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

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Abstract

This paper offers a critique of the Chinese philosophy of online distance learning as a means of building a lifelong learning society. Literature about lifelong learning and its implications for online distance learning is reviewed. Documents, reports and research papers are examined to explore the characteristics of the Chinese philosophy of online distance learning as reflected in the prevailing understanding and debates in the field. Phenomenological analysis, deconstructive discourse analysis and internal criticism are employed, guided by a phenomenological qualitative methodology. The critique reveals that the notion of lifelong learning is to some extent obscured in meaning in the prevailing understanding of and debates about Chinese online distance learning. Furthermore, it shows that the Chinese philosophy of online distance learning paradoxically combines a sense of overenthusiasm with a sense of underestimation associated with the potential of online distance learning in promoting lifelong learning. Also identified is the emerging development of Chinese online distance learning towards its 'in-depth development', based on an increasing awareness of the necessity to enhance the quality of online distance learning through integration of educational theories with information and communication technologies (ICT). The paper calls for a new vision on ICT for learning as a necessary condition for successful incorporation of Chinese online distance learning with and into lifelong learning.

Introduction

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

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

1. What assumptions are attached to the notion of lifelong learning in the discourse of Chinese online distance learning as a means of promoting lifelong learning?
2. What, then, are the ensuing practical, theoretical and political consequences of such assumptions? Have such practices, theories and policies been capable of sustaining lifelong learning through Chinese online distance learning?
3. What are the characteristics of the Chinese philosophy of online distance learning and its recent trend of development?

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

**Methodology and methods**

The qualitative data utilised in this critique comprise second-hand textual data: governmental documents, reports and research papers in Chinese collected throughout the nearly 4 years of my PhD research. The methods for analysing the data consist of phenomenological analysis (the chief), deconstructive discourse analysis and internal criticism, which are guided by a phenomenological qualitative methodology. It is required by the methodology that the researcher maintains a critical attitude towards our culturally derived presuppositions and beliefs by bracketing such beliefs (Cohen & Omery, 1994, pp. 138–139; Crotty, 1998, pp. 78, 80–81). Specifically, phenomenological analysis entails that documents under scrutiny are read as texts, from which there
emerge trends of themes/meanings to be discerned, examined and synthesised, with the researcher self-inspecting and laying aside his or her preconceptions when engaging with the data. Deconstructive discourse analysis incorporates a similar critical attitude towards the meanings permeating in the data and towards the researcher’s own beliefs. Its essence is captured in MacLure’s (2003, p. 3) argument that our commonsensical beliefs of educational realities (ibid.: pp. 9, 171–173) should be deconstructed and torn apart to enable proper engagement with the discursive educational realities (ibid., p. 4). The third method, internal criticism, helps in the systematic and comprehensive analysing of the textual materials examined in this critique. Bell (1999, pp. 113–116) suggests that internal criticism could be used in critically analysing the contents of a document in terms of: its genre; the language it employs; the author’s background and experiences; the purpose, background, reliability of the document, etc.

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

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

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

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

Wolfensohn (2003) argues that education that sustains lifelong learning is the key to fulfilling the developmental goals embraced by 189 developed and developing nations, which include: resolving poverty and inequity, improving human health, enhancing economic and environmental sustainability and promoting peace and democracy. However, critics like Boshier (2001, 2005) alert policy makers and educators of the danger of adopting lifelong learning merely as an instrument for economic development and market competition, which differs from the goal of lifelong learning embraced by earlier advocates emphasising the lifelong development to facilitate learners functioning effectively in the world. Conceived in this fashion, the lifelong learner should
develop as a fully functioning citizen rather than as a ‘cog in the wheel’, which seems to be demanded by the knowledge economy (Plant, 2002). Such a balance applies to distance learning as a pioneering and major area of lifelong learning; and it constitutes the underlying principle on which my critique in this paper is based.

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

The previously mentioned pedagogical changes required by lifelong learning (continual education, learner-centred education and distance learning) not only reveal the direct connection between lifelong learning and online distance learning, they also point to the direction in which lifelong learning is promoted through online distance learning. That is, online distance learning needs to:

- go beyond formal education and become relevant to all learners;
- focus on learning and its facilitation through teaching; and
- encourage effective employment of ICT.

