

Digital Keywords for China: Perceptions and Portrayals in English-language Novels¹

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Introduction

As China emerges as a potential global superpower, it is more important than ever to identify and analyse the ways in which the nation has been represented in English-language novels. Images of China are not static and have evolved in significant ways over time. Today, despite—or perhaps because of—restrictions on press freedom, China is frequently associated in the media with authoritarianism, pollution, economic expansionism, and outbreaks. However, this is only a partial image of a large and complex country and its people, which is home to millennia of history and culture. Perhaps the only thing to be said with certainty about China is that observations that attempt to encompass the nation in its entirety are necessarily ideological and imprecise. In response, we sought to investigate the complex and variegated history of literary representations of China and produce keywords using twenty-first-century data mining techniques. This article details the development of our research project—incorporating the productive tensions generated between the keywords tradition and literary data mining—and offers analysis of the results generated to reveal the evolution of perceptions and portrayals of China in the cultural imaginary.²

In 1976, the cultural and literary critic, Raymond Williams, published his classic, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, which inaugurated the keyword studies tradition. Originally intended as an appendix to *Culture and Society* (1958), which the publisher insisted could not be included due to printing costs, Williams wrote over sixty notes and short essays on a range of words that were used in interesting or difficult ways. Williams continued to add to this collection for over twenty years and the project evolved from a glossary filled with definitions and etymologies into what Williams called a vocabulary: “This is not a neutral review of meanings. It is an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion, which has been inherited within precise historical and social conditions and which has to be made at once conscious and critical”.³ Williams’ project exposed the need to engage with the explicit—as well as implicit—connections people were making in discussions of culture and society. In the 1970s, he thought about keywords in two connected senses: “they are significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought”.⁴ Some keywords are analogous to Jacques Lacan’s *points de capiton* or ‘master-signifiers’; they are words that bind together other signifiers into a cohesive worldview. Others are more like an uncomfortable remainder, that introduce problems and issues of which cultural critics need to be aware. The

keyword studies tradition has evolved into a heterogeneous range of studies dedicated to topics ranging from American cultural studies, modern India, and identity, to gender, digital culture, and sound, as well as numerous essays, many of which have been published in the pages of *Critical Quarterly* and the journal of the Raymond Williams society, *Key Words*. Wiley Blackwell's 'Keywords in Literature and Culture' series provides keywords for various periods in literary history. Meanwhile, Williams' original project was comprehensively updated over the course of a decade by members of the Keywords project at the University of Pittsburgh and published in a collection edited by Colin MacCabe and Holly Yanacek entitled *Keywords for Today* (2018). These projects demonstrate that keywords matter because they shed light on the processes involved in public conversation and reveal how we portray and perceive others in culture and society.

Although Williams never made explicit his criteria for selecting a keyword, MacCabe and Yanacek characterise them as "lexical items that concentrated political and cultural disagreement".⁵ Williams thought of keywords in the same register as we might consider a 'key concept' or a 'key argument', but the term also possessed a specialist meaning in index and catalogue systems. Today, the term 'keyword' more commonly refers to the term entered into a digital database or search engine and can also mean a type of data or metadata. The *OED*'s primary definition is "a word serving as a key to a cipher or code", one that provides "a solution or explanation" or one that is "of particular importance or significance" while the secondary definition is a term "chosen to indicate or represent the content of a larger text or record" in an "index, catalogue, or database". Bruce Bergett and Glenn Hendler note that, "these usages represent keywords as data that unlock mysteries" or as "tools for information retrieval within various archiving systems".⁶ Other terms used by Digital Humanities scholars include headwords, rubrics, typographies, concepts, metadata, and collocated keywords, but we have chosen keywords as our descriptor because our project intentionally crosses the semantic divide. Any attempt to bridge the gap between such different usages is necessarily contingent and ambivalent in its outcomes but appropriate for handling what is at once a very particular and a very general problem: the meaning of China.

In the first part of this article, we highlight some of the ways in which China has historically been depicted in English-language novels as well as the connections and tensions between the keywords tradition and current Digital Humanities projects. In the second part, we show the ways in which techniques in literary data mining can be deployed to offer fresh insight into representations of China. We explain the methods of data collection, linguistic analysis, and the coding exercise. In the third part, we detail the keywords for China and provide insight into the shifting ways in which China was represented over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Overall, this

article details a new and potentially generative model for examining literary perceptions and portrayals at scale as well as in-depth analysis of keywords for China.

China in the Cultural Imaginary

In the preface to his seminal study, *Scratches on our Minds* (1958)—which is concerned with the cultural reception of China and India—Harold Isaacs recounts an Indian fable entitled ‘The Blind Men and the Elephant’. The fable describes how six blind beggars touched different parts of the same enormous animal and eventually “stood there quarreling, each being sure he knew exactly how the elephant looked, and each calling the others hard names because the rest did not agree with him”.⁷ Isaacs was concerned with negative and stereotypical perceptions of China and India at mid-century and asked “what ideas, notions, and images do Americans have in their heads about these hitherto distant lands and peoples?”⁸ His concern was that lack of knowledge would render the public susceptible to misleading accounts of images and events dimly seen. They would see only select parts of the elephant and never receive an accurate impression of the whole. There are social and political stakes in the words and phrases that we use to talk and write about a country and its people, and for much of the twentieth century the novel was the most accessible gateway to understanding distant lands. Consequently, we sought to trace patterns and clusters within the shifting associations that China held for foreign observers and offer a set of keywords that highlight the ways in which these perceptions and portrayals have evolved.

There are relatively few novels that explicitly thematise China. However, references to China frequently appear in English-language novels, even though most authors have limited, if any, experience of East Asia. Because these appearances are often brief, they tend to coalesce perceptions, impressions, and misconceptions about China and frequently assume shared knowledge with readers. Literary scholars typically make claims based on a few exceptional texts. While individual perspectives and expert opinion are necessary for in-depth knowledge and understanding, when it comes to the depiction of China, such studies risk reifying the critic’s beliefs and unconscious biases. As Colin Mackerras states: “what all observers of China appear to have done is to filter what they see through the spectacles of their own backgrounds, ideologies, biases, and experiences, and they cannot avoid the impact of the period and place in which they live”.⁹ At the same time, experts typically provide more nuanced and informed depictions of China that are not necessarily reflective of the broader cultural landscape. It is our hope that offering a large-scale record and analysis of the broader literary context can help to supplement and enhance existing and future studies of the literary and cultural representation of China and catalyse new questions for discussion and debate.

