

Emissaries of the Modern: The Foreign Teacher in Urban China

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Abstract

Some of the most recognizable urban figures in China today are not even Chinese, but “foreigners.” Foreigners stand out from the crowd, not simply because of their perceived racial distinctiveness, but because they are seen to possess and successfully manipulate symbols of a globalized world that many Chinese desire but feel disconnected from. Based on fieldwork in the northeastern city of Shenyang, this article will focus specifically on foreign teachers, itinerant native speakers of English who come to China for adventure and a paycheck in return for teaching their language to others. They are encountered in foreign language classrooms, the media, and in public, acting as indexes of modernity in a rapidly changing urban landscape. While Chinese urban residents bemoan a sense of isolation and backwardness within globalized structures of power and capital, they identify the interloping foreign teacher—stereotypically seen as white, English-speaking, mobile, wealthy, and brand-conscious—as an exemplar of the possibilities of modern selfhood. Foreigners are objects of desire, curiosity, envy, and resentment; each emotion is linked to their status as representatives of a world perceived to be beyond the boundaries of the local, but which in reality permeates it at every level. While foreign teachers themselves are often oblivious to this wider context, they are implicated in everyday practices of Chinese self-fashioning, from education in global languages to marketing international brands. I argue that the image of the foreigner provokes reflections on the nature of Chinese ethnicity, culture, and national identity. Contemplating the foreign as a potential subject position, sometimes critically, is one way that urban Chinese articulate creative possibilities for their own futures. [China, foreigners, modernity, cosmopolitanism, language].

Introduction: Commoditizing foreignness

One summer day in China's northeastern city of Shenyang, while sitting in the teacher's office of Washington English School with Fanny, I brought up the question of foreign teachers. At the time, Fanny, a Chinese foreign language teacher in her early thirties who preferred the use of her English name, had over six years of experience teaching at the school.¹ An intelligent and competent educator, she took great pride in the accomplishments of her students, many of whom were then living or studying abroad. Despite her expertise, however, her position as a Chinese teacher of English, and therefore a non-native speaker, meant that she was often overshadowed at the school by “foreign” teachers, the often-youthful native speakers from Western countries who come to China for several years to travel and teach.

English, in both visual and aural forms, has become ubiquitous in China's urban spaces as the language increasingly becomes a requirement for higher education and professional employment. Numerous private language schools like Washington have emerged over the past twenty years to satisfy this demand for extracurricular foreign language education. Washington, in particular, prided itself on the "foreign experience" provided to its customers, including regular classroom interactions with native speakers, screening foreign films, weekly "free talk" presentations by foreign teachers about their home countries, and a coffee shop in the school's lobby.²

I wanted to know what Fanny thought foreign teachers brought to English language education in China. Teaching experiences for foreigners were typically advertised as adventures rather than serious employment, and foreign teachers were generally thrust into the classroom with little or no training. "In one word," she answered a bit gruffly in English, "useless. I think foreigners can teach nothing actually." She explained to me that, although the school put great stock in the foreign experience for its students, actual fluency could only come from a long time spent abroad. The key for her was therefore to prepare the students to take internationally recognized language exams such as IELTS or TOEFL in classes taught by Chinese instructors, who know far more about the learning styles and needs of Chinese students. For instance, she explained that in one examination for those hoping to study at foreign universities, students must respond orally to a set of standardized questions. To prepare their students, foreign teachers introduce topics such as "technology" or "parents" as part of an open discussion. "The first five minutes they stick to the topic. And then five minutes later they go nowhere. That means the student only spend the first five minutes in the class talk about examination-related questions. And then?" Fanny asked, clapping her hands loudly, "Nothing."³ In contrast, she argued that Chinese teachers know students are looking for "tricks" or "shortcuts," such as analyzing the potential questions and sorting them into types. Chinese teachers then provide students with strategies for answering each type of question. "It's like a domino . . . If you prepare for one question, and then, pitter-patter, pitter-patter, they can do everything." While foreigners attempted to engage students in conversation about various topics, modeling the ostensible purpose of the examination—to elicit "natural" speech—Chinese teachers recognized the contrived nature of the conversational frame itself. They taught the students to realize that what appears to be natural speech is actually an examination, and then helped the students analyze the particular rules and conventions of this interaction.

