conne**x**ions interview with

DENNY HUANG

Transcript of the interview with Denny Huang, Managing Partner at TANG User eXperience Consulting, in Shanghai, China.

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Following post-production, the video recording of this interview will be uploaded to *connexions*' Vimeo channel at https://vimeo.com/218350777

Can you describe your work? What are you mostly responsible for within your organization?

I am the managing partner of Tang User Experience Innovation Consulting. We are a local Chinese firm. We provide user experience strategy, research, and design surveys. So our main methodology is from user-centric, so that we can create holistic channel experience for all kinds. Currently I am in charge of what we call the consumer industries… it means industries like hotels, fashion, luxury, these kind of industries. So actually, most of our clients… they are from this industries… are

coming from international companies, like… Intercontinental Hotel Group (IHG), Chanel, Burberry, Microsoft, Samsung, these kind of companies. We are helping them to do… kind of… localization work in China, like research and design, for example. That is mainly what I'm doing in our company now.

What's it like working with a company like TangUX, and how would you describe your experiences there?

I would say that we're kind of open. We have a very cool environment, just like… I mean… Silicon Valley companies like Google. So we have a cool-designed office, and we have very kind… we can say flexible, open environment here. And most importantly for me, I think we are a great place to learn new things—I mean… partly from our clients, partly from our colleagues. In one hand our clients are coming from… I mean companies from many different industries including smart appliance devices like AR, VR, these kind of new things; traditional… like … e-channels like websites, apps, kiosk card, so many different things. So these can keep up… keep up with new, trendy things.

And in the other hand, our colleagues are coming from very different backgrounds. Some of them are strategists with a business background, some of them are designers… like from human-computer interaction, visual designers, design strategists. So… and some of them are researchers coming from psychology backgrounds. So quite a very diversity of background projects and industries so that this can keep us open and young to always the new things. So that this is for me that… this is the most important thing to work here.

What would you identify as some of the key elements of doing UX localization?

For me, based on our experience before, we summarize this kind of UX localization into three dimensions. The first dimension we call… called "Conflicts." And for conflicts, this is our biggest issue, which is strongly against the local users' habit or culture. For some of them, like a time format, it is too easy to understand. But there are some kind of conflicts, which are also very important. For example, the zip code is… how to say… widely used in the western world to track order status. But in

China, most people do not remember the zip code of that… area, and also zip code is very… vigorous… how to say… I mean not as clear about, really, the destination. There is a wide range of area. So in China, people rarely use zip code. So for some international companies, if they use zip code as a must-to-fill options… must-to-fill content, which will be… block Chinese user. So this is the first layer we called "Conflicts."

The second layer we can call "Cross-Cultural Issues." For these kind of issues, people still can complete their task but their emotional responses are not good. Users feel that the product is not designed for China. For example, many Western websites… or e-commerce sites will use e-mail to get notifications, to track order status, but that is not offered in China, because in China e-mail is used mainly in an official environment. When people buy things from a website or something, people prefer WeChat or SMS to check this kind of status—especially WeChat which is often not very common for these kind of international companies.

And third layer we call—How to say?—"Needs Dissatisfaction." These are due to cultural differences. Lots of local functions, content and features are not provided by these kind of international companies, but they are very common in China. For example, QR code is widely used in China now. It can be used to pay both online and offline. You can use it to visit a website. You can use it to download an app. You can see… many places… in the shops, in the subway, on the airplanes. It's everywhere. But most international companies are not provided this kinds of things. But also there are other kinds of examples, like "Fa Piao," which is invoice in western world. In China, invoice—the Chinese, we call it "Fa Piao"—has a very rigorous requirement from the Government, but many international companies cannot provide these kind of functions.

So our company summarizes into three layers. The first we call "direct conflicts," the second we call called "Cross-Cultural Issues," which the Chinese user feels is not designed for them, and thirdly we call this "Needs Dissatisfaction." Actually, a lot of companies are not providing these kinds of functions… more like this.

What would you say are some challenges to UX localization? And how to overcome these challenges?

Based on our experience before, the past way international companies are doing this: they would find local Chinese research companies to do user testing and user experience evaluation that will fix these kinds of issues of bugs from global design team. But this way of work… people still feel this kind of product or service are not designed for China. I think the most reason is because the global headquarters team has different view with the local Chinese team. So when people are working with this kind of localization projects, the headquarters will ask the local team to follow what they think. This is based on our experience with many international companies. So I would say in order to overcome these kind of issues or challenges, I also suggest— How to say?—three layers.

The first of course is "Awareness." Especially, I think the global team needed to listen to the local team, and more importantly to listen to the local user. So we strongly suggest when we do user research or user testing, we will invite the people from the global team, so that they can really have empathy for the Chinese user that they are really different. Only after they have… the… from this perspective, their attitude change that… feel that the local Chinese team… user is so different that they will really value the local insights and also provide resources and budget to do this kind of localization.

