

Cross-Cultural Cinematic Communication: Learning from the Information Design Process for a Sino-American Film Competition

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the 2014 Sino-American University Student Digital Micro Film Competition, a collaboration developed and administered between the University of Central Florida in the United States and Shanghai University in the People's Republic of China (PRC). By using qualitative text analysis and visual content analysis to review key materials and events from this case, the researchers studied information design and cross-cultural communication practices of various aspects of the partnership. The resulting analysis reveals unique information design challenges associated with cultural differences in communication practices, visual design, and administrative style. The summary of the case and the results of the related research presented here also provide readers with information design strategies that can facilitate design practices—and the associated coordination of event planning—across different cultural groups.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.0 Information Systems: General

General Terms

Documentation, Design, Languages

Keywords

Visual design, Project management, Cross-cultural collaboration, Digital film, Event planning

INTRODUCTION

As visual media in which narrative is central, films can function as engaging and useful texts for learning about other cultures. Similarly, studying the filmmaking process and its associated administrative activities contributes to an understanding of how different cultures approach the process of managing complex projects and authoring creative works. In this entry, we explore how the design and implementation of a collaborative, international film project revealed cultural differences relating to both project management and design between participants from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States (US). Such differences are currently understudied, particularly in regards to collaborative film initiatives, and we do not yet have a comprehensive understanding of the cultural issues involved with organizing such events. This lack of knowledge is problematic for making progress in large-scale global collaborations in which diverse participants must work together toward a common goal and must often do so with limited resources.

The purpose of this manuscript is to add to our knowledge in this area by analyzing the documentation and discourse surrounding a particular Sino-American partnership that took place in 2014 and associated planning activities occurring from the fall of 2012 to the summer of 2013. In examining this case, we first provide a review of key literature that discusses differences in Chinese and American cultural communication patterns. Next, we note our own data to show how it builds upon such prior work. In so doing, we present the results of a qualitative content analysis and a visual design analysis of materials associated with the Competition/case. We then conclude the manuscript with a summary of particular design tactics that proved effective in overcoming cultural communication differences related to design. We believe such an examination of this event/case can help communication designers better understand the unique challenges of developing materials for and coordinating complex projects that span geographic and cultural boundaries.

Situating the Project

In 2014, a new international student micro-film competition initiative launched. The initiative joined the University of Central

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Communication Design Quarterly. ACM SIGDOC, New York, USA.

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Florida in Orlando, Florida (US) with colleagues and officials from the PRC. (The participating PRC organizations included the Shanghai Media Group, the Shanghai Intentional Film Festival, and Shanghai University.) The project had been more than two years in the making and began with a 2012 ribbon-cutting ceremony to formally announce the collaboration between partners from the US and the PRC.

The Competition focused on a number of goals, with primary audiences composed of university students and the general publics in both countries. These goals included

- Encouraging and facilitating cultural and educational exchanges between university students in the two nations.
- Raising awareness of the conservation, preservation, and presentation of folk and ethnic culture among university students and the general public in both nations.
- Providing an opportunity for individuals in both nations to compare and contrast varying approaches to the process of making short films.
- Creating relationships to sustain future collaborative and communicative opportunities for university students and media researchers in both countries.

Given these extensive and diverse goals, organizing and implementing the Competition presented numerous intercultural communication opportunities and challenges.

To begin, it was necessary to develop the technical, political, and administrative infrastructures to allow students from each culture to develop short digital films that communicated key aspects of their culture to audiences in the other country. Winning student films, or those that best embodied the themes of the Competition and showed the greatest technical craftsmanship and narrative ability, were to be showcased in each country during special events. These student films spoke to embedded cultural values within each community. They also presented opportunities for fostering cross-cultural understanding across different participants. Such a partnership was made possible in part through a commitment of resources from stakeholders in both the US and the PRC, but also through the unique media environments present in both countries.

EMERGING CINEMATIC OPPORTUNITIES

The combination of modern digital filmmaking technology and the Internet's global reach provides individuals with the opportunity to create, share, and engage in a dialogue with audiences from around the world. Due to high cost and restricted access, opportunities for film production were once limited to professional filmmakers in both the US and the PRC. However, low cost digital filming technologies such as camcorders and smartphones now provide access to new audiences of creative designers. This situation is true in both the US (Watkins, 2009) and the PRC (Tao & Donald, 2016) – nations where portable smartphone devices are very popular and interest in producing and exchanging videos is relatively common, especially among younger generations (Watkins, 2009; Wallis, 2011). Such access has also provided new opportunities for creative expression in narrative filmmaking due in large part due to more affordable digital technologies (Zhen, 2007; Johnson, 2011).

The history of this evolution is connected to emerging technologies – and related uses of it. Experimentation with digital audio and digital film started relatively early (in the 1990s) in the United States and Japan when those two nations began using the technologies now commonplace in digital filmmaking (Belton, 2002). The ability to actively engage in a cross-cultural, communicative dialogue as enabled by this technology was then extended by the rise of technology infrastructure for public communications and the increased access to global audiences it provided (Sreberny, 2006). While such Web-based access remained relatively limited in the early years, it quickly spread to almost every corner of the globe. And perhaps nowhere is this growth more stunning than in the case of the PRC.

