

Social Media and Parental Trust for Teachers: A Qualitative Study in China

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Abstract

Based on WeChat, the most popular social media application in contemporary China, this ethnographical case study reveals that the development of parental trust for teachers presents as an incremental process. It derives from parents' access to information shared by teachers online, unfolds across their engaging in constant collaborations with teachers, and increases with the formation of their close affective ties with teachers. Such a process is greatly dependent upon the formation of parents' *liangxin* (which is typically translated in English as "conscience") in regard to teachers. This study, conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic began, indicates that social media like WeChat has turned out to be a critical agent in parents' relationship with teachers that intervenes in their meaning-making process as well as their experience of building trust towards teachers.

Key Words: parent–teacher relationship, parental trust, social media, ethnography, WeChat, China, teachers, communication

Introduction

It is widely believed that a home–school partnership should be a central component of elementary education and that parental engagement is a crucial avenue for supporting student development (Chan et al., 2021; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). A home–school partnership could only be built upon

positive parent–teacher relationships in which trust, among other qualities, forms a vital and fundamental component (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Trust between parents and teachers is perceived as both a key for students’ achievement and an essential resource for meaningful school improvement (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). High level of parental trust towards teachers enables families to see that schools are safe and empowering, thereby leading to their greater involvement and commitment to the school (Lawson, 2003). On the contrary, as Troman’s (2000) study suggests, low trust might undermine the home–school partnership and become a source of occupational stress for teachers.

For teachers, parental trust placed in them is of paramount importance for their building up confidence and competency in their career development. However, parents are often demanding (McGrath, 2007). In China, educating the next generation is always regarded as the most important agenda of a family (Short et al., 2001). Chinese parents tend to invest heavily in their children and, accordingly, to extremely high expectations from teachers for the children’s success, which, in turn, implies that it is relatively difficult for them to place trust in teachers, and particularly novice teachers who are often perceived as having a lack of practical experience.

However, the past few years have witnessed some positive changes in parent–teacher relationships in China, which may be largely due to the rise in social media. To date, social media have deeply penetrated people’s everyday life (CNNIC, 2016). Social media have also provided new opportunities for trust development among parents and teachers. Yet, this is an undocumented issue so far. In this study, the author drew on an ethnographic approach to investigate the dynamic development of parental trust in teachers in the context of WeChat, the most popular social media application in China.

Parental Trust and Its Development

Educating children requires collective collaboration from the school, community, and family. Trust in this process is particularly important because it entails interdependence and enhances cooperation. Trust lies at the core of parent–teacher relationships (Dunlap & Fox, 2007). As a multifaceted concept, trust is difficult to define in a clear-cut way in social science. According to Rotter (1967), trust refers to “a generalized expectancy held by an individual that the word, promise, or statement of another individual can be relied upon” (p. 652). Holmes and Rempel (1989) regarded trust as “reflecting confident expectations of positive outcomes” (p. 188). Adams and Christenson (1998) drew on Holmes and Rempel’s idea and defined trust between parents and teachers in terms of “confidence,” that is, “another person will act in a way to benefit

or sustain the relationship...to achieve positive outcomes for students” (p. 6). Based on these thoughts, parental trust in this article is understood in a heuristic way, describing a parent’s willingness to rely on a teacher in whom he or she has confidence. Parental trust indicates that a parent knows or expects the trusted teacher will do the right thing that is in his or her child’s best interest.

To date, trust has been extensively studied in educational research. In general, theorists have tended to adopt current views from organizational trust literature to draw on a rational choice assumption to describe trust as a positive outcome of calculative decisions involving relationship between trustors and trustees (Van Maele et al., 2014). While a large part of the literature examines the meanings of trust and recognizes its importance in educational settings, with a few exceptions (see, e.g., Adams & Christenson, 1998; Santiago et al., 2016), it does not directly address parental trust in their relationship with teachers. Rather, parental trust is often passingly mentioned in studies on the topics of home–school partnership or parental involvement. For example, Hoover-Dempsey and her colleagues (2005) briefly point out that trust in parent–teacher relationship requires two-way communication and that teachers should actively initiate the process by sending invitations for involvement to parents. Some other theorists focus on identifying antecedents of teachers’ credibility in their relation to parents. For instance, Dunst and Paget (1991) noticed that parental trust in teachers relies upon several prerequisites, including common goals, shared responsibility, and full disclosure of information. Parental trust in this strand of literature is generally measured through self-reported surveys, such as the Family-School Relationship Survey developed by Adams and Christenson (2000).