Before entering the critique, it might be useful to look at what Boshier (2004, 2005), a Western critic, has to say about building a lifelong learning society in China. Much similar to what is examined earlier, Boshier (2005, pp. 59–60) brings into focus three indispensable conditions for promoting lifelong learning: vertical integration (education throughout life), horizontal integration (informal and nonformal education) and democratisation (learner-centred education and open learning through such means as distance learning). In respect of the three conditions, he observes that there exist three psychocultural factors which impede the construction of a learning society in China (ibid., pp. 60–62):

- ageism and linear notions of human life that learning is not meant for adults;
- obsession with formal education and derision for nonformal education; and
- the teacher-centred nature of education.

To reduce the influence of these factors, Boshier (2005, pp. 62–63) suggests that more resources and importance should be assigned to nonformal education, and more col-
laboration between formal and nonformal education should be initiated. It would be interesting to find out whether there are any common observations or discrepancies between Boshier's analysis and the critique offered further in the text.

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

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

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

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

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

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

In spite of the significance attached to the construction of a lifelong learning society, confusion exists in policies, practices and research as to what lifelong learning actually means and what it implies for online distance learning. The confusion has led to an overemphasis on the role of lifelong learning to enhance economic growth by providing a better quality working force, which obscures and almost totally replaces the other equally important role of lifelong learning—the facilitation of the human development of all citizens in a learning society (see, for example, CCTV International Channel, 2004; The Central Committee of the Zhigong Party, 2005; Ministry of Education, 1998). Coincidently, such ambiguity associated with lifelong learning is also identified in a policy paper prepared by the European ODL (open and distance learning) Liaison
Committee, which points out the unbalanced emphasis on European competitiveness rather than equity and inclusiveness in European practices and policies in distance learning and e-learning (The European ODL Liaison Committee, 2004).

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

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

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

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

- where 120 million farmers (figure in 2006, see All China Federation of Trade Unions, 2006) who have moved from rural areas to cities for employment are badly in need of compensatory education and training (Cao, 2005);

¹The exchange rate between Chinese RMB and Hong Kong dollars (HKD) is 100: 101.43 at the time of writing (see Industrial & Commercial Bank of China, 2006).
• where 592 counties remain impoverished, the majority of which are located in Western China (Kang, 2004); and
• where training for employees in organisations is in great demand (CERNET, 2003).

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

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

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

Although it is rarely disputed in the literature that online distance learning is ‘the best way for constructing a lifelong learning system’ in China (Bai, 2001), as a form of educational provision it has an unbalanced relationship with on-campus education, particularly at the level of higher education. On the one hand, online distance learning is generally regarded as the extension of on-campus higher education (see, for example, Shen, 2002; Wang, 2005; Xiaotao, 2003). On the other hand, it is considered to be an inferior and marginal form of education compared with on-campus education in terms of the quality of education it can possibly offer and the resources it is entitled to (Wang, 2005; Xiaotao, 2003). In effect, unlike the other academic departments and faculties of their home universities, e-colleges assume the sole responsibility for their profits and losses, and their students have to pay for their full learning costs (Ding, 2005b). No wonder that some commentators (e.g. Wang, 2005; Xi (Xi, Shu), cited in Xinjing Newspaper, 2003) maintain that while the other departments/faculties continue to provide élite (therefore, superior) higher education which is capable of knowledge transmission and the cultivation of students’ desirable values and disposition, e-colleges within the same universities should confine themselves within the limit of offering either popularised higher education or lower-level education and training guided by the profitable educational market. Such critics may not have realised three difficulties that they are faced with. First, they disregard the objective of lifelong learning to provide equal educational opportunities for both traditional-age and adult learners. Second, they may have forgotten the fact that on-campus higher education itself is being popularised because its scale has been rapidly expanding at a rate between 10 and 30% since 1999 (Yang, 2003). Third, the élite/popularised higher education dichotomy itself is based on the questionable bifurcation of academic/vocational education (Hager & Hyland, 2003). Despite such widespread condescension of online-distance-learning provision, some leaders of e-colleges and researchers in the field (e.g. Wei, 2002; Zhang, 2004b)
contend that online distance learning can contribute to widening opportunities of education and training rather than function merely as popularised higher education.

