Rethinking lifelong learning through online distance learning in Chinese educational policies, practices and research

YANG, Min

Educational Development Centre, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

Abstract: This paper offers a critique of Chinese philosophy of online distance learning as a means of building a lifelong learning society. Literature about lifelong learning and its implications for online distance learning is reviewed. Documents, reports and research papers are examined to explore the characteristics of the Chinese philosophy of online distance learning as reflected in the prevailing understanding and debates in the field. To examine the materials in question, phenomenological analysis, deconstructive discourse analysis and internal criticism are employed, which are guided by a phenomenological qualitative methodology. The critique reveals that the notion of lifelong learning is to some extent obscured in meaning and even misused in the prevailing understanding of and debates about Chinese online distance learning. Furthermore, it shows that the Chinese philosophy of online distance learning paradoxically combines a sense of over-enthusiasm with a sense of under-estimation associated with the potential of online distance learning in promoting lifelong learning by offering quality educational opportunities for learners. Also identified through the critique is the emerging development of Chinese online distance learning towards its 'in-depth development'. That is, the development based on an increasing awareness of the necessity to enhance the quality of online distance learning through the sensible integration of educational theories with information and communication technologies (ICT). Such development can be regarded as the emergence of a new Chinese philosophy, which can be pursued as a starting point for effectively promoting lifelong learning through online distance learning making wise use of ICT. The paper concludes with a call for a new vision on ICT for learning as a necessary condition for successful incorporation of Chinese online distance learning with and into lifelong learning.

Keywords: Lifelong learning; Chinese online distance learning; ICT (information and communication technology); policies, practices and research; quality assurance

Introduction

The topic of this paper arose from my PhD research into The Viability of Online Distance Learning Provision for Adult Distance Learners in Guangdong, China (Yang, 2005a). Back in 2002, a Saturday Seminar that I attended about Lifelong Learning at the University of Nottingham, UK made me aware of the heated debate about why and how the concept of lifelong learning in British policies and practices of education, particularly of further education, extended to life-wide learning (Plant, 2002; for an overview of lifelong learning in Britain and other parts of the world, see Field, 2006). It was not long before I realise that lifelong learning has been one of the important foci of policies and debates within and outside the field of distance learning worldwide (ibid; National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning, 1997; Standish, 2005; The European ODL Liaison Committee, 2004, 2006).

Likewise, in China lifelong learning appears to be a most prominent theme in policies, research papers and news reports pertaining to online distance learning (for instance, Ministry of Education, 1998; Bai, 2001; CERNET, 2003), which is the third-generation Chinese distance learning. Chinese key universities and the China Radio and Television University (CRTVU) were funded through the national Modern Distance Education Project (MDEP) sponsored by the Ministry of Education, P.R.C. (Kang, 2004; Ministry of Education, 1998) to establish e-colleges. As a result of the MDEP initiative, 68 e-colleges were between 1998 and 2005 (CERNET, 2003). Whereas one may wonder why and how lifelong has gained the seemingly unquestionable centrality in the discourse of Chinese online distance learning, it might be helpful to consider a few further questions:

(a)   What assumptions are attached to the notion of lifelong learning in the discourse of Chinese online distance learning as a means of promoting lifelong learning?

(b)   What, then, are the ensuing practical, theoretical and political consequences of such assumptions? Have such practices, theories and policies been capable of sustaining lifelong learning through Chinese online distance learning?

(c)   What, then, are the characteristics of Chinese philosophy of online distance learning and its recent trend of development?

If it is important to understand what kinds of learning opportunities are being provided to Chinese learners so as to inform and improve practices, policies and research, then it is worthwhile to investigate the above-listed questions. Thus, this paper sets out to offer a critique of the policies, practices and research in lifelong learning through Chinese online distance learning by addressing these questions.

Methodology and methods

The qualitative data utilised in this critique comprise second-hand textual data: governmental documents, reports and research papers in Chinese collected throughout the nearly four years of my PhD research. The methods for analysing the data consist of phenomenological analysis (the chief), deconstructive discourse analysis and internal criticism, which are guided by a phenomenological qualitative methodology. It is required by the methodology that the researcher maintains a critical attitude towards our culturally-derived presuppositions and beliefs by bracketing such beliefs (Crotty, 1998: 78,

80-81; Cohen and Omery, 1994: 138-139). Specifically, phenomenological analysis entails that documents under scrutiny are read as texts, from which there emerge trends of themes/meanings to be discerned, examined and synthesised, with the researcher self-inspecting and laying aside his or her preconceptions when engaging with the data. Deconstructive discourse analysis incorporates a similar critical attitude towards the meanings permeating in the data and towards the researcher's own beliefs. Its essence is captured in MacLure's (2003: 3) argument that our common-sensial beliefs of educational realities (ibid: 9, 171-173) should be deconstructed and torn apart to enable proper engagement with the discursive educational realities (ibid: 4). The third method, internal criticism, helps in systematic and comprehensive analysing the textual materials examined in this critique. Bell (1999: 113-116) suggests that internal criticism could be used in critically analysing the contents of a document in terms of: its genre; the language it employs; the author's background and experiences; the purpose, background, reliability of the document, etc.

