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"I Know . . . I Live Here": *Laowai* Writing in "the people's republic of"

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Abstract: This essay examines *laowai* writing in Mainland China as an area of literary production. *Laowai* is the usual designation and frequent self-designation of China-resident Western foreigners and constitutes an identifiable migrant community in urban China. These *laowai* texts are written by and intended for a particular ethnically identifiable audience and constitute a body of work that is linguistically, culturally, and thematically distinct from other Anglophone writing on China. These works reflect the dialogic production of a new ethnic or pseudo-ethnic subject developing out of the gap between China-resident Western foreigners and the Chinese society to which they cannot be assimilated. Since Chinese society affords little room for hybrid identities among Western resident groups, the result is insider-outsider writing, which is deeply engaged with the fraught race and gender relations between Chinese and Western subjects in the cities of China. This group, socioeconomically privileged but culturally marginal, challenges both Chinese and foreign narratives about China.

Keywords: English-language writing on China, *laowai*, expatriate writing, Shanghai literature, race in China

The principal cities of Mainland China host sizable foreign communities. Many of these communities are composed of Central, South, or Southeast Asian, Arab, African, Russophone, or Korean people (Pieke 42). However, white Westerners remain the foreigners *par excellence* of the contemporary Chinese imagination, even though they do not pre-

dominate numerically.[1] The white Westerner's status as the "significant Other" (to use theatre scholar Claire Conceison's term for Americans and more broadly *laowai* in the Chinese imagination) is doubtless bound up with the dynamics of global power politics and the history of conflict, not to mention the constant flow of ideas, products, and people between the West and China, that generate a relationship which remains a constant in the development of modern and contemporary Chinese society, politics, and culture.[2]

Nevertheless, scholarship, whether Chinese- or Western-language, has largely failed to identify the formation of Euro-American ethnic communities and Mainland China as a legitimate area for migration and diaspora studies as well as a relevant topic for those wishing to define "Chineseness" or the ethnic conceptions of Mainland Chinese society. Despite high visibility of the community, the uncritical categorisation of China-resident Euro-Americans as "expatriates" rather than migrants means that academic scholarship seldom "approaches foreigners in contemporary China as an immigration issue that is leading to the formation of ethnic communities, comparable in this regard to most if not all of the countries of the developed world," creating a "huge blind spot" (Pieke 42).

I. Who Are the *Laowai?*

Most generic terms for "foreigner" in Mandarin imply white Westerner. The most common colloquial term for foreigner, *laowai*, literally "old outside[r]," is seldom applied to foreign Asians, such as Koreans and Japanese, or to ethnically Asian citizens of the West or Southeast Asia (Farrer, "Foreigner Street" 17; Gries 10, 153n37).[3] The fact that the term *laowai* is essentially a racial designation is also evident in its application to majority white populations in Western countries by Mandarin-speaking travellers and immigrants (Bao; Farrer, "Foreigner Street" 17; Moskowitz 338).[4]

In 2010 the Population Census of the People's Republic of China counted resident foreigners for the first time and published that data (along with data on Hong Kong, Macanese, and Taiwanese residents of the Mainland) in an appendix. Although these numbers are now

no longer quite new, do not reflect more transient populations (i.e., those without residence permits), and certainly include many ethnic Chinese citizens of foreign countries, they still give some idea of the scope of this population (Pieke 44–46). Of the countries with more than ten thousand citizens resident in Mainland China, the Western countries on the list are the United States (second; 71,493 residents), Canada (sixth; 19,990), France (seventh; 15,087), Germany (eighth; 14,446), Australia (ninth; 13,286), and the United Kingdom (tenth; 12,613).[5] Since the boundaries of *laowai* are shifting and the census data are not broken down by ethnicity, we must be content with a working estimate of a total *laowai* population in the environs of 100,000 and climbing. Since the total number of foreigners registered in the census was nearly 600,000, most of whom hail from neighbouring East and Southeast Asian countries,[6] *laowai* foreigners may comprise only fifteen percent of the total population of foreign citizens residing in China. As one might expect, the census also shows that the foreign population is concentrated in Shanghai, followed by Beijing and the province of Guangdong (Canton). Over 100,000 foreigners in the census had lived in China for over five years, and another 265,000 had lived there for between one and five years (National Bureau of Statistics of People's Republic of China).

The census demonstrates that while individuals are often transitory, the resident communities are—barring drastic, unforeseeable events—permanent and constitute today an element of the ordinary urban landscape for the residents of the Chinese megalopolis. Recently, a growing body of work on resident Western communities in the Mainland from social science perspectives has emerged.[7] *Laowai* celebrities such as Dashan (Mark Rowswell) have ornamented the media landscape for decades, and periodic videos or incidents highlighting *laowai* ensure a constant focus on the community in Chinese-language media.[8] But the *laowai* texts—an ethnic literature—that pertain to that community have so far passed with little or no scholarly notice.

