



connexions interview with  
**HUATONG SUN**

Transcript of the interview with Huatong Sun, associate professor of Digital Media & Global Design at the University of Washington | Tacoma, USA.

The interview was recorded for issue 5(1). It was conducted by Quan Zhou, via Skype, on January 16, 2017. The interview was transcribed from the recorded interview by Quan Zhou, *connexions'* section editor, and Alex Kies.

Following post-production, the video recording of this interview will be uploaded to *connexions'* Vimeo channel at <https://vimeo.com/218351634>

**Can you describe your present career in light of international professional communication?**

Hi, everyone, my name is Huatong Sun. In Chinese, this should be pronounced as Sun Huatong (孙华彤). My current career is that I'm an associate professor of Digital Media Studies and Global Design at the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington, Tacoma campus. And I'm also an affiliated professor of Human Computer Interaction at Fudan University in Shanghai, China. I'm with the Cooperative Information & Systems Lab—a lab



that specializes in human-centered social collaborative computing research in China. And I want to thank you for the opportunity for me to reach out to the *connexions* community. I've been following your publication. So, it's very nice.

**What previous experience in international professional communication, if any, has prepared you for your present career?**

That's a very interesting question... and it's kind of funny that when I first arrived in the United States many years ago for my graduate study... people liked to ask me a question: what my culture shock was. So when I first arrived there, in the United States, in graduate school near Lake Superior, in upstate Michigan, people thought I should have some culture shock. And... but the strangest thing was I didn't have culture shock, and I don't know how to answer that question. And... so... I found that I was able to quickly adjust to the new environment. And I also found that I didn't change much.

So... that kind of experience always... always made me wonder about... my cultural background and people thinking about culture. And... I also remember that... so in the second quarter, I took a... an international business communication class. So in one class activity, I was asked to role-play as someone who came from my same cultural background—as an Asian woman. According to the protocol, I should keep silent because I'm an Asian woman, and we know that Asian women or Asian people tend not to speak a lot at business meetings—people tend to remain silent. I felt very uncomfortable at that meeting, but even though I don't usually speak much at business meetings. But when I was told I should not speak, I feel so uncomfortable. That is also some other thing that made me... become interested in cultural issues in professional communication.

At the same time, that was the time, you know, when the internet boom started, and because of telecommunication technology, because, you know, of email and other things, I could keep in contact with my parents, my friends, and also my boyfriend. Usually they say that happens when you're in long distance, a couple can

get broke up, but we didn't break up. My boyfriend ended up being my husband later. So that's part of digital technology I was thinking of. Wow, that's interesting...

So, I would say that these issues... cultural issues and digital technologies always intrigued me so that leads me into the study of culture and technology in the international context.

**What would you say are particular accomplishments of international professional communication practice, research, and/or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?**

I remember when I applied for graduate program in the United States. I contacted some professor at the University of Minnesota—Laura Gurak. I am very grateful to her. She wrote an email back to me. She said that the human side of technology is on the rise. I still remember that sentence in my email. I was not able to get full financial aid from that program, so I didn't go to that university. I remember what she said. I found that the human side of technology is getting more and more attention, and we see a convergence of social science, humanities and computer science.

So... I was also thinking about another case when I was in college. I was a college newspaper editor at that time. I covered news in my school, at Fudan University. So as a Chinese Literature major, I interviewed some science students who bought computers, and put computers in their dorm. That was back in 1994, I think. And... so it was a big news that college students were able to afford and have a computer in their dorm. You might remember that at that time, when we used computers we have to go to the computer lab. All computer labs always had carpets, air conditioning, because they want to protect and take care of computers.

