Utilizing Social Networks in Language Classes – Perception, Production, and Interaction

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Abstract

The ubiquitous presence of social network sites (SNSs) offers both promises and problems for language teaching and learning today. Between 2009 and 2016 the authors incorporated Facebook into their Chinese curricula in three higher education institutions and subsequently analyzed its affordances and implications. Based on student surveys and language data collected from these pedagogical experiments, this action research paper explores three aspects of the findings: students' perception, language production, and language interaction. The discussion focuses on not only the utilization of SNSs as educational tools to engage Chinese learners in innovative and collaborative ways but also helpful suggestions for teachers to enhance instructional outcomes through SNSs. Specific attention is given to create a pedagogically effective, privacy-ensured, and user-friendly social network project with Facebook, which is applicable to other SNSs and similar digital platforms.

Key word: Social Network Sites, Facebook, Action Research, Chinese as a Second Language

Introduction

Our "digital native" students live, interact, and socialize in a technology-driven culture that has significantly changed how they learn and communicate. Using computers, tablets, and mobile phones, today's youth will have consumed and created thousands of hours of digital media by the time they graduate from college (Prensky, 2001), while "spending more time online in informal learning environments and sharing more information digitally than they do with their teachers in a conventional classroom setting" (Phillips, Baird, & Fogg, 2011)[1]. Teenagers today spend a significant portion of their daily lives online, and about a quarter of them do so "almost constantly" (Pew Research Center, 2015)[2]. From K-12 to college level, foreign language instructors are striving to discover new ways of teaching that meet educational needs for greater connectivity as well as opportunities for socio-experiential learning for this new "digital" generation of learners (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008). The goals for language teachers, as stated in TESOL Technology Standards, include integrating pedagogical knowledge and skills with technology to enhance teaching and learning, applying technology in record-keeping, feedback, and assessment, and using technology to improve

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[1] Prensky (2001a) states: "Our children today are being socialized in a way that is vastly different from their parents. The numbers are overwhelming: over 10,000 hours playing videogames, over 200,000 emails and instant messages sent and received; over 10,000 hours talking on digital cell phones; over 20,000 hours watching TV; over 500,000 commercials seen—all before the kids leave college."

[2] According to a study by Pew Research Center (2015), 92% of teens report going online daily — including 24% who say they go online "almost constantly," due to the convenience and constant access provided by mobile devices, especially smartphones. More than half (56%) of teens — defined in this report as those ages 13 to 17 — go online several times a day, and 12% report once-a-day use. Just 6% of teens report going online weekly, and 2% go online less often. Much of this frenzy of access is facilitated by mobile devices. Nearly three-quarters of teens have or have access to a smartphone and 30% have a basic phone, while just 12% of teens 13 to 17 say they have no cell phone of any type.

communication, collaboration, and efficiency (Healey et al., 2011). Of course, utilizing effective and appropriate technology in the language classroom is easier said than done, especially for K-12 instructors who often lack institutional resources or support. The field of teacher education has made, according to Hubbard (2008), "only sporadic attempts to reconcile" technology and teachers' training.

Chinese teachers are on the frontline of pedagogical technology, incorporating computer, online, and multimedia elements into their curriculum. However, an inevitable gap still exists between the formal tools used in classes and the daily lives of the students (Xiao-Desai, Wong & Wu, 2015). Many of our students express that pedagogical programs—such as Blackboard, Moodle, and specific school sites—have little relevance to how they actually communicate in reality. That the students consider these platforms as "school work" prevents them from symbiotically integrating the concept, content, and context of Chinese into their own worlds. It is thus important for teachers to apply "technologies used in our daily personal and professional lives to improve student learning" (Department of Education, 2010).

Social networks, blogs, and online games, along with media-sharing as well astablet and mobile applications have increasingly worked their ways into Chinese classrooms (Yao, Xiao-Desai, Wong, & Magriney, 2018). Among the most ubiquitous of these applications are social networking sites (SNSs). To realize the promises and benefits of SNSs in second language instruction, we introduced the popular Facebook in our different levels of Chinese classes beginning in 2009 and have since received positive results and feedback from our students. This action research shares the data and reflection from our projects, aiming to provide general guidelines for using SNSs such as Facebook for language curricula. We analyze how the use of Facebook accommodates college learners' digital learning styles and encourages conversation, collaboration, and interaction among the students themselves.

The article begins with an overview of Facebook and how it can enable students to take a more participatory role in learning Chinese. Two sources of data are then presented: 1) survey results from 156 students collected between 2009 and 2016, and 2) an action research of a Facebook Project from Spring 2016. We focus on the interaction and language production the Facebook Project provided, along with the approaches and activities on SNSs that Chinese teachers can employ to supplement their instruction. Moreover, we present some suggestions for creating a pedagogically effective and user-friendly Facebook presence in the language classroom. Technology often comes and goes. The pedagogical goal for effective teaching and learning remains constant, however. Our main objective is to provide not merely recommendations for using Facebook in particular but also a relevant framework that can apply to other SNSs in general. We hope to bridge the gap between conventional teaching and the digital world, and thereby contribute to more dynamic classroom experiences for both Chinese language teachers and students.

Social Networking & Student Learning: A Brief Overview

SNSs are web-based services that allow individuals, through their public or semi-public profiles, to communicate and share information with a selected group of users within a bounded system (Boyd & Ellison, 2008)[3]. Facebook is currently the most popular, while other American-based services such as Instagram, Google+, Snapchat, Twitter, and Tumblr are also widely used around the globe (Pew Research Center, 2015)[4]. Despite criticism and controversies,

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[3] According to Boyd & Ellison (2008), social network sites are "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."

[4] As of March 2013, the most popular SNS, as derived from the *eBizMBA Rank* (an average of each website's *Alexa Global Traffic Rank*, and *U.S. Traffic Rank* from both

Facebook has grown from a network connecting students within elite universities into a multi-billion-dollar publicly traded company[5]. Anyone with access to the Internet can sign up for free and within minutes get started using the site. Registered users can create personal profiles, add others as friends, and exchange messages, including automatic notifications when their friends update their own profiles, or even make audio and video calls. The number of active Facebook monthly users worldwide has now surpassed 2 billion; as of the third quarter of 2017, there are about 2.07 billion monthly active users, an increase of 16% year-over-year (Facebook, 2017). There are 1.15 billion mobile daily active users for December 2016. 82% of online users of age 18-29 in the U.S. are on Facebook (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Like other SNSs, Facebook is tightly integrated into the daily media routine of its users; a typical user spends at least twenty minutes a day on the site, and two-thirds of them log in more than once a day (Facebook, 2017). As many language teachers have successfully incorporated earlier communication technologies like

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Compete and *Quantcast* are: 1) Facebook; 2) Twitter; 3) LinkedIn; 4) Pinterest; 5) My Space; 6) Google Plus+; 7) DeviantArt; 8) LiveJournal; 9) Tagged; 10) Orkut. Based on the information retrieved from http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/social-networking-websites. The study from the Pew Research Center (2015) also puts Facebook as the most popular SNS (71%) for teenagers, followed by Instagram (52%), Snapchat (41%), Twitter (33%), and Google+ (33%).

