

Who am I? A Case Study of a Foreigner's Identity in China as Presented via WeChat Moments

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Abstract: Conceptualized upon interrelated theories, social identity and cultural identity, this study explored the identities of a foreigner as she acculturated in China. Data were collected from WeChat, the most popular social networking site in China; 135 WeChat Moments posts of one foreign English teacher from America were analyzed as they displayed identity formation: personal interests and needs, occupation, family (life), Chinese themes and American themes. Posts were further analyzed in terms of personal identity and intercultural identity. While the participant continued to display an “American” identity, she also portrayed and described experiences of Chinese culture, evident in posts about Chinese traditions, contrasts between American and Chinese culture, and usage of Chinese characters. Overall, anxiety and stress were not strongly evident in the participant’s acculturation process, and most posts indicated active and ongoing adaptation to Chinese culture.

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In this era of globalization, people, ideas, and messages are crossing national and cultural borders with increasing speed and frequency. As migrating “newcomers” come into contact with people of different cultural backgrounds, one important question to ask is what is the impact of globalization on individual and social identities. As many studies of acculturation and adaptation claim (e.g., Collier & Thomas, 1988; Kim, 2001; Ting-Toomey, 2005), movement has an impact on identity. When confronted with a new culture, there are behavioral and psychological challenges; these may come from a range of communicative situations, mediated and interpersonal, as Kim (1994) has previously noted: “through face-to-face or mediated forms of communication, intercultural interfaces often present a multitude of challenges, including those that force people to confront and re-assess their own identity as well as the taken-for-granted practices of thinking, feeling, and acting associated with identity” (p.10).

This study takes a more up-to-date look at this question, by analyzing and interpreting the socially mediated messages of one person who moved from the United States to China, and by seeking to understand how identities are shaped, presented, and performed. More specifically, we analyze data collected from one of the most popular mediated forms of communication in China, WeChat. Similar in design to Facebook or Instagram, WeChat (known in Chinese as 微信 *Weixin*) has a function called “Moments” (Chinese: 朋友圈 *Pengyou quan*), where users can share photos and accompanying short text messages (Sandel & Ju, 2015). This provides users with a platform to share pictures and images that present an image of the self, including what they are

doing, what they like, and how they evaluate the activities, events, and “moments” of their lives; in addition, their WeChat friends may comment and send feedback. We have used WeChat Moments as a data source, and conducted a case study of Moments posts as shared by an English language teacher from America. Our analysis may not only reflect ongoing cognitive and behavioral changes, but also demonstrate identity formation during a time of acculturation.

Identity, Social Identity and Cultural Identity

Theories of identity (originating from sociology) and social identity (rooted in psychology) have similarities and differences. As explained by Hogg, Terry & White (1995), both approaches examine the role of inter-group behavior, the relationship between roles and groups, and the salience of social context on identity. While identity theory is more attuned to exploring chronic identities and interpersonal social interactions, social identity theory facilitates investigating inter-group activities as well as socio-cognitive processes. While different meanings of identity—as explained by Thoits & Virshup (1997)—are emphasized in identity theory (“who I am”) and social identity theory (“who we are”), both perspectives see identity as tied to a role and to actions that are taken to enact an identity that conforms to and/or exhibits that role.

Cultural identity is another important area of study. When a newcomer to a different culture engages in intercultural communication, their cultural identity is initially perceived to be negotiable and manageable. Identity management theory—proposed by Imahori & Cupach (2005)—states that newcomers are able to manage their cultural identities and facework when

communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Centering on theories related to identity, it is understood that an individual's identity is synthetically performed in self-reflection, relational role, group membership, and cultural representations. This also applies to individuals entering a new environment. Therefore, the present study first investigates what identities emerge when a novice comes into a new environment, and then discusses how an intercultural identity (Kim, 2008)—explained below—is performed.

Intercultural Identity, Cultural Fusion, and Differential Adaptation

When entering a new environment, newcomers are exposed to new persons and events. As claimed by Y. Y. Kim (2001) in the theory of cross-cultural adaptation, the need to gain and master new cultural practices, called "enculturation," may be accompanied by "deculturation," or the unlearning of former cultural elements. A number of studies demonstrate support for Kim's argument that newcomers experience stress and may see their identity transformed in intercultural situations (e.g., Kim, Y. S., 2008; Milstein, 2005; Pitts, 2007; Sandel, 2014; Suro, 1998). A weakness of this approach, however, is that there are so far only a few empirical studies of the transformation of identity longitudinally, and of how identity may transform over the stages of acculturation.

A criticism of Kim's theory is offered by Kramer (2000; 2003); he challenges the idea of a deculturation-enculturation process and the theory of cross-cultural adaptation. He argues that what the theory proposes is impossible; that to "achieve" adaptation means "escaping suffering or mystically transforming oneself to a realm beyond good and evil" (2000, p. 223). As an alternative, he proposes the theory of "cultural fusion" to explain what is happening to persons and groups globally: Cultural fusion is "a process of adding and integrating new knowledge with old" (p.196). Growth—which in Kim's theory involves the dual processes of enculturation and deculturation—is "not a zero-sum closed system. Instead, it is additive and integrative, so that as a person learns new ways of thinking and behaving, old ones are not necessarily unlearned" (p. 239). Support for Kramer's theory can be found in Sandel and Liang's (2010) study of female marriage migrants to Taiwan, who found that those who expressed greater satisfaction and adaptation learned both cultural practices of their new home, and maintained practices and beliefs from their former homes. As explained by Kramer (2000; 2003), cultural fusion means that the goal of adaption should be to embrace differences; it does not mean that all persons who enter a new culture must completely adapt to the host culture. More recently, Croucher and Kramer (2017) explain that acculturation leads to the creation of a fused intercultural identity, which allows newcomers to both

acculturate to the tasks and behaviors of the dominant, host culture, and also maintain aspects of the home culture that are valued.

