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THE TRANSLINGUAL ARTIST'S PRE-EXISTING CONDITION: XIAOLU GUO'S INTERNAL LINEAGE OF EXILE

Abstract:

Translingual writers, with their unique ability to master affecting prose or poetry in more than one language, offer particularly fascinating queries of research. Xiaolu Guo is one such translingual writer who, as both a novelist and filmmaker, also creates art in more than one medium. Few artists have accomplished the level of complexity inherent in creating profound work in both varied mediums of art and different languages. Exploring the unique drives that allow these multidimensional artists to access disparate planes of creative ability is a worthy direction of analysis. Yet, as an artist who innately inhabits varying identities and statuses, the translingual writer denies easy categorization and simplified attempts at labeling identity. The artist's unique translingual ability, unsurprisingly, often accompanies immigrant or exile status but, as Guo's 2017 memoir, *Nine Continents: A Memoir in and Out of China* insightfully demonstrates, displacement and exile are not conditions solely relegated to the realm of geopolitical borders. Instead, what becomes clear through Guo's painful and captivating memoir is a pattern of internal exile reaching far back into her lineage, which precedes the artist's experience of external alienation through immigration. This poignant state of pre-existing internal exile is a determinative concept that frequently lies at the root of many translingual artists' formative experiences. This essay explores the phenomenon of a pre-existing internal exile among translingual artists, especially as it appears throughout Xiaolu Guo's 2017 memoir, *Nine Continents*.

Keywords: translingual art ♦ multilingualism ♦ exile and displacement ♦ alienation ♦ memoir ♦ Xiaolu Guo

Xiaolu Guo opens the prologue of her 2017 memoir, *Nine Continents: A Memoir in and Out of China*, with an almost elegiac reflection on her state of alienation after having left China: “A wanderer, uprooted and displaced. A nomad, in both body and mind. This is what I had become since leaving China for the West” (2017: 1). Yet, in a nearly immediate self-contradiction the opening line of Guo’s first chapter suggests that these feelings of displacement actually began at least as early as birth: “I was born an orphan,” she claims (2017: 9). In fact, the very title of Guo’s prologue, “The Past is a Foreign Country,” points to the exact opposite sentiment from that of the first lines located within, which suggest feelings of alienation spurred only by immigrant exile. Instead, the prologue title suggests that Guo’s displacement is not bound by geopolitical borders but instead has far reaching roots in internal and temporal realms. The recounted self-history in Guo’s painful and captivating memoir continually emphasizes the idea that the celebrated translingual author’s feelings of otherness go beyond her ostensible immigrant status and instead are deeply rooted in Guo’s shifting but constant position of internal exile. Guo’s *Nine Continents* chronicles her traumatic abuses, the difficulties she faced in changing languages and communities, her furious recognition of the struggles of womanhood, the vast differences in ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ art forms, and her own internalized lineage of otherness as catalysts for her art. Natasha Lvovich coined the idea of an internal position of exile that so regularly plagues the most memorable translingual authors as a “pre-existing condition of translingual creativity” (2015: 118). Lvovich explains: “They are often people who have found themselves in the outsider position, in internal exile, even before their voluntary or involuntary physical exile” (2015: 118). Contrary to what the opening sentence of Guo’s prologue might have readers believe, the poignant state of pre-existing internal exile appears time and again throughout Guo’s *Nine Continents* and acts as the determinative concept tying together all of Guo’s formative experiences for her novels and films.

Guo’s *Nine Continents* – written in English with only a handful of Chinese ideograms and small windows into the differing Wenling and Shitang variations – is haunted by her insatiable hunger for knowledge of her family history. This search for a sense of belonging comes as a result of feeling like a drifting outsider since birth and having been “given away twice” already in infancy – once by her parents to a peasant couple and a second time by the couple to her grandparents (2017: 11). As a young girl Guo is left in the dark about her immediate family and family history, and she receives no insight from her abusive and unsociable grandfather or her woefully ignorant grandmother, both of whom, Guo later discovers, are foreigners to the small fishing village of Shitang. Her pursuit of familial knowledge and belonging is quite literally manifested in Guo’s memoir as physical starvation, where Guo recounts her childhood and early teen years in a constant state of famine. Guo reflects: “My constant hunger became an obsession, finding food was a

