit that will help the researcher to gain understanding as thorough as possible is assumed to be justified” (Stake, 2005, p. 460).

**Bounding the case.** As a system, the case (i.e., my daughter) is inseparable from her multiple contexts. The complexity of the case requires understanding of all relevant issues. However, the case is “a bounded system” (Stake, 1995, p. 2) and “bounding the case, conceptualizing the object of study” (Stake, 2005, p. 459) is the conceptual responsibility peculiar to a qualitative case study researcher. Theoretically speaking, the boundaries of this case were based on the ecological model presented in the work by Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) ecological model which is “one of the most important contributions to the study of human development within cultural context” (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008, p. 21). In the field of family literacy, the “two theorists who have expanded our understanding of systems in relation to development are Bronfenbrenner (1986, 1995) and Vygotsky (1978, 1987)” (Wasik, 2004, p. 619).
At a more concrete level, this case study focuses on the case and the selected everyday literacy-related activities my daughter experienced in her environments from birth to around six years of age, prior to her entry into elementary school in China. Six people—my paternal grandmother, my parents, my brother, my husband, and I—were the case’s indirect and immediate caretakers, which constitute the case’s main context or environment. “At the center of Bronfenbrenner’s thinking is his contention that human beings create the environments in which they live and that these, in turn, help shape their own development” (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008, p. 21). This is extremely compatible with Chinese thought. The six people spanned a temporal distance of about one century. The home I grew up in with my grandmother, my parents, my elder sister, and my younger brother, my parents’ home, and my own home after marriage were the selected places for inclusion in this study. These people and places constituted the case’s main context; they were “cases within the case—embedded cases or mini-cases” which offered me the optimal “opportunity to learn” (Stake, 2008, p. 130) so that the maximized understanding about this case could be achieved. Despite the claimed boundedness of the case as a system, it is useful to keep in mind that no systems can have an airtight boundedness; they are open in known and unknown ways.

**Some considerations in doing a case study in my own family.** In the current research world, whether one is willing to admit it or not, the undeniable fact is that “although the rules of research oftentimes seem prescribed and restrictive, the styles researchers follow in designing, studying, writing, and consulting vary considerably” (Stake, 1995, p. 91).
Understanding as a personal process. The resulting diverse styles of research have occurred not because researchers are purposefully, or inadvertently, pursuing idiosyncrasy without caring or following the rules, albeit this factor cannot be completely excluded. This irrefutable fact indicates, in essence, that understanding is a highly personal process. “Understanding, even if in the form of sudden insight, does not develop from out of nowhere, without basis; its ground is always prepared in a past which we carry around with us” (S. Gallagher, 1992, pp. 90-91). Therefore, the unique background embedded in one’s own culture and traditions conditions one’s interpretation and understanding, which is bound to result in each researcher’s own style of research.

Reducing the level of invasion of other people’s “home grounds.” In addition, other considerations, which had been brewing in my mind for a long time, were also supportive of my choice to utilize an intrinsic design for conducting research in my own family. First of all, it reduced the level of invasion of other people’s privacy to the lowest level possible. The quality of data is one of the determinant factors for guaranteeing the trustworthiness of the research. The most dependable way to obtain quality data is through establishing rapport with the participants, especially the key informant, in order to get access and permission to gather data. When discussing access and permission in qualitative case studies, Stake (1995) wrote, “Almost always, data gathering is done on somebody’s ‘home grounds.’ Most educational case data gathering involves at least a small invasion of personal privacy” (p. 57). This scholar went on to say, “Privacy is a matter of avoiding personal exposure to everyone outside intimate circles, circles decided by the individual” (p. 59). Even if the researcher is skillful both strategically and
tactically at establishing rapport with the researched and gets the permission to physically enter other people’s families, at the emotional level, the researcher may not feel right in terms of intruding on other people’s family privacy. Regarding this aspect, Stake (1995) wrote, “Benny said, ‘I was standing near a family listening to what they were saying when I realized that I shouldn’t be hearing this; this was a ‘family matter’” (p. 59).

Discussing data collection and analysis, Meloy (1994), in her book, Writing the Qualitative Dissertation: Understanding by Doing, quoted one of the correspondents on the technical aspects of data gathering:

The ideal method would have been to videotape, but there was no way to do so without intruding on the process I was examining; also due to confidentiality concerns, permission would not have been given for videotaping. Even with audiotape, some subjects were reluctant to participate. (p. 74)

Seeing is believing. Imagining vicarious experiences is never as impressive as one’s own direct ones. My own ineffaceably disagreeable experience (described below) completely eliminated all my intentions to do any research on other people’s “home grounds.” What happened was that following my passion for early literacy, I planned to do a case study on early reading in a preschool as a pilot study for my potential dissertation research. Although my long-standing and unwavering passion is the intrinsic interest in my own daughter’s acquisition of literacy, I was concerned that using my own daughter as the case and doing research in my own family might not appear scientific or academic enough for a dissertation. Therefore, in order to be more objective, I tried to find a preschool setting to do an instrumental case study on “emergent literacy,” especially the role of book reading in the classroom context.
I found just such a preschool setting. In order to gain access and establish rapport with the potential participants and informants, I spent some time doing volunteer work. I was successful in the sense that I finally obtained permission from the director of the preschool and the classroom teachers to take some pictures of the classroom environment while observing a group of children doing literacy-related activities. Understanding the literacy-related physical environment is important, and photographs are much more dependable than my memory in this matter. It was my plan that through examining and re-examining the pictures, I would be able to describe the details of the characteristics of the literacy environment more accurately in order to analyze and interpret in a more credible way and gain better understanding. I felt confident and happy, because I thought my first step towards my dissertation would be successful.

I took some pictures from the angles I had devised, based on the theories and research I learned during the literature review of emergent literacy. However, before I left the classroom, one of the teachers suddenly changed her mind and angrily demanded me to delete all the pictures. I did this immediately. Then for no apparent reason, she grabbed my camera to make sure I had followed her command and even deleted some of my own old pictures, obviously forgetting completely the various permissions she had granted. This unpredictable behavior surprised me at first.

However, the experience turned out to be fortunate for me for two reasons. First, it was that particular event in that particular moment that finally helped bring to a halt my ever-vacillating mind in regard to determining whether I should follow my heart by doing my dissertation research in my own family, out of my passion, or whether I should
conduct my research on others’ “home grounds” (Stake, 1995) for the purpose of completing my dissertation, which would seem more scientific and objective. Second, this disagreeable experience also served as an event that provoked me to empathically put myself in others’ shoes in a more conscious way and ask the simple yet significant question: Do I want to be observed, taken pictures of, or videotaped while I am working? Then, a more relevant further question occurred to me: Do I want other researchers to come into my own home to observe my daughter and our everyday life? Even so, can the researcher(s) be in a position to capture the whole and true picture so as to present a dependable “thick description?” I also wondered, Can I guarantee that I, as an interviewee, would tell them the same story in exactly the same words or the same ways of expression when I was in different moods, for whatever known or unknown reasons? Yet, according to Ely (1991), “Qualitative researchers, of course, are to document what is really happening rather than what is being put on for their benefit” (p. 51).

In retrospect, it is precisely this bad and good experience that strengthened my determination to follow my passion and conduct the study I was proposing. I truly thank that teacher for teaching me a lesson, a real-life lesson in research. In addition, this precious experience also led me to think more deeply about the nature of human beings and the language we use, due to my background in linguistics and several language learning experiences. In this process, I found some of the stories, reported by Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2005), in different moments in the history of qualitative research, as food for thought.
Denzin and Lincoln (1994) divided the history of qualitative research in North America in the 20th century and beyond into five moments, and later, eight moments (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). These scholars (2005) related a story about “Malinowski (1967) discussing his field experiences in New Guinea and the Trobriand Islands in the years 1914-15 and 1917-18” (p. 15) in which Malinowsky was discouraged, among other things, by the fact that the people “lied” to him. In another work, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Malinowsky described his methods this way:

In the field one has to face a chaos of facts…., In this crude form they are not scientific facts at all; they are absolutely elusive, and can only be fixed by interpretation...Only laws and generalizations are scientific facts, and field work consists only and exclusively in the interpretation of the chaotic social reality, in subordinating it to general rules. (Malinowski, 1916/1948, p. 328; quoted in Geertz, 1988, p. 81). (p. 15)

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) included another story in which “Stoller and Olkes (1987, pp. 227-229) describe how they felt the crisis of representation in their fieldwork among the Songhay of Niger” (p. 18) during the phase of crisis of representation, in the mid-1980s. Stoller learned that everyone had lied to him and came to the conclusion that informants routinely told lies to the anthropologists. This made him feel that the data he had gathered had become worthless and led him to write a memoir in which he himself was a central character, relating his own story about his experiences in Songhay.

These stories raised a question: Did subjects really “lie” to the researchers? Even so, why did they do so? How should the word “lie” be defined? In this sense, I have told many lies in my life. I would like to share one here. In 1995, another teacher and I in our university were sent to South Korea to teach Chinese. Before we left, we had a meeting
with the Party secretary of our university. He reminded us of numerous “don’ts” while we were there. One of them was not to mention anything about the Communist Party. We kept all of this in mind. In Korea, while having a cup of coffee together, one of my students asked me, “Teacher Zhang, how does a Communist Party member look like?” My answer was, “I do not know because I have never seen one.” The fact of the matter was that there were party members everywhere in China. They were ordinary “normal” Chinese people. Did I tell a “lie”? Phillips’s (1992) words are incisive:

Humans are not mere physical objects; and to understand or explain why a person has acted in a particular manner, the meaning (or meanings) of the action have to be uncovered—and to do this the roles of language and of social symbolisms and values have to be taken into account. (p. 5)

All these vicarious experiences, and especially my direct experience made me determined to conduct my current study in my own family. The theoretical foundation for my decision is Confucius’ teaching, “Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you” (as cited in Waley, trans. 1938, p. 198).

Doing the case study as a cultural and family insider. Another reason why my disagreeable classroom experience turned out to be a positive experience was the realization that conducting the case study in my own family as a cultural insider would lead to a better understanding of the case than could be obtained by outsider researchers, as suggested earlier. The aim of a qualitative intrinsic case study is to understand the case. There is a distinction between those culture-specific concepts known as emics and those culture-general or universal concepts called etics, as the result of cross-cultural research (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008). Thus a very important question is raised: “Can anyone
outside any specific human group (culture) understand completely the workings of the
group (culture) to the same degree as an insider does?” (as cited in Gardiner & Kosmitzki,
2008, p. 10). This is both an easy and difficult question to answer, depending on who will
answer the question and from what perspective. Language is a key issue that cannot be
excluded from consideration. However, language is like the air one breathes, which is too
important to be noticed or concerned about, similar to the term “culture.”

Broadly speaking, in terms of language and culture, I may conceive of two kinds
of researchers who might take my place in conducting the same case study in my family,
among those who do research in other people’s families. The first kind of researcher is a
“cultural outsider” in the true sense of the word, who does not speak the Chinese
language and therefore does not really know the culture, although she/he possesses some
knowledge about the culture. I, as a key informant, speak English as a foreign/second
language and could translate between this researcher and my family members. The
findings of the case study might be more easily verified by other researchers with
backgrounds similar to this conceived researcher. But, are the findings true in terms of
the real meanings of the participants, in this case, my family members? Fontana and Frey
(1994) said, “Respondents may be fluent in the language of the interviewer, but there are
different ways of saying things, and, indeed, certain things should not be said at all,
linking language and cultural manifestations” (p. 366). In this regard, LeCompte’ (2000)
comments are worth attention:

Validity is critical to the “goodness” of analyzed data, because no matter how
elegant a researcher’s own model building is, results lack credibility, utility, or
validity if the cultural whole presented by the researcher makes no sense to the persons or groups whose cultural whole is, in fact, being portrayed. (p. 152)

To guarantee the validity of a study, LeCompte suggested, “Therefore, researchers must continually ask the question: Do I, the researcher, really understand and describe what I am studying in the same way that the people who live it do? Did I really ‘get it right’?” (p. 152).

Does continually asking these questions really matter for the outsider researcher if cultural and language barriers exist? Napoleon Chagnon’s observation (as cited in Shaul & Furbee, 1998) provides truly incisive insight in this regard:

Much of [the] world is ontologically real, in the sense that an outsider from a different culture can see and document it in a fashion that other observers can verify. But much of it lies hidden in the minds of the observed natives, whose cultural traditions, interpretations, and assumptions infuse it with spirits, project into it meanings, and view it in a way that the outsider can discover only by learning the language and, through the language, the intellectual dimensions of the culture. (p. 191)

The other kind of researcher I imagine is a “cultural insider” (Purcell-Gates, 1993) who speaks the same language and lives in the same culture, but at the same time, is still an outsider in terms of membership in a particular family or a group—in this case, a Chinese researcher. For this kind of researcher, there is no language and cultural barrier. She or he has the possibility of getting more reliable facts, based on the premise that she/he speaks the same language and understands the culture. However, each and every culture has its own unique characteristics, due to its people’s own histories. In view of Chinese culture, generally speaking, Chinese people do not like to tell their family stories to others, as can been seen in Xu’s (2006) dissertation research on Chinese families:
Being a Chinese, I understood why some families were concerned and reluctant to make their family stories public. Words like “research” or “study” in Chinese tend to be used together or interchangeably with the word “investigation,” and hence carry a connotation of investigation by officials to some Chinese families. As a result, I was not able to include several intriguing family stories in my dissertation as the parents were not willing to sign the consent forms although I explained the different connotation in Canada and the no-risk nature of my school-based study. (p. 14)

Obviously, it is difficult to enter a Chinese family as an “outsider,” which includes the cultural insider who is, at the same time, an outsider relative to the particular family, due to Chinese cultural characteristics, as discussed above. This will constitute an even bigger problem when the researcher is investigating the issue of literacy, because literacy and culture are inseparable.

A case study in a Chinese family. However, everything has exception. Despite the difficulty for an “outsider” entering a Chinese family and the unwillingness of parents to sign the consent forms, some researchers have been able to gain access and establish rapport so that they could conduct research in Chinese families. As an example, Lin (1998) managed to conduct a qualitative case study on emergent literacy with a young Taiwanese girl and subsequently wrote her dissertation, entitled The Case Study of a Taiwanese Young Child’s Emergent Literacy Development. Still, Lin met problems similar to other researchers who conducted studies in other people’s home settings, especially when a child was involved and the focus would be on the everyday experience of the child and family. Lin wrote,

It was planned to get entry in one and half months, to collect the data in the home environment intensively twice a week for two months…However, the investigator found out that it would be too disturbing to the family to conduct home visits more than once a week. (p. 259)
During the time of gathering data, it was difficult to make the child cooperate, as Lin described:

However, the schedule of the participant did not allow the investigator to conduct many of the structured interviews with the mother of the participant alone. In some home visits, the child reacted negatively to the investigator’s talking with her mother….Although the desirable outcomes in this phase were the in-depth information regarding the protocols, the investigator could not obtain the data related to the protocols planned ahead of time because the data collection at home relied highly on the child, who would frequently refuse to do what the investigator tried to observe. (p. 68)

Due to the special nature of conducting research in other people’s family, the data gathered was limited, as Lin explained:

The facilitation identified in this study can not represent all the support Mrs. Yang provided in each type of activity. For example, the investigator could not observe how Mrs. Yang drew with Cheryl together when Cheryl was between two and four years old. The investigator only observed one episode in the videotape which revealed how Mrs. Yang conducted the drawing activity at home with Cheryl at the age of two. (p. 229)

This study failed to identify many other experiences when Cheryl was supported in a drawing activity with Mrs. Yang….It is impossible for the investigator to observe what facilitation Mrs. Yang provided in those activities. The facilitation in the book making activity was inferred from the artifacts and interviews. (p. 230)

The investigator observed three episodes of story reading during the home visits. However, the investigator failed to identify other support Mrs. Yang provided in the story reading embedded in daily life….The investigator can not identify the facilitation Mrs. Yang provided during Cheryl’s early years. (p. 230)

It turned out that the child’s mother “played the role as the most important medium to obtain the desired data” (Lin, 1998, p. 68). Then the question is raised: What would the case study look like if the child’s mother who, in the meantime, was in a position to do the research, had actually done the research?
**The ideal candidate for this case study.** A third kind of researcher would be a “cultural insider” and an “insider” of a Chinese family. The Chinese saying goes, “知子莫如父,” meaning that no one knows a boy/girl better than his own father/mother. It indicates the close and irreplaceable relationship between parents and children. This is true with the research situation. It is not an exaggeration to say that in any studies revolving around a child, the relationship between the researcher and the child is crucial. No one but a parent would know the child and the context concerning her or him as completely, therefore, serving as the ideal candidate researcher. The premise is that this parent is also in a position to do research. Under this condition, a detailed case study of the human environment in which a child learns to read from birth to around age six would be virtually impossible for any researcher other than the parent. Consequently, as the mother of the case, I was the ideal candidate—the third type of researcher—to conduct this case study.

One more important reason for my having been the ideal candidate (and therefore the ideal type of researcher) to conduct this case study was that I was able to follow my long-standing passion. As stated above, understanding the case had always been my passion, because it started a revolution in my family in terms of a person’s education. On choosing a study, Bogdan and Biklen (1992) wrote the following:

> The research agenda is developed from a number of sources. Often a person’s own biography will be an influence in defining the thrust of his or her work. Particular topics, settings, or people are of interest because they have touched the researcher’s life in some important way. (p. 59)
Then these authors emphatically pointed out the importance of the researcher’s own passion in research:

However a topic comes to you, whatever it is, it should be important to you and excite you. Self-discipline can only take you so far in research. Without a touch of passion you may not have enough to sustain the effort to follow the work to the end, or to go beyond doing the ordinary. (p. 60)

Ordinary as this study may sound, this “particular” topic, “settings” and “people” were “of interest” to me, because they had touched my life in an ineffably important way. In agreement with my contention, Gould (1996) asserted, “Life is short, and potential studies infinite. We have a much better chance of accomplishing something significant when we follow our passionate interests and work in areas of deepest personal meaning” (p. 37). In their book, *A Practical Guide to the Qualitative Dissertation*, Biklen and Casella (2007) gave similar advice at a more concrete level: “Do work that you believe in and that you think is important, and seek guidance and help as you need it” (p. 10).

**Procedures of Data Collection**

**Researcher as Instrument**

Because the human element has always been omnipresent in the Chinese way of thinking, and human beings are the core of all issues contemplated, it was quite natural for me to accept the concept of humans as instrument. Therefore, I was the primary instrument for gathering data and doing analysis and interpretation throughout the entire study. However, “to err is human.” Humans are complex beings with beliefs and values. Gould (1996) commented in terms of this aspect:

In the stereotype, an ice-cold impartiality acts as the *sine qua non* of proper and dispassionate objectivity. I regard this argument as one of the most fallacious,
even harmful, claims commonly made in my profession. Impartiality (even if desirable) is unattainable by human beings with inevitable backgrounds, needs, beliefs, and desires. It is dangerous for a scholar even to imagine that he might attain complete neutrality, for then one stops being vigilant about personal preferences and their influences—and then one truly falls victim to the dictates of prejudice. (p. 36)

Therefore, within any paradigm, researchers “should acknowledge that there will be subjectivity and bias” (Gliner & Morgan, 2000, p. 23). Qualitative inquiry is “ideologically driven….There is no value-free or bias-free design” (Janesick, 1998, p. 41). “The attempt to produce a value-neutral social science is increasingly being abandoned as at best unrealizable, and at worst self-deceptive” (Hesse as cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 160). “Objectivity must be operationally defined as fair treatment of data, not absence of preference” (Gould, 1996, p. 36). The ideal way to minimize the potential effects of one’s biases was for me, as the researcher, to provide enough raw materials so that readers can make their own judgments. In the meantime, I stated my own background and qualifications for conducting this study, because the trustworthiness of the study depends on my awareness of my own bias and contexts for gaining an understanding of the case. In addition, toward the end of this chapter, I discussed the criteria I followed to ensure the trustworthiness of this study.

**Researcher’s Background**

My life seems to be married to languages, which has played a major role for me in achieving the present understanding about the importance of a literacy-related environment in early literacy: I began to learn English in the middle school as a foreign language; majored in English language and literature, and learned French as a second
foreign language in college; taught English in the university; lived in Korea for one year teaching Chinese and learning the Korean language, without knowing even one word before going there; earned a master’s degree in English linguistics and second language acquisition; and served as the team leader in my province in Young Learners’ English (YLE), a program in collaboration with Cambridge University in which I had many opportunities to work with parents and young children. Finally, I came to the United States and continued my education in English as a second language. Fortunately, I enrolled in the program of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Denver’s Morgridge College of Education, with a focus on K-12; however, this focus did not cover the period before the age of kindergarten, where my interest really lay. So I decided to audit courses concerning children and family that I felt relevant to my interest, or other courses that seemingly were unrelated but actually interrelated in an interdisciplinary way. At the practical level, I visited almost every kind of early childhood education curriculum models operating in Colorado. Of significance, I realized that my concentration on K-12 education served as a background against which I could see more clearly the necessity to delve into the early years before kindergarten in terms of literacy.

On the one hand, as a researcher who was very familiar with all the study’s informants and spoke the same language, I was in a position to enter their worlds, develop an empathic understanding of them and obtain an emic perspective of their viewpoints, and come up with “thick descriptions” that were as close to the real thoughts of the informants as possible. On the other hand, advantages can be disadvantages at the same time. “不识庐山真面目，只缘身在此山中” [You do not see the true nature of
Mount Lu just because you are inside of it]” is the sentence in a famous poem by a poet in Song dynasty called Su Shi. It is reasonable to assume that it is precisely because of speaking the same language and living in the same culture that one is “inside Mount Lu” and therefore cannot see the true nature of it. This is where my cross-cultural background came in, giving me a unique position in this research. My experiences living in Korea for one year and in the United States for over eight years provided me with a special vantage point to think as an “outsider” and distance myself from the informants, so that I was able to provide a more objectively etic perspective in regard to the interpretation, on a comparative basis.

Emic and etic perspectives are, in a sense, like the Chinese yin and yang concepts. Unification of yin and yang into a whole is characteristic of Chinese thinking. So both my insider and outsider experiences were integrated implicitly and explicitly and served as a foil against which I could interpret and understand this case better, hopefully with a more balanced view.

Role of the Researcher

According to Stake (1995), different roles the case researcher plays may include teacher, participant observer, interviewer, reader, storyteller, advocate, artist, counselor, evaluator, consultant, biographer, interpreter and others. With the researcher’s unique style and level of curiosity, it is her or his responsibility to choose what roles to play (Stake, 1995).

Because the case in this study is a person and the main factors that constitute the case’s immediate and distal environments are also people, in describing the people, I may
be said to have played the role of a biographer, based mainly on interviews, participant observation, and interpretation. So, I may also say I was an interviewer, a participant observer, and an interpreter. The result of a biography will be a story. So I can also say that I played the role of storyteller to narrate my understanding of the case. In actuality, all the other roles identified by Stake (1995) constituted the background of my thinking, with a particular one coming to the foreground from time to time. In a broad sense, there was no distinct demarcation between these roles, and they were all one at a certain level. In a sense, they were like a net: The cord represented my role as interpreter, because of all the roles possibly played by researchers, “the role of interpreter, and gatherer of interpretations, is central” (Stake, 1995, p. 99) and “an ongoing interpretive role of the researcher is prominent in qualitative case study (p. 43).

Research Sites

Part of the data gathered in this study are on a retrospective basis, in the form of autobiographical writing; also part of the data were gathered through telephone interviews between China and the United States with my parents and brother. So it seemed that the research sites should be located at my current home in the United States. This was true in the sense that I conducted some of the interviews and did the write-up here. However, the sites from which this study originated and where the retrospective material came from were in my parents’ home and my own home in China. Therefore, in view of the nature of this study, I could say that the specific research sites included two places: my parents’ home and my own home in China as well as my home in the United States.

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States, where I continued to collect data through phone interviews, mail, and emails. The real research site has actually been in my mind.

Data Sources

The following paragraph from the book, *The Art of Case Study Research* by Stake (1995), seems to have summarized the process of my data collection and legitimized the data I gathered for this study:

There is no particular moment when data gathering begins. It begins before there is commitment to do the study: backgrounding, acquaintance with other cases, first impressions. A considerable proportion of all data is impressionistic, picked up informally as the researcher first becomes acquainted with the case. (p. 49)

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) made similar comments on data gathering: “Some documents that eventually became field texts may have been created prior to the inquiry, or even during the inquiry but for a different purpose. Such documents became field texts when they became relevant to the inquiry” (p. 419).

What the above-mentioned scholars implied is that the birth of a qualitative inquiry is not something that comes into being out of nowhere. Actually the data collection for this study began even long before the proposal for this dissertation. This sounds unscientific, but when Biklen and Casella (2007) discussed the qualitative proposal in their book, entitled *A Practical Guide to the Qualitative Dissertation*, they said,

It is useful to have between one-fourth and one-third of your data already collected before you write a proposal. This amount of data allows you to know what you are writing about and that the topic you are interested in is actually possible to study at the site you have chosen. (p. 67)
Discussing the preparing and defending of a proposal, Meloy (1994), in her book, *Writing the Qualitative Dissertation: Understanding by Doing*, suggested,

> The time for the defense of a “qualitative” proposal ought to be later in the research process, after an initial investigation has been undertaken around a focusing idea…[as] the clarification of the proposal came after…[the researchers] had spent some time in the research context. (p. 31)

As has truly been said by Biklen and Casella (2007), “It is impossible to write a proposal for a qualitative study without doing any of the research because you need to know more about the outcome of the negotiation process between you and your informants” (p. 67).

Continuing this thought, the authors explained,

> Sometimes you are interested for your dissertation project in an event that is occurring at a particular time or in a particular place (say, while you are abroad), and you must collect all of your data before you write the proposal. This is a more difficult situation for dissertation committee members because it effectively terminates the contribution they can make to the design of the study. Sometimes, however, it is unavoidable. Flexibility is important for the qualitative proposal. (p. 68)

This is quite similar to my study. In order to optimize understanding of the case and probe its particularity, data collection in this study followed the following suggestions by Stake (2005) for qualitative case researchers:

1. The nature of the case, particularly its activity and functioning;
2. Its historical background;
3. Its physical setting;
4. Other contexts, such as economic, political, legal, and aesthetic;
5. Other cases through which this case is recognized; and
6. Those informants through whom the case can be known. (p. 447)

Methods of collecting data or creating “field texts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994) for this intrinsic case study included the following: autobiography, field notes by participants, physical artifacts, and interviews.
**Autobiography.** The autobiography was used as one of the main methods for collecting data, and the whole study was autobiographically organized and directed. In fact, although autobiography does not sound “scientific” enough as academic dissertation research, because “science has become virtually synonymous with academic prestige” (Joseph, 2002, p. 47), over the past 200 years, the autobiography has been existent and hidden in every researcher’s study. No matter what term one chooses to use in order to raise the level of objectivity, it is better to bear in mind: “There is no theory that is not a fragment, carefully prepared, of some autobiography. Paul Valery (quoted in Olney, 1980, preface)” (as cited in Smith, 1994, p. 293). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005),

Three interconnected, generic activities define the qualitative research process. They go by a variety of different labels, including *theory*, *analysis*, *ontology*, *epistemology*, and *methodology*. Behind these terms stands the personal biography of the researcher, who speaks from a particular class, gender, racial, cultural, and ethnic community perspective….Every researcher speaks from within a distinct interpretive community that configures, in its special way, the multicultural, gendered components of the research act. (p. 21)

In the situation of case studies, “even when empathic and respectful of each person’s realities, the researcher decides what the case’s ‘own story’ is, or at least what will be included in the report” (Stake, 2005, p. 456). As to the report of the case study, “however descriptive the report, the researcher ultimately comes to offer a personal view” (Stake, 1995, p. 42). In other words, the research can be seen as one edition or a life fragment of the researcher’s autobiography.

“Autobiography in its changing forms is at the core of late twentieth-century paradigmatic shifts in the structures of thought” (Smith, 1994, p. 288). It constitutes one
of the sources of gathering rich qualitative data, as Bogdan and Biklen (1992) wrote that “an autobiography, rich in detail, written for the purpose of telling the person’s own story as he or she experienced it, parallels the role a key informant would play for a researcher” (p. 135). Because a key informant is crucial for the researcher, the method of autobiography is justified and constituted one of the main data collection techniques for gathering part of the data, on a retrospective basis. I believe that the nature of language and the communication through it, in both spoken and written form, proves that the autobiography is the closest reflection of the investigated phenomenon, other things (techniques or strategies) of researchers being more or less similar. When the case is a person, as in this study, the researcher needs to cover contexts within contexts in which human beings involving the person as the case are the main factors; and the autobiography serves the purpose best, because “autobiographical writing is a way to write of the whole context of life” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 421). The “whole context of life” is to qualitative case study what air and water are to living things.

In terms of language, in actuality, a biography written by oneself is much more credible, considering the misunderstandings during the communication caused by numerous factors involving human beings, under the umbrella term, background, including the limitedness of language and the limited ability to use language by both the key informant and the researcher. So, “many now argue that we can study only our own experiences. The researcher becomes the research subject” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 645).
In fact, even when writing one’s own autobiography, language is limited. The writer expresses this, omits that. He or she emphasizes this, and naturally ignores that; praises this, and implicitly and unwittingly negates that. Actually, there is the following sentence in the *Yijing*:


No wonder there is the common Chinese saying, 一切尽在不言中, which means literally that all that one wants to express is expressed in wordlessness. If one cannot express oneself fully, is it possible for others to express his or her experiences truer to the reality the writer wanted to express than he or she could do on his or her own? Joseph’s (2002) following thoughts are incisive:

The history of linguistics is largely a history of misreadings, of failed communication between authors and readers, exacerbated by the illusion that communication has successfully occurred. From readings of Plato’s *Cratylus* as a defense of linguistic naturalism by scholars in the Renaissance and after, to Chomsky’s (1966) interpretations of some of those same Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers as prefiguring his own versions of rationalism and nativism, to the peculiar understanding of Chomsky’s competence-performance dichotomy by applied linguists in the 1960s and 1970s (see Newmeyer, 1990), innumerable lines of failed communication have circumscribed the study of our primary medium of communication. (p. 133)

Language is closely related to culture, especially Chinese language and culture. Therefore, people who speak different languages will construct different knowledge and get different meanings regarding the same phenomenon. Using the autobiography, the writer at least knows what he or she is trying to represent. Whether the purpose is
achieved depends on the writing skills of the autobiographer. He or she cannot express all of his or her meanings, yet can express some; and they are at least true to the writer’s culture, albeit possibly less refined in words or structures.

