

# 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 inhibited 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

thoughts, behaviours and actions. People's behaviours might be influenced by other factors (e.g., environmental conditions) rather than by their cultural traits, and the reasons for, and meaning of, an action can seldom be observed wholly and directly.

Studies in cross-cultural HCI have often embraced some consideration of cultural cognitive models. The model of national culture proposed by Hofstede has been frequently involved in the intercultural study of the use of systems [5]. However being based on a study of IBM employees in the 1970s there are significant gaps for the developing world.

Most Western software developers would support the principles of user-centred design but underlying concepts and assumptions are derived from USA / Northern European cultures. It is inevitable that those tools and techniques which involve users the most would be those very techniques which were most sensitive to cultural issues and the most susceptible to misinterpretations which could have serious impact on the quality of communication between designers and users.

Up to now, both non-native and native personnel have practiced usability in China [6]. The former were mainly involved in projects conducted by multinational companies, and their projects were usually supported by local recruiters, translators, moderators, and facilities. However, valuable information is sometimes hidden in subtle cues or deeply rooted in the social and cultural background, so barriers of language and culture can make a difference in usability studies. With the growth of local usability expertise, the "localization" of usability practice is an inevitable trend, and it will be reinforced by a difference in personnel costs.

### **3 uiGarden Webzine**

#### **3.1 Motivation**

The geographical world is shrinking virtually everyday. People encounter different cultures as a matter of course in their daily lives. As user experience designers who have worked both in the east and in the west, we would like to help weave usability and cultures together. There's much potential to explore the Chinese market, - nearly one forth of the world's population [7]. On the other hand, we also want to bring the newest research and development in the west to China, in order to help the Chinese design and usability industry to keep up with the world.

The clamour is for rapid information access and exchange. Consumers are click happy and they expect instant feedback. Savvy web users, no matter where their geographical locations are, have no patience when it comes to net access. Even so, it is essential in designing for other cultures to understand their customs, habits and taboos. It is imperative to be aware of the particularities of the targeted community. There's also a demand for sharing experience with others. There is a plethora of on-line communities; discussion boards and mailing lists for exchanging ideas and thoughts. However, language barriers make it still difficult on exchanging information and experiences with the Far East. For example, at the Interaction Designers discussion group, many list members have complained that there's not enough research on other cultures and people make mistakes when developing product to the Far East market. Designers need to communicate with peers from other cultures.

Although the number of people in China dedicated full-time to usability practice is still small, maybe around 400, many product designers and developers are interested in usability. They are young, full of enthusiasm, and eager to learn. Of the people who are most interested in usability, quite a few are from design backgrounds with some others from programming background, probably because many companies employ design-trained people for user-interface design jobs.

At the first Sino-European Usability Seminar Tour held in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, more than 200 people attended, with eighty percent from industry. Several companies sent more than ten of their employees to the event. A survey we conducted during the tour revealed that most of these companies have set up usability-related positions and departments. The respondents said they believed that usability would become more important in their organisations and that the major challenges at the moment are to master usability practices and skills and then to get their work recognized by their bosses and product-line units. Among all the aspects of knowledge sharing, Chinese practitioners are particularly long for customised practical instructions on methods of 'best practice' within the west for the development of on line applications (and indeed other areas) in the Chinese context that will not only make them be aware of UCD theory but also benefit their daily activities at work. Therefore, they wanted to attend training courses and learn from case studies so as to be able to start practicing usability in their daily work quickly.

However, in contrast to the rising expectation of theory and methodology practice, there are less than 20 research labs conducting HCI research in China and only a few of these is doing usability research and there is still no dedicated journal or conference in the subject of usability [8]. The limited existence of this area inevitably had some negative influence on the status of usability. There is also a gap between research and practice in the Chinese UI community. Except foreign enterprises, only a limited number of large-scale domestic Chinese companies have connection with researchers in the academic field. Most small to middle-scale IT or Dotcom companies don't take any research activity in their daily work. Therefore designers in those companies find difficult to improve their skills and to meet customers' needs. They have also claimed that lacking in specialised publications, swift trade information and lateral communication in the industry, they are finding it difficult moving ahead whilst trying to develop [9].

