

# Shanghaied in a User-Friendly Manner - An American's Initial Experiences in a Full-Time Usability Job in China

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**Abstract.** As the application of user-centered design spreads across the globe, technology companies are facing new challenges in establishing usability teams in non-western countries. Managers must decide whether to staff their usability teams with local or foreign individuals, and this decision can be influenced by the availability of usability experts who are native to the country. China's rapid economic growth has led to a strong demand for usability practitioners. Given the relatively small size of the usability community in China, there are unique opportunities for non-Chinese nationals. In this paper, I describe the initial experiences I faced as an American joining a usability team of Chinese nationals. I discuss my preparation and experience before arriving in China, as well as the adjustments I had had to make while conducting user-centered design in a culture that was very different from my own. I believe the sharing of my experiences in both work and non-work settings can offer helpful insights to other non-Chinese nationals interested in conducting usability work in China, as well as to managers who are considering adding non-local staff to their usability team.

**Keywords:** working abroad, user-centered design, China, cultural adaptation.

## 1 Introduction

The practices of user-centered design have been steadily spreading across the globe. With its vast population, rapid economic growth, and its recent embrace of various technologies, China in particular is a prime location for the rapid infusion of new usability practices. However, a usability community does not grow overnight. A mature presence requires a mix of industry expertise, academic research, and higher level training. While China has been fostering a small usability community for a number of years, its current needs may be outstripping the current availability of experienced professionals. For that reason, there are rich opportunities for non-Chinese nationals to make important contributions alongside their Chinese colleagues.

After having studied Chinese language for 2 years in the US, I accepted a position with HFI China in Shanghai. I was attracted to the job because I welcomed the additional challenge of experiencing life in a very different culture. My brief time so far in China has been far more than I ever could have imagined.

I believe that in sharing some of my experience, others considering a similar career move and those involved with hiring people can gain a glimpse into some of the issues faced by a Westerner coming to work in China. I realize my experiences may not be representative or complete, however, they offer a chance to see the flavor of such an experience and an insight into some of the contributions that can be made under such circumstances.

Many people around the world work outside of the country where they have spent the majority of their life. However, for those in the usability domain, working outside of one's native country poses a unique challenge given the importance of understanding the user. Can an outsider really gain the same level of understanding of a user as a local person? Are there in fact any advantages of being non-local? These are all questions I hope to explore as I continue my work in China. However, already I feel that there is something to share.

## **2 Before China**

Preparations for moving abroad can be very daunting. Everything from deciding what and how to move to making sure that one leaves things in a proper state back "home" can add up to a lot of time and stress.

Since I was new to HFI and their office in China was new, I was asked to spend 6 weeks in India familiarizing myself with HFI as I participated in their training course for usability professionals. I embraced the opportunity to spend time in a new country and made sure to arrive two weeks early in order to travel around the country and acclimate myself.

While the focus of the trip was primarily to familiarize myself with HFI's practices and people, I found that the incredible India experience was what taught me the most. Working in India for even that short period of time required me to adjust quickly. India was an interesting paradox: I had few issues with the language, given the prevalent use of English, and yet the culture was strikingly different from anything I had ever known.

Whether it was understanding the commonly used head waggle that I had never seen before, or learning how to explain to someone that something had to be done (and done soon), my experience in India served as a sort of practice grounds for what I would later experience in China.

Another benefit of the trip to India is that there is currently a lot of interaction between HFI's India offices and HFI China. While none of the work I have done so far has directly pertained to India, my experience there has allowed me to better understand and appreciation of my Indian colleagues. While of course 8 weeks in India does not make one a master of Indian culture, my current understanding is worlds apart from what it would have been otherwise.

## **3 Work in China**

After my time in India I arrived in Shanghai. Numerous mundane challenges awaited me like obtaining necessary permits/visas, health exams, and finding a place to live.

Now, I could finally immerse myself into the experience of living and working and China.

While I had ideas, I was not sure in what ways I would be able to fit in to a team comprised entirely of Chinese while working on Chinese projects. Like any new job, there was a period of acclimatization that was only more pronounced due to the large change in environment. However, I quickly jumped head first into projects and began to discover how I could make a unique contribution to the team.