And you need to change slippers to use computers. But then suddenly a group of students were able to chip in and purchase computers and put them in their dorms, so that news I covered and published in our college newspaper. And it then was also published on the front page of WenHui Daily (文汇报) a few days later. [Note: As a counterpart of New York Times in China, WenHui Daily was the largest circulated daily newspaper in the Shanghai area then.] And... it was a big accomplishment for a student who was a news reporter. But at that time, I didn't realize many years later I'm doing studies in digital media and also I can be a computer scientist at the same

time. So we see the convergence of the digital media—I would say the social sciences, the humanities—and computer science.

I also remember that many years ago when I first went to ACM CHI Conference, the top conference in the field of human-computer interaction... I was one of the very few who studied culture of computing technologies there, but nowadays when I went to that conference, I saw a lot of social scientists, anthropologists, and—you know—all kinds of people. And now some computer labs in top HCI schools hire social scientists as postdocs to work together. So that is... I think that is a big accomplishment.

At same time, I think the second thing I would like to talk about is that not only scholars and media professionals... pay attention to the impact of computer algorithms. I think ordinary people are more keen to understanding the algorithms and use the technology to fit their lives. I'm teaching "social media" in my... in our communication program. This course was offered... we begin to offer... a few years ago... five years ago. And I taught it every year. I saw the change of teaching that course. This is a 200-level undergraduate course. When I first taught that course, my students had a very naïve understanding of social media, but three or four years later, they have very sophisticated understanding of social media, and some of the sophisticated understanding can be compared with some research that we have been doing. So... I feel that this is another change. People don't take technology for granted, and people now know and see the ideology or algorithm behind technology.

I would say these are two particular accomplishments in our field, and therefore, I also see our role as professional communicators becoming even more important in this technological culture.

### **Can you talk specifically about some accomplishments or trends in design thinking?**

I don't think I'm the best person to talk about accomplishments in design thinking. What I've been doing is that I bring design thinking to our students, so that they are able to become better. When I say better, I mean culturally sensitive designers and innovators. Or maybe, in another way, I do see some trends of design thinking, but

not particularly related to my area, so I don't want to make—you know—a generalization.

So... related to my research interest, I see the trend about critical design. Critical design has been at the forefront of HCI lately. Because I'm teaching in a Critical Media Studies program, I have been trying to introduce that critical design movement into my classroom. It's a very challenging exercise... because we need to help students understand the critical side of technology—the ideology and algorithms behind technology... and also to help them to design and improve some of those cultural sensitivity components in the prototypes they are doing in class. So... it can be, you know, depending on the classroom—depending on the group of students—this... this exercise can be successful.

And sometimes it... it asks the teacher to be very careful about introducing the theories and then to help students understand theories, and also helping students realize this is a journey. I think one of the issues when we teach critical design or teach some innovative design thinking approaches in our classroom, we need to remind ourselves and our students that this is a journey and you can fail in this journey. For example, I'm teaching a new class this quarter. We call it "Mobile Communication and Social Practice." We are using a social practice view to look at how to design mobile communication apps. I told my students in the first class...after so many years of teaching critical design, I reminded them that—you know—this is a journey, you might fail. You should not feel depressed that your project, your design prototype, is not as good as some other group's prototype. The most important thing I want you to take away from this class is that you'll be able to write a thoughtful critical reflection at the end, so you know what you learned, and you learned from your... you... if you're lucky, then you've learned something that you can apply for future design. And if you're not lucky... then you'll learn how to avoid some pitfalls. I think I need to constantly remind students of that. I think it is important to remind students to be an adventurer. They're doing an adventure. This adventure can be successful; or it might not.

**For our audience, will you briefly discuss critical design?**

According to Shaowen Bardzell and Jeff Bardzell and their collaborators, critical design aimed to designing for change to improve the current state of human existence. Of course this is part of the definition. And... I used this definition as a discussion starter for my students. I ask students to think about that. "What is critical design?" Because my students usually take other critical media courses already, so they kind of have some sense of that. So... they'll tell me that critical design is more than usability. It's more than... so, it goes around effectiveness and efficiency. And... it also... looks at issues of diversity of culture, and it looks issues more than ethnicity... groups. So it challenges status quo, challenges old structure, and it should be innovative. These are usually the points my students would bring up in class, so then we kind of form this as our understanding of critical design concept for the class, yeah.

