This paper examines a sample of online discussion data from the course forum for the large-scale beginners’ Chinese course offered by the UK Open University (OU). This forum is open to all registered students, their participation is completely voluntary, and they (rather than tutors) initiate communications. The aim of this study is i) to seek to establish the nature, patterns of use and functions of forums among distance language learners of beginners’ Chinese; ii) to provide a greater understanding of the role and the significance of learner participation in online forums and how forums contribute towards Chinese language learning; and iii) to offer a fresh perspective to the understanding of distant Chinese language learning experience, which is a relatively under-reported group of learners. Quantitative data collected from questionnaires and qualitative data from interviews were analysed together with the routine forum data. The analysis indicates that most students had a very positive experience of the forum. The sense of belonging to a group with the same shared goal of learning Chinese helped them meet the challenges of learning Chinese. They perceived the online discussion forum as a virtual meeting place where they could find support and help; and share their learning experiences, resources, difficulties and frustrations as well as sense of achievement. Our analysis also shows that the forum played a very important role in creating course cohesion, supporting the learning of Chinese and making the learning process enjoyable and fun.