One test of ethnicity concerns "whether a group is perceived by its members to be cohesive and different," a sentiment which must be reinforced by the group being "categorized as distinctive and cohesive by

others" (Jenkins 198). By these standards, *laowai* exhibit the features of an ethnic group.[9] Perhaps because English lacks an exact equivalent, *laowai* is used fairly frequently (and often with some irony) as the self-designation of such foreigners. A minority of Westerners find the term offensive; some Mainlanders claim that it is a term of endearment or respect. In ordinary use, it is not heavily charged with either affection or distaste (Conceison 239n20; Farrer, "A Foreign Adventurer's Paradise" 71; Farrer, "Foreigner Street" 17). Chinese society will generally identify most paler-skinned people, regardless of specific national origin, as *laowai*, and this social category in informal situations generally trumps race or national origin. Consequently, one hears of *laowai* bars or supermarkets and *laowai* neighbourhoods or compounds, and these essentially amount to ethnic enclaves. Long-term *laowai* will all have had experiences of being identified by children pointing fingers or of being approached for linguistic, romantic, amicable, or petty criminal purposes based on their peculiar and visible status in society. As a group, *laowai* are economically diverse but wealthy and privileged by the standards of Mainland society, though only a minority belong to a real economic elite. In terms of numbers, the high-flying executive or diplomatic types are heavily outnumbered by students, language teachers, and various "local" employees (i.e., without expat packages). Often, their prestige outweighs their means.

II. *Laowai* Writing: An Ethnic Literature?

This essay is concerned with contemporary China-resident English-language fiction and poetry by *laowai* authors, substantially directed at local audiences and concerned with *laowai* positionality. It goes without saying that there has been a great deal of Western-language writing on China, including works by now-canonical authors on brief visits, such as W. Somerset Maugham, W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, and Vicki Baum. Encounters with China in the late Qing and Republican eras have also resulted in works by a number of major writers in Western languages, most importantly French, who were resident there for considerable periods—to name only a few, Paul Claudel, Saint-John Perse,

André Malraux, Pierre Loti, and Victor Segalen—and indeed some, such as Chongqing-born Lucien Bodard or Pearl S. Buck, largely made their literary reputations writing about China. There is thus a long history of Western literary fiction and poetry that comes out of the direct personal experience of China. There is, however, little obvious continuity between those China-based English-language literatures and our contemporaries. In the first thirty years of the People's Republic, communities of Westerners in China were extremely small and their activities narrowly circumscribed. Little Western-language literary writing on China was produced in Mainland China, and when it was, it addressed itself to an overseas readership.

Laowai (which, as a term, only reached the Mainland from Taiwan in the 1980s [Yu 170]) is now most easily understood as a constructed social category of individuals of diverse origins existing in Chinese cities, produced by the opportunities and attractions of China's present "Reform and Opening Up" period (broadly defined as beginning in 1978 and ongoing today). *Laowai* written expression is probably most prominent in current affairs and social sciences (such as *Danwei,* a *laowai* China-watching start-up acquired in 2013 by *The Financial Times*) or Chinese-English literary translation (e.g., the members of the web-based forum *Paper Republic*). The most prominent literary creative writing in English is by *laowai* authors and journalists who write non-fiction about China for readers abroad—from the historical thriller *Midnight in Peking* by Paul French to Rachel DeWoskin's memoir *Foreign Babes in Beijing*. However, there are also associations of *laowai* writers who are locally oriented in terms of themes, activity, and audience.

The rise of Mandarin-language competency among *laowai*, their residential integration, their socioeconomic diversity, and the relative youth of the population have produced a distinct contemporary subject. This writing is directed at a local readership, presumes local cultural and linguistic knowledge, and concerns largely the positionality of *laowai* and consequently various aspects of foreign-Chinese personal interaction. This essay argues that these writings constitute a coherent body of work, the local cultural production of a distinct ethnic or

pseudo-ethnic subject which is in the process of forming principally on account of the attractiveness of China as a labour market, place of study, or environment for entrepreneurship and which occupies an unsettled position in social, psychological, and residential terms.

Though *laowai* form a prestigious socioeconomic group, they, overwhelmingly, have no permanent status in China and thus little formal integration (or rights and obligations) in Chinese society; their presence is subject to Chinese policy on aliens. Since China is a "state with no history of mass immigration," its "willingness and capacity to integrate significant numbers of skilled migrants remain . . . questionable" (Farrer, "China Wants You" 397–98). This results in an uneven reception, varying contextually from suspicion to effusive welcome. Therefore, the *laowai* are situated in a peripheral space and one in which (unlike in much of Western immigrant literatures) there is no prospect of a permanent status or mixed identity, since the default Chinese position on foreigners is essentialist and "political, social and cultural barriers to recognition as a fully 'Chinese' citizen are very high for international migrants without Chinese ethnicity" (Farrer, "Foreigner Street" 23). This literary output thus reflects the dialogic production of a new subject, defined by racial otherness and developing out of the gap between the Western individual (and body) and the Chinese society to which it is not invited to assimilate. This position produces a distinct perspective from the broader corpus of Anglophone literary discourse requiring narratives on China to be explanatory, testimonial, and exotic. The texts, while characterised by irony and sexual themes, do not write China and Chinese society as elsewhere and essentially other but as complex and differentiated, comprehensible, interacting, curious, critical, confident, conflicted, and exclusive.

Earlier generations of Anglophone writers on China often wrote from a position of colonial or neocolonial power or, if rejecting such a stance, negotiated a position as "friends of China" or anti-imperialists. Observers of China at a distance writing for Euro-American audiences may still treat the nation with hauteur, but the contemporary *laowai* author is not in a position of substantial power vis-à-vis Chinese society. Despite *laowai* prestige and (sometimes) money, Chinese stereotypes of

the *laowai* are often negative; in an era of economic heft and territorial spats, Chinese nationalism is assertive, expansive, and racially categorical, and limits on full participation in Chinese society are onerous. With the rise of China's power, importance, and nationalist sentiment, the subalternity of the Chinese urban, educated, middle- or upper-class subject, especially when at home, is an antiquated premise, and the position of the *laowai* is peripheral, sometimes objectified, and usually sharply othered. Since the daily experience of the *laowai* is marked by powerful assumptions made about their identity by the overwhelming Chinese majority, the idea that *laowai* outside of remote elite structures (diplomacy, international trade, and finance) have the power to impose anything on Chinese society is absurd in an era in which China is more likely an agent than a victim of neocolonial power. And though one could also note *laowai* complicity in the structure of the global capitalist economy, which creates their presence in China, involvement in that system is not heavily marked in racial terms, since the Chinese state is perhaps its most enthusiastic proponent. It is therefore unsurprising that *laowai* attitudes towards China run the gamut from chauvinistic rodomontade to yearning for belonging.