Scholars of Chinese history have long noted the nation's tumultuous relationship with the rest of the world. Colin Mackerras relates representations of China to the movement of a pendulum; the reception of China from these nations swings between utopian and dystopian extremes according to a complex array of socio-historical developments.¹⁰ Over the last decade, revisionist accounts have positioned the eighteenth century as a Sinocentric world in which China was synonymous with immense wealth and fertility. China held a mirror up to English culture and played a complex role in “the transformation of English ideas of civilisation, enlightenment, and aesthetics”.¹¹ The Victorian Age saw the rise of expatriate-authored narratives, immigration narratives, and the emergence of fears and anxieties about Asia as Chinese people were increasingly represented by the extremes of gentlemanly refinement and degenerate barbarism. Ross Forman notes that fears of immigration, miscegenation, and assimilation are as integral to narratives about China and the Chinese people as “the fantastical landscapes of opium dens and the equally fantastic invocation of secret societies, revenge killings, and plans for the Chinese invasion or takeover of Britain”.¹² One of the most influential texts during the early twentieth century was Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* (1931), which was widely credited with providing a more nuanced depiction of Chinese people and their culture. Her seminal essay, ‘China and the West’, published two years after, presents China as proud, fiercely independent, and suspicious of foreigners in the wake of the Boxer Rebellion and the Opium Wars. Highlighting how both Chinese and Europeans display “excessive pride and self-satisfaction” in their homelands, she underscores a fundamental difference between the two sides: China sought isolation while Western nations “force their civilization willy-nilly upon the Far East, calmly convinced that it is superior”.¹³ In the second half of the twentieth century, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) led to a period of introspection and questioning of the ‘Orientalist gaze’ and Western portrayals of non-Western regions. Scholarship increasingly rejected accounts of China that treated representations as neutral or objective and concentrated instead on the formation of the image of China as an episteme. The ways in which China is viewed are rarely directly related to reality but are instead shaped by a plenitude of images, fantasies, and ideologies that reflect the preoccupations of the observers. Said's work dramatically altered the way cultural historians think about concepts of representation, politics, and power, and inspired writers such as Zhang Longxi to demonstrate the ways in which critics typically used the image of China to construct an Other that could “map out the contours of Western culture as a self-contained system ... a reservoir of dreams, fantasies and utopias”.¹⁴

The long tradition of scholarship on literary depictions of China draws on a wide array of novels, plays, poetry, essays, treatises, maps, travel writing, and artifacts. The novels typically

thematise China and close reading is then extrapolated to make claims about the broader cultural context. One of the advantages of our approach, however, is that it enables the study of traces of China which are written by authors who have little direct experience yet represent and shape broader sociocultural trends. The approach taken here may initially appear at odds with traditional research practices in literary scholarship and criticism that favours engagement with ambiguities, uncertainties, the imprecise and the inexact. Numbers ostensibly offer exactitude but may lead to reductive conclusions, an increase in complexity, and the erosion of life experiences. However, the data and statistics drawn from literary texts offer scholars the opportunity to engage with new forms of generative experience and, we argue, should enter into a reciprocal relation with discursive forms of knowledge. As Steven Connor argues, “To translate a sign or sequence of signs into digital form is not to fix it, but to mobilize or virtualize it, to allow for translations and transformations that are otherwise unlikely, expensive or impossible”.¹⁵ Rather than stymying complex arguments through reductive methodologies or replacing ambiguity and uncertainty with cold precision, quantitative data offers scope for serious engagement with the chief concerns of the humanities. It is our hope that the approach adopted here will help open the field to new—potentially more complex—questions about the place of China in the cultural imaginary.

China and Literary Data Analytics

Our collection of passages about China from English-language novels makes it possible to examine the representation of the nation across the literary field as a whole; the project utilises vastly larger sampling than the tiny number of novels that comprise the canon. Although each passage is a small part of each novel, treated *en masse* they reveal broad trends in the cultural construction of China. Consequently, the passages can help determine whether depictions in individual texts are part of a general trend or outliers. As such, the database has the potential to contribute to nearly every pre-existing and ongoing study of the cultural representation of China by offering data that either supports, nuances, or challenges current research.¹⁶ The project covered a scope of 117 years from 1900 to 2017, which yielded 12,186 passages from 8,438 English-language novels. We coded the data according to a set of keywords such as the following: Chinoiserie, Women, Foot binding, Opium, Warfare, Food, Arts, Economics, and Communism. We then measured the frequency with which each term appears, which consequently enabled us to trace the changing associations for China in the cultural imaginary.

We developed the *China in English-language Novels* database, which is freely available online. The data contains the following records:

- Excerpt

- Keywords
- Character Involved (gender if applicable)
- Chapter
- Page from Book
- Title of Book
- Author
- Nationality
- Year of Original Publication
- Book's Edition
- Remarks

The final category may contain information such as direct sources of full texts, items of note, duplicate entries from anthologies, and other comments when we are collating the extracts. Out of the five extracts from Eric Ambler's *Cause for Alarm* (1938) that contain the words 'China' or 'Chinese', the first entry is:

- "We were eating in a Chinese place, and I have heard that the Chinese are a very difficult race to astonish; but I seem to remember seeing the cook, a Cantonese with a figure like a water butt, goggling incredulously at us through the service door."
- Food; Service Industry; Alterity.
- Nicky Marlow (m)
- 10
- *Cause for Alarm*
- Eric Ambler
- British
- 1938
- Penguin, 2009
- N/A

The database lists up to three keywords in three separate columns to aid data queries. Sometimes searching a novel delivers only a short quotation and, in these instances, we conduct additional searches for low-frequency words to pick out, further contextualise, and lengthen the quotation. This additional context is often invaluable for determining the keyword for a passage.

In order to collect passages in a systematic manner, we made a list of literary novels based on the Wikipedia pages entitled “[Year] in Literature”. These articles present lists of the literary events and publications in a particular year. Our team of Research Assistants (RAs) extracted the list of novels from each article and excluded children’s literature, Young Adult (YA) literature, drama, poetry, non-fiction, and novels that are not written in English. Authors of YA literature tend to publish multiple short novels per year and consequently risk having disproportionate influence on the collection. The RAs then listed full metadata for each text. Additional data highlights relevance to our project by indicating whether the novel contains the terms **CHINA** or **CHINESE** and where searchable text can be located. The latter criterion is intended to aid future projects that seek to search English-language novels for terms unrelated to China. The list of literature and accompanying links to digital copies have made this into an admittedly slow and labour-intensive search engine for the vast majority of English-language novels. With sufficient time and manpower, it is possible to search for any term and it is our hope that this model will inspire other scholars to investigate the literary representation of a range of topics beyond China. The Literature List contains the following records:

- Title of Book
- Author
- Nationality of Author
- Year of Publication
- Applicable for China Data (Y/N)
- Source
- Remarks

We chose to exclude texts that contain more than ten instances of the terms **CHINA** or **CHINESE** because they were deemed to explicitly thematise China. Rather than rehearsing stereotypes or reproducing cultural assumptions, these texts tend to offer more considered and nuanced representations of China and consequently stand as outliers. In addition, the high frequency of the terms **CHINA** and **CHINESE** means that these texts would exert inordinate influence on the collection. The RAs later returned to the dataset for quality control: removing repeat entries, double checking the accuracy of the metadata, and normalising the data. They located digital copies of each text using resources such as Googlebooks, Project Gutenberg, and Internet Archive. As far as possible they linked the text to standard authority controls, and the Library of Congress Control Number (LCCN) will be used in future editions of the database to ensure accuracy when recording metadata.

We are often asked about the potential to employ artificial intelligence or machine learning to search novels for references to China, but the key barrier is the lack of a unified open-source catalogue of novels. Texts published from 1927 onwards fall under copyright law and are unavailable unless purchased. However, we are able to search texts using snippet view, which shows information about the book and extracts that can be directed using search terms. The snippet view reveals a few sentences for each instance of the search term. Texts are nearly always available for snippet search via Google Books, Amazon or Internet Archive. The main difficulty that arises from this method occurs when we are unable to obtain the full quote. When this occurs, the RAs search for adjacent low-frequency words to piece together the complete quote. When we analysed the quotations, we often found it helpful to read the surrounding chapters, and sometimes the entire novel, to situate the extract within its context. For instance, we took care to ensure that we understood whether a problematic or stereotypical utterance about China was stated by a character who is meant to be unlikeable or untrustworthy. We are mindful that the snippet view is a partial view of a novel and, as we will see in later examples, sometimes a stereotype is repeated so that it can be ironized or used to identify a bigot or villain. The U.S. and U.K. versions of Amazon appear to employ their own digitisation method and search functionality; if a text is unavailable on one, it is likely to be available on the other. We also accessed alternative databases such as the HathiTrust Digital Library, eBooks@Adelaide, and Scribd for rare texts. The remaining novels were purchased through Kindle and other ebook providers; these editions are fully searchable.