Having examined the methodology and methods for analysing the textual data used in this critique, I go on to explore the basic assumptions of lifelong learning and their implications for online distance learning.

Lifelong learning: basic assumptions and implications for Chinese online distance learning

Faure et al. (1972: 181) put forward the concept of lifelong learning both as an educational ideal and as the guiding principle for educational policy-making, which consists of learning from life (ibid: xxx), learning throughout life (ibid: ix, 184), and learning for all (especially those from disadvantaged social groups, ibid: 28). They argue for the need to build a learning society for all citizens (ibid: 160-264). The significance of lifelong learning is re-considered by Delors et al. (1996), asserting that it serves the objective of integrating economic growth and human development (ibid: 70) in the context of globalisation and international cooperation (ibid: 34). They (ibid) call on educators' and governments' to pay attention four pillars of learning (ibid: 37): learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together (as global citizens) and learning to be (ibid), which might be interpreted as:

- Learning in order to broaden our horizons;
- Learning to do things better in order to effectively interact with the world;
- Learning to appreciate other cultures so as to live harmoniously together and co-operate as human beings;
- Learning as a way of living in order to be open-minded to fresh and different ideas.

Wolfensohn (2003) argues that education that sustains lifelong learning is the key to fulfilling the developmental goals embraced by 189 developed and developing nations, which include: resolving poverty and inequity, improving human health, enhancing economic and environmental sustainability and promoting peace and democracy. However, critics like Boshier (2001, 2005) alert policy-makers and educators of the danger of adopting lifelong learning merely as an instrument for economic development and market competition, which

differs from the goal of lifelong learning embraced by earlier advocators emphasising the lifelong development to facilitate learners functioning effectively in the world. Conceived in this fashion, the lifelong learner should develop as a fully functioning citizen rather than as a 'cog in the wheel', which seems to be demanded by the knowledge economy (Plant: 2002). Such a balance applies to distance learning as a pioneering and major area of lifelong learning; and it constitutes the underlying principle on which my critique in this paper is based.

The above discussion makes it clear that lifelong learning entails a profound movement from the notion of initial education to that of continual education, including vocational education and training (Cunningham et al., 2000: 22; Faure et al., 1972: 117; Hager and Hyland, 2003: 279-286; Peters, 2001: 105). Continual education assists social members to actively develop their faculties of self-development through independent learning and their ability to actively contribute to their communities (Faure et al., 1972: 142-143), in which the attitude and ability of self-directed learning plays a critical role (Bill, 1998). Lifelong learning also sets the scene for education to transform from the teacher-dominated model to the learner-centred model of education (Faure et al., 1972: 134, 142-143, 209; Peters, 2001: 105; see also Yang, 2005b). More importantly, lifelong learning urges that distance learning be extensively employed, especially online distance learning that makes use of information and communication technologies (ICT), as a way of widening access to flexible educational opportunities (Delors et al., 1996: 41; Faure et al., 1972: 77-80, 126, 212; Keegan, 2000: 27-28; Knapper, 1988: 93-104; Mmari, 1999: 119; Peters, 2001: 107-109).

The above-mentioned pedagogical changes required by lifelong learning (continual education, learner-centred education and distance learning) not only reveal the direct connection between lifelong learning and online distance learning, they also point to the direction in which lifelong learning is promoted through online distance learning. That is, online distance learning needs to:
- go beyond formal education and become relevant to all learners,
- focus on learning and its facilitation through teaching;
- encourage effective employment of ICT.

Before entering the critique, it might be useful to look at what Boshier (2004; 2005), a Western critic, has to say about building a lifelong learning society in China. Much similar to what is examined earlier, Boshier (ibid: 59-60) brings into focus three indispensable conditions for promoting lifelong learning: vertical integration (education throughout life), horizontal integration (informal and nonformal education) and democratization (learner-centred education and open learning through such means as distance learning). In respect of the three conditions, he observes that there exist three psycho-cultural factors which impede the construction of a learning society in China (ibid: 60-62):
- ageism and linear notions of human life that learning is not meant for adults;
- obsession with formal education and derision for nonformal education;
- the teacher-centered nature of education.

To reduce the influence of these factors, Boshier (ibid: 62-63) suggests that more resources and importance should be assigned to nonformal education and more collaboration between formal and nonformal education should be initiated. It would be interesting to find out whether there are any common observations or discrepancies between Boshier's analysis and the critique offered below.

Critiquing the current prevailing understanding and debates in Chinese online distance learning

This section of the paper is devoted to critiquing the Chinese philosophy of online distance learning by critically examining the prevailing understandings and debates relative manifested in the policies, practices and research. The conclusions of the critique are summarised at the end of this section as the characteristics of the Chinese philosophy of online distance learning.

What are the basic assumptions attached to the notion of lifelong learning in the discourse of Chinese online distance learning?

