



Jocelyn Eikenburg leads a new pack of Expat writers

BECOMING ONE WITH CHINA

Jocelyn Eikenburg, founder of *The Wu Way*

Jocelyn Eikenburg, the founder of the *Wu Way Company* and *Speaking of China* is the person to go to for informative tips and quips on dating Chinese men. On her blog, *Speaking of China*, she shares the trials and tribulations of her cross-cultural, interracial marriage. Jocelyn sits down with **Agenda** to provide us with valuable insights into Chinese culture, and how she's growing to become part of it.

How did you end up living in China, and later, writing about it?

The whole idea of China came up when I went to the international studies office at my university to discuss possibilities for working abroad after I graduated. When I told the director I was stumped on what to do, he asked me if I had thought about teaching in China. I ended up going in August

1999. I still wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life, and I thought a year abroad would give me the time and distance I needed. Instead, that was the start of more than five and a half years in China. It wasn't until I met John, who would become my Chinese husband that I really felt inspired to write more publicly about China. I knew it was unusual for a Western woman like me to be in love with, and even marry, a Chinese man, especially a Chinese man from the countryside.

The longer John and I stayed together, the more our relationship surprised me, and even challenged me in ways I never imagined. The classic example I always cite is how my Chinese mother-in-law pulled me aside after the wedding ceremony, and first told me to have children

sooner, and then, when I told her it would be difficult to raise children at this point in my life, she offered to raise my child for me until it was three years old. For me it was one of those *bukesiji* (impossible to imagine) moments, because it challenged my belief that having children is a personal choice that had nothing to do with what parents or in-laws wanted from me.

Why did you start a blog? I guess I was like any writer, believing I really had something to say, and wanting to share it with the world. The difference this time was that I did the incredibly scary thing of deciding to go public with my writing, without the reassurance of a published book or journalist credentials.

Which China blogs you like to read? Any idea who reads yours?

I really enjoy the *China Beat*, *ChinaSMACK*, Gerald Zhang-Schmidt's blog, *Inside-Out China*, *Life Behind the Wall*, *Shanghai Shiok*, *Susan Blumberg-Kason*, and *Tales from Hebei*. I have a lot of Asian and Asian-American/Canadian/British readers, and a lot of Chinese men! There are also a lot of current and former China expats, who are mostly female, and overall I feel they're a smart, thoughtful bunch. I feel fortunate to count some higher-profile readers in the mix, including Rachel DeWoskin (the author of *Foreign Babes in Beijing*) and J.T. Tran, the *Asian Playboy*.

Why are couples composed of Chinese men and Western women so rare?

Some of it has its roots in usual stereotypes, and sometimes there are physical barriers. I've known some expat women comment how they have a hard time finding a Chinese man as tall as them. A friend of mine also once felt uncomfortable because her former Chinese boyfriend commented on how she was heavier than him, and then expected her to lose weight, when she was of a normal, healthy weight. I've had Chinese guys refuse me because they felt, as

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a traditional man, they could never see themselves married to a foreign girl. However, the subtext is often that foreign women are a dangerous choice—too casual, too dangerous—or that they could never accept a Chinese way of life. Generally, the pressure to split up comes from the family since, after all, in China, marriage is a family affair.

On the other hand, there are Chinese men—and their families—who would be happy to have a foreign woman in the family. But there are other complications. For example, my good friend once told me that some Chinese men cannot overcome their feeling of inferiority—that being an American girl, a citizen of one of the most powerful countries in the world, makes us intimidating.

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What are your favorite China books and why? *River Town* by Peter Hessler is right at the top of my list. *Red Azalea* by Anchee Min is the most unusual book I've ever read about the Cultural Revolution. Pearl Buck is better known for *The Good Earth*, but *East Wind-West Wind* is an intimate exploration of what happens when traditional Chinese values collide with the Western perspective. *Waiting* by Ha Jin explores a fascinating question—is it better to have a stable, but loveless marriage, or to marry your soul mate? *Lost in Translation* by Nicole Mones explores the idea of recovering the Peking Man from the point of view of an American translator who loves Chinese men and wants to distance herself from the US.

Repeat After Me by Rachel DeWoskin made me nostalgic for life in China, with a love story between an American woman and a Chinese man, strong feminist characters and a surprising twist on a major event in modern Chinese history. *A Thousand*

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Years of Good Prayers by Yiyun Li is fiction about China like I've never read before. The book features a gay unmarried son, a bisexual Peking Opera singer, a couple with a daughter they hide, and more. *Six Records of a Floating Life* by Shen Fu reads like a Valentine to Shen Fu's true love, Yun, who passes away before her time because of family misunderstandings.

You have also started a company, The Wu Way. Where is the company based and what does it do? The

Wu Way is based in Idaho, where I currently live. It's my one-woman venture, which allows me to make a living as a freelance writer, writing articles, website content and marketing materials, and translating.

You have lived with your husband both in China and US. What was different? Relationships can be very different. In China, most young people will date to marry, and see getting married and having children as a must, not a personal choice. Here in the US, young people might date a lot of people they don't intend to marry, and are more likely to see marriage and children as a more personal choice.

Friendships are not exactly the same either. For example, my husband has this group of guys he calls his “brothers,” and whenever he needs their help, they do whatever it takes to help, even if it isn't convenient. I've yet to find that kind of relationship with my friends in the US. I've told my husband there are always limits

to the help they can give us, because they might decline if it seems inconvenient to them.

What would be your advice to anyone looking to work and live in China?

Frankly, I wish more people traveled to China, or any country for that matter, because experiences like this can really change your perspective on the world, and even lead to personal growth. One of my closest friends in China told me this country is the perfect training ground for learning patience, and I really believe that's true. If you've lived in an apartment complex while your neighbor is doing renovation and the workers start at 7 am, or had to wait in a queue at the train station during a holiday, or simply just heard that *mei banfa* from someone, you know what I mean. I feel like China changed me for the better, but I must admit, I'm still working on the patience!

Any more advice? I remember years ago, a former China diplomat once related a story of how, when he first went to China, he became obsessed with what he called the “shadows of China,” those negative and uncomfortable aspects of living in the country that, frequently, he would even photograph in his daily life. He said it was easy to get caught up in the “shadows” because that's all we ever hear in the Western media—negative, negative, negative. He encouraged me to look beyond those shadows, to connect with a more positive or nuanced side of China that might not make great media coverage, but just might change our perspective on the country. And I would recommend the same to anyone thinking about living and working in China.

Interview by Jelena Kovacevic