

Books

Wit and wisdom

As a new book about Chinese slang comes out, Beijing resident and the book's author **Eveline Chao** introduces the stories behind the lingo and picks out the top five words she thinks you should know

I've always loved slang. From the moment I arrived in Beijing three years ago I carried a notebook everywhere I went to scribble down interesting words I heard. Finally, I'd accumulated so much that I realised I had the beginnings of a book. That's how *Niubi!* was born.

Soon *Niubi!* became this collective, all-consuming project. Even complete strangers got swept up into it. A year ago a friend was shooting a video piece on hip hop in China, and he let me tag along. So these über-cool Chinese hip-hoppers would give sage, profound insights on creativity and censorship or whatever, probably wondering all the while why a random girl was in the room too. At the end I'd pipe up: 'How do you say bitches 'n' hos in Chinese?' Or I'd hear about some particularly trendy person that somebody knew, get their number, and text them: 'Hey, I'm a friend of Jan's. Do you know any slang words for anal sex?' People were amazingly unfazed by my questions.

Beyond just teaching people words to titter at, however, I hope that *Niubi!* is instructive on a deeper level. The last time I went back to the US people asked me: 'Do Chinese people have sex?'; 'Are there drugs there?'; 'Are there gay people?' I realised that many people know nothing about China. More surprising is that even people in China may not know anything about the subcultures from which their slang is born. Unlike in the West, there's still a separation between mainstream society and underground scenes like hip hop, drug culture and the gay scene. For this reason a lot of the words in the book are actually new to many Chinese people as well.

That said, with the internet comes change. Pinning down Chinese slang was difficult in the past because of the regionalisation of language.



learned this word from a British lawyer who had to organise his office Christmas party. He had an 'elves' theme, which caused much consternation. Being forced to dress like an elf does sound like an inherently horrifying proposition. But the reason for his office workers' concern wasn't vanity. Someone explained: 'We can't, because then we'd have to wear green hats!' There are a couple of explanations for this term, but the most plausible one I've heard is that male brothel workers in the Tang dynasty wore green hats.

我出来打酱油的 wǒ chūlái dà jiāngyóu de

This was coined in late 2007, but is still a web classic worth knowing. It literally means 'I'm just out buying soy sauce.' The phrase took the Chinese internet by

storm thanks to a Guangzhou TV news clip of a reporter asking a man on the street his opinion of the Edison Chen sex scandal. The man famously replied: 'I don't give a shit, I'm just out buying soy sauce.' Chinese internet users have taken up the phrase as a cynical euphemism for 'It's none of my business' or 'Who gives a damn?' It's now so widespread that even on Kaixinwang (the Chinese version of Facebook) you'll find multiple-choice polls that include 'I'm just buying soy sauce' as one of the answers.

断背 duàn bèi

Quite a few Chinese slang terms come from English. This means 'gay', but it literally translates as 'brokeback', as in the movie *Brokeback Mountain*.

咖喱鸡 gálíjī

This means hickey or love bite, but is literally 'curry chicken'. Teenagers and people in their early twenties say *zhòng cǎoméi* ('plant a strawberry') to mean 'give a hickey'. That makes sense. But I haven't been able to figure out why 'curry chicken' can also mean a love bite. So I'm putting out

an open call to all *Time Out* readers – if anyone knows, please tell me!

Niubi! is available at *The Bookworm* and *Garden Books*, priced around 110RMB.

'Hey, I'm a friend of Jan's. Do you know any slang words for anal sex?'

Today, southerners know northern words like *niúbī* (literally 'cow vagina', meaning 'freakin' awesome'); or people who still think that no gay people exist in China are proved wrong by the gay Asian community's strong online presence. The web itself has generated humorous, political and colourful terms of its own. That's why there's never been a more interesting time to know slang, both on the streets and in cyberspace.

Slang you need to know

腐败 fǔbài

My favourite words are those that also comment on Chinese society. This means 'corruption', but since corrupt officials are often wine and dined, people now ironically say *fǔbài* to refer to going out to a fancy restaurant, or treating yourself to something nice. Online it's often written 'FB'.

戴绿帽子 dài lǜmàozi

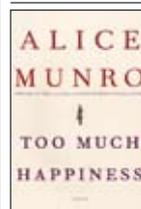
This translates as 'wear a green hat' but means a cuckold. I first

Reviews

Too Much Happiness Alice Munro

★★★★★

Knopf 177RMB



Alice Munro's latest collection of short fiction reflects on themes that have been consistent in her work, particularly death and grief, but this collection also feels propelled by a sense

of shock value. Though she's a noted observer of the hardships embedded in quiet lives, Munro is here drawn to violence: infanticide, self-mutilation and murder. In 'Wenlock Edge', a young girl is forced to take off all her clothes before a dinner date; and in 'Deep-Holes' a husband is disgusted by his wife's breast-feeding. There's certainly 'too much' of something in these characters' lives – and it isn't happiness. But Munro's talent is her ability to reassure us that every part of life, no matter how ugly, is redemptive in some way. *Jessica Ferri*

Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays Zadie Smith

★★★★★

Penguin Press 184RMB



Possessed of both imaginative empathy and an astringent wit, rigorously non-judgmental yet armed with a state-of-the-art bullshit detector, Zadie Smith's non-fiction glimmers with the

same cultural and emotional acuity that illuminated her novels *White Teeth* and *On Beauty*. In *Changing My Mind*, a collection of criticism, essays, and reviews for outlets such as *The New Yorker* and the UK's *Guardian*, her instincts are expansive, inclusive, democratic, yet fiercely personal. Entries include a rueful snapshot of modern-day Liberia that suggests Smith's largely untapped gifts as a reporter; a suite of candid, moving recollections of her late father; and a too-brief foray into weekly movie reviewing. This is a perfect marriage of literary criticism and first-person essay. *Jessica Winter*