No matter how rich the above evidence and how watertight the argument is for the virtues of the autobiography as a method for collecting data, still the question can be raised: Is it in the tradition of a dissertation? To this potential question, Biklen and Casella (2007) provided an answer in their book, *A Practical Guide to the Qualitative Dissertation*, by devoting one chapter to discussing nontraditional dissertations. In an excerpt from this chapter, the authors stated,

There is no single example of the nontraditional dissertation since…what is traditional at one university may be nontraditional at another….Here, we use *nontraditional dissertations* to refer to dissertations that push the boundaries of dissertation writing through their challenges to methods of empirical research….They may also employ such methods as fiction writing and personal memoir. In other words, they challenge the distinction between empirical research and fictional work, blurring the boundaries between personal narrative and more traditional qualitative empirical styles….They push what social scientists, specifically qualitative social scientists, understand as an empirical frame for the dissertation. They are attracted to particular forms of narrating and representing the data, including autoethnography, film or multi-media, and fictional components. (p. 117)

In this sense, my dissertation could be considered in the ever-changing and ever-evolving continuum of the dissertation tradition, now temporarily called the nontraditional dissertation. However, considering the fact, as stated earlier, that the essential ideas constituting the constructivist paradigm have been in the Chinese mind for thousands of years, this study, without a doubt, is within the dissertation tradition.

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Field notes by participants. As a participant, my brother wrote large amounts of interpretive content. In addition, my father and my brother have sent me numerous Chinese books (with their comments on them) relevant to my understanding of early literacy.

Physical artifacts. In conducting this study, I took the following steps toward obtaining physical artifacts: (a) I asked my father in China to send D. Q. Feng’s series of little books related to his Zero Project; (b) I brought with me from China to America Jim Trelease’s article, which I had had for more than 10 years; (c) I was able to uncover my daughter’s photograph with her dad, taken while she was holding a “picarqu” (a Japanese toy), which was the stuffed toy that had initially aroused her interest and motivation to learn to recognize Chinese characters at about age three; (d) I brought from China the small dictionaries my daughter had liked; and (e) I had in my possession an audio tape of poems my daughter recorded for me when I was in Korea.

Interviews. Interviewing is the basic method of data gathering on which both qualitative and quantitative researchers rely (Fontana & Frey, 2005). “What details of life the researchers are unable to see for themselves is obtained by interviewing people who did see them” (Stake, 2005, p. 453). Besides the numerous characteristics of the interview, the main reason why I used the interview method of inquiry is that it is a very good way of overcoming inconvenient distances, both in space and in time; also past events or distal experiences can be learned by talking with the interviewees (Fetterman, 1989). Interviewing is “particularly useful for ascertaining respondents’ thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and retrospective accounts of events (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996, p. 134). It
suited the nature of my study, in which present and past were frequently interwoven, with long-distance phone calls being the method of doing interviews for part of the data collection.

Despite the different diction, there are basically two approaches to interviews: structured or formal and unstructured or informal interviews. Seidman (1991) summarized the characteristics of these two approaches:

The word interviewing covers a wide range of practices. There are tightly structured, survey instruments with preset, standardized, normally closed questions. At the other end of the continuum are open-ended, apparently unstructured, anthropological interviews that might be seen...as friendly conversations. (p. 9)

“Conversations” is also a method of data collection in which there are written and oral conversations; and the latter is the more common kind used (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). Informal interviews or unstructured ones constitute the type of data collection widely used in qualitative inquiries (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). They are used “in an attempt to understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry” (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 366).

Durkin (1966) testified to the importance of informal interviews in her book, entitled Children Who Read Early:

Another by-product of the experience of doing these two studies is an awareness that some of the most interesting and, perhaps, some of the most relevant information in an interview comes not from prescribed and carefully phrased questions but, rather, from the spontaneous comments and digressions of the interviewee. (p. 107)
According to Goodwin and Goodwin (1996),

Characteristics of successful interviewers include the ability to establish good rapport with informants, to engage in natural conversations that will answer the research’s key questions, to probe in non-threatening ways, to know how to follow unexpected leads that appear during the interview, and to listen well. (p. 136)

Central to data collection is the relationship between the researcher and the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). Because there is a very close and harmonious relationship between my family and me, despite the disagreements, as a researcher, I had the potential to possess all the characteristics of a successful interviewer discussed above and was in a position to get more reliable information through interviews. The main interviewees in this study included my parents and my brother. Informal interviews were conducted on a regular and a momentary basis.

Temporally speaking, the field data for this study was collected mainly from the latter part of 1993 in China when I first encountered the Zero Project, with the remainder completed in the United States. Back then, I was not aware at the time that I was already gathering “data” for a potential study by frequently and purposely discussing and debating about fetal education and early literacy with my brother, my husband and my parents. Spatially speaking, this study crossed 3 cultures: When I stayed in South Korea from May, 1995 to May, 1996, the data were mainly collected through informal interviews in the form of conversations via long-distance phone calls with my parents and my brother. Also, some tapes, recorded by the case at 1½ years old, were sent to Korea. Fate brought me to the United States, where some of the theoretical resources of D. Q. Feng’s Zero Project that I mainly used had come from. In October, 2002, my husband
came to work here in the United States, and my daughter and I came with him as his dependents. I subsequently enrolled in the doctoral program in the University of Denver’s College of Education. At that time, I decided to develop into a dissertation the topic that had been so important to me for so many years. Accordingly, I continued data collection mainly through interviews with my family members, and especially my brother, all of whom were the joint caretakers of my daughter.

My family (my husband, my daughter, and I) have been living in the United States since late 2002 and have never returned to China. This is the first time I have been away from my parents and siblings for such a long time. Among all the forms of connecting feelings between us, I found the telephone the best way to decrease the feeling of missing each other that occurred between my parents, my siblings and me.

Because I, the researcher, and my family, the key informants, were so familiar, the tape recorder was not used, but notes were taken after the interviews. Similarly, when Durkin (1966) interviewed the parents in her study, “no tape recorder was used” (p. 45). As to the language used, all interviews in the study were conducted in Chinese to lessen misunderstandings and then translated into English when they were needed in the writing.

**Data Management**

Data management is “the operations needed for a systematic, coherent process of data collection, storage, and retrieval,” according to Huberman and Miles (1994, p. 428). It is essential for the researcher to build a system for storing and retrieving data when they are needed, because the way “data are stored and retrieved is the heart of data management” (p. 430).
Due to the nature of this long-standing intrinsic case study, I tried to keep as much of the organization of data as I could in my head (Stake, 1995). I also established a database in which all the files were divided into two categories: English and Chinese. The autobiographical part was written in English. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese and then transferred to the computer in English immediately after the interviews. In order to make the analysis more efficient and reliable, I used the Chinese version to do the analysis, because the essence of the original language would have been lost in the process of translation into another language, and the nuanced meaning would have had the chance of being distorted. Moreover, I was always thinking in Chinese except when I sat in front of the computer to input the data.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process that serves two purposes: to increase the researcher’s own understanding of the data and to enable the researcher to transmit to the readers what she/he has learned (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The former is the premise of the latter; that is, the researcher has to first understand the data and then find a way to provide vicarious experiences for the readers. Understanding means one can interpret and get meanings: “Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations” (Stake, 1995, p. 71), and it “should not be seen as separate from everlasting efforts to make sense of things” (p. 72). In short, the process of data analysis is, in actuality, the process of obtaining meaning from the data and making sense of it, based on the researcher’s interpretation and understanding.
But “where thoughts come from, whence meaning, remains a mystery” (Stake, 1995, p. 73). This “mystery” intrigued me, as the researcher, and led me, sometimes consciously and sometimes subconsciously, to search for some clue, first in my own previous learning experiences and then in the literature I reviewed concerning the early literacy in China. What emerged was a typical Chinese way of obtaining meaning, especially from texts, exemplified by Y.-R. Chao’s (1976) book-reading experiences as a child. Y.-R. Chao, one of the two selected early readers, introduced in Chapter 2, wrote about how meaning of the texts “become clear” to him:

In those days “reading books” was just to read books. The teacher did not always explain, nor did the students understand; there was just the practice of 

\[ \text{dvwu shu bu chyou shenn jiee}, \]  

‘reading books without trying to understand much’. But after a while, even as long as several years, the meanings in the books began to become clear. This traditional practice was really quite close to what in recent years has been called the audiolingual approach, first emphasizing listening and reading, and letting the meaning gradually come later. (p. 5)

After Y.-R. Chao came to the United States and studied at Cornell University, sometimes he “still followed the old Chinese custom of reading the text aloud several times without seeking to understand too well” (Y.-R. Chao, 1976, p. 11) in order to eventually understand and get the meaning.

Y.-R. Chao’s experience of getting the meanings from texts emphatically points out the importance of the length of time required for understanding. Familiarity with data is crucial in achieving understanding, and length of time is therefore the paramount condition in getting the meaning from the analysis. This extended process is impossible whatsoever for any other researcher to repeat. Stake (1995) is truly right by stating that analysis and interpretation is “greatly subjective” (p. 77). In a sense, “all qualitative data
analysis is idiosyncratic” (Ely, 1991, p. 143). Methods books only provide “persuasions, not recipes” (Stake, 1995, p. 77). The nature of the analysis and interpretation is that it is conducted mentally and automatically; therefore, “each researcher needs, through experience and reflection, to find the forms of analysis that work for him or her” (Stake, 1995, p. 77).

The form of analysis that worked for me, at the theoretical level, is expressed by the Chinese expression on how to get meaning from texts: “读书百遍, 其义自见 [Read the book for a hundred times, and the meaning will pop up by itself].” “A hundred” simply signifies many, many times. This has been one of the main methods teachers suggested students use in China to be familiar with and get meaning from texts. Y.-R. Chao’s experience above was such an example. Although this expression places emphasis on the number of times of reading, it naturally involves other cognitive processes, such as thinking, analysis, interpretation, and understanding, which are completed mentally in a holistic way. This process can be best summarized by Confucius’s words: “He who learns but does not think, is lost. He who thinks but does not learn is in great danger” (as cited in Waley, trans. 1938, p. 91). Learning and thinking are intertwined, and they are operating sometimes simultaneously and sometimes alternately during a long period of time, which will result in ultimate understanding. “By finding, for analysis, the right ambiance, the right moment, by reading and rereading the accounts, by deep thinking, then understanding creeps forward” (Stake, 1995, p. 73).
Strategy of Data Analysis

The form of analysis that I preferred, at the practical level, comes from different authors. I followed their suggestions or methods in an eclectic way. According to Stake (1995), there are two analytic strategies or methods as to how researchers arrive at new meanings about cases, both of which this case study relied on: (a) direct interpretation of the individual instance and (b) aggregation of instances until something can be said about them as a class. In intrinsic qualitative case studies, direct interpretation will overshadow the other strategy (Stake, 1995). Accordingly, I spent most of the time doing direct interpretation.

For one thing, based on the fundamental differences between Western and Chinese philosophy, direct interpretation is a natural method to the intuitive Chinese way of thinking, because “there is much art and much intuitive processing to the search for meaning” (Stake, 1995, p. 72). For another, “qualitative advocates such as Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln (1982) and Elliot Eisner and Alan Peshkin (1990) place high priority on direct interpretation of events” (Stake, 1995, p. 40). It was Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) paradigm of constructivism that led me to find the similarities between Chinese thought and this paradigm and eventually choose a constructivist paradigm to guide this study. The reason for direct interpretation is self-evident: If the researcher has enough knowledge about the case and the culture, she or he will understand what is to be analyzed immediately through direct interpretation in a meaningful way; otherwise, the more systematic and complicated the analysis is, the farther away it is from the real
meaning. Simply put, in essence, strategies of analysis per se are not crucial—the researchers themselves are.

Obviously, direct interpretation was the mainstay strategy used in my analysis. However, “even with intrinsic case study, the caseworker sequences the action, categorizes properties, and makes tallies in some intuitive aggregation,” according to Stake (1995, p. 74). So, to structure the analysis, I followed the three stages of qualitative data analysis suggested by LeCompte (2000), based on my own understanding and modification. The three stages include the item stage; the pattern stage; and the structural stage.

The item stage of analysis. There are three steps in the item stage: tidying up; finding items; and creating stable sets of items.

Tidying up. The first step is to tidy up. According to LeCompte (2000), this is “an absolutely necessary first step to coding and analyzing data” (p. 148). In this respect, I made copies of all the data collected and reviewed the main research question and two sub questions.

Finding items. The second step is “finding items” in data sets, a process that “resembles sifting and sorting, somewhat analogous to sifting flour to remove weevils” (LeCompte, 2000, p. 148). Items, or “units of analysis,” which are relevant to the research question(s), “are the specific things in the data set that researchers code, count, and assemble into research results” (p. 148). “[The] systematic process of looking for frequency, omission, and declaration” is recommended in this stage (LeCompte, 2000, p. 148).
In this study, items were identified according to this process, accompanied by reading and re-reading the data.

**Creating stable sets of items.** Step three of the item stage consists of creating stable sets of items. After the initial items are identified, they must be organized into themes or categories. “Categories should reflect the purpose of the research. In effect, categories are the answers to your research question(s)” (Merriam, 1998, p. 183). “The ‘heart’ of data analysis in qualitative research is coding, a process that results in the data being organized into various categories” (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996, p. 143). Strauss and Corbin (1990) contended that coding “represents the operations by which data are broken down, conceptualized, and put back together in new ways. It is the central process by which theories are built from data” (p. 57). Thus, through coding, I organized the collected data into categories which were meaningful.

I developed my own coding system to organize the data, following the steps suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1992): searching through the data for regularities, patterns and topics that the data cover; writing down words and phrases, which are the “coding categories,” to represent these patterns and topics. At the same time, the “coding families” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 167) served as a very useful guide in helping me conceive how to develop the coding categories and how to conceptualize the kinds of meaningful categories that might emerge at a more concrete level. These coding families include setting/context codes, definition of the situation codes, perspectives held by subjects, subjects’ way of thinking about people and objects, process codes, activity...
codes, event codes, strategy codes, relationship and social structure codes, methods codes, and pre-assigned coding systems.

This study focused on the literacy-related human environment and activities the case experienced during the process of becoming an early reader; thus people were the essential element with regard to time and place. I used the understanding I had achieved for beginning the coding process. As a result, two very broad codes were created: literacy-related background of the case’s main caretakers and the case’s literacy-related interactive activities. Developing broad codes in the initial coding process for purpose of organizing the massive amount of data collected is a desirable strategy, according to Bogdan and Biklen (1998). Listening, speaking or conversation, and reading-related activities, based on the case’s chronological age, were put under the broad code of literacy-related interactive activities. For example, from birth to one year of age, the case usually just listened and few words were spoken. With the passage of time (e.g., age), conversation would be increased, and listening, although ongoing and simultaneous with speaking and conversation, would not be stressed. All data collected were put under these broad codes.

The pattern stage of analysis. In the second stage, called the pattern stage of analysis, the immediate aim is to create patterns. That is, “once the categories are identified, the analysis proceeds by looking for patterns or relationships and then deciding what is important and how it will be conveyed to different audiences” (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996, p. 144). The overall aim of this stage is for the whole picture to emerge. Accordingly, in order to see the whole picture, I listed all the categories on large
pieces of paper and arranged them, based on their fitness and relatedness. In this way, patterns were identified. With the passage of time, more patterns became more salient.

**The structural stage.** The final stage is the structural stage in which patterns are grouped together and create structures, which will assist in the description of the whole phenomenon. In terms of the language used in this study’s analysis, part of the data collected was written in Chinese, and I used Chinese in all of the thinking and analysis done in my mind. In so doing, not only was the analysis more efficient, it was more credible, because the essence of one’s native language would have been lost in the process of translation into another language.

To sum up, the analysis of this study started prior to the formal research, was interwoven with data gathering throughout the whole process of inquiry (Bogden & Biklen, 1998), and continued into the writing stage (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Overall, it was an ongoing and continuously developmental and ever-evolving process. Since the beginning of this study years ago, I continuously did analysis in my mind. It is not an exaggeration to say that I was married to this study. The data were added to or eliminated, organized, and de-organized, and regurgitated countless times in my mind while I was pondering the meaning of important instances and deeply searching for meanings in them, in addition to all the concentrated time doing formal analysis. Seemingly strenuous, arduous, and endless brooding efforts interspersed with unexpected yet predictable moments of “sudden enlightenment” pushed the process of data analysis forward in a zigzag, sometimes roundabout, way. I prepared a notebook, which I call “inspiration notebook,” to write down insights that came to me all of a sudden. In this process, new
meanings at various levels emerged momentarily, along with my understanding having been fleshed out and enriched at each stage and achieved at different levels, as the result of the passage of time during which my knowledge was assimilated and accumulated, regurgitated, digested, and internalized through thinking and learning. As a constructivist researcher, I was aware that my Chinese background, rooted deeply in Chinese culture and traditions, played an indispensable role in guiding, shaping and conditioning the entire process of data analysis.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness consists of four components proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) under the naturalistic paradigm or constructive paradigm: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Within the constructivist paradigm, these terms replace the usual positivist criteria for internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Throughout the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation, I followed the qualitative research strategies for ensuring the trustworthiness of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and I employed these criteria to evaluate the validity of the findings.

**Credibility**

Selection and bias, which will affect the credibility of the research results, are inevitable in the research process, so I tried to be aware of my tacit and formative theories (LeCompte, 2000), as well as make efforts to demonstrate credibility by considering whether my interpretation and representation of the realities conveyed by the informants were done in a meaningfully appropriate way. Guba and Lincoln (1983)
suggested that six strategies be utilized to achieve credibility: prolonged engagement and involvement at the research sites, persistent observation, peer debriefing, triangulation, referential adequacy materials, and member checks. Given the nature of this study, only some of the strategies appear to be applicable.

First of all, the strategy of prolonged engagement at the research site was quite obviously used in this study. Living and growing with all the key informants for years in the same family and having kept very close relationships with them while I was away in Korea and in the United States, several long phone calls every week during the almost nine years away from home, and intensive interviews guaranteed the prolonged engagement of this research. Second, persistent observation was extensively done when I was with my daughter over the years. Third, triangulation was applied. Multiple methods of data collection were used, such as the autobiography and the interview method.

**Transferability**

“The real business of case study is particularization, not generalization” (Stake, 1995, p. 8). Lincoln and Guba (1985) specifically re-conceptualized the notion of generalizability and shifted the terminology to transferability. However, “even intrinsic case study can be seen as a small step toward grand generalization (Campbell, 1975; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Vaughan, 1992)” (Stake, 2005, p. 448). “In intrinsic case study, researchers do not avoid generalization—they cannot…. They expect their readers to comprehend their interpretations but to arrive, as well, at their own” (p. 450). So, I believe that the decision as to whether or not this single case study meets the criterion of transferability should be a decision made by “the reader or user of the study” (Merriam,
1988, p. 177), who needs to draw her or his own conclusions, based on their own backgrounds.

**Dependability**

Dependability, known as “reliability,” generally pertains to the reproducibility of the research; that is, it “refers to the extent to which one’s findings can be replicated. In other words, if the study is repeated will it yield the same results?” (Merriam, 1988, p. 170). “Qualitative case study is highly personal research” (Stake, 1995, p. 135). “The unique combination of your field setting and you in it will never be replicated” (Wolcott, 2001, p. 93). However, in order to obtain dependable data, I employed various data collection techniques and ensured that the description of the data was as objective as possible, despite the highly subjective nature of a parent researcher. The most dependable way to obtain quality data is through establishing a harmonious relationship and achieving mutual trust with the participants, especially the key informant. This was precisely the central characteristic of this my study. However, in terms of the findings of this case study, this criterion depends on the age of the external observers—the readers—if they are Chinese because of the different characteristics in different stages of Chinese culture, due to the rapid changes in recent decades. As to readers from other cultures, due to different ways of thinking, they will distill their own meaning from it.

**Confirmability**

This criterion was applied in order to see if the data support the interpretations the researcher has made. Guba and Lincoln’s (1983) suggestions for the major techniques to achieve confirmability include triangulation, practicing reflexivity, and the confirmability
audit. In this study, triangulation and reflexivity were used. After identifying the categories or themes, I assessed whether the findings were grounded in the data by applying them back to the whole data, including the major part of the data with which I was very familiar, yet remained unanalyzed. Also, during the entire research process, I repeatedly thought reflectively in regard to identifying my own biases or preconceptions.

Wolcott’s (2001) down-to-earth advice and incisive comment touched on all of these criteria of trustworthiness and were taken into serious consideration in this study:

Qualitative inquiry is more than method, and method is more than fieldwork techniques. The more you dwell on the latter, the more you draw attention from your substantive report. Don’t try to convince your audience of the validity of your observations based on the power of a fieldwork approach. Satisfy readers with sufficient detail about how you obtained the data you actually used. You are the best source of information about the confirmability of what you have reported. If you level with your reader on that score, you will have fulfilled an obligation of careful reporting. But the potential of your contribution will be greatly extended if you provide adequate detail about how you proceeded with your analysis. The unique combination of your field setting and you in it will never be replicated, but discussing how you analyzed your data can be a great help to other researchers with comparable field notes, experiences, and data sets of their own. (p. 93)

Limitations of the Methodology

Although the usual limitation associated with “access” to informants is not a problem in this study, two salient limitations concerning the methodology are as follows:

1. I used some of the methods suggested in “personal experience methods” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994), such as autobiographical writing, and conversations. Also, all the dialogues included in this study were reconstructed from my memory. In all probability, “seen from different
worldviews and in different situations, the ‘same’ case is different’ (Stake, 2005, p. 460).

2. Translation from Chinese and English constitutes a limitation in this study. Although languages are inter-translatable, translation has limitedness.

**Ethics**

Everybody in my family was happy that I conducted a case study as to how we together created an early reader who, in turn, motivated everyone in the family to grow with her. This was a revolutionary event in the history of our family, although early readers are everywhere today. My family is glad that I am sharing our family stories with readers, and they were cooperative with data collection. However, I gave my daughter a pseudonym for confidentiality purposes.

**Plan for the Case Study**

In the next chapter, the findings of the case study are presented. An autobiography form and selected “good moments” which are considered relevant to the problem in the narrative form are used to “reveal the unique complexity of the case” (Stake, 1995, p. 63). These moments are basically arranged in chronological order because, to a qualitative researcher, “the understanding of human experience is a matter of chronologies” (Stake, 1995, p. 39). In the meantime, interpretation related to Chinese culture and the family is added wherever appropriate.
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

The goal of this qualitative intrinsic case study was to describe both the distal and the immediate literacy-related human environment one Chinese girl experienced in the process of becoming an early reader before entry into elementary school in China. My own daughter was the case and I was the researcher. The case study was mainly reported in the form of an autobiography. The major research question was: In the history of a particular Chinese family, what are the major human environmental factors that helped form the first early reader (i.e., reading before elementary school)? Based on this primary question, two sub-questions supported and provided greater specificity about the study’s direction: (a) What are the literacy-related experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and values of the people that directly and indirectly influenced the first early reader? (b) What are the immediate literacy-related environments and activities that the first early reader experienced at home?

This chapter presents the findings of the study. It begins with my personal account which tells the story of how I came to be passionate in early literacy and subsequently got involved in the case. What follows in response to the first specific research question is the background and literacy-related beliefs and attitudes of the six people in three generations in my family who are the case’s distal and immediate influence. To answer the second sub question, I present the findings about early literacy-related environments and
activities the case experienced at both her grandparents’ home and her own home. From the viewpoint that the findings “are not so much ‘findings’ as ‘assertions’” (Stake, 1995, p. 42), my “assertions” are threaded with what I selected as the “good moments,” based on my interpretations embedded in Chinese culture to “reveal the unique complexity of the case” (Stake, 1995, p. 63).

Re-emphasizing the Centrality of Interpretation

In the writing process, I tried hard to separate the case report and my interpretation of it for the purpose of providing the readers some space to arrive at their own understanding of the case. I was not successful in doing this, however, because I found that the selection of what to report from the massive amount of data was itself a process of my interpretation. Feeling the pervasive force of my omnipresent interpretation, I spent more time taking the nature of interpretation into serious consideration. Y.-L. Feng (1948) made the observation, “We today still speak of sunrise and sunset, even though we know very well that the sun itself actually neither rises nor sets” (p. 94). In the same vein, Stake (1995) made a similar comment in discussing interpretation in qualitative case studies: “Isn’t that the moon coming up? The moon is standing still while the earth tilts toward it, but we prefer the moonrise interpretations of our companions” (p. 101).

Science tells people the facts about the sun and the moon; people worship science, yet continue to prefer their own interpretations about the sun and the moon. This is one of the facets of the manifestation of the force of a people’s cultural tradition. The whole research process convinced me that “according to one highly respected writer on
qualitative studies, Fred Erickson, the most distinctive characteristic of qualitative inquiry is its emphasis on interpretation” (Stake, 1995, p. 8) or its “centrality of interpretation” (p. 42).

**Interpretation Conditioned by Tradition**

The aim of a qualitative intrinsic case study is to understand the case (Stake, 1995). Understanding means one can interpret in a particular way, and as human beings, we are always interpreting in the process of trying to understand. “Understanding and interpretation are indissolubly bound up with each other” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 360).

According to the argument of philosophical hermeneutics, with hermeneutics being “understood as the theory of interpretation” (S. Gallagher, 1992, p. ix), tradition is not something that is separable to us (Gadamer, 1975). “Understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one’s subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition, in which past and present are constantly fused” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 258). Traditions “shape what we are and how we understand the world (S. Gallagher, 1992, p. 87). Simply put, tradition is “a living force that enters into all understanding” (S. Gallagher, 1992, p. 87).

Then a question that will naturally ensue is, How does one define “tradition?” In his book titled *China’s Cultural Tradition*, Bodde (1957) began with the definition of the two words, “culture,” and “tradition” from *Webster’s International Dictionary*:

*Culture*: “The complex of distinctive attainments, beliefs, traditions, etc., constituting the background of a racial, religious, or social group.” (p. 1)
Tradition: “Any belief, custom, way of life, etc., which has its roots in one’s family or racial past; an inherited culture, attitude, or the like.” (p. 1)

Without spending time distinguishing the two words, the author just put them together by exploring China’s cultural tradition. Obviously, these two words are intertwined and very similar in both denotation and connotation, although the denotation of the word, tradition, is more focused on its roots in one’s family.

In his book, *Hermeneutics and Education*, S. Gallagher (1992) wrote,

We will refer to the hermeneutical operation of tradition as having an “anterior” relation to the interpreter. We always find ourselves with a past that does not simply follow behind, but goes in advance, defining the contexts by which we come to interpret the world. Despite the fact that traditions operate for the most part “behind our backs,” they are already there, ahead of us, conditioning our interpretations. (p. 91)

“To interpret means precisely to use one’s own preconceptions so that the meaning of the text can really be made to speak for us” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 358). One’s own preconceptions, which are remarkably tenacious, derive from one’s cultural traditions. As a result, the interpretation in this study will inevitably be conditioned by Chinese cultural traditions. At the same time, it will be restricted by my limited scope of knowledge about Chinese cultural tradition. I am sure that “seen from different worldviews and in different situations, the ‘same’ case is different” (Stake, 2005, p. 460).

**Entry to the Field: Encountering the Zero Project**

**My First Day of Elementary School**

“Today, I have enrolled you in the school and changed your ‘milk name,’ Hongling, into your school name, Shuping. Now your name is Zhang Shuping. You will
learn how to write it in school soon.” This was what my father told me one night in the summer of 1974. I did not hear my new name mentioned again until the first day of school. I was going to become an elementary school student in about a month. I had a strange feeling that I was suddenly given a new name. As usual, I nodded and did not ask why, and my father did not explain.

It seemed that children in the neighborhood wished to become proud elementary school pupils at that time. We admired the beautiful red scarves around their necks. I had tried to put on my sister’s red scarf many times, but I wanted to have my own.

On September 1, 1974, I got up early. Carrying my long-prepared dark blue cloth bag, I was sent to school by my father. The school was in our neighborhood, and it took us about three minutes to get there. I was assigned to Class 1 of the four classes in Grade 1. There were 58 students in our class. Our class teacher’s last name was Zhang, so we called her Teacher Zhang. After we all arrived, she began to call the name roll. When my name was called, I did not hear it. She looked at me and said, “Zhang Shuping, why didn’t you answer when I called your name?” Later on, I knew that she already knew my name. My new name was not familiar to me, and I did not feel that I was Zhang Shuping at all. After the roll call, it was time to be assigned seats. We were asked to stand in two lines, one line for boys and one for girls, and from left, the tallest, to right in descending order, according to our height. And then, one boy and one girl, this time beginning from the right, that is, from the shortest pupil in each line, would share one long bench and one long table. After the assignment of seats, the teacher began to distribute the text books. After that, she began to speak. I did not remember what she said. Then we heard the
jarring bell ring, signaling the end of the first class. Teacher Zhang said, “Class is over.”

At that point, not understanding how the classes were scheduled, the twin sisters from my class and I left for home together, hand in hand, because we lived close to each other.

This was my first day of school. The next day I knew that I had, in effect, “played truant” unwittingly with the twin sisters. I did not know my name, nor did I know the routine of school. I could not recognize any characters, nor could I write any.

**A Frustrating Chinese Test as a Fourth Grader**

I liked school very much because everything was easy for me; I was good at everything done at school and became popular. However, as a 4th grader, I began to wonder for the first time in my life, at a more or less conscious level: Why am I not a good reader? That was the beginning of my long-standing exploration, which has eventually led to this study.

Therefore, it is not too big an exaggeration to say that since the day after a Chinese test as a 4th grader, I began my exploration, led by a hunch, an indefinable inner light. This was the first Chinese test that included some materials that were not covered in our textbooks. I remember very clearly that in one section we were asked to fill in the blanks with five adjectives to modify the word “sun”; in another section, we were asked to read a passage and then provide short answers or something like that. I could only fill in two adjectives we had learned in our Chinese textbook. As for the passage, I did not understand too much. As a result, I did not get a very good grade, unlike other times when all the materials in the test were what we had learned in the textbook. So it was for the first time since my entry into elementary school that I consciously felt frustrated.
because I began to feel that school was difficult. As a matter of fact, I had no real
perception whatsoever with reference to the level of difficulty of that particular test.
Nevertheless the unsavory feeling lingering in my memory seemed to afflict me on and
off, so much so that it gradually formed a huge question mark in my mind: Why am I not
a good reader and how do I become a better one? Sometimes this question was dormant
and sometimes it was active, impelling me to search for the answer.

