

# Nice Jewish Girls and China: A Recipe for Adventure

It is 1986, China has just opened to independent travelers, and Susan Jane Gilman and her college acquaintance, Claire, decide to travel around China on their own after a late-night conversation at a pancake house. Until they touch down in Hong Kong in a standard dare devil landing, Gilman had never left the United States. *Undress Me in the Temple of Heaven* (Grand Central Publishing, 2009) is not a girls gone wild adventure, as one might gather from the title, but a thrilling account of Gilman's journey through China when the country was still unprepared for foreign visitors.

Claire, an upper-crust preppy and Gilman, a nice Jewish girl, decide they'll forgo all comforts and travel on a shoestring. These Ivy League graduates spend their first night in the Chungking Mansions, battling vermin in their room and wondering if they should just check into the stately Peninsula Hotel down the street. Claire convinces Gilman that they've come this far already and would ultimately be sorry if they caved in so quickly. And while Claire seems to be the more responsible and mature of the two, Gilman learns—after they embark on a six-week manic tour through China, battling illness, dodging shoddy hospitals, escaping the police, and ultimately escaping from China in one piece—that her travel companion might not be all there. What starts as a naïve trip to the People's Republic unfolds into a life-threatening race against time to get Claire proper medical care.

Jewish female Ivy League graduates meet China is also the backdrop of Rachel DeWoskin's debut fictional work, *Repeat After Me* (Overlook Press, 2009).

Aysha Silvermintz is a twenty-something New Yorker, trudging away in the late 1980s teaching English to a small class of immigrants near Columbia University. She had recently suffered a breakdown and dropped out of Columbia before graduation. When a reclusive mainland Chinese man named Da Ge appears in her English class, the other students feel uneasy in his presence, but Aysha sees promise in her new student.

Da Ge escaped China just before Tiananmen and lives a lonely, secret life in New York, hiding demons he brought to the US

from Beijing. When he pursues a friendship with Aysha, she becomes intrigued by her quiet student. Despite her patience and blind faith, Aysha can't break Da Ge's solid exterior—even after he asks Aysha to marry him so he can obtain US citizenship. Despite their quickie marriage at City Hall, Da Ge remains mysterious, often leaving Aysha for days.

As Da Ge's story unfolds, Aysha becomes determined to save her husband all while trying to pick up after her own breakdown a year earlier.

Fans of DeWoskin's 2005 memoir, *Foreign Babes in Beijing* (W.W. Norton) won't be disappointed. In *Repeat After Me*, DeWoskin's characters seem alive, and are just as realistic as her depictions of Chinese culture, especially those aspects dealing with intercultural relationships and family customs. The relationship between Aysha and Da Ge's daughter, Julia Too, and her grandfather—Da Ge's father—is especially endearing. *Repeat After Me* ends years later in Beijing and includes tragic elements found in classic Chinese love stories.

Besides the common Ivy League backgrounds of the protagonists in both books, the mothers of both women shine through as characters

instrumental in their daughters' development as independent young women. While Jewish mothers are often portrayed in literature as overbearing, the mothers in these books both offer an open-mindedness and emotional support that foster the independent spirits in their daughters, allowing them to embark on their international adventures. In return, both protagonists are similar in that they enjoy close relationships with their mothers, yet both grow through their China experiences to develop as mature adults.

*Undress Me in the Temple of Heaven* and *Repeat After Me* are both thrilling coming-of-age adventure stories and must reads for anyone who has traveled to China or enjoys thrilling stories about independent American women who aren't afraid to take risks. ♪