compulsion” (2017: 124). Guo’s physical hunger begins as early as infancy where the bleak poverty of the peasant couple forces them to nourish newborn Guo on a diet consisting only of mashed green leaves. Guo’s malnourishment follows her to the limited resources of her grandparent’s seaside village of Shitang, where her meals are made up of salty sea kelp. On her move to Wenling to live with her parents, Guo’s hunger continues as a result of the food quota system in 1980s China, where the small portions of meat that Guo’s family is able to purchase with their *liang piao* (food tickets) are reserved for her older brother. Guo is treated as a second-class outsider even in her own family, who not only privileges her brother over Guo, but also speak a completely different variety of Chinese from her Shitang dialect.

In his pivotal text, *The Translingual Imagination*, Steven Kellman points out that “modernism is largely a literature of exile, a project of psychic, if not geographical, dislocation” (2000: 6). Though specific to modernism, Kellman’s definition of exile moves beyond a dislocation based on only geographical borders, adding an internal or psychological element. The internal alienation present in Guo’s memoir, as well as in other translingual artists, expresses otherness as a means not only for creativity but also as a pre-existing gateway that allows for more nuanced experiences beyond the artist’s immediate cultural awareness. Having always lived on the margins even before setting foot outside of her home country, Guo accumulates an intimate knowledge of alienation through internal and personal borders or walls. This alienation, she comes to discover, reaches far back into the nomadic history of Guo’s paternal lineage, and the very meaning of her family name ‘Guo’ (‘outside the first city wall’) designates Xiaolu and her family as literal outsiders. It should come as no surprise that artists who have faced deep internal struggles with alienation might have a higher capacity for expressing their art through adopted languages or differing tongues and cultures. Walls and borders can take many forms beyond geopolitical boundaries and, as is clearly depicted in Guo’s *Nine Continents*, internal alienation often precedes the artist traveler’s experience of external alienation.

Gloria Anzaldúa’s multifaceted definition of ‘frontera’ in her 1987 text, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, is theorized as boundaries between places in many senses: geopolitical position, sexual identity, national identity, language, and gender. Through her writing, Anzaldúa explores the painful collisions of varying factions that at once live in both conflict and harmony within her identity as a queer multilingual Mexican American woman living in South Texas in the 1980s. Anzaldúa’s work pushes the boundaries of language, culture, and identity as she explores inhabiting her own sexuality and femaleness in the Chicano movement and writing in the varying registers of English and Spanish, including “Working class and slang English,” “Tex-Mex,” and “*Pachuco* (called *caló*)” (1999: 77). Anzaldúa explains the challenge to locate her place in the masculine Chicano movement of the time: “Suspended between traditional values and feminist ideas, you don’t know whether to assimilate, separate, or isolate” (2013: 548).

Anzaldúa's *Borderlands / La Frontera* is groundbreaking because it does not simply describe the different states of exile and warring borderlands within the identity, but instead goes a step further in building a theory that turns the internal personal struggle into a communal praxis. Anzaldúa uses the Nahuatl word *nepantla* (in-between space) to describe the 'in-betweenness' of differing cultural borders and identities as an agonizing but productive transformational space. "Living in between cultures results in 'seeing' double, first from the perspective of one culture, then from the perspective of another [...] From the in between place of *nepantla* you see through the fiction of the monoculture" (Anzaldúa 2013: 549). *Nepantla* as a theoretical framework creates a constructive liminal space for artists who feel similarly trapped by limiting definitions of identity.