Beginning Exploration

Ever since then, I have never ceased from exploring the answer to this question,
silently and single-handedly. My immediate response was to blame myself: I did not
work hard enough. This answer was immediately confirmed by the eight big characters
by Chairman Mao that read, “Study hard and make progress every day,” which were
printed on a banner put up above the big blackboard but under the big portrait of
Chairman Mao, who smiled at us in the front of our classroom. Our goal was to be
Chairman Mao’s good students. This instilled in me higher motivation to work harder,
because I deeply believed that if I worked harder, I would be a better reader. Immediately,
numerous hard-working exemplars came to my mind and stimulated me to work harder.
However, it seemed that I did not know how to work harder and what this term really
meant, except that I should do my homework in a more conscientious way. Our Chinese
teacher, Teacher Zhang, often told us that we should read some extracurricular books and
copy the good sentences in them in a notebook, so that we could use them in our future
composition writing. I promptly prepared a notebook with a beautiful plastic cover,
because the teacher said it was a good method to enlarge our vocabulary and improve our
writing. Our teacher often reminded us of the common Chinese saying that “if you read and are very familiar with the three hundred Tang dynasty poems, you can come up with writing something like poems, even if you do not know how to write poems.” Sometimes in writing compositions, I consciously felt the innermost strong craving to express some good ideas I thought I had, but could not come up with enough expressions for them. This method would definitely help me. In addition, I deeply felt my strong liking for the beauty of the Chinese language and adamantly determined to become a writer when I grew up. But as to finding some books besides our textbooks to read outside the class, it sounded to me like a new concept. I did not have any extracurricular books at home. Anyway, I began to work harder, because I understood the term and took the teacher’s advice. However, with the increase of grade levels, similar unsatisfying reading experiences continued, obviously independent of what I thought of as my hard work and my benign wish to be a good reader.

I have kept this question and this unpleasant feeling to myself and have never asked publicly about it or shared with others. Or, to be honest, I was neither willing nor thought it necessary to share until today, when I consciously tried, in answer to the initial research question in a broad sense, to trace my literary-related experiences and attitudes back to their origin and source. My goal was to understand why I had such an abiding, never wavering, life-long passion for the topic of early literacy and why I had such a fixed determination to cultivate my daughter into an early reader, so much so that eventually I unyieldingly insisted on writing a dissertation on it.
In retrospect, the reason that I was unwilling to share with others about my frustrating question was due to my growing vanity after I entered elementary school. It tantalized me to keep the impression of my being a good and popular student in other people’s eyes in our school. I did not know why I had always been in the spotlight since entry into elementary school for the merits I was born with, or nurtured with, that seemed much better than those of many of my peers. As luck would have it, these merits of mine were highly valued in elementary school: I spoke good *putonghua*; my handwriting was much better than others, from the very first time we learned to write Chinese characters or Arabic numbers, so that my homework was often held up as a model to other classmates in the grade; and I seemed to have an ear for music, so I could discriminate tones others could not and sang songs with accurate pitches and was naturally active in music performance; and I seemed to be cut out for drawing, so that I won first prize in the citywide drawing competition and contributed a lot to our classroom wall paper. Besides, I excelled in almost every kind of game girls played at recess. As a result, I was selected as the vice-president of the school as a third grader and became the president as a fifth grader. Simply put, since entry into elementary school, I was labeled as a “good student” and twice every year got the award of “three-good-student” (translated verbatim): a well-rounded student who excelled morally, intellectually, and physically—three aspects of development prescribed by the national educational guidelines. In many elections, my classmates would just magically elect me by naming me and raising their hands. Reminiscent of my childhood school years, I often try to understand why these
achievements, which were admired by other students, often came to me. I find that the following statements by Zang (2000) might offer some clue:

In the Mao era most high ranking and middle ranking cadres were from North China and spoke Mandarin. They held high prestige in society. Speaking Mandarin well helped raise one’s status. A child who spoke Mandarin was often assumed to come from a cadre family. In a sense, this was a rather accurate predictor. Children of the middle class families were more likely to speak Mandarin than those of the lower class families. Mandarin, the official language, was also the language their parents spoke with them at home. Their parents were employed in government bureaus, schools, hospitals and other important state agencies where Mandarin was regularly used. (p. 53)

Most lower class parents had limited knowledge of Mandarin and speaking it was not essential to their employment. Unlike middle class children, lower class children had access to Mandarin only in school. They, commonly without radios at home, seldom heard Mandarin used since their parents and playmates conversed only in local dialects. (p. 53)

Although I find it difficult to classify myself based on the rankings and classes described above, one factor seems to have been the reason for my popularity: language. Since entry into elementary school, we began to learn to speak putonghua. I could speak very standard putonghua without any local accent, so I was often selected to make, or rather, read aloud speeches on behalf of the whole class or school. All this often put me in the limelight, which I did not like at heart. I often felt that I was just pushed into the spotlight without choice or thinking. Oftentimes, I felt a kind of awkwardness and uneasiness when I stood in front of the class or in front of the whole school, performing my assigned task.

However, these merits of mine, valued at school, always made my parents proud, and I could see the pride in my father’s face at parents’ meetings. I was, of course, proud
of being able to make my parents proud of me. Without a doubt, I believe I wanted to keep this honorable halo and remain in this category of reputation.

It was all these effortless laurels that seemed to help conceal what I thought was my biggest weakness—reading, the aspect that I truly wanted to be good at. However, the biggest concealer was the particular time period when I was in elementary school. It was 1974, two years before the ending of the 10-year Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

In terms of school life, after discussing the high and honorable prestige teachers had enjoyed in Chinese history in ancient times, Ashmore and Cao (1997) described the social status educators had and the conditions of secondary schools and universities in the Cultural Revolution:

This tone of high respect [for teachers] was the rule for most of China’s history until the late 1960s. Then, during the 10-year Cultural Revolution (1966-76), the rise of the bureaucratic elite prompted a decline of respect for educators. Universities and secondary schools were closed for some of the period; intellectuals were dismissed, killed, persecuted, or sent to labor in the countryside; the publication of scientific, artistic, literary, and cultural periodicals ceased; and the Red Guards attacked writers, artists, and educators. The ideology of political correctness destroyed the intellectual status. (p. 7)

Nonetheless, in the elementary school I attended, teachers were the authority and were highly respected. My parents, like other parents, often told us, “Listen to what your teachers say at school and be a good child.” That is to say, he who listens to teachers is a good student. I was one of them. But I do remember that for a period of time, all the classes in the afternoon were cancelled. There was little homework and we did not need to take any exams. What we did instead for mid-terms and finals was to write a short self-evaluation, and teachers would write their evaluation for each student on the grades.
report card. As students, we loved this golden time! Besides the classes in the morning, we participated in parades, shouting slogans; attended criticism meetings at which Confucius and some names of the then national leaders were the targets; organized small groups to study the Selected Works of Chairman Mao; sang revolutionary songs; performed plays in praise of the workers, peasants and soldiers; worked in our school-run factories; and visited and labored on farms. Looking around, political slogans were on the walls; reading the newspapers, political articles were everywhere; listening to the radio, political rhetoric came to our ears. I read, but did not understand; I listened, but did not hear. To borrow a line from T. S. Eliot’s poem, I “had the experience but missed the meaning” (Eliot, 1943a, stanza 2, para. 7)

Under these circumstances, whether you were a good reader or not did not seem a concern nor important. What was important was whether you were actively participating in all the school activities.

**Practical Literacy-Related Experiences**

Laozi said, “A whirlwind does not last a whole morning, nor does a rainstorm last a whole day” (as cited in Chan, trans. 1963, p. 151). Later in elementary school, that is, in 1976, the Cultural Revolution ended. One year later, the College Entrance Examinations resumed and knowledge began to be valued again. The radio stations began to broadcast educational programs, of which a series on classical Chinese literature was particularly popular. Everybody loved Liu Lanfang, a woman presenter on the radio, who adapted several of the classical novels into easier *baihua* and used her charismatic voice to attract the audiences, young and old. In 1979, we listened to “The Biography of Yue Fei,” a
national hero in the Song dynasty, adapted by Liu Lanfang, and it became a sensation in the whole country. I was one of her loyal listeners.

The lecturers over the radio adapted a number of classical novels to the easier language and presented them in such a vivid and attractive way that I reveled in listening to them. I would miss anything else as long as I could sit down in front of the radio from 6:30pm to 7:00pm everyday and listen and was carried away. The usual textbook-ending sentence of each half-hour program was always like this: If you would like to know what happened, please listen to our next program tomorrow. This magic wording filled me with imagination. Each and every single day passed so slowly because of the sweet and hopeful process of waiting for this half-hour program. I became addictive to those stories and would think about them repeatedly.

This practical and memorable experience seemed to offer some clue to my long-standing question of why I was not a good reader and how I could become a better one. One palpable advantage emanating from listening to these programs was that I suddenly felt I became more knowledgeable, in the sense that my vocabulary was enlarged, and my understanding of them deepened. Sometimes I could use the diction I heard to enrich my writings in school. As a result, reading materials in the tests with similar vocabulary became easier. I became aware that being a good reader was connected not so much with the textbooks we read in class as with the relevant knowledge I obtained out of class, such as from these radio programs. Motivated by this unprecedentedly fresh feeling, for the first time I began to look for extracurricular books to read outside the class. I could clearly feel my progress in reading comprehension after I read even one extracurricular
book. I felt that the more I read, the more connections I could make, both in reading comprehension and in composition writing. Somehow, the number of books I read was very limited, and my progress was not as rapid as I imagined. This new hobby, reading extracurricular books, seemed to resist becoming an integral part of my pastime as I had wished. I had a strong wish to read, but when I sat down, I had difficulty sitting down and reading for very long. I did not seem to have developed the habit of reading. I often made book-reading plans and hoped that I could sit down quietly for some time every day to read books, but these plans were seldom implemented. It was not the lack of time but the lack of habit.

Before I could explore more on how to be a better reader, I began to spend all my extracurricular time, after entering middle school, developing my music interest in the orchestra, playing the violin first and the traditional Chinese musical instrument, called zhong ruan, later on, after I transferred to another middle school. I was lucky to be in these two middle schools at that time, because few middle or high schools had orchestras. The schools that were associated with the Railway Bureau, an important state-run institution, had better facilities. Every afternoon, I would go to the music room to practice as soon as the last class ended. The small school orchestra had frequent performances here and there until my last year in high school, prior to the College Entrance Examinations, at which time I had to quit the orchestra to concentrate on the academics in order to go to college. But I continued to learn to play guitar by myself, listening to the guitar lectures on TV. I could not resist my strong interest to learn music. Playing a
musical instrument was the first thing I did in my life that I feel I really had a real passion for.

Time flew by. Objectively speaking, I became a successful person in people’s eyes, according to the invisibly prevalent social standard in the 1980s and 1990s: I went to college, majoring in English language and literature, a desirable major for girls at that time, due to the open-door policy, and ended up being a faculty member in the same university, mainly because of my academic excellence. Working in the university was an admirable profession in China in terms of social status and salary, because being in the ivy tower is a symbol of being a scholar. At a personal level, I loved the job very much, because teaching is rewarding and is a job that could bring out the best in me. In the meantime, I was realizing my father’s dream. Making my parents proud of me was the biggest filial piety I could perform. However, the unsatisfying reading experiences that only I myself felt continued to nag at me. It was quite obvious to me by now that hard work was not the primary reason for not being a good reader. Then, what was the primary reason?

**Waking Up**

Shortly after working, I met my husband, got married in 1991, and became pregnant in 1993. The pregnancy was not a planned one. In retrospect, my experience at that time can be vividly captured by the following paragraph in Gardiner and Kosmitzki’s (2008) book, titled *Lives Across Cultures*:

Kenkel (1985) puts the transition to parenthood in perspective when he states that “one of the significant features with regard to the parent role is a general lack of
preparation for it…. Related to [this]…is the fact that the transition…is abrupt [and]… is largely irrevocable” (pp. 455-456). (p. 237)

On one hand, I was very excited about having a child; at heart, my ideal was to have many, because I love children. On the other hand, I somehow became very worried, because my gut feeling told me that I was not ready psychologically to raise a child. This child did not seem to come at the right time. With mixed feelings, I was anxiously and hesitantly passing each day on my path to becoming a mother while I continued to work. I felt I lost the ability to control the direction of my ship in life in a vast and fearful ocean.

The day that changed my life and initiated this study came when I was about three months pregnant. After the Thursday afternoon faculty meeting, I was walking towards the front gate of campus and would take the bus home. As usual, I bought the local evening newspaper at the newspaper stand just outside the campus gate. Across the street was the bus stop. I took the newspaper, crossed the street and got on the bus. I found a seat at the back and began to leaf through the newspaper. My attention was caught by a short article in the corner titled the “Zero Project.” This article advocated for quality early childhood education, which should start from fetal education, and early character recognition and early reading were considered the foundation and prerequisite for one to develop into a good reader.

The concept of age zero, that is, the fetal period, was new to me. However, all of a sudden, this project seemed to have opened a small window in the little dark room in which I had been searching for the answer over these years to the question I had had
since fourth grade. The answer was simple: I was almost eight years late—eight years late in terms of the necessary early literacy-related experiences that are assumed to be the foundation for a good reader at school, according to the Zero Project. The critical period of the first few years was irreversible! The project made me recall my childhood years before entry into elementary school, which seemed to confirm the truth of the ideas in the project. My sudden understanding of all this at that time could be vividly described by the following lines:

One mother, a former teacher, considered early reading experiences to be crucial for school success: “Being read to is so essential…’it’s just a part of growing up. And if kids miss out on it, they really miss a lot, and I don’t think it can really be made up. You just can’t catch up.” (Cochran-Smith, 1984, p. 55)

Yes, I felt for some time that I could not catch up and become a good reader as I desired. I became melancholy. Sometimes, acute awareness of something is a vexation and an ineffable agony. At the same time, however, I became excited, because at that moment I felt I woke up. My waking up came at the right time, although I did wish that I could have come across the Zero Project earlier. I suddenly became a confident and proud would-be mother. I felt I had regained control of my ship in life in the vast and beautiful, rather than fearful, ocean. My previous hesitation and fear about raising a child were all gone. I had missed the early literacy experiences that were of paramount significance; I would not let my coming child miss out on them. I would cultivate my child into an early reader and start her education from now on, the fetal stage. My path to becoming a mother suddenly became smoother and brighter. There was nothing to fear, only everything to hope for. I could not help sharing with my family my exciting
discovery, which seemed to have started a revolution in my mind. But how would my family respond? That night was the beginning of my physical entry into the field.

**Passing on the Idea**

Actually, accompanying the short article in the newspaper, titled the “Zero Project,” was a short advertisement of a series of books related to this project. Also, there was another brief introduction to fetal education and the device that was used for communication with the fetus. The article was too short to convey detailed information about the whole project. So I felt I had to read the series of books that elaborated on it. I had to have them! But the problem was I had to get the books in Wuhan city in Southern China where this project was originated. Fortunately, I found a friend in the provincial library who would be taking a business trip to that city. Days later the books arrived! I read them at one sitting, not in detail of course. They struck a chord with me and seemed to have activated all my previous experiences, doubts, and thoughts.

Instinctively, I lent these little books to my best friend, whose daughter was about two years of age. She changed, too, she told me. Later on she enrolled in the college of education to get her master’s degree. And then, my best friend lent the books to another mother. In no time, the books were nowhere to be found. I think these books were worth losing in this way, with the only hope that as many mothers as possible had read them and changed and passed the message onto other mothers, and hopefully fathers. No matter where these little books had been circulated, they were doing their loyal service to transmit ideas, life-changing ideas. Without being feministic, I, in a sense, concur with the saying that “Educate a man and you educate an individual. Educate a woman and you
educate a family” (Cripps, n.d., p. 1). I believe many a parent who read those books could not help concurring with the author, D. Q. Feng, when he said that a parent might have had a regrettable childhood, but the childhood of his or her child must not be so. In my case, I cannot call it regret, because nobody can choose when and where to be born and into what family. Actually, I did not have anything to regret about my happy and free childhood in that special historical moment, but when I became aware that I lacked something I deemed precious and important in life, in this case, early literacy experiences that were the indispensable foundation to being a better reader in life, I, as a mother, like all mothers in the world, had only one wish: I wanted my child to have it. I did not want my child to miss out on what I thought were the significant things that were denied me. That is why I was so inspired by the Zero Project and so highly motivated and stubbornly adamant in trying to put the ideas in the project into the practice of rearing my child, making her an early reader, and helping her to lay the foundation for her later education in order for her to have a fulfilled and happy life. My dream, at a more concrete level, was to make my daughter into one of those early readers reported in connection with the Zero Project, because experience told me that being a good reader was one way of having a happy life. I would keep on trying, no matter what obstacles were to be encountered there in my family.

A Better Understanding of “Knowing Ming”

In retrospect, the “I,” at that time, seemed to have felt the “oughtness” of my action (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 42). I deeply believed, with every cell of my body, that I would loyally follow the methods in the Zero Project without thinking whether the
method would take effect or not, similar to what the Confucianists said: “Doing for nothing.” Doing for nothing was an idea that was derived from Confucianism’s basic conception of *yi*, righteousness (Y.-L. Feng, 1948), the highest spiritual state of mind that Confucianists pursue (He, 1996a). I often think that Confucius set too high a goal for people, and the invisible pressure is always out there. But on second thought, a high goal is necessary in the sense that it can motivate you to try your best and give you hope to persevere.

My state of mind and determination at that time showed that I seemed to have a better understanding of the Confucian concept of “knowing Ming,” as explained by Y.-L. Feng (1948):

About himself, Confucius said, “If my principles are to prevail in the world, it is *Ming*. If they are to fall to the ground, it is also *Ming*” (Analects, XIV, 38). He tried his best, but the issue he left to *Ming*. *Ming* is often translated as Fate, Destiny, or Decree. To Confucius, it meant the Decree of Heaven or Will of Heaven; in other words, it was conceived of as a purposeful force. In later Confucianism, however, *Ming* simply means the total existent conditions and forces of the whole universe. For the external success of our activity, the cooperation of these conditions is always needed. But this cooperation is wholly beyond our control. Hence the best thing for us to do is simply to try to carry out what we know we ought to carry out, without caring whether in the process we succeed or fail. To act in this way is “to know *Ming*.” To know *Ming* is an important requirement for being a superior man in the Confucian sense of the term, so that Confucius said: “He who does not know *Ming* cannot be a superior man” (Analects, XX, 2). (p. 45)

Thus to know *Ming* means to acknowledge the inevitability of the world as it exists, and so to disregard one’s external success or failure. If we can act in this way, we can, in a sense, never fail. For if we do our duty, that duty through our very act is morally done, regardless of the external success or failure of our action. (p. 45)

As a result, we always shall be free from anxiety as to success or fear as to failure, and so shall be happy. This is why Confucius said, “The wise are free from doubts; the virtuous from anxiety; the brave from fear” (Analects, IX, 28). Or again, “The superior man is always happy; the small man sad” (VII, 36). (p. 45)
Confucius’ ideas never seemed so dear to me. It is so true that “Confucianism is...the philosophy of daily life” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 22). I needed them to justify theoretically what I thought I should do, although other people thought I was like an alien. I was determined to do what I thought I should do, with belief, confidence, passion, and hope.

**Seeking Understanding**

The response I got from my family, the moment I shared the Zero Project with them, the night I came across the project, was an antithesis to my thesis. I did not understand why, but I wanted to understand. Where were the sources of my family’s thoughts? Why could they not be awakened by the Zero Project as I was? Why did we have such huge differences of opinion in the same family? Why could they not agree with the ideas included in the project, as those parents or grandparents of the early readers had reported? There seemed to be more than meets the eye. D. Q. Feng (1990) said that his method could be applied to *every* child in *every* family! Why was this not possible in my family, even at the very beginning! No matter how many obstacles I came across, I had to do it. I felt this was something I ought to do, and I would do it adamantly. Later on, I began to think more deeply on this topic and to explore what were the major factors, both positive and negative, in the process of making my child into an early reader. The questions led me deeper into research on this process.

At first, I did not even know where to begin to understand why my family was opposed to the Zero Project. Conflicts and contradictions ensued then gradually became dialogues. The process of my “data” collection began to be enriched from these
conversations. From then on I began to shift from my focus on why I was not a good reader to trying to understand the seemingly simple yet complex process of cultivating the first early reader in my family. Gradually I came to understand that the development of an early reader was not accidental; it took generations to accomplish, at least this was true in my family.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, in ancient China, one of the most important factors in the education of a child was “environment,” with great emphasis on the people around the child. Obviously, in order to understand the case studied in this study, my daughter, understanding the people around her in the family was the most crucial step. They are the people who created the environment for and made contributions to the formation of the first early reader in my family.

The Literacy-Related Experiences, Attitudes, Beliefs, and Values of the Six People Who Directly and Indirectly Influenced the Case

So in response to the first of the two specific research questions, which concerns the literacy-related experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and values of the people who directly and indirectly influenced the case, I present a detailed account of the background, literacy-related experiences, and beliefs concerning early literacy of the six people who constituted the case’s distal and immediate influence. I begin with the case’s indirect caretaker, my paternal grandmother, who influenced my parents and especially my father. Also, my paternal grandmother is a very important person in my life and has contributed a great deal to who I—the case’s most important direct caretaker—am today. In actuality, I could have traced even farther back into the past generations who influenced my
grandmother and go on and on. The main reason to start with my grandmother, in addition to the reasons stated above, is that it was with my grandmother and her children—my father’s generation—that the family’s migration from the rural areas to the cities began to take place. This represented an epoch-making event in my family’s history in which there was subsequently a series of changes at every level later on.

My Paternal Grandmother

My grandmother was born in 1911, the last year of the Qing dynasty, and died in 1980. By the time of my grandparents’ generation, my family (my family on my father’s side) had been farmers for generations.

Life in the rural area. According to Y.-L. Feng (1948), the geographic background of a people influences this people’s economic background. China being a continental country was the fundamental condition: As a continental country, agriculture is the means through which the Chinese people make a living. During the many, many years until 1840, at which time the feudal system was shaken by the Opium War, farmers made up an overwhelming majority of over 90% of the Chinese population (Ding, 2001). Even toward the mid-20th century, “the portion of the Chinese population engaged in farming is estimated at 75 to 80 percent” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 17). That is to say, China was still a farming society when the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949. So, there is a saying in China, literally translated as: We were all farmers or peasants if we count three generations back. The overwhelming majority of farmers were “the peasants who actually cultivated the land” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 18).
The four traditional classes of society in China. The distinction of the traditional social classes in China was stated by Y.-L. Feng (1948):

In the social and economic thinking of Chinese philosophers, there is a distinction between what they call “the root” and “the branch.” “The root” refers to agriculture and “the branch” to commerce. The reason for this is that agriculture is concerned with production, while commerce is merely concerned with exchange. One must have production before one can have exchange. In an agrarian country, agriculture is the major form of production, and therefore throughout Chinese history, social and economic theories and policies have all attempted “to emphasize the root and slight the branch.” (pp. 17-18)

The people who deal with the “branch,” that is, the merchants, were therefore looked down upon. They were the last and lowest of the four traditional classes of society, the other three being scholars, farmers, and artisans. (p.18)

In Bodde’s (1957) words, “According to Confucian theory, the four main classes of Chinese society were, in order of prestige, those of scholars, farmers, workers (artisan and laborers), and merchants” (p. 50). These four social strata were defined primarily on the basis of occupations (Zang, 2000). “We find in their [the farmers’ or the peasants’] high ranking a reflection of the intense concern with agriculture that has always marked the Chinese scene” (Bodde, 1957, pp. 51-52). So in China, “a family having ‘a tradition of studying and farming’ was something of which to be proud” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 18). Even today, the family having a college student in the rural areas is honored and respected. I often heard the villagers say to me when I was in my husband’s home, “Ping [my husband’s milk name] is the pride of our entire village.”

Early years. Referring to the characteristics of farmers, Y.-L. Feng (1948) wrote,

The way of life of the farmers is to follow nature. They admire nature and condemn the artificial, and in their primitivity and innocence, they are easily made content. They desire no change, nor can they conceive of any change (p. 26).
Not only is this a true portraiture of the life of all the farmers in China, it is also an apt description of my grandmother’s life and the life of the people before her generation in my family.

My grandmother was living in a time when major changes in the structure of Chinese society took place in the first half of the 20th century. It was a turning point in Chinese history and a transition from a traditional China to a modern China. As stated in the literature review, large-scale Western influence continued, beginning around 1840. The 1911 revolution overthrew the last dynasty and the imperial system that had lasted for more than two thousand years in Chinese history was ended; a new Republic was founded in 1912. Since then, until 1949 when the People’s Republic was founded, China was ruled by the Nationalist government. During this time, the Communist party, which was established by a group of intellectuals in 1921, had a series of wars with the Nationalist party for power. Actually, “the period of 1912-1936 was the golden age of the Chinese bourgeoisie….However, industrialization was limited to a few light industries and failed to generate major changes in China’s overall economic structure” (Zang, 2000, p. 15). In the first 10 years of my grandmother’s life, the New Culture Movement took place, which reached its climax in the May 4th Movement, representing the awakening of the consciousness of the “individual” (Z. H. Li & Liu, 2009).

Foot binding. Women’s lives in China also began to change in the 20th century. One of the indications of the lower social status and power of women in traditional China was foot binding, a custom which began its spread in the Song Dynasty (Ebrey, 1990) and largely ended by the 1920s due to the influence of Western culture and the efforts of
anti-foot binding societies (M. Gallagher, 2001). Living in the rural area where changes were slower, following tradition was the way of life: My grandmother had her feet bound as a young girl.

As children, we were very curious about our grandmother’s bound feet and were too young to have any empathy whatsoever about the agony she experienced in the binding process. Out of curiosity, we tried every way and means to induce the story behind her foot binding when we siblings, in turn, prepared a basin of warm water to help her wash her feet every evening—one of the forms of filial piety we were assigned to perform by our parents since the time we could do it as long as our grandmother lived with us. But we were never successful. She just smiled her eternal smile, saying it was the tradition for girls in the old society and asking us not to make a big fuss over it. Such was my grandmother’s character; to use Confucius’s words, “不怨天，不尤人 [I do not ‘accuse Heaven, nor do I lay the blame on men.’]” (as cited in Waley, trans. 1938, p. 189).

Once I asked my parents why my maternal grandmother, who is about the same age as my paternal grandmother, did not have her feet bound. My father said,

The generations before your maternal grandmother were landlords, so they were better off and had education. Also, your maternal grandmother lived in the city and had a better life. At that time, due to the social changes, there were different opinions about young girls’ foot binding. Parents who had some education were more open-minded, and they could choose for their daughters whether to bind their feet or not.

Illiteracy. Before China’s large-scale encounter with Western culture in 1840, little attention was given to improving the educational level of the population as a whole, and education was only a privilege to the small minority of landowning families.
Although Western culture began to impact China beginning in 1840, and the Civil Service Examination system was abolished in 1905 “when the government tried to introduce a modern educational system” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 295), in the late 19th century, the estimated illiteracy rate in China was more than 95% (Kuo, 1915). Even in the early 20th century, the literacy rate was still less than 10% (Qian, 2009), and the education of girls only happened in the cities (M. Gallagher, 2001). Actually, at that time, even in some of the rich and educated families where girls had the opportunity to receive better education, they could not be educated with the boys. For example, Y.-R. Chao (1976) wrote that his “two female cousins were secluded in the inside courtyard and could not be placed in the same school with the boys” (p. 4). Even in the early years of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, 9 out of every 10 women were illiterate (L. Yang, 2010).

**Arranged marriage and remaining widowed.** My grandmother was married to my grandfather through an arranged marriage. This was prior to the 1950 Marriage Law that stated, “Women had equal rights to choose their own spouse” (M. Gallagher, 2001, p. 98). They had five sons. Two months after their fifth son was born, that is, in 1937, the beginning of the 8-year Anti-Japanese War, my grandfather died. My grandfather’s early death left my young grandmother with their five little sons: my eldest uncle at age 12, my fifth (youngest) uncle at about 2 months old, and my father, the fourth son, at about 2 years old. After my grandfather’s death, my grandmother remained a widow all her life. During the May 4th Movement, “Confucian family values were held responsible for China’s political and economic weaknesses” (Beauchamp, 2001, p. 150), and there was
“wave after wave of iconoclastic attacks against traditional Chinese culture focusing on the Confucian family since the May Fourth Movement” (Tu, 1998, p. 129). For example, Chen Duxiu “attacked many practices described in the Confucian Book of Rights, such as those pressuring widows to remain unmarried” (Beauchamp, 2001, p.151); but following tradition was my grandmother’s way of life.

**Gradually moving to the city.** The sudden death of my grandfather broke the balance of family life. At 12 years old, my eldest uncle began to go to the city to find work to help raise the family. Then my second eldest uncle, who was 2 years younger, joined him. More workers were needed in the city with the development of the country, as Zang (2000) wrote,

> The 1949 Communist Takeover marked the beginning of a government sponsored industrialization program and a concomitant rapid expansion of the urban work force during the 1950s and the 1960s….Concurrently, China’s urban population grew from less than 58 million in 1949 to more than 133 million in 1965. In other words, the proportion represented by urban residents increased from 10.6 percent in 1949 to 17.9 percent of the total population in 1966. (p. 23)

At around 18, my father went to the city. That was in 1958. Gradually, the whole family left the rural areas and has been living in the cities ever since. My grandmother lived, in turn, in each of her five sons’ families.

**My Parents**

My father was born in 1939, moved to the city in 1958, and met my mother who was born in the same year as my father and had been living in the city. They both experienced, in their first 10 years of life, the fearful and strenuous 8-year Anti-Japanese
War (1937-1945); WWII; and the third Civil War (1945-1949), which resulted in the running of the Nationalist Party to Taiwan and the liberation of China.

Reminiscing on his schooling, my father said,

Our hometown was liberated in 1948. I had only 1 year of schooling before liberation. The wars were going on, and the school in the village was not formal. After liberation, I continued to have schooling for another 5 years and graduated from elementary school in 1953. There were no middle schools in our village. If you wanted to continue schooling in the middle school, you had to go to the city. Living in the village, it was almost impossible for a family to support a child to go to the cities to school. So after elementary school, I began to stay at home and be a farmer until I was about 18 in 1958, the Great Leap. I came to the city and found work in the Railway Bureau, and there I met your mother. I had learned so much knowledge in school, and I just loved to go to school. I think being in school is the happiest time I have ever had. But due to family conditions, I had to stop.