If foreign teachers are so pedagogically "useless," why are they such prominent features of the foreign language education experience for Chinese students? Why does the school invest in the necessary government documentation and accreditation of these foreign teachers whom, the school-owner often lamented to me, were undisciplined and unreliable workers? Mr. Bai, Washington English School's founder and a man who had worked in the foreign language education industry for twenty

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years, once complained to me in Chinese, “Many of our foreign teachers don’t want to come to class. They call and say they are sick. But I know why they don’t come. They are lazy. They think teaching is boring.” Yet Mr. Bai offered much higher salaries to foreigners than other English schools, and regularly invested money in recruiting foreign teachers from abroad. When I asked him if having foreigners teach at his school was worth the effort, he leaned across his desk to say, “Every parent wants their child to speak English fluently. When I started this school, I told them I would put a foreigner in every classroom. None of the other schools could do that. That’s what makes us special.” According to Mr. Bai, it is the simple presence of the foreigner in the classroom, rather his or her skill or credentials as a teacher that validate and authorize the educational experience. Following the logic of magical contact manifested here (Mauss 1972), being in the presence of the foreigner is enough to stimulate a connection to that most elusive of values in modern China: English fluency.

In this article, I aim to analyze the figure of the foreigner as a conduit for modernity in urban China. Like the supposed efficacy of contact with native speakers in English language schools, foreigners—and in particular, white foreigners—are often construed in China as possessing the desired characteristics of modernity which offer the radical powers of self-transformation and mobility so many Chinese desire for themselves. Recent scholarship has revealed many cases in which the foreigner represents a kind of magical power felt to be lacking within the local context (Bashkow 2006; Rutherford 2003). In China, this power can be approached and harnessed both through the figure of the foreigner and through indexes of modernity deriving from abroad: objects and attributes felt to be inextricably linked to the bodies and appearances of foreigners such as branded commodities and foreign languages. I argue that the presence of foreigners provokes thought and reflection on local social positionings, global contexts and the relationships between them in China, allowing for the formulation of novel social identities and new forms of global citizenship.

Foreignness in the postsocialist city

Shenyang, the capital of northeastern China’s Liaoning Province, is a city with a population of nearly eight million people. Despite its size and regional importance, Shenyang has historically been isolated by geography, culture and climate from more prosperous areas along China’s eastern coast. Nonetheless, urban residents here have begun to think of themselves in less provincial terms than in the past, and consequently the urban landscape has been transformed by visible symbols of “modernization” (*xiandaihua*) and “development” (*fazhan*) with distinct connections to foreignness as a source of authenticity. The constant rush of urban construction in Shenyang, as in other Chinese urban centers, has been heavily weighted towards symbols of international competency: five-star hotels, shopping centers with foreign brands, and foreign restaurant and beverage chains such as KFC and Starbucks (Zhang 2006;

Zhang 2000:96). The very look of these new districts is meant to suggest a foreign aesthetic, as gray concrete department stores and communal housing blocks give way to a curving, dynamic, and ostensibly international forms of architecture.

Shenyang's socialist-era buildings now strike most urban residents as hopelessly decrepit, uncomfortable and out-of-date: cracked walls, cluttered staircases, windows caked with dust and hard-packed earthen courtyards. In contrast, modern apartment buildings are sleek, clean, and grandiose, topped by sculpted roofs or brightly colored balustrades. They soar high above street-level, wide bay windows allowing residents to display their furniture and electronics to the envious or admiring views of those in neighboring towers. To walk the streets of Shenyang today is to experience jarring and rapid juxtapositions, dissonances between periods of time preserved in material form.

New residential complexes often provide indexes of foreignness in their design, promotional materials, and even in their names, such as Shenyang's Appreciate Europe and Holland Village. Guillaume Giroir terms these opulent communities, which draw upon Westernized architectural motifs, "globalized golden ghettos" (2006:210). But rather than adopting foreign building designs wholesale, the styles are "modified and reinterpreted according to the Chinese conception of architecture and more generally of space" (217–8; see also Wu 2010). Roof tiles echo Chinese imperial palaces rather than ordinary slate, while gardens are modeled on those of Suzhou rather than rural England. In other words, foreign styles are intended to signify to the consumer an association with luxury and modern living, even as they are adapted to the Chinese built environment (see Figure 1). Appreciate Europe promised its future residents, on advertisements festooned with images of Mozart, Da Vinci and Shakespeare, a "superstructure with the original flavor of Europe," and



Figure 1. Entrance to the newly constructed Tianlong Jiayuan residential complex.



Figure 2. Advertising billboard for Talenty Children's English.

that it would provide a “bilingual environment” for residents to practice their English. That most mainland Europeans, including the historical figures of Mozart and Da Vinci, do not speak English as a native language was not destructive to the message as a whole; the building’s name and the promised use of English inside successfully associated this apartment complex with foreignness as a social value. Washington English School likewise evoked foreignness with its name, and its advertising billboards, scattered in prominent locations across the city, featured a cast of white foreigners hugging each other and laughing together. An advertisement for a different school specializing in childhood education depicted a white child jumping up and down above the slogan, “A valuable new experience” (see Figure 2).