A response to Kramer's criticism can be found in Y. Y. Kim's (2008) explanation of the term "intercultural identity"; in her essay she highlighted the evolving and adapting nature of identity. Perceived as a counterpoint to and an extension of cultural identity, intercultural identity emerges from the experiences of acculturation, deculturation, and the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic. The individual who enters a new environment is in a condition of stress, pushed to adapt in order to fit into the new culture, but pulled by patterns, behaviors, and beliefs from the old one. Faced with such a condition, the individual changes through a process of "compromise" that is open-ended, adaptive and transformative, and leads to a new understanding of self-other orientation (p. 363-364).

A third way of looking at the issue of adaptation is found in De La Garza and Ono's (2015) concept of "differential adaptation." This theory criticizes "traditional" approaches to adaptation, including Kim's work, that they characterize as a "rags-to-riches" fiction of the immigrant individual successfully adapting through effort and adoption of the new culture. Instead, they call attention to issues of power, ideology, and "material forces that both produce and constrain social adaption" (p. 270). That is, not all immigrants enter a new culture possessing the same resources (e.g., education, wealth, skills), nor are they treated or perceived equally—impacted by such issues as differences of perceived race, class, and gender (e.g., female marriage migrants to Taiwan from Southeast Asia and China have fewer resources and are perceived more negatively than white, European and American male marriage migrants to Taiwan; see Sandel, 2015). Thus, the immigrant experience must be understood as different, depending upon a range of individual, social, cultural, ideological, material, and social issues. Therefore, they propose a theory of "differential adaptation," claiming that this recognizes "the specificity and radical diversity of immigrant experiences" (p. 275); adaptation is not a unidirectional process, and individuals are capable of a range of "improvisational and novel responses" (p. 277) to a new culture.

We see in each of these theories points of convergence. All claim that the person who enters a new culture is faced with an array of challenges, and that there is a need to "adapt" on some level, to acquire competencies in new behaviors and skills. And while some individuals may find the process more difficult than others—possessing fewer resources or facing greater social and structural constraints—those who do "better" are able to "fuse" and create new cultural patterns—as described by Kramer, or see beyond differences of what is old and new to achieve an "intercultural identity"—as

described by Kim, or improvise and develop novel responses as they adapt in different ways—as claimed by De La Garza and Ono.

A final aspect of this study is that it examines issues of identity and acculturation through the lens of social media. There is a growing literature on social media that addresses the impacts of a variety of social media platforms, especially the role of social networking sites (SNSs) on acculturative processes (e.g., Croucher & Rahmani, 2015; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Li & Chen, 2014; Mao & Qian, 2015; Sandel, 2014; Sawyer & Chen, 2012). It has been argued that people tend to use social media to adapt to the host country and maintain connections to their place of origin. Other studies (e.g., Van Dick, 2013; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008) have explored identity construction, identity management and self-expression via SNSs. Yet none have integrated the concepts of identity, social media and acculturation, as a way to understand how the acculturative process can unfold, and emerge from a range of identities that may be presented via social media in the context of China.

In 2011 the Chinese company Tencent—which in 1999 launched the popular IM messaging service, QQ—launched a new service, called 微信 (*Weixin*), also known in English as WeChat. Designed for the mobile phone, available on the Chinese internet and offering many of the same functions as Facebook or Instagram, WeChat quickly became the most popular social media service across China (Sandel & Ju, 2015). The navigation bar at the bottom of the app displays four functions: Chats, Contacts, Discover, and Me. When “Discover” is selected, it takes the user to select “Moments” (朋友圈 *Pengyou quan*). This is similar to Facebook or Instagram, where users may share their personal “moments” in the form of pictures, photos, texts, and short videos. WeChat “friends” on the user’s contact list can see these moments, or be selected by the user to see them using their “Discover” function.

Building upon Kim’s (2001) claim that ethnic media contributes to a newcomer’s acculturation in the dominant culture, WeChat was chosen as the media form that we study, as it is the most important social media platform in China and a way for newcomers to interact with Chinese people. Furthermore, WeChat was chosen because messages that are posted there can be analyzed semiotically as markers of identity. Just as Leeds-Hurwitz (1993) claimed, symbols can serve as markers of identity, ranging from national, occupational and religious to gender. As such, WeChat Moments which include videos, texts and photo, may convey users’ ideas, attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, in our study, WeChat Moments postings were analyzed in order to answer the first question:

RQ 1: What themes can be identified in the posts on a newcomer’s WeChat Moments?

Based upon descriptions of thematic meanings

shared, this study analyzed how a newcomer’s identities emerged from posts on WeChat Moments. Therefore, the following question was asked:

RQ 2: What identities of a newcomer are represented via WeChat Moments?

WeChat Moments is designed as an online platform on which users can communicate. Moreover, WeChat Moments posts may be seen as a record, or account, of a person’s life, and as a window to a person’s behavior and psychological state of well-being. Therefore, a newcomer’s intercultural identity can be probed by asking:

RQ3: How does a newcomer’s intercultural identity develop throughout a period of acculturative processes?

