

**Autonomous language learning against all odds**

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### *Abstract*

Conceptualizing learners' individuality as dynamic and contextually situated, this paper reports on an inquiry that examined the genesis of a disabled learner's success in learning foreign languages on the Chinese mainland. Using source texts such as the learner's published diaries, letters and her autobiography, the inquiry revealed that language learning success could be explained by her unwavering will, unyielding beliefs and tenacious efforts in learning languages. Her narratives further unveiled the role that contextual conditions and the learner's agency played in shaping and reshaping her motivational discourses, learning beliefs and strategic efforts. These findings help illustrate how these crucial individual difference factors interact with each other in the language learning process. They also provide further food for thought for language learners and teachers in their efforts to identify means that sustain autonomous language learning efforts in difficult conditions.

**Keywords:** case study research, autonomous language learning, motivation, belief, strategic learning efforts

### **1. Introduction**

Learners have often achieved unusual success in learning foreign languages in contexts where such success was highly valued and contextual constraints were numerous. For this reason, successful language learners could make themselves into legendary figures, influencing many others. In East Asian contexts such as Japan, these learners have published accounts of their experience of learning languages, many becoming bestsellers (Takeuchi, 2003). This phenomenon can be also observed in Chinese contexts such as Taiwan and the Chinese mainland. In particular, on the Chinese mainland, not only are these stories of successful language learning widely

circulated, but also some have become foundational myths for even more successful political/business enterprises to promote the learning and teaching of foreign languages (Bolton, 2002; Lai, 2003).

This paper reports on an inquiry that examined the genesis of one such legendary language learner's success. Zhang Haidi, the learner concerned in the inquiry, was promoted nationwide by the Chinese government as a role model on the Chinese mainland in the 1980s and influenced millions of Chinese of her time (Landsberger, 2001; Zhang, 1999). Born in 1955, she became a paraplegic at the age of five and survived 'four operations for the removal of tumours in her spine' (Landsberger, 2001, p.554). Although she could not go to school because of her paralysis, she 'taught herself medicine, acupuncture, and classical literature' (Zhang, 1999, p. 115). She began to learn English and other foreign languages near the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and had 'translated over 160,000 words in foreign books and reference materials' by 1983( *ibid*). In comparison with other role models promoted in the previous decades, Zhang can be distinguished by her pursuit of knowledge for national development and engagement in the world (Landsberger, 2001; Zhang, 1999). Zhang's paralyzed body, in this author's view, could be metaphorically interpreted as the state of the nation after years of social and political turmoil. Zhang's later soaring success as language learner, translator and author and then chairperson for China's

Disabled Federation also echoes China's developmental success in the last three decades.

Using source texts such as the published diaries, letters and the autobiography of Zhang, this study adopted case study as its methodological approach. Critics may have reservations about case study research, such as difficulties in generalizing its findings (see Flyvbjerg, 2006). However, in-depth analysis of Zhang's experiences allows for 'analytic generalization' as her experiences could be used to 'illustrate, represent, or generalize to a theory' (Yin, 1994, p. 44). Furthermore, 'good social science is problem driven and not methodology driven in the sense that it employs those methods [...] that best help answer the research questions at hand' (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 242). With an increasing attention to language learners' individuality emerging from their narrated experiences (Benson, 2008, Ushioda, forthcoming), the case study approach is considered helpful in exploring how individual learners like Zhang sustain the momentum of their autonomous language learning efforts and achieve success in spite of various difficulties. Answers were sought in the inquiry to the following questions:

- 1) What motivational discourses, beliefs and strategic language learning efforts did Zhang use to sustain her autonomous language learning?
- 2) How do motivational discourses, beliefs and strategic language learning efforts

interact with each other in Zhang's accounts of language learning?