### **3.2 The Birth of uiGarden**

When the Chinese UI design industries are increasing their understanding of usability concept, having found the lack and requirements of communication between the two community, with professional technology and experience in both the west and the east, a group of practitioners and researchers have started to dedicate themselves as a 'bridge' between the western and Chinese usability community.

uiGarden was conceived out of the collaborating team's passion for user-centred design. We recognise the need for a free flow of exchange between the Western and Eastern usability practitioners. We see the uiGarden to become an open platform, a potential for swift and free information exchanges between professional people who might not otherwise have the occasion to meet. There are undoubtedly cultural differences and, there are partly due to the language issues but not entirely so.



Fig. 1. The portal page to get into the site with different language

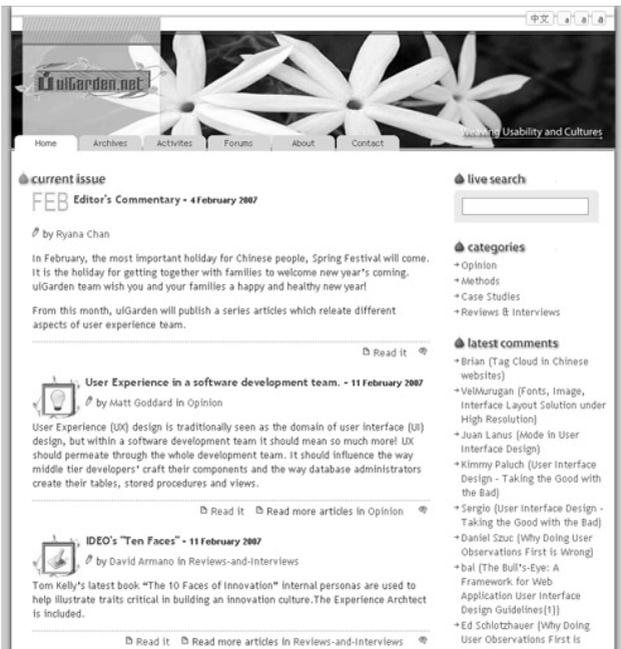


Fig. 2. The webzine in English

uiGarden is in the unique position of being able to discuss, explore and perhaps, resolve some of these differences. It can act as a catalyst to highlight the diversity of the websites between the West and the East.



Fig. 3. The webzine in Chinese

The team's goal is to provide swift and abundant information exchange and communication between the Chinese and western design communities, and to create a project that will mutually benefit both sides eventually. The birth of uiGarden means that communication between the west and the east has stepped into a new phase.

For western practitioners, we aim to create a place to communicate and exchange views with other professionals. The site also acts as a window on the user interface design industry in the Far East, helping to give insights into this increasingly important market.

From the point of view of Chinese practitioners, the website gives access to the latest developments in the West, featuring articles from leading Western experts translated into the Chinese language and providing discussion boards which facilitate discussion of each article.

Main contents are categorised by the type of them, - Opinion, Methods, Case studies and Reviews and Interviews. We bring audiences articles with a focus on:

- exploring theories and concepts that reflect current industrial practice
- future looking articles that address the challenges faced by our discipline
- articles relating to the teaching of user-centred techniques and methodologies
- case studies from projects demonstrating the application of user-centred techniques from two communities
- reviews of books, conferences, sites, software, tools and interactive projects

– interviews with leading experts in the field showing their point of view to professional issues

Articles in this journal are featured in two languages, English and Chinese. Discussion boards are provided at the end of each article to enable readers communicate with the author. Discussions are also translated to the other language in order to give readers from the other community opportunities to communicate with the author.

