Using Webzine to Create Effective Communications Between China and the West

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Abstract. Knowing the development and opinion from other nations is essential for designing usable product for different cultures. Effective communications between different countries is invaluable, however, often inhabited by the problem of limited language access. This paper will provide insight and practical experiences about how we offer swift and free information exchanges between UI practitioners in the west and in China by a bilingual webzine, - uiGarden, that provides an opportunity for researchers and practitioners who work in the user experience design field in the Chinese and the English speaking worlds to exchange views and deepen each other’s knowledge in the field.

Keywords: cultural exchange, China, cross-culture usability, webzine.

1 Introduction

With an ancient civilization and a population of 1.4 billion people, China has become one of the fastest-growing countries in the world. In the economic arena, it has a rapid growth of 9.5% per year in the past two decades. China is becoming potentially the biggest market and an economic giant in the near future. Therefore, China has attracted attention and investments from all over the world. With the rapid growth of the Chinese economy and the process of globalisation in recent years, Chinese enterprises realized that they had to strengthen their competitive edge to be able to survive and compete in the future.

At the same time, more and more multinational companies have entered the Chinese market. There is also a flow of people out of China. There are more and more Chinese students, businessmen, practitioners and researchers in immigrating countries like Canada, the United States, as well as Europe. Domestic enterprises in the west also have customers with Chinese backgrounds. These two factors have brought about a rapid increase in demand for usability.

The fact of encountering contracting cultures can be an enriching facet of modern life with intercultural exchanges, the proverbial ‘melting pot’ but also bewilderment, misunderstandings and miscommunication. Usability professionals both at the west and China are facing new challenges brought by the inosculation between the east and the west when designing usable and enjoyable user experience for their users.
HCI and user experience design has captivated more and more designers, usability specialists, information architects, software engineers, and cognitive scientists, etc. to step into its field. There are 32 HCI consultancies registered on the British HCI group’s web site [1] and 242 companies registered on HCI Bibliography web site [2]. Every year more than 50 conferences related to HCI are held around the world; about 100 books and 400 articles are published [3].

HCI and usability emerged in China much later than it did in the west, really only establishing itself as a field after 2000 and especially more significantly since 2003. Usability practice in China started from activities conducted by multinational companies, some setting up usability groups. Stiff international competition and the desire for development have also made user experience an important issue for many leading Chinese companies, some maintain usability groups of over twenty people and have integrated user-centered design (UCD) into their processes. Usability methodology in design is also being used in Chinese domestic large-scale enterprises. For example, focus groups and usability testing were used in the product design and develop cycle of the Software product, - ‘Happy Home’ of Lenovo group Ltd., the biggest IT Company in China.

However the growth of the usability field in China and a community of interest has led to the formation of professional organizations. Founded in 2004, ACM SIGCHI China [http://www.hci.org.cn], sponsors an annual national conference. UPA China [http://www.upachna.org] was set up in 2004 in Shanghai and organizes the User Friendly conference every year. The European Union-funded Sino-European Systems Usability Network project [http://www.sesun-usability.org] has organised four seminar and workshop tours around China and conducts joint usability studies in China. The first Harmonic Human Machine Environment conference (HHME) was held in October 2005; approximately 200 people, mainly from computer academia around China, attended.

2 Cultural Differences

Significant cultural differences exist within each country. China’s population consists of 56 officially recognized nationalities, with the Han nationality (94%) most numerous. Although there are many different local dialects and accents, Chinese writing is uniform throughout the country, owing to the government’s long-standing efforts to unify the language.

The global HCI community’s understanding of the practical relevance of cultural issues in HCI has mirrored the timescale of the development of the subjects in China. In the last ten years HCI practitioners have changed their approach significantly to embrace cross-cultural development. When defining culture, researchers often refer to patterns of values, attitudes, and behaviours which are shared by two or more people. They further point out that culture is socially acquired, and that relationships with other people, relationships with the environment, and assumptions in term of space and language (for example) affect and shape culture, and are themselves affected by the culture [4]. Culture remains difficult to study, alone and certainly in relation to HCI practices. It is in particularly difficult to identify meanings, attitudes and expectations, not to mention the deeply embedded values and beliefs behind people’s