Yet, parental trust is not a fixed or static psychological feature. Instead, it emerges as a gradual, iterative, and delicate process. In a wide variety of empirical studies, particularly those from the organizational field (see, e.g., Bachmann, 2001; Kanagaretnam et al., 2010), trust development is commonly understood as the positive outcome of an individual’s learning experiences from his or her past repeated behaviours. Lewicki and Bunker (1995, 1996) proposed that trust development undergoes three stages, namely, calculus-based trust, knowledge-based trust, and identification-based trust. The stage-wise nature suggests that trust requires time to develop, and the longer the duration and history of personal connections, the higher the potential level of trust.

In addition, trust development unfolds as a contextualized process which requires taking cultural background into account. In Chinese society, trust is often understood in terms of *guanxi* (a synonym for the English word “relationship”; Liu, 2008) which is commonly perceived as the fundamental dynamic in personalized networks of influence. Parental trust intertwines inextricably

with a parent's creating, maintaining, deepening, and restoring *guanxi* with the trusted teacher. The development of *guanxi* arises from constant interactions. Solomon and Flores (2001) pointed out that "people...develop trust through interaction and conversation in relationships with each other" (p. 96). The Chinese character that is equivalent of trust is *xin*: 信, which is composed of two elements: *ren* (people) and *yan* (words or wording). It also suggests that trust development emerges through interaction, and, in particular, communication.

In the past several years, one could witness a tremendous evolution taking place in the field of communication technology, which could be well represented by the rise of social media. Social media have profoundly changed people's communication and have also notably reshaped the trust-building process. This has been intensively explored by multiple academic disciplines such as media studies and organizational studies (Grabner-Kräuter & Bitter, 2015). A body of literature is also emerging indicating that social media could be well incorporated into school work as a kind of supplement tool that facilitates the formation of relationship among students, teachers, parents, and principals (Chang & Lee, 2013). These previous studies suggest that the use of social media might open up a space for trust development in parent-teacher relationships.

The Research Setting

With respect to parental trust in China, traditional "relational work" among teachers and parents is mainly accomplished through ritualized formats, including semi-annual parent-teacher meetings (twice a year) and home visits. Home visits are uncommon and unscheduled and are often only conducted to selected families in the case of the occurrence of certain problems such as school bullying or truancy. In these formats, teachers are often in the central position and play the controlling role. As a consequence, these kinds of traditional "relational work" are too often dominated by teachers' one-way communication with parents rather than allowing for a genuine dialogue among them. Moreover, in these formats, parents also have little chance to interact with one another and to work together, which, in turn, has hindered their collective involvement as well as their trust-building in teachers. Previously, the rising computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies, such as email, with their efficiency in disseminating information, were widely adopted to promote parent-teacher relationship. In the U.S., Laho (2019) found that parents and teachers were comfortable using digital tools to communicate, and this opened new opportunities for establishing a strong school community. Juniu (2009) noted that teachers could employ CMC to complement traditional means in providing necessary resources to parents and thereby establishing and maintaining a relationship of trust with them.

In the last several years, parent–teacher relationships have been changed by the flourishing social media. In China, social media in general, and WeChat in particular, have been widely used by both teachers and parents in urban districts. WeChat, which is similar to WhatsApp in Europe, is the dominant social media application in contemporary China. As a quasi-ubiquitous mobile application, WeChat has deeply penetrated into educational settings. It affords establishing connections and maintaining communication among parents and teachers. There are three build-in functions in WeChat that are particularly important for the development of parent–teacher relationships. First, “WeChat group” allows users to create group(s) with the maximum size of 500 members and to allow them to exchange messages, photos, videos, and links to other types of content. In a “WeChat group,” parents and teachers are able to discuss issues of common concern. Second, “friending” enables users to become “friends” and subsequently to send one-to-one messages to and from each other. This function is quite suitable for parents and teachers to build up personal relationships. Third, “Moments,” which is primarily designed for users’ self-presentation, provides opportunities for teachers and parents to share education-related information to a deliberately handpicked audience. Afforded by these built-in functions, Chinese parents are likely to meet teachers online and actively engage themselves in education-related issues. In a sense, WeChat has become a breeding ground for small, community-based group cohesion and local mobilization among teachers and parents.

