

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## The problematics and performance of self-translation: The case of Xiaolu Guo

### Book Section

How to cite:

Doloughan, Fiona (2019). The problematics and performance of self-translation: The case of Xiaolu Guo. In: Bennett, Karen and Queiroz de Barros, Rita eds. Hybrid Englishes and the challenge of and for translation: Identity, mobility and language change. Routledge Advances in Translation and Interpreting, 1. New York: Routledge, pp. 21–36.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2019 Taylor Francis



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<https://www.routledge.com/Hybrid-Englishes-and-the-Challenges-of-and-for-Translation-Identity-Mobility/Bennett-Barros/p/book>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

## Chapter 2

### **The problematics and performance of self-translation: The case of Xiaolu Guo**

**Fiona Doloughan, The Open University (UK)**

#### **Introduction**

As Friedrich Dürrenmatt Visiting Professor of World Literature at the University of Bern, Chinese-British novelist and film-maker Xiaolu Guo gave a series of seminars (spring 2018) on hybridism and migrant literature. In her online introduction to the series, she indicated that the focus is “on authors who express themselves in a non-native language, writers such as Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, Eva Hoffman, Ha Jin, Aleksandar Hemon” (Guo, 2018). She also indicated that she would look at her own work as “a writer who came from the East, experienced cultural uprooting and immigration, and who, finally, has adopted a second language, English, in which to write” (Guo, 2018). While Guo does not define what she means by hybridism in this context, the kind of questions she asks, such as “can the writer construct a language hybrid, as a new positive force, thereby creating a literary country of their own?” and “how can non-native English speakers and writers claim English as their own literary vehicle?” (Guo, 2018) suggest that her interest resided in exploring the singular contribution of translingual and bilingual writers to the production of new literatures in English.

In this connection, there are a number of points worth keeping in mind: the first relates to critical theorist Homi Bhabha's discussion of how newness enters the world in work that embodies the transnational and translational (Bhabha, 1994); the second relates to the role of English inflected with the accents and rhythms of other languages and cultures; and the third is the concept of a bilingual aesthetics and the notion of "double consciousness" shown to be characteristic of the literary production of translingual and bilingual writers (cf. Sommer, 2004; Kellman, 2000). Guo's work, as will be demonstrated, is constructed from the perspective of a migrant consciousness where the crossing of borders (geographic, cultural and linguistic) brings to the fore a comparative, critical and intercultural dimension. As well as being a vehicle for the materialisation of cultural difference, Guo's use of language and storytelling techniques draw on the resources of both Chinese and English to create what Bhabha (1994) would call a third space. Such a space, which Bhabha sees as liberatory, depends on an ability to mix and blend resources in a motivated and creative way.

In the context of a volume on hybrid Englishes and translation, it is also important to remember that understandings of the term hybridity (and indeed translation and self-translation) are variable, changing over time and informed by disciplinary difference as well as by ideological stance (Maitland, 2016). While associations with hybridity and stigma may derive from notions of purity in language and the maintenance of standard forms of a language alongside resistance to mixing and blending, "English in its postcolonial manifestations shows a wide range of transfer phenomena and properties from indigenous languages" (Schneider, 2016: 340). Of course whether "transfer phenomena" are viewed positively, negatively or neutrally depends on the critical stance and academic background of the reader. Even the concept of 'transfer', it must be remembered, is rooted in a particular view of language, where individual languages are more or less bounded and distinct

categories. As Tymoczko (2007: 131) notes, the implicit metaphor “translation is transfer” can also steer notions of what is involved in translation both as process and product in particular directions. She suggests that it is important to keep in mind the variety of conceptualisations that have informed views of translation both historically and cross-culturally and to recognise “the importance and utility of exploring the permeable boundaries of translation” (2007: 109) in relation to other modes of cultural exchange such as representation, transmission (or transfer) and transculturation. In other words, she stresses the necessity of seeing translation as existing “far beyond linguistic concerns” (2007: 129) rather than being concomitant with it.

