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WeChat Red Bags:

How International Students from China Use Social Media
While Attending a Public University in California

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Education

by

Laura J. Park

2016

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

WeChat Red Bags:

How International Students from China Use Social Media

While Attending a Public University in California

by

Laura J. Park

Master of Arts in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Douglas M. Kellner, Chair

The growth of international students in the United States and in California substantiates the need to understand the experiences and behaviors of these migratory populations (Institute of International Education, Inc., 2014). In 2014-2015, international students from China in California represented 34% of the higher education population, leading the countries of origin for the state. The purpose of this study is to provide understanding of how international students from China use social media to pursue 'local' Chinese culture in the global context. More specifically, this paper illustrates how Chinese international students engage in the social network site activity, WeChat Red Bags, which utilizes both traditional symbolism and novel features, to participate in native Chinese tradition. Utilizing qualitative, participant-centered methods of data collection and analysis, the findings demonstrate how the students' use of WeChat Red Bags engages dimensions of their 'local' Chinese traditional culture.

The thesis of Laura J. Park is approved.

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2016

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Preface

As a child of a United States Army officer, I first encountered cultural issues, explorations, and negotiations from the privileged perspective of an American “Army Brat” traveling and living abroad. Combined with the conditions of a bicultural, Korean-American heritage, my sensitivities to issues of culture were strong. By the time I entered middle school, I had passed through or visited more countries than I could name. It is to these experiences that I attribute my personal interest in how one experiences different culture.

As an adult decades later, during a visit to South Korea in 2012, I was struck by the local culture’s transformation over the ten years that had passed since my last visit. Subways offered English signage and locals did not stare at me strangely when I spoke English in public. The country offered a picture of understandable progress in a global context. However, a visit to the rustic countryside concerned me. Interrupting my idyllic walk amidst a serene, grassy rice paddy field was a small mass of rubbish in the path before me - the refuse of what appeared to have once been a McDonald's meal. It seemed logical to witness this sign of “progress” at this moment, as the litter seemed to embody the polar underbelly of cultural globalization within a traditional environment. This experience left a lasting impression in my life perspective.

More recently, as a graduate student at a public university in Southern California, an abundance of American universities' services catered to the international community as promotional announcements filled my email inbox. The topics ranged from local buddy and mentoring program opportunities to cultural events and outings. I could not help my growing curiosity about this world and perspective - for instance, how does the foreign student encounter the host culture and environment? The students I observed communicating in other languages, donning a foreign style of dress - appeared unfazed. I also observed a fascinating level of

autonomy in these individuals, possibly facilitated by mobile devices and social apps or technologies. I wanted to pursue how international students can leverage such technologies to adhere to, access, and satisfy their native cultural needs, desires, and obligations while attending school so distant from their home.

I. Introduction

The interest of this study is centered on the international students' use of a social media platform to engage with their native Chinese culture while abroad, and how modern communication resources, such as mobile technologies and SNS's (social network sites) - particularly WeChat - factor into their experiences.

As I was forging my interest in international students, I learned that the popular American social media product, Facebook, had been blocked in China. Other social media products emerged in China and were adopted instead. Renren, a Chinese social network site, offered an alternative to Facebook in China (Li & Chen, 2014). Similarly, the Chinese micro-blogging site, Weibo, had succeeded its American counterpart, Twitter (Shuo & Shirk, 2013). In 2011, the Chinese company, Tencent, released a social messaging app called WeChat. WeChat's popularity and subscriber base grew quickly, reaching over 355 million subscribers by 2013, and by March 2014, 396 million. By the third quarter of 2015, WeChat's base had jumped to "649.5 million combined monthly active user accounts (3Q15)" (Tencent, 2015b). Interestingly, WeChat had a feature called "Red Bags" which specifically resembled a well-known Chinese tradition.

While it has been argued that international students use social network sites as a means to adapt socially and culturally to a new country (Li & Chen, 2014; Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim, & LaRose, 2011) , and that other higher education students in the U.S. use social media to access social capital (Ji, Hwangbo, Yi, Rau, Fang, & Ling, 2010), little is known about how international students from China use social platforms and tools, such as WeChat, in the U.S. as a means to continue participation in their native Chinese culture.

The goal of this study is to provide understanding of how international students from China use social media to pursue 'local' Chinese culture in the global context. More specifically, this paper demonstrates how Chinese international students engage in the activity WeChat Red Bags, which utilizes both traditional symbolism and novel features, to participate in their native Chinese tradition.

In the following thesis paper, I present a literature review on international students' use of social media, a theoretical framework on the approaching global 'technified' culture, a description of my research methods, a report of my findings demonstrating how the students' use of WeChat Red Bags engages dimensions of their 'local' Chinese traditional culture, followed by a discussion.

