

# A Qualitative Study of Intercultural Friendship through New Social Media

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**Abstract:** Applying Casmir's Third Culture Model (TCM) of intercultural communication (Casmir 1993, 1999), the current study examines the ongoing interaction between two international participants mediated by one social medium: WeChat. It describes the dialogic communication patterns between the participants that enabled them collaboratively to construct a shared and mutually beneficial third culture that brought about a productive intercultural friendship. It demonstrates ways WeChat helped transform their interactions and facilitated their friendship development.

**Keywords:** new social media, WeChat, intercultural friendship, third culture, self-disclosure, dialogic communication.

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## 1. Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century has witnessed the rapid and constant development of new social media technologies. New social media are transforming intercultural communication that was mainly conceptualized and studied in face-to-face contexts in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. With the help of new social media, intercultural communication is no longer restricted by geopolitical boundaries, time, or space, and people have been brought into contact with different parts of the world in virtual communities that dwell in cyber space. Under these circumstances, it is imperative that intercultural scholars pay more attention to the impact of new social media on intercultural communication. Research in this area challenges “more than 50 years of intercultural communication knowledge and theory rooted in twentieth-century paradigm of face-to-face interaction” (Shuter 2012: 220).

The current study endeavors to explore the impact of one new social medium (WeChat) on intercultural friendship development through analyzing the ongoing interactions between one pair of international partners over a three-month period in the fall of 2017. Applying Casmir's (1993, 1999) Third Culture Model (TCM) of intercultural communication, it demonstrates ways WeChat helped transform the interaction between the two partners, allowing them to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers to create a shared and mutually beneficial third culture that brought about a productive intercultural friendship.

## 2. Third Culture Model of intercultural communication

Casmir (1993, 1999) proposed what he termed a post-modern chaotic theory of culture: the Third Culture Model of intercultural interaction. “Third culture” refers to “the construction of a mutually beneficial interactive environment in which individuals from two different cultures can function in a way beneficial to all involved” (Casmir 1999:92). Using Geertz's metaphor of music for culture (1973, quoted in Casmir 1999:93), Casmir stressed the importance of mutual construction to harmonious performance in intercultural interaction. To use Casmir's (1999:108) own words, “my third culture building model is an attempt to explain an ongoing

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process in a chaotic systems environment, which does not seek total closure or one endstate, but rather makes it necessary that we ‘keep the dialogue going’.

According to Casmir, intercultural contacts are full of challenges due to cultural differences and gaps. “Transformation by means of interactive, mutually beneficial communication” is considered the means for handling these challenges. Third-Culture building is the solution to intercultural communication problems. A third culture co-created by people from different cultural backgrounds is the survival kit for intercultural-communication chaos. It is the intercultural-communication scholars’ responsibility to determine how and why third cultures are constructed, by considering the communication processes between people attempting to construct “new foundations and practices for their mutually beneficial efforts in an attempt to organize their chaotic environment” (Casmir 1999: 101).

Highlighting the ongoing communication process of intercultural interaction, the TCM stipulates that participants go through four phases in constructing a third culture between them: *contact*, *need*, *interact*, and *third culture*. It is at Phase II that participants sense the mutual dependence on one another to achieve mutually beneficial ends, and that motivates them to keep the interaction going. Rules for interaction, mutually acceptable obligations and outcomes, as well as individual roles, are established that enable a third culture to be created within the framework of the emerging intercultural relationship. Development of dialogic communication skills is a significant prerequisite for building and successfully maintaining third cultures and thus intercultural relationships.

In sum, the TCM sees intercultural interaction predominantly as an ongoing process of negotiating two cultural meaning systems. According to this model, successful intercultural friendships are possible if participants communicate effectively and appropriately to create a shared third culture between them.

### 3. Intercultural friendship: Literature review

Research on intercultural friendships is limited in terms of research interests, topics, methodology, and scope. Generally speaking, studies have been interested in discovering phases of intercultural friendship development (Lee 2008) and variables for intercultural-friendship development (Chen 2006; Gareis 2000; Gareis 2012; Gareis, Merkin & Goldman 2011; Gareis 2012; Gudykunst & Kim 1997; Kim 1991; Kudo & Simkin 2003; Lee 2006; Mas'udah 2017; Shiao 2016; Sias *et al.* 2008). All the existing studies under review used either interviews or surveys for data collection, relying upon participants’ recollections and narrative reconstructions of their experiences. All the studies except for Shiao (2016) and Mas'udah (2017) examined intercultural friendships in face-to-face situations.