In her analysis of skin-whitening product advertisements in the Indonesian edition of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Saraswati (2010) notes how “whiteness” has become unmoored from overt depictions of race, instead circulating as an affective quality of cosmopolitanism, or as she terms it, “cosmopolitan whiteness.” A similar logic is at work in these English school advertisements in Shenyang. Though depicting mostly white foreigners, they simultaneously extend to the viewer the cognitive possibility of joining into the fun through the mediating power of the English language. These billboards not only adorn otherwise blank walls around the city, but ring the temporary walls built around construction sites. As such, they also draw an implicit connection between their visual content and the modernist fantasy spaces—shopping malls, luxury hotels, foreign restaurants—being built just behind them.

The figures of foreigners have been recruited into multiple contexts of image production and consumption within China’s contemporary

media and urban landscapes (Conceison 2004). This is not simply because of their difference, but of what their particular form of difference represents. As outsiders, foreigners are a perfect screen for the projection of the possibilities of China's future, even as their opposites, rural migrants, become screens for the projection of mediatised discourses of backwardness, rudeness, and social disruption (Zhang 2002; Zheng 2000).⁴ Modernization entails for urban Chinese far more than new relations of capital and economic globalization. It is instead an aesthetic and semiotic process, involving transformations at both the individual and spatial level (Fong 2007; Rofel 1999; Zhang 1996). When Shenyang residents discuss modernization and China's future, they are as apt to talk about rising levels of civility and international mobility as they are about wealth. Indeed, these three dynamics are often treated as inseparably linked: greater wealth in the future will lead to greater opportunities abroad, which in turn will lead to a higher quality (*suzhi*) of citizen (see Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006). As the presumed point of origin of these processes, both the foreign and the foreigner carry great semiotic weight.

This is not to say that the foreigner is simply a messianic figure capable of bestowing the gifts of modernity. I aim to reveal the complicated, ambivalent, and often critical responses to the foreigner's appearance, and thus to the process of modernization itself. In the literature on figures of modernity that has inspired this special issue, interpretations of individual figures are not meant to be hegemonic or absolute. As Barker et al. (2013:15) remind us in their introduction to an edited collection of Southeast Asian figures of modernity, figures are "ethnographic sites that mediate a wide range of processes and structures that are themselves often in flux." Interpretations of the meaning of the foreign figure are similarly polysemous, and resonate across multiple social fields. Even as many Chinese students look up to their foreign English teachers as fascinating cosmopolitan individuals, Fanny and Mr. Bai could regard them with indignation and even contempt.

We might think of Fanny's criticisms of the pedagogical strategies of her foreign colleagues as analogous to the role that foreigners play in the imaginings of modernity in China. Just as it is the presence of the foreigner in the classroom rather than their actual teaching that matters to language students and their parents, the foreigners' efficacy in acting as emissaries of social forces beyond the local context derives not from their individuality but from their social position as *foreigners*, erasing autonomy in favor of abstraction and what Georg Simmel called "the consciousness of having only the absolutely general in common" (1971:148). Here Simmel appears to be fascinated by the way in which the consciousness of the group is dependent upon the alienated individuality of the stranger. His description of the "stranger" as a foreign interloper emphasizes the way in which these individuals, with their own stories, experiences and modes of thought, are reduced to the circumstances of their alien origins, allowing them to be recruited as objective interlocutors in domestic affairs. I believe a similar process is at work with foreigners in China. Radically reduced to their position as representatives of a globalized world beyond China—that

is, as mere figures—foreigners are made to comment upon China’s engagement with that world.⁵

The reducibility of foreigners to the facts of their origins has some major implications for both the conduct of research and how I present my work here. Although I do discuss the thoughts and experiences of some foreigners as recorded in ethnographic interviews, my focus is on the responses of my Chinese informants: what does the image of the foreigner evoke for urban residents? How do they respond to the radical alterity before them? What does the encounter between the foreigner and the urban Chinese resident signify for a greater understanding of Chinese modernity? To answer these questions, I first review how foreigners are defined within the modern urban landscape in Shenyang as a particular type of racially identified outsider. I then consider how the otherness of foreigners is metadiscursively produced in practice. The outcome of this process leads me to conclude that the foreigner exists as a figure of a particularly Chinese form of modernity.