Method

Liz (a pseudonym) was chosen as the participant for this study. She came to China from the United States and worked as an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) Teacher for a “2+2 program” at a university in Zhuhai, Guangdong province, China. (Students spend their first two years of study in China, and then two years at a collaborating university outside China.) She worked in Zhuhai for a total of four years, and then left in September 2016.

Before coming to Zhuhai, Liz taught for two years at a primary school in Shenzhen, China. When working in Shenzhen, she used QQ to contact local friends. She started using WeChat only after September 2012 when she came to Zhuhai. She used WeChat as social networking site to interact with friends, both Chinese and foreign, who also used WeChat, and engaged in social interactions with other foreign and Chinese teachers at the university. Like many other foreigners, and some local Chinese people, she used a VPN (Virtual Private Network) in order to “climb” China’s internet firewall to access Facebook. (See Xu, 2015, for an explanation of China’s censorship of the internet, and actions taken by local participants to get around such controls.) Through frequently updating posts in Moments, Liz shared information about her work and life in Zhuhai with WeChat friends, including the first author. These posts, mostly in English and a few in Chinese, can be seen as reflections of her life in China, and were chosen as data for this case study.

After obtaining her trust and consent for this study, I (first author) started to collect data from Liz’s WeChat Moments. Her first WeChat Moments post was made on 13 January 2015. But the first post was only a photo without any accompanying text, so it was not counted for the present analysis. Only 14 posts could be found in her WeChat moments in 2016, mostly about traveling. Overall, the time from 2013 to 2015 was the main period when Liz worked in Zhuhai, and it was a period when the majority of her posts were shared via WeChat. Meanwhile, these WeChat moments were posted before

the time when she knew that her posts were under analyses.

A total of 139 mobile phone screenshots of WeChat Moments posts, including one short video, were collected from Liz's WeChat Moments—spanning the period from January 15, 2013 to December 31, 2015. Three of the posts were photos only, without any accompanying text. These were excluded from this analysis, yielding a total of 135 posts. All these posts displayed a combination of a photo and/or image, and accompanying text. The text was either inserted by the

user herself and displayed at the bottom of the post (e.g., Figure 1. Screenshots 1 - 3), or it was embedded in the photo/image itself (e.g., Figure 1. Screenshot 4). Liz sometimes posted a group of photos/images (maximum nine) to create a mosaic image, with accompanying text displayed below. One example is Figure 1. Screenshot 1, notice that below the date there appears "4/4." This means this is the fourth of 4 photos posted together. For the purposes of analysis we display only one of the photos.

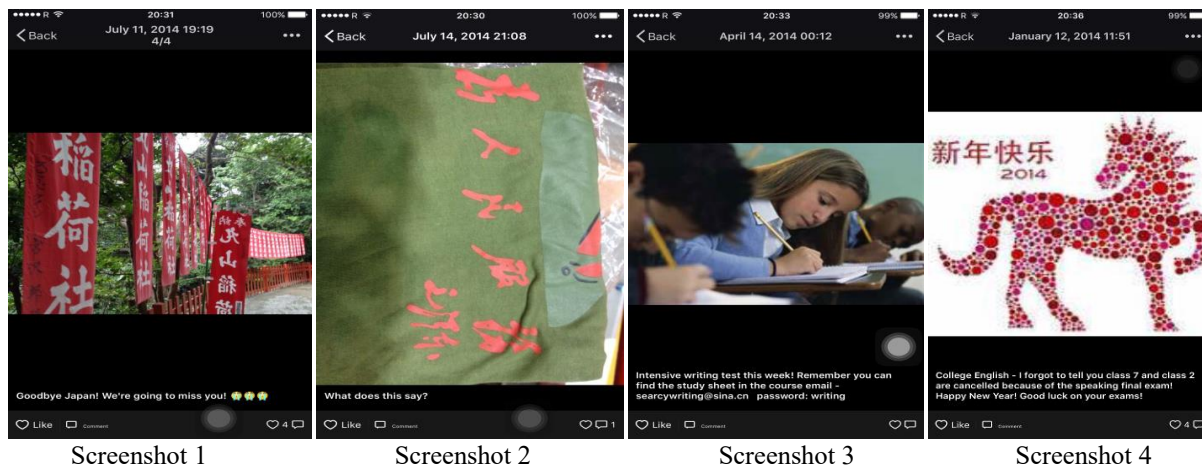


Figure 1. Examples of posts via WeChat Moments

Posts were coded by examining both the photos/images and accompanying text. Initially, general themes, such as traveling, yummy food, scenery pictures, gardening, family life, working experience in Zhuhai, asking for help or advice, summer vacations in the US, were identified. Then these were refined so that each post could fit under one or more broader themes. More specifically, the posts describing Liz's hobbies such as traveling (via food, scenery), hiking, gardening were labeled as "Personal interest & needs." Posts with such questions as: "Anyone knows a good, trusted camera repair shop in Zhuhai to Guangzhou?" were also classified as "Personal interest & needs," as Liz was viewed as a foreigner living in the host environment. Furthermore, as Liz was working as an English language teacher in Zhuhai, all posts involving students, assignments, examinations and classroom activities were categorized as "Occupation." When Liz posted photos with family members like her husband, parents, and relatives, or wrote texts such as "Waiting for my parents to arrive! First time I get to see my father on Father's Day in 3 years!" "Camping with fam," these posts were coded as "Family life." Liz made many posts of traveling, often shown as accompanied by and/or experienced with her husband. These posts were not coded as family life, but as "Personal interest & needs." Other posts on the theme of festivals, food, ceremonies, language (i.e., those that

made reference to Chinese characters and/or phrases), art, places in China and America were coded as either "Chinese" or "American themes."

