GOING ONLINE TO CHINESE AUDIENCES:
THE ROLE OF CULTURE

Jeffrey Hsu, Information Systems, Silberman College of Business Administration, Fairleigh
Dickinson University, 285 Madison Avenue, Madison NJ 07940, jeff@fdu.edu

ABSTRACT

There are many issues relating to the cultural aspects of Chinese culture and society which can
impact the design and content of computing systems and web sites (which are directed towards
Chinese audiences). This paper focuses on many of these issues and provides practical
guidelines and advice for those who want to reach out to Chinese audiences, whether for e-
commerce, education, or other needs.

Keywords: Cultural aspects of information systems design, China, e-commerce,
internationalization, globalization.

INTRODUCTION

The potential for the Internet and e-Commerce in China and Chinese-speaking nations (including
Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore) is large. Many experts believe that China will have the
second largest population of web surfers, after the US, by the year 2005 (1), and currently, the
Internet population in China is doubling every six months (2). This enormous, yet perhaps less
recognized emerging market of the Chinese-language population, (including well over a billion
in mainland China alone), spread out throughout China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, and
with many more “Overseas Chinese” spread out throughout the world.

In fact, the Chinese market can be considered as potentially one of the largest in the world, even
though currently it is in the early stages of development. Even so, in 2000 there were close to 9
million computers connected to the Internet in China (3), and the number of users exceeded 22
million (2). All of this growth occurred since 1996, and China is now considered one of the top
five nations in terms of Internet use, and some experts predict, that China is making strides
towards having the second largest population of web surfers in the world. Clearly, there is a vast
potential market which has yet to be expanded and tapped to its fullest potential.

It should be noted that while there is a very large potential market in terms of total Chinese and
Chinese-speaking population, the type of user who would be using the Internet actually forms a
kind of subculture within the general population, with characteristics including higher income
and educational levels, and more users in urban and metropolitan rather than rural areas. This is
generally true for most Chinese-speaking nations. While there are a number of issues and
impacts which relate to the use of the Internet in China and in Chinese-speaking nations, culture
is the area on which this paper focuses. Culture is an important part of a successful web site or
e-commerce business, since instead of working within the cultural confines of a single nation,
such as that of the United States, cultural boundaries are crossed. Consequently, there are
frequently a number of different issues and considerations which come into play.
THE CHINESE WEB SURFER

What are some of the characteristics of the Chinese web surfer? Despite difficulties in gaining access to the Internet, whether it be the cost, restrictions placed by the government, slow access speeds, or the lack of availability in certain areas, the Chinese are very enthusiastic about getting onto the Information Superhighway. In fact, according to CNNIC (2), the number of users is increasing by 33% per year, while the total number of web sites has increased dramatically.

Most of the users of the Internet in China are from the major cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. While the majority of China population is found in rural areas, there is a strong tendency for users to be concentrated in cities and urban areas. A strong focus on urban issues, concerns, and interests should therefore be taken into account when designing for a Chinese audience web site.

Generally, roughly twice as many males than females are online, and most of them are young. The majority of Internet users are less than 25 years of age. Many of these either have a college education, are students, and/or have professional employment in government or industry.

DESIGNING FOR CHINESE- WEB DESIGN FOR CHINESE SITES

As a starting point, it would be useful to examine what are some of the distinctive aspects of Chinese culture, especially those which could relate in some way to the marketing and effectiveness of web sites. Chinese culture is unique, and two commonly used terms express this: Zhong Guo, the Chinese word for the country itself, means “the center of the world,” expressing belief that China is unique and an important force in the world. In addition, Guo Qing reflects the fact that China is a special, important country which has its own distinctiveness and uniqueness.

