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Who is a *Laowai*? Chinese Interpretations of *Laowai* as a Referring Expression for Non-Chinese

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Laowai, a referring expression popularly used for non-Chinese, has found favor in the discourse of Chinese people. This article investigates Chinese interpretations of *laowai* based on survey data from a sample of 290 native Chinese. The results show that not all non-Chinese are called *laowai*. This expression—connoting a more complimentary meaning—is more often used by the Chinese respondents to name Western white people than any other cultural groups. For those who are not called *laowai*, other traits are used to refer to them—for example their nationality, skin color, or other features. The use of the expression *laowai* is generally based on ethnicity rather than nationality. Chinese interpretations of *laowai* reflect two features. First, the respondents tend to oversimplify the heterogeneity of other cultures. Second, the Chinese idea of *shuren society* regulates the respondents' choice of the term *laowai*, which serves a dual purpose: 1) separating an "out-group" from the "in-group", and 2) expressing a willingness to cultivate a friendly relationship between Chinese and non-Chinese.

Keywords: laowai, referring expressions, nationality, non-Chinese, *shuren society*

Introduction

In the era of globalization, when no country can survive without interacting with others in the world, "foreigners" are almost permeating every corner of Chinese people's life. According to the statistics of the 6th nationwide population census, released on April 29, 2011, the permanent non-Chinese residents in China were up to about 600,000, among which Koreans, Americans and Japanese are the top three nationalities (National Bureau of Statistics of China, n.d.). Other major non-Chinese include Burmese, Vietnamese, Canadian, French, Indian, German, and Australian. In 2012, foreign travelers to China

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amounted to more than 27 million (China National Tourist Administration, 2013). With these changing demographics, it is increasingly common for Chinese to engage with non-Chinese in everyday social interactions. Consequently, many native Chinese find themselves referring to non-Chinese in their daily life.

Referring to nationality is a common way of describing foreigners. But there are many other terms of reference using cultural traits accepted by natives but possibly disfavored by foreigners. For example, Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese use *gringo* to refer to Americans, Japanese refer to Westerners as *gaijin*, and Thai call Westerners *farang*. For native Chinese, the term *laowai* (in Chinese 老外) is widely used and has become an archetypal phrase. However, *laowai* is not used as an address term. It is commonly used to refer to non-Chinese for communication other than face-to-face interactions. In the Chinese language, referring expressions and address terms are partly overlapping yet different. Some terms referring to human beings can also be used to address people, such as *laoli*, *laozhang*, *laoshi* (teacher), *mama* (mother), *erzi* (son), etc., and many address terms can often refer to people, such as *zhangjiaoshou* (Prof. Zhang), *wangxiaojie* (Miss Wang), *zhaojingli* (Manager Zhao), and so on. Referring expressions consist of "a repertory of forms manifesting social relationships and roles between persons," while address terms are used by "addresser to addressee in the speech event by means of oral, written, or telegraphic channels of verbal communication" (Yao, 2008, p. 20). So it is reasonable to define *laowai* as a "referring expression" according to the distinction mentioned above and the current usage of *laowai* in China.

The term *laowai*, which originally meant "layman" or an unprofessional person in a particular field, is now widely used and can be translated as "non-Chinese," "foreigner," "outsider," or "alien" in the Chinese Mandarin language in mainland China (Qi, 1998). *Laowai* is composed of two Chinese characters: *lao* (老) meaning "old," and *wai* (外) meaning "outside." The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary (Dictionaries Compilation Office, 2010, p. 821) defines *laowai* as "foreigner" that is used in a humorous way. This term nowadays has become so popular in China that it is not only used in daily conversations but also in official media and more formal writing (Liu & Zhang, 2010). For instance, there are such TV programs in China as "Laowai teaches you oral English," and "Laowai's view of China"; and such headlines as "Why Laowai love Chinese traditional martial arts?", and "'Crazy laowai' do business and have fun in China" in *People's Daily* and *China Daily*, the most authoritative and influential newspapers of China. Recently, there has appeared in Shanghai a brand-new monthly English magazine called *Laowai Magazine*, offering free fashion, lifestyle, and culture tips.

However, *laowai* is considered by many non-Chinese to be a pejorative term equivalent to "a taunt" or "a gibe," thus conveying Chinese people's hostility, even xenophobia towards them (Bi, 2000; China Daily, 2008; Liu & Zhang, 2010; Qi, 1998, 1999; Zhang & Chen, 2008). One of the possible reasons may be that they are confused by the polysemy of the word *lao* since it not only implies a positive and honorific meaning, such as *laoshi* (teacher), *laobiao* (cousin) and *laolian* (experienced and skillful), but also may bear such derogatory connotations as "disgracefully old" in *laodongxi* (old disgraceful guy), "old and outdated" in *laogudong* (old-fogey), and "stubborn" in *laowangu* (old stick in the mud) (Dictionaries

Compilation Office, 2010, pp. 817–820). Many non-Chinese are uncertain about the exact connotation of *lao* in *laowai*. For these reasons, they suppose that the term *laowai* bears unfriendliness, and they appeal to native Chinese to abandon it and choose some other more "friendly" terms of reference (French, 2007). Because of the complaints, many commercial departments in Beijing are required to avoid using *laowai* to refer to foreigners. Some Chinese salespersons have even received fines or cut wages as a consequence of calling foreigners *laowai* when they were at work. But these measures have not decreased Chinese people's practice in using the term *laowai*. What is perhaps even more irritating to foreigners is that many Chinese, when located overseas, call the local people *laowai* though they themselves are actually *laowai*.