In addition, there is a view that shifting demographics and increased migration and mobility have impacted upon the complexity of social and cultural interactions and resulted in “diversified and fragmented linguistic manifestations” (Schneider, 2016: 340). As a lingua franca and a “globally available resource for speakers” (2016: 340) and by extension writers, English is seen as a dynamic linguistic system in contact with others, employed critically and creatively for a variety of purposes. It is perhaps to be expected that it will be “marked by increasing diversity and hybridity” (2016: 340), though what this means in practice and how it intersects, if at all, with translation is less clear, all the more so, given differing conceptions of translation. For writers such as Guo, awareness of a transnational and translational perspective is part and parcel of her writing life. “Words fail me all the time, whether in Chinese or in English. But I still churn my words out in a foreign world, in a language that I hope will become mine” (Guo, 2016). Despite the dangers of failing to communicate and recognition of what it means to inhabit more than one language, Guo is determined to take possession of her various linguistic resources and mark them with a transcultural meaning-making capacity.

As a self-proclaimed “writer in transition” (Guo and Hertel, 2016: 6), Guo is aware of the ways in which national and linguistic categories can serve to include and exclude and how difficult it can be to resist the imposition of labels and the impetus to define and categorise in mutually exclusive ways. She admits that “[a]fter I came to Britain and began to write in English, I suffered an identity crisis for years” (5). She sees herself not as a Chinese writer or a British writer or even a Chinese-British writer but as “a proud world citizen; being able to live where I want to live; being able to write in different languages” (10). For Guo, “being straightjacketed into a national identity kills our real identity” (10). She indicates that all she really wants to do “is reveal multiple possibilities, multiple dimensions, and multiple identities” (10).

Guo’s sense of herself as a citizen of the world and as an artist who can simply do her own thing has been hard won, given her trajectory from China to the UK, via spells in continental Europe. Now a British citizen, with a second home in Berlin, she had to fight for the right to return to Britain after her visa expired and she was forced to go back to China. It took the intervention of an immigration lawyer, support from Salman Rushdie and from her local MP, before she was given permission to return to Britain and accorded leave to remain. Likewise, her linguistic journey from Chinese (Mandarin and Zhejiang dialect) to English was a difficult and, in many ways unconventional, one. She speaks in interview (Guo and Hertel, 2016: 4) about her “crazy, absurd decision” to write in English, given her (at that time) “very broken English”. However, she eventually managed to turn her linguistic and cultural travails to good account in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, her 2007 dictionary-novel, shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction, by combining dictionary entries with a narrative form to tell the story of ‘Z’, a young Chinese woman who spends a year in London

learning English with the aid of her dictionary and the immersive language learning environment provided by her English boyfriend with whom she lives. This novel written in “the kind of broken English inflected by a Chinese student” (Guo and Hertel, 2016: 5) essentially mimics the process of language acquisition and seeks to recreate the experience of the linguistic outsider as she is initiated into a new culture. As will be discussed, it is a work whose very premise relies on languages and cultures in contact and on a comparative and translational dimension as the main protagonist narrates her experience of language learning and the difficulties of accommodating to a new culture.

This chapter will show that along the continuum from *Village of Stone*, a 2005 work in translation, to Guo’s 2017 memoir *Once Upon a Time in the East* via *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007), there is a continual refashioning/rewriting of self (both in Chinese and in English). How this rewriting or reversioning of self relates to concepts of translation and self-translation is complex, given Guo’s trajectory as a writer with an acute awareness of both the problematics and performance of translation. In interview Guo (2016) points to her dream of a third language that would permit mutual comprehension on the part of those of who speak different languages. She expresses her frustration with having to, as she puts it, constantly translate from one language to another:

My tongue is tied. I cannot express my thoughts with only one language. So I translate. I use one word to find another word. I try to write a transcript which is in both Chinese and English, a text that is alive and true for both cultures I am living in. (Guo, 2016)

Later in the same article she connects her alienation, of not feeling at home, to the way in which her languages –“Mandarin, English, Zhejiang dialect” (Guo, 2016) – fail to render her meaning and constrain her communication. At the same time, however, she recognises that the writing life demands and is a product of such statelessness.

My languages alienate me. They don't make me feel at home. They tell me I live in the wrong place. They make me stateless. That's the nature of my writing life (Guo, 2016).