According to Farman, (2013) the interweaving of social media into the fabric of educational settings has effectively triggered a cultural shift in the “process of inscribing meaning into our contemporary social and spatial interactions” (p. 1). It is therefore apt for the current author to make a point that social media like WeChat have extended and reshaped the patterns of interactions so that parent–teacher relationships and the associated trust would be created, maintained, and developed in a distinct way from that through traditional face-to-face ritual interactions. Such a change afforded by social media holds the potential for parents’ developing trust towards teachers.

Methodology

In this study, the author took a qualitative approach to examine parents’ experience of trust in teachers. Patulny and Lind (2007) maintained that qualitative fieldwork is quite suitable to investigate the formation of social goods including trust at a micro level. According to Lewicki et al. (2006), qualitative methods, and longitudinal qualitative methods in particular, with their focus on the development of facets and bandwidth in relationship, are more likely to

allow insights into the transformational process of trust. Moreover, given that WeChat by nature is a semi-closed platform, the inherent subtle dynamics of power and exclusion suggests that parents' experience of trust are likely only accessible through qualitative approaches.

This study is part of a larger ethnographic project ranging from September 2017 to December 2019 on teacher development in the social media era. The data analyzed here is drawn from parents of two classes of students in an urban elementary school in Zhaoqing, a city located in southern China. The two classes were respectively managed by Ms. Juan and Ms. Sun (pseudonyms), who graduated from normal universities and began their careers in late August 2017. Both of them taught first grade at the time the research project started. Ms. Sun taught Chinese, and Ms. Juan taught mathematics. The two novice teachers were selected as the focus in this study mainly because they were facing more challenges than their older counterparts in earning trust from parents, and they are also savvy in utilizing WeChat which has become an indispensable component of their social life. Like many other novice teachers in China, Ms. Juan and Ms. Sun served as a class teacher who would loop with the children from first grade to sixth grade at the elementary schools. Soon after they started to work as class teachers, they each created groups in WeChat to accommodate parents¹ of the students in their respective classes.

Participants

Permission was first obtained from Ms. Juan and Ms. Sun and then from the principal of their school. After that, the researcher was introduced by Ms. Juan and Ms. Sun into their respective WeChat groups for parents. Following this, the researcher made an announcement to give the parents a detailed explanation of the purpose and procedure of the study. Then the researcher provided the parents a written consent form which was taken home in a sealed envelope by their children. The consent form clearly addressed participants' rights, the researcher's promise to protect their privacy and confidentiality, and the relevant contact information. Subsequently, 32 parents in Ms. Juan's class and 36 parents in Ms. Sun's class signed the consent form and sent it back to the researcher. Six parents in total (4 in Ms. Juan's class, 2 in Ms. Sun's class) did not sign due to the fact that these parents were migrant workers who were inaccessible at that time. Several days later, the researcher attempted to contact these six migrant parents via WeChat and sent them a digital version of consent form. They all gave the researcher an oral agreement to take part in the project.

Procedure

Consistent with an online ethnographical approach (Crichton & Kinash, 2003; Hine, 2000), the researcher drew on the twin methods of observation and interviews to access the experience of the two cohorts of parents in their relationship with the teachers in WeChat groups, the key “field sites” of the present study. Given that ethnography involves a researcher’s extended and experiential participation in a specific context, the researcher at the first phase of the study maintained constant immersion in the two WeChat groups to collect the textual and other forms of artifacts, such as links of webpage, pictures, and the like. Such a long-term immersion increases the likelihood for the researcher to encounter important moments in participants’ online interactions and to experience revelatory incidents (Yin, 2013). In order to avoid influencing the participants’ regular interaction in any particular direction, the researcher deliberately limited his involvement. Most of time, he remained there quietly, following the discussion threads. Later, the majority of participants had also permitted the researcher to establish personal connection with them via the function of “friending,” which thus allowed him to collect their postings on Moments. On some occasions, the researcher engaged the parents directly by contacting them personally through one-to-one messaging for explanations of their actions or speeches in WeChat.