Implementing Chinese online distance learning through the MDEP is an integral part of the Action Plan for Vitalizing Education for the 21st Century (Ministry of Education, 1998), which sets the following goals for the educational reforms:

- 'Targets for 2000: universalised basic education; 11% enrolment for higher education; preparation of China's new infrastructure for the new economy'.
- 'Targets for 2010: gradual universalisation of senior secondary school; 15% enrolment for higher education; establishment of a national system of lifelong learning, a system of knowledge innovation'.

The Action Plan is the guiding document of the recent educational reforms in Chinese educational system (Surowski, 2002). By using the key terms 'new infrastructure for the new economy', 'a national system of lifelong learning' and 'a system of knowledge innovation' almost interchangeably, the document conveys the message that the objective of and driving force is to construct a system of lifelong learning and its necessary infrastructure in order to enhance the country's development in the new knowledge economy. Therefore, developing online distance learning as a means of constructing a learning society in China sets the tone of the policies, practices and research in Chinese online distance learning (see, for example, Bai, 2001; CERNET, 2003; CCTV International Channel, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2000; The Central Committee of the Zhigong Party, 2005; Wang, 2005).

In spite of the significance attached to the construction of a lifelong learning society, confusion exists in policies, practices and research as to what lifelong learning actually means and what it implies for online distance learning. The confusion has led to an over-emphasis on the role of lifelong learning to enhance economic growth by providing a better-quality working force, which obscures and almost totally replaces the other equally important role of lifelong learning - the facilitation of the human development of all citizens in a learning society (see, for example, CCTV International Channel, 2004; Ministry of Education, 1998;

The Central Committee of the Zhigong Party, 2005). Coincidently, such ambiguity associated with lifelong learning is also identified in a policy paper prepared by the European ODL (open and distance learning) Liaison Committee (The European ODL Liaison Committee, 2004), which points out the unbalanced emphasis on European competitiveness rather than equity and inclusiveness in European practices and policies in distance learning and e-learning.

The above-mentioned rhetorical ambiguity about lifelong learning cannot be fully comprehended without reference to the trend in China's national development (see also Ren, 2004) over the past 20 years. Hu (Hu Angang, cited in Liu Yang, 2003) comments that following China's first-generation strategy of development adopted 20 years ago, too much emphasis has been laid on the growth of national GDP and the construction of infrastructure, leading to insufficient investment in public resources, such as education, health care and environmental protection. This has resulted in severe inequality in the distribution of wealth and public resources among citizens living in urban and rural areas and different regions, leaving farmers in poorer rural areas the largest and most disadvantaged social group in China (ibid). Hu (ibid) rightfully contends that China's second-generation strategy of development should focus and be based on human development through education for all citizens in order for China to attain sustainable economic development and a more socially inclusive society.

Similar concern regarding China's insufficient investment in education is raised by Tan (Tan Songhua, et al., 2003, cited in CERNET, 2003) in the policy report From a Nation of Big Population to a Nation Strong in Human Resource, which points out four fundamental problems with Chinese education (my italics):

- *Inadequate investment*, such as the gap of a millions RMB[1] in funds for teacher training in higher education;
- *Unbalanced structure*, such as the priority given to higher education as compared with primary and secondary education and vocational education/training;
- *Incomplete systems*, such as the insufficient provision of non-formal and informal education and training;
- *Inflexible mechanisms*, such as the lack of mechanisms for credit transfer between institutions providing different forms and levels of education/training.

As some leaders of the Ministry of Education and e-colleges (CERNET, 2003; see also: CCTV International Channel, 2004; Yu, 2005; Zhang and Feng, 2003) maintain, online distance learning institutions can play a key role in constructing a lifelong learning society in China by opening learning opportunities to learners, particularly adult learners in 'grass-roots units' (that is, in small towns) and rural areas. Some institutions, such as the China Radio and Television University (CRTVU) and the Central Agricultural Radio and Television College,

---

[1] The exchange rate between Chinese RMB and Hong Kong dollars (HKD) is 100: 101.43 at the time of writing (see Industrial & Commercial Bank of China, 2006).

have made considerable progress in this regard (CERNET, 2003). Such progress is both significant and encouraging, because China is a country –

- where 120 million farmers (figure in 2006， see All China Federation of Trade Unions, 2006) who have moved from rural areas to cities for employment are badly in need of compensatory education and training (Cao, 2005),
- where 592 counties remain impoverished, the majority of which are located in Western China (Kang, 2004), and
- where training for employees in organisations is in great demand (CERNET, 2003).

In particular, Wei (2002), former president of the CRTVU, argues that the development of online distance learning should be viewed as a long-awaited opportunity for realising educators' ambition of making high-quality education accessible for learners in the most remote and poorest areas. These observations highlight the significance of constructing a 'complete lifelong learning system' in China (CCTV International Channel, 2004) in order to serve citizens at different ages and in different parts of the country in need of learning opportunities.

To sum up the analysis in this section, there are conflicting assumptions, interests and agendas as regards attaining the goal of lifelong learning through online distance learning, which are impacting on policies, practices and research of Chinese online distance learning.

