

7. Translation as a Motor of Critique and Invention in Contemporary Literature: The Case of Xiaolu Guo

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This chapter will position translation as a particular mode of reading and of writing that draws not only on critical engagement with ‘source’ texts but also on the creative potentials of interaction between languages and cultures in the production of a ‘target’ text. Writers for whom English is not the sole means of communication or of expression, and whose circumstances or history are such that they have crossed cultures, tend to have increased awareness of cultural relativity and linguistic difference. This may be explicitly expressed or communicated in terms, for example, of a focus on a particular thematic or in relation to linguistic or generic choices. Indeed, for many such writers, the notion of translation itself and what it might mean in the context of writing and meaning-making more generally becomes a locus of interest. With access to more than one writing system and set of linguistic and cultural conventions comes the potential for enhanced creativity and the kind of double vision or critical perspective that depends on or emerges from such a dual consciousness as is the case of bilingual writers, for example.¹ Translation itself has become a hot topic, given continued debate about the contexts (literary, social, cultural, political, commercial) in which it can be seen to operate and the scope and extent of its influence.

That issues relating to translation are prevalent in our lives today is borne out by Sherry Simon’s recent review in *Target*, a leading translation studies journal, of Susan Bassnett’s 2011 *Reflections on Translation*: “What Bassnett shows so powerfully,” Simon writes, “is how translation, more than one might have realized, is at the heart of our existence as readers, as theatre-goers, as citizens.”² For more than a decade now, there has been increasing interest in and discussion of the meanings and import of translation, not just in relation to notions of linguistic and cultural exchange, but in broader social, political, and

critical terms. Indeed, in the context of a recent international conference (July 2015) on the theme of “Innovation Paths in Translation and Intercultural Studies,” organized by the International Association of Translation and Intercultural Studies, many of the talks by specialists in the field reflected awareness of translation’s shifting social and cultural roles at a time of rapid technological change and political and economic challenges. It is timely, therefore, to reconsider the implications not only for production but also for reception of work created by writers who engage critically and creatively with the “richness of diversity” that translation and translational practices, in a broad sense, open up.³

This chapter will argue that increasingly translation, in multiple senses, is integral to contemporary literary production and reception. In focusing on the work of Xiaolu Guo, a Chinese-born writer, now resident in the UK, it will illustrate the extent to which translation is implicated in shaping the construction of her narratives. It will do so against the backdrop of some recent theoretical and critical work in translation studies, comparative and world literature, and postcolonial and cultural studies, broadly speaking. In so doing, it will seek to build on a body of research that highlights the centrality of translation and translational practices in the production and circulation of contemporary writing, while addressing the consequences for readers of interaction with ‘original’ works that are already the product of more than one language and culture.⁴

The choice of Guo is motivated rather than contingent in the sense that her life history, as well as the concerns articulated in her fiction and in her films, reflect and are a product of processes of translation both literal and metaphoric. As a graduate of the Beijing Film Academy as well as the recipient of a scholarship to the National Film and Television School, Beaconsfield, who has produced a number of award-winning films, and as a writer of fiction in both Chinese and English, whose inclusion in *Granta Best of Young British Novelists* 2013 stands as testimony to her literary status, Guo’s trajectory is not untypical of

that of many writers today who cross national and cultural borders. Indeed, a closer look at Guo's cinematographic and novelistic oeuvre would suggest that she has long been concerned with issues of translation in multiple senses. As I have shown in another context, as a filmmaker Guo often treats similar themes to those realized in her novels (migration; alienation; loss) and imports into her fiction images and visual elements that support and extend the verbal, while her films often rely on poetry and metaphor in exploring their characters' worlds and feelings.⁵ In other words, what can be seen to characterize Guo's work is a focus on extending the possibilities of one mode or medium by drawing on those of another. Thus her fiction is spatialized, while her films are, to an extent, novelized or formally framed and edited, so as to import some of the devices of fiction into cinema. These can be considered translational narrative practices.

A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers (2007), for example, employs a range of resources (intertextual, visual, linguistic and cross-cultural) in addition to the imposition of a primarily conceptual mode of organization on what is otherwise a straightforwardly linear narrative detailing the life of a young Chinese woman residing in London, falling in love and learning English over the course of a year. These resources function to disrupt linearity and encourage a reading and interpretation which sees a thickening of time and an opening up of intercultural spaces, as the here-and-now is filtered through the consciousness of a young woman who has come from elsewhere and who therefore, inevitably, has a comparative perspective. Her grounding in a different language, culture, and set of values serves as a critical lens to interrogate the presentation of what might otherwise appear as naturalized or normative customs and conventions in her new place of residence. Likewise, *She, A Chinese*, Guo's 2009 film in Chinese and English, seeks, in the director's words, to challenge "the traditional Chinese cinema style, to cross over cultural borders, with a fresh artistic language and a personal voice."⁶ This artistic language and

personal voice derive at least in part from a desire to produce a film that responds to Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* by reversing the direction of travel (from China to Europe) and by highlighting, perhaps somewhat ironically, the youthful rebellion and coming of age of a young Chinese woman in London. In any case, what is common in both instances is Guo's reliance on representational and expressive modalities that cut across languages and cultures, whether these relate to the language of literature or film, to Chinese or English, or to the cultures of the West or of the East.

