

## **Facebook Use and Acculturation: The Case of Overseas Chinese Professionals in Western Countries**

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The emergence of social network sites has provided new opportunities for intercultural communication. This study is one of the first to explore the role of Facebook on the acculturation of Chinese professionals overseas. Through qualitative interviews, we explored how overseas Chinese professionals use Facebook to maintain their social networks, manage their multicultural identities, and adapt to Western culture in their host countries. Our research reveals that overseas Chinese professionals tended to manage their identity with little self-awareness, and their Facebook communication reflected Chinese traditional culture in many ways. Facebook was regarded as a useful acculturation tool for them to learn about popular social topics in the host countries.

*Keywords: overseas Chinese, identity management, Facebook, acculturation*

### **Introduction**

Acculturation has long been a challenge for Chinese people living overseas in Western countries. Disconnection from old social networks and lack of new social networks in the host countries pose major challenges to overseas Chinese people's acculturation to their host societies. The emergence of social network sites (SNSs) has provided an alternative and innovative way for overseas Chinese to connect with different sociocultural groups. Existing research has examined the acculturation process of overseas Chinese off-line (e.g., Batonda & Perry, 2003; Leung & Bond, 1984), yet their identity management and acculturation in the virtual world, especially in social media, remain largely unexplored.

This research explores the ways that Chinese use Facebook to manage their various social networks—for instance, their work network, their overseas Chinese friends' network, and their network of friends from other cultures. Since Chinese identity is very heterogeneous among Chinese people from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and some other Asian regions (Shi, 2005), we focus on mainland Chinese residing in the United States, Canada, and Europe. This research also attempts to understand how Chinese people living overseas manage their multiple cultural identities on Facebook. Furthermore, this

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research examines how overseas Chinese professionals' use of Facebook affects their interactions with the dominant Western culture and influences their acculturation process. Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with highly educated overseas Chinese people of different social statuses and who used Facebook for different activities.

Pfister and Soliz (2011) proposed that intercultural communication should be reconceptualized in a networked society. Digital media offer new and unique spaces and new forms of interaction (many-to-many) for intercultural communication and new modes of representation, which can enable and potentially constrain intercultural communication through publicity. Facebook is a tool that involves both privacy and publicity, broadcasting and one-to-one messages, and it can facilitate interpersonal and group communication. Through studying overseas Chinese professionals' use of Facebook to integrate into Western cultures, to manage their multiple cultural identities, and to maintain their various social networks in different cultures, this research provides empirical evidence that can help in the development of new theories and concepts in intercultural communication in the new media era. Facebook is a popular communication tool among Westerners, especially in English-speaking countries such as the United States and Canada, and it is gaining popularity among Chinese people living in those countries. Through this research, we hope to obtain useful information on how social media such as Facebook can be used as an alternative platform for intercultural communication and acculturation. Theoretically, this study has the potential of contributing to identity management theory and acculturation theory by examining how those theories can be applied in virtual world.

## **Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

### ***Identity Management and Acculturation***

Our inquiry centers on overseas Chinese professionals' identity management in Western countries. Identity is never static, and it continues to change with people's experiences. Hall's (1996) definition of identity reflects the ongoing formation process and complexity of immigrants' identity:

Identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not "who we are" or "where we came from," so much as what we become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we represent ourselves. (p. 4)

The concept of identity is similar to the important metaphor of "face" (Mien-tzu) in Chinese culture. Face is defined as "a reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation. This is prestige that is accumulated by means of personal effort or clever maneuvering (Hu, 1944, p. 45). Similar to identity management, individuals also try to maintain and negotiate face in communication. Cultural variability, individual-level variables, and situational variables influence individuals' face negotiation strategies (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). To gain a comprehensive understanding of how overseas Chinese manage their identity and negotiate their face online, we recruited participants with different cultural, individual, and situational characteristics.

Identity management theory has been widely applied to examine intercultural communication and relationships (Imahori & Cupach, 2005) and is useful for exploring our research topic. According to identity management theory, there are three stages of managing intercultural relationships: trial, enmeshment, and negotiation. At the trial stage, individuals begin to explore cultural differences and try to find what kind of cultural identity they would like to establish in the intercultural communication relationship. At the enmeshment stage, individuals develop common understandings of one another and of the relationship with people from another culture. At the negotiation stage, individuals are able to deal with some challenging intercultural communication issues in a constructive way based on their mutual understandings of the cultural differences and the shared common rules in the relationship with people from a different culture. Based on the length of their stay in Western countries and their ability to adapt to a different culture, Chinese people who are living overseas may be at different stages of their relationships with Westerners, which could result in different behavioral patterns of using Facebook for intercultural communication.