Affectingly, liminal in-between spaces become an integral part of Guo's identity in a wholly tangible way, as the reader of her memoir comes to discover – alongside young Guo hungering for identity and answers – the definition of her family name as described by her father in one of the most insightful sections of her memoir, "Where Do We Come from, Father?" Young Xiaolu learns from her father that 'Guo 郭' literally means: "outside the first city wall." Her father continues, "In the old days, people built two layers of wall around their cities and Guo is the space between them. An in-between zone. That's what our name means." (Guo 2017: 111). Guo quite literally inhabits a state of displacement and alienation through the inheritance of her family name. In this same conversation Guo learns that her grandfather was a *Hakka*, meaning 'guest family,' and she begins to recognize that her own feelings of displacement and alienation might have far-reaching ties to generations before her. Guo discovers that her family's ancestors were nomadic Hui Muslims that had to give up their customs to become acculturated to the Han Chinese in the South of China. "We were really a family of orphans, it seemed to me. Orphans of a nomad tribe," Guo reflects (2017: 113). Guo's painful recognition of the estrangement and disconnection that defined her ancestral lineage acts as her own *nepantla* and becomes a crucial turning point in her search for identity that leads to the production of profound art. Unmentioned in Guo's memoir is another etymological meaning attached to her name: Lu 櫓 in Xiaolu (小櫓) is 'turret' or watchtower (Wieger 1915: 546). Though Guo's family name might place her as an outsider, Lu 櫓 profoundly represents her position as keen observer high above the city wall, who is able to see and recognize what others below cannot.

"I wondered what belonged to me, what I could really call *mine* in the end," Guo bitterly considers (2017: 113). This question becomes the very motivation that propels Guo to search for meaning through creative outlets. Traveling from Shitang to Wenling, then Beijing, and finally the United Kingdom, Guo finds herself adjusting to new lives and languages, each time without a true sense of belonging or resonance. Like Anzaldúa, Guo is either continuously at odds with, or completely alienated from, the various art forms and cultures that define her early life. Guo's experiences of constant abuse by men in a highly patriarchal culture further influence her feelings of alienation

and displacement. From her angry and violent grandfather, to the two-year recurring rape as an adolescent by an older man whom Guo names for the first time in this memoir, to the abortion she had to undergo after an exploitative relationship with her teacher as a young girl, Guo frames her feelings of womanhood on these disturbing and brutal moments: “being born this way was a curse,” Guo exclaims (2017: 185). She quickly recognizes that simply being a young girl and later, woman, adds another stratum of alienation to her life. The reflection on womanhood sparked in part by Guo’s witness of “the terrible injustice” of her own grandmother’s existence is a major impetus that pushes Guo to seek greater fulfillment and possibility: “I couldn’t draw her out of her pain, life was a brute force that I had no power to change. The only thing I could hope for was that my fate would not be a repeat of hers. Never, ever!” (2017: 149). Her grandmother, having suffered immeasurable struggles, left the world without ever having a name, only *shi* meaning ‘wife’ and before marriage, ‘second sister’ (2017: 34, 37). Guo recounts that her grandmother had bound feet, was sold as a child bride, had been beaten daily by her husband, and never learned to read or write.



Figure 1: Xiaolu Guo, *We Went to Wonderland*.

Although most of Guo’s experiences with men in her memoir are painful and abusive, two of the most important relationships pivotal to her quest for identity and knowledge are with men: her own father and the stationmaster of Shitang. A source of knowledge, warmth and encouragement, the stationmaster acts as an early father figure to Guo, giving her the first insight into her family history by explaining the meaning of her grandfather’s Hakka lineage, and telling her that she will one day go out and

“conquer the world” like her ancestors (2017: 29). Appropriately, the stationmaster – an alleged world-traveler himself – serves as the overseer of long-distance travelers in and out of Guo’s small fishing village. Guo’s relationship with her father is equally loving and supportive. He is the sole source of solace and love in her move to Wenling, relating to Guo as the only other member of her family that can speak her Shitang dialect, and holding intimate knowledge of the customs and traditions that young Guo had been raised on in the fishing village. As a painter, Guo’s father is also a source of artistic inspiration and guidance, gifting her books that would have a lasting impact on her trajectory as a writer. In her 2008 documentary [We Went to Wonderland](#), Guo chronicles the visit from her parents and their “European tour” that she includes in *Nine Continents*. The documentary centers on her voiceless father – a consequence of throat cancer – as he experiences Europe and the United Kingdom for the first time. The opening scenes of the documentary present

an intimate portrait of Guo's father silently communicating his experiences through pen and paper. His Chinese ideograms, written in almost lyric verse, are translated into English lines of similar poetic form onto the screen. It is fitting that Guo's art has given a profound voice to her voiceless artist father, one of the most influential people in her private life, who would die only three months after their travels through Europe.

