Developing an experiential design approach to gain understanding about foreign culture: challenges and solutions

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Abstract

China’s economy is growing. It has been said that “the question like ‘how to do business with Chinese people’ have occupied the minds of international business people who are planning to enter China.” (Fan & Zigang, 2004). Sweden as a country which listed China as its largest trading partner in Asia and a priority country in Sweden’s export strategy, has a need to gain understanding about guanxi — an important concept in Chinese business culture. In this thesis, the author will present the development of three exercises inspired by design methods (role play, visualization and customer journey map) which aim to help Swedish business managers to learn guanxi in an experiential way. It includes the challenges the design team went through, how did they solve it and what are the latest version of the exercises looks like. The main challenges presented in this thesis are: how to embed specific knowledge smoothly into exercise; how to set up the role of facilitator(s); and how to increase the level of satisfaction for the users. Those challenges are not only specific to our project, but also could be inspirational for other people (e.g. designers, business culture scholars and so on) who want to create similar exercises or looking for new ways to deliver the knowledge about cross-cultural business communication.

Keywords: Design methods, Guanxi, Experiential learning, Role play, Visualization, Customer journey map
Acknowledgement

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Linköping in May 2019

Cao Linqi
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1. Introduction

1.1 General background introduction

This project was conducted with Usify – a design innovation agency based in Linköping, Sweden. It began with an initiation of developing a design tool box that can help Swedish SMEs’ managers who’s working with China at an early stage to gain understanding about the cultural knowledge they need with facilitation by trained designers. This tool box was aimed to be a foundation of potential service for Usify in the future. Here in this thesis we need to clarify that the word “we” stands for the design team: me and Ida Franzén – a student who study the final year of her master’s in Design and Product Development program at Linköping University.

The need of developing this kind of toolbox is obvious. First, speaking about cross-cultural business communication, it is clear that cultures have their own differences. For instance, “western countries are generally much higher than China in terms of individualism”. Also, “western countries seem to have a short-term orientation while China is considered to be long-term oriented” (Fan & Zigang, 2004). Those kind of cultural differences affects business culture also to some degree. It is claimed that “there is something in all countries called ‘management’, but its meaning differs to a larger or smaller extent from one country to another” (Hofstede, 1993).

It is true that “China is Sweden's largest trading partner in Asia and a priority country in Sweden's export strategy”. About the collaboration between both countries, the way they think and behave is different. Take an example of BRI (Belt and Road initiatives) policy and action, it finds that “Swedish officials are often highly cautious, maintaining a wait-and-see policy. China has not prioritized Sweden because of its perceived lack of serious commitment. The importance of being ‘in from the beginning’ cannot be overestimated in the Chinese cultural context. As noted above, joining the AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) on the last day on which it was possible to register did not create good will” (Weissman & Rappe, 2017). From that case we can see people from both countries have different mindsets towards same topic. So, “the questions like ‘how to understand China’ and ‘how to do business with Chinese people’ have occupied the minds of international business people who are planning to enter China.” (Fan & Zigang, 2004).

From designer’s point of view, design can be seen as an effective way to create understanding. There is potential of using design to help people from different culture to understand each other. In this case, help Swedish business people to understand how Chinese people doing business.
1.2 Pre-study and design criteria for the tool box

The initial purpose of this project was to use design to help Swedish companies who’s doing business with China in the early stage to have a better understanding of their Chinese business partner and how Chinese people do business. The scope was quite general. In order to have more specific scenarios for later design, we conducted a series of interviews to explore what are the difficulties they usually run into when they collaborate and what kind of solutions they wish for.

The interviewees include: 3 Swedish managers who has experience about working with China; 3 Chinese business people who is dedicated to bring Swedish innovative product to China for over a decade; 2 Swedish business men who worked in China for years and speak fluent Chinese now dedicated to help Swedish companies to go to China; 1 Chinese person who worked in marketing agency that aims to help foreign companies to localize their product for Chinese market; 1 Chinese manager who worked for Swedish companies who have experience in working with Sweden. In addition, relevant information also gathered from an event called “An outlook on China” organized by Science Park Mjärdevi in February 15th, 2019, where Swedish managers share their insights from a delegation trip to China in autumn, 2018.

From the analysis of the interview result (figure 1), we sort the difficulties into 10 problematic scenarios. Then the design team picked 1 scenario together with Usify to work on later as a focus for the tool box. The scenario is about how to understand guanxi – an important concept in Chinese business culture. It was also the most demanded knowledge asked by Swedish companies based on the interview.

**Figure 1.** An overlook of the interview result analysis’ style
After we defined the scenario there was a more specific design criteria for the tool box that has been decided together with Usify:

- This tool box will help people have a better understanding of guanxi.
- This tool box can be used by Swedish SMSs’ managers while they are still in Sweden.
- This tool box will be used by people working in any business area.
- The tools in the tool box need to be designed based on design methods.
- The tool box will be used with trained designers’ facilitation.

1.3 Research question

Main research question for this thesis: What challenges were encountered when adapting design methods for gaining understanding about guanxi?

Sub-questions:

- What are the challenges when developing different tools/exercises?
- How did we solve that?
- What are the tools/exercises that we came up?

1.4 Delimitation & clarification

Due to limitation of time, the complete tool box cannot be fully developed. Within the thesis period, it is the content of the tools in the tool box that we designed. We haven’t reached to the stage where we can fully explore all possible format for the tool box. We kept the format in a paper prototype level here. For this thesis, we’re focusing on the process of developing tools/exercises. Thus, the outcome will be the challenges we ran into when adapting design methods for our use; how did we solve it and what are the latest version of tools/exercises look like.

In addition, we also need to clarify our role in this tool box. Even though the purpose for this tool box was to help Swedish companies to gain cultural knowledge, we ourselves are not culture experts. We are designers in this project. That means we are not going to simply answer companies’ cultural
questions, instead that our job is to help them to learn the knowledge by themselves using our tools/exercises.