What are the practical, theoretical and political consequences the assumptions attached to the notion of lifelong learning in the discourse of Chinese online distance learning?

Although it is rarely disputed in the literature that online distance learning is 'the best way for constructing a lifelong learning system' in China (Bai, 2001), as a form of educational provision it has an unbalanced relationship with on-campus education, particularly at the level of higher education. On the one hand, online distance learning is generally regarded as the extension of on-campus higher education (see, for example, Shen, 2002; Xiaotao, 2003; Wang, 2005). On the other hand, it is considered to be an inferior and marginal form of education compared with on-campus education in terms of the quality of education it can possibly offer and the resources it is entitled to (Xiaotao, 2003; Wang, 2005). In effect, unlike the other academic departments and faculties of their home universities, e-colleges assume the sole responsibility for their profits and losses and their students have to pay for their full learning costs (Ding, 2005b). No wonder that some commentators (e.g. Wang, 2005; Xi (Xi, Shu), cited in Xinjing Newspaper, 2003) maintain that while the other departments/faculties continue to provide élite (therefore, superior) higher education which is capable of knowledge transmission and the cultivation of students' desirable values and disposition, e-colleges within the same universities should confine themselves within the limit of offering either popularised higher education or lower-level education and training guided by the profitable educational market. Such critics may not have realised three difficulties that they are faced with. First, they disregard the objective of lifelong learning to provide equal educational opportunities for both traditional-age and adult learners. Second, they may have forgotten the fact that on-campus higher education itself is being popularised

because its scale has been rapidly expanding at a rate between 10% and 30% since 1999 (Yang, 2003; my italics). Third, the élite/popularised higher education dichotomy itself is based on the questionable bifurcation of academic/vocational education (Hager and Hyland, 2003). Despite such wide-spread condescension of online distance learning provision, some leaders of e-colleges and researchers in the field (e.g. Wei, 2002; Zhang, 2004b) contend that online distance learning can contribute to widening opportunities of education and training rather than functioning merely as popularised higher education.

In terms of the quality of education in Chinese online distance learning, critics have identified various problems that are associated with the following factors:

1.   The competitive behaviours of competing e-colleges, which have led to replication and waste of the highly-limited resources while developing educational infrastructure and learning resources (You, 2002);

2.   Lack of technological standards for the development of infrastructure and learning resources (*ibid*);

3.   Poor management, profit-driven and commercialised promotion of some learning centres, which have resulted in lowered standards of technical and administrative student services (*ibid*; Lu, Y. 2003; Yong, 2002);

4.   On-campus teaching and learning in the name of online distance learning (You, 2002);

5.   Inadequate use of the pedagogical advantages of ICT in the development of learning resources and in course design and delivery *(ibid)*;

6.   Failure to draw upon constructivism in the development of learning resources and in course design and delivery (Yong, 2002).

One notorious example of quality-associated problems widely cited is the large-scale cheating organised by staff members at a learning centre of E-college of Hunan University in Guangzhou in March, 2003 (Ding, 2005a). The scandal caused a profession-wide crisis and deep scepticism associated with the question as to whether quality education can be achieved through online distance learning (ibid).

The Ministry of Education adopts the following measures/policies in order to enhance the quality of education in Chinese online distance learning, among which Measures v and vi are in the process of formulation at the time of writing:

i. Tightening the regulation of learning centres in terms of their technological infrastructure, administration and provision of student supported services (Lu, Y., 2003; Ministry of Education, 2003; Zhang, 2004a, 2004b).

ii.   Encouraging the use of standardised public service systems, such as the Aopeng Public Service System, which by design are 'high-speed educational Internet bars' or 'educational supermarkets' that enable learners to freely and flexibly choose subjects offered at different e-colleges, which also serve the purpose of enhancing collaboration among e-colleges (*ibid*).

iii.   Sponsoring the development of fine-quality ICT-based/enriched online distance learning resources according to specified technological standards.

Selected fine-quality learning resources are to be freely available on the Internet for all e-colleges (Lin and Yu, 2002).

iv.   Introducing standardised computer-based national examinations of public subjects, including College English, College Chinese and Advanced Mathematics for students enrolled in 2005 and onwards (Lu, 2004).

v.   Entrusting the evaluation of e-colleges' quality of educational provision to an independent organisation (*ibid*).

vi.   Entrusting the authentication of e-colleges' quality of educational provision to an independent organisation (*ibid*).

Although they indicate the sincere determination of the Ministry of Education to address existing quality-associated problems, some of these well-intended policies are lacking of a sound pedagogical basis.