Lee (2008) identifies three stages of intercultural friendship formation: initial encounter, interaction, and involvement, which parallel the three phases (trial, enmeshment, and involvement) of the Identity Management Theory (Cupach & Imahori 1993, Imahori & Cupach 2005). Lee’s study confirms Casmir’s (1999) claim that needs or interests are what motivate intercultural partners to continue their interaction.

Some important factors have been found to influence intercultural friendships. One is self-disclosure (Chen 2006, Lee 2006, Kudo & Simkin 2010, Gareis, *et al.* 2011, Sias *et al.* 2008). Chen (2006) found two levels of self-disclosure used to reduce uncertainty between intercultural friends: superficial (e.g., attitudes, opinions, tastes, interests, studies, work, personality) and intimate (e.g., money or financial matters, body, appearances).

Another important factor is “providing assistance” (Kudo & Simkin 2010, Lee 2006). This includes giving help, doing favors, providing support, and offering advice.

Culture learning is another factor that influences intercultural friendships (Lee 2006, Sias *et al.* 2008). Partners teach each other their home languages and share differing cultural

beliefs and values. Most respondents in Lee's (2006) study reported that cultural learning was the best part of an intercultural friendship.

Managing conflicts caused by cultural differences was yet another significant factor. "If members in an intercultural friendship can manage their conflicts in a productive fashion, the friendship tends to sustain" (Lee 2006: 55). Stressing cultural similarities while respecting different viewpoints is essential for intercultural friendship.

Perceived similarity and personality attraction have been found to be important for intercultural-friendship development. So is the development of a language consisting of vocabulary, grammar, and jargon unique to the friendship (Sias *et al.* 2008). Personality attraction can be a triggering factor for intercultural friendships, while shared interests and needs help move intercultural friendships to a next level (Lee 2008).

Some personal variables have been found to influence intercultural-friendship development. People with certain personalities are better at developing intercultural friendships: for example, those who are receptive to other nationalities (Kudo & Simkin 2010), possess greater communicative adaptability, or are outgoing (Gareis, Merkin & Goldman 2011). Gareis and colleagues define "communicative adaptability" as a mixture of communication skills and personal attributes such as being witty, supportive, and relaxed; enjoying meeting and engaging with others; having self-awareness concerning appropriate self-disclosure; and possessing excellent verbal skills. Lee (2008) found that events such as meeting a partner's family or loved ones (see also Lee 2006), taking a road trip together, or experiencing together significant moments such as a wedding function to bring participants closer.

Finally, geographical regions have been found to affect intercultural-friendship development. Gareis (2012) found that students from English-speaking countries and from northern and central Europe had more close American friendships, while students from East Asia had no American friends. Southern US culture was seen as beneficial for intercultural friendships, being perceived as more amiable and polite (Reed 1993), representing the most collectivist region in the US, and favoring a slower pace of life.

While all the above studies address face-to-face intercultural friendships, two studies have examined intercultural-friendship development on social media (Mas'udah 2017, Shiau 2016). In Shiau's study, 18 Taiwanese ESL students recounted their use of social media in English learning and intercultural relationships. They reported that social media enabled them to use stickers and photos (selfies, places visited or personally meaningful, meals or other food) to introduce their home culture and express their cultural transition experiences. Participants shared their helplessness not being able to develop friendships either face to face, due to lack of language skills, or on social media, as they perceived stickers and photos as "superficial" or "unprofessional" communication.