## **2. Motivational discourses, beliefs and strategy use in autonomous learning**

Language learning research has consistently demonstrated that autonomous language learners sustain their learning with a strong motivation, beliefs in what works in learning and strategies that help achieve their language learning objectives, all considered essential components of autonomous language learning (Gao, 2006; Horwitz, 1988; Wenden, 1998, 2002; Yang, 1999; Oxford, 2003, 2008; Ushioda, forthcoming; Zhang, 2003). While these components have been traditionally considered 'static' learner attributes, researchers have recently contended for a shift from a theoretical abstraction of learner attributes towards:

a focus on the agency of the individual person [...] with an identity, a personality, [...]; a person with goals, motives and intentions; a focus on the interaction between this self-reflective agent, and the fluid and complex web of social relations, activities, experiences and multiple micro- and macro-contexts ... (Ushioda, forthcoming; also see Gao, 2010; Palfreyman, 2003)

Recent studies, especially those endorsing sociocultural perspectives that highlight the mediation of contextual conditions on language learning, have also advanced views that language learners' motivation, beliefs and strategy use in

autonomous learning emerge from an interactive process between shifting contextual conditions and learners themselves (e.g. Gao, 2008, 2010; Palfreyman, 2003, 2006).

In the process, contextual conditions, consisting of materials (artefacts) and discourses distributed through a myriad of social networks, mediate the kind of motivational discourses, beliefs and strategy options that learners have for language learning (Oxford, 2003; Palfreyman, 2006). Meanwhile, individual learners reveal their agency through the exercise of their capacity and willpower to ‘achieve desired and intended outcomes’ in the language learning process (Giddens, 1984, p 15).

Meanwhile, researchers have argued for the centrality of ‘ideal self’ as a motivating incentive in sustaining and regulating language learners’ efforts to acquire linguistic competence (see Al-Shehri, 2009; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). This focus on language learners’ pursuit of ‘ideal self’ may be seen as similar to the emphasis on individuals’ ‘efforts’ and ‘perseverance’ in their pursuits of ‘self-actualization’ and ‘self-realization’ in traditional Chinese educational discourses (Gu, 2003, p. 97; See also Gao, 2008; Jiang & Smith, 2009; Shi, 2006). Exploring the links between language learning motivation and the L2 self, Ushioda and Dörnyei (2009, p. 3) conceptualize the ‘ideal self’ as ‘the representation of the attributes that someone would ideally like to possess (i.e. a representation of personal hopes, aspirations or wishes)’. While language learners undertake various strategic efforts to effect local

changes within their immediate learning settings and facilitate their autonomous language learning, they can also ‘make events seem real and almost tangible’ through ‘mental simulations’ thus enabling them to undertake learning efforts ‘within the constraints of reality’ (Al-Shehri, 2009, p. 165). Learners’ accounts of such language learning efforts can then be used as a means to explore autonomous learning as it emerges from interactions between learner agency and contextual conditions.

### **3. The source texts and analysis**

The inquiry examined Zhang’s narratives of language learning in five published texts (see Table 1), including ones published by the Propaganda Department of the National Communist Youth League (Texts 1-4) and her autobiography (Text 5). Texts 1-4 were published in Chinese while Text 5 was published in a mixture of English and Chinese. Therefore, all the excerpts in this paper, except those indicated otherwise, were translated from the Chinese originals.

#### **Insert Table 1 here**

It must be noted that these source texts can not be regarded as factual representations of Zhang Haidi and her language learning efforts as all the texts were socially constructed and some of them were politically motivated. Most of the texts were published in the early 1980s when Zhang was being promoted to be a role model

nationwide on the Chinese mainland. Given this particular historical time, these texts included obvious ideological stances, such as calls for young people to work for a better socialist future. However, the essential elements of Zhang's language learning narratives have been confirmed by her autobiography in 2004 (Text 5) after the Chinese mainland witnessed dramatic changes in terms of social, cultural and ideological conditions. In fact, earlier accounts about Zhang (Texts 1-4) marked the 'beginning of the depoliticization of society' towards 'diversity and pluralism' (Landsberger, 2001, p. 551; also see Guo & Huang, 2002; Shen, 1995; Zhang, 1999).

