



#### A SNAPSHOT OF IDEO

As a business innovation consultancy, IDEO is the behind-the-scenes hero of many international brands, such as Microsoft, Nestlé, P&G, and Samsung, and visible contributor to social enterprises and nonprofit organizations, including governments and educational institutions. Founded in the US, IDEO designed the first mass-produced mouse for Apple and created the Human-Centered Design Toolkit for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Over the past decade, IDEO has received hundreds of design awards and expanded from the US to many other locations worldwide, including London, Munich, and Shanghai. Paul describes the company's growth as "organic."

In China, IDEO has partnered with TCL, Dongfeng Automobile, Fofile, Vats Group, Jinjiang International, Li Ning, Sany Heavy Industry, China Mobile, and SMG. Any significant change of these companies in the local market might be attributed to their collaborations with IDEO.

#### PAUL'S POV

In China, you need a philosophy and a belief instead of a strategy. An entrepreneur is likely to miss lots of value and learning opportunities if he or she fails to engage in deep emotional interactions.

International companies are different from global companies. International companies have branch offices around the world, but so what? Global companies cater to cross-cultural exchanges and are truly globalized.

As consumers become smarter, shifting from unconscious to conscious consumption, a company's products should carry "viewpoints" and keep up with consumer-driven innovation.

A company is about people; it is an emotional alliance.



Paul looks at the varieties of social life on a street in Shanghai. Photograph by Zhu Qian.

## PROFILE

# Rediscovering China with Paul Bennett

*A company is an emotional alliance.*

*China Entrepreneur* magazine accompanies Paul Bennett, IDEO global chief creative director, on an innovation trip in Shanghai, where we experience the global design consultancy's creative force and reflect on the loss of "cultural consciousness" in China.

By Olive (Yanli) Hou for *China Entrepreneur* | Edited by Cai Yu | Translated by Ehyssa He, IDEO

"Hey, do you think we're crazy?" "Have you ever seen another global design consultancy like ours?"

Questions like these were often asked of me by Paul Bennett, global chief creative director of IDEO, while, as a reporter for *China Entrepreneur*, I accompanied him on his trip to Shanghai from April 19th to the 21st.

Caring about you and all your crazy ideas – this is probably the greatest motivating force behind IDEO's ideology. When working with them, it is almost impossible to stand aside and just be an observer, as they are constantly observing and asking questions of you. "Where did you find that store?" "Excuse me, but who is Bao Qingtian?" And even, "Why are you so quiet today?"

I have to admit, during these three days of following and interviewing Mr. Bennett, I was won over by this organization's creative force and was able to see a different China from the one I normally see everyday.

At IDEO's Shanghai office, Paul and his colleague Richard Kelly,

managing director of IDEO Asia, bend themselves into a large tent and then fold into a blue and a red beanbag chair, respectively. I recline on a wicker chair that is obviously a product of IKEA and sway back and forth in comfort, as we talk.

"I can sniff out a company from its lobby," Paul tells me. Likewise, IDEO office has its distinctive smell. Indeed, the wall-mounted LCD screen by the reception desk is loop-playing photographs by IDEO employees around the world. This photobase can be shared at the same time across the network and all the images can be used freely as a source of reference. There is also a Yurt in the office. Outside, two or three rows of bamboo plants are grown on both sides of the balcony, where a blue-eyed, blonde-haired designer is talking with a colleague who's sitting with his legs crossed and his feet up on an antique table. There is also a yurt in the office. Back inside, in the kitchen area, you'll find two posters, each with one bold word on it. One reads "Transparency," and the other reads "Diversity". Against this backdrop, two local housekeepers prepare Shanghai-style breakfast, such as dumplings, preserved bean curd, deep-fried dough sticks, and homemade soybean milk, every day.





Paul insists having haircut in a foreign place as his routine to learn about how local people communicate with each other. Photograph by Olive (Yanli) Hou.

An ordinary workday at IDEO Shanghai starts with employees dressed in Meihua-branded jackets doing the eighth set of radio gymnastic exercises. According to Richard, who is engaged in market expansion here in China, “IDEO has inherited the optimistic spirit of California, US, with a deep understanding of the cynicism from Europe. But what is Asian style? What are Chinese elements? For our foray into this market, we’ve been listening carefully like students. We don’t want to take on the role of a teacher; instead, we’d prefer to see ourselves gradually as a coach who embraces empathy and voices opinions, as appropriate. The most important Chinese element, perhaps, is bravery, or entrepreneurship.”