In order to investigate the development of parents’ perceptions on particular topics occurring in the WeChat group and/or the Moments, the researcher conducted 16 offline interviews individually with 12 parents (see Table 1) via video chat. The interviews were organized by customized questions which reflected the researcher’s observation of their interaction in WeChat groups and/or the Moments. During the interviews, the researcher followed guidance provided by Miller and Glassner (1997) to reach parents’ experience through the practice of listening and encouraging them to share their perspectives as insiders. This enabled the researcher to deepen his understanding of parental perceptions of and attitudes towards the teachers and to bracket preconceived or stereotypical notions about “what was going on” in the participants’ minds.

Ethnography relies heavily on researcher reflexivity during the whole process and “the acuity of the researcher-as-instrument” (Sherry, 1991, p. 572) is the key for a qualified inquiry. Therefore, the researcher kept on recording his thoughts, perceptions, and feelings by using a notebook during the whole data collection process, as well as during analysis phase. The field notes also served to triangulate data gathered from observation and interviews.

Table 1. Overview of 12 Parents Who Participated Interviews

	Parent (pseudonym)	Role	Occupation	Level of Education
Parents from teacher Sun's class	Tong	Mother	Worker	High School
	Jinlin	Mother	Unemployed	High School
	Yuchen	Father	Migrant Worker	Junior School
	Zen	Mother	Business Owner	Junior College (2 years)
	Liutian	Mother	Government Servant	College Bachelor (4 years)
Parents from teacher Juan's class	Wangjin	Father	Professional	College Bachelor (4 years)
	Wujun	Mother	Business Owner	Junior School
	Tiantian	Mother	Worker	Junior School
	Meiru	Mother	Migrant Worker	High School
	Wenzi	Mother	Unemployed	Junior College (2 years)
	Junjun	Mother	Professional	College Bachelor (4 years)
	Liu Yong	Mother	Government Servant	College Bachelor (4 years)

Data Analysis

Based on grounded theory, the researcher followed the procedural guidelines proposed by Corbin and Strauss (2008) in data analysis. Given that “no single source of information can be trusted to provide a comprehensive perspective” (Patton, 1990, p. 244), multiple sources of data—including the records of parents’ posts and utterances in WeChat groups, the transcribed interviews, and the researcher’s field notes—were integrated into the analysis. By doing so, the researcher aimed to minimize potential bias, reduce interpretive problems, and enhance verisimilitude (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003). The postings and utterances from the two WeChat groups were first archived and managed in a Word data file. Then, the multiple sources of data were skimmed several times by the researcher to gain a holistic sense. Transcripts were then carefully reviewed with a focus on instances of parents’ perceptions about their relationship with the teachers. This process was to gauge the development of parental trust for teachers. Codes were identified based on units of meaning during this stage, then later collapsed into broad themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). These procedures facilitated a rigorous analysis process. In addition, the researcher’s prolonged engagement and familiarity with the specific cultural context enhance his sense of the data, allowing him to become a storyteller about the development of parental trust for the teachers.

Findings and Discussion

WeChat was first used by the two teachers as an efficient messaging tool to deliver information, for instance and among others, announcing the school's policy and assigning homework. However, the use of WeChat also inadvertently promoted parents' educational involvement and consequently led to the development of their trust in the teachers. In this article, the development of parental trust afforded by WeChat is presented in the following four forms: information-based trust, collaboration-based trust, affect-based trust, and *li-angxin*-based trust.

Information-Based Trust

At the beginning phase, the teachers first came to the parents as a stranger inviting them to be there in WeChat groups. Parents often acted as receptacles for teachers' authority and, accordingly, made few or even no responses. Some parents liked to send out emojis to show their knowing of the information sent by the teachers. There were no regular conversations, but only a one-way flow of information from teachers to parents occurring in the two WeChat groups. When interviewed, Tiantian (note: all parent names used throughout are pseudonyms) gave her explanation for her silence in the WeChat group:

I would like to talk to her [Ms. Juan]. But I think it is impolite to inquire something more. A teacher would tell parents what they should know. It is inappropriate for me to say too much because it might bother her and trouble her.