Over the last two decades, Internet access in the PRC has grown significantly – from 2.1 million users in 1999 to over 640 million users today (Internet Users by Country, 2014). The PRC contains just under 20% of the world's population (with 1.4 billion persons) and represents 22% of the world's Internet users (Internet Users by Country, 2014). Given this ubiquity of both smartphone technology with digital video capability and Internet dissemination channels, the PRC is becoming a growing presence in the area of global film and international film dissemination. Yet a number of cultural, linguistic, and other aspects need to be considered should individuals from other cultures wish to collaborate on filmmaking or film distribution projects with partners from the PRC.

Despite their emerging popularity and ubiquity among younger users in both countries, we still know very little about collaborative film ventures coordinated between individuals in both the PRC and the US. Such knowledge is important for individuals to develop complex projects in which information design strategies and documents need to be broadly accessible and usable across cultural boundaries. In order to do this specifically within a Sino-American context, we must better understand differences in Chinese and American design preferences. As St.Amant (2005) notes, direct observation of individuals within a culture or analysis of materials created by those individuals are two primary methods of understanding how culture relates to design preferences, audience expectations, and information format. Before considering the specific case of communication patterns surrounding a film competition, however, it is useful to first summarize some key literature regarding general communication design preferences in the US and the PRC.

CROSS-CULTURAL DESIGN IN SINO-AMERICAN CONTEXTS

To ground this work in theory, we explored research surrounding the cross-cultural implications of document design. We also reviewed literature that spoke to prior findings in terms of the preferred design and use of information by each culture. This review of the literature presented in this section briefly outlines some of what we currently understand about the major communication differences between Chinese and American cultures.

Communication Styles

Research in intercultural communication speaks to notable differences in how American and Chinese cultures communicate (Young, 1994; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Wang et al., 2009; Ding, 2013) and in how they design and interpret scientific and technical information (Qiuye, 2000). Young (1994) explains that even straightforward conversational matters, such as talking and

moments of silence with conversation, function differently within different contexts in different cultures. The literature also notes high variability between Eastern and Western cultures in areas such as individualism-collectivism, analytic vs. holistic reasoning, and low- vs. high-context communication styles (Wang et al., 2009). Because of such factors, translation can be difficult and filled with collaborative challenges (Ding, 2013).

Within this context, Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) note that Chinese communicators are known for using restraint and control when speaking or writing, a philosophy embedded in Chinese adages such as *yi yan ji chu* (“What has been said cannot be unsaid”), *huo cong kou chu* (“misfortune comes from the mouth”) and *yan duo bi shi* (“He/she who talks errs much.”) (p. 36). Such a philosophy means that non-Chinese audiences often perceive essential information as “missing” from a given communication. The idea behind such communication patterns is rather than having such details delivered explicitly and directly, the person doing the speaking or writing expects the listener or reader to extract those details from the context/setting in which something is said or written.

Gao and Ting-Toomey explain that this context-based approach underscores the importance of implicit communication in Chinese culture, as represented in the phrase *han xu*. *Han xu* refers to verbal and nonverbal communication modes that are indirect and do not list out all details for readers or listeners. This communication style is one commonly used in social and professional environments in Chinese culture and it might be seen as reflecting a more collectivist approach to interactions.

In contrast, American communicators tend to be more direct, explicit, and literal in their communications. As Gao and Ting-Toomey write, such differences can be observed by looking at popular adages in both countries. The adages “don’t beat around the bush” and “say what you mean” (p. 69) tell us much about preferred communication styles in the United States. For the Chinese, *pang qiao ce ji* (“beat around the bush”) and *yi zai yan wai* (“meaning lies beyond words”) (p. 69) provide an alternate model for thinking about communication and highlight key cultural differences in expectations about communication style and purpose.

Technical Communication

In regards to technical aspects of communication, Qiuye’s (2000) study compared the use of graphics in scientific communication and technical manuals used by both American and Chinese audiences. In her work, Qiuye examined articles popular science publications had done on Dolly the cloned sheep as well as reviewed various technical manuals for consumer household items such as fans and coffee makers manufactured in both China and the United States. Her findings, which supported general patterns identified by Gao and Ting-Toomey, reveal that Chinese documents tend to use more contextual information when presenting new ideas, while the American publications often adopt a more direct approach. Per Qiuye’s findings, publications for American audiences also seem to emphasize task performance while materials for Chinese audiences tend to provide greater detail in regards to technical information and specifications. Finally, American materials generally contain more straightforward linkages between visuals and textual annotations used in the materials.

Taken collectively, such research supports the notion that China is a high-context information design culture. It is a culture in which communication patterns are often characterized by an indirect

style in which much of the information associated with a given communiqué is transmitted outside of the explicit written document. The United States, by contrast, is a low-context information design culture. That is, it is a culture in which communication is more focused, explicit, and problem-oriented.

Hypertext

Additional research explores the effects of culture on the design of communication artifacts such as websites. Faiola and Matei (2006), for example, conducted an experimental study with Chinese and American users. Their work indicates users found information more quickly and spent less overall time interacting with a site when individuals used sites developed by designers from their own cultures. Faiola and Matei also found that both Chinese and American participants were able to locate information more quickly when using websites developed by professionals from the participant’s same cultural background.