In recognizing the importance of the two men who had a crucial role in her life, it is equally pertinent that the nomadic outsider lineage in which Guo discovers and grounds her identity comes from her paternal side, though she explains that it is not uncommon to be distant from one's maternal side of the family: "In China, because women marry 'out' of their families and into that of their husband, the maternal grandmother is called *waipo*, literally meaning, 'outer grandmother'" (2017: 157). Yet, the positive male influences of her father and the stationmaster, and Guo's grounding of her own identity in her paternal lineage, do not negate the fundamental role that witnessing firsthand her grandmother's misery—as well as living through her own abuses Guo suffered as a woman—played in formatively shaping her aspirations and art. Themes of abuse, difficulties with love and intimacy, and women's empowerment are acutely present in Guo's films and novels. These themes are best exemplified in Guo's 2007 novel *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, where a Chinese immigrant narrator tells the struggles of loving and communicating with her English-speaking British boyfriend, and her 2009 film *She, a Chinese*, which follows a young Chinese woman, Mei, through a series of relationships with startlingly abusive men.

Similarly, Chinese American writer Yiyun Li channels her pre-existing internal estrangement and painful experiences into themes present in her affecting prose in English, such as her 2009 novel, *The Vagrants*, where a young girl is executed for her rebellious actions against Communism. Li, unlike Guo, refuses to either write or translate her works into Chinese because of her deeply personal decision to completely abandon her first language, which she calls a "kind of suicide" (Laity 2017). Li quotes Vladimir Nabokov, "My private tragedy, which cannot, indeed should not, be anybody's concern, is that I had to abandon my natural language," and refashions the statement to better fit her personal experience: "My private salvation, which cannot and should not be anybody's concern, is that I disowned my native language" (2017: 138–139). Li's 2017 memoir, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life*, as Michael Hofmann (2017) describes it, "...is intimate, but not personal; or personal, but not private." However, it is filled with affecting lines that point to her depression and two suicide attempts. "There is this emptiness in me," Li writes, "All the things in the world are not enough to drown out the voice of this emptiness that says: you are nothing" (2017: 18). Li does not attribute her pained interior life to her immigrant status but instead defines her depression and suffering as innately part of her identity regardless of time or place: "Altered sceneries are at best distractions, or else new settings for old habits. What

one carries from one point to another, geographically or temporally, is one's self," Li explains, before discussing her "troublesome relationship with time" and the past (2017: 4). Li's suffering is alleviated by the novelists that inspire her, such as Elizabeth Bowen, Lev Tolstoy, and Katherine Mansfield, whose phrase in a notebook that Li comes across is borrowed for the title of her memoir. Clearly, Li represents another example of a poignant translingual artist whose internal alienation is innately part of her identity beyond her immigrant status.

Like Li, Guo finds the most solace and inspiration from Western art and begins writing her very first poems after reading Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsberg, and Ezra Pound. Guo's early attempts at poetry fit squarely into the genre of 'Misty Poetry,' which had come about after the Cultural Revolution as a rejection of the rigid style of Classical Chinese poetry in favor of Western Modernism. Gifts from her father, the first two books Guo remembers having immensely impacted her were Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Irving Stone's biographical novel about Vincent Van Gogh, *Lust for Life*. The "Western Narrative Fiction" Guo cites as early influences include Marguerite Duras, Ernest Hemingway, and J.D. Salinger, as well as Luis Buñuel's autobiography, *My Last Breath*. For film Guo found her early inspiration in French Nouvelle Vague: Alain Resnais, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Jean-Luc Godard. Though the Western art Guo encountered was monumental in shaping her artistic identity, it remained a collection of concepts and styles that were foreign to her. In Beijing Guo discovered the popular underground performance art known as *xing wei yi su* (behavior art), where artists used their own bodies for dramatic and often grotesque public performances in critique of political and social norms, such as the one-child policy. Guo was drawn to their creations and set out to make a documentary among the artists. Yet, even within the realm of art in China that she felt interested in, Guo still experienced estrangement, as she quickly decided that the masculinity inherent in the performances of the artists she admired could never fit her own form of expression: "Somehow, I always found their artistic language to be very male. It was too macho and too blunt, to put it simply" (2017: 232). Again Guo found her identity in conflict with her immediate environment and dreamed of leaving China for the 'West.'

