Arts & Humanities

Our Babe in Beijing

600 million Chinese think Rachel DeWoskin ’94CC is a typical American home-wrecking seductress. Her new book reveals her to be a subtle scholar of Sino-American perceptions and misperceptions.

Apr. 27, 2005

One night in the fall of 1999, Derek Walcott, the Nobel Prize–winning poet, went out for Chinese food with some friends from the Boston literary community — novelist Askold Melnyczuk, poet Tom Sleigh, critic Sven Birkerts, and a graduate student named Rachel DeWoskin. “I had just started school,” DeWoskin recalls, “so for me this was like going out with the president of the world.”

Their arrival created a buzz at the restaurant. A group of waiters pointed and whispered. Eventually, one of them approached the table and said something to DeWoskin in Chinese. “He asked me what kind of broccoli we wanted,” she told the writers.

“And of course the waiter spoke fluent English,” says DeWoskin, “and he said, ‘No, I didn’t. I asked her if she was the Foreign Babe in Beijing.’ And so I had to tell them the story.”

The story — the short version, anyway — is that DeWoskin ’94CC has experienced fame on a scale unknown to most mere Nobel laureates. As one of two title babes in the Chinese nighttime television drama Foreign Babes in Beijing, which aired in 1995, she was seen by an estimated 600 million people. That’s roughly 10 percent of the world’s population.

The full-length version of the story can be found in DeWoskin’s book, also titled Foreign Babes in Beijing, which came out from Norton in May.

DeWoskin never expected to be a published memoirist at 32. But then she never expected to be a Foreign Babe at 22. It seemed an improbable fate for an English major fresh out of Columbia College. On the other hand, if her classmates had been

asked to name the graduate “Most Likely to Star in a Chinese Soap Opera,” they probably would have picked DeWoskin. She’s extroverted, curious, peripatetic, and a born adventurer — literally; for the first several months of her life she slept in a suitcase. Her father, Kenneth ’66CC, ’74GSAS, is a noted sinologist whose research and restlessness kept the family constantly on the move. Childhood, DeWoskin writes, was “a collage of infinite staircases to Chinese walls and temples. . . . We wandered lost through villages in Sichuan, slept in military guesthouses allegedly in beds once used by revolutionary heroes, and trekked up holy mountains over paths pressed in the ground for thousands of years by pious pilgrims.”

But even a lifelong familiarity with China couldn’t prepare DeWoskin for the culture shock she would experience living there on her own. And nothing, of course, could have equipped her for life as the country’s most recognizable outsider — a human symbol of the culture shock China itself was beginning to feel.

Lost in Translation

DeWoskin bolted for Beijing right after college and stumbled into the soap opera role just a few months later. A friend told her about the casting call, and it sounded like a welcome diversion from her uninspiring work at an American PR firm. DeWoskin had no professional acting experience, but that didn’t end up mattering to the show’s director. She looked the part. The audition, as she describes it in her book, was a few perfunctory improvisation exercises:

“Bill loves to take the bus,” Director Yao continued. “But you,” he said to me, “like to take cabs and live like a true foreigner.” I thought about true foreigners.

“Let’s take a cab,” I said to Bill.

“No!” he said. “I want to take the bus!”

“You’re hired,” said Director Yao.

I didn’t know the word for “hired.” Bill translated for me.

DeWoskin needed some help with the show’s title, too. It wasn’t until she looked closely at a sign on the studio door that she noticed it wasn’t Foreign Girls in Beijing — there were “a few extra, sexy strokes” in one of the Chinese characters. But she had trouble getting a translation from the friend who had put her up to auditioning:

“It’s not a thing you call your mother or your sister,” I suggested.

“Not your mother.”

“What about your sister?”

“I don’t have a sister.” Past-tense counterfactual hypotheticals are hard to discuss in China. I wasn’t sure why this was so, but I knew from experience that my colleagues were literal. I turned the sentence forward.

“If you have a sister someday, will you call her niu?”

“I won’t have a sister. My parents are too old.”

Once shooting began, DeWoskin realized that Western acting experience probably wouldn’t have helped her anyway. Director Yao was constantly urging her to be more reqing, which translates as “passionate” but in practice meant “ridiculously overwrought.” He seemed most content when she was acting most like a Muppet. “There is no pretense in China that art should be reflective of reality,” DeWoskin writes. “Television acting there is the love child of the studied, exaggerated dances and vocals of Peking Opera, and the melodrama of socialist theater.”

Everyday conversation, by contrast, was a cipher. For all its literalism, spoken Chinese can be dizzyingly indirect. Its rules, DeWoskin came to understand, “included never saying right out what you wanted to happen.” And like most languages, Chinese is full of idioms whose real and apparent meanings are miles apart. In the show’s theme song, DeWoskin and young Westerners like her are called laowai — “old foreigners.” Old, in this case, suggests a sort of comical obliviousness, akin to senility. When a friend asked DeWoskin if she agreed that American women were kaifang, “open-minded,” DeWoskin nodded enthusiastically, not realizing it wasn’t a compliment. “The word in Chinese was used to talk about a lack of discipline, peppered with promiscuous abandon.”