This inductive coding resulted in five themes, namely: (1) personal interests and needs, (2) occupation, (3) family, (4) Chinese themes, and (5) American themes. As shown in Screenshot 1, the topic was relevant to traveling (one of Liz's hobbies), and thus its theme was identified as personal interests and needs. This showed what a person Liz is, a characteristic of oneself, and it was embedded in personal identity. In Screenshot 2, Liz raised a question about the meaning of Chinese characters written by Chairman Mao and widely-known in China. Moreover, she posted one image of a horse (Figure 1. Screenshot 4), to represent the year of the horse according to the Chinese calendar. These two posts were classified under the category of Chinese themes. They reflected Liz's motivation to learning new things and her awareness of Chinese culture, which, to some extent, revealed her intercultural identity. The perceived intent of Screenshot 3 was to remind students to prepare and take the writing test. As this obviously was related to Liz's job as an English teacher, this post was coded under the theme of occupation. Furthermore, it represented Liz' role identity as a responsible and considerate English language teacher.

When the meaning of a photo was unclear, the

accompanying text was analyzed to determine how to code it. However, for a number of posts the theme was either unclear, nor did it fit clearly into any of the five themes listed in Table 1; these were coded as “others.” For instance, a post with a photo of two lovely puppies and the accompanying text “puppies” was labeled as “others.” Finally, the posts where the topic could not be clearly defined or did not fit the five broader themes listed in Table 1 were coded as “others.”

Not all posts could be counted as exclusively presenting one theme, and could be coded as fitting under two themes. Consider, for instance Screenshot 4 (Figure 1). This is an image of the horse, drawn in the traditional Chinese cultural color of red, and embedded with the Chinese characters (新年快乐 *Xin Nian Kuai Le*, Happy New Year), which clearly is a Chinese theme. Yet the accompanying text at the bottom of the post is a reminder that classes and exams were canceled, fitting under the theme of “Occupation” and Liz’s role as teacher. Therefore, Screenshot 4 was counted twice as it expressed both “Occupation” and “Chinese themes.” A total of 11 posts were counted twice. Thus, the sum of themes from the 135 posts was 146, as shown in Table 1.

Each of the 135 posts was analyzed to identify themes that manifested the user’s identity in the host environment. Inductive coding of the posts was done by the first author, with assistance and interpretive comments provided by the second. Results from the coding of posts are shown in Table 1.

Results

Over a period of three years, from 2013 to 2015, a total of 135 (coded as showing 146 themes) WeChat Moments posts were shared by Liz, and selected for this analysis. Five categories were identified. The number of posts shared in 2013 (63) was greater than those posted in 2014 (44) and in 2015 (28) respectively. This change across time may be explained by finding from studies of newcomer adaptation (e.g., Croucher & Kramer, 2017; De La Garza & Ono, 2015; Y. Y. Kim, 2001) that over

time, a person becomes accustomed to a new life and adjusts; that is, Liz may have found her “new” environment less remarkable. Overall, the number of posts in each category lessened across time. The number of posts labeled as “Personal interest & needs” (48) made up the largest category, approximately one third of all posts. The smallest (apart from Others), was the number of posts coded as showing an American theme (16), comprising about 11% of the total.

Category 1: Personal interests & needs

Posts relevant to personal hobbies numbered 39, with only 9 posts about seeking information. More specifically, this item can be further divided into subgroups like traveling (36) and gardening (3 posts). Under traveling, 31 were photos of scenery and individuals, and five about food (as shown in Figure 2). These narrated Liz’s frequent travels to places including: Cambodia, Hong Kong, Korea, India, Indonesia, Japan, Nepal, Thailand, and places across China. The photos and accompanying text conveyed the message that she is keen on traveling; from this it can be claimed that one way to describe her personality is to say she is a “travel lover.” We see this in the three screenshots in Figure 2, delicious local food in Sichuan (Screenshot 5) and Beautiful Yangshuo (Screenshot 6).

From analyzing her posts, Liz presented herself as someone fond of taking risks. She not only enjoyed sightseeing but also adventure travel, as evident in pictures of her hiking, camping and climbing mountains. Screenshot 7 describes her climbing of Thorung La Pass as a conqueror. The text below the photo gives detailed information: “*Even the British Army turned back!...too dangerous and impossible...deep snow and cold, but we did it!*”. Not shown are other posts that indicate Liz’s enjoyment of gardening and cooking. From other posts we see that Liz sought help resolving problems, and seeking information. She asked for help from her Chinese and foreign friends. This is most clear in the post looking for a trusted camera repair shop (Screenshots 8).

| Years Categories | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | Total |
|---------------------------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------------|
| Personal interest & needs | 22 | 12 | 14 | 48 (32.9%) |
| Occupation | 14 | 9 | 7 | 30 (20.5%) |
| Family (life) | 10 | 10 | 3 | 23 (15.8%) |
| Chinese themes | 8 | 9 | 2 | 19 (13.0%) |
| American themes | 9 | 4 | 3 | 16 (11.0%) |
| Others | 6 | 3 | 1 | 10 (6.8%) |
| Total | 69 (63+6*) | 47 (44+3*) | 30(28+2*) | 146 (135 + 11*) |

