

**“WHAT DO I WANT FOR MY LIFE (我想要的到底是什么)”：A NARRATIVE STUDY  
EXAMINING SELF-AUTHORSHIP IN CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

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## **Abstract**

Self-authorship refers to individuals' capacity to make complex meaning of beliefs, identities, and social relationships. Self-authorship theory thus provides a holistic framework to consider young adults' development across epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions. Recent research on self-authorship not only increased representation of demographically diverse students, but also challenged the original individual-centered theory through incorporating lenses that afforded greater sociocultural relevance. My research aligned with this collective effort toward a more inclusive, socially situated, culturally responsive view of self-authorship.

My research adopted narrative inquiry to explore how self-authoring was experienced and expressed in a group of Chinese undergraduate students. My study's framework was informed by sociocultural theory, narrative constructionism, and dialogical perspectives on narrative analysis. Specifically, 12 Chinese undergraduate students were interviewed in China and Canada about their stories of personal growth in university. Participants were invited to share stories about their pivotal university experiences and how these experiences shaped their beliefs, identities, and social relationships and actions. Dialogical narrative analysis was performed to develop a narrative typology of self-authoring for the Chinese students. Three signature narrative types were elaborated in the typology. They are passion narrative (i.e., participants developed their inner voices by pursuing their passion), resistance narrative (i.e., participants developed deep forms of self-consciousness through resisting uncomfortable situations), and competence narrative (i.e., participants sought a lifepath to fulfill their need to be successful). Under each narrative type, individual narrative trajectories were further specified to capture variations among the participants' self-authoring processes. These variations reflected

how participants' personal characteristics and their situated context shaped their distinct processes toward self-authorship.

The novel insights produced by the narrative typology contributed to a more situated, holistic, and diversified understanding of self-authorship. As the first study to introduce a Chinese student sample, a sociocultural framework, and dialogical methods to self-authorship literature, my study not only generated complex understandings of self-authoring processes in culturally diverse students, but also offered methodological implications for future research in different sociocultural contexts. Finally, my study offered important questions for rethinking practices to foster students' self-authorship in higher education.

## **Lay Summary**

Self-authorship is a theory that examines how we make meaning of life experiences to develop our beliefs, identities, and relationships. Through this lens, my study looked at Chinese undergraduate students' stories about their important university experiences and how they had grown as a person through these experiences. My study found that some of these stories focused on passion, others on resisting a life path that wasn't working for them, and others on making right choices to achieve success in a particular domain of life. These stories helped my participants to clarify their academic and career goals, better understand their needs and wants, and develop their own voice as a person. My study also offered general insights into how we develop self-authorship through storytelling.

## **Preface**

This thesis is the original research and intellectual property of the author, Xinke Wan. The data used in this study were collected in partial fulfillment of the program: Human Development, Learning, and Culture, in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, under the supervision of Dr. Nancy Perry, supported by the expertise and feedback from Dr. Jan Hare (committee member) and Dr. Leyton Schnellert (external examiner). The work presented is original, unpublished, and independent work by the author. All research and data as part of this thesis was approved by The University of British Columbia's Behavioral Research Ethics Board [certificate: #H19-00794].

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## **Dedication**

*To all young adults who are finding their inner voice of an authentic self. There will be times when you feel lost, frustrated, uncertain, even painful. But remember, we are all in this journey together. I hope you can find resonance, comfort, inspiration, and new possibilities in the stories*

*I share in this work.*

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 The Changing Landscape of Young Adult Development

The changing landscape of modern society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires transforming our thinking about learning and development. Calls for lifelong learning, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and adaptive expertise have attracted increased attention among education researchers and practitioners and inspired paradigm-shifting work on learning and development across different age groups and contexts (Baxter Magolda, 2014; Butler, Schneller, & Perry, 2017; Domont, Istance, & Benavides, 2010; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Particular to the phase of young adulthood, researchers have proposed integrative and complex frameworks to reconsider the nature of development in this critical period of transition so as to reflect evolving demands of a constantly shifting world (Arnett, 2000, 2014; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012; Kegan, 1982, 1994). These frameworks elaborated distinct aspects and processes of young adult development. Among the most influential perspectives, Jeffery Arnett's notion of emerging adulthood characterized the age of 18 to 25 as the most *volitional* years of life. He further elaborated why emerging adulthood is unique in terms of identity exploration in multiple domains (e.g., work, love, and worldviews):

Emerging adulthood is a time of life when different directions remain possible, when little about future is decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course. (Arnett, 2000, p. 469)

Similarly, Robert Kegan's work offered an integrative perspective on adult development. He specifically discussed how to prepare emerging adults for "the hidden curriculum of modern life" (Kegan, 1994; Kegan & Lahey, 2009). He emphasized that current challenges that young adults

face in modern ages require more than acquisition of knowledge or mastery of skills, but a higher-level, integrative capacity of human mind, or a revolutionary way of knowing. Self-authorship henceforth was born of Kegan's theory of human consciousness to describe this kind of integrative capacity of mind to make complex meaning of beliefs, identities, and social relationships. Baxter Magolda took Kegan's notion of self-authorship and developed a holistic model that captured college student development along epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions (Baxter Magolda, 1999, 2001; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, 2012). Her extensive research on student development linked educational practices that foster self-authorship to desirable outcomes of higher education and 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, including cognitive complexity, responsible decision making, interpersonal and intercultural maturity, and modern citizenship. (Baxter Magolda, 2014; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, 2012).

Over the past two decades, research on self-authorship has emerged and expanded to diverse university student populations and various educational contexts (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Abes & Hernandez, 2016; Abes & Jones, 2004; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, 2012; Jones, 2009; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernández, 2007; Pizzolato, Nguyen, Johnston, & Wang, 2012). This body of research has evolved from merely adopting and elaborating on Baxter Magolda's individual-centered developmental model, to integrating alternative theoretical perspectives (e.g., critical race theory, queer theory) to situate self-authorship development in complex sociocultural contexts. My research aligns with this extended effort toward a more inclusive, socially situated, culturally responsive view of self-authorship. Specifically, my research integrated a perspective of sociocultural theory, a stance of narrative constructionism, and dialogical narrative approaches to explore how self-authoring is experienced and expressed in Chinese university students. To represent their self-authoring processes, my study developed a

narrative typology of self-authoring, which contains three signature narrative types (i.e., the passion narrative, the resistance narrative, and the competence narrative) and various narrative trajectories. The novel insights produced by the narrative typology contributes to a more situated, holistic, and diversified understanding of self-authorship. My research also contributes to current self-authorship literature by introducing an integrated sociocultural framework of self-authorship and a new methodological approach informed by dialogical perspectives. These perspectives I developed in my study can not only inform future research, but also offer practical suggestions for developing supportive discourse communities that promote self-authorship in various contexts of higher education.

## **1.2 Thesis Overview**

My thesis has five chapters. Chapter 2 provides an overview of current literature on self-authorship. Particularly, I offer a historical view on the two waves of theoretical expansion of the self-authorship theory based on empirical studies that included diverse student populations and alternative frameworks. I then situate my study in the recent movement of self-authorship literature toward diversity and inclusion. Concluding this chapter, I introduce the sociocultural framework that guides my study and state my research questions. In Chapter 3, I adopt a narrative style to elaborate my methodological journey. I tell my story about how I clarified my methodological stance (i.e., my ontological and epistemological beliefs), chose an appropriate framework of narrative inquiry (i.e., narrative constructionism), and found a specific narrative analysis method that allowed me to achieve my research goals (i.e., dialogical narrative analysis). In Chapter 4, I present my findings. This chapter primarily focuses on the narrative typology of self-authoring I developed from my analysis. The narrative typology showcases signature narrative types and trajectories represented in my participants' stories. Chapter 5 starts

with a discussion that links the findings in Chapter 4 to my research questions and existing literature. Based on this discussion, I further explain the theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions of my research. Concluding this chapter, I reflect on some limitations of my research and offer considerations for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter consists of four sections. The first section is an overview of current self-authorship theory and research. I begin with origins of self-authorship by introducing the constructivist-developmental theory of self-authorship. I then move to discuss two waves of theory/research expansion on self-authorship in the recent two decades. I provide a critical analysis of both achievements and gaps in the existing body of self-authorship literature, which lays the ground for the discussion of my theoretical framework. In the second section, I introduce the context of my study and provide rationales for relocating the unit of analysis to the mutual space between the individual and the social context. In the third section, I focus my discussion on the theoretical perspective of my study, sociocultural theory. Specifically, I propose several important reconsiderations of self-authorship (e.g., the nature of the inner dialogue, social origins of inner voice, the process of developing self-authorship) offered by sociocultural and dialogical perspectives. These reconsiderations form a foundation for my study design, methodological choices, and representation of results. I then summarize my theoretical perspectives through a reflection on my learning journey and positionality. In the fourth section, I state my inquiry purposes and research questions.

### **2.1 Origins of Self-Authorship and Theory Development**

#### **2.1.1 Definition of Self-Authorship**

The construct of self-authorship was originated from Kegan's order of human consciousness (1982, 1994) and further elaborated by Baxter Magolda (1999, 2001, 2009; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, 2012) in her scholarly work of student development in higher education. Kegan (1994) offered an evolutionary perspective on the capacity of the human mind in modern ages. He emphasized the hidden curriculum of modern life, which entails navigating ambiguity

of knowledge, managing explosive information, and comprehending diverse perceptions, claims, and expectations in multiple domains of adults' public and private life (e.g., partnering, parenting, employment, citizenship). Modern adulthood, hence, requires more than a mere change in behavior, or acquisition of specific skills, or mastery of particular knowledge. Instead, modern adulthood necessitates an integrative capacity of the human mind, a revolutionary way of knowing, and a higher-level complexity in our consciousness. Self-authorship is born from Kegan's theory of the evolution of human consciousness. Self-authorship, as a form of higher human consciousness, is not a mastery of specific mental skill or a formulation of a particular aspect of individual identity; rather, it is an integrative psychological capacity of complex meaning making.

Inheriting a constructivist tradition from Piaget and his successors, Kegan's theory supports that human consciousness evolves through meaning making of lived experiences. Through meaning making, individuals interpret life events, produce rationales for critical decision making, and frame beliefs and values that guide our way of living. Kegan (1994) defined self-authorship as a qualitatively complex system of organizing our meaning making worlds:

It takes all of these objects or elements of its system, rather than as the system itself; it does not identify with them but views them as parts of a new whole. This new whole is an ideology, an internal identity, a *self-authorship* that can coordinate, integrate, act upon, or invent values, beliefs, convictions, generalizations, ideals, abstractions, interpersonal loyalties, and intrapersonal states. It is no longer *authored by* them, it *authors* them and thereby achieves a personal authority. (p. 185, *emphasis original*)

The development of self-authorship, therefore, is inherently the evolution of individuals' meaning-making system. Kegan extended meaning organization beyond thinking processes to encompass all the cognitive, affective, intrapersonal, and interpersonal realms of human experiences. Hence, self-authorship is a formation of a sense of whole personhood.

Self-authorship theory explains how individuals hold meanings they create for themselves. This unique focus on the individual's ways of knowing departs self-authorship theory from other self-related psychological constructs (e.g., identity, self-concepts). Specifically, most self-conceptions constitute the content of one's knowing, which answers the question of who I am. Self-authorship, in contrast, is an in-depth self-inquiry about how individuals come to know who they are as a person through lived experiences. Moreover, self-authorship is not a static state; rather, it continues to assimilate new constructs and take on qualitatively different forms as individuals go through a wide range of personally meaningful life events. Becoming self-authoring is a cyclical and iterative journey. It often involves processes of questioning and deconstructing one's old beliefs, liberating from and renegotiating relationships with authorities in personal and broader social contexts, and constructing new life meanings, and fostering the growth of independent consciousness (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). Therefore, self-authorship is a critical life lesson for university students who are going through significant life transitioning events through college where they learn to become independent young adults.

### **2.1.2 Dimensions of Self-Authorship**

Baxter Magolda (2001, 2007, 2012) applied Kegan's concept of self-authorship to university education. Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship provides a rich theoretical perspective on young adults' holistic development in terms of three integrative dimensions: epistemological (i.e., what we value and believe and how we know), intrapersonal (i.e., how we

view ourselves), and interpersonal (i.e., how we want to interact with others). Specifically, a self-authoring individual is able to: consider multiple viewpoints and utilize internally grounded perspectives to make meaning (cognitive maturity); reflect on their own values and use self-affirming beliefs to form a coherent identity (integrated identity); and hold mutual respect for others and oneself, appreciate differences, and collaborate for the common good (intercultural maturity). Baxter Magolda argued these three intertwined developmental capacities prepare college graduates for a productive life as effective workers, parents, family members, and citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **2.1.3 Self-Authorship as a Constructivist-Developmental Theory**

Self-authorship inherits Piaget's constructivist-developmental theory. Accordingly, Baxter Magolda defined self-authorship as a psychological structure of meaning making that evolves along a developmental continuum. In other words, the structure of meaning making is not permanent, stagnate, or definite. It is rather dynamic and fluid and becomes complex over time.

In her twenty-five-year longitudinal study, Baxter Magolda proposed three milestone developmental stages of self-authorship: *Following External Authority*, *Crossroads*, *Self-Authorship*. In the stage of *Following External Authority*, the meaning making structure is characterized with an external orientation. Individuals rely on authority figures to determine what they believe, who they are, and how they engage in social relations. Some examples include having a dichotomized view of knowledge as right or wrong, internalizing external values for self-definition, and uncritically seeking acceptance and approval from others. In the *Crossroads* stage, both the newly formed internal voice and external perspectives are fully present, constantly entering into intense competition for dominance over individual self-consciousness.

Typically, individuals begin to question and critically examine authority infused in those external viewpoints. Meanwhile, they are actively constructing and testing out their own approach to knowing in forming individual knowledge, identity, and social relationships. In the final stage of *Self-Authorship*, individuals use predominantly internally oriented meaning making structures. The self-authoring person is secure with their internally defined belief system, identity, and ways of socially relating to others. The internal foundation becomes a filter through which external influences are analyzed and coordinated. Individuals have gained sufficient confidence to follow their accumulated internal voice when navigating life challenges and refrain from being “pulled back to the former tendency to subsume one’s views to other’s views” (p. 87). The external voice does not disappear entirely; instead, it moves to the background either unnoticed or processed more readily through the internal foundation.

The evolution of the meaning making structure across the continuum is not linear and straight forward, but rather cyclical and continuous. Although the theory identifies three major developmental milestones, the journey toward self-authorship is rather dynamic, which includes “forward strides, “side shuffles”, and “meandering tangents” (p. 16). The cycle of self-authorship can repeat across time and experience (e.g., becoming a professional, becoming a parent, changing careers). Recent research in self-authorship has substantiated those cyclical patterns in socially and culturally diverse student populations (Jones, 2009; Pizzolato, Nguyen, Johnston, & Wang, 2012; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004), which will be further discussed in the following section. Moreover, variability also exists across each developmental dimension (i.e., epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal). One might use the self-authoring structure in the epistemological domain but not the interpersonal domain. Tentatively held structures during

the transition period may also vary in stability across different contexts, whereas consolidated structures are less influenced by environments.

#### **2.1.4 Limitations of the Constructivist-Developmental Self-Authorship Theory**

Justified by recent research, constructivist self-authorship theory is limited in its individualized analytic focus (Abes & Hernández, 2016). Constructivist researchers tended to ascribe the achievement of self-authorship to successful psychological evolution inside the individual's head. For Baxter Magolda, the consolidated internal foundation, consisting of self-chosen beliefs, has a primary function to decrease the likelihood of being controlled by other's voices from multiple life contexts. According to Baxter Magolda and King (2012), the stage of self-authorship was defined as follows:

For these individuals, the sources of beliefs, values, identity, and nature of social relations exist inside the person in his or her internal psychological world rather than being dictated by those around him or her ... At the external end of the continuum, there is no sign of a meaningful internal voice. As the internal appears and grows, it moves closer to the foreground until it eventually comes front and center and the external voice moves to the background. When the internal voice sufficiently develops, it edges out the external voice. External influences do not disappear, of course; rather these individuals use their internal voices to decide how to manage external influences. (pp. 13-14)

Several constraints of this view are unpacked as follows. Firstly, it implies a dichotomy between the individual and the social. This analytic perspective positions internal individual voices and external social influences in a form of irreducible tension (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). The limitation of this view has been extensively critiqued in recent wave of self-authorship studies. For instance, researchers have questioned the central concepts of agency and authenticity

underpinning self-authorship by discussing risks and difficulties associated with living with authentic, self-chosen beliefs and identities regardless of context, particularly for students with oppressed identities (Abes & Hernández, 2016; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Jones, Kim, & Skendall, 2016). Researchers have also troubled the privileged view toward individualized knowing as evidence of complexity through incorporating considerations of non-western cultural and Indigenous perspectives that value communal knowledge and relationships (Abes & Hernández, 2016; Pizzolato et al., 2012). Alternative theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches have been introduced to further capture the dynamic interaction and constant negotiation between the individual and the changing social context in the self-authoring process (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Hernández, 2012; Jones, 2009). I will discuss this wave of expansion in self-authorship scholarship in the next section.

Another limitation of the constructivist-developmental model concerns its conception of development (Abes & Hernández, 2016; Abes & Kasch, 2007). The self-authoring continuum defines the movement from external to internal meaning-making orientation as developmental progress, indicating cognitive complexity, achieved autonomous identity, and relational maturity. Divergences from this developmental normality are likely to be oversimplified as deviations. In this regard, the constructivist-developmental theory may fail to recognize variations in the ways self-authoring is experienced and expressed. These variations are not specific to socially and culturally diverse groups, but reflect the essence of all human experiences that are, by nature, complex, multifaceted, and intersecting (Abes & Hernández, 2016; Jones, 2009; Jones et al., 2016).

Furthermore, in the constructivist theory, self-authorship development consists of milestone stages toward a unified direction. This view may penetrate a view of privilege and

power by prioritizing the supremacy of the universal developmental model. Contextual influences are given a subordinate emphasis and are only used to explain non-typical patterns that were not initially accounted for in the original model (Abes & Hernández, 2016). Without challenging the reductionist view of development and the dichotomized view of individual development and social context, we cannot fully capture diverse pathways and patterns in people's self-authorship experience.

The dichotomized view of the individual and the context reveals another limitation regarding the origination of the internal voice. Though developing the internal voice is given primary emphasis, Baxter Magolda's work does not sufficiently explain the critical process that gives rise to and sustains the growth of the internal voice. As such, the internal voice is considered to reside within the realm of the individual's core sense of self, which is assumed as a pre-existing, independent entity separate from external conditions and social influences. This theoretical constraint may become more conspicuous when studying self-authorship in non-western groups from a more collectivist, relationship-focused cultural context, where the notion of self is inseparable from the situated context and relationship (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Pizzolato et al., 2012). It may not be at all surprising to find, in these cultural groups, a different perception of the role of social influences in shaping one's sense of self as well as more complicated relations to different sources of social influences. Authoritative influences, positive equal relationships, and connectedness to community, may exert profound impact on individual ways of knowing and trajectories of self-authorship. Considerations of complex dimensions of the broader sociocultural context repeatedly challenge any view that attempts to essentialize development toward uniformity, including the constructivist-developmental perspective of self-authorship.

## **2.2 First Wave of Theory and Research Expansion: Self-Authorship in Diverse Students**

Since Baxter Magolda's introduction of self-authorship to the student development literature, research interest has burgeoned to expand her predominantly middle-class, White student sample to include more racially, socially, and culturally diverse student populations (Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, 2012; Jones, 2009; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernández, 2007; Pizzolato et al., 2012). The first wave of theory expansion henceforth has come from this strand of research on self-authorship in diverse student groups across the United States (e.g., students of color, gay and lesbian students, students characterized as at "high-risk"). Highlights of theory development of self-authorship are summarized here.

First, additional developmental patterns that have not been captured in the original sample are identified. Research on Latino/a college students yielded insights on variations in individual self-authorship development, including possibilities of regression and stagnation, as opposed to exclusively forward strides (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernández, 2007). The patterns of "retreat" and "re-emergence" in self-authorship development were found in Pizzolato's studies of first-year, high-risk college students (Pizzolato, 2003, 2004). Her studies highlighted that self-authoring development might be thwarted by perceived environmental hostility as well as ineffective coping of multifaceted challenges faced by high-risk students. Pizzolato indicated that self-authored ways of knowing that existed prior to college may "disappear" if students encounter marginalizing experiences, and that self-authoring will only "reemerge" when students act on productive self-regulatory coping strategies and/or seek guidance from caring social relationships. Baxter Magolda and King's further research on self-authorship through the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, which included "six

varied institutional settings” and “a diverse population of students” consolidated these developmental patterns in their participants and asserted that self-authorship development “is better characterized as undulating, cyclical, or wavelike than linear, more like a swiveling helix than a fixed straight line” (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 16).

Second, researchers have also advanced nuanced understanding of the catalysts (e.g., experience of dissonance) and processes pivotal to developing self-authorship. In their study of 166 students of color, Pizzolato and colleagues (2012) specified dimensions of “dissonance”, which is the primary catalyst for self-authorship development: identity dissonance that concerns identifying with their racial or ethnic group membership (as opposed to solely the individual sense of self), and relational dissonance, referring to struggles to “balance personal, relational, and cultural consequences of meaning making” (p.667). They also considered cross-cultural differences in people’s conception of self (i.e., the autonomous self versus the self in relation to others). They found for students from racially, socioeconomically, and generationally diverse backgrounds, the relationship-focused dissonance is more likely to initiate identity exploration and subsequent self-authoring development than the autonomy-centered dissonance previously documented in White college graduates.

Third, studies have increased to investigate the ways multiple social identities and contextual influences interact with the development of self-authorship. As illustrated above, research on students of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds has broadened the individual-focused scope of self-authorship to include the negotiation of ethnic identity and relations to their ethnic group of membership as crucial aspects of developing self-authorship (Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernández, 2007; Pizzolato et al. 2012). Studies have also begun to consider the influence of both proximate familial context and the greater process of

cultural socialization (e.g., cultural selfways) on shaping how people understand their concept of self, which further revealed distinct pathways of self-authorship (Pizzolato et al., 2012). Apart from familial contexts into which students were born and raised, studies have also suggested that novel, dissonance-provoking contexts offered by college experience, such as community service settings, may afford new opportunities of self-authoring as students confront their privileges and existence of oppression, appropriate values for social good, and build meaningful relationships with people from diverse backgrounds in the community setting. (Abes & Jones, 2004).

Furthermore, researchers who studied LGBTQ student groups have introduced complementary theoretical models (e.g., the model of multiple dimensions of identity) to incorporate the process of managing multiple intersecting identities (e.g., race, gender, culture, sexual orientation, and social class) and the influence of contexts of privilege and oppression as part of the individual's lived self-authoring experience (Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Jones, 2009).

For example, Jones' (2009) autoethnographic study showcased managing external perceptions is not a straightforward solution but an intense struggle over the entire course of developing self-authorship for participants associated with oppressed states (e.g., students of racial or ethnic minority, gay and lesbian students). Jones' work suggested, for individuals with oppressed identities, their self-authoring voice grows in strength through the ongoing dialogue with multiple lines of social discourses fused with power and privilege. Overall, this strand of research has a shared emphasis on contextual influences that complicate the self-authoring process, which challenged the individual-focused, autonomy-centered model of self-authorship. However, how researchers have defined "context" varies: from physical environments (Abes & Jones, 2004), to structural diversity which refers to the demographics of the institution (Torres &

Baxter Magolda, 2004; Torres & Hernández, 2007), to a more psychological view of context that transcends physical boundaries and focuses on the ways influences of family and community shape individual psychological meaning making (e.g., Pizzolato et al., 2012), to a more sociological perspective, emphasizing social structure of power and privilege (Jones, 2009).

In summary, research on diverse student populations has advanced more complex and nuanced understanding about self-authorship development. These findings have revised the original constructivist-developmental model of self-authorship in multiple aspects. Specifically, this strand of studies has yielded fine-grained understanding about various theoretical constructs, including the processes, patterns, and catalysts of self-authorship. These theoretical extensions were achieved through including diverse student experiences and different social contexts that were critical to students' self-authorship development.

As this wave of research has primarily focused on elaborating the existing constructs of the constructivist-developmental theory of self-authorship, the limitations of the constructivist-developmental perspective itself have remained unchallenged. These limitations, as discussed previously, include the notion of development as a stage-oriented progress toward complexity and the dichotomic unit of analysis that separates what constitutes internally individual from what is defined as externally social. Nevertheless, this body of research is significant for developing a more comprehensive self-authorship theory and affords crucial implications for subsequent research. Almost all studies in this wave of research have underscored the profound impact that the sociocultural context where the individual is situated has on shaping their pathways of self-authorship, though the meaning and layers of contextual influences need to be further specified. The shift of focus from psychological involvement to social context has given rise to a new body of research on self-authorship, leading to a second wave of theory expansion.

New theoretical perspectives with sociocultural emphasis have been introduced to transcend the original individualist, psychological theory. This wave of expansion will be the focus of discussion in the following section.

### **2.3 Second Wave of Theory and Research Expansion: Reconsiderations of Self-Authorship**

In Abes and Hernández's (2016) recent review of self-authorship research, they highlighted major limitations of the constructivist-developmental model and pinpointed several aspects of a more inclusive, sociocultural approach to self-authorship. This review summarized key points of theoretical expansion foregrounding social context and recommended directions for future research on self-authorship. Here, I summarize Abes and Hernández's discussion of the limitations of the original theory and alternative ways of reconsidering self-authorship. I present their insights on the assumptions limiting inclusive self-authorship in the constructivist-developmental model. I further provide examples from empirical studies that challenge these assumptions through incorporating alternative theoretical frameworks. I then discuss what limitations have not yet been addressed in this review and current research, which leads to the theoretical framing of this study.

The first limitation Abes and Hernández identified is imposing a norm of cognitive complexity on students with oppressed identity, which may exclude various sources of knowledge and ways of knowing. To address this limitation, they recommend validating all students as knowers and centering all lived experience as knowing. Hernández's (2012) study of Mexican American young woman developing self-authorship centered students' lived reality of racism as the focus of inquiry and incorporated "resistance through activism" as a salient context for self-authorship development. Drawing upon perspectives of critical race theory, her research

revised the three dimensions of self-authorship as developing critical political consciousness (epistemological), constructing an ethnic identity that includes the value of serving the Latino community (intrapersonal), and developing political acuity through relationship negotiation with community members, political allies, and opponents (interpersonal). By validating students' lived experience of racism and foregrounding the context of self-authoring development as resistance to power, Hernández found a unique trajectory of self-authorship through political activism in Mexican women that would otherwise be missed in the original self-authorship model.

The second limitation of the constructivist-developmental framing of self-authorship highlighted in this review is the preference for individualized knowing as evidence of complexity over communal knowledge, relationships, and sense of self valued in more collective cultures and Indigenous perspectives. Therefore, Abes and Hernández accented the importance of including epistemologies that challenge the individualistic notion privileged in Western psychology in order to further understand complex ways of knowing, social relations, and identity construction in students from diverse backgrounds. Pizzolato and colleagues (2012) suggested that familial and cultural psychological contexts developed in participants' early experiences have significantly shaped and mediated students' self-authoring experiences. Likewise, Jones' (2009) study also indicated the critical impact of social locations on individual pathways of self-authorship. According to Jones, social locations weaving together sociocultural resources, including social class, culture, ethnicity, race, religion, "constitute the sense of place that served as home to our earliest constructions of self and identity" (p. 294). These studies suggested that the individual's internal voice is constantly animated by and in interaction with multiple relationships and locations in their situated context.

The third limitation concerns the assumption about self-authoring as increasing individualization and separation from others, in order to achieve control, autonomy, and independence. This limitation echoes what I earlier described as the dichotomic view of the internal voice and external influences, which indicates an unreconcilable tension between the individual plane and the social plane, rather than a dynamic, ongoing interchange between them. Studies using an intersectional approach challenged this individual-focused, autonomy-centered assumption underlying self-authorship (Jones, 2009; Jones et al., 2016). Jones and colleagues' studies suggested sustaining an *authentic* self involves a dual process of ongoing negotiations of identity and managing external perceptions, given the changing context, and that self-authoring is "a fluid process responding to social structures embedded in the context rather than a developmental continuum toward complexity" (Abes & Hernández, 2016, p. 104).

Lastly, they further challenged the categorical and stage-oriented view of self-authorship development and emphasized a more fluid and performative perspective on self-authorship. This point called for more inclusive reconceptualization of not only the meaning of self-authorship, but also the nature of development. Abes and Kasch (2007) analyzed a lesbian student's narrative through both the lens of constructivist self-authorship and queer theory. Queer theory offered perspectives on aspects and processes of self-authorship development that are suppressed by the language of the constructivist theory. Their findings suggested that unlike the external to internal process typically accounted for as a sign of self-authorship development in the constructivist theory, lesbian students simultaneously need to redefine the meaning of external influences (i.e., deconstructing and reconstructing power structures of heterosexism) in order to make meaning of their multiple identities (i.e., a process from external to internal). In other words, for students who do not identify as heterosexual, resisting power structures that define

them as abnormal is an integral part of their journey toward self-authorship, a process Abes and Kasch renamed as “queer-authorship”. Their results also challenged the constructivist notion of development as linear, finite, and measurable; instead, they highlighted the fluid, infinite, dynamic process of development informed by queer theorists, for whom development does not accommodate “arriving” at milestone stages through a straight line, but rather involves “multiple practices, complex relations, and dynamic positionings across contexts” (p.632). Taken together, through developing language to describe self-authorship, which is not confined by the constructivist theory, their research exemplified a more inclusive approach to understand diverse self-authoring possibilities and trajectories.

In summary, Abes and Hernández’s (2016) review of self-authorship research along with recent studies that incorporated critical and post-structural frameworks afford important implications for future research toward inclusive self-authorship. These implications include: a) validating students’ diverse lived experiences that resist traditional constructivist framing of self-authorship; b) broadening the individualistic unit of analysis to consider how social context not only influences, but fundamentally shapes individual self-authoring; and c) studying the sociocultural process of self-authorship development.

To conclude, the second wave of literature expansion has stepped outside of the constructivist framework of self-authorship to explore new theoretical possibilities to explain the phenomenon. Self-authorship research has now shifted from merely including diverse student samples to rethinking fundamental constructs through alternative sociocultural frameworks (i.e., critical and poststructural theories). By foregrounding the social context where self-authoring is emerging and forming, researchers have advanced theoretical conceptualization of self-authorship to a new level. The most significant contributions in this emerging strand of

scholarship of self-authorship include: a) exposing fundamental limits of the constructivist theory (e.g., privileging individualistic notions and developmental normality); b) redefining the meaning of self-authorship to reflect marginalized students' lived reality (e.g., resistance to established power structure at the core of becoming self-authoring); and c) characterizing self-authoring development as a dynamic, complex, and infinite process responsive to the changing context. Altogether, these perspectives have revolutionized our thinking about and approach to socially and culturally inclusive self-authorship.

Since this body of literature is still burgeoning, current sociocultural reframing of self-authorship is limited either in the scope of reconceptualization (i.e., the framework adopted only partially reconstructed one or few dimensions of self-authorship, such as identity construction) or the kind of self-authoring experience it represents, which is exclusively shared by a particular group of participants (e.g., "queer authorship"). My study aimed to contribute to the current wave of theoretical expansion beyond the constructivist-developmental self-authorship. Specifically, my study aimed to develop a more integrated and inclusive sociocultural framework to study the nature and processes of self-authorship in a group of Chinese university students. Before formally discussing my theoretical framing of self-authorship, I first introduce the context of my study, which informed my choice of analytical unit. Unlike previous self-authorship research that foregrounded either individual psychological development or social context, I located my unit of analysis in the middle; that is, the interanimating relationship between the individual and the social context. This analytical unit further shaped my theoretical lens and methodology.

## **2.4 Moving Forward with Theory: Context of My Study**

My study adopted an integrated sociocultural framework to explore how self-authoring was experienced and expressed in participants from a non-western world. In this section, I discuss how my study context required a united analytical focus on both the individual and the context. I argue that the united focus not only fits my sample of participants and research purposes, but also proposes a new perspective on the framing of and approach to self-authorship. This discussion will lay the ground for the introduction of my theoretical perspectives, sociocultural theory, and my methodological approach in Chapter 3.

My research studies the nature and process of self-authorship in a group of Chinese university students in both China and Canada. All my participants were born and raised in mainland China. Though the larger sociocultural context in China has remained relatively collective and homogenous, as a young generation born in the 90s, my participants have greater autonomy support and wider latitudes of freedom in choosing their own life path than typically experienced by many former generations. Because of a more opened-up political environment and more frequent cross-cultural exchanges between China and other parts of the world, my participants have also benefited from an increasingly globalized world. Some of them chose to study abroad for undergraduate or graduate studies, while others acquired international cultural experiences from travelling or participating in international exchange programs at university. For these reasons, studying self-authorship in this group of Chinese participants required shifting the focus from solely the individual to include the influence of sociocultural context. However, current research that foregrounded social context mainly defined context at the macro level (i.e., structures of power and the reality of oppression) and almost exclusively focused on participants associated with oppressed social status or marginalized experiences. Though having unique

merits given their research focus, these perspectives were not suitable for the context of my study.

Given the context of my study I described above, studying self-authorship in Chinese university students, without particularly attending to their privileged or oppressed social status, but instead focusing on holistically representing their lived experience of self-authorship, required a united focus on both the individual and the social. Therefore, I located my unit of analysis in the middle – the mutual plane where the individual functioning meets, interacts with, and responds to the changing social context. This dialectical unit of analysis not only transcends the individual-centered, psychological framing of self-authorship, but also sustains a sociocultural emphasis without narrowing the scope of context to particular power structures or marginalizing experiences. Therefore, in my study, self-authoring was considered neither as a quest for individuality and independence, nor a battle against existing structures of injustice and oppression. Rather, inspired by Sociocultural theory and dialogical methodologies (Bakhtin, 1984; Frank, 2010, 2012; Vadeboncoeur, 2017; Vygotsky, 1930-1934/1978; Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992), I approached self-authoring as an intense struggle, a balancing act, and a monophonic dialogue, that persists and prevails in all kinds of lived experience that resists reductionist categorization. This united focus on both individual and social processes of self-authoring formed the basis of my theoretical perspective and the dialogical methodology I adopted for my study. In the following sections, I introduced the theoretical perspective of my study, sociocultural theory, particularly Bakhtin's dialogical approach, which further lead to a reframing of self-authorship and self-authoring development.

## **2.5 A New Lens: Self-Authorship Reconsidered through Sociocultural Theory**

### **2.5.1 A Unified Focus: Situating Meaning Making in the Middle**

Sociocultural theory, inspired by Vygotsky, describes development as mutual functioning of both the individual and the context. Specifically, from a Vygotskian view, individuals' ways of knowing are shaped by and constantly interact with their sociocultural context (Vygotsky, 1930-1934/1978). The key action that promotes self-authoring – meaning making – henceforth is located in a dynamic social space that extends the boundary of the individual mind.

A united, dialectical focus on both the individual and social dimension of development forms the premises of sociocultural theory. This united focus has its roots in Vygotsky's view of development. For Vygotsky, the development of any human psychological function can be attributed to a sociocultural phenomenon. The distinctive qualitative shifts between rudimentary to higher mental functions occur through mediated actions with cultural tools, primarily language and speech (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Vadeboncoeur, 2017; Vygotsky, 1930-1934/1978). As cultural tools are socially situated, evolved, and organized, participation in social practices with others is instrumental in human development (Vadeboncoeur, 2017; Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992). According to Vygotsky (1930-1934/1978), mental function first appears on the social plane and then on the psychological plane. Thus, intermental processes give rise to the intramental functioning. Through social participation, individuals develop consciousness of themselves as a socially situated being and learn to engage in culturally valued experiences (Vadeboncoeur, 2017).

Accordingly, from a Vygotskian perspective, self-authorship, as a higher-order self-consciousness, is essentially a form of inner speech. Constructing inner speech is not the pure

work of individual psychological functioning. Instead, it is a culturally mediated transaction between the individual and the social in a shared cultural space. Therefore, the self-authoring voice is not devised within individuals' psychological world but appropriated through active participation in all sorts of social dialogues and practices. Self-authoring thus represents the individual's agentic response to a variety of social discourses. This united focus of the individual and the context, hence, questions the irreconcilable dichotomy that position internal integrity opposed to external influences, and instead, interweaves them into a dialogical relationship.

