The LISA Forum - Asia

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by Deborah Fry,
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Some 160 industry players, 65% of them from the greater Asia-Pacific area, attended the recent LISA Forum - Asia in Shanghai.. Entitled "China's localisation business - the economic, technical and educational perspectives", the Forum was co-sponsored by the Shanghai Branch of the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, Nortel Networks, STAR Software, LMI Asia, Trados China and International Communications. Building on LISA's first Chinese Forum, held in August 1997 in Beijing, the conference discussed localisation business practices in China and Asia, China's e-commerce and Internet strategy and language translation, as well as product localisation, internationalisation and globalisation.

Welcoming participants to the Forum, LISA Director Michael Anobile emphasised the Localisation Industry Standards Association's role as a go-between and knowledge provider. It was extremely important to the localisation business not only to attract Western producers to the Chinese market but also for China to understand the new technologies and overcome the language barriers to allow it to take its prominent position. LISA had the benefit of some of the leading companies in the IT sector who could share their expertise, and he was hopeful that China would embrace and share their ideas. The interest in this topic was clearly seen in the bilingual Press conference preceding the actual Forum, which included representatives of over 30 international, national and local publications as well as business TV. Senior industry representatives - Michael Anobile, Hans-Peter Siegrist, CEO and founder of STAR, CP Chang, IBM China R&D Manager of Planning and Development Operations, and Carl Kay, VP Asia Sales and Marketing, LionBridge - gave their views of the language industry and the challenges facing the Chinese market in a session moderated by Jared Spitaro, General Manager of Trados Corporation Beijing. The general conclusion, as Hans-Peter Siegrist put it, was that "Localisation is strategic to doing business in China. Quality translation and product localisation provides greater access to high-tech and software solutions to an ever increasing number of Chinese business and private users of information products and services."

One major focus of the Forum was on Internet, the Web, and the opportunities for e-commerce in China. In his keynote speech, Tony Perkins, Principal and General Manager of McKinsey & Company's Beijing office, talked about how to catalyse e-commerce growth in China. He said that considerable progress was being made in all the five areas necessary for e-commerce development - technological enablers,

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appealing content, customer sophistication, payment and fulfillment systems, and regulatory support. Rapid Internet growth would continue to be driven by consumers' needs for information and communication, but e-commerce development was difficult in China and would come from business-to-business. In addition, the "natural owners" of this process - large Chinese companies - needed to move quickly (this topic was also the subject of an Executive Round Table held before the Forum that Tony facilitated and that was attended by senior industry managers). Chen Chong, Deputy Director General of the Department of Electronics and IT Products at the Chinese Ministry of Information Industry, said that the Chinese Government was heavily promoting the Internet as a way of doing business in China. It was paying a lot of attention to solving the payment systems issue and how to operate the Internet to generate revenue. China was definitely open to the world and needed good software and applications for Internet use, and the first step towards this was localisation.

In the business and technology tracks that followed, a number of companies presented products and services designed for the Chinese market, as well as providing project case histories and information on the specifics of Chinese and Asian markets. Many of the tools mentioned were also available for detailed examination in an exhibition held in parallel to the Forum. The second day of the Forum also saw an operations review by Dimitri Kieffer, the Asia/Middle East Group Manager for Microsoft Corporation's MIBN (Microsoft International Business Network) on how the company managed its Asia Pacific localisation and translation production teams. According to Kieffer, his job included identifying and supporting vendors, managing internal demand for their services and promoting globalisation within his own enterprise. Substantial progress had been made over the past few years, although challenges still remained, and new ones - such as the need for increased Web localisation - were also arising.

The Forum concluded with a panel discussion of localisation technology available for the Chinese market moderated by Jane Ee, General Manager of Asia Rain Automated Translations Pte Ltd. The panel examined translation memory, machine translation, text mining, tools for converting between Simplified and Traditional Chinese and for internationalisation, and speech and handwriting input. Here, too, considerable progress had been made, although the experts conceded that it would still be some time before all tools reached industrial strength, and the way in which humans could get the most out of them also needed to be examined.