[5] *Facebook* was launched as "thefacebook" in February 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg with his fellow Harvard College students Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes. What distinguished *Facebook* from other early social network sites such as *Friendster* and *Tribe* was its focus on educational background. It was first built by and for Harvard students, but was shortly expanded to other colleges in Boston, the Ivy League, and Stanford University. The initial membership required users to be affiliated with a recognized university with official email addresses from that institution. *Facebook* gradually added support for students at other universities before opening to anyone aged 13 and over in September 2006. In May 2012, it went public and became one of the largest public trading companies (Downes, 2007; Yadav, 2006).

email, chat rooms, and bulletin boards into the classroom, it is reasonable to expect SNSs, too, will have a place in the instructional curriculum (Muñoz & Towner, 2009).

Social media indeed plays an important role in our students' daily lives. A national survey in 2009 finds that 73% of teenagers, and an equal number (72%) of young adults, use SNSs (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Another report states that two-thirds of the surveyed students in higher education are "comfortable" with interacting with their teachers on Facebook (Hewitt & Forte, 2006). According to Fischman (2008), 39% of college students surveyed would like to have regular online interactions with professors. Yet only 23% of the information technology staff surveyed (n=301) maintain that their campuses offer such electronic faculty-student communication. Recognizing the trend, a large number of colleges and universities have made Facebook their official social networking site and woven it into the "behind the scenes" school experience (Selwyn, 2007). Facebook is said to bring a sense of community belonging, build bonds between classmates, as well as provide a supportive structure for both students and instructors that fosters better interaction and enhances motivation (Aydin, 2012; Muñoz & Towner, 2009). Schwartz (2009) envisions Facebook "as part of the larger commons," in which students and teachers "stay connected," virtually leaving the instructor's office door open all the time.

Understandably, there is skepticism about this new mode of communication. Some critics voice their concerns about privacy and anxiety in teachers' interaction with students on SNSs (Hewitt & Forte, 2006), whereas others opine that these online social spaces do not serve an academic purpose (Charnigo & Barnet-Ellis, 2007), or even worse, have the potential to become a "creepy treehouse" (Stein, quoted in Young, 2008)[6]. Consequently, Rodriquez (2011)

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[6] Defining the term "creepy treehouse," Jared Stein, director of instructional-design services at Utah Valley University, offered this clear explanation on his blog: "Though [SNS] may be seen as innovative or problem-solving to the institution,

provides several key areas for teachers in higher education to consider when they deal with social media use: ownership, privacy and security, access, accessibility and compliance, stability of technology, intellectual property rights, and copyright law. Although the "intention of enhancing engagement, interaction, and excitement" through SNSs and other online programs is "a very worthwhile effort," Rodriquez (2011) also cautions educators that they must ensure "the trade-offs are equitable and ethical." Social media will no doubt continue to have a prominent role and expanding in our daily communication, even though the interfaces or formats may differ. Teachers, hence, should harness its potential rather than simply dismissing it.

As the information technology revolution unfolds, language educators and researchers   are exploring innovative pedagogical ideas and methods that take advantage of, or at least address, digital and computational advancements. Over the past decade, volumes on technology and pedagogy, such as *Teacher Education in CALL* (Hubbard & Levy, 2006) and *Preparing and Developing Technology-Proficient L2 Teachers* (Kassen, Lavine, Murphy-Judy, & Peters, 2007) have been much welcomed editions that provide inspiration and direction for language professionals. With increasing scholarly interest in SNSs notwithstanding, only a few researchers detail their pragmatic aspects in the classroom itself. SNSs have not yet been widely used as instructional tools (Conole, 2010; Harrison & Thomas, 2009; Toetenel, 2014). Studies on SNSs and language learning provide only limited empirical data to date (Wang & Vasquèz, 2012). Lomicka and Gillian's *The Next Generation: Social Networking and Online Collaboration in Foreign Language Learning* (2009) offers a collection of notable essays regarding Web 2.0 and language education. *Social Networking for Language Education* (2013) edited by Lamy and Zourou is

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they may repulse some users who see them as infringement on the sanctity of their peer groups, or as having the potential for institutional violations of their privacy, liberty, ownership, or creativity." See Young (2008).

another example, in which various authors, mostly based on case studies, inspect the concept of web technology and language learning in post-secondary education.

Likewise, Facebook has attracted scholarly interest in recent years. Current research on Facebook deals mostly with the users' psychological or affective profiles (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007; Urista, Dong, & Day, 2007). Literature review on Facebook's general educational potential appears cautiously optimistic (Aydin, 2012; Hew, 2011; Manca & Ranieri, 2013; Yang et al., 2011). Most researchers concur that Facebook can be "an informal, dynamic, social and flexible environment where more or less structured learning experiences can take place," yet one should also pay attention to "mixing information and learning resources, hybridization of expertise and widening context of learning" (Manca & Ranieri, 2013). Most studies are not directly related to language acquisition and pedagogy, however. For those that are language oriented, their focus is predominantly on English as a Second Language (Liu, et al., 2013). Using nine case studies, Mitchell (2012) documents how English learners use Facebook over a four-week period. Meanwhile, Romano (2009) argues that using Facebook can add a more light-hearted atmosphere to the classroom and thus enhance both teachers' and students' experiences in English learning. Working with university students, Kabilan, Ahmad, and Abidin (2010) maintain that Facebook can provide a meaningful learning environment that supports the process of learning English. Mill (2011) also finds that Facebook can be beneficial for individuals learning French language and culture as online communities.

Still, the topic of SNSs and Chinese language learning remains unexplored. Few studies emphasize on learners of less commonly taught languages in SNSs (Jin, 2017; Wang & Vasquez, 2012). While recent works have introduced the pedagogical prospects that SNSs hold for teachers and learners, it is our goal to experiment and examine their affordances in the Chinese language context. We put

forward collaborative action research in three American universities that has taken place over the past seven years and provide concrete instructional suggestions for teachers to utilize Facebook in particular, and SNSs in general, as language learning platforms in college-level Chinese classes.