Recent self-authorship literature, shifting from foregrounding individual psychological involvement to foregrounding social context (particularly power structures), have challenged, yet not explicitly exposed the fundamental limitation of this binary, close-bounded view of individual functioning and social processes. Nevertheless, a common theme that has persisted in this body of literature is a more dynamic view of the relationship between the internal and social process of self-authorship (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Abes & Hernández, 2016; Jones, 2009). That is, the negotiation between the internal foundation and other external voices is more of a constant struggle, animated by the changing context, than an obstacle to overcome or a developmental task to accomplish in order to achieve a state of finite internal integrity. I therefore argue, to better understand and vividly represent possible dimensions of this dynamic relationship, we require a dual focus on individual mental functioning and social context – a view that sociocultural theory can offer. Correspondingly, sociocultural theory portrays self-authoring as selective appropriation and creative representation of sociocultural narratives in one's situated context. I prefer using self-author“ing” rather than self-author“ship” to emphasis the unfinalizing nature of the process. In the next section, I elaborate on the definition of self-authoring reframed

through sociocultural theory. I also explain how this reframing informed my approach to represent self-authoring in my study.

### **2.5.2 Rethinking Self-authorship: Bakhtin's Monophonic Dialogue**

Sharing the united focus on both the individual and the social, Bakhtin's (1984) dialogic approach extends a Vygotskian perspective to the realm of individual ideological consciousness, a process similar to that of self-authoring. I introduce here a set of fundamental constructs in Bakhtin's work that afforded significant relevance to the reframing of self-authoring through a sociocultural perspective.

Bakhtin's description of individual ideological becoming supports Vygotskian notion of development as a process of gradual individualization, which first emerges on the social plane and then on the individual mental plane. Bakhtin's work supported a social origin of the internal voice, as opposed to ascribing the internal voice as part of the entity of individual traits and internal strengths. Specifically, the individual's internal discourse is born of and stimulated by another's discourse. Bakhtin further explained that another's discourse not only profoundly influences but also fundamentally shapes the very basis of individual consciousness. Moreover, one's own discourse is not a simple transmission of the words of others. Instead, it is individuals' own artistic representation of and personalized response to social discourses. Also, for Bakhtin, the inner voice is not a solo, isolated voice that governs the individual territory; it is rather a continuous inner dialogue, or an intense *struggle*, among various lines of appropriated social discourses. In this regard, Bakhtin distinguished two categories of social discourse: *externally authoritative discourse* and *internally persuasive discourse*.

*Externally authoritative discourse* represents the hierarchical authority of political power, institutions, traditions, acknowledged truth, or an authority figure. With authority already fused

within it from a distant past, externally authoritative discourse forcefully demands acknowledgement and “unconditional allegiance” from us (p. 343). This type of social discourse is assumed given and seems alien to us. Authoritative discourse is static and complete in its innate structure. Thus, it prohibits free appropriation of individuals’ will or reframing of the context. The awakening of independent ideological life first occurs when the individual strives to liberate oneself from the authoritative influence of another’s discourse. The significant development in one’s self-consciousness begins with these tentative experiments that aim to separate internally persuasive discourse from enforced authoritative discourse. Baxter Magolda’s description of self-authorship development reflects this process of differentiating external authoritative discourse from other forms of internal discourse.

The existing body of research on self-authorship seems to associate external influences exclusively with unchallenged authority, enforced identity, or negative stereotypes (Abe & Kasch, 2007; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012; Pizzolato et al., 2012). Individuals must navigate, criticize, and liberate themselves from those authoritative influences in order to become more self-authoring. Examining the differentiating and liberating process served their respective research purposes and afforded significant value to advance the knowledge of self-authorship. However, this view did not sufficiently explain what narrative resources individuals use to grow their internal voice. What has been still missing from current research is the differentiation between external authoritative voices and the ones that afford internal persuasiveness, and how individuals engage with the latter, which can be a critical process of developing self-authorship. Without this subtle distinction, it seems impossible to challenge the supremacy of the internally oriented meaning making and the view that any reference to external voices is a sign of dependence and immaturity. In this regard, Bakhtin’s work offered critical insights. He

elaborated on another form of social discourse, which he named as *internally persuasive discourse*. His accounts of internally persuasive discourse affirmed the social origin of any internal voices and shed light on how internal voices forms, functions, and develops over time.

*Internally persuasive discourse* provides instrumental structures and rich ingredients to the development of higher-order self-consciousness. In internally persuasive discourse, we retell other's words in our own. It tightly interweaves our own words with those of others that we thoughtfully choose to appropriate from our surrounding context. The fluidity, openness, and infiniteness embedded in internally persuasive discourse indicates its acute receptivity and high responsiveness to new materials and situations. Bakhtin described the creative and productive nature of the internally persuasive discourse as follows:

It is not so much interpreted by us as it is further, that is, freely, developed, applied to new material, new conditions; it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts. More than that, it enters into an intense interaction, a struggle with other internally persuasive discourses. Our ideological development is just such an intense *struggle* within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions, and values ... in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever new *ways to mean*. (pp. 345-346, emphasis original)

Therefore, for Bakhtin, the internal voice is not a monologue that reflects a single and solitary mind, which contrasts with the psychological view in Baxter Magolda's theory. Instead, the internal voice, or more precisely, the internal dialogue, is "polyphonic" by nature (Tappan, 1999). Internally persuasive discourses constantly enter into dynamic interactions among themselves and with new external discourses as individuals move through different life contexts. Therefore, creative orchestration and savvy management of various lines of internally persuasive

discourses indicates a developed state of inner dialogue, in other words, self-authorship.

Bakhtin's dialogic view, hence, presented a new lens to approach self-authoring as a dynamic relationship, an intense struggle, a monophonic dialogue between the individual and the social.

### **2.5.3 A Learning Journey: My Theoretical Perspective and Positionality**

In previous sections, I offered an overview of the development of self-authorship theory and research. This overview included the origins of self-authorship, the constructivist-developmental model of self-authorship, and alternative perspectives that reconceptualized the nature and processes of self-authorship, including the sociocultural lens I offered in the previous section. In this section, I reflect on my own learning journey and elaborate on how my positionality toward the original self-authorship theory has shifted throughout my research process. This further leads to a summary of my theoretical perspective and positionality.

Over the course of my research, my positionality to the original self-authorship theory has changed. When I first proposed the idea of my research, I ascribed to the constructivist-developmental framework and intended to examine how well it might fit with Chinese undergraduate students' experiences. Through my coursework, I came across different notions of "self" in cultural psychology literature, such as the independent self versus the self in relation to others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and I found it relevant for my research given the cultural background of my participants. This was when I started to question whether the original model based on individualistic notions could accurately reflect my participants' experiences. I then decided to add another dimension to my inquiry; that is to examine culturally specific meaning and processes of self-authorship in the Chinese context. The most transformative learning experience, which completely revolutionized my thinking about self-authorship, happened when I took a course on sociocultural theory. This course introduced me to a new way of thinking

about human development, which contrasted with the Piagetian tradition – the foundation of self-authorship theory. I completed a course paper where I reframed the whole construct of self-authorship through the sociocultural perspective inspired by Vygotsky and Bakhtin. Writing this paper perhaps was one of the most intellectually challenging tasks I accomplished throughout my entire master’s program. I achieved my current theoretical framing through that experience. My learning journey extended my thinking about self-authorship first beyond the original theory, then beyond the boundary of culture, and eventually beyond the epistemological paradigm that foregrounds the theory. Perhaps the most important lesson I learned was: the only way to better understand the complexity of the phenomenon is to constantly challenge our own limitations of thinking and open our imagination to different possibilities. The sociocultural framework of self-authoring that I eventually arrived at was a fruit of such struggle. I summarized my theoretical framing of self-authorship in this study as below.

I prefer using the term self-author“ing”, instead of self-author“ship”, to accent its nature as what Bakhtin called a polyphonic dialogue, as opposed to a complex mental capacity. What Baxter Magolda described as “the internal voice”, in my theoretical framing, is an inner dialogue consisting of multiple voices. These voices are not entirely our own, but rather the interweaving of our own words and words of others made available through our context. People selectively appropriate and creatively reconstruct these narrative resources to develop consciousness of themselves both as an independent individual *and* as a socially situated being. Self-authoring is an intense dialogical struggle, animated by and responding to the changing context. Self-authoring is a practice of *unfinalizability* (Bakhtin, 1984; Frank, 2010, 2012). This means the process of self-authoring is never finite or achieved as a state of ultimate internal integrity. As Bakhtin eloquently argued in his work, the structure and meaning of our inner voices, remains

open and unfinalized, receptive and responsive to new contexts that *dialogize* it, constantly developing new ways to *mean*.

In terms of self-authoring development, the first premise that foregrounds my study is that self-authoring is originated from social participation. Individuals' engagement with other's voices and surrounding sociocultural narratives is instrumental to form voices of one's own and expand the repertoire of the inner dialogue. Therefore, what indicates the development of self-authoring is increased responsiveness and adaptivity of the inner dialogue to the changing context. The process of self-authoring thus extends beyond the boundary of mind and situates in a dialogical space between the individual plane and the social plane. Second, the trajectory of self-authoring development thus is not a unified developmental continuum. Depending on what narrative resources are made available in the context and the individual's conscious or unconscious choice of the narrative resources, self-authoring development may take up different *purposes* (i.e., for what purpose and in what context are we self-authoring?), *content* (i.e., what narrative resources do we choose to author our stories? How do those resources in turn restrict possibilities of self-authoring?), and *forms* (e.g., upward spiral toward a higher purpose/an integrated identity, resistant movements against external control, cyclical struggle to balance personal needs and social expectations). In this regard, the primary goal of my study was to represent what kinds of narrative trajectories of self-authoring were salient in my participants' stories, and what those trajectories taught us about different possibilities of self-authoring.

The integrated sociocultural framework of self-authoring I introduced above was not confined to the specific context of my study. That means both the theoretical and methodological approach I adopted and developed for my study can be applied to other groups of participants

and different study contexts. The sociocultural reframing of self-authoring has potential to explore diverse kinds of self-authoring experience that are complex by nature.

Recognizing my own privilege as a narrative researcher who can exert power over participants' voice (as Arthur Frank framed as "speak *to*" the participants, rather than "speak *with*" them), I chose to commit to a more ethical and inclusive positionality. I tried to hold a dialogical space for my participants' stories to speak for themselves rather than finalizing them. This ethical commitment was reflected not only in my theoretical perspective of self-authoring, but also my inquiry questions, choice of methodology, and analysis and representation of stories.

## **2.6 Inquiry Purpose and Questions**

My study is a narrative inquiry exploring the self-authoring journey of Chinese undergraduate students. Stories are at the center of my narrative inquiry. Personal stories in which we infuse a deep sense of self and/or a meaning of life create space for rich forms of self-authoring. My inquiry invites participants to share these kinds of stories centering on, but not limited to, their growth in university (e.g., what are some of the most important experiences/the most pivotal growth you had in university?), and how these stories shaped them holistically as a person. I view participants' narrative construction, not as an objective reflection of their cognitive structuring, but as an instrumental process that gave rise to self-authored ways of thinking. With a focus on the nature of participants' narrative construction, three research questions thus guided my inquiry:

- 1) What stories do Chinese undergraduate students tell about their important university experiences? How do they make meaning of the experiences in the story?
- 2) What kinds of narrative types and trajectories are represented in their stories?

3) What do the narrative types and trajectories reveal about the students' self-authoring processes?

The first research question specifies a narrative focus on story. As my study is the first one to include undergraduate students from non-western/Chinese cultural background, it is important to first understand how self-authoring is experienced and expressed in this participant group. Reflective meaning making of personally important experiences thus provides an optimal context to reveal potential self-authoring processes for Chinese students. Unlike the more widely used constructivist approach to studying self-authorship (i.e., assessing meaning making based on developmental stages), my inquiry approaches Chinese undergraduate students' meaning making through the lens of narrative (re)construction. Specifically, my analysis of stories explores in-depth the narrative types and trajectories represented in the stories (the second research question). Each narrative type and trajectory reveal critical insights about how Chinese young adults come to know who they are, what they believe, and how they relate to others (i.e., the three dimensions of self-authorship). Through the analysis of narrative types and trajectories with sociocultural perspective as underpinning theoretical lens, my research aims to better understand the nature and processes of self-authoring in Chinese undergraduate students (the third research question).

### Chapter 3: Methodology

*Doing excellent qualitative research of any kind is not easy – nor should it be. This is because qualitative research is more than a technique or a procedure that can be learned quickly ... It is a craft and way of being that requires something called ‘phronesis’, which means ‘practical wisdom’. The key to develop this lies not just in reading book chapters or engaging with exemplars in action or attending professional workshops but actually doing analysis and learning through experience.*

--- Brett Smith

I started this chapter with the quote that deeply resonated with me and captured the exact process of my methodological learning and practice. In this chapter, I choose to tell the *story* of my methodological inquiry, rather than merely presenting a monotonous description of research procedures. This narrative writing style not only allows me to claim my author’s voice, but also makes my researcher’s positionality and its impact on the research process visible to my readers. Furthermore, critiques of qualitative research commonly refer to the lack of transparency regarding uses of method and how conclusions are drawn (Bryman, 2012; Dreher, 1994). Therefore, I choose to showcase the evolving thinking process I went through to reach a coherent methodological approach. I hope to openly discuss both the merits and limitations of this process with my readers. To do that, my writing does not present an effortless, “cleaned up” methodology script; instead, it discusses the messiness, struggles, iterations that the methodological learning process entailed. This format of methodology writing is an active practice of reflexivity, which ensures research rigor is maintained throughout the inquiry.

I begin with the story of finding the “fittest” methodology for my study. Specifically, I first present my search for an appropriate framework of narrative inquiry and then I introduce the

dialogical narrative approach that I selected for my study. Then I move to discuss specific methods I used in my study, including sampling, data collection, and data analysis. Finally, I revisit how reflexivity and research rigor was practiced throughout my inquiry.

### **3.1 Into the Woods of Narrative Inquiry: A Search for the “Right” Methodology**

Perhaps the most influential idea that I took away from my qualitative methodology course was the notion of “methodological coherence”. Methodological coherence emphasizes meaningful interconnectedness among the researcher’s theoretical lens, inquiry purpose and questions, methodological choice, use of methods, and representation of results (Tracy, 2010). I adopted methodological coherence as the most critical criteria to ensure the overall rigor of my qualitative inquiry. I kept returning to this concept I considered a variety of available methodologies and methods in the self-authorship and narrative inquiry literatures, trying to find a “perfect” fit for my study. I asked myself: What is the most appropriate methodology that fits the sociocultural framework of self-authoring and the context of my study? What components should it have? How should I *practice* the methodology in a way that coheres with and effectively executes what I proposed to do? The development of my methodology involved two phases: the first phase was to clarify my methodological stance and select an appropriate form of narrative inquiry, which happened as I developed my thesis proposal; the second phase was to refine my methodological approach through a dialogical lens, which occurred prior to data analysis. I discuss both phases in the following sections.

#### **3.1.1 Clarifying My Methodological Stance: What Kind of Narrative Inquiry?**

The first phase of my methodology development was when I designed my thesis proposal. At that point, I had decided to maintain an inquiry focus on stories about pivotal university experiences, as this focus had persisted through self-authorship research in higher

education settings. Self-authorship researchers have provided compelling evidence that such stories were a rich context to understand students' meaning making process and self-authorship development, though most studies adopted grounded theory as a methodology in order to develop the constructivist self-authorship model (Abes et al., 2007; Abes & Jones, 2004; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, 2012; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004; Pizzolato et al., 2012). Given the central focus on stories, narrative inquiry became a natural choice.

Meanwhile, since I had already reframed self-authoring through sociocultural theory in a course paper, I was aware of the limitations of the individual-centered, psychological approach in studies using grounded theory and constructivist narrative inquiry. I realized the need to find an alternative methodological stance that would allow me to study self-authoring as socially and culturally situated as proposed. It was through the process of clarifying my researcher's positionality, in particular my ontological and epistemological stance, that I became clearer about the fundamental principles that should guide my methodology choice (i.e., narrative constructionism). This was evident in my writing of thesis proposal:

I adopt a relativist ontology and a constructionist epistemology to guide my narrative inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2013). For me, ontologically, there is no single truth awaiting to be discovered. We construct our own realities through lenses and perspectives of our choice. My guiding epistemological beliefs view knowledge as social artifacts conditioned to specific sociocultural contexts. Therefore, instead of viewing personal narratives as an objective transmission of people's internal 'cognate schemas' (Sparkes & Smith, 2008, p. 297) or a 'true psychology waiting to be discovered' (Braun & Clark, 2013, p. 30), I understand narratives not as 'theory-free observation' (p. 299) but as socially conditioned constructions produced by narrators for uses in various contexts and

human relationships (Sparkes & Smith, 2008). Furthermore, narrative constructionism also coheres with the sociocultural perspective, in particular the dialogic approach to self-authorship, in my study. As the constructionist narrative approach can preserve rich contextual features of each participant's stories, it opens more space for me to examine the dynamic exchange between the individual's inner world and social contexts in the self-authoring process. Specifically, through this approach, I aim to understand how Chinese university students draw on and dialogue with sociocultural narratives in their situated contexts throughout their self-authoring journey, which potentially can produce novel theoretical insights to the existing body of research.

Constructionist narrative inquiry shared the basic proposition in narrative research that humans lead storied lives and that stories are an essential means through which humans construct meaning for their experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Frank, 2010; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998; King, 2003; Riessman 1993, 2008; Sparkes & Smith, 2013). The constructionist narrative approach differs from the constructivist narrative approach in terms of the view of stories. While constructivist narrative researchers commonly adopt a more realist view of story as an objective reflection of the individual mind, narrative constructionists see story as a co-constructed social practice located in a cultural space (Frank, 2012; Risseman, 1993, 2008; Sparkes & Smith, 2013). For constructionists, the truth about stories is that there is no truth outside the story (Frank, 2010). Human subjectivity – “their rootedness in time, place, and personal experience, in their perspective-ridden character” – is thus at the center of inquiry (Personal Narratives Group, 1986, p. 263-264, as cited in Riessman, 1993). Riessman discussed the view of story under the lens of narrative constructionism: “Informants’ stories do not mirror a

world ‘out there.’ They are constructed, creatively authored, rhetorically replete with assumptions, and interpretive.” (Risseman, 1993, p.5)

Though I had developed solid theoretical understanding about narrative constructionism by then, it remained somewhat “fuzzy” as I had not yet acquired “practical wisdom” by implementing the ideas I learned into practices. In order to better understand how it might look in self-authorship research and how it differs from other narrative methods, I brought this lens of narrative constructionism to self-authorship literature that claimed narrative inquiry as methodology.

The last two decades of self-authorship research has clearly demonstrated a trend moving from constructivist to constructionist theoretical lens and methodological choices. Early self-authorship research that studied storied data (Abes & Jones, 2004; Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007) adhered to constructivist epistemology and adopted a categorical content perspective of narrative research (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). This was most evident in the data analysis method – constant comparison analysis, which involved a coding process developed from and typically practiced in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Participants’ stories were viewed as a reflection of their meaning making capacity (e.g., referring to meaning making capacity as a “filter” between contextual influences and self-perceptions of identities). In terms of content, storied data were broken down into chunks that were compared with and used to elaborate constructs of the constructivist self-authorship theory. Structural analysis was limited to linguistic features of the narration (e.g., pauses, silences, tensions) to “add greater depth to some of the categories that emerged from the content analysis” (Abes & Jones, 2004, p.617). The constructivist narrative approach was suitable given the research purpose of developing the original self-authorship theory. However, the fracturing of storied data limited the possibility to

study the rich context of the story, which is supposed to be the strength of narrative inquiry. Moreover, fracturing individual stories in order to fit them into existing categories risked reducing the complexity of lived experiences and the power of the participants' voice.

As studies began to include not only diverse student participants, but also alternative frameworks, researchers recognized the limitations of the constructivist perspective. They started to experiment with constructionist approaches to narrative data. For example, Abes and Kasch's (2007) narrative inquiry compared analysis results of a traditional categorical content approach to that of a constructionist narrative approach informed by queer theory. Their purpose was to "queer" the constructivist narratives. They achieved this purpose by "rereading an existing text to analyze how queer notions, normativity, performativity, and liminality, undergird and drive the text" (p. 623). Their study developed a novel reconceptualization of both the nature of self-authorship and the notion of development and proposed a new framework of "queer authorship". Similarly, Jones' (2009) collaborative autoethnography (consisting of autobiographical narratives and dialogic conversations) exemplified methodological practices of constructionist narrative inquiry. Jones kept participants' stories as a whole to capture the complexities of the lived experience that "rarely fall into neat categories" (p. 289). She connected personal narratives with rich sociocultural contexts. Jones presented participants' voices in her findings as "evocative stories" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000):

... long to be used rather than analyzed; to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled; to offer lessons for further conversation rather than undebatable conclusions; and to substitute the companionship of intimate detail for the loneliness of abstracted facts. (p. 744)

Rather than ascribing to a categorical coding method, Jones' analytical process was a dialogic interpretative practice among her and her participants. This process included reading and rereading individual narratives, writing "responses" to these narratives to capture what stood out to each participant from these stories, generating emerging themes by looking at the sociocultural context, patterns, and points of divergence, and interpreting these themes using the intersectional framework. Another example of constructionist narrative inquiry in recent self-authorship literature is Hernández's (2012) study of Mexican American women developing political consciousness through activism. Like Jones, Hernández had an integrated theoretical perspective that had methodological implications. Specifically, she adopted a social constructionist epistemology, self-authorship as a framework, critical race theory as a perspective, and narrative inquiry as a methodology. Hernández presented her participants' lived experience accenting the reality of racism, which was a way of "centering particular stories that might otherwise be overlooked in normative developmental theory" (Abes & Hernández, 2016, p. 105).

These narrative inquiries above demonstrated an integrated level of methodological coherence and showcased merits of using constructionist narrative approach to study self-authorship. First, the researchers were transparent about their epistemological stance, theoretical perspectives, and methodological approach, and the interconnectedness among these choices. Their methodological practices of narrative inquiry were informed by and coherent with their theoretical lens (e.g., queer theory, intersectionality, critical race theory) and their representations of findings amplified sociocultural complexities as an integral layer of participants' stories, rather than an extraneous variable. Second, these studies tended to keep stories in wholeness. By keeping the storied experience intact, rather than reducing them into pre-existing categories, researchers had more flexibility to study the fluidity, nuances, and dynamics of the self-authoring

process. Resisting over-coding the storied data ensured these stories can fully emerge and breath. Lastly, constructionist narrative approach offered a different possibility of representing participants' voice. Such representation aligned with the ethical and inclusive stance of the research. Jones presented what this new positionality looked like at the end of her study:

I present our findings as a series of evocative stories that draw the reader in as we narrate the lived experience of intersecting identities, both in our individual voices as well as a collective voice that resists the essentializing and categorization of identity space. The process 'exposes a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretation (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739)".

### **3.1.2 Narrative Constructionism as a Plural: Finding the "Right" Approach.**

After I clarified my methodological stance as narrative constructionism, I developed my narrative interview protocol and wrote a "theoretical" script on narrative analysis as part of my thesis proposal. Then, I spent three months collecting narrative stories in both China and Canada. After transcribing the interviews, time had come for me to decide, for practical purposes: What kind of narrative analysis method should I use for my data? What steps should I take to perform such analysis? And in what ways should I represent my participants' stories? This time, I dived into literature on constructionist narrative approaches, in hopes of finding some kind of standardized analytical procedure that I could follow to perform the analyses. Not surprisingly, what I initially thought would be a "quick-fix" or simple accommodation required months of reading and learning about constructionist narrative methodology and analysis methods.

Even within the camp of narrative constructionism, scholars differed in methodological perspectives and practices of narrative analysis. Here I offer a few points of divergence to showcase the broad landscape of constructionist narrative approaches. First, although

constructionist narrative researchers agreed on the sociocultural nature of personal stories, they differed on how they understand and analyze the sociocultural features embedded in a story. Some researchers attended to the participants in a conversation and the process of taking turns in talk, with each speaker adding to what becomes an emerging story (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Riessman, 2008). Others examined how each story is a reconstruction of narrative resources made available through a sociocultural context (Frank, 2010, 2016; Smith, 2016). Second, most constructionist narrative researchers opposed the idea of fracturing stories into manageable chunks of data. Instead, they preferred a more holistic approach to preserve narratives in its wholeness without eliminating the sequential and structural features that characterize narrative accounts (Frank, 2010; Riessman, 1993; Smith, 2006). Guided by this principle, constructionist narrative researchers performed narrative analysis on at least two levels: the *what* of the story (what is being told – the content of the story) and the *how* of the story (how is the story being told – the structure of the story). However, less agreement has been reached in terms of what bounds the content of a story (and how a story differentiates from a narrative) and what kind of narrative structure is under analysis. In terms of content, some narrative researchers worked with extended accounts of a particular life event (e.g., a story about illness), some with life stories, and others with a bounded segment of interview text about an incident (Riessman, 2008). Regarding narrative structures (the ‘telling’ of the story), some researchers examined the linguistic phenomena (e.g., uses of clauses), some attended to the story’s overall sequential composition, and others studied cultural narrative resources used to organize and structure stories (Smith, 2016). Lastly, what further complexifies the issue are diverse classifications of other specific and nuanced features of narratives, including narrative sequence (chronological,

consequential, thematic), genres (habitual, hypothetical, top-centered), and forms of telling (Riessman, 1993).

I came to realize (and at the same time be overwhelmed and frustrated by) the fact that there are no standardized procedures to follow, but only different angles to approach narrative analysis, with each serving specific purposes (Smith, 2016). To decide an appropriate narrative analysis approach, I had to keep returning to my primary research interest, researcher positionality, and theoretical framing of self-authoring. I always knew, on some level, that I wanted to take a more ground-up approach to explore how self-authoring was experienced and expressed in my Chinese participants' own words, rather than imposing an existing framework on them. Recognizing any individual voice has social origins and always exists in plural forms, I was also keen about studying the sociocultural resources that individuals draw from to tell their story. I started with Katherine Riessman's (1993, 2008) celebrated works on narrative analysis and found myself more confused after reading them, as she approached narrative analysis from a socio-linguistic lens, with an emphasis on the process of co-construction in conversation and linguistic structures of speech. This focus did not fit well with the purpose of my research. As I continued reading more about various kinds of narrative analysis, it was by pure accident that I came across Arthur Frank's (2015) chapter titled "Practicing Dialogical Narrative Analysis". The word "dialogical" immediately caught my attention, so I decided to take a look at this method. And there, I found the "right" narrative methodological framework for my study and never turned back.

### **3.2 Out of the Woods: A Dialogical Perspective on Narrative Inquiry**

Dialogical Narrative Analysis (DNA) is a narrative approach that executes Bakhtin's dialogical principles. Arthur Frank (1995, 2010, 2015) developed the framework of DNA

through his extensive narrative work on first-person illness stories. DNA naturally appealed to me, not only because it is grounded in the dialogical perspective that I adopted for my study, but also for the concrete practices it offered to study self-authoring in coherence with that dialogical vision. Rather than using DNA as solely a method for data analysis, I adopted the perspective of DNA for methodological considerations. These considerations included the view of story, practice of the method, and representation of results. In this section, I unpack some of the most important methodological perspectives I acquired from DNA.

### **3.2.1 The Dialogical View of Story**

In DNA, any individual voice is a dialogue between multiple voices, and any story, no matter how personal, is only borrowed from “fragments of previous stories and artfully rearranged but never original” (Frank, 2012, p. 3). The dialogue within a speaker’s story, on the one hand, is polyphonic. This means that the speaker’s voice always consists of and resonates with voices of specific others, including those whom the speaker listens to and those whose response he or she anticipates. On the other hand, every story is a reassembly of multiple codes of language usage and genres, which come from the generalized others of a speech community. Bakhtin (1984) described this form of dialogue as heteroglossia. Frank (2010) further explained those fragments of speech may contain motivational schemes for characters, plot occurrences, and recognizable styles. In other words, any person’s speech is a dialogic place where multiple speech communities intersect (Frank, 2012). Story, hence, is dialogical by nature. This perspective of story coheres with my theoretical framing of self-authoring as creative orchestration of other’s voices and sociocultural narratives.

There is a clear distinction between “story” and “narrative” in DNA. Stories are tales that people tell about their life, which is “living, local, and specific” (as cited in Frank, 2010, p. 14).

Narratives are “resources from which people construct the stories they tell and the tellability of stories they hear”. Narratives are templates, which are made available through our situated cultural context and social relations (Smith, 2015). Narratives offer us “tropes” and “plotlines” to understand stories we hear and to construct specific tales of our own (as cited in Frank, 2010).

Frank (2010) summarized the reciprocal relationship between stories and narratives as below:

Stories reassemble bits and pieces – character types and motivations, forms of action, symbols, tropes – recycle them in the present storytelling, and then turn them loose for future use, which now has added resonance. In storytelling, perception and memory are always filtered through narrative resources, shifting and expanding those resources. (p. 90)

### **3.2.2 Studying Self-Authoring as Narrative Reconstruction**

DNA’s view of story/narrative has important methodological implications for studying self-authoring through a dialogical lens. Specifically, in my inquiry, I studied self-authoring as narrative reconstruction. Such narrative reconstruction happened through two parallel processes: the reassembly of individual memories and the reconstruction of sociocultural narrative resources.

At the individual level, narrative reconstruction is primarily a reassembling process of individual memories. The premise here is that people only imaginatively reconstruct a past to account for a present situation, and any reconstruction “reaffirms the impression that life has a course and the self has a purpose or *telos*” (Williams, 1984, p.179). In DNA, storytelling is an interpretative act representing people’s subjective perception of life, rather than an accurate description of their individual mind. Therefore, narrative reconstruction is inherently performative. The stories we reassemble are purposeful selection and intentional recreation of

past experiences that afford recency, salience, and emotional impact to the present context of storytelling (Frank, 2010). I found this notion of narrative reconstruction useful to illustrate how self-authoring was expressed in people's narration of their stories. Stories that showcased salient traces of self-authoring in my study were anything but a raw utterance of random life events. They were often highly organized, inherently coherent, and perhaps had already been rehearsed on different occasions, ready to fully perform at appropriate cues (e.g., my inquiries about their pivotal university experiences and personal growth). Therefore, studying self-authoring as narrative reconstruction required me to explore beyond what was being told to include the analysis of the telling of the story (Frank, 2010). In that regard, my inquiry explored the narrative types and trajectories of participants' stories, which revealed critical insights about their process of self-authoring.

Any form of narrative reconstruction, however, is not the pure work of individual memory. Stories are already present in our surrounding context, calling for our attention and offering themselves for adaptation (Frank, 2012). This view of story coheres with the sociocultural perspective of my study. That is, individuals' social participation and cultural experiences not only profoundly impact, but also fundamentally shape the stories they tell. Therefore, each person's story is also a recreation of sociocultural narrative resources made available through situated contexts. In this regard, my inquiry examined how the sociocultural context in which the participant was situated was implicated in their story and their specific trajectory of self-authoring. My analysis of stories also revealed how their individual voice were in ongoing dialogue with voices of others in the context.

### 3.2.3 Commitment to Unfinalizability

The commitment to unfinalizability ensures that both the process and the product of DNA are inherently and consistently dialogical. The principle of unfinalizability manifests in every aspect of DNA, from the view of story, to the practice of method, and finally, to the representation of results. I introduce here the basis of unfinalizability in DNA and will revisit the principle in my discussion of data analysis and results.

Dialogical analysts respect each participant's capacity for continuing change and thus their voice should remain unfinalized (Frank, 2012). Dialogical analysts exercise caution when they make claims about participants' stories: they seek to speak *with* the participant, rather than speak *about* them. Like all narrative researchers, dialogical analysts face the tension between the fact people constantly revise their stories and the practical need to end their analysis and produce a report. Rather than claiming a privileged view about participants' story that often results in finalizing their voice, dialogical analysts balance this tension by attending to the relative stability of narrative resources, particularly, the finite number of character types, plot lines, and genres. Conclusions are drawn based on the finite nature of narrative resources, not the people who use those resources (Frank, 2012). Dialogical analysts recognize each person is at the crossroads of multiple potential stories of "possibilities imagined not taken" and yet we only have a limited understanding of what possibilities lie beyond the particular crossroad (Frank, 2010). Dialogic analysts hence hear stories not as what the participant *could* say, but what the participant is currently *located* to say, given the narrative resources made available through their social context at that moment of their life. In this way, storytellers remain unfinalized either as an individual or as a collective (Frank, 2010).

Dialogical analysts are positioned to hear multiple versions of stories at the crossroads that otherwise would not be immediately available to any individual storyteller. Therefore, it is indeed the mission of dialogical analysts to recognize the linkage between different stories that express similar experiences and bring them together into a dialogue. This dialogue can help people, both individually and collectively, by connecting them to other potential resources that might offer a different possibility of narration. Frank (2010) described the mission of dialogical research as follows: “Rather than carrying the monological message, *this is all you are*, dialogical research can offer the possibility, *this is what else you are connected to*” (p.102). Dialogical researchers participate in the ongoing reassembling of social stories and acknowledge the fact they will never achieve a whole story, as claiming wholeness indicates finalization. Therefore, they shape their representation of stories as a polyphonic dialogue with the intention to open continuing possibilities for others to listen and respond to what is heard. The presentation of findings thus is not an end, but a springboard of an ongoing dialogue.

The principle of unfinalizability I learned in Frank’s work and continued learning through my practice of DNA transformed how I considered my own positionality as a narrative researcher and my approaches to story representation. I began to see each story I heard as different narrative possibilities expressing (or trying to express) a form of self-authoring. The story must afford some kind of profound impact to the participant’s self-authoring for it to be told to a narrative researcher. My role as a dialogical researcher was to explicate common narrative types and trajectories among those shape-shifting stories and bring them into dialogue with one another. A quote from my research journal captured how I represented stories of self-authoring without finalizing them, and I shared it here:

Rather than presenting self-authoring as stages, I presented it as narrative possibilities with unique trajectories. Rather than saying to my readers that *“this is what you will be going through to be more self-authoring”*, I am saying *“These are some trajectories of self-authoring I saw in people’s stories. You may find your story resembles some of these trajectories. Some trajectories may seem familiar, while others unimagined. Either way, use them as resources to experiment with different ways of authoring your voice, and to construct your own story moving forward.”*

### **3.3 Methods**

#### **3.3.1 Participants**

In total 12 Chinese university students were purposefully sampled from two large, public, research universities, 7 students attending university in a major metropolitan area in China, and 5 Chinese international students attending university on the west coast of Canada. The purpose of selecting the two groups of Chinese university students in both China and Canada was to explore the potential impact of sociocultural contexts had on the shaping of participants’ trajectories of self-authoring. The purposeful sampling criteria were aimed at the maximal variation (Braun & Clarke, 2013). First, to ensure diversity in participant demographics, I recruited participants from a range of social groups. The criteria of diversity were customized to the Chinese context such that participants encompassed diverse social groups including gender, geographic location (i.e., urban/rural), and K-12 school experience (i.e., public school in China, international school in China, school experience in Canada). Participants also represented a range of academic programs (e.g., social sciences and arts, natural sciences, and applied sciences) and included students from different years of college.

Participants were recruited through third party informants. Specially, I contacted third-party recruiters in my network who are faculty members and current graduate students at the universities and asked them to disseminate my study information and recruitment advertisement in their personal and professional networks. Interested participants then connected with me through the contact I provided in the advertisement or through the third-party recruiter. I then met with each individual potential participant at a place on campus of their choice and provided them with detailed information about the study and discussed the consent process. All participants gave their oral and signed consent after the meeting.

Table 3.1 summarized the demographic information and personal backgrounds of the participants. I will provide more detailed personal backgrounds and histories of the participants in Chapter 4 (the results chapter).

**Table 3.1 Demographics of Participants**

		N of participants (Chinese university)	N of participants (Canadian university)
Total Number		7	5
Year level			
	First year	0	0
	Second year	0	2
	Third year	0	2
	Fourth (and fifth) year	7	1
Gender			
	Male	4	1
	Female	3	4
Program			
	Arts and Social Sciences	4	4
	Natural Sciences	2	0
	Applied Sciences	1	1
Region of birth			
	Rural regions	2	0

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	Medium-sized towns	3	1
	Developed urban cities	2	4
High School			
	Chinese public schools	7	1
	Chinese international schools	0	2
	Canadian public school	0	2

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The backgrounds of the two groups of participants have both similarities and differences. The similarities of the two groups of participants include being born and raised in China, mandarin as first and primary language, and having a large portion of K-12 schooling experiences in mainland China (with only two participants completed their high school in Canada). In both university contexts, participants had abundant opportunities to experience distinct shifts in ways of learning in university, engage in a variety of social activities through student clubs and professional initiatives, interact with people from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, and explore possible future paths and prepare for their life plans after university. Also, students in both universities needed to cope with similar challenges such as moving away from home, adapting to a new academic and sociocultural environment, and building relationships with people different from them. These experiences participants had during college became rich context for their self-authoring. On the other hand, the two groups of Chinese university students differed from each other in terms of the contextual nature of their college experiences and broader sociocultural experiences. For example, a student in the Chinese university may encounter challenges when interacting with students from diverse ethnic backgrounds and multiple geographic regions across China, whereas a Chinese international student may need to comprehend Canadian cultural norms and establish a new social network after leaving their friends and family back home. For Chinese international students, they also

had to cope with a range of acculturative stressors as a result of being in a new culture, including language barriers, distinct cultural norms and expectations, intensified academic stress, social isolation and loneliness (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The commonalities shared by two groups of participants allowed the analysis to reveal typical narrative types and trajectories in Chinese participants' stories, whereas the diversity in participants' personal backgrounds and university experiences ensured the representation of variations in their self-authoring processes.