Communication across borders requires 'translation', both literal and metaphoric, of self and of cultural other. To be sure, translating the self and self-translation can be seen as rather different concepts, in that the latter is conventionally employed in a restricted sense to refer to an author who translates his or her own work more or less 'faithfully' from language A into language B, while the former might be regarded metaphorically as a mode of self-inscription. I wish to argue, however, that Guo's work can best be regarded in relation to a dissolution of these 'hard' borders. I am employing the notion of self-translation in an extended sense to incorporate the ways in which translingual, transnational writers avail themselves of the potentials of their bi- or multilingualism to open up new linguistic spaces that depend on access to and interaction with both languages, thereby helping to construct a version of self which is always already in translation. Given that language is never devoid of cultural 'content', Guo's work invariably carries cultural assumptions generated by the context/s in which she writes as well as by her choice of language (Wilson, 2011). Certainly Guo's second Chinese novel *我心中的石头镇*, rendered in English translation as *Village of Stone* is mediated by the voice of her translator, Cindy M. Carter. It nonetheless prefigures in terms of its themes aspects of her later work which address issues of location and self-realisation and the impact of place and culture on narrative. Described online at "Paper Republic – Chinese Literature in Translation" as a "[f]ictional memoir of a young woman coming to terms with repressed memories of her childhood in a Chinese fishing village", it clearly signals both its status as literature – a fictional memoir – and its cultural location. Short-listed for the 2005 Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, *Village of Stone* brought Guo's work, albeit in translation, to public attention, though it was her 2007 novel *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for*

*Lovers* which proved pivotal for her English-language career as a writer. As will be shown in what follows, a path can be traced from *Village of Stone* to Guo's 2017 memoir which reflects a series of linguistic and cultural transformations as well as creative self-fashioning that serves to position Guo's writing within the field of transnational, translational writing.

### ***A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers: linguistic and generic hybridity***

In an interview for the Open University in 2013 in the context of the development of teaching materials for a third-year module on Language and Creativity, Guo indicated that her 2007 novel started life in the form of diary entries that she had kept when she first arrived in the UK in 2002-3. After typing these up, she had about 100 pages but had to consider what to do with them and figure out how to create some kind of narrative.

So when I was writing *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, I had a problem, how to hook or glue all this material together, this love story in this cultural battle, a man and a woman from a different culture. Then one day I found this style which is inspired, and really directly inspired, from Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*. And I remember I read the Chinese version of that book when I was 19 or 20 in my university in Beijing. I loved the linguistic formula which started from a vocabulary, a lovers' language, a lovers' vocabulary, then there's analysis after that vocabulary. (Doloughan, F. and Guo, X., 2013)

In essence, Guo translates something based on her own observations and experience as a learner of English and turns it from a series of diary entries into a novel, structured around a series of dictionary entries featuring a young Chinese narrator who relates one year in her life from arrival in Heathrow to her return to Beijing. Yet even this account simplifies a more complex process of translation, transposition and mediation that involved shifts on the part of the writer (the pronominal 'I' in the novel refers to narrator Zhuang Xiao Qiao or 'Z', as she is called), her publishing house and editorial interventions. Guo's original idea of producing a

work that would focus more narrowly on language and the language-learning process required reworking into a novelistic form that would satisfy an Anglophone reader's need for story and characterisation (cf. Spyra, 2016: 449). Guo's awareness of differing reader expectations and novelistic traditions is reflected in comments she made in "Writing China across the globe" (Guo and Hertel, 2016).

Most Chinese novels are metaphorical, tale-like, loosely constructed, less woven and polished – the structure is so tight in the Western way! And I realised once I write in English, it's a totally different book. The characters are different; the construction of the characters is different. I began to experiment. But beyond all the pain and struggles I had in this language, I also freed myself. I liberated myself.

What is notable here is the sense of liberation that Guo feels once she gets past the pain and struggle of writing in another language. *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* opens up a space that permits a comparative dimension in terms of the affordances and constraints of 'Chinese' and 'English', as well as awareness of their (at times) resistance to translation. As Wang (2014: 346) puts it, "this 'bad English writing' provides an alternative way of understanding Chinese language (e.g. syntax and morphology) and ultimately Chinese patterns of thought".

After a short prologue in which the protagonist reflects on what it means to leave China for the West, the book starts with her arrival at Heathrow.