My eldest aunt told me that my father was very good at abacus in school and was famous for this in the village, which laid the foundation for his becoming an accountant later on after being enlisted for several years in the navy. With good memories of school, pursuing further education became my father’s dream, and in time his children were to realize this dream.

My mother had the same education as that of my father and worked in the same place with him. When discussing the ideological changes in China from 1949 to 1976 under the leadership of Chairman Mao, M. Gallagher (2001) wrote:

The driving force of change during this period was the radical leadership group’s adherence to Marxist ideology, which states that women and men are equal, and that women were oppressed in the past because they were confined to the family and had no access to socially productive labor. (p. 98)

Therefore, “full employment for women was a major agenda item for the Communists when they took over in 1949” (M. Gallagher, 2001, p. 99). One year before my father
returned from the navy, my parents were married and their first child, my elder sister, was born in 1964. At that time, my mother had a full-time job and no time to take care of my sister. So after my sister was born, she had to be sent to my maternal grandparents’ home, where she stayed until she was old enough to go to kindergarten.

**Myself**

I was standing in front of the offices reading the big-character poster with some colleagues, when I felt a sudden excruciating pain. I think it was because you could not wait to come out reading the big-character poster, too. I was taken to the hospital. You were born. ---My mother

It was 1966. My twin was the unprecedented Cultural Revolution in Chinese history. This 10-year period was a historical decade of “relentless social upheaval in the People’s Republic of China” (Zang, 2000, p.1) and “the unprecedented cultural desert” (D. Q. Feng, 2005a, p. 6) during which traditional Chinese culture was completely destroyed as the “feudal poisonous tumor” (He, 1996b, p. 12) and Western culture was absolutely excluded as “imperial stuff” (p. 12). It was a period when the prevailing belief was, “The more knowledge you have, the more anti-revolutionary you are,” and “the illiterates are the most honorable” (D. Q. Feng, 2005a, p. 6).

My birth story was often repeated by my mother. The fact that she was reading the big-character poster was often used jokingly as a kind of sign that I would be the child who loved learning most and did well in school among the siblings and as a prognostication that I would be the first college student in my family, the first step for me to become a scholar in order to realize my father’s dream.
The big-character poster my mother was reading was an instrument for expressing the opinions of particular people, and it was a familiar phenomenon in the Cultural Revolution. Usually, these kinds of posters were written with brush and black ink on a large piece of paper and were displayed on walls. In my memory, they constituted a major part of the print in the environment. When I close my eyes, I can still see the big white papers with big black characters. The posters were like waterfalls on the walls. As to what was written on them or how to read those characters, I did not know. I never asked, nor was I read to or anything explained.

My mother told me that after I was born my paternal grandmother came to live with us to take care of me and became my main caretaker in the daytime when she went to work. My sister was still living with my maternal grandparents. Since the day I could remember, except for a short period of time during which I stayed in the kindergarten, my grandmother was my main caretaker.

**Memories of family before elementary school.** According to Zang (2000),

It is widely believed that during the traumatic period of 1966-1976, almost the entire population was victimized…. Most existing scholarship dealing with the Cultural Revolution focuses on former Red Guards and on those among the intellectual elite victimized by the social disorder. (p. 2)

Continuing, Zang recounted,

However, little is known about family life and political behavior of ordinary Chinese who were neither among the Red Guards nor political victims of the Cultural Revolution. They were the “silent majority.” Their stories may more accurately reflect Chinese society than the accounts of highly placed Chinese intellectuals with privileged access to Western academics with whom they are eager to share their traumatic experience. The Cultural Revolution experience of ordinary Chinese differs from that of the intellectual elite and even among
themselves there was great variation in family life and political participation during the period. (p. 3)

My family members were ordinary Chinese who belonged to the silent majority. As to the level of difference or variation between the experience of that particular historical moment in my family and the experiences of either “the intellectual elite” or other ordinary Chinese families, I doubt the existence of a standard measure. Somehow the depictions about the events in the Cultural Revolution suggest the picture of a boisterous ocean that has lost reasoning and sanity, roaring and howling, with turbulent, formidable waves devouring all it encounters. I could even hear the fierce sounds and see the black, gray, and dark blue colors. But all these only appear in my imagination, because I had no way whatsoever to connect this chaos with my childhood, although I was born like a twin of Cultural Revolution and grew with it until third grade.

In my memory, my family was a stable little boat anchoring in a peaceful harbor, undisturbed by this social upheaval recorded in history. Always optimistic and provident, my father was the spiritual leader and rational captain of our family ship. He was always making 1-year or 2-year plans for the future of our family and realized them step by step. Never did I see him lose hope. He seems to have inherited all the merits my grandmother had, especially her optimism, broadmindedness, empathy, and tolerance. Actually, optimism is regarded as one of the characteristic features of the Chinese, as Keightley (1990) explained:

Confucian optimism about the human condition was maintained even in the face of Confucius’s own failure to obtain the political successes that he needed to justify his mission. The optimism, both moral and epistemological, was a matter of deep faith rather than of shallow experience. (p. 51)
Confucius’ teaching that “和为贵 [It is harmony that is prized]” (as cited in Waley, trans. 1938) has always been my father’s mainly manifested principle for the family. He is a good practitioner of the common Chinese expression “家和万事兴 [If the family is harmonious, everything thrives].” As to harmony in the family, Tu (1998) said, “With a strong emphasis on family harmony as a social value, indeed a political asset, the Confucian husband is well disposed to exercise the art of compromise in domestic affairs” (p. 132). This is truly an apt description of my father, but the best I can say about this statement is that it is only a linear theoretical generalization of the Chinese husbands I have seen.

My mother was the physical caretaker, busy with preparing delicious meals and doing other chores as soon as she came home from work. She would stay up all night hand-making new clothes for each of us children before the Spring Festival. She was like the warm stove in winter that made the home cozy. What I really liked about her most was that, in contrast with my father, she never expressed any expectations for our academic achievement after we went to school. On this aspect, Hammer and Miccio’s (2004) comment was right:

All members of a culture, however, do not universally agree on the values of that culture (Rogoff, 1990), and variations will occur “because of differences in their genes, their family’s position in the community, their material resources and the chance circumstances in life” (Rogoff, 1990, p. 118). (p. 306)

As long as we were healthy and happy, my mother was happy. Living with my mother, there was no pressure whatsoever.
In short, I think I can say we had “严父慈母 [a strict father and a loving mother]” in terms of the common Chinese education model at home. My father was the decision maker and my mother was the follower. They were a good yin-yang match in terms of personality, so they seemed to be always in a harmonious relationship, despite the existence of some conflicts. Their loving relationship was the crucial factor to our harmonious family. Generally speaking, my parents practiced the traditional family role of “husband singing, wife accompanying” (Y.-R. Chao, 1976, p. 6). Ebrey’s (1990) comments are relevant here:

As a consequence, it became common to think that whether a family declined or prospered depended on hard work and managerial success [p. 205]….These attitudes toward the long-term rewards of cooperation and hard work for a family’s future came to form the core of what has sometimes been called Chinese “familism.” (p. 206)

By today’s standard, the material stuff at that time was not as rich, but through my parents’ hard work, frugality, and, what is most important, their harmonious relationship, the life of our family was peaceful and warm.

**My literacy-related activities before elementary school.** With my parents’ deep belief that education started with elementary school, it was not surprising that in the process of my trying to identify the “literacy-related” activities in my pre-elementary childhood years at home amongst the ocean of data, “speaking less” was one salient theme that emerged. Language did not seem to be the prominent motif in the connection among us, but actions were. Conversations were usually one way or “dictation action” between parents or grandparents and us children. They spoke, we listened. A child,
especially a girl who listened to her parents, was considered a filial one and a good one. Staying with my grandmother, my main caretaker during the day before I entered elementary school, I could not recall any particularly arranged literacy-rich activities by today’s standard. However, Confucian works embody “a very fruitful method of thinking. This method is simply to seek connections” (Cope-Kasten, 2001, p. 50)—a concept reflected in systems theory. In this sense, literacy is related to many known and unknown factors. For example, play is related to literacy development. Therefore, I could name my early literacy learning experiences as play-centered literacy curriculum, and the old adage that “play is children’s work” (Hoorn, Scales, Nourot, & Alward, 1999, p. iii) is an apt description of my childhood curriculum. Hoorn et al. (1999) wrote, “Each child is a developing whole--integrating competencies and skills through play. The child who is ‘just playing’ is, in fact, blending individual needs with cultural expectations” (p. iii).

_Whole-hearted play in the neighborhood._ In turns, my paternal grandmother lived in the homes of her five sons, all of whom were extremely filial to her. But she lived with my family most of the time since I was born, because my mother was the only one among all her five daughters-in-law who had a full-time job and was busy every day. Because both my eldest uncle and my father worked in the Railway Bureau, we lived in the same neighborhood assigned by the government. Railway Bureaus are important state-run institutions and therefore offer better benefits for their employees; so we had better housing in our neighborhood. The building we lived in was two-storied and red-bricked, and there were eight families in this one building. There were a series of similar buildings in the neighborhood, but there were some differences among the housing.
according to social ranking and prestige in the bureau based on many factors. At that time, my eldest uncle had a higher position than my father, as a cadre in the bureau, so he was given better housing by the government. His family’s house was bigger than ours in terms of living space; also they had a bigger front yard than ours and an additional backyard.

To take care of me, my grandmother would come to my home after eating breakfast at my uncle’s house every morning and stay with me during the daytime. After dinner at night at our home, she would go back to my uncle’s house to sleep. My grandmother never took me to a place far away from home due to her bound feet. Every morning, weather permitting, she would carry her small wooden stool and take me to play in the neighborhood among the buildings. She would sit with a group of other grandmothers or grandfathers from the neighborhood while a big group of children of different ages were playing together. When noon came she would say, “Ling [my milk name], let’s go home and have lunch.” She made the lunch. We ate together silently, except for some of her simple words, such as asking me to have more, while she added some food to my bowl. After lunch, I would play for a while and then she would say, “Ling, it’s time to take a nap.” She made the bed for me. In winter, she would put a hot water bag in my quilt; in summer, she would sit beside my bed, fanning me to sleep. After taking my nap, we would go out to play again, until my parents came home and supper was ready. After supper, my grandmother would go to my eldest uncle’s home, and I would continue to play until bedtime.
The neighborhood was my paradise and the paradise for a big group of children. It was our natural playground. There were at least two children in each family; usually there were three, four or five. There seemed to be a grandma or grandpa in each family. The neighborhood was like one big family. There were many grandmas, grandpas, uncles, and aunts to whom we could turn for help when needed. We did not know their names; Grandmother, Grandfather, Uncle and Aunt were their names to us. With them around, we played whole-heartedly every day.

Actually, I did not know that my grandmother had her own last name and first name until I was in elementary school and was required to fill in a form about the “family component,” which would show your social class at that time. In my mind, her name seemed to be Grandmother Zhang, Aunt Zhang, or just Grandmother, depending on the caller’s age compared to my grandmother’s age. As a child, I never thought of asking her name. How could children ask an adult’s name! We all knew it was disrespectful to do so. Baker (1979) wrote about this aspect:

Parents’ names were taboo and, if they happened to be common ones, considerable ingenuity was required to avoid their use. Sometimes, where avoidance of the word was impossible, a filial child would deliberately mispronounce or miswrite the word. (p. 103)

Later, I learned that nobody, except for my parents, knew my grandmother’s name. To me, she did not seem to have or need to have a name. Isn’t Grandma a cozy name? To me, “Grandmother” was a name. Every child in the community called her Grandmother, just as we did. Even the children whom we met for the first time called her Grandmother. Grandmothers were a very important member in the families. They were
kind and warm and their major job was to look after their grandchildren. Actually, except for calling the children by their names, we called every adult woman “Aunt” (using the characters for mother’s sisters) and every adult man “Uncle” (using the characters for father’s brothers, either an elder uncle or younger uncle, depending on the comparison of the ages of one’s father and the male adult).

The whole neighborhood had the atmosphere of a big happy family, and everyone was friendly to everyone else. Whenever one family had delicious stuff, we, the little ones, would be called to share, or they would have their children send some to our home. Similarly, when we had something good, our grandma and parents would first ask us to take some to our neighbors’ children. Older people were respected; young children were taken care of. In my eyes as a child, it was truly a vivid depiction of Confucius’ thought of Da Tong, which is closely related to his life philosophy of ren, human-heartedness or humaneness. It is the highest state of Confucius’ political ideal and the highest ideal of human society. It is a beautiful society where ren has been completely actualized (Kuang, 1990). The blueprint of Da Tong is translated by Cheng (1946):

“When the Great Principle (the ideal social order that Confucius had in his mind) prevails, the world is like one home common to all; men of virtue and merit are to be elected to be rulers; sincerity and amity pervade all dealings between man and man; people shall love not only their own parents and own children, but also those of others; the aged, the young, the helpless widows and widowers, the orphans, the destitute, the incapacitated, and the sick shall be well provided for and well looked after, while the able-bodied shall exert themselves in their aid; men shall be appropriately employed and women suitably married; one detests that things are abandoned or wasted on earth, but, when gathered or stored up, they are not to be retained exclusively for oneself; one detests that exertion does not proceed from oneself, but its fruits are not to be regarded exclusively as one's own. Thus there will be no, and no cause for, conspiracy, robbery, theft, or rebellion, and no
need to bolt one’s outside door. This is a true Commonwealth.”----Confucius, 
Book of Li, Bk. XXI, Title Li Yun, Ch. 9. (p. 8)

Quiet meals. In my memory, my parents were always busy working and we 
children were always busy playing. Therefore, seldom were there specially arranged 
opportunities for us to sit down and talk. So meal times were the main periods when the 
whole family sat down together. Actually, whenever I thought of mealtimes, one rule 
would jump out in my mind: Keep silent. It was the rule made by my father. It seemed to 
represent anti-literacy activities according to today’s research concerning early literacy, 
which showed that mealtime is a good opportunity for the development of a child’s 
literacy. In this regard, Powell (2004) wrote,

Other research shows that everyday family conversations provide children with 
opportunities to learn about narratives (e.g., De Temple & Beals, 1991; Heath, 
1983). For example, Beals (2001) found strong positive relationships between 
narrative and explanatory talk during family mealtimes in the preschool years and 
children’s scores on literacy-related measure when children were 5 years of age. 
Narrative talk includes extended discourse about an event that has happened or 
will happen and usually takes several turns in a conversation. Explanatory talk 
provides logical connections among objects, events, concepts, or conclusions. (p. 
159)

As to why we could not talk at meals, I asked my father, through conversational 
interviews, one afternoon. His explanation was as follows:

There are two reasons: One is that talking while eating is not good to your 
digestion, and it is dangerous if you talk or laugh while eating. The other reason is 
that for us who have experienced some political movements, silence is gold. We 
often say that 言多必失 [too much talk will inevitably lead to inappropriateness]. 
Guess what? To my surprise, I found theoretical support during my recent classics 
reading with Jiezi [my brother’s milk name] and Badou [my brother’s son’s milk 
name]. For example, in the Yijing, there is the advice that “君子以慎言语，节饮食 
[Thus the superior man is careful of his words and temperate in eating and 
drinking]” [as cited in Wilhelm & Baynes, trans. 1967/1950, p. 521]. In addition,
Confucius also said: “食不语 [While eating he would not converse]” [as cited in Ames & Rosemont, trans. 1998, p. 138].”

So silence at meals is not only supported in ancient classics, which are the foundation of Chinese culture; it is also conducive to health. Considering the inseparable relationship between Chinese language and culture, silence at meals is related to culture at a particular historical stage. Without consciously and directly teaching the apparent aspects of literacy, the transmission of important aspects of Chinese cultural values, which are inseparable with literacy, was always going on in our family. As Pickle (2001) said, “Indeed, the interweaving of Chinese language and culture is so dense that it is often difficult to separate out the threads in order to describe it in a linear fashion” (p. 33).

Learning xiao and ti at mealtimes. Xiao is commonly translated as filial piety and ti as brotherly love (or brotherly deference or fraternal love). Mealtimes also reminded me of the two squared tables in our home: one big, one small. The bigger one was a square, brown-orange colored table against the wall in the room. So there were three sides in front of which you could put chairs. There were always two chairs sitting on each side of the table against the wall. The one on the left side of the table where you could put your right hand on the table, the most important place at meals, always belonged to my grandmother when she was with us or to my father if my grandmother was not at home. The other belonged to my father. My mother would sit on the third chair. If my grandmother was not at home, my mother would take the other chair against the wall.

There was also a small, short orange-brown colored table. It was usually placed under the big table. At dinner, it was pulled from under the big table and put next to it.
This was the dinner table for us three siblings—my elder sister, my younger brother, and me.

My mother was always the server at the table until my sister and I could help. The first bowl to be served was always for grandmother, then father, then my elder sister, me, and my younger brother. My mother would leave the last bowl for herself. When my sister or I could serve the table, we always left the last bowl for ourselves. My grandmother always got most of the “good food” but every time she put the good food that had been placed in her bowl into our bowls. As the youngest, my brother usually got the most. Then my parents would put their good food into my grandmother’s bowl saying, “Mother, eat some more.” My sister and I would put ours into our parents’ bowls. My brother would put his into ours.

The meals were almost silent, with few words spoken; the good food passed quietly from one bowl to another and ended up being shared among us all. But we all insisted that the eldest and the youngest got the most. In return, the eldest and the youngest would think of the younger ones and the elder ones.

These two meal tables might be somewhat odd to some people. The fact that there was one bigger and one smaller table reminded me of what Schaaf (2001) wrote:

The Chinese family, nevertheless, is traditionally inclusive, not insular, and strongly hierarchical, its behaviors guided by Confucian tradition....That tradition is ingrained in Chinese culture in the forms of social custom, the rules of engagement for Chinese both within and without the family. (p. 165)

Hierarchical as the big and small squared meal tables may sound, the atmosphere was filled with care, love, and warmth. As children, we learned xiao and ti at mealtimes
through the simple actions of the order of serving meals, passing good stuff to others, and so on, which is a crucial part of Chinese culture.

Xiaoy and ti are the most basic moral prescriptions, and they are considered the roots for the realization of full humanity (Tu, 1998). Confucius regarded xiao and ti as the root of being human beings. Between xiao and ti, Confucius particularly stressed xiao, filial piety (Kuang, 1990), for the family. The family in China is a miniature of the society. Ebrey (1990) wrote about the relationship between filial piety in the family and the harmonious society:

Confucius is particularly associated with the concept of filial piety. The Analects contains the statement that the basis of human goodness (jen) is filial piety and brotherly deference (Analects 1.2). In Confucius’s conception of a society regulated by ritual, people occupying a great variety of statuses and roles deal with each other in the ways appropriate to their station; by doing so, they continually maintain and create the social system without the use of force. The family is the primary arena in which this process of creation would take place; therefore, the social and political importance of correct behavior within the family is enhanced. For instance, Confucius said, “When gentlemen are generous to their kin, the people will be incited to human goodness. When the elderly are not neglected, the people will not be fickle” (Analects 8.1). (p. 202)

“Filial piety is rooted in human nature in the view of Confucius” (P. Chao, 1983, p. 93). I agree with Cheng (1946): “As observed by one Sinologue, ‘Confucius taught filial piety as the basis of all happiness in the life of the people’” (p. 166). Cheng also wrote,

Filial love is bound up with the doctrine of filial piety, which is not only a salient characteristic of the Chinese family, but also a cornerstone of Chinese civilization. In the words of Confucius, “Civilization commenced with filial piety.” (p. 166)
According to P. Chao (1983), the words of Confucius, quoted below, “may well form the essential basis of filial piety” (p. 79):

Filial piety is the root of moral power in man. His trunk and limbs, his hair and skin are received from his father and mother, and the beginning of filial piety consists in his not daring to injure them. To establish his moral character, to walk in the right way and to extend his good name to later generations, thereby satisfying his father and mother, this is the final accomplishment of filial piety. (as cited in P. Chao, 1983, p. 79)

Pointing out that Confucianism should not be considered a religion, Y.-L. Feng (1948) explained,

To the Westerner, who sees that the life of the Chinese people is permeated with Confucianism, it appears that Confucianism is a religion. As a matter of fact, however, Confucianism is no more a religion than, say, Platonism or Aristotelianism. (p. 1)

Although Confucius indicated a way of life rather than forming a religion (P. Chao, 1983), “he embodied quasi-religious ideas in three aspects of filial piety” (p. 80). According to P. Chao (1983), these three aspects are as follows:

(1) One is taught not to move one step without thinking of one’s parents. (2) The memory of parents replaces the reverence for a deity seen in other religions; conduct is to be guided by a sense of pleasing ancestors. (3) Morality is derived and diffused from the sense of reverence and love for one’s parents. He who loves his parents hates no man; he who reveres his parents is discourteous to no man. It is in this tenet that the religion of Confucianism lies. (p. 80)

In regard to the significance of filial piety, Ebrey (1990) wrote, “In the age of the philosophers following Confucius, when many established principles were challenged, the desirability of filial piety and the deference of juniors was assumed by all, even opponents of Confucianism like Mo Tzu and Han Fei Tzu” (p. 202).
In the *Three Characters Classic*, a common primer for young children since the Song dynasty, it was written “首孝弟,” meaning *xiao* and *ti* are the first thing one should learn above everything else. According to the sequence of learning recommended in this primer, the *Xiao Jing* (the *Classic of Filial Piety*) was placed before the reading of the *Four Books*, which “have been the Bible of the Chinese people” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 1). After mastering the *Xiao Jing* and the *Four Books*, the children could begin to read the Six Classics; that is, the *Book of Odes*, the *Book of History*, the *Book of Changes*, the *Book of Rites*, the *Book of Music* (now lost), and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

During the May 4th Movement, “filial piety, Lun Xun charged, sacrificed children for the sake of their parents’ happiness” (Bai, 2005, p. xxi). However, my memories of my childhood years told me *xiao* and *ti* were principles that never changed in the family.

*Never too much.* Another salient rule at meal times made by my father was that we should eat just half a bowl of rice first when we thought we could eat one bowl of rice and had to eat up every grain of rice in our bowls. Simple as the rule was, it has, oddly enough, had a lasting effect on our lives and has become the rule in my own family. When I asked my father about the reason for making this rule, he said, “Experiences showed that the majority of children’s diseases come from eating too much. We had better eat 60 or 70% full each meal.” My father always practiced his principles and set an example for us whenever he wanted us to do certain things. He is a very self-disciplined person. No matter how delicious the meal was, he never ate too much. He applied the same rule to other aspects in life. The reason for eating every grain of rice in the bowl
and not wasting any grain was that industriousness and frugality have always been our tradition. Wasting food is a shameful thing. Every elementary school student could recite the poem in our Chinese textbook (I paraphrase): Every piece of rice in the bowl is the product of farmers’ laborious labor. In regard to my father’s insisting on our eating half a bowl, my interpretation is that it is the idea of the mean, implicit in the Chinese mind, which was implemented unawares in our everyday life. “Never too much” has been the maxim supported by both Confucianists and Daoists (Y.-L. Feng, 1948). To use Laozi’s words, “Reversion is the action of Tao” (as cited in Chan, trans. 1963, p. 160).

*Quietly watching father practicing calligraphy.* Growing up with the Cultural Revolution, big-character posters were often seen, as mentioned earlier. They can be considered literacy activity for me. I remember that before entering elementary school, one of the activities I did at home was to watch my father writing calligraphy. It was the only time that we could see some Chinese characters being written. As to what they meant, we never asked and were never told. Silently watching my father writing was the main activity. My father was good at calligraphy. That is why he was one of those responsible for copying the big-character posters. At home, we often saw our father practice calligraphy using the brush. We would sit around him watching, but he never initiated teaching us and just wrote silently. Whenever he was not satisfied with one stroke of a character, he would write the whole character again. Somehow we loved that silence, a sense of harmony and peace, because you have to concentrate when you write. Whenever he finished writing, he would let us appreciate it and smiled with satisfaction. Occasionally, we offered to try, but my father would say we were too little and would
learn it when we went to school. Then we knew we could not try, so we stopped offering to try.

My spontaneous literacy activity—drawing quietly. When I asked my parents what I liked to do in my childhood, this is what my mother told me:

I think children were just born to be who they are. Among the three of you, you are the one who liked to draw, to scribble and concentrate on looking at your dad writing and tried to copy. You were just born this way. The floor at home and the hallway was cement at that time. You would draw using chalk, from one end of the hall-way to another for a long time. You were about four or five years old, I guess? I cannot remember exactly. What you liked to draw best was what you called “young pioneers.” Several of your cousins and some older children became young pioneers after entering elementary school. You just loved to draw. Nobody asked you to or taught you. Your father seemed to enjoy your pictures and just used a mop to clean them after you drew, and you would do it again. You would do it for hours at the weekend until your little fingers felt hurt.

This was my “emergent literacy,” drawing with chalks. I did not remember any paper or pencils around before schooling for us to write or draw with.

Learning to sing the first English song at about four years of age. My eldest uncle and aunt with whom we lived in the same neighborhood had four children: The second was a son and all the others were daughters. They were older than I, so they often took me, along with my younger brother, to play after class. We had a very good relationship. My “Second Sister” (the third sibling) was a middle school student and a very good student in school. I always remember my aunts and uncles saying that she was the most articulate and was the student leader at school. Like her brother and elder sister, she was a red guard, too. The sign of a red guard was wearing a red piece of cloth around one arm with three big characters on it: hong wei bing, red guard.
In the middle school, students began to learn English. And because my Second Sister liked me very much, when she had just learned her first English lesson, she put me on the chair and began to teach me “Long Live Chairman Mao.” In retrospect, she had a very heavy Chinese accent; the pronunciation was like a Chinese dialect. One day, she came to our house and said she had just learned an English song. She put me on the chair and taught me the song, “I Love Tian An Men in Peking [Beijing].” The lyrics were as follows:

I love Tian An Men in Peking,
The sun rises all over Tian An Men.
Our great leader Chairman Mao,
He is leading us marching on.

This is an English song translated from the Chinese song. She was surprised that I learned it so fast. I remember she told my mom, “Hongling is just like her name, lovable and does things fast.” Then she put me down on the floor and let me practice. For a long time, I sang this song again and again. When my brother was old enough, I taught him this English song.

**Summary of my early childhood literacy curriculum.** I spent my first 10 years—my infancy (birth to 2), my early childhood (2-5), and a large part of my middle childhood (7-12) (Gauvain & Cole, 2005) during the 10-year Cultural Revolution. So my early childhood years before elementary school had little to do with books. Never were any books read to me. Besides several small-sized picture books and my cousins’ and sister’s textbooks, the only books I remember clearly at home were the *Selected Works of Chairman Mao*. They were sitting on a little bookshelf, forming a straight line, seldom
moved—a perfect decoration in those days. In terms of the spoken language I heard, everything my grandmother said was simple, revolving around my physical needs, such as eating, dressing, napping, and playing. I stayed with my grandmother from Monday until Saturday afternoon, after which time my parents had a day and a half off at home. Even when they were at home, we did not talk a lot. They were busy doing chores; we were busy playing. Every day life seemed simple. Little de-contextualized language was used in our few conversations, which is assumed essential for child’s later reading. By today’s standard, I could say that I was extremely deprived and disadvantaged in terms of early literacy experiences, conceptions, and knowledge, which provide the foundation for later reading development.

In the process of my review of the literature concerning the paradigm of reading readiness and emergent literacy, I found that my parents’ belief regarding literacy was extremely consistent with my understanding of the description of the maturationalist theory (Teales & Sulzby, 1986). In the West, in the field of early literacy, the paradigm of reading readiness started in the late 19th century and remained predominant for the next 60 years in terms of young children’s reading development (Gillen & Hall, 2003). This paradigm held that young children’s literacy development did not start until formal schooling. So it is quite an understandable phenomenon considering the historical stage both in China and the West: China was precisely in a period of learning from the West, trying to become a modern country in the modern world.

Inferring from what I heard from my parents and the adults around me in my childhood years, I assume that they would all be on the nature side if there was a debate
between nature and nurture. Western influence since the mid 19th century was a factor. Another important factor was that my family belonged to the overwhelming majority of ordinary Chinese who had a tradition of farming without a tradition of studying. Consciously educating their children from infancy, or even earlier, which was the tradition in the landlord scholars’ families since ancient China, represented the “unknown unknowns” (Rumsfeld as cited in Seely, 2003, para. 5) to my parents. They had no experiences of being taught in their own childhood and so lacked the knowledge either to be for or against early childhood education. Therefore, like that of all the children around me, the curriculum of my childhood prior to elementary school, at almost 8 years old, was extremely similar to the description by Ravitch (2000): “For those influenced by the ideas of G. Stanley Hall, modern education meant a ‘natural’ education, one that removed all stress and strain from the growing child, leaving plenty of time for play” (p. 90). Like the majority of children around me, I enjoyed a plethora of time for play, 100% spontaneous play. My parents and other adults around me often said that children’s task was to play; they often said that the little ones were “not yet capable of ‘thinking’” (Slote, 1998, p. 48). Kliebard’s (1985) description of G. Stanley Hall’s idea was exactly what my parents believed: “Hall felt that reasoning power was not yet in the child’s repertoire and that early concentration on intellectual matters could be injurious to the child’s health” (p. 38). Moreover, Hall’s curriculum, which “would be dominated by play at least until the eighth year” (p. 38), was truly a vivid evocation of my pre-elementary years. I was like a free bird, flying heartily in nature out of complete spontaneity every day, waiting to become mature enough to be ready for schooling.
The advantage and disadvantage of being literate at an earlier age. I could not recall any particular literacy-related activities when staying with my grandmother before entering elementary school; however, my grandmother’s influence on me was pervasive. My grandmother “spreads doctrines without words” (as cited in Chan, trans. 1963, p. 140) to use Laozi’s words. This kind of education was powerful and far-reaching. Confucius’ words strengthen the real essence of Laozi’s way of education: “If the ruler himself is upright, all will go well even though he does not give orders. But if he himself is not upright, even though he gives orders, they will not be obeyed” (as cited in Waley, trans. 1938, p. 173). In my mind, my grandmother was always the authority in the family. “Many Americans who know little else about Chinese culture are aware that it stresses respect for one’s elders” (Higgins, 2001, p. 107). “The respect for age (normally a symbol for experience and wisdom) is characteristically Confucian” (Tu, 1998, p. 132). Although “a distinctive feature of Confucian ethics is to accept seniority as a value in setting up social hierarchy…age alone does not automatically give one status” (Tu, 1998, p. 127). My grandmother gained our respect via her merits as a person. She seldom spoke, but her few words and silence were powerful. Her voice was soft and low, but her message was strong. Authority does not need to have a louder voice or more words.