Since I am concerned here with Mainland China-based and -published Anglophone literature by non-Chinese residents, I am not taking into account the long history of foreigners writing fiction and travel literature in other Europeans languages; likewise, I do not consider the long-standing English-language publishing houses of Hong Kong, since those writings and endeavours derive from a separate community than that of the Mainland. While acknowledging the kinship of *laowai* writing with such other categories, as well as with writing in English by immigrant Mainland writers, this essay is about literary writing of the *laowai* for local audiences who read English, the majority of whom are *laowai*. Publications that are forums primarily for *laowai* texts include Beijing's *the Anthill* (a collection of China-related texts which describes itself as a "writer's colony"), Shanghai-based H.A.L. Publishing, and associated projects. *Laowai* fiction and poetry can also be found in journals such as Chengdu-based *MaLa Literary Journal* and Hong Kong-based *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal.*

III. The *Laowai* Literary Scene: The Example of H.A.L. Publishing

I will begin by examining one organisation of *laowai* writing: Shanghai-based H.A.L. Publishing. Founded in 2009 by Swede Björn Wahlström and Canadian Nathan Fischbacher, H.A.L.'s most visible hub is its website (www.haliterature.com), where the editors post stories, announce contests or news, and advertise events as well as produce print and web publications. The group has published two anthologies, branded as HALiterature, in 2011 (*Party Like It's 1984*) and 2012 (*Middle Kingdom Underground*), sponsored several poetry slams known as SLAMHAI, cooperated with art and drama groups as well as with several Shanghai magazines, and run themed competitions (such as Big in China, Shanghai Erotic Fiction, and Shanghai BARd Fight). In 2012, the group launched an online literary journal called *Far Enough East*.

The management, as described on the website, comprises Wahlström, the Canadian W. M. Butler, Shanghai-based American Miller Wey, and Oregon-based Dena Rash Guzman (the managing director for North America). In 2011 Guzman founded her own online journal, *Unshod Quills*, which published many H.A.L. writers until its discontinuation in August 2013, though it was not exclusively China-focused. A broad swath of nationalities is represented in H.A.L.-related publications and events, including British, Irish, Spanish, German, Serbian, Swedish, Canadian, and Chinese. H.A.L.'s most regular event is "Groupthink," described on the website as a "fortnightly meeting of locals, expats, despots, sexpots, hipsters, and wannabe literati" ("HAL-news"), in practice consisting of brainstorming and writing exchanges, with some stories eventually being polished and put up on the website. H.A.L.'s events have garnered coverage from most of the local English-language media, and its publications receive local Anglophone reviews.

In the "About Us" section of its webpage, H.A.L. furnishes a definition of its purpose as specialising

> in publishing exceptional local and expat authors from China, for whom this country forms the natural backdrop of an at-times mundane, at-times wholly extraordinary existence. Amidst the tumult of economic explosion, identity crises, na-

> tional glory, and East-meets-West clichés are individuals living their lives like anyone else. We are locals, we are expats, we are yellow, black, and white. And we are writing. ("About")

This mission statement initially distinguishes local from expat, but both are credited with being "from China" and having China as a "natural backdrop." Nevertheless, in order for *laowai* existence to be "extraordinary" it must presumably be contrasted with "home," which indeed appears in several of H.A.L.'s stories as a grey, comfortable prologue from which protagonists emerge and to which they must return. H.A.L.'s claim is at once that the experience of the *laowai* is as humdrum as anyone else's life and that they occupy a privileged vantage point in China's dynamic and dramatic rise. The phrase "[w]e are locals, we are expats" is deliberately ambiguous, allowing simultaneously for H.A.L. to be imagined as consisting of both expats and locals while suggesting that there are perhaps expats who *are* locals. Given that the definition of the *laowai* is founded on the localisation of the Western foreigner in China, this would seem to be a reasonable summation of the project.

Today's young Westerners, arriving from multiculturalist liberal democracies, are familiar with and will have often internalised a conception of citizenship that is not ethnically based. Thus many will presume that residence and cultural adaptation confer hybrid identities and eventually nationality. Most of them will have met Han Chinese people, born in Asia, who, having resided in the industrialised West for an extended period of time, will be offered and in most cases encouraged to adopt new or hybrid identities in the West. Every country of Western Europe, North America, and Australasia has an "immigrant literature" on which the respective national cultural establishments pride themselves.

The reverse is not true: most Mainland Chinese do not regard national identity as something that can be acquired, discarded, or separated from ethnicity. Even a *laowai* born in China is only a highly unusual kind of *laowai*, a *Zhongguo tong* (literally: "[someone who can] pass through China").[10] More than a few protagonists in *laowai* writing are thus struggling with the inflexibility of *laowai* identity. These contradictory elements reflect the emergence of the subject who has neither

the colonial luxury of holding China to be remote, inscrutable, and incomprehensible nor the option of identification or assimilation.

