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Book review

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Tao T, De Cremer D and Chunbo W (eds), *Huawei: Leadership, culture, and connectivity*, SAGE: Los Angeles, CA, 2017. 361 pp. ISBN: 9789386062055

Reviewed by: Mark Crowder, *Manchester Metropolitan University, UK*

With over 170,000 employees in more than 170 countries and regions, serving more than one-third of the world's population, how does Ren Zhengfei manage a giant called Huawei?

This is the question posed on the back cover of this weighty book. Huawei is a true global giant and is the world's largest manufacturer of telecommunications equipment (*Economist*, 2012). It is, therefore, a company of great international importance and one that is ripe for study. However, Simon Murray's first sentence in the foreword, 'this is a story not of a company but of a man', sums up the book neatly. The authors have researched Huawei over a 14-year period, and the content is comprehensively underpinned by almost 150 in-depth interviews and explores the growth of Huawei from a start-up company to its present position as a global leader from the perspective of its founder, Ren Zhengfei. It considers his guiding principles, his strategies and his leadership techniques, and weaves these into a compelling story of success.

In terms of structure, the book is traditional. It begins with a lengthy (22-page), but very informative introduction. Although this can potentially be skipped, it is, in fact essential reading that provides the foundation for much of the remaining content of the book, and it neatly sets the scene for what follows. The bulk of the book is devoted to nine chapters, whose titles include phrases such as 'common sense', 'the soul of business', 'self-criticism', 'compromise', and these reveal much about the company and its core beliefs. The fact that two chapters are devoted to managing change is significant, and it helps to emphasise the key role that this has within Huawei itself. Indeed, the illustrative quotes presented in these chapters are among the most compelling of the entire book.

A clear theme emerging from the book is that the success of Huawei is emphatically rooted in the Chinese culture. The organisation is operated as a co-operative where the company is owned by its employees, rather than a 'traditional' business. Indeed, the foreword states that its founder, Mr Ren, only has a 1.4 percent share of the company. Perhaps stating that the approach is 'unique' would be going too far, but it is certainly a rarity in the world of global business, and its success demonstrates that there is no 'single right way' to manage a business. Perhaps other organisations could learn a thing or two from Huawei, with its strong focus on service and quality, and where customers and employees are fundamental to its business approach. For example, some of the underlying foundations of Huawei would raise eyebrows in traditional western economies, and statements such as 'focus on customers, not competitors' (p. 141) run contrary to the much-respected wisdom of strategy gurus such as Michael Porter. Despite this, the approach clearly works – in this case at least.

There are clear overlaps between the approach of Huawei and William Ouchi's (1981) *Theory Z*, which examines the Asian approach to leadership – in this case, Japan – and which also values culture and interpersonal relationships, and emphasises the need for trust between managers and staff. The book does not explore these links because it does not seek to be a heavy academic work, but instead aims to be a work that is digestible for the interested layperson. In this, it succeeds. It provides a rich case study that is full of practical examples of how Huawei have approached their business.

The authors' style is engaging, pacy and full of enthusiasm. This reader got the distinct impression that they were excited about their writing, and this brings energy to the book that adds considerably to the reading experience. However, one result of this approach is that the authors' tendency to use very short paragraphs (often only a single sentence long) rapidly becomes irritating and makes the text read like a list in many places, which detracts from the message the authors are trying to convey. In a similar vein, on occasion, the phraseology of the text is convoluted and opaque, and it needs to be read several times in order for the meaning to become clear, although this may be the result of translation issues rather than the source material.

It is a long book (361 pages) that needs to be read in several sittings. Therefore, the lack of an index is a significant drawback. Several times, this writer read something of interest that he wished to return to some days later, but it was difficult to quickly locate the key section. This is, therefore, not a book that one can easily dip in and out of, which is a pity. This is, though, a relatively small gripe that does not really detract from the overall excellence of the book. Perhaps this is an issue that future editions could rectify.

The book ends with a short addendum that identifies possible opportunities for the Chinese economy in the coming years and explores factors as diverse as how to improve education in rural areas, the increasing trend towards globalisation and the rapid pace of technological change. The authors' contention is that China is likely to be at the forefront in each of these areas, and the implication is that Huawei will be one of the vanguards in this new future. Having read this book, it is hard to disagree.

The book is a revised version of an earlier work and has been extensively modified to address some of the criticisms of the first edition. When assessing the worth of the work, the lead author (Tian Tao) states in his preface, 'I think the first edition would at most get a 60 out of 100, but the new edition would be a solid 80'. This writer would disagree. A total of 90–95 percent would be more appropriate for such an engaging, thought-provoking and fascinating book. High praise indeed, but richly deserved. Thoroughly recommended.

References

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