My grandmother was always wearing that peaceful smile, providing care for each of us in her quiet way. Her serene face possessed the power to quench all potential fires of quarrels in my family. The relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is usually notorious, and I did see how this notoriety was manifested in some families in our neighborhood. However, I only remember one time when my grandmother and my
mother had a quarrel although my mother was quick tempered. It was on the issue of the appropriate feeding of my brother, but it was soon ended. In this theoretically difficult relationship, my grandmother was the main factor in keeping peace at home.

In my memory, the words my grandmother used were not countless, and they were extremely simple. The two characters my grandmother often said to me (in Shandong dialect) translate in English to, “Do not be afraid,” when I showed fear; the three characters she often said to me translate to, “good girl,” when I did something good; when something bad happened, she would say, “all will be better.” However, the few words I remembered were imprinted in my mind and left me with a limitless space to imagine. The strength I saw in her face and from her low and soft voice made me fearless. To use Laozi’s words: “There is nothing softer and weaker than water, and yet there is nothing better for attacking hard and strong things” (as cited in Chan, trans. 1963, p. 174). The patience and understanding she showed always calmed me down. “Patience nurtures magnanimity” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 9). I learned patience from my grandmother. To me, she was like the water described in Laozi’s words: “Water is good; it benefits all things and does not compete with them” (as cited in Chan, trans. 1963, p. 143). By society’s standard, both then and now, my grandmother had no formal education and was illiterate; she could not read nor could she write. But by Helen Keller’s (n.d.) standard that “the highest result of education is tolerance” (p. 1), my grandmother is one of the most well-educated woman I have ever met in my life. She is a good example of practicing what Confucius advocated for: “和而不同 [seek harmony not sameness]” (as
cited in Ames & Rosemont, trans. 1998, p. 169). Her tolerance served as the ballast of our three-generation-family ship. No matter how stormy the sea was, the ship was always stabilized because my grandmother was on it.

“In thinking all things become solitary and slow” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 9). The moment I think of my grandmother, my mind becomes calm because her eternal serenity and tranquility is still encompassing me. This feeling of mine is somewhat hidden in the following description by Y.-L. Feng (1948):

Most of the great artists of China took nature as their subject. Most of the masterpieces of Chinese painting are paintings of landscapes, animals and flowers, trees and bamboos. In a landscape painting, at the foot of a mountain or the bank of a stream, one always finds a man sitting, appreciating the beauty of nature and contemplating the Tao or Way that transcends both nature and man. (p. 23)

To me, the person sitting in the painting is my grandmother and I often imagine myself sitting beside her, silently listening to the sounds of nature. I often feel that this must be the reason why my favorite English song is, “The Sound of Silence.” I love it precisely for the combination of these four English words that capture some of my inexpressible memory. It is silence that I feel in thinking about my grandmother. Any word sounds redundant.

Yes, the best depiction of my grandmother is only existent and alive in my mind in an aesthetical whole that is beyond any words. I do not possess the capability to express my impression of her in my native language, let alone my second language. Zhuangzi, the famous Daoist philosopher, said, “Words are for holding ideas, but when one has got the idea, one need no longer think about the words” (as cited in Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 12). Any words I might pick and choose will inevitably flaw the whole beauty of
my grandmother in my heart of hearts. Somehow, it is always the essence of Daoism that appears in my mind when I think of my grandmother. Daoism means “the One, which is natural, eternal, spontaneous, nameless, and indescribable” (Chan, 1963, p. 136).

“Taoism emphasizes what is natural and spontaneous in him [man]” (Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 22). I have come to better understand many of the abstract concepts in Daoism through the concrete manifestations of my grandmother’s quiet actions. Tao Qian’s poem, with Daoism at its best, expresses this feeling of mine:

In these things there lies a deep meaning;
Yet when we would express it, words suddenly fail us.
(as cited in Y.-L. Feng, 1948, p. 23)

To be literate at an earlier age, or not to be literate at an earlier age: that is not a question. Instead, it is an answer that you yourself cannot control. It depends on what families and what stage of history you were born into, without any of your own choices. Everybody was born equal as a human being, but not born the same. Whether being literate is advantageous or not is relative to time, society, and people.

“It is often the case that things gain by losing and lose by gaining” (Laozi as cited in Chan, trans. 1963, p. 161). In my childhood, I “gained” a harmonious family and a happy and relaxing childhood. Laozi said, “Calamity is that upon which happiness depends; happiness is that in which calamity is latent” (as cited in Chan, trans. 1963, p. 167). My grandmother’s being illiterate and my parents’ not being highly literate in that particular historical period protected my family from the political storm in the outside world, so that our little family world remained a peaceful haven. Workers, peasants, and soldiers were the most honorable classes at the time. In retrospect, I am very thankful that
my grandmother was illiterate and was a farmer so that in elementary school during the Cultural Revolution, I could fill in, on the form investigating the family component, that my family was in the honorable farmers’ class. Also, I am thankful that my parents had only 6 years of schooling, so that we could identify with the good social class in my formative years. My father’s several years of experience in the navy enabled me to identify with soldiers who were admired as heroes, because “after 1962, the CPC asked Chinese people to learn from the People’s Liberation Army” (Zang, 2000, p. 50). Therefore, like almost all of my other classmates, I felt proud when submitting the forms, without understanding the meaning at that time. All of these indications of social status gave me pride and confidence in my formative years. What is more important, I “gained” a happy family. For a child, nothing is happier than to live in a peaceful family.

What did I lose? I “lost” the opportunity to have early literacy experiences, which is regarded as important nowadays for later reading. “To have little is to possess. To have plenty is to be perplexed.” (Laozi as cited in Chan, trans. 1963, p. 151). “Which is worse, gain or loss?” (Laozi as cited in Chan, trans. 1963, p. 161).

My Brother

As a child, I cannot remember everything that happened to me, but I remember the day when my little brother was born. That was in 1971 when I was about five years of age. I did not have any impression of the fact that my mother had gotten pregnant, because she went to work every day. But one day, my father was so excited to tell us that we had a little brother coming home the next day from the hospital. In the afternoon of the next day, I saw a three-wheel carriage with a canopy. I saw my mother wearing a
green-and-black striped, square-patterned scarf around her head, holding my brother. There were already children and adults from the neighborhood waiting to see my brother. “Zhang Family” had a son! A lot of red eggs, boiled with a kind of plant called ai that could make the eggs red, were distributed to our relatives and neighbors. People near and far came to see my little brother. He was the son that my father had been expecting for a long time, after having my sister and me. It seemed that every family had to have a son. My father really wanted to have a son, my mother said. Having a son after two daughters had always been my father’s dream.

The middle character in my brother’s name, chuan, is the symbol that indicates his generation in the family pedigree. Only male children will carry the generation symbol as the middle character in their names. So all my father’s brothers’ male children who are the same generation carry the same character, chuan, in the middle place of their names. We girls have more “freedom” in this aspect. There is no fixed character prescribed as the middle character in our names. My grandmother said that the reason why my brother’s last character of his name was jie was twofold. The first reason is that “jie” has the same pronunciation as another character that basically means “stop.” If my parents had a son this time, they would stop giving birth to any more children. At that time, you could have as many children as you wanted. The other reason is that jie means “outstanding,” encompassing my father’s wish for his son.

After her maternal leave of 3 months, my mother went back to work, taking my brother with her, because she was still breastfeeding. Every morning, my brother was sent to the pu ru shi (literally translated as feeding room), close to where my mother worked.
It was a place for infants whose mothers were working. My mother would go there at regular intervals to feed my brother. Then, in the period before he went to kindergarten, my grandmother became his main caretaker.

Living in the same family with the same main caretaker, my brother had pre-elementary experiences similar to mine—growing up naturally by playing every day. As the male child in the Zhang family, my father held more hope for my brother. However, my father was never satisfied with his son because my brother did not seem to be the person who could realize my father’s dream, that is, to be a scholar. So my father often criticized my brother and said he did not work hard enough and asked him to learn from me. We all understood that because he was the only son, he had the responsibility to work harder, establish himself, and honor our parents and ancestors.

Although my brother was frustrated with our father’s unsatisfactory comments and misunderstandings, he was an extremely filial son in the true sense of the word in Chinese culture. Even today, my brother is a typical example of the kind of filial son who would rather sacrifice his own happiness for the sake of our parents’ happiness. He feels guilty if he cannot. As long as my parents are happy, he would rather just remain silent and accept the criticism, seldom talking back. As a sibling, he has always been the loyal protector of his two sisters, up to today, although he is 7 and 5 years younger than my sister and me, respectively. He ended up majoring in English for 2 years and went on to take a job that had nothing to do with English. Then he went to study Chinese in the night university and became interested in the ancient classics.
My Husband

My husband was also born in 1966, 2 months earlier than me. I met him soon after graduating from college in 1989, and we were married in 1991. He lived in the countryside, whereas I lived in the city. His family had been farmers from generation to generation. They had been living in the village literally translated as Shen Building Village, with all the people living there having the same last name. His family was illiterate until his generation, and except for his sister and himself who became college students, the rest of his family are still farmers, including his eldest brother who is a high school graduate.

His father was the leader in the brigade in the village. His mother does not even have a first name. After being married to his father, his mother’s name was written in the household book as Shen Zhangshi, with the last character, “shi,” added after her own last name, following her husband’s last name. The character, “shi,” shows that this person does not have her own first name. My husband’s family is highly honored in the village, because there are two college students in the family, which is an apt example of Y.-L. Feng’s (1948) explanation that “a family having ‘a tradition of studying and farming’ was something of which to be proud” (p. 18). He is a son who not only makes his family and ancestors proud but also makes the whole village feel honored.

My husband and I received the “same” education in the sense that we used the same textbooks described in the national curriculum. When he told me his memories about his early childhood years concerning literacy before elementary school, he said,
I can use one word to summarize my childhood: play. The whole village was our paradise. Except for the time to eat, we played from morning till late at night. Parents never tried to find us because it was very safe in the village.

There was only an elementary school and a middle school in his village. After graduating from middle school in the village, he was the only one in his class who passed the exam to enter the reputable high school in town. He would bike several hours to school and come back home once a week. Then he became the second college student (his elder sister was the first one) in the history of his family, entering the medical university in our province. He majored in Western medicine and then got a Ph.D. in molecular biology.

My husband told me the only motivation for his entering the medical university was that just after he learned that he had been admitted to the key high school in town, his father was misdiagnosed in the village clinic and could not get to the hospital in town in time to save him. As a consequence, his father died of an illness that could have been cured by just a small operation.

**Introduction of the Zero Project to My Family**

I found it hard to make a clear demarcation in my family between the caretakers’ attitudes and beliefs concerning fetal education and early literacy, because this case study has been presented in chronological order. Directly addressing the second research question, the following unfolds what happened revolving around early literacy in my family. I encountered two heated debates on two issues: The first, occurring during my pregnancy, was on fetal education; the second, occurring when my daughter
was about six months old, was on character recognition. So the findings of the two research questions were sometimes intermingled.

Two months after we were married, my husband went to another city for his master’s degree. We had our own home on campus, but after he went away I stayed with my parents. My husband would come to see me every 2 or 3 weeks. About three months after I became pregnant, I encountered the Zero Project on the bus on my way home from work one evening, as mentioned earlier.

That evening, the moment I talked about the idea of the Zero Project and my unusual excitement, which was no less than the ancient Greek scholar, Archimedes’s feeling of “Eureka!” To my disappointment, I did not find any excitement from my family. Instead, there were opposing opinions at different levels in my family.

**Debate in the Family**

The introduction of the ideas in the Zero Project to my family served as a stone to stir the peaceful surface of the lake. We began to respond and concentrate on the device for fetal education, introduced in the project, and the nutrition for pregnancy:

I: But according to Feng’s ideas based on scientific research, not only can the fetus hear the sound of the mom’s heartbeat, it can also hear the sounds outside the womb. So Feng suggested we name the unborn baby and use the device to call the baby every day, as if it were here with us. After birth, it will know its name immediately. Also, you can talk to the fetus via the device, because science revealed that a 6-month-old fetus can hear us talking. Or we can let it listen to music so that it will have music talents after birth. Feng said there are two kinds of fetal education: indirect and direct fetal education. Direct education includes three aspects: nutrition *taijiao*, emotional *taijiao*, and avoiding mal-stimuli. Direct *taijiao* also includes music *taijiao*, language *taijiao*, and athletic *taijiao*. There are a lot of details in his books. What is more important, Feng said that every child has 2 lives: physical life and spiritual life. We have all only paid attention to a
child’s physical life now; what we need is to give the child spiritual life, that is, rich information, experiences….That is the main function of the device for taijiao.

My mother (smiling): I wonder how you, with a college education, would even think about those superstitious ideas. How can you believe that? Isn’t that device crazy? You talk to the fetus through the device? You let the fetus listen to tapes? You do not want to injure its development, do you? You want a normal child, don’t you? Look at the three of you. You are fine, aren’t you? Aren’t you a successful person? Don’t’ you have spiritual life?

My father: I agree. It sounds too extreme. Never too much in doing anything is my principle.

My brother (frowning and surprised): I do feel very doubtful about what you said, but they sound quite refreshing. We touched a little bit about fetal education in ancient China in our studies. None of them use any kind of device for taijiao. Also, that was thousands of years ago in ancient China. Remember, there is only one Mencius in China.

What frustrated me most was that about a week later, when my husband came back to see me and I excitedly told him about the taijiao in the Zero Project, I encountered prompt diametrically opposed attitudes from him. He said,

Name the fetus and talk to her or him through the device? You believe that? What an extreme example of doctrinarianism you are. Is Feng crazy? I think he is. But I do not hope you are as crazy as he is.

So on the device of taijiao, there was only one answer in unison—No! After all, my husband majored in Western medicine and knew a lot about the development of fetuses in the pediatrics course he took in medical school. The thick medical textbooks on our bookshelf looked more authoritative than ever and deterred me from buying the device for fetal education. My husband seemed to have crushed my dream of following the method in the Zero Project and the successful cases in his book and thus cultivating a well-rounded child. On second thought, this would be my only child. To be honest, I
dared not do any experiment using any devices on my child that I was not familiar with, based only on the cases reported in connection to the Zero Project. In those families, there seemed to be no opposing opinions at all. Everything has two sides. My husband was an expert in my heart. However, I had deep faith in nutrition during pregnancy; and this was the only safe thing I could do. I believed that everybody would agree with me and support my plan on pregnancy nutrition.

So I bought a book on pregnancy nutrition from the book store near our campus. It was a very detailed book on every aspect of pregnancy, based on scientific research on child development. It also elaborated on the process of the development of the fetus. A brand-new, refreshing, and amazing world was unfolding in front of me. The daily schedule for a pregnant woman was there in minute details as to what to eat, how much to eat, and when to eat. I decided to eat in accordance with the suggested diet in the book.

Predictably and understandably, I got an “antithesis” from my parents and husband. The following is our conversation:

My mother: Ling, you seem to have complicated your pregnancy since you mentioned the so-called Zero Project. Pregnancy is a natural process for a woman. Pregnancy is an important event, but it is still a normal part in life. When I was pregnant with the three of you, I worked until I was taken to the hospital to give birth. I was busy every day. What do you think I could eat at work? Moreover, the life then was not as good as it is now, and I did not have any specially nutritious food to eat, and I just ate as I usually did. But, look, all of you are quite healthy. You are very good in every way, and your dad and I are both very satisfied. Those ideas are not applicable. Pregnancy is a nature thing. Just eat whatever you want to eat as usual and the baby will be healthy.

I: Hubby, I think you can convince Mom. I listened to you not to buy the taijiāo device, but I believe that you must agree with the nutrition for pregnant women in Feng’s books, do you? I hope you can talk with Mom and Dad and persuade them
from the perspective of medicine and science. The book is full of scientific findings. So I will follow the book.

My husband: I know, but as long as you are on a balanced diet and avoid too much hot stuff, you will be fine. Anything we eat will transfer into the basic nutrition elements. Just eat anything like you do as usual. Mom is right. Being pregnant is a natural process. I do not think my mom who lived in the countryside ate anything special included in that book, but I am quite okay.

I: But your mother did not have those books at that time, and nobody knew anything about taijiao in the countryside. The scientific research shows us that there are a lot of new findings about human brains and scientific childrearing which we did not know before. I hope you can read Feng’s books with me sometime when you get a chance.

My husband: I think I have more important books to read. Anyway, it is no use arguing about these unpractical things. Do things their natural way is the best. Listen to Mom. Mom has a lot of experiences.

My mother: Ping [my husband’s milk name] is right. He knows much more than you do in this aspect.

This was usually the stopper of my desire to continue any conversation on this topic. My husband’s response was more disappointing because I expected that he could help me to persuade my parents, using his medical knowledge. Even if he did not believe in talking to the fetus, he should know that a fetus needs balanced nutrition. All students in medical school should have knowledge about nutrition; why not my husband? He learned about nutrition and did not apply it in life. It was about his child too. For a moment, I thought that he was the most stubborn man in the world. He became a strange person to me.

My father came to my rescue. He seemed to have softened his attitude by now. (He knew very well that I was a person who was stubborn when I had strong faith in something). He said,
Ling, I know you have your reasons to accept those ideas. But generally, I am with your mother and Ping. I think the nutrition part makes a lot of sense to me, though. The problem is, who has the time to strictly follow the ideas in the book? All of us are busy working ….But let’s find a solution.

In the late Warring States period more than two thousand years ago, the famous patriotic poet, Qu Yuan, was famous for saying, “众人皆醉我独醒 [The large majority of people are drunken while I am alone awake].” It was an apt description of my feelings on our several discussions on taijiao. I wanted to make them wake up, but they seemed to be in their deep sleep. I suddenly felt that I was like an alien landing on the strange earth. None of them understood me.

For the first time, I came to the realization that there was such great variation in terms of people’s beliefs, even in the same family. It was not that there had been no differing opinions among us in the past, but this time was totally different. It was about the education of my child, my only child. Raising our child based on the scientific childrearing theories in the Zero Project was an event of great significant and needed the endeavor of everybody in the family. Why was there always a consensus among family members, especially between husbands and wives, on the education of the children reported in D. Q. Feng’s successful cases? I really hoped that my family could be one of them.

In the meantime, I tried to comfort myself by thinking that contradicting ideas are good. Yin and yang are contradictions. Yin and yang, in this case, the differing opinions, were opposite each other but still in unison. It is contradictions that produce vitality. Chinese have the tendency to “find in all things an underlying harmony and unity, rather
than struggle and chaos” (Bodde, 1981a, p. 135). That is, conflicts are only the phenomenon and are temporary; harmony is the essence and is eternal. Contradictions are the necessary conditions for progress and vitality. My deep belief that harmony in the family would make everything thrive kept me going. I believed that we would achieve a harmony in which we kept each one’s differences, to use Confucius’s words, “君子和而不同 [Exemplary persons seek harmony not sameness]” (as cited in Ames & Rosemont, trans. 1998, p. 169). Whitehead (1925) is right when he said,

In formal logic, a contradiction is the signal of a defeat: but in the evolution of real knowledge it marks the first step in progress towards a victory. This is one great reason for the utmost toleration of variety of opinion. (p. 187)

However, to know the theory with rationality is one thing; to put it into action is another.

The following paragraph by Stake (1995), in a sense, vividly captures the characteristics of my family’s response to the ideas in the Zero Project:

Qualitative study capitalizes on ordinary ways of making sense. Each person has a great deal of experience encountering strange objects and phenomena. For a while, some of them just don’t fit anything we are familiar with, but then, suddenly, some of it is a bit familiar….Occasionally we encounter something really new, something that relates little to previous experience. We haven’t encountered it, even in science fiction. Not only do we struggle with the new name, if available, but we struggle to make a new class of things. (p. 72)

Yes, although my family members had been living in the same family for many years, they had different experiences, including literacy-related ones in their childhood; consequently, they really needed time to accommodate “something really new” to them.
Our Solution

Parents, showing love to their dear child,
Would do with grace all forms of self denial.
(as cited in P. Chao, 1983, p. 71)

This common saying is an apt expression of my parents’ unconditional love for me. My parents had done everything they could within their wherewithal. My father, although thrifty in everyday life, never put money first when something worthwhile needed to be done. His decision was that my mother would take early retirement 3 years before her usual retirement age in order to take care of me during pregnancy and my future child, because my husband was studying in another city and could not take care of me at the time. So I continued to work. I had three morning classes and a Thursday afternoon faculty meeting. Faculty did not have their own offices on the campus so we stayed at home, not needing to go to the campus unless we had classes or meetings. Whenever I had classes in the morning my mother would go to the university with me. She would stay at my own home on campus and cook lunch for me. After lunch we would take a nap and come back to my parents’ home. Although my mother said it was some of the ideas I accepted in the books that made my pregnancy complicated and disagreed with the idea that I should eat according to the authoritative book I had chosen and designated on pregnancy nutrition, she tried her best to cook according to the book to make me happy. As to the concrete method of fetal education recommended in the Zero Project, I did buy a lot of music to listen to and tried to keep a peaceful mind. However, “Never too much” was my guide.
As a would-be mother at that time, I was very happy, although feeling a little guilty as a daughter, about what other people would call my unusual decision. But when I saw my parents’ determination and genuine happiness, I regarded my acceptance of their decision as a kind of filial piety, because I made them happy. Filial piety is based on mutual care and love. Cheng (1946) wrote,

Chinese parents, partly through instinct and partly by habit, would take a deep interest in their children throughout their lives, while Chinese children, owing to the doctrine of filial piety, apart from nature, are ever reminded, if not indeed mindful, of their filial duties towards their parents. (p. 165)

Although it is true that parents love their children unconditionally, this was still a decision some people around us did not understand in terms of the loss of part of our income and the pension on my mother’s part. But my parents thought the loss of money was nothing compared to my well-being and the child’s well-being. My brother said jokingly, “What is Dao? This is the Dao.” Then he comforted all of us by reciting Laozi’s words:

When the highest type of men hear Tao,
They diligently practice it.
When the average type of men hear Tao,
They half believe in it.
When the lowest type of men hear Tao,
They laugh heartily at it.
If they did not laugh at it, it would not be Tao.
Therefore there is the established saying:
The Tao which is bright appears to be dark.
The Tao which goes forward appears to fall backward.
The Tao which is level appears uneven.
(as cited in Chan, trans. 1963, p.160)
This solution of my parents strengthened the cohesiveness of our family. With unconditional support from my parents, I stepped onto the path to becoming a mother, full of confidence and hope.

**Naming of My Child Before Birth**

“Names are powerful for individuals, and they sometimes have powerful stories worked up in them as well” (Ayers, 2001, p. 41). Yes, naming is a big event for a new member in some families, and there are different ways to do this in different regions. I would have only one child due to our national policy, implemented in 1978. Rare things are precious. So are people. Some parents like to put their wishes into their children’s names. My husband wanted a son. He thought it was his responsibility to have a son to carry on his family name. I had no reason to blame him, because I know that even my father, whom I deeply respect as a perfect father, also had this thought and realized his dream after having my elder sister and me, but that was in the 1960s. My husband was not the first-born son in his family, and his eldest brother already had a son. Also, theoretically, he should not have had the pressure of having to have a son, considering the fact that he was the second-ever college student in his family, with the highest degree in the whole village and the pride of not only his family but also his village in which Shen is the family name. Nevertheless, he felt he had the responsibility to have a son. As P. Chao (1983) explained,

> Filial piety, as interpreted by Confucians, means that children must please, obey, and support their parents while alive, mourn and ritually serve them after their death. It is incumbent upon the male child, in the light of filial piety, to see that the ancestors’ souls will be attended to from generation to generation. (p. 100)
Many Chinese traditions, such as these, were still kept in the villages, despite the damage in the Cultural Revolution.

My husband just saw what he wanted to see. Usually he did not believe in superstitions. But now he seemed to become very superstitious. Based on watching some of my taste changes and some other changes during pregnancy he said we would definitely have a son. When I was pregnant for about six months, the result of a B-ultrasound showed that we would have a daughter. My husband’s immediate response was that it must be a misdiagnosis—medical misdiagnoses happened sometimes.

After the B-ultra sound test, we began the naming event, several months before the child was born. This became our frequent topic for a while. My husband did this with a son in mind. With very contradictory feelings, my husband looked in the big dictionary to find a good name for “our son.” However, he was conscious that the doctors were probably right, so he tried to come up with a neutral name, which would be applicable for both girls and boys, with an emphasis on boys—a name that would embody his family name, his feelings for his family, and our wishes for the child. It took him a long, concentrated time thinking how he could put all these inexplicably complex feelings into two Chinese characters for “our son’s” name. He often said that after our son grew up he would take him home to honor their ancestors. My husband had to be responsible for his family and ancestors. Only male children would have the right to observe their ancestors in the Spring Festival. When I was at my husband’s home during the Chinese New Year, I insisted several times on going with him to see the ritual that was kept intact in the village; I was refused.
Without finding the most apt characters in the dictionary that could epitomize his various meanings, finally his hobby of guessing character riddles came to his rescue. He began to concentrate on his own family name: Shen. He took the strokes apart in different ways and changed them into two different characters: One was “you” and the other was “jia” in pinyin. Both these two characters are very close in form to his family name and look like a well-educated naming creation. In the meantime, although the last character, jia, is usually used in a boy’s name, it has the same pronunciation as the character that is often used in a girl’s name but has a different tone. In short, our child, no matter what the gender, would have a name that was inseparable from my husband’s family name. When listening to it sounded out or looking at it, it resembled a boy’s name; however, it could also be viewed as a neutral one, or a girl’s name if I wanted to interpret it that way. We would call our new child, Jiajia, as her milk name.

My husband was waiting for “our son,” and I was preparing everything for “our daughter.” An invisible tension was always there. My parents were very happy to hear that I would have a daughter. Because of the single child policy, there was a saying that many people in the city preferred to have daughters, because daughters are often said to be the “small cotton-padded coat closest to the mother.”

I really cannot blame anybody because my husband’s feeling was common among the Chinese men and understandable. It reflected his deep emotion for his village, his ancestors, and his transitional role and responsibility. In this regard, Bodde (1957) wrote, In China, even persons whose work brings them to the great cities, and who live there for decades, possibly for generations, still continue to regard the little rural village of their ancestors as their real “home.” It is this sense of belonging,
generation after generation, to one small place, that has given the Chinese family its stability and cohesiveness. (p. 43)

Actually, my father often missed his village, his hometown, and often wanted to go back or take his children back, although for decades all the people he was familiar with had moved to the city. My father’s hometown was his children’s hometown, although I was not born there or have never been there.

**Birth of My Daughter**

At about one o’clock on the afternoon of April 27th, 1994, our daughter was born. She weighed 3,300 grams, or 6.6 jin, a Chinese weight measure unit with one jin being a little heavier than one pound. Double 6 is a very lucky number in Chinese culture, meaning everything will go smoothly. I cried. They were tears of joy! I asked the doctor, “Is my daughter’s mouth okay?” and he answered, “Yes, she is beautiful.” Hearing this, all the worries I had had during pregnancy as a first-time mother were gone. I had always been worried about my daughter’s lips, because I had taken two tablets of medicine when I was feeling particularly ill, but worried about their effect on the fetus. This was during the period in which I assumed that fetuses grow their lips. I, acting paranoid, consulted many doctors and they all said this was nothing serious. I did not believe what they said until now, when I really knew that those two tablets had not caused any harm. I just wanted my daughter to be perfect. That is all. I looked at my daughter—her big eyes, her rosy cheeks, her impressively long black hair, almost covering her forehead—her everything. She was beautiful, in the true sense of the word, by any mother’s standard.

The son my husband had been hesitatingly waiting for did not arrive. His dream was lost
in not being able to have his family’s “root”—a male child. What was ironic was that when the nurse put my daughter beside me, I saw a paper label around her wrist. On it were the four characters: Zhang Shuping’s son. What on earth is reality?!

**Coming Home**

Due to my C-section operation, I stayed in the hospital for 9 days and my daughter was in another room fed by the nurses. Occasionally she was taken to my ward. On the ninth day in the morning we were ready to go home.

The May of 1994 was unusually hot. The car was waiting outside. Holding my daughter, who was sleeping in the thin quilt called the “candle-shaped swaddle” my mother had made, and escorted by my father, my husband, my younger brother, and my elder sister, I slowly stepped into the car and headed home.

**Physical environment.** The city where my parents’ home was located is the capital of the province in the eastern part of China. My parents’ home was located in the eastern part of the city. It was within a 10-minute walk to a kindergarten and elementary school to the west and a 5-minute walk to the north to the middle school and high school (both were included as one school), where I spent more than five years. It was within a 10-minute walk to the hospital to the east, and a 5-minute walk to the south to the biggest gymnasium in the province, where we spent much time playing. It was a very convenient neighborhood, both then and by today’s standards.

We moved in just after it had been built, when I was in the second semester of my first year in the middle school in 1980. It was a pretty large home by the standards of the time. It was a three-room home on the second floor in a four-storey, light grey building.
Two of the bedrooms faced south, which is a crucial factor in making a home a good one. The living room, kitchen, and bathroom faced north. One small hallway led to the door.

In the hallway, one could change his or her shoes. Looking up, on the eastern wall of the living room, one could see the huge painting of pink cherry blossoms on a light grey bridge with splashing water under it, meandering into some faraway place. One might have the feeling of being in a quiet park on a spring morning. Under the painting was a round brown table with several brown chairs. That was our dining place. Next to the southern wall was a brownish yellow couch, full of stuffed animals. On the northern wall was the window under which was a sofa, fitting the corner leading to the western wall. The laminated flooring was of a wood-grain texture. Through the window could be seen a big spice tree, planted by our neighbor downstairs, and also other houses. Near the western wall was a TV. Because this room faced north, it was cool in summer but did not get much sunlight.

My daughter and I lived in the largest bedroom with a balcony next to the window and the southern door leading to it. As long as it was a fine day, we had lovely sunshine coming in. It used to be my parents’ bedroom. Because of the new member in our family, they moved to the other bedroom, which used to be my brother’s, and my brother moved to the living room. My sister was already married then, and my husband was studying in another city.

Entering our bedroom near the window and balcony, one could see the huge bed, custom-made for my daughter and me to share. Next to the bed was a table and chair. Next to the table was a small bookshelf. Opposite our bed was the place for my
daughter’s stuff. Here, in my parents’ home, I began the process of rearing my daughter and grew with her.