In contrast with the negative experiences of the Taiwanese ESL students in the US, in Mas'udah's study, six Asian, Arab, African, and European college students studying in Kocaeli University, Turkey, shared predominantly positive experiences using social media to develop intercultural friendships with other foreign students. These students used Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp: the first two for more general information sharing such as news, articles, photos of personal moments, WhatsApp for more personal and private information sharing with close friends. Mas'udah concludes that the use of social media helps enhance intercultural-friendship development through 1) supplying topics for face-to-face communication, 2) providing a better perception of others, 3) identifying similarities, 4) reducing misunderstanding, 5) sharing mostly positive responses, 6) enabling participants to express themselves more confidently, and 7) facilitating closer bonding with friends. Mas'udah found that the enhanced features of social media enabled richer self-disclosure: users could freely disclose themselves by sharing any kind of information, from general to

personal, while receiving responses to their self-disclosure or giving responses to others' self-disclosures.

To sum up, a review of the literature reveals two gaps in the existing literature on intercultural friendships. One is the predominant attention that has been given to face-to-face interaction. The field is in need of research on the impact of new social media on intercultural friendship formation. The other gap arises from the predominant use of survey questionnaires or interviews for data collection. Participants' recollections of their past or current experiences of intercultural friendship have been overly relied upon for understanding the subject matter. Though valuable, these types of data do not allow researchers to examine the actual ongoing interaction sequences, especially if one wants to investigate how participants engage in dialogues to help them build a shared third culture (Casmir 1993, 1999).

This study attempts to fill the gaps by providing a case study of intercultural interaction mediated by WeChat. Through close analysis of the actual ongoing interaction over a period of three months, the study explores the following research questions:

**RQ 1.** What communication patterns characterized the interaction?

**RQ 2.** How did these communication patterns help develop a third culture between the communicators?

**RQ 3.** How did the new social medium WeChat facilitate the building of a third culture?

## 4. Methods

### 4.1 Data collection

The case study draws on a large corpus of data collected during a term project for an undergraduate intercultural-communication course in the fall semester of 2017. Informed consent was obtained from students who were informed that these files would be used for possible research studies, and they were guaranteed complete confidentiality. Students enrolled in my class ( $n = 33$ ) at a university in southwest Texas were paired with college students enrolled in an intercultural-communication course for English majors at a comprehensive university in northwest China.

I designed the project guidelines and shared them with the Chinese professor who assisted by pairing students from her class. The project asked students to have ongoing interactions with their international partner through email over a period of three months. Students were to produce ten to twenty journal entries in which they would reflect upon their interaction and tie in relevant course concepts. Another element was an essay in which students were to discuss three things they learned about intercultural communication through their interaction. A final assignment was an oral presentation at the end of the semester in which students were to share their intercultural experiences with their international partners. While the US students completed all these parts, the Chinese students were asked to do only the reflective essay and oral presentation.

Shortly after the interactions started, many students switched from email to WeChat as the medium for interaction. WeChat (微信: literally, "micro-message") is a Chinese multipurpose messaging, social media and mobile payment app developed by Tencent. First released in 2011, WeChat provides a wide range of functions on a wide range of platforms. Like WhatsApp, WeChat enables users to send messages in multiple formats (voice, text, or pictures) to either a single person or group of individuals (through WeChat Group Chat or "tagging"). Users can also make audio or video calls (Keating 2016). Unlike WhatsApp, WeChat allows users to post text messages, photos, stickers (e.g., emoji), and short videos to Moments: a social platform similar to Facebook's newsfeed. As with Facebook, they can "like" or comment on others' posts (Keating 2016, Kuo 2014, Sandel & Ju 2015). WeChat

serves as a platform for entertainment, shopping, and transactions (Kuo 2014). According to Zeng and colleagues (2016), WeChat is currently recognized as the best social networking site used by people of all ages and professions in China – including, of course, college students.

The material for the current study was selected because this particular pair of students demonstrated successful and productive intercultural friendship. By “successful and productive”, I mean what Hunter and Elias call (1999: 558-559) “a favorable contact” that exhibits such characteristics as “intimacy, equal status, and cooperative interdependence”. I wanted to show that, through dialogue-based communication with the help of new social media, meaningful intercultural friendships are possible despite cultural differences and other challenges.

Data for analysis in this study consists of 1) email and WeChat interactions between “Dalia” (a pseudonym), a junior college student in the US, and “Yan”, a junior college student in China, over a three-month period from September to December 2017; 2) Dalia’s twenty journal entries; 3) Dalia’s and Yan’s reflective essays; and 4) Dalia’s oral presentation.