* Indicates posts that were counted twice

Table 1. Number of Moments’ Posts in 2013/2014/2015

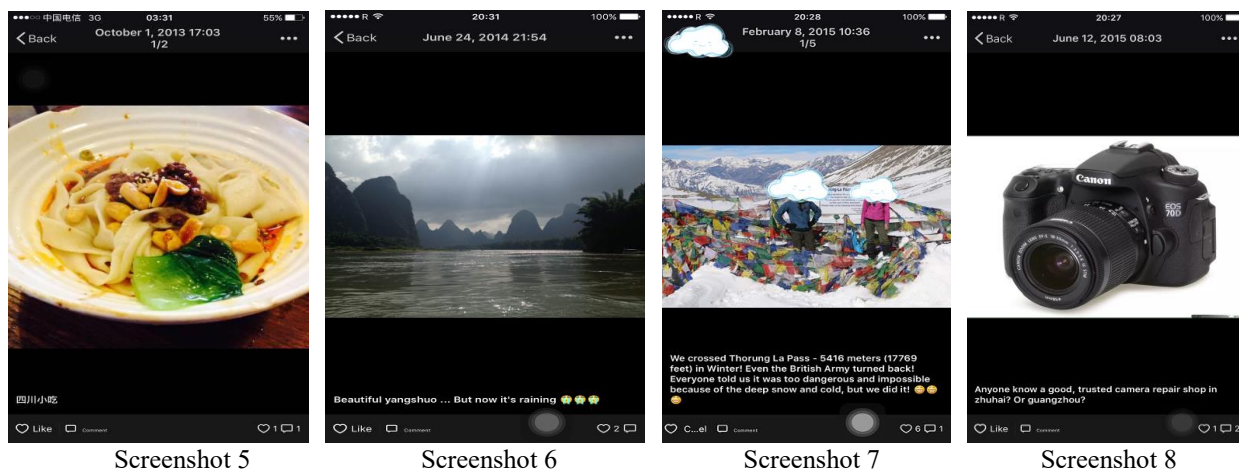


Figure 2. Personal interests & needs

From considering the presumed audience of these posts—local readers in China—these may be interpreted as a sign of Liz’s willingness to contact with local people and then acculturate to the new environment. Yet this must be qualified by acknowledging that readers may be other “foreigners” living in China, and are not necessarily “local” Chinese persons.

Category 2: Occupation

Liz’s posts that exhibited the theme of Occupation (30), reflect her role as an English teacher. Messages ranged from grading assignments, circulating the time and location about an upcoming examination, and a group photo taken with her students (Figure 3). Screenshot 9 is a statement and image of Liz working hard when grading students’ journals. The second (Screenshot 10) conveys the date, time and location of an upcoming exam. The third (Screenshot 11) is a photo taken on the last day of class with her female students. This post signals that she had a good relationship with her students. All were written from the perspective of the teacher, demonstrating that she embodies the role of teacher. From examining other posts—not shown—we find those that serve to remind students to remember to write their names on assignments, and help students to install mobile apps (e.g., a dictionary app) to help their studies.

Category 3: Family

The third theme, Family (23), covers posts showing Liz’s family life and displaying activities or moments of her personal life (See Figure 4). The first (Screenshot 12) is a wedding photo, with the accompanying text, “Four years ago... We said, ‘I do.’” This shows when she got married, while other posts (not shown) identify that she lives in Zhuhai with her husband. She willingly shares photos of places where she lives and with whom she lives, and states her husband’s name, his favorite food, his birthday and their anniversary. From other posts it is clear

that she is married, as she often posts photos of her and her husband; she also inserts text with these photos, where he is referenced by such role-related words as “we,” “husband,” and “hubby.” In the second post below (Screenshot 13), Liz “tells” us she is a daughter, waiting for her parents to visit her in Zhuhai and celebrate the Father’s Day. Screenshot 14 is a post about a family camping trip she took with four family members during the summer vacation, when she returned to the U.S. The big smile on face in the photo conveys the same expression as the accompanying emoji. These posts display a self that is happy and satisfied with her family life.

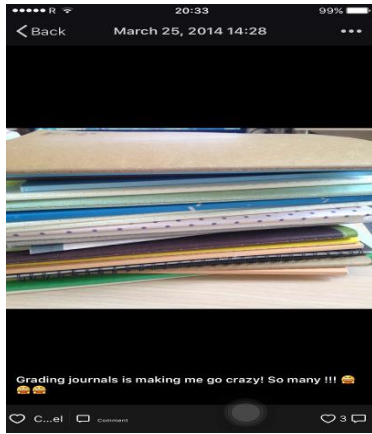
Category 4: Chinese themes

When Liz came to work in Zhuhai, how did she respond to the new culture? Part of the answer can be seen in posts about differences in food, language, and social practices, as illustrated in Figure 5.