Significance of International Students in Higher Education

While international study and higher education is not new, the growing number of international students in the United States and in California further substantiates the need to understand the experiences and behaviors of these migratory populations. In 2015, the Institute of International Education reported an upward trend of international higher education students in the U.S. for the sixth year in a row (Institute of International Education, Inc., 2015a). In 2014-2015, the trend continued, as the total number of international students in the U.S. increased by 10% to 974,926, marking the "highest rate of growth since 1978/79" (IIE, 2015b). Likewise, in 2014-2015, the increase of foreign students in California grew by 11% (totaling 135,130), marking the state as that with the highest number of foreign students. In California, students from China occupy the top spot, where they represented 34% of the higher education population, while students from South Korea and India represented 11% and 8%, respectively (IIE, 2015c). There has also been interest in understanding the experiences of students who study abroad, as

the intersection of personal and academic phenomena calls for a holistic approach to international education that cannot be measured through conventional, deductive means (Kauffman, 1992).

Significance of Migration Amidst a Technological Landscape

The conditions of geographic mobility in an increasingly technological civilization intensify the need to examine the effects of migration among international students. As student migrants traverse the technological and geographic landscape, use of computing technologies for transnational activities is increasingly interwoven into the experiences abroad. These conditions present a growing demand for a migrating student to resort to communication technology in order to participate in their native 'local' culture, and more specifically, engage in their native cultural traditions.

Use of Social Media for Navigating Culture

While use of Internet communication technologies offers ways in which users can potentially connect with the world - overcoming geographic distances and other barriers - individuals have at their fingertips apparatus to navigate cultures and cultural products. Prior to achieving its status as Web 2.0, where users can utilize collaborative functions, the Internet was primarily a means of information retrieval and delivery (Lievrouw, 2011). Today, collaborative use of the Internet empowers the media user to the authoritative roles of producer and organizer, as well as that of audience member and consumer. Rather than rely upon hegemonic ideals and representations inherent in earlier media, users can exercise agency. This agency is enabled by

emancipating features of modern technology, sharply contrasting the one-way banking consumption modes of conventional television, print, radio, and out of home mass media.¹

II. Literature Review

Little is understood about how Chinese international students pursue 'local' home culture, much less, tradition, through social network sites. Below is a literature review of related inquiries.

Locating Home Culture Through Internet Media

Some research has been done on Chinese international students' use of Internet media for connecting to home culture and identity. Pursuant to Anderson's 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006), which gives rise to "*collective* diasporic imaginations" (Shi, 2005, p. 57), an ethnographic study of Chinese students and professionals in Iowa City found that Chinese ethnic media, most evident as Internet media, provides diasporic members with "common reference points to socialize either with people back home or with other Chinese diaspora members in the United States or all over the world" (p. 66). The study highlights the importance ethnic media plays in locating points of cultural identification, as one participant expressed, "We want to know how people celebrate spring festivals [Chinese New Year celebrations] these years in China, you know, maybe just a few shots in TV. But you can't get them from mainstream TV" (p. 65). As Shi's study demonstrated, the use of ethnic media generates a "sense of cultural coherence and unity through symbolically reviving the memories of the past and retelling the history, which anchors the identification of the diasporic floating lives" (p. 69).

¹ The one-way communication modes of traditional media has not always been one-sided. Douglas Kellner relates how homeless individuals would cheer for the destruction of authority figures while watching a Hollywood action film. However, this phenomenon still relies upon the mainstream representations (Kellner, 2015).

How Students Use Social Media Abroad

The literature deductively supports that international students encounter social media as a means to adapt socially and culturally, as well as to access social capital in their host environment. For example, a study by Li & Chen utilized a survey of Chinese international students at a large public university in the U.S., that demonstrated Facebook and Renren use is positively associated with bridging social capital (2014). The results of the study declare that international students develop different types of social capital through different social network site (SNS) platforms. A study in China, Korea, and the U.S. that included the general public as well as students, found basic correlation between SNS usage and the formation of social capital and that users have “more emphasis on formation of new relationships in the use of SNS’s” (Ji et al., 2010, p. 1119). Another study of international students at a major Midwestern university found a positive relation between Facebook usage and social adjustment and online bridging capital, extending work that has been done on SNS usage and social capital (Lin et al., 2011).

III. Theoretical Framework

The study sought to understand how international students’ native 'local' culture may encounter a global culture that is dominated by the system of modern technology. Today’s influence of technology is unprecedented, as the meaning and value systems of culture are absorbed into an all-encompassing system of universalization, impersonalization, and reduction, rendering culture meaningless. Embracing one’s native 'local' culture offers the means to counter an increasingly dominating global culture that is subject to such dominating influence of technologies, or "technification" (Redner, 2004, p. 112). Understanding culture as fundamentally grounded in tradition, this paper applies the background of the traditional Chinese Red Packet ritual in Chinese New Year to the study of how international students from China engage in

'local' Chinese culture, or tradition, through a specific and novel social network site activity, WeChat Red Bags.

Introduction to WeChat

The study focused on WeChat, as the dominant platform among participants' use of social media. Tencent's description on its website describes WeChat as a "social app," where:

The platform brings together messaging, social communication and games all within one easy-to-use app. Users can choose to send free text and multimedia messages, video calls or share photos on their closed Moments social network. Others features include mobile games and convenient friend adding services (Tencent, 2015a).