### **3.3.2 Data Collection**

I used narrative interviews as my method for data collection. Compared to semi-structured interviews, narrative interviews are more open-ended and flexible. The narrator takes a leading role in the interview with the researcher following them down their trails (Riessman, 2008). My role as a narrative interviewer was to provide broad prompts to invite sharing of personal stories and ask follow-up questions in response to each individual story. For most of the interview, I tried to listen as an empathetic companion so that my participants could feel comfortable sharing stories about their growth and learning during university. The narrative interview consisted of three portions: a) personal histories before university (e.g., personal characteristics, familial background, school experiences); b) meaning making of pivotal university experiences; c) reflection on key aspects of personal growth during university and how they shaped them as people. I originally designed to conduct two interviews, one focusing on personal histories before university, and one on meaning making of university experiences and personal growth. However, most participants chose to combine the two interviews into one longer interview as this arrangement better suited their personal commitments. The longer interview has the merit to ensure the wholeness of participants' stories. Interviews ranged from

60 to 120 minutes and were recorded on an electronic device. All interviews conducted in the participants' and my first language, Mandarin.

Before the interview, I invited participants to complete a self-reflective exercise about their pivotal experiences and significant growth and in university (see Appendix E – Pre-Interview Reflective Exercises). The exercise asked participants to list one or more significant university experiences and consider why the experience(s) was/were important to them and what they learned from the experience(s) about themselves, others, and the way they view the world. I explained to them that the intention of the exercise was to help them engage with the potential interview topics so that they could have time consider the stories they wanted to share in the formal interviews. Participants were also welcomed to customize the exercise to their personal conditions or bring other artefacts or relative documents that represented their growth in university to the interview. All participants in the Chinese university completed the self-reflective exercise and brought it to the interview (two participants brought additional documents as representations), whereas participants at the Canadian university did not choose to complete the exercise in written form. However, in the first meeting where I introduced the study and consent form to participants at the Canadian university, I asked for their thoughts about the questions in the exercise. Most of them responded that these questions resonated with them and that they could think of important university experiences that contributed to their personal growth.

In the interview, I first invited participants to introduce themselves and share parts of their personal history (e.g., Can you tell me about yourself? Where were you born and raised? What are your family relationships like? How were your school experiences before university?) For all participants, I asked how they chose a university to attend a program of study within the

university. Furthermore, for participants at the Canadian university, I specifically asked about their considerations when making the decision to study abroad. These questions allowed me to familiarize myself with where my participants came from, how they viewed themselves as a person, how they related to significant others in their social relationships, and what considerations they had when making important life decisions. After the introduction of their personal histories, we focused our conversation on pivotal university experiences and personal growth. We used their reflective exercise (if they had completed it prior to the interview) as a springboard for the sharing of personal stories. I also referred to the interview protocol I designed for the study, consisting of broad prompts to invite stories (see Appendix D – Interview Protocol). The interview prompts are open-ended (e.g., What are some of your most important university experiences or personal growth?) so that my participants could choose what kind of stories they wanted to share and how they shared them. Some of them chose to reflect on various domains of development (e.g., academic, professional, relationships, personal life), while others chose to zoom in on one transformative decision they made recently and traced back chronologically to other aspects of their story. Most of the time, I followed my participants' lead into their stories, listened attentively, and asked followed-up questions to better understand what they thought happened, why they experienced the feelings they felt, and how their perspectives changed before and after the experience.

In the interview, I did not view myself as a passive listener who was invisible and silent. Instead, I actively participated in a dialogue with my participants. In dialogical narrative research, any individual voice is polyphonic. In the context of an interview, my voice interacted with the voice of the participant. The stories they told were provisional co-constructions of our dialogue. As an active participant in the interview, I occasionally recounted the story I heard

from my participants and asked if they thought my interpretation reflected what they described as their experience. In this regard, narrative analysis started earlier than formal data analysis of transcribed texts. Many of my interpretations were happening in real time with the progression of the interview. So I shared some of my in-situ interpretations of their story with my participants and invited their perspectives on my interpretations. For example, I might share a reoccurring conflict I heard in their accounts and asked for their clarification. Alternatively, I might speak about a character strength in the story I heard and invited their interpretation of their own character. I found this practice productive on most occasions. My participants might agree or reject my interpretations. Either reactions led to further clarifications and elaborations, which indicated richer, more in-depth narrative construction. In this way, member reflections were already embedded in the process of interview, rather than just as a post-hoc checking mechanism.

### **3.3.3 Data Analysis**

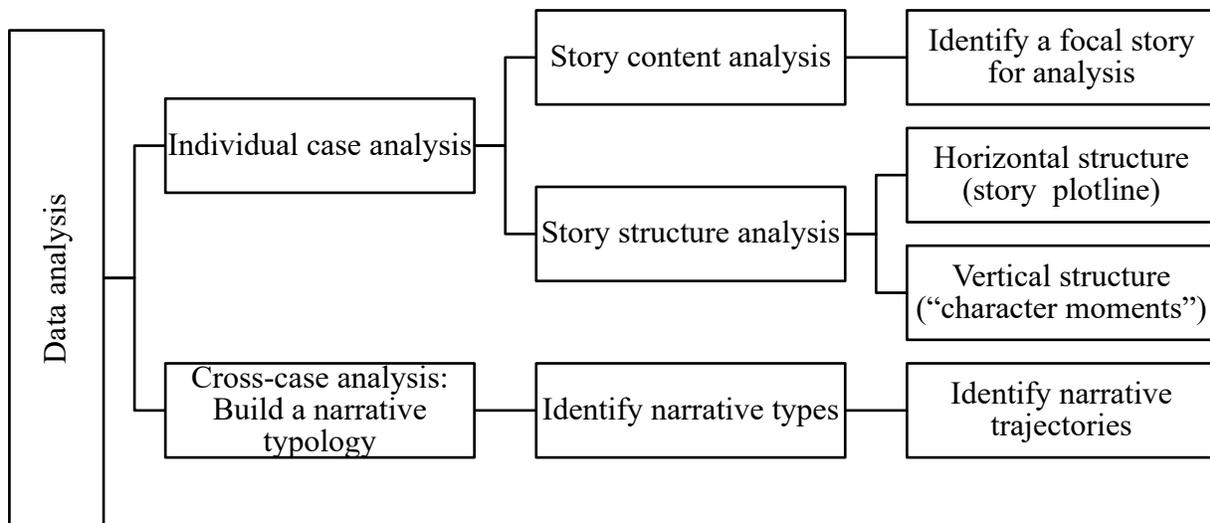
In this section, I discuss my practices of dialogical narrative analysis, based on the guidelines and exemplars provided by dialogical narrative researchers (Frank, 2010, 2012; Smith, 2016). I describe here the process I engaged to analyze the stories. However, I present this process, not as a series of sequential steps I took to generate results, but as major components of my analytical approach, as my analysis happened in a cyclical movement between and within each component. The analytical process itself was dynamic; it kept emerging and evolving as my engagement with data deepened in practice.

I started my analysis with data transcription. I used an online transcribing service to generate a verbatim transcription of each interview. Then, I listened to each interview and made corrections on the transcript. After finalizing each interview transcript, I engaged in a process

called “indwelling”, which involved listening to and reading the transcripts multiple times and making notes about initial impressions (Smith, 2016). Indwelling allowed me to listen deeply to what stories my participants told and why telling the story was important to them at that moment. As I listened, I tried to refrain from my inclination to propose my narrative, coinciding with my theoretical lens and categories, on their stories. Instead, I chose to follow their lead and made efforts to understand their perception of life at that point of the storytelling. The process of indwelling was critical to “get” the stories.

After I familiarized myself with the transcripts, I delved deep into the analytical process, which involved analysis at both individual level (individual case analysis) and the collective level (cross-case analysis). My process of data analysis is summarized in Figure 3.1 (see below).

**Figure 3.1 Data Analysis Process**



**Individual Case Analysis.** At the individual level, I performed both content and structural analysis. In terms of content analysis, I focused on the content of the focal story in the interview. I used the term “focal story” to mean the story that provided [the most] salient traces

of self-authoring meaning making. Some key features of the focal story involved having a plotline or a persisting narrative pattern that led to self-authoring meaning making, demonstrating the character of the teller, presenting the teller's journey of self-exploration, and/or expressing the teller's point of view about his/her life. The focal story typically consisted of several interconnected meaningful events that allowed the participant to negotiate their views and beliefs, identity, and relationships in complex contexts. The content analysis began with identifying pieces of the story that otherwise might locate in different portions of the interview. I brought the pieces together to form a focal story for further structural analysis. At the same time, I looked for the theme of the focal story (i.e., What is the story about? What is the thread of the story?). Content analysis informed the building of narrative types of self-authoring.

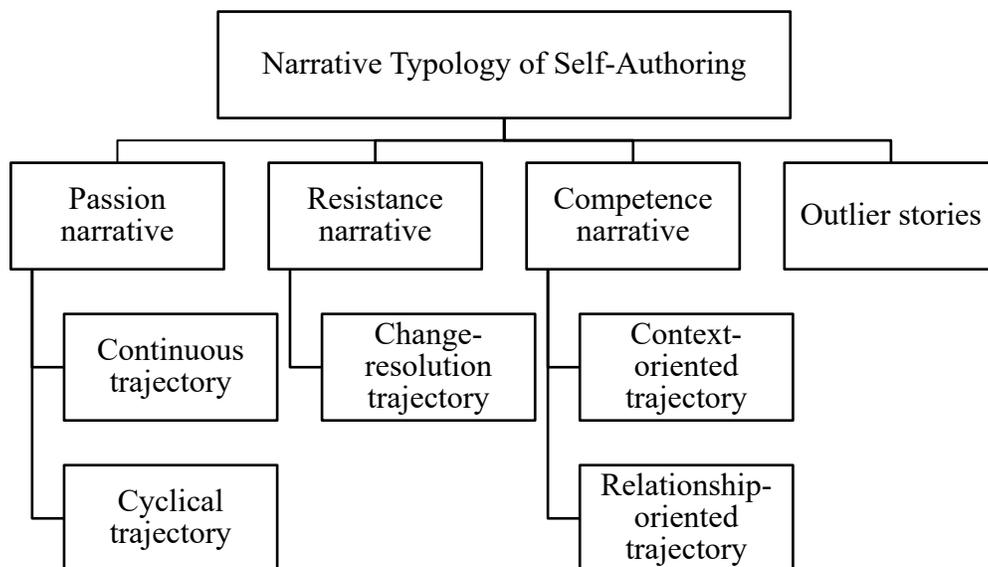
Structural analysis of the focal story was an in-depth examination of the telling of the story (i.e., how the story was told). Structural analysis happened at both horizontal and vertical level. The horizontal structure referred to the plotline of the story, which indicated the chronological sequence of events. In this regard, I used William Labov's (1984) classic stages of narrative construction (i.e., abstract, orientation, complicating event, resolution, evaluation, and coda) to guide my analysis of story structure. This step helped me to familiarize myself with how the narrated events unfolded over time, the narrative arches of the story (e.g., ups and downs, climax, turning points), and how the storyteller made meaning of the events by telling his/her story in this way. Vertical structures are elements that give depth to the story, which distinguish story from other forms of narration. Frank (2010, 2012) introduced several vertical structures in his discussion of the capacities of story, including characters, trouble, point of view, suspense, and imagination. In my analysis, I paid particularly attention to "character moments". Character moments represented the teller's character in the story and "the point" they wanted to make

about their life through sharing the story. Those moments came to me through my deep engagement with the story: they were the teller's words that "stuck" with me after I left the story and every time I came back to it they afforded equal if not greater vocal resonance. Examples of character moments included a point the teller made about their life or an important aspect of their becoming self, a use of metaphor that described a dilemma they faced, or a key phrase that conveyed their struggle at that moment of life. I felt that those words powerfully showcased their self-authoring voices. Analysis of both the horizontal and vertical structures of the story provided rich information on how experiences were constructed in Chinese undergraduate participants' stories and how their narrative reconstruction provoked self-authoring meaning making. Structural analysis informed the development of individual-specific narrative trajectories of self-authoring.

Although my analysis tried to include as many narrated experiences as possible, it should be noted that it was not practical to include all of them from the interview for detailed analysis. Participants' meaning making of isolated, peripheral experiences might be excluded for close analysis (e.g., resolving a conflict with a roommate on a sanitary issue) given the purpose of my study. My analysis mainly focused on focal stories that demonstrated in-depth self-awareness and self-discovery and reflective thinking about growth during university. The selection was not "unaccountably intuitive" (Frank, 2012, p.10): I made a judgement based on what I learned through attentive listening to the stories and member reflections with my participants. But I want to acknowledge this potential bias embedded in my selection of stories. Guided by the principle of unfinalizability of dialogical analysis, I also acknowledge each participant has an independent, well-rounded life outside the story I introduced in my study and I respect their capacity to continue to change and grow beyond the story they shared at that moment of their lives.

**Cross-Case Analysis: Building a Narrative Typology.** At the phase of cross-case analysis, I aimed to build a narrative typology to represent Chinese undergraduate students’ self-authoring processes. The building of the narrative typology was guided by the principle of dialogical narrative typology explained by Frank: “Elaboration of types of narratives allows recognizing the uniqueness of each individual *story*, while at the same time understanding how individuals do not make up stories by themselves” (2010, p. 119, emphasis original). The narrative typology of my study has two levels (see Figure 3.2: Narrative Typology of Self-Authoring). The first level is the narrative types of self-authoring, which illustrated common themes in Chinese undergraduate students’ meaning making of their pivotal experience and growth in university. The second level is the narrative trajectories under each narrative type. The narrative trajectories revealed how participants’ sociocultural contexts shaped their specific trajectory of self-authoring in relation to the narrative type. I explain my processes of developing narrative types and trajectories below (see Figure 3.2).

**Figure 3.2 Narrative Typology of Self-Authoring**



The development of narrative types began with thematic groupings of the stories. As my analysis deepened, three dominant themes emerged from the stories: *passion*, *resistance*, and *competence*. Each theme represented a persisting pattern of participants' narrative (re)construction of their pivotal experiences, which showcased salient traces of self-authoring meaning making. Accordingly, three narrative types were identified: the passion narrative, the resistance narrative, and the competence narrative. Within each narrative type, variations existed among individual narrative trajectories. For example, two stories in the passion narrative could be both about pursuing an academic field of interest, but how the pursuit looked like and what it meant for the individual's self-authoring depends on the individual's situated context. Therefore, under each narrative type, I further elaborated distinctive narrative trajectories among individual stories to capture the kinds of narrative curves in that type. Exploring these narrative trajectories led to more fine-grained understanding of how sociocultural contexts shaped individual trajectories of self-authoring. There were two stories that did not fall into any of the types. I specified them as "outlier" stories, which will be also discussed in the next chapter.

Grounded in the principle of unfinalizability, the narrative types are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. I followed Frank's suggestion to elaborate the narrative types as different threads in the fabric of an individual's story (Frank, 2010). An individual might draw on different aspects of all the three narrative types (and other types yet to be discovered) given their situated context and relationship. The narrative typology remained open and unfinalized. The narrative typology I built in my study showcased what kinds of stories Chinese undergraduate students told to author their voice. It hence could serve as a starting point for future narrative inquiry of self-authoring. In this regard, the typology itself becomes another

voice of the polyphony, connecting stories in new ways and continuing to respond to new stories (Frank, 2010).

### **3.4 Reflexivity**

Qualitative researchers have agreed that reflexivity is among the primary indicators for quality control in qualitative research (Berger, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Tracy, 2010).

Although I kept this section separate, as I indicated at the beginning of this chapter, I embedded reflexive practices throughout my writing. I explained how my inquiry journey revolved around both theory and methodology: how my positionality shifted throughout my learning, how I made each choice, and why making that choice was a coherent fit for my study. Therefore, what in this section, I add forms of reflexivity that have not been explicitly expressed earlier, but are important to ensuring the quality of my study.

Practicing reflexivity requires us to critically examine and be transparent about how our personal beliefs, values, identities, social locations, and cultural background impact the choices we make in our inquiry (Berger, 2015; Tracy, 2010). My own experience of self-authoring in my university years transformed how I viewed myself as a person and shaped my life path of becoming an education researcher. Growing up in the highly competitive Chinese academic culture, I never felt like I had a story before university, primarily because I was overwhelmingly preoccupied with being a hard-working student and achieving well in exams that determined my future. Entering university was a turning point as, for the first time in my life, I had opportunities to pursue a field of passion and discover aspects of myself through successes, hardships, and important life decisions (e.g., pursuing a graduate degree abroad). The big question that I asked throughout my young adulthood were the questions that drove my study: Who am I and who do I want to become? What do I want for my life? When I encountered the theory of self-authorship

in my graduate study, I found it captured the process I went through to reconstruct my own story. Hence, I proposed this thesis study to explore how self-authoring was expressed in Chinese undergraduate students' stories. My choices of theoretical framework and methodology were informed by my own and my participants' non-western background, our shared cultural experiences in the Chinese educational system, and my knowledge and experience of the broader Chinese social context at large.

Furthermore, reflexivity foregrounds dialogical research. Doing dialogical research demands the researcher to constantly reflect on how the narrative resources to which we have access limit our ability to understand the stories we hear. Perhaps more importantly, how the stories we hear call on us to shift our horizons:

The hermeneutic commitment is to ask not only what the story means within my horizons, but also how far I can understand what it means within the horizons of the storyteller and other listeners. Perhaps most important: how does the story call on me to shift my horizons? A hermeneutic interpretation presupposes the interpreter's personal transformation but then redefines the personal within the dialogical. (Frank, 2010, p. 97)

Throughout my inquiry process, I experienced several horizon-shifting moments. The first time I shifted my horizon was when I reconceptualized the framework of self-authorship through Sociocultural theory. Though reading Vygotsky and Bakhtin's work, I began to consider other possible narratives about self-authorship beyond the story told by constructivist psychologists. I reconstructed my own narrative script about self-authorship through integrating sociocultural and dialogical perspectives. The reconstructed narrative (i.e., the sociocultural framing of self-authoring) allowed me to explore alternative language to better represent self-authoring in my participants' stories.

Meanwhile, I also began my search for approaches that empower stories and create space for diverse ways of self-authoring. Learning about dialogical narrative inquiry thus led to another horizon-shifting moment. DNA expanded my vision of how different stories about self-authoring can be studied and retold in ways that balance analysis and dialogue (i.e., revealing the narrative resources the teller uses to construct stories while leaving the story unfinalized).

Another incident of horizon shifting happened when I encountered two participants' stories that did not fully emerge in our interviews. Despite my relentless efforts to "get" the story by altering interview tactics, both of them seemed to struggle with thinking about "pivotal" growth they had in university. One participant considered her university life "dull" and lacking in transformative experiences (e.g., she told me before the focal interview, "I can do the interview, but I am afraid I don't have anything interesting for you."). The other participant had a university experience she considered important (e.g., participating in a professional training program), but she did not perceive personal growth as an integral part of the experience. At first, I was inclined to discard such stories as "garbage data" (a term used by a graduate colleague of mine). As I read more about DNA, I came across a line that wrote "a life that is not fully narratable is vulnerable to devaluation" (Frank, 2010, p. 75). I began to question how my own views, judgement, and biases may cause me to show preference for certain familiar stories while disregarding others as not worthy of retelling. Both participants attended the Canadian university, whereas I completed my undergraduate study in China. I therefore found myself an outsider to their experience, even though we shared similar cultural background and all had received education in both countries. Perhaps they had a well-lived story beyond my current horizon. I asked how their stories called on me to shift my horizons so that I could better understand them. If I could not yet understand what their stories meant within their horizon, at

least I could give them a voice in the dialogue. I decided to include the two stories as part of my analysis and use them to reflect on my own limited perspective. This reflection will be elaborated in the results chapter.

### **3.5 Rigor**

According to Tracy (2010), research rigor is marked by “a rich complexity of abundance” in terms of theoretical constructs, data sources, contexts, and samples (p. 841). Theoretically, I built a solid grounding for my research through the integration of self-authorship theory and the sociocultural framework. Incorporating the sociocultural approach in my study addressed limitations of the constructivist and individualistic theorizing that has characterized research on self-authorship to date. Moreover, this approach generated culturally meaningful perspectives on the nature and processes of self-authoring in Chinese undergraduate students’ experiences. Methodologically, constructionist narrative inquiry coheres with the sociocultural framework that informs this study. Particularly, DNA effectively implemented theoretical principles I proposed in the sociocultural framing of self-authoring. Furthermore, dialogical narrative practices offered alternative representations of diverse trajectories self-authoring and novel insights on how these trajectories responded to context.

In terms of the research context and samples, East Asian contexts have not yet been sufficiently studied in the body of research on self-authorship (Abes & Hernández, 2016). Related to but quite distinct from the western world, the Chinese context offered unique theoretical insights in relation to culturally specific meanings and expressions of self-authoring. The results of this study thus can inform culturally inclusive pedagogical approaches aimed at promoting self-authoring experiences.

High-quality data sources and data analyses should be ensured to provide for and substantiate meaningful and significant claims in qualitative research (Tracy, 2010). In terms of the quality of data sources, stories of Chinese university students, generated new and unique data distinct from the existing data collected from North American contexts. The narrative approach I chose for my study was also well-suited for capturing the wholeness of participants' experiences as well as complexity in their meaning making of these experiences (Abes & Jones, 2004). The interview arrangement ensured sufficient rapport building that was instrumental to productive conversations. A combination of data collection methods of interviews and reflective exercises provided participants with layered support that scaffolded in-depth self-reflection and rich narrative accounts. Furthermore, methodological coherence was also addressed through using appropriate data analysis method to answer my research questions. Dialogical narrative analysis empowered stories by preserving contextual complexity and rich details in participants' stories instead of breaking them into dissected categories. The grounded-up analysis I adopted focused on how self-authoring was experienced and expressed in my participants' narrative reconstruction. Therefore, the analysis provided rich insights on the sociocultural narrative resources that shaped participants' stories, which further led to the development of different narrative types and trajectories of self-authoring. The narrative typology I built from the stories offered a novel perspective on the dialogical representation of participants' voice in self-authorship research.

## Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, I present my research findings through Chinese undergraduate students' stories to explore my three research questions:

- 1) What stories do Chinese undergraduate students tell about their important university experiences? How do they make meaning of the experiences in the story?
- 2) What kinds of narrative types and trajectories are represented in their stories?
- 3) What do the narrative types and trajectories reveal about their self-authoring processes?

I organize Chinese students' stories into three major narrative types. They are the passion narrative, the resistance narrative, and the competence narrative. The narrative types illustrate common themes in Chinese students' stories about their important university experiences. Within each narrative type, I further specify narrative trajectories to demonstrate how these themes were represented across the beginning, middle, and ending of individual stories. For each narrative trajectory, I present a participant's story in detail to showcase how he/she constructed his/her beliefs, identity, and social relationships through making meaning of pivotal lived experiences. At the end of each story, I use a visual to illustrate how the participant's self-authoring process is represented in their narrative trajectory. I also discuss how their self-authoring process interacts with sociocultural influences in their situated context. Two stories did not fit any of the narrative types above and I struggled to generate a descriptive label to characterize their type and trajectory. I specify them as "outlier" stories and I include my analysis of the two stories at the end of this chapter. I choose to represent participants' stories in this format, rather than organizing them to specifically answer the three research questions, because this organization ensures a holistic representation of participant stories and thus creates space for the stories to

speak for themselves. I will revisit my research questions in the next chapter (the discussion chapter) and provide my answers to each of them by linking my findings to existing literature.

Table 4.1 provides an overview of the narrative types and trajectories I found in my study and their distribution across participants at the Canadian and Chinese universities. In total twelve stories were analyzed to produce the narrative types and trajectories. In my writing of findings, I chose one participant’s story to describe in detail for each narrative trajectory. These stories provided the richest information and demonstrated distinguishing features of the narrative type. To orient readers to the participants and their stories, Table 4.2 offers an overview of those elaborated stories in my following writing of results.

**Table 4.1 The Narrative Typology of Self-Authoring and Distribution of Stories**

Narrative Type	Narrative Trajectory	Number of Stories
Passion Narrative	Continuous trajectory	1 CHN, 1 CAN <sup>1</sup>
	Cyclical trajectory	1 CHN
Resistance Narrative	Change-resolution trajectory	2 CHN
Competence Narrative	Context-oriented trajectory	2 CHN, 1 CAN
	Relationship-oriented trajectory	1 CHN, 1 CAN
“Outlier” Stories		2 CAN

<sup>1</sup> CHN indicates stories from participants attending the Chinese university. CAN indicates stories from participants attending the Canadian university.

**Table 4.2 Overview of Elaborated Participant Stories**

Participant	Gender	University	Narrative type	Narrative trajectory	Story highlights	Character moments
Zhaizhai	Male	Chinese university	Passion narrative	Continuous trajectory	Zhaizhai always wanted to become a scientist since childhood. He consistently pursued his passion in science throughout university.	<p><i>“I always knew I want to become a scientist.”</i></p> <p><i>“I want to be a physicist who holds warmth in his heart.”</i></p>
Xiaoya	Female	Chinese university	Passion narrative	Cyclical trajectory	Xiaoya developed her passion in sociology in high school. Her trajectory was more cyclical due to the challenges she encountered while pursuing her passion, but she thrived through the challenges and eventually, she cycled back to her path of passion with newfound perspectives.	<i>“After I have been tested more than once [by failures and setbacks], the path has become clearer to me.”</i>
Victor	Male	Chinese university	Resistance narrative	Change-resolution trajectory	Victor resisted against a wrong choice of life (i.e., his first program) that did not suit his interest by transferring major to another program. It is through resisting against an undesirable reality that he came to better understand himself as a person (e.g., who he is/is not, likes/dislikes) and what he wants for his life.	<i>“I don’t know what I like, but I do know what I don’t like.”</i>

Amy	Female	Canadian university	Competence narrative	Context-oriented trajectory	Amy negotiated her sense of competence across various decision-making contexts. For each decision, she strategically analyzed her strengths and stretches in relation to contextual demands and chose an option for which she felt in control of her abilities to experience success.	<p><i>“Leverage your strengths and avoid your stretches.”</i></p> <p><i>“Perhaps I should walk a path that I can be good at.”</i></p>
Maomao	Female	Chinese university	Competence narrative	Relationship-oriented trajectory	Maomao expressed her need for competence as she tried to negotiate personal and relational consequences of her future job choice. She experienced struggles in her attempt to balance her individual needs for growth with her family’s expectations.	<i>“It’s not a matter of my own independent choice.”</i>
Lynn	Female	Canadian university	Outlier		Lynn did not identify any of her university experiences as “pivotal” for her personal growth.	<i>“I can do the interviews, but I am afraid I don’t have anything interesting for you.”</i>
Fiona	Female	Canadian university	Outlier		Although Fiona identified one significant university experience, she did not perceive personal growth as an integral part of that experience.	<i>“I understand your point of asking me those questions, but I may not have the answers you want.”</i>

#### 4.1 Passion Narrative

Participants with a passion narrative focused their story on developing their passion in a field of interest. In my study, three participants demonstrated passion narratives. Their passion narratives all revolved around the discovery and development of their intrinsic interest in their respective discipline (i.e., physics, linguistics, and sociology). Their stories began with their curiosity for knowledge sprouting in early life experiences, which shaped their choice of a program of study to pursue in university. They highlighted university experiences and relationships that fostered the growth of their academic passion. Their meaning making heavily emphasized how their academic passion holistically shaped their view of knowledge, personal identity, and social relationships and action. Hence, participants with a passion narrative demonstrated evidence of self-authoring in the process of pursuing and growing their passion in various contexts.

There are two distinct narrative trajectories within the passion narrative. One is the continuous trajectory, and the other is the cyclical trajectory. Participants in the continuous trajectory demonstrated consistency and continuity in developing their passion without disruptions, mainly because they had predominantly positive experiences that nurtured the growth of their passion. Participants in the cyclical trajectory arrived where they are today in their passion pursuit in a more spiral movement, with back-and-forth strides, as they experienced a mixture of successes and failures when experimenting in their field of passion. Here, I first present the continuous trajectory with Zhaizhai's story and then the cyclical trajectory with Xiaoya's story. Based on my retelling of their stories, I then discuss how self-authoring was demonstrated in each story and how the sociocultural context in which the participant was situated was reflected in their individual self-authoring trajectory.

#### 4.1.1 The Continuity Trajectory: Zhaizhai's story

Zhaizhai was a fourth-year Chinese undergraduate student in the physics program at the Chinese university. He described himself as an enthusiast about “anything in the shape of knowledge”. Above all, he claimed physics as his true passion. He expressed keen interest to pursue an academic career in physics science. Zhaizhai seemed to embody many qualities of a successful science student. He is smart, articulate, and highly logical. Even though we came from different academic backgrounds, our conversation was delightful with shared laughter.

Zhaizhai's passion narrative stemmed from his interest in science, which began in childhood and continued to develop throughout university. He associated the growth of his passion in science, particularly physics, mostly with positive experiences and supportive relationships. In Zhaizhai's story, his passion in science was at the center of his meaning making of lived experiences. This central theme of his narrative profoundly shaped his beliefs about knowledge, his emerging identity as a science researcher, and his growing dedication to science education. In this regard, Zhaizhai's passion narrative revealed rich insights about how he authored his own voice. Now I retell Zhaizhai's story.

**Discovering the Passion.** Unlike many others who discovered their passion rather late in their adulthood, Zhaizhai seemed to have found his path early in his life and never drifted away from it ever since. On more than one occasion Zhaizhai expressed he has always been determined about his life path of becoming a scientist: “*I always knew I want to become a scientist*”. In his childhood, when adults asked what he wants to do when he grows up, Zhaizhai dreamed to become a scientist. For Zhaizhai, it seemed more than an impromptu answer to entertain with adult expectations. He really *meant* it. As a child, Zhaizhai seemed to have developed an aptitude for science. Being able to “understand and reveal the law of nature”

fascinated him, though some of the ideas he had about science, as he admitted, seemed “very vague and rudimentary” when he was younger. Nevertheless, his passion for science gave Zhaizhai a sense of purpose and direction since a young age, guiding him to “take every step firmly and steadily along the way.” Throughout his school years, Zhaizhai enjoyed learning about different disciplines in natural science. Eventually, he chose physics as his program of study as he considered it as the most encompassing discipline in the science field:

当时小学当然不知道自己学什么，就想我想当科学家，我想当什么学家呢？想了半天，我想研究宇宙的运行，我要当天文学家！然后又想了半天，我要研究分子原子，后来听人说化学家是研究分子原子，就想我要当化学家！然后大概上了初中之后知道这些东西都是物理可以做的，所以就选择了物理。

*Of course, I didn't really know what I wanted to study in elementary school. But somehow I did know I wanted to become a scientist. "What kind of scientist do I want to be?" I thought about it for a while. At first, I wanted to study the universe and how it works, so I thought I could become an astronomer! As I grew older, I began to think about studying molecules and atoms. People told me chemists study these things, so then I thought I could be a chemist! And then when I got to middle school, I learned that you can study all these cool things through physics, so physics it is.*

**Nurturing the Passion.** Zhaizhai's passion narrative continued to develop new meaning in the university context. University education provided abundant opportunities for Zhaizhai to expand the depth and breadth of his learning about physics. He was deeply engaged with course content, actively participated in scientific research, and became involved in student science communities outside the classroom. Zhaizhai spoke with pride, “*Everything I have done in these four years has never drifted away from physics*”. In terms of academic growth, he achieved a high academic standing throughout university. He also actively competed in university-

national- and international-level physics competitions. His academic achievements granted him a place in a leading national research institute of engineering physics for graduate study. Outside his academic life, Zhaizhai dedicated most of his time and efforts to a science student club and became the club leader in his senior year. He envisioned the mission of the club to be to disseminate high-quality, research-informed science content to the general public. All these rich experiences expanded and enriched Zhazhai's view of his discipline. When reflecting on his university learning about physics and general science as a field, Zhaizhai expressed his attitude toward physics and his belief in "the scientific spirit":

我觉得我应该对物理学是比较敬畏的。就是这个事情，当然跟宗教信仰差别特别大，因为我们知道科学是有一个严谨的自省的体系的，它会自己推翻自己，所以说我觉得对这种东西的信念应该是属于.....就是科学精神，我现在大概的态度就是非常热爱科学精神，虽然我做的可能相对不是特别多，但比较热衷于科学精神的传播。首先是对真理的探寻。然后是基于实证和逻辑的这样一种观点。就是实践是检验是你的唯一标准，然后逻辑是推导真理的，不是唯一途径，但是是重要途径。然后再就是自我质疑，自我反思，自我批驳，就是我们看物理学的发展史，就是从一开始科学的发展，从亚里士多德开始，都是后人不断地批驳前人，但是前人的观点并没有因此就过时或者不重要，但是它是不断的成长的。其实我觉得科学精神主要是这个吧。

*I am in awe of physics, not in the sense of some religious faith, as we know that science has a rigorous system of self-scrutiny; it challenges itself. I believe in the scientific spirit. That's my attitude. I am very devoted to the scientific spirit. Though I am not sure how much I can do, I am very passionate about disseminating the spirit of science to a greater audience ... The scientific spirit first entails a search for truth. Second, it's based on positivism and logic reasoning; that is, practice is the sole criterion for testing truth, and truth derives from logical reasoning, which may not be the only means, but certainly an*

*important one. Third, science questions, scrutinizes, and refutes itself. If we look at the history of physics, it's been like this from the very beginning. Since Aristotle, [scholarly] decedents have been proving the claims made by their predecessors wrong, but this doesn't mean previous claims were outdated or insignificant; they were only constantly evolving. That's my thoughts on the scientific spirit.*

During university, Zhaizhai also built positive relationships with his teachers. Zhaizhai spoke extensively about professors who had a significant impact on his view of physics and a physics scholar. Zhaizhai expressed his wish to become a physics scholar like those professors whom he regarded as role models. In Zhaizhai's eyes, they exhibited not only academic excellence and integrity, but also “high moral standards of a scholar”, reflected in their devotion to teaching:

比如说某老师他上课，真的是生声情并茂，图文兼具，然后把自己对物理的热爱，把自己一生对物理的理解，对自然的那种探寻都交给我们，非常让人震撼。总之可能这四年遇到得很多这样的老师。

*In his class, you see him teaching. His voice is full of passion, complementing his use of visuals and texts. What he presents to us is his exuberant passion for physics, his life-long understanding of the physics world, and his own quest for the truth about nature. They win your respect when you are in their presence. And I've met so many great teachers like him in the past four years.*

Furthermore, Zhaizhai reflected on how the academic culture of the university impacted his emerging identity as a prospective scholar/educator. The Chinese university Zhaizhai attended was once a teacher college before it transformed to a comprehensive, research-intensive university. Until today, the university has maintained its historical mission of educating future teachers. Zhaizhai was particularly drawn to this aspect of the institutional culture, which further

shaped his vision of becoming not only a physics scientist, but also a science educator. This impact stood out in his description of his connection with the university's motto (the university motto encouraged its students to become a teacher with character strength and serve as a role model for others):

当你每次经过校训碑，听过了这些老师他们的故事，我跟他们有些也还挺熟的，经过他们的一些交流，也会有这样的感想……我一直知道我想做一个科研工作者。但是现在我也希望把自己的领域，把科学精神更多的普及给大家，做一个好老师，就做一个好老师。

*When you see the motto on the university monument every time you walk by it, and after you heard so many stories of your professors who embodied these qualities and be in their presence, these thoughts naturally come to you ... I know I always want to become a science researcher, but now I also hope that I could break down the wall of my field, and bring it closer to others, and introduce them to the scientific spirit. [So I want] to be a good teacher, yeah, a good teacher.*

Zhaizhai seemed to trace his special connection with teachers and their stories to the influence of his parents, who were both high school teachers. Zhaizhai admired his father's devotion to teaching and education. He reflected on his father's influence on his enthusiasm about education:

因为我父亲是一个对生活特别有热情的人。他就是对生活特别有热情，所以这个事业特别有热情……他喜欢教学，但是他当时是想当校长，为什么想当校长？是因为他有自己的教育理想，他要去做自己的教育理想。

*Because my father is a person of great passion for life, and a person dedicated to his career. As much as he loved teaching, he wanted to become the school principal. Why? Because he had his own vision for education, and he wanted to take action to realize that vision.*

**Integrating the Passion into a Personal Identity.** At the end of our interview, I invited Zhaizhai to reflect on how these experiences he described shaped who he is currently as a person. His response demonstrated how he integrated his passion for science and education into a coherent personal identity:

我用我竞选十佳大学生的时候说的一句话，就是，我希望自己成为一个就是‘有温度的物理人’，‘过有方向，但不局限的学术生活’。首先我比较热爱学术嘛，所以说我的可能我这辈子生活的主题。这个是主线，是热爱的事业。然后但是[我的生活]只有这个不行，因为只有这个的话，那这不是一个“有温度的人”，这不是一个活生生的人。然后我希望成为一个有教育热情，有科普热情，然后能够去给别人带来温暖的一个人。所以就是有温度的人。一个说的是学术理想，一个是道德理想。  
*I'd like to quote the speech I gave at [a university public speaking event]; I want to be “a physicist who holds warmth in his heart”<sup>2</sup> and “lead a purposeful yet not limited academic life”.<sup>3</sup> First of all, I am passionate about science research, so this will a major theme of my life. This is my thread, a career that I am deeply passionate about, but this shouldn't be the only foci [of my life]. Because if [I] am only about my own academic work, I am not “a person who holds warmth in his heart”; there's nothing human about me. I want to become someone who has a passion for education and a passion for communicating science to the general public, someone who can bring warmth to others.*

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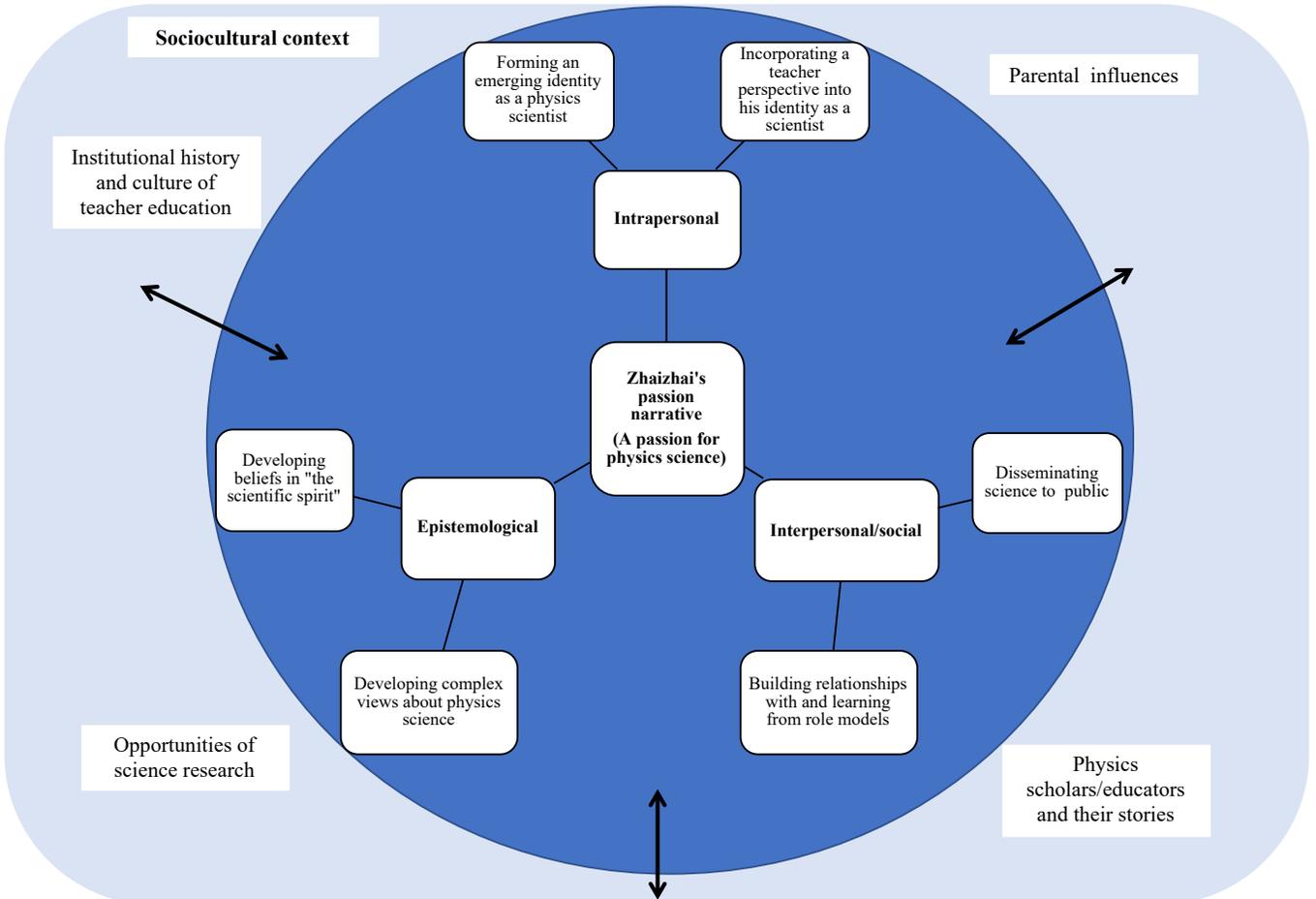
<sup>2</sup> I used a direct translation here because they were Zhaizhai's own words, which were well-phrased in Chinese, though the meaning of the two sentences might not be entirely clear to English native speakers. Therefore, I provided further explanation here. By “*a physicist who holds warmth in his heart*”, Zhaizhai spoke to the fact that scientists might appear to people distant, cold, authoritative figures who talk about abstract knowledge in jargon. The meaning of “holding warmth” in his words referred to being approachable, willing to share his knowledge with others, and passionate about science education.