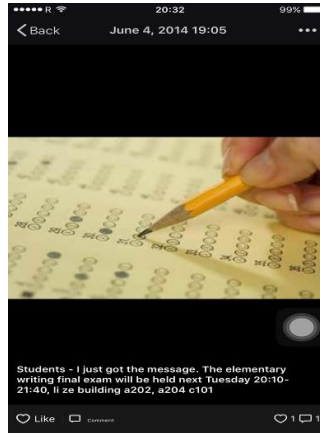
One Chinese dish that is popular all over China is hot pot; the version of hot pot that is served in Sichuan province is especially well-known, as it uses spices and chili peppers that make it taste “*ma la*” or “numb and spicy.” This we see in Screenshot 15. Described as “Chongqing hot pot,” named after the city in Southwestern China, Liz wrote that her “mouth is on fire!” We can see the items that make up such a meal: a bowl of spicy hot pot, chopsticks, and drinks, *Wang Laoji* (王老吉), a Chinese herbal tea, believed to be a perfect match for hot pot. This displays participation in Chinese food culture. The second and third (Screenshots 16 and 17) show another kind of Chinese culture, namely the symbols and clothing of a Chinese wedding. The Chinese character “囍” *Xi*, is a special word, made by doubling the character 喜 (*xi*), which means enjoyment or happiness. This “double xi” is a character associated with weddings, and printed on many wedding-related items and places, such as invitation cards, a wedding dress, or

a restaurant or a home where a wedding ceremony takes place. The third photo (Screenshot 17), taken at “Leck and Anny’s wedding,” also displays the theme of a Chinese wedding, signified by the red umbrella above their heads, and the wedding clothes worn by the couple.

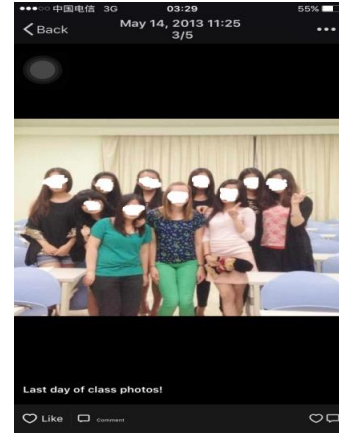
Interestingly, the white wedding dress and suit are both western imports, but have been adopted as “traditional” clothing for today’s Chinese weddings, demonstrating the kind of “cultural fusion” that Kramer (2000; 2003) describes.



Screenshot 9



Screenshot 10



Screenshot 11

Figure 3. Teacher-student



Screenshot 12



Screenshot 13



Screenshot 14

Figure 4. Family

In Figure 6, we see posts that comment on differences and similarities between what is perceived as Chinese and American. Consider the text below the picture of coffee (Screenshot 18): “Only in China do you pay ¥25 for half a cup of ‘American’ instant coffee. I hate you Nescafe.” Presumably she is complaining that the “American” coffee sold in China is a cup of Nescafe, instant coffee, and at a price of ¥25 (about 3.70 USD), costs more than the same item served in America.

Another interesting theme emerges from two sequential posts. The first (Screenshot 19) is a picture of a meal—chips, tomatoes, and beef—with the text: “Last meal in America + 😄😄😄”; the second (Screenshot 20) is also a picture of a meal—*changfen*, steamed rice rolls—and the accompanying text: “First meal in China

+ 😄😄😄😄”. While the food items differ, the way each is displayed and commented on accentuates similarities. This is most evident in the use of emoji—repeated smiling and loving faces. They convey the message that Liz enjoys both Chinese and American foods, and appreciates and embraces both cultures. That is, unlike Kim’s (2001) claim that acculturation involves unlearning (deculturation) the old in order to embrace (acculturate) what is new, Liz appears to add a new cultural element to her food repertoire, supporting Kramer’s (2000; 2003) description of cultural fusion as that which is additive, and not a “zero-sum” game.

In other posts Liz displays Chinese traditional culture, comments on Chinese activities, and in some, writes the accompanying text in Chinese characters. As we see in Figure 7, *Chuanju* (a type of

Chinese opera originating in China's Sichuan province, Screenshot 21) is shown as Liz sees it. A male actor, dressed in a blue costume and holding a folded fan in his right hand, is performing. The second post (Screenshot 22) is a photo of Liz standing in front of terraced rice paddies; the text below is written in

Chinese: “再见广西!” (*Zai jian Guangxi!*), or “Farewell Guangxi!” Presumably this is a post written and addressed to Chinese-reading friends, and expresses joy at traveling to a scenic place, and a happy mood written in Chinese, the language of her new environment.



Screenshot 15

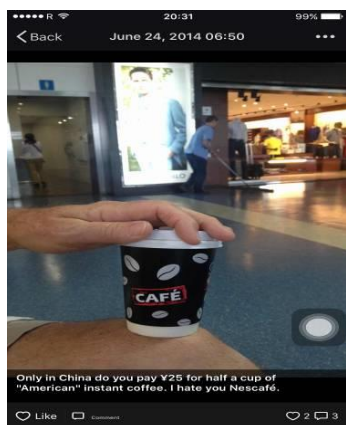


Screenshot 16

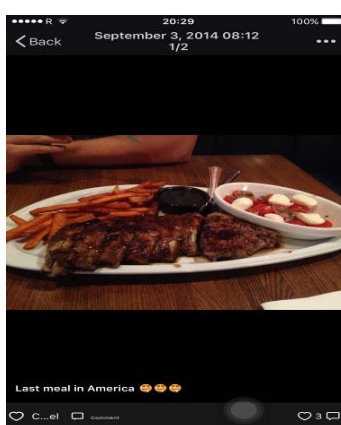


Screenshot 17

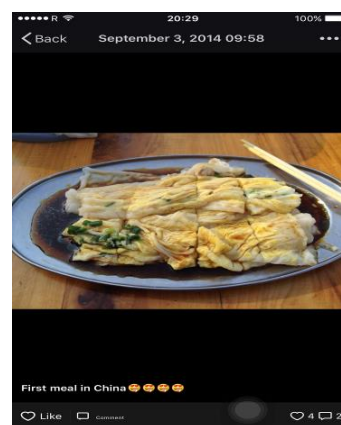
Figure 5. Chinese themes (1)