In general, culture was characterized by Nathan (4), as the traits which define the uniqueness of a culture, which differentiate it from others. In the case of Chinese versus Western (American) culture, these differences are described by Xing (5) in Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>American</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intuitive</td>
<td>Rational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic</td>
<td>Scientific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introverted</td>
<td>Extroverted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-restrained</td>
<td>Aggressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependent</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procrastinating</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient</td>
<td>Impatient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group-Oriented</td>
<td>Individualistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity</td>
<td>Change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Chinese versus American Culture (adapted from (5)).
HOFSTEDE'S DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE

The Dutch cultural anthropologist Geert Hofstede conducted detailed interviews of hundreds of IBM employees in 53 countries from 1978 to 1983. Through statistical analysis, he was able to determine patterns of similarities and differences among the replies. From this analysis, he formulated a theory that world cultures vary along consistent, fundamental dimensions. Hofstede identified five dimensions and rated 53 countries on indices for each dimension, normalized to values (usually) of 0 to 100. His five dimensions of culture were as follows: power distance, collectivism vs. individualism, femininity vs. masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long- vs. short-term orientation.

Power Distance

Power distance (PD) refers to the extent to which less powerful members expect and accept unequal power distribution within a culture. Hofstede claims that high PD countries tend to have centralized political power and exhibit hierarchies in organizations with large differences in salary and status. Low PD countries tend to view subordinates and supervisors as closer together and more interchangeable, with flatter hierarchies in organizations and smaller differences in salaries and status.

In general, it could be generally stated that the Chinese tend to exhibit more of a tendency towards high PD, and that the use of appropriate symbols and expressions of power and authority would be appropriate (6, 7).

Individualism vs. Collectivism

Individualism in cultures implies loose ties; everyone is expected to look after one's self or immediate family but no one else. Hofstede found that individualistic cultures value personal time, freedom, challenge, and such extrinsic motivators as material rewards at work. In family relations, they value honesty/truth, talking things out, using guilt to achieve behavioral goals, and maintaining self-respect. Their societies and governments place individual social-economic interests over the group, maintain strong rights to privacy, emphasize the political power of voters, maintain strong freedom of the press, and profess the ideologies of self-actualization, self-realization, self-government, and freedom.

Collectivism differs in that it implies that people are integrated from birth into strong, cohesive groups that protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. Collectivist cultures value training, physical conditions, skills, and the intrinsic rewards of mastery. The characteristics of Chinese society imply a leaning towards collectivism. Therefore, collectivism may influence the following aspects of user-interface and Web design:

- Motivation based on personal achievement is underplayed in favor of group achievement.
- Images of success: demonstrated through achievement of social-political agendas.
- Rhetorical style: official slogans and subdued hyperbole and controversy.
- Prominence given to wise leaders and states of being.
- Importance given to products shown by themselves or with groups.
- Underlying sense of social morality: emphasis on relationships.
Emphasis on change: tradition and history.
Protection of personal data differentiating the individual from the group (6,7).

Masculinity Vs. Femininity (MAS)

Hofstede focuses on the traditional assignment to masculine roles of assertiveness, competition, and toughness; and to feminine roles an orientation towards home and children, people, and tenderness. He acknowledges that in different cultures different professions are dominated by different genders. In masculine cultures, the traditional distinctions are strongly maintained, while feminine cultures tend to collapse the distinctions and overlap gender roles. China tends to exhibit a the characteristics of a high masculinity (MAS) index value which seem to indicate an emphasis on dominant masculine roles.

Since Hofstede's definition focuses on the balance between roles and relationships, we believe masculinity and femininity may be expressed on the Web through different emphases. High-masculinity cultures would focus on the following user-interface and design elements:
• Traditional gender/family/age distinctions
• Work tasks, roles, and mastery, with quick results for limited tasks
• Navigation oriented to exploration and control
• Attention gained through games and competitions
• Graphics, sound, and animation used for utilitarian purposes. (6, 7)

Uncertainty Avoidance (UA)

People vary in the extent that they feel anxiety about uncertain or unknown matters, as opposed to the more universal feeling of fear caused by known or understood threats. Cultures also vary in their avoidance of uncertainty. In high UA cultures, what is different may be viewed as a threat, and what is "dirty" (unconventional) is often equated with what is dangerous.

