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**ARTICLE – DIGITAL MODERN LANGUAGES**

# WeChat-Mediated Simulation and the Learning of Business Chinese

Xuan Wang<sup>1</sup> and Xiaoli Wu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cardiff University, GB

<sup>2</sup> KU Leuven, BE

Corresponding author: Xiaoli Wu ([xiaoli.wu@kuleuven.be](mailto:xiaoli.wu@kuleuven.be))

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The purpose of this tutorial is to demonstrate social media engagement in higher-level language classrooms, using WeChat (a China-based free application with functions similar to WhatsApp or Messenger) as the digital medium. Originally designed for users in the Chinese market, WeChat is also available in English and increasingly used beyond China for both social and business communication, therefore its use as demonstrated in this tutorial may also be applicable to the learning of other languages, or to inspire the use of similar digital tools in language learning and teaching. This tutorial illustrates specifically how WeChat can facilitate the learning of language and culture for business in a Chinese context. It explores several modes of communication offered by WeChat, including one-to-one or group instant text messaging, voice messaging, voice or video call, document sharing, and online publication. These various functions are utilised in different stages of a business simulation game, and set up as pre-planned learning tasks. The tasks consist of specific, progressive activities and goals, such as drafting and pitching a business plan, business consultation, market research and digital marketing. Accordingly, specific learning processes are generated: enabling the simulation of digital business communication (focusing on China in this case) through gamification; in doing so, it extends learning in the conventional classroom ('here' offline in Europe) and blends it with that in real-life interactions and business practices ('there' online in China). The tutorial shows that the digital mediation afforded by WeChat encourages a coherent and authentic learning experience through collaborative and blended learning in interconnected steps, in which teachers act mainly as the organiser and facilitator while students are enabled to develop self-directed/collaborative, negotiated/differentiated, and affective/motivational learning, following a task-based approach.

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## 1. Background

This tutorial demonstrates the feasibility of integrating digitally mediated learning through a simulation game facilitated by WeChat, a China-based mobile application similar to WhatsApp and Messenger, with the learning of business Chinese. The goal of simulating digital business for learning the target language is inspired by wider societal changes that witness the rise of

China as a superpower, and the consequent demand for cultivating competent intercultural speakers of Chinese as well as entrepreneurs with a global mindset and practical knowhow for the relevant economic and cultural markets. This could also be said about several other modern languages not widely taught in the West that are emerging as new 'global' languages, such as Arabic and Hindi. In a broad sense, the goal of this tutorial is to inspire classroom-based teachers and learners to respond practically to such shifts brought by globalization to the current landscape of Modern Languages.

Furthermore, digital mediation, through social media, is drastically reorganizing the way in which we access and disseminate information and communicate with others, both in workplace interactions and business practices (Darics 1; Darics 2), and in technology-assisted education (see Reinders and Reinhardt for the state of the art of digital gaming in language learning and teaching). In Chinese-speaking environments, WeChat has become instrumental in enabling not only social networking but also emerging e-commerce domestically and internationally. It offers an interactional tool as well as a potential business market. This tutorial attends to this specific trend by showing a way to engage learners of Chinese in a WeChat-based simulation of a transnational start-up business. It demonstrates that digitally mediated simulation and gamification can enhance immersive, authentic and coherent learner experiences and, as such, the learning of the latest business and digital literacy and cultural skills in the target language.

## 2. Overview

This tutorial rests on the concept and principles of simulation-based education (Crookall & Oxford; Crookall) and task-based language learning (Ellis; Thomas & Reinders). WeChat plays a central role in generating a series of interlinked simulation tasks that will enable learners to develop a meaningful project to promote local business to the Chinese markets. The duality of learning and 'doing business' is supported by the flexible use of different digital features and functions of WeChat at different stages of the project to achieve business and pedagogical goals.

The tutorial will provide a step-to-step guide, showing how to weave the use of WeChat into simulated business activities both in the classroom setting and with 'authentic' audiences beyond the classroom. It demonstrates the possibility to extend learning in the conventional classroom ('here' offline in Europe) and blend it with that in simulated 'real-life' communication and transnational business practices ('there' online in China).