What is of note is the fact that Guo's training as a film-maker is in documentaries, which at one level seek to show aspects of reality and to deal with social and cultural issues, broadly speaking. In *Late at Night: Voices of Ordinary Madness* (2013), shown at the British Film Festival, the viewer gets a sense of the extent to which Guo is driven by ideas rather than narrative. Yet this film, which at one level might be described as a critique of capitalism or as the study of an underclass, in that it presents mostly marginalized figures living in the East End of London, is a highly wrought, formally structured film, which employs a series of cinematographic devices and fictional frames which, in effect, impose or create a reading path through the otherwise episodic and fragmented voices. There are stylized images and quotations on screen from a range of writers and philosophers, such as Beckett and Huxley, which have the effect of superimposing on the moving images and the talking heads a frame for reading. In short, the treatment of topics in Guo's films, whereby meaning is made at the level of form and in relation to the viewer's engagement with structure, including repetition and juxtaposition, demands an ability to read one mode in terms of another and to harness a translational logic. In her films, as in her fiction, Guo relies on sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit points of comparison and critique between East and West, communist and capitalist systems in their differential production of citizens, ideas of freedom and control, of inclusion and exclusion, of the creation of a sense of belonging or alienation. Of particular concern is

the question of how particular societies produce certain types of people or ways of viewing the world and what it means to feel at home in a culture or to experience dislocation. For those who move across cultures, whether voluntarily or out of necessity, notions of mobility and displacement, of being subjects in translation, are part of the texture of their lives as well as aspects of the spaces of imagination.

New modes of reading and writing

Before turning in more detail to analysis of Guo's work, it would be useful to refer to societal, critical and political contexts that inform current interest in translation in an extended sense and that frame my reading of translation as a mode of literary production and reception as well as an interpretive space at the confluence of languages and cultures. What I want to highlight is the co-existence of a number of arguably inter-related, if apparently contradictory, phenomena and their connection with extended concepts of translation. These relate to: changing and increasingly unstable relationships between language and nation; increased mobility and border-crossing on the part of many contemporary writers, even if the effects of this mobility and border-crossing are not evenly distributed or entirely predictable; and the rise of English as a lingua franca.

At a time when monolingualism can no longer be assumed to be the default position in many parts of the world, and when many writers writing in English have access to other languages and cultures and refer to them or employ them either covertly or overtly in their work, it is more difficult to maintain what for many is, in reality, a fiction.⁷ The idea that languages and cultures are bounded and distinct, rather than mutually informing or complementary, has begun to be revisited, as have notions of translatability and equivalence more generally. The "default rule of monolingual speech" can no longer be maintained, as

those who can, often do speak or write in more than one language, sometimes switching languages depending on the particular context, their sense of audience and of purpose, as well as the affective and intellectual values invested in one language or another.⁸ Economic forces and political power also play their part in decision-making about which language or languages to use in a given situation: witness the rise of English and the imbalance in terms of what gets translated into and out of English across the globe.

Certainly, within a postcolonial and cultural studies paradigm there has long been recognition of the politics of language and the relevance of conceptions of, and approaches to, translation and translational writing to literary production. What has changed, in my view, is the fact that such issues can no longer be contained within bounded disciplinary or sub-disciplinary areas but constitute a challenge to literary studies more generally. Writing in English, indeed conceptions of English literature, its inclusions and exclusions, are subject to contradictory pressures: the simultaneous policing of, and movement across, borders (for example Apter's notion of 'checkpointization').⁹ What it means to write in English, while accessing or employing other languages and cultures, is not necessarily the same today as forty or fifty years ago, nor are readers necessarily schooled in similar ways of reading. The kind of work produced by Guo, for example, is alert to the creative and critical possibilities of linguistic and cultural border-crossing as well as to the role of English in extending readership beyond those familiar with Chinese literature and culture. At the same time, her incorporation of extended notions of translation within her work, not just at the level of theme but also in terms of structural mechanisms and modes of organization, is evidence of an artistic and literary practice informed by the politics of style as well as by a bilingual aesthetics, in Sommer's terms.¹⁰ As Ch'ien indicates in relation to what she calls the weirding of English, the "problem of interpretation and translation has become a subject for writers" from immigrant backgrounds or for those who have crossed linguistic and cultural, as well as

geographic, borders.¹¹ Many of them, she asserts, “sustain a practice of linguistic polyculturality” and “challenge the existence of a normative standard for English” by drawing on the systemic properties or affordances of another language in the design and material realization of their narrative.¹² This can be seen in Guo’s literary and narrative practice insofar as she constructs layered textual worlds with a comparative dimension where the materiality and cultural politics of language is always in play even as it serves as critical lens and resource for creativity.