<sup>3</sup> This sentence (“*lead a purposeful yet not limited academic life.*”) expressed Zhaizhai's vision of an academic career in science. He wants to guide his research with a sense of purpose and be devoted to his scholarly work. Meanwhile, he wants to explore various interests outside his academic life to holistically develop himself as a person. Hence his life is not limited to the academic component.

*This is what I mean by “a person who holds warmth in his heart”. Those words expressed both my academic aspiration and a moral vision of my career.*

**Representing Zhaizhai’s Self-Authoring.** Zhaizhai’s passion narrative reveals a continuity trajectory. It demonstrated a continual process of pursuing and developing his passion, from the discovery of his passion at an early age, to nurturing the growth of his passion in university, and to integrating the passion into a deep sense of personal identity. I represented Zhaizhai’s passion narrative and its connection to self-authorship in Figure 4.1.

**Figure 4.1 Zhaizhai's Passion Narrative and Connections to Self-Authorship**



Zhaizhai's narrative centers his passion for physics sciences. Figure 4.1 demonstrates how his passion narrative holistically shaped and further developed aspects along the three dimensions of self-authorship (i.e., epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal). In the epistemological domain, Zhaizhai developed a more complex and systematic view of physics science as a field and a more rational attitude toward his discipline. This was evident in his description of the purpose and nature of physics science (e.g., "*Science questions, scrutinizes, and refutes itself.*"). He also acquired an in-depth understanding of "the scientific spirit", which captured his abstract and critical thinking about the epistemological structure of his discipline (e.g., "*The scientific spirit first entails a search for truth. It's based on positivism and logic reasoning.*"). In terms of intrapersonal growth, Zhaizhai elaborated how his passion for physics shaped his vision to become a physics scientist and the kind of scientist he wanted to be (i.e., a physicist who is devoted to science education). In terms of interpersonal development, research on self-authorship has expanded the interpersonal dimension to include not only how individuals construct specific relationships, but also how they engage in social action (Hernández, 2012). Zhaizhai's passion narrative showcased how he engaged in mature relationships with his mentors and how these positive relationships he built over the course of his college further developed his beliefs in physics science and physics education. His passion for both science and education internationally motivated him to actively participate in science dissemination for the public good.

Figure 4.1 also illustrated how the sociocultural context interacted with Zhaizhai's self-authoring process. The contextual influences that Zhaizhai referred to in his story (e.g., the institutional history of teacher education, the academic environment that encouraged students' engagement in science research, role-model professors, parental influences) were mostly positive opportunities and nurturing relationships that furthered his engagement with his field of passion.

In Zhaizhai's story, his own voice echoed many voices of others who had significant on his growth as a science student. He recreated sociocultural narrative resources in his situated context (e.g., role-model stories, the university's motto) to develop his own passion narrative.

#### **4.1.2 The Cyclical Trajectory: Xiaoya's Story**

Unlike the undisturbed continuity and transparent clarity expressed in Zhaizhai's passion narrative, Xiaoya did not see her journey to her true passion as an apparent, effortless choice, but rather the opposite: it appeared to be a mixture of major setbacks, lost moments, and winding detours. Xiaoya was a fourth-year Chinese undergraduate student in the program of education at the Chinese university. Xiaoya's parents were both college graduates of a prestigious Chinese university. Her father furthered his study and obtained a PhD degree in the United States and became an international banker. Her mother held a master's degree and worked as a professional Russian translator. Raised in this elite family in the capital city, Beijing, Xiaoya was given high hopes for her education. Her mother's unrealized "grand dream" to study at Peking University (the Chinese Harvard) was passed down to Xiaoya since she was a young child. Xiaoya appeared to me as a brilliant and diligent student. She expressed a keen interest in social sciences, particularly sociology. Her interest in sociology burgeoned during her time in high school through her extra-curricular activities. The rejection from the sociology program of her dream university, however, drove her into an unexpected path. Xiaoya's story showcased how she made meaning of her experiences along this path and eventually found her way back to her passion for sociology with new-found light.

**Discovering the Passion.** Xiaoya discovered her interest in sociology through her involvement in a student journalism club during high school. Here, she had the opportunity to participate in first-hand social investigations. For example, while working for the school's

newspaper, she interviewed a group of senior craftsmen of Chinese traditional arts and wrote a journal article on intangible cultural heritage. Her hard work as a student journalist brought her to Milan, Italy, where she reported on the World Expo.

Xiaoya directly benefited from the educational transformation of her high school. The school used to be highly authoritative and restrictive, but during her time, the principal was invested to support student's autonomy through extracurricular activities. Therefore, Xiaoya enjoyed the luxury of dedicating half of her time at school to work for the journalism club and the school's newspaper<sup>4</sup>. She expressed an appreciative attitude toward these early opportunities before university:

就是[学校改革]像实验一样，鼓励我们办社团，我社团活动参加得很多，我参加那个叫是[校园报社名称]，它会有辅导和直接管理的这种老师，然后会有一些学新闻的学长学姐来学校进行指导，特别好，所以当时抓住了这个机会。

*It was like an experiment. They encouraged us to run student clubs. I participated in many. [Name of the school's newspaper] was one of them. We were very fortunate to have teachers who could mentor us and help with managing the newspaper. We even had some alums who studied journalism came to share their experiences and advice, which was incredible! So I took advantage of this opportunity.*

These experiences planted the seed for her intrinsic interest in subjects such as sociology that involved components of experiential learning and social inquiry:

我感觉这种经历是让我感觉是我喜欢的，我觉得喜欢去学习这些，去做一些调查。

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<sup>4</sup> This rate of extracurricular time was exceptionally rare given the larger educational context in China. Students dedicate most of their time to academic work.

*I think I liked these experiences. I liked learning about these issues and doing this type of social study.*

**A Passion Pursuit of Ups and Downs.** A major setback in “Gao Kao” (i.e., The Chinese University Entrance Examination) pitched her passion pursuit into disarray. With high expectations from her family, Xiaoya applied for the sociology undergraduate program at Peking University, but she was then rejected as her standardized test score was not high enough in the examination to be accepted into the university. The rejection struck her like a nightmare:

当时感觉就是很挫败，第一是感觉自己不如父母。

*I was very frustrated and pretty much defeated. My first thought was I wasn't as good as my parents.*

At home, she faced the overwhelming disappointment from not only her parents, but also from members in her extended family, accumulating to “a total despair of herself”. Furthermore, Xiaoya interpreted the rejection as being “turned down” by her true passion and considered herself “not good enough” for studying sociology:

因为当时我自己特别想学社会学，然后当时就没有没过嘛，就觉得这个学科好像我很喜欢，但是人家好像不太认可我那个感觉，各方面都不太顺畅那种感觉。

*I was so determined about studying sociology, but then I was rejected, so it felt like, I had confessed my love for sociology, but she turned me down. It just didn't work out at that time.*

After the rejection, Xiaoya came to the program of education at the Chinese university (the research site of this study) with a saddened heart filled with disappointment and self-doubts. Even though she didn't think the education program at the university was a bad choice, she couldn't easily walk away from the feeling of failure. She described her emotional state in the first year of university as “closing up” and “feeling lost”. She didn't feel the excitement about

university life as many other freshmen did. Demoralized, she was unmotivated to adapt to life at university:

因为刚我刚来[这所大学]的时候也很自闭，就是也不愿意跟大家去那么 social，也不愿意去结交新朋友，就是不太积极。就感觉大家刚进一个新学校，应该比较乐于去探索这些事情了，然后我还没有那种没有那种热情，就感觉提不起劲头来。后来也发现，其实北大也没有那么重要，这件事情就是它只是一个 title，但是当时转不过弯来，还是有点自暴自弃的感觉。

*I closed myself up when coming to [this university]. I didn't want to socialize with others, to make new friends. I wasn't active at all. Other students were excited to explore new things when they first came to the university, but I just couldn't find that excitement in me. I was upset and disheartened. I gradually came to realize later that maybe attending Peking university doesn't really matter as much as I thought it would be. It's just a title, but I couldn't wrap my head around it at that that time, so I was feeling like giving up on myself.*

The only attempt Xiaoya made to lift her spirits was to get involved in a student club. Because of her positive experience in the journalism club in high school, she chose to join the university's newspaper. Here she had opportunities to conduct more sophisticated and rigorous field investigations and engaged in in-depth, non-fictional writing, which attracted her interest in high school. Xiaoya shared two pivotal experiences she had when working for the university's newspaper. The first experience was winning a provincial-level golden medal for her team's report on the backstage life of the university's dining staff. This fruit came from her hard work. For more than two months, Xiaoya and her team had to enter the field site at 2 AM to observe the backstage life of the university's dining staff, where everyday meals were prepared for over 20,000 students. In these extended hours, they observed activities of the kitchen crew and

interviewed kitchen staff, including chefs, managers, and serving members. She talked about how shocked she was when she saw their living conditions:

他们住的是地下室，连插座都没有，没有空调，当时没有暖，就暖器很差、特别冷。他们必须要在食堂里头，趁着3点到5点就没有学生吃饭，那个时间段在那插着那个插头。反正就居住条件非常的差。

*They lived in a basement, no electricity outlets, no air conditioners. And the heating was really bad. It was so cold down there. They could only charge [their phones] using the outlets in the dining hall from 3 to 5 PM, when there were no students. The living conditions was horrifying.*

Entering the field was a significant learning experience for Xiaoya. She overcame fears of interacting with strangers in an unfamiliar context and learned strategies to conduct social investigations:

我学到了如何进入现场，我要看什么、去问什么。所以当时就感觉自己一下从一个小儿科的一个学生那种类似，就是真的到了一个调查记者这种感觉。

*I learned how to enter a field site – what to see and what to ask. And I grew so much through that experience. In that moment, I felt like I am no longer a student anymore, but a real investigative journalist.*

This investigation also raised Xiaoya's awareness about social inequality. She deepened her inquiry about inequality in the second field experience she shared. This time she turned to the phenomenon of the "urban village" – a migrant enclave in a central urban area characterized by high density and overcrowding. She noticed that a crowded area near the university was one of the biggest urban villages in Beijing. She decided to conduct a field investigation of the urban village:

它是一个城中村。所以那里的人特别的多，然后里面真的是破败不堪，就是个贫民窟，我们去采访那。我们几个人，其实一开始很害怕，因为那块挺乱的，然后后来发现很多，那还有一个小学，有一个幼儿园，有很多孩子，孩子很愿意跟我们交流，就觉得我们很新奇，我们就跟这些孩子先进建立的这种友好关系，他们进而又采访他们的妈妈等等。

*It was an urban village. It was very crowded and extremely decaying, like a total slum.*

*We went for some interviews. We were afraid at first, for it was very chaotic. There was an elementary school and a kindergarten with many children. These children liked to talk to us. They were curious. We tried to make friends with them and then we had a chance to interview their moms.*

This time, her curiosity pushed her further than a superficial portrait of the urban village. She was not completely satisfied by just depicting what happened:

反正进入到现场是给我很大震撼的，我没有想到离我们这么近的一个地方，有一个那种混乱不堪，居住条件极其差的一个地方。反正就是那一次采访的时候，我是觉得，我特别想明白这是为什么。我并不是满足于它是发生了什么，我就想搞清楚它是为什么，城中村到底是怎么回事？

*Entering in that field site was such an eye-opening, mind-blowing experience. I could never imagine such a horrible, chaotic living area, just outside the university. It was from the interviews last time I began to think about why. I was not satisfied by just knowing what happened. I wanted to find out why this happened: how on earth did the village form and become like this?*

Xiaoya reflected on her growth through the two pivotal experiences she shared:

就是我一开始有点自闭。就是我很怀疑我自己能不能融入大学生活，或者说我不太想融入大学生活。我觉得这两次经历起码让我认识了很多到现在也是很好朋友的那种志同道合的人。然后，我发现我真的喜欢去探索这样的事情。而且我发现就是

那种普通的、事实性的描述，好像并不能满足我的好奇。我真的是很想去理解，去阐释，去追问后面的那个为什么。尤其是城中村那次。对，城中村那次，它不管是哪个角度去切入它，你都觉得它是不足的，自己不管你是一个多么观察细致的一个调查记者，你只写一个那种白描层面的，永远是不足的。它一定要去从一个更宏大的，更理论支撑的这么一个视角去看它，我觉得它是充分的。

*I closed myself up when beginning university. I had doubts if I could ever adapt to life at university. Or perhaps I didn't want to be a part of that life. But through these two experiences, at least, I met and became friends with likeminded people who shared the same interest with me. I also realized that I am truly passionate about exploring and investigating this kind of social issues. And I came to know that my curiosity wasn't satisfied by only a portrait of what is or the description of certain facts. I really do want to understand, to explain, to pursue the 'why' behind the phenomenon, especially thinking about the time when I was investigating the urban village. No matter which aspect you chose to depict, it all seemed somewhat insufficient. No matter how observant a journalist you are, however exhaustive you try to be, it still stays at the level of a superficial description of what happened. You have to see it from a macro, more theoretically informed perspective. Then you can say it's sufficient.*

The two experiences Xiaoya described offered her alternative opportunities to re-engage with her passion for field investigation and social inquiry through real-world experiences, other than studying it through a formal program of study. The successes she gained (e.g., the prize-winning report) helped her rediscover her confidence in pursuing her passion. Evident in her reflection above, her experiential learning in the field brought her fresh perspectives and a more fine-grained understanding of the purpose of and approaches to social inquiry.

With the newfound confidence and perspective, Xiaoya expanded her exploration in her field of passion. Xiaoya invested more deliberate efforts into sociological research. She led one undergraduate research project and employed a sociological lens to study school bullying. She used all her elective credits for sociology courses. She chose to challenge herself by writing term papers on topics in sociology when studying as an exchange student in Hong Kong and the UK.

Despite her keen interest in sociology and the variety of rich experiences that deepened her engagement with the discipline, the shadow of the rejection seemed to have an enduring effect on her confidence to pursue sociology. This effect rose to the surface when Xiaoya applied for the sociology master's program of her "dream school" in the UK. Xiaoya shared with me her struggles when writing her personal statement for the sociology master's program:

三个月，我文书写不出来一个字，我不知道我说什么，甚至我一想到陈述我自己，我就觉得很痛苦，我有什么可说的，我怎么说我都很自卑。

*For three months, I couldn't write a word. I didn't know what to say about myself, to the extent that whenever I tried to write the personal statement, I found myself in total agony.*

*What do I have to say about myself? Whatever words I chose, I was devaluing myself."*

Frustrated and anxious, Xiaoya visited a therapist and in their last session, they performed a therapeutic sand play. In her sand play model, Xiaoya chose to divide the rectangular sand tray into two separate spaces by a river in the diagonal direction. She put a bridge above the river. On the upper right side, she put a golden tower, surrounded by flowers and crystal-like gems, as well as some thistle and thrones that symbolized hardships. She put a human-shaped doll on the bridge, indicating where she was at that moment. However, the bridge wasn't pointing at the tower. The therapist made one slight change – she turned the bridge to face directly at the tower. Reflecting on that moment, Xiaoya explained how it helped her understand where her self-doubts stemmed from:

那一瞬间对我来说是非常启发式的，就是我为什么一直写不出来呢？我就好像在这儿，我对着的是我想申请的学校，我一直是犹豫不决，不敢去面对它。然后她把我这个一转过来，我就觉得好像撬动了一些什么东西。她认为我是总觉得[申请梦校的社会学研究生]承载了很多意义，就好像是翻身仗一样，好像这是第二次试探吧。当时[她申请的研究生院]是我申的唯一一个社会学专业，其他两个申请的项目都是教育学。这个是真的出格的，而且是我高中就真的很想学社会学。就好像跟这个事情已经挑战一次，失败了，这是第二次挑战，要再失败，就真的我承受不了这个打击了就觉得。所以就是心理负担很重。

*This moment was extremely inspiring. Why wasn't I able to write that personal statement? As it was like I was on the bridge, facing my dream school, but I was so hesitant and indecisive. Somehow, I couldn't face it. The moment she turned the bridge lifted something for me. She interpreted as it [applying to the sociology program of her dream school] carrying so much meaning for me, like a counter-battle that I am determined to win, like me being tested for the second time. It is the only sociology program that I applied for. The other two programs I applied are both in education. So I am really going above and beyond here, but deep down, it's something I never ever stopped thinking about since high school. I already took that chance once and I failed. And this is my second try, if I failed again, I seriously couldn't take it. I was overthinking it too much.*

Xiaoya described writing her personal statement as “carving out the shape of self”.

Xiaoya metaphorically described this process as “taking stock of the treasures in your warehouse”. To write the statement, she needed to reflect, organize and polish her relevant university experiences in order to present them to “guests who are invited to visit your warehouse”. She reflected on how her mindset evolved from the initial self-devaluation to creating a fair and authentic self-expression in the writing process:

我当时纠结一个问题，就是我跟[她申请的研究生院]之间是不是应该我去奉承它的那种感觉，就是我要完全按照它的标准去呈现我，但是那可能不是我，然后如果我完全呈现我，它可能就觉得不符合它的录取标准，就怎么平衡这个事情。后来有一个[在她申请的研究生院读书的]师姐，她跟我说，其实国外的大学想看的自我陈述是一种不卑不亢的态度，就是你给很大方的向她展示你是什么样的，他想要的不仅仅是你们项目跟我合适，而且你们项目还需要我，就比较平等的交流的，这种态度。我当时我觉得很有启发，因为我一直我当时很急于去奉承它了，觉得我教育的背景不够，我就抛却了顾虑杂念和顾虑，开始一段一段写。

*At first, I was struggling with if I needed to comply to their standards, to express myself in a way that aligns with their admission criteria, but that wasn't really me. If I presented myself as only who I think I am, perhaps it wouldn't be what they want. I was having a hard time finding that fine balance. One of the alumni who already studied at [the graduate school] shared with me that the admission committee overseas wanted to see the attitude of bù bēi bù kàng (a Chinese idiom, meaning an attitude of self-affirming without degrading oneself or being overly arrogant) – that is, to proudly and fairly present yourself as who you are. They want not only to see how their program fits your own goals and interests, but also would like to know what they need from you. The conversation should be like between two equals. I was very inspired, and I realized I was trying too hard to please them while downplaying my background in education, so that moment I decided to get rid of all of my concerns and hesitations and just start writing, paragraph by paragraph.*

Before, the fact that she had taken the unintended path (i.e., studying education as her major) worried Xiaoya, because she was unsure whether her disciplinary background would be a good fit for the master's program in sociology. Therefore, the realization Xiaoya described above empowered her to recreate what she called a “fair self-expression” and to claim her own story.

**Reconnecting to the Passion.** Writing the personal statement invited Xiaoya to re-engage and reconstruct her own passion narrative. I presented below quotes from Xiaoya's personal statement that represented her passion narrative in her own words. In her personal statement, she first described how her interest in sociology, particularly in social inequalities and social rights advocacy for marginalized populations, stemmed from field investigations of the life of laborers in urban villages:

*My great interest and strong aspiration in sociology stem from my concern about the inequalities suffered by the underclass of society. Since middle school, I have been serving as a volunteer teacher of the children of migrant workers in rural-urban fringe for five years. Entering into [the Chinese university], I joined a student press corps, dedicating to field investigations on the living status of labourers in cities. I greatly expanded my understanding of their wandering life experience and marginalised social rights. Such realisation was still superficial, and it didn't satisfy my desire to understand society from a theoretical perspective.*

Through her coursework, she deepened her understanding of these social issues through sociological constructs, for instance, "Modernity", which further solidified her determination to become a "social science researcher":

*It was the class of Sociology in my sophomore year that brought me deep inspiration and made me realize that it could help me to solve lots of social issues. My exploration and reflection on Modernity deepened my enthusiasm in this field ... For me, modernity, an essential way for Sociology to "scan" all aspects of social inequality, is what I am most concerned. We should understand how Modernity impacts the social inequalities and propose solutions to them. I intend to raise the awareness of the fate of the underclass*

*group and strive to change this unfair status quo these in my subsequent study. Therefore, among the extensive study and practice of sociological theories, I determined my mind to become a social science researcher.*

Next, she interweaved sociological perspectives that inspired her critical reflection with multiple threads of her research related to children of marginalized groups. Her statement convincingly demonstrated the coherent interconnection between her theoretical learning in sociology and its application in education research and practices. Here I provided an example, which was Xiaoya's description of her field investigations introduced earlier:

*I formed the problem consciousness in the Reproduction of Inequality. The field investigation and internship experience drew my attention to the children of migrant workers living in urban villages. When I was an investigative reporter, I went to the biggest urban villages in Beijing to conduct a field investigation for a month. The lack of social and cultural capital caused the children living here to lose the opportunity of upward social mobility. The article I published at school journal won the gold award of non-fiction writing for college students in the capital competition.*

Toward the end of her personal statement, Xiaoya expressed how her passion in sociology shaped her perspective of knowledge and ways of thinking, and her vision of her passion pursuit:

*To me, sociology is a passion that continually drives me to question everything that is relevant to people and society ... After finishing my graduate study, I will continue to explore the path of social inequality and pursue my PhD in sociology. I will concern with social inequality with a critical spirit and try endeavour to speak truth to power from a professional perspective of sociology.*

Looking back on her experience of writing the personal statement, Xiaoya expressed:

其实在写完 PS 最后一个字的时候，我觉得对我来说是一种“超越”。那一瞬间真是一种超越，就是我完成了一个我觉得无法完成的事情，不管申上还是不申上，我都无所谓了，我完成了一个自我的实现。

*When I finished with the last word in my personal statement, for me, that was a moment of self-transformation. I accomplished something I wouldn't think I will be able to accomplish. It doesn't really matter if I can get in or not. I have achieved a state of self-actualization.*

Toward the end of our conversation, as I noticed most of the experiences Xiaoya shared evolved around her interest and exploration in sociology, I invited her to share whether she knew this was her path from the beginning, or she gradually came to that realization. Here is Xiaoya's reflection:

是慢慢清晰了，我一开始都放弃这个事情了。就后来是我知道我喜欢她，我可以去学，可以当成一个爱好，可以当成一种前置课里的选择，但是我们真的没有想过就是完全放弃教育去学社会学，也真的是受到我好朋友的鼓励，她一直很鼓励我，她就说去学一个自己真正喜欢的学科，人都是不一样的，会发光，而且我从她身上看到了这一点，真的人是不一样的。我其实对教育不是不喜欢，我很喜欢教育，要不然我不会选这个专业，然后但是我总是没有感觉到那种 passion，但是在学社会学的时候，我面临的挑战教育学多多了，也是面临挫折比它多多了，但是我没有觉得我被打倒，没有觉得我被因此而不喜欢她，所以我觉得好像试炼过一次两次，才越来越清晰这个事情。

*It's a gradual realization. In fact, I had already given it up at first. Later on, I knew I like it and I could perhaps study it, but only as a side interest, as an elective, and I never thought I could give up education entirely to pursue sociology. I was also encouraged by*

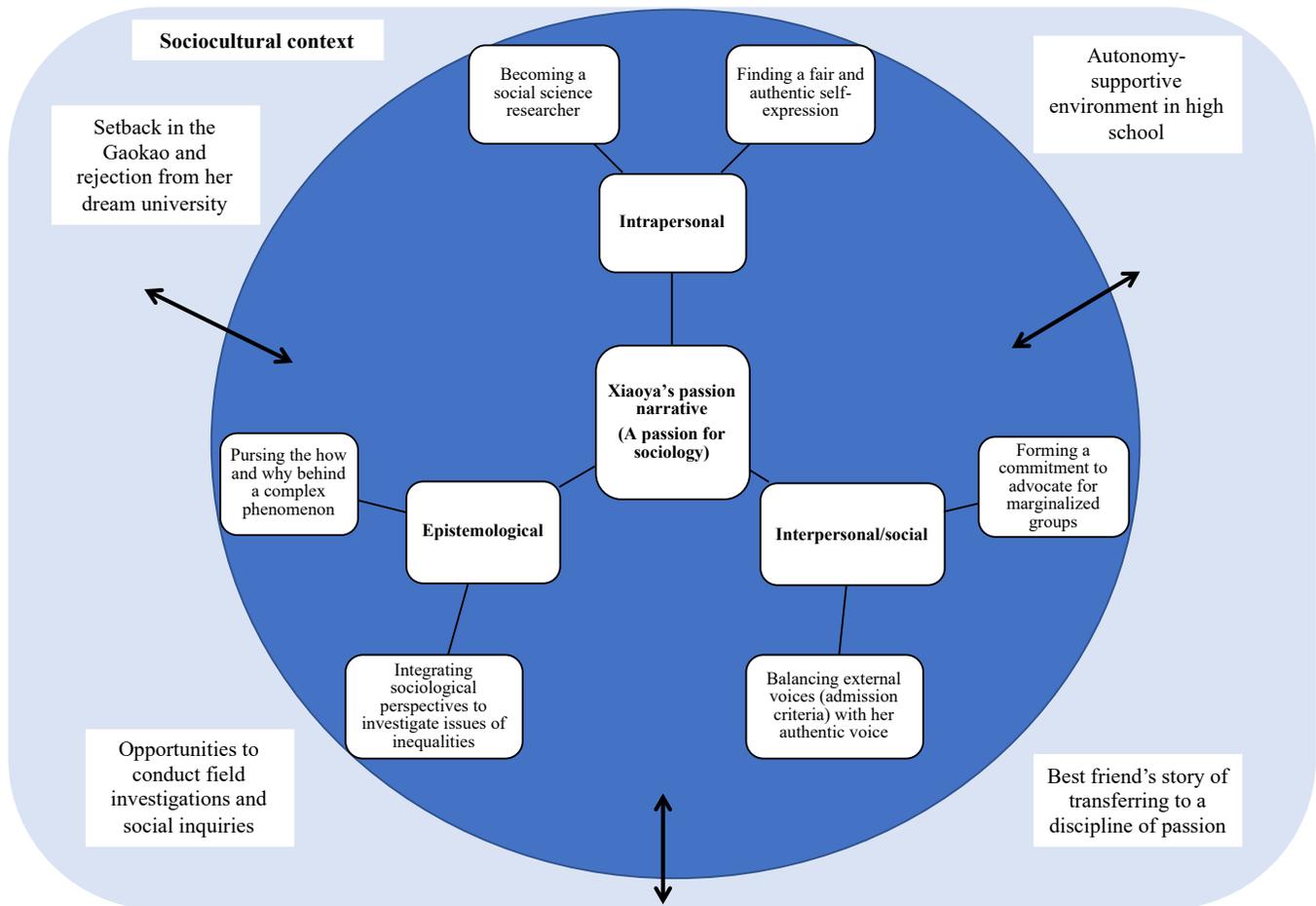
*my best friend's experience.<sup>5</sup> She was very supportive of my decision to pursue a discipline that I am really passionate about. She told me when a person can study the discipline they truly love, they become different, full of light. Because I see that light in her, I know you will be feeling the difference. It's not that I don't like education as a discipline, I do enjoy it, otherwise I wouldn't choose it as my major, but I just don't feel the passion for it. When I was studying sociology, I faced way more challenges and way more setbacks and failures, but I was not defeated. I never stopped liking it because of these setbacks and failures. After I have been tested more than once, the path has become gradually clear to me.*

**Representing Xiaoya's Self-Authoring.** Xiaoya's passion narrative demonstrates a cyclical trajectory. Although her extra-curricular experiences at high school had planted seeds for her passion for sociology, a major setback in the Gaokao and the subsequent rejection from her dream university disrupted her plan to pursue sociology as a program of study. Instead, she took another unintended path and studied education as her major. Despite this interruption, Xiaoya continued to explore opportunities to immerse in various types of field investigations and social inquiries. Through these rich field experiences and her theoretical learning about sociology, Xiaoya gradually cycled back in her journey and re-established a tighter connection with her field of passion. In Figure 4.2, I represented Xiaoya's passion narrative and its connection to self-authorship.

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<sup>5</sup> Xiaoya's best friend at university transferred her major into a discipline of her passion. Xiaoya supported this friend through the process of program transition.

**Figure 4.2 Xiaoya's Passion Narrative and Connections to Self-Authorship**



Xiaoya's passion narrative centers her passion for sociology, which took roots through her extra-curricular activities in high school. In the domain of epistemology, Xiaoya developed a critical lens of social inquiry through her field experiences and sociological training in courses. This lens allowed her to pursue the *how* and *why* behind a complex phenomenon and acquire a deep understanding of the nature of the phenomenon through sociological perspectives. In the intrapersonal domain, Xiaoya formed an emerging identity as a social science researcher. Writing her personal statement offered a unique opportunity for her to express that identity and find an authentic voice of herself in that identity. In the interpersonal and social domain, Xiaoya developed a commitment to advocate for social inequalities and marginalized groups. This commitment

stemmed from her deep engagement with issues of inequalities through her field investigations and research experiences. Also, Xiaoya's demonstrated how she balanced external voices (e.g., admission criteria) with her inner voice while writing her personal statement. Therefore, the dialogical process was critical to claim her own authentic voice and develop her passion narrative.

Various contextual influences, including both positive and negative influences, shaped the cyclical trajectory of Xiaoya's passion narrative. Her setback in the Gaokao and the rejection from her dream university was a major disruption of her passion pursuit. Thus, Xiaoya's passion narrative look different from Zhaizhai's continuity trajectory. However, Xiaoya was also surrounded by supportive environments (e.g., autonomy-supportive environments in both high school and university), relationships (e.g., a friend who was supportive of her decision to pursue sociology), and rich opportunities (e.g., field experiences and research opportunities) to develop her passion for sociology. These positive influences supported Xiaoya to eventually find her way back to her passion with rich perspectives that she otherwise would not have if she had not taken the unintended path.

#### **4.2 Resistance Narrative**

Participants with a resistance narrative focused their story on how they dealt with an undesirable reality through resistance and change. There are two participants whose story demonstrated a resistance narrative. The participants emphasized resistance-provoking experiences that developed their awareness of critical aspects of their beliefs, identity, and relationships. Experiences of resistance oriented them to a unique self-exploratory process to clarify their individual and social needs for development and growth. Their meaning making of resistance thus became instrumental to their self-authoring development.

Both stories demonstrating a resistance narrative represented a change-resolution narrative trajectory. The story began with the participants finding themselves in a disappointing reality that

contrasted their expectations. Trouble quickly arose and escalated through complicating events. Participants' meaning making of these events developed their understanding of who they are, what they believe, and how they relate to others. The narrative reached a climax when they came to realize their current situation could not sufficiently satisfy their need for growth and development and that their passiveness in that situation would elicit undesirable consequences. The desire to resist burgeoned with that realization. They chose to respond to the situation by making an active change to explore more possibilities of development in new contexts. At the end of the story, they expressed resolution and a sense of new-found clarity about their life and their becoming self. Through the resistance narrative, participants demonstrated meaningful integration their beliefs, identities, and social relationships and continual growth of their self-authoring voice. Now I present Victor's story below as an example of the change-resolution trajectory within the resistance narrative.

#### **4.2.1 The Change-Resolution Trajectory: Victor's Story**

When I met Victor, he was in his fifth year of university. Victor did not think of himself as much of a rebel before university. He considered himself growing up with a passive character. He described himself as “fairly content about what's been given” and “definitely not prone to stand out or be different from others”. Victor was raised in an “ordinary” family in Shandong province, which is among the most conservative regions in China and known for the preservation of Chinese cultural traditions and customs. Victor spoke about the impact of the conservative culture on people's perception of an ideal trajectory of life:

就是我们山东人非常的古板，感觉非常的传统，人生就是一条线，就是读书，上学读研究，上大学，读研究生，毕业考公务员，然后在事业单位去任职，对，这就这一个模式，没有别的模式了。

*People like us who are from Shandong province are very set in their own ways, very conservative. Life is basically a linear trajectory: you start school, then go to university, and then get a graduate degree, and after graduation, ideally, you will pass the government test to be employed as a civil servant, and work in a public sector. Yeah, this is the only celebrated template of life, no other possibilities.*

Victor's father is an engineer working for a state-run company. As his work required frequent travels and relocations, Victor's father wasn't as involved in his education as his mother when he was younger. Victor's mother was a staying-home mom when Victor was growing up and dedicated most of her time to her son's education.