From literature research we also realized there are both good side (the well use of network) and negative side (e.g. corruption) about guanxi. As designers, our aim is not to teach our intended users how to use guanxi in a negative way to get through their life. Our purpose is to have an attempt to use design methods to increase understanding about certain culture.
2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Guanxi

It has been found that “more interpersonal strategies have been employed by Chinese business managers when initiating a business relationship” (Zhu, Nel & Bhat, 2006). “The role of guanxi in Chinese business culture provides one of the most dramatic examples of an entrenched cultural norm under pressure from international business trends” (Dunfee & Warren, 2001).

Then, what is guanxi? There is theoretical definition stated in the literature and that is, “relational entities and their relationships (e.g., Bian, 1997; Tsui & Farh, 1997), as social practices of building and using personal relationships to get through life and work (e.g., Chen, Chen, & Xin, 2004; Guthrie, 1998; Xin & Pearce, 1996), as a strategy for organizations to gain competitive advantage (e.g., Li, Poppo, & Zhou, 2008; Li & Zhang, 2007; Park & Luo, 2001; Peng & Luo, 2000), and as a mechanism of contracting and transactions” (Lovett, Simmons, & Kali, 1999).

So, how can guanxi be built in China? Literature article suggests “guanxi building is often initiated after identifying a guanxi base. There are three bases contains different type of foundation (e.g. common social identities, common third party, creating potential future basis) that can help you to build guanxi.” Research found that “firms which established guanxi relationships based on trust and shared goals experienced greater success” (Abramson and Ai, 1999). After that it comes to the stage to enhance guanxi quality. “Personal interaction and returning favors are the key for building guanxi. The extension of the time for repayment symbolizes both the closeness of guanxi and the willingness to continue it. When it comes to the time of using guanxi, asking favors are rigorous means of re-evaluating guanxi quality. Quality is signified by sharing not only joys and benefits but also problems and misfortunes” (Chen & Chen, 2004).

The benefit of understanding and building guanxi in China is obvious: research shows that “there is a positive link between guanxi and overall firm performance, market entry, and decreased transaction costs” (Ai 2006; Luo 2007; Quer et al. 2010; Cheng and Tang 2012). “It is a critical component in succeeding as a foreign entrepreneur in China’s dynamic market. Guanxi also can help business people to have access guanxi partners’ already established network. When stuff happens, when you need pragmatic solutions, your network can help you to fix that. In a word, it can save you if you’re in trouble and it can help you to promote your business” (Ngoma, 2016).
There is no doubt that *guanxi* is important in Chinese business culture, however, it is stated that “very little foreign entrepreneurs know how to build and manage their *guanxi* relationships. This gap in knowledge has been previously acknowledged within the literature” (Luo & Chen, 1997; Chen & Chen, 2004). Thus, “there’s a growing and urgent need to increase that understanding” (Ngoma, 2016).

2.2 Design methods

Design methods can be seen as a way to gain understanding of a product or service, “like ‘how’ and ‘why’ users interact with products, what they value? What’s their behavior? And what’s the context like?” (Teixeira, 2001) Those design knowledges are valuable for designers for further design activity, meanwhile also meaningful for creating empathy, to step in other people’s shoes. Take an example of one of the prototyping methods – role play, it can be used as “a method to gain first-hand experience with the feeling of prototypes, as well as to explore, communicate and evaluate design ideas by acting out different situations” (Buchenau & Suri, 2000).

In a word, design methods provide people ways to gain understanding about user and context. It is also suggested that design methods support ways of thinking and acting, used by designers to work through a design process. Previous work has shown that “practitioners view design methods as flexible ‘cores’ (Gray, Stolterman, and Siegel, 2014) or ‘ingredients’ (Woolrych et al., 2011) which are used to communicate the complexity of practice” (Gray & Boling, 2017). Those ‘ingredients’ can be used in various of creative ways. For instance, “role play method can be applied into exercises that can used for educational purpose” (Druckman & Ebner, 2008).

It is common to see design as external representation to help people create empathy and gain understanding on certain topic or group of people., Designers have used visualization as one type of external representation for representing their internal thoughts. “It is commonly used in service design when designers need to describe current or future services” (Blomkvist & Segelström, 2014). “The benefits of using visualization can be: articulate insights, communicate insights and maintain empathy for service design practitioners” (Segelström, 2010, 2013). There’s no doubt that external representation can help with making the invisible (thoughts) visible and “support learning, communicating and collaborative work” (Blomkvist, 2011). To elaborate that, “use external representation for learning purposes can be divided into explorative and evaluative approaches. Exploring means building something to generate insights and ideas. The coordination of activities and externalizations of ideas can make them shareable. It is also easier for people to remember the insights even after a long time” (Blomkvist & Segelström, 2014). Definite external representation like customer
journey maps can make knowledge sharing easier; Ongoing external representation like role-play can achieve the same benefits and also “support inferential reasoning” (Kirsh, 2010).

For designing a tool box inspired by design methods and its various applications, there are various format of how it can be. It can be a website that lists all the tools they have in certain categories; it also can be an interactive program which can customize tools based on your needs. Take an example of Design Thinking tool box –the application of numerous methods and techniques from various disciplines: design, but also engineering, informatics, and psychology. “Design methods and tools described by Schindlholzer (2014) ranges from guidelines to design workspaces to methods to define personal strengths and weaknesses. It cannot be easily assigned to singles steps in the micro or macro process. The experienced design thinker uses from the repository those appropriate to the situation” (Brenner, Uebernickel & Abrell, 2016). It gives us insights how a design tool box can be and being used. It relies on designers’ experience and their own judgement of when to apply which methods.

2.3 Experiential learning

In order to create tool box, we also needed knowledge about how the users can learn knowledge using the tools we generated. It would be a different way of learning compare to sit down and listen to lectures or read a book. The way of learning we provided would be in an experiential way, e.g. in a format of a workshop or exercise.

The differences between traditional ways of learning and experiential learning is that “the later one emphasizes experience as a central role of learning and development “(Dewey, 1938). Experiential education can simply define as learning by doing, which “immerses adult learners in an experience and then encourages reflection about the experience to develop new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of thinking” (Lewis & Williams, 1994). “In traditional ways of learning the leaners are treated as passive receivers. Because of today’s rapidly changing environment, there’s an increasing demand in adult education that it must utilize learners’ previous experiences in order to enhance their current and future learning” (Lewis & Williams, 1994).