Overseas Chinese people's identity management, especially at the negotiation stage, overlaps with their acculturation process. Acculturation happens when different cultural groups continuously negotiate and change their original cultural patterns through constant interaction with one another (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). Berry (1990) argued that acculturation tends to induce more changes in the acculturating group—which, for instance, could be Chinese professionals living in Western countries, as in our study. Identity management is related to two key issues in acculturation strategies: (1) cultural maintenance, or the extent to which individuals consider their cultural identity and characteristics important and try to maintain them (Berry & Sam, 1997); and (2) contact and participation, or the extent to which individuals become involved in other cultural groups or remain among their own cultural groups (Berry & Sam, 1997).

Acculturation can be a stressful process associated with negative emotions such as depression and loneliness (Chun & Choi, 2003; Croucher, 2008). Immigrants have used various technologies to resist and assist in their acculturation processes (Croucher, 2011). Chinese students who experience negative emotion in the acculturation process tend to seek online communication and social networking (Wang, Huang, Huang, & Wang, 2009). The use of the Internet can assist the cultural adaptation process and improve Taiwanese people's fluency in English (Tsai, 2006). Through exploring overseas Chinese professionals' identity management on Facebook, our research sheds light on how Chinese people living overseas navigate acculturation through Facebook.

### ***Overseas Chinese and Chinese Cultural Values***

Chinese immigration in Western countries has increased rapidly in recent years. In Europe, the number of Chinese immigrants reached 2.5 million in 2011 (Latham & Wu, 2013). In the United States, Chinese immigrants have been the fastest growing ethnic minority population over the past two decades. They constitute the second largest immigrant group in the United States after Mexicans (Camarota, 2007) and reached 1.8 million in 2010 (McCabe, 2012). In Canada, Chinese have become the largest group of immigrants, and, as a result, the Chinese language has become the third most spoken language in Canada after English and French (Wang & Lo, 2005). Compared with the first wave of Chinese immigrants in the

19th century, who were mostly semiliterate peasants and craftspeople, the immigrants after 1978 are largely composed of highly educated and skilled professionals and students who have great potential for career success in the destination countries (Yin, 2007). Our study focuses on Chinese immigrants after 1978.

With the growth of Chinese immigrants in Western countries, a plethora of research has focused on their acculturation and identity struggles in the destination countries (e.g., Batonda & Perry, 2003; Leung & Bond, 1984). Recent Chinese immigrants tend to maintain close ties with their native land and are subject to the strong influences of Chinese culture as they attempt to adapt to Western cultures (Liu, 2005), which indicates Chinese immigrants tend to maintain their own cultural identities in the negotiation stage of identity management. Therefore, the following key Chinese cultural values/characteristics are discussed in more detail: collectivism, social harmony, the division between in-group and out-group, and high-context culture.

The distinctions between collectivism and individualism are the major cultural differences between China and most Western countries. Individuals from a collectivist culture such as China tend to subordinate their personal goals to the collective's goals, whereas individuals from an individualistic culture such as the United States, Canada, and the Netherlands tend to emphasize their personal goals over the collective's goals (Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988).

An emphasis on human relationships and social harmony is another key Chinese cultural value. To maintain social harmony, each individual should know his or her place in the social order and avoid overt conflicts in interpersonal relationships. As a result, people take care not to offend others and try every means to protect or save others' face. Nisbett (2003) asserted that "maintaining harmonious social relations is likely to take precedence over achieving personal success" (p. 49). The primacy of social harmony can lead to the suppression of individuality. There is a Chinese motto: "The peg that stands out is pounded down." When this principle is applied in communication, Chinese people are more likely to take a middle way and avoid expressing extreme opinions (Nisbett, 2003).

Chinese also tend to distinguish between in-group and out-group members (Leung & Bond, 1984). Chinese are more trusting and open toward close circles of friends and family, and they are more distant and detached toward out-group members, such as mere acquaintances and strangers. The distinction between in-group and out-group members can lead to more aggressive behaviors toward out-group members in Chinese culture (Bond & Wang, 1981). This division between in-group and out-group could be interesting to explore when overseas Chinese negotiate their cultural identities with other cultural groups on social media. The acculturation process for Chinese people living overseas might take a long time, because they are not so open to out-group members from other cultures until they become in-group members.

Chinese culture is a high-context culture, which is different from the low-context culture in Western countries included in our study. In a low-context culture, people tend to convey messages more explicitly and directly. The meaning lies in the transmitted messages themselves. In contrast, high-context

communication uses "more implicit and indirect messages in which meanings are embedded in the person or in the sociocultural context" (Gudykunst et al., 1996, p. 511).