Though Guo's influence and inspiration stem from Western art, she pointedly structured the form of her memoir to include her own renditions of excerpts from the 16th-century canonical Chinese text, *Journey to the West*. Guo's English retelling of the classic Chinese text – untitled and given to the reader without context – serves as a kind of epigraph for each of her five sections, which are unmentioned in the narrative of her memoir. In *Journey to the West* by Ming Dynasty writer Wu Cheng'en, a Chinese monk, Xuangzang, departs on a journey full of incredible hardship and suffering to find the Buddhist sutras and translate the texts for the Chinese people. The clear parallels between Xuangzang and Guo's journeys make for a natural pairing. Not unlike Guo, Xuangzang leaves his home in search of meaning in the 'West' beyond China. Both Guo and

Xuangzang translate and share the truth that they have discovered: Xuangzang for the people of China, and Guo for her readers and viewers. Guo's texts and films act as cultural translations that share the truth and meaning she has synthesized from beyond and within China. However, in her retelling, Guo's centralization of the monkey, "Wukong, meaning Emptiness Knower" – one of three protectors sent from heaven to guide Xuangzang – is key to the significance of the canonical Chinese text to her memoir and life's work (2017: 81). One day after experiencing immense sadness and loneliness, Wukong feels an urge to do something "deserving with his life" and sets out to find and assist Xuangzang (Guo 2017: 6). As a shape-shifter with incredible strength and ferocity, Wukong – a cunning trickster figure – is integral to Xuangzang's journey. Like Wukong to Xuangzang, Guo's own knowledge of 'emptiness' through exile, pain, and loss propels her journey and is fundamentally part of her art and truth. In *Journey to the West*, Wukong achieves enlightenment at the completion of his task. Guo's rendition restructures this by explaining that Wukong cannot rejoin the world as a "savage creature" because his "mind has been so infected by human unhappiness," and Wukong is set free, disappearing as a glow on the horizon above the sea (2017: 351). Embedded in her memoir's celebration of *Journey to the West* is the central idea of Guo's artistic endeavors: finding shared truths from both inside and beyond her cultural borders through the intimate knowledge and power of experiencing emptiness. In her [presentation](#) at the 2017 5x15 festival in London, Guo describes *Journey to the West* as being truly inspirational to her, explaining that it is "Not about journey, it's about cultural translation."

Traveling the Nine Continents – as the Daoshi at the Taoist temple had once prophesied to Guo and her grandmother when Guo was a young girl – was her destiny, and Guo was intent on fulfilling it: "Going abroad seemed to be the very definition of freedom. Contrary to Confucius' wisdom, I was determined to travel the Nine Continents whether my parents were alive or not!" (2017: 186). The Nine Continents, Guo explains, is an ancient Chinese adage for any part of the vast world beyond China. Guo's dichotomy of Chinese art and traditions against her fantasies of life and art in the West are central to her early quest for identity and artistic expression. The section in Guo's memoir that immediately follows her encounter with the performance artists finds Guo coming back to her dorm from a Kurt Cobain commemorative concert in Beijing feeling the urge to write. Guo recounts the steamy and electrifying moment of communal resistance and rebellion sparked by Cobain's deeply affecting desperation as a strong stimulus to write a novel, or *xiaoshuo*, 'little talk.' Guo explains: "To write a book of 'little talk' with a continuous narrative arc seemed very Western and modern to me" (2017: 236). It is this foreign medium, inspired by her encounters with Western art, that first launches Guo into the world of art in which she will continue to contribute. Guo's first novel, *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, would be published a year later. Her early attempts at screenwriting after graduating from the highly competitive Beijing Film Academy – from which Guo earned one of only eleven places after competing against over 7,000 other applicants – was not as immediately fruitful or easy as her experience in publishing a novel

because of the environment of extreme censorship for filmmakers in China. After many rejected screenplays, the despairing Guo resorts to writing television scripts for what she calls the “propaganda box,” which she had recognized as such since the age of eight living in the communal building of Wenling. It is not until her journey to the United Kingdom with newfound freedom and inspiration that Guo is able to focus on her filmmaking craft.