IV. The *Laowai* Subject: Interaction on the Privileged Periphery of China

Laowai writing is too nationally diverse to be "American" or "British," too thematically coherent to have a merely biographic definition, and too China-focused to be simply "international." The imagined reader of the H.A.L. website and anthologies is China-based, highly proficient in English, and possesses considerable familiarity with Chinese language, geography, society, and culture. The main subject of *laowai* literature is the interaction between Chinese and *laowai* characters. In writing about this interaction, *laowai* literature frequently deals with the (unearned) prestige of *laowai* in Chinese society, stemming from the vision of white foreigners that prevails in Chinese society, and which some have seen, especially in Shanghai, as leading to a "growing narcissism" in the *laowai* population (Conceison 201). The *laowai* narrators and protagonists that emerge are privileged, ironic, and often selfish and opportunistic but probably more deeply and honestly engaged with the Chinese city and the Han Chinese subject than Western characters in other forms of Anglophone writing.

An obvious primary characteristic of *laowai* writing is the use of words from Chinese that form a part of daily *laowai* life in China. Jacob Dreyer's story in *Party Like It's 1984*, for instance, is furnished only with a Chinese title, "红口梦,"[11] (which translates as "Dream of the Red Mouths"; Pinyin: *Hongkou meng*), punning on the eighteenth-century classic *Honglou meng,* "Dream of the Red Chambers." Instead of Cao Xueqin's charmed garden of delights and genteel decline, however, Dreyer gives us "industrial clichés" in a country where "even the possibility of rebellion was impossible" (31). The narrator meanders through a grimy labyrinth of unachieved, joyless sexual possibilities, from the "transsexual [who] asked me coyly, *wanr ma*? [wanna play?]" (33)[12] to the gay bar where patrons "try to catch a glimpse of my *xiaodidi* [dick; literally "little brother"] in the bathroom" (36). The narrator ends up with a woman whose "embrace only gave me the chills" (38). It is tell-

ing that the straight *laowai* protagonist concerned with his liminal position in the PRC is wandering the city paying special attention to, and feeling a certain fraternity with, Chinese people whose sexual identities remain marginal in the PRC. The shared experience of marginality is a reminder that queer approaches can also be fruitful to examining the *laowai* position.

Some take the linguistic interventions further. S. C. [Susie] Gordon's "Editor in Brief" features a painfully funny satire of a *laowai* good Samaritan "giving big eyes of empathy to [a beggar's] monkey" (154) and enlisting his Chinese-speaking compatriot in trying to purchase the monkey: "Dwooar shar chyenn, needer ho-tser?" (153). This translates, in standard Chinese Pinyin, to *duo shao qian, ni de houzi?* and in English to "How much, your monkey?" The phonetic mimicking of bad *laowai* Chinese is possible in an English text though not in Chinese (since written Chinese does not easily notate accent), yet it is only amusing for a reader who speaks Chinese reasonably well. The satire of his phonetic insufficiency is compounded by the ridicule of their motives: they want to release the monkey to "an animal sanctuary" (154). The drunken protagonist, who has encountered this group in the midst of a dejected Shanghai pub crawl, falls out with them when he brings up the "near impossibility of locating any animal welfare establishment in this city, especially one that would accept a mangy creature like that" (155). The story mocks sanctimonious *laowai* reaction to Chinese social conditions, but the protagonist is no more sympathetic. At the beginning of Gordon's story, he is moaning about the slippage of his prestige: "My name is Tom Winston, for all the good it does me. I remember a time when a name like mine used to mean something in Shanghai. Being Tom Winston opened doors" (149). In the end, the *laowai* protagonist leaves Shanghai in pathetic despondency; the reader is being invited not to lament the decline of *laowai* prestige but to ridicule those who cling to it. Gordon also parodies *laowai* behaviour in bars: "Will gives the signature cry of the laowai: *fuwuyuan!* [server!]" (162). Like several other *laowai* women writers, the focus of Gordon's parodic impulses is the arrogance of male *laowai* and their declining sexual and economic status (cf. Farrer, *Opening Up* 322–24).

The young Chinese woman who narrates Katrina Hamlin's "The Beautiful Country" (a direct translation of the Chinese name for the United States, *Meiguo*) is doing her best to retain her illusions about the *laowai* men, though she is a little nonplussed that the first American she has met "explained that actually really life in the Beautiful Country is not always perfect and rich although people have very white teeth," which, besides being true, is also nicely observed, linguistically believably off-kilter, and poignant. This gentle piece sways between the slightly disillusioned woman and a satire of the American man who "said whisky and green tea made him sick. Then it did make him sick," and who has arrived in "the Middle Kingdom" not "for the development of our country" but "because there was nothing for him in the Beautiful Country" (Hamlin, "Beautiful"). Not only do American men fail to live up to the dreamboat stereotype the narrator's imagination has generated, but their presence is neither charitable nor admirably capitalistic; dismayingly, they are coming to China as an escape and even a refuge from diminished economic prospects in the US. Hamlin's is one of several *laowai* narratives written in the voice of a Chinese woman trying to make sense of the *laowai* man. The story's basic conceit relies on the reader realising that the Chinese word for the US translates as "beautiful country." By narrating, in first person, the slight disillusionment of a Chinese woman encountering *laowai* men for the first time, Hamlin shows the disjuncture between the allegedly beautiful West (and the allegedly beautiful men of the West) and the reality of Western culture, economics, and masculinity.