The Present Study

The proliferation of SNSs like Facebook, which play a central role in both the real and virtual lives of youth nowadays, provokes educators to consider how this new form of community-based sharing and content creation can be employed in language classrooms. With our "digital native" students in mind, we incorporate Facebook into our beginning, intermediate, and advanced Chinese language classes, to varying degrees in three higher education institutions. The Facebook Project started in a large private university in southern California in Fall 2009 for both beginning level and advanced level classes. In addition, an experiment with Google+, approximating similar formats and activities on Facebook, was conducted in Fall 2012. In the same semester, a Midwestern liberal arts college adopted the Facebook Project for its comparable beginning and intermediate level Chinese classes. In Fall 2015 and Spring 2016, the Facebook Project was introduced to the first semester of beginning Chinese classes in a northern Californian public university.

We have implemented the Facebook/Google+ Projects in a total of eleven classes over a seven-year span. Multiple types of data have been collected, such as online surveys, questionnaires, researchers' observations, extensive field notes and observations, along with students' productions on SNSs (texts and statistics). The following analysis focuses on the qualitative data from student surveys as well as instructor's notes and reflections. Conceived and conducted as an action research on second/foreign language pedagogy, our collaborative effort follows the recommendations of Mackey and Gass (2015) with a step-by-step work plan, including: 1)

identification of the problem, 2) data collection, and 3) qualitative evaluation, which are explained in the subsequent sections.

Action Research Stage 1: Identification of the Problem

Classroom-based action research is often motivated by teachers' curiosity or concern about certain aspects of the classroom. The first step, therefore, always starts with identifying a problem and then forming a hypothesis (Mackey & Gass 2015). In our everyday teaching, we witness the significant amount of time that students spend on SNSs, which probably contributes to their lack of practice and engagement in the target language outside of the classroom. If SNSs are an integral part of our students' social and personal lives, it is reasonable for teachers to tap into their educational potential rather than lamenting or ignoring them. Informed by extant literature and our own experiences, we hypothesize that the integration of SNSs into language learning routine can increase language production as well as boost active participation and meaningful interaction among our students. Hence, we seek to gain better understanding in three pedagogical areas of inquiry:

1.   Students' Perception: How do our students perceive the use of SNSs as a learning tool in Chinese classrooms?

2.   Language Production: What language do they produce in SNS-based learning activities?

3.   Language Interaction: How do students and teachers interact in SNS-based learning environment?

Action Research Stage 2: Pedagogical Design and Data Collection

General Design of Facebook Project

Our Facebook Projects serve as interactive platforms for target-language use among the participating students. All our

projects, except for one Google+ project in Fall 2012, are based on Facebook "Group," a feature that stresses collaboration and allows discussions, events, and numerous other activities. Due to different institutional settings, curricular requirements, and newly added functions on Facebook over time, the specific details of our projects do vary. Nevertheless, they share the same overall designs and principles. To start the Facebook Project, the instructor of each class creates a "closed" Facebook Group to which students request membership. Only approved students in the specific classes can have access to the Facebook page (and it is not open to public viewing). Before permitting students to join the group, the instructor gives the class clear instructions about the Facebook assignments, for instance the number of required weekly updates, likes, or comments. Students are encouraged to view the group site as a safe and friendly socializing space where they can freely express their opinions, tell personal stories, and share other interests in Chinese. The use of English and other languages is kept to a minimum, restricted to proper nouns like personal names, organizations, or places. Workshops on Chinese input methods are provided at the beginning of the semester and occasionally during the course. Students may use various tools for assistance, including online dictionaries, but are asked to limit their application to vocabulary or word items only and not chunks of text or sentences provided by translation programs such as Google Translator.

Sample Project

To illustrate the logistics and findings in our seven-year SNS studies we present our most recent attempt as an example. In Spring 2016 two classes of first-semester Chinese students in a Northern Californian university took part in the Facebook Project. The textbook was *Integrated Chinese, Level 1 Part 1 (3rd edition)*. By the end of the regular 16-week semester, the classes had finished all ten lessons in the book. The Facebook Project was initiated in the third week of the term, after the beginners had obtained basic skills of Chinese

language and training in Chinese input methods. The total number of the Facebook Group members reached 59, including 53 students, two instructors, and four volunteer language tutors (native speakers).

Data Collection and Procedure

Before we discuss the selected case study's results, an overview of our data collection and research procedure in the project is imperative.

Online survey and questionnaire. Online surveys and questionnaires are designed to gauge students' opinions and experiences about learning through SNSs in our Chinese classes. Students from all eleven classes over the past seven years are surveyed. We send the surveys to them toward the end of the semester for each class. Altogether we have collected 212 completed responses, with 46% male and 54% female participants, whose ages range from 17 to 22. Most of them come from beginning level classes (N = 137), followed by intermediate level (N = 42) and advanced level (N = 33). The survey has 23 questions—one open-ended question and 22 multiple-choice or 5-point Likert scale questions. It takes approximately 20 minutes to complete. The survey is provided in the Appendix.

Language and interaction data. In the sample project mentioned above, two social media analytics tools, Sociograph (© sociograph.io, 2017) and Grytics (2015-2016 © 1339 SAS), are used to manage the group and later extract data after the semester is completed. Sociograph is a free tool that tracks and analyzes Facebook Page activities. In the case of Facebook Group, the tool interface provides the administer an activity graph with an overview of all the posts ranked with the number of likes, comments, and shares. Grytics is a more comprehensive tool that offers functions of measuring, analyzing, and improving engagement of Facebook Group in addition to extracting data at the end. Finally, we compare the data from these two tools against each other to ensure accuracy and comprehensiveness.

Field notes. During each semester, instructors take notes and reflect on the Facebook Project, using techniques of action research, participant observation, and illuminative evaluation (Zuber-Skerritt 1994; McKernan 2013). The three authors share all their notes, comments, and reflections using Google shared folder.

Action Research Stage 3: Qualitative Evaluation of the Facebook Group

We conclude our action research by reflecting on our findings and proposing suggestions for language teachers who are interested in carrying out similar projects that utilize SNSs for their classes. Aggregating all qualitative data, we analyze the experiences of Facebook usage in our Chinese language classes from the perspectives of both the students and instructors. We employ grounded theory techniques to code the data and identify recurring themes emerging from the Facebook Project. Once a theme is identified, we reexamine and confirm whether it is supported by other examples and further evidence such as students' production in the Facebook Group. Finally, we annotate our results, where appropriate, with descriptive statistics and short answers in the survey together with relevant literature for more accurate interpretations.