Figure 2: Guo, *She, a Chinese*. Video [here](#).



Figure 3: Guo, *The Concrete Revolution*. Video [here](#).

Guo’s influence from the French Nouvelle Vague, especially Godard, is clearly evidenced in her film *She, a Chinese*, and her 2004 documentary, *The Concrete Revolution*—with rocky walking camera movements, jump cuts, slow motion, and freeze-frame close-up shots. Guo explains her vision for *She, a Chinese* in her [director’s statement](#): “My ambition was to make a film that challenges the traditional Chinese cinema style, to cross over cultural borders, with a fresh artistic language and a personal voice.” In Godard’s iconic style, Guo’s *The Concrete Revolution* includes brightly colored static title images between scenes that display quotes from Chairman Mao, such as “We are not only good at destroying the old world, we are also good at building the new” (Guo 2004). *The Concrete Revolution* follows the construction in Beijing in anticipation of the 2008 Olympics, and Guo provides a clear critique of China’s presentation of itself on the world stage in conflict with the way the country treats its own people. The jump cuts are especially effective in Guo’s documentary where the film transitions from the clip of a construction site manager speaking over a construction worker’s response to Guo’s questioning. The narrator – Guo herself in the Chinese version – states “A note on censorship,” as the image on the screen abruptly and hilariously moves from a dusty construction site to a recording of two men, naked except for pairs

of small swim briefs, swimming in an icy lake. This clip of the scantily clad male swimmers, explains the narrator, would not be admissible in Chinese censorship laws because of the rule that men are only allowed to be shown naked as much as three inches below the nipple. Clever and comical breaks in the narrative of the documentary, such as the clip of the ice swimmers, are juxtaposed with the desperation of the peasants that Guo encounters. Centering on interviews with the peasant construction workers experiencing inhumane living and working conditions for the “new Beijing,” Guo reflects on her own role as the documentary interviewer no longer inhabiting peasant status, herself, having gone to college and receiving citizen status.

The documentary also features sound bites of English commentary about tourism in China and images of Western influence, such as blonde-haired American models, the prevalence of McDonald’s locations in Beijing, and a Starbucks inside the Forbidden City – which has become a kitschy tourist destination – contrasted by the demolishing and evicting of residents in older homes to make way for new construction. Like Guo’s written works, her documentary showcases her multifaceted identity, a critique of Chinese society, and an exploration of both the themes West vs. East and old vs. new. “What does home mean? [...] Going home is not only about traveling in space, it also means traveling in time,” Guo explains as the documentary transitions to film in the Shitang village (*The Concrete Revolution*). A joltingly beautiful depiction of the village juxtaposes the bleak landscape of steel and concrete in Beijing with the simple and natural landscape of the seaside fishing village where Guo spent her early childhood. The film ends on a shot of a fisherman – not unlike Guo’s own grandfather – sailing out on sparkling blue water as the sun shines down on the undulating waves. The shot mirrors the image that Guo places on the last page in her memoir of her father’s painting of the sea and bright sun, *Ode to the Light*. It is telling that Guo has reimagined the hardship and despair she had once associated with Shitang – as told in her memoir – to represent the small village in such a glowing way, in contrast to the new Beijing starved for Western culture in her documentary. Along with *We Went to Wonderland*, *The Concrete Revolution* and *She, a Chinese*, Guo has directed eight other films, her most recent premiering in 2018, titled *Five Men and a Caravaggio*. Sadly, most of Guo’s films are almost impossible to find access to in the United States. However, her [Web site](#) offers further explorations of Guo’s work, including presentations, interviews, and critical reviews of her films and novels.

