



Above: The cover of *Someday We Will Fly*, by American author Rachel DeWoskin.

Right: DeWoskin reads from her new novel during a tour of Shanghai's Hongkou Jewish settlement on June 9.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Creating hope in a wartime city

A new novel explores life in Shanghai's Jewish settlement in the 1940s, **Jocelyn Eikenburg** reports.

A photo of three teenage Jewish boys on a table tennis team, wearing matching T-shirts with their school logo, are among some images of children at the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum that American author Rachel DeWoskin saw one summer, inspiring her new historical novel set in the 1940s in Shanghai's Hongkou Jewish settlement.

"There was so much evidence of how devoted these kids' community was to creating a sense of normalcy, giving the children a childhood, even though the context of an occupied city at war was excruciating," says DeWoskin.

"Many of the refugees had no idea where their family members were or whether they were OK. Many had fled Nazi-occupied Europe and landed in Shanghai, destitute and disoriented. Yet they created schools for their kids, ran camps, music lessons and table tennis teams. And shirts. I found those small insignia so moving, and the combination of the photos evoked — of danger and resilience — to be worthy of literary exploration."

DeWoskin imagines this world through her character Lillia, a 15-year-old aerial acrobat from a circus family in Poland who flees in 1939 with her father and 1-year-old sister to Shanghai, where they struggle to survive as she wonders if her mother is still alive.

"Lillia is suddenly on her own for the first time in her life, and in a certain sense responsible for her sister, which is intense and complicated, especially given that she's in an unfamiliar city. But she finds her way, as kids so often do — with grit, grace and practical application of her skills, with warmth and by way of friendship. She figures out how to

keep her hope alive even though she's also full of dread."

The title *Someday We Will Fly*, which echoes Lillia's circus performances, emerged in response to what DeWoskin says is Lillia's "desperate desire to have a view of her own life that offers some possible future escape from the constraints of war. She wants, as I think we all do, to transcend her circumstances."

As part of her research, DeWoskin spent seven summers living in the neighborhood Jewish refugees called home, in the Embankment Building, which once served as a processing center for refugees arriving in Shanghai. This helped the author feel more anchored in what it would have been like in the 1940s.

Shanghai was no exception to how miserable life in occupied cities can be.

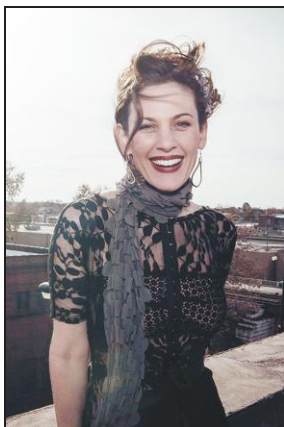
"Disease was rampant, and poverty was everywhere, yet the resilience and courage demonstrated regularly by Chinese citizens and refugees alike were remarkable."

People ran businesses, opened shelters, created lending libraries and schools, made art, music and literature, and crafted toys for children, she says.

"The cultural output from that era is astonishing. Of course the ways people survive are numerous and often surprising, and the expressions of the lives they led took many forms, including poetry, fiction, visual art and music. Hope is often naturally derived from both the creation and the appreciation of such expressions."

DeWoskin reflects that resilience through Lillia, who makes puppets for her circus out of trash and forgotten objects she encounters around Shanghai.

"That's a metaphor for how we



DeWoskin is pictured in Chicago, Illinois, where she lives. PHOTO BY DRIBELBIS AND FAIRWEATHER PHOTOGRAPHY

"I hope people will take from the novel a way to imagine how human beings save each other and ourselves by creating havens, by letting families land safely when they're fleeing violence and terror in their home countries."

Rachel DeWoskin, author of *Someday We Will Fly*

build meaning from whatever we have at our disposal and how we create art. It's a homage to the ways in which the Jewish refugees created art, literature and music. They didn't have that many resources, but they used what they had to make beauty."

To promote *Someday We Will Fly* in China, DeWoskin appeared in Beijing at the Bookworm and in Shanghai at M on the Bund earlier this month.

While this novel, DeWoskin's sixth book, presents her first focus on Shanghai's Jewish community, its setting in China continues her long relationship with the country, which she first visited as a young child with her father, a renowned Sinologist.