A paradigmatic approach was adopted to analyze the source texts, in which narratives were analyzed paradigmatically to 'produce taxonomies and categories out of the common elements across the database' (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5; also see Smeyers & Verhesschen, 2001; Erickson, 2004). The narratives were selected and categorized according to the foci of this inquiry, namely Zhang's motivational discourses, language learning beliefs and strategic learning efforts (Patton 1990; Strauss & Corbin 1998). With her narratives reconstructed thematically, it then became possible for interpretations to be made concerning the interaction between contextual conditions and agency in her autonomous learning efforts.

#### **4. Emerging findings**



In the analysis, narratives in the source texts were found to have consistently portrayed Zhang as a highly motivated language learner committed to socialist ideals and a pursuit of ‘ideal self’. They also recorded unique ways that she used to overcome the contextual constraints and her physical disability in learning languages. These efforts were also found to have been guided by her committed beliefs in what would work in learning languages. These findings, focusing on her learning of English, will be presented in detail in the following sections.

#### ***4.1 Motivational discourses***

Due to her medical condition, Zhang needed unusually strong willpower to continue her language learning efforts. Her willpower was found, in the analysis of the narratives, to have consisted of socialist ideals and a powerful personal vision, reflecting the contextual mediation on her narrated experiences.

##### *4.1.1 Socialist ideals*

According to Texts 1-4, the catalytic event that made Zhang determined to learn English took place in a county hospital where she worked as a temporary medical worker in the Acupuncture Section. Known for her reputation for learning new things, she was approached by ‘an old comrade’ with a request regarding the English instructions on an imported medicine for cardiac problems:

I took the medicine and looked at it. I had to apologize to my comrade: ‘[..]. I have never learnt English’. This old comrade was very disappointed [...]. After she left, I felt really ashamed of myself. [...] I started thinking: well, [...]. Why can't I learn English? If I learn English, I can have one more means to serve my people. [...] I must learn it. (Text 3, p. 53)

As can be seen from the above extract, the motivational forces underlying her efforts to learn English appear to have been closely associated with the ideological discourses of her time with an emphasis on serving the needs of ‘our people’ (Guo & Huang, 2002; Shen, 1995; Zhang, 1999). Nevertheless, it can also be argued that a pragmatic orientation towards the learning of English is a crucial component of her motivational discourses, her seeing the language as a means to acquire advanced technology, i.e. medical knowledge in this particular case, for the benefit of the country. This pragmatic motivation could be also related to a strong desire for Zhang to be a ‘useful’ member of society, making meaningful contributions through translation, in spite of her physical predicament. Therefore, frequent references to her translation works were made in her diaries and correspondence:

[...] my efforts to learn English continue. Now I can [...] translate the instructions for some of the imported medicines. (Letter to Weiguo, June 8<sup>th</sup>,

1976, Text 1, p. 20)

I have sent the translation of *The Encyclopaedia of Canine* together with the English original to the Science Press through comrades [...] if the translation is no good, I will be preparing to translate another book, an English novel called '*Surgery by the Sea*'. (To Uncle Song, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1982, Text 1, p. 85)

By undertaking these translation efforts, Zhang began to see the learning of English as an additional means for her to prove herself as a competent member of society. In spite of the obvious ideological imports, this desire to be 'useful' is also suggestive of her pursuit of an 'ideal self' underlying her language learning efforts (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009), which is detectable in an implicit form in Texts 1-4 but is in full display in her own autobiography (Text 5).