Screenshot 18



Screenshot 19



Screenshot 20

Figure 6. Chinese themes (2)

The last post (Screenshot 23) communicates a criticism of a local Chinese theme. Liz took a picture of the label affixed to a bottle of Heinz Ketchup. The label instructs users that this product can be used as a condiment for a Chinese dish, pizza, bread and other foods. But Liz disagrees. She wrote: “Do not trust Heinz! Ketchup does NOT belong on spaghetti, enchiladas, pizza, or croissants.” And in another post (not shown), Liz wrote: “...Ketchup is a condiment for French fries, hot dogs, hamburgers, and sandwiches and It should not be used as a sauce to cover noodles. Some things don't belong together. Noodles and ketchup are two of those things...” These convey the message that she does not approve of

all that is done to food in China. The imported, American food, Heinz Ketchup, should be used as a condiment for some items, but not for all, and as recommended on this label.

Category 5: American themes

When adapting to Chinese culture, Liz's ethnic culture did not disappear. She presents a side of herself that features American themes, while at the same time experiencing, reflecting and commenting on Chinese themes. This comes across most clearly in Liz's posts of America as home. As seen in Figure 8, she shares pictures of her hometown, the university where she graduated,

and the Easter holiday. These messages transcend geographical boundaries of time and space: they were presumably posted for her local, Chinese friends, but came from an American culture and context. In the first post (Screenshot 24), there is a picture of Liz and her husband, sitting on a mountain top, similar to the photo of her above (Figure 7, Screenshot 22) standing in front of Guangxi's scenery. Yet in this other image, she situates the photo figuratively and literally as "hometown," Western North Carolina, thus claiming an identity that is

not local to China. The next post (Screenshot 25) shows her standing in front of a building, described as, "My alma mater, Furman University." In other posts (not shown), Liz shows homemade non-Chinese food such as corn dogs, pizza, chicken pot pie, bagel and apple pie, again, telling Moments readers she comes from a different place. The last (Screenshot 26) is an image with the words, "Happy Easter." This is a Christian holiday associated with her home, and not one associated with or widely celebrated in China.



Screenshot 21

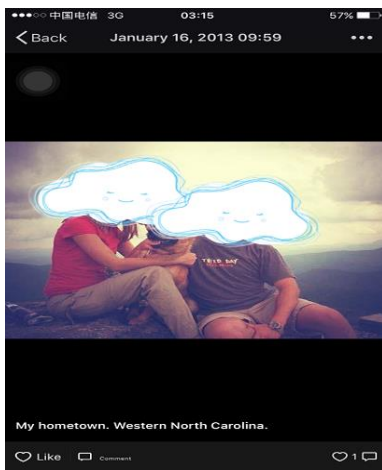


Screenshot 22



Screenshot 23

Figure 7. Chinese themes (3)



Screenshot 24



Screenshot 25



Screenshot 26

Figure 8. American themes

Discussion

The use of media in home and host countries plays different roles in the acculturation processes. This is consistent with Kim's (2001) conceptualization of social communication which refers to ethnic social communication and host social communication. The

paradigm of social communication states that a foreign person's active participation in the host culture is positively associated with developing communicative competence in and becoming acculturated to the host country. Conversely, too much involvement in home ethnic social communication impedes the acculturation

process. Liz's use of WeChat, the most popular social media platform in China, is one indication of her use of host communication and adaptation to the host culture. Yet, as we thematically examine Liz's WeChat Moments 135 posts over a three-year period, we find not a straight-line move to acculturation, but a mixing of themes and displayed identities, more consistent with the claims of cultural fusion (Croucher & Kramer, 2017; Kramer, 2000; 2003). In other words, the research shows that people who move across cultures engage in a mixing and addition of cultural elements, not a zero-sum process of subtraction (deculturation) as a necessary precondition to achieve addition (enculturation). Implications of these findings, and how they speak to issues of identity, are discussed below.

Personal identity

As explained by Brewer and Gardner (1996), studies of identity have benefited from cross-cultural perspectives, by understanding that a person's identity is based upon how the self is construed personally, relationally, and collectively. Furthermore, self-construals can shift if an identity is primed as representing the collective "we," the comparative "they," or the personal and individual "I." In the present study, we can see a similar range of self-construals at work in Liz's postings to WeChat. When she posts pictures and comments about her hobbies and activities, we see a self that is personal. She has traveled to many places within China and abroad. She is fond of camping and adventure traveling, posting pictures of someone who enjoys personal challenges and the joy of experiencing new foods, activities, and adventures.

Yet when she posts messages about her students and classroom activities, we see a collective and relational identity, of a teacher who cares for students by providing them with information about assignments and exams, a willingness to help students, and the creation of a friendly and harmonious classroom atmosphere. Her posts convey a construal as "we" relating and doing things together in a Chinese cultural setting, where Chinese food, language, customs, and festivals are jointly celebrated. This concept of "we" is also conveyed in her posts of family (life).