### ***Overseas Chinese Professionals' Acculturation and Media Use***

Differences in human relationships and communication styles create extra challenges for Chinese people as they acculturate to Western societies. In the acculturation process, media can be a powerful tool for overseas Chinese people's representation of their identity. Life for diasporic populations is inherently contradictory and complex (Ma, 2002), and media can be an empowering tool for cultural groups facing challenges such as geographical displacement and cultural alienation (Shohat & Stam, 1996). Shi (2005) found that Chinese diaspora use Chinese ethnic mass media more than English media for information and socialization as well as for maintaining their unique Chinese cultural capital. Some Chinese diaspora in the United States admit their lifestyles and cultural practices have changed to a way that is no longer compatible with Chinese tradition, but they tend to deny they are Westernized or Americanized and have a strong sense of protecting their Chinese cultural authenticity. A quantitative study finds that Chinese international students tend to use both Facebook and Renren (a popular SNS in mainland China) to express their identity as well as build and maintain their interpersonal networks (Li & Chen, 2013). Taking a qualitative approach, our study explores how overseas Chinese use Facebook to manage their identity and social networks in different language and cultural groups. Overseas Chinese people's bilingual or multilingual use of SNSs for identity management is of interest to our study and might reveal complex patterns, because research has found that individuals from different cultures perceive and use the Internet differently (Chau, Cole, Massey, Montoya-Weiss, & O'Keefe, 2002).

### ***Facebook and Identity Management***

Facebook is one of the world's most influential social media. As of 2012, Facebook had over 900 million active users (Sengupta, 2012). Facebook allows users to post messages, update status, chat online, share photos, and achieve other purposes. It has become an important tool for people to meet new people as well as connect with acquaintances and old friends. Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2006) found that individuals in the United States are more likely to use Facebook to search for people they already know off-line than to browse for complete strangers to meet.

Although Facebook is a popular SNS in the Western countries where our interviewees lived, it is blocked by the Chinese government through the Great Firewall of China project (Kirkland, 2014). Facebook was first blocked after the July 2009 Ürümqi riots, because the Chinese government suspected antigovernment activists could use Facebook to communicate, plot, and plan. In September 2013, the ban of Facebook was lifted within a 17-square-mile free-trade zone in Shanghai to make foreign investors more comfortable, but the rest of China still cannot access Facebook. Although there are ways to bypass the Internet firewall and access Facebook, they require rather sophisticated technological skills, and most Chinese in mainland China are not able or not motivated to make the effort. Therefore, Facebook is used by Chinese people living overseas primarily to maintain their social networks outside mainland China.

Facebook is an important tool for bonding social capital and bridging social capital, with the strongest association between bridging social capital and Facebook use intensity (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). Bridging social capital exists more among weak ties such as acquaintances and strangers in social networks, and it is more about the values created by heterogeneous groups including a wide range of information without emotional support (Donath, 2007; Haythornthwaite, 2005). Bonding social capital exists more among strong ties such as family and friends that are usually socially homogeneous groups, and it is characterized by extensive assistance and personal support. Contacts with weak ties are more likely to be out-group members, and those with strong ties are more likely to be in-group members in Chinese culture. Chu and Choi (2010) found that college students in China show a level of bridging social capital similar to their counterparts in the United States but a lower level of bonding social capital in SNS. A similar pattern could be found among Chinese people living overseas in their Facebook use.

As Facebook has gained popularity, it has become a convenient tool to maintain long-distance relationships and establish new relationships. This study explores how Chinese professionals living overseas use Facebook to manage their identities and facilitate their acculturation in Western countries. To explore how overseas Chinese use Facebook to negotiate their Chinese culture with different cultures they encounter in their host countries at the third stage of identity management, we pose the following two research questions:

*RQ1: How does overseas Chinese professionals' use of Facebook reflect their Chinese cultural identity?*

*RQ2: How do overseas Chinese professionals manage their multiple cultural identities in different cultural groups on Facebook?*

Furthermore, we are interested in exploring how Facebook has been used by Chinese people living overseas as a media tool to navigate culture and life in their host countries throughout their acculturation process. Thus, we pose a third research question:

*RQ3: How do overseas Chinese professionals feel the use of Facebook affects their acculturation process?*

### **Method**

Because this study explores a relatively new topic with little existing literature, we adopted a qualitative approach that favors an inductive mode of inquiry (Cresswell, 2009). Semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 overseas Chinese professionals. In the interviews, we tried to facilitate interviewees' "thick description" (Geertz, 1983) of their social life, which includes the contextual significance of their communicative activities. We not only asked how they used Facebook as a SNS but tried to find out what kind of situations they used it in and how this kind of use related to their particular social and cultural backgrounds. Through qualitative interviews, we aimed to understand participants' behavior from their own perspectives, because qualitative interviewing is well suited for obtaining detailed accounts of subjects' perspectives on complex phenomena (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