“Lao bai xing!” Paul cuts in suddenly in Chinese. Glimpsing my surprised expression, he explains, in a slightly smug tone, “Lao bai xing translates as ordinary people, but the word lao gives it a warm and respectful touch, while bai xing literally means hundred surnames and indicates being rooted in the community. It’s one of my favorite Chinese words, because it reflects the unique emotional connections and close relationship among the Chinese people.”

Paul’s interest in lao bai xing far outweighs his interest in elites. Conversations with local designers struck a faint chord in his mind: you’ll need to interact with lao bai xing before you can truly understand China. In Paul’s view, probing into the long-standing culture for new solutions to serve the 1 billion consumers represented by lao bai xing is something really cool. “I’ve been sharing photos on Facebook. Every scene bears a viewpoint behind it. In China, innovation often stems from inadvertent behaviors, such as hanging out a pole for drying clothes. We get inspired and uncovered the underlying truth. Then we’ll reverse the mirror and say, ‘This is how you inspire us and also what you miss.’”



Midea team members Huang Zhibeng (left), Hao Jiandong (middle) and Shen Hong (right) are imitating the gestures on their iPhone apps in the hand, in an effort to explore the possibility of integrating daily exercise with cell phone apps. Photograph by Olive (Yanli) Hou.



Paul Bennet, IDEO Global Chief Creative Officer, and Richard Kelly, Managing Director of IDEO Asia, are sitting in the yurt and exchanging their views on Chinese experience. Photograph by Olive (Yanli) Hou.

“In China, you need to pay attention to when and to whom to talk, rather than keep talking by yourself all the time. You should be very gentle and friendly, instead of being simplistic and crude,” he continues. Such insight relates back to his experience in Asia as a child. Paul, a British citizen, was lived in Singapore until he was 12 years old. “I once delivered a speech to the Singaporean government,” he says. “The first slide I showed was a photo of me with my father. The boy in the picture was only 4 years old. Forty-five years later, I want to bring something back. I’m super excited about culture and Asia, where change is happening.”

After Paul joined IDEO in 2001, he led the business in London and the European market. In 2006, he became chief creative officer of IDEO worldwide. His secret to keeping creativity alive is reminding himself that he’s a designer. “I would rather shoot myself in the head than spend most of my time in an office building or a meeting room with nothing to do. You must have a down-to-earth attitude and feel your existence in the world. That’s why I do a lot of things that seem crazy, such as having my haircut in a strange place, or buying vegetables at a local wet market. This is my blood. This is my life. I don’t like international hotels and lobbies. In Shanghai, I prefer visiting neighborhoods than going to Xintiandi. If you want to understand a culture, you must immerse yourself in it and stay non-judgmental.”

As the chief creative officer, Paul spends more than 200 days a year traveling around the world. His responsibility is to keep alive the passion for innovation of IDEO’s 600 employees and to effectively connect and “cross-pollinate” various ideas, passing on inspirational thoughts from one place to another.

Paul especially favors the notion of small ideas or actions leading to big breakthroughs. “As I said at a workshop in Australia last year, you should never expect to solve a crisis all at once. Big problems should be addressed in a way that starts from small details and taps into different perspectives. Because China has a population of more than a billion, it’s unrealistic to get all the people doing the same thing. Rather, you need different people on different things. No one needs a future that remains as a theory. Impact is created through solid work. In order to help people change their behaviors, you must first identify what their current behaviors are. Setting up a dialogue is important and can help bring together trends in technology, entrepreneurship, and transformation.” That’s why Paul says he likes Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba Group. “Ma said that he himself is short, and he eats little, and those he helps are small- and medium-sized enterprises.”

“What can we learn in China to bring to the world?” This question has been asked of Richard for the past six months. He says clients are starting to benefit not only from cost advantages but also from business models. For example, energy doesn’t seem to be an area in which China dominates, but an American client coming here may break its original business model, gain some knowledge, and then adapt it for operations elsewhere in the world. This process can be described as “reverse innovation.”