In reporting their results, the Faiola and Matei note the many important ways in which culture can affect information design. In essence, culture influences factors from obvious and explicit differences in the interpretation of numbers, symbols, icons, and texts to the “implicit and less formal dimensions of page format, imagery, color, information architecture, and system interaction” (p. 380). Faiola and Matei’s work also explicitly calls for additional research to be done on both international Web design and the cross-cultural implications of design features in relation to usability and accessibility.

METHODS

To examine the case of the 2014 Sino-American University Student Digital Micro Film Competition, we conducted research at multiple locations in the PRC and the US. For this process, we collected materials from the project management process of the Competition to analyze communication patterns from American and Chinese participants. In reviewing this case, we used qualitative methods, text analysis, and visual content analysis to collect and analyze data. To better understand cultural communication expectations relating to this case, we analyzed specific materials including key project documents and observations notes taken during our participation in the planning of this overall event.

We began data collection on his case in the fall of 2012 when the project began via an initial visit from PRC representatives to the University of Central Florida. Our data collection for this case then concluded with the Competition’s first showcase (which occurred in conjunction with the Shanghai Film Festival) in March of 2014. (Note: The Competition remains active and is ongoing as of 2015, but this research reported here focuses only on the planning process for the inaugural year/2014.)

In terms of data collection, we focused on learning more about cross-cultural communication by studying the documentation and workflow procedures surrounding the organization of the project. In collecting this data, we specifically wanted to determine if the same communication style preferences and strategies identified in other types of documentation, as identified in our literature review, also held true in documents surrounding other contexts, such as the organization of this event.

Research Questions

Our objective for undertaking this research project was to examine different aspects of this case/the initial planning of the Competition in order to address the following research questions:

- RQ1: Do participants from the PRC and the US show different preferences for individualistic versus group-oriented design or communication patterns in project management contexts?
- RQ2: Do cultural communication differences seem to cause tensions in project management contexts involving participants from different cultures?
- RQ3: Do cultural factors affect the visual language different groups use when designing online materials (e.g., websites) for sharing information on the same event with other members of their same culture?

We believed addressing these questions could provide a richer understanding of how cultural communication and design preferences and expectations could affect the management of collaborative, international projects.

Important Events

In choosing materials for analysis, we focused on a number of important project events that occurred during this case because they involved stakeholders from both countries/cultures working together to develop key informational assets critical to the success of the Competition. We focused specifically on three events:

- *Event 1:* An initial planning meeting hosted by the University of Central Florida. For this first meeting to initiate the overall collaboration, visiting delegates from the PRC met with the US project researchers and administrators in order to negotiate the terms of the Competition. (This initial meeting took place on November 18, 2012 in Orlando, FL.)
- *Event 2:* An April 20-30, 2013 visit of the US delegation to Beijing and Shanghai. During this trip, the US stakeholders met with colleagues in the PRC in order to discuss additional details and visit with sponsoring agencies and partners in the PRC. This trip included a meeting with the Ministry of Culture (April 22), with China National Radio (April 23) and with the Shanghai Media Group (April 26).
- *Event 3:* Certain email-based and face-to-face planning meetings the web design and development team at the University of Central Florida had with partners in the PRC. These meetings were important because they shaped the design of the project websites. These meetings were conducted between April and June in 2013.

By focusing our analysis of the case on these particular interactions, we believe we can more effectively identify central variables that could affect cross-cultural communication (e.g., conveying and understanding ideas) in a wide range of project-related contexts.

Materials

After selecting specific instances of events for review, we next selected various types of materials for analysis. We selected these materials because they were central mechanisms for exchanging information between partners in the US and the PRC. The materials selected for review included:

- Submission guidelines for student films from both countries

- Meeting observation notes/field notes taken by both authors during planning meetings/exchanges
- Approximately twenty emails sent between the authors and participants from US and PRC teams
- A copy of the prepared memorandum of understanding between the two universities
- The official US website for the project (<http://chinaus.cah.ucf.edu>)
- The official PRC website for the project (<http://www.ideayes.net/news/action2EnglishVersion.aspx>)

We based our decision to examine these specific materials on our desire to focus on those documents most critical to the organization and implementation of the Competition.

In terms of data collection methods for this project, journal entries were viewed as particularly important tools for capturing experiential data and creating field texts (a perspective supported by Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We used written notes vs. recording devices to collect observational data because the parties involved in the case were still getting to know one another throughout the planning of this event. For this reason, we did not wish to introduce any recording devices that might be perceived as jeopardizing the spirit of establishing effective partnerships by engaging in actions that might seem as questioning the trust of the involved parties (e.g., the desire to record meetings vs. rely on participants to remember that to which they had agreed at a meeting).

Policies and procedure documents dictated how the Competition would operate. They governed everything from the initial submission of films to the specific thematic categories and the mechanisms for judging films. We chose these policy and procedure documents for review because they could provide insights about embedded cultural values that shaped approaches and actions.

In terms of digital project deliverables, we analyzed two project websites:

- A website American designers created to promote the collaborative initiative and to advertise the film to American audiences, primarily targeting the English-speaking world.
- A website Chinese designers created to manage the submission of student films for Chinese participants and used to promote intellectual property rights among the younger generations of producers in China.