Besides the direct communication on the articles with their authors, we also provide forums in both language for casual discussion, focuses on various topics, not limited to one article. Popular topics are also being translated to another part, so participators will know what the popular issues are the most concerned by peers in the other community.

中文论坛				
讨论区	最后发表	主题	帖子	
 <p><b>以用户为中心的设计</b> (3 人正在浏览)                      实践讨论区：实践中遇到的用户研究,纸上原型,可用性测试,评估,界面规范,信息架构,UI团队建设等问题和经验,来和大家一起来讨论吧~~~                      子讨论区:  基础概念问答区,  资料下载区</p>	 <p>Bad Usability Cale... christina 2007-02-13 20:27</p>		275	2,186
 <p><b>本站建设与新闻</b>                      对于论坛和网站有什么意见和建议,请写在这里吧!本站的新闻公告等也将在这里发布。</p>	 <p>uigarden的易用性太差,答... 烟水寒 2006-12-23 01:14</p>		61	518
 <p><b>行业新闻与活动</b>                      媒体上发现的新的产品设计, Cool的网站交互,甚至新生活形态,您之您觉得有创造的事物~看看,人家怎么个妙法吧?如果您知道您的组织举办任何行业内活动也请发布到这里。</p>	 <p>创新科技帮助视障人士打造... ryana 2006-12-20 03:14</p>		155	450
 <p><b>招聘&amp;自荐</b>                      招聘和自荐信息请发布在此。</p>	 <p>GE医疗集团 全球设计部 招... 小亚落落 2006-12-26 08:06</p>		85	194
 <p><b>设计人聊天</b>                      同为设计人,尽情磨牙灌水吧!也许可以激发新的灵感呢!</p>	 <p>Coming to China ryana 2007-01-31 01:48</p>		144	1,050
English Forum				
讨论区	最后发表	主题	帖子	
 <p><b>User-Centred Design</b>                      Discuss user-centred design, including usability testing, user experience, GUI, information architecture, etc. here.                      子讨论区:  Web Accessibility,  Product Design &amp; Physical Usability</p>	 <p>Should alt text be... eleanor 2007-02-13 20:33</p>		91	236
 <p><b>News and Announcements</b>                      uiGarden site news and announcements. If you have any comments, feature requests, suggestions, or want to report a bug, here's where to do it!</p>	 <p>Working towards eq... eleanor 2007-01-24 00:17</p>		20	59
 <p><b>Events</b>                      HCI, Usability, UX, Interaction design related events.</p>	 <p>BCS BISSG - Wirele... deepfrost 2007-01-14 16:41</p>		89	191
 <p><b>Jobs</b>                      Job postings in HCI, Usability, User Experience, Interaction Design, Information Architecture and Ergonomics, etc.</p>	 <p>Singtel usability ... eleanor 今天 19:23</p>		29	41
 <p><b>The Lounge</b>                      General discussion about anything you like.</p>	 <p>Hello, I am Helent... eleanor 2007-02-13 10:53</p>		83	320

Fig. 4. Forums in two languages

This project has attracted attentions from all over the world and has got support from Britain’s academic ground and from China. We hope this bilingual webzine will be a real ‘bridge’ between the English speaking world and China.

## 4 Conclusions

After two years hard work, the impact of uiGarden webzine on the information exchange is dramatic. Numerous western practitioners including usability gurus like

Don Norman, Jared Spool, Aaron Marcus, etc. have featured on the site, given Chinese practitioners and researchers the most fresh information from the western world. At the same time, the webzine has helped more and more Chinese practitioner introducing their practice in China in English for peers in the west to understand what's happening in China. At the time when this paper is written, there are more than 1000 subscribers to the webzine from all over the world.

There is still much to learn from the project. We believe that as more effective communication between the east and the west, western designers will gain more ideas when designing for global products. On the other hand, learning usability theories and methods without language barriers will also bring more people in China to understand and accept the concept and enable the Chinese usability and design industries to keep up with the world.

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