

Why China? Finding My Way in a Land of 1.4 Billion

Debra Lane Wright

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Wright uses her experience doing business in China to adeptly suggest ways both countries can improve their cultural understanding.

Readers of Debra Wright's *Why China?* will likely still ask themselves at the end of the book, why China? This is not a bad thing; the author raises many questions about Chinese manners and customs that interested readers will want to explore further. The author spent seven years as a consultant for a high-end hotel chain in China where she learned firsthand, sometimes painfully, how to interact effectively within the Chinese business culture. The book presents insightful lessons and funny and poignant stories useful to travelers and those looking to do business with this economic giant.

In 2005, Wright jumped at the chance to go to Nanking to help the hotel chain attract more business and tourism from the United States. Arriving in the frigid weather with only the clothes she wore (her luggage was lost for nine weeks), she made an unfavorable first impression because her fur coat was viewed as a sign of showy American wealth. Two years passed before Debra felt confident that she could work effectively with the Chinese, confidence that was rewarded by her receiving the prestigious International Innovator of the Year Award from the International Marketing Association.

The author did not learn Chinese and at times was left at the mercy of translators who understood English but not how to apply it to business settings. Wright strongly cautions those hoping to do business in China to find skilled translators to convey subtext. She also observes that the Chinese give gifts frequently and expect gifts in return. Chinese businesses are traditionally boss- and not customer-driven, which means that workers will do whatever is necessary to please those in charge, even at the expense of consumer service. China remains a male-dominated culture, and in restaurants, men often do the ordering and are served first. The author cautions the Chinese that this will have to change if they want to attract more American tourists.

Included are a few clichés (“One should always push oneself to be the best”) and some historical generalizations that would be easily challenged by historians (“America was essentially founded as a country where principles furthering the common good for all prevailed”). Once readers get by these distractions they will admire Wright as an energetic and enthusiastic worker with a genuine affection for the Chinese people and their culture.

KARL HELICHER (Fall 2014)

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