With the differing interpretations by Chinese and non-Chinese, the term seems to convey a range of different semantic meanings. In view of the above disagreements about the use of *laowai*, it is important to clarify the connotation of this Chinese referring expression so as to remove the communication barriers caused by the possible misunderstanding of the term. More essentially, understanding Chinese interpretations of the term *laowai* may not only enhance the cultural consciousness of native Chinese, but also help foreigners understand Chinese culture as well. This study is accordingly designed to reveal Chinese interpretations of the referring expression *laowai* by answering the following questions:

(1) Who is called a *laowai* by mainland Chinese and who is not? (the criteria for identifying people as *laowai*)
(2) What is the semantic understanding of the term *laowai* by mainland Chinese?
(3) What kind of cultural traits can be perceived from the referring expression?

Literature Review

Referring Expressions

Linguistically, referring expressions are "deixis, anaphora, naming, and other forms of designation of objects, places, or persons in the environment or under discussion in spoken discourse" (O'Connell & Kowal, 2008, p. 143). Such expressions can indicate the relationship between the referenced object (or person) and the listener; thus, owing to their descriptive quality, these expressions may reveal the speaker's perspective and his or her evaluation of the referent (Hou, 2012). Since they are not "a neutral tool" (O'Connell & Kowal, 2008), referring expressions have become the focus of discourse study, especially in political discourse. In political speeches, speakers in TV interviews or other media interviews are found to divide the world into "us" and "them," or "we" and "they," which imply a "good guys" and "bad guys" mentality (Suleiman & O'Connell, 2003, p. 419). Accordingly, referring is not just "about giving and receiving information but about navigating social relations'' (Stivers, Enfield, & Levinson, 2007, p. 19), and it "serves as a revelation of the speaker's perspective toward the person or institution or object of his or her discourse" (O'Connell & Kowal, 2008, p. 148). Therefore, there is a practical motivation to study the referring expressions for non-Chinese, in this case, the term *laowai*, so as to detect Chinese evaluation of non-Chinese.

Historical Development of Chinese Referring Expressions for Non-Chinese

In Chinese history, there have been all kinds of referring expressions for non-Chinese, which reflect the ever-changing perception of non-Chinese by the Chinese people. As early as 140BC in the booming Han Dynasty (202BC–220AD), China began its diplomatic interactions with countries from the Middle East, and with other East Asian countries. The emperors at that time, ruling a prosperous ancient China, despised foreigners and called them either *fan* (番), referring to non-Chinese of the ancient time, or *yi* (夷), referring to the non-Chinese living to the east of China; both terms sound contemptuous. However, the slighting attitude did not hinder Han rulers from receiving foreigners who came to China and sharing cultural practices. During both the Han and Tang Dynasties (618-907AD), another flourishing period, China adopted an open policy and treated visiting foreigners as guests, receiving them in a special place named the Court of State Ceremonials. This seemingly contradictory behavior rightly reflects that the rulers held a "power mentality" which was evident in both their displaying of financial resources and sharp intellect, as well as a general feeling of superiority (Mei, 2006). Nevertheless, with the decline of Chinese national power in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing Dynasties (1644–1912), China suffered from long-term invasion and plunder by Japan and various Western powers. Therefore, Chinese hatred for these invaders was reflected in their referring expressions. In the discourse of that time, Japanese were called *wokou* (pirate), *riben guizi* (Japanese devil), or *xiaoriben* (tiny Japanese). Westerners were called *yangren* (foreigner or outlander), *yangguizi* (foreign devil), *waiguolao* (gringo), or *hongmao* (red hair). Lu Xun, the titular head of the Chinese League of the Left-Wing Writers in the 1930s, frequently mentioned *yangren* and *yangguizi* in his fictional writing and essays; these terms were understood as a rhetorical use bearing hatred for foreigners (Yu, 2001). This influence can still be found in people's communication in today's China.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Chinese people have gradually improved their international status. As a result, they began to use a more equal and neutral term *waiguoren* (foreigner) to refer to the people who come from other countries. With China's open and reform policy put into practice in the late 1970s, more and more foreigners have come into China and Chinese have gone abroad. In the current period of globalization, there has been much more contact between Chinese and people around the world, so more friendly terms are used for non-Chinese. For example, *waibin* (foreign guest), *keren* (guest), and *waiguopengyou* (foreign friend), etc. are employed in formal situations, while in everyday contexts Chinese tend to call foreigners *laowai*. The term *laowai* was first used in Taiwan and then was introduced into mainland China in the early 1980s and soon became popular (Yu, 2001). It was included in *Dictionary of Chinese Catch Phrases* in 1984 (Qi, 1998). Nowadays, it has become a good-humored nickname for non-Chinese, particularly for Westerners, and is now a highly naturalized way to refer to foreigners in China (China Daily, 2008). Extensions of this term have also been coined, such as *xiaolaowai* (foreign child), and *nülaowai* (female foreigner)

Literature on the Term Laowai

There are several academic studies in China on the referring expression *laowai* (Bi, 2000; Liu & Zhang, 2010; Qi, 1998; Yu, 2001; Zhang & Chen, 2008). Qi analyzes the use of *laowai* by reviewing his international students' (mainly European and North American students) writing on *laowai*. He thinks that the term *laowai* is different from the Japanese term *gaijin*, which is used by native Japanese, especially Japanese children, to refer to non-Japanese. *Gaijin,* implying disdain and exclusiveness, is more often used by innocent Japanese children, while *laowai* is used almost by all Chinese. For native Chinese, the term *laowai* shows a complicated attitude of contradiction towards foreigners, which embodies coexistence of intimacy and alienation, respect and contempt. It came into being with modern Chinese history that successively witnessed humiliation, xenophobia, envy, and worship. Qi appeals to foreigners to understand the cultural background of the term *laowai*, and Chinese speakers to care about foreigners' feelings when using the term, with the purpose of improving intercultural communication.

