



Curriculum Connections

Alone Like Me

by Rebecca Evans

Anne Schwarz Books, 2022

Fiction, set in China

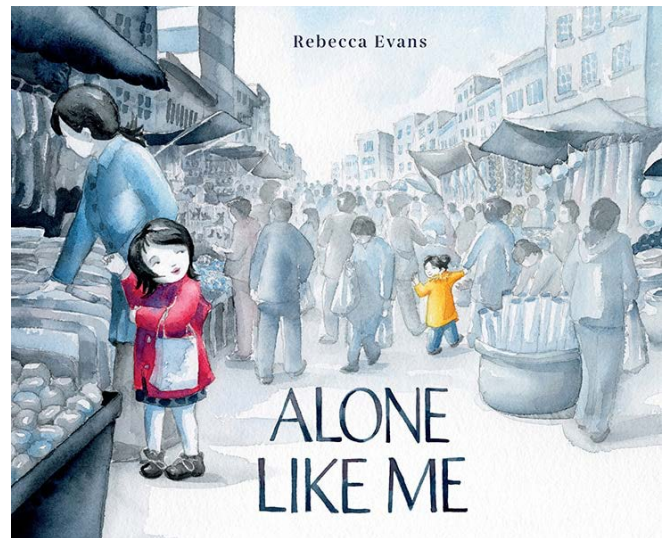
2022 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Children's Literature

Appropriate for Grades: Grades 1-8

Best for Grades: Grades 1-6

Introduction to the Book

Alone Like Me features beautiful watercolor images, and the main characters are illustrated as pops of bright colors. Overtly, the plot is rather simple, yet it carries undertones of much larger themes. For young readers, the book would work well as a mini-unit. For middle grades, the book could serve as an introduction to bigger units that explore themes of rural-urban divides, empathy, socioeconomic limiting factors, children and factories, and China's Hukou system.



Teacher's Note: The one-page author's note at the back offers an excellent introduction to some of the underlying themes in the book and should be read in advance to help guide productive conversations during and after the reading.

Best Matched Curricular Unit Themes

- Watercolor and Contrast (Art)
- Friendship and Empathy (English)
- Rural-Urban Identity (English/Social Studies)
- Factories and Children (English/Social Studies)

Essential Questions

- How does one find one's place when "home" is relocated?
- How can societies support relocated families with limited funds?
- Why is friendship essential?



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Front and Back Matter

The author uses every single page to add information and enrich the reading experience. Where there are often blank pages, she instead enriches the reading experience with the following:

Inside Front Cover

Illustration of rural landscape with rice terraces

Glossary and Pronunciation Guide

Very useful; note that the family is shown boarding a bus on a dirt road.

Title Page

Note that the family is shown exiting the train at a stop in Shanghai.

Author's Note (in the back)

Introduction to the origins of the story idea and research

Inside Back Cover

Illustration of Shanghai cityscape along the Huangpu River

Suggested Activities

Character Matching. Liling (pronounced: Lee-ling) writes a note translated as, "Ni hao, I am Liling." Her note is also written in Chinese characters. Have students draw lines from each Chinese character to the translated word they think it matches.

Answers: 你好 (*ni hao*), 我 (*I*) 是 (*am*) 莉玲 (*Liling*).

Clues for Translation. Examine Liling's second note ("Your yellow coat...friend Liling."). Since it is longer, it is much harder to figure out which words match their translated equivalents. As a class, try to use different context clues (repetition, position in the note, etc.) to find the Chinese character for "yellow." (*Answer:* 黄)

Writing Chinese. Liling writes, "我是 莉玲," and then Qiqi (pronounced: Chee-chee) writes, "我是 琪琪." So the characters for "I am" are "我是." Students can try writing, "我是 [their names]."



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Drawing Landscapes. Liling and Qiqi both draw the landscapes near their homes. Have students try drawing the land around their homes, even if they live in a city.

Red Ginger Flowers and Notes in a Can. Have students pair up. As a class, have the pairs of students find pictures of red ginger flowers and then discuss the following: Do you agree that Liling looks like a Red Ginger Flower? If your best friend were a flower, what kind of flower would he be? Try drawing the flower you choose and then writing your friend's name under it.

As a class, set up cans with strings attached (the way Liling and Qiqi do it in the book), and send notes to one another using the cans.

Zodiac Animals. Qiqi draws a yellow and orange tiger to accompany her, and Liling draws a red and pink dragon for herself. It is possible that these animals represent the zodiac signs associated with each girl's birth year. Have students find their own zodiac animals and then draw them using their favorite color.

Research. The author's note at the back of the book provides six websites, but many of the links are no longer working. Children could explore the websites listed below and share what they learn in a jigsaw activity. (Note: a jigsaw activity is one in which students gather information on different topics, sometimes in small groups, and then share what they have learned to the entire class in order to piece together the bigger picture)

- For older students, the film *Last Train Home* by director Lixin Fan (2011) would be an excellent addition to the unit after this research (<https://zeitgeistfilms.com/film/lasttrainhome>).
- Child Friendly Factory Spaces (<https://studio-anrikevisser.com/child-friendly-factory-spaces-in-china/>)
- PBS Newshour: Chinese Children Left Behind (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/millions-of-chinese-children-fend-for-themselves-when-parents-must-follow-work-far-away>)



THE NATIONAL CONSORTIUM FOR TEACHING ABOUT ASIA

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- CNN World: China Raises Left-Behind Children (<https://www.cnn.com/2014/02/04/world/asia/china-children-left-behind/index.html>)
- China Briefing: Shanghai Hukou (<https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-hukou-system-shanghai-benefits-eligibility-application-process>)

Suggested Discussion Questions/Writing Prompts

- **BEFORE reading.** The book is titled *Alone Like Me*. Why do you think the author gave it this title?
- Liling says, "My parents can't afford to pay for school here in the crowded city." Why do you think school would be too expensive for her?
- When Liling goes to work with her Mama and Baba, how do her parents look at her differently from how the other workers react to her?
- Did you see anything at the market that Liling visits that is different from the markets you visit?
- After first seeing the smiling girl wearing yellow, Liling looks for her everywhere she goes. Why do you think Liling tries so hard to find her again?
- There is a two-page illustration where Liling looks out over the city from her balcony. Describe what you see. How does the view make you feel? Why?
- Why do you think Liling wears red and Qiqi wears yellow? (Note: red and yellow or gold are traditionally paired as auspicious colors in Chinese culture.)
- Why do the kids at the park behave unkindly in both words and actions toward Liling?
- Is Liling's dragon illustrated as a scary dragon? How is the dragon similar or different from dragons you have seen in other stories?
- **AFTER reading.** The book is titled *Alone Like Me*. Why do you think the author gave it this title?

Author: Josh Foster, educator and learner, Instructor of Film Studies and English Literature, A. Mario Loiederman Middle School for the Creative and Performing Arts, Maryland 2023

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