In both *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007) and *I Am China* (2014) the co-presence of Chinese and English is in evidence in a visible and material sense. The former explicitly treats the process of language acquisition, and in so doing is written in a kind of broken English which gets progressively more complex and sophisticated, both lexically and grammatically, as the young protagonist Z becomes more proficient. Comparison of the Prologue and Epilogue of the novel bears this out. Z’s reflections as she leaves Beijing for London at the beginning of the narrative, for example, are couched in language that is syntactically and lexically simple, marked by the language of a learner.

Now.

Beijing time 12 clock midnight.

London time 5 clock afternoon.

But I at neither time zone. I on airplane. Sitting on 25,000 km above to earth and trying remember all English I learning in school.

I not met you yet. You in future.¹³

As the narrative continues, what becomes clear is that despite some of the syntactic and lexical ‘errors’ made by Z, her thoughts and reflections are anything but simple. Already the

kind of questions she poses in her broken English—“When a body floating in air, which country she belonging to?”—echoing her concern with time zones, travel and positionality, are indicative of a mind at work.¹⁴ What becomes apparent is Z’s philosophical disposition, as she subjects her experience in a new language and of a new culture to scrutiny.

By the end of the novel, the language has become more complex and visibly more ‘correct’.

It’s a big aeroplane, with so many seats, so many passengers. Air China, with the phoenix tail drawn on the side. This time it takes me east. Which direction is the wind blowing now, I wonder? Coming to England was not easy but going back is much harder.¹⁵

While the narrator’s philosophical disposition continues to be in evidence—she is still posing questions about the relationship between location and sense of self—what has changed, apart from the complexity and grammaticality of her language, is the ‘thickness’ of her experience. Time has passed in a new culture, the direction of travel has changed, and Z is a year older. With the passage of time she understands from the inside what it means to have been translated across time and space, and to be subject to translation by as well as of oneself. Returning to Beijing constitutes a kind of culture shock in reverse as she notes the changes that have taken place in her absence.

The whole city is dusty and messy. Unfinished skeletons of skyscrapers and naked construction sites fill the horizon. The taxi drivers spit loudly on to the road through their open windows. Torn plastic bags are stuck on trees like strange fruits. Pollution, pollution, great pollution in my great country.¹⁶

This image of Beijing is evocative and the language used to project it is striking. The “skeletons of skyscrapers,” the “naked construction sites,” and the plastic bags “like strange

fruit” are poetic and metaphoric. The qualifying of “construction site” by the adjective “naked” is unusual but meaningful, both complementing the image of rapid development in Beijing, with building projects in progress, and suggesting a kind of soulless cityscape. The kind of control and manipulation of language demonstrated here is that of a competent and linguistically playful narrator—witness the two meanings of ‘great’ in evidence here. Reference to the natural world (trees, fresh air) and its despoiling and destruction (plastic bags, pollution) plays a narrative role here, but is also indicative of Guo’s ongoing concern as a writer with the environment and its man-made destruction. It is difficult not to hear an echo of Billie Holiday’s voice in the expression ‘strange fruit’ to describe the torn plastic bags caught in the branches of the trees.

While in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, use of English is marked and inflected with Chinese ‘accents,’ and notions of translation feature large in relation to movement and communication across cultures, in the case of *I Am China*, the presence of English-in-translation manifests itself in a less obviously mimetic way. Realization of the book’s premise—the translation into English of assorted documents and letters by a translator at the invitation of a publisher—does not involve learner language, but that of a trained translator from Chinese into English, who is seen to grapple with the complexities of the translation process. Scottish-born translator Iona muses at intervals on the challenges of her task as well as on her own limitations as a translator. These challenges range from the organizational and lower level (for example, the bundle of documents she receives needs to be sorted), to higher-order skills and knowledges such as understanding of colloquial as well as formal Chinese, and familiarity with Chinese history, literature, and culture. *I Am China* is a novel that reflects on processes of translation even as it demonstrates them by, for example, comparing different versions of a translation to test the possible meanings being made. In the context of a narrative where the question of whether an event has already taken place or is

about to happen, differences between Chinese and English in their rendering of temporality become a crucial, not just an incidental, issue. Iona struggles with the translation of protagonist Jian's final two scribbled lines about the blueness and purity of the sea, as she tries to uncover what has happened to him and where he is:

Then she changes the tense. Since Chinese has no tense indication with verbs it can be hard to determine the meaning.¹⁷