These websites were selected for analysis because they were documents critical to the Competition's project management and they provided insights into the design preferences of American and Chinese designers.

Data Analysis

With our three research questions guiding our analysis, we used a qualitative coding approach to note relevant data within the materials we reviewed. Following several of the strategies suggested for identifying patterns in qualitative data outlined in Saldaña (2013), we specifically looked for patterns dealing with similarity/difference, frequency, sequence, correspondence, and causation. For example, correspondence events highlighted relationships between activities and events. These correspondences included when an email mentioned a specific document such as the memorandum of understanding that corresponded to both prior

events (negotiations leading to specific language choices) and future events (formatting decisions guiding the ultimate design of the Competition). Causation events noted moments that served as springboards for later outcomes or adjustments to the project. Similarly, when one pattern was observed multiple times, its frequency suggested that it deserved further analysis.

For this analysis process, we also used Gee's (2014) "making strange" tool for discourse analysis. We then used this tool to note coded moments in our documents that made sense to us as project insiders, but would seem unusual – or "strange" to outsiders looking in from either culture (e.g., when important details seemed to be missing from key documents, which was strange because it was counterintuitive to American design expectations). We selected this overall approach for coding data because it allowed us to focus on those units of text that seemed most salient in relation to cultural communication differences.

Our three part textual coding strategy for identifying important events was as follows:

- *Part 1:* Did the text indicate an example of a cultural difference or similarity in communication style?
- *Part 2:* Was there something unique or "strange" about the text that spoke to embedded cultural values?
- *Part 3:* Were there causal or corresponding outcomes that could be linked to documents or document sections that spoke to moments of tension between project partners? (Such tensions would be useful for framing events or actions that were candidates for cultural misunderstanding.)

While this method did help us identify certain trends in our data, we do recognize it also created a number of limitations in terms of what we could say about the data.

To begin, our coding strategies were based upon our own subjective interpretations of events and how documents related to those events fit within those categories. Next, this classification method did not always capture complex communication nuances that sometimes resisted classification into discrete categories. Finally, this strategy did not always fully represent the holistic context of communication because it only accounted for written documents. In other words, if nonverbal cues such as eye contact or body language were not coded in individual notes or our own journal entries, they were excluded from the analysis entirely, leading to an incomplete picture of the event.

For our visual language review of the project websites, we also relied on similarities and differences to classify the documents and to perform our analysis. Fortunately, checklists for such visual comparisons exist in the literature, and we adapted the work of St.Amant (2005), who uses prototype theory from cognitive psychology in devising a procedure for examining intercultural web design.

In prototype theory, visual representations are key in structuring how individuals classify and categorize objects and images. Accordingly, website visitors from different cultural backgrounds will categorize visual images and objects differently, leading to varying expectations for appropriate and credible web content. In analyzing key design features within different cultures, St.Amant suggests prototypes create "scales of acceptability" that can be examined by developing a checklist to evaluate macro-level design features including menus, buttons, colors, hyperlinks, body text,

search features, and images. This checklist can be further tailored to address more micro-level features, such as the particular patterns surrounding these elements (e.g., blue underlined hyperlinks, or using buttons only positioned on the left hand side of the page).

Although we did not use prototype theory explicitly in this work, a carefully considered model for comparing the two main websites for this film competition project was essential. Thus, following St.Amant's suggestions for developing checklists for intercultural web design, we developed a similar checklist (Appendix A) to assess macro-level characteristics of both Chinese and American sites. The macro-level review done via this checklist focused on visual design aspects such as color scheme, iconography, textual density, and technical features. The micro level review, which followed the preliminary analysis, involved a more focused examination of each of these items in order to determine where they fit on the scale of acceptability for each respective culture. In order to ensure an accurate and representative sample has been achieved, St.Amant recommends concentrating on an initial site and then using five to seven other sites as secondary sources of comparison. However, given that the website comparison was only one aspect of the larger case history and the film competition was relatively unique, this level of detail was not included in the analysis.

RESULTS: CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE SINO-AMERICAN FILM COMPETITION

In this section, we present the results of our analysis of the following events that took place during the organizational stages of the Sino-American Film Competition (between November of 2012 and June of 2013). Specific results discussed in this section include

- A description of the practical challenges posed by translation
- A description of the cultural challenges posed by individual vs. collective work style preferences
- A framing of the project as a collaborative initiative serving diverse audiences with diverse expectations about media usage and distribution from project stakeholders
- An analysis of the PRC political contexts influencing certain, important project decisions
- A cross-cultural, visual comparison of two project websites to illustrate intercultural variations within the communication design process for the Competition

We believe these results provide a range of important insights related to effective communication design practices and approaches associated with working in international teams.

Translation

One significant issue we faced early on in this project was in regards to translation related to Sino-American communication. Because none of the American participants were fluent in Mandarin Chinese, all of the documents for the project were written in both Chinese and English – a factor that created serious workload issues for one of the project organizers. Later in the project, we were able to recruit students to help with this process, but early on, journal entries and project emails indicated that the process was, at times, burdensome and time consuming. In one journal entry recounting a planning meeting in the PRC, the US participants noted difficulty adapting to a lengthy meeting that was conducted entirely in Chinese and

at which only the group's translator spoke for the US delegation. For some of the US attendees who were accustomed to speaking directly to individuals at such meetings, this additional level of mediation via the translator was noted as being "unsettling."