Foreigners as figures

Foreigners used to be an uncommon sight in Shenyang. Even twelve years ago, when I first visited the city as an English teacher, my white skin and blonde hair could draw involuntary shouts of surprise from passersby. In contrast, today’s foreigners can travel relatively unremarked through the streets of this increasingly cosmopolitan urban center. There are occasions, though, in which foreigners become objects of attention, even of fascination. They erupt into the flow of social interaction by virtue of a locally situated alterity, an alien presence in an otherwise familiar landscape. These can be manufactured occasions, as when English schools host “free talks” with their foreign teachers, or serendipitous events where certain actions or contexts thrust a foreigner into a moment of recognition and attention. Stan, a Midwestern American English teacher in his late 30s, illustrated such a moment for me with a perhaps exaggerated but nonetheless illustrative tale of his encounter with a crowd of Chinese people in a city park. Curious about the purpose of the gathering, he claimed to have pushed his way through the crowd until, reaching the center, he found nothing that could draw the attention of so many people. He asked someone next to him what everyone was staring at, to which the man responded by simply pointing at him and answering, “You.”

I see this narrative as emblematic of the peculiar position of foreigners in contemporary China. On the one hand, foreigners have become more familiar to urban residents as the number of foreigners living in China has increased substantially in the last decades. Whereas foreigners once consisted of perhaps a hundred itinerant language teachers and businesspeople, since the 1990s the Shenyang city government has encouraged joint business ventures between domestic and foreign companies, including BMW, General Motors, LG, Toshiba, and Boeing among others. An exploding demand for foreign language teachers by

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private language schools has also increased the number of foreigners living in the city. Ten years ago there were only three or four major foreign language schools that could provide work visas and receive government permission to hire foreign teachers; today, nearly any school can hire foreigners, and the number of registered private schools is in the hundreds. Countless other unregistered single classroom or neighborhood schools also bring in occasional foreign teachers. It has also become more common for people to develop friendships with foreigners, either through professional contact (as teachers, co-workers, or businesspeople) or in venues characteristic of modernization, where relationships feel more open and unconstrained (such as coffee shops, shopping malls, and foreign restaurants or bars).

On the other hand, foreigners also maintain a radical sense of otherness and distance. Most foreigners residing in China, with the exception of overseas Chinese, would find it nearly impossible to apply for Chinese citizenship.⁶ But beyond their legal status as perpetual outsiders, foreigners are also configured in popular discourse as inescapably different culturally, possessing a mindset incommensurable with the “Chineseness” understood to be an inalienable property of the Han ethnonational culture (Chun 1996; Tu 1994). Foreigners, I was told repeatedly, do not understand China, nor *can* they understand China: the language, history, culture, traditions, worldviews, and assumptions are simply too different to enable meaningful dialogue. Thus, the friendships I mentioned above seem always fraught with incommensurability and partial understandings.

Today, foreigners have become both more visible and, because of their now unexceptional status, more invisible at the same time. That is to say that, just as the number of foreigners on Shenyang’s streets has increased, the foreigner has been simultaneously reduced to the form of a caricature or figure, sometimes quite literally as when Da Shan (also known as Mark Rowswell), a white Canadian famous for his fluent Chinese, composed and led a Chinese language skit with an all-foreign cast of actors in the national 2011 Chinese New Year television special. Recent television dramas almost always feature a foreign character, whose struggles with the language and culture form a key element of the plot. Remembering Simmel’s discussion of the stranger here, we can say that the *figure* of the foreigner is now immediately recognizable, but is frequently an archetype without individuality, an actor in a play dictated by Chinese expectations and norms.

The origins of these ambivalent sentiments about foreigners are rooted in China’s long history of engagement with representatives of the world beyond its borders. During the late-19th and early-20th centuries, when China was semi-colonized by foreign powers and the survival of the nation seemed at stake, the foreign was both a threat and an object of fascination (Brady and Brown 2012). The May Fourth Movement of 1919, a grouping of revolutionaries, students, and intellectuals that formed in the wake of protests against the collusion between China’s weak national government and European powers, both opposed the intrusion of Western nations into China’s domestic affairs and idolized

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progressive Western thinkers (Lee 2001; Weston 2004). Its leaders were the first generation of students freed from slavishly studying the Confucian classics for advancement in the imperial examination system, giving them greater freedom to explore Western literature and philosophy (Schwarcz 1986:23–29). The paradox between an antagonism to the expansion of Western power in China and fascination with foreign culture is explained by the presumed separability between foreigners and foreignness, the notion that ideals of Western progress could be adapted to China in order to shock the Chinese people out of a traditionalist mindset. As the Cornell-educated philosopher Hu Shih explained:

The spirit of doubt and criticism does not spring up of itself. It is always the outcome of a new vision and a new point of view. There must be sufficient data for comparison and reflection before the mind is freed from the shackles of the old standpoint which had long been taken for granted. [Hu 1919:354]

The necessity of appropriating foreign ideas to save China was so strong that Leo Ou-fan Lee has concluded, “by the 1920s, it came to be generally acknowledged that ‘modernity’ was equated with the new Western civilization in all its spiritual and material manifestations” (2000:32). If the foreigner was figured as an invader in this period, it was also one whose outlook could be adopted and then assimilated to the Chinese context.