**What would you say are some challenges of international professional communication practice, research, and or/pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?**

I feel that there are two kinds of challenges. The first is whether we're more connected or further divided. In particular, after the recent American Presidential election, we talk about the bubbles different cultural groups live in, and they don't necessarily communicate with each other... yeah. So I think that at the end of my book, *Cross-Cultural Technology Design*, I was hoping that we can have more culturally sensitive technologies. In my case, I hope there'll be more culturally sensitive mobile messaging technologies that will serve local user needs, but at that time I didn't see those cases when I was finishing the book manuscript. A few years later, I saw the emergence of WhatsApp®, Kakao Talk®, WeChat®, and LINE®, and I thought, "Oh, wow! These apps came!" And, actually, they... they came from different cultural contexts, and they represent different cultural ideas and ideologies in their designs. It's very fascinating. I began to do the fieldwork. I conducted multi-site international fieldwork, and I interviewed users in the United States, in Japan, South Korea and China. I got some interesting findings. I'm still working on data analysis and this will be part of my second book. The second book is called *Cross-Cultural Social Media*

*Design*. Or maybe I'll call *Global Social Media Design*. I haven't made a decision yet. But anyway... so... as I've been watching the development of these kinds of culturally sensitive technologies, I kept wondering whether we are more connected or further divided. This is the first challenge I'm talking about.

The second challenge I'm talking about is that I feel that even though we made a lot of progress to promote international professional communication... I think we're still far from celebrating our accomplishment. I remember when I went to the 2001 SIGDOC Conference. That conference's theme was about going international. I don't remember the actual wording for the theme. But it's about going international... but there was only one session devoted to the theme. Only a handful of people came to our session. I went to that conference because I submitted a paper for that, but unfortunately only three people came to our session. That was back in 2001. I also remember two months ago I went to the DUB Retreat. DUB is a collaborative group at the University of Washington as you know. It stands for Design, Use, and Build. So we have an annual retreat that reviews people's work and shares the work. I'm part of the DUB group. So the theme of that year's DUB retreat was about International Technology something... I don't remember clearly. So... one panelist asked the question, "So how many of you are doing international HCI research?" In a big hall that had maybe 100 scholars, PhD students, master's students, only 4 or 5 people raised their hands. So I see there is still a long way for us to go.

**How do you see technology or changes in technology impacting, maintaining, or altering international professional communication practice, research, or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?**

I feel technology redefined the locality of the world. One thing I keep saying—and when I offer workshops, you know, to industry... to... professionals, I would say that "Every local technology is also a global technology, and every global technology needs to be local." So... I think that the synergy, engagement, interaction of both local and global, it's very important. And this, we'll be able to address some of the issues: We talked about the old Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions theories. If we see culture as

cultural production, we'll see more of the synergy and the interaction of the local and the global. And we will be able to address to those issues.

I want to talk about that class I'm teaching this quarter, "Mobile Communication and Social Practices." So... we are kind of using Lucy Suchman and Jeanette Blomberg's article—that 1999 article, "Reconstructing Technologies as Social Practices." So, I think one of the... I should say that article talks about three aspects that will help us to redesign technology as social practice. One is critical... understanding the critical analysis of technology. And the second is the ethnographic studies of technology use. Third is seeing technology design and use as cultural production. I feel this part is currently missing in our current research and design practices.