Laowai writing is often critical of the *laowai* community, parodying oriental fantasy and presenting the behaviour of the *laowai* as opportunistic and amoral. In this, it is playing a traditional literary role of provocation and self-exploration. In its obsession with race and culture as played out in terms of relations and encounters set against the backdrop of China's rapid economic development, *laowai* writing shares many of the thematic concerns of postcolonial writing, even if its narratives approach the themes from a standpoint of knowing privilege. Writing from a position of (often guilty) racial prestige, *laowai* writing can acknowledge injustice and inequality, but it does not occupy (or attempt to occupy) a moral high ground as it engages with Chinese people,

place, and culture. That engagement, like the social encounters between *laowai* and Chinese, is rarely entirely equitable, but it also tends to avoid the generalising sweep or the oriental imagery of Anglophone writing on China because the writers' linguistic and social distance from the Chinese environment is diminished. The resulting texts show a mixture of knowing irony, ridicule, sexual desire, and arrogance along with shifts between grand literary ambition and tongue-in-cheek self-deprecation.

The limits of appropriate expression and representation of China necessarily become an editorial issue, and cultural and racial politics are clearly never far from the minds of the writers and editors. There are limits on the depictions of China that H.A.L. is willing to accept: Wahlström notes that the editors do receive "China-bashing stories, but we have a strict policy about that. I'm not out to put China down. Even if a story is about some horrible stuff that happens here, that doesn't mean I don't like China. If so, what the hell am I doing here? I chose to live here" (Seghin). H.A.L. thus theoretically requires a minimum identification with, and respect for, Chinese society and an acknowledgement that while appropriating a "local" identity, the *laowai* are residents by choice and for that reason bound to be more respectful.

One of the most caustic accounts of *laowai*-Chinese relations comes from Mainlander Ginger wRong Chen, who has participated in H.A.L.'s anthologies and events.[13] In "American in Shanghai" the Chinese woman Spring, herself a migrant from another city, remarks to the cultured, intelligent American Benjamin Martin that he is "so American," which she clearly intends as praise. Unfortunately, as a cosmopolitan, intelligent American, Benjamin is alarmed. "[T]he phrase, 'You are so American' became the worst insult he could get," since to him it connotes rudeness and stupidity. A garbled and humorous dialogue ensues:

> "You are! You are American, aren't you?". Spring was innocently confused.
>
> "I am. But when people say, 'You are so American,' they mean something else."
>
> "What something else?", she asked, genuinely unsure, then added to clear things up, "I love Americans, they are macho

> and tough, I love that in a man," and leaned in to him, tipsily and flirtatiously.

Martin fails to make the content of his objection clear to her, and the expected sexual encounter (on the pretext of a transparent late-night invitation to "watch a DVD") degenerates into a requirement that she "write down the pros and cons of Americans point by point. I want you to prove to me I am the best, the most interesting, the most macho of them all." He is pacified when she declares that he is different from the Americans she has known before (although "weird"). But this is only a moral victory, for by the time he is satisfied with her conception of him, Spring has left the apartment, and he has lost the assignation on his point of pride. Martin wants the sexual encounter to proceed on the basis of suave Western cosmopolitanism, not a perception of American rustic machismo, which he despises. For Spring, these are trivial, mood-killing distinctions of little interest. In this story, as elsewhere in her writing, Chen challenges the directions in which desire flows between *laowai* and Chinese characters and subverts (and mocks) both gender and national stereotypes. It is little wonder that her bio in *Unshod Quills* describes her as a "female incorrect Chinese writer," as she puns on her real name "Chen Rong" by signing herself as "Ginger wRong Chen." Spring's presumption (and that of the protagonist in "The Beautiful Country") is that *laowai* men are sexually available and desirable, a reading one finds mirrored to a substantial degree in sociological findings on the stereotyping of *laowai* men by Chinese women (Stanley). The bemused female authors, Chen and Hamlin, have enough distance from their characters to find *laowai* men a little obtuse and to find in their cultural insecurity, and their resistance to objectification, a source of amusement—one perhaps generated by the irony that sexual success results in objectification.

"Big Plastic Bags" by Dena Rash Guzman, an American (sometime) *laowai*, features a male *laowai* narrator who had "only a mild chick habit" (58) back in Minnesota but, after a move, "made Shanghai mine" (59). The Chinese city is, as elsewhere, portrayed as a sexual playground for male *laowai*, one where one need not "worry about white male privi-

lege. We come here to escape the need to worry about that. This city is about taking what you want. . . . I'm a conqueror, blue-eyed and strong. I came here to succeed, but it was too easy" (59). Eros is again supplanted by the cynicism of satiety: "Nights, I do what men in Shanghai and all other major Asian cities do: I get laid. I get laid a lot" (60). The poorer Chinese women "like my suits and my car and driver. I give them what I can, but you can't give much, or they'll never go away" (60). The narrator, while putting the reader through a list of his kinky sexual conquests, justifies his behaviour as altruistic and even echoes the political rhetoric of Communist liberation: "[T]he Chinese women are like sexual revolutionaries and I am an experienced paramilitary advisor helping to establish a new order" (64). Guzman, yet another *laowai* woman whose writing mocks male *laowai* entitlement, highlights the incredible vanity of the protagonist by having him liken his own reckless quest for gratification to the heroic national narrative. Guzman's technique for exploding male *laowai* prestige is to take a caricature of the male *laowai* self-image to its absurd conclusion.