It is important to clarify that at no point should anyone involved in this simulation be led to believe that they are dealing with real-life business cases, whether offline or online, in Europe or in China. Consent from all parties, especially interlocutors who will act as potential 'customers' or 'business partners' from a distance in China, should be formally sought based on a clear understanding that they are participating an educational simulation and merely roleplaying in a simulated transnational business scenario on WeChat. Teachers should make sure this is properly planned and explained beforehand and handled with full transparency at all stages of the simulation.

Teachers will act mainly as organizers and facilitators, while students are encouraged to develop self-directed, collaborative, differentiated and motivated learning. The pedagogical scope of this tutorial, therefore, is not so much of a guide about using WeChat per se, but a guide on instructional design of a simulation game mediated and facilitated by WeChat.

Specifically, the tutorial consists of two pedagogical sections. The first section explains, from the perspective of instructional design, the basic steps of planning a digital simulation game. This is crucial for setting up the simulation and successfully achieving its educational goals, as the section will outline the key pre-simulation factors and strategies for the teacher

as instructor, even though the simulation game itself requires minimal involvement of the instructor. The second section will describe in detail how learners can follow their simulated functions and the chain of tasks in the game and then go through progressive stages of doing business in Chinese using WeChat. Screenshots of WeChat-mediated activities will be provided as illustrations.

### 3. About WeChat

Before discussing the details of simulated learning this tutorial is set to outline, let us first take a look at WeChat, the digital tool upon which the tutorial is centred.

WeChat (微信 wēixìn, logo shown in **Figure 1**) is a free smartphone application developed by the digital gaming giant Tencent in China. It offers a mixed package of features and functions similar to other apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Messenger. These include a range of functions that allow end-users to engage in social networking and work-related communication, including regular functions (see **Figure 2** for an illustration) such as text and voice messaging, video calls and conferencing, document and image exchanging, as well as unique features such as online booking and payment, and verified blogging and official publicity. In China and Chinese-speaking communities, WeChat is currently one of the most common media for workplace communication and grassroots entrepreneurial activities (see **Figure 3** for an example of the latter).

In addition to the abovementioned multiple modes of mediation and interaction, WeChat offers distinctive affordances to facilitate pedagogy. For learners of Chinese as a foreign language, as Jin shows, WeChat affords a casual space with easy access to authentic, meaning-focused communication with native speakers; it makes available differentiated linguistic resources and multi-literacies while fostering a space for new identity creation. Wang et al. further reveal that pedagogical affordances of WeChat can take place at the levels of instructional, social and cognitive engagement. For instance, WeChat-based teaching allows teachers to focus largely on task design and organization, which encourages students to engage themselves in the task independently and draw on social strategies to manage their learning. Cognitively, the possibility of simultaneous multimodal interactions, such as using audio and



**Figure 1:** WeChat logo.

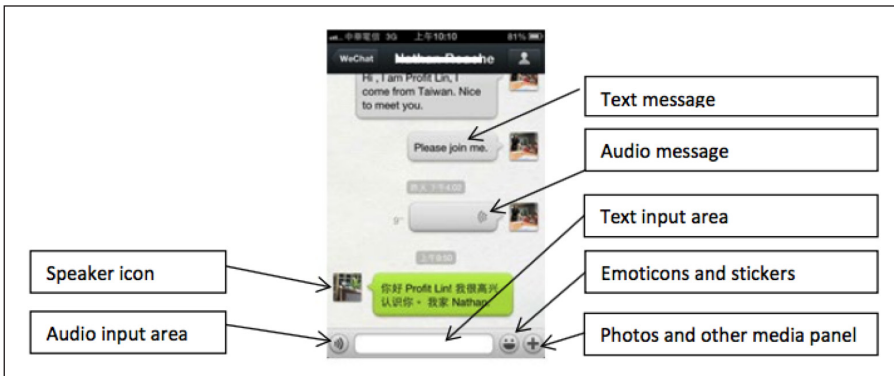


Figure 2: Screenshot of WeChat interface on a smartphone (Wang et al. 22).



Figure 3: Screenshot of WeChat marketing of a Chinese restaurant in Wales.

text chat at the same time, contribute significantly to successful meaning negotiation and effective learning outcomes (Wang et al.).

It is the combined characteristics of WeChat being a useful medium of everyday chat, of business and of learning that the feasibility of this tutorial is based on. As WeChat has also become available in English (and other languages) and its service regularly updated to accommodate users outside China, it is increasingly used beyond Chinese-speaking environments. This means that its use for simulated learning as demonstrated in this tutorial resembles digitally mediated business practices in convincing ways. Therefore, ideas presented in this tutorial can also be applied to the learning through business model in other languages, or to inspire the use of similar digital tools for general language learning and teaching.