Zhang and Chen (2008) conducted a quantitative study of Chinese university students' internal motivations for using *laowai* to refer to foreigners, and non-Chinese students' psychological reactions when they are called *laowai*. The results show that the meaning of the term in actual use varies according to the users' motivations. The term has a complicated mixture of meanings including friendliness and hospitality, appreciation and admiration, as well as depreciation and exclusion. The authors finally conclude that the term *laowai* is a slightly derogatory term according to the Chinese and the non-Chinese students' opinions.

Liu and Zhang (2010) studied the term's various connotations using both a questionnaire and interviews with native Chinese and non-Chinese. They found that the use of *laowai* entails a continuum that centers on a neutral meaning but extends to two extremes of complimentary and derogatory meaning. This continuum reflects both Chinese expectations of an equal international status with foreigners and their complicated attitude towards outsiders.

However, there are some limitations to these studies. First, "non-Chinese" are usually confined to mainly Westerners and other Asian people located near China, possibly because of more frequent contact with people in these cultures. This supposition, then, unnecessarily limits the concept of "non-Chinese." Additional questions include: Is it true that all non-Chinese are called *laowai*? If not, why are they not called *laowai*? How do native Chinese refer to them? Also, do the two extremes of complimentary and derogatory meanings balance each other? The purpose of this study, then, is to conduct a closer investigation of how native Chinese use and understand the term *laowai*.

Methods

Research Design and Procedures

Step 1: The first step was to gather general information about the term *laowai* by interviewing some native Chinese. Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted among Chinese college students and teachers, doctors and nurses, and salespersons, with a male to female ratio of 5:6. The time of

duration varied from ten minutes to one hour. Three open interview questions were chosen to focus on the image of *laowai*:

(1) Where do you think the people who are called *laowai* come from?
(2) In your opinion, what features and qualities does a *laowai* have?
(3) What special connotations do you think the term *laowai* has?

The interviewees were also allowed to convey additional ideas concerning *laowai* besides answering the above questions.

Step 2: Based on findings from the interviews, the second step was to design a two-part questionnaire to obtain native Chinese respondents' understanding of *laowai*. Part I was identification of *laowai* according to nationality. Fifteen countries (Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, India, Saudi Arabia, Russia, the UK, Germany, Denmark, Australia, the USA, Brazil, Congo, and Kenya) from the five continents were listed. The choice of the sample countries was based on the interviewees' answers to the first question. The guiding principles were: (1) these countries should include all the major races in the world, and (2) these countries should be well known to most Chinese people. Respondents were asked to choose the way they refer to people from these sample countries: by using nationality, *laowai*, or other terms?

As nationality is insufficient to elicit the respondents' precise concept of *laowai*, Part II involved identification of *laowai* according to ethnicity and provided eight photos of non-Chinese people from which the respondents should choose the ones they referred to as *laowai* (see Figures 1–8). These non-Chinese included people from around the world with different skin colors: yellow, white, black, and brown. The respondents were informed that none of the people in these photos were Chinese but were not informed of the nationalities of those pictured. The guiding principle of photo selection was that no national traits could be readily detected from the photos, such as national costume and national architecture, so as to reduce the hints of nationality from the context as much as possible. The photos were chosen from *China Daily* online, a very influential English newspaper in China, and *Baidu*, the largest Chinese search engine in the world.

Figure 1. Source: **Baidu**

Figure 2. Source: **China Daily**

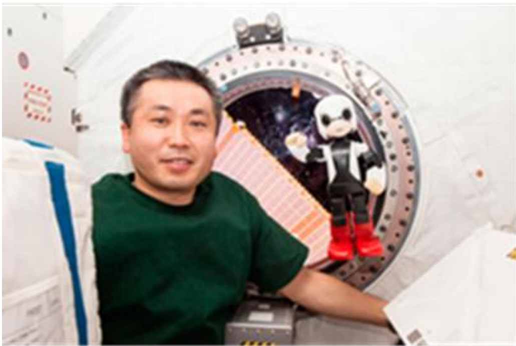

Figure 3. Source: **China Daily**

Figure 4. Source: **Baidu**

Figure 5. Source: **China Daily**

Figure 6. Source: **Baidu**

Figure 7. Source: **China Daily**

Figure 8. Source: **Baidu**

Step 3: While the first two steps were designed to elicit the respondents' generalized concept of *laowai*, Step 3 aimed to obtain more detailed descriptions of *laowai* from the respondents. Following Kuhn and McPartland's approach (1954), the respondents were asked to write in Chinese as many sentences or words as they could to describe their mental images of typical Chinese and typical *laowai*. The descriptions were to include both physical features and personality traits of these people. From the detailed descriptions, the semantic coverage of the term *laowai*, or its connotation, was more broadly understood. To improve accuracy of the data, the back-translation technique (Brislin, 1970) was adopted in order to provide a reliable English translation of the descriptions.

It was found that the descriptions of *laowai*—especially those about personality traits—were diversified, with some descriptions mentioned much more than others. These descriptions provided a basis for designing a semantic differential (SD) test of *laowai* (Osgood, Tannenbaum, & Suci, 1957). Five bipolar adjective pairs assessing perceived qualities were chosen and included both personalities and values: open-minded vs. conservative; indirect vs. direct; extrovert vs. introvert; collective vs. individual; and cautious vs. adventurous. A sixth adjective pair, derogatory vs. complimentary, was included to elicit the general valence of the term *laowai*.

As Figure 9 shows, the two bipolar adjectives A versus B lie on the two extremes: the position marked 0 is labeled "neutral," the 1 and -1 positions are labeled "slightly," the 2 and -2 positions "quite." By working out the mean score for each pair, we can discover what qualities best portray the image of *laowai*.