From Birth to One Year and One Month

One little new member busied the whole family. Jiajia was such a quiet baby, mostly calm with tranquil eyes. Sleeping was her major task for the first few months, but whenever she awoke she would have that serene expression in her eyes. When she awoke she would not cry, even when she did not see anybody around her. Several times, when I opened the door I saw her lying there, quietly smiling in the direction of the door, waiting patiently. She seldom cried. Among the 3 types of children—the easy child, the difficult child, and the slow-to-warm-up child (Berk, 2006), Jiajia was the easy child.

Talking to Jiajia. The task I assigned to everybody was to talk to Jiajia in an intentionally complex way; that is, in grammatically correct sentences, using complex structures, whenever possible: “Just play the music instrument to the ox,” as D. Q. Feng often said. But it seemed that nobody listened or cared. Talking to her when she was awake was a natural thing. Who could resist the temptation to talk to the baby in motherese? But by my standards, my parents’ talk was too limited and simple, such as, “Let’s eat now; let’s change diaper now; or let’s go out now.” In an environment in which nobody concurred with you, I felt awkward when I tried to speak formally to Jiajia in a redundant way. Eventually, in terms of speaking, I no longer assigned any tasks to my parents. The main reason I could not control the situation was that after my maternal leave of 3 months plus the summer vacation, I went back to work three mornings a week, and my mother became the main caretaker during the day, especially in the morning. In
addition to my complex way of talking to Jiajia, the following other literacy-related activities were frequently performed.

“Talkative meals” around the round table. On the surface, people can sit anywhere around a round table, but the fact is there is still a difference in who sits where. The position facing the door is always the most important seat and should be either for my father or mother. My mother was the one who mainly took care of Jiajia, so she often was in that place. We all could feel that my father always offered the most comfortable seat to my mother.

I made the rule in the family that as long as Jiajia was awake and it was time for dinner for us, she would join us, and everybody would treat her as a “real” member who could participate in the conversation. So, when Jiajia was awake at dinner time, even before she could sit up, we always put her near our dinner table, and let her taste everything on the table, introducing to her the name of the taste of a certain kind of vegetable or meat or anything else on the table. The following is one of our conversations:

I: Jiajia, it’s time for dinner. Let’s go to the dining room. [I held her to walk to the dining room.]

Jiajia: [Smiled]

I: Here we are at the dining room. Wow, we have a feast today. Let’s see what we have for dinner. We are going to have jiaozi. Do you remember we made jiaozi together the other day? We put flour in the basin first, then put some water in it until they integrate well. You have to use both your hands and do it until it becomes a big dough. We put the dough on the table with some dry flour powder. We cut the big dough into small ones and use the wooden needle to make a round wrapper. We put the filling in it, and we make it a jiaozi. Right? Now we have boiled the jiaozi, and they are ready to eat.
I: Jiajia, let Grandmother hold you for a while. Mom has to set the table. [Grandma held her and she began to see the process of setting the table for dinner. During the process, I explained everything I was doing.]

I: Jiajia, you know we have four people for dinner today. So I put four pairs of chopsticks in front of the four seats. One, two, three, four. The first pair is for Grandpa, the second pair is for Grandma, the third pair is for Mom, the last pair is for...

Jiajia: [Looked at me…]

I: Yes, the last pair is for Jiajia, because you are the youngest in the family. Now, let’s put the bowls on the table near each pair of chopsticks. The first bowl is for Grandpa, then Grandma, then Mom, then Jiajia. Now I will go to the kitchen to get the jiaozi. Here we are. Let me put jiaozi into the bowls now. Grandpa first, grandma second, mom third, Jiajia the last. Here are some small plates for vinegar. We also need some garlic, soy sauce, salt. Last, let me put a big bowl of the soup that boiled the jiaozi. You know there is a principle in terms of eating, especially jiaozi. We usually drink the soup that boiled jiaozi. It’s called “the original soup digests the original food” literally, that is, after we eat jiaozi, we drink the water by which we boil the jiaozi. There is nothing in the soup but some of the flour coming from the wrapper and a little bit of oil oozing out from the filling.

I: [Jiajia was always attentive when I talked with her, and I was quite sure she understood it; and I could understand the subtle expression she showed me. I put one jiaozi in front of Jiajia’s little mouth and let her taste the wrapper first.]

Jiajia, have you tasted the wrapper? Do you like it? It’s a little sweet, isn’t it? And it’s soft. But it is a little hot. [I put a tiny little piece of the wrapper into her mouth. She was happy and moved her little arms and legs to show her excitement. Then I put a tiny little bit of the filling into her mouth. She showed me another expression to tell me the different flavor.]

I: Jiajia, when we eat jiaozi, we often put a small plate of vinegar, salt, garlic, soy sauce as the seasonings. Let’s try them one by one. [I used the end of one stick of the chopsticks and dipped it into the vinegar and put it into her mouth.]

I: Let’s try the vinegar, Jiajia. Oh dear! [I see her weird facial expression and her trying to cry.] I know it’s very sour. Yes, vinegar is sour. Sour. There are other sour things, too. Some of the apples are sour (sour and tart are the same Chinese words), some oranges are sour, hawthorns are sour…Remember, have we eaten all of them? Oh, I see, you remember them. Let’s try some soy sauce.
Jiajia tried everything on the table and made different expressions to show she could differentiate flavors. I would find an apt word to describe her facial expression. We often use the five flavors to describe the richness and variety of life: sourness, sweetness, bitterness, hotness, and saltiness. It surprised all our family, because very soon Jiajia knew all the names of all the things we adults knew at home and became more responsive in the family conversations. When she was about 10 months old and could walk in the learning-to-walk-cart with four wheels and a round circle in which she could move in any direction, she was assigned a task to help set the table for each meal. She knew the order to place the bowls: She had learned that she was the youngest and therefore should eat the smallest portion, and the old people should be honored and respected. When she helped to serve fruit for a snack, she always gave the first to Grandpa and Grandma, the next to me, and the last for herself. Then she was praised for being a good girl. The deeply ingrained xiao, filial piety, in our minds was transmitted to my daughter, Jiajia, even when she could not yet talk.

The difference between my daughter and me in learning xiao was that I learned xiao through quiet actions with few words; my daughter learned xiao through both actions and illustrations in language. For example, I told her the two typical household stories regarding xiao and ti, which were included in the *Three Characters Classic*. The typical story of xiao is summarized in the primer in several characters “香九龄，能温席”: The story is that when Huang Xiang, a boy in the Han dynasty, was 9 years old, he knew to use his own body temperature to warm the cold quilt for his father before
sleeping at night in winter and to use the fan to cool his father’s sheet and pillow in summer. The typical story of ti is also summarized in the primer in several characters “融四岁，能让梨”: The story is that in the Han dynasty, a boy named Kong Rong knew, at 4 years old, to offer the bigger pear to his elder brother. Because Jiajia was the only child in the family, it was difficult to just talk about the sibling love and respect. She later learned what ti really meant in our own home on campus playing with a large group of children at different ages.

**Playing.** When we played with toys with Jiajia, language was often the thread. For the first few months, stuffed toys were the major toys for their softness, in view of safety. I bought every kind of object I could find, usually from the campus stores. When she could sit up I began to buy the hard animal toys, such as a chicken, duck, and frog, which looked more real, and when they were wound up, they could move. Also, in one of our campus stores there was almost every kind of plastic animal imaginable. I bought one in each kind and played with Jiajia, teaching her their names and color, the sounds they made, and some simple information about each kind of animal.

Before she could walk Jiajia was already very familiar with the environment. At 9 or 10 months old she sat in the learning-to-walk vehicle, helping her grandparents, uncle, and me, and participating in family life very actively. She served as a good helper in setting the table for meals by putting the chopsticks or tablespoons on the table and bringing newspapers and other things to family members. She knew the place of everything at home. Wherever I was in the kitchen cooking, for example, I would take
Jiajia with me and explain everything I was doing, teaching her the names of the objects she saw and their functions. I treated her as my friend. When I forgot something, she would know and offer to help me to find it. She could always find it. As to books, there were several thin picture books with a few Chinese characters. She played with them sometimes.

**Tour of the home.** I acted as Jiajia’s tour guide at home. Every day, when Jiajia was awake, I held her up to see the surroundings in our home. I would tell her the names of all the parts of various things at home and say something of their function, as well as the stories connected with them. As her tour guide I explained everything I could associate with the object or event I was introducing to her and tried to involve her senses to get immediate experiences, for the purpose of understanding some abstract concepts. For example, our heating system in the winter consisted of a series of iron planks close to the walls. The design on them was beautiful: light green was the main color; several red and orange goldfish were swimming in a little pond; delicate dark grass was flowing. I would hold Jiajia and try to teach her what it meant to be hot.

I: Jiajia, put your hands on the heating iron. [For the first time, she did it without thinking.]

Jiajia: [Almost crying]

I: Did you feel the hotness of the heating iron? Yes, it is hot. Why do we use the heating iron? Yes, because it is winter now. It’s very cold outside. Let’s see how cold outside. [I took her out onto the balcony near the heating iron.]

I: Do you feel the cold? It’s so cold outside. Look, there are not leaves on the trees. Next spring, the tree will grow new leaves. Do you know that we have a very famous poet in the Tang Dynasty? Oh, you know. His famous poem is entitled “Grass” [and I recited the poem].
Every time I talked to her she listened quietly with interest. Somehow, facing a baby whom many people around me regarded as understanding nothing, I felt for the first time the limits of my knowledge. Every time my parents heard me talk to her in what they thought was the strange and unnecessary way, they would kindly laugh at me. But I continued stubbornly.

Tour in the neighborhood. I often took Jiajia to the botanical garden, the provincial gymnasium, the book stores, and any other places I could go with her, introducing to her everything we saw along the way. When I did this, the people around me would look at me with strange looks. I knew I was too verbose, but I did not care. I had faith she could understand me. She did. Before she could talk, whenever she was with children around her age, she seemed to be the one who understood the most and showed her understanding to the adults. People said she was talented. I knew they were not right. Every child could understand if one kept on communicating with them.

Character recognition postponed. When Jiajia was about one year old, I proposed to the family that we should begin to teach her to recognize characters, according to the suggestions in the Zero Project. In the eyes of my family, I had become an abnormal person who was full of vagaries and knew nothing about my daughter’s well-being. That babies’ eyes were not strong enough yet was the argument; also, they were too young to learn. I became the target of criticism again. Sometimes I still hoped that my husband would change his attitude. He did not.

My husband: But I do not believe what you said about the education starting from zero at all. Do not listen to what those books said. Listen to me. Early education? Both of us read the article in our textbooks in the middle school entitled “Shang
Zhongyong,” didn’t we? You do not want our child to be Zhongyong, do you? Zhongyong was quite talented around five, but he became a very ordinary man later on.

I: Oh, it is so good that you mentioned this article. Your interpretation is prevalent among some people, but it is a wrong interpretation of the author’s intention, I think. The point the author tried to make was to tell us that even though a child has talent at an early age and showed unusual talent in his childhood, he or she would become ordinary if the parents do not continue to provide appropriate educational opportunities. Zhongyong’s father used his son’s talent to satisfy his own pride and did not provide continuous education that was apt for Zhongyong. That is the main reason Zhongyong became ordinary. This is exactly an apt example to support Feng’s ideas, which maintain that we should emphasize early childhood education which will lay a solid foundation for his or her later education and continue to provide quality education after entry into schools. Feng said that early character recognition and early reading is the foundation.

My husband: Anyway, I don’t want to touch on this topic any more.

My husband and I had used the same textbooks because in our education from elementary through secondary school, the same national curriculum had been used. Zhongyong’s story had been included in our middle school Chinese textbook. This was a story often told as proof whenever people talk about the issue of nature versus nurture. The take-away message was that children who are smart at a younger age will become as ordinary, or less than ordinary, as normal children with average intelligence. This is the usual interpretation of the story: A person was smart when young, but not when old. The other interpretation—the correct one—is that even if one was born smart and showed early talent, without the appropriate environment and education, he will become ordinary or less than ordinary when growing older. In the story, the father of Zhongyong just showed off in front of others how smart his son was and did not provide the appropriate continuing education for his son. Clearly we each had different interpretations of the
story and neither of us could persuade the other. Then my husband told me the often-told story about his own childhood concerning literacy:

The elementary school was in our village. My sister was in school, and I followed her to school one day and found everything the teacher taught was very easy. I was about 5 at that time. Rules in the village were not strict. My father served as the leader in our brigade and then registered me in school. Our tables were stone plates, and we brought our own small wooden stool. Because I found everything easy in school, I began to make trouble in class and was therefore often criticized by the teacher. In the meantime, my grandfather feared that my brain would be damaged if I began to learn at such a young age, and my making trouble was used as the evidence for his argument, so he insisted that I quit school about a week later. I played for about another two years at home and entered elementary school at 7. So without having early childhood education before elementary school, I am good enough. My grandfather might be right. The task of children is to play. Honey, remember, we have only one child. Don’t you wish her to be happy?

What parent does not wish his or her child to be happy? Deeply ingrained ideas were hard to remove. Yes, “the attempt to step outside of the process of tradition would be like trying to step outside of our own skins” (S. Gallagher, 1992, p. 87).

Actually, D. Q. Feng himself had been clearly aware of these deeply dyed traditional ideas on early childhood education in society. D. Q. Feng (2005a) maintained that many traditional preconceptions and biases about childrearing were like “spiritual candle wrap” (p. 81) (infants’ swaddle is like the shape of a candle), constraining the development of children’s “second life” (p. 119) (the first is physical life; the second is psychological health and spiritual level). One of the biases is that those who are early talented will die young. Similarly, there is a well-received belief in society that those kids who are too intelligent will cause damage to their health. So it seems that my family was not alone. My husband was only one of the many people who hold on to tradition.
However, tradition and ingrained beliefs based on our own family backgrounds were like a cold wall, preventing us from having constructive communication on the topic of early character recognition and early reading. We ourselves had had little or no early literacy experience before elementary school and in our circle of friends we did not know anybody who had. I did not blame my family because I did not have any experience raising the baby, and my mother had had experience raising three. After all, I was living in my parents’ home and had to compromise to keep the harmony. Moreover, listening to them and being obedient was a good way to express filial piety. This would be an experiment on a human being whose result was irreversible! Maybe I was just an armchair educator, an idealist. I began to doubt my own strong belief in the Zero Project. First and foremost, I wanted my daughter to be “healthy,” “normal,” and “happy.” I tried to comfort myself. I had several innermost contradictions and made numerous compromises. The mean is always the way. Never too much was the frequent reminder. I used the idea of the mean as the theory to justify my decision.

All these heated inner debates frustrated and drained me, quenching the fire of my enthusiasm and causing me, for a while, to lose the energy and desire to make any attempt to teach Jiajia character recognition. Anyway, it would not be too bad if she turned out like me. I could not recognize any characters before almost eight years of age. So my plan, based on the Zero Project, of teaching her character recognition before she was 1 year old was aborted. However, what comforted me most was that I did try my best to talk to her as much as possible within my discretion. There are so many factors one cannot control. After all, I was doing part of what I wanted to do. The quenching of my
passion was only temporary. Whenever I felt frustrated I thought of the following paragraph by Mencius, which we had learned in the middle school, to comfort myself (the English translation is cited in Cheng’s 1946 book, titled *China Moulded by Confucius*):

> When Heaven is going to entrust a person with a great task, it is certain first to accustom his heart to affliction, his sinews and bones to fatigue, his body to hunger, and his person to poverty and wants, as well as to bewilder him in all his undertakings. Thus it stirs his heart, reinforces his nature with patience, and augments his capacities. (p. 92)

**From One Year and One Month to About Three Years of Age**

In May 1995, I went to Korea to teach Chinese and returned to China in 1996. During this 1-year time, despite the high prices of long-distance phone calls, I phoned my family as frequently as possible and talked with Jiajia on the phone.

**Jiajia’s literacy-related activities with my mother.** My mother was the main caretaker during the day while my father and brother went to work. Although I told my mother what to say and how to speak to Jiajia, she did not seem to listen. Jiajia’s health was her primary concern. For the most part, she would take Jiajia out to play every day in good weather. My mother told me that sometimes she taught Jiajia a lullaby or a children’s song. Sometimes she recited a simple poem to Jiajia. Tao Xingzhi is right in saying, “Life is education,” (as cited in D. Q. Feng, 2005b, p. 23), not the other way around. I realized that taking care of a child who has just learned to walk is, in itself, a huge task. Thus, I could not designate any extra tasks to my mother.

My mother told me that the main literacy-related activity she did with Jiajia was watching TV with her every day. TV served as a baby sitter while she was cooking. I
failed to persuade her not to do so. But she told me that Jiajia liked watching TV very much and learned a lot from it. My mother told me,

For example, every evening from 7:00pm to 7:30pm was the News Broadcast through CCTV. There was weather forecast at the end of the program in which the names of the capitals of provinces and the directly administered cities would be read out loud, and the weather there would be reported. Jiajia watched the news with us silently. However, as soon as the weather forecast began, Jiajia would become very excited and lead the anchor to report the names of the cities in the right order, without any mistakes. Then she would be looking around and got a lot of praise.

**Jiajia’s literacy-related activities with my brother.** But what made me happy was that my brother began to wake up. He gradually changed his mind and read the series of books by D. Q. Feng and began to accept some of the ideas in the Zero Project. He was not married and lived with my parents when I had been pregnant and given birth to my daughter. He was an especially indispensable helper to my parents in taking care of Jiajia when I was in Korea for that year. Like father, like son. He is very much like my father in terms of the characteristics of being caring, empathetic, considerate, careful, and responsible. He said Jiajia was his “guinea pig”; he said he had gained a lot of first-hand childrearing experience and was quite ready psychologically for his own child. The following were the literacy-related activities he did with Jiajia.

**Ancient poem recitation.** Due to his Chinese background and interest in the classics, my brother likes ancient poems. He taught Jiajia to recite the ancient poems we had learned in school. Reciting ancient poems was an activity parents liked to do with their young children and was used to promote their children’s good memory. Although
*baihua* became the normal form of written Chinese after the May 4th Movement, *wenyan* still remained important in a person’s education, as Norman (1988) described:

The Classical literary element in the modern written language is so important that it is hard to imagine anyone mastering the modern language without some acquaintance with the Classical language. This is undoubtedly the most important reason for continuing the teaching of Classical Chinese and the later literary language in present-day Chinese secondary schools. Nowadays very few people write in a purely literary style, and the number of people able to do so is rapidly diminishing. Nonetheless the influence of literary Chinese is all pervasive, and a good knowledge of China’s three-millennia-long Classical literary tradition remains a virtual necessity for any educated person in Chinese society. Like the Western classical languages, Classical Chinese is deeply rooted in Chinese culture, and will inevitably continue to play an important role in future Chinese linguistic development. (pp. 109-110)

**Occasional playing with Chinese characters.** My brother bought several simple primers for Jiajia. In these primers, on each page, there was a big colored picture on the left and the corresponding character on the right. Usually, this was mainly used as a way for Jiajia to recognize the objects in them and match the pictures with the real objects, such as cabbages, books, and other everyday-life objects. Jiajia liked those books very much and played with them repeatedly by herself. When Jiajia was about one year and a half, my brother used a tape recorder to capture some occasions at home when Jiajia was reading aloud the names of the objects in the primers and reciting almost twenty poems he had taught her. The tape was sent to me in Korea. It was the most precious gift I received there.

**Discussion of the content issue.** When I returned from Korea, my brother began to discuss with me the content issue in regard to teaching Jiajia. The following was our conversation:
My brother: Actually, whenever I taught Jiajia an ancient poem, our mother would say that it was a waste of time to teach her those things that she could not understand. She said that it was “play the music instrument to the ox.” But recently, I have been thinking about what I should teach her. I think the songs or lullabies our mother taught her were too simple in contents. I tried to look for some ideas on what to teach Jiajia in Feng’s book, but it seemed that he did not emphasize much on exactly what contents to talk to the babies or what particular characters to teach them. He just said that we need to talk to the baby everything we see and do. It is a little too abstract. Now Jiajia already knows all the names of the objects around us, and it seems that every day she is talked to about the same contents. I think it is a waste of time.

I: I never thought of this. The take-away message from the Zero Project for me is just talk to your child and tell her everything around you. Also, some children’s stories and poems were recommended in the books. I have never seriously thought about the content issue. My understanding is that the more ideas you have, the more connections you will have, and then you will find reading comprehension easier. That is my personal experience in reading. None of us had experiences in making an early reader. We need more time to talk about this issue. By now, I think as long as Jiajia can read before elementary school, my goal will be achieved. That is my only goal, and that is what both you and I lacked. That is my understanding of the essence of the Zero Project.

My brother explained why he thought we should teach Jiajia the Chinese classics, based on his own experiences in life. He came to the conclusion that Chinese ancient classics could give a person the right direction in life. The following was our conversation:

I: We have all tried to guess why your academic scores suddenly dropped as a sophomore in high school. Is it still a secret?

My brother: Do you still remember my best friend, Sheng, in high school? At the end of the freshman year, he was diagnosed with a kind of heart problem. The biggest trouble was he could not sleep well at night, therefore he was very depressed in school and could not concentrate. So for a while, I often played truant with him and went to a faraway place during class time, comforting him.

I: We knew that he was sick. But did you think about whether this would influence your studies? Obviously it did.
My brother: I didn’t. He was my best friend. I should be with him when he needs me. Also, our parents did not really care or understand me. Our father was specially disappointed at me because I am his son. He thought I was a person who did not study hard. So I would rather be with my best friend.

I: But Sheng left you, later on.

My brother: Yes, after he got better, he seemed he did not need me so much and even said and did something that hurt me a lot. I was totally crushed by his unexpected betrayal. I did not realize there was such a kind of person who was not loyal to friends in the world, and my best friend is such a person. How could he become such a person! At that time, nobody cared about my feelings and frustrations. Although I lived at home everyday, I had nobody to talk to about all this agony. I had no guide in life when I needed one. Nobody told me what I should do next or what books to read. I often played truant and went to the Thousand Buddha Hill to be alone. Only myself. I sat there among the trees savoring this suffering. It was this affliction and upheaval in emotion that made me begin to ponder on a lot of questions that I had never thought to ask myself. For example, what is the nature of human beings? Was Sheng born an evil person? If not, why did he change into such a bad person? Sometimes I even questioned the meaning of living. Why do I live? I am not good at this and I am not good at that….I had never asked such silly questions. Sometimes I wished I could go to sleep and never wake up. But I would not do so, because I have so many duties: I have parents, siblings, and relatives, and they need me. They would be crushed without me. I do not live for myself in this world. All these duties and responsibilities seemed to almost kill me, but they were the ones that kept me going. Sometimes I feel good about it, because these are the responsibilities I should fulfill, and the people I care about and love.

After some time, suddenly, I thought of Li Bai’s [one of the most famous poets in the Tang dynasty] poem: “天生我材必有用 [One was born into this world to be bound to be useful in some way].” His optimism was very much inspirational to me. In retrospect, from another standpoint, I should thank Sheng. At least, he was my best friend for a period of time and later taught me a precious lesson in life. To use Laozi’s [as cited in Chan, trans. 1963] words, “The good man is the teacher of the bad, and the bad is the material from which the good may learn” [p. 153]. Ha ha ha.

I: From then on, you began to be interested in philosophy, especially Daoism?

My brother: You can say so. I think it is the main reason I gravitated towards Laozi when I was in college majoring in Chinese. How I wish somebody could have told me to read some great philosophers when I lost my life compass in high school. The classics included in the textbooks in middle and high school were too
fragmental and too few. Now I think we should all learn some philosophy as a person in order to live a life with inner peace. My sentiments are that the sages’ incisive wisdom of life can calm me down and make myself stand out of life to look at it reflectively. So I think we should teach Jiajia philosophy since an early age.

Therefore, when you were in Korea, I decided to teach Jiajia some ancient poems, but our parents were extremely against it. I told them scholars in ancient times all began to learn philosophy since a very early age, but they did not listen. Anyway, I taught Jiajia some ancient poems. She seemed to love them very much and often asked me to repeat.

Our discussions on the curriculum content issue gradually decreased because I was planning to move to our own home on campus. Physical distance was not the issue; “mind distance” was.

**Perplexity of mind for the forever lost year.** How I wished I could stay at home with Jiajia everyday! During that one year away from home, the following question was always on my mind: Which is more important for a young mother: career or staying with her child? I was often in contradiction: My gut feeling told me that I absolutely wanted to stay all the time with my child; the reality told me that I could not give up my work. I felt a desperate weakness in controlling or changing reality. This was the biggest regret I felt during Jiajia’s growth. This regret became stronger when I read research similar to the following report by Hart and Risley (1999):

> The amount that parents talked with their 1- to 2-year-old children was generally correlated with the parents’ SES. But the data showed that no matter what the family SES, the more time parents spent talking with their child from day to day, the more rapidly the child’s vocabulary was likely to be growing and the higher the child’s score on an IQ test was likely to be at age 3. (p. 3)
From Almost Three to Six Years of Age—Moving to Our Own Home on Campus

Having taken care of Jiajia for a whole year without me at home, my mother was really tired. So after I came back from Korea, my father decided to take my mother on his business trip to Beijing. Unfortunately, my mother got sick after returning from Beijing and was hospitalized for a long time. So we decided to move to our own home on campus and send Jiajia to kindergarten. She was almost three and was just old enough to go to the kindergarten attached to our university. The most important reason for our move was that I wanted to make up for the time I had missed with Jiajia, and the difference in beliefs on rearing her had been the main factors causing contradictions and disharmony among family members living together. Filial piety requires that we respect our parents’ opinions regardless of differences in order not to make them angry. At the same time, there is a common phenomenon called ge dai teng, meaning grandparents would love their grandchildren more than the parents, in the sense that they would give grandchildren more freedom and have a tendency to spoil them. I was very clear that our different levels of awareness regarding the early childhood education advocated by the Zero Project would be a primary cause for disharmony in our family.

Our campus. The environment in which our university campus was located was a university-centered one. There were several universities close to ours: the polytechnic university, the athletics college, and the medical university to the west; the arts college, the traditional Chinese Medical University, and the economics college to the east. Until I came to the United States in October, 2002, the policy for housing was that we were assigned housing by the university, based mainly on how long you had worked for the
university. After I was married in 1991, as a young faculty member, I was given one room on campus. We lived there until I was assigned a bigger two-bedroom apartment opposite the campus, about three years before I came to the United States.

**Our home.** It was a place that resembled my childhood neighborhood in nature. It was rare to have such a big family-like place for a single child who typically would have lived in a separate home, without knowing the neighbors very well. I thought it was an ideal place for Jiajia’s growth. The apartment buildings on campus were usually the dormitories for the students, but several of them were allocated for young faculty and staff. Our home was in the eastern wing of Student Building 3. It was a four-floor building, and there were 10 rooms on each floor of the wing. The western wing of it was also for young faculty and staff. The main portion of the building between the two wings was used for students’ dormitories.

Each family in that building had one room. Working in different departments of the university and being neighbors, we young faculty and staff were just like sisters and brothers and helped each other, no matter who had difficulty doing something. The husbands got up early in the morning, took a cold shower even in winter, and then either climbed the Thousand Buddha Hill to the south of campus or played basketball on campus. The wives would be busy preparing for breakfast. Later on, the husbands’ early morning exercises became the first episode of a national health program on TV, because one of the husbands was the producer at the provincial TV station for a series on this program. Our life in that simple student building was a memorable one.
Each family had one child, and altogether 14 children lived in the building, their ages ranging from 1 to 7 years. There were 2 other 3-year-olds besides Jiajia. At least one parent in each family worked at the university, representing the following departments: chemistry, physical education, English, geography, physics, and computer science, with several others working in administration at the university.

We were living like one big family. Whenever one family made some unique food, almost all the children were invited to eat it together. If there were new toys, almost all the children shared them. As long as we were off from work, our doors were usually open, because you did not know which kid would come in and out, looking for a playmate. Seldom was this child disappointed. They were just like siblings, entering any of the homes whenever they liked. They were always welcome. They were called “free electronics” by a faculty member in physics department. The whole building was their family. This environment was crucial for these children, each being the only child in his or her family. They learned to understand “ti,” that is, to respect the elder brother (or sister) and to take care of the younger brother or sister, which they did not have the opportunity to learn in their own families as a single child.

Our campus was awarded the title of “Garden-like Campus” in our province, and it was quite safe. It was a paradise for these children. They would play freely, usually without being accompanied by their parents. If some parents were not feeling secure enough, there would be one or two parents accompanying them. As the single child in the family, these children were not as lonely living in such an environment as those living in their own separate homes who had to find playmates and arrange playtimes. There was
every kind of parent-child interaction between these children and the adults in such an environment. Although there were arguments among children and misunderstandings among parents, harmony was always the mainstream. Therefore, all the children and adults grew in a positive way together. Moments of learning, manifesting Vygotsky’s (2005) “Zone of Proximal Development” (p. 37), seemed frequently to appear.

The two big bookshelves. Entering our home, everybody would first notice the two big, hand-made bookshelves standing side by side against the southern wall near the window that faced west. It was the centerpiece of our home. On the top shelves were my husband’s medical books, usually huge, thick, and heavy. My books were also there. Some of our books were in boxes. The lower shelves belonged to Jiajia. She had a big library: fairy tales, animal books, plant books, idiom stories, and a children’s encyclopedia—her favorite books being about animals, plants, the pocket monster, and fairy tales. In addition, there were several kinds of children’s magazines, such as Mickey Mouse and Chinese Children. Also, there were various recorded stories.

Cheng Yi, a Chinese philosopher in the Song dynasty, said, “外物之味, 久则可厌; 读书之味, 愈久愈深” [The savor of material objects without will become boring after a long period of time; the savor of reading books becomes deeper with the passage of time].” Jiajia became the child who owned the most books in the building.

A map of the United States — my husband’s American dream. When our door was open and one came in, he or she could see everything in the room at once except one place: the piece of wall behind the door. It was there that my husband’s dream was in the
making. It was a map of the United States. He seemed to be so happy standing in front of the map and would talk for hours about the universities, research institutes, and famous professors and their papers. He was not alone. Going to the United States and other foreign countries to study and work was many young people’s dream, especially those majoring in science, and among such countries the United States was considered the ideal country, particularly by those interested in science. This had been a trend ever since our open-door policy, beginning in the late 1970s, when Western culture re-entered China. As a result, among our neighbors living on the fourth floor only, one family went to Japan; one family went to Israel first, then to Germany; and two families, including mine, came to the United States.