To start with, the measure of making public service systems 'high-speed educational Internet bars' and 'educational supermarkets' seems to be simplistic and dangerously pedagogically flawed, because of three reasons. The first reason is that this measure carries the presumption that as long as learning resources are in place for students' free choice, students can automatically go about their acquisition of the knowledge that they need. This presumption is associated with the positivist view that learning technologies may miraculously bring about learning, which is challenged by Benson (1997: 25) as misleadingly laying too much emphasis on technologies without paying sensible attention to their pedagogical advantages. Another reason is that it disregards the basic necessity of keeping coherent logic and structure within the curriculum and adopting aligned teaching and assessment approaches within courses offered at e-colleges (for discussion about coherent curriculum and aligned teaching and assessment, see Biggs, 2003: 25-31 and Toohey, 1999: 68-69). The last reason for the inadequacy of the measure is that, closely related to the previous point, it does not take into account the necessity of providing e-colleges with guidance as to how they may collaborate in establishing inter-institutional credit transfer systems that are based on coherent curriculum and consistent teaching/assessment approaches shared among the collaborating e-colleges (for discussion regarding inter-institutional credit transfer systems, see Brindley and Paul, 1993). To put it simply, however sophisticated the educational technological infrastructure for online distance learning might have been constructed and however user-friendly (for e-collage teachers, students and administrative staff) the public service system might have become, these should and could never substitute educators' thoughtful curriculum and teaching/assessment design that is specifically relevant to the group of students they teach.

Further, the concentration of funds on developing fine-quality rather than learner-relevant learning resources seems to be strategically and financially unwise. This measure might serve as an example of what Boshier (2001) calls 'techno-zealotry'. As Ren (Ren Weimin, cited in Zhang and Feng, 2002) argues, although the development of fine-quality learning resources can have exemplary effect for academics engaged in the development of learning resources, too much focus on 'fine-quality' seems to have resulted in the lack of emphasis on the

learner-relevance of learning resources and necessary academic support for students.

Moreover, the use of standardised national examinations of certain public subjects as a means of quality assurance cannot serve as a long-term solution to the improvement of e-colleges' quality of education, though it could be a short-term remedy for the 2003 crisis. The rationales for the Minister of Education to implement this measure are that national examinations are an effective tool for quality assurance, that it can provide students with the necessary incentive for learning and that it can help to restore the reputation of e-colleges, as reported by Lu (2004). However, standardised national examinations can discourage the cultivation of culture among teachers of these subjects at e-colleges to experiment and explore the rich alternatives of teaching and assessment strategies, such as learning portfolio, projects, case studies, problem based learning (for a discussion of such strategies, see Yang, 2005b). Currently, such strategies that are learner-centred have been widely advocated (see, for example, Su, 2004) but insufficiently implemented and researched2.

The above discussion shows that although great effort has been made by the Ministry of Education to tackle quality-related problems in Chinese online distance learning, more in-depth theoretical and practical exploration is badly needed in the search and implementation of appropriate solutions to quality assurance.

Although there exist a number of problems with the quality of Chinese online distance learning as discussed above, there has been a movement away from the initial emphasis on the expansion of online distance learning which is based on the large-scale development of educational infrastructures and the development of ICT-enriched/enabled learning resources, towards the increasing awareness of the necessity to enhance the quality of online distance learning, as observed by Nan (2005). Nan (ibid) suggests that this highly desirable movement should be based on 'the integration of modern educational thinking and theories and modern information technologies'. Such movement marks the transition of Chinese online distance learning from its initial stage of fast expansion to its current stage of in-depth development, which focuses on sustaining social and human development as much as on promoting economic advancement (ibid). Hopefully, this may be an indication that the confusions associated with the promotion of lifelong learning through Chinese online distance learning are being paid attention to and addressed. Moreover, an evolving picture of the contemporary Chinese context of lifelong learning in the form of informal or nonformal learning is depicted by Boshier (2004). He (ibid) identifies 'good social and historical reasons' for believing that China can become a learning society, since there have been established 61 burgeoning learning cities and numerous learning towns, districts, neighbourhoods, streets and villages that are of Chinese characteristics, such as the 'learning district' of Zhabei in Shanghai and

---

2 A critique of the existing research into Chinese online distance learning is offered in my PhD thesis (Yang, 2005a), in which two drawbacks of the overall quality of existing studies in the field are identified with relevant examples: (a) Most of the times, critical information on the context, existing literature and adopted research approach and methods is simply missing; (b) those studies of satisfactory quality are mainly findings of surveys, which are statistically sound, but are nevertheless restricted in their provision of rich and in-depth data.

the 'learning mountain' of Lushan in Jiangxi Province.

What are the characteristics of the Chinese philosophy of online distance learning and its recent trend of development?

Overall, three general features characterise the Chinese philosophy of online distance learning, as revealed through examining the prevailing understandings and debates that are manifested in the textual data of this critique.

The first characteristic of the Chinese philosophy of online distance learning is that it is being highly politically-driven: the prevailing understandings of and debates around the objective of developing online distance learning as a means of constructing a lifelong learning society is largely influenced by Chinese government's agenda and strategy of national development.