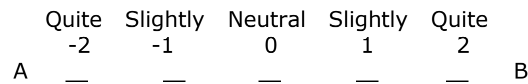

Figure 9. The 5-point bipolar adjective scale.

Participants and Measures

Three hundred questionnaires were sent through e-mail or handed out in paper form to native Chinese in shops, supermarkets, hospitals, schools, universities, government offices, and factories. Two hundred and ninety responses were found to be valid. The majority of the respondents (about 80%) are located in Jiangsu Province, an economically developed province along the eastern coast of China. The rest live in Beijing, Shanghai, or Shandong Province. Although the sample did not cover every province of mainland China, the respondents come from the places where people have more chances of meeting and communicating with non-Chinese. The respondents are from various walks of life: teachers, students, doctors, nurses, engineers, shop assistants, civil servants, employees, farmers, retirees, and others. Their ages range from 12 to 65 years old. Male and female respondents make up 46% and 54% of the total, respectively. All 290 respondents were asked to complete the questionnaires in Step 2 and Step 3, in that order. The benefits are that the same respondents would keep unity of the survey while the limitations are that the respondents might become tired of the array of questions and give random responses. In the data analysis, those with any one of the items unanswered were excluded from the analysis. Both the interviews and the questionnaires were conducted in Chinese so the participants could respond without any linguistic barriers.

Results

Results of Step 1

Of the 11 interviewees, nine think *laowai* mainly refers to Western white people, while only two believe all non-Chinese can be called *laowai*. Interviewees' descriptive qualities for *laowai* can be classified into two groups: appearance and personality. The connotations of the term *laowai* vary from negative to neutral to complimentary, with the neutral meaning exceeding the other two.

Results of Step 2

In Step 2, varying percentages of the non-Chinese were called *laowai*, described by their nationality, or described with other referring expressions. Figure 10 shows that the likelihood of being referred to as *laowai* varies greatly according to country of origin. Three groups emerge from the data: "a high *laowai* rating" (65.9%–45.2%) including people from the USA, the UK, Germany, Australia, Denmark, and Russia; "a mid *laowai* rating" (40.8%–36.9%) for Congolese, Kenyan, Brazilian, and Saudi Arabian people; and "a low *laowai* rating" (17.8%–2.8%) for Vietnamese, Singaporean, Indian, Korean, and Japanese people.

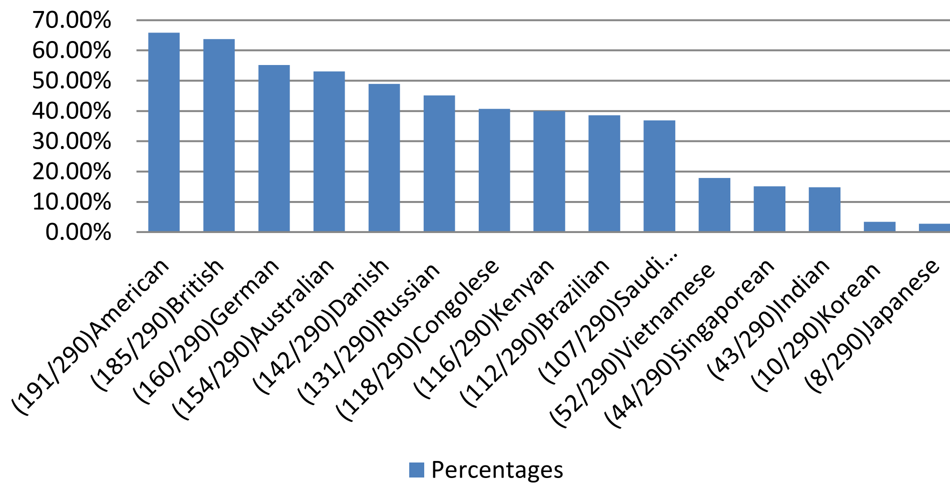

Figure 10. Ranking of laowai-referring (n=290).

As Figure 11 shows, Chinese respondents generally refer to non-Chinese by their nationality. Although Figure 11 does not show as great disparity in percentage as Figure 10, it gives an opposite ranking—Asian people, such as Korean (79.3%), Singaporean (78.6%), Vietnamese (73.4%), Japanese (69.7%), and Indian (68.3%) being the top five who are most likely to be called according to their nationality. Americans (31%) and British (34.5%) have the lowest likelihood of being referred to by nationality; interestingly German, Kenyan, and Congolese people have equal likelihood of being referred to by nationality (about 40%).

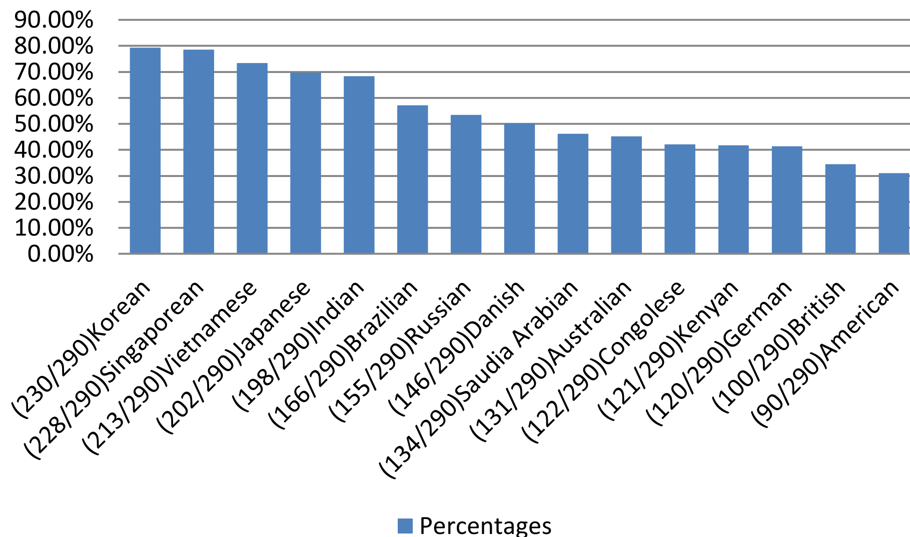

Figure 11. Ranking of nationality-referring (n=290).