And… after the global team has awareness of this, I think the second part is the strategy to do it. For example… some international companies care more about brand building in China, but some international companies care more about… like, e-commerce part in China. This kind of different strategy will highly affect how we do UX localization in China. And also, the relationship between the global team and the China team is very important for this. And also, the clear strategy between each team is also important, to keep the localization where it really works.

The third part of course… after the strategy is clear… I think the key part is the "Execution." How we do this kind of localization is also important. We should deeply understand Chinese culture, like e-commerce environment, user needs and even like… targeted personas of China, which is often slightly different than the headquarter's definition. From my personal experience before, for example when they

do execution, in the past many of them are using foreigners to do local research. They just fly to China and have two or three days of listening to what people said. It helps, but if we want to deeply learn the difference between local and global, I think we need… maybe we need to find local people to do this, or maybe we just spend more time so we can really deeply understand the culture… why people feel it. I have a case before, all kinds, I wanted to do UX localization in China. They have a Western design agency to do it… but when we saw the design, most of the people do not like the design. People said Chinese users like red. Red is very popular in China, so they use red. But Red has different meanings in China. Only the local, really very deep understanding can clearly define in what kind of environment or scenarios we can use the red and what kind of red we can use. So that's based on our experience before.

So I would summarize the key challenge is… how the global team supported the local team to do this kind of work. And we should, figure it out from Awareness, Strategy and Execution—this kind of three aspects to do it.

How do corporations balance globalization and localization?

We always face this kind of issue when we work with international companies, because you know, from a global perspective, they want global consistency so that we can create a greater brand image. Also we can cut cost, we can share the same platform, same development team, same mechanics. But from a local perspective, when we talking with the Chinese team, they would say that the Chinese is so different from the Western world. And especially the Chinese e-commerce environment and also the mobile Internet are so advanced that most of the Western companies or Western environments are e-commerce and mobile internet. So they keep fighting on this.

So… but we summarize it as there are four factors we should consider. Of course we do not want it too global, the Chinese users' environment and expectations are not considered, but also we do not want to go too local. If we go too local, that means that we need additional… we need additional cost of local team, maintenance, and for sure, a lot of cost issues for companies. So we'd summarize it in four factors. The first is what we call the "Target User" or we call the "Target Cust…" "Persona." For many comp… for many brands the local Chinese… the target person or target

user is very different from the mainland. For example, for some kind of ice cream brands, in the US it may be just sold in supermarket—it is just not a premium brand. But in China it is a premium brand. It is a very high price, and of course their target user is kind of upscale. That means the value propositions are also different with the global team.

And, the second… we should consider is "Brand." For some kind of Brands, like we work with many luxury brands. For this kind of brand, the Chinese user wants it to be an international brand. They do not want it to be too local. If it is too local, people will not use it. But for some brands, there are kind of daily things like faster use… so for this kind of brand it should be very local because it has very big competition from local Chinese companies.

And thirdly, of course, is from… design perspective. For design perspective, especially I would say interaction design and functions and content may be more important than visual. As for visual part, people are prepared for these sort of international design, so people are ok with it. But for interaction it is often different with global. For example, in China it only takes two, no more than three steps to finish booking a hotel. But when work with many international hotel brands, they usually ask for five or even six or even more steps. They ask for a lot of information. This is … from this perspective, I would say that we should, follow the Chinese perspectives. That's… that is very important, yeah.

The fourth part is "cost" which is very important. So … we needed to talk to the global team and of course the local team to check how much resources, how much cost we can spend on on this part. So that we can define a strategy, find the right balance on the globalization and localization. So… in general, I think this kind of balance all starts from the global team having a clear mindset that the Chinese user is different, the environment is different, the best practice is also different. And, of course, the Chinese market is also one of the important markets… so that they can provide resources and budget to do this. So… this… that is based on our experience.

How would you describe your journey into UX localization?

So I'm… more talking about it from our company perspective. I remember around six or seven years ago, many kind of… international companies are actually doing localization on translation. So for them, localization is more like translation… for them. For some kind of advanced companies, they will also finding us to do usability testing … user experience evaluation for them. So we find the issues, we report them to them. And … but we don't know what will happen after they get … got our input. Maybe they just do the research then ignore it when they… do the design, I don't know.

But the situation has changed around three or four years ago, maybe because the Chinese market is becoming more and more important for global business and also they face more and more competition from the local brands. They started to do exploratory research to define target persona, to learn their environment, to learn their journey, to identify pinpoints and opportunities. And also they will… we will find a local design agency to work with them. So at that time, for this kind of advanced—How to say?—localizing… localization international companies were doing this kind of work. And, now of course we find more and more companies are doing this.