“The process of experiential learning has the potential to result in a person’s cognitive reconstruction of experience and significant personal learning such as overcoming one’s biases. It includes a cycle of steps such as “trying” and “undergoing” by becoming aware of a problem, getting an idea, trying out a response, experiencing the consequences, and either confirming or modifying previous conceptions”
Another way to understand the experiential learning processes identified by David Kolb in 1984 includes four parts: learners have concrete experiences; then they reflect on the experiences from a variety of perspectives. From these reflective observation learners engage in abstract conceptualization, creating generalizations or principles that integrate their observations into theories.

Experiential exercises, for instance role-plays and simulations, have been widely used for educational purposes. The simulations are intended primarily to enhance learning benefits for the role-players participating in them. “Learning objectives are thought to be accomplished by providing realistic, but controlled, environments in which learners are guided only by implicit rules” (Drukman & Ebner, 2008). Bredemeier and Greenblat (1981) concluded that “simulations are more effective than other instructional methods, as aids to retaining the learned material”.

It’s not difficult to connect design methods to effective experiential learning. From learning perspective, it is stated that “the effective learning processes associated with exploration, exploitation and sharing of human knowledge (tacit and explicit) that use appropriate technology and cultural environments to enhance an organization’s intellectual capital and performance” (Kay, 1993). Meanwhile design as external representation can “support learning, communicating, collaborative work” (Blomkvist, 2011) and make knowledge sharing easier. It makes it possible for us to take ‘ingredients’ from design methods and transform them into various kinds of experiential learning exercises in order to achieve an excellent learning result.
3. Developing the tool box

3.1 Concept ideation procedure

The ideation process started with exploring existing design methods and thinking about its potential adaptation to our need. At the meantime we also took inspiration from existing tool boxes on the market. We first listed every possible method on the board and its examples of adaptation and then selected the ones we thought would be most suitable for increasing understanding about guanxi and tried to create idea/concept drafts following a basic structure (figure 2). It means for each tool idea we had we needed to think about what design techniques we needed to use to tell what kind of cultural knowledge in what kind of format.

![Figure 2. Basic structure for idea generation](image)

At the beginning, we were attracted to methods that can help people to create empathy and understanding for other people, like empathy mapping and interview stimulation with extreme personas. Our purpose of using those techniques was to make business partners from different cultures to understand each other better. However, after going further with how the techniques can be implemented into complete exercises, we found out it was hard to deliver knowledge about guanxi directly. Then we decided to eliminate them.

Then we tried to focus on the knowledge we want to deliver around the concept of guanxi, for example, to explain how guanxi works, how Chinese people build business connections and how Swedish companies can reflect on their former experience from an angle of guanxi building? Then 3 design techniques came up: role play using prepared scenarios, visual mapping and experience mapping. To elaborate on why we chose those 3 techniques for basic concepts, here are the reasons:
a. Role play exercise with prepared scenarios:

We want the participants to learn from the experience of acting out of prepared scenarios that’s tight to how guanxi works. They will have a goal to approach in this exercise and there’re tasks along the way. We can embed cultural knowledge within the journey of approaching the goal. It will be an activity that the participants need to be active and ready to explore new knowledge.

b. Visual Mapping

Visual Mapping can be a good tool to map out the network status. Meanwhile, we wanted to explore more functions from it. For example, is it possible to highlight how strong the connection is and be able to give suggestions about what’s the next step for guanxi building? We think there is potential in visualization techniques which can help us to achieve that.

c. Experience Map

This exercise was inspired by customer journey mapping. The idea was to make participants reflect on their past experiences. It is suggested in the experiential learning’s theory, “it’s valuable learning for the learners to reflect on the experience from a variety of perspectives when they have concrete experience” (Kolb, 1984). The logic for this tool is, it’s almost impossible to tell everything about guanxi since it varies a lot depends on different situation. There’s no complete right and wrong answers. That’s why we thought we should focus on helping participants to learn from their own experience by reflecting what they have done follow our guidelines. The guidelines are based on theory presented in this thesis.

Figure 3. the learning curve
In addition, we can see from the learning curve (figure 3) above, there is a point when you get a bit experience on certain things and you think you know it, but you still don’t know what you don’t know. We were hoping this tool can help the participants to realize what they don’t know and set a good foundation for mastering the knowledge at the end.

3.2 Detail design & iteration process

At this stage we needed to design the detailed elements of all 3 exercises. The elements can be sorted into 3 categories: materials for participant’s experience, basic instruction for the exercises and facilitation guide for facilitator(s). For different exercise the materials for participant’s experience can be different. For example, the materials for the role play exercise could be different personas, storyline and tasks. We designed the first draft and prototypes based on theories presented in this thesis, our own knowledge and experience. Then we brought it to different group of people for testing. In the testing sessions we sort the participants out into 2 groups: one is Swedish business people (management level) with little or no experience about working with China; and one is Swedish business people (management level) with some experience about working with China. We test different tools with different groups. Experience map need to be tested with people who have some experience, and both groups are suitable for testing other two tools. Figure 4 is our testing session timeline and which tools with which version got tested with which group of people. Role play exercises got tested 5 times and been iterated twice; visual mapping tool got tested 6 times with no iteration so far; experience map got tested 5 times with 1 iteration. This process was designed also based on feasibility of the testing group.

During the testing sessions our main goal was to evaluate our tools and gain new ideas for future improvements. The main questions we were investigating are:

a. Can participants learn the knowledge we prepared in the exercises?

b. Anything good or bad about the tool?

c. How much they would like to use this tool again and why?