Despite the challenges associated with translation, it was important for these issues to be worked out early in the project's life cycle in order to maintain open communications both in the planning and implementation stages of the Competition. Most importantly, to facilitate cultural exchange between viewing audiences, all films eventually needed to include subtitles so respective audiences in the other countries could understand the dialogue and the contexts from which films emerged. Fortunately, we were able to use our earlier experiences with translation to facilitate other aspects of the project. Doing so included approaches such as adding additional time into the submission guidelines' production schedules for the students participating in the Competition in order to implement captioned subtitles.

Individual vs. Collective Dynamics in Project Submission Documents

Key cultural differences in individualistic versus collective design preferences were identified in the policy documents outlining the film submission process. These documents were designed to provide student filmmakers with instructions on how to submit their films for review. Because American participants had created their procedures independently and for American students while Chinese participants had created their procedures independently and for Chinese students, these items made for interesting documents for comparison.

In the US submission guidelines, students were instructed to submit their digital films individually and without any specified support from their university institution. The organizers provided registered users with access to servers for large file management and sharing on the Web (via technologies such as the Dropbox file hosting service). Therefore, the design of such an independent submission process could be easily arranged.

In the PRC, however, collective effort, even in terms of the document submission process, was more highly valued. As a result, organizers in the PRC encouraged university institutions to play a larger role in the process, and institutions there were encouraged work with students to identify and to submit their most representative student works. Instead of an individualistic form of patriotism, the context in the PRC was one where the honor of the university institution was at stake as students and administrators alike were encouraged to take pride in their educational background and affiliations. Also, due to the state policies over media content control in the PRC, all media contents submitted for the Competition in the PRC were subjected to review. Any materials uploaded to the public domain, or any PRC-based server that could be accessed by the general public, were screened in order to avoid the spread of content deemed "inappropriate for the mass public" by the state government.

While the US team had the option of employing websites such as Dropbox for collecting student works, the PRC-based team led by Shanghai University used a customized content management system. In this case, the Rookies Innovation Platform, a website created jointly by Shanghai University and other media agencies in the PRC, became the sole platform for submitting works for this Competition from within and outside of the country. The Rookies website was originally created to provide a platform for Chinese

university students to showcase their digital films. It was the first to provide such an opportunity in the PRC, and it made efforts to educate and protect students in regards to the intellectual copyright aspects of their work. Although we, the authors, still witnessed the pattern of collectivism in the very design of the website, it nevertheless opened a path for the future development of website platforms that educate filmmakers about intellectual property rights and empower younger generations of producers and directors of independent films in the PRC.

Serving Diverse Audiences

The authors observed complex cultural differences related to how Chinese and American participants approached the potential audiences for this Competition. The submission guidelines used in the PRC, for example, included an extensive list of partners involved in the project. The authors believe the inclusion of such information spoke to the importance of industry credentialing and corporate sponsorship. The US version of these guidelines, by contrast, was more independent and situated more firmly in academia. The films were submitted directly to the American organizers, with no governmental review, and the categories for acceptable themes were more flexible than in the PRC. Such textual differences indicated diverse audiences with unique informational needs invested in this project.

Further analysis of the submission guidelines suggested the variations in the content of the guidelines focused on facilitating different audience networks. Entities in both nations, for example, desired a strong partnership between collaborative institutions, yet the system in the PRC allowed for more engagement with public audience by allowing for factors such as the broader public exposure of films beyond more traditional academic settings. In addition, the PRC participants allowed a wider audience to participate in content selection and voting activities by permitting individuals to use their mobile phones to engage in such practices. Thus locally created films had significant global reach as well. In many ways, this approach created global connections by allowing viewers from around the nation and the world to participate in the Competition via a combination of online media and mobile phones.

Cultural Shifts

As we analyzed policy documents for this part of the project, it became clear that there were some important moments of cultural shift in which attitudes or decisions were changed based on discussion or shared experiences between Chinese and American participants. ("Cultural shift" here means changes in attitudes or beliefs outside of initial impressions or ideas.) For instance, there were initially some very distinct cultural differences in regards to attitudes about the distribution of media. At the start of the collaboration, the US delegation was initially unfamiliar with China's state policies regarding media production and distribution. The same was true for the Chinese delegation's knowledge about the US culture surrounding digital video usage and distribution. This situation led to moments of tension and a delayed production schedule while the film submission processes were being negotiated. Just as the US participants needed to recognize and appreciate the role of the government in PRC media production, the Chinese partners were also meeting filmmakers in the US and learning about the design approach of US filmmakers for the first time. The latter practices emerge from a media culture that might be characterized as more commercial and educational, but less policy driven.

In another moment of cultural shift, cultural attitudes were positively affected by the US group's visit to Beijing. The screening of prior work that took place during the visit provided a particularly significant opportunity for cross-cultural understanding between the two delegations. This situation represented a causal event because it specifically influenced how some of the language was phrased on the final version of the submission guidelines documents. During a one-day onsite meeting at C Media Group's headquarter in Beijing, a selection of short digital films was shown to the group in order to provide attendees with a common set of example entries. One of the films shown at this even was "The Crane Dance." "The Crane Dance" attempts to capture the complex sentiment of the younger generations towards tradition in the light of rapid modernity and urbanization. The film tells the story of a young boy's re-discovery of his heritage and identity through learning a traditional form of dance from the village elders in the southern PRC.