He entered university as a science student.<sup>6</sup> Although he managed to maintain a good academic standing in high school, he never considered himself as talented as his peers who, in his eyes, embodied a natural aptitude for science. Given that, when it came to pick his university major, he wondered if he would be more successful if he chose a different academic focus (i.e., arts and social sciences). On a dare, he chose the education undergraduate program with a specialization in learning technologies upon entering university. However, the reality contrasted his expectations. Victor gradually lost interest in learning about education, and eventually decided to transfer to the Computer Science program at the end of his second year. His story about transitioning to a different major demonstrated the change-resolution trajectory in the resistance narrative. Now I retell Victor's story.

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<sup>6</sup> Before the recent curricular reform in China, students were asked to choose a focus of study in high school, either in science or arts and social studies. All students studied three major subjects. They are Chinese language arts, Mathematics, and English. Students in the science stream studied three additional subjects in science. They are Physics, Chemistry, and Biology. Students in the arts and social studies stream studied History, Politics, and Geography. Victor was in the science stream in high school.

**The Unchosen Choice.** The unchosen choice expresses a dialogical view of people's relationship with their story. Frank (2010) elaborated Bourdieu's idea of unchosen choices as follows: "The stories that people grow up on are unchosen, and as templates for experience – or, what we hitch a ride on – these stories lead people into choices that are unchosen" (p. 25). Victor's choice of his first program of study at university could perhaps be described as an unchosen choice. Before university, Victor relied on his mother to make the majority of important life decisions, such as which university to attend and what major to take. His mother wanted him to attend a university in Beijing, as the capital city would afford abundant opportunities for Victor's personal development. Reflecting on his thinking about choosing his university program, Victor said:

我完全不知道这些专业是干什么的，并且我也不知道我以后要干什么，毕业之后的职业规划是什么。关键是我也不知道哪个职业好和坏，比如说哪个职业赚钱多，哪个职业赚钱少，哪个职业安逸，哪些不安逸，所有的我都不知道，所以说这样的情况下，就只能选一个分最高的，就盲目的去选一个。

*I had no ideas about what all these majors mean. At that point in my life, I had never thought about what I want to do with my life after graduation, or what is my plan for my career. And also I didn't know which jobs are more prosperous than others, like which ones earns more than others, or which ones provides more comfort than others. I had absolutely no clue about these things. In that case, I could only choose the major with the highest admission score.<sup>7</sup> It was a blind choice.*

Upon entering university, Victor didn't have a clear idea of what he wanted to study and what he could do with his university diploma. Victor complied with his mother's will. He entered the education program with a specialization in learning technologies at the Chinese university

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<sup>7</sup> In China, students are admitted to a university and a program of study based on their standardized test score in the College Entrance Examination (i.e., the Gaokao). Programs with the highest admission score are most likely the disciplines that are most popular or nationally renowned for its academic reputation.

without concrete ideas of the prospects of the program. It turned out to be a research-oriented undergraduate program. Students were expected to develop theoretical knowledge about teaching and learning with a focus on educational technologies and cultivate skills to conduct research in various educational contexts.

Victor was a proactive student and a goal-oriented learner. He took opportunities to get involved in research projects to learn more about the field and acquire research experiences. Not far along in the program, Victor quickly realized that he wasn't satisfied with the depth of course content and became increasingly critical of research in his field. Trained as a science student, Victor was confused when introduced to ways of thinking and research practices in social sciences. In his first year, as much as he was troubled, he was hesitant to transfer to a science-related major in haste:

我想选择一个我喜欢的事情，然后但是我大一一年没有想明白，然后对于转专业还有一些胆怯犹豫，然后不敢做出这个决定，所以说我大一一年是没有下决心的（指转专业）。因为其实我的……（停顿）因为习惯了别人帮忙做决定的时候，自己也不敢做决定，然后大一一年就这样浪费过去了。

*I wanted to choose something I could enjoy, but I didn't figure that out quite yet in my first year. And at the same time, I was still having some doubts about transferring my major, so I was hesitant to make the decision. So I hadn't made up my mind for it, because... [pause] you know, when you were so used to having others making decisions for you, you were afraid to make your own decision. So I wasted my first year being in that state.*

**Trouble.** His confusion only escalated during his second year and eventually turned into an overwhelming sense of frustration. Victor led his own undergraduate research project this year, investigating using Legos to support students' learning in physics. While conducting his research experiments, Victor grew more skeptical of the trustworthiness of his research results. He perceived that the approach to research in education is at odds with his view of what "scientific" research

should be. Unable to recognize the purpose of his research agitated Victor. His frustration was vividly conveyed in his reflection on this research experience:

非常的难受，因为我当时做了这么一个课题，就是探究乐高教具是否能提高中学生的物理成绩。但是在做实验的过程中，我发现这东西对能否提高他的成绩并不能完全的说定。所以说我认为做这个事情没有意义，因为我就算做了这个事情，我就算发现了它（学生成绩）有了提高，也不会推广，并且我也没认为它有提高，虽然说发了论文，但我也没认为这个东西对这个学生有作用有帮助。我当时的研究是只能是提高他们的热情，但是我认为在这个高考大环境下，还是要刷题，在我的理解里，还是去做原来的事情，就这样按部就班地去学习，并且也是比乐高要好的一种方式。我就不想再做这一种实验，不想再做这个课题，就这此类的课题我都不想去！

*I was very frustrated. I conducted a research project to examine whether using Legos can improve students' performance in Physics. When I was doing the experiment, I was unsure whether this experiment can actually prove the effect of this technique, so I think this project was pointless. Even I could find a significant impact, I wouldn't promote this kind of technique, let alone I couldn't even find the significance. Although I published a journal article based on the project, I don't think the Lego technique would in fact help students improve their performance. My results only suggested that it increased their interest in studying about Physics. Personally speaking, with the system of Gao Kao unchanged, the most effective way to improve learning results is still the old-fashioned way, which is to focus on solving problems that appear in exams. Much better than using Legos. I don't want to design this kind of experiment anymore. I don't want to do this project anymore. And I don't want to do this kind of research anymore!*

Victor realized that his own epistemological beliefs conflicted with the fundamental principles that grounded his discipline while doing his research project. He gradually became aware of his preference for applied sciences over social sciences, as the former have more explicit standards and

pragmatic applications. He explained this fundamental disagreement later in the interview when I asked how he found out his first major wasn't a good fit for him:

第一，是非常实际的考虑就是金钱，对，因为我要赚够能够让自己实现财富自由的经济基础，对，我认为这是我原来的学科不能给我的，这是一方面因素。第二个因素是我不喜欢没有确定结果的一些知识，对，或者说我不喜欢这样的学科，当然每个人性格不同嘛，我喜欢的学科是有固定答案的学科，对，然后还有就是能立刻看见作用的学科，对。人文社科的话对我来说就非常的不适应，对，然后我喜欢那些，就是一天付出了一天的努力，晚上就能看到成果，或者说付出一个月努力，一个月之后也能看到成果，而不是付出一年的努力，也看不到它在社会上的成果，对，有不安全感。

*Well, first, a practical concern is money, yeah, because I want to make enough money to achieve financial freedom. I don't think my first major could provide me that level of latitude. Then, the second consideration is that I am not a big fan of ambiguous knowledge that doesn't produce a precise conclusion. I just don't like these disciplines. Of course, everyone is different. I like disciplines that give unequivocal, clear-cut answers, yeah, and the ones that produce immediate results. So I was unable to adapt to the ways of thinking in arts and social sciences. I enjoy research projects that produces some concrete outcomes after a day's hard work, or a month's hard work, not those that after a year's investment of time and efforts, you still can't be sure about the impact of your research in the real world. I don't like that kind of uncertainty.*

Frank (2010) described the dilemma of the unchosen choice: “Each understands him- or herself as always necessarily part of some collective, but each finds that this collective imposes a story that resists individual stylistic variation, elaboration, or play” (p. 30). As an unchosen choice, Victor entered an academic world that contrasted his expectations. The collective story of the world was saturated with its own conventions, rules, and values. He gradually came to realize that several aspects of his own story (i.e., need for financial freedom, preference for unambiguous knowledge

and pragmatic disciplines) were in opposition to the collective story of which he was a part.

Resistance began to build up as Victor's dissatisfaction of his frustration escalated:

然后到了大二的时候我对专业的不认同感越来越强烈的时候，尤其是，我是随着做课题的过程中。做教育技术学的课题过程中，我发现我极其的不认同的时候，我就感觉到非常的痛苦，对，然后我就想无论如何我也要转专业了。如果说当我想到我的未来一生，如果都要在做这件事情的时候，我是感觉人生是没有色彩的，对。

*The detachment from my major only intensified during my second year, especially while doing that research project. As I couldn't see any point in doing what I was doing, I was in desperation and agony, yeah, so I decided to transfer my major regardless of the consequences. If I looked into my future, I saw myself doing that for a lifelong time, then I knew my life would be black and white, without any colors, yeah.*

**Epiphany.** Narrative researchers have drawn on the concept of “epiphany” to describe interactional experiences that manifest the character at moments of crisis. These moments can potentially alter the fundamental meaning structuring in a person's life (Denzin, 1989). The climax of the resistance narrative manifests in the epiphanic moment when the participant comes to full realization of their trouble and recognizes an urgent need for change. Victor vividly recalled his epiphanic moment:

应该是在10月份，正好是我本期课题要做到最关键的时候，然后我每天要跑到实验学校做实验，我每天和课题组的同学打车去实验校，在车上的时候经常去发呆的看着窗外，就感觉，‘这真的是我要做的东西吗？’。这个让我印象特别深，那个场景我现在还能记得，就是我脑海中就浮现出来了‘温水煮青蛙’的这个故事，然后我认为虽然没有一个非常大的刺激，但是就是这样一个非常小的事情，让我下了决心，就一下就下了决心，我认为我是不能再这样做下去了。

*It was in October. And my project was undergoing a very critical stage – I needed to do experiments in schools every day. I shared cabs with two of my team members to get to the school, and I was looking through the windows, thinking to myself, ‘Is it really what I want*

*to do?’ That moment stuck with me forever, and the story about “the boiling frog”<sup>8</sup> suddenly came up in my mind. Although I don’t think there was anything dramatic about that moment, it was indeed in that moment that I made up my mind. I knew I couldn’t do this anymore.*

At the core of his epiphany was the image of the boiling frog. Before this, Victor had expressed overwhelming frustration about not recognizing the purpose of his research as well as the fundamental divergence between his views of knowledge and the epistemological tradition of his discipline. He was deeply troubled by this unreconcilable tension. Victor immediately identified with the boiling frog: he was holding on to a wrong choice of life in which he couldn’t see a promising future, and he knew if he didn’t make a change, the consequence would be unbearable. The epiphany was so powerful that transformed Victor’s accumulative feelings of resistance into an action of change.

**Change.** The desire to resist and change urged Victor to act. Victor wanted to transition to Computer Science. He consulted his academic advisor and parents who were supportive of his decision. Their encouragement eliminated his lingering hesitance and supported his transition to Computer Science. Victor spoke about his rationale for processing different advice he received at that point:

*感觉其实心里都是有一个答案的，我去问别人的话，只是想让别人去印证我的答案。  
I always had the answer, and I just needed others to tell me I am doing the right thing.*

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<sup>8</sup> The boiling frog is a fable describing a frog being slowly boiled alive. The premise is that if a frog is put suddenly into boiling water, it will jump out, but if the frog is put in tepid water which is then brought to a boil slowly, it will not perceive the danger and will be cooked to death. The story is often used as a metaphor for the inability or unwillingness of people to react to or be aware of sinister threats that arise gradually rather than suddenly. Definition retrieved from: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boiling\\_frog](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boiling_frog)

Victor turned to his friend, a senior student who was in a same undergraduate program as Victor and transitioned to another field for his graduate studies.

他当时跟我分享一下他的心路历程，也是非常的曲折，然后当我听到他的心路历程的时候感到非常的震撼。既然他也要转专业，他也有和我一样的想法，他也是印证了我的感受。然后他对于我当时的处境分析得非常透彻，因为他是过来人，对于教育技术学的个人发展也分析得非常透彻，当我听了之后，我更认为：“嗯，是的，我不喜欢这个专业。”

*He shared with me his journey, which also involved lots of back and forth... Hearing him talking about how his thinking evolved was so powerful. He wanted to transfer major, and perhaps he was having the same thought as I did, and he justified my feelings at that moment. And he helped me think through my situation. He was someone who had been through all this, and his explanation about the trajectory of growth as a student of learning technology was very thorough. After I heard all this, I was even surer that “yeah, this is not what I want”.*

**Resolution.** Reflecting on his experience, Victor explained multiple factors he considered for transferring to Computer Science:

因为计算机非常火，我感觉我是心态上还是有很强的跟风的性质。然后还有一个考虑很现实，因为要赚钱，对，因为要赚钱。然后还有一个很重要原因就是我想选择一个给我发展空间大的学科，就是我当时的想法非常的明确，就是我如果说本科学了计算机的话，我以后如果突然意识到我想我人生的乐趣在教育技术，我可以随时回到教学技术，但是如果说反之的话就不是这样子，对，这是一个非常就对我影响很大一个想法。另一个我考虑的因素是我能给我的家庭带来什么，给我的女朋友和父母带来什么。

*Because Computer Science has been among the most popular professions. I noticed my strong conformist tendency. And then there's a realistic concern too – to make money, yeah, make money. Another important consideration is that I wanted to choose a field that offered*

*a better platform for my professional development. I was so sure that if I have a degree in Computer Science, and if I realize my interest still lies in learning technologies later on, I will still be able to come back to it anytime, but I can't do it the other way around. It was a powerful realization at that time. And another important factor that I considered is what I can offer to my family, including my girlfriend, my parents.*

On more than one occasion, Victor identified the financial prospect of a career as his primary concern. Here, Victor's consideration about finances seemed to extend his own personal need for financial freedom. It encompassed an additional social dimension that relates to his role as a family member. Victor considered that a prospective career in Computer Science will allow him to provide financial stability to his family and fulfill his responsibility as a son and a partner.

What also sparked my interest was Victor speaking about his choice of Computer Science as a promising means to achieve a variety of practical life goals, including fulfilling both individual needs for development (i.e., bringing him a sense of personal fulfillment) and social responsibilities for others. Victor's choice of major and future career appeared to derive from practical considerations rather than an intrinsic interest in the field itself. His accounts thus contrasted with participants with a passion narrative who perceived an internal life purpose ingrained in their pursuit of passion. Noticing that, I asked if he had considered his choice of profession expressed his unique self-values. He elaborated that he didn't perceive his choice of profession declared his self-worth:

因为我是一个比较随意的人，我没有一个特立独行的执念，对，我没有对于个人自我价值的一个执念，我知道有些人是有的，比如说他们可能会追求自己变成一个艺术家，对，特立独行的艺术家。我没有，我是认为，其实我做哪个行业都可以，假如说有出现一个新的行业，它能给我带来事业的发展，我也可能也会去做那个行业。我的耐受力比较强。

*Well, I am very flexible. I am not an individualist and I don't have a particular obsession for a remarkable idiosyncratic course. I know some people may have that, like they may want to become a free-spirited artist. I don't have that mindset. I think I can work in any industry. And if there's an emerging industry that offers new opportunities for my career, I may consider doing something in that industry. And I have a high threshold of tolerance, too.*

In our subsequent conversation about if he thought himself as a purposeful/self-determined person, Victor admitted that he didn't have a natural instinct for what interested him as those who declared their passion early in their life:

我对于主见的理解是那种天生的主见，就是直觉上的主见，他们从一开始就非常的有想法，对，就举一个例子来说，在高考之前选专业的时候，他们就非常有想法，或者说他们在高中的时候就知道自己要想做什么，我认为这，是我理解的有主见。所以说我认为我完全不是类型，包括现在也是。我对自己的感觉是，我是知道自己不喜欢什么，但我不知道自己喜欢什么，对，这是我一个很明确的一个道理。就是我很难分清自己喜欢什么，然后我的承受能力也是挺强的。即使是一个不喜欢的东西我也可能也能承受一段时间，但是当我最后发现真的承受不了时候，我就会当断则断。

*My understanding of a being purposeful/self-determined person is someone who has natural instinct, like an intuition – they always know what they want for themselves. For example, they would know what they want to study when choosing their major before university, or they may have already figure out what they want to do with their life in high school. This is the quality I see in a real purposeful/self-determined person. And I don't see myself as that type of person. Even now, I still wouldn't call myself purposeful/self-determined. I think myself more like the kind of person – 'I don't know what I like, but I do know what I don't like', yeah. I am always aware of this fact. I can't seem to really know what I am really passionate about, but I am rather tolerant. Even it's not something I enjoy, I can still do it*

*for quite a while, but if at last I know I can't take this anymore, I will let go without hesitation.*

I identified the sentence “*I don't know what I like, but I do know what I don't like*” as one of Victor's character moments. It showcased how the resistance narrative functions in Victor's story. Specifically, in the resistance narrative, a clear source of intrinsic passion is provisionally unavailable, and yet a wrong choice of life may surface as a prominent narrative theme. Victor identified himself through resisting and separating himself from the wrong choice and changing his life path to a different track. In this regard, the resistance narrative may not offer Victor a self-affirming identity (i.e., “this is who I am and who I have always been”). However, it might help him to clarify, through resistance, who he may not want to be and what he does not want for his life. Looking back on his decision about changing his major in his fifth year of university, Victor expressed an appreciative attitude without regrets:

首先我是不后悔这个决定，说实话，我是非常感激我自己的，因为它让我走上了一条完全不同的路。它让我找到一个我可以认可的事业，并且现在当我想到我未来的时候，我认为是光明的。

*First, I never regret making this decision. In fact, I am very thankful for myself. It leads me on a totally different path. Taking on this path leads me to a career that's intrinsically satisfying. Now when I think about my future, it's full of light.*

Looking back on his university years, Victor identified self-discovery and horizon expansion as the most critical aspects of his personal growth in university:

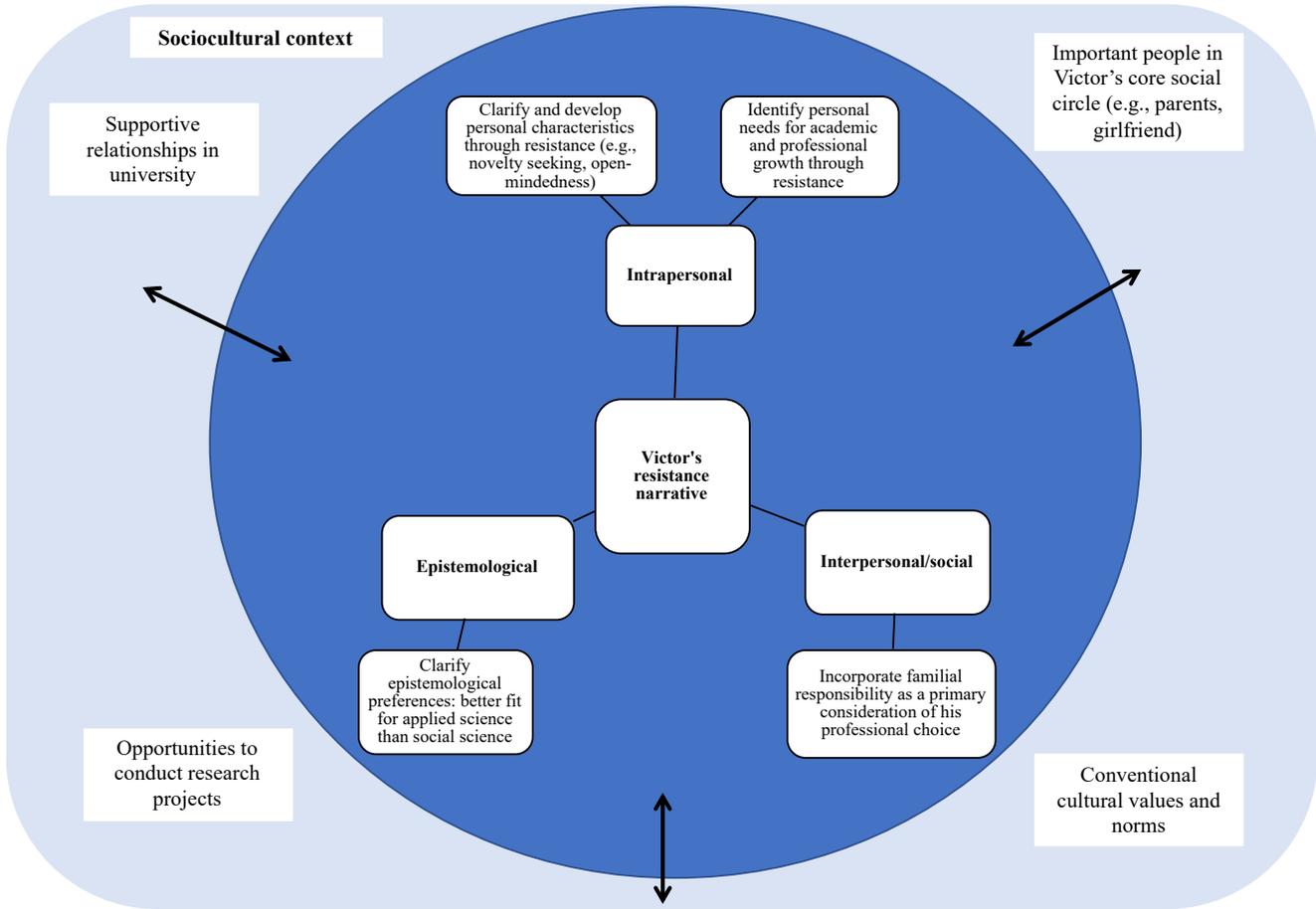
[大学]开阔了我的眼界，让我认识了更多人生的可能吧，然后就不再那么狭隘。说实话，我刚进大学之前我的思想是非常狭隘的，所以我并不知道人生是要干什么，然后随着我不断的探索，发现人生越来越有意思。有意思在于我能做很多新鲜的事情，我这个人是非常喜欢新鲜的事情的，比如说包括旅游啊，探索啊，做课题啊，也是我可能更喜欢去尝鲜。做课题我可能是更喜欢新鲜的课题，包括选专业也是这样的。我

选专业的时候想做一个很新的学科，正在火爆学科，想去当那种弄潮儿的感觉，我享受那种感觉，我不喜欢研究一个古老的东西。这是我理解的有意思。

*[University education] has expanded my horizon and introduced me to more possibilities of life, which allowed me to become a more open-minded person. To be honest, I was a very narrow-minded person before university. I didn't have a clear clue about what I want to do with my life. It is in university that I began to explore more possibilities and discovered that life can in fact be very interesting and meaningful. It is meaningful because I can always try new things. I found myself enjoying novelty. I enjoy traveling to and exploring new places and conducting new research projects. I prefer projects that afford novelty, which became my primary consideration when choosing my major. When I transferred my major [to Computer Science], I wanted to be in a discipline that encourages innovation and novelty. I want to be at the frontier of the field. I like the feeling of riding the highest waves of our era. I don't like spending time investigating antique things. That's what I perceive as the meaning of my life.*

**Representing Victor's Self-Authoring.** Victor's resistance narrative represented a change-resolution trajectory. Victor's resistance narrative began with him blindly entering an undesirable path (i.e., the education program). His subsequent experiences provoked resistance and led to further clarification and negotiation of Victor's beliefs, identity, and social relationships. Resistance accumulated to a point of epiphany when Victor make up his mind to alter his choice of program. The change (i.e., transferring to the Computer Science program) led to positive resolutions and new-found perspectives on his life and his becoming self. Figure 4.3 demonstrated Victor's resistance narrative and its connections to self-authorship.

**Figure 4.3 Victor's Resistance Narrative and Connections to Self-Authorship**



Victor's resistance narrative emerged from his story of changing his major. Unlike participants whose narrative emphasized their persistence in pursuing their passion (i.e., the passion narrative), Victor's resistance narrative highlighted a self-exploratory process that involved experimenting with different paths (including making mistakes) before arriving at what he currently perceived as the fittest choice of life. It is through experimenting, resisting, and adjusting that he came to better understand his core values and beliefs, who he currently is as a person, and how he relates to important others. Specifically, in the epistemological domain, Victor became aware and further clarified his epistemological stance (e.g., preference for unambiguity and objectivity in knowledge production, emphasis on efficiency and pragmatic values of research)

through his involvement in education research projects. He chose to pursue Computer Science as it better aligns with his beliefs about the purpose and method of scientific research. In the intrapersonal domain, Victor developed his personal identity in various aspects through his resistance narrative. He became more aware of his core personal traits that had significant impact on his choice of life (e.g., novelty seeking, open-mindedness). He acquired a clearer understanding of his personal and social needs for personal and professional development (e.g., preference for profession that encourages novelty and innovation, need for financial freedom, latitude of professional growth, provision for his family) in the course of transferring his major. In the interpersonal/social domain, he incorporated familial responsibility as a primary factor in his career considerations. Therefore, Victor's resistance narrative demonstrates how he integrated interrelated aspects of his epistemological beliefs, identity, and social relationships in a meaningful way that is instrumental to develop his self-authoring voice.

Sociocultural influences significantly impacted Victor's resistance narrative. Victor carried cultural values about an ideal life trajectory to university. His learning and development in university broadened his horizon and allowed him to consider diverse life possibilities beyond the prescribed model offered by conventional cultural narratives in his hometown. The university context also provided Victor with opportunities to engage in research. Through these opportunities, Victor was exposed to different perspectives on knowledge construction and developed his epistemological beliefs in ways that otherwise would not be possible in other contexts. Supportive relationships Victor maintained in university provided him with advice on his choice of program. People in Victor's core social circle, including his parents and girlfriend, became his primary consideration when considering his career choice. Victor integrated those voices of others into his inner dialogue.

### **4.3 Competence Narrative**

Participants with a competence narrative focused their stories on developing their competence to achieve personal and relational goals. Five participants' stories revealed competence narratives. Their meaning making focused on how they constructed and negotiated their sense of competence in various contexts and/or in specific social relationships. For example, when making important life decisions, they evaluated different options based on the extent to which they felt in control of their abilities to experience success and/or meet social expectations. Developing their competence narrative allowed the participants to clarify their personal needs for development, understand different aspects of themselves (e.g., their strengths and challenges), and make strategic decisions and/or balance expectations from others. In other words, developing a competence narrative is central to their self-authoring process.

Two narrative trajectories were specified under the competence narrative. One is the context-oriented trajectory and one is the relationship-oriented trajectory. In the context-oriented trajectory, participants developed their competence narrative across different contexts. They assessed how different aspects of their abilities responded to specific contextual demands when they considered options of their critical decisions. They made strategic choices based on their perceived level of competence. In the relationship-oriented trajectory, competence narrative functions differently. The primary concern of the participants was to what extent their current level of competence allowed them to balance the expectations of others and their own individual will when making important decisions. I first present the context-oriented trajectory through Amy's story and then the relationship-oriented trajectory through Maomao's story.

#### **4.3.1 The Context-Oriented Trajectory: Amy's Story**

When I met Amy, she was in her third year at the Canadian university. She was admitted to the business school and chose accounting as her specialization. Before coming to Canada, Amy

grew up in a large developed city on the east coast of China. Amy attended public schools in China from kindergarten to Grade 9. After that, Amy and her parents decided together that she would study abroad for university. From grade 10 to grade 12, she attended an international school. There she took courses from the Advanced Placement curriculum and prepared herself for college study in North America. Amy was born and raised in a highly educated family. Her parents are both university professors. When describing her experiences of growing up, she expressed appreciation toward the nurturing familial environment that her parents created for her. She considered herself having “walked a normal walk”, not unlike many other children in her family’s social circle:

就是他们身边同事的孩子也都是比较认真学习的这么一个感觉，所以就很少会有走另类的那种路的感觉，所以我父母对我的印象就是，他们从小给了我一个比较好的一个教育环境，然后感觉走了一条比较正常的路。

*Most children of my parents’ colleagues are hard-working students, and few of them would act out, you know, do something idiosyncratic. So since a young age, my parents have created a desirable environment for me, so, yeah, I guess I just walked a normal walk.*

Amy described herself as a “standard good student” in terms of her academic performance at school. Amy spoke positively about her school experiences before university:

我对学校的感觉就是就认真学习，跟同学们打好交道，跟老师打好交道，然后管好自己的事儿。

*My experience with school was basically studying hard, being nice to your classmates, being nice to your teachers, and minding your own business.*

Amy’s sharing of her personal growth focused on three pivotal decisions she made before and during university. These decisions allowed her to “find her own walk”. The three decisions were choosing to study abroad, choosing her university program, and choosing her major specialization. Amy’s interpretation of the options she had emphasized how different aspects of her abilities interacted with specific contextual demands. She showed preference for options that made

her feel in control of her abilities to accomplish desirable outcomes. Hence, Amy developed her competence narrative across different decision-making contexts. Constructing her competence narrative allowed Amy to develop awareness of her strengths and limitations and make strategic decisions about her academic and professional development. Now I present Amy's story, focused on her telling of the three important decisions that shaped the path she chose for herself.

**Studying Abroad: “Leverage Your Strengths and Avoid Your Stretches”** The idea of studying abroad for university sprouted when Amy was in middle school. During that time, Amy was suffering from mental distress due to the highly competitive academic culture in the Chinese exam-oriented system:

我就是初中那段时间到考试我也特别紧张，然后睡不着觉那种。然后我妈看了也觉得这样不太好，对我个人身心发展的不太好。就觉得出国是一个比较不错的选择，然后我当时也是压力比较大，就觉得出国可能是一条压力比较小的一条路，也不说压力小，就是把压力均匀分配一下，因为国内上学的一个体验就是，我感觉就是到考试那些压力特别大，然后平时就没有平均分（配）的那种压力。考试的时候就是压力全部加在你头上，特别是高考，我觉得我没有经历过高考，但是我觉得如果今天我觉得我不是就是会在高考上发挥比较好的那种。

*I was feeling extremely anxious about exams during middle school. I was suffering from bad insomnia too. My mother was concerned with its negative impact on my mental health. So we thought perhaps studying abroad would be a better choice. As I was so stressed out all the time, I thought choosing to study abroad would be less stressful. I don't mean it's not stressful at all, but it's more like distributing your stress evenly across time. My experience with school in China was being stressed out all the time. When exams approach, particularly Gao Kao, your stress level would reach the peak. Though I didn't take the Gao Kao, I don't think I would do well in it.*

Amy's plan to study abroad was also influenced by other people in her family's social circle. Many children of her parents' friends and colleagues have studied abroad and spoke positively about their experiences. When Amy was about to start high school, it came a critical time for Amy and her parents to decide whether she would continue staying in the mainstream public-school system or attend an international high school to prepare for studying abroad. Amy explained her considerations:

当时我也是比较倾向于出国这条（路），因为我小学初中时候英语成绩比较好，口语比较好，然后我想就可以发挥一下自己的优势，扬长避短嘛。

*I was leaning towards studying abroad too, because English has always been my strength since elementary school, particularly my English speaking skills. So I want to optimize my strengths [by choosing to study abroad]. You know, leveraging your strengths and avoiding your stretches (this is a Chinese idiom).*

Leveraging her strength in English language skills became one of Amy's primary considerations when choosing to study abroad. To act on her strength, Amy chose to attend the international school and prepare herself for study abroad. Amy's hard work in high school brought her a place in the Canadian university.

**Choosing a University Program: “Perhaps I Should Walk a Path that I Can Be Good at”** Amy chose the Bachelor of Commerce program when she applied to the Canadian university.

Likely, Amy's choice reflected a strategic consideration of her strengths and stretches based on her academic performance in different subjects:

当时是我一开始是想学……我有一个当医生的梦想，你知道吗？但是问题是我物理、化学真的很不好，贼不好的那种，就是没有脑子。然后我爸就劝我说，我高中经济学特别好，不花点时间就拿九十九、一百的那种。然后我爸又跟我说，你要不要考虑一下走商科这条路？也挺好的。但是他还是会尊重你的主意。后来想想也是，还是走自己比较擅长的路，然后就听了我爸的决定。

*And at first, I wanted to study ... Do you know my dream is to become a doctor? But the problem is I am so bad at Physics and Chemistry, really bad. I just don't have the brain for it. And my father said to me that I am good at Economics. I did very well with Economics at high school – I didn't spend much time on it, but I got like 99/100, sometimes 100/100. So my father said why not considering business school? But he was very respectful of my own will. And I thought about it for a while and I agreed with him – perhaps I should walk a path that I can be good at, so I took my father's suggestion.*

The need for competence in the program of study was the rationale Amy provided for choosing the Bachelor of Commerce program. Amy's indicated a high level of competence in Economics for she was able to obtain good grades with relative ease. To walk a path that she can be good at expresses Amy's confidence in her ability to take control of her learning and achieve successful outcomes.

**Choosing a Specialization: “Find My own Walk”** Amy shared that her most significant learning in university was to “find her own walk”. Like many college freshmen, Amy was overwhelmed by the sense of “being lost” when she first entered university:

*到大学最大感受就是你特迷茫，因为你不知道以后想干什么，然后你你不知道你走的这条路是不是对的。*

*You feel lost when entering university. You don't know what to do with your life, and you are not sure if you are walking the right path.*

Amy metaphorically described her life at university as riding a roller coaster, involving many ups and downs. Compared to high school where there were more structural and emotional supports from teachers, parents, and friends, Amy felt more isolated in the Canadian university (“*You need to figure everything out by yourself.*”). Moving to a country with distinct historical, social, and cultural traditions on her own, Amy had to deal with additional challenges. These challenges ranged from learning to live independently (e.g., running errands, paying bills, feeding herself,

moving into a new apartment, settling disagreements with a roommate), to coping with cultural shock (e.g., exposure to drug issues and western dating culture), to adjusting to a foreign academic environment (e.g., learning to collaborate with others, struggling to actively participate in class discussions), and to dealing with loneliness and isolation (*“It’s hard to make friends ... because this is not home. Everything feels unfamiliar to me.”*).