After the communist victory in 1949, the new government was faced with the dilemma of differentiating the representatives of foreign imperialism from those who had supported the communist cause. As Anne-Marie Brady documents, the state adopted the metaphor of “friendship” to acknowledge and reward these individuals, a vocabulary that persists even today (Brady 2003). Yet this friendship was also strategic in its application. Faced with the need to modernize its industries, gain technical expertise and maintain trade with foreign nations, China’s leaders designed a system of managing foreigners that maximized their usefulness to the state even as it marginalized their impact on the population. “Ultimately, the long-term objectives of the CCP’s *waishi* [foreign affairs] strategies, from the 1930s to the present day, are not aimed at developing solidarity with the underdeveloped world. The CCP’s long-term goal has been to regain what many Chinese believe is China’s rightful place in the world as a leading power, if not *the* leading power” (Brady 2003:27). In other words, the foreigner’s ambivalent status as both friend and foe, familiar and alien, and potential source of modernizing power, has a long history throughout China’s modern period.

Counting foreigners: Racialization and appearance

Domestic media reports often cite government statistics indicating that there are now more than 10,000 foreigners living in Shenyang. But government statistics reflect a bureaucratic approach to “foreignness” rather than one based upon popular concep-

tions of race. The Chinese government uses the word “foreigner” (*waiguoren*) for any non-citizen, including ethnic Chinese from other countries (Pieke 2012:44). In practice, however, many of the people counted as foreign by the state were not considered so by my informants, who drew upon popular ideas of relatedness, place-based belonging, and race to categorize groups of others, strategies that have long social histories in China (Blum 2001; Dikötter 1992; Fiskesjö 2006). For instance, overseas Chinese (*huaqiao*) from Singapore or Hong Kong are technically counted as foreigners, but are perceived as ethnically similar to locals and thus connected to the local social context in a way that other outsiders are not. Similarly, Shenyang’s proximity to Korea has led to both a sizeable ethnic Korean population and significant direct investment from South Korean businesses. While the government differentiates the domestic Korean population of Chinese nationals from foreign Korean visitors, most Chinese in Shenyang lumped them together as members of a common Korean ethnic population (*chaoxianzu*) (see also Gao 2008). Finally, since China began to develop close ties with several African countries, Shenyang has hosted numerous educational exchanges for medical and foreign language students from this region who are classified as “Africans” (*feizhouren*) or “blacks” (*heiren*). African is a term applied equally to natives of Africa and African-Americans or other black Westerners. In other words, although all non-citizens are technically foreigners, each of these groups was classified differently by Shenyang residents on the basis of perceived ethnic or racial characteristics.

The term *waiguoren* is typically reserved for those perceived to be most different, racially and culturally, from the Chinese population: white westerners. Louisa Schein has noted the surprising prevalence of white feminine bodies in such diverse Chinese contexts as household decorations and bridal gifts. Rather than an image of erotic consumption, the white woman acts as an “instructor in the magic of the commodity” by dressing in, and posing with, desirable objects such as expensive clothing, furniture, jewelry and cars (Schein 1994:147). White foreign bodies act as consumer fetishes, objectified constructions that, in their presence as images, provide gateways for the observer to participate in China’s own modernist promise. Similarly, Fanny once explained to me that there was one instance in English teaching in China where foreign teachers were valuable: the practice exam. “You practice several hours with the local teacher, and then you go to the foreigner, you stare at their white face and look into their blue eyes . . . and make yourself nervous. The more nervous you are in the practice examination, the less nervous you are in the real one.” The appeal to the foreigner’s default appearance (white face and blue eyes) as something both valuable and terrifying reveals the racial assumptions at the heart of foreignness and its power. Foreignness and whiteness are conflated to the extent that the indexes of modernity paradigmatic of foreigners in general are attributed to whites, while other outside racial groups are perceived to possess these in only partial measure.