The second characteristic of the Chinese philosophy of online distance learning lies in its paradoxical combination of a sense of over-enthusiasm and a sense of under-estimation in connection with the potential of online distance learning. On the one hand, it comprises a sense of over-optimism, which is associated with the capability of online distance learning to make high-quality learning resources accessible to increasing number of learners beyond the confinement of campuses of key universities. Such over-optimism reflects the unbalanced emphasis on connectivity, contents and cost-effectiveness rather than the use of ICT for enhancing the learner-relevance and quality of education in online distance learning. On the other hand, the Chinese philosophy of online distance learning also constitutes a sense of over-pessimism and under-estimation of the potential of online distance learning in achieving high-quality educational outcomes. Such over-pessimism has to do with the lack of integration of online distance learning with lifelong learning and the ensuing over-emphasis on formal/academic on-campus education rather than informal/nonformal education and vocational education/training via online distance learning.

The third characteristic identified of the Chinese philosophy of online distance learning is its moving away from the initial emphasis on the large-scale expansion of online distance learning (in terms of student number, technological infrastructure and learning resources) towards the stress on the enhancement of the quality of online distance learning.

It may not be surprising that political influences play an important role in the development of Chinese online distance learning, as they do in other educational contexts. On the other hand, the paradoxical combination of over-optimism and over-pessimism associated with the potential of online distance learning may be attributed to the profession's lack of experience and lack of in-depth theoretical and practical exploration of this relatively new form of distance learning (see Footnote 2). It may be argued that the hope of the healthy development of Chinese online distance learning lies in the transition that it is attempting to make towards in-depth development, which may help in overcoming the symptoms of over-optimism and over-pessimism that are simultaneously present in policies, practices and

research in the field. Whether or not such transition could be successfully made or would remain a mere buzzword depends on whether its implementation is being taken seriously in policies, practices and in the theorization by the profession.

The above-presented conclusions of the critique coincide and complement the observation made by Boshier (2005: 60-62) about lifelong learning in China cited in different places in this paper. Further, Boshier's (ibid) advocacy of the vertical integration, horizontal integration and democratization of formal and nonformal supports Nan's (2005) view that pushing forward the transition of Chinese online distance towards its in-depth development is the promising direction for constructing a lifelong learning society in China.

Rethinking lifelong learning through Chinese online distance learning with a new vision on ICT for learning

As an ending remark, I would argue that there exists an urgent need for stakeholders to rethink Chinese online distance learning in terms of its socio-political, pedagogical, technological and administrative dimensions in order to genuinely re-orient policies, practices and research towards the model of lifelong learning proposed by its early advocates like Faure and followers (1972), thereby sustaining its in-depth development. Such a need may be illuminated by the vision of the European ODL Liaison Committee (The European ODL Liaison Committee, 2004):

> '...a new vision on ICT for learning is needed at policy, management and grass roots practice level...This new vision should put context, community, collaboration, competencies, motivation of learners before computer, cost-effectiveness, contents and connectivity; it should relate more closely eLearning to the lifelong agenda ...'

Echoing Nan's (2005) arguments discussed earlier, the above-cited *new vision on ICT for learning* expressed by the ODL Liaison Committee is also applicable for promoting the second-stage development of Chinese online distance learning. Equipped with this new vision, educators and policy-makers in the field can and should shoulder the challenging task of sensibly re-engineering Chinese online distance learning to take the enterprise of lifelong learning to a new horizon.

References

All China Federation of Trade Unions (2006). *Industrial Injury Insurance Available for 18.71 Million Farmer-labourers* [online]. Available at: http://www.acftu.org/template/10004/file.jsp?cid=601&aid=45080.   Accessed: 20/09/2006

Bai, C.Q. (2001). Mass Higher Education and Modern Distance Education. *Modern Distance Education*, *82*(4): 13-15.

Bell, J. (1999). *Doing Your Research Project: a guide for first-time researchers in education and social Science*. 3rd ed. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Benson, P. (1996). Concepts of autonomy in language learning. In: R. Pemberton *et al*. ed.

Taking Control: autonomy in language learning. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996: 27-34.

Biggs, J. (2003). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. 2nd ed. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Bill, D. (1998). The Dearing Inquiry into United Kingdom Higher Education and the Role of Lifelong Learning in the Learning Society, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, *3*(3),

Boshier, R. (2005). East Meets West in Shanghai: but is there a learning society on the road to Cathay? *Open Education Research, 11*, 4, 56-64.

Boshier, R.W. (2001). Black Cat, White Cat? Mice Are Nice. But Learning Matters More. Invited address. *The National Conference on learning Cities*. Jiujiang, Jiangxi Province, China, November, 20-21, 2004.

Boshier, R.W. (2001). Running to Win: The Contest Between Lifelong Learning and Education in Canada. *New Zealand Journal of Adult Learning*, April, 2001

Brindley and Paul (1993). The way of the future? In: Moran, L. and Mugridge, I. ed., *Collaboration in Distance Education*. London: Routledge, 1993:83-96.

Cao, L.J. (2005). *Compensatory Education for Farmer-labourers: interviewing Chen Shouyi* [online]. Available at: http://reviw.qianlong.com/20060/2005/03/24/33@2566066.htm. Accessed: 09/05/2005.