## 4.2 Data analysis

The qualitative data-analysis software *ATLAS ti 8<sup>2</sup>* was used to aid analysis. My analysis follows a grounded approach (Strauss & Corbin 1998) characterized by openness and freedom from assumptions about the phenomenon under investigation. I started with the data and did open coding of the email and WeChat exchanges, followed by Dalia’s journal entries, followed by Dalia and Yan’s reflective essays. This allowed me to triangulate (Flick 2004) datasets for comparative (and, arguably, more valid) analysis. These datasets are comparable in that they all relate to the same interaction, though taken from different perspectives and produced at different times.

The triangulation of datasets allowed me to have a more balanced and holistic understanding of the participants' intercultural experiences, particularly Dalia’s. I checked Dalia’s reflective essay against Yan’s, examined Dalia's and Yan's WeChat exchanges, recalled Dalia’s oral presentation in class, and read Dalia’s journal entries. These various perspectives provided me a more accurate picture of the process of interaction and the relationship's development.

Yan’s voice was heard only through the email and WeChat exchanges and her reflective essay. Without access to her personal journal or her oral presentation at the end of the semester – the data that would be more likely to reveal her personal thoughts or feelings – I was unable to understand fully her feelings about the interaction and her relationship with Dalia. Even her essay did not allow me to know her true feelings. Unlike Dalia, whose essay described her feelings, challenges, learning experience, and positive outcomes – how this intercultural experience affected her personally – Yan was academic and professional in tone with her essay, analyzing the communicative differences between her culture and American culture. However, she did indicate in the beginning of her essay that her interaction with Dalia was successful and enjoyable, and she confirmed that they formed a fun and lasting friendship as a result.

My analysis can be divided into two parts: textual analysis of what Dalia and Yan communicated and structural or sequential analysis of how they communicated. I wrote memos throughout the analysis process.

### 4.2.1 Textual analysis

I did open coding of each dataset independent of the others. I then compared the codes across datasets to identify commonalities and differences (axial coding). Some codes were named based on my interpretation of a sentence or passage (free coding); some were taken from the

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<sup>2</sup> <https://atlasti.com>

data (*in vivo* coding). No contradictory codes were found. Dalia expressed her liking of Yan in the WeChat messaging, and she shared the same feeling in her journal entries, reflective essay, and oral presentation.

After finishing coding all the text, I categorized the codes into groups based on their semantic relationships (Spradley 1980). Three categories emerged: “equal relationship”, “fun relationship”, and “trusting relationship”. Table 1 provides a summary.

#### 4.2.2 Structural or sequential analysis

The textual analysis reveals a successful, mutually enjoyable, mutually beneficial friendship between Dalia and Yan. The structural/sequential analysis directs attention to the influence of WeChat on their interaction. I focused on the functions and features and identified the ways it helped transform the interactions and facilitated the creation of a third culture.

#### 4.2.3 Memos

Memos are based on the coding and “on broad interrelations that are gradually revealed by the investigator” (Bohm 2004). When writing memos, researchers are basically asked to remove themselves from the data and go beyond any purely descriptive work: hence the motto “stop and memo!” (Bohm 2004: 271). Writing memos proved crucial to my analysis because it allowed me constantly to find ways to make sense of the data by comparing what I was finding against what I thought before. In the course of writing the memos, my analysis paper started to take shape.

**Table 1:** Summary of coding.

Categories	Frequency	Properties	Examples
equal relationship (ER)	18	characterized by nonjudgmental attitude, perceived similarities, and learner stance	lack of judgment, perceived similarities, learner stance, humble attitude, willingness to learn, respect for the other's perspective, learning, resemblance, equality
fun relationship (FR)	20	associated with light and interesting conversations, kind humor or joking, positive energy, and liking of each other	liking feeling, nonserious conversation, small talk, jokes, kind humor, laughter, fun, finding things interesting, staying positive, making a positive influence, seeing in a positive light
trusting relationship (TR)	28	characterized by mutual caring, freedom to express oneself, sense of security, sense of support, and personal attention	hearing each other out, sense of mutual freedom, advice giving, caring relationship, bonding, having an “amazing” “cherished” friend, connecting, leaving fear behind, sense of person not culture, being open, offering support, talking about weight, personal knowledge

