

ChinaLife

Who will be Mr Laowai?

A DOZEN FOREIGN MEN ARE FLEXING THEIR MUSCLES FOR A BEAUTY PAGEANT THAT HAS CHARITABLE INTENTIONS

By TIFFANY TAN

James Kite came home from work one evening and was surprised to discover he was a contestant in a male beauty pageant. "Guess what? I enrolled you in Mr Laowai," Kite, 24, quotes his female French housemate as saying. "What is that?" he recalls responding. Mr Laowai China, to be held in August, is a pageant for foreign men that aims to promote cultural exchanges and charity work, as well as give participants an opportunity to develop their potential, the organizers say. Applicants should be foreign nationals and at least 18 years old.

Like most female beauty contests, Mr Laowai will feature a talent show, a parade of sportswear and a question-and-answer segment. Kite, a French-American who works as a leasing manager for the Parkview Green commercial center in Beijing, turned out to be a good sport about his housemate's prank. He decided he might as well win since he's already in.

"I'm gonna go ridiculously all out," says Kite, who describes himself as impulsive, a thrill-seeker and a fan of extreme sports like sky diving, heliskiing and cliff diving.

But if Scott Pruett has his say, the Mr Laowai title is not going anywhere, but to him.

The 49-year-old American, a copy editor and voice artist for CCTV who could be mistaken for a professional bodybuilder, thinks winning the contest is the perfect way to show others how older people can maintain a youthful appearance and keep their lives spicy.

"I want to redefine middle age in the Middle Kingdom," Pruett says by phone from Tongdao, Hunan province, where he's shooting a Chinese film.

"There's almost a universal lack of love in middle-age marriages in China. And if my wife and I can, by example, show people how to be better lovers into their middle-age years, then they will absolutely be happier.

"They'll be better people, they'll be healthier, they'll live longer and they'll be more involved with their kids."

Pruett, a Las Vegas singer and actor, moved to Beijing in February 2009 to be with what was his long-distance Chinese girlfriend. They are now married with a one-year-old son, and are working on a book about their love story.

Besides Kite and Pruett, 10 other men have so far qualified to compete in the inaugural Mr Laowai, organized by the same people behind September's first Miss Laowai China.

David Sinkala, chairman of the Miss Laowai organizing committee, says Mr Laowai is a product of public demand.

"We received a huge, huge amount of feedback concerning Miss Laowai, and a major part of it was women and men asking if we were somehow discriminating against the sexes by only hosting Miss Laowai."

Meanwhile, the committee also received criticism about the quality of the debut Miss Laowai show, a program that ran overtime and had various technical glitches, and had a couple of sponsors who did not deliver on their promises.

"We appreciate the criticism that we got," Sinkala says. "We are improving on the deliv-



PHOTOS BY FENG YONGBIN / CHINA DAILY

Three Mr Laowai China contestants: James Kite (above), Scott Pruett (right) and Terence Hew.



ery of our services to sponsors ... make sure that everything we promise is given."

Both Miss Laowai and Mr Laowai are raising funds for breast cancer victims and marginalized Chinese children, such as migrants, orphans and those with special needs. Mr Laowai is hoping to make at least 50,000 yuan (\$7,596) for charity, Sinkala says.

Terence Hew, 40, decided to sign up for Mr Laowai to support charity and to help Chinese people better understand foreigners.

"Not many locals know a foreign person. Every time we have a point of contact with them, we represent foreigners as a whole and we should represent them well," says the native of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, who is a consultant at a Chinese PR firm.

"For me it's both an honor and a responsibility because foreigners in the future will be judged by what they see in you."

Hew's Mr Laowai ambition is solidly supported by his Chinese fiancée Amanda Wang.

"He has a very attractive personality and he can speak very good Chinese," says the 32-year-old lawyer who got engaged to Hew less than six weeks after they met.

"He has a lot of strengths to bring to this competition, and I think he will win."

Wang is so excited for Hew that she's even joked about postponing their August wedding in Kuala Lumpur, if it coincides with the Mr Laowai contest.

A pretty face and much, much more

It is no surprise if beauty queens are amateur models or television personalities. In fact, these are paths that pave the way to a beauty title. But how about a titleholder who does commissioned paintings, weaves carpets and has a pet lizard?

The reigning Miss Laowai China, 23-year-old Ana Ropot from Moldova, is all of the above. Ropot spent much of her childhood visiting her maternal grandparents in Glinjeni, a farming town in the Moldovan northwest. "In late autumn, the beginning of winter, all the women gather together and start doing handicrafts — knitting, embroidery, even doing carpets," says the fifth-year international tourism management student at the Beijing International Studies University.

It was also the farm that cultivated in her a kinship for animals. In her Beijing apartment off Chaoyang Park are a handful of housemates with at least four legs: an aquatic turtle that lives with fish and snails, a rabbit, ladybugs and a lizard. "I didn't want a pet lizard, but I saw him all on his own in a shop and felt sorry for him since shops usually don't take good care of an animal that's on its own," Ropot says.

Ropot moved to Beijing from the Moldovan capital of Kishinev, in 2006, to attend

university. Three years later she won the Miss Fujian Tulou pageant, and last September was crowned Miss Laowai, a title intended to represent foreigners in Beijing.

"We were a family," she says of the 17 other contestants. "It was the first contest I joined where girls didn't try to rip each other's dresses backstage ... putting glue in shoes."

As Miss Laowai, Ropot's duties include attending charity events and expat functions. When she has time, she embellishes the designs of her clothes, makes pencil sketches or does oil paintings. Her latest work is *Dor*, a painting of her hometown's landmark Eastern Orthodox church, a piece commissioned by the Moldovan Embassy in Beijing. "This painting represents what I feel for my home," Ropot says. "You know when you miss something really really bad and it's eating you up inside?"



Ana Ropot is the reigning Miss Laowai China.