The keywords were determined through collocation or proximity to the words **CHINA** or **CHINESE**. We analysed each reference using a set of qualitative research questions divided into two stages. Stage 1 consists of the collection of the raw data on lexical words within a certain proximity of the search terms and leads to the identification of a list of keywords for analysis (Stage 2).

Stage 1: Identification of keywords:

- 1) Identify the topic of the citation.
- 2) Identify lexemes (basic units of meaning) in proximity to the search terms **CHINA** or **CHINESE**.
- 3) Explain how these lexemes generate meaning by reading the surrounding text.
- 4) Compile a list of these lexemes and record their frequency to generate a list of keywords.

Stage 2: Analysis of keywords:

- 1) Identify the sense in which a keyword is used and check if any semantic shifts (changes in meaning) have taken place over the course of the data. Consult the *Online Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* to check for additional meanings.

- 2) Identify the duration and time frame of the keyword.
- 3) Record trends or associations that accumulate.

The coding scheme is based on definitions from the *OED*. The list of keywords was generated by examining clusters of quotations and considering the authors' nationalities and the publication years. We derived definitions for each keyword and identified sub-categories based on frequency. Identification of these keywords enabled us to detect patterns in the collection and to record the frequency with which key conceptions of China appeared over time. Keywords derived from quotations from novels are always provisional and contingent upon the reader's interpretation and consequently, the database is not free from cultural bias. However, by coding the results, we aimed to provide a data-driven approach to representations of China that can supplement and nuance other studies in the field.

Digital Keywords for China

We sought to entwine the keywords tradition, inaugurated by Raymond Williams, with the technique of literary data mining. Since Williams' original *Keywords* volume and its expanded revision, published in 1976 and 1983 respectively, we have seen the emergence of large electronic corpora, online search engines, and the integrated digital version of the *OED*, the latter of which has stimulated reconsideration of the origins and usages of particular words. Researchers in the keywords tradition increasingly use these tools in combination with cultural analysis and close reading, based on the authors' wide reading practices. Writers frequently refer to the etymologies and illustrative quotations provided by the *OED* and data such as n-grams provided by Google Books that mark the frequency with which a specific word appears. The revised *OED* and electronic corpora enable researchers in the keywords tradition to comment on usage with greater confidence and make decisions about which words to study based on quantitative and qualitative analysis of actual language use. Colin MacCabe and Holly Yanacek highlight collocation, in particular, as a crucial tool for examining a keyword's semantics and historical development but also note that "collocation patterns and analysis of frequency are not the best instruments for investigating many of the questions [*Keywords for Today*] most cares about: often, our entries focus on fine nuances of meaning and connotation, which emerge from close reading of significant texts".¹⁷ Similarly, the editors of *New Keywords* supplemented their entries with related material from the *OED* and "other national dictionaries of English as well as from specialized social science, humanities, or cultural studies dictionaries. We also provided copies of appropriate web searches and, where relevant, Williams's entry or entries relating to the same keyword".¹⁸ Brad Pasanek's online database, 'The Mind is a Metaphor', makes available the opportunity to search and sort metaphors from

eighteenth-century writing which he then used to perform what he terms ‘desultory reading’, a form of unsystematic perusal frequently employed by Enlightenment thinkers: “Because my study of eighteenth-century English literature took in a wide variety of printed and electronic texts—often both simultaneously—it entailed a style of extensive, discontinuous reading, which is signalled by my selection of headwords. Much of this reading, guided by keyword search, was self-conscious drudgery, almost algorithmic in its step-by-step consideration of examples”.¹⁹ The resultant ‘philosophical dictionary’ arranges quotations under headwords, in a methodology that combines the use of keywords with search engines. Pasanek’s ‘desultory reading’ is not dissimilar to our own reading of quotations although ours are first systematically tagged with specific keywords and our reading is chronological rather than semi-random. Meanwhile, the Typologies component of Alison Booth’s ‘Collective Biographies of Women’ project identifies a wide-ranging selection of keywords drawn from a corpus of biographical narratives. Booth’s thoughtful response to Moretti’s work and the allegations of sexual violence against him remind us of the importance of biographical criticism, which is often excluded from macroanalytic and topic modelling projects. Booth encourages an approach that “retains biographical and textual specificity, including differences of gender, in what we call ‘mid-range reading’, to interpret biographical narratives in networks”, and “our critical methods should be sensitive enough to zoom in to recognize biographical detail in the big picture of disciplines and even nations”.²⁰ Booth’s ‘mid-range reading’ is similar to our own reading of the quotations under each keyword and encourages us to be attentive to biographical detail, even while shifting between macro and micro scales to construct a genealogy of representations of China.

Digitized access to literary texts has enlivened close reading practices by enabling rapid search and comparison. Michael Hancher argues for a form of close reading that is dependent “not on distant reading but on minute particulars discovered by digitized access to published texts”.²¹ In this respect, the digital revolution enables us to access a far wider array of texts and our bespoke methodology enables us to trace connections and patterns throughout literary history. Using **CHINA** and **CHINESE** as search terms enables a form of close reading across multiple texts that is focused on one trace. Similarly, the editors of *Modernism: Keywords* (2014) envision literary history through the trope of the ‘bounce’, conceiving of words and texts as ‘balls’ that collide, leaving imprints of one another: “By focusing our attention, we bring one ball or one word or one text into the foreground and place others in the background, but by frequently shifting focus, we activate a continual alternation between what is foreground (text) and what background (context)”.²² Our ethos is similar, but we consider our approach to be more systematic. Rather than attempting to account for multiple colliding balls with unknown vectors and velocities, we identify keywords in

the data and map patterns and associations; this approach deliberately corrodes the hierarchy between foreground and background, allowing the pattern or trace to rise to the surface.

Despite the increasing number of research projects that attempt to bridge the gap between the keywords tradition and the practice of literary data mining, there remain significant tensions. We view these tensions as productive antagonisms that complicate and nuance the research process. For instance, Lisa Marie Rhody views text mining as “steeped in the masculinized rhetoric of scale and ambition”²³ and explores the ways in which feminist approaches to text analysis might evade positivistic claims of objectivity. Data mining methods typically “treat writing as a field of relations to be modelled, using equations that connect linguistic variables to social ones”.²⁴ The problem with such approaches is that they risk effacing nuances, concealing errors, and the concerns of minority groups may be excluded. Laura Mandell notes that quantitative cultural analytics often reduces gender to a binary and notes that reading texts from a distance often risks producing stereotypes and clichés. She argues that statistical results are not meaningful without close reading: “dynamically reading, generating, and analyzing numbers are essential to making interpretative quantification possible”.²⁵ Data mining strategies typically depend on similarities to identify patterns, but this also means that differences risk being ignored or erased in the process. The small research team who worked on our project comprised a diverse collection of scholars of varying genders, ethnicities, nationalities, sexualities, and career stages. Our decision to place close textual analysis in a non-hierarchical relation with literary data mining simultaneously highlights patterns gleaned from traces that would otherwise be overlooked, while reintroducing nuance and avoiding crass generalisations. Instead of creating graphs, maps, and trees, we made use of literary data mining techniques to identify keywords. By close reading the quotations organised according to keyword, we were able to analyse trends and shifts in perceptions and portrayals of China.