### 5. Findings

As with any other intercultural interactions that are chaotic (Casmir 1993, 1999), Dalia and Yan had to deal with various barriers and challenges. These include their initial uncertainties and fears, the time difference between China and the US (14 hours), language barriers (English is Yan’s second language), difference in religions (Dalia is Christian, Yan atheist),

differences in cultural norms (e.g., expected ways to show care or concern), and different social media practices regarding e.g. the use of stickers or emojis. That said, both enjoyed their three-month project interaction (11 September - 4 December 2017) and have maintained contact ever since: as of this writing, their friendship is still ongoing. Dalia asked me how to mail Yan a birthday present the semester following the course and sent her a gift. Dalia and Yan developed a lasting intercultural friendship during a three-month interaction. How did they accomplish this?

Close analysis of the data reveals dialogic communication patterns that enabled them collaboratively to construct a “mutually beneficial interactive environment” in which both of them could “function in a way beneficial to all involved” (Casmir 1999: 92), along with the significant role WeChat played in facilitating the building of that “interactive environment”.

### 5.1 Dialogic communication

Dialogue is a collaborative process of co-constructing meanings between communicators (Stewart, Zediker & Witteborn 2009: 235). One significant feature of the interaction between Dalia and Yan was how they treated each other with equality and mutual respect. As Table 1 shows, “equal relationships (ER)” constituted one major category of my codes. From the onset of their interaction, they were both respectful, showed sensitivity, and demonstrated understanding and tolerance toward each other. While conscious of each other’s cultural identities, they treated each other as individuals.

In her initial email, Yan expressed her excitement about communicating with Dalia. Her message highlighted her purposes in interacting with Dalia: namely, to learn about life in America and allow Dalia to learn about life in China. She indicated her awareness of the time difference as well as her poor English-writing skills. She apologized for writing to Dalia at an hour that might be inconvenient. She stated, “if you see this letter, please write back”, which was rather blunt, probably due to her lack of English proficiency.

Within a few hours of receiving Yan's email, Dalia replied. She expressed her excitement learning about a culture far away. After introducing herself in equal quantity and quality to Yan (noting gender, nationality, college status, major, university), she responded to each of Yan's questions, showing her attentiveness and responsiveness. Dalia was very cautious with her word choices and expressions so as not to hurt Yan's feelings. Correcting a typo in Yan’s letter (Yan typed “Deer” instead of “Dear”), with the assumption that Yan indeed lacked English skills as she claimed in her email, Dalia explained the difference between the two words, adding “but it's okay. we're all here to learn”. Dalia followed all the rules for constructing an email message perfectly, which implicitly taught Yan the proper way of starting and ending an email. Dalia's English writing was much smoother and more proper than Yan's since English is her first language.

Their exchanges demonstrated perfect *symmetrical self-disclosure* as they continued to share in equal quantity and quality. Their self-disclosure was candid and personal from the beginning. Yan shared one defect with her appearance; Dalia shared one of her own in response. Each complimented and encouraged the other, turning the defects into something positive. As they went on, they expanded the scope of their sharing into such topics as boys, study habits, politics, religion, family, and marriage. Their responses to each other were honest, candid, and positive.

Through such symmetrical self-disclosure, they were able to learn about each other and identify many similarities between them. They were attracted to each other’s personalities (Lee 2008). Dalia reflected in her journal entries that she found Yan positive, uplifting, and outgoing. Yan disclosed in her messages that she was impressed by Dalia’s gentleness and patience when Dalia did not attempt to impose her religious faith on her. They learned about

each other's family lives and discussed (among many other things) the marriage and educational systems of the two countries.

They likewise displayed “mutual humble attitudes”. Sometimes Yan used words that puzzled Dalia. In her email response to Dalia who had asked about her campus, Yan used “canteen” to refer to the cafeteria. Dalia was confused but was able to figure out the meaning by reading the rest of Yan’s message carefully. In her response to Yan, Dalia candidly told Yan her thoughts and gently gave her the more common expressions. Yan thankfully accepted Dalia’s correction and apologized for her inappropriate use of words. In this interaction, both showed patience, humility, acceptance, and mutual respect.