WeChat challenged categorization throughout the course of the study on "social media." Some participants referred to WeChat as a messaging or chatting application, "quite similar to Facebook, but kind of like, not like, exactly the same." Participants acknowledged rich multimedia functions of WeChat, including game use and audio and video sharing.

WeChat also satisfied criteria of the likes of Facebook and other social media, or "social network sites:"

We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211).

For the purposes of analysis, this paper refers to WeChat as a "social network site," "SNS," or "social media." The reference accounts for WeChat's comparable status among other

social network sites or social media, as well as how the platform itself was addressed within the topic of “social media” in participant interviews.

Description of WeChat Red Bags

In 2014, WeChat Red Bags emerged as a popular activity. According to Han & Xu, WeChat Red Bags exceeded expectations of WeChat throughout most of China:

After nine days of the Lunar New Year festival, users of WeChat’s Red Bag application grew to beyond 8 million with over 400 million yuan (USD\$85 million) exchanged via 40 million messages" (as cited in Holmes, 2015, Internet and social media usage in China section).

An activity accessed via WeChat, WeChat Red Bags is graphically depicted in the likeness of the physical Red Packet exchanged for Chinese New Year in China. Whereas in the traditional ritual the money is allotted and delivered inside a paper Red Packet, the digital likeness of the Red Packet in WeChat Red Bags symbolizes virtually initiated lucky money bestowal. Just as the physical Red Packet transmits currency, the digital image of the WeChat Red Bags represents the exchange of real money. There are at least two specific modes of Red Bags: 1) a competitive game among multiple users, where the goal is to win an allotment of lucky money, and 2) an individual transfer of money (Holmes, 2015).

Conceptions of Culture and Tradition Applied to the Study

The conception of culture informing the study draws from Kroeber and Kluckhohn's description:

Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling, and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of

traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values (as cited in Hofstede, 2001, p. 9).

Above, Kroeber and Kluckhohn illustrate that ‘tradition’ and its associated meanings and values provide the foundation of culture. Highlighting the importance of meanings and values in anchoring tradition, Eric Hobsbawm manages to delineate ‘tradition’ in his discussion of ‘invented tradition’ (Hobsbawm, 1992). He defines tradition by its symbolic and ritual use and function, and a link to a historical past. This sense of ‘tradition’ contrasts the practical, technical methods of social activity that serve technical purpose and function rather than meaning and value. Thus, the study applied ‘tradition’ as an essential dimension of ‘culture,’ where tradition and culture are anchored by the system of traditional meaning, value, symbolism, ritual, and a link to a historical past.

The Process of Technification

In Hobsbawm’s conception of tradition, the more an activity serves traditional, symbolic and ritual function, the less practical it becomes. Conversely, the more practical an activity and method, the less symbolic and traditional are its relevance and purpose. He allows that practical, or technical, methods can be co-opted by ritual and symbolic use, thus, barring mutual exclusivity. In modern civilization, however, technical methods dominate culture, and Hobsbawm’s model of equilibrium is thrown off. The dominance of the technical methods, or techniques, of modern cultural developments is uncharted (Ellul, 1970; Redner, 2004). While technical methods and technique historically need not be of instrument or of machine (Ellul 1970; Redner, 2004), the emergence of new apps, devices, hardware and software are clearly growing at an accelerating rate. Such “progress” proliferates the invention of one technology that begets another (Ellul, 1970), perpetuating the process of technification (Redner, 2004).

It is critical to anticipate the reign of technology over culture. In global modern culture, the “meaning and value-endowing aspects of culture have been relegated to an inferior role” (Redner, 2004, p. 123), and the system of techniques triumphs (p. 14). This is problematic because an ultimate, all-consuming technification of culture results in a homogenous, technologically-dictated global culture that is subjugated by a consumer market rather than human agency. Further, “Global culture is a commodified culture because the values of culture have given way to utilities” (p. 121). This reduces cultural meanings and values to what can be packaged and sold. Thus, culture in the market is subordinate to what can be reduced to commodity and sold. Though global culture has not been achieved fully, Redner depicts a bleak horizon. A completely technified global culture is universalizing, impersonal, reductive, and ultimately void of human cultural meaning and value. And rather than achieving cultural diversity, the increasingly digitally connected, global civilization exacerbates the already reproductive, common denominator workings of culture. Thus, the use of technologies propagates the technified global culture, rendered meaningless by the absorption of the principal components of 'culture.'

Though Redner’s message inspires a vision of impending cultural disaster, the acknowledgement of local culture offers optimism: “Where there is an identifiable group of people, big or small, sharing a common cultural life, there a local culture will be found” (2004, p. 11). For it is by embracing local culture that the oppressive global culture is to be countered. But embracing local culture is not to preserve it, for culture must exist as a part of life if it is to survive. Rather, in “conserving” cultures, “What matters is in what spirit this is done, and that it should not lead to selling out” (p. 12). In alignment with Redner’s remedy to counter global culture, WeChat Red Bags attempts to imitate ‘local’ traditional values - but strikes a balance

through novel methods subject to the rules of the technical platform. Such a balance can and must be struck for any local culture to survive being absorbed by global culture.