#### *4.1.2 Personal Pursuit*

In a letter addressed to 'all the young people in China' on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1982, Zhang asserted that she learnt foreign languages 'not for personal pleasures', but that foreign languages were 'a weapon', which must be learnt together with particular professional needs, for instance, the need to translate the instructions on imported medicines into Chinese (Text 1, p. 72). However, in spite of such pragmatic motivational discourses, Zhang's vision of her 'ideal self' was a crucial motivational force sustaining her

language learning efforts, when pursuing English competence as a means to fulfil her societal obligations of being ‘useful’. From the very beginning, she projected another ‘self’ on to the confined world where she spent time learning English:

[...] I finally decided to find an English friend for myself. She is the me in the mirror. In order for me to practise English conversation with her, I wrote down two scripts, one for a girl from China and the other for the English girl. I began to talk to the me in the mirror [...] (Text 2, p. 63)

This reference to another ‘me’ in the source texts published in the 1980s was presented as a strategy that Zhang adopted to overcome her physical disability and learn to speak English. In her recent memoir (Text 5), however, this ‘me’ has acquired more features and substance, revealing the critical play of her powerful imagination in the learning of English. First of all, this ‘me’ had an English name, as recorded in one of the imagined conversations as follows:

Who are you, please?

I am Mariana.

(Text 5, p. 15, English original)

‘Mariana’ in due course has also more visual representations and ‘she’ was described

in one of Zhang's diary entries as follows:

Perhaps you have read *Jane Eyre*. My home village is near the place the story occurred. Here it was winter. The sky was gray and the weather was cold. All tree leaves fell early before and the fields seemed vast and solitary under the cover of white snow. (Text 5, p. 20, English original)

By creating and investing in this imagined self, Zhang sustained the motivational level necessary for her to overcome various difficulties in the process of learning English (also Al-Shehri, 2009; Li, 2009; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). It also helped her relate her language learning efforts to a process of 'self-cultivation' and 'self-realization', which has been encouraged by traditional educational discourses (Gu, 2003, p. 97; Shi, 2006).

Meanwhile, she was also engaged in numerous imagined conversations concerning why she had to learn English. Again and again in these motivational dialogues with herself, she convinced herself to undertake strenuous language learning efforts with various reasons, including:

Because English is a beautiful language.

That is what I have chosen. (Text 5, p. 18, English original)

These statements revealed her inherent interest in the language in contrast to the pragmatic values that the official propaganda materials (Texts 1-4) had attached to the learning of English. These motivational dialogues are also indicative of Zhang's agency in committing herself to the learning of a language that she held dear to her heart.

#### ***4.2 Learning beliefs***

It emerged from the analysis that her autonomous language learning had been guided by beliefs in how she could learn languages best in her setting. Most fundamental to her sustained language learning efforts was her strong belief in her capacity to learn regardless of her physical disability as she recalled in one of her public speeches in 1983:

I have a strong sense of self-esteem since young. Although I am physically disabled, I never felt that I was left behind. I have always believed that I could learn what other children could learn at school although I have to spend twice as much time at home. (Text 3, p. 42)

The extract above shows her awareness of the extra efforts that were required of her in learning anything and her confidence in achieving her learning objectives. This

strong sense of self-efficacy helped her overcome numerous constraints on her efforts to learn English, including the lack of learning resources and limited access to teachers and other language learners. Given these challenging conditions, she had developed a strong belief in the importance of memorization in learning languages as memorization could be done without working with other language learners (also see Gao, 2008). In addition, she displayed in the narratives a committed belief in the necessity to use the language she was learning.

#### *4.2.1 The importance of memorization*

According to her perception, the learning of a language is like building a skyscraper, which requires ‘a solid foundation’:

If the foundation is not solid, there will be no significant progress. Just like verb tenses, the use of prepositions and so on, we have to master them.

Otherwise, we cannot write English properly. (Letter to Guoqing, May, 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1978, Text 1, p. 51)

In the same letter, she further advised Guoqing to ‘eat’ a few more books ‘by repeatedly reading, understanding and digesting them word by word, sentence by sentence’ so that ‘a solid foundation’ could be laid. Guided by this belief, one of the most important steps she took was to memorize English words and texts. The

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importance of memorization as perceived by Zhang could be testified to by an incident following one of her major operations, which kept her confined to bed for days:

‘Am I still alive?’ that was her first question. [...]

