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Coming Distractions: *Chinese Whiskers*

November 30, 2010 in [Books](#), [Interview](#) by [mcunningham](#) | [Permalink](#)
By Maura Elizabeth Cunningham

Pallavi Aiyar's 2008 memoir, [Smoke and Mirrors: An Experience of China](#), details the six years she spent living in Beijing, first teaching English and then becoming a reporter for The Hindu. Now stationed in Brussels with the Business Standard, Aiyar's articles tend to focus on topics such as [Belgium's cultural conflicts](#) and [the uneven parallels drawn between India and China](#). For this reason, I was quite surprised to learn that Aiyar's second book, to be released by Harper Collins India in early 2011, is a story of Beijing narrated by two cats: Tofu and Soyabean, the protagonists of Chinese Whiskers, share the story of their hutong life amidst the backdrop of the SARS epidemic and pre-Olympic construction. In a concise and gripping tale, Aiyar conveys the chaotic and ever-changing landscape of Beijing in the early 2000s as experienced by some of the city's most vulnerable residents, both human and feline. Eager to learn more about this unusual book, I posed a few questions to Aiyar via e-mail:

MEC: How did you come to write a book that views Beijing from a cats'-eye perspective?

PA: I spent five years living in Beijing's hutongs. These were neighbourhoods that reflected many of the tensions generated by the intersection of China's almost remorseless embrace of modernity with persisting forms of a more traditional, communal way of life.

Animals were an intrinsic part of the hutongscape. At twilight you could sometimes spot the elongated silhouette of *huang shu lang* (黄鼠狼 the yellow weasel), the Beijing equivalent of the city fox, tip toeing across the roofs of courtyard houses sniffing for prey. Regardless of the season old men in patched up Mao suits would sit around corner stores on low stools, their caged song birds proudly on display next to them.

And then there were the dogs. The hutongs were disproportionately peopled with retirees and their pet dogs; the ever dwindling younger generation having taken off for swankier addresses. The aural backdrop to life in these alleyways was therefore punctuated by the yapping of Pekinese dogs who were as pampered and loved by their elderly owners as a favoured grandchild.

This was an environment where people and animals lived cheek to jowl, the cramped spaces of the living quarters forcing everyone out on the street.

In my previous book, *Smoke and Mirrors*, I wrote extensively about my life in the hutongs and this was one aspect of the book that people across the world, be it in India, China or the US, seemed fascinated by. It seemed natural therefore to situate my novel in this geography and the cats just seemed an intuitive and interesting way to gain entry into this world.

Especially since in 2006 my husband and I adopted two kittens ourselves and through that process became acquainted with a whole new side to Chinese society. We came to meet dedicated cat protection activists, disillusioned veterinarians and wise grandmothers, some of whom ended up as characters in the novel.

That said, I'm also a hopeless anthropomorphiser and have always loved books with animals as principle characters.

MEC: Your website calls *Chinese Whiskers* "a modern fable." What do you mean by this? Have you read other works that fit into this genre?

PA: A fable is usually defined as a traditional morality tale which uses animal stories to teach a moral. At heart *Chinese Whiskers* is a fable. Through the eyes of Tofu and Soyabean we are warned of the corruption that can result from a society experiencing fast paced change, where long-established moorings are coming undone, leaving people without a moral compass.

But although it's a fable, it's in an updated form, set in a modern-day context. Beijing in the early 2000s was a time that witnessed a frenetic recasting of the city's topography and also placed strenuous demands on people to come to grips with new ideas and realities. Hence I call it a "modern fable."

In the current context, anthropomorphic works tend to be considered unfashionable and commercially unviable by the publishing world. I was extraordinarily lucky in having my story accepted. But that means I haven't come across other works that fit this genre of late which makes *Chinese Whiskers* quite a unique attempt.

MEC: In what way is *Chinese Whiskers* a follow-up to *Smoke and Mirrors*? In your view, how do the two books fit together?

PA: On the surface the two books are very different. *Smoke and Mirrors* was a work of non-fiction that blended reportage and memoir to tease out the divergent implications of the choices the modern Chinese and Indian states have made. It was received with some enthusiasm by China watchers, geo-strategic analysts, diplomats, journalists and the general reader with an interest in international relations.

Chinese Whiskers, on the other hand, is a novel with cats in it. Many of those who enjoyed *Smoke and Mirrors* don't know what to make of this, when I tell them. Cats are not serious. Cats don't make for analytic insight.

To begin with I beg to differ vis-a-vis the imputed lack of seriousness of cats. But the larger point for me is that there is in fact a logical continuity between *Smoke and Mirrors* and *Chinese Whiskers*. Several chapters in the former sought to evoke the rhythm and texture of life in Beijing at a particular moment. Themes that came up in *Smoke and Mirrors* included those of a sense of moral anomie in the wake of fierce materialism, corruption, the role physical architecture plays in moulding social relations. These are all themes and issues that *Chinese Whiskers* addresses. But I think its appeal is wider than that of *Smoke and Mirrors*. It is intended for people who may be more interested in cats than China to begin with, but hopefully might end up being drawn to learn more about a country and culture they once knew little of. It also works for a broader age group, including younger readers. And hopefully it will be an entertaining diversion for the more "serious" China watchers as well.

MEC: It's become fairly common for Western reporters to write stories about the growing importance of pets as status symbols for upwardly mobile Chinese, but most of those articles focus only on dogs ([here's](#) a recent example from the *New York Times*). How are attitudes about cat ownership different?

PA: I think despite the surge in popularity of dogs as pets, there is a fairly mainstream attitude in China that persists in seeing them as social pests. The (mistaken) idea that large dogs are aggressive and prone to attack people lies behind the rule in most big cities that specifies the size and breed of dog that one can own. They are also seen as a source of rabies and stories of anti-dog mob rampages resulting in the massacre of animals sporadically emerge.

Cats on the other hand, with the exception of the SARS epidemic, are not seen as a public health menace and there is greater tolerance of them. Their ownership is not restricted in number and there is no cat license fee, unlike for dogs. At the same time they are not seen as a prestigious accoutrement in the manner in which some middle class people look at expensive breeds of dogs.

In the hutongs if they are kept as pets it's for utilitarian reasons; for catching rats rather than as is common with small dogs, as child substitutes.

At the same time there is a sub culture of cat protection societies which are fiercely committed to feline rights and working with stray animals to house and sterilize them. There is no exact equivalent for dogs since stray dogs are so much rarer in an urban context.

Differences apart, both cats and dogs share a similar and uncomfortable middle ground in China, somewhere between pet and food. While dogs are eaten in the north as a warming meal in the winter, cats are consumed quite commonly in southern China.

MEC: How did your own cats react to the move from Beijing to Brussels, and do you see that experience leading to a sequel to *Chinese Whiskers*?

PA: Our cats have taken to non-hutong life in Brussels' stately [maison de maître](#), as though they were born to a life of cheese and chocolates. I suppose I can envisage a sequel titled from "From Dustbin to Diplomats" detailing the transformation in their fortunes. On the other hand, life in Brussels lacks the elemental drama of hutong existence and Belgium as a whole just doesn't compare as a setting to China at the time of SARS and the Olympics. But who knows? Intrigue in the corridors of the European Commission might just lend itself to a sequel.

Tags: [Chinese Whiskers](#), [Pallavi Aiyar](#), [Smoke and Mirrors](#)