### **3.1 Disclosure of a One-Way Mirror**

One example involved the testing practices for conducting a focus group. The focus group occurred in a room which was viewable through a one-way mirror. In previous practice, participants were told they were being observed but were not explicitly told there was a one way mirror. Upon understanding the procedure, I insisted that participants should be informed of the one way mirror.

My colleague insisted that if the participants were informed of the one way mirror they would become uncomfortable and unable to focus on the interview. She explained that since we were in China we had to adjust our methods.

I explained that I felt it would be unethical not to inform the participants of the one-way mirror. If this affected our data then we simply had to find another solution or live with it. My colleague still protested.

I then explained that although US participants may be more used to such a situation, there were still many individuals who would fit the stereotypes of Chinese participants in terms of their degree of frankness or comfort in such situations. In the US we didn't simply throw them out or change procedures, but we would try to find ways to work with such individuals if possible.

I questioned whether, from a participant's view, the ethical issues involved might be different in China. I asked my colleague to imagine herself as a focus group participant and that she had not been informed that there was a one-way mirror. I then asked her to imagine that after the testing she was informed about the one-way mirror. How would she feel? My colleague came to a quick conclusion that this would upset her and she would not feel good about the situation. I replied that her response seemed to support the notion that Chinese participants would expect to be informed of such issues. She agreed but continued to voice concerns that it would still lead to the participants being uncomfortable during testing.

I continued to insist that we simply couldn't give up and sacrifice our obligations as researchers. It might not be simple, but it was our responsibility to find a solution that provided the best research conditions for us without sacrificing the rights of the participant.

After about 5 minutes of thought, my colleague said she had an idea. She suggested that she introduce me before the testing, I make a few comments in Chinese, and she then point out the one-way mirror and explain that I would be observing. She felt this might create an environment where we could inform the participants of the one-way mirror without making them uncomfortable. I replied that I would be happy to do anything that would enable us to properly inform them of how they were being observed.

We carried out the plan as described. When I spoke a little Chinese to the participants they responded extremely warmly and clearly appreciate my gesture. The group seemed very relaxed and had no questions about the observation process. The testing went smoothly. There was never any indication the group was uncomfortable and in fact it was extremely forthcoming in the discussion.

Afterwards, my colleague and I agreed it was a success.

### **3.2 The Dialects of China**

In another instance, I faced the issue of dealing with a specific dialect of China. Although Mandarin is the national language of China, Mandarin, many parts of China retain the use of local dialects. These dialects are often, from a practical standpoint, as different from Mandarin as another language.

For a project in Wuhan, China, we initially had a simultaneous translator from Wuhan. Given that our moderator did not speak Wuhanese, all participants were asked to speak in Mandarin. After a period of time it became clear that the translator was not sufficiently skilled for our needs so a new translator was quickly flown in from Shanghai. While the new translator was clearly superior, we ran into some problems when participants sometimes slipped into speaking Wuhanese. The previous translator had been able to effortlessly translate portions that were spoken in Wuhanese while the “better” translator could not. This did not have a large effect on the actual interview process since the moderator was restricted to Mandarin no matter what. However, for later data analysis it proved useful to have translations for the bits that were spoken in Wuhanese.

This experience made me wonder whether we could have gotten more expressive or detailed replies to questions had the interview been conducted in the local dialect. The lesson for me was that while Mandarin is the national spoken language, it does not mean it will be participants’ language of choice. Depending on the nature of the participants and the requirements of the research, using the local dialect could be advantageous or critical.

### **3.3 Translating Culture**

Sometimes, there is more to be translated than spoken or written language. The implications of specific body language, tone of voice, mannerisms, etc. can differ across cultures. The next case presents such an example.

An Indian colleague and I were observing a focus group from a separate room. At the beginning of the session a man sitting close to the moderator suddenly stood up. In a loud voice he began to complain that the session was being conducted in Mandarin and not in the local dialect. It was not long before the Indian colleague stood up and said she was going to enter the room with the focus group to resolve the situation. I immediately recognized how the situation appeared to her and quickly explained that it wasn’t as bad as it seemed and that we needed to let the moderator handle the situation. The moderator proceeded to calmly speak to the man and explain that since she was not from the local area she had to conduct the interview in Mandarin. After a minute or so the man sat down and the session went on without a hitch.

