

By Ye Jun

As a Western woman with a shorter Chinese husband, Jocelyn Eikenburg has turned a lot of heads, but the 33-year-old American is determined to challenge the stereotypes about Chinese men and Western women in love.

Eikenburg keeps a blog called "Speaking of China," where she shares her understanding of Chinese culture and offers advice to those in family and dating dilemmas. She was named one of the "101 Inspiring Women Bloggers to Watch for 2010" by WE Magazine, a women's online publication based in the US.

Posting stories about her relationships with her husband and in-laws, who hail from rural Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, and addressing topics like why Chinese men are sexy and how Western women can meet Chinese men in China, Eikenburg has exploited a piece of blogosphere where intercultural couples, especially in which a Western woman marries a Chinese man, can find a community where they can discuss their cultural frustrations and confront the intricacies of cross-cultural relationships.

"I've long been obsessed with sharing the experience of marriage to a Chinese man in a meaningful way that others could relate to," said Eikenburg, who lives in Idaho but is now moving back to China with her husband in May to permanently reside here. "My goal is not really to make people agree with me, because not everything is simply right or wrong. I just want to encourage people to discuss these issues or topics."

Crossed cultures

Although she never thought that China would be anything more than a single memorable year teaching English in Zhengzhou, Henan Province in 1999, the adventurous explorer stayed for nearly six years, during which she worked as a technical writer for an NGO, provided English training for an Internet company, acquired fluent Chinese, and tied the knot with a Chinese man in Shanghai.

According to the Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau, only 305 of the 2,492 Chinese-foreign couples who registered for marriage in 2009 were made up of a Chinese man and a foreign woman.

Among all the challenges people in similar relationships might encounter, she said location was one of the issues that surprised her the most.

While it might not be a difficult decision for a Chinese woman to move to her foreign husband's country, living abroad can impede a Chinese husband's ability to support his family, which can lead to quite a few disputes, she said in an interview with another blogger. Most Chinese men want to contribute financially to the household, but it can be difficult when they are in a foreign country, where it's more challenging to find a job because some Western employers don't value a Chinese education.

Eikenburg believes that good communication is critical for intercultural couples to maintain a successful relationship. "When you come from different cultures, and you've been socialized differently, sometimes you perceive the same situation in drastically different ways," she said.

Eikenburg said that she used to get really upset when her husband talked to her in a voice that sounded grumpy, but later she discovered that his parents and relatives all

use the same tone, and it wasn't interpreted as angry. "I could have avoided years of arguments if I had tried stepping back from my anger to have a conversation with my husband about it," she said in the interview.

China's bride

Eikenburg's writing is full of her own experiences with her husband, which have served to inspire her conversations with readers and equip her with a Western perspective about Chinese family dynamics.

It's no exaggeration to say that it shocked Eikenburg when her Chinese mother-in-law pulled her aside days after her wedding and asked her to "have children sooner."

With a Western upbringing in suburban Cleveland, Ohio, Eikenburg has long held the view that having children is an option rather than a required course and that when to have one is a personal decision.

Fortunately, her husband helped her understand her mother-in-law's behavior. He took Eikenburg aside and explained the pressure to have children stems from a desire to continue the family line and from the Confucian principle of filial duty. "You might say that my mother-in-law was just doing her job as a Chinese mother, and I can respect that," she said.

"China's traditional preference for sons still means to some degree that the wife becomes part of the husband's family. So when a Western woman marries a Chinese man, she's just going to get exposed much more to the culture," Eikenburg added.

Citing her better half as her honored muse, Eikenburg said her husband is her biggest fan and greatest supporter.

"His perspective as a Chinese man and psychology PhD candidate is so insightful because he often can get to the heart of behavior and culture in a way that no one else I've known really can," she said.

A writing adventure

Abandoning teaching for writing, she started the blog in 2002 but stopped in 2006 after she moved back to the US with her husband. In 2009 she revised the blog to have more engaging discussions with readers.

"It's extremely gratifying to see conversations going on in the comments on my website," she said, adding that it's these conversations – usually between the readers themselves – where the magic really happens.

Eikenburg said that readers often challenge her, admitting that there have been many times when she would post something and then go to bed feeling anxious about how people will take it.

But readers remind her that China is a vast and diverse country. "So much of Chinese culture is really local, just like the dialects," she said.

Keeping the blog has not only helped Eikenburg gain new perspectives about China but also paved the way for her to establish herself as a writer. She is currently working on a memoir about her experiences in China.

"I still get a sort of 'stage fright' about my own writing – especially when I'm posting something really controversial or incredibly personal," she said.

"So putting my writing out there has been a sort of therapy, helping me realize it isn't so scary after all. I've discovered this new confidence as a writer, which has given me the courage to start writing," Eikenburg told the Global Times.

► US woman gives advice on intercultural relationships

A love affair with China



Jocelyn Eikenburg and her Chinese husband (left).

Jocelyn Eikenburg at her wedding in Zhejiang Province in 2007. Photos: Courtesy of Jocelyn Eikenburg

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