After the testing sessions, we were able to come up with a map of feedbacks (figure 5) for all the tools. And that’s considered a wrap for this project within the thesis period.
Figure 4. testing session timeline & iterations of each tool

Tested, gained feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Testing session timeline</th>
<th>Mar. 20th</th>
<th>Apr. 10th</th>
<th>Apr. 11th</th>
<th>Apr. 15th</th>
<th>Apr. 17th</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Testing workshop with design students, 4 people</td>
<td>Testing workshop with Group A, 5 people</td>
<td>Testing workshop with Group B, 1 person</td>
<td>Testing workshop with Group A, 1 person</td>
<td>Testing workshop with Group B, 1 person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1st version: role play exercise
2nd version: role play exercise
3rd version: role play exercise
1st version: visual mapping
2nd version: visual mapping
3rd version: visual mapping
1st version: experience mapping
2nd version: experience mapping
3rd version: experience mapping

Fig. 5. An overview of the feedback mapping’s style

Group A: Swedish business people (management level) with little or no experience about China.
Group B: Swedish business people (management level) people with some experience about China.
Year 2019
3.3 The three exercises

Here is the latest version of our 3 tools/exercises. It includes the detail of the exercise, purpose and target group of each exercises. To explain each exercise, I will use a persona called Eva (figure 6) to demonstrate how it works.

**Figure 6. Eva’s persona**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eva</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job title:</strong> Manager in a Swedish company.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relevant experience:</strong> At early stage of working with China, not so familiar with the culture. Only been to China once for 3-days-business trip.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motivations:</strong> China is a huge market. She wants to know how to do business in China.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.3.1 Role Play Exercise

The role play exercise allow participants to learn knowledge by playing roles in half-scripted storylines. The participants will go through the journey of building personal contacts based on their given tasks.

From the character relations map (figure 7) we can see that there are different ways to achieve the goal. The journey includes success and failure of building contacts.

There are 13 persona cards (figure 8) with belonging instructions. Each participant grabs a persona to play. There need to be at least 2 players to play Anna & Jun. Character Ming will be played by facilitator A. For the characters that does not have a player, place the persona cards on the table with information facing down. When you want to interact with the character, flip the card around and read the official information.

Now, Eva and her colleague Jonas are doing this exercise together. Eva plays the role called Anna – a Swedish manager wants to bring her product to China. She’s looking for the right person to collaborate for production and distribution. Jonas play a role called Jun – a local Chinese business manager with high social statues with what Anna needs (which is Anna’s goal to reach).
Figure 7. An overlook of the story line and character relations

START
Anna
Swedish Manager, friends with Thomas

Thomas
Swedish business man lived in China for years.

Ming
Local Chinese businessman, own Thomas favor

Zhang Long
Hong Yun's business partner, has interest in Scandinavian products

GOAL
Jun
Chinese business manager with high social status

Wu Yan
Jun's important business partner

Wang Li
Wang Chao's wife

Wang Chao
colleague, owns a factory for large production

Li Haı
CEO of a distribution company

Li Na
colleague, works with distribution

Figure 8. Sample of two sides of a persona card

Hong Yun
Ming's former classmate, works with marketing

When played by player: Do not read out loud, just make action according to the character instruction.

You work with marketing. You are not interested in innovative products, but you want to build Guansu with Ming by doing him a favor, so you pass him on to some of your contacts (Zhang Long and Wu Yan) that might be interested.

When not played by player: Read out loud:

"I have 2 friends (Zhang Long and Wu Yan) who might be interested. I'll talk to them."

Contact info:

Zhang Long - Business partner of yours with big network and has an interest of Scandinavian products.

Wu Yan - Business partner of yours, the two of you help each other out.
Anna needs to find her way to reach the right connection. Ming is played by facilitator A—a local Chinese business man who’s willing to help her using his own network since he owns a favor of Anna’s best friend. Anna and Ming will make decision together on who should contact. Meanwhile, every time Anna makes a new connection, there will be ‘cost’ charged from her “wallet” (figure 9). The cost is e.g. 3 months, 6 dinners, 5000 Swedish kronor (figure 10). The facilitator B will help her to map out her contacts statues (green means success, red means failure, yellow means waiting) and costs on the base map (figure 11). At the end of the exercise she will have a clear vision of how many contacts she needs to go through (the complicity) and how much/long does it costs. In addition, while Anna’s making new contacts through other people, facilitator B will map the movements of how Anna’s relations with different connections on the guanxi scoring map. (figure 12). That means the participants can see every time a new contact comes in, the old contact which helped her to do that move closer to Anna. It can remind them always include the middle man.

After Anna successfully reached Jun (her goal person), there will be a task asking the participants to organize a dinner to build guanxi with Jun. They need to think about who to invite and how to place them in a business dinner table (figure 13). Then the exercise ends.

**Figure 9 & 10.** The “wallet” and the “cost”

3 months, 3 favors exchange, 3,000 kr.

3 months, 3 common business events + tea session afterwards, 3,000Kr.

2 months, 4 dinners + KTV afterwards, 4,000 kr.

**Figure 11.** An example of how base map works
Our aim for using role play method is to make participants explore the situation themselves and learn from it. Originally role play as a design method is meant to make enactments of specific touchpoints or service moments and exploring them (Blomkvist & Segelström, 2014). It can help people get an idea or experience quickly by acting out the possible scenarios. People may learn a lot about what’s good and what can be improved by trying on roles.

For our exercise, we applied the similar logic. Participants can try out roles in a pre-prepared scenario following instructions/rules. When they are experiencing the play-out, there will be useful data generated for participants” benefit. The data is various. It can be new cultural knowledge they never
heard of; it also can be questions that rises during the exercise. The main purpose of this exercise is to trigger questions and raising awareness about Guanxi.

When we were designing this exercise, we do have some cultural knowledge we want to provide that’s embedded in the exercise. Here are the knowledge and how are they represented in the exercise:

a. Guanxi is complicated.

The plot in the storyline shows the complicity. The character Anna need to go through multiple contacts in order to find the right connection she needs. There are success and fail feedback from each new contact. At the end of the game, the mapping shows on the base map also can show her complex journey.

b. You need to include the middle man when you’re organizing guanxi building events.

The information on the persona cards suggested twice that the participant need to organize business dinner with the middle man as tasks. They will get the idea from there. In addition, when facilitator B is mapping the guanxi scoring, especially when he/she moves the middle man closer to Anna when a new contact comes in, it will trigger the thoughts of including the middle man.

c. In the guanxi network, it’s a mix of private contact and business contact.

In the exercise the participants can try to contact both private and business contact as listed on the persona cards. This will give them an idea of what kind of contact they can try to rich.

d. In order to build guanxi network, you need to spend time and costs to build friendship.