Later, however, occasional discussions began occurring, particularly at the time when the teachers shared issues of common concern with parents, such as students' peer bullying, the school's reform, and the like. Parents learned more from other group members and attempted to express their own viewpoints. This was validated by Pang and Watkins' (2000) study's finding that parent-teacher communication mainly depended on the occurrence of problems. These occasional discussions, however, inadvertently opened up an avenue for both teachers and parents to get to know one another better, which, as Mazer et al.'s (2009) study indicated, can lead to the emergence of trust development.

Yet there is one key issue remaining unclear: what kind of information could be potentially important in parents' building trust in teachers? From parents' point of view, teachers' character or virtue-related information, which is embodied in their relationship with students, is the key for their trustworthiness. In this regard, Wenzhi said when interviewed:

I got to know a lot about Ms. Juan through WeChat. She would like to post what she had done in the WeChat group or in her Moments. In my eyes, she is a responsible and hard-working teacher. Although she is a novice teacher, I believe she can deal with the challenges in her teaching.

Parents were likely to make their judgment about a teacher in terms of character, such as benevolence, integrity, diligence, and fulfilling responsibility rather than competency and richness in teaching experience. This accords with Chinese culture which grants specific respect to teachers primarily for their virtue (Zhao, 2013). As the two teachers shared more information in WeChat, whether it was official announcements or issues of common concern, parents were nudged and invited to become aware of what happened to their children during school and, along with this, to know more about teachers, especially their character.

Teachers' self-disclosure is pivotal for parental trust in the time of crisis. This was evident in Ms. Sun's dealing with an incident in which two boys from her class got bruised because of a fight during the break time. This incident took place in late October 2017. Ms. Sun posted detailed information and her coping strategies to the WeChat group as well as her Moments. Many parents sent "like" to Ms. Sun or added comments to express their viewpoints, such as the following:

The boys are naughty. It is impossible for a teacher to watch them every moment. You [Ms. Sun] have done your best.

Well done! Ms. Sun! You are quite different from others because you did not conceal the information.

Through Ms. Sun's constant self-disclosure, the incident was converted from a crisis to an opportunity for her to earn trust from parents. This incident made parents feel concern or worry about their children's safety in the school. However, as Ms. Sun reported the details of the incident via WeChat, the parents felt their concern or worry was responded to well, which, in turn, brought positive consequences for their relationship with Ms. Sun. Having been comforted by Ms. Sun through her self-disclosure, the parents in the WeChat group consequently obtained a sense of "*fang xin*," that is, feeling assured.

The impact of teachers' self-disclosure on parental trust went beyond parent-teacher relationships on WeChat and spilled over to parent-child relationships at home. Triggered by teachers' self-disclosure, parents were more likely to talk with their children, asking them something about their school lives. They would then post the information provided by their children to the WeChat groups as feedback for the teachers and/or as a response to concern from other parents. For instance, in December 2017, Ms. Juan initiated

a pedagogical reform in which she put the name of 10 daily star students on the blackboard and photographed the list and sent it to the WeChat group that could be seen by all parents. This triggered many parent–child interactions which were shared and discussed widely by the parents. It is through their children’s “word of mouth” that the parents obtained a more comprehensive picture of the teachers, which has consequently promoted the generation and development of their trust for the teachers.

Collaboration-Based Trust

Since the WeChat groups were created by the two teachers and the parents were invited to join in, there has been a huge amount of interactions taking place, often presenting in a sporadic form. As suggested by Boyd (2007), WeChat allows for asynchronous communication, and it also extends the period of existence of any speech acts. The interaction among parents and teachers on WeChat, albeit seemingly being sporadic, is by no means ephemeral. Instead, it could breed joint understanding and coherent collaboration. For this, Junjun shared her experience during an interview:

I once complained in WeChat about the bad manners of my children at home, and this was echoed by some of the other parents. Ms. Juan appeared and shared some working strategies with us. She made me acknowledge that I was not alone in facing these challenges.