DeWoskin’s character on the show, Jiexi (pronounced “Jessie”), is decidedly kaifang. She comes to China, ostensibly, to study, but discovers her true purpose the first time she lays eyes on Li Tianming, a model-handsome Beijinger who also happens to be a model husband and father. She pursues him with Western abandon, while in a parallel plotline another American babe (actually played by a German) enjoys a more traditional courtship with Tianming’s unmarried brother.

The show pushed all sorts of buttons, playing to Chinese anxieties about the corrupting influence of the West even as it titillated viewers with soap-opera sex. Tianming stands at the brink of infidelity, wringing his hands, while Jiexi blurts lines like “I don’t want to be your wife, just your mistress,” and “I love you. What are we waiting for?” Scenes of the couple’s illicit lovemaking are intercut with shots of Tianming’s virtuous wife working in a factory.

Foreign Babes followed on the success of another nighttime drama called Beijinger in New York. This time around, DeWoskin writes, the producers wanted the Western view of China. What they produced, of course, was the Chinese view of the Western view of China. Jiexi’s parents object to their daughter’s Chinese boyfriend, whom they’ve never met, on the grounds that he’s “lazy and uncultured.” “Before the Foreign Babes script,” DeWoskin writes, “I had never heard the stereotype that Chinese are lazy. But Chinese believe that Americans believe it.”

Yet it would be reductive merely to call the show reductive. Part of its appeal lay in the characters’ potential to surprise and change. Jiexi, for example, redeems herself in the final episodes, sacrificing everything, including a substantial inheritance, to be with Tianming. After the show aired, old women began coming up to DeWoskin on the street and petting her hair, saying “It was true love with Tianming, wasn’t it?”

Lifestyles of the Poor and Famous

“As a pig fears getting big,” holds a Chinese proverb, “so a person fears getting famous.” This may be truer in China than elsewhere, since there’s no guarantee that the hassles of fame will be offset by the conveniences of fortune. DeWoskin received $80 per episode of Foreign Babes, and there were only 20 of them. She continued working at the PR firm, where her Chinese colleagues cheerfully informed her that she “filmed quite fat.” Yet she experienced all of the headaches of celebrity, including some that seemed uniquely Chinese, such as being mobbed by admirers in a city where notions of privacy and personal space are virtually nonexistent to begin with. Women followed her through the grocery store, buying everything she bought. The studio gave her home phone number to anyone who requested it. A journalist asked if Jiexi were a typical laowai, and DeWoskin’s response — “Yeah, most of us are China scholars, home wreckers, and temptresses” — was printed without irony. Some reporters simply wrote first-person stories about the show and published them

under DeWoskin’s byline.

DeWoskin made a fuss about that, but in general she knew better than to get bent out of shape over all the attention. “I tried not to get impatient,” she says, “because for everyone who saw me on the street, it was the first time. For me, it became the millionth time, but that wasn’t the fault of the fans. It was my fault. If you parade naked on TV, it’s your fault. That’s the rule.”

Model Babes

Like the show, DeWoskin’s book is an attention grabber. Fishnet stockings and stiletto heels figure prominently in its cover illustration. The first sentence of the first chapter is “I learned the Chinese for ‘drop trou’ on the set of a nighttime television drama called Foreign Babes in Beijing.” But the book isn’t trashy or gossipy; readers who buy it hoping for Beijing Babylon will be disappointed. It’s a serious, at times almost scholarly, meditation on life in modern China, replete with endnotes. As a memoirist, DeWoskin is uncommonly outward looking, and her principal interest is neither fame nor sex but culture shock.

And not only hers. DeWoskin moved to Beijing just as a massive wave of Westernization was washing over the country. The push for political reform had more or less halted at Tiananmen Square, but economic liberalization was rolling forward faster than ever. A 5,000-year-old society was changing minute by minute — a phenomenon, DeWoskin says, that has gone largely unreported in the West.

“There are a lot of books by Westerners about China, and some of them are very good,” she says. “But they tend to be books about China as an oil consumer or as a coal producer or as an economic force — the Waking Dragon kind of thing. They tend not to explore the kind of social dynamics that are a byproduct of modernization. And I’m interested in those social dynamics, particularly in terms of how they affect women.”