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

1. The competitive behaviours of competing e-colleges, which have led to replication and waste of the highly limited resources while developing educational infrastructure and learning resources (You, 2002);
2. Lack of technological standards for the development of infrastructure and learning resources (ibid.);
3. Poor management, profit-driven and commercialised promotion of some learning centres, which have resulted in lowered standards of technical and administrative student services (Lu, 2003; Yong, 2002; You, 2002);
4. On-campus teaching and learning in the name of online distance learning (You, 2002);
5. Inadequate use of the pedagogical advantages of ICT in the development of learning resources and in course design and delivery (ibid.);
6. Failure to draw upon constructivism in the development of learning resources and in course design and delivery (Yong, 2002).

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

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

i. Tightening the regulation of learning centres in terms of their technological infrastructure, administration and provision of student-supported services (Lu, 2003; Ministry of Education, 2003; Zhang, 2004a,b).
ii. Encouraging the use of standardised public service systems, such as the Aopeng Public Service System, which by design are ‘high-speed educational Internet bars’ or ‘educational supermarkets’ that enable learners to freely and flexibly choose subjects offered at different e-colleges, which also serve the purpose of enhancing collaboration among e-colleges (ibid.).
iii. Sponsoring the development of fine-quality ICT-based/enriched online distance-learning resources according to specified technological standards. Selected fine-quality learning resources are to be freely available on the Internet for all e-colleges (Lin & Yu, 2002).
iv. Introducing standardised computer-based national examinations of public subjects, including College English, College Chinese and Advanced Mathematics for students enrolled in 2005 and onwards (Lu, 2004).
v. Entrusting the evaluation of e-colleges’ quality of educational provision to an independent organisation (ibid.).

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

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

To start with, the measure of making public service systems, ‘high-speed educational Internet bars’ and ‘educational supermarkets’ seems to be simplistic and dangerously pedagogically flawed, because of three reasons. The first reason is that this measure carries the presumption that as long as learning resources are in place for students’ free choice, students can automatically go about their acquisition of the knowledge that they need. This presumption is associated with the positivist view that learning technologies may miraculously bring about learning, which is challenged by Benson (1996, p. 25) as misleadingly laying too much emphasis on technologies without paying sensible attention to their pedagogical advantages. Another reason is that it disregards the basic necessity of keeping coherent logic and structure within the curriculum and of adopting aligned teaching and assessment approaches within courses offered at e-colleges (for discussion about coherent curriculum and aligned teaching and assessment, see Biggs, 2003, pp. 25–31 and Toohey, 1999, pp. 68–69). The last reason for the inadequacy of the measure is that, closely related to the previous point, it does not take into account the necessity of providing e-colleges with guidance as to how they may collaborate in establishing interinstitutional credit transfer systems that are based on coherent curriculum and consistent teaching/assessment approaches shared among the collaborating e-colleges (for discussion regarding interinstitutional credit transfer systems, see Brindley & Paul, 1993). To put it simply, however sophisticated the educational technological infrastructure for online distance learning might have been constructed, and however user-friendly (for e-college teachers, students and administrative staff) the public service system might have become, these should and could never substitute educators’ thoughtful curriculum and teaching/assessment design that is specifically relevant to the group of students they teach.

Further, the concentration of funds on developing fine-quality rather than learner-relevant learning resources seems to be strategically and financially unwise. This measure might serve as an example of what Boshier (2001) calls ‘techno-zealotry’. As Ren (Ren Weimin, cited in Zhang & Feng, 2003) argues, although the development of fine-quality learning resources can have an exemplary effect for academics engaged in the development of learning resources, too much focus on ‘fine-quality’ seems to have resulted in the lack of emphasis on the learner-relevance of learning resources and necessary academic support for students.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It may not be surprising that political influences play an important role in the development of Chinese online distance learning, as they do in other educational contexts. On the other hand, the paradoxical combination of overoptimism and overpessimism associated with the potential of online distance learning may be attributed to the profession’s lack of experience and lack of in-depth theoretical and practical exploration of this relatively new form of distance learning. It may be argued that the hope of the healthy development of Chinese online distance learning lies in the transition that it is attempting to make towards in-depth development, which may help in overcoming the symptoms of overoptimism and overpessimism that are simultaneously present in policies, practices and research in the field. Whether or not such transition could be successfully made or would remain a mere buzzword depends on whether its implementation is being taken seriously in policies, practices and in the theorisation by the profession.

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

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

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

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

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

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Rethinking lifelong learning through distance learning


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