We are both Chinese, so the snowball technique was used to select the interview participants. All 12 interviewees were originally from mainland China, and they include 8 women and 4 men. All the interviewees were highly educated, with a master's degree or above. The interviewees were between 26 and 37 years of age, with an average age of 30. The interviewees lived in four different Western countries when the interviews were conducted: eight in the United States, two in Canada, one in the United Kingdom, and one in the Netherlands. Two interviewees had living experiences in different Western countries: One had lived in the United Kingdom for two years and then the United States for two years; and the other had lived in Belgium for two years, Czech Republic for one year, and then the Netherlands for four years. Until the time when the interviews were conducted, the interviewees had lived in Western countries for three to twelve years, with an average of around six and a half years. The interviewees' professions included doctoral student, assistant professor, business management consultant, computer engineer, and stay-at-home mom. Five of the interviewees were single, and the others were married to overseas Chinese. Four interviewees had children born in Western countries. More demographic information about the interviewees is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1. Interviewees' Demographic Information.**

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Western countries resided in	Years of residing in Western countries	Highest degree	Occupation
Helen	F	29	Canada	4	Doctoral candidate	Student
Barbara	F	35	United States	12	Master	Programmer IT
Nancy	F	27	Canada	9	Doctoral candidate	Student
Mike	M	35	United States	12	PhD	Senior researcher
Tom	M	30	Belgium, Czech Republic, Netherlands	7	Doctoral candidate	Student
Daniel	M	35	United States	8	MBA	Business analyst
Wendy	F	26	United States	3	Doctoral candidate	Student
Lily	F	34	United States	12	PhD	Stay-at-home mom
Lisa	F	27	United States	5	Doctoral candidate	Student
Jasmine	F	27	United States	3	Doctoral candidate	Student
Joan	F	28	Britain, United States	4	Doctoral candidate	Student
Jack	M	27	Britain	5.5	Doctoral candidate	Student

The interview guide was drafted by the first author in English and then revised by the second author. We live in two different Western countries, and we both use Facebook. The incorporation of both of our perspectives in developing the interview guide strengthened the validity of the study. The English version of the interview guide was finalized and then translated into Chinese.

The interviewees decided how they would like to take the interview at their convenience. Except for one e-mail interview, all other interviews were conducted through Skype audio/video chat or telephone and were audio-recorded. The interviewees could choose to participate in the interviews in English or in Mandarin. It was not surprising that 10 out of the 12 interviewees decided to participate in Mandarin, their mother tongue, to fully express their opinions without any language barrier. The interviews lasted for 30 to 66 minutes, with an average length of about 45 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed in the language in which the interview was conducted, 10 in Chinese and 2 in English. Thematic analysis was conducted through the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which started with independent data reduction and interpretation. The two researchers, who are fluent in both Chinese and English, independently coded the transcript manually, identified key themes, and categorized them into each research question. Representative quotes of each theme and category were also highlighted in this process. Then we exchanged our coding notes and summaries before discussing the differences and similarities. When differences were found between our coding notes, we discussed the direct quotes in the transcript to reach an agreement. Through this continuing comparison, we were able to identify a few key themes with representative quotations from the participants to answer the research questions.

This procedure ensured that key and recurring behaviors and meanings reported by the participants were identified. The constant comparison procedure increased the reliability of the qualitative data analysis through triangulating our analyses and interpretations of the data, as multiple researchers' involvement in data collection and analysis can overcome the biases and other shortcomings of only one investigator (Olesen, Drees, Hatton, Chico, & Schatzman, 1994).

In reporting and interpreting the results, we weaved our theoretical knowledge and methodological sensitivities into the voices of the participants. Because we share with the participants the common cultural background as overseas Chinese living in Western countries, an emic perspective was taken in this study. An emic perspective allowed us to have a deep understanding of the participants' voices. Meanwhile, we kept reflexivity and distinguished our own voices from the participants' voices to make sure the participants' experiences and opinions were accurately represented.



## Results

### ***Research Question 1: Facebook and Chinese Identity***

Our first research question investigates how overseas Chinese professionals' use of Facebook reflects their Chinese cultural identity. Before asking about their identity management online, we asked participants to reflect on their cultural identities in real life. Half of the interviewees claimed that they retained a strong Chinese identity; nearly half of them had a mixture of Western and Chinese cultural identities, among whom two disclosed that they were more Westernized than Chinese; and one interviewee described his identity as Asian and international rather than Chinese since the various definitions of Chinese could be based on geographic location and genetic, ethnic, cultural heritage, or some other traits, and those definitions sometimes are controversial and debatable. This particular interviewee avoided any controversy that could be caused by misuse and misunderstanding of the word *Chinese*.