The wallet concept is designed for this purpose. Whenever the participant is making a new contact, they need to spend the “cost” from the wallet and facilitator B will place it on the base map. That way the participant can feel the motion when the “cost” is taking away from the wallet; and at the end of the game they can see how much it cost in total on the base map.

e. Get an idea of what can you do for guanxi building events.

The information printed on the “cost” cards informs examples of what the events can it be. There’re events are obviously needing to use private time and that’s something different from Swedish business culture.
About a more specific target group for this exercise in terms of making it most beneficial to the user, will be both people with and without any experience about working with China, or a mixture of both play at the same time. People without experience can get new knowledge from this exercise; people with experience can raise more questions by playing the roles. If it’s a mixture, they can learn from the discussion they had during the exercise. Since people have different experience, it’s hard to predict what kind of discussion will happen during the exercise. However, no matter the experience level, they will all get cultural knowledge and questions raised from it.

3.3.2 Visual Mapping

Visual Mapping is a tool to help people visualize their network status and give clues to strategic network planning. This exercise requires 1 facilitator. It will take around 15-30 minutes depends on how long the discussion goes. We can still use Eva as an example, and here’s how it works:

Eva now sit down and watch facilitator’s demonstration. The facilitator shows Eva figure 14 and explain: This is a tool that can help you to map your network statues. On the upper level it shows different people involved in the network and how they’re relations like (the darker the line the tighter the connection is); On the lower level it shows the contexts of how the relations are built. We continue to use the characters from the role play exercise to explain an example. Anna know Thomas from old times, so you can see there’s a dark line between Anna and Thomas on the map. Thomas knows Ming for years but not as well as he knows Anna, so the line between Thomas and Ming is slightly lighter blue. Thomas invite Ming and Anna to dinner to introduce each other. So, Anna now knows Ming but they just met one time, so the connection is very light blue. After the three of them meet several times, their relations get closer, so the light blue changes to a darker blue. Anna and Thomas also get the information that Ming has a close contact called Chao that can be interesting for them to meet. So Ming introduce Chao to Anna and Thomas. It shows on the map that Chao and Ming have a dark blue line between them; Anna and Thomas have light blue line with Chao. When they are building relations with Chao they also find out he has a close contact called Wu Yan would be interesting to know. Now the map grows...

Then the facilitator introduces another use of the visual mapping tool which is to give clues to strategic network planning by follow “the dark blue way”. The introduction delivered by explanation of a task: Using the status of the first one start from the right side in figure 14, if Anna wants to build guanxi with Wu Yan, what can she do? She needs to always include the middle man when socialize and try to make the lines towards darker blue. She first needs to check what’s her strongest contact. It’s Thomas, but
Thomas doesn’t know Wu Yan, so it’s better not to ask Thomas. Then she checked contacts around Wu Yan and find out Chao is her close contact. But she does not know Chao that well, they only met once. Thus, the ideal plan would be making connection between Anna and Ming stronger with Thomas’s help. Then build a stronger relation with Chao (Ming as middle man). Once the connections are stronger, it’s time to get to know Wu Yan with Chao’s help.

Figure 14. how visual mapping works

After the introduction is done, the facilitator will present a task (figure 15) for the participants to try out the strategy. Anna wants to reach Jun, what can she do? The participants can have discussion and draw plans together. They need to use what they have learnt from the introduction and apply it to this exercise. The facilitator can give some hint when they stuck. The exercise ends when they finish the task. But the tool itself can still be used after it. It supposed to be used during their journey of building Guanxi.

Figure 15. the visual mapping task
The purpose of this tool is to use visualization to help people mapping their network building status and give clues to strategic plan along the way. There is also cultural knowledge about *guanxi* included:

a. When you want to strengthen your weak contact, involve common strong contact person.

b. Reach to your ideal contact step by step. Know the people in the middle (between you and your goal) so you don’t put enemies in the same dinner table.

c. Get to know the end goal’s network just to be safe. That indicates if you know more people around your goal’s network, there’s less chance you will get cheated which it’s a lot of foreign business people’s fear.

d. Building strong *guanxi* network takes time. There’re several steps needed in order to approach the ideal contact person. The participants will realize that both from the introduction and the task.

The target group for using this tool would be people who is curious about how to build *guanxi* and track the network status. People with or without experience about *guanxi* building both can have a clear understanding about how to use this tool and get started with the help from facilitator.

### 3.3.3 Experience Map

Experience map (figure 16) is a tool to help people to reflect their past experience and learn from it. From experiential learning’s point of view, “it is valuable learning for the learners to reflect on the experience from a variety of perspectives when they have concrete experience” (Kolb, 1984).

From the first row you can see a series of questions from left to right. And it follows with 2 rows of examples. Then at the bottom row is some “answers” (theories behind questions). The blank spaces in the middle is for participants to fill in their answers towards the questions.

Now, we still use Eva as a testing person. The facilitators first introduce her the basic layout of the experience map. Then the two of them started to demonstration an example by playing roles: one as the facilitator who’s asking questions one by one from the map; one as a Swedish manager who just been to a business trip in China and sharing his/her memories meanwhile answering the questions. The conversation goes like this (Facilitators as A & B):
**Figure 16.** An overview of the experience map

**A:** “Could you tell me what activity you want to reflect today?”

**B:** “I would like to talk about the experience about I have been invited to a wedding of my business partner’s son.”

**A:** “Great! Where did it happen?”

**B:** “It was in the rural area of Beijing.”

**A:** “What was the purpose of the activity and was it achieved?”

**B:** “I don’t really know why I was invited.”

**A:** “Ok. Was it a private or business activity to you?”

**B:** “It was private. I met the family members.”

**A:** “Do you feel you’re building relations on personal level or organizational level?”

**B:** “Definitely private level.”

**A:** “Do you exchange any information? Private or business?”
B: “Mainly private information exchanged.”

A: “Who paid for the activity?”

B: “My business partner paid for everything. The food, travel... The hotel I stayed located in central Beijing and he paid for my travel expenses.”

A: “How do you feel about the activity?”

B: “I enjoyed a lot. But still don’t know why he invited me?”

A: “Is there any gestures of trust building?”