Our evaluation is qualitative and reflective, organized along our three research questions: students' perception, language production, and language interaction. We use data from all our projects to analyze the first question on students' perception, and data from the sample project to explore the second and third questions about language production and interaction in the Facebook Group. Last but not least, we discuss the pedagogical promise of SNSs based on the six themes derived from the coding process.

Students' Perception of SNSs in Chinese Language Classes

Our experiences in integrating SNSs into the Chinese language curricula have been heartening. The overwhelming majority

(96.2%) of our students claim that they enjoy using Facebook for classes. The participants are by and large enthusiastic about the educational prospects of SNSs. A significant number of them (85.2%) recommend their instructors to continue the practice. One student points out that he now uses "more Chinese on Facebook than any place else—including Chinese class," and he has become "more motivated to speak Chinese outside" of Facebook and the classroom. Another student remarks: "Facebook is my home away from home…and [it] allows me to practice Chinese in a familiar setting." One student states that she finds Facebook to be "much more friendly," and it "tends to augment" her learning of Chinese "in a positive way."

While most students enjoy the experience of using Facebook, a small minority—less than 3% —have some reservations. Using SNSs is "engaging," one of them notes; "it keeps students' attention and makes learning more fun. However, at times, it can be distracting. Overall, it is beneficial in making the learning experience more… enjoyable, which I believe results in better grades and performance because the students are interested in the subject matter." Another respondent raises a different kind of concern—she at times feels "embarrassed that my friends [outside of Chinese class may] see what I post for my Chinese class." The "privacy" issue is surely one of the most controversial yet intriguing aspects of the "social" network site, involving questions about individual and learner identity that deserves in-depth investigation. For better or for worse, SNSs entail "authentic" opportunities for intercultural communication, which oftentimes go beyond the ability of and appropriateness for younger students, especially those in K-12. It is, of course, inadvisable to let underage students talk to strangers on SNSs. Our discussion thus has focused only on the simplest and pedagogically-controlled applications through our Facebook Groups. However, we believe that more advanced, mature, and responsible students can benefit from more complex and unrestricted

interactions that approximate closer to real-life social communications online.

Language Production in Facebook Group

Looking more closely at our recent classes in 2016 as an example, we can categorize the language production in the Facebook Project during the 16-week semester (from February 14 to May 15) in several ways. By text types, students have produced a total of 20,379 Chinese characters and 3,508 non-Asian Characters. By engagement types, students produced a total of 539 posts, 1011 comments, and 2162 reactions (Facebook offers the following reactions you can choose for any given post: like, wow, haha, sad, love, and angry). Figure 1 provides the breakdown of the engagement types. By post types, there are 307 status updates (text), 156 photo updates (text with photo), 54 shared videos, and 22 shared links. The percentage of each post type can be found in Figure 2.

Although a thorough corpus analysis of the text data is beyond the scope of this paper, we perform word segmentation and Part-of-Speech (POS) tagging using NLPIR (a.k.a. ICTCLAS 2013) for all the texts produced by students, and then generate a complete wordlist using AntCont 3.4.3 (Anthony, 2014). The results show that these learners used a total number of 10,582 words and 581 token types (excluding non-Asian characters). This preliminary learner corpus analysis indicates the use of a wide range of language functions and linguistic devices by these Chinese beginners. Aside from a detailed annotation and examination of the wordlist, which are worthy of a separate investigation, the overall outcomes reveal that students used many words that do not come from the curriculum at this level. This is particularly notable for students who have heritage backgrounds or previous Chinese learning experiences. The Facebook Project seemingly offers them an opportunity to expand and extend their language communications beyond the confines of instruction, syllabus, or textbook.
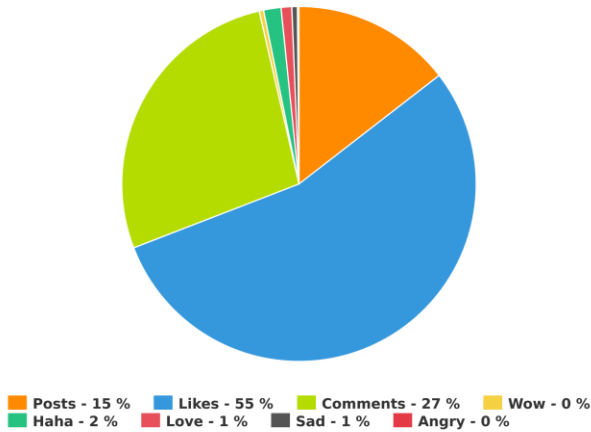
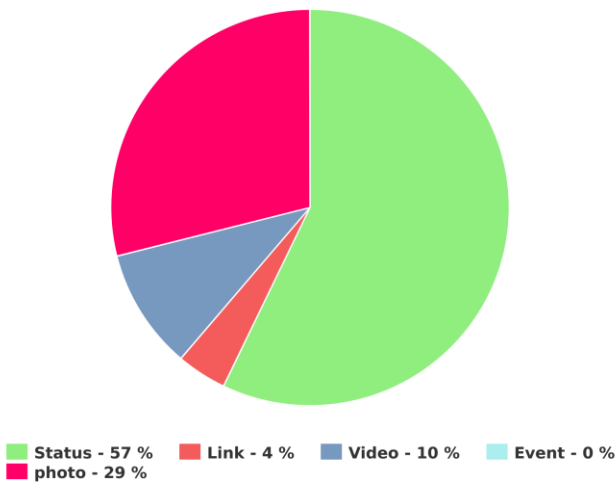Figure 1. Types of engagement in Facebook group

Figure 2. Types of posts in Facebook group

Group Interaction in Facebook Project

In terms of members' interaction, the Facebook Group is a highly interactive community. Participants either comment on or react to 97.47% of all posts (reacted: 95.96%; commented: 64.14%). These interactions demonstrate students' engagement in interpretive reading and viewing, interpersonal writing, and presentational writing

modes of communication. Table 1 shows the top six posts with the most interactions. Evidently, the most popular posts are closely related to topics in the textbook and reflect daily life events of the students.