Stepping out of the yurt at 1:30pm, I follow Paul into the brainstorm session with a project team that’s helping Midea Electric Appliances Corporation identify new opportunity areas in the Chinese market. IDEO designers have already set the tone for Midea to transform from a “product-oriented company” into a “knowledge-driven company.” They’ve pulled together two weeks of nationwide research, interviews, and data collection.

At IDEO, a project team typically consists of two or three designers with diverse backgrounds. This ensures that the end result addresses people’s desirability, technological feasibility, and business viability from different angles. Each project goes through three phases to achieve the goal: ideation, design, and communication. In this project, the ideation phase has been finished. The new concept the team presents to Midea is based on China’s health and wellness philosophy, or tong (which means through, suggesting the dredging of the body’s channels or purification).

This brainstorm session will focus sharply on design. Paul, Richard, a marketing manager, and other project



*The movements and music of Chinese radio gymnastic exercises are obviously something novel to those from the West, but Paul has already mastered everything and is quite enjoying it. This video is going to be submitted for IDEO's Global Talent Competition. Photograph by Zhu Qian.*

designers—more than 10 people in all—grab chairs and gather in front of three large whiteboards. “Built on” is the most frequently heard phrase during the discussion. Everyone offers constructive ideas based on those of others. Soon a wide array of ideas appears on Post-it notes spread across the boards: “Can we use furniture to grow flowers and plants? For example, grow mushrooms on the sunless ground floor?” “How do we display indoor ‘weather?’” “Can we get nutrition information when vegetables are scanned?”

I’ve barely overcome my astonishment when I find myself suggesting “leveraging geomantic knowledge to inform the design of home appliances.” “Write it down or draw it, and put it up there!” Paul tells me. After a fumbling effort, I put my Post-it note among other ideas on the board. In less than an hour, the board is brimming with design ideas. Three team members are tasked with selecting the feasible courses of action and drawing design sketches.

I ponder on the brainstorming principles of IDEO:

**Defer judgment.** Any idea is a good idea. Scrutinize later.

**Encourage wild ideas.** Embrace the most out-of-the-box notions because they can be the key to solutions.

**Build on the ideas of others.** No “buts,” only “ands.”

**Stay focused on the topic.** Always keep the discussion on target, otherwise you may diverge beyond the scope of what you’re trying to design for.

**One conversation at a time.** Let people have their say, so that all ideas can be heard and made use of.

**Be visual.** Try to use both your left and right brains as much as possible.

**Go for quantity.**

Set a seemingly crazy objective and try to surpass it.

In Paul’s view, feeling carries more weight than thinking. During a visit with Yunus in Bangladesh, Paul asked

the Nobel Peace Prize laureate how he makes decisions. Yunus answered with a story. Paul recalls, “He said that he once ran into two CEOs making shoes for their kids: one with burning eyes, while the other’s eyes were purely colorless. He would definitely choose to work with the former.”

At 3pm, Paul leaves for Zhongyuan Hair Salon to have a haircut. This is how he gets to “feel” a foreign culture every time he goes to a new country. He has had haircuts in Brazil, Australia, New York, and Greece. His insights: A Greek hairstyle is most likely to freak you out. The service in Brazil makes you feel most left out—hairdressers keep chatting with one another, so their focus is not on their customers. The Chinese hairdresser convinces Paul to trim his beard as well. “You look younger! You’re more handsome!” Surrounded by compliments, Paul scratches his hair and chin, and sighs a relief. Now he’s learned more about the power of hairdressers. “Chinese people are afraid of communication of emotions, but not physical contact,” he notes. “This hairdresser completely focuses on me, with great confidence, while also chatting with her co-workers from time to time.”

At 6pm, Paul returns to office to host a workshop on how businesswomen view networking in a digital world. At the request of Girls in Tech, IDEO will sort out ideas around networking in this e-world. “Women hold up half the sky!” Paul says, in his not-so-fluent Mandarin. He has realized that speaking the language helps him get closer to Chinese people. “Yunus said that if you give a man a dollar, he spends it. If you give a woman a dollar, she manages it.” Paul sees tremendous potential in female leadership. He once met Chinese TV hostess Yang Lan at lunch. He speaks very highly of her notion of “combining optimism and pragmatism.”