Depictions of China and Chinese people wax and wane over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and significant peaks appear in the late 1930s, late 1950s, and early 2000s. These dates coincide with the Second Sino-Japanese War, the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, and a period of rapid economic growth. A significant trough appears between 1966 and 1976, which coincides with the Cultural Revolution, and may reflect fears and anxieties within the English-speaking world. Predictably, the most common keyword is **CHINOISERIE** which reflects the adoption and spread of porcelain around the world. The second most popular keyword is **REMOTE** which appears 1300 times. It refers to instances when China is referred to as a country very far away, on the other side of the world, or as an index of foreignness. Keywords such as **HEALTH**, **CRIME**, **FOOD**, and **WOMEN** are also common, appearing 273, 390, 984, and 921 times respectively.

Overall, the data indicates that China is typically associated with distance and otherness, war, poverty, food, femininity, crime, mystery, and restaurants. Closer analysis of individual keywords enables us to place them within their historical context and reveals new connections and patterns. While our analysis primarily organises the quotations historically, other productive avenues would foreground attributes such as genre and geography. The following sections highlight key findings for the keywords for: the Chinese people; a far and distant land; health and sickness; crime; opium; food; and women. Throughout our analysis, we carefully read the surrounding material, and sometimes the entire novel, to gain greater understanding of the context in which an utterance is made. We are mindful of the fact that novels are heteroglossic and a narrator or a character does not necessarily express the views of the author. We are also attentive to genre and take account of historical fiction, science fiction, parodies, and imitations that may deliberately express anachronistic views. For example, *Devil May Care* (2008) is a James Bond continuation novel by Sebastian Faulks that imitates the deeply problematic Orientalist stereotypes employed by Ian Fleming. It is also important to note that although derogatory terms such as ‘Chink’ appear with disappointing frequency, these terms only appear in the data set when found in proximity to the search terms **CHINA** and **CHINESE**; at present, we do not have the resources to search for variants. Some of the points are not surprising but they clearly establish context and chart the directions that Orientalist depictions have taken over the course of a hundred-year period.

The Chinese People

The data set reveals various stereotypes about Chinese people as they evolve over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which helps render outliers more distinctive. The clichéd image of the Chinese Mandarin and the term ‘Chinaman’ are common throughout the 1930s and 1940s—we found 68 and 89 instances respectively—but significantly decline in the latter half of the century. The word ‘Chinaman’ later appears in Carol Shields’ *Larry’s Party* (1997), which comments directly on prejudice. Viv Bondurant states during a conversation with her co-worker, Larry: “Well, look, you just can't say Chinaman anymore. It sounds prejudiced. You have to say Chinese person.” “Oh.” “Saying Chinaman's like saying Wop or Honky.” “My old dad says Chink.” “Exactly. There you have it. We’ve come a long way, baby”.²⁶ Chinese people are often depicted as incomprehensible and undesirable although these stereotypes were ironized later in the century. Accordingly, the famous detective, Hercules Poirot declares, “What I say is one face is very like another face—that’s what I say. If we were all Chinese, we wouldn’t know each other apart” in Agatha Christie’s *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933).²⁷ Chinese people are here presented as multitudinous and indistinguishable for comic effect. However, twenty-first century novels present characters who make such utterances as ignorant. Christina Schwarz’s *Drowning Ruth* (2000) features a character

called Imogene who believes in past lives and draws on outmoded cultural stereotypes: “You were a Chinese spy. Your eyes have that little slant and you’re always so quiet, watching people. You know things, but you don’t tell.”²⁸ Meanwhile, John Sayles’ *A Moment in the Sun* (2011) features the educated and open-minded Diosdado, who despairs of his father who calls bribes “seed money” and Chinese people, “yellow monkeys”.²⁹ On the one hand, such depictions risk repeating racist caricatures, but on the other hand, they are off-set by the critical lens through which such utterances are observed.

Depictions of Chinese people most often present eyes as the defining racial characteristic; there are over 50 novels that contain descriptions of Chinese eyes as alternately slanting, squinting, flat, tilted, sleepy, and wise. Sadly, this trope has not declined and numerous references to Chinese eyes persist into the twenty-first century. For example, *Doctor Sleep* (2013) by Stephen King and *A Brief History of Killing* (2014) by Marlon James contain references to characters defined by their eyes. Chinese eyes are sometimes employed as a synonym for duplicitous intent. For example, a line in Percy Walker’s *The Moviegoer* (1961) equates eye shape with deceit: “There is on her desk a snapshot of her father and it is this very crowding of the cheekbone into the eye socket, narrowing the eye into a squint-eyed almost Chinese treacherousness, which is so ugly in him and so beautiful in her”.³⁰ The presumption that Chinese people are untrustworthy also appears in S. S. Van Dine’s *The Kennel Murder Case* (1933): “Moreover, I imagine he always comes in silently—it’s a Chinese characteristic. On general principles, the Chinese never want their movements, however innocent, to be known to foreigners”.³¹ We also identified several instances of Chinese people being characterised as impassive and inscrutable in novels by August Derleth, Ian Fleming, and Susan Sontag, as well as in the depiction of O’Brien’s servant in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949): “He was a small, dark-haired man in a white jacket, with a diamond-shaped, completely expressionless face which might have been that of a Chinese”.³² The image of an old and dishevelled Chinese man, often bearing mystical wisdom or insight, is a common trope in English-language novels between 1945 and 2000 and he typically only appears for one brief scene. He is variously described as “a very small and ancient Chinese”³³, “an old, mummified Chinese”³⁴, “a tall, stooped Chinese, an ageless old man”³⁵, and “some ancient little Chinese martial-arts master”.³⁶

References to the large population of China first appear in John Brunner’s science fiction novel, *The Martian Sphinx* (1965), which anticipates his concern with over-population in *Stand on Zanzibar* (1969). Under Mao Zedong, the Chinese population doubled in size and Brunner’s concerns were inspired, in part, by this rapid growth. Similarly, Maia Lee in Rick Riordan’s *Big*

Red Tequila (1997) states: “You don’t understand what a billion means unless you’re Chinese”³⁷, and in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005), Henry Perowne thinks to himself that “China is simply too populous”.³⁸ In David Lodge’s *Thinks...* (2001), the English novelist, Helen Reed, discusses the false assumption made by the famous thought experiment, ‘Searle’s Chinese Room’, that China has the largest population with a common language.³⁹ At the same time, the Chinese people are described as “the most interesting people in the world”⁴⁰ in Timothy Taylor’s *Stanley Park* (2001), and the “most wonderful people in the world”⁴¹ in Christina Stead’s *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940). The nameless sailor, represented by the zebra, in Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* (2001) is described as beautiful: “He had no facial hair at all and a clear, shining complexion. His features—the broad face, the flattened nose, the narrow, pleated eyes—looked so elegant. I thought he looked like a Chinese emperor”.⁴² Unfortunately, these positive representations are outliers and lack substantial commentary or insight about China or its citizens.