In order to prove her capacity for memorization, she memorized 16 Japanese words that night. She found that she did not forget one of them the second day.

She was happy... (Text 2, p. 50)

As reported by her biographical writers, Zhang was greatly relieved after she found that she was still able to memorize words and subsequently still able to learn languages. This incident revealed the critical importance that she attached to her memorization capacity in learning languages.

As she recalled in Text 5, her belief in memorization also evolved as she continued to learn English. At the beginning, she ‘copied all the words [she] learnt every day into a notebook, just like a primary school pupil copies new characters learnt in a Chinese lesson’ (Text 5, p. 28). Then, a close friend sent her a collection of English texts and advised her to ‘memorize all the texts in this book and all the words in them so that [she] will be good at English in a month’ (ibid). She did try to memorize words and texts by rote learning, repeating them many times, but she soon



became dubious of this mechanical way to memorize words and texts. She noticed that such rote learning did not help her retain and use the memorized words. As a result, she felt that there was a need for her to discover new ways to memorize and learn English words. Her pursuit of suitable ways to learn English led her to conclude:

I believe that there is a need for me to memorize words within the reading materials or texts and memorize them through understanding their meanings and usage. I think that the texts provide the contexts and particular scenarios for the use of these words and their meanings emerge in these contexts and scenarios.

(Text 5, p. 33)

This belief in contextualizing word meanings for memorization transformed her memorization efforts into a process of deep learning, echoing previous research on Chinese students' approaches to language learning (e.g. Gu, 2003; Jiang & Smith, 2009). The belief also drove her to use her powerful imagination to create contexts facilitating her learning of new words when such contexts were non-existent. For instance, as mentioned in Text 5, she would even imagine herself as 'a film director', creating scenarios and plots for her to memorize words and texts.

#### *4.2.2 Language is to be used*

One would probably assume that language use could not play a significant role in

Zhang's language learning because of her physical disability. However, the texts have recorded her persistent efforts to utilize what she learnt, revealing a strong belief that one has to use the language they are learning. In order to use the language she was learning, she tried to imagine another self with whom she could engage in English conversations. She also tried her best to write English letters to her friends. As she learnt English in a county far away from the main transport links, writing English letters was probably one of the few means through which she could get in touch with other English learners:

[LY] was also learning English by herself in a major city. [...] she could find English teachers and also buy English books in bookshops there. I regularly updated her with my progress in the learning of English. [...] My letters to her used both English and Chinese. (Text 5, p. 10)

It took her some time to come up with the first letter written in English to LY. In one of her English letters to other friends, she asserted her beliefs in learning as follows:

I study English every day. At the same time I exercise my guitar.

'Where there is a will, there is a way' (Letter to Laoxiang, August, 8<sup>th</sup>, 1976, Text 1, p. 24, English original)

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Similarly, in her letter to Guoqing (May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1978), she not only pointed out mistakes Guoqing had in his English letter to her but she also advised him on how to improve his English, revealing her beliefs in learning the language.

The source texts also recorded her attempts to translate English works into Chinese and some of the translation efforts took place almost immediately after she started learning English. Her translation efforts might have been associated with her motivational orientations but they could be related to the belief she had in using the language, as reflected in her letter to Weiguo (June, 8<sup>th</sup>, 1976):

Encouraged by my friends, I began to translate an English novel called '*The Moonstone*'. [...] I know little about translation and I am also a beginning learner. It is really difficult. Well, I treated the task as a pastime. (Letter to Xiao Xu, Oct. 10<sup>th</sup>, 1976, Text 1, p. 28)

I had my translation manuscript returned by a publisher today. [...] This is my first time to translate major works. [...] I will now be focusing on translating the 2<sup>nd</sup> book. If this is no good again, I shall translate a third book. (Diary entry, June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1982, Text 1, p. 161)

In the given conditions that Zhang found herself in, the options for her to use English were apparently quite limited. Like other language learners of her time on the

Chinese mainland, she probably considered translation one of the ways for her to master the language by going deep into the available English texts since translation required her to analyze these texts for deep processing and render her understanding in Chinese (Gu, 2003; Jiang & Smith, 2009). Therefore, her persistent translation efforts revealed her strong belief in the importance of using the language she was learning.