Amy spoke about important mindset shifts during her transition to university: from following teachers’ instructions and expectations to taking ownership of her own learning (e.g., selecting courses and instructors, researching course requirements, finding solutions to unexpected problems), and from relying on other’s guidance to cultivating independence and practicing responsible decision making. Amy’s reflection on her journey was vividly captured in the excerpt below:

但大学我觉得更多的是每个人就比较 isolated，就比较跟别人隔开了，然后你一个人在走你自己的路，然后你不仅要为你这条路拼命努力，你还要你还要不停地确认你有没有走错路，你有没有走的路是不是对的，你走着走着，你也可能到阴沟里去。然后你有时候完全可以歇下来，但是别人一直在走，反正更多的是一种看不清，然后需要一种不停的给自己打气，要需要更大的勇气。

*Everyone is isolated from each other [in university], and you need to walk your own walk. And you work really hard to walk it well, and you always need to check if you are walking it right and that you are not walking into a wrong direction. You never know if you may get yourself into nasty situations. Sometimes you think you can take a break, but you see others walking, non-stop. Anyway, it is always unclear, so you need to be your own cheerleader, cheering yourself on.*

Amy strived to find her own walk in university. One example of this was to choose her major specialization. There are three specializations offered in the Bachelor of Commerce program: finance, accounting, and marketing. Students were required to take all three introductory courses in

their first and second year to familiarize themselves with these specializations and their respective career prospects. Amy eventually chose accounting as her specialization as she felt most competent when studying accounting. She explained why she thought accounting is a good fit for her abilities:

首先我觉得就会计课程来说，我学起来比较轻松。我觉得它是我的强项的，因为可能它本身就比较简单。我是那种记忆力比较好的孩子，然后但不是死记硬背，因为我就是理解记忆比较强的那种。所以我觉得，还是就是学习方面，就光是学习方面还是比较适合我。

*First, accounting courses are relatively easy for me. I considered it (accounting) as my strength, perhaps just because it's not that difficult by nature. I've always been the kind of person who is good at memorizing, not in a mechanical sense. I am good at comprehensive memorizing, so in terms of schoolwork, accounting seems a good fit for me.*

In addition to her coursework, Amy attended professional events in accounting. She was more informed of the career options and prospects as an accountant and inspired by the stories of professional accountants she met at the events. Amy also actively sought opportunities to gain professional experiences and cultivate essential skills in accounting through internships. She became confident that among the three specializations, accounting would be the best fit for her needs for professional development. She summarized her thoughts in the excerpt below:

随着现在科技发展越来越快，我觉得一些基础会计的工作以后可能会被替代，但是 upper level 的那些财务管理方面，我觉得还是有一定的人才需要，我觉得走这条路可能对我以后的职业发展会比较好。首先，就是以后找工作方便。不仅是学校上课，还这段时间做工作下来，我觉得这份就是工作比较稳定，我做这个工作的时候没有 marketing 的时候起伏那么大，就是内心起伏很大。有一次做 marketing 工作，有个客户特别难搞，然后那一天我就整个晚上睡不着觉。但是做会计我不会有这种问题。我觉得你就把自己该干的东西干完，干完之后你可以准时下班。然后第二个因素，我想想看，就给的还可以。第三个，职业发展，我觉得比较稳定，会计基本上职业发展就是，考证，然后积累经验，一般是到了事务所积累经验，然后之后跳到大的企业去

做。我觉得我可以看到我以后努力的方向，努力的就是该考什么证，该做什么事情。我觉得就是这条清晰的方向给了我更多的信心。

*To my knowledge, some basic-level accounting jobs might be replaced with the development of technology, but the need for skilled professionals in the upper-level financial management will persist. So the career prospects of accounting look promising for my own professional development. First, you can always find a job as an accountant in the job market. Second, speaking from my personal experiences, my mental health is relatively stable when doing the job. I mean I didn't experience as many mental ups and downs as I did when doing the marketing internship. In that internship, I had to deal with a picky client. It was so stressful that I had trouble falling asleep at night. I never encountered the same kind of problem when I was doing my accounting internship. You do your job, and at the end of the day, you are good to go, so the job's really stable in that sense. Second, it pays well. Third, the trajectory of professional development in accounting is predictable and affords certainty: You get your certificates that you need to get and then you continue accumulating professional experiences. You probably will first start with an accounting firm and then work your way up to big corporates. I can see that path clearly ahead of me. For example, the kinds of certificates and qualifications I should get, and the kinds of things I need to do. That sense of clarity gives me more confidence to walk that path.*

Unlike the confidence and sense of competence, Amy expressed about accounting, she considered the two other options, marketing and finance, might position her in disadvantage in relation to more competent others. See how Amy explained this for marketing:

在我上 marketing 这门课的时候，我就决定了，这是完完全全不是我想做的东西，我就是真的不适合做这个东西。然后首先是语言，我觉得是语言方面的一个缺陷。就做 marketing，英语是母语的人，我觉得他们会有更多的 idea，表达自己会更加的

professional, 更加的专业。比如说我们用中文做就是做市场营销和一个外国人用中文做市场营销, 肯定是我们更加好一点。然后我当时就把 marketing 选项给去除了。  
*When I took the Introduction to Marketing course, I knew this is not what I want to do at all. I am not a good fit for it. First is the language barrier. Those who speak English as their first language, I think they'd have more ideas, and they know how to express themselves properly in a more professional way. If using Chinese to do marketing, I am sure we can do a better job than a foreigner who speaks Chinese. So I excluded the option to specialize in marketing.*

Amy indicated English as her second language a major limiting factor that impacted her overall competence in marketing, especially when matching with other competitors who are native English speakers. Amy also shared why she didn't choose to specialize in finance. Similarly, Amy didn't perceive herself possessing qualities that she recognized in more competent others who are more likely to succeed in a finance career:

然后金融的话, 我也就是参加了几个 info session, 我觉得学金融相对于会计对我来说的劣势就是.....我可以和别人打交道, 但是我没有像有一些大部分就想要在金融路上走得远、走得好那些人, 他们的 networking, 他们和别人打交道, 他们手里的资源, 是非常非常强大的。这一点是我没有办法比。所以我觉得后来我还是选择会计。  
*As for finance, I attended a few info sessions. Well, compared to accounting, I think my weakness would be ... though I can work with others, I don't have the quality that you see in the most successful people in finance, like their networking skills, knowing their way around people. They are incredibly resourceful too. In terms of that, I couldn't compete with them. So I think I'd still choose accounting as my specialization.*

She added that social competences, which she referred to as “soft skills” (e.g., communication and collaboration), are more valued than “technical skills” in the western education. This contrasts with the education she experienced in China where more emphasis is placed on academic achievement

than social development. For this reason, Amy considered her soft skills not as strong as her peers who grew up in Canada and other western countries. Amy's considerations about the three specialization options reflected how she understood and constructed different aspects of her competence in relation to specific contextual demands and social relationships. Amy seemed to prioritize her need for competence in the domain of academic growth and professional development.

However, the competence narrative may not be the only thread of Amy's story. At the end of our interview, Amy expressed how she viewed the meaning of her life. Her statement reminded us that a person always has an independent, more well-rounded life beyond the story they shared:

我觉得人生最大的意义就是，就是人最快乐的时候，不是就是做完你最不想做的事情的那一瞬间，开始做你最想做的事情。我觉得就是把你该做的工作完成，然后去实现你的爱好，去追求你的爱好，这就是人生的意义。我挺喜欢，挺喜欢摄影的。然后就拍照。我喜欢就抽空去拍照，然后想去各地旅游拍照。

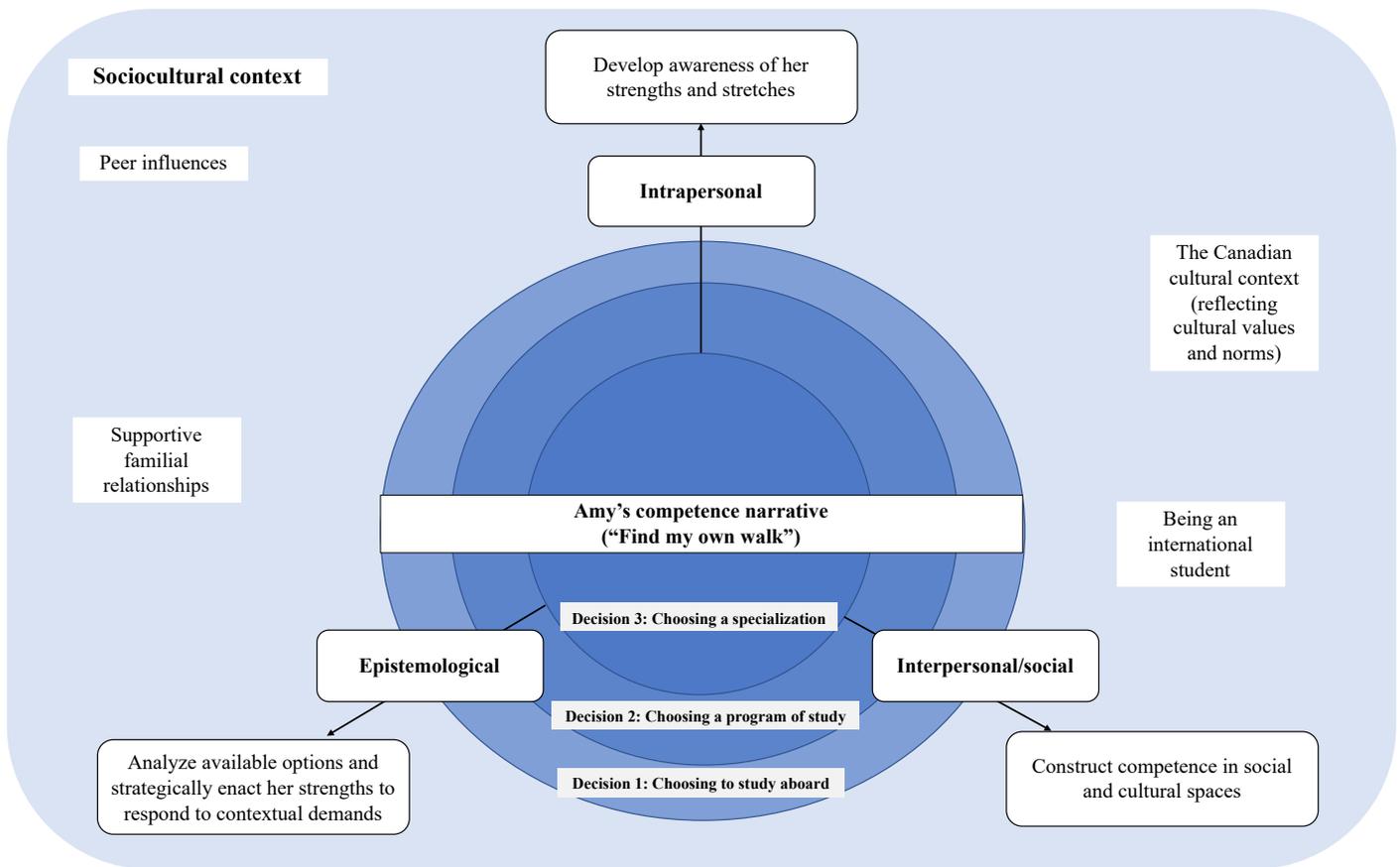
*I think the meaning of life, or the happiest moment that we can possibly experience, is when you stop doing what you don't enjoy doing to pursue what you are passionate about. You first need to finish the job that you're supposed to do and then you can go and pursue your hobby, your true passion. That's where I think the true meaning of life lies. For example, I like photography. I enjoy traveling to different places and taking photos in my leisure time. I want to travel the world one day with my camera.*

Amy's narrative trajectory may seem to have some similarities with the cyclical trajectory in the passion narrative (represented by Xiaoya's story about pursuing her passion in sociology), as Amy demonstrated a gradual clarification of her own path through her three pivotal choices (i.e., choosing to study abroad, entering the commerce program, and choosing accounting as her major). However, Amy's trajectory differs from Xiaoya's in the following aspects. First, Amy's story is about "finding her path", whereas Xiaoya had found her passion prior to university and followed

that path from the beginning. Therefore, the fact that the passion is ever present distinguishes Xiaoya's passion narrative from Amy's competence narrative. Second, Amy's choices were pragmatic, as she was looking for a path that ensures success (e.g., "Perhaps I should walk a path that I can be good at"), whereas students like Xiaoya who followed their passion viewed challenges and failures as tests of their determination and persisted through them. Lastly, Amy did not need her education and career path to be her passion path. Instead, her passion narrative (i.e., her passion for photography) lies outside her academic life. These comparisons indicate narrative types may not be mutually exclusive and, as was the case for Amy one person may have multiple threads of narrative types (i.e., an academic/education narrative and a personal passion narrative). The implications regarding the openness of the narrative types will be further discussed in the next chapter (See section: Rethinking self-authorship development through a sociocultural lens.)

**Representing Amy's Self-Authoring.** Amy's story about her important decisions demonstrated consistent patterns of the competence narrative. The decisions Amy described focused on the domain of academic growth and professional development. In this particular domain, Amy's need for competence is a persistent theme. Amy's competence narrative trajectory is context oriented. Specially, Amy's meaning making emphasized how she construed her level of competence in specific situations and relationships. Each decision provided a rich context for Amy to engage in the self-authoring process: to make a wise choice, Amy had to deliberate affordances and constrains of each available option, consider different aspects of her strengths and challenges, and take strategic action to "find her walk" and continue grow as a person. Amy's competence narrative and its connection to self-authorship is illustrated in Figure 4.4 (see below).

**Figure 4.4 Amy's Competence Narrative and Connections to Self-Authorship**



Amy developed her competence narrative across three different decision-making contexts: choosing to study abroad, choosing her program of study, and choosing accounting as her specialization. These decisions together profoundly impacted her sense of self and her choice of her current life path. In the epistemological domain, for each decision, Amy evaluated the opportunities and challenges offered by each option and made a wise choice based on her perceived competence in that specific context (e.g., enacting her strengths to experience success). For example, Amy chose to study abroad because she felt competent about her English language skills to achieve her goals, and because she felt confident that she could effectively cope with the moderate stress level in the preparation process. In the intrapersonal domain, Amy demonstrated exploration of various aspects of her personal strengths and stretches. Being aware of her strengths and limitations

allowed her to make strategic choices about her academic and professional development. The interpersonal/social domain reflected the influence of cultural context and social relationships in shaping Amy's competence narrative. One instance was that Amy integrated different perspectives into consideration when navigating different options (e.g., her father's advice on her university program, career prospects of accounting). As another example, Amy perceived her English language skills as a strength when she decided to study abroad, whereas in the Canadian context, she perceived English as her second language a constrain when choosing her specialization.

In terms of sociocultural influences, peer influences were evident in Amy's competence narrative. For example, Amy did not choose marketing or finance as her specialization because she was concerned her linguistic and social competences might position her in disadvantage when competing with English native speakers. Also, Amy's parents were supportive of her autonomy. This allowed Amy to explore a career path of her own choice. Furthermore, the cultural context in which Amy was situated also shaped the formation of her competence narrative. Specifically, as an international student studying at a Canadian university, Amy had to navigate implicit cultural norms and values to determine what kind of competence is key to success in that particular context (e.g., her emphasis on cultivating "soft skills") and deliberately cultivate the valued competences in order to achieve her goals.

#### **4.3.2 The Relationship-Oriented Trajectory: Maomao's Story**

I met Maomao in one of the university's dining halls before her trip to a job interview in her home province. Maomao was a fourth-year Chinese undergraduate student studying Chinese literature at the Chinese university. She was in the pre-service teacher program and she wanted to become a Chinese language arts teacher in secondary school after graduation. Maomao was born and raised in a rural village in central China. She then left home and attended high school in a larger county close to the capital of the province, Wuhan, to receive better education. As her

parents were both migrant workers who were away from home most of the time, Maomao grew up with her grandparents. For this reason, Maomao developed a close relationship with her grandparents. She is particularly emotionally attached to her grandmother. Maomao viewed her grandfather as the authoritative figure in her family. Her grandfather played a significant role in her and her younger brother's education. He held high hopes for his grandchildren. Maomao described her grandfather as a strict disciplinarian. She reflected on her grandfather's influence on her personality:

我的学习、生活基本上都是他安排的，因为他是一个特别严厉的人，他就是会对你束缚很多，就是会让我变得比较胆小软弱的那种性格，然后还有他要求比较严，所以就形成了一些习惯，不会睡懒觉这些。因为他们比较传统的那种，他们自己养成了（这些习惯），所以他希望在我们身上也要得到这种延续。

*He arranged my studies and other parts of my life for me. He is a very strict person. He has set expectations for how you are supposed to behave. I think it has shaped the timidity and softness in my personality. He is very strict with us, so [under his influence] we have formed good habits, like getting up early, no sleeping in. People like him are very conservative and set in their ways, so they expect our behaviors to align with their standards.*

Maomao's grandfather participated in most of her major life decisions. It seemed natural for Maomao to consider her grandfather's expectations and perspectives when making important decisions. Unlike her grandfather, Maomao's parents showed more respect for her own will:

我觉得他们有时候还不是还没有到启发那么高度，他们就是想让我自己去选择，可能他们就是因为他觉得他们选的我也不一定喜欢，我也想我有想过，可能是因为我爷爷管的比较多，然后因为我爸爸他小时候也是在爷爷身边长大，所以他不想让我这样子。

*They are not at the level of giving your guidance to help you find what you want, but they want me to make my own decisions. Perhaps they know I may not like what they choose for me. I suppose having grown up with my grandpa, who manages everything for his children, my father wouldn't want that for me.*

In our interview, Maomao primarily focused on reflecting her recent job-hunting experiences. She was in the process of applying and interviewing for teaching positions in secondary schools. Maomao considered her job choice as a collective decision that involved her closed family members. For this reason, she had to consider various points of view from different family members along with her own individual will. She elaborated her need for competence through her struggles of balancing her familial expectations and her personal needs and interests. Her competence narrative therefore is oriented by her relationships with closed family members.

**Developing an Inner Voice.** In general, Maomao demonstrated development of her inner voice in university, which was reflected in how she viewed her emerging identity as a teacher. It has always been Maomao's wish to become a Chinese teacher. Upon entering university, Maomao chose the pre-service teacher education program, which is a four-year program that offers a specialization in a subject area. Maomao chose Chinese language arts as her major because she was inspired by her Chinese teacher in high school:

*我高中的时候的一个语文老师，她性格特别温和，我喜欢的那种性格，她语文教得特别好，然后我就想我也想要成为那样的人。*

*I was inspired by my Chinese teacher in high school. I like her gentle and approachable personality, and she teaches Chinese well. I want to become a person like her.*

Her decision was supported by family members, particularly her grandfather, who was a teacher himself and considered teaching as “a desirable profession for girls”. Maomao continued to be influenced by many inspirational teachers in her university. They introduced her to innovative

pedagogical practices and teaching philosophies beyond conventional methods that she experienced in school. She expressed feeling encouraged and supported by those mentors as well as the nurturing academic culture at the university:

老师们都很鼓励你，我觉得[大学名称]整体的氛围都是那样子，让你可以去做自己。

*Instructors are very supportive here. The whole culture of the university is like that: you are encouraged to be yourself.*

Maomao reflected on how university education and positive influences from her teachers developed her ideas about the kind of teacher she wants to become:

我以前是知道我想做老师，但是现在我想做一个有[大学名称]特色的老师。不再用传统的那种，要用比较新的[那种方法去教学生]。你要善于去接受那种新的观念。另一个我觉得还是要学会一直学习，我想成为那种[老师]，就是会自己写文章，会读很多的书，然后并且可以和学生一起探讨。我会读很多书，然后学生也会读很多书，这样大家有一个那种探讨，就喜欢这样子。还有就是，因为我说以前我高中老师影响我，我也想成为去成为影响我的学生的那样的一个老师。然后还有一个就是生活得很好，就是不说这个职业不好，很快就直接职业懈怠，每天就像黄脸婆那样子。我希望就算工作，就是会很热爱它。

*I've always knew that I want to become a teacher, but now, on the top of that, I want to be a teacher who embodies the qualities that I learned here. You don't want to stick to outdated teaching strategies. You'd want to be adaptable to new ways of teaching. And I want to continue my learning, be a learner myself. I want to be the kind of teacher who writes a lot, reads a lot, and enjoys discussions with students. For example, I will read a lot of books, so will my students, and we'll get together to discuss what we've read. I'd enjoy that. Because I was inspired by my high school teachers, I'd like to be someone who can influence my students too. I also want to enjoy teaching. I mean I don't want to burn out from*

*professional fatigue. I don't want to wear a stern face and complaining about work all day. I want to love what I do, be passionate about my job.*

**Negotiating a Balance Between Her Own Voice and the Voices of Others.** For the reasons she described above, Maomao wanted to work at a school that encourages new ways of teaching and learning. However, when she started applying for jobs, she found the reality more complicated than she previously anticipated. In addition to her own interests, Maomao had to consider multiple pragmatic factors (e.g., salary, distance from home, staff welfare) and coordinate different opinions in her family when exploring her choices of school. First, Maomao did not consider her job choice (e.g., what kind of school she should apply for) as an individual decision. Instead, she viewed it as a collective decision that involved her close family members. Maomao spoke about how she considered her choice of school in relation to other family members:

因为现在的事情都是家里有关系的，它就不是我个人，就是完全独立的选择。虽然是我自己在这个过程中，但是我会考虑，一个是和家里边的距离，还有他们的接受程度什么的。就比如他们可能会想要有编制什么的，这个是我爷爷比较在乎的。还有和家里边的距离，我爸爸虽然说你可以去想去的，但是他说还是希望我可以离家近一点什么的，然后妈妈就不会这样子，妈妈她可能就会比较尊重。

*(Referring to her choice of school) All that I am dealing with involves my family. It's not a matter of my own independent choice. Although I am going through the process of myself, I always consider, for example, how far it is from my family and whether they would approve my choice. They want me to work at a school that offers stability and good welfare, which particularly concerns my grandfather. In terms of distance from home, my father wants me to stay closer to home, although he expressed that he would support my own decision. My mother on the other hand is respectful of my own will.*

The schools that Maomao's family, particularly her grandfather, wanted her to work at (e.g., schools that are less competitive, more conservative, and closer to where her family is) do not suit

her own needs for professional development, whereas the schools that Maomao preferred (e.g., schools that are more progressive and more competitive; schools like these are far away from her home) might not be favored by other family members. Maomao reflected on this dilemma she faced:

我觉得这个其实就是会让人迷茫的一种来源。因为有时候你特别想要满足别人对你的期待，然后但是自己也不想委屈自己，所以这时候就觉得，好像对自己的要求更高，但是要求更高，有时候你的能力又达不到那个要求。

*Here is where you could potentially feel lost, as you want to satisfy other's expectations, but at the same time, you don't want to compromise your own needs [by complying to their will]. Every time I think about this tension, I'd expect more of myself, but my current abilities don't allow me to meet that expectation.*

Elaborating on that, Maomao further explained:

就比如家里面可能想要你去一个公办的那种、特别传统的学校，但这时候我想去一个那种和我自己比较符合的，就是那种特别开放的那种氛围的学校。这时候有一个很好的公办的学校，它又符合你自己的期待，又符合父母的期待。但是你就想要去那样的学校，你本来能够达到的水平是B级，这时候你想去A级，那么你对自己要求就要更高，如果你的能力暂时没达到的话，就会陷入那种很迷茫，就不知道该怎么办。

*For example, my family want me to work at a traditional public high school, but I want to work at a school that suits my needs, a school that is open to new ways of teaching. Then say there's a good public school that offers what you want and meets your family's expectations. Naturally you want to work at a school like that. But now your competence is still at, say, level-B, but the school you want to work at demands level-A competence. [To be able to work at that school] you have to expect more of yourself, but when your abilities are not there yet, you feel lost. You don't know what to do.*

By the point of our interview, Maomao had applied for teaching positions at several schools that potentially satisfy both her family and her own expectations, but she had not been successful in these applications. In the group interviews, she met other teacher candidates who demonstrated strong competence in the subject area and excellent teaching performance. This is perhaps why she perceived her current level of competence does not fully allow her to pursue what she wants without compromising meeting her familial expectations.

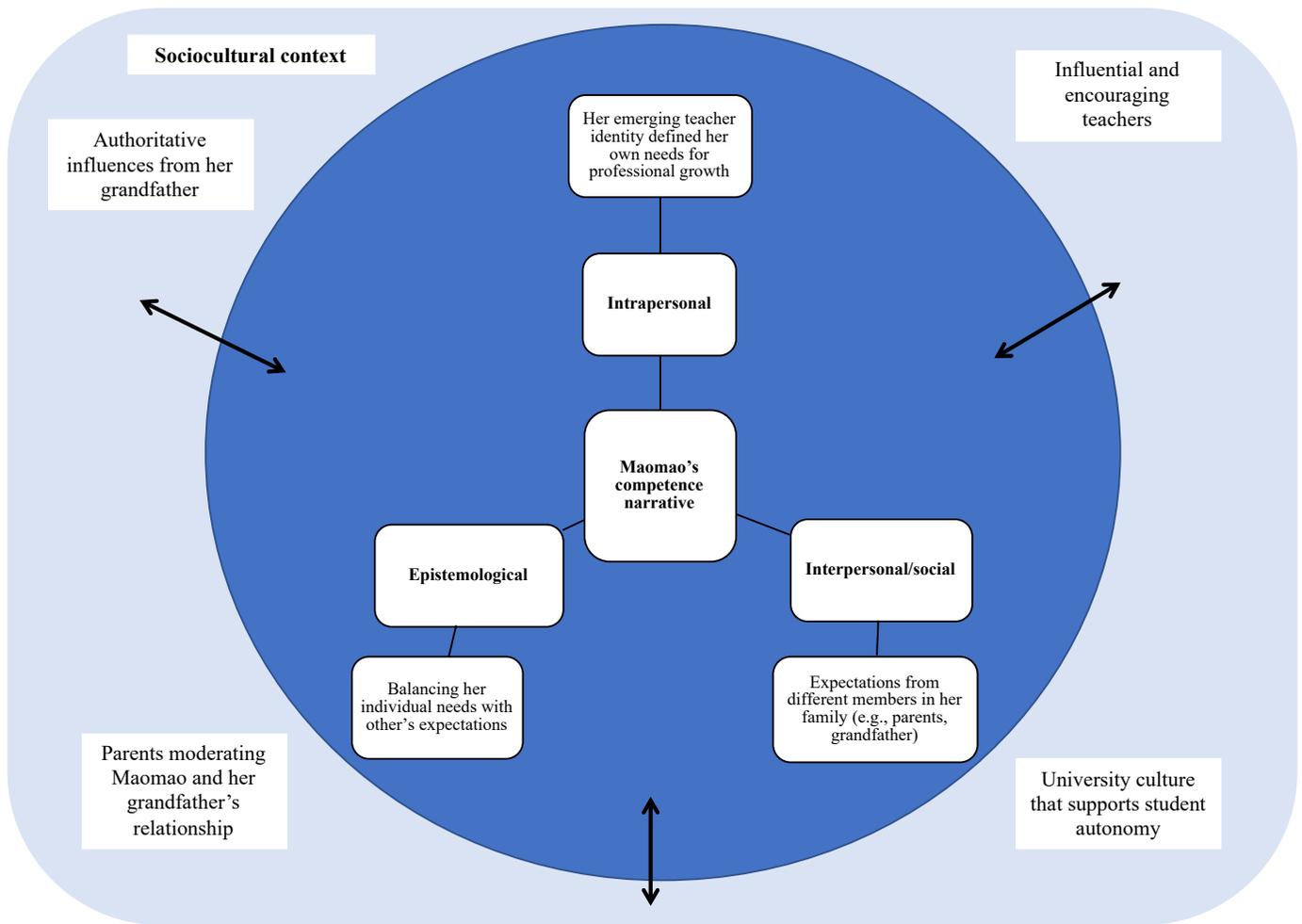
At the end of our interview, Maomao discussed how she might coordinate different voices in her family with her own voice when time has come to make a final decision:

就是说怎么去平衡的话，我觉得我父母这时候可能就是一个调剂的作用，因为我可能会首先去考虑我的爷爷是怎么想的，然后我父母可能就是说你想想你自己想的。我觉得最后可能还是会根据自己原来想的那样走，但是如果更多可能的话也会去考虑别人的看法，然后也会想去说服别人，因为你怕得不到别人的支持。

*In terms of balancing, I think my parents are moderating my relationship with my grandfather, because I will still always consider what my grandfather thinks first, but then my parents will remind me to think for myself. So at this point, I will probably stick to my original plan. But if I could have more choices, I will consider other's perspectives. I want to convince them, because I'm afraid not having their support of my decision.*

**Representing Maomao's Self-Authoring.** Different from Amy who constructed her competence narrative across various decision-making context, Maomao's competence narrative revolved around her relationship with her closed family members. Specifically, Maomao's sense of competence was based on both fulfilling familial expectations and fulfilling her own needs for personal and professional development. Maomao's competence narrative and its connections to self-authorship is illustrated in Figure 4.5 (see below).

**Figure 4.5 Maomao's Competence Narrative and Connections to Self-Authorship**



As illustrated in figure 4.5, in the intrapersonal domain was Maomao's emerging identity as a teacher. This new identity she developed in university defined her own needs for professional growth, which was expressed in her preference for innovative schools that are open to new ways of teaching. The interpersonal/social domain reflected the expectations from different family members, including her parents and grandfather. Therefore, in the epistemological domain, Maomao experienced struggles as she tried to balance her own individual needs for development and other's expectations, particularly when she felt her current level of competence was limiting her to satisfy both. The focus of Maomao's self-authoring process was to coordinate different

familial perspectives that she valued and negotiate a balance among those different voices. As she expressed in the last excerpt in the previous section, at the point of data collection, she chose to prioritize her personal needs with considerations of familial expectations.

In terms of sociocultural influences, as explained above, family expectations, particularly her grandfather's authoritative influences, were most evident in Maomao's competence narrative. Her parents, on the other hand, tried to moderate Maomao's relationship with her grandfather by encouraging Maomao to think and choose for herself. Meanwhile, Maomao highlighted how her emerging identity was profoundly impacted by the nourishing, autonomy-promoting university culture and influential teachers she had in the past. These positive influences motivated her to explore who she wanted to be as a teacher and as a holistic person.

#### **4.4 Beyond the Horizon: "Outlier" Stories**

Stories have boundaries. Stories have power to connect people, but also can create alienation and otherness (Frank, 2010, 2012). As narrative researchers, we can easily collect stories that share familiar narrative resources with those of our own. Those stories respond effectively to our cues and we understand them immediately upon hearing them. However, there are stories beyond our horizons. Despite exhaustive strategies we apply to "get" the story, we struggle to surface it. The utterances we manage to elicit seem disconnected, discursive, even sometimes meaningless. It does not look like a story, as it lacks clear character types, plotlines, and tropes that are commonly used to identify a story (Frank, 2012). In my research, I encountered two stories like this. I was unable to clarify a narrative type for them given the reasons I described above. However, I recognized dismissing the stories might risk finalization of participants' voices. Dialogical analysis taught me to listen to these stories with an open mind and use them as pivotal points of reflexivity. I asked myself: What did the stories tell me about the limits of my own horizon? And

perhaps more importantly: How did these stories call on me to shift my horizon so that I can maintain a dialogue with them?

In this section, I present the two stories that I struggled to surface from the interviews. I examine how my own story, including my personal experiences, theoretical perspectives, and methodological commitments, shaped my interaction with and representation of the stories. I acknowledged that my current horizon limited me to fully understand the stories, and thus I opened them for further dialogue.

#### **4.4.1 Lynn: “I Am Afraid I Don’t Have Anything Interesting for You.”**

Lynn was a third-year Chinese international student studying economics at the Canadian university. I connected with her through one of my graduate colleagues at the Canadian university, who was Lynn’s high school teacher and was pursuing her graduate degree at the Canadian university. Perhaps what made Lynn come to our meeting was more to do my colleague a favor than her interest in sharing her story. This can be inferred from her response to my study invitation: after reading the study information and the consent form, Lynn told me: “I can do the interviews, but I am afraid I don’t have anything interesting for you”. I wondered what made her think she did not have a story to tell. I assured Lynn that anything she shared would be valuable and appreciated without judgement. She signed the consent form and agreed to participate in the study.

In our subsequent conversations, I learned that Lynn was born in Hunan province in central China and moved to a metropolitan city on the South Coast, Shenzhen. There, Lynn completed her schooling before university. She attended public schools before grade 10 and studied at an international school from Grade 10 to Grade 12. Lynn didn’t think herself as a particularly interesting case for my study. She described herself as an “ordinary”, “obedient” student throughout most of her school years. In school, she was well behaved, never broke rules or acted out, but she admitted that she was never keen about studying. As usual, I opened the focal

interview with broad prompts asking for her decision to study abroad, important university experiences, and personal growth. However, these questions did not have the effect on Lynn in ways that I normally anticipated.

When talking about her parental influences, Lynn considered her father having a key role in “determining the big picture” of her life. She seemed to have the idea of a supposed-to-be life trajectory since a young age:

像我觉得大方向一直都是他定的……就是说是肯定要念完大学，或者研究生，然后以后去从事经济方面的工作。这个大方向，我感觉从小我就是有这个观念，从初中开始的样子……就是进银行、投行工作。

*The big picture has been decided by him [referring to her father] ... have to at least finish college, preferably graduate school, and then get a job that has something to do with economics. I seemed to have this big picture in mind since I was young, maybe since middle school ... yeah, like working at a financial or investment bank.*

Lynn related her future plans with her father’s influence without indicating her own thoughts or feelings about it. I further inquired her attitude toward “the plan”. With hesitance in between, Lynn responded in utterances, which I pieced together here (I had to probe for clarification in between her responses):

我不太清楚……就是我没有想过别的样子，就我……我以前我小时候说很想当医生，因为我爷爷就是医生，以后来后来……就不知道，就没这个想法了，然后我主要我也不知道说从事金融会是什么样一种状态，我也不太……我也不知道……然后我以前就是不想想这个问题，我也不知道自己要干嘛……就是对未来那些事情……我都会很焦虑，我不管是……我哪怕想到说我要不要上研究生这个问题，我都很焦虑。所以我前两年就是别人问我上不上研究生，我一直都说我等大三以后，我再来想这个事情。现在必须要想，就是我是那种……有点不到万不得已，不去干，有点拖延，算是拖延症吧，我很拖延症……我现在就是说，我自己知道说我没有办法去……规避它，我只能受着。这种观念是我差不多……我也是大学的时候，去年

吧，才慢慢有这种说，说你要是自己一个人觉得难过了，遇到什么事情了，你没有办法了，你就只能去面对它，就把这种（焦虑）感情去把自己自己用消化掉就好。

*I am not sure ... I never really think about other possibilities ... I considered becoming a doctor when I was young. My grandpa was a doctor. Then...I don't know, and such idea disappeared as I grew older... And I am also not sure what it would be like working in financial institutions ... I don't know ... I didn't want to think about these things before. And I don't know what I want ... like things in the future...I feel anxious about it. Like graduate school, I feel anxious about making that decision [whether to apply for graduate school]. When I was asked that question two years ago, I would say I'll decide when I get to third year. Now I kinda have to decide it...I am that kind of person who procrastinates a lot... Now I know I cannot procrastinate anymore. I know it. So, I have to endure the anxiety. Last year, I became aware that if you are upset because of something that you don't have a solution for, you have to face it on your own: You have to learn to digest your anxiety.*

Lynn's story seemed to struggle to emerge because, in her words, she seemed to have accepted a pre-determined story imposed by her father and did not consider how life might look different outside that possibility (e.g., "I never really think about other possibilities"). Further, she also seemed to lack concrete ideas about the possibility she accepted as her only choice (e.g., "*And I am also not sure what it would be like working in financial institutions*"). At this point, she was unsure about what she wants for her life and she felt anxious when being forced to pursue an answer to that question. Her story is lost in her voice/lack of voice.

Lynn found it challenging to think of pivotal university experiences or transformative personal growth. After pausing to think, Lynn elaborated one lesson she learned in university:

很重要的事情……我觉得，没有什么‘很’重要的事情，但是就是那种……就可能平时那种每次考试的时候，然后感觉有点自己……就是没准备，我是那种留要留到蛮晚才开始学习的那种，然后每次都就是……复习时间不够，平时学得也不扎实。然后我从慢慢就会觉得说平时也要……很多事情是循序渐进，不是说你一下子就可以，你就一口吃成胖子！我觉得这一点是学到的。但是虽然前两年也没有怎么实践吧，但是确实是有这种比较深刻的这种感觉。

*Important experiences ... I don't think there are anything 'very' important ... Maybe around the time of exams, I always felt like ... not prepared. I always procrastinated till the last minute ... I didn't have enough time to do revisions every time, and I didn't learn the content very well during the term. Then I came to realize maybe I should study harder because learning takes time. You cannot have it all just by pulling a full-nighter. So I guess I've learned that lesson, though I don't put it into practice much in the past two years, but I am already aware of its importance.*

Lynn expressed her awareness of the importance of taking responsibility for her own learning, though she found it hard to implement it in practice. She further explained her lack of proactivity in studying:

对，然后最后就干什么事情都就是更主动一点……到现在可能说自己真正经历了，然后自己这么一点点悟出来，干什么事情还是要去主动，多去问啊，然后因为我平时基本上就关于课业的信息，都是基本上说……我基本上都有朋友跟我一起上课，然后就不是他们告诉我的，不怎么会去主动了解这些事。就可能说今天有作业就这样，这几周做要 due 啊，然后都是他们告诉我的。所以我觉得还是要主动一点，然后自己多去了解，然后上课先做好准备那种，就是要自己有准备一点。

*Yeah, should be more proactive. Maybe now I have learned the importance of it from experiences. I became more aware of it every time – you should be proactive. Ask if you don't know ... Normally, I get the information about my courses from my friends who take the courses with me. If they don't tell me, I wouldn't know about that information. I don't*

*really gather these things by myself. For example, if an assignment is due a certain week, I would be told about this by others. So I guess I should be proactive. Try to learn these things myself. Be more prepared for classes.*

I found my current horizon limiting when encountering accounts like the two excerpts above. The story cue I often used to invite stories (i.e., pivotal university experiences) seemed ineffective with Lynn. Unlike participants who might already have a well-rehearsed story waiting to be told, Lynn's response to my question seemed somewhat forced to serve my researcher's interest. Lynn talked about her developing awareness of taking initiative in her studies, but this specific lesson she learned seemed isolated from other parts of her story, which I was unable to capture. In other words, I got a response to my question, but I didn't get Lynn's story. My pre-existing assumption about self-authoring surfaced as I interacted with these accounts: everyone must have certain important experiences in college to teach them about who they are and who they might become. Apparently, the framing of my research and my ways of questioning may naturally favor stories about exciting incidents and transformative growth than stories like Lynn's, which might be hidden and unheard.

In terms of personal growth, Lynn spoke about her becoming more independent in her life (e.g., moving to a new apartment, paying bills), more open-minded and less judgmental (e.g., *"I used to judge others quickly, though I didn't talk about it, but now I wouldn't judge others ... I may have developed a 'don't-mind-other's-business' attitude."*), more capable to regulate negative emotions (e.g., *"Maybe now I have to face a lot of things on my own. May feel upset sometimes, but I need to cope with it by myself anyway."*) Similarly, Lynn talked about these aspects of growth as isolated incidents in response to my questions. The connections between different incidents and whether these incidents were relevant to the shaping of her beliefs, identity, and relationships remained unclear to me.