Another feature of their communication was the establishment of “mutual trust and good will”. “Trusting relationship (TR)” was another major category of my codes. Yan and Dalia never judged or thought badly of each other; instead, they allowed each other to prove who she was and otherwise treated each other kindly, which proved particularly beneficial when conflicts arose. I observed one conflict between Dalia and Yan while triangulating the various datasets. Dalia mentioned it in her oral presentation and her journal entries but not in her WeChat interaction with Yan. It occurred during the early stages of their interaction. One night, they were interacting through WeChat. Because of the time difference, when it was still daytime on Yan’s side, it was already past midnight on Dalia’s end. Yan texted Dalia, “it’s so late. You should go to bed now. Finish your homework tomorrow.” Dalia used this as an example of intercultural conflict in her oral presentation. She confessed that she was somewhat annoyed by Yan’s directly telling her what to do with her time when they were merely acquaintances.

Dalia said that her interpretation of Yan’s behavior changed as their interaction continued and their friendship evolved. She initially took it as intrusion into her personal space and was somewhat offended. Later, as recorded in her journal, she took that same behavior as a sign of care and concern (Yan being influenced by her Chinese cultural norms) and started to treasure it.

In this conflict situation, Dalia used patience, open-mindedness, trust, and kindness, maintaining contact and (when appropriate) opting for proper silence. Instead of impulsively expressing anger or projecting a negative perception of Yan based on one single act, she kept an open mind, allowing Yan to show who she was through continued contact.

A final feature of their communication to note was the use of humor to form a fun relationship. “Fun relationship (FR)” was a third major category of my codes. Dalia and Yan's interactions were filled with laughter, light humor, and jokes, for example when they chatted about boys or their opinions on presidents. Dalia was impressed with Yan’s humorous and sunny spirit. Their interactions consisted of small talk with short and witty exchanges intermingled with funny pictures, stickers, or emojis.

In sum, Dalia and Yan engaged in dialogic communication that enabled them to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers to deal with conflicts effectively, all of which helped them construct a shared and mutually beneficial, interactive environment that contributed to their successful friendship. My analysis shows that WeChat played an indispensable role in this process.

## 5.2 WeChat

In her journal entry of 17 November 2017, Dalia wrote that she and Yan were “appreciative of the modern technology” for letting them “go through this journey”. If they had not switched from email to WeChat, they probably would not have been able to form a lasting friendship within such a short period of time. WeChat enhanced their self-disclosure (Mas’udah 2017) and helped transform their interaction in a number of ways: 1) making it highly informal and



personal, 2) making it spontaneous and immediate, 3) facilitating expressions of liking and affinity, and 4) enriching mutual cultural learning.

### **5.2.1 Informality and personalness**

Dalia and Yan's initial exchanges through email were relatively formal because they were still strangers and email as a social medium is somewhat formal in structure. When they switched to WeChat, the tone immediately became light and personal even though it was only the second day they had been interacting. The multiple functions and features of WeChat such as instant text and picture messaging, hold-to-talk, and video chat enabled them to share more personal aspects of life such as living environment (pictures of their dorm or room), daily routines (school, bedtime, foods, clothes, etc.), viewpoints on sensitive issues (gender, politics, religion), and – gradually – other aspects of their lives (travel, family, weight control, appearance). Audio messages enabled them to hear each other's voice. Video chat allowed them to see each other in everyday life. In sum, WeChat enabled them to have highly informal and personal interactions from the beginning. It enhanced mutual self-disclosure known to be important for intercultural-friendship formation in face-to-face contexts (Chen 2006, Kudo & Simkin 2010, Gareis *et al.* 2011, Sias *et al.* 2008).

### **5.2.2 Spontaneity and immediacy**

WeChat added spontaneity to Dalia and Yan's interactions. With its help, they could let each other know their whereabouts and feelings. They could share their everyday lives with each other instantly and richly. Once when Yan was in class, she shot a brief video of her foreign teacher teaching and sent it to Dalia.