As illustrated in the parent’s words “I was not alone,” the WeChat groups have allowed for parents to develop a sense of embeddedness, that is, feeling a subjective link or psychological experience of being the same as others. Josselson (1992) argued: “our embeddedness in a social context limits and gives meaning to all our other relationships. Embeddedness is the soil in which other relatedness grows” (pp. 178–179). In this sense, trust given to parents’ relational experience with the teachers could be seen as an effect of embeddedness. Yet, parents’ sense of embeddedness could be only achieved in and through parents’ engagement in interactions with others, which has been largely facilitated and promoted by their use of WeChat. In Rosen et al.’s (2011) words: “Communication technologies facilitate the self-organizing of virtual communities into collectives, allowing voluntary participants to gain a sense of belonging” (p. 985).

Rohe (2004) noted, however, that simply being part of a culture or a community is not necessarily linked to the generation of trust. Rather, it is the content and extent of the interactions that have an accumulative impact on trust building. In the present study, as has been noticed, parents were able to lever the embedded network relationships afforded by WeChat to initiate

and organize a number of meaningful parent–teacher collaborations. For instance, in January 2019, there was a fantasy online role playing game, Honour of King, gaining explosive popularity among students in Ms. Sun’s class. She posted some pictures of a group of students who were absorbedly discussing the game before and after classes, calling for parents to take some actions to deal with the issue. Ms. Sun obtained many immediate positive responses from the parents. Some of them initiated a project to encourage parent–child book reading after school, and Ms. Sun was invited to be the supervisor. When the project was under way, the parents were willing to constantly share their experience in the WeChat group which, in turn, made them feel more committed to the cause of the project and more a part of the online community. At the same time, they could also receive support and guidance from Ms. Sun and, along with this, they could also instill their overall trust towards her. Zen expressed her gratitude to Ms. Sun when interviewed:

Ms. Sun is the key role in our community. She brings us together here in WeChat. Without her, there would be no cooperation like the parent–child book reading project among us. I admit that she has done much more than she was required to as a teacher.

Thanks to WeChat, the majority of parents were able to become aware that they were embedded within a larger shared context. This has enabled them to work together as collaborative partners for the benefit of the children. In doing so, parents could further get to know the teachers’ disposition and character. As illustrated in the previous excerpt, Ms. Sun was perceived by the parent as a self-sacrificing teacher who “has done much more than she was required to as a teacher.” According to Putnam (2000), parents’ trust for teachers in this sense became “thick” which occurred in the dense network afforded by WeChat. In addition, as suggested by Putnam and Feldstein (2004), the inherent trust within a parent–teacher relationship is not the end in and of itself but is instead a type of catalyst for further collaboration and more effective engagement which creates an array of opportunities for trust accumulation.

Affect-Based Trust

Traditionally, parents in general feel somewhat subordinate to teachers because teachers are regarded as the authority of knowledge and morality (Lasky, 2005). A parent might become close to a teacher and, yet, such a kind of closeness often has the quality of reverence and admiration, rather than the symmetric status expectation of friendship. WeChat served as a bridge between home and school. It also reshaped the relationship intimacy among parents and teachers. Some theorists such as McEwan (2013) have demonstrated that social

media could be used as a facilitator for greater relational closeness. According to O'Sullivan et al., (2004) the various built-in functions in WeChat has effectively increased its inherent mediated immediacy: "the communicative cues... that can shape perceptions of psychological closeness between interactants" (p. 471). As has been noticed, the constant interactions in WeChat have fostered an emergent sentiment of "we-ness" among parents and teachers, which consequently allowed for the development of inherent affective ties. In this regard, a migrant worker, Yuchen, and a business owner, Wujun, shared their experiences as follows:

Yuchen: I would like to meet her [Ms. Sun] individually on WeChat to discuss about educating my children. She is always there together with us and is kind and patient to respond to my concerns.

Wujun: She [Ms. Juan] is approachable and easygoing, just like my neighbour girl, but not a remote, inaccessible authority.

As illustrated in the two excerpts, parents in the present study have been greatly empowered by their usage of WeChat which has enabled them to befriend teachers so that the teachers could be analogically perceived as the girls living next door. The use of WeChat has effectively reduced the power imbalance, thereby opening up a space for the development of affective closeness in parent-teacher relationship.