In rendering the lines in the future tense – “There, that sea, the bluest and purest sea. It will be the last blue I shall ever see”, Iona is alerted to the possible undertones: that Jian is going

there to die. It is Jian's written correspondence with his girlfriend Mu which forms the substance of a major strand of the narrative. The novel's Prelude, which presents in italics the English translation of a letter dated December 29, 2011, is followed by a series of early chapters, told in the third person, which present to the reader the figure of Scottish-born translator Iona as she sets about her translation brief. These initial chapters set in April 2013 present to the reader a description of London, of Iona's flat, of her recent sexual encounter, and chart her engagement with the process of translation of the documents before her, as she tries to piece together the story she uncovers. Translation is shown as a multi-faceted practice integral to the novel's design, narrative progression and plotting. It serves both as narrative matter and as critical lens through which to explore what it means to live in translation or to be translated.

Brief commentary on the letter of December 29, 2011 from Jian to Mu illustrates some of the issues that translation can raise in terms of movement across languages and cultures. Take, for example, the opening sentence after the address to “Dearest Mu”: “The sun is piercing, old bastard sky.”¹⁸ Already the inclusion of the phrase “old bastard sky” suggests a degree of foreignization, alerting the reader to the fact that s/he is reading in

translation. In addition, mention of events and participants from a recognizably Chinese context (Tiananmen Square, Chairman Hu Yaobang) help remove the reader from his/her here-and-now to another time and place. While this process of entering another space and constructing a world on the basis of graphic and verbal triggers is true more generally of a process of reading and meaning-making, Guo's novel emphasizes the embeddedness of translational practices in the production and reception or interpretation of the narrative.

In effect, what is already happening is the emergence of new circuits of reading and writing, as Bassnett has called them, which are increasingly intercultural, or at the very least require sensitivity to the fact that English always operates in the presence of other languages and literatures.¹⁹ Alastair Pennycook points to the ways in which English can always be re-appropriated by those for whom it is one resource, among others, in their extended linguistic and expressive repertoires.²⁰ Utterances in English produced by speakers and writers for whom English is but one of a number of languages are not deficient by default, nor necessarily lacking in the idiomaticity assumed to be the prerogative of so-called native speakers. English that is described as 'broken' or 'accented' or that is perceived as a kind of 'translatorese' or 'translatese' may originate from a variety of speakers and writers and have multiple forms and functions.

Translational spaces and the construction of narrative

As I have argued elsewhere in relation to the narratives produced by writers having access to English in addition to other languages and cultures, a situation that can no longer be presumed to be exceptional, the co-presence of these other languages and cultures, even where, on the surface, they do not seem to operate, creates a kind of translational space.²¹ Whereas for Eva Hoffman, for example, acquisition and 'mastery' of English initially meant

suppression and loss of her native Polish in order to acculturate to Canadian and American 'norms,' the work of writers such as Xiaolu Guo constructs and embodies a counter-narrative by showing the extent to which English Only, rather than English Plus, is potentially limiting for both readers and writers at a time when, arguably, translation has become a primary modus operandi. The question of "[w]ho is addressed, and how, in the course of translation," and of the ways in which these questions relate to processes of migration, is, to an extent, entangled in the politics of space and of movement, as well as of language.²² In other words, context, as well as co-text, is important in helping to decipher the meaning of what one is reading. In *I Am China*, for example, the treatment and status of those who are forced to leave their countries of origin, and the ways in which their claims are handled and 'translated' across jurisdictions, is one of the concerns of the novel. Kublai Jian, one of the central protagonists, is expelled from China on political grounds and lands in England, where he finds himself first in a psychiatric unit in Lincolnshire, having been declared by a doctor to suffer from "borderline personality," then in an Immigration Removal Centre in Dover. From here he is eventually transferred to an Asylum Centre in Switzerland, "one of a few refugees granted a transfer to a Third Country, owing to uncommon political status."²³

What is of particular interest here is the way in which the novel narrativizes and embeds within itself aspects of a particular social and political reality. Jian's detention in the Lincolnshire psychiatric unit and his medicalization is shown to be the consequence of his inability to articulate his situation—he is after all a Chinese man from Beijing—in language that the authorities understand. (The question of whether or not an interpreter was present is not directly addressed, but what is made clear is Jian's frustration, incomprehension and initial sense of powerlessness in the face of forces that feel alien to him). From a human point of view, his weariness, anger at his treatment, and sense of humiliation are understandable: "The words wouldn't come. He felt totally inert and unable to argue back or explain what

was really wrong.”²⁴ Jian’s experience appears to be distorted and misrepresented by the language of power. However, he does take matters somewhat humorously into his own hands by writing to the Queen, a letter to which he receives a rather officious reply, informing him of the correct process for corresponding with her Majesty. The humour is in some ways a relief from the underlying bleakness of the book, notwithstanding the resilience and integrity of some of the characters. In distributing a manifesto at a music event in China, post-Tiananmen, Jian has taken a stand for freedom of expression and human rights, and has paid the price. His treatment in parts of Western Europe such as the UK, Switzerland, and France and his experience outside of China, illuminate the plight of those who find themselves caught up in systems they don’t understand and over which they have little or no control. The human story revealed in diary entries and letters to his girlfriend Mu undercuts and disturbs the bureaucratic and hegemonic practices of states and territories.