Global culture's modern technification absorbs the meaning and value systems of culture (Ellul, 1970; Redner, 2004). In this context, technology assumes a more ideological role than in any culture before. In Redner's view, and essential to the framework of this study, is that 'technology' tends to predominate culture and thus relegates the other dynamics of culture, particularly the traditional meanings and values, as secondary. In global culture particularly, the system of 'technology' ultimately triumphs over human culture, threatening to eradicate the essence of culture. Local culture must maneuver negotiations within these conditions of a technological, universalizing, and market driven civilization. The study seeks to understand how students' use of technology, in this case WeChat, can engage in 'local' tradition as a counterbalance to global culture. The use of WeChat demonstrates a choice where Chinese identity, membership, and participation is asserted and pursued, within the confines of global culture. Understanding online user activity in these terms is an imperative aspect of global cultural analysis.

Red Packet: Example of Chinese Culture Rooted in Tradition

Following Kroeber and Kluckhohn's conception of culture that is rooted in tradition, this paper examines how international students from China might engage in 'local' Chinese tradition as a fundamental dimension of Chinese culture. A novel interpretation of the Chinese Red Packet tradition, the WeChat Red Bag activity offers a lens with which to view how local Chinese culture might be engaged in the technological realm. This paper analyzes how international students from China might use the social network site activity, WeChat Red Bags, to negotiate

and pursue elements of 'local' Chinese traditional practice and culture within terms of technological society.

Chinese Culture Rooted in Tradition

Studies on Chinese culture reveal tenets firmly rooted in traditional culture. Collectivism and social harmony particularly call for social behavior appropriate to one's social role, thus maintaining "face." Respect to social hierarchy and the related power distance is grounded in filial piety towards those with senior status (Bond, 1986).

As the study specifically examined how the use of WeChat Red Bags relates to local Chinese tradition, understanding Chinese traditional practice is vital to examining how participants used Red Bags to engage in their 'local' Chinese tradition abroad. The example of Chinese Red Packet ritual for Chinese New Year demonstrates how cultural practice embodies Chinese tradition and traditional values. In demand and popular since ancient times (Liu, He, & Zhang, 2015), and still practiced today, the Red Packet ritual clearly illustrates a process that is rich with symbolism and meaning. The auspiciously colored, paper Red Packet and its contents are still associated with traditional meanings in Chinese culture, such as luck and wishes for the Chinese New Year, as well as the social code that indicates a hierarchal bestowal from senior to junior parties (Chan, Denton, & Tsang, 2003). In this sense, the Red Packet ritual manifests and bestows traditional values of social harmony and respect to hierarchy, evoking traditional collectivist Chinese culture, as appropriate social behavior must be demonstrated "to other individuals according to their social relationship" (p. 48).

Acknowledging that culture constitutes a moving target, the study seeks to understand culture in terms of these traditional principles.

IV. Research Design, Methods, and Setting

To answer my research questions, I utilized participant-based, qualitative methods. To better understand the nuances of students' experiences, I sought to triangulate my findings through multiple modes and sources of data (Merriam, 2009). These included individual interviews, observations of social media use, and participant journal writing. The interviews included observations and elicitations of social media use, as guided by the inductive process.

Recruitment Methods

Recruitment occurred through voluntary responses to posted advertisements around the campus. A total of eight participants were recruited who voluntarily self-identified as international university students from China attending a public university in California. Participants also self-identified with satisfying the following criteria: 1) 18 years of age or older, 2) proficiency in communicating in English, 3) ability to handwrite on paper, and 4) social media user. All participants were assigned pseudonyms in this study.

English proficiency was required among participants due to the need for the researcher to communicate with participants. The handwritten aspect of the journal writing was incorporated as a way to minimize issues of privacy in the virtual space that were out of the researcher's control. Further, it offered another way for participants to reflect on and report thoughts on social media use and the context of experiences.

The eight participants consist of six undergraduate, one graduate, and one continuing education student at the university.

Data Collection Methods

Individual interviews. I interviewed all participants on an individual basis, accounting for an inductive, participant-based mode of data collection.

The three-interview series allows for the inclusion and exploration of the unique life histories, experiences, and meanings of participants (Seidman, 2013). Further, this structure allows multiple opportunities for overall communication about the topic, which serves to mitigate aberrations that cannot be controlled by the interviewer. However, the interviews were held to a maximum length of approximately 45 to 60 minutes instead of the recommended 90 minutes. This modification served to facilitate participation in all three interviews per participant, particularly within the time constraints of data collection. In the first interview, I utilized an unstructured format to learn about participants' general backgrounds and experiences as related to the topic of the study. In the second and third interviews, I utilized a semi-structured approach, where I employed an interview guide that drew from the previous interview. Four of the participants participated in all three interviews (Diane, Fred, Holly, Mary), three participated in two interviews (Faye and Liv), and one participant participated in one interview (Anna).

