



Anne Schwartz Books, 2022

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

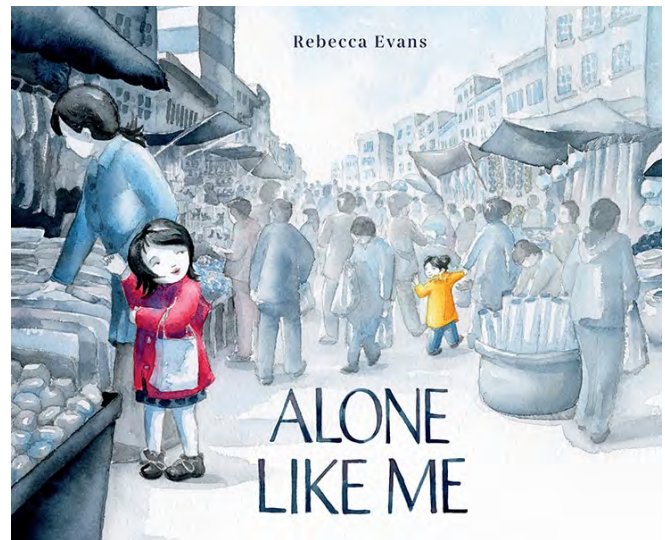
Culture Notes

Alone Like Me

by Rebecca Evans

Fiction, set in China

Alone Like Me by Rebecca Evans depicts the loneliness of a Chinese girl who moves to Shanghai with her migrant worker parents. The narrative is deeply rooted in China's national conditions: the rural-urban divide, the household registration (*hukou*) policy (pronounced Hoo-Kouh), the one-child policy, and migrant worker culture. The book's core cultural backdrop is China's rapid urbanization and the struggles of rural families seeking a better life in large cities.



The protagonist's sense of alienation stems not from linguistic barriers but from the invisible boundaries imposed by China's hukou policy—a household registration system that divides residents into rural and urban categories and determines access to education, healthcare, housing, and social welfare. Originating in the 1950s, the policy was designed to control population flow. As China urbanized rapidly in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the policy created a "floating population" of migrant workers who live and work in cities without urban hukou, leaving their children marginalized.

China's one-child policy, implemented from 1979 to 2015, limited most Chinese families to one child. For rural families, the policy drove parents to seek higher-paying jobs in cities while leaving children with relatives in the countryside (as "left-behind children") or bringing them to cities where they had no legal status and could not attend school. The protagonist's loneliness is amplified by being an only child—without siblings to rely on, she must navigate the unfamiliar urban environment alone.

I was also born in the Chinese countryside. However, unlike the girl in the book, I have two younger brothers who were born outside the policy. This was quite common in rural China, especially when the first-born child was not a boy. According to traditional

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beliefs, only a son carries the family name and lineage, while daughters marry into other families.



The book depicts Chinese zodiac culture effectively by connecting the girls with the dragon and tiger. Although Evans does not explicitly link the animals to the girls' zodiac signs, readers may naturally make that association, as these are two powerful zodiac symbols in Chinese belief. When the girls write to each other—"We can be fierce tigers and CHOMP their words," "We can be mighty dragons roaring over the clouds"—they symbolically resist the bullying of city children. For reference, the twelve Chinese zodiac animals, in the order in which they appear, are rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. Each animal is believed to possess both positive and negative traits.

At the heart of the narrative is the experience of rural migrant workers in China, a demographic that has fueled the country's economic growth yet often faces social exclusion. Migrant workers typically take low-wage, labor-intensive jobs in cities such as Shanghai, living in cramped housing on the urban fringe. Their children, known as "migrant children," often cannot attend public schools because of hukou restrictions. Instead, they usually attend informal migrant schools with limited resources, which further isolates them from urban peers. In the book, the girls do not attend school but follow their parents to the factory every day. This is probably uncommon in China, especially nowadays. If parents cannot provide education in the city, they often leave children with grandparents in rural areas, contributing to the "left-behind children" phenomenon. Alternatively, they try to enroll them in charity schools established by

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volunteers. In Beijing, there was once a well-known charity school called Tongxin Shiyan Xuexiao (同心实验学校), built by hundreds of volunteers and serving children whose parents worked as cleaners, security guards, construction workers, or vendors. However, the school was later declared illegal and ordered to close. In September 2020, it was shut down and transformed into a children's activity center.



The book's depiction of discrimination and bullying by city children feels realistic. Although I was not a migrant child, when I left my village to attend high school in the city, I felt the gap between myself and my city-born classmates. I was not familiar with the popular singers, athletes, or video games they discussed, and I often felt alone. It is meaningful that the girls in the story find each other, share similar experiences, exchange notes, and play together. However, their living conditions appear better than those of most migrant workers I have known. Migrant workers commonly live in shantytowns—old residential buildings, private houses in older districts, "urban villages," or suburban areas. Many families in Beijing lived in dark, damp rooms of less than ten square meters.

The tall, orderly apartment buildings shown in the book do exist—for example, there are dormitories in Shanghai designed for migrant workers. These typically house four to eight people per room, provide shared bathrooms, prohibit cooking, and include service facilities such as a canteen and management office. I have not visited a Shanghai dormitory, but as a journalist and later a literature teacher at a vocational school



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providing free education for migrant workers' children in Beijing, I visited several crowded migrant living areas. Although the protagonist's family appears to live better than many migrant workers, and they remain together as a family, they still cannot be happy in an unfair society.

In summary, the book captures a pivotal moment in China's urbanization, reflecting the real-life struggles of millions of migrant children grappling with identity, belonging, and loneliness in a rapidly changing society. Its cultural significance lies in humanizing this marginalized group and revealing the hidden costs of China's development, as well as the universal desire for connection amid displacement. When a narrative engages deeply with historical and social authenticity, it is challenging for creators without lived experience to depict it fully and accurately.

Author: Huan Li, Chinese children's literature specialist, writer and teacher of children's literature

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Chinese resources

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