The translation of Jian’s narrative takes place at many different and overlapping levels: within the fictional frame, it is literally translated from Chinese into English by a freelance translator educated at the School of Oriental and African Languages (SOAS) in London—indeed there are representations of his handwriting in Chinese script within the novel followed by translator Iona’s renderings in English; Jian is also ‘translated’ across cultures. He is removed from China and from his relational and familial ties, his cultural knowledge and his place within a particular society at a particular moment, and variously re-located. His location is shaped first by his status as ‘a non-person,’ someone who belongs to no country, since his visa has run out and he has been expelled from China, then as a refugee, as a temporary legal resident of one country (Switzerland), and as someone travelling and working under an assumed identity in another (France). His mobility is not of the transnational, cosmopolitan variety. In his travels and travails he encounters others like himself, those living on the fringes of society, surviving and making do, busking, working in

restaurants, working on ships. Ultimately, however, the price for all of this ‘freedom’ is too high.

As I have begun to indicate, Guo’s work also interrogates conceptualizations of translation in relation to border-crossing, both linguistic and cultural, as well as in relation to narratives of migration. These narratives of translation can be read in the context of the social and political worlds which they index, as well as in relation to current theories of and discourses surrounding translation. In terms of language politics, modes of representation, and conceptualizations of translation at a time when English as a lingua franca may be seen as “[t]ranslation’s defining moment,” it is as well to look more carefully at the ways in which translation is narrated and represented.²⁵ Equally it is important to examine the extent to which translation can be both a critical *modus operandi* and a driver of new modes of writing.

The following section will turn to Guo’s work in relation to translation as motor of critique and invention. It presupposes, following Bakhtin, that the novel draws on heterogeneous discourses in its construction of narrative, even as it recognizes that the links between language and life or between narrative shaping and the representation of particular types of social and political worlds through discourse is heavily mediated and multi-layered. It is important to bear in mind, however, that in her inclusion of visual images (samples of handwriting, record covers, photos, drawings, and other realia) as well as in her explicit representation of different sign systems and in her overt treatment of translation, Guo is explicitly marking her work as multimodal and multilingual. Even if on the surface, her narratives are predominantly in English, it is English visibly in the presence of other languages and other sign systems. In her thematic as well as in her formal concerns, Guo points to the location of English today as a lingua franca: as a language of power, certainly, but also as a material resource on which to draw in her construction of narratives of translation that explicitly thematize stories of movement across languages and cultures,

foregrounding issues of loss and/or gain in the process of encountering difference and translating self and other. My contention is that in relation both to individual works and across her corpus to date, Guo's work presents a critique of aspects of a translational culture, even as it depends on a reader's ability to recognize and engage with the double consciousness and bilingual aesthetics of the narrative voice.

Translation as critique and invention

A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers is the dictionary-novel that brought Guo to the attention of an Anglophone public and was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2007. The fact that it has been translated into a number of languages, including Italian, French and Dutch, is indicative of its international reach and relevance beyond a purely Anglophone world. The challenges, both perceptible and imagined, of translating a work written in ostensibly 'broken' English into French would constitute the subject of another essay; but those who are interested in reading the 2008 translation into French by Karine Laléchère entitled *Petit dictionnaire chinois-anglais pour amants* will find one set of instructive solutions to the 'problem' of translating Chinese-inflected English used by an increasingly astute and proficient learner of English in London into 'broken' but progressively more complex French. Of course, in many ways this linguistic tour de force—the mimetic re-presentation of the language-learning process by a Chinese learner of English over the course of a year in London as she acquires grammatical structures, vocabulary items and cultural knowledge while she experiences and gives voice to the frustrations and limits of cross-cultural understanding—is just one aspect of a work that foregrounds cultural translation and demonstrates what it means to be required to adjust to new cultural norms. The struggle for recognition and for self-definition is enacted at many levels: linguistic,