At IDEO, storytelling is an important approach to generating creative ideas. Although data matters, too, people’s emotions are often more informative. Paul asks each participant to talk about their idols and why

they idolize them, as well as how they interact with others in real and virtual worlds, with relevant examples.

I ask Paul about the difference of networking in the East and the West. He says that networking in China generally serves to make people feel happy and comfortable, whereas in the West it’s more transactional. Network management is highly emotionalized. The key is not to be afraid of managing multiple roles, but to enjoy it.

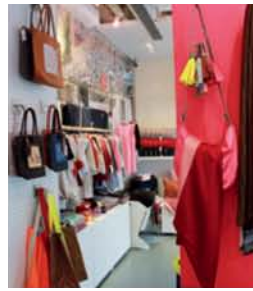
A distinctive Chinese-style exercise: the eighth set of radio gymnastic exercises.

Paul is already familiar with these movements. Due to his larger-than-life figure, he creatively cuts apart the back of his jacket, sticks it with black adhesive tape, and decorates it with cheerleading pompoms. This is quite a new experience for him. “I’ve never had morning exercises like this, nor have I heard such music. In the West, it’s all about hip hop.”

At 11am, colleagues gather together in the yurt for an internal brainstorm session called Boston Bird. Introduced by IDEO’s Boston office, this brainstorm exercise aims to encourage multicultural integration. Employees at IDEO Shanghai come from diverse backgrounds: there are Western designers from Europe and US; designers from Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, and Singapore who are familiar with both Chinese and Western cultures; and local designers educated in the West or who have experience working in foreign-owned companies. English is the primary working language, but for concepts that originate in China, Mandarin is used and then translated into English.

A question is posed: “How do we enable cross-cultural communication in the Shanghai office?” After chatting for a while, employees come up with a set of questions: “Who is your super hero?” “What kind of superpower you want to have?” “How can you use your superpower to change the future of China?” Bao Qingtian, monk Ikkyu-san, Han Solo from Star Wars, Batman, manga





Left: At IDEO, you don't need to sit upright during project discussion. The culture of "Serious Play" is deeply embedded in its staff's mind. That's why you may often see a happy and childish smile on Paul's face. Top right: Handmade bag store. Bottom right: Paul takes photos in Fu Xing Park, watches some elderly people dancing and sheds tears silently. Photographs by Olive (Yanli) Hou.

character Doraemon ... Post-it notes bearing these names and images start to appear on the whiteboards. "Sorry, who is Bao Qingtian?" Paul looks puzzled. His Chinese colleagues go on to explain vividly, "An honest and upright judge in ancient China!"

While discussing the topic "Changing the future of China with superpowers," some IDEOers imagine crafting a cooler future for China through design, while others want to bring together those like-minded through mindreading. Paul's answer is to help retrieve China's precious heritages through his superpower of optimism. One designer even wishes for a superpower that makes people feel full without eating too much. The others respond playfully, "Then skip lunch today!"

The discussion reaches a climax when Paul grabs a map of Shanghai, turns it over and puts it on a colleague's back. In a half-squat, he draws the colleague's superhero, superpower, and vision on the paper and turns it into a totem. "Each of us can have a shawl or flag like this on the wall." "Great!" People start clapping.

"Serious play" may be the Western phrase to describe what was going on just now. Take a look at the walls of the office, and you'll find all kinds of improvised and unusual pieces of work, each of which has a story to tell. "Do these have anything to do with your business?" I ask, feeling confused. Paul replies, "Don't think of it as trivial. These are topics for us to start internal cross-cultural communication as an organization. We make fun of one another, unafraid of being overshadowed and are open to the fact that we're ignorant of certain things. Trust is the prerequisite of all kinds of work. It's like going back to university and doing homework in a team."

A "flat" organization helps spur a vibrant flow of ideas. Paul explains, "Once a designer's laptop was broken, and I bent over to help him fix it. My colleagues reminded me that I didn't need to do this as I was a senior executive. I said that I wanted them to see me doing this precisely because I was a senior executive."