Part I also captured other referring expressions that have low rates but cannot be ignored. The first category includes terms bearing national features related to modern times or history. For example, Japanese are also called *xiaoriben* (tiny Japanese) (24.5%) or *ribenguizi* (Japanese devil) (3.1%), Koreans *bangzi* (stick) (17.2%), Indians *A'san* (the third) (16.9%), and Vietnamese *houzi* (monkey) (8.6%). These terms sound racist, possibly motivated by lingering anger over Sino-Japanese wars and other conflicts between China and these countries.

British, American, German, and Russian people are also referred to by using the name of the countries plus "*lao*" (佬), a different Chinese character having the same pronunciation with "*lao*" (老) in *laowai*. "*Lao*" (佬) refers to an adult in a slighting way, such as *yingguolao, meiguolao*, *deguolao* and *eguolao*. Brazilians are also referred to as *sangbaguoren* (people from nation of samba) and Danish as *meirenyu* (mermaid). Both of the percentages are as small as 1% or so.

The second category includes terms concerning people's skin color or continent of origin. People from such African countries as Kenya and Congo are called *heiren* (black people) (29.4%) or *feizhouren* (African) (6.1%). Saudi Arabians are called *zhongdongren* (people from the Middle East) (16.9%). Additionally, *heiren* is also used to name Indians and Saudi Arabian.

The photo selections made in Part II result in three categories, as shown in Figure 12: a "high *laowai* rating" for the Western white faces in Figures (photos) 5 and 2, chosen by over 90% of the respondents; a "mid *laowai* rating" for Figures (photos) 8, 1, 4, and 6, chosen by about 56-43% of the respondents (apparently these are generally grouped as darker complexioned); and a "low *laowai* rating" for the East Asian faces in Figures (photos) 7 and 3 by about less than 8%, getting the least agreement on the *laowai* label. It seems that the "high *laowai* rating" in photo selection coincides with that of Step 2, based on the respondents' supposition that all people in the USA, the UK, Germany, Australia, Denmark, and Russia are white.

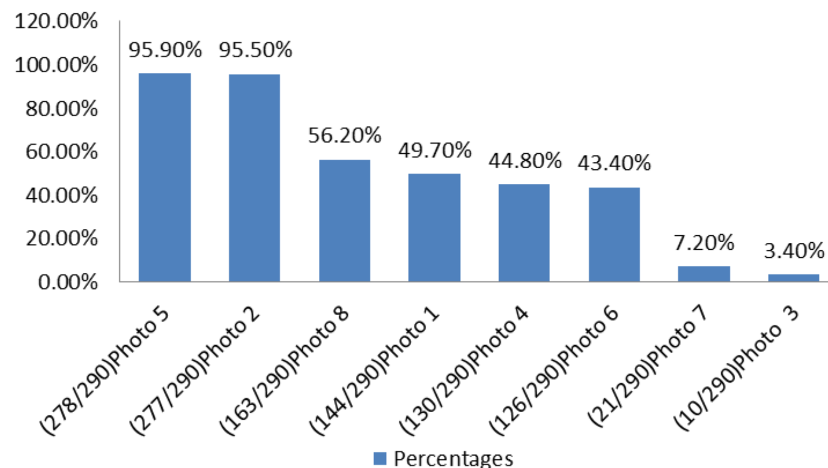

Figure 12. Ranking of photo selection (n=290).

Results of Step 3

In Step 3 we collected descriptive adjectives, nouns, and phrases associated with "typical Chinese" and "typical *laowai*." These descriptors were translated into English and then back-translated into Chinese to check the accuracy of the English translation (Brislin, 1970). The most frequent descriptive words and phrases are shown in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Table 2 vividly shows the physical images of typical *laowai* in the minds of most respondents. The skin color, hair color, eye color, and the shape of nose and body are all clearly framed, and are quite different from Chinese features (Table 1).

Table 1. Top Six Physical Features of Typical Chinese (n=290).

Physical features	Number of Respondents	Percentage %
Yellow skin	235	81.0
Black hair	229	80.0
Black eyes	206	71.0
Thin	117	40.3
Short	102	35.2
A flat face	97	33.4

Table 2. Top Seven Physical Features of Typical Laowai (n=290).

Physical features	Number of Respondents	Percentage %
White skin	265	91.4
Tall and strong	262	90.3
Blonde hair	239	82.4
A distinctly outlined face	164	56.6
Blue eyes	157	54.1
Black skin	99	34.1
A high-bridged nose	93	32.1

Laowai's personalities are also distinguished from those of native Chinese. As Tables 3 and 4 show, besides sharing some similar qualities with typical Chinese, such as being friendly and polite, *laowai* are supposed to be open-minded while Chinese are conservative; *laowai* are direct and Chinese are indirect; *laowai* are extroverted while Chinese are reserved and shy; *laowai* are individualistic and Chinese are collective; *laowai* are adventurous and Chinese are cautious; *laowai* are confident and Chinese are modest, and so on.

Table 3. Top 15 Personality Traits of Typical Chinese (n=290).