Recently—I mean this year—we found out a new trend. Some of the international companies I think are already beyond localization. Actually, they want to innovate for the local market—especially for the China market. They want us to do… kind of… more work to identify new opportunities even if it hasn't been used in their headquarter before, so we are working with these kind of things. So we can see that as the Chinese market becomes more and more important for their business, and the competition becomes more and more rigorous for them, they will stand more and for them—it's even beyond the localization… it's more about … it will go to more like innovation for the local. So that's, that's… a phenomenon we have seen before.

Do you think it's getting more competitive for your business? Are there other companies in the Shanghai area that do that kind of business?

Yeah, that is… there is another trend is that… for this kind of user experience research and design work, many of our clients are finding local consulting agencies or design agencies or research agencies to work with them. So on the one hand, of course, for this kind of international companies, they say that as they are foreigners, they want to find Chinese to work with them so that they can integrate both local knowledge and global insights together. And, even, we found very interesting trend is that for many of our clients, the local Chinese companies, now they also prefer the local Chinese companies to work with them. On the one hand, they found … they already know that the local Chinese team can do most cost-effective way to work with them as many local companies can provide very valuable… valuable insights for a relatively low price compared to many Western companies. This is from my point of view. And, the other point of view is that for this kind of international design agency… consulting agency… they are facing a problem that non-Chinese people… they think that they do not know the Chinese environment so they are also prefer… prefer for this kind of local companies. So I think the trend has changed. Several years ago, both the international companies and the local clients, they preferred international companies to work with them. So I think it is, also changed.

Would you describe TangUX as a UX consulting firm?

Yes, we are described as consulting, but we are also providing design services, I mean detailed design service for our clients. So… when we work with our clients we start from research. We define a UX strategy for them. We even define the product and service strategy for our clients. Then we go to what we call the "concept design," or design style definition… and then we go to detailed design, including service design, interaction design, visual design, and… or even interior design. So… this is also an advantage for us… because for—in China, for this kind of international… agency, they are facing a problem that people are thinking they are too "concept," are too— How to say?—too far away from the… the local business, because their concept is more like 3 or 4 years or even more years later, they can feasible in China… so it can

be critical. But they don't want it to be too critical. It only solves this year's issue. So… we try to find a balance between innovation and implementation. We do not go too far towards innovation, but we are also not too focused on figuring out the current issue. So that's our position. We… we found the phenomenon that more and more of the Chinese clients care about this. But maybe several years later when Chinese companies are bigger or strong enough, they are starting about to do innovation for five or ten years later. But, currently… I think the phenomenon is like this.

Would you say your clients tend to be the bigger companies?

Oh… not really. Actually, I would say our clients… for this kind of, like Intercontinental®—they are Fortune 500 company. For this kind of company, we have around like 50-60%, but we have like 40-50% from start-ups or mid-scale companies. And… we even find a more interesting phenomenon that in China this kind of smaller companies, start-ups, they care more about user experience. They spend much. They spend more time—more budget. And they have top management support. Most of our projects for this kind of smaller business companies or start-ups—actually, with their founder or CEO, this is a little bit different. When we work with big clients, bigger companies, like Fortune 500 companies, they usually have a very complex, big company structure… so actually we can do very small things for them. We do testing for them, we do research for them, or we only design like… we only design website for them, or we only design app for them. But when we work with some kind of company—not big enough with them—we have—How to say?—we have top management support so that we can go beyond the… go beyond the UX work or specific channel work, so that we can plan strategy for them. We even have them to plan strategy of product… of strategy… of service from user perspective. Of course, we will balance with them from… from business... but it's already beyond the UX research or UX design. And we also plan holistic channel strategy for them, what's the position of a retail store, what's the position of a website, what's the position of an app, what's the position of like WeChat. And of course we will design for each channel.

Now we… we've… it's very often to think… think about holistic experience or service experience, but when we worked with big clients, it is often have very big upscale… upscale… embarrassed to do it. But when we work with these kind of not-that-big company, we can really to let the user… I mean the service experience way—or we call the holistic experience way—really works. Yeah, that is so different.

What suggestions do you have for learners who are interested in a career in UX in an international context?

For this I just share one insight. I would say local insights with global vision is very important. I mean… just now we all talked about localization, local culture, local environment, local user, and local best practice. We consider this very important; we have discussed it. But, of course… but… global vision or global view is also so important when we do this kind of work… because, for example, from a local perspective, even when people are doing transaction things, they want it to be local. But when we… when they want to see the visual, the animation is kind of designed— I mean, purely designed things—they prefer for… they want it to be global… internationally trendy things. They… they don't want it to be too… too local.

Because, I mean, from the innovation and design-trend perspective, there are many things happening around the world. We… we need to learn it, and the Chinese users are very keen to pursue… pursue this kind of global innova—new things, cool things, cool technology… trendy things. So… I would say global vision is still very important. So we have, in our company, around 50% of our colleagues have international education background or have worked in… in Western… world before. That is much fruitful when… so the international-background people and the local-background people working together. ■