The parents' friendship with teachers might be coupled with instrumental concerns for maximizing the benefit of their own children. Yet, blending affective closeness with instrumental relationship has effectively deepened parental trust for teachers. Afforded by WeChat, some parents could easily invite teachers to their spontaneous education events, such as the aforementioned parent-child reading project. Several parents even took the further step of inviting the teachers to join in their close *guanxi* circle (tightly bound social network). For instance, in October 2018, Ms. Sun updated a text post in Moments, jokingly saying that several parents had enthusiastically introduced their relatives or friends to be her boyfriends and this, albeit being funny for her, made her feel that she was cared for by the parents.

It appears that such a form of affect-based trust could be accomplished at expense of teacher's work-life balance. This might be unacceptable in the mainstream Western culture where teachers' professionalism is often defined with a stress that teachers should distance themselves from parents for the sake of professional integrity (Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996). Yet, in Chinese parents' view, the notion of teachers is understood in a holistic sense of the person, and teachers' trustworthiness is primarily a matter of character or virtue. A person's character or virtue is largely embodied in his or her relationship or *guanxi*

with others. Therefore, it is acceptable for parents to establish affective bonds with teachers, without regarding the teachers' professional–private dichotomies, and, along with this, to place an extremely high level of trust in teachers.

Liangxin-Based Trust

In and through constant collaboration via WeChat, parents increasingly played an active role in the educational process. They generated a huge amount of online content over time, which, in a sense, has brought a powerful digital environment into being. WeChat is no longer simply a messaging channel, but rather can be seen as a thriving space for the emergence of shared values and mutual understanding on education. Such an online environment has, at least temporarily, gained attention and cultivated awareness and commitment from parents. Being embedded in such an environment, parents have the opportunities to learn more about education and the role of the teacher, which, in turn, enabled them to obtain a more comprehensive delineation of role expectations and obligations by the teachers as well as by themselves. They also became more reflective in their relation with the teachers which made it possible for them to cultivate an appreciative attitude towards teacher. In this regard, Liuyong, a government servant, shared her experience:

I am not a bystander anymore. As I worked with the teacher in educating my child, I got to know that to be a teacher is not an easy job. I tried to step into the shoes of Ms. Juan. I could imagine what I might act like in her particular situation.

In December 2018, there was a text post updated in Jinlin's Moments to show her empathetic understanding of teachers:

A teacher is the person who shares no blood link with your kids but is willing to care for their progress. She always treats your kids in a positive way and pays every effort to help them reach their potential. She is always ready to dedicate herself for the benefit of all the kids in the classroom, without complaint or regrets.

To be reflective connoted the meaning that parents were exercising their own *liangxin* (conscience), which is defined in Chinese culture as an inner knowledge that gives people awareness and guidance in order to distinguish between right and wrong (Taylor, 2009). Liuyong's experience and Jinlin's text post (each mentioned above) illustrate that parents have undergone a constant process of learning which, albeit being informal and casual, occurred as a result of interconnections afforded by WeChat and, at the same time, represented their endeavor to live by *liangxin*.

In China, trust is firstly understood in the terrain of morality, which suggests that parental trust is an integrative element of their own virtue. To trust a teacher is a kind of “right” moral choice. In this sense, parental trust can be aptly perceived as a cultural norm. This might be partly due to the fact that teachers are traditionally ascribed with particularly high status, signalling that they deserve to receive unconditional trust from parents. Yet, in the present study, such a cultural norm has been established mainly in and through the constant interactions via WeChat. With the development of mutual understanding, collaborative participation, and affective closeness among parents and teachers, their co-constructed virtual community has evolved into a small-scale, family-like network which provided not only a reservoir of resources but also feelings of belonging and worth. Trust is the crucial principle to coordinate expectations and interaction in its members’ coping with the uncertainty inherent to the educational process.

There were some cases in which the two teachers were in a crisis of credibility. For instance, one parent once proposed that Ms. Juan should increase the task difficulty in students’ math assignments, while Ms. Juan held a different view and refused to follow the parent’s suggestion. The parent then reported this issue to the principal who later forced Ms. Juan to meet the parent’s need. Ms. Juan felt sad that her teaching had been intervened upon and shared her viewpoints in the WeChat group. She was soon echoed by many parents, and the majority expressed their support for her in the WeChat group.