B: “I think so. He introduced me to all his guests in the wedding place.”

A: “Do you think both parties are in the same power hierarchy?”

B: “It’s hard to tell in this occasion.”

A: “How do you rank this activity for guanxi building and why?”

B: “I would rank this pretty high. I think we’re closer than before. But to me this is not a legit event for business relationship building.”

A: “Do you have any confusions?”

B: “Yes. I still don’t know why I was invited to this private event? Is this how Chinese people build Guanxi?”

A: “I want to ask a culture expert if this is a good event for guanxi building and how can I behave better in this kind of situation next time?”

The facilitators will not be answering questions when the participants reflecting their experience since they are not culture expert. But the participants can choose to write down the questions they have and keep it for later.

After the demonstration, now, Eva needs to think about an experience she wants to reflect and analyze. She will answer the questions one by one. After she answers, the facilitator will show her the theories behind the questions which is written on the bottom row. For instance, the reason why they ask, “was this a private or business activity?” is because Chinese business people tend to mix private life and business life. You need to be prepared to spend your free time to participate in private events without
talking about business in order to build Guanxi. Then the exercise ends. This map can be used for reflecting past experience any time people want to. It’s re-usable.

The purpose of this exercise is meant to help people to reflect their past experience in a structured way with a focus of guanxi building. Here is the cultural knowledge embedded in this exercise and the relevant questions:

a. Business works differently in different parts of China. – “Where did it happen?”

b. Chinese business people tend to mix private life and business life. You need to be prepared to spend your free time to participate in private events without talking about business in order to build Guanxi. Then the exercise ends. – “Was it a private or business activity to you?”

c. A personal relation is important for trust building which is vital for building business contact. – “Do you feel you’re building relations on personal level or organizational level?”

d. If people pay for your activity, it means they value you. – ”Who paid for the activity?”

e. In China, in order to build trust, you need to spend time with your business partner to show respect and to show you’re committed. It means you don’t only care about money. – ”Are there any gestures of trust building?”

f. Make sure the person you talk to is in the same hierarchy with you. Don’t be fooled by tittle. You might talk to a “manager” who has no power to make decisions on his/her own. – ”Do you think both parties are in the same power hierarchy?”

Then, based on the culture knowledges the participants might rank “how good the activity is for guanxi building” differently.

The purpose of giving examples at the beginning was to lead the participants the way we want them to reflect. Meanwhile also to show what are the activities can be, so they have inspiration to search in their memories.

The target group of this activity is people who has experience on working with China despite how much experience they have. This map can be used ideally by single person, also by several people who share the same experience (it would be interesting discussion when people have various thoughts about same experience).
4. Results: Challenges encountered during the design process and our solutions

From the design and iteration process, I sort out the challenges we ran into to three categories: how to embed specific knowledge into exercise smoothly; how to set up the role of facilitator; and how to increase the level of satisfaction for intended users? In the following part I will write about what kind of challenges happened for designing different exercises and what’s our solutions.

4.1 Challenges from designing role play exercise and our solutions

There have been 3 versions of role play exercise designed during the project time frame. Version 2 and 3 are designed based on the feedback we got from the testing sessions. It was a bit challenging when we tried to adapt original role play method into our own use since we were not helping Swedish companies to understand certain products or services. At the beginning we had the idea that it would be good for our target group to learn from an experience. And by acting out, they get the chance to think as another person and get response based on their behavior. Here are the challenges we ran through and our solutions:

a. Embed specific knowledge into exercise smoothly

Considering the original role play method is to empower people to learn from exploration and improvisation on certain scenarios relates to product or service, in our case we need to prepare scenarios that can deliver the knowledge about Guanxi. At the beginning, for the first version of this exercise, the material we prepared only embedded with limited information. We wanted to find a way to deliver more knowledge.

We had suggestion from the testing sessions that we can have a small presentation before the exercise and embedded some soft cultural values in the exercise. However, we think the former one would neglect the power of role play and try to add something extra; the later one is doable but hard to realize since there are countless of soft values and not easy to make it relevant to the existed exercise.

However, we decided to try to add as more relevant soft values as we can. It was happened from version 2 to version 3. We listed all the value we think could be relevant to the exercise, and try to blend them in. At the same time, discover more knowledge in the existed exercise and make them visible. We can see in the latest version of the exercise, we have the wallet & cost concept, guanxi scoring and table seating. Those are the small tasks which didn’t disturb the original storyline and also creates more knowledge learning material.
b. The aim of setting up the role of facilitator

During the design process, we had trouble deciding the facilitators’ tasks. We tried only have facilitator introducing the exercise instruction, then it’s up for the players to do all the tasks. We found out in the testing session that it was not an ideal solution. Because people start to forget about some of the tasks (e.g. the mapping task); they ended up having lots of questions on if they were doing the right thing; and they could go to other potential problem area that we didn’t predict before since guanxi covers a wild range of knowledge and possible scenarios.

So, we decided to have one facilitator play one of the most important character for decision making in the storyline to influence the overall direction; and have another facilitator in charge of other side tasks (e.g. mapping the base map, collect the “cost” from participant’s “wallet”, mapping “guanxi scoring” and facilitate the “table seating” task). Then the situation is more controlled without eliminating intended learning outcome.

c. Increase the level of satisfaction

From the testing sessions we learnt that this exercise can trigger lot of questions about guanxi which we as designer cannot answer properly. And there is also a fact that some of the questions has no correct answers since the situation varies a lot in real life. So, at the end of the session the participants ended up with some new knowledge, but a bunch of questions that leads to low-satisfaction for the whole experience of gaining knowledge from this exercise.