Between her book’s roughly chronological chapters, DeWoskin includes four “Biographies of Model Babes,” affectionate sketches of young people she befriended in China, each of whom, she felt, had adapted to the changing culture in a way that was somehow admirable or instructive. “My desire to write the book was in part a desire to record what I saw as a single moment,” says DeWoskin, “a moment in the

lives of people who are much better representatives of Beijing than I am. Because to me, Beijing is never going to be this way again. I look back at the ’90s with a kind of awe at the short window during which the entire culture changed so dramatically. And it’s fascinating to watch people adjust to their own city when they’re in their 20s, especially my women friends, because they were sort of a new breed.”

In 1996, while Foreign Babes was being rebroadcast for the first of many times, an anti-Western manifesto called China Can Say No was climbing the Chinese bestseller lists. Given a choice between the two world views, DeWoskin says, she will side with the soap opera every time — because for all its shortcomings, Foreign Babes was finally about embracing the other, and embracing the future.

DeWoskin’s book could have been subtitled China Can Say Yes and No. She’s uncomfortable with one-sided stories and is constantly making the case for complexity. When Western newspapers criticize the show for its stereotyping, she writes letters to the editor crying hypocrisy: How often, she wants to know, has American television presented a Chinese character who isn’t an inscrutable Oriental, a femme fatale, or a martial-arts hero? When her Chinese friends call her a typical American, DeWoskin insists on her individuality, then admits that individuality is, indeed, a typically American value. Again and again in her book, DeWoskin steps back and says, “On the other hand . . .” If Chinese overacting “seemed odd to me in the context of the restraint I observed there in daily interactions,” she writes, “Chinese may have perceived my desire for understatement as a departure from my real life as a loud foreigner.”

Babes in Arms

A compulsive journal keeper, DeWoskin unwittingly wrote the first draft of her story while she was living it. Later, looking over her notebooks, she knew that memoir was the only way to tell it properly. But she admits to having reservations about the genre. DeWoskin was a poet first, and still regards herself as a poet first. In high school she did two years of independent study in poetry writing, although the results, she says, were mostly “rhyming poems about breaking up with athletes.” It was at Columbia that her mature voice began to emerge, thanks to three influential courses taught by the late Kenneth Koch: a survey of modern poetry and two workshops, one of which was devoted to imitative writing. “He taught me how to

read modern poetry," DeWoskin says, "and he taught me that the way to write poetry is to read and imitate good poets, which has been an absolutely essential lesson. I think it's the best possible way to teach young poets."

DeWoskin returned from Beijing in 1999 to study with the poet Robert Pinsky at Boston University. "I moved to Boston because he's there," she says, "and I wanted to do the poetry program. It was the only place I applied."

That admiration was soon mutual. Pinsky appreciated the creative and critical spark DeWoskin brought to his workshops. "Rachel walked into class in that pagoda-shaped woolen hat with the pompoms dangling at the ends of the untied flap-cords," Pinsky says in an e-mail interview, "and everyone knew that one of the energizers had entered the room." But it was her substance, more than her style, that made a lasting impression. When asked to recommend a young poet for a special "Emerging Writers" issue of the literary journal Ploughshares, Pinsky nominated DeWoskin. "She is a serious person and a serious poet," he says. "In the prose memoir and in her poems, she goes beyond the nonsense."

Graduate school introduced DeWoskin to teaching, which she loves. It also introduced her to Zayd Dohrn, a talented playwright now pursuing a PhD in comparative literature at Columbia. They married last April. After eleven years, DeWoskin is back in New York, living in graduate-student housing and enjoying the obscurity into which pop-culture icons can sometimes retire. The soap opera proved influential but ephemeral — made quaint by the very cultural transformation it had helped to usher in. It hasn't been rebroadcast in a while. Today DeWoskin doesn't even get double takes when she walks through Chinatown.

That anonymity suits her fine, she says, especially now that there's a new babe on the scene. On September 6, two days after she delivered her first draft to Norton, she delivered Dalin Dohrn, a baby girl. It's a rather desultory life for DeWoskin at the moment, but she thrives on the variety — parenting, promoting Foreign Babes, revising a novel she hopes to sell, traveling, and teaching as much as she can. She's currently visiting public high schools as part of a residency with the Teachers and Writers Collaborative, and she plans to pick up some poetry and analytical writing courses at area colleges in the fall. It's not necessary work, strictly speaking; DeWoskin recently sold the foreign rights to her book, which has taken some of the financial pressure off. It's just that she misses the classroom if she's away from it for too long.

“I didn’t love writing at home,” she says. “I know it’s every writer’s dream, but I prefer the stimulation of getting out in the world every day and being engaged in a conversation with kids about books. There’s nothing I like to talk about more than books.” She’s always frustrated, she says, by students who seem less concerned with their reading assignments than with their postgraduation employment prospects. “I tell them, ‘Who cares? Get a liberal arts education. Learn to write papers. And then leave the country. Go someplace where everything is out of context and everybody thinks differently than you think. Go have all your ideas upended.’”

Guide to school abbreviations

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