A Far and Distant Land

The word “China” in English-language novels often does not stand for itself but as a far and distant location to which characters escape or are exiled. China is often found in lists of exotic or remote locations, most commonly alongside India, and it is not uncommon for the two countries to be conflated or even confused: ““Do you know the East, sir?’ said Frank. ‘I know the Far East,’ said Colonel Julyan. ‘I was in China for five years. Then Singapore.’ ‘Isn’t that where they make the curry?’ I said”.⁴³ There are clear shifts in tonality throughout the twentieth century. During the late 1950s and 1960s, China is “wonderful”⁴⁴, the “favourite”⁴⁵, “preferred”⁴⁶, and, according to Patricia Fearing in Ian Fleming’s *Thunderball* (1961), “fascinating”,⁴⁷ and there are correspondingly few references to remoteness. However, opinions become increasingly polarised in the wake of the Cultural Revolution. China is described as either “fascinating, completely fascinating”⁴⁸ and “wonderful”⁴⁹, or a “godforsaken place”⁵⁰. Later, Anne Shepherd in Dean Koontz’s *Intensity* (1996) names her daughter, Chyna, after China: “I just suddenly realized one day that China is the only just society on earth, and it seemed like a beautiful name”.⁵¹ By contrast, Richard in Alex Garland’s *The Beach* (1996) names China as his worst destination: “I had a lousy time in China. I went for five days without talking to one person except when I ordered food in restaurants. Terrible food too”.⁵²

References to China as a far and distant land are often linked to reflections on the ways in which empathetic responses to suffering are reduced by distance. For example, in David Garnett’s *Go She Must!* (1927), the protagonist, Gerald Grandison, stung by rejection from his same-sex lover, exclaims that “It means no more to me than a famine in China”.⁵³ Similarly, Lorinda Pike in Sinclair Lewis’ *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935) is dismayed to discover that the influence of the

proto-fascist Corpo government has spread to Vermont and declares “it's like reading about typhus in China and suddenly finding it in your own house!”⁵⁴ These phrases allude to the notion that mass suffering has little impact if it takes place in a distant land. John Cowper Powys presents a more nuanced version of the sentiment in *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932) in which the relative nature of suffering is posed as a question when Tossie Stickle learns of her husband's death: “Did Tossie feel her grief worse than any of those who mourned? Or were the moans of some old Chinese wife on the banks of the Yellow River yet more heart-broken?”⁵⁵ Meanwhile, Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation of a Beheading* considers temporal as well as geographical distance: “He could perfectly well understand sensitive and intelligent thinkers not being able to sleep because of an earthquake in China; but being what he was, he could not understand why these same people did not feel exactly the same spasm of rebellious grief when thinking of some similar calamity that had happened as many years ago as there were miles to China”.⁵⁶ China is commonly invoked in order to highlight the relative nature of responses to suffering throughout the twentieth century but appears most regularly in speculative fiction that dwells on vast societal change such as Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), Aldous Huxley's *Island* (1962), and John Christopher's *The Guardians* (1970). The phrase “Clean your plate; people are starving in China”⁵⁷ appears in William Goldman's *The Princess Bride* (1973) and becomes a common admonition until the dawn of the twenty-first century. This phrase was likely inspired by reports of the Great Chinese Famine of 1959-1961.

The collocation “for all the tea in China” is a common expression in novels throughout the second half of the twentieth century and is used to connote immensity, mass, and scale. The variant “for all the *rice* in China” appears in *Le Bonheur fou* (1957) by the French author, Jean Giono.⁵⁸ The phrase “for all the *babies this side of China*”⁵⁹ appears in Walter D. Edmond's *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1936) and another variant appears in Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998): “Nelson was not going to sleep in our chicken house for all the *teeth* in China”.⁶⁰ Each version is usually linked to food, connotes immensity, and sometimes alludes to starvation in China. The final variant appears in James Michener's *Rascals in Paradise* (1957) and again alludes to immensity and wealth: “near Manila was a mountain of pure gold, belonging to no one and rich enough to pay all the taxes of China”.⁶¹ Similarly, the Great Wall is often referenced to convey magnitude and status, and occasional allusions to the bones buried within it are used to convey the scale and human cost of erecting such monuments. The notion of digging a hole to China is a common expression throughout the twentieth century that develops into numerous variants. Since China is not the antipode of either the UK or the US, the phrase more accurately reflects the notion that China was the exact opposite of Western nations in terms of culture and customs. Overall, the

data shows that English-language novels do not simply position China and the Chinese people on a continuum of Otherness but consistently position them in direct opposition to Western norms.

Health and Sickness

In the 1930s and 1940s, English-language authors often associated China with diseases such as cholera and typhus; the decline of this trope coincides with the development of public health systems in the 1950s. This image was nearly always coupled with the notion that it is a distant land, with the implicit notion that terrible events that take place there cannot affect foreign observers. Scientific medicine is typically presented as superior. Novels such as *The Narrow Corner* (1932) by W. Somerset Maugham and *The Keys of the Kingdom* (1941) by A. J. Cronin depict doctors who garner great prestige in China while characters refer to the need for missionaries to cure the Chinese people of a multitude of diseases in John Steinbeck's *The Wayward Bus* (1947). In the 1950s, several novels depict Chinese doctors, nurses, and dentists as competent and professional. However, in the wake of the H2N2 epidemic that originated in central China in January 1957, references to "Chinese flu" appeared in Judith Krantz's *Princess Daisy* (1980), Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* (1993), and Leon Forrest's *Meteor in the Madhouse* (2001). Charles Eric Maine's *The Darkest of Nights* (1962) depicts the spread of a novel coronavirus that originates in China and spreads around the world, resulting in quarantines, social distancing, and eventually, violent protests and anarchy in the U.K. The only references to SARS in connection to China appear in Vincent Lam's *Bloodletting and Miraculous Cures* (2006) and Danielle Lim's *Trafalgar Sunrise* (2018). We anticipate that a similar wave of associations between China and epidemics will emerge in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ali Smith's *Summer* (2020), which is part of the Seasons quartet that seeks to capture the contemporary moment in literary form, offers a reflexive comment on the representation of Chinese people in the age of social media: "According to the net people got it from eating snakes. Other places say bats and pangolins. Stuff has gone viral online about Chinese people eating little yellow snakes on skewers".⁶² Smith's novel is concerned with the substitution of factual truths with emotional truths in political discourse and the spread of populist rhetoric and tribalism. Consequently, references to China predominantly highlight the spread of xenophobic attitudes in relation to the pandemic: "You know what a skunk is, his mother says. God help us, probably someone somewhere is eating one right now and starting a new Asian virus. Nobody laughs".⁶³ The results of our project suggest that the delayed response of Western governments to the spread of COVID-19 was due, in part, to long-held cultural beliefs that China is a far and distant land (the 'antipode' of the U.K. and U.S.) coupled with submerged associations between the Chinese people, infectious disease, and, as we will discuss below, exotic food.

Chinese medicine becomes a convenient shorthand for a variety of bizarre and exotic medications that claim to treat a range of peculiar maladies. Although there were sporadic references to Chinese tonics, it was not until the 1960s that Chinese treatments and cures began to be portrayed in English-language novels and they became a recurrent motif. These range from powdered viper, “yeki bones”⁶⁴, “dragon bones”⁶⁵, “tiger bones”⁶⁶, “Tiger balm”⁶⁷, “yin-yang energies”⁶⁸, and the “Chinese Flip method”⁶⁹ to a host of ineffectual ointments, pills, unguents, and potions that, in combination, take on the character of the famous (fictional) Chinese encyclopaedia from the preface to Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things* (1966). Several of these treatments appear in science fiction tales such as Charles Beaumont’s ‘The Love Master’ (1960) and L. Sprague de Camp’s *The Tower of Zanid* (1982). Although they are initially presented as panaceas, Chinese tonics are increasingly associated with cures for emotional distress—for instance, Chinese bark is said to soothe sorrow—and are eventually reconceived as either aphrodisiacs composed of animal parts such as rhinoceros’ horn or serpent-bladder, or as beauty products.