cultural and existential. But this is also a book that touches on resistant translation and resistance to translation, calling attention to the power differential between English and Chinese, even as it adopts strategies to subvert assumed hierarchies by demonstrating the advantages of English Plus. For while this is a novel directed towards an English-speaking audience, and one which by and large assumes little knowledge of China or Chinese other than stereotypical representations on the part of the reader, the narrator's refusal at a moment of frustration to continue writing in English and her switch to Chinese—a move requiring the ostensible intervention of an editor's translation into English—draws attention to the fact that it is the monolingual, rather than the bilingual or multilingual individual, who is disadvantaged or at a loss in today's world where an ability to speak or write more than one language is the norm.²⁶ In addition, in drawing on a pluricultural generic repertoire in the construction of her narrative, Guo is able to combine the linear and spatial potentialities of narrative to produce a new narrative form—the dictionary-novel. Indeed Guo has spoken in interview at the Open University in 2013 about her search for method in writing her novel that originated as hundreds of messy pages typed up from the diaries she kept about her own observations and experiences as a young Chinese woman in England. In looking for a narrative thread, and seeking to turn a series of anecdotes and observations into a structured narrative, she drew on Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* as a resource in terms of a search for form (an A-Z of quotations and observations about love) and a method that would allow her to combine narrative drive—what happens in the course of one year in the life of a Chinese woman in London—with topical and thematic control. To put it differently, the dictionary form, drawing as it does on thematic and definitional categories ('Home,' 'Privacy,' for example), allows for cultural and linguistic comparison in a story about accommodation and acclimatization, about translation of self and other, as well as about love. In terms of layout, too, the dictionary form permits a design that separates off abstractions or general definitional

statements from the ensuing narratives that test their legitimacy or their limits by relating episodes from experience that dramatize or personalize understanding and integration of new linguistic and cultural knowledge. In other words, formal arrangements of words, different scripts and images on a page are seen to be motivated carriers of meaning in Guo's fiction, just as in her films style and length of shot, pacing, movement, gesture, inclusion of voice over, use of dialogue and text in more than one language, alongside music and colour are all semiotic markers that carry meaning potential. As a film-maker as well as a novelist, short story writer and poet, Guo's repertoire includes a range of resources to be deployed either singly or in combination to reinforce or disrupt a reader's or viewer's encounter with narrative. In terms of genre, Guo also demonstrates an ability to subvert expectations by creating generic blends such as her dictionary-novel, or using case notes and interviews to tell a story as she does in *UFO in Her Eyes*. It is as if she is constantly experimenting with forms of story-telling, using the affordances of the modes and media at her disposal while testing their limits. In this sense, access to more than one language and culture constitutes a set of resources to be marshalled and exploited in the creation of meaning. To write, then, is to engage in a set of translational practices aimed at creating for the reader through material features of language and design a story or cultural script about self in relation to other.

I Am China takes the preoccupation with translation as subject and dynamic, as critical lens and potential motor of creativity further. As well as being a structural principle mediating and constituting the novel, its embedding and realization at different levels in the narrative—at the level of story and of theme, at the level of plot and of motivating force to drive forward the action, as a device both literal and metaphoric—ensure that it is integral to the fabric of the work. Each of the nine chapters begins with an extract from an ancient Chinese text or with a Chinese proverb that is first represented in Chinese characters, then reproduced in a Romanized pinyin version followed by a translation into English. Moreover,

within sections of the text fragments of handwritten as well as printed Chinese characters are embedded alongside English translations ostensibly proffered by protagonist Iona Kirkpatrick, a professional translator from Chinese into English. In some sections, there are even notes inserted by the translator where, for example, she has had difficulty deciphering the handwriting, or where the expression used is one she is unfamiliar with because it is extremely colloquial.²⁷ There is also reference to real works of literature in translation (for example the Chinese and the English translation of a Russian novel by Vasily Grossman) and their resonances in the lives of the novel's protagonists, and there are fragments of other languages (such as French and German) woven into the fabric of the novel where the setting and/or narrative demands it. So, for example, when Jian has a French lesson at the Asylum Centre in Switzerland, there are some short phrases in French that both enact the subject of the lesson—saying where you are from—and provide an air of authenticity to the setting, while reinforcing the theme of 'self-translation.'

A good example of the way in which translation is both subject and object within the narrative—or to put it another way both theme and commentary—reveals itself in a section of chapter two of the novel entitled, with some irony, "Welcome to Dover." In this section translator Iona is struggling to render the idiomaticity of one of Jian's letters to Mu, in which he refers to being exiled in England. Stuck in a camp in Dover, he feels himself to be nothing but a registration number. He relates his dreams and memories of China and of Mu, indicating the extent to which he misses them. On the page a section of that letter is reproduced complete with crossed out Chinese characters where in his haste to commit himself to paper, he has made a mistake. As well as commentary on the difficulties of the text, fragments of which are reproduced in the "original" with translated passages set off in italics, there is also, within a section of italicized translation, set off in square brackets, a translator's note: "not sure what this means. It's a new colloquial expression I've not heard

before.”²⁸ So in addition to the literal level at which translation operates (from Chinese into English) there is also within this ‘literal’ level an enactment of a meta-level of translational knowledge where the translator’s presence is explicitly marked and her choices discussed. It is paratextual insofar as it is set off from the main text, not as a footnote, but simply in parenthesis within the narrative text. It draws attention to the role of the translator in interpreting meaning by selecting (or failing to select) particular ‘equivalents.’ In disrupting the illusion of a self-contained (fictional) work in translation, it highlights the operations required in the process of translation at the level of lexis and grammar. Yet there is a further level at which this reference to the task of the translator takes place, and that is within the third person narrative where the narrator, rather than the fictional protagonist, comments on the difficulties of translation. So, for example, there is a passage in section 11 of ch. 2 (‘Welcome to Dover’) that articulates the role of translation as a kind of bridge-building between cultures and individual worlds.