### **4.3 Strategic efforts**

In presenting Zhang's motivational discourses and learning beliefs, the previous sections have already shed some light on the strategic learning efforts that she had undertaken to improve her English in the face of all the difficulties. These strategic learning efforts included her commitment to memorization and learning the language through use, in particular, writing English letters and translation. Zhang was also found to have used her powerful imagination to process English words and texts by contextualizing their meanings and conduct English conversations with an imagined interlocutor. In addition to these findings, two more aspects of her strategic language learning efforts still deserve attention, namely her metacognitive control of language learning and her remarkable efforts and success in creating a social space facilitating her learning efforts in spite of her physical disability (Gao, 2007; Palfreyman, 2006;

Wenden, 1998, 2002).

#### *4.3.1 Metacognitive control of learning*

The narratives, including her public speeches, diary entries and selected correspondence, revealed that she set clear goals and planned activities from the very beginning of her efforts to learn English. Once she decided to learn English, she set 'being a translator' as a goal for her learning of English. In her letters and diary entries, there were frequent references to her efforts to translate English works into Chinese. To become a translator, she set up a rigid schedule to expand her vocabulary:

I set a rule for myself. No matter how busy and how tired I was, I would not sleep until I had memorized 10 English words. (Text 3, p. 54)

In addition to her consistent observance of this memorization rule, the source texts also recorded that she had been closely following language learning programmes on the radio. In one of her letters to a friend, she reported a list of language learning programmes on the radio as follows:

Are you listening to English language learning programmes on Shandong People's Radio Station and Jinan People's Radio Station? The programme on Shandong Radio starts at 5:30 AM and 12:30 PM, on Jinan Radio programme at 21:30PM. If you keep following these radio programmes, you will make

significant progress within six months. (Letter to Xuemei, Dec. 20<sup>th</sup>, 1977, Text 1, p. 43)

Zhang had all these listening activities scheduled and implemented her planned activities.

Meanwhile, she attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of her learning efforts whenever possible. In another letter to Xuemei, a close friend of hers, she reported her thrill over answering all the questions in an examination paper correctly:

A few days ago, Xiaoluo managed to find an English language examination paper for me. I tried and answered all the questions correctly. I was so happy about it. (Letter to Xuemei, Dec. 14<sup>th</sup>, 1977, Text 1, p. 41)

The success in answering these examination questions confirmed the effectiveness of her language learning efforts. Her efforts to translate English texts and then send translation manuscripts to publishers may be considered another means for her to get direct feedback on her language learning progress. Meanwhile, she was a highly reflective language learner, evidenced by her efforts to identify ways of processing English words and texts deeply through her imagination, rather than rote memorization.

#### *4.3.2 Create a social learning space*

The analysis of the source texts also identified Zhang's strategic efforts to create an English-rich environment. Having no dictionary, she reportedly developed her own, writing English words on 'the walls, desks, bookshelves, arms, and hands... any place that I can reach' (Text 3, p. 63). Without any competent speakers to practise English with, she imagined her other 'self' in the mirror to be an 'English' girl that she could have conversations with (Texts 3, 4 & 5). Even though she found it difficult to socialize with other language learners because of her medical condition, she still managed to create a social network of learners and teachers that supported her language learning. For instance, she solicited every possible help from any visitor who knew some English and who could help her learn English in however insignificant ways, described by her biographers as follows:

Zhang keeps putting questions about learning English to anyone visiting her who happened to know some English. Many of them became her English teachers for one single letter or word. (Text 2, p. 21)

