



# You had me at 'hello'

Newlyweds Teo Soo Kng and Michelle Phua met through iChat — and their connection developed into more than just words by MELODY TAN

The Internet is a big place. Yet Teo Soo Kng, 37, a researcher in biomedical engineering, and 32 year-old Michelle Phua, who works in healthcare, managed to find each other through the iChat platform, which is accessible to registered Social Development Network (SDN) users. They first spoke to each other through iChat in February 2011.

"It was Chinese New Year and I didn't have anything to do," recalls Michelle. "As a *DUET* subscriber, I recalled reading about iChat in the magazine and decided to log on out of curiosity."

As for Soo Kng, he had become a regular on iChat after discovering it just two weeks before Michelle did. "I wanted to widen my social circle, so I chatted with whoever was there to see if there was anyone I could click with. I messaged Michelle because I found her iChat nickname quite unique — I think I asked her what it meant."

Laughing, Michelle admits, "I don't remember him asking what it meant! Anyway, my nickname — Vadium — was something I coined. There's no meaning that I'm aware of." She adds that Soo Kng came across as an experienced iChat user, and she ended up getting some tips from him on how to use it.

The two eventually took the relationship a step further and began to chat frequently on the phone over the following weeks. They would talk almost every night, often until one or two in the morning. "I can't remember what we talked about but she always had something interesting or funny to say," Soo Kng says.

## GOING WITH THE FLOW

Their first date took place after Michelle returned from a holiday to Langkawi. They met for dinner at a restaurant in Sembawang. "The date went well enough for Soo Kng to say at the end of it that he wanted to see me again," says Michelle. "And though he wasn't as lively as he was on the phone, his witty insights and easy banter made it easy for



*Soo Kng and Michelle at Fort Canning, on the day they registered their marriage*

*Soo Kng and Michelle on holiday in Italy*



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— Michelle

me to say yes to a second date.”

They proceeded to meet up whenever they were free, and would go for movies or meals on weekends. Once, while out strolling around VivoCity, he reached over and held her hand. Surprised by this, Michelle went home to ponder over what had happened. “I realised he hadn't officially asked me to be his girlfriend, so on the next date I made him confirm our status.”

Soo Kng explains his seeming reluctance to make things official. “I thought we were just going with the flow! I was quite shy. Three to four months into our relationship, we did talk about whether we wanted to settle down with each other.”

What won him over was Michelle's caring nature. Soo Kng, who has two older sisters, lives with his mother. “I'd bring Michelle home for dinner and she would always talk to my mum, watch TV with her and tell her about the things we did. I really liked this about her.”

Similarly, Soo Kng's thoughtful affection was part of what she found attractive about him. “He's caring and attentive, and surprises me at times,” says Michelle. “I always think he's not listening but he remembers all the

small details — like I once casually mentioned I wanted a Nespresso machine a long time before Christmas. It was just a passing remark, but he really bought it for me that Christmas!”

### A PRACTICAL PAIR

The couple made plans to apply for a HDB Build-to-Order flat, and selected a five-room apartment in Sengkang in September 2011. In October 2012, they registered their marriage and held their customary wedding ceremony this March. Their new home will be ready in August 2015. In the meantime, they live with Soo Kng's mother.

“There was no traditional proposal,” says Soo Kng. “We were having lunch with Michelle's parents

and I asked her father for permission to marry her. I did so because Michelle places a lot of emphasis on family and is so close to her parents.”

The newlyweds enjoy spending time together and exploring new places, especially dining venues. They also enjoy travelling and visited the United States in October 2011 and Italy in May 2012. Each trip was not without its challenges. “He's very 'last-minute', whereas I like to plan in advance,” says Michelle of her husband. “It did test my patience, but we've learnt to compromise.”

Soo Kng agrees. “Both of us are pretty stubborn, so we do have disagreements,” he says wryly. “We try to work things out by learning to respect each other's views — I tend to be more logical, so for issues that require logical input, she lets me take the lead. She takes care of situations where we deal with people. We tap on one another's strengths and expertise.”

The couple, who are planning another vacation this year, reflect on what they've learnt during the course of their relationship so far. Says Michelle, “It's important to be able to voice your expectations and be honest with each other, because the other party cannot read your mind.”

Soo Kng agrees. “It's important to communicate and not hide anything, even if there are differences in opinions,” he says. “It's okay to disagree with one another, as long as we agree to disagree.”

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