Personality traits	**Number of Respondents**	**Percentage %**
Indirect	87	30.0
Conservative	85	29.3
Diligent and hardworking	74	25.5
Hospitable	71	24.5
Polite	67	23.1
Modest	66	22.8
Introvert	63	21.7
Friendly	57	19.7
Traditional	56	19.3
Face-saving	55	19.0
Honest	40	13.8
Caring about interpersonal relations	39	13.4
Collective	38	13.1
Zhongyong (the golden mean)	37	11.4
Cautious	36	12.4

Table 4. Top 15 Personality Traits of a Typical Laowai (n=290).

Personality traits	**Number of Respondents**	**Percentage %**
Open-minded	154	53.1
Passionate	90	31.0
Not sticking at trifles	67	23.1
Direct	56	19.3
Humorous	54	18.6
Friendly	52	17.9
Extrovert	41	14.1
Polite	38	13.1
Individual	33	11.4
Energetic	31	10.7
Independent	30	10.3
Innovative	29	10.0
Adventurous	21	7.2
Confident	19	6.6
Conversable	18	6.2

In addition to the listed descriptors in Tables 3 and 4, some other words and phrases are used to describe *laowai* personalities, though they get very low percentages. According to these Chinese respondents, *laowai* seem to possess more positive than negative qualities, even more positive than those attributed to Chinese themselves. For example, about 5% of the respondents use "equal" and "democratic," and 4% use "practical and realistic" to describe *laowai*; while such contrary words as "autocratic," "hierarchical," and "corrupt" are chosen to describe Chinese, though they make up only 2.3%. The pair of antonyms "efficient" and "inefficient" is adopted to define typical *laowai* (2.4%) and typical Chinese (1.4%). Thus, it is not surprising to find about 3.5% of the respondents think *laowai*, generally speaking, are better-educated and more refined than Chinese. At the same time, only two groups of prejudicial words and phrases are discovered describing *laowai*. One is "violent" (2.9%), including "high crime rate," "warlike," and "fierce." The other is "inflexible" (1.7%), which is expressed as "mechanical," "dull," "rigid," and "stereotyped."

Drawing upon the descriptors generated above, Step 3 also entailed a more focused analysis of five adjective pairs evaluated on a semantic differential scale and the results are depicted in Table 5. The mean scores of the first five pairs of descriptions are positive, implying that *laowai* personalities tend to be more open-minded, direct, extroverted, individualistic, and adventurous. According to the ranking of the mean scores of all the five pairs, "collective vs. individualistic" (1.20), "direct vs. indirect" (1.10), and "cautious vs. adventurous" (1.05) stand out as being much more evident in distinguishing *laowai* than the other two pairs: "conservative vs. open-minded" (0.90) and "introvert vs. extrovert" (0.85).

The 0.07 mean score of the pair "derogatory vs. complimentary" in Table 5 suggests that the term *laowai* has a slightly complimentary understanding, in spite of its closeness to the neutral meaning.

Table 5. Results of the SD Test on the Personalities of Laowai and the Connotations of the Term Laowai (n=290).

Descriptors	**Quite (-2)**	**Slightly (-1)**	**Neutral (0)**	**Slightly (1)**	**Quite (2)**	**Descriptors**	**Mean**
Conservative	0	14	73	131	72	Open-minded	0.90
Indirect	0	0	58	145	87	Direct	1.10
Introvert	0	0	101	131	58	Extrovert	0.85
Collectivistic	0	0	44	145	101	Individualistic	1.20
Cautious	0	0	58	160	72	Adventurous	1.05
Derogatory	2	10	253	15	10	Complimentary	0.07

Discussion

Who is a Laowai—and Who is Not?

Although there are few unanimous agreements on who is exactly a *laowai* and who is not, the tendency to refer to non-Chinese as *laowai* appears to be grouped into three different "*laowai* ratings." The three groupings present some generalizations about *laowai*. Generally speaking, Chinese respondents use *laowai* when referring to non-Chinese whose physical features and personality traits are quite different from native Chinese. The degree of being different from native Chinese changes the likelihood of being referred to as *laowai*. Caucasians or Western white people are considered *laowai* by a majority of the Chinese respondents and black people by nearly half. East Asians have the least possibility of being referred to as *laowai*. The general principle is that, for those non-Chinese, the more different both in appearance and personality from native Chinese, the more likely they are to be called *laowai*. Namely, the Chinese criteria of judging *laowai* mainly lie in the ethnicity of the non-Chinese instead of the exact nationality. The identification of *laowai* in Step 2 elicited the respondents' choice of American, British, and other Westerners as having "high *laowai* rating"; however the results of the photo selection in Step 2 complicates these results somewhat. For example, the figures with black skin in Photo 4 fall in "the mid *laowai* rating" group (44.8%) although these are actually Americans (compare to Part I findings where

U.S. Americans were ranked as "the high *laowai* rating" of 65.9%). This indicates that the Chinese respondents identify *laowai* according to ethnicity (mainly skin color and appearance) when they are not sure of the nationality. It is quite likely that the choices of *laowai* in Part I are made based on the Chinese respondents' overgeneralization that a nation's predominant race represents the whole country, for example, Americans are white, Congolese are black, and Singaporeans are yellow (East Asian). Accordingly, it can be deduced that American-born Chinese may not be called *laowai* even though they are American.

Those described as *laowai* look totally different from Chinese, who have yellow skin, black hair and eyes, and who are short and thin. The most common conceptualization of *laowai* is as Western whites, "the high *laowai* rating" in the photo selection (Figure 12) and the descriptions of physical traits of *laowai* (Table 2): white skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes. The conceptualization of *laowai* also allows for an important percentage of black people being included in the descriptor (34%). Tall and strong was also a very strong indicator for *laowai* (90%), which of course could include people from both of these racial categories.