Through watching "The Crane Dance" together, the delegations from both counties were able to see the Competition as a potential asset for safeguarding and promoting folk traditions in both countries. This factor was evidenced by an author/organizer's journal entry in which he notes this event as being significant in helping him to better understand the significance of family history in Chinese culture. These experiences in Beijing also enabled the two parties to identify shared concerns such as the preservation of cultural values and local village identities and observe similar values in different cultural and political environments. Thus, the joint viewing of "The Crane Dance" served as a connecting point where the two parties were able to exchange ideas and strategies for solving the same essential problem – safeguarding against the disappearance of intangible cultural heritage in the globalized age.

Political Policies as Cultural Pressure Points

One final observation from our qualitative analysis focused on observation notes/journal entries and a series of emails that revealed moments of tension dealing with the project submission guidelines, particularly in regards to the categories under which students were to submit their work. One such event occurred when the Chinese partners decided to introduce an additional category into the Competition just as the submission guidelines were nearing their release date.

To fully understand the environment in which this new request unfolded, it was necessary for American participants to grasp the Chinese political context from which it originated. It was a context that involved a complex structure of policy-making and political procedures. It was a context that also involved a newly reshaped Politburo Standing Committee and a recently appointed party general secretary, Xi Jinping (Miller, 2013).

The film competition project was first proposed and initiated in 2013 when the PRC's new Chairman Xi Jinping introduced the "China Dream" theme to the public. Chairman Jinping's new "China Dream" proposed an agenda that was intended to appeal to the people. According to the PRC newspaper *People's Daily*, on the day the new Politburo Standing Committee was introduced to the world, Xi appealed to national pride saying, "Our people are a great people.... The Chinese people have opened up a good and beautiful home where all ethnic groups live in harmony and fostered an excellent culture that never fades." In his talk at China's Revolutionary History Museum two weeks later, Xi declared that the PRC had found the "correct path" to realize "the Chinese nation's great renaissance" and to achieve the "China dream."

He declared that the PRC would achieve the goal of building a "wealthy, powerful, democratic, civilized, and harmonious socialist modernized nation" by the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP, which will arrive in 2021, in Xi Jinping's ninth year in office (*People's Daily*, November 30, 2012).

Given these circumstances, the collaborative Chinese partners proposed a new category for submission: "Chinese Dream, American Dream." The theme seemed to be inspired by the more commonly quoted "American Dream" and the spirit of independence. At first it was unclear to the American team why the category was suddenly included on the submission documents. Designers questioned the necessity of adding a new "surprise" category during the final planning stage of the project and one journal entry noted US participants were concerned about how students and judges would interpret this new category. A broader knowledge about the politics of and the emerging political landscape in the PRC ultimately helped the American team members to better understand the central importance of a seemingly small detail that caused tension and delay in the planning of the Competition.

PRC state enterprises and public universities are both very policy driven. This situation is very different from that of the project's US counterparts, which exercised more independence from



Figure 1: Main Web Site (US Version, Overview Page)



Figure 2: Main Web Site (US Version, Interior Page)

governmental agencies. Fortunately, during the project's planning phase the American participants were working with a subject matter expert who informed them that adding the new "China Dream" theme to the Competition was necessary to ensure the successful approval of the project in the PRC. Doing so was also central to securing funding support for the competition from both governmental and private sponsors in the PRC.

Visual Analysis of Project Websites

The last stage of our research involved a visual comparison of the two project websites. To compare and contrast the visual language used in these sites, we reviewed differences between the Rookies Innovation Platform website, created by Chinese designers, and a parallel website developed primarily for American audiences and created by American designers. Organizers believed that designers familiar with the goals, needs, and everyday patterns of their local audiences could more quickly produce compelling strategies that could lead to more effective designs to solicit films from each country. (This hypothesis is supported by Faiola and Matei's (2005) findings, which was previously summarized in our literature review.)

The two sites chosen for this comparison included the American-designed informational site and the Chinese-designed film portal. The film competition initiative was originally launched through a WordPress-enabled site (see Figures 1-2) that provided information about the Competition for both Chinese and American audiences, although the American audiences were more common users of this site.

Films on the American site were then individually submitted



Figure 3: Rookies Innovation Platform (Chinese Version, Main Portal)



Figure 4: Rookies Innovation Platform (Chinese Version, Guidelines)

using Dropbox or email submission, while the Chinese films were uploaded, annotated, and evaluated through the Rookies Innovation Platform (see Figures 3-4).

The purpose of the American website was primarily informational and used to advertise the Competition, its themes, and the overall procedure for submitting the films. The Chinese site's primary purpose was to provide details about submission for Chinese filmmakers. Thus it was not appropriate to directly compare all features of the American-designed website to all features of the Chinese-designed website due to the different informational purposes of these two sites. However, major aesthetic and functional features of the two sites can be compared at the macro level. Doing so is still a useful exercise for highlighting some high-level cultural differences in information design. As shown in Figures 1-2 (American designs) and Figures 3-4 (Chinese designs), a comparison of these two sites reveals some interesting differences.