CCTV International Channel (2004). *Educationists Proclaiming Significant Innovations in the Educational System* [online]. Available at: http:www.tlsz.net/ReadNews.asp?NewsID=197. Accessed: 05/03/2004.

CERNET (2003) *Symposium on the Report 'From a Nation of Big Population to a Nation Strong in Human Resource'* [online]. Available at: http://open.edu.cn/ycjy/zx/200306/fmzt/index.htm. Accessed: 15/07/2003.

Cohen, M.Z. and Omery, A. (1994). Schools of Phenomenology. In: J.M. Morse, ed., *Critical Issues in Qualitative Research Methods*. London: Sage, 1994: 136-153.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The Foundations of Social Research: meaning and perspective in the research process*.   London: Sage Publications.

Cunningham, S. *et al*. (2000). *The Business of Borderless Education*. Commonwealth of Australia [online]. Available at: http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/eippubs/. Accessed: 04/02/2003.

Delors, J. *et al*. (1996). *Learning: the treasure within*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

Ding, X.F. (2005a). On Debates around the Quality of Chinese Online Distance Learning and Measures for Quality Assurance (2). *Distance Education in China* [online], March 30. Available at: http://www.open.edu.cn/ycjy/luntan.php?id=170. Accessed: 27/04/2005.

Ding, X.F. (2005b). *On Debates around the Quality of Chinese Oline Distance Learning and Measures for Quality Assurance (3)* [online]. Available at: http://www.edu.cn/20050509/3136600.shtml. Access: 28/05/2005.

Faure, E. *et al*. (1972). *Learning to Be: the world of learning today and tomorrow*. Paris: UNESCO.

Field, J. (2005). *Lifelong Learning and the New Educational Order*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

Hager, P. and Hyland, T. (2003). Vocational Education and Training. In: N. Blake, *et al*. ed.,

(2003). *The Philosophy of Education*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Industrial & Commercial Bank of China (2006). RMB Exchange Rate Spot Rates [online]. Available at: http://www.icbc.com.cn/e_other/quotation.jsp. Accessed: 28/09/2006.

Kang, F.Y. (2004). *eLearning in China: recent history and current situation* [online]. Available at: http://www.echinaprogramme.org/echina/downloads/1. Accessed: 01/11/2004.

Keegan, D. (2000). *Distance Training: taking stock at a time of change*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Knapper, C. (1988). Technology and Lifelong Learning. In: D. Boud, ed., *Developing Student Autonomy in Learning*. London: Kogan Page, 1988: 91-106.

Lin, J.F. and Yu, S.Q. (2002). *Reflections on the Current Situation and Problems of Chinese Online Distance Learning* [online]. Available at: http://www.edu.cn/20020205/3021721. Accessed: 24/06/2002.

Liu, Yang (2003). *The Second-Generation Strategy for China's Development: interviewing Hu Angang* [online]. Available at: http://news.sohu.com/2003/12/02/57/news216375759.shtml. Accessed: 02/12/2003.

Lu, Y. (2003). Distance Learning Calls for Support Services. *Distance Education in China (Information Edition)* [online], 16. Available at: http://ww.chinaonlineedu.com/media/200316/sdbd.asp. Acdfessed: 07/11/2003.

Lu, Y. (2004). *Decision Made Regarding National Examinations in Online Distance Learning* [online]. Available at: http://www.edu.cn/20040205/3098409/shtml. Accessed: 27/02/2004.

MacLure, M. (2003). *Discourse in Education and Social Research*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Marshall, C. and Rossman, G. B. (1995). *Designing Qualitative Research*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ministry of Education (1998). *Action Plan for Vitalizing Education for the 21st Century (People's Republic of China)* [online]. Available at: http://www.hku.hk/chinaed/action_plan.htm. Accessed 13/06/2002.

Ministry of Education (2000). *Advices on Supporting Certain Higher Educational Institutions to Establish E-colleges and Carry out the Modern Distance Education Experiment (Document 10)* [online]. Available at: http://www.moe.gov.cn/moe-dept/gaojao/zhengce/2000-10.htm. Accessed: 15/10/2003.

Ministry of Education (2003). *Circular on Regulating the Administration of Modern Distance Education Off-campus Learning Centres* [online]. Available at: http://teacher.com.cn/trt2/visit/comprehension/edulevel/content/contentc.jsp?contentI. Accessed: 05/03/2004.

Mmari, G. (1999). The Open University of Tanzania. In: K. Harry, ed., *Higher Education through Open and Distance Learning: worldview of distance education and open learning*. London: Routledge, 1999: 110-122.

Nan, G.N. (2005). *Developing Modern Distance Education: the Chinese approach* [online]. Available at: http://www.edu.cn/20050316/3131285.shtml. Accessed: 24/05/2005.

National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning (1997) *Learning*

for the 21st Century (Fryer Report). London: DfEE.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. 2nd ed. London: Sage.

Peters, O. (2001). *Learning and Teaching in Distance Education*. London: Kogan Page.