WeChat also rendered their interaction more immediate, reducing their distance both geographically and emotionally. When Yan sent Dalia videos of what she was experiencing, she basically invited Dalia into her life for the moment and allowed her to share her experiences. On one occasion, Yan told Dalia that she was traveling to a major city during a national holiday that lasted over a week's time. Yan shot pictures of the train station, streets, and people around her. She made short videos of the scenery and interesting places she was visiting and sent them to Dalia immediately.

Yan took Dalia along on her journey virtually, sharing, to a great extent, her emotional and physical experiences. Dalia was able to chat synchronously with Yan throughout the journey, which made her virtual experience more real and alive. Later, when Dalia traveled to Mexico, she acted like a tour guide. All the pictures and videos she took on the go, coupled with short instant-text messaging, created a virtual space for Dalia and Yan's co-presence.

By creating spontaneous and immediate interactions and virtual co-presence, WeChat helped Dalia and Yan overlook many factors that might have been challenging for face-to-face intercultural exchanges. WeChat's diverse tools for interaction helped distract the communicators from focusing on the chaotic aspects (Casmir 1999) of their relationship such as geographical boundaries, language barriers, cultural differences, and stereotypes. Instead, they were absorbed into a virtual reality created between them with the help of WeChat. That virtual reality pulled them closer together by temporarily freeing them from all the limitations of physical presence and allowing them to meet in cyberspace.

### **5.2.3 Facilitating expression of liking and affinity**

Dalia defined small talk as nonserious conversation in contrast with deep conversation. In her journal entry of 12 October 2017, she wrote:

Yan and I have really grown in our relationship. There's time when we talk about each other's homes, culture and views, but there's other times we participate in small talk. Since we are so busy, we don't really have time to go into a deep conversation, so we do

a bit of small talk. We talk about homework, our planners, our desks and our rooms, but there's one small talk that became my favorite; the boy talk.

At the end of that entry, Dalia commented:

I enjoy small talk; it brings our relationship closer. I get to learn more about who Yan really is, rather than how her culture defines her. Which I think is a great way for us to keep our friendship going because in times it's best to put the serious conversations aside and just have a small talk.

WeChat as a new social medium facilitated that small talk. They sent each other funny images, emojis, and photographs. Through the combined use of video, image, and text, they joked and shared, in a humorous way, their viewpoints on US presidents and boys – since both were single, female college students. When they were both awake and online, they engaged in synchronous interaction, sharing light and fun conversation.

WeChat facilitated their expression of liking or affinity. Dalia's and Yan's friendship proved that love is the keystone to ethical intercultural relationships (Hall 2005). Through their mutual respect and understanding, they developed great bonds through loving acts. Dalia wrote in her journal 27 October 2017:

Yan has become an amazing, great friend. She has a big heart and is always caring for me. I mentioned how I was going to be traveling to a very dangerous part of Mexico, she gave me advice and told me not to go out alone and that being with family would be safer. Soon I came to see that she and I have developed a caring relationship where I can be free to express my problems and she will be there to hear me out. When being sick she makes sure to care for me by telling me and advising me on ways to get better. She has become a very positive light in my life and I have been able to trust her more. As our relationship grows, we form a bond of trust and I know that if any of us is going through something we will be there with loving arms to support each other. Due to our experiences I have noticed that the nature of love is important in every relationship.

#### **5.2.4 Enriched cultural learning**

Dalia and Yan were able to learn about each other's native languages, cultural beliefs and values. Like the participants in Lee's (2006) study, Dalia appreciated cultural learning as one important part of their friendship. WeChat functioned as a useful tool for Yan to introduce aspects of Chinese culture to Dalia. Yan gave Dalia a taste of Chinese customs during the National Day holiday by sending pictures and videos along the way as she was traveling. Whatever Yan was experiencing culturally, Dalia got to share in it. In her journal entries, Dalia confirmed WeChat's role in her learning aspects of Chinese culture: cooking, arts, music, history, language, and so on. She was able to see, hear, touch, smell, and sense how Chinese people lived their everyday lives virtually, in a rich and fascinating way. She wrote in her journal 13 October 2017:

When she was celebrating the festival, she went to a city called Chengdu, where she sent me pictures of the places she went to. Everything looked so interesting and pretty; there were people dancing and many sightseeing. She gave me a glimpse of her culture and I enjoyed it very much. I hope one day I can go visit and learn a bit more.... I hope I can show her our culture and many of the customs we have, the way she has shown me about hers. She has brought her culture in to my life and I am glad I can become a part of it through her.