And it’s like Iona is building this bridge again, through her reading, her translation. Building a bridge of meaning from their letters, and she has to choose the right words to keep the structure standing. And it is so hard. The Roman letters of English and the oriental characters of Chinese are not natural bedfellows. [...] How can she find the right translation for these swear words in English? If she had spent more time in Beijing’s streets and markets and noodle stores on her year in China at university perhaps she would now grasp much more. One day, she thinks, she will master the language and understand the culture perfectly.²⁹

The presence of a narrator is marked in this passage by use of the third person and by the tag – “she thinks” – that attributes knowledge of Iona’s thoughts to someone with access to those thoughts. At the same time the reader is conscious of following Iona as she works

through her translation and contemplates relations between the subjects of her translated portions of text. In the interrogative: “How can she find the right translation for these swear words in English?”, there would seem to be an alignment between the perspectives of narrator and character, as the reader slips into Iona’s head and appears to have unmediated access to her thoughts. This direct access is of course an illusion enabled by the choice of modality (‘can’) and use of the demonstrative pronoun ‘these’ (rather than those) which bring us closer to Iona’s perspective. The reader thereby gains insight into the workings of translation and the difficult choices it demands of the translator.

In addition, translation – as an activity that involves first making sense of what one reads, and then rendering it into a form that enables another reader to decipher it and construct or co-construct meaning – is brought into close alignment with the production of text more generally. Indeed, there are explicit comparisons between the task of the translator and that of the writer of fiction: “Perhaps translating is another kind of storytelling: finding the writer’s voice, unravelling the narrator.”³⁰ As in any text, there is the question of who speaks and/or who narrates; and who sees or witnesses the unfolding action. The hand of the translator may not always be visible to those who read in translation but the translator will have ordered and organized the text in translation according to her understanding of events, their inter-relationship, the behaviour and motivation of protagonists and so on. It is made clear that with a language such as Chinese there is much to consider when rendering it into English. Apart from the thorny issue of tense and temporality, there is the question of tenor or tone, and of colloquial or street language mixed in with more formal registers. Then there is the relationship between text and context (as well as with co-text). What is particularly well demonstrated here is the extent to which translation is a dialogic process, not just in terms of a dialogue between writer and translator but also between the words on the page and the context that informs those words and helps give them particular resonance. The translator

must, in effect, resurrect or reinstate a context such that her eventual choice of wording can be read within and against the cultural norms operating in the source culture at the time, while paying attention to the norms of the target culture. Of course it is not always possible to know what these norms might be with any degree of certainty and this, I think, is the point. Words, in whatever language, relate both to one another within a text and also signal relationships beyond the world of the text. They are in dialogue with the world of the reader, as well as with the world of the writer. These worlds do not map directly on to one another but must be inferred and co-constructed. Just as a narrative text is the co-creation of a writer and reader, and a blend of the discourse of characters and a narrator or narrators, orchestrated by the hand of the author, so a translated text owes its particular configuration to a blend of voices, including that of the translator.

Moreover, in *I Am China* translation works to defer the construction of a narrative insofar as Iona's translations are effected randomly and in no particular order, given the fact that not all the documents are dated nor are they all written by the same hand. Creating a narrative, therefore, becomes an activity assured by the translator as she researches the 'real' lives of the individuals whose stories she is representing through a selection of documents that have by chance come into her orbit. The reader is party to this effort at trying to detect a narrative thread; s/he becomes a kind of co-investigator in the biographical, cultural and linguistic research conducted by Iona. But, as we have seen, Iona herself is implicated in the narrative, not only by virtue of her professional training as a translator but as an actor in the drama played out before the reader's eyes. Iona has a dual role as cultural and linguistic interpreter and as a participant in the production of the novel we are reading. In addition, in translating the lives of Jian and Mu, she is also translating herself. The uncovering of their story, which speaks of a critical period in modern Chinese life, pre- and post-Tiananmen Square, is also a stimulus to the creation of a life story for Iona herself. The process of

delivering a book, based on her translations from the Chinese, of the lives and loves of Jian and Mu, a book whose publication is an act of defiance, forces Iona to re-assess her own life and to create an alternative, more meaningful existence. What she reads and writes forces her out of her professional and personal corner and enables the construction of a different future, one where it looks like Jonathan of Applegate Books, who commissioned the translation in the first place, will play a personal, and not just a professional, role.