One way of solving that problem was to make the questions as part of the learning outcome. For instance, we can ask the participants to write down all the questions they came up during the session, so at the end they will have a clear visual on the questions, then they know what to learn next. Another idea is to make our exercise more knowledgeable and make it more obvious to the participants. For example, in version 3 we use the base map to show the “cost” instead of only drawing lines from contact person to contact person; we have facilitator move the guanxi scoring map in an obvious way and make sure the participants know the knowledge embedded there; we also introduce the table seating exercise and give the answer at the end. We got the feedback that the participants can feel a better closure from version 3’s testing session.
4.2 Challenges from designing visual mapping exercise and our solutions

Compare to role play exercise, visual mapping was easier to be adapted for our own use. It also got better feedback from the testing sessions and that’s why we didn’t do much iteration for it. Here are the challenges we ran through and our solutions:

a. Embed specific knowledge into the tool smoothly

For tracking network statues, there are some tools already existed and are using by business managers (e.g. CRM tool). It looks similar to our tools. However, we designed our tool to embed guanxi knowledge so there’re some differences. There’s an extra strategy we added which is specific to guanxi building that includes basic rules to follow. It serves to a special culture environments and relevant purposes.

The knowledge is now embedded in a way that the facilitator needs to explain that along with a task. The participants get the knowledge by listen to facilitator’s introduction and trying out a following task. During the task they will have questions and discussions, the facilitator will also bring the knowledge to them then.

b. The aim of setting up the role of facilitator

When the participants are accomplishing tasks, the facilitator needs to lead them to the direction which can trigger the knowledge. We noticed that from the testing session, participants tend to make some mistakes when they just started with the task, for instance, they will try to organize a dinner with everyone in the middle and the goal person to know each other and finish the task. Then the facilitator needs to interrupt and ask certain questions to challenge them, like “what if some of the people you invite for the dinner doesn’t like each other? You don’t know them yet.” “if you don’t know your first contact so well, how you know that persons know other people you need?”. Then they will stop and think about what to do instead. During the testing sessions we had so far, the participants were able to use the knowledge we provided and come up with good plan at the end.

c. Increase the level of satisfaction

During the testing session we found out people are more intrigued into this exercise since they feel it’s more like a real tool they can use. However, the feedback we got from the first testing workshop was it triggers a lot of questions about non-important details (e.g. the detail description of characters) provided in the task. It’s was not so clear since we thought it’s not the focus of this exercise. However, it decreases the level of satisfaction. The testing sessions after that we chose to enhance the facilitators
role and use that role to lead the direction of conversation, so the participants would not be bothered by that.

4.3 Challenges from designing experience map exercise and our solutions

This tool was inspired by design method called customer journey map which is “a depiction of the customer’s journey through a service with a focus on the experience” (Blomkvist & Segelström, 2014). We were aiming to help people to dig deeper of their own experience which they maybe not reflect it from guanxi point of view. Although the format was easy to adapt, there’re still some other challenges:

a. Embed specific knowledge into the tool smoothly

We had challenges when we were designing the guidelines of how people can reflect on their experience from guanxi point of view and the theory behind it, we read through relevant literature and took advises from a culture expert (who’s a Swedish business person that has experience working with China for 6 years). We considered some important guanxi building gestures and basic rules (also explained as part of the theory part in this thesis) and make that into a smooth flow of questions that can also facilitate the participants to reflect their own experience in a logical order. However, during the testing session, we found out that some of the questions were not so relevant to certain experience. We chose to skip it and continued with other questions for version 1 and 2 since it doesn’t affect the learning in a major way.

b. The aim of setting up the role of facilitator

When we wanted to test the first version of this tool we were not sure how can we explain how it works to the participants in the introduction. We thought the best way is to give them example and show it by playing roles. The roles are: the facilitator asking a series of questions; and a Swedish manager who just went back from a business trip to China, so they will feel more related.

When the exercise starts, the role of facilitator is more like an interviewer. That person needs to support participants to reflect more but in the direction that’s relevant to Guanxi. During the testing sessions, we found out the participants sometimes too focus on talking instead of document their answers. Then the facilitator needs to either remind them or help them do it. When it’s time to reveal the theories behind the questions, the facilitator needs to lead the conversation in a way participant can reflect their experiences again to the relevant answers.

c. Increase the level of satisfaction
For version 1 we only had a series of questions for participants to reflect their experience. Like the role play exercise, the participants end up with a lot of questions and dissatisfaction. So, we ended up telling them the answers. Then we got the feedback that it’s better to reveal the answers in some way before the exercise ends. So, for the second version of this exercise we chose to reveal the theory behind the questions after they already told their experience, so it doesn’t affect what they were going to say originally. That raised the level of satisfaction in our following testing sessions.
5. Discussion

5.1 Result discussion

The tools (results) we came up are based on the theories presented in this thesis. We wanted to create exercises based on experiential learning theories using the right ‘ingredients’ from design methods to increase understanding about guanxi in a way that’s including raising awareness, triggering questions, learning new knowledges and even inspire strategic thinking. The right ‘ingredients’ from each exercise are: knowledge exploration initiated by half- script storyline for the role play exercise; insights articulation and communication for visual mapping exercise and experience mapping exercise. Those exercises are also based on design team’s own experience in planning, performing and reflecting about what should happen and analyzing what does happen. It provided us “valuable implicit knowledge regarding what works in the development of a new product concept” (Teixeira, 2001).

The three exercises deliver different knowledge about guanxi and we tend to introduce them in a certain order: role play, visual mapping and experience map. To us, despite it actually achieved the goal we meant to or not, the role play exercise is like an entry game, when you know nothing about guanxi and you want to learn it in an experiential way. That exercise is going to give you a general view of what is like to build Guanxi. After the entry, it is time for the “real” tool. Visual mapping will take it to another level of how guanxi can turn into a strategy for business network building in China. Then the experience map –a tool will work all the time when you have fresh experience about working with China and use that as your own resource to understand more about guanxi (since guanxi is complex and the right answer differs depends on specific scenarios). From here, the design tool box for leaning guanxi hasn’t finished yet. There’s so much more to explore within this theme and we believe there has to be other design methods can be used as inspiration for tools.