Plant, M. (plant.malcolm@ntu.ac.uk) (2002). *Saturday's Seminar on Lifelong Learning in University Park*. 14 May. E-mail to: Min Yang (Yang.Min@ntu.ac.uk).

Ren, Y.L. (2004). *Problems and Solutions of Regional Modernisation* [online]. Available at: http://www.cas.cn/html/Dir/2004/09/06/5003.htm. Accessed: 14/11/2004.

Shen, Y. (2002). *Qualification of Online Distance Learning Cannot be Viewed as Entirely Equivalent to Qualification of On-campus Education* [online]. Available at: http://www.edu.cn/20020805/3063329.shtml. Accessed: 08/08/2002.

Standish, P. (2005). Person-centred education (presentation notes). Presented at one-day conference *The Person in Educational Theory and Practice: some current perspectives and critiques*. 5 February 2005. Birmingham University, UK.

Su, X. (2004). *Topics for Exploration from the Frontier* [online]. Available at: http://www.openedu/com.cn/suxin2/read.php?id=2063. Accessed: 28/05/2005.

Surowski, D. (2002). *Overview of the Educational System of China* [online]. Available at: http://www-personal.ksu.edu/~dbski/publication/overview. Accessed 25/04/02.

The Central Committee of the Zhigong Party (2005). *The Zhigong Party: proposal regarding China's modern distance education* [online]. Proposal No. 0017 presented at the 3rd Meeting of the 10th National Political Consultative Conference. Available at: http://www.edu.cn/20050311/3130817.shtml. Accessed: 27/04/2005.

The European ODL Liason Committee (2004). *Distance Learning and eLearning in European Policy and Practice: the vision and the reality* [online]. Available at: http://www.odl-liason.org/pages.php?PN=policy-paper_2004. Accessed:11/26/2004

The European ODL Liaison Committee (2006). *Learning Innovation for the Adapted Lisbon Agenda* [online]. Available at:
http://www.odl-liaison.org/pages/policy-paper_2006.html. Accessed: 31/06/2006

Toohey, S. (1999). *Designing Courses for Higher Education*. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.

Wang. S.J. (2005). *Position and Role: a core issue in experimental universities' provision of modern distance education* [online]. Available at:
http//www.edu.cn/ycjy/luntan.php?id=165.   Accessed: 27/04/2005.

Wei, Y. (2002). *Cultivating an Advanced Culture of Internet-based Learning* [online]. Available at: http://www.edu.cn/20021115/3072209.shtml. Accessed: 25/11/2002.

Wolfensohn, J.D. (2003). *Education and Development* [online]. Washington: The World Bank. Available at: http://www.worldbank.org/education. Accessed: 09/04/2003.

Xiaotao (2003). The Way Out for E-colleges. *China Online Education (Media Section)* [online], August 2003. Available at:
http://www.chinaonlineedu.com/media/200308/fengmian.asp. Accessed: 07/11/2003.

Xinjing Newspaper (2003). *Online Distance Learning should not be Integrated into Traditional Education* [online]. Available at:
http://www.edu.cn/20050310/3130705.shtml. Accessed: 27/04/2005.

Yang, D.P. (2005). *The Improving Equal Opportunities for Students in Rural and Urban Areas and the Emerging Problem with Opportunities for Different Social Groups: the*

situation in higher education [online]. Available at:
http://www.blog.edu.cn/more.asp?name=ayjx&id=75904. Accessed: 29/04/2005.

Yang, M. (2005a). *The Viability of Online Distance Learning Provision for Adult Distance Learners in Guangdong, China*. Nottingham, Nottingham Trent University. Ph.D**.** Nottingham, UK.

Yang, M. (2005b). The Pedagogical Use of ICT for Adult Distance Learners in Guangdong, China. *Asian Journal of Distance Education 3*(1) [online journal]. Available at: http://www.asianjde.org/.

Yong, P. (2002). Respecting Educational Principles and Promoting the Development of Distance Learning. *Distance Education in China. 184*(5): 22-24.

You, Q.Q. (2002). *Unified Planning and Standardised Administration for the Healthy Development of Modern Distance Education* [online]. Available at: http://www.hyxr.com.cm/yuanchengjy/13.htm.   Accessed: 28/05/2005.

Yu, Y.X. (2005). *Speech at the Ceremony for the 'One University Student for Each Village' Plan Initiated by the Ministry of Education* [online]. Available at: http://www.openedu.com.cn/suxin2/read.php?id=2065. Accessed: 28/05/2005.

Zhang, A.W. and Feng, L. (2003). *Development of Chinese Modern Distance Education* [online]. Available at: http://open.edu.cn/ycjy/fengmian.php?id=75. Accessed 10/02/2003.

Zhang, Y.X. (2004a). *Investigation and Reflections of Modern Distance Education in Higher Education Institutions* [online]. Available at: http://www.chinaonlineedu.com/info/news_special.asp?id=4932. Accessed: 01/12/2004.

Zhang, Y.X. (2004b). *Modern Distance Education: unavoidable challenges* [online]. Available at: http://www.china-school.net/net/20041115142301.htm. Accessed: 01/12/2004.