Interestingly, when participants were asked about how they managed their cultural identities on Facebook, almost all of them reported that they did not try to manage their cultural identities intentionally, and their online identities were nearly the same as their real-life identities. However, when interviewees talked more about their specific ways of communicating with others online, they selected the content carefully and adapted their ways of communication accordingly. Therefore, the Chinese participants in this study seemed to manage their identities with little self-awareness.

Interviewees reported performing a variety of activities on Facebook, including sharing photos, making comments or congratulating on friends' updates, sending private messages, sharing documents or information, online chatting, and organizing social events. When the participants in this study negotiated their Chinese culture with the cultures in their host Western countries on Facebook, they demonstrated a strong sense of Chinese cultural identity.

### ***Privacy Concerns About Facebook***

Interviewees were concerned about maintaining face, as was demonstrated in their photo-sharing activities. Most interviewees indicated that they liked to use Facebook to share photos and saw this capability as a strength of Facebook. Most interviewees were very careful about how to share photos that included them or their friends, which demonstrates their caution regarding face management online. Nancy's view on this issue is typical:

I rarely share a photo with people in it. If I am in the photo, I always try to share the one in which I look prettier. I do not share photos with me and my friends unless I get consent from those friends. However, I feel it is troublesome to seek consent, so in general I do not share photos with my friends. As a result, if I have 30 photos on Facebook, at least 25 of them are only scenes and only 5 include people. I do not like to share anything related to my privacy.

Tom shared a similar viewpoint stating, "I usually share photos to demonstrate my photography skills, not to reflect my personal life." In discussing what kind of photos should be shared on Facebook, interviewees tried not to violate other people's privacy by sharing photos including them without their permission. Interviewees were highly concerned about both self-face and other-face in sharing photos. This kind of concern is related to privacy issues that have been raised by many Facebook users.

Although privacy has been a general issue for Westerners who use Facebook, it is surprising that overseas Chinese participants in this study were so seriously concerned about it. Privacy concerns had limited their use of Facebook. Daniel, a business analyst who had lived in the United States for eight years, was concerned that self-disclosure on Facebook could impact his career:

Recently I heard that many companies check their potential employees' Facebook pages to get more information on their private life, and human resources managers would use their private life as a reference in making hiring decisions. Therefore, as a working professional, I do not want to disclose too much information on Facebook.

Overseas Chinese professionals' serious concern about privacy management on Facebook in relation to their career indicates their adoption of Western social practices in the negotiation stage of their identity management. In the United States, not only the popular media reported many cases of employers using Facebook information in hiring decisions, but academic research has been conducted on how decision makers utilize job candidates' Facebook information (Brown & Vaughn, 2011).

Chinese interviewees' concern about privacy could be explained by the sharp division between in-group and out-group members in collectivist Chinese culture. As Leung and Bond (1984) observed, Chinese tend to be more open to in-group members and keep distant and detached from those who are considered to be members of their out-group social networks. Our interviewees had Facebook friends who were not so close to them. Naturally, they would want to protect their privacy and project a positive public image/face to those out-group members on Facebook. The interviewees' concerns about privacy and appropriate ways of sharing photos demonstrated that they tried to manage their Facebook identity carefully by excluding any information that could be private to themselves or their friends.

### ***Keeping Harmony on Facebook***

Keeping harmony and avoiding conflicts are dominant Chinese cultural norms that are clearly reflected in overseas Chinese professionals' use of Facebook. Daniel stated that he would avoid expressing personal opinions on sensitive topics on Facebook; for instance, he would never talk about religion because it could offend people who held different beliefs. Similarly, Mike shared his concerns of publicly sharing his political views on Facebook:

Before I posted any Facebook updates, I would think through whether this post could offend any one of my more than 100 Facebook friends. . . . After considering all the factors, I only share uncontroversial information that wouldn't offend anyone; usually it is purely scientific knowledge.

Interviewees tended to avoid conflicts and keep harmony both online and off-line. As Mike commented, "I try not to offend anyone on Facebook. In my real life, I also avoid offending anyone and avoid self-contradiction caused by my multiple identities."

The way Chinese people living overseas use Facebook to maintain weak ties also reflects the important Chinese cultural value of harmony. Lily explained, "Connecting with friends on Facebook is less intruding, especially with friends who I have lost touch with for a long time. A comment or message is a great start to reconnect, and then we can move on to other communication methods like phone calls." Facebook is favored by overseas Chinese to maintain weak ties due to this intrusiveness, which helps to maintain harmony in interpersonal relationships. Facebook is used as a buffering communication tool to check the other person's willingness to reconnect; thus, it can help to save face if the other person does not show interest.