Visiting book stores and buying books. There were several book stores within a 5-minute walk from the front gate of our campus, including two particularly for children. There was no public library close to where I lived and borrowing books from the libraries was not part of our life. Therefore, the book-stores neighboring the campus became our resorts. Jiajia and I went to the book stores several times a week, and buying books seemed to be an important part of her life. No matter how expensive a book was, if Jiajia liked it, I would buy it for her. I valued her interest and let her choose many of her books. At the same time, her father’s American dream also exerted some influence on my choice of books for her. For example, a set of biographers of some of the famous American presidents and famous scientists was part of her library.

Around the year 2000, a new book-store selling children’s versions of the Chinese classics was opened to the west of the campus gate. The classics were written in
simplified characters. There were different editions with beautiful decorations for the ancient classics, such as the Four Books, the Five Classics, and others embodying and encapsulating the essence of ancient Chinese philosophy. The selected original excerpts in simplified characters were at the top of a page, with relevant pictures, translations, and footnotes at the bottom. In some of the books, there was *pinyin* above each character so that first graders who learned *pinyin* in the first semester could read these books by themselves. Jiajia seemed not interested in this book-store. I bought a set of the classics for her, but she never chose to read these books by herself.

**Modeling – Big dictionary, small dictionary.** I found an interesting phenomenon: When her dad was reading at home, Jiajia would look at her dad’s book and then go the bookshelf and find a similar one in terms of the category of the book. For example, one day her dad was holding a big dictionary, looking up words. Jiajia looked at it and took down a small dictionary to leaf through. When her dad was reading a magazine she would take a children’s magazine to read. She did all this silently.

**Talking.** Due to the divergent parenting opinions between my husband and me, I had to figure out ways in which I could cultivate an early reader and still keep harmony in the family. He thought I was too verbose and too exaggerating when I talked to Jiajia, using too many unnecessary explanations. He thought Jiajia’s task was to play. I could not persuade him and was disappointed at his attitude. Then I decided to designate a fixed time everyday to take Jiajia out on campus to talk with her, using my way, and then the Jiajia-Mom’s time was born.
Birth of Jiajia-Mom Time. When we moved to our own home on campus, Jiajia was almost three and was enrolled in the kindergarten attached to our university. There were 42 children in one class, with two teachers. Jiajia got sick the first day she went to kindergarten due to too much crying and not eating properly. Usually I had classes on three mornings and was free in the afternoon and all the other days of the week. My mother came to take care of her when I had class. As long as I did not have class I would let her stay at home. So basically I paid the money each month to the kindergarten without sending her there regularly, for a while. So our topic in Jiajia-Mom’s Time was often on what she did while I was not with her, her thoughts and feelings about it. Sometimes our topics were random, based on the different happenings of each day. Sometimes we talked about the stories she heard on the tapes or the animated movies she watched on TV. Usually she was the narrator; I was the listener and commentator. Sometimes I would fill in some more appropriate words for her and ask some questions based on her story.

Character recognition. When Jiajia was about four years of age, I tried several times to teach her to recognize characters using her favorite book, titled the Scientific Tales. I chose this book because she was very familiar with each and every story in it. My assumption was that because she was already familiar with all the stories in the book it would be easier for her to map the pronunciation of each character onto the character itself, written on the pages. I held her hand to point at each character while I was reading aloud to her. She seemed impatient because she could recite the story very fast and felt that I was reading too slowly. She would quickly lose interest and ask me to just read it.
I told her that she needed to recognize the characters in the book. She said she could already do so. When I tested her I found that she mistook her recitation and our looking at the books together for being able to really recognize the characters. Obviously my teaching method was not effective.

At that time the Japanese animated cartoon movie, called *Pocket Monster*, was running on TV and very popular among the children. Jiajia became a fan immediately. Each pocket monster had a name and unique personality. When the series of TV plays were on, like many other children, Jiajia knew all the names of the little spirits and their stories. At the same time, diverse versions of books about the little monsters, along with related toys of various materials, were also on the market. They became Jiajia’s new interest. She began to collect stuffed animals of the monster spirits and wore T-shirts with the little spirits on them. One of the monster spirit books was big and thick, containing a display of the portraits of all the pocket monsters. The pictures were colorful and attractive to children. Jiajia wanted this book badly. But this time she did not get it at once. Every day she asked me to take her to the book store to look at it. One time, she cried out loud after leaving the store and said she had to have it. I thought the time had come. Sitting on the campus I discussed the conditions with her for buying this book: She had to agree for us to use this book to learn to recognize the characters in it. She agreed, of course.

We bought the book. At first, I asked her to read it freely by herself with the purpose of getting familiar with it. She was so excited and began to “read” it whenever she had time and sometimes read it with other children. My plan was to try to connect her
interest in the little monster stories with character recognition, because she was very interested in telling each monster’s story. Beside each pocket monster there was its corresponding name in Chinese characters. There were many Chinese characters with complex strokes in the names. To Jiajia, it seemed there was no difference between which character I thought was easy and which was difficult. To her they were just different names for the little monsters. We would play a game together: I asked her to look at each picture of the monster, pointing at each character in the name, read the characters aloud to me five times, and then tell me the story. Jiajia liked this method very much and thought it was easy. The activity acted as a transition and catalyst for her to develop from an emergent reader to a conventional reader. After repeating the characters several times for some time, she could recognize all the characters in that book. From then on I would ask her to choose a book with a few characters and read it to me by pointing at the characters. She got praises after reading each book. Gradually the books she read to me were the ones with more characters.

**Reading.** Character recognition was usually the first step in Chinese reading. Reading books to children was not a tradition, at least in my family. Methods of character recognition were emphasized in the Zero Project, and the child’s becoming a conventional reader seemed to be the natural product derived from character recognition. Although reading stories to children was mentioned in the Zero Project, there was no emphasis on it. The Zero Project was like a light telling me which direction to go on the road. Due to the dissonance at home in our opinions on early literacy it was difficult for
me to follow the methods that were suggested in the project, but I did take in the essence of them. I continued to explore ways to develop Jiajia into an early reader.

**Reading aloud: Jim Trelease’s article in Reader’s Digest.** When I only dared to follow the spirit of the Zero Project, without following the exact methods due to fear of the force of tradition, I came across an article in one of the back issues of *Reader’s Digest* in the reading room of our department in 1998. It was titled “Most Important Thing You Can Do for Your Child” and told about the story of an American, Jim Trelease, and the importance of reading aloud to children. This represented another “Eureka” experience to me. Due to my background in learning foreign languages, Jim Trelease’s ideas sounded very credible. The special significance of this article, at that time, was that it suggested the perfect compromise I could use, because my family thought that letting young children read books could injure their eyes badly. This article led me to think that we talk to our babies anyway, thus reading was just making different sounds. It would not harm my daughter’s eyes! I did not think anything about the difference between the English and Chinese languages and whether the method applicable to children who speak English could also be applied to children who speak Chinese. My language-learning experiences seemed to have blurred the differences between languages. I came to the assumption that all languages could be learned with the same method.

Jim Trelease asserted that it was never too early to read aloud to babies. This strengthened the belief I got from D. Q. Feng on early childhood education. Jiajia was about four years old then. Although I seemed to be 4 years late in formally setting the goal of reading books to her on a daily basis, I did spontaneously read to her, and she
already knew some characters. She seemed to be quite familiar with the patterns of written Chinese already. Jim Trelease offered me an applicable method, serving as the walking stick on my difficult road to develop an early reader. I was more determined than ever to read as many books as possible to Jiajia. Although the content of the books was not emphasized in the article, I did have my own criteria for choosing books for her: First, the wider the scope of the books, the better, as long as they had healthy contents; second, they should be written in standard written language; and third, the publishing houses should have credibility.

As to the reading styles we used, I would usually explain any new characters I thought Jiajia might not understand while reading or ask her to point out the vocabulary she did not understand. After some time she did not want me to stop to explain anything and asked me to just read the whole story, or the whole book if it was not too thick. My elementary school classroom experiences often led me to ask one question of Jiajia after reading any story: “What is the main idea of the story?” I also encouraged her to connect the story in the book to her own experiences by asking her the questions: “What does the story remind you?” and “What can you learn from the story?” In the process of her answering, I tried to modify and elaborate the sentences she used and taught her new vocabulary whenever possible.

Another method she enjoyed was to be asked to fill in some blanks when we read a new book for the first time. When I read a story I would stop suddenly and asked her to fill in the blanks according to the context. The characters I often left out were usually what I thought were the key ones. The purpose was to see whether she could follow the
thought of the author and the plot of the story. To my surprise she could often provide the
exact characters used in the book or some characters that were similar to the original ones.
Jiajia was always enthusiastic about this fill-in-the-blank reading game and often asked
me if she could do so when we had a new book. Most of the time she was right and I
could see her elevated confidence on her smiling face.

From then on I began consciously to read aloud to Jiajia. She loved it so much
and was even addicted to it. I read, and she listened, as long as I had time. It was such an
enjoyable time for both of us. I seemed to have found an anchor on the path to developing
her into an early reader, under the guidance of the Zero Project. I just needed to read to
her—the more, the better. Reading aloud became an indispensable part of our lives. The
more I read to her, the more she wanted to listen. I read so many books with her that I
had not read before. I grew with Jiajia, and my only dream was to be the mother depicted
in the following poem, “The Reading Mother”:

You may have tangible wealth untold;
Caskets of jewels and coffers of gold.
Richer than I you can never be-
I had a Mother who read to me.
(Gillilan, n.d., p. 1)

**Bedtime reading.** During the daytime, whenever Jiajia did not have a playmate,
she would ask me to read books to her. When she was about five and a half, reading
aloud time began to decrease during the daytime, because she liked to read silently by
herself, asking me the characters she did not know. But every night before sleeping,
bedtime reading aloud continued as a daily feature. Before lying down, Jiajia would
choose several books by herself and then put them beside the pillow. She would ask me
not to explain and just read from the first page until the last page, if they were the thin books. If I made a mistake by missing several lines due to fatigue she would correct me as if she could recite many of the books and ask me to read from the missing lines again. She would become more and more excited. Every evening I had to stop her or prescribe the number of stories to be read on a particular evening; otherwise, it would be difficult for me to stop.

*Raising small animals and reading the encyclopedia.* The campus was really a cozy, tranquil, and safe place in which to live. Stores of diverse kinds were along both sides of the street, separating the campus and the Teachers Residency Area. You could buy almost everything you needed for daily living within a 10-minute walk around the campus. The vendors brought various kinds of small animals to sell along the streets, and they would always attract Jiajia’s attention. She was extremely interested in raising small animals, so we tried to raise any kind of animal we could keep at home: rabbits, chickens, ducks, fish, a lizard, a newt, a turtle, a tortoise, and birds. When the rabbits or ducks grew too big we would donate them to the animal corner in the kindergarten. Raising animals and trying to find information about them in the encyclopedia became an activity Jiajia liked very much.

One summer evening she saw a cage of rabbits on our after-dinner walk along the street in front of the campus. All the rabbits in the cage were white except one brown one. Jiajia wanted the brown one. Based on the previous experiences we had had in summer raising a rabbit at home her dad said she could not raise a rabbit anymore. But she liked
the brown rabbit so much! So every evening, we would go to the market to see the rabbit.

Seeing her strong interest in the rabbit, I had a plan:

I: Jiajia, do you know anything about the brown rabbit?

Jiajia: Yes, Mom, I know a lot of stories about rabbits.

I: Listen, Jiajia. Let’s go home and find more information about rabbits in the encyclopedia. After you know more about the rabbit, we might go to your dad together to convince him to buy one. Let’s have a try.

Jiajia: Okay, Mom.

Then we began to read about rabbits in the animal section of the encyclopedia. Jiajia was about five and a half then and knew many of the characters in the encyclopedia. She would ask me if she did not know one. Finally we convinced her dad and bought her the brown rabbit. She was so excited and liked the encyclopedia much more than before. She learned a lot of facts about rabbits and other animals, too. As a result, in her play she would sometimes listen to the ants to see whether the facts in the encyclopedia were true or not. She would identify a particular kind of snail with its nomenclature.

**Jiajia’s silent reading of her favorites books.** Although the children visited different families frequently in the building, there were times they stayed at home. One of Jiajia’s favorite activities was reading books in front of the bookshelf. She would often sit on her small chair and read her favorite books again and again. This is a good example of “读书百遍，其义自见 [Read the book for a hundred times, and the meaning will pop up by itself].” Later on, when I talked with her about the books she had often read by herself,
I found that at first, she could just recite the books; in time, after repeated readings, she would add more elaborations and more connections.

**Writing.** Writing was emphasized neither in the Zero Project nor by Jim Trelease. I never thought of intentionally teaching Jiajia to write anything before elementary school except for writing her name. My assumption was that if she could read, it would be easy for her to write, and also the teachers would teach the children to write anyway. Reading was my focus. In spite of my de-emphasis on writing, the materials for writing were available. We bought a short, sturdy, squared table, with the four corners rounded for children to “study” on. We put it in the middle of the room. Due to its heavy weight the children could not move it. That was our purpose. We prepared several small chairs for the children who would come in momentarily. Under the table was a shelf. On it were regular pencils, colored pencils, papers, and exercise books for drawing, coloring, or tracing, and so on. The children liked the coloring books best; it was a form of team play for them. Sometimes, they would collaborate to finish coloring a picture by sharing the tasks. There were also simple arithmetic exercise books in which children were usually asked to draw lines to match the numbers with the corresponding pictures.

**Jiajia’s First Day of Elementary School**

School age was 6 in 2000. Jiajia was about six and half when she entered elementary school. On the first day of school, Jiajia received her textbooks. After she arrived home in the afternoon she took the Chinese textbook and read it aloud to us. There were few characters in it that she could not recognize.
Conclusion: Bi-Directional Influence

In our recent conversations, I found a very surprising phenomenon: My father had enlarged both his vocabulary and his scope of knowledge. What was most apparent was that he often quoted from the classics. For example, when I asked why he made the rule for us to keep silent at meals, he mentioned the *Yijing* and the *Analects*. I was curious and asked how he came to do this. He said simply: “I need to learn new knowledge every day. It is so good to learn.” Later on, in one of my telephone conversations with my nephew, my brother’s son, who is currently a first grader, I learned the secret. Addressing me as Er Gu [Second Paternal Aunt], he revealed,

Almost every day, Grandpa copied five sentences from the *Analects* or Laozi. Then he copied each sentence five times. Then Grandpa, my father, and I would sit together to talk about them in the evening. Sometimes, even Grandma would sit down and listen. Grandpa said he did not want to fall behind me. He said he wanted to catch up with me. Also, I am teaching Grandpa and Grandma the *Di Zi Gui* [the name of a classic] I learned in the kindergarten.

About two months before I came to the United States my brother’s son was born. As a result of the debate and discussion between my brother and me on the content issue in curriculum before elementary school we came to a temporary consensus that he should start to teach his son some of the Chinese classics at home. His son is now a first grader, but could recognize many characters before entering elementary school and thus became the second early reader, following my daughter, in my family. The difference between them is that my daughter learned more *baihua* while my nephew learned more *wenyan*. My brother told me that he had to learn every day in order to teach his son. He has really been enjoying the process. What is more important, he told me that it was this learning
phenomenon that made his family a more cohesive and happy one, because seeing the
child’s progress every day, parents are happy.

After participating in my daughter’s early childhood education and my brother’s
son’s early literacy education, my father is now totally aware of the importance of
starting children early in education in general and literacy in particular. He said,

Had I known the importance of early childhood education and early literacy when
you were young, I would have devoted my life to it. Even if I could not do it, I
would have asked someone who could to teach you. But the crucial issue was I
did not have the awareness. Opportunities are not opportunities until you are
ready to “see” and are prepared for them.

Seeing Jiajia’s enthusiasm in reading books and my nephew’s wider scope of knowledge,
my mother also said, “Now I also admit that children should receive education since an
early age.”

We have been living in the United States for almost eight years. My daughter was
a third grader upon arriving and is now in high school. Her hobby is debate. My husband,
in a sense, ascribes her enthusiasm in debate to her being an early reader and
has more or less changed his opposing attitude to early childhood education. This change
of attitude took more than ten years! It is better late than never.

However, as to the contribution of being an early reader to my daughter’s life-
long growth as a person living in this world, I cannot measure. But I am fully convinced
in its importance in providing her one way of passing part of her time in life in a
meaningful way, because she told me reading books really made her happy. There must
be numerous other ways I do not know, which could be well expressed by Rumsfeld’s (as
cited in Seely, 2003) incisive little poem:

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The Unknown
As we know,
There are known knowns.
There are things we know we know.
We also know
There are known unknowns.
That is to say
We know there are some things
We do not know.
But there are also unknown unknowns,
The ones we don't know
We don't know.

(para. 5)
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
--T. S. Elliot (1943b, stanza 5, para. 3)

This case study shows that the appearance of an early reader who could read before entering elementary school is not a natural or accidental phenomenon. Instead it is the result of the continuity of the unwitting and deliberate efforts of several generations in a family. In this case it took three generations to create an early reader in the history of my family. Numerous known and unknown dimensions contributed to this process, but the general harmony and consolidation in the development of my family, from generation to generation, despite the existence of contradictions, constitute its foundation. The single most important, tangible factor to have brought all of this about is the gradual generalization of education in society and the concomitant result of the parents' increasing awareness of the importance of early childhood education. At the same time, an early reader in my family motivated the whole family to pursue further education and rethink the central curriculum issue of content from the perspective of human nature.
Parents’ Awareness Matters Most in Producing an Early Reader

D. Q. Feng (2005a) said, “Early childhood education is, first and foremost, a question of awareness. This is the most significant and fundamental question” (p. 3). The observable difference in the experiences the case (my daughter) had that resulted in her becoming an early reader, compared to all other family members in this study, was that she was exposed to more spoken language and more written language through being read to. This is supported by Anbar (2004):

The most distinguishing difference between early readers and children who do not read early appears to involve the parents. Increasingly, the focus of attention has shifted to parents and home environment. Numerous studies confirm that these two factors play a crucial role in early reading development. Early readers appear to have homes filled with books and other literacy-related toys and materials, as well as parents who enjoy extensive interactions with their youngsters; discussing, naming, reading, stimulating, and responding to myriad literacy-related and other kinds of questions. (pp. 26-27)

However, the observable difference in parents’ actions and the consequent creation of environments conducive to early literacy are both predicated on what D. Q. Feng called “awareness.” Awareness means a change in attitude. One’s attitude determines one’s actions. Simply put, attitude determines all. Parents’ awareness is related to the historical stages they lived in as well as their own family traditions. It is understandable that my grandmother, who was illiterate, had no awareness whatsoever of early childhood education. My parents, although they had had 6 years of schooling experiences, had no awareness either. The reason might be that they had no family tradition of studying and therefore they were not exposed to any early literacy experiences in their own lives, nor did they live in a time when early reading was a prevalent phenomenon. Moreover, there
were no people around who could educate them or other venues that could inspire them. My father loved school so much that his favorite motto was the common Chinese saying, “万般皆下品，惟有读书高 [Learning (reading books) surpasses all other occupations].” Having this deep conviction in learning, he highly valued education and his highest goal in life was to support his children unconditionally to pursue as much education as possible. There seemed to be nothing impossible in his eyes as long as one worked hard. In the cultural outsider’s eyes, he seemed like a typical Chinese parent—one of the generalizations about Chinese people—highly valuing children’s education and having high aspirations for their academic achievements. Obviously as a result of their education, both my parents had the ability and knowledge to at least teach us to recognize or write characters prior to elementary school. In addition there were actually Chinese characters everywhere in our environment. By today’s standards some would say that I grew up in a literacy-rich environment considering the fact that there were big-character posters and many slogans everywhere. We even had the opportunity to watch my father practicing calligraphy. However, in my father’s mind the time prior to elementary school was children’s play time and all his high academic expectations for us did not begin until our entry into elementary school. So even when we offered to try calligraphy he deprived us of the precious opportunity and quenched our spontaneous desire to acquire literacy, unwittingly, out of non-awareness.

As a parent, although I did not have any early literacy experiences myself, the existence of the Zero Project, in a different historical time than that of my parents, was
part and parcel of the premise of the ignition of my awareness of the importance of early childhood education. At the same time, my own educational experiences and personality happened to bring me to a point where I was ready for this awareness. In the final analysis, it is not the difference in ability; it is the difference in awareness, or change of attitude. With different levels of awareness or with the difference between awareness versus non-awareness in terms of the importance of early childhood education in general and early literacy in particular, the resultant literacy-related environment created or “seen” by the parents is correspondingly different. It is this difference that is crucial.

For example, in terms of spoken language, my awareness led me to make the rule that my family and I talk regularly to Jiajia, the more the better and in a more redundant way whenever possible. So the quiet mealtimes I had had as a child were deliberately changed into talkative ones for Jiajia. In the process of reading the literature in the field of emergent literacy and family literacy I found that talkative mealtimes were conducive to children’s literacy development, as Powell (2004) wrote,

Other research shows that everyday family conversations provide children with opportunities to learn about narratives (e.g., De Temple & Beals, 1991; Heath, 1983). For example, Beals (2001) found strong positive relationships between narrative and explanatory talk during family mealtimes in the preschool years and children’s scores on literacy-related measures when children were 5 years of age. Narrative talk includes extended discourse about an event that has happened or will happen and usually takes several turns in a conversation. Explanatory talk provides logical connections among objects, events, concepts, or conclusions. (p. 159)

When Jiajia was old enough to participate in conversations I created various opportunities to interact with her. The birth of Jiajia-Mom’s Time was an example in which I tried to use more new words to explain the same event to enlarge her vocabulary
and concepts. This was also found to be supported by research. For example, Powell (2004) wrote that the mother’s “use of rare words with her preschooler has been found to be related to language and literacy skills at kindergarten age (Tabors, Beals, & Weizman, 2001)” (p. 159).

In terms of the tangible literacy resources in the home environment, compared with the selected works of Chairman Mao and a few small-sized picture books in my childhood, abundant books on various topics within my husband and my own knowledge scope were bought for Jiajia. No books were ever read to me, whereas Jiajia was read to often—as many books as we could get.

In terms of how much time was spent, my parents devoted most of their time to their work due to demanding work schedules, whereas I devoted much of my time to interacting with Jiajia around books and any other activities she liked, setting the bedtime reading as a routine, no matter how busy I was.

More important were the intangible aspects of literacy-teaching opportunities hidden in the environment, which could only be “seen” by parents who were aware of the importance of early literacy. As an example, I used the heating system to teach Jiajia the concept of hotness and then went out immediately into the cold for her to experience the meaning of coldness, whereas all the apparent Chinese characters around my siblings and me were ignored by my parents. Thus, it all depends on the parents’ awareness of the importance of teaching children literacy, as Leichter (1984) wrote:

In attempting to survey artifacts in homes to determine which literacy resources were available, it became evident that no clear boundary could be drawn between an artifact that served such a purpose and one that did not. Indeed, we seemed to
rely on implicit assumptions that certain artifacts were educational while others were not, and that those artifacts containing print were potential resources for learning literacy while those without print were not. Yet these assumptions were unwarranted. Sewing patterns, for instance, are not in the home for the purpose of literacy instruction, but they have potential as an educational resource not merely in the teaching of sewing and the use of patterns but in developing spatial concepts and the ability to recognize visual forms, intellectual skills that may well be underpinnings for literacy. Clearly, whether something is thought of as an educational resource derives more from human attitudes than from its physical characteristics. (p. 41)

Yes, Leichter (1984) was right. Based on our awareness versus non-awareness of the importance of early literacy, my parents, and I as a parent, had completely different attitudes towards early literacy which resulted in markedly different actions related to engaging in children’s literacy. The awareness made me “see” opportunities to teach literacy anywhere, whereas my parents’ non-awareness left many potential opportunities untapped. This led to a totally different result for the children who were involved. Before entering elementary school, I could not recognize any Chinese characters; in contrast, Jiajia found few Chinese characters that she could not recognize in the Chinese textbook for first graders.

Parents’ Limitations

However, it was precisely in my deliberate endeavor, based on my awareness, to use rich language when interacting with Jiajia, that I felt my own limitations in vocabulary, concepts, and scope of knowledge, even when I was talking to her before she was able to talk. Therefore, I became aware that only having awareness of the importance of early literacy is not enough. The limitation of my own level and dimensions of literacy
as a parent restricted the scope of my child’s literacy experiences and the enhancement of her literacy level.

This aspect was very obvious in the content issue debate between my brother and me on teaching Jiajia. Due to his background, particularly his experiences in high school and his major in college, my brother liked the Chinese classics, especially Laozi, and therefore insisted that we teach Jiajia some Chinese classics. My educational background in English literature and linguistics led me to be more influenced by Western culture and therefore to prefer to buy more books on topics of literature, both foreign and Chinese, whereas my husband would buy books on science due to his background in medicine and science.

Consequently, my brother and I had different opinions on the content in the early literacy curriculum for Jiajia. The classics were not the main literacy curriculum for Jiajia although recitation of some ancient poems, especially poems in the Tang and Song dynasties—a tradition in many Chinese families—was included. Being able to recite ancient poems is regarded as a reflection of the brilliance of a child’s mind and a source of pride of some parents for their children.

Choice means exclusion of other choices. Parents’ limitations are actually everyone’s limitations, especially for those individuals who are in charge of curriculum content issues.

**My Interpretation and Chinese Philosophical Ideas**

Careful readers might have noticed that in my interpretation of the data I used many sayings from Chinese philosophy. It was Daoism that came to mind when I thought
of my grandmother and my mother, and it was Confucianism that was of help in my interpretation of my father’s behavior. It was first Confucianism and then Daoism when I thought of my brother. I even compared my grandmother to a sage, which was really my instinctive feeling of my impression of a sage as defined in Chinese culture. In Y.-L. Feng’s (1948) words,

> Chinese philosophy has always tended to stress that the sage need do nothing extraordinary in order to be a sage. He cannot perform miracles, nor need he try to do so. He does nothing more than most people do, but, having high understanding, what he does has a different significance to him. In other words, he does what he does in a state of enlightenment, while other people do what they do in a state of ignorance. As the Ch’an monks say: “Understanding—this one word is the source of all mysteries.” It is the significance which results from this understanding that constitutes his highest sphere of living. (p. 340)

Readers who are not familiar with Chinese culture might well ask: Being illiterate, does your grandmother possess this high understanding? Or, is it not just too exaggerating to compare your grandmother to a sage? Such wonder is justified because it seems that in people’s mind philosophy is usually more concerned with metaphysics; metaphysics seems abstruse and esoteric and therefore far removed from people’s daily lives. However, due to the unique nature of Chinese philosophy, which is both this-worldly and other-worldly, it is a natural thing for me to make connections between philosophy and our daily lives and ordinary people. I believe it is also true of other Chinese. Y.-L. Feng’s (1948) description of the two main traditions of Chinese philosophy might help: “Confucianism is the philosophy of social organization, and so is also the philosophy of daily life. Confucianism emphasizes the social responsibilities of
man, while Taoism emphasizes what is natural and spontaneous in him” (p. 22). A word about the place of philosophy in Chinese culture is now in order.

The Place of Philosophy in Chinese Culture

When discussing the purpose of studying philosophy, Y.-L. Feng (1948) wrote,

According to Chinese tradition, the study of philosophy is not a profession. Everyone should study philosophy just as in the West every one should go to church. The purpose of the study of philosophy is to enable a man, as a man, to be a man, not some particular kind of man. Other studies—not the study of philosophy—enable a man to be some special kind of man. (p. 11)

Y.-L. Feng (1948) also wrote about the central place of philosophy in Chinese culture:

The place which philosophy has occupied in Chinese civilization has been comparable to that of religion in other civilizations. In China, philosophy has been every educated person’s concern. In the old days, if a man were educated at all, the first education he received was in philosophy. When children went to school, the Four Books, which consist of the Confucian Analects, the Book of Mencius, the Great Learning, and the Doctrine of the Mean, were the first ones they were taught to read. The Four Books were the most important texts of Neo-Confucianist philosophy. Sometimes when the children were just beginning to learn the characters, they were given a sort of textbook to read. This was known as the Three Characters Classic, and was so called because each sentence in the book consisted of three characters arranged so that when recited they produced a rhythmic effect, and thus helped the children to memorize them more easily. This book was in reality a primer, and the very first statement in it is that “the nature of man is originally good.” This is one of the fundamental ideas of Mencius’ philosophy. (p. 1)

Although Y.-L. Feng compared the place of philosophy in Chinese culture to that of religion in other cultures, which gives people the impression that knowing philosophy is a common thing among ordinary people, he mainly emphasized that philosophy “has been every educated person’s concern,” and the children from rich families began to learn philosophy at an early age. This has already been shown in Chapter 2 regarding the two
early readers, Hu Shi and Y.-R. Chao, who were representatives of traditional education in ancient China.

It might be easier to understand that I used some expressions from Chinese philosophy, because all the high school students learn some Chinese philosophy in their Chinese textbooks. For example, I naturally thought of Mencius’s words and used them to encourage myself when I met opposing opinions on teaching my daughter character recognition in her infancy. But readers might continue to wonder whether it is appropriate for me to compare my grandmother to a sage, the highest goal for being a human being in the Chinese tradition. To be honest I had no idea whether my grandmother had great understanding as the sages had. According to Y.-L. Feng’s (1948) theory of spheres of living, which will be discussed below, my grandmother did not have great understanding, because she was illiterate and had no formal education or learning with respect to Chinese philosophy, in which the highest goal is to cultivate sages. However, her behavior was truly like that of the sage described in Chinese philosophy. Often this makes me doubt the function of formal education. I have met some sage-like people who do not have a high level of education or any education at all; I have also met some narrow-minded people who have had the highest degrees conferred upon them. There must be some “unknown unknowns” (Rumsfeld as cited in Seely, 2003, para. 5) in education.
A Nation of Philosophers

In his book, entitled *China Moulded by Confucius*, Cheng (1946) wrote,

The Chinese have been called a nation of philosophers. What this really means is another matter. But it is certainly true that the Chinese people, whatever may be their stations in life, are in a high degree amenable to the influence of philosophy. That they have a large amount of patience and perseverance, a great capacity for endurance, and a remarkable sense of contentment, is well known and often noticed by foreigners. These qualities are not necessarily born in them, but are more often the result of a philosophic culture. To witness this, one has only to watch, in a summer evening, the Chinese peasants who, after their day of toil, wash their feet in a running stream in front of a setting crimson sun, singing folksongs, as if all their earthly cares of the day were flowing away with the dirt. There is also a touch of philosophy, not without a sense of humour, in the monotonous cries, used to be heard in the once-narrow streets of Canton from load-bearers who, trying to ease their fatigue, uttered, as they went along with their loads: ‘Who the devil asks you to be poor! Who the devil asks you to be poor! By this they meant that the proper way to get over poverty was to work and not to grumble. And so, they found the key of life. (p. 91)

Yes, ancient Chinese philosophy is the theoretical foundation of Chinese culture (Y. D. Wang, 1996a) and it is pervasive at every level of life. Moore (1974) wrote,

Dr. Hu Shih [Hu Shi], the great Chinese intellectual and philosopher, has been quoted as saying that every people has a unique character in terms of which that particular people must be understood—and that this essential character or mind of a given people consists essentially of its deepest philosophical convictions. (p. 2)

Actually many of the concepts have taken root in Chinese people’s conduct guidelines through many of the expressions from ancient philosophical works. One may not have read any Chinese philosophy, a good example being my grandmother, but the essence of Chinese philosophy seems to be in one’s brain, because it is in the lifeblood of Chinese culture and is embedded in the Chinese cultural genes. It is true that “tradition has such a solid foundation among the Chinese people” (Moore, 1974, p. 10). Therefore,
it is understandable that the “deepest philosophical convictions” are in every Chinese person’s mind, and they enact them at different levels, based on their own backgrounds.