### **How do you apply design thinking in professional communication pedagogy?**

This is something I have been thinking and have been doing... I found that introducing design thinking in professional communication classes help students to become better designers. I was thinking about the class I just finished last quarter, that's "Print Design." When I first taught this course many years ago, I primarily just covered the basics of graphic design principles because that class is an introduction of visual design for professional communication students. Students who take that class usually have no experience about design—print design—also about design technologies such as Adobe InDesign. So our goal was to teach students to be able to use print design jargons, and be able to use industry standard software Adobe InDesign to connect these two things. After a few years I found that while students liked that class, I got kind of bored. And I encountered a book called *Design: A Very Short Introduction* from John Heskett—I would say... a guru in industrial design. So... I began to introduce some of the thoughts in my class. That was the starting point, later I found if I introduce design thinking, I can make this class more interesting and more useful to my students.

So nowadays when I teach that print-design class, we start with something actually related to Critical Design. I told my students that design could have changed the world—better design could have changed the world. So we started to look at

design thinking. I kind of introduced that concept to students. Later... then we moved to the real business of print design, design jargons, rhetorical situation, to help students to understand the rhetoric behind each successful design, and know how to revise rhetorical strategies to fix poor designs. And after students get confidence and develop some skills about print-design projects, usually towards 2/3 of the time, I begin to introduce those concepts such as creative confidence that comes from... David Kelly. We watch videos, ask students to see how they think of that—whether they are more competent in their print design skills. I should also say that in my class, we also work hard to build a community of practice. In that way, when they have major projects, I ask the student to present that project to the whole class and then I assign respondents to give constructive feedback. So... I give students a certain format so that they can get constructive feedback. So students are used to that they are going to get constructive feedback or criticism from their peer students... their peers—their fellow students. So after a few rounds they are used to getting this kind of feedback, and I also found that they feel more confident about their design skills. Now they don't feel shy about their designs, right?

Toward the end of the quarter, I ask students to watch a TED Talk video that was done by a NPR journalist John Hockenberry, "We Are All Designers." John Hockenberry connected design with his own experience. He's a very famous journalist, but he was confined to a wheelchair since a car accident when he was a college student. Even though he was confined—you know—to a wheelchair, he still won several prestigious journalist awards. He conducted interviews in war areas. Particularly because my students are in the media studies program, I feel that that talk relates to them and they can see that design actually is everywhere. And... everyone is a designer. So by directing the class this way, I feel that I was able to boost the students' confidence. And... thinking about our students... the majority of our students—more than 60% of our students—are first generation college students. They... they need to have this kind of reminder that they will be able to... conquer... work towards the... maybe some bad luck in life, and then... everyone has disadvantage, and that disadvantage can be part of an advantage of design. So that is how I use design thinking in my regular design class.

**What kinds of international and intercultural experiences and skill sets has higher education taught students to help them transition to industry? In what ways could higher education do a better job of preparing the next generation of graduates for international professional communication?**

I think that what we can do to help our students... that—first, that through our own research—and bring our own research to classrooms to help students to see the invisible global influences. I would say that this is the responsibility of the core as international professional communication research we have, yeah.

So... when I teach other classes that are not related to the international communication topics, I still remind students about those international cases, and if possible I would include some international communication project. So for example, in my social media class, we always look at how social media technology is used in different countries. And... in my print-design classes, it's not international print design—but we still talk about that—how people in Middle East might interpret an ad in a different way. People read from right to left—they don't read from left to right. And, and... how are you going to avoid these kinds of problems?

In addition to that, I think that we need to help our administrators and other colleagues to realize the global impact... And... I'm thinking about my own case. I work at the University of Washington Tacoma campus. Every day when I drive to work I can see the Port of Tacoma. The port is connected with big ports in East Asia, including China, Japan, and South Korea. So our daily experience is actually impacted by that. However, I do not think that many of my colleagues are fully aware of that. When we talk about our mission of urban serving, people will tend to talk about serving local communities. I would like to add that this local community is also very global. For example, Tacoma has a bigger number of immigrants, and... it's said that Tacoma has the highest... mixed-race marriage rate. I don't think my colleagues know that. And I didn't know that, either, until later the mayor gave a talk at my campus. I was able to learn a bit about that because I serve on the Global Honors Council, and I think that we're lucky that we have an honors program that has a focus on the global dimension.