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The otherness of foreigners: On an outward bound adventure

While white foreignness is powerful because it embodies qualities considered radically different from Chineseness, it is an oversimplification to say that such qualities are always desirable; in fact, the relationship between Chineseness and foreignness is more complicated, as can be seen from an incident that took place at Washington English in the summer of 2005. The school planned an “outward-bound adventure” for its entire staff, including both foreign and Chinese teachers as well as the marketing, human resources and accounting departments. The event was advertised in English on posters placed throughout the school, prominently featuring the tagline “I am the Superman!” with the familiar “S” emblem of the titular superhero in the background. In smaller type, the poster explained that the purpose of the event was to build teamwork and “psychological quality” (*xinli suzhi*), comparing the challenge of the event to being like “a small ship leaving a safe harbour, sailing to meet every kind of challenge and overcome every difficulty.” Like Clark Kent’s phone booth transformation into his alter-ego, Superman, the poster promised that participants would return from the event a new kind of person, ready to deal with life’s challenges.

On the morning of the planned adventure, I joined employees being transported to a nature park several hours outside the city limits. Disembarking from the buses, we were confronted with a camouflage-clad group of Chinese “coaches” (*jiaolian*) bearing U.S. Special Forces badges on their arms. The coaches immediately called everyone to attention, barking out familiar orders that all Chinese students are taught during “Learn from the Soldier” days in senior middle school and university. After lining up, standing at attention, and being inspected by our new drill instructors, the school’s staff marched off to tackle obstacle courses and physical challenges.

I was teamed up with the foreign teachers and some Chinese teachers who were deemed to be the most “Westernized.” We failed to devise a way to lift a bucket of water placed in the center of a circle with only two sturdy ropes and a prohibition from touching the ground, but did manage to form a human bridge from one tree to another. Our team did not, however, last very long. Upset at being ordered around on what was promised to be a day of fun, most of the foreigners left by lunch, catching minibuses back into town. We were disqualified from the competition and the remnants of our team spent the rest of the event observing others. Several days later, I asked some of the Chinese teachers what their impressions had been of the outward bound adventure, and why they thought the foreigners had left early. Fanny said that the foreigners had not understood its purposes, of which, she told me in English, there were two: “One is to teach you the discipline. The other is to know that you are part of a team, that one person can’t do what they want, can’t be selfish, or it will hurt the team. The foreign teacher just thinks it’s a fun

day.” May, a younger and less experienced Chinese teacher in her late 20s, chimed in with her own interpretation, switching between Chinese and English. “You see, you foreigners just don’t understand. We Chinese know what is the discipline (*Ni kan, nimen waiguoren jiu bu dong. Women zhongguoren zhidao*, what is the discipline).” Western culture does not, she told me, encourage people to meet challenges at any cost, while Chinese culture forces people to endure suffering for its own sake, teaching them discipline. She told me she was certain the foreign teachers would disagree (and many of them did), but that they left simply because their culture prevented them from understanding the event’s purpose.

May then pointed to a photograph that had been emailed to all of the Chinese employees, taken during the day’s final task. The coaches had ordered the participants to move everyone from one side of a seven-foot wall to the other. Mr. Bai had not been present through most of the event, but arrived to take part in climbing over the wall. The photograph, taken from the perspective of someone sitting on the wall, showed numerous employees grasping Mr. Bai’s hand, hauling him towards the top as others hoisted him from below. “Look,” she said, “the foreigners have all left, but we stick together. I can understand them. Sometimes, that day, I feel a little strange too. Why am I doing this? But we Chinese understand this kind of thing.” May’s explanation, like Fanny’s earlier discussions of the pedagogical unsuitability of foreign teachers who simply “do not understand” the needs of their Chinese students, separates foreigners as uncomprehending outsiders from the Chinese who know their thoughts.

The outward-bound adventure should be understood here within the context of similar events that Chinese students participate in as part of their education. “Learn From the Soldier” activities were regularly conducted in schools in the 1980s and 90s, especially high school. The purpose of such military activities is rooted in Maoist notions of self-reliance in the face of external threats. Even in 2005, incoming students at Liaoning University, where I also attended classes, trained for two weeks in military fatigues as they were taught by soldiers to march in formation, follow basic orders, and learn how to handle rifles. Similarly, “Learn From the Farmer” activities send students to the countryside to absorb the peasant ideology so crucial to socialist legitimacy. Instead of hard labor, however, many students viewed this as simply an opportunity to get out of the city, with girls bringing their high heels and parasols for a day in the country. Nonetheless, we can see here a strategic move by the state to inculcate certain values in younger generations by drawing upon the symbolic power of particularly valued groups of people: obedient soldiers and rural peasants (the authentic representatives of pure socialism). The logic and lessons of these exercises were thoroughly familiar to the teachers at Washington School, but in this case, the source of values was different from their school experiences.