## 6. Discussion

This study investigated the communication patterns that characterized the interaction between Dalia and Yan: how these patterns helped them develop a third culture, and what role WeChat played in the process. The results show that Dalia and Yan engaged in dialogic communication patterns characterized by equality, fun, good will, and trust. These patterns enabled them to construct a third culture collaboratively as a shared and mutually beneficial interactive environment (Casmir 1993, 1999), one in which they could negotiate cultural differences, deal with challenges and develop a productive and lasting intercultural friendship.

Dalia and Yan's interactions provide a real-life illustration of the TCM. Through dialogic communication, they collaboratively transformed a chaotic environment caused by linguistic, cultural, geographical, and other challenges into a new, interactive environment. They both benefited from the new environment as manifest in their enjoyment of the interaction, expression of other positive feelings, and indication of a productive friendship.

As the TCM suggests, Dalia and Yan went through phases in their interactions: what the model terms *contact*, *need*, *interact*, and *third culture*. Initially, they were thrown into an encounter involuntarily, as they were paired as partners for a course project. Their contact phase started when Yan sent an email to Dalia and Dalia replied. In the beginning, their need to interact was probably purely academic, though one cannot eliminate the possibility of personal interest in learning about another culture. Gradually, that external need was replaced by an internal one whereby they developed a routine of sending and receiving greetings and updates on a regular basis. They started to feel a dependence on each other. Relational or identity needs arose as their relationship evolved. They reinforced each other's self-value and importance to each other through complimenting and showing support and encouragement to each other. Whenever an issue arose, they resorted to each other for advice or comfort. Such psychological needs became strong and reliable motivators for bonding that carried their friendship beyond the project.

As they continued to interact, they formed their own rules for interaction: frequency, types of greetings, when and what to share, how to respond to each other's messages, etc. A third culture evolved between them within the framework of an emerging intercultural friendship. They developed valued interactions, shared perceptions of obligations and responsibilities in relation to each other, and arrived at rules for interpreting each other's acts. The shared culture enabled them to overcome emerging challenges and benefit mutually.

My analysis confirms that the development of dialogic communication skills is a significant prerequisite for developing and maintaining successful intercultural friendships. The essence of dialogic communication is what Buber (2009) terms "interhuman" or "person-to-person" interaction. Stewart (2009:65) summarizes three characteristics of genuine dialogue: each person must turn toward and be open to the other; each must make the other present; each confirms the other's being without necessarily approving. Dalia and Yan demonstrated these characteristics by treating each other with genuineness, candidness, trust, equality, non-imposition, support, and confirmation.

My analysis further shows that the new social medium WeChat played an indispensable role in the process of third-culture building by rendering the interactions highly informal and personal, adding spontaneity and immediacy, enhancing expressions of affinity and liking, and otherwise enriching the cultural learning.

The various tools WeChat provides enabled them to do at least three things: 1) diversify the types of information they shared (instant messaging, images, photos, audio messaging, video calls, emojis, etc.; see also Mas'udah 2017); 2) increase their interactivity by allowing them to greet each other with brief notes or stickers, send short messages of support or encouragement, and offer prompt advice or help; and 3) distract their attention from the

chaotic aspects of communication that often hinder face-to-face interaction, such as geographical boundaries, language barriers, cultural differences, and negative stereotypes.

## 7. Conclusions and limitations

The current study has limitations. First, the data were limited. Not having access to Yan's personal journal entries or oral presentation means that my analysis reflects more of Dalia's experiences than Yan's. As a case study, the findings probably lack applicability to other such interactions. I only studied one type of new social media, so the generalizability of my findings concerning the functions of new social media may likewise be limited.

Despite these limitations, my study makes a significant contribution to the field. It shows the significance of dialogic communication in intercultural interaction. It provides a case study applying the TCM to intercultural friendship. More significantly, it shows the ways that new social media affect intercultural interaction. It offers an excellent example of successful intercultural-friendship development over a short period of time with the help of new social media. It suggests rich ground for research into the interconnections between new social media and intercultural interaction.

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