Wangjin: In my mind, what Ms. Juan has done is correct. It is impossible for her to make every parent satisfied. It is such a big family here on WeChat.

Liuyong: This is not to say, however, Ms. Juan is perfect. She is still a novice teacher. It is no good to complain about her teaching style. The teacher needs to grow up, so do we as the parents. We should be more reasonable and fair.

Parental trust here is akin to a type of family ethics (Liang, 2013), carrying a meaning of social norm that determines which action is in the best interest of the community. As illustrated in the words “the teacher needs to grow up, so do we as the parents,” the teacher’s welfare is not merely her own business, but rather a part of collective duty. Parental trust embodied their commitment, entailing them to engage in effective and constructive communication in times of conflict. Seen in this light, trust is a way through which parents were able to help the teacher move on and, ultimately, benefit their children as well as themselves. It is in this sense that trust can be viewed as a kind of “social glue” (Fukuyama, 1995), binding the parent–teacher community

online. The parents' responses here reflect that a regime of trust has been consequently fostered and sustained in and through WeChat. Such a regime of trust continuously worked on parents and served to sustain the development of parent–teacher relationships.

Concluding Remarks

This ethnographic case study illustrated the dynamic development of parental trust in teachers in the specific context of WeChat. Essentially, it derived from parents' access to information shared by teachers online, unfolded across constant collaboration and coordination, and increased with the formation of close affective bonds among parents and teachers. Accordingly, parental trust undergoes the following three forms: information-based trust, collaboration-based trust, and affect-based trust. These findings are, to some extent, in accordance with that of some previous studies (see, e.g., Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Lewicki & Bunker, 1995, 1996) regarding trust development as somewhat a stagewise process and a positive, accumulative outcome of prior experiences. Yet, this is not to say there are clear-cut conceptual boundaries among these three forms of trust. Instead, the three forms of trust are always intertwined with one another and develop in a complementary way. In this process, WeChat served not merely as a platform that was more favorable than traditional means for the development of parental trust in teachers. Rather, it has effectively extended a communication logic that has the power to drive social action of both parents and teachers, including self-disclosure, collaborative cooperation, and the associated affective bonding.

More interestingly, the present study also indicates that parental trust development is not merely based on their rational calculation of gain and loss, which is widely perceived as the underlying mechanism of trust development in mainstream organizational literature (Luhmann, 2000; Misztal, 2013), but it depended more upon the formation of their *liangxin* (conscience) in regard to the trusted teachers through their practice of reflexive judgment (Green, 2001). The use of WeChat is particularly conducive to such a kind of “reflexive judgment.” The digital environment in WeChat, which presents as a semi-closed online parent–teacher community, constantly distributes awareness and knowledge about teaching as well as teachers. This has effectively provided parents rich clues to learn to be a parent, a parent who should be a supporter, a partner, and also trusting in their relationship with teachers. In addition, more importantly, such an online community transformed itself into to a small-scale, family-like network in which parental trust in a sense became a type of common ethical principle that coordinated their activities to obtain the shared goals in educational process.

Although this study is based on WeChat, a semi-closed social media platform, and conducted in the specific cultural context of China, its findings well demonstrate that social media like WeChat are no longer mere platforms for circulating information. Rather, social media have turned out to be a critical agent in parents' relationship with teachers that facilitates their meaning-making process as well as their experience of building trust towards teachers.

This is an exploratory study on the potential through social media for parental trust in teachers. It has also informed relevant stakeholders in the education system of the power of teachers using social media in their relational work with parents. Social media have widened the channel for teachers to establish and maintain relationships with parents, and the mediated parent–teacher connection has opened up new possibilities for the development and maintenance of inherent trust. Yet, the development and accumulation of parental trust is largely based on constant and regular interactions which require teachers to inject affective concerns or friendship. This implies the potential risks for teachers' work–life balance and, in particular, their professionalism. Questions associated with the potential risks should be addressed in future studies.

Endnote

¹Typically, it is the mothers, not the fathers, in the teachers' contacts. In this sense, parent–teacher relationships in this article can be remarkably equivalent with mother–teacher relations. For the sake of convenience, we still use the traditional term parent–teacher relationships.

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