



Foreign Babes in Beijing: Behind the Scenes of a New China

Rachel DeWoskin

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Determined to broaden her cultural horizons and live a “fiery” life, twenty-one-year-old Rachel DeWoskin hops on a plane to Beijing to work for an American PR firm based in the busy capital. Before she knows it, she is not just exploring Chinese culture but also creating it as the sexy, aggressive, fearless Jiexi, the starring femme fatale in a wildly successful Chinese soap opera. Experiencing the cultural clashes in real life while performing a fictional version onscreen, DeWoskin forms a group of friends with whom she witnesses the vast changes sweeping through China as the country pursues the new maxim, “to get rich is glorious.” In only a few years, China’s capital is transformed. With “considerable cultural and linguistic resources” (*The New Yorker*), DeWoskin captures Beijing at this pivotal juncture in her “intelligent, funny memoir” (*People*), and “readers will feel lucky to have sharp-eyed, yet sisterly, DeWoskin sitting in the driver’s seat” (*Elle*).

Foreign Babes in Beijing: Behind the Scenes of a New China Details

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Matt Holloway says

So this girl graduates college and goes to China to work for an American PR firm, but also gets cast in a cheezy Chinese sitcom (same title as the book) about slutty American chicks and how badly they long for Chinese guys. It's watched by like 40 million people. I'd give the book 5 stars but she doesn't string out the sitcom storyline long enough. Her cultural reflections and stories about Chinese friends are great and illuminating, but they can't compare (in my eyes) to the stories about the sitcom.

Erin says

Fun read that goes way beyond hilarious stories of propaganda-making.

Jessica Larson-Wang says

I liked this book a lot. China in the 1990s was a special place and Rachel DeWoskin had the good luck to be involved with a very interesting group of people. I'm married to a Chinese musician, and many of his tales of that period of time are similar to what DeWoskin talks about in her book. For that alone, and the fact that I somewhat know the feeling of being a "foreign babe" in China, I found it easy to relate to her book. China memoirs aren't that uncommon, but I was excited to come across one written by a young American woman (without a religious agenda), and would recommend it to all female expats in China.

Of course, the China she portrays is already a thing of the past, so the book shouldn't be looked at as a commentary on today's post-Olympic "new China," but rather the new China as it really was, back in the days when China was practically a new frontier and anything and everything seemed possible.

Lena says

As memoirs go, this story of a recent Columbia grad who ends up starring as a Western hussy in China's most popular soap opera is a fascinating one. I learned a lot about what modern day life in China is like from this book. It was particularly shocking for me to read that some people there don't keep journals out of fear what they write might be used against them by the government. Still, the tone did get a little academic for me at times and I wish the author had included more of her own personal journey within her very compelling observations about modern China.

Lm Huffman says

Really interesting memoir of a young American woman working in Beijing in the 1990s. I learned a great

deal about China and how it has changed since the revolution (and since the 1990s). My only wish is that the title (which comes from the name of a Chinese soap opera in which the author acted) and the picture on the cover wasn't so tawdry - it makes the book sound like it's going to be so much less than it is; which is an insider's account on being an outsider in China, told with intelligence and insight.

Karen Germain says

I first heard of Rachel DeWoskin a few weeks ago, when I picked up her one of her works of fiction, "Big Girl Small", which I loved. I immediately looked up other books by DeWoskin and discovered that she had written a memoir about her time living in China in the mid-90's. The title of her memoir "Foreign Babes In Beijing" refers to the title of the very popular Chinese soap opera that DeWoskin found herself cast in as Jiexi, an all American girl and temptress to one of the married Chinese male characters.

This memoir is just plain crazy and impossible to put down. DeWoskin did not move to China with any interest in acting, but went to the audition on a lark and she just seems to go with the flow with regard to experiences and people that come her way. She probably embraces a foreign culture in the best possible way, making many friends that lead her multiple opportunities.

She has interesting things to report regarding stereotypes (both through her TV show and in the general public) and how they can perpetuate false ideas. The stereotypes on the soap opera are often completely ridiculous, but shine a light on how even minor perpetuated falsehoods can cause damage when trying to break down cultural barriers. Sometimes people want to believe what they have been told, rather than listen to the person in front of them and form a real relationship. This is not to say that DeWoskin doesn't form many real relationships with Chinese friends, but she is often finding herself having tread lightly and defend her culture and misrepresentations. This theme is rampant throughout the book.

This book was endlessly interesting and a great read if you love memoirs or travel journals.
<http://www.alwayspackedforadventure.com>

Neil Pierson says

With a newly minted BA in English, Rachel DeWoskin moved to China in 1994. China was just beginning to open itself up to commerce with other countries, and foreigners living in China were still relatively uncommon. Although she had studied Chinese and traveled in China, she was looking for an intense, exotic experience. Boy, did she get it.