In terms of the amount and type of content, the same American preferences low-context information identified by Wang et al. (2009) and the Chinese preference for additional technical information up front as noted by Qiuye (2000) seems to hold true in certain parts of these websites. For instance, the American site emphasizes large visuals and a generous use of white space, while the Chinese site showcases the technical specifications prominently in the center of the page. This strategy makes these guidelines easily accessible by prospective Chinese participants, while the American visitors will need to search more to find technical information about the project and access the submission guidelines.

In terms of a more focused visual analysis of the specific icons and objects used within the sites, dragons and giant pandas are the two most popular icons used to represent a Chinese culture and are often selected for websites that are meant for an international audience. The American-designed site, in contrast, contained more neutral and officious icons such as state flags, government logos, and various photographs approved by the Chinese partners. It was useful to use design to symbolize partnership and authority by incorporating visual language reflective of both cultures into the final graphics of the official informational website. For example, in order to reinforce an ethos of unity, the two countries' flags were blended into a single header image used atop the site.

On the Chinese-designed site, the image of a phoenix was adopted as a logo, and Chinese cultural and folk elements incorporated into the website's icon of a baby bird with a watermarked phoenix. The design of Rookies Innovative Platform's seemed to anticipate audiences that included foreign Internet users, but the site's designers also wished to attract young, Chinese university students who were just starting to experiment with short digital films. The emphasis, therefore, was on "young, inexperienced, and unpolished" imagery, which was hoped to engage the target young audience. Such visual simplicity, however, belies more sophisticated technical depth. The Rookies Innovative Platform, for example, boasts of being the first of PRC-based websites for making intellectual property rights more understandable for young filmmakers. The site also aspires to help young and inexperienced student filmmakers become more polished and marketable in their career aspirations. For example, the phoenix watermark implies "the hinting potential to become brilliant, strong, and legendary" filmmakers that they could become through promoting their creative work through the Rookies Innovation Platform software.

In terms of color, the US-designed site is comparatively simple

and follows a specific nationalistic color theme. The PRC-based site, by contrast, uses additional color patterns (orange and yellow) designed to create a “warm” and “welcoming” effect according to Chinese cultural conventions. Another obvious difference can be found in the use of imagery on the two sites: the focus of the US site was to display visual portrayals of richly diverse folk and ethnic cultures from both the US and the PRC. Per our subject matter expert’s suggestion, a group of carefully selected images exemplifying similar cultural patterns were chosen for the banner rotation on the US site. These images included an African American jazz musician performing at an American football stadium, a female ethnic Kazakh tamboura player performing on a Chinese nomadic grassland, and a group of Halloween Jack O’ Lanterns juxtaposed with a group of Chinese Spring Festival Red Paper Lanterns. The banner images revolved in a constant motion separated by lengths of time and used to create a simple montage relevant to audiences from both countries. The visuals were large and prominent on the US site in order to attract random visitors who might be intimidated by a lengthy text-based introduction to the site.

The Chinese-designed site, on the other hand, used a more subdued visual aesthetic in order to provide more technical content in regards to the submission procedure for the Competition, using a denser amount of detail and text than would be likely found on a similar site created by American designers. (Figure 2, for example, shows that bulleted points include information about Tony’s Farm, the sponsor, which is information that would probably be conveyed in a background icon or logo on a US-designed website.) Similarly, much background information was presented within the submission guidelines; however, this was the kind of information that would likely reside on an entirely different “About the Competition” page on a US version of the site.

Elements of the Chinese-designed website also reinforced an ethos of collectivism. For instance, the home page of the Rookies platform contains the phrase “Bring out the Creativeness of the Chinese People” in Chinese characters that fade in and out in on the top banner – a design that confirms the collective effort as well as echoing Chairman Xi Jinping’s advocacy for national pride. The photos chosen for the home page of the Rookies platform, in turn, include a group photo of the American and Chinese teams at the screening and awards ceremony. (Such a visual demonstrates the high priority of the collective team effort as well as international collaboration.)

DISCUSSION: STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING CROSS-CULTURAL CHALLENGES

In this section, we review what we learned from this research and suggest a number of specific strategies for facilitating cross-cultural communication in Sino-American partnerships. Doing so allows readers to make use of these results for their own collaborative projects in which similarly complex negotiations take place between Chinese and American stakeholders.

In regards to the challenge resulting from individual versus collective communication preferences and the resulting political bureaucracy, it is critical to identify and secure the participation of a subject matter expert who understands and can work with the PRC’s state media policy. These local experts (especially ones with extensive, multisite fieldwork experience) are able to provide information that is essential in “decoding” project events and data,

especially those events that cause tension. Our subject matter expert was Mr. Jianren Kuang, an award-winning Chinese playwright who had prior experience consulting with both Chinese and American media conglomerates such as CCTV and CBS. He provided the Americans with invaluable insights about media relations and socio-political policies. His interpretation of the late-introduced “Chinese Dream, American Dream” theme, for example, was a critical moment in helping the US team understand details of the new Chinese political structure as the importance of PRC government approval in our partnership. The advice and recommendation of our project consultant also helped us identify key partners in both Chinese education and industry – entities that could help support the project and serve as liaisons to state governments.