Table 1. Top six posts with the most interactions (Translation was provided here by the researchers. Personal names, university, and other identifying features are disguised with ***)

Content	Comment	Reaction
我没有吃早饭. (I didn't have breakfast)	11	10
你好！ 我叫***。我在***大學學教育。 新年好~ (Hello! My name is ***. I am studying education at *** University. Happy New Year~)	11	7
我的猫是累了 (My cat is tired)	8	10
這個週末你們想做什麼？(What do you want to do this weekend?)	9	6
今天是我爸爸的生日，所以我做晚飯。他喜歡菲律賓菜所以我做菲律賓菜。這是菲律賓的spaghetti, lumpia, 還米飯。…(Today is my dad's birthday,	6	11

so I made dinner. He likes Filipino food so I made Filupino food. This is Philippine's spaghetti, lumpia, also rice…)		
我吃美国菜，你呢? (I eat American food. What about you?)	8	3

The interactions between students and instructors in the Facebook Group are also noteworthy. The instructor usually functions as a facilitator by providing feedback through comments. As an instructional tool, the Facebook Group enables three roles for the teachers and tutors—friend, facilitator, and administrator.

As Facebook "friends," teachers can participate the same way as students via status updates, sharing links, commenting or reacting to other's posts. Among all online interactions, the two instructors together contribute 24 posts, 145 comments, and 358 reactions in addition to the students' language production presented above.

As pedagogical facilitators, instructors can curate language materials and topics that fit the group's learning needs and design classroom activities that incorporate Facebook Group interaction. Figure 3 shows two types of posts. Whereas the one on the left is a free topic post initiated by a student asking his classmates whether they like the television series *The Big Bang Theory*, the one on the right is the narrative account of a student's shopping experience with her partner, which is a response to a "shopping clothes online" task that the teacher has assigned for the class.

Figure 3 Post initiated by students vs. Post generated by instructional tasks.
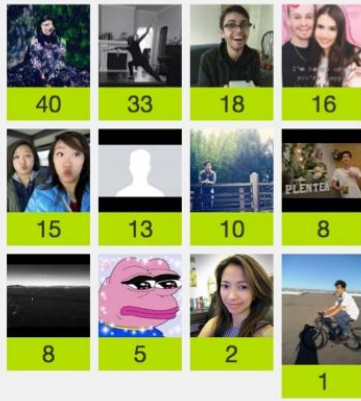
Teachers are also the administrators of the Facebook Group. On one hand, they can use social network management tools to monitor each student's production and performance objectively; on the other hand, they can also actively make things happen, such as providing incentives for students to participate. For example, using the engagement tools provided by Grytics, every two weeks the instructor will post a "Wall of Fame" to acknowledge top performing members and to enhance community building (Figure 4). The "Wall of Fame" calculates an "engagement score" and "influence score" for each member and lists the top influencers, top engaged members, top commenters, and top publishers for any given period. The regular updates of such lists not only increase students' motivation and spark their competitive edges but also enhance class bonding and general interests.
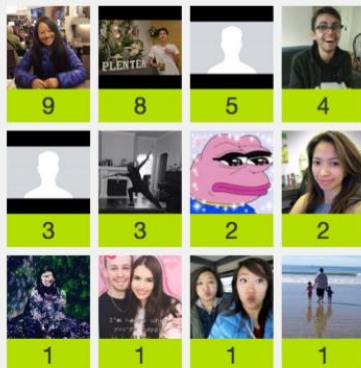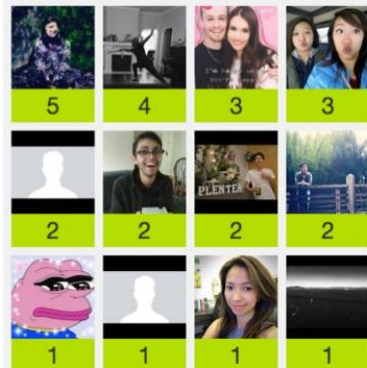
Figure 4. Bi-weekly "Wall of Fame"

Overall, the findings from our action research demonstrate the potential benefits of integrating SNSs such as Facebook into language classrooms, particularly in terms of improving learner engagement and offering real-life opportunities for language production. This aligns with our broader goal of helping students to process, practice, and bring what they have learned in class to more meaningful and relevant communicative interactions with their peers and teachers online. In the next section, we will share our experiences along with challenges from implementing this type of pedagogical innovation in Chinese language classes. Suggestions for future application will also be provided.

Using Facebook & SNSs in the Classroom - Some Suggestions

Our accumulated experience as instructors has taught us that some SNS features work better than others, which forms the central thread of the remaining discussion. Corresponding to our analytical framework, we present our findings in three sections: 1) students' perceptions and reactions about using Facebook in Chinese language classes; 2) instructional suggestions for language production based on three aspects of classroom teaching: beginning level courses, peer- and self- error correction, and in-class activities; and 3) design issues of SNSs in language classes regarding group interaction, including the affordance of Facebook and privacy concerns.

Students' Perceptions & Reactions about Learning through Facebook

If Facebook provides a convenient and effective communicative environment for its users, it also exercises significant power over language teaching and learning, and offers promise for this field. The majority of our students believes that technology-enhanced activities like SNSs are beneficial for their learning. Three fourths of our survey respondents (75.6%) agree that "it is productive

to use technology as well as social media/networks in their Chinese classes." Compared to traditional classroom learning activities, 64.7% of the students find these "technology-driven activities are more relevant to their learning experiences," and 89.7% of them consider they "are more engaging and interesting." In addition, 70.5% of the students feel that the "technology-driven activities that the instructor used are more time-efficient in regard to the amount of knowledge/skill(s) they have gained or learned." They view such activities as "quite important" or "very important" to improve their overall language skills in a positive way: Listening (77.5%), Speaking (73.1%), Reading (67.3%), Writing (71.8%), and Culture (69.8%).

In order to make online and social networking experiences meaningful, however, such applications have to be integrated into well-designed lesson plans with clear learning objectives and expectations (Aydin, 2012). Instructors can connect with students about assignments, upcoming events, useful links, and samples of work, whereas students can use Facebook after class to collaborate with others in group projects or contact classmates and instructors when they have questions about the assignments or examinations. Many teachers like us have also called attention to the students' skill levels in using SNSs. While SNSs can be beneficial to all levels of language learners, it is important to keep in mind that beginners who have limited language skills are more suited for pedagogically-controlled settings. The "real-life" and "authentic" experience on Facebook is still somewhat constructed and artificial. Although advanced students are better equipped to navigate through the complex social media world of communication, certain filtering and constant guidance by the instructors are necessary. This is probably the reason why most studies about SNSs and language to date primarily focus on literacy and culture, which require a high level of language proficiency.