"I wouldn't have the same understanding of the world or my own life if I hadn't been traveling to China," DeWoskin says.

The author has dedicated her new novel to Shanghai for being a place for people escaping desperate situations and mortal danger.

DeWoskin describes this as an example of a country getting it right during World War II "when no one else did."

"There are diverging analyses of why the Jewish refugees were permitted to land in Shanghai," she continues, "but the fact remains: no one else let those refugees in."

"The outcome was heroic — survival for thousands of people who would otherwise have been lost. I hope people will take from the novel a way to imagine how human beings save each other and ourselves by creating havens, by letting families land safely when they're fleeing violence and terror in their home countries," she adds.

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China pushing to get more books in global market

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Just as readers in China get to read a large number of foreign books, many Chinese books are available in overseas markets as well. And as part of its program to push Chinese books abroad, the China International Publishing Group recently organized a related seminar on publishing Chinese books.

According to Lu Cairong, deputy director of the CIPG, there were over 20,000 kinds of books about China published in English in 2017, and that number reached 40,000 in 2018.

Besides English, books about China were also published in French, Spanish, Russian, Japanese and German. The books on China cover subjects like modern history, culture, literature, traditional medicine and language.

"This shows the international community's hunger for information about China. And this also pushes us to consider how to meet this requirement and how to make the books better," Lu says.

Professionals from the publishing industry in many countries participated in the seminar.

According to one of them, Kauschal Goyal, general manager of India's GBD Books, people in India are interested in knowing more about China's reform and opening-up, the Belt and Road Initiative and Chinese culture.

"Indians already know something about Confucius' *Analects*, Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* and Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* but they have not heard about other Chinese philosophers like Mencius and Chuang Tzu.

Goyal says Indians know more about Jack Ma of Alibaba but less about Ren Zhengfei of Huawei, Ma Huateng of Tencent and other businesspeople in China.

Argentina's Mil Gotas Press president Guillermo Bravo says that Spanish-speaking countries have a great interest in China, but the bridge for mutual understanding is not wide enough.

Comparing the publishing scene in the two regions, Bravo says while Chinese companies are usually large and employ many people, their counterparts in Latin America are much smaller.

"But despite the difference in size, I still hope companies from both sides can cooperate more so readers will gain," says Bravo.

The delegates also offer suggestions about how Chinese books can be made more attractive to overseas readers.

According to Kim Seung-il, president of South Korea's Gyeng Ji Press, China tends to provide a lot of funding for the publication of academic books overseas as opposed to books about Chinese history, culture, the political situation and the economy that are easy to read.

"This shows the international community's hunger for information about China. And this also pushes us to consider how to meet this requirement and how to make the books better."

Lu Cairong, deputy director of the China International Publishing Group

"But I see that people prefer to read the latter kind of books, so I suggest that China uses half of the funds for academic books and the other half for other kinds of books."

Both Kim and Laura Prinsloo, chairperson of the Indonesian National Book Committee, say the quality of translation plays an important role in introducing China to the outside world.

Prinsloo's says: "We need to enhance our cooperation in translation projects and grant programs between Indonesian and Chinese publishers that are supported by both governments."

Representatives of Chinese publishing houses at the seminar proposed nine titles for publication abroad and sought advice from the foreign delegates.

Egyptian delegate Ahmed Mohamed Elsaid Soliman says that *The Story of the Pioneers Who Created the Chinese Dream* will likely work, as books about the Chinese economy are welcomed in Arab countries, and points to examples such as Zhang Weiwei's *The China Wave: The Rise of A Civilization State*.

"But we want detailed and vivid stories about the Chinese economy instead of dull economic theories, so stories of entrepreneurs are a good choice," he adds.

He also likes the title *My Xinjiang Friends and I*, which is about the author's experience in Northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region.

"Xinjiang is interesting for the Arabs. We hope to learn more about it."

Malaysian delegate Hasri Hasan echoes him, saying: "Malaysians also have interest in this region since both Malaysia and Xinjiang have many Muslims."

Hasan says he likes the title *10134 Kilometers Through China*, a travel diary about China, since "Malaysians like traveling."

He also suggests that readers be offered some video content so that they can appreciate China more.

"These exchanges help us to seek common ground," says Goyal.



Some Chinese titles published in other languages on show at a recent book event in Beijing. WANG RU / CHINA DAILY