Acupuncture first appears in Terry Southern’s *Candy* (1958) and is depicted in over 15 novels; although sometimes presented as mildly sinister or met with bemusement by various characters, the practice is nearly always depicted as harmless. Tai Chi first appears in 1985 and, unlike acupuncture, is unanimously presented in a positive light. Twenty-first-century novels depict Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) as exotic and mystical; these images are predominantly found in novels by British and American authors but feature heavily in the work of Canadian writers such as Thomas B. Costain, Cory Doctorow, and David Adams Richards. In Elisabeth Harvor’s *Excessive Joy Injures the Heart* (2000), the protagonist, Claire Vornoff from Ottawa, seeks a solution to her insomnia. Her “tiny Chinese doctor” speaks “so poetically that she was seduced”. In the end, she wonders if her inability to understand the process is due to “Oriental medicine being so obsessed with contraction and scatter”.⁷⁰ This peculiar phrase is Vornoff’s interpretation of the doctor’s otherwise lucid explanation of TCM practices. In this instance, the author demonstrates good understanding of TCM but includes a character who is utterly confused by it. David Leavitt’s *The Body of Jonah Boyd* (2004) suggests that TCM can produce dramatic results and Anne Armstrong experiences “a dream in which a voice speaking from a turtle’s mouth gave her instructions as to how she could cure herself”.⁷¹ TCM is rarely presented in an authentic manner and typically mystified or exoticized in English-language novels.

Crime

Chinese people are often associated with crime and criminality throughout the twentieth century, although the exact nature of the criminal activity evolves over time. Chinese criminals appear as a

series of archetypes that include highwaymen, pirates, bandits, gangs, and assassins. There are references to Chinese highwaymen in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1935) and throughout the 1940s, references to Chinese pirates and bandits abound. Rather than direct representations, characters typically refer to them as elements of a previous adventure. For example, in Phoebe Atwood Taylor's *The Left Leg* (1940), Leonidas remarks: "You're the one who crossed Tibet on a bicycle, and kidnapped a gang of Chinese bandits!"⁷² In Mary Renault's *The Charioteer* (1953), an encounter with Chinese pirates appears as part of a list of fantastical adventures and in J. D. Salinger's 'The Laughing Man' (1953), the titular character is kidnapped from infancy by Chinese bandits. These second-order representations suggest that Chinese pirates or bandits are a cultural trope that offers a shorthand for swashbuckling adventure rather than considered serious subject matter. The trope reaches its apogee in Angela Carter's 'The Bloody Chamber' (1979) in which the protagonist's mother is reported to have mastered a range of adventurous tropes: "outfaced a junkful of Chinese pirates, nursed a village through a visitation of the plague, shot a man-eating tiger with her own hand".⁷³ The attribution of these heroic exploits to the protagonist's mother rather than a prince subverts simplistic gender binaries and exposes these tropes as shallow stereotypes. Although appearances from Chinese pirates cease, Chinese bandits continue to be a common trope with appearances in novels by J. G. Farrell, Martin Cruz Smith, Irving Abella, Michael Connelly, and Giles Foden. In the twenty-first century, Chinese pirates reappear either in relation to hacking, as in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003), online piracy as in Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), or in Cory Doctorow's *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* (2003) as part of a theme park ride based on a Chinese pirate queen, replete with "AI-driven sims that communicated with each other and with the guests, greeting them by name each time they rode and spinning age-appropriate tales of piracy on the high seas".⁷⁴ Hamid is one of two British Pakistani novelists to appear in the database (Tariq Ali is the other) and tends to view China as a rising economic superpower.

Chinese people often appeared as sinister or ruthless figures who were complicit in underworld crimes in detective fiction by Sax Rohmer, August Derleth, and J. J. Marris (a pseudonym for John Creasy). In Marris's *Gideon's Day* (1955), the drug-lord and archcriminal, Chang, is pursued by the titular character, who states that "half the trouble with men like Chang [...] was that they had no sense of doing wrong. To them, nothing was sacred, nothing inviolate. Orientals especially seemed to lack a sense of morality".⁷⁵ However, towards the end of the twentieth century, Chinese criminals were less likely to be associated with brothels, drugs, and gambling dens and instead became a background presence in crime and mystery novels. Rather than the archvillain, Chinese criminals tended to appear as minor characters. James Jones invents the

notion of the “Oriental’s Revenge” in *A Touch of Danger* (1973); it is purported to be “the way they figured out to get even with us, for all the terrible things we’ve done to them”.⁷⁶ American and British writers are most likely to portray Chinese people in this manner.

In Ian Fleming’s *Goldfinger* (1959), the villain, Auric Goldfinger mistakenly attributes the Japanese martial art, karate, as Chinese: “wandering Buddhist priests became an easy prey for footpads and bandits. Their religion did not allow them to carry weapons, so they developed their own form of unarmed combat”.⁷⁷ Chinese and Japanese criminals are presented as interchangeable in *You Only Live Twice* (1964) when James Bond discusses the ‘Black Dragon Society’ with the head of the Japanese Secret Service, Tiger Tanaka; “Was it the equivalent of the Chinese tongs? ‘Much more powerful. You have heard of the Ching pang and Hung-pang tongs that were so much feared in China in the days of the Kuomintang. No? Well the Black Dragons were a hundred time worse. To have them on your heels was certain death”.⁷⁸ There are frequent references to Chinese gangs such as the Triads, the Black Hand, and Tongs—named after the halls or gathering places for Chinese immigrants that were often associated with criminal activity— throughout the 1990s. We also see references to Chinese assassins, most notably in Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* (1990) and John Grisham’s *The Chamber* (1994), and they are reconfigured as “corporate assassins”⁷⁹ in Michael Swanwick’s *Gravity’s Angels* (1991). Tom Clancy’s *The Cardinal of the Kremlin* (1988), Raymond Benson’s *The Man with the Red Tattoo* (2002), and Denis Johnson’s *Tree of Smoke* (2007) all reference the perils of encountering a “Chinese agent”, “Chinese Triads”, and “Chinese gangs”. While the association of Chinese people with criminality is typically found in novels from the U.S., it becomes a recurrent trope in British novels during the second half of the twentieth century.

By contrast, 1940 to 1955 marks a period when Chinese people are more frequently depicted as the victims of crime. Xavier Herbert’s *Capricornia* (1938) contains a reference to robbing and murdering a Chinaman while in Henry Miller’s semi-autobiographical novel, *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939), the protagonist states: “It was so easy to swindle the Chinese that I went back to Manila in disgust”⁸⁰ and there are numerous references to Chinese people being stolen from or shot at. In the early twentieth century, some crimes were depicted in semi-mythical terms and allusions to Chinese culture are made to heighten the sense of unreality. For example, in *The Big Sleep* (1939), Raymond Chandler’s famous private detective, Philip Marlowe falls into a whiskey-induced slumber and dreams of “a man in a bloody Chinese coat who chased a naked girl with long jade earrings while I ran after them and tried to take a photograph with an empty camera”⁸¹ while Virginia Woolf refers to the foot of a Chinese murderess displayed at a local museum. There are references to the

mythical criminal mastermind, Fu Manchu, in novels by Kurt Vonnegut, Norman Rush, and Michael Slade that comment on the construction of this controversial figure rather than present him as a character.

Opium

At the dawn of the twentieth century, popular English mystery novels such as Sax Rohmer's *The Yellow Claw* (1915) and Thomas Burke's *Limehouse Nights* (1916) articulate xenophobic fears of characters becoming Chinese if they smoke opium. These mystery stories were swiftly supplanted, primarily by U.S. novels that offer critical perspectives on the Opium War. For example, Mourning Dove's *Cogwea, the Half-Blood* (1927) comments on "the heritage of the white men's civilization, forced—like the opium traffic of China—upon a weaker people by the bayonets of commercial conquest"⁸² while in G. K. Chesterton's prologue to *The Floating Admiral* (1931), a novel written collaboratively by a band of transatlantic writers known as the Detection Club, the captain of a battleship recalls the "shameful war by which Great Britain forced opium upon China".⁸³ In these novels, the opium trade is seen as a national shame although this critical approach does not persist in the latter half of the twentieth century. The only exceptions were Belva Plain's *Tapestry* (1988), which contains the line: "when you think about it, some of the fanciest families in this country got their start a hundred years ago in the slave trade, or bringing opium to China"⁸⁴ and Janice Y. K. Lee's *The Piano Teacher* (2009) in which Victor Chen spits, "Bloody British on their moral high horse, while they poisoned half of China with opium for their own gain".⁸⁵ Plain is American but Lee was born and raised in Hong Kong before moving to the U.S.; her life experience is likely to have sensitized her to historical systems of oppression and marginalization. Overall, there is a clear bifurcation between British representations of the Opium War and the response in North American novels.