Elicitation. I elicited responses from social media and participant journal writings to stimulate discussion and gain an understanding of what indicators and visual and auditory representations and depictions might mean to the participants, as well as an understanding of the context of the observations. This elicitation was frequently initiated by a tour or demonstration of social media on either participants' smartphones or my own. Elicitations of social media and journal writings helped me to understand some of the nuances of engaging in WeChat and its Red Bags activity, as well as the content and context of those meanings and components. I found the elicitation and tours of social media during interviews to be highly effective aids in understanding the context of social media activities.

Language. While the interviews were conducted in English, some of the social media content and participant journal writings consisted of Chinese text. I utilized translation services

for some Chinese content in social media and all of the Chinese content in participant journals. Due to the fact that I do not read or understand the Chinese language, I primarily gathered participant meanings through the interviews that were conducted in English.

Data Analysis Methods

To analyze the data, I first located and determined emergent patterns, themes, and codes. The approach aligns with Saldaña's definition of Initial or Open Coding, where "Initial Coding is intended as a starting point to provide the researcher with analytic leads for further exploration" (2013, p. 101). Analytic memos and field writings recorded throughout data collection and analysis informed the direction of further analysis.

The plan for analysis prioritized the processing and synthesis of emergent themes and patterns from the participant interviews. However, the data and memos were recursively analyzed to understand more conclusively how the emergent codes and themes related to the topic of the study. As a part of this recursive process, I revised codes as the analysis uncovered specific layers of meaning.

Throughout the analysis phase, I continued to employ an emergent and recursive approach, including frequent revisiting of the interview transcripts, social media observations, participant journals, and researcher memos and notes.

Physical Site

The physical study site is a large, urban, public university in California. The university's website touts a "diverse" and "international" setting. According to university data, the student body is comprised of 30% Asian and 10-15% International students with a large ratio of undergraduate to graduate students. The immediate neighborhood is characterized by an assortment of retail outlets where students can socialize, shop, eat, and drink. Within moderate

driving distance from campus, however, the choices are endless, ranging from countless entertainment and art attractions, shopping destinations, and many types of culinary options.

V. Findings

The purpose of the study is to understand how international students from China use social media to pursue 'local' Chinese culture in the global context. More specifically, the study explores how the participants' use of WeChat Red Bags, utilizing both traditional symbolism and novel features, demonstrate adherence to 'local' Chinese tradition.

Participants' Usage of WeChat

WeChat was found to be a major hub of access to Chinese identity and social and cultural participation. As a resource for content, communications, and a sign of identity, WeChat is the preferred "social" medium ingrained into the experience of the participants studying abroad as international Chinese students.

Chinese circles. WeChat usage was vital to participation in Chinese circles. Mary shared: "All my friends around me who are Chinese they use WeChat." Liv, who came to study abroad to experience an "American dream" specifies, "most of my friends are Chinese and then we are all using WeChat." Faye, who maintained Chinese social ties in California even though her decision to study at the university was due to wanting to experience cultural difference, describes WeChat use in terms of cohesion, where, "Chinese people are always like, grouped together," and group participation: "activities with Chinese students we only gonna use WeChat." Such WeChat use is tied to a sense of belonging, where WeChat is interwoven into Chinese identity, membership, and participation.

Use interwoven in life abroad. WeChat's use was clearly tethered to life, activities, and access to opportunities abroad, spanning academic, extracurricular, professional, recreational,

social, entertainment, and informational usage, with contacts near and far, including family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances located in the immediate host environment, in China, as well as in other locations throughout the world. The use of WeChat interwoven into life abroad was found among all participants.

Simply having a WeChat account, as well as adding WeChat contacts, was incorporated into life abroad. Diane, a Freshman deeply involved in a university-affiliated Chinese cultural club, and dorm-mates with friends from high school in China, adds "anyone that I meet" because "everyone has a WeChat ID." While Liv, attending a continuing education program at the university after receiving her International Business Master's degree at another institution in California, likens the WeChat account to a "namecard," and thus, a sign of identity.

The act of generally "checking" the WeChat app for notifications was common. For example, Faye, a transfer student in her junior year majoring in Math Econ, identified with checking WeChat frequently over other social media, "over ten times everyday." Alex, a busy doctoral student who emphatically shared that he wasn't much of a "social media person," admitted that both he and his wife had been "checking" WeChat in the evening right before sleep and first thing in the morning, catching the updates that had taken place overnight from the time difference in China.

Example: WeChat a hub of access to cultural participation. Diane, deeply involved in helping to produce her Chinese cultural club's event for Chinese New Year, provides an example of how WeChat is used as a hub of cultural access and participation. In the following excerpt, Diane describes how carrying out her role takes place largely in WeChat:

I'm responsible for a program, like a show...they're nearly [number obscured to preserve anonymity] of us, each responsible for a program, and we need to like, check how their

preparation go, and to...build up a connection between them and our general director so actually all of that are done on WeChat

Further, Diane details how she, along with the other program volunteers, deploy WeChat as a vital scheduling and coordination platform:

...we have a group on WeChat so that our director can directly connect to us and we then pass her orders to the performers, and basically do all scheduling on WeChat

In the above, Diane illustrates how WeChat is thickly intertwined with handling the details and relationships in producing the event. Using WeChat not only facilitates, but makes possible the connections, as she and her club “can’t really do that in email.” Thus, fulfilling her Chinese club role requires her to use WeChat.

