

THE ENTREPRENEURS Huiping Iler's firm helps companies trolling global markets for customers adapt their sites to other cultures

Fine-tuning websites lost in translation

SARAH DOUGHERTY SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

A few years ago, emissaries from the California winery Kendall-Jackson met with restaurateurs in China.

Pouring a glass of pinot noir, the Kendall representative described the wine as having hints of strawberry. He was met with blank looks; no one in his audience had ever tasted the fruit. The company went back to the drawing board to adapt its descriptors to the Chinese palate.

The strawberry analogy is one a myriad of missteps companies can make when they troll international markets for customers.

With more and more North American businesses expanding their reach using websites, Huiping Iler saw a niche waiting to be filled. She started Ottawa-based **Wintranslation.com** to not only translate corporate websites, but also adapt them to other cultures.

Now a decade old, her company has done work for heavy-weight clients like **Maple Leaf Foods** and **Caterpillar**, and Iler is a sought-after speaker.

Iler, 33, learned about cultural adaptation first-hand.

After growing up near Heng Yang, an industrial city in southern China, she left on a scholarship to study communications at the University of Windsor in Ontario.

At the top of her class in China, Iler had a tough time at Windsor; she had never used a computer, didn't grasp Canadian cultural references and had to learn a different style of reasoning and writing.

"It was a huge struggle," she said.

But the transition gave Iler a leg-up when it came to understanding cross-cultural differences. So after graduation and working at a few clerical jobs, Iler launched her own translation business from home.

Her first clients included people who needed to translate official documents like marriage certificates. The immigration section of the Canadian Consulate General in Detroit was her first important corporate client.

While Iler did some Chinese-to-English translation, she hired freelance translators for most of the work.

"My goal was not to become a great translator myself, although I do translation," she said. "I was more interested in the business side."

But Iler admits it took her time to master some business skills and she finally farmed some out, like accounting. Employee turnover was also a problem until she figured out what qualities to look for.

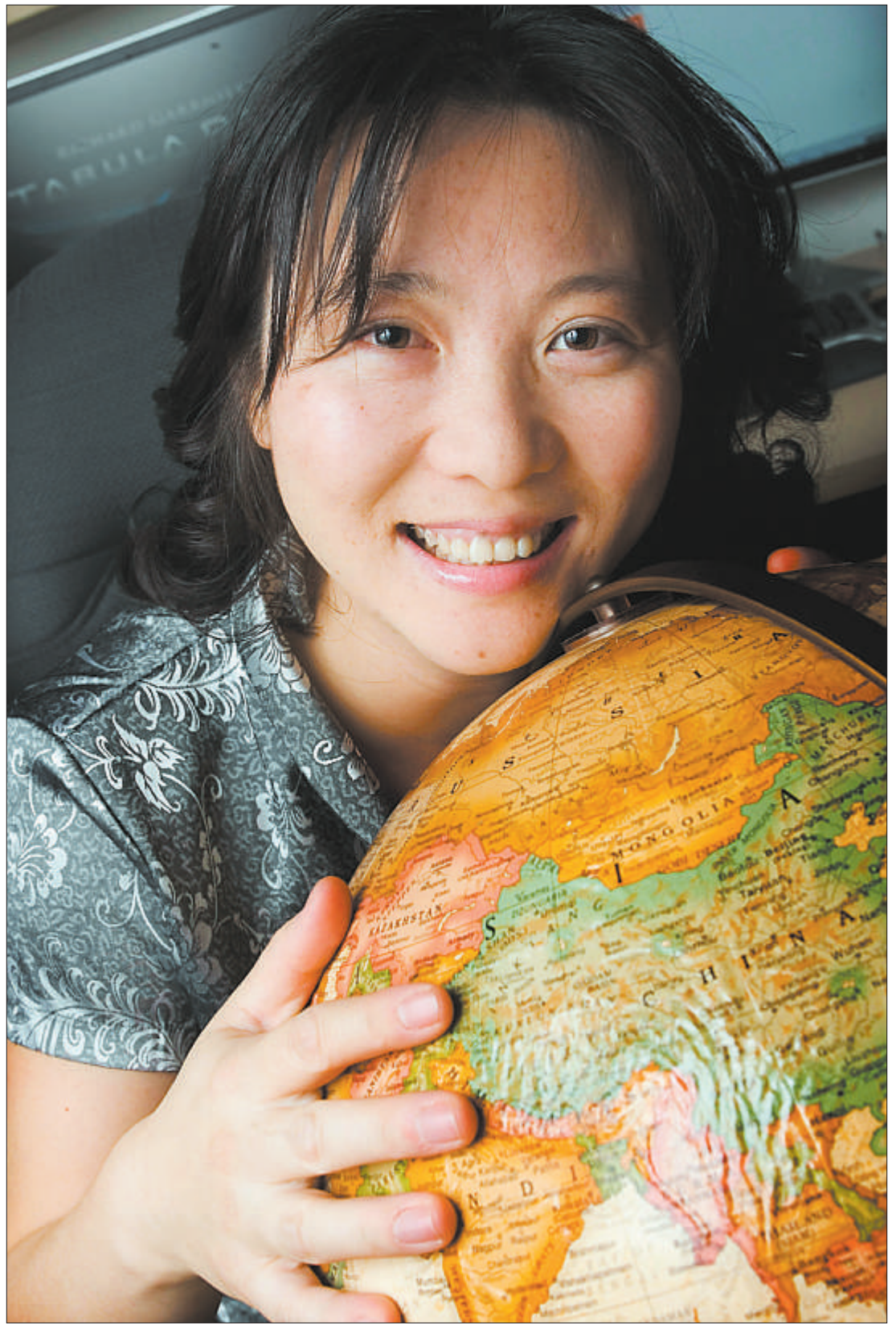
"I realized it wasn't necessary to have a superb-looking resumé," she said.