Guo spent most of her young adulthood yearning for the West and pushing against Chinese traditions and heritage: “I would cut away the past and become someone else” (2017: 207). Indeed, this desire to discard the ‘old’ and discover the ‘new’ is the very thing that pushes Guo to pursue filmmaking in the first place, which she saw as a “fantasy world” far from what she knew in Wenling (2017: 193). Guo dreamed of abandoning her Eastern identity to replace it with Western art and inspiration, keeping the prophecy about the Nine Continents squarely in her consciousness, until she encountered the cold, wet, and barren landscape of Southwest Wales. Wales, to Guo, was

a depressing and desolate place and people, the antithesis of the bustling, crowded, and bright environment she knew in China, specifically Beijing. Guo describes her visit to Wales as the loneliest moment of her life: “It was on those barren hillsides [...] that I understood how much I needed China as the driver of my imagination, a source of creativity, thought and understanding” (2017: 300). Hannah Beech of *The New York Times* claims that, “When her memoir veers to exile in Europe, its emotional punch is weaker” (2018). However, it is only in her European “exile” that Guo’s memoir locates her true formation of identity that would come to influence her art. The eye-opening moment in Wales acts as a revelation for Guo that refocuses the trauma and hatred she had once associated with China as a deeply influential part of her art and identity. This intimate self-awareness allows Guo to create widely affecting art that is as equally moving in any language or cultural environment she chooses to create it in. It is only on the train back to London after Guo’s miserable time in Wales and her pivotal realization—accepting the painful and multifaceted East / West multilingual identity within her—that Guo began to write the screenplay for her highly celebrated feature-film, *She, a Chinese*.

Guo’s accumulated knowledge of life as an outsider in both China and the United Kingdom is on full display for the reader in her debut English novel, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007). Guo’s ordeal in Beijing as a “voiceless daughter-in-law” in the house of her first boyfriend, the physically abusive Jiang whose language Guo unconsciously adopts – although she describes it as “rude and very male” – is directly mirrored in *Dictionary for Lovers* (2017: 238). This exact episode is reflected in an act of ventriloquism in the novel, as Ania Spyra points out, of the male known only as ‘you’ upon the narrator in a relationship that, “resembles a colonizing one in its inequality of power” (2016: 450). The novel, which serves as a written time capsule for Guo’s journey in learning English, illustrates her real frustrations in understanding and using the various tenses of the English language. Guo explains that in Chinese, “All tenses are in the present. Because once you say something, you mean it in your current time and space” (2017: 304). This struggle is exemplified in the grammatical aspect of *Dictionary for Lovers* where, in an unsettling and bewildering experience, the narrator’s voice is constantly in the present tense, creating the effect of both inviting the reader into the first-person narrator’s innermost thoughts and alienating the reader through her language. *Dictionary for Lovers* is an example of what Guo does best: balancing alienation and displacement with intimacy and shared human experiences.

Unsurprisingly, Guo resists one-dimensional attempts at labeling her identity. At the beginning of her presentation for 5x15 festival, Guo bristles slightly as she takes the stage after having been introduced as Chinese: “When you say ‘she’s Chinese’ I always get a bit kind of nervous because, yes, I am Chinese by birth, British by law, European by spirit” (“[Life as an Immigrant, Life as an Artist](#)”). Guo would probably equally cringe at *The New York Times* reviewer’s clean and succinct statement on her nationality: “She is now a British citizen,” pointing out that, “In 2013, *Granta*

named her one of the best young British novelists” (Beech 2018). *Nine Continents* presents Guo’s wanderer status as a deeply personal part of her lived-experiences that is ingrained far back in her lineage. Like other translingual artists, Guo’s pre-existing alienation allows her to take the impenetrable darkness of her exile and find meaning that can reach beyond cultural and linguistic barriers. Guo’s ability to create art and beauty where there seem to exist only estrangement and suffering can be best expressed in one of the most pivotal moments of her life – that would come to define her later creative abilities – when she meets art students at the beach in Shitang. Upon witnessing a young artist paint the Shitang beach in brilliant hues, which Guo had always only seen as a dreary grey and brown of sea and seaweed-covered sand, she exclaims to the artist: “‘But there’s no sun there! Only grey clouds!’ The girl just smiled. Without responding she began to paint the sea with a mix of red and blue. It was one of the happiest days of my life.” (2017: 67).

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