Having this knowledge in mind, it might become a little easier to understand why my grandmother was always patient and hopeful, no matter how hard one imagines her physical life must have been. Bodde (1981a) observed that along with the concepts of the original goodness of human nature “go the optimism, the good humor, and the will to live, that are marked characteristics of so many Chinese” (p. 137). In addition, in *The Analects of Confucius* are found the following words:

The Master said, A Knight whose heart is set upon the Way, but who is ashamed of wearing shabby clothes and eating coarse food, is not worth calling into counsel. (as cited in Waley, trans. 1938, pp. 103-104)

The Master said, Incomparable indeed was Hui! A handful of rice to eat, a gourdful of water to drink, living in a mean street—others would have found it unendurably depressing, but to Hui’s cheerfulness it made no difference at all. Incomparable indeed was Hui! (as cited in Waley, trans. 1938, pp. 117-118)

The Master said, He who seeks only coarse food to eat, water to drink and a bent arm for pillow, will without looking for it find happiness to boot. Any thought of accepting wealth and rank by means that I know to be wrong is as remote from me as the clouds that float above. (as cited in Waley, trans. 1938, p. 126)

This does not mean that if one can recite some sages’ words he or she will find happiness in a poor life. In this aspect, Cheng’s (1946) explanation is apt:

This cumulative philosophization of the Chinese mind does not of course abolish poverty or other hardships of life, but it can dull the edge of affliction. “Honest poverty,” says Prof. Giles, “is no crime in China. Nor is it in any way regarded as a cause for shame. It is even more amply redeemed by scholarship than is the case in Western countries.” “It seemed to me,” says Bertrand Russell, “that the average Chinaman, even if he is miserably poor, is happier…because the nation is built upon a more humane and civilized outlook than our own.” (p. 94)
Therefore, it makes sense to me when I read Cheng (1946) saying: “The average Chinese finds life agreeable, though he may be poor” (p. 24). It is true, at least, when I am reminiscent of my childhood. The word “poor” is a relative concept.

“What Knowledge is of Most Worth?”

Zhuangzi said, “吾生也有涯，而知也无涯 [One’s life time is limited while knowledge is unlimited].” This made the classic curriculum question, “What knowledge is of most worth?” (Spencer as cited in Doll, 1993, p. 1) really worth rethinking, considering the fact that one’s lifetime is limited. In retrospect, my studies in pursuing the Ph.D. degree in Curriculum and Instruction made me aware that this question was actually the focus of the discussion initiated by my brother when he helped raise my daughter. Deeply convinced at that time by the Zero Project, which was mainly theoretically based on the latest Western scientific research in various disciplines, I wanted my daughter, in light of the limitation of my background, to acquire knowledge concerning the modern world. Actually this question pertaining to the knowledge has been lingering on my mind ever since. The classic answer was given by Spencer, who posed this question in *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical*:

To the question…What Knowledge is of most worth?
—the uniform reply is—Science. This is the verdict on all counts.
For direct self-preservation…Science.
For gaining a livelihood…Science.
For parental functions…Science.
For good citizenship…Science.
For the enjoyment of art…Science.
For purposes of discipline…Science.
Science…is the best preparation for all these orders of activity.
(as cited in Doll, 1993, p. 1)
Obviously, according to Spencer, science is the sure-fire way to negotiate the world. Doll (1993) continued his discussion as to why science is worshiped, especially in America:

Herbert Spencer asked and answered this question in the year Charles Darwin first published his Origin of the Species and the year John Dewey was born. Spencer’s answer, Science, Science, Science, not merely reflects the tenor of the times but also mirrors the foundation on which the modernist paradigm has been built, a paradigm that framed American intellectual, social, and educational thought during the first seven or eight decades of this century. Science is one of the dominant obsessions we have had as a people. Productively it has made America a leader among the world’s industrial nations; socially it has framed for us the dream of a more leisurely life where machines replace people in doing the drudgery of daily living; intellectually its methods have dominated areas well beyond its own domain—areas of philosophy, psychology, and educational theory. (p. 1)

Science and China

Undoubtedly, nobody would deny the huge influence of science on the world. As stated earlier, what we call science today derives from Western philosophy. Due to the fundamental difference between Chinese thought and Western philosophy (Y.-L. Feng, 1948) Jung (1967) held that “the Chinese [have] never developed what we [the West] call science” (p. xxii). In this regard, Y.-L. Feng (1948) explained,

The fact that the Chinese were farmers also explains why China failed to have an industrial revolution, which is instrumental for the introduction of the modern world.…In China there have been not a few notable inventions or discoveries, but we often find that these were discouraged rather than encouraged. (p. 26)

However, “in the nineteenth century, beginning with the Anglo-Chinese Opium War of 1839-42, the industrializing West came to China in force and irrevocably broke or changed the traditional historical patterns” (Bodde, 1981b, p. 42). In other words, Chinese culture and society developed along her own path until the Opium War (Ding, 2001). Y.-L. Feng commented incisively,
The advancement of science has conquered geography, and China is no longer isolated “within the four seas.” She is having her industrialization too, and though much later than the Western world, it is better late than never. It is not correct to say that the East has been invaded by the West. Rather it is a case in which the medieval has been invaded by the modern. In order to live in a modern world, China has to be modern. (p. 27)

Hence, this was the beginning of the large-scale encounter between China and the West, which started in 1840, and the beginning of China’s learning from the West on the path to living in a modern world. This process was gradual. Throughout the long tradition in Chinese history, literature, history, and the classics were the focus of the curriculum, and taking the examinations to become government officials was the highest goal. In this regard, Lu (1922) said that in 1898, when he entered the schools run as the result of the late Qing Westernization Movement, reading books and taking examinations were the right way, whereas studying scientific knowledge and military technology from the Western countries under the Westernization Movement was looked down upon in society. However, with the introduction of a modern educational system by the Qing government, the abolition of the Civil Service Examination system in 1905, and the progress in learning from the West, the curriculum in schools became increasingly more similar to that of the Western countries. In the New Culture Movement, “science” and “democracy” constituted the focus that was influenced by the West. In the late 1970s, with the re-entry of Western culture, science and technology in education became the important means for making the country prosper, and fast changes have been taking place at every level of Chinese society ever since, as Mote (1971) wrote:

To be sure, Chinese civilization displays a unique continuity; yet the level of culture, the structure of society, the form and functioning of government, the
Nowadays, “few newspapers can avoid the topic of China” (Giskin & Walsh, 2001, p. xi). It is not an exaggeration to say that China is now, to borrow Dewey’s (1938) words, a society “where change is the rule, not the exception” (p. 19).

**Concept of Change in Chinese Culture**

Wilhelm and Baynes (trans. 1967/1950) commented on the concept of change in their translation of the *Yijing*, the *Book of Changes*:

In the Book of Changes a distinction is made between three kinds of change: nonchange, cyclic change, and sequent change. Nonchange is the background, as it were, against which change is made possible. For in regard to any change there must be a fixed point to which the change can be referred; otherwise there can be no definite order and everything is dissolved in chaotic movement. This point of reference must be established, and this always requires a choice and a decision. It makes possible a system of coordinates into which everything can be fitted. Consequently at the beginning of the world, as at the beginning of thought, there is the decision, the fixing of the point of reference. (pp. 280-281)

In the lightening economic change for a better physical life, concomitant undercurrent changes are also taking place. It is the change in people’s needs in regard to their spiritual level. In the 1990s, there began a revitalization of the study of the ancient classics in China. In 2002, according to a report in the *Wenhui Newspaper* (R. L. Zhang, 2002), the classics, both Chinese and foreign, were the priority choice among the middle school and high school students in Shanghai. In 2006, lectures on the Confucianist classics, Daoist classics, and other ancient Chinese philosophical works became a popular program on CCTV, China Central Television, at the national level. The lectures on
Confucius’ *Analects* by Yu Dan, a professor at Beijing Normal University, among others, were extremely popular among people both young and old. The goal was to enable a person aged 14 or 15 to understand the *Analects*. Her book, titled *Yu Dan Analects Contemplation*, based on her lectures, sold 900,000 copies within 10 days (Yu, 2006a). Another illustration of the vitality of the respectable status of the ancient Chinese philosophical classics in people’s minds was that the highest mark (full mark) in composition writing in the Chinese College Entrance Examination in 2010 was given for an article written in *wenyan*. In order to understand this composition, written by a high school student, all the readers had to consult numerous dictionaries.

Yes, everything changes in this world; what does not change is the principle of change. However, human’s eternal desire to live a happy life with peace of mind is the non-change demonstrated in this classics revitalization, as the Chinese saying goes, “万变不离其宗 [The nature or aim remains unchanged despite all apparent changes in form].”

**Change of My Perspective on the Content Issue: Rediscovering Chinese Philosophy**

In retrospect, the most important issue, derived from my case study and initiated by my brother, boils down to the content issue in early Chinese literacy curriculum. In regards to curriculum, Kliebard (1985) wrote,

Thinking about the curriculum is as old as thinking about education. It is hard to imagine any inquiry into the nature of education without deliberate attention to the question of what should be taught. From the point of view of a serious educator, whatever the historical period or the particular setting, the question of what to teach involves a selection from a vast array of knowledge and belief within a culture. Since it is impossible to teach everything, that selection from the
culture reflects in part some sense of what is most worthwhile in that culture seen in relation to the kind of institution the school is and what it can reasonably accomplish. (p. 31)

In actuality, the discussion initiated by my brother concerning the content issue in curriculum gradually called my attention to the “64 dollar question in curriculum”: What knowledge is of most worth? However, I did not seriously think about it, or rather I was not at the point of becoming aware of the importance of thinking about it, until about one year before I came to the United States, when my daughter was a first grader. Since then, this question has not left my mind, becoming more clarified especially after I enrolled in the doctoral program in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Denver in the United States.

To me, Chinese culture is like the air we breathe everyday and thus was not noticed until one day when I realized that I was going to leave it for a long time. My perspective on the content issue began to change about one year before we came to the United States. This change was mainly due to our crucial decision, the worth of which is still not clear: We were going to take our daughter to live in the United States. Learning English as a foreign language in China is one thing; coming to live in the United States where English is spoken, especially bringing our daughter to live and study there, was another thing, mainly because of her age, when Chinese culture would still not be ingrained in her mind and an age when it is easy to change. As adults, living in other cultures means the enrichment of our life experiences. However, it would be quite different for a child who has no mastery of her native language and culture. As a result, I suddenly felt a kind of panic and hesitation. This nameless panic and fear led me to ask
myself a question I had never thought of: What is Chinese culture? Or more concretely, what is the Chinese culture I think my daughter should have mastered so that she would keep her Chineseness when she goes to live in a Western culture? In other words, what are the characteristics of Chinese culture that I would want to tell people in other countries if I were asked about it?

This question led me to begin to notice and care about my own culture and led me to buy some books on Chinese culture. To my surprise, Y. D. Wang (1996b) posed this seemingly simple question: As Yan-Huang descendants, each and every one of us is proud to be Chinese. However, how many of us understand our own culture?

With this awareness of wanting to know my own culture, the opening of a new book-store close to our campus caught my attention soon afterwards. The store represented a reflection of the revitalization of the ancient classics in China that had quietly begun in the 1990s. As I mentioned earlier, my brother had noticed this trend due to his background and tried to persuade me to teach Jiajia some classics; however I did not. The book-store sold Chinese classics in the children’s version, and so this time I bought some of these books and tried to instill them in Jiajia, who was already a first grader. I found it was not as easy as when she was younger and had tended to absorb everything I tried to teach her. She had a lot of homework to do every day and I wanted her to have a break after coming back from school, rather than having her read more books, let alone the classics that required more time. What was more important, she showed no interest in them. In retrospect, it was not that she was not interested in these books; it was that I, as a parent, had not provided opportunities that would open a
window for her to become interested when she was very young, the optimal age. I relayed my regrets to my brother and bought sets of classics for him to teach his would-be child in the future. At that time my brother was already a believer in early childhood education after his experiences with Jiajia’s growth. His son was born about two months before we came to the United States and the classics became a major part of his son’s early literacy curriculum.

The change of my viewpoint on the content issue was strengthened after I came to the United States, facing a variety of unexpected pressures in life, both from within and from without. In coping with these stresses I experienced the trajectory in mind of rediscovering my own culture and ancient Chinese philosophy, the foundation of Chinese culture. These were never so close to me in my life. As Kumaravadivelu (2008) observed, “In understanding other cultures, we understand our own culture better; in understanding our own, we understand other cultures better” (p. 6).

In the meantime, in the process of pursuing my Ph.D. degree in Curriculum and Instruction it was again these familiar Chinese philosophical ideas that I turned to in order to understand better what I had been learning. In addition I did not notice until writing my dissertation that my interpretation of the case study could not be done without frequently using the ideas in Chinese philosophy and culture as the background and support. I was very grateful that I had learned part of Chinese philosophy in my middle and high school Chinese textbooks, which laid the foundation for me to explore further by myself.
The trajectory I experienced in my heart in rediscovering my own culture strengthened my determination to agree with my brother that we should teach young children philosophy. What convinced me more about this determination was that my brother had been integrating some ancient Chinese philosophy into his son’s early literacy curriculum at home, which was more effective than I had imagined.

**My Temporary Conclusion on Early Literacy Curriculum in China**

All this led me to conclude at this final stage of my dissertation: In China, no matter what the literacy curriculum is for a child at an early age, Chinese philosophy should be an indispensable part of it, from the perspective of human nature. Beginning at an early age, she or he should have a solid body of knowledge—a body of ideas—as a kind of anchor, a frame of reference, and a foundation not only for her or his lifelong education, but for living in this world happily with an understanding of the meaning of life. This can be called the relative “non-change” in a child’s curriculum.

**Theoretical Support for My Conclusion**

When discussing the centrality of interpretation, Stake (1995) observed, “Views held by large numbers of people, especially respected people, are held credible, even factual” (p. 101). So it seems that I need to find some theoretical underpinnings from the respected people for this temporary conclusion of mine.

My encounter in China with Jim Trelease’s article in the *Reader’s Digest* led me to care more about research done on book reading when I came to the United States. On the issue of book quality, Teale (2003) said,
There are a number of ways to address this question, but the following comments of folklorist and author Julius Lester (2001), offered in response to a question about what “makes a book literature, especially a children’s book,” are quite insightful. (p. 125)

The following words are cited by Teale (2003):

There are many answers, but two have come to mind immediately. One is the quality of language. Literature cares about language, cares about enabling the reader to experience the possibilities in language, that how something is expressed enables one to experience anew that which he or she thought they knew…. Literature is the genre that enables us to experience that words matter.…

Second, implicit in literature is a vision of what it is to be human. The literature that has endured—the Greek tragedies, Shakespeare, the great Russian novelists [sic], etc.—has done so because of the moral vision those works give us of the human condition. (p. 126)

The second point above touches on the nature of humanity and the important contribution of enduring classics to this aspect in the West.

In China, R. L. Zhang (2002) wrote about the reason for reading the classics:

A classic must satisfy two conditions: stand to the test of time and become more vital after a long time. Unlike the best seller, classics do not have a large readership in any times, but they can have the lasting charms and can arouse people’s interest forever. The reason is that classics, in the form of classics, touch on, contemplate and express the fundamental questions of human existence. These questions will not disappear with the flux of times. The changes, at most, are the form of their presentation. Just because classics employ unrivaled ways to think and express these questions, their depth and breadth are difficult to transcend by posterity and they have eternal charisma for human beings. (p. 60)

When he was alive the great Chinese educator, Tao Xingzhi, made great efforts in advocating for quality education (D. Q. Feng, 2005a), and quality education is now the priority in China’s education policy. How can quality education be instilled in a child? According to R. L. Zhang (2002), “The quality of a person can only be cultivated through humanities education and reading classics should be an indispensable part in humanities
education” (p. 61). Furthermore, “classics are the mother of culture. The inheritance and
development of culture can only begin from reading classics” (R. L. Zhang, 2002, p. 61).
Quality is a concept that is difficult to define. The above viewpoint on the quality of a
person seems to echo Confucius’s aim and methods in education for his students, as Y.-L.
Feng (1948) commented:

He [Confucius] wanted his disciples to be “rounded men” who would be useful to
state and society, and therefore he taught them various branches of knowledge
based upon the different classics. His primary function as a teacher, he felt, was to
interpret to his disciples the ancient cultural heritage. (p. 40)

Four Spheres of Living. In response to the question of what is the function of
philosophy, Y.-L. Feng’s (1948) answer was, “According to Chinese philosophical
tradition, its function is not the increase of positive knowledge of matters of fact, but the
elevation of the mind” (p. 338). Then he used the four spheres of living as a more clear
explanation for his answer:

In my book, *The New Treatise on the Nature of Man*, I have observed that man
differs from other animals in that when he does something, he understands what
he is doing, and is conscious that he is doing it. It is this understanding and self-
consciousness that give significance for him to what he is doing. The various
significances that thus attach to his various acts, in their totality, constitute what I
call his sphere of living. Different men may do the same things, but according to
their different degrees of understanding and self-consciousness, these things may
have varying significance to them. Every individual has his own sphere of living
which is not quite the same as that of any other individual. Yet in spite of these
individual differences, we can classify the various spheres of living into four
general grades. Beginning with the lowest, they are: the innocent sphere, the
utilitarian sphere, the moral sphere, and the transcendent sphere. (p. 338)

The following is Y.-L. Feng’s (1948) theory of the four spheres of living, each of
which is explained, respectively. The first sphere of living is called “the innocent sphere,”
which he described in the following way:
A man may simply do what his instinct or the custom of his society leads him to do. Like children and primitive people, he does what he does without being self-conscious or greatly understanding what he is doing. Thus what he does has little significance, if any, for him. His sphere of living is what I call the innocent sphere. (p. 338)

The second sphere of living is called “the utilitarian sphere,” Y. L. Feng said,

Or many may be aware of himself, and be doing everything for himself. That does not mean that he is necessarily an immoral man. He may do something, the consequences of which are beneficial to others, but his motivation for so doing is self-benefit. Thus everything he does has the significance of utility for himself. His sphere of living is what I call the utilitarian sphere. (p. 338)

The third sphere of living is what Y.-L. Feng called “the moral sphere”:

Yet again a man may come to understand that a society exists, of which he is a member. This society constitutes a whole and he is a part of that whole. Having this understanding, he does everything for the benefit of the society, or as the Confucianists say, he does everything “for the sake of righteousness, and not for the sake of personal profit.” He is the truly moral man and what he does is moral action in the strict sense of the word. Everything he does has a moral significance. Hence his sphere of living is what I call the moral sphere. (pp. 338-339)

The fourth sphere of living is the highest and ideal one for a human being. Y.-L. Feng called it “the transcendent sphere” and explained it as follows:

And finally, a man may come to understand that over and above society as a whole, there is the great whole which is the universe. He is not only a member of society, but at the same time a member of the universe. He is a citizen of the social organization, but at that same time, a citizen of Heaven, as Mencius says. Having this understanding, he does everything for the benefit of the universe. He understands the significance of what he does and is self-conscious of the fact that he is doing what he does. This understanding and self-consciousness constitute for him a higher sphere of living which I call the transcendent sphere. (p. 339).

Y.-L. Feng provided this further explanation of the four spheres of living:

Of the four spheres of living, the innocent and the utilitarian are the products of man as he is, while the moral and the transcendent are those of man as he ought to be. The former two are the gifts of nature, while the latter two are the creations of the spirit. The innocent sphere is the lowest, the utilitarian comes next, then the
moral, and finally the transcendent. They are so because the innocent sphere requires almost no understanding and self-consciousness, whereas the utilitarian and the moral require more, and the transcendent requires most. The moral sphere is that of moral values, and the transcendent is that of super-moral values. (p. 339)

According to the tradition of Chinese philosophy, the function of philosophy is to help man to achieve the two higher spheres of living, and especially the highest. The transcendent sphere may also be called the sphere of philosophy, because it cannot be achieved unless through philosophy one gains some understanding of the universe. But the moral sphere, too, is a product of philosophy. Moral actions are not simply actions that accord with the moral rule, nor is moral man one who simply cultivates certain moral habits. He must act and live with an understanding of the moral principles involved, and it is the business of philosophy to give him this understanding. (p. 339)

Final Thought

Early age is the optimal time to start to educate children and therefore it should also be the time to expose them to the Chinese classics—the essence of Chinese culture—due to their unique, age-specific characteristics which enable them to memorize first and then gradually grasp the meaning (D. Q. Feng, 2005b). In other words, parents should provide them opportunities to store some classics in their memory, which will gradually be digested by them with the passage of time and finally be internalized in them with the growth of their life experiences. Although the concrete methods of implementing this advocated curriculum are beyond the scope of this study, Y.-R. Chao’s (1976) words are still inspiring:

Our teacher was rather strict, but we liked him because he explained the lessons and the new words. In those days “reading books” was just to read books. The teacher did not always explain, nor did the students understand; there was just the practice of dwu shu bu chyou shenn jiee (du shu bu qiu shen jie), ‘reading books without trying to understand much’. But after a while, even as long as several years, the meanings in the books began to become clear. This traditional practice was really quite close to what in recent years has been called the audiolingual approach, first emphasizing listening and reading, and letting the meaning
gradually come later. So it was quite unprecedented when our teacher first explained the text, and afterwards let us read. (p. 5)

I do not think the purpose of my advocacy for integrating Chinese philosophy into the curriculum from an early age is to create people who will make history, although many of such people read Chinese philosophy very early in their life, as illustrated by the two early readers, Hu Shi and Y.-R. Chao. Rather my thought is that based on the nature of Chinese philosophy, it is the essential nutrition everybody needs, among others, in order to bravely face reality and live happily in the world. Actually, Y.-L. Feng (1948) provided a good summary that explains why Chinese philosophy can help people in their daily lives:

[Chinese philosophy] is both of this world and of the other world. Speaking about the Neo-Confucianism of the Sung Dynasty, one philosopher described it this way: “It is not divorced from daily ordinary activities, yet it goes straight to what antedated Heaven.” This is what Chinese philosophy has striven for. Having this kind of spirit, it is at one and the same time both extremely idealistic and extremely realistic, and very practical, though not in a superficial way. (p. 8)

Sartre (n.d.) stated, “Everything has been figured out except how to live” (p. 2). “The main concerns of the Chinese were with how to live” (Cope-Kasken, 2001, p. 43).

There are various ways to live in this world. However, merely to live is not our ultimate goal as human beings; to live happily is. In this regard, I mentioned earlier that Yu Dan’s (2006a) book, based on her lectures on Confucius’s Analects, enjoyed unprecedented popularity. There might be numerous reasons for this, but I think the main reason was because she said that the truth in the Analects is to tell us how to live that kind of happy life that we desire in our souls (Yu, 2006b).
Suggestions and Directions for Further Research

On becoming a parent my passion in education began. This unwavering passion also played an important part in my motivation to pursue my doctoral studies and the subsequent writing of this dissertation, in addition to the realizing of my father’s dream to cultivate a child who would be a scholar in the family as well as my own self-fulfillment. This study is a descriptive narration of how my daughter became a reader prior to entering elementary school. Just as Chinese cosmology emphasizes a dynamic and process-oriented world view, I also regard a person’s growth as a process constantly influenced by people, both in the immediate and distal environment, from generation to generation.

My next research project will be on a case study of my daughter’s literacy development after she came to the United States, at around 9 years of age. In retrospect, at a rational level, one of the important factors that constituted my motivation and determination to pursue a Ph.D. degree in education was to enable me to better support and understand my daughter in the context of Western culture. Since we came to the United States, I have encountered a new and frustrating yet challenging problem, or rather, an invisible battle in the arena of thought: fighting for my daughter to maintain her Chinese cultural heritage in the face of her immersion in Western culture.

My husband and I brought our daughter to a new culture; therefore it is our responsibility to nurture her and help her form the ability to develop herself and fulfill herself in this new culture. In this regard, I think one key factor is that I, as a parent, should first understand the new culture and school systems myself, so that I can guide her
with wise advice, which is an external motivation for my pursuit of a Ph.D. degree in education. In the meantime, my cross-cultural and language experiences have convinced me that the single most important weapon with which I might win this battle is to keep her native language, Chinese, so that I will not lose her at the level of heart and soul, because the nodal element to keep people closer is communication through language at a deeper level. For some time, I have been perplexed with this vexation. How to keep her Chinese at a certain level is a new challenge. What is more important, how to help her to know the Chinese culture is a more difficult challenge, because “when in Rome, do as the Romans do,” and also, she did not have sufficient opportunity to practice the Chinese culture. Both my internal and external motivation merged into my passion to persist to the end of this study. This process of battling for my daughter with the Western culture will be another project with an emphasis again on literacy; this time, English literacy and Chinese literacy.

A further research project I have been thinking about undertaking for a long time could also be said to have begun in my childhood years. It was like a seed dormant for many years in my heart that did not find the right soil to grow when I was in China, but began its slow growth when I was in Korea and received its irreplaceable environment for development after I came to the United States. That is, within the whole study, there is an underlying theme, which can be described as follows: As a mother, my dream has been to spend as much time as possible with my daughter. This dream started when I realized, as a child, how much I wished to be with my mother. My biggest wish in childhood was that my mother would be sick. Only then could she stay at home for a few days without
having to be busy working. I still remember vividly how I felt the security and warmth of
being around my mother. The elementary school was just two or three minutes’ walk
from my home so many of us were “children with keys around necks.” It was quite safe
for young children to be alone in the neighborhood. There were grandpas and grandmas
around all the time. One winter afternoon after school, I walked towards home. As usual,
I reluctantly took out the key from inside my jacket and was about to unlock the door. I
looked up and saw the door unlocked! My mom was at home! Warmth and fondness
filled my heart. Yes, my mom was at home! She had a bad cold. I was very sorry but very
happy. How I wished my mom would be sick every day so that she could stay at home.
The cold room suddenly became warm. Literally the room was cold, because there was
no fire in the stove and my mother was too weak to make the fire. It was that day that I
began to learn how to make the fire and keep the stove warm. My mother was the whole
world to me. No matter how hard my playmates tried to convince me I would not go out
to play. I just wanted to stay as long as possible with my mother. Many of these kinds of
fond feelings planted a seed in my innermost heart: I would be at home when my child
came home after school every day. This is the origin of my unwavering dream to want to
stay at home for my daughter.

Since the day when my daughter was born in China my only wish and dream was
to be a stay-at-home mom. I wanted to be with her every second. But I consciously knew
I could not. Moreover, I had left my daughter for one year. I often thought about this and
asked myself: Being a mother is the most important job in the world; the mother is the
baby’s whole world. Therefore, why cannot the mother be with her child? I knew my
voice could not be heard; reality would prove the impossibility of my dream. What I
could do was to find time to be with my daughter by giving up the opportunity to make
extra money. In every mother’s heart, her child is priceless.

   When I stayed in Korea, I had many opportunities to be with housewives. Their
calmness and patience with their children aroused my dream again and made it even
stronger. One year later, when I returned to China, I was given more important positions
in my career, because I had been sent by my university to Korea. I could not refuse
sometimes, although my only wish was to be with my child. When can dream and reality
become one? Ultimately, what I could do was to try hard to find a balance between my
career and my daughter. I wanted to do both well. I was very tired, both physically and
mentally.

   After I came to the United States, accidentally I became a stay-at-home mom. I
had inadvertently realized my dream. Consequently, I had more time to learn, to think, to
be a better helper in my daughter’s growth. My experiences here strengthened my
determination to advocate for my long-standing dream: Mothers should stay at home
educating themselves and their child(ren) when the children are young. Your child is not
only your child, she or he is also a member of society.

   My experiences told me that my own ideal is that mothers should stay at home
until their child(ren) finish high school. I am consciously aware that it is a path full of
prickles, or it is a Utopia, or rather, only a mirage. However, I will keep this ideal and
have been trying my best to practice it. Laozi’s words are encouraging to me:
A tree as big as a man’s embrace grows from a tiny shoot.
A tower of nine storeys begins with a heap of earth.
The journey of a thousand *li* starts from where one stands.

Upon writing this final chapter, close to the end of my dissertation, I felt something similar to the nature of “enlightenment,” based on my limited understanding of this term at this particular period of my life. I feel that Y.-L. Feng’s theory of the spheres of living somehow has the same spirit with a common expression in Ch’anism, “the philosophy of silence,” related by Y.-L. Feng (1948):

In Ch’anism there is the common expression that “the mountain is the mountain, the river is the river.” In one’s state of delusion, one sees the mountain as the mountain and the river as the river. But after Enlightenment one still sees the mountain as the mountain and the river as the river. (p. 263)

Is this not, in essence, similar to T. S. Elliot’s little poem that I used to begin this chapter and end this dissertation?

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
--T. S. Elliot (1943b, stanza 5, para. 3)

And the place where I started to explore and know for the first time is best described in the “Commentary on the Decision” of hexagram 37, Jia Ren, THE FAMILY, in the *Yijing*, the very foundation of the entire Chinese culture:

THE FAMILY. The correct place of the woman is within; the correct place of the man is without. That man and woman have their proper places is the greatest concept in nature. Among the members of the family there are strict rulers; these are the parents. When the father is in truth a father and the son a son, when the elder brother is an elder brother and the younger brother a younger brother, the husband a husband and the wife and a wife, then the house is on the right way.

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When the house is set in order, the world is established in a firm course. (as cited in Wilhelm & Baynes, trans. 1967/1950, p. 570).
REFERENCES


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*Note: S. P. Zhang, dissertation author, personally translated the designated text from the Chinese for use in this dissertation.