One last kind of post is the comparative, "they" of American and Chinese themes. We saw this in Liz's comments on the "proper" use of Heinz Ketchup, the cost of "American" coffee in China, and the last and first dishes. These posts display a self-construal of the American who participates in Chinese culture and compares and evaluates the merits of both cultures. These are not only indicators of cultural differences and mindfulness, but they also show an ability to evaluate such differences and contribute to the contours of a personal identity.

Intercultural identity, cultural fusion, and differentiated adaptation

As discussed above, three theories of intercultural communication and adaptation—cross-cultural adaptation, cultural fusion, differential adaptation—claim that the newcomer changes, that is adapts, when crossing a cultural boundary and starts to live in a new environment. However, each theory describes the process differently. Cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 2008) examines how the adapting individual faces the challenges of stress, and moves toward a universal understanding of culture, that is tied to neither the old nor new. Cultural fusion (Croucher & Kramer, 2017) claims that adaptation is an additive process, and that elements of both old and new cultures are mixed in intercultural communication. Differential adaptation (De La Garza & Ono, 2015) critically examines power, and the structural and ideological forces that impact adaptation, and claims that individuals adapt differently. As we look at our data—WeChat posts by Liz, an American English teacher in China—we find that elements of each theory help us better interpret our findings.

First, what has until now not been examined—examined via differential adaptation theory—is Liz's unique position in China. During the period of data collection, she was a highly educated teacher from America. As a teacher, she engaged in a profession that is held in high regard in China; as someone from America, she came from a country of power and prestige; and as an English teacher, she possessed a language skill that is highly valued in China. That is, it would be problematic to compare her experience as a newcomer to China with, for instance, a low-skilled laborer from Vietnam, or a black African business entrepreneur. We agree with De La Garza and Ono (2015) and their claim that not all immigrants possess and/or have access to the same resources. Liz had the money and means to take many trips across China and the region; she was also held in high regard and treated with respect by her students. These are conditions that are specific to her, and not universally shared or sharable.

De La Garza and Ono (2015) argue that by seeing adaptation as differential, it allows scholars to see a more "nuanced" understanding of the ways immigrants position themselves individually and socially when adapting, and that immigrants "actively choose how and to what extent they adapt, moving in different directions even when constituted by powerful interests" (p. 275). In this study, we see posts that displayed both an American identity—hometown, food, family, and a willingness to learn and experience a Chinese identity—food, language, customs, culture. This points to an immigrant with agency, who was able to make evaluative statements about what she liked and disliked about both cultures, and was free to negotiate her own adaptation.

Second, we draw upon Croucher and Kramer's (2017) most recent statement of cultural fusion theory, which claims that "[p]eople seek out difference/stimulation because the alternative is boring, offers no change, and therefore no opportunity" (p. 101). The individual who experiences adaptation continues to maintain a personal and cultural identity—from the culture of origin—but at the same time finds new cultural ways of living both interesting and stimulating. This is something we see in Liz's posts as someone from "Western North Carolina," and as someone who enjoyed eating Chinese food, participating in Chinese cultural activities, traveling to different places (e.g., "Chillin on the Mekong"), and expressing herself through the language of China: "再见广西!" (Farewell Guangxi!). Her adaptation was not a zero-sum, but an additive and inventive process, showing what she enjoyed both cultures.

Third, drawing upon Kim's (2001; 2008) theory of cross-cultural adaptation, we find that Liz's presentation of herself and her interactions with others changed over time. One way to interpret the decrease of the total number of posts that can be coded as displaying an American or Chinese theme is that cultural differences decreased in saliency by the third year. This may reflect a stage of adaptation and personal growth—as predicted by cross-cultural adaptation theory. What was at first culturally unfamiliar became over time familiar and thus unremarkable. We can also see Liz's movement toward an "intercultural identity," as she came to adopt some signs of Chinese culture, such as festivals, food, dress, and language. She also gained the ability to creatively use cultural knowledge, notably the Chinese language, to express her thoughts and feelings. She made posts about her role as teacher, and interactions with students, demonstrating that she built relationships with local friends. Therefore, these posts show how acculturation, as a source of "stress," can work to change a newcomer's behavior.

What is not possible to infer from these data, however, is how the adaptation process impacted Liz psychologically. Over the period of three years, was she "transformed" and able to see cultural differences from a universal perspective, the goal of intercultural personhood (Y. Y. Kim, 2008)? Further study and new forms of data (e.g., in-depth interviews, large-scale surveys) may be required to probe this matter. Or perhaps a challenge and final limitation to answering such a question about the development of an intercultural identity is that there can be no agreed answer. If we take seriously the claims of cultural fusion and differential adaptation, suggesting that adaptation is not a uniform process, but rather a negotiation that must take into account both external, structure and power, and internal and individual agency, then we may be unable to produce what De La Garza and Ono (2015) criticize as impossible

to achieve "reliable generalized models" (p. 270). If we acknowledge that Liz's experience in China as a highly educated American teacher of English language is not the same as experiences of other immigrants, then a universally homogenous, final and achievable state of intercultural personhood is unattainable.

Despite the acknowledged limitations of our case study, this research does show a new way to look at the process of adaptation. By analyzing social media in general and WeChat Moments in particular, it provides a new approach for examining how the individual presents a changing and varied construal of the self when crossing to a new culture and context.

Note. An earlier version of this paper was presented at i-COME'16 The International Conference on Communication and Media Exploring Communication: Beyond Nation Cultural Adaptation, Images and Identity, September 18-20, 2016.

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