This is not the end of her efforts to find social support for her learning of English. At a time when China was still in political turmoil because of the ongoing Cultural Revolution, she managed to find an English teacher, who had been exiled to a

neighbouring village because of his overseas connections, considered then a sign of disloyalty to the nation. This teacher reportedly refused her requests at first but was finally moved by her insistence and decided to help her out secretly (the teacher's account was included in Text 2). Zhang conveyed her excitement about this achievement in the following letter to a close friend, who was also learning English:

I have improved my pronunciation because I am learning English from a teacher whose English was taught by an *English woman* (Zhang's original) in a church school in Beijing. He has also been to countries such as the US and the UK. He also helped me with my grammar. (To Xun Ning, May, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1976, Text 1, pp.14-15)

Frequent references to the learning of English in her correspondence (Text 1) show that she invested heavily in establishing a social network in relation to her language learning. In many of these letters, she made requests for help concerning particular English learning materials such as the following one:

I hope that you could do me three favours: 1) could you lend the two books (about learning English, author's note) again after you finish learning them? 2) When you buy any English book, could you also buy me one? [...] 3) I hope that you can write to me regularly so that I can learn about your progress and learning



methods [...] (To Xun Ning, April, 1979, Text 1, p. 60)

In fact, Zhang obtained almost all the learning materials through the help of her friends. She also returned their favours. As mentioned earlier, she was found in many of her letters to have been advising friends such as Guoqing (May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1978) and Xue Mei (Dec. 20<sup>th</sup>, 1977) on how to learn and use English. As a result, she was able to create a supportive social network in the process of learning English. This group of ‘friends’ played an important role in sustaining Zhang’s efforts to learn English and other foreign languages.

## **5. Discussion**

As presented in the above sections, Zhang, as a disabled language learner, has achieved language learning success almost impossible even for learners with no medical condition such as hers. Her achievements in learning English could only be explained by her unwavering will, unyielding beliefs and tenacious efforts, all working closely together to sustain her acquisition of English competence in the face of all the difficulties. The narratives further reveal the interaction between contextual conditions and Zhang’s agency in shaping and reshaping her motivational discourses, learning beliefs and strategic efforts (Palfreyman, 2003; Oxford, 2008; Ushioda,

forthcoming).

Motivational discourses in Zhang's narratives of different times appear to be multi-faceted with earlier source texts emphasizing her motivations to learn English in line with the ideological discourses of that time and later source texts focusing on her pursuit of an imagined self, embodied as 'Mariana' in her autobiographical accounts (Al-Shehri, 2009; Li, 2009; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). Apart from her strong will to learn English, these narratives are indicative of her strong beliefs in learning the language through memorization and using it actively as mediated by contextual conditions. Being physically disabled in a remote county, Zhang found it difficult to access learning materials and socialize with competent users of the language.

Memorization of English words and texts was likely one of the few options available to her in learning English as it was recommended by her friends and was also in accordance with the traditional emphasis on the role of memorization in Chinese students' educational efforts (Jiang & Smith, 2009; Shi, 2006). However, her physical disability did not discourage her from believing in the importance of using the language to enhance her learning. This belief drove her to seize any possible opportunities to use the language and even create such opportunities when there were none (also see Gao, 2007).

Meanwhile, as portrayed by the narratives, her strategic language learning efforts

have been guided by the goals that she had set in response to the mediation of contextual conditions. She critically reflected on her efforts and identified ways for further improvement to enhance her learning of English. She was also found to have made strenuous efforts to create a language-rich learning environment and maintain a social network supporting her learning of English. To achieve these ends, she attempted to change her physical learning environment and connect herself with different users and learners of English (real or imagined) through various means, in particular, correspondence and imagination. Her persistent translation efforts, using the language through translating English texts into Chinese, also reflected the goal that she had set for herself in the learning of English. These efforts speak for the extraordinary will that she had in learning the language against all the odds facing her. As a result, her autonomous language learning efforts could be seen as emerging from the interaction between contextual conditions and her strong willpower (Wenden, 1998, 2002; Palfreyman, 2003).