### ***Promoting Chinese Culture on Facebook***

Two interviewees who strongly identified with Chinese culture tried to express their Chinese cultural identity and their love of Chinese culture on Facebook. Jasmine served as a Chinese cultural informant to her U.S. friends on Facebook. When Jasmine's friend went to Hong Kong and was uncertain of the appropriate way to dress for an important business meeting, she corrected her friend's wrong knowledge that wearing white clothes was not appropriate in those occasions in China; she told her friend that white was good, but wearing all white might be problematic.

Similarly, Jack used Facebook as a platform to promote his hometown's culture: "I often share some information about my hometown, such as the travel information and Chinese TV programs about my hometown. I even put my hometown's information in my personal profile." This behavior clearly shows Jack's pride in his Chinese identity. In brief, participants' Facebook activities reflect their strong Chinese cultural identity, as demonstrated in their concerns about privacy and harmony and their promotion of Chinese culture.

### ***Research Question 2: Facebook and Managing Multiple Identities***

In the acculturation process, Chinese people living overseas constantly negotiate their Chinese cultural background with the culture in their hosting countries. Our second research question concerns overseas Chinese professionals' cultural identity management through sharing different types of information in different cultural groups and social networks on Facebook. Participants in this study used different languages, managed different groups of friends on Facebook, and used various SNSs to manage their multiple identities.

### ***Managing Language Use***

When posting information on Facebook, most of the interviewees primarily used English, and nearly half of the interviewees would adapt to the language the other party used in his or her Facebook

communication. Mike posted in English to make sure all his friends could understand as well as to show respect to others in Facebook communication. Tom adapted to different languages:

I usually use whatever language my friends use. If my friends use Chinese, I use Chinese; if my friends use English, I use English; if my friends use Dutch, I use Dutch. If I really do not understand the language my friends use—for instance, Czech—I will translate and try to understand, and then translate my information to Czech and send it to them. . . . I use whatever language my friends use to communicate with me. When I send messages to my friends, I try to use his or her native language. . . . I post public information in English so everyone can understand.

The use of different languages for different cultural groups demonstrates the participants' cultural sensitivity in adapting to different cultural groups as well as the way they manage different cultural identities. Overseas Chinese professionals' adjustment to other languages for Facebook communication might be due to the fact that Chinese is difficult for most people who speak other languages.

#### ***Managing Different Groups of Friends on Facebook***

In addition to using different languages, the interviewees adapted to different cultures through categorizing friends into different groups on Facebook, such as alumni, colleagues, classmates, ski club members, and friends from China. Different types of information were exchanged in different cultural groups. Jack responded that he had professional relationships mostly with Westerners and social relationships mostly with Chinese people on Facebook. He tended to exchange academic and professional information with Westerners (e.g., conference information) and social information with Chinese people (e.g., social gatherings). This distinction reveals that Chinese people living overseas manage their professional, social, and cultural identities in different groups of friends.

#### ***Managing Different Social Network Sites***

Many interviewees reported that they used multiple SNSs to connect with friends in China and their host countries. They opened Facebook accounts mainly because of Facebook's popularity in their host countries. However, they maintained contact with their Chinese friends through other popular SNSs in China, such as QQ, Renren, MSN, Wechat, and Microblog. They tended to share richer information and deeper conversations on the Chinese SNSs than on Facebook. Postings about hot topics on the Chinese SNSs are less likely to be misunderstood, because the participants' Chinese friends are more familiar with Chinese culture. As Joan explained:

I mainly use Microblog to connect with my friends in China. We talked about many different issues, from hot topics in society to popular culture and recent news, et cetera. However, on Facebook, I rarely talked about any social topics since people in different countries have different topics of concern. People might not be interested in the social topics I posted. My topics on Facebook are limited to personal updates, such as wedding, graduation, and travel.

Apparently, overseas Chinese professionals did not use Facebook as a platform for enmeshment in identity management, when individuals develop common understandings of the relationship and culture with people from another culture. Other than the reason of cultural understanding, Chinese professionals living overseas used Facebook less actively, because Facebook is banned in China and it is necessary to maintain contact with their Chinese friends through other SNSs. In addition, modern communication technologies are developing rapidly in China. The functions of some popular SNSs are comparable to and even exceed those of Facebook.

### ***Research Question 3: Facebook and Acculturation***

The third research question explores the role of Facebook in overseas Chinese professionals' lives and acculturation experiences. All interviewees reported that they started to use Facebook as it was introduced by their friends, and they had used Facebook for one to six years. All of them took advantage of the Facebook function of introducing friends to them through e-mail exchange with others and finding common friends with their Facebook friends. None of the participants claimed they were active users of Facebook, but rather used it passively.