Language Production – Instructional Suggestions

Using Facebook for beginning level language students. SNSs can be useful for productive language tasks, even for beginning level and younger students. Pascopella and Richardson (2009) argue that pedagogy changes with technology, and social networking tools can be applied to keep up with younger students' interests. Teenagers, according to Denny (2010), often do not instantly think of online writing tasks, such as posting on SNSs, as "real" homework assignments, and hence teachers should consider using a variety of mentoring strategies and communication modes to engage students in more writing practices outside of the classroom. For example, in the third week of the curriculum, we ask our first-semester Chinese students to upload a video on the course Facebook page that introduces their family members to their classmates. The students then watch each other's videos and post replies or questions. The quality of the videos varies, just like other types of assignments, ranging from excellent short films with superb editing, music, and graphics to simpler straight-forward "monologue" types of web-cam recordings.

Our focus is, of course, the Chinese language used in the postings and videos. Almost everyone can correctly use the grammar patterns and vocabulary items taught in class to ask and answer questions about family members, hobbies, and basic personal information. It is interesting to see how students ask their classmates specific questions on details that are not mentioned in the video. They often ask their classmates who have "pretty" sisters or friends questions like "她有男朋友吗?" [Does she have a boyfriend?]. Others make comments about what they see in the videos, describing someone with remarks like "他很酷" [He is cool]. All the while, the students are using grammar and vocabulary they have learned in class but in a new social context—that of asking a friend a question or replying to a friend's inquiry. The act of contextual communication thus takes precedence over the traditional methods of drilling patterns that may mean nothing to the students themselves.

Navigating through these online social interactions allows students to enhance their interpersonal, presentational, and interpretative communication abilities in Chinese on their own terms. Many students even voluntarily go out of their way to pick up new vocabulary words, such as "shorts," "ball games," or even "pets," which they will not learn until later, to describe their families. Many students remember these words throughout the semester, for they find relevance in and context for what they have learned.

Using Facebook to enhance peer- & self- error correction. Similarly, SNSs provide a far less threatening medium for students to comment on each other's language use, even mistakes, for they do not consider the postings as "school work" but rather friendly interactions. We notice that students themselves often serve as peer reviewers and point out their classmates' errors, for instance, when a character is mistyped (since the same *pinyin*, the system by which the student input their Chinese text, can refer to a variety of different characters) or a wrong word is used. Xiao and Wong (2014) find that second language learners, including heritage language students, experience lower foreign language anxiety (both avoidance behavior and somatic anxiety) in writing assignments when done online. It is thus productive to introduce peer-review assignments on the postings, which can reinforce correct use of language in more agreeable and less intimidating ways. Certainly, a specific guideline and rubric for appropriate correction manners should accompany such activities.

If the goal of the class is to help students learn, retain, and use what is presented, instead of simply going by the textbook, SNSs can play a significant pedagogical role in this regard. After all, the ways in which they use Chinese to communicate are comparable to how students would talk to each other in reality, even including correcting each other's mistakes, hence making learning the language a lot of "fun," more "practical" and "relevant" as some students observe. Many students also tell us that they continue to use some Chinese to communicate with classmates whom they have befriended

in the class on their personal Facebook interactions. Some even consider Chinese as their "secret" language.

Using Facebook for in-class activities. More than an out-of-class homework activity, Facebook can be utilized inside the classroom, adding different flavors to in-class assignments or games to the regular routine. Many instructors at college levels have begun to use an "audience response system" or "clicker" that allows students to interact through small, hand-held, remote keypad devices, and consequently, compensate for the passive, one-way communication inherent in lectures and the difficulty students experience in maintaining sustained concentration (Caldwell, 2007). Students and instructors who have experience in using these systems are often enthusiastic about their positive effects on the classroom. These response systems are helpful technologies to improve "traditional delivery" (Draper, 1998), and research literature generally praises their pedagogical advantages[7]. Nevertheless, these systems rely on hard-wired devices that can be costly and difficult to use. The recent Microsoft "Mouse Mischief" also requires plug-in devices that can become quite complicated when more than a handful of participants are involved[8]. SNSs like Facebook can offer the same advantages of instant response system without many of the complications.

Used as a classroom activity, Facebook ensures that students actively interact with their classmates. Once again, the Facebook Group serves as the portal of synchronous interaction. She or he can simply post a question or a picture in class, and students will input

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[7] Bransford, Brophy, and Williams (2000), for example, provide an excellent review on student response systems and more advanced technologies, which they call CATAALYST (Classroom Aggregation Technology for Activating and Assessing Learning and Your Students' Thinking). Also, Bransford and colleagues praise student response systems and the related pedagogy as one of the most promising technologies for transforming classrooms to be "more learner-, knowledge-, assessment-, and community-centered."

[8] Information and instruction on *Mouse Mischief* can be found at http://www.microsoft.com/en-us/download/details.aspx?id=7037

their responses as promptly and correctly as they can, providing that they have access to Internet and electronic devices (such as computers, laptop, tablets, or smart phones). The exercise can be used as a monitoring assignment during the output period or just a quick fun game after the lecture. Furthermore, as many foreign language students become anxious when they are asked to speak or perform in class, communicating via the Internet can greatly relieve their anxiety and allow shy students an outlet for interaction.

Language Interaction - Facebook Group as a Pedagogical Platform

Interactional affordances of Facebook as second/foreign language pedagogical tool. The educational potential of SNSs can be multifaceted, but two affordances of Facebook make it particularly amenable to language learning: multimodality and community-bonding. We believe these two features of Facebook play a key role in motivating students from being "passive observers of the educational process" to "engaged learners" in our project (Ziegler, 2007).

On Facebook students not only learn to communicate with each other outside of the formalities of the classroom but also practice what Kress and Jewitt (2003) calls "multimodal literacy." Unlike traditional teaching modules, Facebook by its very nature is multimedia and interactive. It allows many applications such as synchronous and asynchronous discussions and sharing of pictures and videos. These elements are vital in computer-mediated communication (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010). Students can now post texts, pictures, videos, and sound files as means of interaction. Such tasks require them to be fluent in a broad range of competencies in visual, audio, and written forms, which are essential communicative and presentational skills. Accordingly, the increasingly popular concept of using electronic portfolios as evaluation and assessment tools can be easily achieved through social networking technology (Walters, 2009). Moreover, SNSs along with

other online sources can also provide valuable authentic cultural materials for language learning and communication (Wong, 2016).

The design of the SNS interaction is important and defines the nature of the community. Relations in Facebook are not only among "friends" but also with members of social networks (Downes, 2007). Users can "like" and join common-interest groups, organizing themselves by family, school, workplace, or other categories. This social aspect of the site is instrumental in facilitating communicative language teaching and learning. Traditional instruction is generally based on prepackaged materials and fixed content, as well as assessment tasks defined by teachers (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008). While these approaches are effective in their own right, some students believe their learning experiences can be enhanced by increasing the relevance of the content, offering instant feedback, and having more collaborative exercises with their peers. In fact, situated learning theory maintains that people learn by participating in communities of practice (Mayes & De Freitas, 2006). SNSs like Facebook can offer learners this dynamic opportunity, as more attention can be allocated to the act of communication and the social context of learning rather than prescribed instructional activities (Wertsch, 1985). SNSs may also be of special interest to K-12 or heritage school teachers who are always looking for innovative ways to connect with younger students, yet often lack sufficient resources.