Another story in which the sexual/racial nexus operates in highly unexpected ways is Matthew Durie's "The Baijiu Demon." This story revolves around a *laowai* fighting a losing battle against a demon summoned by and resident in the *baijiu* prescribed by a TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) doctor. By the time the story is over, the doctor is dead and the demon has assimilated the doctor's "little brother" (119; i.e., "penis"; cf. Dreyer, above). The *laowai* protagonist is himself submitted to the domination and apparent assimilation (via rape) into the *baijiu* demon. Needless to say, it is one of the stories a *laowai* reviewer must have had in mind when he writes that the collection is "[n]ot for the faint of heart" (Byrne). One might take the easy route and read the story as an exotic *laowai* take on China's timeless and inscrutable mysteries. On the other hand, the *laowai* protagonist ends up emasculated and assimilated by a Chinese demon, which one might interpret as male *laowai* anxiety over their situation in an increasingly confident, nationalistic China.

Some *laowai* stories are more concerned with identity crises brought about by trying to establish the legitimacy or meaning of Western pres-

ence in China and the uncertain, shifting terms of Chinese-Western interactions. Consider the protagonist in Hunter Braithwaite's "Enough Rope," who is caught in a state of inertia ("I sat around, waiting for the clash of civilizations" [72]) until he is driven by compassion to bring a crying child on the street home. To his muted dismay, the child's adult sister and brother appear and establish themselves in the rescuer's apartment: "The apartment was mine, sure, but it was a small autonomous region planted in a larger territory owned by *them*. As Chinese, they were shareholders, owners of 3/1.3 billionth of the lease" (83; emphasis in original). While exploring the gap between himself and his uninvited Chinese lodgers, the protagonist tries to elide their differences: "In my classes my students would go on and on about how Westerners drink coffee, and Easterners drink tea. As if that difference means anything. We all drink, I'd tell them" (80). Braithwaite's narrator's *laowai* guilt causes him to make unreasonable concessions to the encroachments of the Chinese siblings, leaving him in a position of existentialist crisis: "[L]ife only makes sense to Christians and the depressed" (85). By the end of the story, the meaninglessness of his work as an English teacher and his life in China is accented by the sudden departure of the Chinese family, who have become both his tormentors and those who "lent a sense of purpose" to his life (84). Without them, he is left in a state of total paralysis: "The last month I taught subject/verb agreement at school, which I found philosophically difficult because it implies an accord between people and the things they do" (86). This protagonist also ends up on a plane back "home," having found himself unable to establish a basis for interaction with the people in whose country he is living, remembering the period as "[t]his part of my life in which I was forever a tourist" (84).

Compared to Sinophone writing, *laowai* writing has greater freedom to make overt political allusions, beginning with the titles of both anthologies: Orwell meets irresponsible hedonism in *Party Like It's 1984*, and Sinocentrism is undermined and eroticised in *Middle Kingdom Underground*. The "stories from the people's republic of" subtitle, shared by both anthologies, revolves around the unspoken, just as China's own political discourse does. *Middle Kingdom Underground*'s subtitle has

an added twist: on the front cover of the book, "China" is greyed out against a black background, while on the inside cover it is represented with "____." What is central to this writing (just as China—the Middle Kingdom—is also central) is simultaneously silent, half-spoken, identifiable by the shape of its absence. One is reminded of the Chinese word for "imply," which would translate directly as "to show darkly." The back cover may somewhat sleazily promise that the authors are "telling it like they're not allowed to," but it is clear that H.A.L. is also conscious of boundaries it must retain, both in expression and strategies of distribution. The covers of the two books, of an Asian woman in whiteface threatened by a toy gun and of a Caucasian person with blood on his lips, holding a phone receiver with an urgent expression, suggest violence and transgression while ironising the same with the staginess and whimsicality of their composition and execution. A triangle of red fabric on the right-hand border of *Middle Kingdom Underground* falls just short of an explicit reference to the PRC flag.

A good example of a story that would be deemed unpublishable in Sinophone China due to its political and sexual content is Tom Mangione's satire "Wild Days." One of H.A.L.'s funniest stories, "Wild Days" is set in the near future and purports to be a piece of analytical journalism regarding the fictional "Wild Days phenomenon" of China's last decade, in which reading a Chinese-language story called "A Little Boy's Loss" "made millions of Chinese people into supergeniuses in a matter of weeks [and] also made them into sex maniacs performing massive orgies in the streets" (242). The premise is knowingly outrageous, but the types of writing out of which Mangione produces pastiches are impressive—smarmy Chinese sentimental fiction, avant-garde modern theatre, official Chinese pronouncements and propaganda, human rights organisations, *The Economist,* Chinese folk musicians, American and Chinese academics, and the porn industry. Again the likely audience is clear: it is first and foremost a *laowai* reader who will simultaneously understand that *gaokao* refers to the Chinese university exams, identify with the imprisoned English teachers (the "Anhui Seven"), recognise the bureaucratic taxonomy of "Number Two Shanghai Wild Days Treatment Centre," and appreciate the satire of the "former president

Obama's opinion piece" in the *New York Times,* in which he declares that America must rise to the challenge and turn the intellectual achievement of Wild Days to its advantage. The sense of humour is distinctly Western, and it would require a high level of English and experience of Western satire to regard it as amusing; on the other hand, the context is too specifically Chinese to appeal to a broad Anglophone public. The depiction of the entire Chinese society as beset by a sex craze may raise questions about Mangione's purpose: Is the sex craze envisaged as the release from a culture of massive sexual repression? Is the main feature of interest the incongruity between the phenomenon described and sexless propriety of regime propaganda or sentimental literature?