Returning to Lynn's words at the beginning, "I am afraid I don't have anything interesting for you", did Lynn think she did not have a story worth telling? If a person's story struggles to take a narratable form, is self-authoring still possible to that person? Self-authoring depends on narrative resources, which we access through our context. These resources give our stories narrative forms and expand our imagination possible ways to author our story. Maybe Lynn has a story that was hidden beyond my current horizon. Maybe the story is still forming and has not yet taken a fully narratable form. Lynn said she hadn't considered other possibilities about her life other than the one her father depicted for her. Perhaps she could use additional narrative resources to explore how her stories could be otherwise. By providing various possibilities of self-authoring, I hope my research provided narrative resources, not immediately available to Lynn in her current context, to help her develop her future story.

#### **4.4.2 Fiona: "I Understand Your Point of Asking Me Those Questions, But I May Not Have the Answers You Want."**

I found it particularly challenging to engage with Fiona's story at first because of its unfamiliarity. Unlike previous stories I collected, Fiona's story seemed not to prioritize "growth" as a central theme. She could identify an important university experience and yet did not perceive personal growth as an integral part of that experience. As my engagement deepened, I eventually had an epiphany moment. I noticed that it was impossible for me to hear her story properly if I kept trying to fit it into my current horizon. Instead, I had to examine why my current horizon (i.e., the stories I held on to) limited my capacity to fully comprehend her story. Therefore, Fiona's story became a pivotal point of my horizon shifting.

Fiona was in her fifth year at the Canadian university. She had a combined major in Computer Science and Statistics. She participated in the Co-Op program (i.e., a one-year professional experience at local companies within a Science program) in her third year and was

near the end of her second internship at a technology company when I met her. Fiona was born and raised in a middle-class Chinese family in a developed medium-sized city on the East coast of China. Her parents were supportive of her autonomy throughout her education. Her school experience before university was positive. She described herself as a well-behaved, good student, as she wanted to maintain a good image in front of teachers and parents.

I was unable to identify a focal story from Fiona's interview at first because I was "caught up" in my own story as well as the stories I previously collected. In those familiar stories, many participants presented their character as motivated, adventurous, and purpose oriented. Growth, challenges, dissonances, and conflicts seemed to dominate the themes of most stories. The storyteller's meaning making of those elements reveals salient traces of their self-authoring processes. Through their narrative construction, they articulated who they are, who they want to become, and what they perceive as a meaningful life. In that regard, Fiona's story looked nothing like that. She did not seem to perceive an external, future-oriented purpose outside her present living itself. She expressed that she enjoyed a more relaxing, comfortable lifestyle and never forced herself to do things that make her uncomfortable:

我是自己会想去做我自己喜欢的事情，如果我觉得这个事情我自己不觉得……觉得不舒服的话，我不会强迫自己就要去干什么。

*I do things that I enjoy. If I think something would make me uncomfortable, I wouldn't force myself onto it.*

Even growing up in the highly competitive Chinese education system, unlike other Chinese students who tend to feel stressed in the exam-oriented academic environment, Fiona was able to regulate external stressors and maintain a stable positive state of mind:

考试压力的话，我倒觉得还好。而且我觉得如果高考没考好的话，也可以考第二次，就我自己一个人，我自己个人是感觉不太能感觉到压力的，就算我觉得我这个时候应

该有压力，但是我自己还是会让自己放松，因为觉得，嗯，没有什么可以比自己，让自己在这段时间里面尽量可能让自己在这段时间里面会轻松一点，愉快一点，就克服过去，你不要很辛苦。

*I don't think exam pressure is that big of a problem for me. I'd think if I did poorly in Gao Kao, I could take it again the next year. I am the kind of person who doesn't feel the level of stress as many others do. Even when I do feel stressed, I will try to calm myself down, because ... I don't think there's anything more important than making yourself feel a bit more relaxed, comfortable, and happy during those stressful times. And that state of mind will help you overcome [challenges] ... Just don't make life even harder for yourself.*

She described her university life as “relaxing” and “delightful”. She found her choice of studying aboard and the social and academic culture of Canadian education fitting her preferable lifestyle:

我觉得对于我来说，还挺喜欢我出国留学的决定。但我觉得如果在国内留学的话，在国内大学的话，可能会更积极一点，因为大家那个时候比如说准备4级、6级，然后你看那些朋友都在考什么证，因为感觉国内的人那种比较 peer pressure 比较多，然后那种可能在大学的时候就已经感觉到自己毕业之后想要做什么，或者有个很明确的目标，但在这里的话，就没有。所以如果我在国内可能就是推动你自己自主能力，然后比较可能上进，在这里的话可能比较放松。

*I liked my decision to study aboard. If I studied at a Chinese university, I would imagine I'd be more proactive. For example, you may have to prepare for English Level-Four and Level-Six exams.<sup>9</sup> Or you may know friends who are working hard to get their professional certifications. I feel like there's a lot more peer pressure in China. And you may [feel pressured to] start planning for your future quite early in university, or you may need to have clearer goals for your life, but here in Canada, it's not like that. So if I*

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<sup>9</sup> They are two standardized English language level exams that university students have to take in China to graduate university.

*studied in China, maybe I would [be forced to] be more goal-driven, but here, I could be more relaxed.*

Fiona identified two major components of her university life, academic studies and leisure time outside school. She adapted well to the high level of autonomy in the Canadian higher education as she liked to arrange her academic work at her own pace. She learned to take control of her studies (e.g., selecting courses that fit the pace of her life, keeping her academic work organized). She found taking ownership of her own learning was natural and intuitive, rather than challenging:

挑战？我觉得不算，因为我个人的话比较喜欢这样子的生活。就是如果有我认识的人，我熟悉的人，可以跟我一起上课，也很不错，但是如果没有这样的人，我一去上课，我自己也会觉得是一个就可以很轻松，然后就可以随缘认识新的朋友在课上，我觉得也很不错。

*Challenging? I don't think it's challenging [referring to organizing her studies at her own pace], because I like doing things this way. If there's someone I know who take the same course with me, that's great, but if there's no one I know of, I can go to classes by myself, and I can feel very relaxed. Maybe I would meet new people in classes. I am fine with either of the scenarios.*

On weekends Fiona enjoyed spending time with friends and exploring local restaurants with them. She appreciated the connections she shared with her friends, but she would not force herself to fit into certain social groups (e.g., *"You go with the flow, as long as you are happy with the social circle you have. I don't force myself to make friends."*). Furthermore, she also explained she did not feel particularly lonely when studying abroad: *"I can stay home for a long time. If I miss home, I call my parents. And the nature is beautiful here, so I don't miss home as much."*

When I asked if she ever considered what kind of life she wants to live or what kind of person she wants to become, she gave me a response that I did not anticipate:

我觉得看个人，还要看你身边的朋友是怎么样的人，如果你身边的朋友是会经常去想这些的，但你可能也会这样子，但是如果你身边的朋友，就是周末的时候约你去爬个山，吃个饭，吃个早茶那种，你们可能就不会这样子。我就还好，挺轻松的。我自己不喜欢给自己的压力。所以我就我觉得，如果你每天想着说，我自己要去怎样才可以怎样的话，就会很疲惫，精神压力就会很紧绷。

*I guess it depends on your own personality, also the people around you. If people around you always think about that kind of things [referring to people who always think ahead and plan for their future], you'd be like that too, but if they are the kind of people who enjoy hiking and eating great food, you probably wouldn't consider those things. I am a very chill person. I don't like to put too much pressure on myself. So if you are always thinking about you have to do something to live a certain life, to be certain kind of person, you'll feel exhausted. You'll be stressed out.*

Fiona's narration style was completely different from those I encountered before. As illustrated in accounts above, she seemed not to perceive an extraneous purpose outside her present life. A persisting theme in her story was to make her current life enjoyable and free of undue concerns.

Nevertheless, Fiona did identify her Co-Op experience as significant during her time at university. Through this opportunity, she began to experience life outside university (e.g., “stepping into the real society”, commuting to work) and build relationships with colleagues from diverse age and racial groups. She had a positive experience with her first internship experience:

我 team 很好，我的 manager 就很好，然后那些组员都很好，所以收获了那种平常就其他地方可能收获不到那种友谊，我就包括现在算是我现在离开了，但是我还会跟他们一起，比如说我们一周会约一次饭，然后有时候会晚上聊天，就是吃完饭之后，我们上个礼拜，然后在咖啡厅里面坐着聊天，聊到晚上 10 点，然后听他们说一些，他们 career 的一些事情，听他们的生活经历，然后我就觉得这样的话，是你学生时代肯定是你接触不到，因为他们年纪不一样嘛。然后我感觉他们也对我很好，比较 nice，就给我很多建议。

*My team was really nice: my manager and team members are good people. I've built friendships that otherwise I wouldn't have on other occasions. Even I've left the company, I still hang out with them. We have weekly gatherings. Sometimes we'll talk until late night. Like last week we talked for hours in a café until around 10 pm. I listened to them chatting about their careers and life experiences. These are things that you wouldn't have exposure to when you're just a student, because they're older than you. They are really nice to me and give me good life advice.*

Reflecting on her Co-Op experience, Fiona expressed that she developed a more solid understanding of her career trajectory:

我觉得主要是对之后你自己的一个职业生涯有了一个更清楚的认识。比如说你可以知道你之后会跟怎么样的人去有接触，你会知道有什么东西你要注意，然后你会知道有哪些不同的，比如说等级，然后有不同的薪资，然后你要怎么做，可以晋升，然后还有之后可能还有管理层，就各种。

*I think after Co-Op, you'd have a better understanding of your career. For example, you'll know what kind of people you will be working with and how to work with them. You'll know things you need to pay attention to. You'll know the differences between different positions and different level of salaries. You'll know what you need to do to get promoted, to become a manager. Things like that.*

However, when asked about her personal growth through the Co-Op program, she did not perceive personal change and growth as an integral part of the experience. Though I attempted to change the way I asked about that question throughout the interview, Fiona's responses remained unchanged. I presented two incidents as below. The first incident was when she was invited to reflect on her Co-Op experience:

心珂：你刚刚说从开始实习以后，从学校的环境就完全跨出来到社会的环境，你觉得在从学生到慢慢的转向一个社会人的这么一个阶段中，你有什么样的成长吗？

*Xinke: You spoke about your transition from university to the real world. What kind of growth did you experience in the transitioning process from being a student to becoming a social person?*

Fiona：什么样的成长？[疑惑]

*Fiona: What kind of growth [with confusion]?*

心珂：或者改变？或者觉得自己就不太一样了的地方？

*Xinke: Or do you think yourself has changed after the experience? Did you notice something different about yourself?*

Fiona：没有觉得自己有什么不太一样，但是就是我觉得我没有觉得自己不太一样的地方。

*Fiona: I don't think there's anything changed about myself. No, I don't think so.*

心珂：心态上有变化吗？

*Xinke: Do you think your mindset has changed at all?*

Fiona：也还好，因为别人看到我同事看到我的话也是一个在校生，然后出来做实习这样子。然后我看到我自己出来做一个事情，也不会给自己太大的压力，说一定要把……我一定要比如说早到或者晚走，我一定要做的比 full time 要多或者要好，我没有这种。

*Fiona: Not really. People still see me as a student who's doing an internship outside school.*

*I don't put too much pressure on myself when doing the internship. I don't think [I have to prove myself by] working longer hours or doing a better job than full-time employees.*

The second incident showcased that Fiona did not perceive growth as part of her important lived experience when she talked about her decision to study in Canada:

心珂：你觉得对于中国留学生来说，在大学里面最关键的成长可能又有哪几个方面呢？

*Xinke: What are some key aspects of growth do you think it's important for Chinese international students during university?*

Fiona：最关键的成长？你说在这里读书来说？

*Fiona: Key aspects of growth? You mean studying here in Canada?*

*[Followed by a long pause]*

万：会有成长的感觉吗？

*Xinke: Do you think you've grown as a person in university?*

Fiona：我觉得还好诶，如果是成长的感觉的话，可能是随着人生阅历的增长，跟年纪的增长，你慢慢……如果你说这里，会有什么成长……我也说不出来。

*Fiona: Not really ... My understanding of 'growth' is that it's something that comes with the accumulation of your life experiences, which has something to do with your age ... If you're talking about how studying here in Canada specifically contributes to growth, I am not so sure...*

Fiona did not directly associate her growth as a person with either her Co-Op experience or studying at the Canadian university. She perceived the significance of the Co-Op program as an opportunity to develop her professional skills and career experiences, yet not her character strengths or professional and personal identities. She interpreted growth as an accumulative consequence of lived experiences, independent from the specific sociocultural context where she was currently situated.

Apparently, Fiona did not take up the story cues I embedded in the interview as anticipated. After the interview had concluded and the recorder was turned off, I asked Fiona whether she thought the questions I asked afforded relevance to her experience. She told me she understood my

intention of asking questions about personal growth and transformation during university. However, she did not particularly relate to those questions because she did not perceive these themes as central to her story. She further explained that she is the kind of person who “follows her heart”: she does not like put immense pressure on herself to plan for her future and obtain checkmarks on her list. She chose to prioritize her well-being in the present moment and live a comfortable lifestyle. Therefore, she knew her answers to my questions might not be what I wanted to hear.

My encounter with Fiona’s story prompted me to question the assumptions I held about self-authoring. Fiona’s story did not follow the typical growth-oriented storyline that was evident in the three narrative types I identified earlier. Fiona’s story may not support the assumption that self-authoring foregrounds personal transformation and that stories reconstruct the transformation to yield new meanings. For Fiona, growth might not be a prominent theme of self-authoring in her story. Perhaps, comfort could be a more salient theme in her story. She chose to prioritize her comfort in the present over pursuing a far-reaching purpose in the future. She could be whoever she already is (rather than striving to become a different version of herself) in her comfort zone. Return to her statement: *“if you are always thinking about you have to do something to live a certain life, to be certain kind of person, you’ll feel exhausted. You’ll be stressed out.”* Her story may seem static, hollow, even meaningless if I did not choose to shift my horizon to listen for alternative meanings embedded in the story. Her story may not easily fall into apparent narrative types of self-authoring, but I cannot pretend it was unheard. Thus, I left her story open for further dialogue.

#### **4.4.3 Opening “Outlier” Stories for Dialogue**

Both Lynn and Fiona’s story were “outliers”. In the framing of my research and the context of the interview, their stories did not fully emerge or effectively perform. As my practice of dialogical analysis deepened, I came to realize that this phenomenon was at least partially due to

my limited horizon that prevents me to fully comprehend the meaning of their stories. As I indicated in the previous chapter, I am an outsider to both Lynn and Fiona's experience, particularly their university experience. I spent my college years in a vastly different social and cultural context in China, and thus the experiences that shaped my own self-authoring might not be relevant to Lynn and Fiona. The narrative resources that I used to tell my story might be unheard of to Lynn and Fiona, and vice versa. Furthermore, my own personal story is different from both Lynn and Fiona's story. I have always been a goal-oriented person who plans for future. I pursue my goals diligently to achieve the milestones I set for myself. I prioritize hard work and proactivity over comfort in the present. I never stop thinking about what kind of person I want to become and what kind of life purpose I want to achieve. And I have surrounded myself with like-minded people who are self-reflective and purpose driven. These aspects of my personal story shaped my core sense of self and my own self-authoring process. I did not attune to Lynn and Fiona's story at first because they sounded unfamiliar and different from my own story. In this regard, King (2003) suggested that stories have interpretative openness: people can take a story and do whatever they want with them, except pretending they haven't heard the story. The same applied to narrative research, particularly dialogical narrative analysis. I could not pretend I never heard Lynn and Fiona's stories just because they shared few similarities with stories of my own and may not directly prove the point I wanted to claim in my research. Stories like Lynn's and Fiona's should be part of the dialogue, especially when they don't fall nicely into a narrative analyst's typology. Their voice should remain unfinalized and open for further interpretations.

#### **4.5 Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I presented findings with a focus on the narrative typology of self-authoring through my participants' stories. These stories provided rich insights into my inquiry questions. Firstly, the stories represented the kinds of lived experiences that potentially provoked self-

authoring processes for my participants and their meaning making of these experiences. These lived experiences included but are not limited to: pursuing a field of passion, resisting against a wrong choice of life, and negotiating competence across different life contexts. The two outlier stories provided different angles to consider participants' self-authoring processes. These two stories showcased two incidents, one in which participant struggled with authoring their own voices and the other in which the participant did not follow a growth-oriented self-authoring trajectory. Secondly, the three narrative types (i.e., the passion narrative, the resistance narrative, and the competence narrative) and various trajectories I specified in the findings revealed diversified purposes and processes of self-authoring found in my participants' stories. Furthermore, the visual representations of the participants' self-authoring offered new insights into the situated meaning of the epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions of self-authorship. A detailed discussion of my findings in relation to my research questions and existing literature will be followed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

In Chapter 5, I first summarize my research findings in response to the research questions I posed at the end of Chapter 2. I then move on to the theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions of my research. Lastly, I discuss limitations of my study and close with possible future research directions.

### **5.1 Answering My Research Questions**

**Research question 1: What stories do Chinese undergraduate students tell about their important university experiences? How do they make meaning of the experiences in the story?**

My narrative inquiry centered Chinese undergraduate students' stories about their growth in university. In these stories, most of my participants reflected on different aspects of their university experiences and how these experiences shaped who they are and what they want to achieve in their lives. Their stories provided rich contexts to explore how self-authoring was experienced and expressed in this participant group. Whereas previous research examined students' meaning making based on their reflection of an isolated event or a recent decision (Pizzolato, 2005; Pizzolato et al., 2012), my research invited my participants to consider a variety of experiences they had in university and reflect on how these experiences holistically reshaped their belief system, current and possible selves, their relationships with others, and their action in the world. This holistic narrative gaze of my inquiry generated rich personal stories that revealed salient traces of self-authorship.

To answer the question "What stories do Chinese undergraduate students tell about their important university experiences?", I explored what themes were present in Chinese undergraduate students' stories. Specifically, since my research is first one to include Chinese undergraduate students, I focused on how the stories elaborated my participants' lived experiences of self-

authoring. This focus is consistent with recent consensus in self-authorship literature that recommends validating all students as knowers and centering all lived experience as knowing (Abes & Hernández, 2016). Therefore, instead of projecting existing theoretical constructs on my participants' accounts, I analyzed participants' stories in their wholeness to explore latent processes and expressions of self-authorship in participants' narrative construction. Three broad themes that emerged from my participants' stories include pursuing a field of interest/passion (e.g., Zhaizhai, Xiaoya), dealing with an undesirable reality through resistance and change (e.g., Victor), and exploring a competent life path to achieve individual and/or relational goals (e.g., Amy, Maomao). These themes illustrated the kinds of signature experiences that were pivotal for the Chinese undergraduate students to find their self-definition and form their inner voices.

To answer the question "How do they make meaning of the experiences in their story?", I examined participants' meaning making through the lens of narrative reconstruction (William, 1984; Frank, 2010). I explored not only how my participants interpreted particular life events, but also how they organized their experiences and connected them in a personally meaningful way to construct a holistic sense of self. This approach to meaning making was informed by dialogical narrative approaches (Frank, 2010, 2012) and departed from existing constructivist methods that primarily focused on assessing cognitive processes of meaning making (e.g., how participants addressed cognitive dissonances and achieve equilibrium in their meaning making process) (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012; Pizzolato, 2003, 2005; Torres & Baxter Magolda, 2004). My findings yielded a new level of complexity in participants' meaning making when they were asked to consider their experiences holistically and its impact on their development as a person. An emerging identity and/or a higher life vision surfaced as they connected different strands of their experiences in meaningful ways. For example, both Zhaizhai and Xiaoya's stories were about pursuing their academic interest in their respective disciplines. Although they spoke about how

different kinds of university experiences impacted their beliefs, identities, and social relationships, their meaning making became most dense and complex when they reflected on how various strands of their academic learning and research experiences came together to shape their becoming sense of self and their orientation toward their future scholarship (e.g., Zhaizhai: “*I want to be a physicist who holds warmth in his heart*”; Xiaoya: “*I determined my mind to become a social science researcher ... I will concern with social inequality with a critical spirit and try endeavor to speak truth to power from a professional perspective of sociology*”). Furthermore, the new level of complexity revealed in this kind of meaning making highlighted a process of becoming, which has not been explicitly specified in self-authorship literature. Specifically, participants who demonstrated self-authoring development not only expressed their identity as who they currently are, but also who they can possibly become in the future. This finding revised current description of the intrapersonal dimension of self-authorship by expanding its focus on “who I am” to include an additional question of “who I am becoming and/or who I want to be”. Taken together, my study results indicated that self-authoring meaning making is holistic, complex, purposeful, and future oriented.

**Research Question 2: What kinds of narrative types and trajectories are represented in their stories?**

To represent Chinese participants’ processes of self-authoring, I drew on dialogical narrative analysis to develop a narrative typology of self-authoring (see Figure 5.1).

**Table 5.1 The Narrative Typology of Self-Authoring and Exemplar Stories**

Narrative Type	Narrative Trajectory	Exemplar Stories
Passion Narrative	Continuous trajectory	Zhaizhai
	Cyclical trajectory	Xiaoya
Resistance Narrative	Change-resolution trajectory	Victor
Competence Narrative	Context-oriented trajectory	Amy
	Relationship-oriented trajectory	Maomao
“Outlier” Stories		Lynn, Fiona

The first level of the narrative typology is the three narrative types that illustrate the kinds of themes that provoke self-authoring processes for Chinese undergraduate students. The narrative types are the passion narrative, the resistance narrative, and the competence narrative. As previously indicated, these narrative types were developed through the analyses of participants’ narrative reconstruction. Accordingly, the narrative types explored how participants constructed different threads of their experiences to convey a purposeful expression of the self. Specifically, participants who hold a passion narrative explored their inner voices by pursuing their passion in a field of interest. Participants who hold a resistance narrative highlighted their experience of resisting an uncomfortable situation and how their action of resistance shifted their perspective on themselves as a person. Participants who hold a competence narrative constructed their narrative to accent their need for competence in specific situations or relationships and developing their sense of competence was central to their self-authoring process. Along with the three narrative types, I specified two outlier stories that do not fall into any of the types (i.e., Lynn and Fiona’s stories)

Under each narrative type, I further specified narrative trajectories to capture variations among participants’ self-authoring processes. These variations reflected how participants’ personal

characteristics and their situated context shaped their distinct process toward self-authorship. Within the passion narrative, I identified a continuous trajectory, represented in Zhaizhai's story, and a cyclical trajectory, represented in Xiaoya's story. The continuous trajectory indicates that the participant's pursuit of passion afforded consistency without interruptions from external forces. Individuals in this trajectory emphasized positive experiences and supportive relationships that helped them to develop their passion in a certain field. In the cyclical trajectory, the participant's passion pursuit was marked by spiral movements and back-and-forth strides, as they experienced a mixture of failures and successes when they experimented in their field of passion. Within the resistance narrative, only one trajectory was specified from my data: the change-resolution trajectory, illustrated in Victor's story. In the change-resolution trajectory, participants resisted against an undesirable reality by making active changes to their situation. Their action of change led to resolution and yielded new life purposes. Within the competence narrative, two narrative trajectories were found: a context-oriented trajectory, represented in Amy's story, and a relationship-oriented trajectory, represented in Maomao's story. In the context-oriented trajectory, participants constructed their sense of competence across different contexts. They considered how different aspects of their abilities responded to contextual demands in order to make strategic decisions that matched their needs for competence. In the relationship-oriented trajectory, participants negotiated their sense of competence to balance other's expectations and their individual needs and interests. In both trajectories, developing a sense of competence in relation to their individual and/or relational goals was central to their self-authoring process (i.e., promoting negotiation of beliefs, identity, and relationships with others). These narrative trajectories illustrated how the narrative types (passion, resistance, and competence) were represented in individual stories given their situated context.

**Question 3: What does the narrative types and trajectories reveal about the students' self-authoring processes?**

**A Diversified View of Self-Authorship.** The narrative typology I developed in my study showcased not only common patterns across participants' self-authoring processes (e.g., passion-driven, resistance-driven, or competence-driven), but also diverse trajectories toward self-authorship. These findings contributed to a more situated and diversified understanding of self-authoring purposes and processes.

Firstly, my findings challenged the constructivist view of self-authorship as a universal, stage-oriented movement in a unified direction (i.e., from following external formula to forming an internal foundation) (Abes & Hernández, 2016; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, 2012). Instead, by centering participants' lived experience as the focus of inquiry, my study uncovered various themes underlying the Chinese students' meaning making of their lived experiences and formulated three narrative types to represent these themes in their self-authoring. These narrative types indicated that students may enter self-authoring processes from different contexts for different purposes. Participants with a passion narrative predominantly experienced self-authoring development as they pursued a field of passion. The purpose of self-authoring in that context was to clarify their vision of pursuing that passion and how pursuing their passion reshaped them as people with a particular orientation to their future career. Participants with a resistance narrative discovered their inner voices when encountering a situation that challenged their comfort zone. The purpose of self-authoring in that context was to better understand their likes/dislikes and develop their character response to challenging situations. Participants with a competence narrative engaged in a process of negotiating their beliefs, identity, and relationships in tasks that tested their level of competence in relation to obtaining desirable outcomes. The purpose of self-authoring for them was to find a suitable life path in which they could achieve a sense of agency and

competence. The exploration of narrative types in my study hence contributed to revealing these diverse kinds of self-authoring processes and purposes that reflect and validate the lived reality of participants. These findings offered a more situated perspective to examine and represent self-authorship patterns and processes that had yet to be considered in current literature.

Secondly, further specifications of narrative trajectories offered more fine-grained insights on the dynamics and nuances in self-authoring processes. My findings indicated that individuals can hold a same narrative type but have distinct self-authoring trajectories (e.g., the consistent trajectory versus the cyclical trajectory in the passion narrative; and the context-oriented trajectory versus the relationship-oriented trajectory in the competence narrative). The narrative trajectories, therefore, reflect the fluidity and openness of a narrative type and its responsiveness to context. Individuals can draw from a narrative type and develop their personal variation of the narrative within and in response to their own situated context to serve their own purpose of self-authoring.

Thirdly, my findings indicated that my participants may be at different points of the self-authoring journey, which coheres with some of the developmental patterns of self-authorship Baxter Magolda and her colleagues (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, 2012) proposed. For example, some participants seemed more secure with their internally constructed beliefs and self-identity (e.g., Zhaizhai, Xiaoya, Victor), whereas others demonstrated struggles when their inner voices conflicted with voices of others (e.g., Maomao, Lynn). The discovery of narrative types and trajectories, however, suggested that the constructivist model of self-authorship (e.g., the cyclical movement from external to internal meaning making) should be considered, at least, along with the different kinds of self-authoring processes in which students identify themselves, rather than as a universal model that fits all.

**A Holistic View of Self-Authorship.** My research introduced a more holistic view to consider the dimensions of self-authorship as they relate to specific self-authoring types and

trajectories. To achieve this, my research explored the situated meaning of the epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimension in each participant's narrative construction. Consistent with patterns found in recent self-authorship research (Henández, 2012; Pizolatto, 2012), my findings indicated that the self-authoring process is integrative, simultaneously involving negotiation and reconstruction of meaning in all three dimensions. However, the narrative approach I adopted for my study represented the interconnectedness among individuals' construction of beliefs, identity, and social relationships in a new light. Specifically, rather than examining psychological interactions among the three dimensions that typically dominated studies adopting constructivism (Abes et al., 2007; Abes & Jones, 2004; Pizolatto, 2012), my research explored how participants coordinated meaning of their beliefs, identity, and social relationships in an integrative way to construct a holistic sense of self and/or form a personal vision to guide their actions. My findings suggested that the specific meaning that participants assigned to each dimension and the ways they connected these meanings were responsive to the context in which they were self-authoring.

For example, for participants with passion narratives, their construction of beliefs, identity, and relationships were situated in contexts in which they grew their passion. Their narrative construction coherently integrated their view of the fundamental principles and missions that ground their respective discipline (epistemological), their identity as an emerging scholar (intrapersonal), and their vision of their future scholarship that contributes to a greater social discourse (interpersonal). For participants with resistance narratives, the context of resistance exposed pressing conditions that required them to consider critical aspects of their beliefs, identity, and social relationships of which they may not yet have been consciously aware. For participants with competence narratives, contexts or relationships that exerted expectations on competence were mostly likely to provoke dissonance experiences and exploration of new forms of self-definition.

The visual representations I developed for each participant's self-authoring in Chapter 4 provides examples for presenting the situated meaning the participant assigned to the three dimensions and how they came together to shape the participant's self-authoring trajectory. These findings and representations thus offer a new lens to better situate self-authoring processes in a dynamic space between the individual mind and the sociocultural context.

**A Consolidated Sociocultural Perspective on Self-Authorship.** In Chapter 2, I reframed the constructivist self-authorship theory through sociocultural perspectives inspired by Vygotsky and Bakhtin. My theoretical framework proposed several sociocultural reconsiderations of self-authorship, including social origins of the inner dialogue, self-authoring as selective appropriation and recreation of sociocultural discourses, and the constructive role of other's voices. In this section, I revisit these ideas. I explain how my research findings, particularly insights from the narrative typology of self-authoring, consolidated these conceptual propositions I proposed earlier and how they further our understanding about the nature and processes of self-authorship.

*Narrative construction as instrumental process of self-authoring.* Sociocultural theory posits the development of mental functioning is mediated by cultural tools, primarily language and speech (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995; Vadeboncoeur, 2017; Vygotsky, 1930-1934/1978). From a sociocultural lens, self-authoring development, as a form of higher mental functioning, is not entirely a successful psychological evolution inside one's head, but mediated by cultural tools, particularly our use of language. Therefore, the study of people's narrative construction reveals that culturally mediated space in which they experience, construct, and develop self-authorship. This stance formed the foundation of my methodology and distinguishes my approach from prior research that examined participants' narrative accounts as an objective reflection of their cognitive processes (Abes et al., 2007; Abes & Jones, 2004; Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, 2012; Pizzolato, 2003, 2004; Pizzolato et al., 2012). Instead, my research proposed that people's development and

expression of self-authorship is situated in a process of constructing and reconstructing their narratives of who they are (and potentially who they are becoming). In other words, narrative construction is an instrumental process that mediates and develops higher-order self-consciousness and promotes self-authorship processes, rather than merely mirroring independent psychological functioning.

My research provided an opportunity for the Chinese undergraduate students to take a holistic glance at their pivotal lived experiences and construct a narrative about how these experiences shaped who they are, what they believe, and how they relate to others. This conversation engaged them in self-authored forms of thinking and opened a space for them to explore, form, and express their inner voices in ways they otherwise would not be able to access in typical life contexts. More specifically, constructing their own self-narrative required thoughtfully selecting different threads of impactful experiences, creatively organizing them in coherent ways, and artistically representing them through language to convey a purposeful life vision and core sense of self. Their self-authoring processes, therefore, were situated in and mediated by their narrative construction, rather than serving an isolated function of mind. Studying self-authoring as culturally mediated action and situating it in narrative construction offered an alternative perspective and approach to explore culturally responsive forms of self-authoring in diverse participant groups.

*Rethinking self-authorship development through a sociocultural lens.* Self-authorship has been typically conceived as a process of developing an internal voice to construct a self-authored system of belief, identity, and relationship (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007, 2012; Pizzolato et al., 2012). My study proposed a sociocultural view that suggests the internal voice is neither monophonic nor a property of an individual mind. Instead, inner voices exist in a form of inner dialogue interweaving the words of one's own and the words of others. Individuals develop their

inner voices through appropriating words from sociocultural discourses and creatively representing them in and across various contexts. My narrative approach and findings consolidated this proposition about the nature of inner voices and how they are formed.

Firstly, my findings suggested the social origin of the inner voices. Specifically, my elaboration of narrative types and trajectories illustrated what forms of sociocultural narrative resources were made available for the Chinese students through their context, and how they recreated those resources to construct their self-authoring voices. Since narrative types reflect discourse styles of the speech community that surrounds the storyteller (Frank, 2010), three narrative types, *passion*, *resistance*, and *competence*, showcased typical kinds of narrative templates offered by the cultural context and social relations where the Chinese students were situated. Further specification of individual narrative trajectories represents each participant's personal reconstruction of the narrative type(s). These findings suggested that self-authoring resides in processes of selectively appropriating sociocultural narrative resources and creatively reconstructing them for use in diverse contexts. Therefore, these findings confirmed that inner voices are originated from and formed through individuals' active participation in social discourses and cultural practices, rather than a devising of mind.

Another example from my findings that further elaborated the polyphonic nature of inner voices is that individual may simultaneously integrate more than one narrative type to express their inner voices. For instance, although the passion narrative is the more salient narrative type demonstrated in Zhaizhai and Xiaoya's stories, they both incorporated aspects of the competence narrative (e.g., emphasizing experiences that made them feel competent about achieving important academic aspirations) when elaborating their vision for their possible selves and life missions. Similarly, while Amy's story primarily demonstrated the competence narrative when speaking about her choices of academic and professional paths, she might also have a passion narrative as

she expressed that she has always been passionate about photography and she has been pursuing that passion outside her academic life. These findings suggested that the narrative types are not mutually exclusive; rather, they offer different threads for individuals to fabricate their story (Frank, 2010). The findings also consolidated that developing self-authorship entails savvy management of various types of narrative and knowing when and how to creatively apply them to different contexts of self-authoring. Self-authoring development, therefore, is indicated by the increased responsiveness of the inner dialogue to the changing context. The fluid and context-responsive nature of self-authoring processes elaborated by my findings are consistent with the developmental patterns found in socially and culturally diverse student groups (Abes & Hernández, 2016; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Jones, 2009; Jones et al., 2016). The narrative typology contributed a new approach to capture such fluidity and dynamics in self-authoring processes, which can be adapted for diverse research contexts and participant groups.

*Role of Other's Voice.* My findings revealed new insights on the role of other's voices in individuals' self-authoring development. Specifically, my research found that constructive external voices are important ingredients for individuals to grow their inner voices. Previous research typically associated external voices with enforced authority and liberating the internal voice from the control of external authority is considered as progress toward self-authorship (Abes & Kasch, 2007; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). My findings suggested, however, external voices that afford internal persuasiveness (in Bakhtin's words, internally persuasive discourse) can offer instrumental structure to support the development of inner voices. These voices may come from influential figures, close family members and peers, and broader sociocultural context. Examples of these kind of external voices prevailed in my data. Zhaizhai used words from influential professors whom he regarded as role models and the motto of the university to develop his vision of his future scholarship. Xiaoya listened to her best friend's advice to pursue a field that she is deeply

passionate about. Amy considered her father's advice to choose a major that matches her strength. These findings contributed a more nuanced view on the different kinds of external voices and their roles in shaping the individual's inner dialogue.

## **5.2 Contributions to Self-Authorship Theory, Research, and Practice**

### **5.2.1 Theoretical Contributions to Self-Authorship Theory/Research**

My narrative inquiry contributed to the recent expansion of self-authorship research using alternative theoretical frameworks to capture self-authoring processes in socially and culturally diverse student groups. As the first study to include a Chinese participant sample, a sociocultural framework, and dialogical narrative approaches, my research pushed boundaries of self-authorship theory and research in the following three aspects. Firstly, the sociocultural reframing of self-authorship fundamentally challenged the ways in which self-authorship had been typically conceptualized by shifting the analytical focus to the synergetic relationship between individual mental functioning and sociocultural processes. On the one hand, the united focus considers individuals' engagement with sociocultural discourses made available through context (e.g., cultural narrative types, other's voices) not only influences but also fundamentally shapes their inner voices. On the other hand, this focus also recognizes the uniqueness of each individual's orchestration of their inner voices (illustrated through participants' diverse narrative trajectories). Through a united focus, self-authoring thus becomes what Bakhtin described as a polyphonic dialogical process between the individual and the social.

Furthermore, uniting the individual and the social in this way is a theoretical breakthrough that simultaneously transcends the individual-centered psychological view of self-authorship development in Baxter Magolda's constructivist model and examines sociocultural processes without limiting these to particular power structures or marginalized groups explored in previous studies (Abes & Hernández, 2016; Abes & Kasch, 2007; Hernández, 2012). Instead, the narrative

typology approach informed by sociocultural and dialogical perspectives created space for examining both individual agency and autonomy and the influences of relationship and the larger sociocultural context in my participants' self-authoring processes. My study therefore can inform and expand the ways self-authorship are conceived in studies that adopt either a more psychological or sociological lens.