Laowai personality traits (Table 4) seem to be in a binary relationship to those of native Chinese (Table 3), possibly reflecting (perceived) cultural differences between the East and the West. People in Western countries such as the USA, the UK, Germany, Australia, Denmark, and Russia do not belong to the Confucian cultural sphere in which China and many other Asian countries (like Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Vietnam, and Singapore) share similar values and religion influenced by Confucianism (Zeng, 2013). This places them in the "out-group" and therefore they become typical *laowai* in the Chinese context, ranking as "the high *laowai* rating" (Figure 10). The semantic differential assessment of the six adjective pairs in Table 5 further indicates "typical" *laowai* traits, which are commonly thought of as Western traits in contrast to Eastern, Chinese traits (Table 5). "Individualistic," with the highest mean score, comes to be the most crucial value for *laowai*. "Direct," as a common trait of communicating and behaving of Western people, is the second highest characteristic. "Adventurous," a particular way of handling matters associated with many Westerners, is the third important quality reported by respondents. "Open-minded" and "extroverted," the two personality traits or dispositions, are also used to describe *laowai,* though some respondents think they are not as typical as the other three.

For "the mid *laowai* rating" and "the low *laowai* rating," some respondents would like to use other ways to refer to non-Chinese including nationality, national features, skin color, or place of residence. The nationality-referring way is widely used for Asians such as Koreans, Singaporeans, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Indians (Figure 11). It is likely the so-called "cultural proximity" (Kastenholz, 2010; Straubhaar, 1991) of these groups that affords Chinese the ability to name East and South Asians by their nationalities. Most Chinese can distinguish precisely which country the non-Chinese Asian comes from according to his or her appearance and language. More explicably, Chinese and other Asians share similar values, for instance, past-oriented time sense, collective social orientation, indirect conversation pattern, and so on, among which collectivism is the most firmly held by Chinese and other Asians. It pertains to societies in which people are integrated into the strong and cohesive "in-group" or "we-group," and people of in-group protect each other in exchange for "loyalty" (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010, p.91). It is highly likely that Chinese tend to include those who are perceived as similar to themselves in the big family of the

East, and often in a Confucian cultural sphere. Compared with Caucasians and other races, these Asian people are much closer to Chinese; thus they are not real foreigners or *laowai*.

In addition, some non-Chinese who are not commonly called *laowai* get nicknames based on their current or historical national features, though they are also named according to their nationality. Japan is one such example. In Part I, about 27.6% of the respondents chose *xiaoriben* (tiny Japanese) or *ribenguizi* (Japanese devil) to refer to Japanese people; both of these terms bear contempt and hatred. It was also found that the respondents choosing such humiliating terms vary in age. This may be explained by recalling the decades of wars between China and Japan—before and during the Second World War—that have left a lasting imprint on the Chinese people. The young Chinese generation, though not having experienced the wars, continues to remember the hatred by studying the period of history and through media publicity about the wars. *Bangzi* (stick) for Koreans, *A'san* (the third) (16.9%) for Indians, and *houzi* (monkey) (8.6%) for Vietnamese are similar examples.

Some of the groups identified as *laowai* by a majority of the respondents were also nicknamed by a small number of other respondents as *meiguolao* (Americans), *yingguolao* (British), *deguolao* (German), or *eguolao* (Russian). The suffix *lao* (佬), meaning an adult man in a slighting sense, is added to the end of the nationality, which suggests the speaker's aversion and disdain to the referent. This may find the direct explanation in their common national features of the past—Western powers that invaded China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. When being bullied and not able to revolt effectively, the Chinese at that time could only express their wrath by verbal disdain. There are very complex reasons behind the use of these prejudicial terms: politically, the incapable Chinese government at that time; economically, the ever-weak national power; diplomatically, the foreign invasion; psychologically, Chinese nationals' abreaction; and linguistically, the Chinese language with rich connotations, and so on. Some other neutral nicknames concerning national features (or cultural heritage) are also found in the survey, such as *sangbaguoren* (people from nation of samba) for Brazilians, and *meirenyu* (mermaid) for Danish, both of which are based on the Chinese respondents' stereotype of these countries. The terms can possibly be regarded as the antonomasia or new names for these non-Chinese.

For other non-Chinese who are not called *laowai* by some respondents, their skin color or living place becomes the basis for reference. For example, Congolese and Kenyans, two sample nationalities presented in Step 2, are called *heiren* (blacks) (29.4%) or *feizhouren* (Africans) (6.1%), though also considered as *laowai* by nearly half of the Chinese respondents (40.7% and 40% respectively). Chinese tend to know less about Africans compared with people from Asia. Therefore many Chinese cannot exactly identify their nationality (especially those who have black skin) and have to refer to them according to their skin color or (presumed) continent—Africa. In addition, there are a small number of respondents who prefer to use *heiren* to refer to people in India, Saudi Arabia, and Brazil—which is again based on their assumption that people in these countries all have darker skin color. This assumption is, of course, inconsistent with the fact that other complexions (yellow, brown, and white) are also part of the population in these countries. Another similar example is *zhongdongren* (16.5%) for Saudi Arabians, a general name supposed from the geographical area—the Middle East.

Semantic Understanding of the Referring Expression Laowai

Contrary to many foreigners' understanding of *laowai* as a negative term (Bi, 2000; China Daily, 2008; Liu & Zhang, 2010; Qi, 1998; 2001; Zhang & Chen, 2008), this study finds that the term *laowai* is generally regarded by Chinese respondents as a neutral-complimentary expression referring to non-Chinese. Table 4 for personality traits of typical *laowai* contains few negative descriptors and most of them bear positive connotations, such as open-minded, passionate, friendly, polite, energetic, and innovative.