Further, Diane explains how advertising via the Moment, a semi-public or private posting in WeChat, offers other WeChat users the basic details about the event:

...the advertising of the [event] is also on Moments. Just some basic information, like where to pick the tickets for that, and what you may can see on [the programs], that's all on Moments.

The significance of WeChat use as a means of accessing cultural and social participation is brought into relief as a vital information system providing communication means to produce the cultural event.

Holly, a Freshman with many Chinese friends on WeChat, describes how she learns of the cultural event through such advertising: "Some of my friends share a link on their Moments, and I saw it so I click into it and find out this kind of activity so I call up my friends, and we just go."

Holly's response to the event illuminates a rich connection to her Chinese roots, reminding her of home: "It makes me miss my hometown, my parents, and traditional food. It's really good, I like their show."

Holly also accesses a sense of a shared experience abroad among other international Chinese students: "I think it reminds me of my life in China. And like, it reminds me okay, like, there are also so many Chinese people here with me in the same situation, maybe study alone in America."

In the above example of the campus Chinese New Year event, usage of WeChat is illustrated as a means of accessing cultural life and participation abroad tied to Chinese culture, identity and belonging. The clear prevalence of WeChat abroad and with others gives rise to WeChat's application as a hub of access to cultural and social Chinese identity, membership, and participation.

WeChat Availability. The availability of WeChat in China, as well as in other locations, clearly factored into the use of the SNS as a medium for students to communicate across national and geographic borders. All of the participants reported either using WeChat to communicate with folks in China, or with individuals they knew from China. This availability of WeChat contributed to the ingrained use of WeChat abroad.

WeChat Red Bags

The context of WeChat's prevalence and use as a hub of access was applied to analysis of the WeChat Red Bags activity. All participants were familiar with WeChat Red Bags and seven of the eight participants had used Red Bags. This study analyzed the dominant mode of Red Bags use, the group mode, in terms of traditional Red Packet exchange. In addition to the group mode, there was an individual mode of exchange in Red Bags. However, only one participant

explicitly referred to the other mode of individual bestowal. An alternative to not being able to receive the physical “red envelope” in China, Faye had received a money transfer from her parents through Red Bags.

WeChat Red Bags use was explored in this study as a potential extension or adaptation of tradition that underpins ‘local’ culture, where "...the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values" (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, as cited in Hofstede, 2001, p. 9). While Red Bags use engages ‘local’ tradition through explicit associations, including traditional symbolism of the red packaging and meanings of luck and New Year's wishes, an analysis of Red Bags use reveals engagement with traditional values in novel ways. Certain concessions and adaptations with Red Packet tradition were found in this extension of traditional practice, as use was embodied in a popular game indicating the shift from physical, traditional ritual to digital, novel means. The shift manifested in peer instead of hierarchical bestowal, and the competition for random, indirect distributions of lucky money. Adherence to traditional values of collectivity, sharing, and reciprocation emerged in the competitive game activity, linking the activity to the traditional Chinese collective culture.

Red Bags: Digital Extension of Tradition

The majority of participants initially describe Red Bags as an extension of tradition, where the Red Packet money exchange has been adapted into digital format. For example, Fred, a Freshman who recalls spending Chinese New Year holidays in China, describes Red Bags in terms of the traditional ritual: “in China it's a tradition in during New Year - usually like, the elderlies or parents to give you pocket money in a red envelope, and like, for some reason people are doing this on WeChat." Anna also likens Red Bags to tradition, where the physical symbol

has been converted into a digital one: "...for Chinese, if the New Year came we would usually get a red bag with money in it. So, WeChat actually turn it into, like, electric red bag money."

In WeChat Red Bags, the digital symbolism and transmission of virtual money indicate a conversion from traditional into novel form. Akin to the traditional Red Packet ritual, the WeChat Red Bags activity signifies vital, positive, and traditional meanings for the Chinese New Year. For Liv, the traditional meaning of 'luck' is embodied in an explicit reference to Red Bags' "lucky money," comparable to Red Packet's 'lucky money' exchange in China with her family. For Alex and Fred, Red Bags embodies the traditional wishes for the Chinese New Year associated with the Red Packet.

How Red Bags Redefines Tradition

Competing for WeChat Red Bags consists of a race among users in a Red Bags group to receive varying, random distributions of lucky money represented by the image of a red bag. The competition is initiated when a monetary contribution is granted by a donor user to the group. Other members of the group then race to click on the action in time to obtain one of the limited distributions of lucky money. Distinct themes emerge in the Red Bags group participation.

Collectivity, Sharing, and Reciprocation

Alex's conception of a shared "big red money pot" captures the collective spirit of the activity: "So you know, somebody throwing a big red money pot, and then everybody can you know, open it, and share piece of it."