Finally, including a Chinese participant group generated novel insights into how self-authoring is experienced and expressed in non-western cultures. In western scholarly work, people from East Asian cultures have been typically conceived as having more relational and situated self-conceptions (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Pizzolato et al., 2012). Self-authorship literature has not been an exception. When participants with East Asian heritage were involved, what seems to dominate the discussion was their high regard of communal harmony and collective values and goals subsuming individual interest and independent will. In that regard, my research offered a more complex, nuanced, and dynamic view on both the individual and relational dynamics of self-authoring in Chinese students from an insider stance. Contrary to the popular view of students more likely to experience self-authorship through relational dissonance (Abes & Hernández, 2016; Pizzolato et al., 2012), my participants' stories revealed both autonomy-oriented self-authoring (e.g., Zhaizhai and Xiaoya's passion narratives) and relationship-focused self-authoring (e.g., Maomao's competence narrative, Lynn's story) and more often, the co-existence of both (e.g., Victor's resistance narrative, Amy's competence narrative, Fiona's story), the dominance of which depends on the immediate context of meaning making. For all my participants, the tension between their quest for agency and autonomy and their longing to satisfy social expectations and maintain their communal status persisted throughout their stories. Their self-authoring hence arose from and evolved through an ongoing process of negotiating the meaning of such tension in and across various life contexts. These complexities reflected in my participants' self-authoring further

justified a united focus that intermingles individual and social issues, rather than a singular focus on the cultural context alone, when analyzing narratives of participants from non-western backgrounds.

### **5.2.2 Methodological Contributions to Self-Authorship Theory/Research**

The methodological framework of my study incorporated sociocultural perspectives, a constructionist stance, and dialogical narrative approaches. This coherent design not only allowed fine-grained specifications and alternative representations of participants' self-authoring processes to surface in my participant group, but also offered boarder methodological references for future studies in different sociocultural contexts. I discuss my methodological contributions to self-authorship research in the following two aspects.

The first methodological contribution of my study concerns the study of participants' narrative construction. In my study, narrative construction of lived experience was not considered as an objective mirroring of mental structuring, a prevailing stance in existing studies using narrative analysis, but rather an instrumental process that promotes and mediates critical self-authoring processes. Therefore, the analysis of participants' narrative construction in my research provided a holistic lens to explore how participants constructed meaning of different aspects of their lived experience, rather than isolated incidents, to develop their self-authoring voices. The dual analytical focus on the content of participants' story and the structuring of their storytelling offered a novel methodological approach to reveal latent types and diverse trajectories of self-authoring underlying participants' narrative construction.

The second methodological contribution of my study is the narrative typology of self-authoring. Drawing from principles of dialogical narrative analysis, my research explored the kinds of narrative types and trajectories that revealed salient traces of self-authoring in my participants' stories. The narrative typology offers a theoretically grounded, methodological coherent, and

culturally responsive approach to examine and represent self-authoring journey for diverse participants in ways that previous research has not yet considered. In particular, this approach shows promise for future research that aims to reveal culturally specific processes of self-authoring and/or uncover diversified pathways toward self-authorship in ways that accent participants' lived reality. Also, this approach can increase sociocultural relevance and responsiveness of the constructivist self-authorship model. In this regard, one implication for future research is to situate the developmental continuum of self-authorship within the narrative typology to explore how self-authoring evolves in specific narrative types and trajectories.

### **5.2.3 Contributions to Practice: Building Discourse Communities to Support Self-Authorship**

My research indicated that people draw from sociocultural narrative resources made available through their situated context to develop their self-authoring voices. The sociocultural resources in the discourse communities that surround the individual may simultaneously expand and constrain their possibilities of self-authorship (Frank, 2010, 2012). Therefore, the most critical practical implication of my research is to build cross-level, cross-context discourse communities to support dialogue on self-authorship in higher education. The notion of discourse communities is grounded in the situative perspective on cognition, which recognizes cognition is socially distributed (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Discourse communities bring members with different types of experience, knowledge, and expertise together and engage them in meaningful conversations that support both individual and communal development. Accordingly, members in a discourse community that promotes self-authorship can draw upon and incorporate each other's experiences and perspectives to create rich dialogues and new insights into diverse forms and trajectories of self-authorship.

The perspective on self-authorship as appropriating and recreating sociocultural resources and the notion of discourse community opens new ways of thinking about the nature of discourses in higher education context. They put forth a set of critical questions for university executives, instructors, and student advisors to consider as they devise university-wide initiatives and student-centered pedagogies and services. Some of these questions include: How can we create a discourse culture and instrumental structures in university to not only engage, but also empower students to author their own stories in authentic ways? How can supportive yet critical discourse communities that honor individual differences but also constructively challenge one another's thinking be created in classrooms, student services, and other informal contexts? How can we support inclusiveness and celebrate diversity in those discourse communities? How can the diverse backgrounds of members be transformed into creating positive change on individuals' development as a person and the growth of the community? These questions provide a starting point that potentially can be sprung to broader dialogues on self-authorship promoting practices in higher education.

### **5.3 Limitations of My Study**

#### **5.3.1 Sample**

Sample size and representation were two potential limiting factors of my research. In terms of sample size, 12 participants' stories were selected for analysis. This relatively small sample size limited the development of a more comprehensive narrative typology that includes more diverse ways of self-authoring. I addressed this potential limitation by ensuring a diverse representation of participants' backgrounds in terms of academic disciplines, geographical locations, and educational experiences. A future study can enlarge the sample size to revise and expand the current narrative typology I developed in this research. In terms of sample representation, most of my participants are junior- or senior-year students. Those higher-grade students contributed rich personal stories as

they were able to consider their university experiences holistically and reflected on how the experiences they had shaped themselves as a person. Future studies, however, should include more first- and second-year students to capture their self-authoring process and its evolution across time. Also, most participants in my study, particularly those who revealed salient traces of self-authorship, are high achievers in mainstream academic settings. The positive experiences they had in their educational trajectory are rich ingredients for developing self-authored ways of thinking. Therefore, they may be more likely to experience self-authorship than students who experience more struggles than successes in school and university. The two outlier stories I specified indicated that there may be a group of students who do not perceive university experiences as pivotal to promote their self-authorship. Future studies should explore how those students experience or struggle with self-authoring and what kind of practices can support them in their self-authoring journey.

### **5.3.2 One-point Data Collection**

One-point data collection was a major limitation of my study. Narrative data collected only at one time was limited in revealing the evolving process of participants' self-authoring. I attempted to address this limitation by taking a holistic focus on participants' narrative construction. Specifically, I invited my participants to reflect on their university experiences holistically and consider how different aspects of their experiences come together in shaping their beliefs, identity, and relationships. Furthermore, my data analysis approach maintained this holistic focus by approaching the story as a whole, rather than breaking the data into isolated codes. Future research should consider including multiple points of data collection to capture self-authoring development across time.

### **5.3.3 Data Sources**

I primarily used verbal-to-text narrative data in my research. However, this format of data source can limit self-authoring expressions for participants who are not used to express themselves in words. Also, interview questions designed to capture potential self-authoring thinking might not resonate with participants who do not share similar ways of thinking with the researcher (e.g., Amy's comment about "getting the point" of my asking the questions, but not "having the answers" she thought I would have expected). Therefore, alternative format of data sources and different approaches to collect data (other than interviews) should be considered in future self-authorship research.

### **5.4 Concluding Remarks and Future Directions**

Self-authorship has attracted escalating interested of researchers and educators in higher education. Since Baxter Magolda's milestone longitudinal study, researchers have explored and examined self-authorship development in diverse student populations across North America. Self-authorship theory has been further developed through two waves of theory/research expansion. The first wave of expansion happened in the first decade of the twenty-first century when researchers expanded the original predominately White student sample to include more racially, socially, and culturally diverse student groups. These studies contributed to more fine-grained specification and elaboration of developmental processes that had not been captured in Baxter Magolda's original constructivist model. The recent decade has seen a surging body of research that not only included diverse participants, but also considered alternative theoretical perspectives and methodologies to challenge the constructivist theory. This body of research marked the second wave of expansion of self-authorship literature. Calls for more inclusive and socioculturally responsive frameworks and methods have evoked increasing consensus in self-authorship research community (Abes & Hernández, 2016). My research stands with these calls and contributes to this current expansion of

self-authorship theory and research. Specifically, my study proposed a consolidated sociocultural framework along with the approach of narrative typology. My research offered a theoretically informed and methodologically coherent design that can be adapted for future studies in diverse contexts and participant groups. As a concluding remark, I propose several possible directions of future research.

First, future research can adopt the narrative typology approach to self-authorship and examine its relevance in different contexts and different participant groups. The narrative typology I developed in my research can serve as an example and a springboard for future studies that are interested in exploring nuanced processes and diverse pathways toward self-authorship. Researchers can also use this approach to analyze existing data sets to enrich their understanding of participants' experience of self-authorship.

Second, researchers interested in developing the constructivist model with sociocultural considerations can consider situating the continuum of self-authorship (i.e., from externally oriented meaning making to internally oriented meaning making) within specific narrative types and trajectories and compare the processes of self-authorship development within and across each narrative type. This strand of research may contribute new insights into how the narrative construction of self-authorship evolve over time.

Third, multiple-point data collection and diversifying data sources can also be a possible direction for future research. Collecting data at multiple points across university can reveal dynamic movements and changes in individuals' narrative trajectory. Different kinds of data sources can offer new opportunities to capture diverse expressions of self-authoring beyond words and texts.

Lastly, self-authorship research should also expand to include contexts beyond traditional four-year programs. For example, professional development initiatives and programs that prepare

young adults for future careers can serve an optimal context to experience self-authoring development. My doctoral research will extend on this stream of research to examine self-authoring process for teacher candidates in an eleven-month professional program and its link to professional identity development. The theoretical framework and the narrative approach I developed in this research will provide a solid foundation for this endeavor.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A Ethics Approval for the Study



The University of British Columbia  
 Office of Research Ethics Behavioural  
 Research Ethics Board  
 Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road, Vancouver, B.C. V6T  
 1Z3

### CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK

<b>PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:</b> Nancy E. Perry	<b>INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT:</b> UBC/Education/Educational & Counselling Psychology, and Special Education	<b>UBC BREB NUMBER:</b> H19-00794
<b>INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:</b>		
<b>Institution</b>		<b>Site</b>
UBC		Vancouver (excludes UBC Hospital)
<b>Other locations where the research will be conducted:</b> Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China		
<b>CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):</b> Xinke Wan		
<b>SPONSORING AGENCIES:</b> UBC Faculty of Education - "What Do I Want for My Life": A Narrative Study of Chinese Undergraduate Students' Life Experiences and Personal Growth during University"		
<b>PROJECT TITLE:</b> "What Do I Want for My Life": A Narrative Study of Chinese Undergraduate Students' Life Experiences and Personal Growth during University		

**CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE:** August 7, 2020

<b>DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:</b>	<b>DATE APPROVED:</b> August 7, 2019
<b>Document Name</b>	<b>Version</b> <b>Date</b>

<b>Protocol:</b>		
Research Proposal	1	April 1, 2019
<b>Consent Forms:</b>		
Chinese Consent Form - Interview	1	April 22, 2019
English Consent Form - Interview	2	July 15, 2019
Chinese Consent Form - Interview	2	July 15, 2019
English Consent Form - Interview	1	April 22, 2019
<b>Advertisements:</b>		
Recruitment email to third-party recruiters	2	July 15, 2019
Recruitment Information	1	April 22, 2019
<b>Questionnaire, Questionnaire Cover Letter, Tests:</b>		
Interview protocol	1	April 25, 2019
<b>Letter of Initial Contact:</b>		
Script of the initial meeting with invitees	1	July 15, 2019
Letter of Initial Contact	2	July 15, 2019
<b>Other Documents:</b>		
UBC Mental Health Resources	1	April 22, 2019
BNU Mental Health Resources	1	April 22, 2019
Email Reply regarding BNU Ethics	1	April 25, 2019
Reflective Exercise 2	1	April 22, 2019
Reflective Exercise 1	1	April 22, 2019
Demographic Information		
The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.		
<b><u><i>This study has been approved either by the full Behavioural REB or by an authorized delegated reviewer</i></u></b>		

## Appendix B

### B.1 Interview Consent Form (English)

#### Informed Consent Form for Interview Participants

**Title of the study:** *“What Do I Want for My Life”: A Narrative Study of Chinese Undergraduate Students’ Life Experiences and Personal Growth during University*

**Principal Investigator:**

Dr. Nancy E. Perry

Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education

Faculty of Education

2125 Main Mall

Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z4

Tel: 604-822-6410 | Email: [nancy.perry@ubc.ca](mailto:nancy.perry@ubc.ca)

**Co-Investigator:**

Xinke Wan

Graduate Student

Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education

Faculty of Education

2125 Main Mall

Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z4

Tel: 604-773-4082 (Canada); +86 18813044465 (China) | Email: [xinke.wan@ubc.ca](mailto:xinke.wan@ubc.ca)

**Purpose of the Study:** What does your university life look like for you? What are the most transformative experiences you had in university? What did you learn about yourself, others, and the world from these experiences? Your stories of personal growth during university are what we are looking for in this study. Research has shown that university experiences, such as opportunities to build future careers and being part of a social community, are critical for young adults to develop fundamental beliefs and values, the sense of self, and important social relationships. Therefore, we are curious to learn about your university life and how that has shaped who you are today. Ms. Wan is conducting this research to fulfill the requirements of Master of Arts program at the University of British Columbia (UBC). The results of her research will be shared with academic and educational audiences through her thesis as well as through scholarly presentations and publications. Your input in this research, hence, will contribute to the advancement of the world’s knowledge about young adult’s development and the promotion of student-centered educational practices in universities.

**Study Procedures:** Your involvement in this study will consist of three meetings (an initial meeting to review information and consent materials with the researcher and two interviews) and the completion of a reflective exercise about your undergraduate experiences. The first meeting will last 30 minutes. The interviews will last 60 to 90 minute each. The reflective exercise will take 10 to 20 minutes to complete. The meetings will be scheduled in consultation with the

researcher and take place at a mutually convenient time, outside of classes and other commitments.

You will be provided with the consent form prior to the first meeting so that you can learn about your participation in the study and prepare questions for the researcher to answer in the first meeting. During the first meeting, the researcher will provide details of the study and participation procedures and review the information and consent materials with you to ensure that you can make informed decision about your participation. Following this meeting, you will have up to one week to decide whether you would like to participate the study.

If you decide to participate, you will meet the researcher two more times to conduct interviews. In the first interview, you will be asked some questions about your social and educational background, personal history, and your overall university experience. In between the two interviews, you will complete a reflective exercise about your personal growth during university. You can choose an exercise that best suits your interests and needs. In the second interview, you will be asked a series of questions about your most significant experiences of personal growth in university and how these experiences have shaped your beliefs, views of yourself, and relationships with others. You can refer to the reflective exercise for this discussion. The two interviews will be audio recorded using an electronic device. The researcher may also take notes of key points you mentioned and questions to ask you for clarification and elaboration throughout the interview.

Your interview will be transcribed using an online transcription service, iFLYREC, provided by iFLYTEK, a Chinese technology company. The audio recording of your interview will be uploaded to the server for a short period of time via an password-protected user account. iFLYREC uses an automated speech-to-text algorithms to generate transcriptions (with a built-in editor and quick turnaround). This significantly reduces time spent on transcription for the researcher. The researcher will delete your recordings and transcripts from the iFLYREC platform as soon as your interview is transcribed in a non-restorable manner (i.e., your data will be permanently removed from the disk, as indicated by the privacy terms of iFLYTEK).

You will receive the full transcript of your interviews, so that you can check the accuracy of the transcription and add or retrieve any information you provided at your own will. After data analyses are completed, you will receive a brief summary of the study findings and the researcher's interpretations of your accounts, which will be used in the thesis. You can comment on these interpretations and request changes be made. You may be asked to clarify and elaborate some of your accounts to ensure the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. You can also choose whether to have these accounts included in the thesis.

**Potential Risks:** As this study involves in-depth self-reflection on important life events and disclosure of private thoughts, it is possible that your participation in the interviews and reflective exercises might evoke emotionally challenging experiences, although the study is primarily focused on typical university experiences that most students have. To mitigate these risks, you always have the right to choose what to share and how much to share with the researcher. You don't have to share information that may trigger painful memories or challenging emotions that make you uncomfortable. You may choose to withdraw from the study

at any time for any reason. Additionally, you can access the mental health resources provided in your consent package as needed.

**Potential Benefits:** This study offers opportunities for you to reflect on your personal development in university from a fresh perspective that you may not otherwise experience in other settings. Research has shown that interviews like the ones in this study can help students understand themselves better, clarify their life goals, and help them make important decisions. Moreover, your participation will contribute to the advancement of knowledge about development in young adulthood and inspire more student-centered design of educational practices in higher education.

**Remuneration/Compensation:** You will receive a \$25 gift card or gifts of the same value for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** Every effort will be made to keep your data confidential. However, because the study involves a small number of participants, interviews are audio recorded, interview recordings are transcribed using an online service, and the focus of the study is on personal stories, it is impossible to guarantee absolute anonymity. You can choose to use a pseudonym for this study or be identified with your real name at your will. Digital files that document your personal and demographic information will be password-protected and kept separately from other data. Case codes will be used to match your data with your identification information. If you choose not to be identified in the analyses and subsequent reporting of the study, the researcher will remove any information that can be used to identify you when the interview is transcribed. In this case, your personal information will not appear in any completed presentations and publications.

All hard copies of data, including consent forms, demographic information forms, and the reflective exercise, will be digitized on the research site as soon as they are collected and stored on a secure UBC server (i.e., UBC Workspace). The researcher will leave the original copies with you. All digital files will be kept in UBC Workspace for a minimum of five years. This is a secure Canadian server. After this time, if we determine that these documents are no longer needed, they will be securely deleted by the researcher.

In terms of the online transcription service, it is important for you to know that uploading files via the internet is never totally secure and on occasion such information can be intercepted. However, the researcher will remove all identifying information from the files before uploading and make sure the data is on the server for the minimum amount of time needed to generate the transcript. Once the researcher receives the transcript, she will encrypt the file and store on UBC Workspace.

**Withdrawal of Consent:** You can choose to withdraw your consent at any time without penalty, including during the interviews. If you withdraw from the study, the research team will not keep or use any information you have already given.

**Data Retention and Destruction:** All of your data, including audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews, demographic form, reflective exercise, and consent form, will be retained for a

minimum of five years after the study is completed, as electronic files, and stored on a secure UBC server (i.e., UBC Workspace). After five years these files will be permanently deleted.

**Open Access:** The researchers may be required to make their data publicly available at the time of publication. The research team will only make data publicly available, if required to do so by an academic journal. The research team acknowledges that making data public has the potential for increasing the risk of participant identification and will take steps to protect confidentiality in this event. Only de-identified data would be made public (data that uses pseudonyms and excludes identifying information). If the data are made publicly available, you will not be able to withdraw your data at that point.

**Contact for Information about the Study:** If you have any questions or would like further information about this study, you may contact the Principal Investigator Dr. Nancy Perry via email at [nancy.perry@ubc.ca](mailto:nancy.perry@ubc.ca) or by phone at 604-822-6410.

**Contact for Concerns about the Rights of Participants:** If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail [RSIL@ors.ubc.ca](mailto:RSIL@ors.ubc.ca) or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

## CONSENT

I have read and understand the information in the letter regarding Ms. Wan's Master Thesis study, "*What Do I Want for My Life': A Narrative Study of Chinese Undergraduate Students' Life Experiences and Personal Growth during University*". I understand that my participation is voluntary. I understand I can withdraw my participation at any time without penalty. I have kept a copy of this letter that describes the study and a copy of this consent form.

---

Printed (legal) name of participant

---

Date

---

Signature of participant

**Please provide your email so we can report to you about the progress of the study.**

Email:

## B.2 Interview Consent Form (Chinese)

### 访谈知情同意书

研究题目：“我想要的到底是什么”：中国大学生大学经历与个人成长的叙事研究

课题负责人：

Nancy Perry 教授

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研究目的：你的大学生活是怎么样的？你在大学里最重要的经历是什么？你是如何通过这些经历去认识你自己、他人和这个世界的？你独特的个人成长故事正是我们研究的主题。已有研究表明，大学经历，如寻找未来的职业方向及参加社团，对大学生的心理发展有重要的作用，包括人生观、价值观的形成、自我意识的成长以及重要社会关系的建立等方面。因此，我们这项研究想了解你的大学经历是怎样的，以及你在这样的经历中获得了怎么样的成长。这项研究的成果将通过论文、会议展示、学术期刊等途径，分享给国际学者和教育工作者。你对于这项研究的贡献能丰富目前学界对于大学生成长的认知，同时，能对以学生为中心的高校教学实践提供参考。

研究过程：您在该项研究中的参与涉及以下方面：与研究者进行三次面谈以及完成一项有关的您大学经历的反思性练习。第一次会面的目的是确保您对本研究的过程及您的参与有充分知情权，为您决定是否参与本研究提供相关信息，会面时间大概为 30 分钟。第二次、第三次会面，研究者将对您分别进行两次一对一访谈。每次访谈的时间为 60-90 分钟。在第二次、第三次会面期间，您会完成一个 10-20 分钟的反思性练习。研究者会与您商议决定所有的访谈时间和地点，以避免干扰您的课业学习与其他事项。

在与研究者第一次见面前，您将通过邮件收到这一份知情同意书，让您能在会面前对于研究情况和您的参与要求有所了解，并提出相关问题以便当面问询。研究者将第一次见面中为您提供更详细的研究信息和参与信息，并向您充分解释知情同意书的各项条例，以便您做出充分知情的决策。您将会有一星期的时间决定是否参与本项研究。

如果您决定参与本项研究，您将与研究者会面两次，并进行访谈。在第一个访谈中，您将会被问到一些有关您的个人、教育背景，成长经历，和大学体验等方面的问题。在第二次访谈之前，您可以选择完成一项有关您在大学期间个人成长的反思性练习，您可以与研究者的商量练习的形式和内容，以符合您的个人情况和需要。第二次访谈中，您会被问到有关大学期间关键成长经历以及这些经历对于您价值观、自我认知、社会关系等方面的塑造的问题，您可以运用您的反思性练习来回答这些问题。两次访谈都会被录音。在访谈过程中，研究者会根据您诉说的内容做相应记录，以便记住您们谈话中的关键点以及向您提出进一步的问题。

研究者将会使用科大讯飞提供的语音转录服务转录您的访谈。您的访谈录音将通过一个加密的帐户上传到讯飞云端，在短时间内进行机器转录。运用讯飞进行转录能极大缩短研究者转录访谈的时间。在转录完成后，研究者将及时删除您的录音和访谈转录稿，以保护您的个人信息。删除您的数据后，讯飞平台将无法复原您的数据。

在转录完成后，您会收到的您的访谈转录稿，以便您检查转录的准确性。同时，您可以选择增减您所提供的信息。在数据分析完成后，研究者还将会提供给您一份研究结果的报告和您被引用的陈述的分析。您可以检查这些分析是否符合您的感受、体验和描述，若不相符，您可以要求研究者进行修改。研究者可能会要求您对您的被引陈述进行进一步阐释，以保证研究分析的准确性。同时，您可以选择是否让您的被引陈述出现在研究论文里。

#### **参与研究的利弊：**

**参与之弊（研究风险）：**由于本研究需要您对重要人生经历进行深度反思，同时需要您向研究者表述反思的过程和一些个人的想法，您有可能在参与这项研究过程中有较为复杂的情绪体验，尽管这项研究本意是聚焦于中国大学生的典型生活体验的范畴。为了降低这一潜在风险，您始终有权选择与研究者的分享什么以及分享多少，您亦有权选择不分享任何可能出发痛苦回忆以及让您有不舒适的情绪体验的事件和想法。您可以在任何时间点停止您的参与而不受到任何惩罚，此外，研究者将为您提供一系列心理健康的资源和服务，供您参考。

**参与之利（参与好处）：**本研究将为您提供一个了解自我的宝贵机会，让您从一个新的视角看待自己在大学期间的成长和发展，这可能是您在其他的生活情景里较难体验到的。以往研究表明，本研究的访谈设计（叙事访谈），能够帮助学生更好地了解自己，帮助明确人生目标，甚至有利做出重要的人生决策。此外，通过本项研究，您的经历，将推动研究者对于大学生自我发展的认知，启发教育者在高校进行促进大学生积极人生意义建构的教学实践。

**报酬：**您将获得价值等同于 25 加元的礼品卡或礼物作为参与本项研究的感谢。

**保密性：**由于这项研究参与者人数较少且涉及个人故事的分享，也由于访谈会被录音并使用线上平台进行机器转录，因此研究无法确保完全匿名。您可以选择用假名或真名参与研究过程和成果发表，若您选择运用假名，研究者将在进行数据分析前删除所有能用于识别您个人信息的内容，且保证您的个人信息不会出现在日后的研究结果发表中。所有您的纸质资料，包括访谈知情同意书、个人信息表、反思练习，会在访谈结束后被扫描并上传到加密电脑以妥善保存。您的案例将被编号，案例编号将被用于信息匹配和案例分析，以确保对您个人信息的保护。任何包含您个人信息的文件（如访谈数据和反思练习）会被加密，并与其他数据分开保存。若您选择对您的身份进行保密，在访谈转录前，研究者会删除所有能辨别您身份的信息，这些信息同样不会出现在任何形式的成果发表中。

所有纸质数据，包括访谈知情同意书、个人信息表、反思练习，会在收集后马上进行电子化，并且安全上传到 UBC 的服务器（UBC Workspace），同时研究者会将纸质版的原件留给您。所有电子化后的研究数据会在收集后的五年内被安全储存在 UBC Workspace 中。五年后，若我们决定这些数据不再发挥任何功能，我们会删除这些数据。

您需要知道，上传您的访谈录音到科大讯飞的线上平台进行访谈转录并非百分百安全，可能会存在数据被窃取的情况。但是，研究者会保证在上传平台前删除能用于辨别您身份的信息，并且在转录完成后就立刻删除您的访谈录音和转录稿，以对您信息的进行保护。您的转录稿和录音将被安全存储在 UBC Workspace 中。

**退出研究：**包括在访谈期间，您可以随时选择撤销同意或退出研究并不受到任何惩罚。如果您选择退出研究，研究团队也会销毁且永不使用您提供的信息。

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## Appendix C Demographic Information Form

### C.1 Demographic Information Form (English)

Name	
Pseudonym (Optional)	
University	
Faculty/Department	
Major/Program	
Year Level	
Gender	
Ethnicity	
Which part of China do you come from? (Please indicate the city and province)	
Plan after graduation	
Anything else you would like to share about yourself?	

## C.2 Demographic Information Form (Chinese)

姓名	
假名	
大学名称	
院系名称	
专业	
年级	
性别	
民族	
家乡（省份与城市名称）	
毕业后计划	
其他	

## Appendix D Interview Protocol

As much as possible, I want my participants to tell their stories and author their own voices in these interviews. How have university experiences shaped their beliefs, identity, and social relationships? Therefore, I have identified broad categories for conversation and framed open-ended questions to begin conversations about these topics. Follow up questions will prompt clarification/specification and/or elaboration.

There is a logical flow to the topics I have identified, although the protocol is intended to be flexible enough to allow participants to lead the conversation. Also, I am not committed to asking every question within a category or asking questions in the order they appear, so long as the broad topics are addressed.

### Interview 1 (30 – 60 minutes)

**Context:** Once participants have given their consent, I will meet each participant in a prior meeting before the focal interview in order to get to know each other and build rapport. In this prior meeting, I will collect necessary demographic information (e.g., gender, age, region of China they come from, program of studies, year/level in university) and invite participants to share some of their personal history and their perception of university life.

#### *Personal History*

Briefly, tell me about your life before university.  
能跟我讲讲你进大学之前的经历吗？

- a) Which part(s) of China did you grow up?  
你在哪里长大？
- b) Who have been actively involved in your life (e.g., family members, friends, teachers, communities)?  
你的成长经历里有哪些重要的人？
- c) Can you briefly explain what role have they played in your life?  
他们在你的生命中扮演了何种角色？
- d) How did you see yourself before college?  
你在进大学之前是一个怎么样的人？

How did you decide to come to this university and this program?  
你为何会选择这所大学和这个专业？

- a) What were your considerations when making this decision? Is it your own decision?  
当时做这个选择的时候，你考虑了哪些因素？这是你自己的决定，还是你和你的家人共同的决定呢？
- b) (For UBC students) What made you decide to study internationally? At UBC?  
你为什么决定出国留学？为什么选择了 UBC？
- c) Was this decision supported by your family/support network?

- 你的家人支持你的这个决定吗
- d) (For UBC students) What does it mean for you/your family that you are studying at UBC/in Canada/so far from home?  
出国留学对你的意义是什么呢?
- e) Was it a good decision for you?  
你现在如何看待当时的这个决定呢?

### *University Perception*

Tell me about your life in university.

能跟我讲讲你的大学生活吗?

- a) What does university life look like for you?  
大学生活对于你而言是怎么样的?
- b) How do you feel about university life?  
你对大学生活有什么感受?
- c) Have there been any surprises? Challenges? Do you feel you were ready/prepared well for this experience? How so?  
大学生活跟你预想的一样吗? 有没有遇到一些挑战呢? 你如何应对的这些挑战呢?
- d) What are some changes and/or challenges you have experienced after entering university? What do you think caused these changes/challenges?  
上大学以后你有没有什么改变? 为什么会有这些改变呢?
- e) How have these changes/challenges had an impact on you?  
这些改变是如何影响你的呢?

### **Interview 2 (Focal Interview) Questions (90 – 120 minutes)**

After the prior meeting, participants will be invited to engage more deeply in reflecting on their college experience by choosing one of the reflection activities as a warm-up for the focal interview. They can choose to complete a worksheet with personal customization if needed (see “Reflection on My University Experience” and “Reflection on My University Journey”); they can think about a metaphor to describe their personal growth in university; they can find an artistic way, such as drawing, to express meanings they create of university growth; and/or they can bring an artifact that represents something meaningful to them in relation to their university experience.

These prompts are intended to prepare participants for the main focus of the focal interview and inspire deep reflection and elicit rich stories. Participants will bring their worksheets/artifacts/drawings etc. to the focal interview and we will use these as a springboard for our conversation.

*Based on the warm-up activity:*

Invite participants to share what they thought about/prepared for this focal interview. Based on participants’ answers, I will then prompt for clarification and elaboration. E.g., why did you

choose to bring this artifact to the interview? Why does it mean to you in relation to your university experience?

*Key university experiences:*

- a) Tell me about a significant experience you have had during university. What was the most significant experience you had in university? (Probes: What happened? When? Where? Who was involved? How did the events unfold?)  
能跟我说说你的一个重要的大学成长经历吗？(发生了什么？在哪儿发生？什么时候发生的？这个故事里有哪些人？事件发生的顺序是怎样的？)
- b) Why was it important to you?  
为什么这个经历对你很重要？
- c) How did you feel when it happened?  
你在当下的感受如何？
- d) How did you perceive the situation when it happened?  
你如何理解当时的所见所感？
- e) Whose perspectives/ what options did you consider at that moment?  
当时你考虑了谁的意见或者哪些可能或者哪些选择？
- f) How did you decide what to do? How did you decide what works for you?
- g) 你最后是如何做决定呢？你如何判断什么是适合你的选择呢？
- h) When did you realize what you really wanted at the time (or a “Ah-ha” moment)? How did that happen?  
在经历整个事件的过程中，有没有豁然开朗的一刻？能跟我讲讲这具体是怎么发生的吗？

*Key persons involved in participants' stories:*

- a) Can you tell me about a person/persons who is/are important to you in university? Who are they? How have they been involved in your personal growth in university? Why are they important to you?  
你的大学里有没有一个人或一些人对你产生的重要影响呢？他们是谁？他们是如何参与你的大学的？他们为什么对你重要？
- b) Can you tell me about an interaction/conversation you had with them that had an impact on you? When? Where? What happened? How did it make you feel?  
你能给我举一个与这个人或这些人交流具体的例子吗？什么时候、在哪里、如何发生的？这个互动/对话对你有什么启发呢？
- c) What perspectives have they offered you? What did they teach you?  
他们给你了哪些启发？教会了你什么？

*Take-away from key university experiences:*

- a) What did you learn from the experience?  
你从这件经历中学到了什么？
- b) What new perspectives/ways of thinking did you gain from the experience?

有哪些新的看待问题的视角？

- c) How did the experience help you better understand yourself as a person?  
这个经历是如何让你更好的去理解你是怎样的人？
- d) How did the experience help you understand other people and your relationships with them?  
这件事情如何加深你对他人以及你与他人关系的理解的？

*Pulling it altogether: authoring one's own voice:*

Based on what we have discussed:

- a) How has being in a university changed who you are as a person?  
大学的经历对你最大的改变是什么？
- b) What are the key lessons you learned in university?  
大学里你学到最重要的事是什么？
- c) What are the most important factors that have contributed to your growth in university?  
哪些是你在大学成长里最重要的因素？
- d) What will be your next step after university?  
你毕业以后的计划是什么？
- e) Do you have a long-term life goal/life purpose? Can you tell me more about it?  
你有思考过你生命的意义或价值吗？能具体跟我讲讲吗？

*Summary:*

- a) From your experiences, what do you think is/are the most important growth experience(s) that Chinese university students should have during university? What are some key aspects of growth? What does them mean to you?  
就你的经历来看，你觉得对于中国大学生来讲，最重要的大学成长应该是怎么样的？有哪些方面？这些方面对你来说意味着什么？
- b) What do you attribute your growth to?  
你认为哪些因素导致了你的这些重要成长？
- c) To what extent did your university experiences challenge your fundamental beliefs or values?  
你认为大学的经历有改变你的人生观、价值观和世界观吗？
- d) To what extent did your university experiences challenge your understanding about yourself?  
你认为大学的经历改变了你对自我的认识吗？
- e) To what extent did your university experiences change your social relationships and ways you relate to others?  
你认为大学的经历改变了你与他人的关系以及你与他人相处的方式吗？

## Appendix E Pre-Interview Reflective Exercises

### E.1 Exercise Option 1: Reflection on My University Experience (English)

#### Reflection on My University Experience

Can you summarize your university life in three key words?

- 
- 
- 

List one (or more) significant university experiences:

(They can be anything related to your personal growth in university: an important decision you made, an inspiring course you took, a critical success, a challenge you countered, being part of a community, meeting an important person etc.)

- 
- 
- 

Why is/are the experience(s) important to you?

(You can be brief by putting down key words. Also, feel free to add more description as you'd like.)

- 
- 
- 

What did you learn from the experience(s)?

(What are some new perspectives you gained from the experience(s)? What did you learn about yourself? Did the experience(s) change the way you relate to others and the world? If so, how?)

- 
- 
-

## E.2 Exercise Option 1: Reflection on My University Experience (Chinese)

### 我的大学回顾

你能用三个关键词来形容你的大学生活吗？

- 
- 
- 

简要列出三个重要的大学经历：

(可以是任何对你个人成长有重要意义的人和事：一个重要的决定，一门对你有启发的课程，一次成功的经验，一个挑战，参与的社团/你服务的社群，一个重要的人等。)

- 
- 
- 

为什么这些经历对你很重要？

(可简要列出关键词，也可以写下更具体的描述。)

- 
- 
- 

你从这些经历中学到了什么？

(有哪些新的视角或价值观？对自己的新认知？对与他人和世界的新看法？)

- 
- 
-

### E.3 Exercise Option 2: Reflection on My University Journey (English and Chinese)

#### Reflection on My University Journey 我的大学回顾

In this exercise, you can choose to reflect on your university journey using either of the options below. We can also discuss about customizing these options to suit your personal conditions and interests!

在这个练习中，你可以选择一下任意一种回顾方式。我们也可以根据你的需要做出调整。

1. You can reflect on your journey chronologically: Think about significant experiences you had, special people you met, important decisions you made, and life lessons you learned in each school term or year and then come up with some key themes that capture the essence of your experience. You can have a theme for each term or academic year. Put down the themes in circles and briefly list relevant events, people, and other details in the box below each circle.

你可以按时间顺序回顾你在大学的成长：回顾大学四年，在每一年里有哪些对你很重要的大学经历，对你很重要的人，你做的很重要的决定，学到的人生课题等。你可以分别给每一年命名一个成长主题。将这些主题写在圆圈内，在圆圈下的方框里列出一些与这个主题相关的事件、人物、细节等。

2. You can also reflect on different domains of your personal growth in university: For example, academic (knowledge, skills, competences, beliefs, worldviews), social (relationships with others, being part of a community), personal (understanding about yourself, self-awareness), future (next step after college, long-term goals). Put down domains that are important to you in circles and briefly list relevant events, people, and other details in the box below each circle.

你也可以选择回顾你成长的不同方面或领域：比如，你可以分别回顾在大学里，学业、人际关系、自我认知、未来计划四个方面的个人成长。将这些方面分别写在圆圈内，在圆圈下的方框里列出与这个领域的成长相关的事件、人物、细节等。

# My Journey in University

**Academic**

**Social**

**Personal**

**Future**