Finally, a note on the issue of security and privacy on WeChat. In terms of technical security of the software, WeChat is considered a stable, innovative and well-maintained application with an extensive array of features and functions. Since the year 2017, under the new legislation in China, WeChat requires its new and registered users to comply with Real-Name Authentication (although alias is still editable from the user end). For domestic users, this is mostly done through bank card or official identity verification to increase the monitoring of online activities.

Meanwhile, for users located outside China operating from a non-Chinese mobile phone, the app automatically installs an international version rather than the default home version, which works from a separate, international server and is subject to the laws and regulations of the country where the account is registered. That is to say, the question of which server is used to route messages depends on where the app is installed. These factors are worth bearing in mind when using WeChat either in classroom learning and teaching or in everyday life.

There are, nevertheless, compelling pedagogical reasons why WeChat is highly recommended for the purpose of this tutorial. As mentioned earlier, WeChat is currently one of the most common media in China for not only social networking but also workplace communication and grassroots commerce. For learning business Chinese, the involvement of WeChat will allow simulation of the reality of business mindsets and practices in China as closely as possible, which is the intention of this tutorial. Besides, many of the higher-level learners of Chinese will have already had ample experience with the app and will have been using it as their main social media tool to connect with China. So, most of these students are ready and willing to extend its use to the new domain of business Chinese.

However, in a case where people have concerns about security and privacy on WeChat, or have difficulties obtaining the app, teachers can consider using different digital platforms which the learners are more attuned to.

#### **4. Planning the Simulation**

To ensure that the pedagogical content and activities of a simulation are well thought out and designed appropriately, and the intended goals achievable, we must first take into account the following aspects of planning.

##### ***4.1 Considering Roles and Functions***

Simulation is not an explicitly taught activity (although not teacher free) since it should resemble the 'reality'. This means that participants must step inside the reality of a social function mentally and behaviourally in order to fulfil roles and responsibilities in a specified situation (Jones). In this sense, a participant accepts the simulated (virtual) reality and acts accordingly, be it a company director or a hospital patient. It also means that, according to Jones, the teacher as instructor is prohibited from solving problems or making decisions for the participants. They should monitor and facilitate the process unobtrusively, while the participants as learners are responsible for solving assigned problems.

In this tutorial, the reality of the function will be modelled on language use and business communication of digital marketing in the tourism industry, a setting in which participants will learn to perform a chain of business tasks as team members of a local company using WeChat. It is this context as precondition that will guide and motivate participants' learning performance throughout the simulation game. Compared with the learners, the presence of the teacher is secondary and restricted to caretaking capacities such as explaining, briefing, cue giving, knowledge-gap filling and so forth.

#### ***4.2 Identifying Pedagogical Goals***

In simulation-based language learning, the teacher should identify an achievable set of educational goals and align simulation game activities with those goals. Ideally, the goals of learning should be pertinent to participants' lives and interests so that they can practice expressing themselves in the target language during the simulation.

Participants are also encouraged to contribute to setting up goals and scenarios based on real-life situations or their personal interests and experience. This can demonstrate the usefulness of foreign language skills in real life and significantly boost learner motivation and performance.

The learning goals can be general (e.g. global outcome oriented) and individualized (e.g. according to specific functions or personal needs) at the same time. Ultimately, participants are expected to enhance their knowledge and competence in the target language by fulfilling simulated functions, although it is important to bear in mind that learning proceeds differently for different individuals.

For the purpose of this tutorial, the general educational goals will be twofold: to support learners to improve and apply Chinese language skills and cultural knowledge in business, and in alignment with this, to set up and facilitate a specific startup business simulation which requires learners to establish a local travel company in order to identify, design and promote a realistic tourism product to Chinese 'customers' via WeChat. In this process, which is pedagogically staged progressively (more on this in the next section), each participant will also have the opportunity to set their own learning goals and agenda by assuming and executing their functions in the game, working on their weaknesses and with their strengths in order to fulfil those functions, and in turn contributing to and shaping each step of the simulation from their different perspectives and capacities.