By contrast, businesses in low UA cultures may be more informal and focus more on long-range strategic matters than day-to-day operations. In these cultures, what is different may be viewed as curious, or even ridiculous. Based on this definition, we believe uncertainty avoidance may influence contrary aspects of user-interface and web design. High-UA cultures would emphasize the following:
• Simplicity, with clear metaphors, limited choices, and restricted amounts of data
• Attempts to reveal or forecast the results or implications of actions before users act
• Navigation schemes intended to prevent users from becoming lost
• Mental models and help systems that focus on reducing "user errors"
• Redundant cues (color, typography, sound, etc.) to reduce ambiguity.

Low UA cultures would emphasize the reverse:
• Complexity with maximal content and choices
• Acceptance (even encouragement) of wandering and risk, with a stigma on "over-protection"
• Less control of navigation; for example, links might open new windows leading away from the original location
Mental models and help systems might focus on understanding underlying concepts rather than narrow tasks.
Coding of color, typography, and sound to maximize information (multiple links without redundant cueing) (6, 7).

Long- Vs. Short-Term Time Orientation

In the early 1980s, shortly after Hofstede first formulated his cultural dimensions, he developed an additional dimension. Long-Term Orientation seemed to play an important role in Asian countries that had been influenced by Confucian philosophy over many thousands of years. Hofstede found such countries shared these beliefs:

- A stable society requires unequal relations.
- The family is the prototype of all social organizations; consequently, older people (parents) have more authority than younger people (and men more than women)
- Virtuous behavior to others means not treating them as one would not like to be treated
- Virtuous behavior in work means trying to acquire skills and education, working hard, and being frugal, patient, and persevering

Western countries, by contrast, were more likely to promote equal relationships, emphasize individualism, focus on treating others as you would like to be treated, and find fulfillment through creativity and self-actualization. One of the suggestions was that Asian countries are oriented to practice and the search for virtuous behavior while Western countries are oriented to belief and the search for truth. China was found to have a very high long-term orientation.

Based on this definition, high LT countries would emphasize the following aspects of user-interface design:

- Content focused on practice and practical value
- Relationships as a source of information and credibility
- Patience in achieving results and goals (6, 7)

Aside from Hofstede (7), there is also Appadurai’s Five Dimensions of Cultural Flow (8) and King’s Towns and Landscapes (9). Appadurai attempted to capture the ways in which cultures relate to and influence each other. These include the following five dimensions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethno-scapes</th>
<th>Flows of people—users and the Internet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finanscapes</td>
<td>Currency and stock exchanges – Internet and e-commerce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideo-scapes</td>
<td>The distribution and proliferation of state and counter-state messages over the Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediascapes</td>
<td>Images of media and information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techo-scapes</td>
<td>Technological products and equipment for the Internet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appadurai’s Five Dimensions of Global Cultural Flow (8)
And King claims that the Internet allows “the global diffusion of information, images, professional cultures and sub-cultures, supported by international capital flows.” Both of these models support the concept that culture exists on, and is an important component of, the Internet, and should be taken into account whenever a web site is intended to be accessed overseas.

**TRADITIONAL CHINESE CULTURE**

There are elements of traditional Chinese culture, which even in our modern-day society still carry weight in Chinese societies. These include the influences of Chinese philosophy, including Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. The influences of these helped to create a sense of practicality, together with philosophical views of life, in Chinese culture. Other traditional values which are important to be aware of include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Tradition</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respect for Elders</td>
<td>Elderly people are respected in Chinese culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for Social Status</td>
<td>Gender, age, job status, government authority, law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Face”</td>
<td>Importance of “saving face”; avoiding embarrassment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Education is highly valued in Chinese traditional culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dragon</td>
<td>An important symbol in Chinese culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color</td>
<td>Red symbolized “happiness” White and black symbolize “mourning”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chinese Cultural Traditions, adapted from Lee (10)

Unlike the United States and other Western cultures, Chinese culture is influenced by Confucianism, in which the notions of societal harmony, and of respect for family and elders. As discussed by Xing (5), many Chinese attach a sense of importance to being a part of a group, rather than emphasizing their own individuality. In addition, Confucianism emphasis the moderate, “middle” path to things, instead of selecting one or the other extreme.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper, a number of issues and considerations relating to Chinese cultural and web site/e-commerce design were discussed, and clearly, there are some important factors which should be taken into account when creating a website or e-commerce site for Chinese audiences.
REFERENCES