It is no coincidence that the outward-bound adventure was suffused with images and signifiers of foreignness. The coaches wore elite American military uniforms. The advertising for the event was in English and

drew upon Western themes, knowledge, and characters like Superman. The event itself was organized by an English school and a point was made by Mr. Bai to invite the foreign staff and promote their attendance. All of these factors acted as potential semiotic resources for Chinese to be able to experience, understand, and transcend the otherness of foreigners. Becoming foreign was not, in itself, the goal, just as learning from peasants is not meant to change one into a farmer—and this was clear when the foreigners, those presumably most familiar with the ritualized elements of an outward-bound adventure, were the ones to give up and leave. Instead, their perceived lack of discipline places foreignness in a relation of dialogue rather than strict desire, with Chinese participants able to engage with and discuss the particular desirable and undesirable elements of foreign identities. The significance of this dialogue for contemporary Chinese social life is apparent from the seriousness that the Chinese teachers brought to this experience in contrast to the casual and even contemptuous response to “Learn From the Farmer” days in school—after all, nobody aspires today to be a farmer, but being nominally foreign in one’s outlook is highly desirable. Through the dialectic between native and foreign in the outward-bound experience, May and Fanny became capable of, employing the logic of the advertising poster, being both Clark Kent and Superman, Chinese and foreign, at the same time. Chineseness could be constituted through the use of the foreign as a symbolic intermediary.

Foreign figures of Chinese modernity

I often asked foreigner teachers what they thought of being a language instructor in China. Did they see themselves, like Fanny did, as useless props for students’ consumption? I was surprised that foreigners only rarely got upset by the question; in fact, the most common answer was something like, “Maybe . . . I don’t know.” A general sense of confusion pervades the expat experience in China. Kevin, a 32-year-old white South African who had taught English in Shenyang for eight years, says:

When I got here, no one sat me down and laid it out for me. Like, this is what you’re here for. The day we got here we were just shoved into a classroom. Five minutes before the time class starts they hand you a book and say, ‘these are the words you’re teaching today.’

Despite years spent living in Shenyang, and the experience of marriage to a Chinese woman, Kevin still claimed to not know why he was needed in the classroom. Why do these people want me to do this? What do they get out of it? Foreigners like Kevin could only speculate.

As I have shown above, however, foreignness can act as an alternative subject position for reimagining modern Chinese selfhood. But what is the nature of the modern in such reflections? Barker et al. (2013) focus on the “modern” quality of such diverse individuals as the schoolteacher, flight attendant, police chief or NGO worker, a quality intrinsic to their

state of being in the world. These figures encapsulate an ethos characterized by “a reflexive engagement with and embrace of a broader world that at least temporarily leads away from the identities, practices, languages, and ways of knowing that are assumed to be relatively timeless and enduring (i.e. the realm of tradition)” (13). Such an ethos is not new in China and, as historians have vividly illustrated, the turning away from tradition in favor of a more open, global, and mobile—but ultimately more alienating—social world has a rich heritage dating back at least to defeat in the nineteenth-century Opium Wars with Britain and the national disillusionment it fostered (He 2002). Rather than something entirely novel or of the moment, modernization has been a continuous, ongoing and often traumatic experience for Chinese people during the last 150 years, a constant reworking of both space and bodily praxis that transforms people and the urban landscapes they inhabit.

Within this continuous reworking of local space, the presence of foreigners is not strange but to be expected; indeed, their absence would problematize the entire thesis of the modernist project. Thus, foreigners are often invited to *appear* in places where their presence authorizes the international character of events, such as the outward-bound adventure, but also restaurant openings, academic conferences, retail promotions and so on. Steven, a 40-year-old white Canadian English teacher, often supplemented his teaching income by acting in television commercials. These roles rarely involved speaking, but instead his use as a visual bodily signifier attesting to the efficacy of advertised products. In one particular case, he and another white foreign teacher were cast as Western medical doctors, which involved extensive efforts to transform them from unruly expats into authoritative, respectable physicians. During the shooting of the commercial, they were given nonsensical lines to read, and told that their voices would eventually be dubbed into Chinese, extolling the virtues of a local herbal medicine “grown on the slopes of Changbai mountain.” Steven pointed out that the façade of the commercial should have been revealed to the consumer by an apparently glaring mistake: when asked to peer into a microscope, Steven had forgotten the fake eyeglasses he was wearing, and had put his eyes to the instrument through the empty frames of his glasses. The commercial’s producers were not concerned—his appearance was guarantee enough for the audience that the medicine was effective.