#### ***4.3 Planning the Duration and Stages***

Simulation games designed for language classes can be completed in a single class or stretch over a number of sessions, depending on the purpose and the complexity in implementation. The case presented in this tutorial recommends a duration of about ten hours, i.e. five sessions of two hours, with the assistance of the teacher, and approximately one extra hour in between each stage where learners can engage freely in individual or group preparation outside the classroom.

The stages of learning described in this tutorial will simulate the sequence of business development, moving from setting up the company team, to conducting marketing analysis and business planning, to finally marketing products online. Each stage can also be treated as a short-term, self-contained simulation, to be planned as a component part of the global simulation project. This way, and to return to the previous point about goal setting, the overall goals of this tutorial as described above are finetuned into subsets of more specific, short-term goals of learning, and matched by interlinked local tasks. For example, the short-term goal to establish a company may generate learning activities such as reading memos and discussing job descriptions in Chinese, negotiating and redefining personal roles and titles, and working out a culturally sensible company name or brand in Chinese.

#### **4.4 Using the Target Language**

Simulation creates an immersive reality, including virtual reality. In this kind of environment, the target language is often the only language to be used in the entire simulation process. Whether students are sufficiently comfortable with using the target language for communication is a factor to consider before starting the game. Ideally, the target language should be used as much as possible at different stages of simulation. Switching to their first language may undermine the whole idea of sustaining a simulation mode of reality in the classroom.

From such a perspective, this tutorial is recommended for intermediate or advanced learners of Chinese. Participants are expected to use Chinese in all four modes of communication (listening, speaking, reading and writing) wherever possible, with either peers or other interlocutors such as the teacher and the 'customers' at all stages.

#### **4.5 Selecting the Mode of Mediation**

When employing social media or any kind of digital tool in simulation, it is essential to choose the modes that can provide the best features and functions for mediating activities and realizing pedagogical goals. For instance, in business communication, WhatsApp is widely used for text-based instant group messaging, whereas Skype or Zoom is a more common medium for video calls or conferencing. Such factors can influence decisions made during simulation design, in terms of which tool or which features of a tool will be used, involving whom, at what point and for what purpose.

Teachers should also pay attention to characteristics such as the technical challenges and techniques external to the digital tool, associated with game design and modes of teaching. These may include division of groups, in and outside classroom possibilities, online and offline scenarios, and so forth.

In this tutorial, modes of mediation will be selected and deployed not only in terms of the inbuilt functions of WeChat, but, more importantly, in relation to the needs of the simulation as it evolves. For example, in the preparatory stage of a simulation task, group chats can be casual, using mostly brief informal texts and emoticons. But as it develops to the stage of a simulated sales pitch, participants will engage individually in sustained speaking using formal language containing appropriate terminologies and elaborate arguments. For this, they are expected to produce several segments of speech of about sixty seconds each, using the push-and-hold voice messaging function in order to communicate these to the audience (see **Figure 2** for an illustration). When conducting market research, an authentic approach would be to encounter 'customers' by talking directly to people in China in real time via WeChat, either by voice messaging or even by video conferencing if participants feel confident enough. This creates an excellent moment to simulate business interviews, when learners are expected to focus on outcome-driven speaking and listening.

The implementation of such examples in a learning project will become clearer in the next section. For now, it is useful to remember that modes of mediation, including offline and involving no digital mediation, can be drawn flexibly and creatively according to the way the simulation game is planned to progress and how it actually progresses when implemented.

### **5. Implementing the Simulation**

#### **5.1 Installing WeChat**

The WeChat application for smart devices can be downloaded via the link <https://www.wechat.com/en/>. Additionally, a computer-based web version (in Chinese) is available via the link <https://weixin.qq.com/>. For installation, simply follow the auto prompts which are written in English for users outside China (see Appendix for details).

## **5.2 Briefing Participants**

In setting up a simulation game, briefing is a crucial step as it provides participants with the content information, the goals and characteristics of the simulation, and the strategies and vocabulary necessary to complete it. Briefing is the first phase of the simulation but should be approached in a minimalist way. Briefing on language can even be separated from the simulation itself and conducted on a different occasion.

For the purpose of this tutorial, learners are required to participate in a business simulation, which stretches over five to six weeks both in and outside the classroom (with the classroom time being about five or six sessions of two hours). The simulation invites them, in groups of four or five, to set up a travel agency from its inception through research and development of sales promotions in order to cater for the growing number of Chinese tourists in Europe. Participants are required to set up branch offices based in different regions of their current country. These branch offices are negotiated and formed according to each group's joint interests and strengths.