In 1999, Iler's business took a turn when she won a contract from **Planet Intra Inc.** (now called **Vialect**) to translate and adapt the documentation and user interface for a software program for the company's office in Germany.

From then on, Iler grew her expertise in "localization," or adapting websites for foreign markets or users from different cultures.

"A lot of firms have the chance to use the Internet to go global, to get international customers," Iler said. "Sometimes translation is not enough, you have to culturally adapt the content."

Iler pointed to a faux pas committed by computer giant **Dell** a



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Huiping Iler, 33, runs Ottawa-based Wintranslation.com. Her mantra: Don't make assumptions.

while back: The company's website had images of people making the OK sign – joining their index fingers to their thumbs to make a circle – a gesture familiar to most North Americans. The problem? The gesture is considered obscene in Brazil.

Along with her team of four employees, Iler now audits websites to make sure images and sounds are appropriate in the target market.

She also makes sure design features stand up to international use. For example, sites that send automatic acknowledgements to customers often use a first name only, a practice considered much too informal in some cultures.

Clients in other countries might also be used to a different style of website. North Americans tend to favour clean, simple sites. In China, the trend now is toward "busy" sites with flashing features, according to Iler.

On the technical side, Wintranslation.com helps clients with such issues as language meta tags that tell Internet search engines which language Web pages are written in.

Once concepts, images and technical features have been adapted, Iler turns her attention to written content.

"The words on your website

are your salesperson, the person behind the counter," Iler said.

Too many businesses skimp on writing quality instead of hiring professionals, she added.

Many companies also fall into the trap of assuming an English site is enough.

"In North America, because it has been a leading economic superpower for so long, people assume everyone speaks English," Iler said.

Even Internet searches are not usually done in English. On Google, the popular search engine, 60 per cent of searches are done in a language other than English. In China, a Chinese-language product called Baidu is the most frequently used search engine.

Iler says her translators are trained in knowing which key words international users turn to most when searching the Internet.

A laptop computer, for example, can also be called a portable or notebook computer. "If you use the wrong term, you won't show up in search engines."

With the growing importance of Asian markets, Iler is now not alone in the localization field. Montreal-based **Orchimédia**, for example, specializes in helping Quebec companies, educational institutions and government

agencies adapt their websites and deal with Asia generally.

Louis Bertrand, a consultant to small and medium-sized businesses at the Business Development Bank of Canada, says Canadians are probably more alert to cultural differences than their U.S. neighbours because of Canada's place in the global marketplace.

"We're more of a niche-type economy," Bertrand said. "We're used to thinking about what the customer needs."

With government agencies now an important clientele for Wintranslation.com, Iler relocated to Ottawa in 2006, but kept a office in Windsor.

The company works with about 150 freelance translators on a monthly basis and employs specialists in Web marketing and software localization. Iler's company also provides interpreters and foreign-language typesetters.

She declined to reveal Wintranslation.com's revenues, but the company website indicates they have topped \$1 million.

In workshops, Iler repeats one essential message: Don't make assumptions. "A dose of humbleness helps. Something might not work in another culture."

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