Simmel argues that strangers are individuals both near and far: living in close proximity, but of alien origin. “The stranger is close to us insofar as we feel between him and ourselves similarities of nationality or social position, of occupation or of general human nature. He is far from us insofar as these similarities extend beyond him and us, and connect us only because they connect a great many people” (1971:147). In other words, the foreigner—the quintessential stranger—occupies a dialectical position that mediates between social worlds, a terrain, according to William Mazzarella, “on which we re-cognize ourselves in the paradoxical form of something outside ourselves” (2006:476). On the one hand, foreigners are concrete individuals occupying localized social space. One

can view them, talk to them, and touch them, engaging in a host of everyday interactions. On the other hand, foreigners represent a world beyond the local, a greater social totality that may feel tantalizingly out of reach. Their apparent flexibility, mobility and affluence, unhindered by local constraints of kinship or the responsibility of enduring social ties, makes them representative of a social world that many Chinese would like to be a part of. As figures, foreigners mediate between these realities, points of both contact and access.

This process of continuous self-making and self-representation is also a distinctly urban one in China. As I have shown here, it is tied to the circulation of images and figures of foreigners in such diverse spaces as advertising, teaching, architecture, company field trips and other everyday interactions (see also Kondo 1990). While rural China is itself being transformed in multiple ways (Bossen 2002; Liu 2000; Yan 2003), the discourses of modernization rearticulate the rural as inescapably backwards, traditional, or, to use Li Zhang's formulation, the focal point of China's "lateness," like a temporal anchor dragging behind the ship of state (2006:462). Rural areas become, both discursively and politically, barred from innovation, transformation, and renewal. In these terms, the countryside's lack of modernization is not simply due to the absence of foreigners, an absence produced more by state residential policies than disaffection, but to the very inconceivability of the foreign figure's marked presence in a rural area. In contrast, the figure of the foreigner saturates urban contexts and where absent is often actively recruited to authenticate the modernizing process.

My argument here has shown the way in which foreigners are recruited as semiotic resources, mediating figures between the local context and a world lying beyond. It makes little difference whether they appear as images, as in Mr. Bai's advertising billboards, or in the flesh—in both cases their presence offers the possibility of Chinese experiencing that world, perhaps always at a distance but nevertheless real. Foreignness promises agency: the perceived ability to take control of the forces of modernization, and the freedom to move beyond local contexts and limitations. At the same time, selfhood is firmly rooted in a stable sense of Chinese ethnonational identity. As individuals who are, according to Simmel, both near and remote, foreigners are persistently recruited into these narratives of modernizing Chinese identities.

Notes

Acknowledgments. I thank the editors of this special issue for inviting me to participate, as well as their generous comments and sharp insights. Research for this article was supported by a postdoctoral fellowship from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

¹This article is based on ethnographic research conducted in Shenyang, China over several visits, most recently in 2010. I allowed the choice of pseudonym for my informants to be dictated by their own

naming preferences. Those who preferred English names therefore have English pseudonyms, and those who preferred Chinese names have Chinese pseudonyms. To further protect their identities, the name of the school has also been changed.

²Washington English School had about four hundred registered students at the time of my fieldwork, each paying on average 4000 yuan (US\$615) a month. In return, students were offered three hours of native speaker instruction and six hours of Chinese teacher instruction in English each week.

³In this article, I have not edited English language speech in order to maintain its prosodic quality. I indicate where possible which utterances are in Chinese and which are in English. Consistent codemixing of the two languages was a common feature of everyday speech among both teachers and students.

⁴Modernization is discursively configured as a solely urban phenomenon, distanced both spatially and metaphorically from rural areas. Foreigners, too, are predominately urban. Since residence for visitors is still controlled by the Public Security Bureau, foreigners (even anthropologists) need special permission to live in the countryside and are therefore only rarely seen there.

⁵Millie Creighton notes a similar dynamic in Japanese uses of foreigners in advertising, writing that “they are often stripped of individual identity and their own personalities, encountered and experienced as representative *gaijin* . . . rather than real individuals” (1995:155).

⁶Technically, under regulations published in 2004, foreigners in China may apply for permanent residence and eventual citizenship. In practice, however, “the regulations on permanent residence are very strictly applied and such residence is reportedly mainly given to ethnic Chinese. . . . Permanent residence of foreigners is still treated as the exception rather than a normal aspect of a modern society” (Pieke 2012:60). Pieke goes on to note that in 2010, for example, no foreigner in the province of Yunnan held permanent residence, although some were in the process of applying (60; see also Choe 2006:101). One of the problems is reportedly the lack of clarity in which policies govern the permanent residence and application to citizenship of foreigners in China, prompting local bureaucrats to simply refuse to process such cases.

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