Microsoft researcher Lili Cheng has been instrumental in shaping the company's direction on social networking. She stands beside "Profile," by Japanese artist Kumi Yamashita, whose raised blocks of type are shaped to create a shadow of a face when light crosses them.

Job: General Manager, Microsoft Future Social Experiences Lab, also known as FUSE

Age: 45

Residence: Bellevue

Birthplace: Tokyo

Grew up in: Omaha, Nebraska

Work experience: Architect at Nihon Sekkei in Tokyo, intern at Apple's Advanced Technology Group, researcher at Microsoft, director of user experience for Windows Vista.

Education: Bachelor's degree in architecture from Cornell University, master's degree in interactive telecommunications from New York University.

Family: Husband, Yarom Boss, is a senior program manager at Microsoft. They have three sons who are 17, 13 and 11.

Tech-savvy Dreamer
Lili Cheng runs Microsoft's social-media lab

By Sharon Pian Chan
Seattle Times technology reporter

As a researcher who helps Microsoft harness the social-media crowd, Lili Cheng cuts a distinctive profile as an individual.

The researcher charged with being the most social person at Microsoft considers herself an outsider.

Lili Cheng, the head of Microsoft's social-media research group, is an architect at a company of computer scientists. At her first job, she was the only woman and the only person who didn't speak Japanese at a construction firm of 300 in Tokyo.

"It's really easy for me to imagine the person who is left out," said Cheng, who has 1,240 friends on Facebook. "I feel like I don't always fit in, and I like that."

Cheng is general manager of FUSE Lab, which stands for Future Social Experiences.

She has said that the biggest failure for an architect is if you design a space and no one shows up to use it. The same is true with social media.

"Social is risky," she said. "You don't know what's going to work out."

What makes Cheng an elusive creature at Microsoft is she can think simultaneously in the right-brain mode of blue-sky research and in the left-brain mode of software ship date.

Stefan Weitz, a director at Microsoft Bing, sums her up this way: "Lili is a dreamer with a rigorous tech background."

Microsoft considers social media important, important enough that Microsoft Chief Executive Steve Ballmer met with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg the day he announced Microsoft's acquisition of Skype — to make sure Zuck was cool with it.

But unlike Google, which is chasing Facebook and its 750 million users with the new Google+, Microsoft has no plans to build a competing social network.

Its approach to social media has been more incremental, with new features rolling out across Bing, Office and MSN, many of which can be traced back to Cheng's research group.

The people at Cheng's FUSE Lab are version 1.0 types who have experience developing and shipping new products.

A researcher at FUSE started experimenting last year with cloud computing and Twitter in a project called Twigg. Six weeks later, Bing rolled the feature out to tens of millions of users.

Search on Bing, and the results now show your friends' Facebook "likes" and tweets.

Besides Twigg, the team developed social-media projects with the names Montage, Companycrowd.com, Docs.com and Spindex.

FUSE is a part of Microsoft Research, a group of 850 people hired to research and publish papers in academic journals.

Microsoft spends $9 billion a year on research and development. That number includes money invested in developing products like the next version of Windows, but the amount remains staggering.

The National Science Foundation, by comparison, received $6.9 billion in federal funding in 2010.

Kid at heart

Cheng is 45, but on social media, she's like a 15year-old. Here's a recent tweet from her: "sunshine. fun people. <heart> #foocamp." (Foo Camp is a tech gathering.)

She always has 1,000 unread emails in her inbox. "I'm like, when it scrolls off, it's gone," she said. The best way to reach her is to "d" her. As in, send her a direct message on Twitter.

Cheng imagines redesigning email to suit different personalities — from people who like to have zero emails in the inbox, to people like her.

Her father is from China, her mother is Japanese and an interior designer who specializes in textiles. Her dad, a landscape architect, came to the U.S. from Shanghai for graduate work at the University of Michigan.

After completing his degree, he started driving across the country to look for a job.

He got in a car accident in Nebraska and, while waiting for repairs, decided to stay.

Cheng said she was one of three Asian Americans at a Nebraskan high school with 1,500 students.

"Can you imagine being Asian in the Midwest? That's hard core," said John Maeda, a friend and president of the Rhode Island School of Design who grew up in Seattle.

After getting her architecture degree from Cornell, Cheng took her first job in Tokyo at Nihon Sekkei. Her next stop was Los Angeles, where she decided to leave architecture.

"Architecture is a pretty old, established profession," she said. "The computer was really open-ended."

Then at 23, she went to New York University to get a master's degree in interactive telecommunication.

Her first internship was at Apple working on QuickTime software.

Cheng said it's funny that people now consider Apple the ultimate barometer of cool, because when she was there "I thought it was so uncool."

Coming from New York and L.A. — where even poorly paid architects wore Armani suits — Cheng could not believe Apple employees walked around barefoot wearing Apple T-shirts at the company's offices in Cupertino, Calif.

She made an emergency trip to a Gap store to buy a plain yellow sweater and black pants so she would blend in.

In 1995, she and her husband, Yarom Boss, took jobs at Microsoft. She joined Microsoft Research's Virtual Worlds group and ended up running it.

In 2001, she started the Social Computing Group and built an early social network called Wallop that Microsoft spun off as a company.

Early disciple

Cheng talks about social media like it's an indie band that she watched play dive bars for years before it made it big.

"A lot of people said it was just weird people talking about cats," she said. "Social was girlie. ... For the first years of Twitter, I spent time telling people, 'This is really cool,' and people said, 'I don't get it.' "

She launched an annual Social Computing Symposium in 2004 to bring together researchers and developers working on social media. At one event, people wrote and acted out short plays using puppets, handmade props and other randomly found objects.

Danah Boyd, a senior Microsoft researcher who has gone to several symposiums, said that one year in Redmond, everyone sang karaoke, then broke into a closed hotel pool and went swimming.

"In some ways I just think of her as a Tigger," Boyd said. "She does an amazing job of bringing out the child in everyone."

That includes former Chief Software Architect Ray Ozzie, who created FUSE Lab and made Cheng its leader. "Lili would just bounce up to him and say, 'Wheeee! We are going to do these fun things,'" Boyd said.

Switch to Vista

While working on a design project in research, Cheng started thinking about how it could apply to Windows. Rick Rashid, Microsoft's senior vice president for research, and Bill Gates got involved and they made her director of user experience for Windows Vista.

She went from the research world of imagining "what if" to managing a 200-person team and shipping software for 100 million computers.

After Vista, she returned to research instead of climbing the corporate ladder in the Windows group.

"People here were like, 'Did you do something wrong?' " Cheng said. "I wanted to create things."

She was ready to downsize. FUSE Lab, started in 2009, has 30 people.

"Sometimes, it's just easier for a really small team to try something and see if it works," she said.

Her team built Montage, a website that creates an instant news site about a topic based on social-media feeds. This month, FUSE launched the experimental **companycrowd.com**, a version about businesses.

The team Cheng leads has also built software called Kodu for kids to create video games. It's been used at Tyee Middle School in Bellevue and Benjamin Franklin Elementary in Kirkland.

Maeda of Rhode Island School of Design loves that Cheng has brought warmth to the cold arts of technology.

"She's a warm visionary as opposed to a cold visionary," he said.

His old boss used to say to him, "Don't be a laser beam; become like a light bulb," Maeda recalled. "I think of Lili as someone who illuminates spaces, and that's why she's perfect for social media."