Against a fading sunset, the car is heading towards the wet market on Wei Hai Road. Paul is going to buy some food there and take them to a cooking classroom to learn Chinese cooking. "If I wasn't a designer, I would be a cook," Paul confesses. "I don't like baking, because it's not techniques-heavy. I'm good at cooking

mushrooms." He pauses, then teases Richard, "The other day we were grilling mutton on the balcony at Richard's home. Jesus! He fussed over it for three hours and still got nowhere."

As we walk out of the wet market, we somehow touch on the topic of residents in Shanghai being prohibited from wandering in the street in their pajamas during Expo. Paul looks confused: "If residents wear pajamas in the street, it shows they feel safe and comfortable about living in the city. Why not? IDEO should have a pajama party. Yes, it would be fun!"

The cooking school is located in an art complex on a winding and serene street. The complex is to be demolished soon. "What a shame!" Lost in admiration, Paul takes out his iPhone to capture Peking opera masks on the steel door, decadent plants on the windowsill, and the peeling paint on the walls. He makes an empathetic expression to match the word empathy that appears in graffiti.

Tonight Paul is going to learn to cook sweet and sour pork with pineapple, twin mushrooms with oyster sauce, and Shanghai-style fried noodles. Not used to using a Chinese knife, Paul finds himself clumsy-handed, being overcautious and indecisive when cutting. "I can't do any better." Giving an apologetic smile, he quickly switches his brain to a questioning mode, "Will Chinese people refrain from greasy food for health concerns?" "Are there any so-called new Chinese dishes?" "How can Chinese dishes be mixed with other foreign cuisines?"

Paul is moved to tears. In front of him, there is a crowd of elderly people dancing to the music of the 1980s, gratified and content. "No sneering, no self-conceit or cynicism. They trust one another, enjoying their life in tranquility. This is how Chinese people get close to each other." Listening to Paul's touching words, I feel ashamed of my ignorance of my own culture.

Observation and lateral thinking are the two basic skills of IDEOers. As we watch an old man playing with a diabolo, which produces whistling sound, Paul cups his chin and says, "Um, we can make a ring tone out of that."

Back in the office, the Midea project team and the digital networking team are in their final phases of

summary. The Midea team picks out the most feasible design solutions through voting. One of the options chosen is an herbal machine. According to this solution, service suppliers may start by growing quality-assured plants in community gardens and prescribe herbal recipes for community members based on their health conditions at the community health center. Consumers then take the products back home to make drinks out of them. A business cycle thus takes shape. Meanwhile, the digital networking team reaches a conclusion: belief and value systems are what help people connect at a deep level. Paul scribbles on Post-it notes on this thigh as he listens and can't help exclaiming, "This is awesome! It is a unique perspective on China!"

Our final stop is Shanghai Trio, a handmade-bag store on West Fuxing Road. Owned by a French designer, the store uses Chinese fabrics to create mash-up craftwork. Browsing through the owner's inspirational books, Paul heaves a sigh, "This is what IDEO should learn from." He asks for customization of his laptop bag with yellow nylon lining and a dark blue cover. "Technology inside, tradition outside—a perfect combination!"

During our farewell gathering, I accidentally splash beer on the ground. Seeing the foam revolving into a parabola, senior user experience designer Lin Jiajun shouts out, "Wait, wait! That's art!" He takes out his iPhone and snaps a picture of it.

Since his arrival in China in early April, Paul has taken more than 800 pictures with his iPhone. His favorite one is the bamboo groves on Mo Gan Shan Road in Shanghai. Paul recalls the last time he cried was in Bangladesh, where he'd heard the story of a poor prostitute who asked for small loan to buy a cow so her son could pay to go to university. Paul said to the young boy, "Your mother must be so proud of you." But the boy said, "No, sir, I am proud of my mother." After his trip to Asia, Paul started a blog called The Curiosity Chronicles to collect all of his discoveries.

"Do you think we're crazy?" I can now answer this question. At IDEO, crazy is synonymous with passion. Today companies seem to over-emphasize rational decisions in management, which often deviates from using people's fundamental needs as a starting and focal point of business. Creativity is thus either lying dormant or being repressed. At IDEO, it is passion that persists and does not waver—and forms the foundation of innovation.