The man's reaction would have been viewed as extremely threatening in US (and apparently Indian) culture. Had the testing occurred in the US I would have quickly entered the room to assist the moderator. However, in China it is not uncommon for people to express themselves in such a manner without it having the same overtones it would have in the US. My experience not only led me to be able to quickly place the man's reaction in a proper context, but to also quickly recognize how the other observer was viewing the situation. Having a clearer picture of both sides enabled me to effectively head off an unnecessarily strong intervention. It was a case where not only my understanding of Chinese culture, but also my understanding how Chinese culture might be perceived by others played a key role in allowing a process to run as efficiently as possible.

### **3.4 Applying Personal Experiences to Work**

Living in China gives me the chance to explore and take in the culture at a much deeper level than I could by simply traveling here for a 1 week project and departing. Given my natural tendency to conduct "amateur ethnography" when I travel about, I quickly accumulated a wealth of knowledge and intuitions about Chinese culture. Working with Chinese colleagues and interacting with Chinese friends was not only an additional experience but also an opportunity to see how closely my view of things matched theirs.

These experiences proved invaluable on a project examining owners of small groceries and convenience stores in another Chinese province. My previous exposure to such stores in China gave me an advantage compared to simply coming straight into the country from scratch. However, my familiarity with stores outside of Shanghai (and China) kept me from falling into the trap of assuming practices in the other province would match those of Shanghai (in fact, in many ways they did not). Having a sense of bargaining habits, products available in stores, how money was transacted, etc. allowed me to better situate myself into the domain of the project.

The point here is simply that for usability professionals in a foreign country, daily non-work experiences which are only available to those living in the country can play a significant role in facilitating their work.

### **3.5 Office Culture**

Prior to arriving in China I had read several books on Chinese business culture. They were very intriguing and I look forward to applying what I had learned in my everyday actions with colleagues.

However, when I arrived I quickly realized that while the books may represent a certain segment of people, they did not always apply to the people I interacted. Many of my colleagues were under 30. This age group is very different from older generations. Their lives have been shaped by events that differed significantly from those of their parents. They have grown up in a more "westernized" China. I found it much easier to work with them than the books led me to expect. On a regular basis I would find their actions directly contradicting what a book would have predicted. The books were still valuable as providing a reference point from which to interpret actions, but the books were simply not directly applicable to my situations.

Even seemingly simple issues such as defining the number of days off for a holiday can require a great deal of effort to sort out. In China, for a holiday it is common for companies to shift some of the workdays to a preceding and/or following weekend in order to provide a bigger block of consecutive days during which the holiday is closed. However, I found I had to be extremely explicit in what I meant when I asked how many days I had off. If I asked the question (in English) the answer often corresponded to the number of consecutive days the office was closed. However, what I was really interested in was the number corresponding to the reduced number of days I would actually have to work. The misunderstanding wasn't a simple language problem, but that the typical Chinese model and American model of holiday structure were so different from one another that both sides didn't appreciate how the other side was interpreting and framing comments.

Much is often made about the differences in ability to provide criticism in Chinese and American culture. While certainly this is true, especially when coupled with issues of hierarchy, I found that for project work I had little difficulty with these differences.

## 4 Conclusion

My experience in China has only just begun. However, I have already seen how a foreigner can make significant contributions in applying user-centered design in China. As my experience grows, I hope to find more ways to combine my set of perspectives and skills with those of other professionals. Ultimately, I believe that a mix of "insiders" and "outsiders" can lead to the most effective usability solutions.

Every day when I am walking around China, I feel as if I am doing ethnography. This outlook gives me an extra boost of energy, helps enable me to overcome the challenges of working in a "foreign" culture, and provides me with a rich set of additional information to apply to my work. Of course, reading books can assist in beginning to understand another culture, but especially in a fast changing place like China, living there can provide a much deeper level of understanding. Although foreigner's knowledge of the local culture is unlikely to reach the same point as a local person's, he or she is also able to offer a new perspective. Complementing a local awareness with a foreign awareness can bring a different set of ideas and perspectives to the table while developing an appreciation of the culture under study.

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