Aligning with the above sense of sharing in Red Bags, Liv recounts the frustration of not being able to give Red Bags to her group:

I can receive lucky money, like, if I'm lucky enough to get one, but I can't like, send out those red bags, and I got blamed by my friends, 'Why do you just receive money instead

of like sending out one! You know, you're so selfish! [laughs]' And I was like, 'Oh, I can't! I can't find lucky money anywhere on my WeChat!

Above, we sense Liv's exasperation at not being able to post her own money to the Red Bags group. The importance of reciprocation is embodied in the playfully voiced criticism from her friends, for being "so selfish!"

Liv is finally able to post money to Red Bags after she follows a friend's advice to switch from the English to the Chinese version of WeChat in order to access the capability. But first, she captures and shares evidence, proving to her group that she was unable to post money to Red Bags:

...in order to prove [laughs], like, I really tried to send out the red bags but I couldn't, I took a screenshot of my WeChat and there's no button for sending out, there's only a button for receiving, so I send out that pictures of screenshot to my group, and everybody said, 'Oh! English version! Oh-okay!' So I changed the language really quick

For Liv, the reciprocal, dual roles of giving and receiving, combined with the random, indirect distributions of lucky money, culminate in an exciting and engaging session of competitive Red Bags:

And then after I send out like four dollars red bag to the group, and you can see they're like you know, like, grabbing, 'cause you will get a notice saying like...you know, X-Y, X-Y and Z [Liv's assigned pseudonyms in the scenario], you know, got one dollar, or somebody got like ten cents [laughs]

Further, Liv elaborates on how the two-way participation in Red Bags allows her to have "more fun" and enjoy a sense of community:

It's really fun, like, and you will commenting on their like behaviors of course, afterwards. Like, 'Oh, you are so fast!' or something like that, you know? And after they receive the money, they will send out a red bag, as well, so I will go and grabbing those. So, once the interaction involves, like, there's sending...there's receiving, and it's more fun...I don't want to do anything else, but just you know like, having fun with my groups

The shared roles of giving and receiving in Red Bags result in reciprocation, collectivity, and sharing that echo Chinese traditional culture.

However, participants reveal a multitude of concessions encompassed in the transformation of the physical practice into digital form.

Highlighting how the lucky money ritual "should" be done in tradition in China, Diane points out how Red Bags use fails to iterate the hierarchical bestowal:

...in the tradition, it should be like the elder person, elder people give you the envelope with some money in it, but on the WeChat it's like, anybody, like, any friends of you, can give envelope like in a group of WeChat

In the above, Diane clarifies that any group member in Red Bags can take on the role of giver, which differs from the traditional Red Packet ritual.

Similarly, Alex highlights a scenario where "everybody" in the group can compete for lucky money:

People throwing for example, one hundred dollars in one WeChat circle of twenty friends, and everybody can you know click on that red wrapped, red money, to see how much they can get out of that...So, everybody can participate and people call it scrambling for red money.

The dual roles of giving and receiving in random, indirect distribution, contrast the hierarchical, specific bestowal of traditional Red Packet ritual. However, further exploration reveals the emergent values and themes in Red Bags use, evoking tradition. The access in WeChat to social and cultural identity, membership, and participation, is extended to Red Bags through the use of traditional symbolism and the novel features of the activity. It is through the novel means of Red Bags that traditional values emerge (collectivity, reciprocation, and sharing), evoking tradition, and thus, Chinese traditional culture.

VI. Discussion

Interpretation of the Findings

My findings have demonstrated how the students' use of the social network site activity, WeChat Red Bags, embodies dimensions of 'local' Chinese traditional culture through novel features and traditional symbolism. Fulfilled as a fun game among group peers, the adherence to mutual goals and roles mirrors tenets of collectivity, social harmony, and sharing that characterize the traditional Chinese collective culture.

In WeChat Red Bags, a process of social harmony and equalization arises. It is the equal relation to the group that indicates bestowal, reflecting "in-group" collectivity (Chan, et al., 2003). Just as "anyone" can "throw money," "everyone" can go for the "big red money pot." Further, the conditions of reciprocation echo the "mutual support" inherent to collectivism, as Holmes found (2015). Random bestowal prevents the risk of giving exaggerated or inadequately valued gifts, as would be feared traditionally, where giving improperly valued gifts fails to align one's behavior with social relations (Chan, 2003), leading to a loss of "face." Clearly, shared roles in Red Bags preclude the social hierarchy, status, and filial piety that ground traditional ritual (Liu, et al., 2015). It is the random distribution and the group's peer orientation that

maintain social harmony. Thus, Red Bags adapts the means and method of lucky money exchange, bypassing the hierarchical, and specific bestowal of tradition.

The compromise. As ‘local’ cultural traditional practice is negotiated in the face of a homogenizing, technified global culture, it is clear concessions are made. The social and cultural identity asserted in WeChat manifests in the very choice of the site. Where use of the new medium gives rise to collective cohesion, identity, membership, belonging, and a link to China, the medium itself could be argued to constitute a component of ‘Chinese’ culture. In this sense, use inhabits a “*collective* diasporic imagination” grounded in Anderson’s ‘imagined community’ (Shi, 2005, p. 57; Anderson, 2006).