In other *laowai* writing, the relative freedom from censorship gives *laowai* the opportunity to express empathy or (helpless) wrath in ways that Sinophone writing on the Mainland cannot so directly employ. These types of expressions, more straightforward in tone than the irony-laden mainstream of H.A.L., can be deeply moving. They can also show deep concern with the effects of the Chinese political system on the non-*laowai* subject, though without a patronising or self-righteous tone. Consider this excerpt from Reid Mitchell's poem "Hospital So Lazy It Let the Sick Girl Die":

> The hospital says her roommates should have smelled her
> stinking sooner
> the taxi driver should have bought a faster automobile
> the miles to the next hospital should have shrunk themselves
> into inches
> Hospital #1 should not have sent her to Hospital #3
> Hospital #3 should have hired better doctors, competent to
> raise the recent dead
> Her parents should have shut her away safe in a sunlit sanitarium
> brought her to the tops of mountains
> (oh sing the mountains of China!)
> sent her to another university
> kept her at home
> banked more money

made their daughter's case medically interesting
sent red envelopes
joined the CCP
given birth to twins (lines 17–31)

Laowai writing forms a considerable body of writing which is more often aware of or ironic and knowledgeable about the role of *laowai* in the society of contemporary China than travel writing, China-watching, or the flourishing genre of China memoir. For the Chinese reader, it could also be a useful corrective to the heavily stereotyped versions of *laowai* that appear in Chinese television and film. There is a constant tongue-in-cheek quality to the body of work, one of the expressions of which is H.A.L.'s self-definition on its website as a "postpat colonist publishing house," neither entirely serious nor wholly facetious. Consider a commentary written by David Perry, a *laowai* with a University of Iowa M.F.A. and instructor at New York University Shanghai, on H.A.L.'s project:

> [W]e take it to mean people who are kind of insider-outsiders—folks who aren't just in China for mere career reasons or just passing through, but rather who've settled because they like it and would just as soon live in Shanghai as, say, in Berlin, Buenos Aires, New York, or Haifa. Post-commie, post-religious, post-Cold War, post-colonialist, post-yadda-yadda-yadda rootless cosmopolitans . . . or something like that. (We're probably just taking the bait on a post-theory English major joke by actually analyzing the whole "post-pat" thing, but whatevs—we're post-English major ourselves and really can't help it).

The characteristics of *laowai* writing show that the presumed reader is no longer a monolingual Anglophone outside of China but is rather a resident in China, quite possibly bilingual, and of indeterminate race, nationality, and level of familiarity with China. Beyond this basic demographic identity, *laowai* literature is concerned with the necessity of finding a way to morally ground the presence of outsiders in China, claiming a place in China, and also denying the essentialist tendency (as common

among Chinese people as among Westerners) that East and West are incompatible and incapable of meaningful communication. The twain do meet in this writing, and though it is not always pretty, it is largely free of oriental mystique. The heavy symbolism of silk, tea, dragon, and other *chinoiserie* is largely absent or transformed into more resourceful, comprehensible, and knowing symbols (karaoke, rice wine, enumerated schools and hospitals). The tendency to research and explain, to preface everything with "in China" or "in Chinese culture," is largely gone. *Laowai* writers, mostly born in the late 1970s or 1980s and inevitably drawing at least partly on personal experience, relate stories of daily lives which are indeed mundane, peripheral, and often rather despairing. This cannot, obviously, prevent the stereotyping of both *laowai* and Chinese, but it also does not produce the endgame of inscrutability. The stories are relentlessly set in the here and now and feature interactions that are often only partially understood by the characters. These interactions, though realistically hobbled, are yet persistently functional. The stories are packed with *laowai* trying to make out the Chinese characters and vice versa, but none concludes that the other is an insoluble enigma.

Laowai, while being resident and knowledgeable or even fluent, remain strangers in the sense of "outsiders," which is one rather direct translation of *laowai*. Put another way, unlike much writing on China, these writers are not insiders writing for outsiders, but members of a socially constructed community writing for each other with the "conventional" Chinese "other" watching and sometimes contributing or commenting. A 2011 story by Hamlin contains the following passage, in which the *laowai* protagonist has been approached by a man who, as a child, lived in the Shanghai apartment she is now renting:

> "How long have you lived here?"
>
> "I moved in this week." His face twitches, and she feels him taking possession of the room in his mind. It's more his than hers; he wants that to be true.
>
> They reach the ground floor, and step outside. "But I've been in China longer than a week," she tries to reassert herself, "Over two years in China."

He's not listening.

She is about to say something else, but he speaks over her. "You know what to do now?"

"What?"

"You see that car?" He points down the road. "The one with the lights? That's a taxi."

"I know," says the girl, who was already lifting an arm to wave it down.

"You have to wave it down," he says.

"I know," says the girl. The taxi is already slowing, now stopping. He hasn't noticed or he ignores the tone of her voice. "I live here," she repeats. ("New Home")

Hamlin's title "New Home" points to *laowai* ambivalence towards China: it suggests a new home to which no belonging may be attached and in which the *laowai* is always perceived as transient. This is perhaps the defining tone towards which a "postpat" aesthetic is developing: a strangerhood in a country where hybrid identity is withheld, often by means of exaggerated friendliness (such as the persistent official tendency to describe all foreigners, from tourist to the China-born, as "international friends").[14]

As forces of global capitalism generate substantial migration from West to East and North to South, they create new, privileged, largely English-speaking transnational groups who tend to shed individual nation-based identifications and develop their own societies and cultural forms, including literature. The "postpat colonial" *laowai* writers are deeply concerned with questions of race and gender in the contemporary world and are producing a diverse, relatively autonomous corpus, which strives to engage with these issues. Some of the work may be considered reactionary or simply in bad taste; other pieces may seem courageous in their willingness to confront underlying, usually unspoken, issues surrounding the Western presence in China. As texts by relatively young Westerners, these works are shot through with irony, pop culture, and sexual allusion.