The recurring theme is Rachel trying to figure out what the hell is going on. In spite of her studies and experience, she struggled to understand or speak with the Chinese. (You need to be careful with any language that uses the same word for "business" and "sex." Or one where a minor mispronunciation turns, "My teacher was strict," into "My teacher was castrated.")

She lands a job with a public relations firm that helps foreign companies develop their business (as in "business") in China. She doesn't know anything about public relations and not very much about China, so there's a lot for Rachel to figure out. Most of her coworkers aren't much help.

Through the merest chance, she is cast in a new TV soap opera called "Foreign Babes in Beijing." For several reasons, Rachel is mostly bewildered. There are her language limitations; she has no experience as an actor, much less in acting as it's done on a Chinese soap opera; and the show is being filmed from the end of the script to the beginning. It's no glamour assignment, either. She gets calls at 3:00 am to show up at the freezing cold studio where she may not even be needed, she's paid far less than her co-stars, and she still has that PR job.

The show, it turns out, is about a couple of American women--one played by a German, but who cares?--who fall in love with Chinese men, one of whom is married. To attract viewers, the producers use whatever they can, including the reputation of western women for being "open-minded."* The motives of the government for allowing the show are more mysterious. Maybe they expect that as international commerce grows, there will be an onslaught of foreigners and strange ways, and they want to prepare their people? Or maybe somebody got bribed.

The native population doesn't come across very sympathetically, which is a little unusual in this type of book. Most of the Chinese disdain foreigners, resent them, or envy them. Verbal faux pas are not greeted with laughter or explanations. They embarrass the Chinese, who shun the speaker. Rachel spends quite a bit of time with Chinese intellectuals, who have the same complaints about their culture as any other intellectuals.

I didn't really connect with this book. Maybe it's because in the period covered, the author never did find solid footing. It's hard to explain something to a reader when the author isn't sure of it herself.

* Apparently, Chinese use the same word for "open-minded" and "slutty."

Louise says

When I first saw the title of the book, Foreign Babes in Beijing, I didn't know what to expect. Its cover was racy but facetious. I was confused about the title. Was it implying local Chinese women weren't babes?

The first few chapters cleared up the confusion. This non fiction book is about the author, Rachel, and her first few years as an expatriate in China. Foreign Babes in Beijing is actually the title of a Chinese soap opera she acted in.

I had read and grown tired of the usual books I read about China. Mostly written by Chinese Americans, the stories they shared were good and usually touching, but after reading so many of them, they soon started melting together in my mind. Foreign Babes, written by a western hand offered a different perspective of China. Sometimes I identified with Rachel, since I've lived in the US for most of my life, and sometimes I identified with the Chinese locals.

Rachel's view of China shows Chinese perception of foreigners and their treatment of them. It's something that I had an inkling of, but not the full details. Each chapter contains an excerpt for the script from the soap opera. Some of them are amusing because of the Chinese stereotype of how foreign women are like.

Foreign Babes in Beijing is an entertaining and eye-opening read and is a nice change of pace from the usual books on China written by Chinese Americans. It made me think about moving back there, but not living the typical expatriate life — I'd rather live like a local.

John says

Don't let the title and the cover fool you, because this book is not as salacious as it sounds. (Aside: This was the first book I put on hold at my library, and when the librarian handed it to me, she was all, "Woohoo, look at those fishnets! I thought it said 'Foreign Babies' but I guess not." She thought I was some kind of pervert. While that may be true, she did not have evidence of it in her hand at the time.) This is the true story of the author, who went to Beijing in 1995 to work for a PR firm and have some adventures. She ended up staying for five years and managed to play a main character on a very popular Chinese primetime soap opera, called *Foreign Babes in Beijing*. This book is about her experience living in China, working with and dating young Chinese people. She also expounds upon the Chinese relationship with the West, and in particular views of the USA and the ascent of capitalism. If you are interested in China or foreign travel, this might be a book you would like. Check it out.

Sigrid-marianella says

It looks like chick-lit but don't judge a book by its cover.

I'm absolutely loving this book, but I suspect it might be because I myself lived in Beijing for some years and can relate to a lot of what she is writing. I'm not sure someone who hasn't lived there would be as captured as I was so for that I give it four stars.

Having arrived in China 10 years after Rachel I enjoyed reading her descriptions of the city as it was and getting an image of how it has transformed (and in many ways remained the same). How living outside second ring was considered the outskirts of town, and a reference to one of few foreign bars (comparing to the booming nightlife culture today), the suppressed love-relations between foreigners and Chinese (today a common sight).

I am always fascinated by the stories told to me by people who lived in Beijing in the 80s and 90s, this book gives you a good insight to the new China on a personal level back in the 90s. If you lived or live in Beijing/China, I am certain you will enjoy this book.