### ***Passive Use of Facebook by Chinese People Living Overseas***

Interviewees tended to use Facebook as a tool to connect with friends, and they tended to read their friends' status updates more often than posting their own status updates. Some interviewees observed that Westerners tended to be more active on Facebook and updated more often than Chinese. Few Chinese tended to be on Facebook very often or kept updating their statuses. As Daniel explained, "Chinese do not like sharing trivial things in their daily life." Joan declared Facebook an unimportant communication tool in her life:

I feel using Facebook is similar to attending a bar. It is chaotic. Strangers say hello to each other, but it is impossible to have deep conversations. Facebook is an accessory or a decoration to my life. Everybody has a Facebook page, and you do not need to spend too much time or energy to maintain it. As long as you have it there, it is good to use it for a brief chat with friends that you haven't seen for a while.

The passive use of Facebook by the interviewees partly reflects their trial stage of acculturation in the Western countries. On one hand, the act of opening a Facebook account itself shows a willingness to explore new cultures. On the other hand, they tended to be lurkers on Facebook—reading others' updates more often than posting their own. Participants' passive use of Facebook may be due to their lack of involvement in local social networks at this stage of the acculturation process. They do not share as many common topics and interests as local people do. Therefore, the interviewees were uncertain and hesitant in sharing information and updating their statuses. As Jasmine noted,

If I had a bigger social circle of Americans, Facebook could be an efficient way to communicate. The disadvantage of using Facebook is that Americans might not

understand what you posted on Facebook, especially some cultural stuff, which could easily cause misunderstandings.

Jasmine's comment also shows the hesitance of some Chinese to share information and to be open to out-group members, their Western friends.

### ***Facebook Use and Maintaining Social Capital***

Similar to findings among Americans (Ellison et al., 2007; Steinfield et al., 2008), Chinese people living overseas use Facebook to maintain social capital but more for maintaining weak ties than strong ties. Interviewees shared the common point of view that Facebook was more suitable for informal and occasional communication with friends they were not very close to, and it helped them to stay connected with their social networks. As Barbara described:

For the friends that you haven't contacted for a long time, you may lose their information. However, with Facebook, you will not lose contact with them. Facebook can tell you their updates, and they can get your updates as well.

Mike regarded Facebook's way of maintaining contact with others as an important strength because it boosted overseas Chinese professionals' social capital. He argued that Facebook is a more important social networking tool for Chinese people living overseas than it is for local people in Western countries. Local people have more off-line networks, such as families, relatives, and alumni, and they can rely more on those networks. For Chinese people living overseas, Facebook can supplement their lack of social capital off-line.

### ***Facebook as One of the Tools to Learn New Cultures and Life Styles***

Interviewees shared that the major challenges of acculturating to Western cultures were language barriers and cultural differences. A few interviewees pointed out that they did not have enough knowledge of popular culture and lifestyles in their host countries, so there were few common interests and topics that they shared with Westerners, which made it difficult for them to make friends in their host countries. The use of Facebook can help overseas Chinese conquer some of these challenges. As Wendy stated:

Opening the Facebook account and attending to my friends' posts show that I want to integrate into the Western society. Facebook is a platform that Americans use to share their life. I also try to use Facebook to make friends and keep in touch with Americans, such as asking them about some good local restaurants and the American customs if I have questions.

Jasmine emphasized that Facebook could be a more useful tool for integrating into Western societies if she used it more frequently. Facebook is a popular communication channel in the United States, so having more Facebook friends should be helpful, especially at the initial stage of acculturation.

Participants who had been in Western countries for a relatively short period tended to try several means to become familiar with the new cultures. Facebook provided more personal information about their Western friends' lives and major activities. It also sometimes reminded them about popular social and media topics. Mike commented as such: "If all my American friends on Facebook talk about the same thing, this can remind me what the popular topic is and what my American peers are interested in discussing." Mike also liked the way that Facebook linked with mass media by listing key online mass media reports that users selected on their Facebook time line, because it "processes and selects mass media information, and it is helpful for learning the host country and the Western world." Therefore, Facebook is particularly useful at the trial and enmeshment stages of the acculturation process as overseas Chinese professionals seek to be exposed to the new cultures as much as possible.

However, Facebook plays a limited role in further integration into the local social network. Many interviewees believed that Facebook communication could not replace face-to-face interaction, which was more effective in developing closer relationships with Westerners. Barbara commented that Facebook communication tended to be superficial and could hardly go deeper for exchanging cultural opinions.