In the embodiment of traditional collectivity, Red Bags use mirrors dimensions of the homogenous global culture that Redner warns about. As there is no hierarchy in Red Bags, “everybody” and “anybody” is the same, assigning uniqueness of players as invalid or secondary. Where individual and human uniqueness is devalued, culture is depersonalized, and rendered meaningless. As a game, Red Bags exerts creative license to reference and depart from tradition, but also to advance the technification of culture.

In the compromise between embracing ‘local’ cultural tradition and confronting the demands of technological society and global culture, the adherence to tradition and traditional values demonstrated in the Red Bags activity is mediated by workings of the platform. This mediation is first made evident in the rules of the game, as the random distribution is attributed to the platform instead of individual social relations or society. Use of the platform is ultimately mediated by a market system that prizes technical advances. This is a concern, since a commodified culture in global culture consists of reduced, packaged culture, thus relegating meaning and value to secondary importance. It is interesting to note that while “everyone” and

“anyone” is encouraged to participate in Red Bags, such participation fuels the numbers that satisfy a corporate bottom line. Red Bags use is therefore an example of commodified culture within the system of the platform and the system of the market in the technified culture. This rule of market worthiness is directly reflected in the game’s goal of winning. Though the meaning of ‘luck’ of traditional Red Packet is evoked, ‘luck’ in Red Bags is also equated with winning. This ‘winning’ of money, rather than receiving 'lucky money' in traditional, specific bestowal, prioritizes obtaining market currency over the traditional meanings for the Chinese New Year.

VII. Limitations of the Study

One limitation to this analysis is the scope of the study. As a small-scale study, the eight participants are not to be understood as representative of a randomized population. The results of the study are the outcome of in-depth observation and analysis of how this particular set of students used WeChat Red Bags to participate in Chinese culture. The insights presented by this study can be expanded upon in mixed methods, quantitative, or large-scale studies in the future. The time constraints limited the participant observations and involvement to what could be captured in a few months. Thus, the study offers a brief glimpse into the participants' use of WeChat and WeChat Red Bags while studying abroad.

Another limitation of this study is the inherent issues of authority, where the researcher, as designer and executor, determines the parameters of the research, in turn moderating the voices of participants in the gathering, analysis, and reporting of the findings. I hope that I have presented my findings in keeping with the integrity of the data and experiences of the participants.

VIII. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand how international students from China use social media while studying abroad in California in the global context. The prevalent and interwoven use of the social network site, WeChat, offers a means to assert and pursue Chinese identity, participation, and membership abroad. More specifically, the exploration of WeChat Red Bags revealed use that engages in 'local' culture and tradition through the novel means of technology. Through its capacity to connect, and relate past meanings to the present, WeChat illustrates an example of how culture can be accessed, managed, and practiced through social media. More than a medium of communication, WeChat embodies ways of life abroad.

However, the prevalence and ingrained use of WeChat into life brings up the issue of access. In order to participate, a student must possess the right technology, the current device that is compatible. In order to access terms of equalization and peer support within WeChat Red Bags, one must already meet the initial criteria. Such qualification also extends to other aspects of use, such as which language and/or version of WeChat one is using, and banking methods to access payment features. Thus, "everyone" that is in WeChat, has been determined by the criteria to participate in the platform.

Another limitation of using social media and SNS's, such as WeChat, is that they only mimic live human interaction, doing so through imitation of some mechanisms and behaviors. For example, the WeChat user is not grabbing the WeChat Red Bag. The user is touching a lit screen. And she or he may go a day without speaking to anyone, but engaging in the activity with the other players of Red Bags. The use of social media, according to Sherry Turkle, prioritizes the performance in the medium, rather than authentic communication. In this illusion, the digitally connected are alienated from one another, as well as themselves. The dissatisfaction that

arises out of the misuse of technologies is not surprising. Even so, the "relentless connection" persists, contributing to a new solitude (2011). The confusion of an "I share, therefore I am" mentality in social media risks the sense of self that is integral to maintaining internal balance (2015, p. 62). Further, the connected, tethered society is subjected to the platform and the device. In order to accomplish simple tasks, the user is pulled into an orbit of digital distraction (Turkle, 2015).

The positive uses of WeChat, and SNS's, avail the ability to connect and coordinate outside of the social media realm. The power to organize and to take real action is vital to embracing local culture.

Appendix A: List of Interviewees

| Participant | Age | Marital Status | Major | University Status |
|--------------------|------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Alex | 34-35 | M | Education | PhD (Second Year) |
| Diane | 18 | S | Financial Actuarial Mathematics | Freshman |
| Anna | N/A | S | Business Econ. | Junior |
| Faye | 21 | S | Math Econ. | Junior |
| Holly | 18 | S | Engineering | Freshman |
| Fred | 18 | S | Physical Science (Undeclared) | Freshman |
| Liv | 26 | S | General Business Certificate | Continuing Education |
| Mary | 21 | S | Chemistry Material Science | Junior |

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