Leanne says

Stupid title, stupid cover, thoughtful engagement with China and her position as an outsider during the 90s.

Eric Klee says

When I travel, I like to bring a book with me that would be considered "light reading." I picked up *FOREIGN BABES IN BEIJING* because it was described as a "Sex and the City" set in China on the dust

jacket. The author moves to Beijing to work in PR and suddenly finds herself on a Chinese soap opera called "Foreign Babes in Beijing." Sounds fun, right?

As I started to read it on the airplane, I was suddenly transported back to my freshman foreign governments class in college. I wasn't expecting a dull history lesson on Chinese government, culture, and word definitions. I'm sure the information presented is fantastic...if that's what you're looking for. I, on the other hand, was looking for humorous stories and adventures in China, a la Chelsea Handler. I felt quite misled by the book's title, summary, praises, and photo on the dust jacket.

After 50 pages in, I realized that the memoir wasn't going to be full of lighthearted humor and debauchery as I was led to believe. I gave up and said *zài jiàn* (goodbye) to Foreign Babes.

Bärbel says

Absolutely loved it! Well written and a pleasure to read.

Katie says

Edited to say that I totally dropped this down to two stars. I've read/been reading solid three-star books since then, and realized how much more I disliked this one compared to them, so two stars is a truer reflection of how I felt about it.

This is purely in the "meh" category. I never really got who DeWoskin was throughout the thing, and found myself super bored - especially considering that the story should have been really interesting. I'm not sure how long after the events it was that she wrote this, but it had a lack of personality/depth that I think means it was a long, long time in between her stay and her writing. It felt sort of squashed together; I rarely felt like I had a hold on the sequence of events, and then she'd put in a bunch of facts about China. While these were most certainly useful and interesting, it took me out of her own story at times and I found myself confused as to where we left off.

When DeWoskin does show her personality, she . . . kind of annoys me. There's this naivete she puts across that I don't really buy, to be honest. I mean, I think it's reasonable to be overwhelmed by a place so different from where she grew up, but she has this "Aw, shucks!" mentality that was irritating, especially considering her father was a sinologist and she had traveled to China frequently as a kid. This is especially so when she discusses how embarrassed she was by the TV show. Oh, come on. If you didn't want to do it, then fine, don't, but how can you possibly be so awkward? It's like she wants to come off as this awesome adventuress AND a humble, thoughtful foreign girl just trying to sweetly make her way through Beijing.

The only reason I'm not just giving it two stars is because I feel like my irritation at the voice was purely subjective. (Edited to say: Perhaps, but the review is my own opinion, so whatevs.) Honestly, if you have an interest in China, this is a light way to start understanding some of the history. The rest is so muddled, though, that I would take her cultural observations with a grain of salt.

Dennis says

I'm glad that I didn't judge this book by its cover, although I cannot deny that the shapely pair of fish-netted legs did catch my attention. Truth is this book is far less sensually provocative than it is *evocative* of expatriate life in the heart of an awakening economic powerhouse. Rachel DeWoskin's memoir about her adventures as a 20-something college grad working in Beijing for an American PR firm paints a vivid portrait of life as a foreigner in China during the 1990s.

Rachel is not just your average expat, however. Armed with a Columbia degree and some knowledge of the Chinese language and people, Rachel seems to meld fairly well into Beijing life right from the start. She rather serendipitously collides early on with an opportunity to star in a Chinese soap opera, *Foreign Babes in Beijing*, as the rich American girl, Jiexi, who steals the heart of the married Tianling. The role instantly shoots her to stardom and makes her recognizable by the greater part of some 600 million viewers. (Rachel ponders, "It was too huge a number to think about. If we all held hands would we cover the planet?")

Rachel utilizes the soap opera role as a device for contextualizing her own experiences as a young western woman living in Beijing vis-à-vis the Chinese' views romanticizing their country's new openness in the world.

Throughout her years in Beijing, Rachel easily makes friends with other expatriates and a variety of activists, artists and intellectuals, all who provide her with starkly contrasting approaches and attitudes to a modernizing China. The author's humor is as astute as it is self-deprecating. She offers thoughtful and sometimes cheeky perspectives on everything from Americanized boyfriend Zhou Jun's Jeep that he named *Kelindun* after the American president (Clinton), to her commanding Ugly American boss Charlotte's insistence on throwing an American Thanksgiving dinner for bewildered and oft-times intimidated Chinese staff, to the fear and uncertainty attendant to the fervent patriotism that swelled amidst the international kerfuffle-cum-crisis NATO provoked when it bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade.

This book is thoroughly enjoyable and provides a remarkably insightful first-hand view of the rapidly changing, and increasingly important and powerful society of China.