Opium was frequently associated with decline and social dysfunction in the minds of historians of late imperial and early Republican China: "the drug served as a powerful metaphor for China's political somnambulism in the age of Western imperialism".⁸⁶ However, with the emergence of Chinese nationalism and the rise of the Communist Party, opium as a metaphor for decline was no longer appropriate. Although there are relatively few references to the Opium War in the second half of the twentieth century, China and Chinese people are associated with opium dens, the drug trade, and Chinese pipes with increasing regularity. It is not until the publication of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* in 1973 that a more sympathetic representation of Chinese people appears, despite being marred by Orientalist caricature. Chu Piang is a Chinese factotum who, in the aftermath of the Opium War, falls under the influence of the drug and becomes a source

of fascination for tourists: “He is a living monument to the success of British trade policy back during the last century. This classic hustle is still famous, even today, for the cold purity of its execution: bring opium from India, introduce it into China - howdy Fong, there here's opium, opium, this is Fong - ah, so, me eatee! - no-ho-ho, Fong you smokee, smokee, see? pretty soon Fong's coming back for more and more, so you create an inelastic demand for the shit”.⁸⁷ Pynchon strives to show the impact of predatory and inhumane trade practices on individual lives and delivers an extended description of tourists and onlookers that also serves as a rebuke to the broader literary representation of Chinese opium addicts. By this point, the trope of opium-smoking Chinese was embedded in novels such as Morton Thompson’s *Not a Stranger* (1954), Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American* (1955), and Herman Wouk’s *Marjorie Morningstar* (1955): “a sensible Chinese smokes twenty pipes of opium a day and we think he's an Oriental degenerate”.⁸⁸ Even when opium is not directly referenced, it is often alluded to by its lingering traces; for instance, in W. Somerset Maugham’s ‘A Casual Affair’ (1947), the rooms above a Chinese shop are described as “foul with every kind of Chinese stench”, which is later revealed to be opium.⁸⁹ The writer, Tilney, in Aldous Huxley’s ‘Chawdron’ calls it the “national vice”.⁹⁰ Alongside Pynchon, Gore Vidal and William Styron offer self-reflective commentary on the association of the Chinese people with opium. In Vidal’s historical novel, *1878* (1976), the protagonist, Charles Schermerhorn Schuyler, reflects that “lately there have been a good number of attacks in the press on the Chinese, whose supposed addiction to opium is always mentioned as proof of their undesirability as citizens”, although this statement is undercut when Schuyler himself admits that he sometimes smokes opium at a Chinese club in Paris.⁹¹ Meanwhile, Stingo, the novelist at the heart of Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* (1979), reflects on his uncritical connection between addiction and “comatose Chinese in their smoky dens”.⁹² Nevertheless, the image of opium dens and Chinese pipes persists, only to be displaced by images of the drug trade in the 1990s and early 2000s; the novelisation of *Licence to Kill* (1989) presents the Chinese as the “major drug dealers of the Orient”.⁹³ Finally, in the twenty-first century, writers such as Robert Ludlum, Stephen King, and Will Self refer to ‘China white’, the street name for an especially pure form of heroin.

Women

In the 1920s and 1930s, English-language novels frequently portray Chinese women as possessing curious features and it is commonly implied that they are ignorant. Unlike British, European, and American women, Chinese women are typically presented as highly biddable and novels such as Hugh Walpole’s *Vanessa* (1933), Raymond Williams’ *Second Generation* (1964), and Martin Amis’ *Yellow Dog* (2003) present them as exotic mistresses, jilted lovers, or illicit wives. They are presented as submissive, docile, and harmless, often to the approval of onlookers. In Ian Fleming’s

Dr. No (1958), the nurse, May, is introduced in the following manner: “an enchanting Chinese girl in a mauve and white flowered kimono stood smiling and bowing as Chinese girls are supposed to do [...] there was nothing but warmth and welcome in the pale, flowerlike face”.⁹⁴ In Thomas B. Costain’s *The Black Rose* (1945), the beautiful British-Chinese woman, Maryam is presented as an ideal wife because she fawns over her husband and child, indulges in childish moods, describes herself in the third-person: “obedient wife knows when hint has been given”, and deliberately relegates herself to the secondary position of a “small and humble wife”.⁹⁵ Maryam is given the nickname, “Black Rose”, in an allusion to cloves; it refers to her “great spirit, a tang like the black rose” in comparison to other girls who are as “tasteless as young squashes”.⁹⁶ Chinese women are often presented as numerous, available, and acquiescent, and they are regularly compared to fruits, flowers, and precious materials. Studs Terkel’s *Working* (1974) portrays them as “delicate—like a piece of porcelain”,⁹⁷ while in Rex Stout’s *Too Many Cooks* (1938), Lio Coyne, the Chinese wife of master chef Lawrence Coyne, is leeringly described as “dainty and mysterious” and a “poor little blossom”.⁹⁸

At mid-century, Chinese women were often associated with prostitution and are typically found in crime fiction. Kathleen Winsor’s *Star Money* (1950) and Richard Mason’s *The World of Suzie Wong* (1957) both feature Chinese women making a living in an industry saturated with the “secrets of Chinese love” as a means to escape from poverty.⁹⁹ This character type is later found in *Rage of Angels* (1980) by Sidney Sheldon, *Living Up the Street* (1985) by Gary Soto, and *Crawling at Night* (2001) by Nani Power. In ‘Lucky Chow Fun’, the opening story of Lauren Groff’s short story collection, *Delicate Edible Birds* (2009), the protagonist, Lollie, discovers that the only Chinese restaurant in her town is a covert whorehouse trafficking Chinese girls: “They were bought in China and brought over here, it seems. They were poor. They worked in sweatshops. The Chens gave money to their parents, promised a better life”.¹⁰⁰ Holden Caulfield, the disaffected narrator of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) is told by his former mentor, Old Luce, that Chinese women are able to regard “sex as both a physical and a spiritual experience”.¹⁰¹ They also occupy minor roles and receive diminutive epithets such as “beautiful Chinese girl”¹⁰², “shortest little Chinese wife”¹⁰³, and “tiny Chinese lady”.¹⁰⁴ These descriptions do not only appear in male-authored fiction; women writers from the UK and US also present Orientalist imagery. Surveying the representation of Chinese women in twentieth century English-language novels would lead most critics to conclude that these writers have collectively succumbed to the Madonna-whore complex; the women are either passive wives or otherworldly temptresses and there is little scope for nuance or depth.