A 'memo' from the 'company headquarters' is to be provided by the instructor, which asks its branch offices to devise new tourist products and marketing strategies for incoming Chinese tourists, based on the results of their own comprehensive market analysis of travellers' tastes and preferences. From within the group, each branch office will appoint its own 'office manager', a 'salesperson', an 'office clerk' and a 'market development representative' accordingly.

The briefing phase is mainly done in class, and it is important to provide participants with information about how to set up a WeChat account at this stage (see 5.1 above).

## **5.3 Conducting Simulation Tasks**

The central stage of the tutorial revolves around simulated business tasks. This is outlined in four progressive steps below.

To start with, participants work together in an offline environment to prepare the setup of their company branch. Briefed by the teacher, they are required to consider the different regions of the country in which they are situated and select a regional office for their company while thinking of a suitable travel company name for marketing in Chinese. Participants also negotiate and decide which position in their company they would like to take, according to their own linguistic, personal and business skills.

Next, participants work online, independently of the teacher, to establish their imagined company virtually on WeChat (see **Figure 4** for an example). This involves collaborative business planning, making considerable use of WeChat and other digital resources that prompt intense in-group communication in which participants interact, debate, discuss and agree on issues that emerge as relevant, interesting and important from the perspective of their individual roles in the company and that of the Chinese tourist market (see **Figure 5** for illustration).

After that, participants move to identifying and performing what a real travel agency does – that is, to design and promote a tourist product through digital marketing and advertising. To further simulate and facilitate cross-cultural business communication, each branch office is asked to make contact with potential Chinese 'customers' (introduced by the teacher) on WeChat, and pitch their product verbally in Chinese directly to these customers and then modify and fine-tune the product design textually based on 'customer' feedback (see screenshot in **Figure 6** as an illustration).

Finally, towards the end of the simulation, each branch office promotes their company and local tourism resources to the wider Chinese market by advertising their business product on



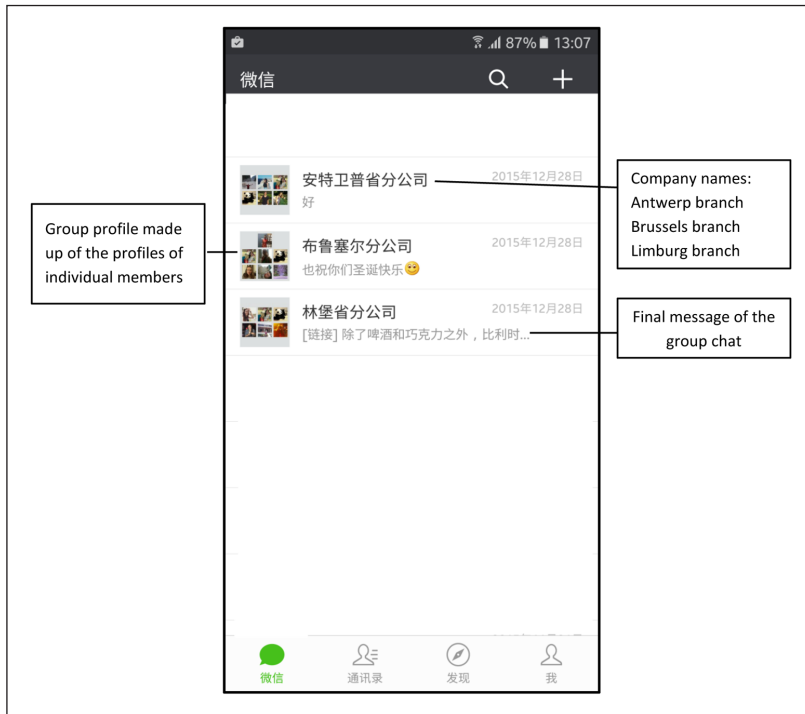


Figure 4: Screenshot of three practice companies formed by learners on WeChat.



Figure 5: An illustration of students' learning process mediated by WeChat.



Figure 6: An illustration of connecting with Chinese 'customers' on WeChat.



Figure 7: Illustration of a tourist guide published on WeChat.

WeChat. They do so by publishing the final written tourist guide of their city or province in Chinese on a selected WeChat official subscription account (see screenshot in **Figure 7** for an example).