To assist with issues raised by diverse expectations of audience and media distribution, it is important to consult with bilingual subject matter experts who have spent time in both countries. In our case, this consultation helped project stakeholders identify the needs from both the American and the Chinese teams. It was also helpful for the US delegation to directly see some of the operational procedures at major commercial sites in the PRC – sites such as C Media Group’s headquarters in Beijing and Shanghai Media Group’s headquarters in Shanghai. The members of the American team found that identifying possible obstacles and proposing possible solutions onsite with the aid of experienced subject matter experts who have lived and/or traveled extensively in both countries was an effective cross-cultural communication mechanism in the field.

In regards to navigating political challenges, it is important to understand political differences and varying approaches to government oversight and regulation. Again, it is useful to rely on subject matter experts with experience in both countries for this knowledge. These local experts provided information that was essential in contextualizing the tense events noted as troublesome in our journal entries. In the case of our late breaking “China Dream” category, for example, one local expert helped to explain to the US members of the team why such late breaking information was worthwhile and important to include in the Competition as a new theme, even though it was complicated to adjust materials at that point in the process.

Navigating multiple audiences and media formats also means considering diverse audiences with particular informational needs and expectations. Because of this situation, it is essential to conduct site visits and meet with all involved stakeholders to determine the expectations for audience and media distribution. In the case of the American participants, a site visit to Beijing and Shanghai provided geographic and cultural familiarity, which was critical to properly frame the aspects of folk tradition and cultural heritage that eventually became major themes for the Competition. Meetings with PRC representatives in Beijing and Shanghai during the planning stage confirmed the two parties’ intention to further explore the possibility of safeguarding and promoting both counties’ folk traditions and cultural heritage through the digital film partnership.

Finally, for effective cross-cultural web design, we found that specific types of planning tools were effective for planning websites for diverse cultural audiences. Because ethos and collective character were so important to both US and PRC stakeholders, we chose to use narrative planning tools to think about audience and character more holistically. A holistic analysis of these sites asks us to consider the stories each site wishes to tell its audiences and the

characters that are participating in those stories. Through working with design teams from both countries, participants learned that narrative brainstorming or storyboarding tactics were effective design tactics in the pre-design phases of intercultural web design. Key stories about each culture articulate embedded values and reveal central cultural priorities in a way that is understandable and relatable to designers from another culture.

Stories can be used to highlight environmental themes, develop key actions or events, or frame character in a particular way. In the case examined here, while the US version of the Competition website connotes ideas about character that individual adventure, emotion, and visual imagination, the PRC version cultivates an ethos of community and professionalism through its use of detailed information about sponsorship, government approval, and technical detail. The desire of the Chinese stakeholders to reach users on mobile devices and inspire action was also more evident in the Chinese approach to the project, especially given the prominent inclusion of a quick response (QR) code that could be scanned by mobile device users in order to quickly load the portal's website on their phones or tablets.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we considered several examples of coded documents extracted from a detailed case history involving a Sino-American partnership. In developing solutions for problems that emerged during a collaborative, international project (e.g., late breaking changes to the Competition theme or finding appropriate partners in the media) the international partners involved in this case developed strategies for effective cross-national and cross-cultural information design projects. Analysis of documentation associated with the management of the film project framed some of the potential problems identified by this study and did so in regards to how we make important decisions about designing for international audiences composed of diverse individuals and communities.

The analysis of this case/this project also reveals a number of insights about Sino-American collaborations. This analysis also provides an example of why participants should be transparent in the criteria and policies employed with the various informational stakeholders from different cultures collaborate on a project. Through the events surrounding the planning of the Competition, participants from both cultures learned that cross-cultural communication requires delicate handling of information and interpretations of project goals when collaborating across cultures. As participants in this event, we – the authors – found the strategies presented in this essay to be especially beneficial for producing a cross-cultural multimedia project. Such approaches are likely to be useful for other information designers, communication designers, and project managers who seek to develop successful design-based partnerships that involve working with complex informational assets in international contexts.

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APPENDIX A: VISUAL CHECKLIST FOR WEBSITE EVALUATION

This checklist focused on aspects such as color scheme, iconography, textual density, and technical features.

Textual Density / White Space

- Text very dense, very little white space
- Text somewhat dense, little white space
- Average text and white space
- Text somewhat sparse, more white space
- Text very sparse, lots of white space

Hyperlinks

- Numerous hyperlinks (> 10)
- Many hyperlinks (> 5)
- Several hyperlinks (> 2)
- Few hyperlinks (1-3)
- No hyperlinks

Technical Features (check all that are present)

- Registration / login page
- Film submission upload field
- Interactive widgets
- Location aware services
- Search bar
- Dropbox functionality

Color Tone

- Warmer colors (reds and oranges)
- Cooler colors (blues and greens)
- Other

Visual Style

- Prominent visuals, given priority over text
- Subdued visuals, lower priority than text
- Visuals given equivalent priority to text

Logos:

- Competition logo
- Government sponsorship logo (how many: ____)
- Corporate sponsorship logo (how many: ____)
- Other logo

Describe Color Scheme:

Describe Icons/Images Used and Image Placement:

Other Observations: