

# Tai Tais Talk Back

## The truth behind the lady of leisure stereotype

by Kristi Lanier

**Expatriate wives** wear an array of less-than-flattering stereotypes. The most common include biting references to luncheons, manicures and the fabric market. And when they aren't ribbed for their cushy compound living they're chided for getting a mid-day massage. Why do these women need to relax when they have no stress? Or so the thought goes at least.

Where the expat entrepreneurs are praised for their gumption, the itinerant students for their sense of adventure, and the corporate employees for their hard work, no such understanding exists for the "tai tais." Trailing wives are drawn as idle princesses who whine about the help, shop, and make little attempt to understand the local Chinese culture. Ouch.

In reality, this caricature of the tai tai is far too narrow to be accurate.

Common wisdom says that a stereotype becomes so because there's truth in it. But sociologist James Farrer gives it a different spin: "A stereotype is created by building on a problem and making it categorical." So what then is the tai tai "problem" that has built them into a "categorical" joke?

Dr. Farrer, a professor at Sophia University in Tokyo, spent months in Shanghai recently researching the expat community for an upcoming book on the foreign experience abroad. In the over one hundred interviews he conducted he found a recurring problem – not just for tai tais but for all foreigners in China. That problem is integration.

By and large foreigners who arrive in Shanghai are globally minded and eager to learn. Same goes for the tai tais. "They didn't come here just to speak French with their French friends," Farrer says. "They went abroad to have an international experience."

In the beginning expats all share the same goal: to be part of the city's broad international community and its local one as well – a "cosmopolitan local," as Farrer describes it. What actually happens is after a while, language-learning efforts falter. Then the realization hits that the yawning cultural gaps aren't shrinking and making local friends isn't so easy. And the tai tais – without a work outlet to connect them locally and courted by expat clubs with ready-made national groups – are the first to fall.

"The ideal is to be international and in touch with China," Farrer says. "Ironically most foreigners [fail]."

The stereotype for tai tais persists because it's a foreigner problem. They come to typify something true of all foreigners. People tend to look down [on them] because they typify the lack of integration."

And the tai tai becomes the expatriate's fall guy – or gal, rather.

The few expats that do integrate locally are the ones who either stay for years or who dramatically exit their comfort zones – engaging local Chinese on their level, in their language, over mahjongs, cards, or a noisy meal out. There are reasons the tai tai cannot do this in the way a young, single person can – responsibilities to husband and children, and short-term stays. And it's compounded by simple socio-economics: "The higher up the social ladder the harder it is to get out of your comfort zone," Farrer says. Americans, especially, are self-conscious about social inequalities. Age matters as well. "The older you are the harder it is. A 50-year-old westerner and a 50-year-old Chinese lady have almost nothing in common." And of course, there's the good old language barrier.

### **tai tais come to represent the shortcoming of all foreigners – the failure to master China's complex and confounding culture**

So, according to Farrer tai tais come to represent the shortcoming of all foreigners – the failure to master China's complex and confounding culture.

Tai tais themselves are aware of the jabs directed toward them and will either let them bounce off or even engage in the mocking. For their part, they see their situation as anomalous – a departure from a reality they will eventually return to.

"I like shopping. I love massages. I figure I'm never going to be able to get another 15 dollar foot massage in my life," says Jennifer McGivern, who moved to Shanghai in 2004 for her husband's three-year contract. "I keep everything in perspective because I know in 13 months this fantasy will end."

Certainly, she says, there are benefits. She thinks of her girlfriends at home who are raising their kids without an ayi and knows this aspect of her life will be harder when she returns. "[The tai tai life] sounds really great because



it comes from people's perceptions of living the high life. There's the tai tai, she doesn't have to work, money isn't an object, she has free time."

But in pointing out the common perceptions, McGivern touches on another key cause of the tai tai stereotypes – plain and simple envy. Jealousy over "luxuries" like drivers obscures for the outsider the reality for these women. "The coin really has two sides," she says. "When you're living it, it has some tarnish underneath."

Those two sides vary from woman to woman. For McGivern a second side is an overworked husband whose job "is a thousand times more stressful" than at home. "We thought he was going to be going 8 to 5," she says. "There are times he's up at 5:30 on the phone. He comes home, grabs a plate out of the microwave and is on a conference call from 7:30 to 10." The situation leaves her often feeling like a single parent to their three-year-old son.

McGivern's experience is not unique. The working spouse often has to spend more time traveling or at the office and the trailing spouse is left isolated at home as the primary caregiver, disciplinarian and playmate for their children. In addition their independence is curtailed by language and culture and their ability to carve out their own space limited by the resources available.

While the tai tais may have the freedom to go for a pedicure any time, it doesn't make up for the support networks they've left behind. "As a man you have your professional life. Many guys have the support of

companies and colleagues," says Alexia Greindl, who relocated from Belgium last August. "As a woman you have to reinvent yourself, ask what am I doing here, how am I going to use my time."

So for the women, friends met through the international community fill the multiple roles of colleagues, mothers and sisters.

To Greindl, the naysayers' criticism is misplaced. "If I really had to I would say you are completely wrong. If the man is happy in his job it's because he has a very good tai tai and support at home. When the family is happy it has a lot to do with the tai tai. There's a lot to reward the tai tai for."

As sociologist Farrer says, the social expectation is that you work and your acceptance comes from work. The result is an undervaluing of the homemaking role and a lack of acknowledgement for the special challenges to independence that Shanghai presents. Take for example just running a simple errand: Traffic makes a trip to find a screw at the hardware store an all-day event. And many women couldn't just hop in the car and do it themselves if they wanted to. Some company contracts restrict driving for insurance reasons.

"The bottom line is women are going to get the raw end of the deal, where stereotypes are concerned," says expat Jill Guild. "Why aren't more people talking about the man who's out at the KTV and never at home? The woman is making the sacrifice but does she get built up for that? The woman gets the negative comments." ☒