Women writers in the twenty-first century provide much more complex and engaging depictions of Chinese women. Zoë Heller's *The Believers* (2008) depicts the tangled lives of New Yorkers and in one scene, Audrey Litvinoff's husband, Joel, is admitted to hospital and treated by Dr. Wu, who is of Chinese descent. Although Audrey initially disapproves of her appearance and asks to see someone more senior, Dr. Wu is proven to be entirely competent. Elizabeth McKenzie's *The Portable Veblen* (2016) features a character named Hexi Pu who decides that "being Chinese was a plus. People tended to think she was smart and shy, maybe a disciplined musician. They didn't suspect she was a detective. Also, it was hard to tell her age. She could still pass as a girl, even go into high schools under cover".¹⁰⁵ Although the novel foregrounds the effect of cultural misconceptions, the description's exclusive focus on positive stereotypes still risks obfuscating the real harms caused by assumptions made on the basis of race. Meanwhile, Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005) offers an alternative to stereotypical depictions of Chinese women on the basis of their youth, eye shape, and hair: "A naked Chinese woman who looked eighteen from the back now turned and surprised Zora with her crumpled face, in which two little obsidian eyes struggled under the pressure of folded skin from above and below. Her pubic hair was very long and straight and grey, like dead grass".¹⁰⁶ The Chinese woman in question is observed by Zora Belsey, who is grappling with her insecurities as she enters into the first chapter of her sophomore years. Zora momentarily thinks, "*Imagine being her*", and the cruel comparison establishes a hierarchy that assuages her self-doubt.¹⁰⁷ Unfortunately, portrayals of Chinese women as independent, successful, and leading rich and complex interior lives remain the exception and the vast majority of English-language novels present them as exotic, submissive, or objects of pity.

Food

Chinese food and drink are represented as alternately a source of fascination and repulsion. Tea is frequently coded with cultural significance, either in terms of its geographical origins or as a popularised practice in British or American society, and several novels highlight the lucrative nature of the trade. Approval of green tea typically correlates with favourable attitudes towards China. For instance, Aunt Brenda in *Pied Piper of Lovers* (1935) by Lawrence Durrell refers to "comforting little ceremonies, those genteel cups of China tea"¹⁰⁸ while in George Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934), the insufferable Elizabeth Lackersteen declares that her tea is "absolutely beastly. It's quite green" (130) and after tasting it declares: "Ugh! It tastes exactly like earth".¹⁰⁹ There is a notable peak in references to Chinese food in the second half of the twentieth-century due to the rapid expansion of Chinese restaurants and fast-food in the UK and the US. Although Chinese food is represented positively in novels by William Golding, Susan Cooper, Jacqueline Wilson, William Boyd, David Almond, and Tony Parsons, novels like *It Can't Happen Here* (1935) by Sinclair

Lewis and *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (1959) by Mordecai Richler highlight the inferior quality of this “new-style” food in terms of its taste and nutrients and condemn it as a pale imitation of authentic Chinese food.¹¹⁰ In James Jones’ *Whistle* (1978), Chinese food is delivered in bland “cardboard containers”¹¹¹ and Thomas Berger’s *Changing the Past* (1989) describes the protagonist John Kellog’s distaste of fast-food: “He hated Chinese food, at least this kind, in which only by chance could you ever locate a fragment of protein”.¹¹² Rather than an exotic spectacle, it is presented as nondescript “takeout”¹¹³, “paper cartons”¹¹⁴, and “the muck they served in the two restaurants in town”.¹¹⁵

English-language novels often focus on the more mysterious and bizarre aspects of Chinese food, from the unusual ingredients used in dishes to the use of chopsticks instead of cutlery and a wide variety of unusual customs and practices. Andrew Neiderman’s *The Baby Squad* (2003) features a Chinese restaurant called Soy-Hoy, in which dining becomes a spectacle: “It was a complete experience, with the restaurant running like a show. Customers felt as if they had stepped into a movie, complete with Suzie Wongs and Charlie Chans. They even had the Dragon Lady at the front desk, along with Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee look-alike waiters and an evening’s performance of Chinese folk dancers”.¹¹⁶ These novels depict ingredients that range from the exotic to the ludicrous such as “sea-slug”¹¹⁷, “prawns and bamboo shoots and sharks’ fins”¹¹⁸, “dead rats”¹¹⁹, “rotten eggs”¹²⁰, and “puppy-dog soup”.¹²¹ In W. Somerset Maugham’s *The Narrow Corner* (1932), Dr. Saunders is invited to a grand dinner with “bird’s nest soup, shark fins, bêche-de-mer and many other delicacies”.¹²² In *What a Carve Up!* (1994) by Jonathan Coe, the main character, Michael Owen, is shown to be inept at using chopsticks and this is played for comic effect. During an awkward conversation with his neighbour, Fiona, his discomfort is accentuated by the foreignness of Chinese food. His attempt to use chopsticks eventually results in his meal looking like “it had recently been used by Jackson Pollock to form the basis of a particularly brutal composition fashioned entirely out of authentic Chinese foodstuffs”.¹²³ Nevertheless, Chinese food is primarily treated as an object of suspicion. In *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk* (2010), David Sedaris describes Chinese food from the perspective of two flies: “‘Chinese,’ the male said. The female sighed and picked halfheartedly at a snow pea. ‘Ten will get you twenty it’s from the Shanghai Garden,’ she told him. ‘I had their pork lo mein once and was in the restroom for two days.’”¹²⁴

While there are references to the excellence of Chinese cooking, these are primarily used to reinforce the superior taste of the consumer. For example, Mario Puzo’s *Omertà* (2000) presents John Heskow’s refined palate in the following manner: “He liked the silver covers over each dish as if it contained some delightful surprise. [...] Tonight he went all out. He was particularly fond of

Peking duck and crayfish in Cantonese lobster sauce. There was a special white fried rice and of course a few fried dumplings and spicy spareribs. He finished off with green-tea ice cream, an acquired taste, but one that showed he was a gourmet of Eastern food”.¹²⁵ Chinese food is often subject to mystification and outliers are employed to tacitly reassert the Otherness of China and Chinese people.

Conclusion

Keywords highlight how we portray and perceive others in culture and society and help us to identify habits of language. The process of detailed and careful literary data mining has enabled us to identify the social and cultural formations that, often intangibly, proliferate Orientalist thought and behaviour. The quotations collected under each of the keywords enabled us to alternate our perspective between detailed close reading of individual texts and a broader, more systemic approach. We were able to zoom in on specific texts and authors to recognise biographical detail and the influence of gender, race, and nationality. This approach enabled us to identify and trace Orientalist discourses with exactitude and highlight the ways in which they develop and grow through minor phrases and passages that may otherwise go unremarked. The resulting keywords highlight the fact that novels are not autonomous units but carry traces of broader discourses. While exceptional texts remain integral to the work of literary scholars, we also benefit from exploring the stigma, social inequalities, and false assumptions that may arise from the wider landscape of the novel form. The resulting keywords call for us to reassess not only our values but our systems of valuation. They reveal that traces accumulate and construct an image of a place or a people that is far more persuasive for being constructed by links readers form themselves. In place of explicit descriptions of China that can be read critically, we argue that the multitude of small assumptions, presentations, and portrayals instil a pervasive sense of the nation’s attributes. The traces found in English-language novels effectively constitute death through a thousand cuts rather than an easily evaded blow.

Amidst an increasingly polarised landscape and as China emerges as a potential global superpower, it is important to remember that the diffuse sense of strangeness or unease individuals may feel in the face of the Other is almost entirely a product of the habits of language produced through and by cultural artifacts. As early as 1950, scholars and historians were concerned that lack of knowledge about China would render the public susceptible to misleading accounts of images and events dimly seen. There are social and political stakes in the words and phrases we use to talk and write about China and the Chinese people. Consequently, it is more important than ever to recognise and analyse the ways in which the nation has been represented in English-language

novels and the ways in which they risk propagating myths and assumptions about China as remote, exotic, bizarre, and unfamiliar at a time when greater dialogue, engagement, and respect is desperately needed.

Notes

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