It is probably interesting to note the different emphases in the motivational discourses as recorded by the source texts published by the Propaganda Department (Texts 1-4) and Zhang's autobiography (Text 5). The official propaganda materials (Texts 1-4) highlight the role of socialist ideals in Zhang's autonomous language learning while her autobiography focuses on the role of her visions of 'ideal self' in

sustaining her language learning efforts. Given the political ambience of the time, it is not surprising to see that the propaganda materials downplay the importance of Zhang's visions in the language learning process and portray her imagination efforts as strategies to overcome the difficulty in finding someone to practise conversational English. Nevertheless, a carefully edited selection of Zhang's letters and correspondence for public consumption still retains references to the ways that she used her vision and imagination in learning English, suggesting the centrality of these elements in her commitment to the learning of the language. This said, Zhang must have seen the learning of English as a crucial step for her to become a 'useful' person to society in spite of her physical disability and being 'useful' has also been at the core of the 'ideal self'. Without this commitment to being 'useful', she would have not been continuously favoured by the political establishment, leading her to a meteoritic rise as a national role model in the 1980s and chairperson for China's Disabled Federation in the new century (Landsberger, 2001; Zhang, 1999). In addition, the construction of the propaganda texts and autobiography was probably also mediated by the societal and traditional discourses in the wider context, which emphasizes the importance of 'self-cultivation', 'self-realization', 'effort' and 'perseverance' in individuals' educational pursuits (Gu, 2003, p. 97).

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the processes underlying Zhang's success in learning English in extremely challenging conditions, highlighting the role that her willpower and beliefs have played in sustaining her efforts to learn English. Although Zhang's success cannot be easily repeated by others, her narratives can still be used to encourage language learners' reflections on how she achieved her language learning success and what elements they need to achieve any success in learning languages. They can also inform language teachers about language learners of particular generations in China, as millions of them may have been influenced by Zhang's stories of learning English or similar ones (Jiang & Smith, 2009). Even though China is a much more developed country these days, it is still a diverse country with great socioeconomic disparities in different geographical areas. Many language learners are still in need of Zhang's strong will or have been through a similar process in order to achieve some results in learning foreign languages. In addition, Zhang's narratives help teachers see the importance of cultivating a strong will, in particular, encouraging students to use their vision and imagination in learning foreign languages (Al-Shehri, 2009). Zhang's efforts to create a social network supporting her language learning also deserve teachers' and learners' attention as such social networks remain important in the language learning process and can be achieved through modern

technologies such as the Internet.

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**Table 1: The Source Texts in the Inquiry**

No	Title	Year of Publication	Author(s)	Publisher	Note
1	Zhang Haidi shu xin ri ji xuan 張海迪書信日記選 Selected Diaries and Correspondences of Zhang Haidi	1983	Propaganda Department, Communist Youth League	China Youth Press	An edited collection of Zhang's diary entries and correspondences
2	Shan guang de sheng huo dao lu : Zhang Haidi shi ji 閃光的生活道路：張海迪事迹 Shining Life path: The story of Zhang Haidi	1983	Propaganda Department Communist Youth League	China Youth Press	A collection of national leaders' speeches on Zhang, Zhang's public speeches and her colleagues' speeches on her
3	Shan guang de sheng huo dao lu : Zhang Haidi shi ji. Xu bian 閃光的生活道路：張海迪事迹. 續編 Shining Life path: The story of Zhang Haidi (Continued)	1983	Propaganda Department Communist Youth League	China Youth Press	A collection of national leaders' speeches on Zhang, Zhang's public speeches and her colleagues' speeches on her
4	Jin xing : Zhang Haidi de gu shi 金星：張海迪的故事 Shining star: The story of Zhang Haid	1983	Miao Deyu & Wang Guangming	Shandong People's Press	A documentary report on Zhang
5	Beautiful English 美麗的英語	2004	Zhang Haidi	Writers' Press	Autobiography (focusing on the learning of English and other foreign languages)