The guanxi knowledge we embedded in the exercises are some basic rules that could be important for new learners to know. We must clarify that there’re still a lot of knowledge we didn’t cover which also constantly requires people to learn it through their own life experience. There’s also a fact that it’s hard to find complete right answers for guanxi since it varies according to different situation. Hence, the purpose of our exercises presented in this thesis is to mainly raise awareness of the existence of Guanxi, raising questions for participants’ later learning activity (once they know what’s their confusion they will have a more specific learning goal), learning some new cultural knowledge about Guanxi, as well providing tools which they can use it along the way of their guanxi building journey.
About the challenges we ran through when developing the exercises, I think it would be better if I demonstrate them in a more organized way. There are three categories: how to embed knowledge into exercises smoothly; setting the role of facilitator; and increase the level of satisfaction.

a. How to embed knowledge into exercises smoothly:

Except the knowledge we can deliver in an experiential learning exercise, we also can add more knowledge depends on which design method we choose. For role play exercise, the nature of role play is exploration, so we added more tasks along the way, so participants can learn from the journey of accomplishing the tasks. For visual mapping exercise, the use of visualization makes communicate and sharing insights easier. It is more natural to present the network strategy using visualization techniques. For experience mapping, the guideline we provided for reflection helped participants to reflect their past experience in a more structured way; the format of customer journey map makes information sharing easier which support the discussion happened in the exercise.

b. The role of facilitator:

It is stated that “the common challenges in experiential learning is proper planning and follow-through of experiences that truly make use of the necessary elements of the process of experiential learning” (Hedin, 2010). This high lightened the importance of facilitation. In service design, the reason of having facilitation is “to get the most out of people and keep them moving forward together in a context where they all feel useful, engaged, and might even come again next time” (Stickdorn, Hormess, Lawrence & Schneider, 2018). “The facilitation should be content driven instead of process driven, that means facilitators facilitate toward a result” (Verschoor, 2018). In our exercises, 2 facilitators were needed in role play exercise. The reason for that was 1 facilitator couldn’t fully have a control of the situation and easy to affect the participants’ learning result. It is mentioned in the book: This Is Service Design Doing, “It can be effective to have a facilitation team, one to be outcome-focused, while other takes care of the needs of the group.” Thus, setting up 2 different facilitator roles was a good decision. For the visual mapping exercise, the facilitator needs to lead the participants to certain direction so it’s easier to reveal the embedded knowledge. “It’s also crucial for facilitator to create a ‘safe space’” (Stickdorn, Hormess, Lawrence & Schneider, 2018) where allows failure to happen for the participants when they are doing the tasks in visual mapping and experience mapping exercises and play a supportive role.
c. Increase the level of satisfaction:

One thing we learnt from testing those exercises is we need to carefully manage participants’ expectations. Because our exercises are unlike other types of culture lessons that can provide a huge amount of hard knowledge, we are trying to make participants curious about the topic and learn from their own experience. That means they will have a lot of questions along the way, even though those questions will help you create your own strategy. It is important to highlight the purpose of the exercises before the participants start since they might expect certain learning result from those exercises. We can increase the level of satisfaction of the exercises by observing and evaluating the testing sessions to find out why participants feel certain way about it; and make some changes (sometimes suggested by them), then test it again.

5.2 Future improvements

For the further development of the tool box, besides making changes based on the feedback we got from the testing session, there are 3 major steps we need to think about:

a. The format of the exercises
At this stage all our prototypes are in paper and the tools are delivered in a format of exercise/workshop. We were more focused on the content instead of the format. It has been mentioned by the participants that some of the tools they’d like to see it in certain digital format while they’re in different life situation (e.g. on a business trip to China). In the future I would like to explore more possibilities of the format of the tools with our intended users. For instance, having co-design workshop to ideate different opportunities.

b. Think about the possibilities of other design methods
In this thesis we have explored three design methods and its application to our project’s need. However, there are other design methods could be suitable for our purpose. Depends our what our intended users’ need I would like to try different design methods in the future and discover more knowledge that can be embedded in the tool.
c. Collaboration with culture experts

It has been mentioned in the testing session by the participants that it could be a good idea to collaborate with culture experts. For instance, combine the exercises with culture lectures; or having culture experts answer the questions raised by participants during or after the exercises.

Finally, I would like to mention that I think a follow study on our tools is necessary. Especially for visual mapping and experience mapping since those are tools that can be used over time. In this thesis we haven’t done a following study on how users can actually use that us tools in their real life, e.g. following/tracking the users on a business trip to China and observe how they use our tools? Those can be valuable data for use to further improve the tools.
6. Conclusion

Those three exercises we came up was a good trail of using design methods to help people to gain understanding on certain knowledge, to bridge the cultures. We as project team learned a lot from the process of developing and the feedback we got from the testing sessions. It shows its potential, however it definitely needed to be developed further in order to fit our target users’ needs better.

This thesis is meant to give the readers insights of what are the challenges could happen when you try to adapt design methods into exercises for learning certain knowledge? The main challenges presented in this thesis are: how to embed specific knowledge smoothly into exercise; How to set up the role of facilitator; and how to increase the level of satisfaction for the users. Those challenges not only specific to our project, but also could be inspirational to other people (e.g. designers, business culture scholars and so on) who want to create similar exercises or looking for new ways to deliver the knowledge about cross-cultural business communication.

The tools we have in the tool box are currently still fulfill the design criteria we had in the beginning. First of all, it’s based on Swedish business manager’s needs since we did a pre-study in order to make sure Guanxi is actually the knowledge they want to learn; Secondly, the tools can be used by Swedish managers in any business field while they’re still in Sweden; Thirdly, the tools are exercises that designed based on design methods and used with trained designer’s facilitation. Finally, those tools also can raise curiosity for the intended users to discover more Guanxi knowledge themselves. It proves that the ‘ingredients’ we took from design methods can actually achieve intended learning goal in an engaging way.

Even though at this stage those exercises only can achieve the function of raising awareness and curiosity about Guanxi for participants’ later learning activity and providing ways for them to reflect their network and experiences, in Chinese we have a saying “Give people the tool for fishing is better than just give them the fish.” We got feedback like “I can realize more things when I reflect my past business experience from Guanxi perspective.” “It is good to track what happened and plan.” “Sometimes business men are focusing sales, those exercises force them to think about culture and think more strategically about how to do business in China.”

In this project, even though the tools are aimed to help Swedish business managers to understand how Guanxi works in China, we got the feedback from testing sessions that the logic/theory behind different tools can also work for learning other cultures. It is an inspirational feedback to us because that shows
the potential of how design can be used for empowering cross-culture business communication. It’s an absolute valuable topic for us to investigate in the future.
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