H.A.L.'s "postpat colonist" tag is both a knowing jab at literary theory and a genuine attempt to take on the undeniably neocolonial element of *laowai* society and experience. At the same time, H.A.L. makes the claim that the opportunity has come (or is coming) to move beyond expatriate identities. Once one has moved beyond the –pat, however, no new patria may be forthcoming. China does not naturalise *laowai*, and likely few *laowai* would choose to become naturalised if they could. That may be the ultimate summation of this writing's context: to be *laowai* is to be a member of a privileged, stateless community—a poor little rich kid, consoled with cash and sex, without an invitation to stay or a nation to belong to.

Yet it is also possible to take a more positive stance on this generation of Westerners writing about China with both a general familiarity with Chinese culture and language and an audience of whom they presume the same. *Laowai* may be peripheral to the Chinese experience, but the periphery has repeatedly proved an important place from which to challenge monolithic narratives about China. Especially if they speak Chinese, *laowai* cannot easily be convinced by the tyranny of any particular discourse on China, whether it comes from the PRC or Western media. For the same reasons that transnational narratives are valued in European-language literatures, the marginality of such a perspective can be productive and insightful.

Notes

1 In part, this is because large Asian nations (Korea, Japan) are regarded as sharing aspects of their culture with China. This is usually phrased, both academically and popularly, in Sinocentric terms, with Han Chinese culture as the core and source of culture which is disseminated to neighbouring nations—the cultural periphery. In the words of the *The Oxford History of Historical Writing,* "[c]ultural Sinocentrism was the *basso ostinato* of East Asia for more than a millennium: the classical Chinese language and writing system; legal and administrative systems; Buddhism . . . and the art of historiography itself" (Rabasa et al 2; emphasis in original).

2 Non-Chinese Southeast Asians, South Asians, and Africans have a different experience of China, often marked by undisguised and barely inhibited racism (Frazier and Zhang). Ethnic nationalism ensures that foreign-born overseas Chinese "returning" (as the Chinese term *guiqiao* puts it) to Mainland China will

be received differently from *laowai*, even if their experience may also range from alienation to belonging (Farrer, "A Foreign Adventurer's Paradise?" 71; "Foreigner Street" 34–35).

3 Similarly the term *waiyu* (foreign language) often means simply "English," and the default meaning for *waiguo* (abroad) is the Western world rather than Asia. In some cases, such as in the 1991 play *Da liuyang* (The Great Going Abroad), *waiguo* even becomes the "ambiguous pseudonym" of the United States (Conceison 92, 99).

4 In the interest of full disclosure: my writing has been published by several of the journals, blogs, or publications listed here, and I am also acquainted with some of the authors and publishers discussed here. Doubtless, my ideas on *laowai* writing are influenced by my own sense of the identity under discussion, and in this sense this article constitutes a kind of auto-ethnography, justifiable precisely because involvement creates different kinds of knowledge than dispassionate observation. I am not financially or editorially involved in these publications. I asked Björn Wahlström, who had not previously seen this article, to check the text for factual errors after the paper's initial acceptance in *ARIEL*.

5 Beyond these large populations, there are also, for example, more than three thousand Brazilians and 4,500 Kazakhstanis, as well as residents from other countries with a complex relationship to the Western world and a more ambiguous relationship to the *laowai* group.

6 Asian countries by rank: first, South Korea; third, Japan; fourth, Burma; fifth, Vietnam.

7 The principal scholar publishing on *laowai* is Farrer at Sophia University in Tokyo. A sociologist focusing on Shanghai and Tokyo, Farrer includes *laowai* as a major strand in his work, especially with regards to the Shanghai labour market, nightlife, and cross-cultural perceptions and relationships. Another important contribution has been made by Stanley, an education scholar whose ethnographic work among English-teacher *laowai* in Shanghai demonstrates how "gendered national identities" can provoke "identity tensions for the [*laowai*[men themselves" (213).

8 For instance, in 2007 a Princeton graduate even created a controversial Internet sensation as "Red *laowai*" by broadcasting videos of himself singing Communist Party propaganda songs while shirtless. Authorities wondered, not without basis, whether the videos were meant as ridicule.

9 Of course, by other definitions that require a perception of a common ancestry and a shared language or religion, *laowai* will likely never form an ethnic group. However, one may question whether such definitions are useful for studying the rapid population movements of the present day.

10 All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

11 Although the title is in Chinese characters only, the text of this story is in English.

12 All bracketed translations of Pinyin are my own and do not feature in the original.

13 Although she is Mainland Chinese, I have chosen to include Chen as a *laowai* writer, because her writings appear in *laowai* forums and publications and because, being engaged primarily with *laowai*-Chinese dynamics, her writings have thematic and stylistic resemblances with other *laowai* authors. A narrow biographical definition of *laowai* would be inimical to an essay on a category of writing so deeply concerned with boundary-crossing.

14 Brady points out that in Chinese officialdom, "[f]riendship terminology is a means to neutralize opposition psychologically and to reorder reality" and that "friendship has the meaning of a strategic relationship; it does not have the meaning of good or intimate relations" (7).

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