Chapter XII

Chinese Cultures and E-Commerce

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ABSTRACT

The potential for the Internet and e-commerce in China and Chinese-speaking nations (including Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore) is huge. Many experts believe that China will have the second largest population of web surfers, after the United States, by the year 2005 (McCarthy, 2000). Currently, the Internet population in China is doubling every six months (CNNIC, 2001). There are many issues relating to China’s cultural aspects and society, which can impact the design and content of web sites that are directed towards Chinese audiences. Some of these issues include basic differences between Chinese and American/Western cultures, family and collective orientations, religion and faith, color, symbolism, ordering and risk/uncertainty. Attention is given to the differences between the cultures of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore, as well as addressing issues brought up by related theories and frameworks. A discussion of important
considerations that relate to using Chinese language on the World Wide Web (WWW) is also included. Finally, insights are gained by examining web sites produced in China and Chinese-speaking countries. This chapter will focus on many of these issues and provide practical guidelines and advice for those who want to reach out to Chinese audiences, whether for e-commerce, education, or other needs.

INTRODUCTION

The revolution of the Internet and the Web has radically changed the way that we live, work, and play, "to the extent that for many, using electronic means has become the norm rather than the exception. It may be assumed by some that English-language sites, or perhaps those in European languages or Japanese, make up the majority of what is on the web. However, one enormous, yet perhaps less recognized emerging market for the Web is the Chinese-language population, well over a billion of them in mainland China alone, spread out throughout China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, and with many more “Overseas Chinese” spread throughout the world.

In fact, the Chinese market can be considered as potentially one of the largest in the world, even though currently it is in the early stages of development. Even so, in 2000 there were close to 9 million computers connected to the Internet in China (CNNIC, 2000), and the number of users exceeded 22 million (CNNIC. 2001). All of this growth occurred since 1996; China is now considered one of the top five nations in terms of Internet use. Some experts predict that China is making strides towards having the second largest population of web surfers in the world. Clearly, there is a vast potential market that has yet to be expanded and tapped to its fullest potential.

It should be noted that while there is a very large potential market in terms of total Chinese and Chinese-speaking population, the type of user who would be using the Internet actually forms a kind of subculture within the general population, with characteristics including higher income and educational levels, and more users in urban and metropolitan rather than rural areas. This is generally true for most Chinese-speaking nations.

While there are a number of issues and impacts that relate to the use of the Internet in China and in Chinese-speaking nations, culture is the area on which this chapter focuses. Culture is an important part of a successful web site or e-commerce business, since instead of working within the cultural confines of a single nation, such as that of the United States, cultural boundaries are crossed.
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