### 5.4 Debriefing

The debriefing phase takes place after a period of simulation activities surrounding a particular task. It can be done among the participants themselves, with the teacher and/or with the Chinese audience.

After each business activity, the ‘office manager’ often holds a virtual meeting either on WeChat or in class to discuss with the whole team about their experience of success and failure. During such a debriefing, team members reflect upon a recent experience, discuss what went well or wrong, and identify opportunities for improvement. The teacher, when involved, can start a debriefing by asking each participant to explain briefly what s/he did and why s/he did it. Checklists, questionnaires and recordings can also be used in debriefing.

Another way of debriefing is to involve the Chinese ‘customers’ either in Europe or in China on WeChat. This provides participants with ample feedback on their product design, marketing strategies and also their language and communication skills.

An overview of the tutorial in steps is listed in the table below, which includes tasks and WeChat functionalities involved in different stages of simulation.

### An Overview of the Tutorial in Steps.

Tutorial Steps	Simulation Tasks	Use of WeChat
Installing WeChat		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Download and install WeChat</li> <li>• Create an account with phone number</li> <li>• Add friends on WeChat</li> </ul>
Briefing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Receiving memo from the company headquarters</li> </ul>	
Business simulation tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set up the branch office (choose company name, office location, work out each staff member’s responsibilities)</li> <li>• Market analysis</li> <li>• Business plan</li> <li>• Advertisement and sales strategies</li> <li>• Pitch the tourist product to Chinese ‘customers’</li> <li>• Social media advertising</li> <li>• Showcase the business product</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create group chat</li> <li>• Text messaging, hold-to-talk voice messaging, broadcasting, video calls and conferencing, photograph, data and video sharing</li> <li>• Read news and use local services in official subscription account</li> <li>• Add Chinese ‘customers’ and liaise with them on WeChat</li> <li>• Company promotion on WeChat</li> <li>• Product advertising</li> <li>• Publishing on official subscription account</li> </ul>
Debriefing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Company team meeting</li> <li>• Consult Chinese ‘customers’ and experts</li> <li>• Revise business plan, advertising or sales strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion and reflection among students in group chat</li> <li>• Get ‘customer’ feedback via voice and/or written messages, etc.</li> </ul>

## 6. Some reflections based on experience

The WeChat-mediated simulation described in this tutorial has been offered to students of high proficiency in Chinese since 2015. In the specific case presented as illustrations in this tutorial, the students were enrolled on a master's-level programme and had all previously spent a year studying in China. They had been using WeChat as a main social media platform to connect with China. This was one of the key conditions that motivated us to consider utilizing WeChat as the digital platform for a simulation-based approach in our language class. Based on our observation and learner feedback, the applications of this model in the past few years have helped not only improve students' linguistic competences, but also enable and enhance their acquisition of professional competences, such as team working, decision-making, cross-cultural interaction, understanding the ethical responsibilities of professionals, and efficient and effective communications and negotiations. These competences are vital for real-world success in future workplaces.

In summary, this tutorial is most suitable for teachers facilitating a group of intermediate to advanced learners, ideally at the undergraduate or postgraduate level. The idea of exploring social media tools as demonstrated in the tutorial is particularly relevant to developing blended or fully online language learning in view of the impact of COVID-19 on traditional classrooms. It is hoped that learners will find using social media tools such as WeChat for learning language and culture highly authentic, stimulating and creative. Although the use of WeChat outlined in this tutorial is most relevant to the learning of business Chinese, its underlying concept of simulation and task design is easily adaptable to the teaching of other languages, for a different communicative purpose, or in another cultural context, using similar digital resources as the platform for learning.

### Additional File

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix.** A brief guide on how to use WeChat. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.300.s1>

### Author Information

Xuan Wang is a Senior Lecturer in Chinese Studies in the School of Modern Languages at Cardiff University, UK. She holds a MA in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and Applied Linguistics and a PhD in sociolinguistics. She has taught on university-level Chinese programmes in Belgium, The Netherlands and Britain. Her research covers both applied linguistics and sociolinguistics with reference to Chinese language and culture.

Xiaoli Wu is a lecturer of Chinese in the Department of Sinology and Language Institute at KU Leuven, Belgium. She holds an M. Ed., an M. A. in applied linguistics and a PhD in educational sciences. Her research focuses on second language acquisition, and TCSL (Teaching Chinese as a Second Language) in particular.

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
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