As the interviewees stayed longer in Western countries, they developed different patterns of and viewpoints about acculturation. Other than Facebook, the actual social context had a greater influence on their acculturation. When talking about acculturation, the two interviewees who had stayed in the United States for 12 years and the one who stayed in three European countries for seven years emphasized the particular social contexts' influences on their motives of adapting to the "mainstream" local Western cultures. Barbara commented:

After staying in New York for a long time, I do not feel it's important to integrate into the Western culture, and I do not have such a strong desire. . . . In New York, 20% of the population might be Asian, 20% might be Latino, 20% might be European, 20% might be American Caucasian, and 20% might be African American. I do not think there is really a so-called American mainstream culture. I stay in whichever culture I feel comfortable with and communicate with whomever I like. There is no strong need to integrate into the Western culture.

Responses reflected that participants had come to the negotiation stage of acculturation. Unlike the newcomers, who are eager to explore or become assimilated in the new cultures, the participants in our study had a more sophisticated understanding of their own identity and felt comfortable with their current identity. Rather than taking the simplistic view of "American mainstream culture," they were able to capture the diversity and complexity within the host country's culture. The deeper understanding of the host country's culture and their Chinese culture enabled them to negotiate their identity in different social and cultural contexts. It is interesting to learn from the interviews that a higher level of acculturation is not characterized by a strong desire to integrate into the host culture. Rather, it is characterized by a clear sense of the situations and the relative comfort with one's identity and social life.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Suler (2002) stated: "The media chosen can intimately interlock with the degree of identity integration and dissociation and with the extent to which a person presents a real or imaginary self" (p. 459). Our findings echo Suler's comment on the relationship of individual choice of media and identity management. Our interviewees all stated that their Facebook identity was close to their real-life identity; therefore, their virtual world and the real world seemed to be blended. Similar to findings among Americans (Ellison et al., 2007; Steinfield et al., 2008), Facebook helped overseas Chinese professionals maintain social capital, but more so for weak ties than for strong ties. Our interviewees shared that the online social capital through Facebook could supplement their lack of social capital off-line in their host countries. However, it is hard to develop close off-line relationships merely through Facebook communication, and face-to-face interaction is still crucial. The social and political backgrounds of the host and home countries influence overseas Chinese people's choice of certain social media. Facebook is used by overseas Chinese primarily to maintain their social networks outside of mainland China, because the site is banned by the Chinese government for political concerns. Overseas Chinese professionals' identity management on Facebook is largely a demonstration of intercultural communication with individuals living in their host countries. Our research shows that Facebook has been used by overseas Chinese professionals at different stages of identity management.

Having a Facebook account already indicates a willingness to acculturate among Chinese professionals living overseas. Facebook is linked to mainstream mass media information in the host countries. Information shared by contacts in the host countries can be a valuable source of information about popular culture and social events, which can be helpful for overseas Chinese who are at the trial and enmeshment stages of their identity management.

In our study, participants shared a lot of information on their negotiation of identities on Facebook. Chinese culture is distinctively different from the cultures of the Western countries in which the interviewees resided, and the interviewees admitted their unfamiliarity with the cultures of their host countries. But they did display cultural sensitivity by sharing different types of information in different languages and managing different cultural groups and social networks on Facebook. On one hand, Chinese people living overseas made the effort to ensure their Facebook identities and ways of communication were appropriate to their contacts in different cultures. On the other hand, traditional Chinese cultural values strongly influenced overseas Chinese professionals' identity management on Facebook, especially Chinese values such as harmony and the distinction between in-group and out-group members. Our research findings suggest that further identity development is often marked by a better understanding of self and the specific cultural contexts. At the negotiation stage of identity management, Chinese people living overseas even lack a strong desire to integrate into the host culture. They are able to manage their multiple cultural identities by deliberately choosing the social events to attend rather than getting lost in the passive immersion of all social activities. The findings demonstrate, both in thoughts and behaviors, a clear distinction between the enmeshment and negotiation stages of identity management theory.

This research provides a preliminary understanding of overseas Chinese professionals' Facebook use and acculturation in Western host countries. The diverse backgrounds of the participants ensure that a



variety of perspectives and voices were represented. However, the multiple countries that our interviewees resided in limited our ability to embed their Facebook communication in the specific social contexts of their host countries. Future research could focus on overseas Chinese in one country—even in one city—to capture the place-specific cultural and historical context, because Levitt and Jaworsky (2007) suggested that space, place, and the nature of embeddedness are important future directions for studying social phenomena related to transnational migration. An important limitation of our study is that the interviewees were all highly educated Chinese professionals with decent socioeconomic status in Western countries. Future research could focus on Chinese people of lower educational level and socioeconomic status. In addition, interviewees in this study compared their use of Facebook with different social media, especially some Chinese social media such as Renren and Microblog. This finding echoes Sun's (2005) call for research on communication and representation of Chinese in the Chinese transnational mediasphere. A further exploration of the similarities and differences of how overseas Chinese use different social media could attempt to capture the complexity of overseas Chinese professionals' identity management in the virtual world.

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