The adjective pair of derogatory vs. complimentary, as Table 5 shows, seems to confirm Liu and Zhang' study (2010) that the use of *laowai* is a continuum centering on neutral meaning and going to two extremes of complimentary and derogatory meaning. What is worth noticing from Table 5 is that the survey crystalizes the continuum by showing how far the two extremes are from the center. The two obviously unbalanced extremes display the tendency of the complimentary connotation, thus producing the mean score 0.07. For the different choices at the three points—derogatory, neutral, and complimentary—the respondents' mentality toward the term *laowai* can be broadly understood. The landslide choice of the neutral meaning (253) of *laowai* may be interpreted as indicating that the Chinese respondents wish to live peacefully in the world together with people from other countries, and to enjoy an equal relationship with them (Liu & Zhang, 2010). The choice of complimentary connotation (25) shows that the respondents regard non-Chinese, especially Westerners, as superiors; it may also align with an admiration for the advanced science and technology of the Western countries (Zhang & Chen, 2008). The least choice of negative connotation (12), however, possibly reveals some respondents' fear and anxiety about foreign competition and possible humiliation (Zhang & Chen, 2008).

Chinese Cultural Traits Perceived from the Referring Expression Laowai

Chinese interpretations of the referring expression *laowai* generally reflect two cultural traits. First, due to the lack of knowledge of some other countries, the respondents tend to oversimplify the complexity of populations and the heterogeneity of other cultures on the basis of presumed physical appearance and cultural values. The "overgeneralized" are usually those with whom they are least familiar. The term *laowai* is a broad generalization of the non-Chinese who seem to be different both in appearance and values from native Chinese. This cultural trait can also be detected in the terms *heiren* (blacks), *feizhouren* (Africans) and *zhongdongren* (people from the Middle East), all of which generalize the non-Chinese. One concern is that such oversimplification and overgeneralization of other peoples and cultures without considering their respective features can hinder the deeper understanding and result in intercultural communication barriers.

Second, the use of the term *laowai* favored by the Chinese respondents can be fundamentally attributed to the Chinese idea of *shuren society* (Yang, 1995; Fei, 2005), which is made up of acquaintances who have a close relationship in privacy or in public. Based on the structure of "a differential mode of association," the *shuren society*, also called "society of relationship," is composed of "distinctive networks spreading out from each individual's personal connections" (Fei, 1992, p.71). It advocates that people in society should maintain a close relationship by setting up a social network in which everyone can help each other, benefit from each other and live harmoniously. This attitude habitually separates the "out-group" from the "in-group." Those who are similar to "us" are put in "our"

nei group, meaning "inside," while those who are different from "ourselves" are grouped as *wai* or "outside." Therefore, non-Chinese are differentiated from native Chinese and are labeled *laowai,* which implies the existing boundary between the "in-group" and the "out-group."

While seeming somewhat exclusive, the term *laowai* suggests a casual and friendly relationship between the speaker and the referent as advocated by *shuren society*. The Chinese prefix *lao*（老）is added in front of the word *wai* and thus the term *laowai* gets the same word building with the often-used Chinese referring expressions *laoli, laozhang,* and *laowang* (also used as address terms). The prefix *lao*, mainly meaning "close and amiable" in the modern Chinese language, expresses the equal, free and tolerant personal relationship in the modern Chinese society (Zhou, 2000). So *lao* plus one's surname (*Li, Zhang, Wang*, etc.) is used to refer to (or address) someone you know and feel familiar with, but who is not necessarily elder than you. Foreigners are people from the outside, and *wai* (outside), opposite to *nei* (inside), can describe this commonality of non-Chinese. The "close and amiable" *lao* added in front of *wai* can alleviate the exclusiveness the word *wai* brings. In this way, the term *laowai* also indicates Chinese willingness to regard non-Chinese as their friends and to cultivate friendship with them. This mentality goes as such: even though you are from the outside about whom I have little knowledge, I will still try to treat you in a friendly and cordial way, just as I treat my friends *laozhang* and *laowang*. It rightly coincides with a famous saying of Confucius, an ancient Chinese sage, "Is it not a delight after all to have friends come from afar!"

Conclusion

With its increasingly frequent use in Chinese discourse, the term *laowai* is becoming as common a referring expression as *laozhang* and *laowang*. When its connotation is clarified, misunderstandings between Chinese and non-Chinese should be minimized, so as to smooth intercultural communication in the age of globalization.

The Chinese respondents' interpretations of the term *laowai* as revealed in this study reveal their own cultural traits. First, the respondents tend to oversimplify the heterogeneity of the world; second, with the influence of the Chinese idea of *shuren society*, the respondents habitually separate "out-group" from "in-group" while willing to cultivate a friendly relationship with non-Chinese. The oversimplification of other cultures and "in-group" vs. "out-group" separation are obstacles to accurately knowing the world. But the respondents' willingness to cultivate a friendly relationship with non-Chinese as reflected from the use of the term *laowai* is beneficial to intercultural communication between Chinese and non-Chinese.

As with all research, this study has some limitations. In particular, respondents' demographic information—such as gender, age, level of education, and occupation—was not incorporated into the methodology and discussion and so we cannot discern what possible impact such demographics might have on the findings. For example, the author finds that the Chinese respondents who have frequent contact with foreigners, such as foreign-language tour guides and foreign service specialists, prefer to distinguish non-Chinese by using the exact nationality rather than *laowai* as a referring expression. Additionally, respondents with some training in intercultural or cross-cultural communication are less likely

to adopt prejudicial terms to refer to non-Chinese. A future study including the effects of demographic variables would likely add further insights into the uses and conceptualizations of *laowai* in China.

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