I remember that when I worked at Miami University. Miami University had a plan called Miami Plan... in the past. When I started working there, they changed the name into Global Miami Plan. So I see more and more universities realize the importance of the global. And, um, what we need to do to help our colleagues to see that, you know, the global part—aspect... it's everywhere. It's not something you can avoid. So... last year we got some questions for our Global Honors program. Some people said that "I'm teaching math; I don't see how this is related to the global." Some of our Global Honors students say that "No, I don't think so. Um... you know, think about that we have the numbers... the numbers came from the Arabic—the Arabic numbers." So, yeah, actually it's global.

**What has industry done well to help higher education teach international and intercultural experiences and skill sets or to help their own employees develop such experiences and skill sets? What else might industry do to help prepare the next generation of graduates for international professional communication?**

I don't know if my answer will be accurate... I will say... will fit to the question, but I have a lot of thoughts about our collaborations with industry professionals, so maybe my answer is about my thoughts about how we should collaborate with industry professionals.

First, in my own experience, I found that we are lucky to have the industry partners, because they help our colleagues, our administrators, to see the importance of the global vision. Sometimes, it's hard for us to persuade our colleagues that, you know, we need to have this kind of global-related research—we need to include international components into our professional communication curriculum. I will not... just think about, "Oh we have a... a International Professional communication course, so that, you know, we're sufficient. We already achieved this competency for our curriculum." I think that we need to include that mission, that international professional communication vision—or the global vision—into... into all the classes. This should be part of the competency... or literacy—global literacy or global competency. So... it's nice to have a couple of collaborators—industry partners—

come to our school... then share their experience so that we... we can, you know, persuade our administrators and colleagues.

But, also, I think that we want to be very careful about collaboration with industry partners, because our industry partners or our industry friends could also be confined by their particular experiences. Um... so in the past, in my first job, I was the internship coordinator. I did regular site visits with our intern employers and also helped form the local advisory board. So while I interviewed them during site visits, they tend to tell me what kind of skills they want our students to learn. Now, they're not necessarily in the international communication area, but I know this is what you usually expect when you partner with industry people—yeah, industry professionals. I think they provide very thoughtful insights. We should respect our industry partners' suggestions. However, I think our goal is not just help our students land jobs, and the jobs that work this year might not work for next year. I want to actually help our students and help prepare them to get ready for the career trends in 20 or 30 years, right? It's a changing career trend. We want to help them to be innovators. So I think that we want to be very careful when we collaborate with our industry partners, because professional communication can be very skill-oriented, and we could get a request saying that “Oh, you should cover this particular technology. You should cover that particular tool set.” We... we want to be very careful about that, because we don't want to... we don't want to forget the foundation of liberal education we promote—right?—in our curriculum, through rhetoric and other professional communication courses.

So... I also remind my students that when they are taking my class... some class—skill-oriented classes—I want to remind them they need to get the literacy—the foundation, not necessarily the particular skills. So in my class of Cross-Cultural Communication Design, of course we cover skills and toolsets, but also I want to remind them—I said—I want to remind them the difference. So usually towards the end of the quarter, I show them a photo that was taken in a German supermarket by one of my friends—I saw that picture on her Facebook, and I asked her to use it in my class. So that is a picture of a lot of different brushes you find in German markets. So in German supermarkets you see brush for mushrooms, brush for vegetables, brush for pots, and also so many different things. It's very amazing! You don't see so

many different kinds of brushes... from American grocery stores... or Chinese tool stores. So... I told my students that my class will not help them to make a brush to clean mushrooms. That's not the goal. But I help them to gain that competency—or the understanding to learn—how to design a brush that can help them clean mushrooms. Yeah, I think that we want to be very careful that we're not... giving students brush to clean mushrooms, yeah. We actually helping them to design that brush that can be used to clean different kinds of things. ■