Privacy & usage of Facebook. Obtaining a Facebook account is simple. Numerous schools already have an official Facebook presence, while many teachers and students are Facebook users themselves. An easy way to start a class project on Facebook is to create a Facebook Group, as described earlier, that lets its users set up a designated space to which others request membership. It comes with three privacy settings: "Open", "Closed", and "Secret." For a language learning group, we suggest the "Closed" setting. The more "controlled" environment allows members to socialize in an extended

community while still maintaining a desirable distance and privacy among the instructors, students, and the general public.

To further protect the privacy of both instructors and students, each participant can create an account with a special Chinese profile that is specifically used for the Facebook Projects. Codes of conduct online should also be clearly explained to students beforehand. Students will "friend" the professional (not personal) profile of the teacher, whose page can become another portal for course activities and class related postings.

Alternatively, instead of setting up a Facebook Group the instructor can administer a "fan page" or "group function" for each of the courses he or she teaches. For the former, students will "like" it and then be able to read and post information on the page. For the latter, the instructor invites students to join the Chinese "group" associated with their individual classes. The list of members, postings, and discussions of that group are not visible to other Facebook users. The main advantage of a fan page is its neutrality. Neither the instructors nor the students need to be friends with each other, and thus, compromise their personal information. All parties can keep their privacy intact. Communications that take place on the fan page or in groups can also be designated for one particular course (for example, only students enrolled in that course will participate) and as a result create a more comfortable and controlled environment for the participants.

Most of our students are already familiar with SNSs and need no special instruction on how to use or communicate through them. The students are most likely even better versed than many of the instructors. According to our survey, all but 2 of our 212 students (98.7%) already have profiles on SNSs such as Facebook. An overwhelming majority of our students (92.9%) visit SNSs at least once, if not multiple times, every day. There are many reasons behind their usage, including communicating with personal friends (96.1%), keeping in touch with particular interest groups (51.3%), getting to

know the latest information, news, and trends (44.8%), or just killing time (41.6%). Our findings echo many other similar surveys that indicate "communication" is the most important impetus behind people's participation in SNSs (Aydin, 2012; Subrahmanyam, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Many people also see Facebook as an online knowledge-sharing network, forged by interpersonal interactions and imperative communication and even business skills (Aydin, 2012; Decarie 2010; Huang et al. 2010). Additionally, Facebook offers learners the chance to adopt the role of "navigators of knowledge," which is now collaboratively produced and shaped by culture, context, and co-generated communication (Clark et. al, 2009). By negotiating meaning and understanding through peer communication, students become active producers and dynamic users of the target language.

Conclusion

One of the major predicaments for Chinese language educators today is how to effectively utilize technology to engage the digitally savvy and short-attention spanned students in lectures and classroom activities. Integrating SNSs into teaching Chinese or other less commonly taught languages is both exciting and challenging. Facebook is now available in 101 languages with over 300,000 users helping in translation (Facebook, 2017), which can be useful for language pedagogue.

This study is a limited and initial attempt to examine the phenomenon, and hopefully, the beginning of more in-depth and expansive research on the topic. SNSs, as Livingstone and Brake (2010) maintain, "like much else on the Internet, represent a moving target for researchers and policy makers." As improvements in information technology can swiftly alter the pedagogical discourse, teachers must constantly keep up with the pulse of new technological developments. SNSs come and go; those that were popular a few

years ago might no longer be in vogue today[9]. These tools, be they Facebook, Google+, Instagram, or other yet-to-come new platforms, will always be changing. Technology, however fancy it might become, does not necessarily guarantee superior pedagogical results. The key is to engage students in learning Chinese in dynamic, relatable, and contextual ways that take advantage of the advances (Wong, 2008). Chinese language and cultural pedagogy need to consider the progressive and performative aspects of language acquisition that march forward with time (Wong, 2016).   In many ways our instructional goals and content remain the same, only the methods of implementation, such as drilling, practicing, and monitoring, have now been woven into the fabric of social networking, offering yet more tools and techniques for instructional practices.

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[9] For example, Livemocha, a free language learning SNS launched in 2007 that provided 35 different language lessons (Harrison, 2013; Zourou & Loiseau, 2013), was closed permanently on April 22, 2016. According to the site, it had approximately 12 million registered members from 196 countries around the globe during its operation.

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Appendix

LEARNING CHINESE LANGUAGE THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKS

What do you think about second language learning and social network, especially using the latter to achieve the educational goals of the former in your Chinese language classes? Through this survey, we hope to hear from you and find out more about utilizing the newest technology to enhance your language learning experiences.

There are two sections of this survey with a total number of 23 questions. It should take you about 10-15 minutes to complete. By answering this survey, you herewith give your consent to participate in this project and permit the researcher to use the data for his study. The information collected in this survey is for an academic research and will be used only for research/educational purposes. Your responses will remain anonymous and confidential. You are free to withdraw during anytime of the survey.

Thank you very much for your participation.

Section I: Background

1. Gender:

□ Male

□ Female

2. Age:

(*Choose only one of the following*)

□ 12-14

□ 14-16

□ 16-18

□ 18-20

□ 20-22

□ 22-25

□ 25 and over

3-a. Ethnic Background

(*Choose only one of the following*)

□ African

□ Arab

□ Asian (non-Chinese/e.g. Japanese, Korean, Thai)

□ Caucasian

□ Chinese

□ Hawaiian & Pacific Islander

□ Hispanic

□ Middle Eastern

□ Mixed ancestry

□ Native American

□ Others, *please specify* _____

3-b. If you are of Chinese background, you come from:

(*Choose only one of the following*)

□ China (Mainland)

□ Hong Kong & Macau

□ Taiwan

□ Singapore & Malaysia

□ East and Southeast Asia (other than the regions mentioned above)

□ Africa

□ Australia & New Zealand

□ Central & South America

□ Europe

□ United States & Canada

□ Others, *please specify* _____

□ No answer

4. How long have you been learning Chinese language?

(*Choose only one of the following*)

□ Less than 1 year

□ Between 1-2 years

□ Between 2-3 years

□ Between 3-4 years

□ Between 4-5 years

□ More than 5 years

5-a. Where are you learning/taking courses in Chinese now and where have you learned Chinese before?