Conclusion

What this chapter has illustrated is the extent to which translation in an extended sense is part and parcel of the literary and critical landscape today. Literary production is visibly affected by the fact that English, increasingly, is being used by writers with access to other languages and cultures, many of whom focus on and thematise issues of translation. English clearly does not operate in a cultural and linguistic vacuum but always in the presence of other languages and literatures. While language politics remains an issue, there is a sense in which writers with English Plus are helping to change the terms of literary production insofar as they are developing new literary forms and a new literary aesthetics based on translational modes of writing. In terms of reception, there are a number of attendant issues revolving around notions of readability and the ability of monolingual readers to evaluate literature that depends on a bilingual or multilingual aesthetics. I have focussed here on the work of Xiaolu Guo to illustrate the many senses in which translation features in her writing and to place this focus on translation both as a critical *modus operandi* and as a spur to enhanced creativity. A work such as *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* has a mimetic relationship to translation insofar as it is constructed around the premise of language learning and indicates the extent to which languages and cultures appear to be constitutive of one another. Armed with a dictionary and a willingness to learn vocabulary and structures, Z translates her experience and her thoughts into increasingly

complex English. Yet she remains a Chinese woman in London, and despite greater familiarity with English customs remains at a certain distance to the society and its values. In *I Am China* translation becomes even more central to the narrative even if it is staged in a different way. Through the figure of the translator the accent is placed on translation as a dynamic and multi-dimensional process requiring knowledge and skill as well as perceptiveness and persistence. In this instance translation is presented as an act of defiance as well as a labour of love. It drives the plot and serves to uncover the mystery at the heart of the lives of the protagonists. Translation becomes a vital (in both senses) mode of storytelling that alerts the reader to the ways in which biography – the story of a life – and history are textured according to linguistic, social and cultural location. Not only is writing a form of translation, so too is reading.

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Notes

¹ Doris Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

² Sherry Simon, “Review of *Reflections on Translation*, by Susan Bassnett,” *Target* 27 no. 1 (2015): 94.

³ Simon, Review, 96.

⁴ See for example Steven Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics*; Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Susan Bassnett, “Reflections on Comparative Literature in the Twenty-First Century,” *Comparative Critical Studies* 3 no. 1-2 (2006): 3-11; Yasemin Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue: The Postmonolingual Condition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); Tamar Steinitz, *Translingual Identities: Language and the Self in Stefan Heym and Jakov Lind* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2013); Maria Lauret, *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Doloughan, *English as a Literature in Translation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016).

⁵ See Doloughan, *English as a Literature in Translation*.

⁶ Xiaolu Guo, “She a Chinese: Director’s Statement”, *Xiaolu Guo*, http://www.guoxiaolu.com/FIL_SAC_director_statement.htm.

⁷ Yildiz, *Postmonolingual Condition*; Doloughan, *English as a Literature in Translation*.

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- ⁸ Jan Blommaert, "Commentary: Superdiversity old and new", *Language and Communication* 44 (2015): 83.
- ⁹ Emily Apter, "Translation at the Checkpoint." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 50 no. 1 (2014): 57, 68, 69, 72.
- ¹⁰ Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics*.
- ¹¹ Ch'ien, *Weird English* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 28.
- ¹² Ch'ien, *Weird English*, 21, 14.
- ¹³ Xiaolu Guo, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2007), 3.
- ¹⁴ Guo, *Dictionary*, 3.
- ¹⁵ Guo, *Dictionary*, 349.
- ¹⁶ Guo, *Dictionary*, 350.
- ¹⁷ Xiaolu Guo, *I Am China* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2014), 313.
- ¹⁸ Guo, *I Am China*, 3.
- ¹⁹ Susan Bassnett, "Translation Studies at a Cross-Roads," *Target* 24 no. 1 (2012): 15-25.
- ²⁰ Alastair Pennycook, "English as a Language Always in Translation," *European Journal of English Studies* 12 no. 1 (2008): 33-47.
- ²¹ Doloughan, *English as a Literature in Translation*.
- ²² Michaela Wolf, "'The Language of Europe Is Translation': EST amid New Europes and Changing Ideas on Translation," *Target* 26 no. 2 (2014): 233.
- ²³ Guo, *I Am China*, 106.
- ²⁴ Guo, *I Am China*, 15.
- ²⁵ Lance Hewson, "Is English as a *Lingua Franca* Translation's Defining Moment?," *The Interpreter and Translator Trainer* 7 no. 2 (2013): 257-77.
- ²⁶ Guo, *Dictionary*, 179-80.
- ²⁷ Guo, *I Am China*, 77, 72.
- ²⁸ Guo, *I Am China*, 70-2.
- ²⁹ Guo, *I Am China*, 78.
- ³⁰ Guo, *I Am China*, 65.