(*Check any that apply*)

□ Adult learning program

□ College, Community College, University

□ Elementary school

□ Middle school

□ High school

☐ Heritage/Weekend school

☐ Intensive/summer language program

☐ Private tutoring

☐ Professional/military training program

☐ Study-abroad program

5-b. If you are a college student, what is your major?

(*Check any that apply*)

☐ Chinese

☐ Anthropology

☐ Architecture

☐ Area Studies, Cultural Studies, & International Studies

☐ Arts

☐ Business & Accounting

☐ Computer Science

☐ Communication, Journalism, & Speech

☐ Economics

☐ Education

☐ Engineering

☐ Film & Media Studies

☐ Geography

☐ History

☐ Languages & Linguistics (e.g. Korean, Spanish, Second Language Studies)

☐ Law

□ Literature (e.g. English, Japanese Literature)

□ Medicine & Natural Sciences (e.g. Biology, Chemistry, Dental Health)

□ Music, Dance, & Theatre

□ Philosophy & Religion

□ Political Science & Government

□ Psychology

□ Social Sciences (e.g. Sociology, Social work)

□ Women Studies & Gender Studies

□ Undecided or Unclassified

□ Graduate Programs (e.g. MA, PhD)

6. Which level of Chinese language class(es) are you taking now?

□ Not taking any Chinese class right now

□ First-year level

□ Second-year level

□ Third-year level

□ Fourth-year level or above

□ Other, *please specify* _____

7. Which writing system of Chinese character are you most familiar with?

(*Choose only one of the following*)

□ Traditional

□ Simplified

□ Both

□ None (*Pinyin* only)

8. How would you evaluate your overall Chinese language and cultural knowledge?

	Very Poor	*Quite poor*	*Medium*	*Quite good*	*Very good*
a) Listening	□	□	□	□	□
b) Speaking	□	□	□	□	□
c) Reading	□	□	□	□	□
d) Writing	□	□	□	□	□
e) Culture	□	□	□	□	□

9. Why do you study Chinese?

(*Check any that apply*)

□ Be multilingual and multicultural

□ Better understand Chinese culture and society

□ Better fit into my schedule

□ Career and job opportunity

□ Chinese is an important global language

□ Chinese is a challenging and difficult language

□ Chinese is my heritage language

□ Communicating with my Chinese-speaking co-workers/colleagues

□ Communicating with my Chinese-speaking friends

□ Communicating with my Chinese-speaking parents

□   Communicating with my Chinese-speaking relatives (e.g. grandparents, aunt, uncle)

□   Communicating with my Chinese-speaking spouses, boy-/girl-friends

□ Doing Internet or online activities

□ Easy subject to get a good grade

□ Family/parental influence

□ Important to my field of study/research

□ Language requirement for my study/degree

□ Listen to Chinese music and songs

□ My own personal interest and pleasure

□ Participate in the Chinese communities where I live/work

□ Read Chinese literature and scholarly works

□ Read Chinese newspaper and magazines

□ Travel to China, Taiwan, and Chinese speaking places

□ Watch Chinese films and televisions

□ Other, please specify_____

10. Do you personally have an account/profile on a social network site (e.g. Facebook)?

(*Choose only one of the following*)

□ Yes

□ No

11. Do you personally have an account/profile on a social network site (e.g. Facebook)?

(*Choose only one of the following*)

□ Yes

□ No

12. How often do you visit/use social network site(s) (e.g. Facebook)?

(*Choose only one of the following*)

□ Not at all

□ Seldom (about once every two weeks)

□ Sometimes (about once a week)

□ Rather often (more than 3 days a week)

□ Very often (once every day)

□ All the time (multiple times a day)

13. If you do personally use a social network site, what are the purpose(s)/reason(s)?

(*Check any that apply*)

□ Communicating with my personal friends

□ Communicating with my family

□ Communicating with particular groups of interest/friends

□ Getting to know new friends

□ Getting to know latest information, news, and trends

□ Playing games and other web-based activities

□ Killing time

□ Just because everyone is using it

Section II: Learning Chinese language and Culture through Social Networks

14. Do you think it is important to use technology as well as social media/networks in your Chinese classes?

(*Choose only one of the following*)

☐ Very important

☐ Somewhat important

☐ Neutral

☐ Somewhat unimportant

☐ Not at all

15. Do you have any difficulties in understanding or using the social network activities in your Chinese classes?

(*Choose only one of the following*)

☐ Very easy to use and understand

☐ Somewhat easy to use and understand

☐ Neutral

☐ Somewhat difficult to use and understand

☐ Very difficult to use and understand

16. Do you think it is productive to use technology as well as social media/networks in your Chinese classes?

(*Choose only one of the following*)

☐ Very productive

☐ Somewhat productive

☐ Neutral

□ Somewhat counter-productive

□ Not at all

17. Compared to traditional classroom learning activities, do you find the social network activities that the instructor used are productive to your learning experiences?

(*Choose only one of the following*)

□ Very productive

□ Somewhat productive

□ Neutral

□ Somewhat counter-productive

□ Not at all

18. Compared to traditional classroom learning activities, do you find the social network activities that the instructor used are more relevant to your learning experiences?

(*Choose only one of the following*)

□ Very relevant

□ Somewhat relevant

□ Neutral

□ Somewhat irrelevant

□ Not at all

19. Compared to traditional classroom learning activities, do you find the social network activities that the instructor used are more engaging and interesting?

(*Choose only one of the following*)

☐ Very much so

☐ Somewhat

☐ Neutral

☐ Somewhat less

☐ Not at all

20. Compared to traditional classroom learning activities, do you find the social network activities that the instructor used are more time efficient in regards to the amount of knowledge/skill(s) you have gained or learned?

(*Choose only one of the following*)

☐ Very time efficient

☐ Somewhat time efficient

☐ Neutral

☐ Somewhat inefficient

☐ Not at all efficient

21. Which of the following skills that you feel can be most improved and beneficial from using social network in the Chinese classes?

(1: Not at all; 2: Not quite important; 3: Neutral; 4: Quite important; 5: Very important)

	Not at all	*Not quite important*	*Neutral*	*Quite important*	*Very important*
	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*
a) Listening	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b) Speaking	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c) Reading	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d) Writing	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e) Culture	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

22. Do you personally recommend the instructor to continue using network site in the classroom?

☐ Yes

☐ No

23. Please leave any reflections, comments, and/or suggestions regarding the social network activities and your learning experience in this class (open-ended question)