Is unbelievable, I arriving London, 'Heathlow Airport'. Every single name very difficult remembering, because just not 'London Airport' simple way like we simple way call 'Beijing Airport'. Everything very confuse way here, passengers is separating in two queues. Sign in front of queue say: ALIEN and NON ALIEN. I am alien, like Hollywood film *Alien*, I live in another planet, with funny looking and strange language. (Guo, 2007: 9)

What Guo does here is to take some of the characteristics of the speech and writing of a language learner from China and reproduce them (e.g. the absence of 'it' as an empty subject;

lack of an article; problems with prepositions and verb forms/tense). Yet already in her representation of Z's arrival in Heathrow, the narrator draws on images from other Anglophone countries, such as the United States, in that the notion of dividing into two queues, one for aliens and one for non-aliens, may have more to do with the US, than British, passport control systems where the lines are divided by those with passports from the European Union and the European Economic Area and those with any other passport. Indeed in the prologue, Z considers what she already knows about English and the West and it boils down to stereotypical images from "American TV series dubbing into Chinese, showing us big houses in suburb, wife by window cooking and car arriving in front house" (Guo, 2007: 5). In some ways, both 'English' and 'Chinese' are constructed as over-arching terms rather than always embedded in their specificity and variety. Certainly there is reference to the fact that Z's mother only speaks the dialect of her village and is ignorant of Mandarin as well as acknowledgement in the novel of the structures of textbook English which don't always facilitate 'authentic' communication. However, the tenor of the book, particularly at the beginning, is predominantly comic and is not intended to be read entirely referentially or realistically. It tries to represent prototypical episodes and incidents, using dictionary entries (e.g. 'full English breakfast'; 'properly'; 'discord'; 'colony') to explore key terms in the narrative in relation both to Z's language learning journey and her increasing awareness of the ways in which cultural resonances and ideological issues inform language use. These key terms or dictionary entries also act as a kind of organizing principle in advancing the narrative from Z's initial arrival to her eventual departure. Arguably the entries move away from a focus on a beginner's linguistic and grammatical development, including syntax and vocabulary building (e.g. 'properly' (pp. 19-20); 'progressive tenses' (pp. 40-43)) to more overtly comparative cultural and critical concepts (e.g. 'home' (pp. 123-130); 'colony', (pp. 131-132)) such that as the narrative progresses the obviously humorous gives way to slightly

darker and more painful notes, as the politics of language and identity construction come to the fore.

The entry under ‘full english breakfast’ (sic) (pp. 16-18), for example, begins with the ingredients in italics of a choice of two breakfasts available at Z’s hostel: the builder’s super platter or the vegetarian breakfast. For Z, as a Chinese woman who likes to eat, this introduction to the culture at her ‘bed and breakfast’ provides an opportunity both to learn new words and to compare Chinese and English culinary habits. She is amazed by the size of the portions: “Is big lunch for construction worker!” (16), she writes, before describing the individual elements of her breakfast.

Food like messy scrumpled eggs, very salty bacons, burned bread, very thick milk, sweet bean in orange sauce, coffee, tea, milk, juice (16).

The description incorporates a number of interesting linguistic features as well as reflecting, in a humorous way, cross-cultural differences. For someone from the East who has not experienced ‘baked beans’ before, the description ‘sweet bean in orange sauce’ renders the food item comprehensible in terms of a different culinary tradition; the reference to ‘burned bread’ for toast is a way both of making strange the familiar and of indicating a negative evaluation of it. And as for ‘scrumpled eggs’, the language learner’s ‘error’ is fortuitous in suggesting, at least for this reader, a kind of hybrid of ‘crumpled’ (like a suit or a piece of paper) and ‘scrambled’. The addition of ‘messy’ leaves the reader in no doubt of Z’s negative visual assessment of the breakfast. In gustatory terms, she goes on to make clear that in addition to the ‘very salty bacons’, baked beans taste “like somebody put beans into mouth but spit out and back into plate” (17). She remembers having seen some “[w]hite colour beans, in orange sticky sweet sauce” (17) on tins in China and points to the fact that “[t]in food is very expensive to China” (17). So the assumption is that this food item in front of her must be very expensive, even if it tastes terrible.

Yet concern with food, weather and the use of pronouns in the subject and object positions (pp. 25-7) give way in later sections to more deeply personal and political concerns. For example, the entry under ‘colony’ talks about love-making as a battle with Z’s boyfriend as the commander. After providing various dictionary definitions of colony to include groups of people; and land, Z writes: “You possess my whole body. They are your farm [ . . . ] My whole body is your colony” (Guo, 2007: 131-132). This suggests that she sees herself as a new territory to be discovered and possessed. Her boyfriend is strong – “your strength is overwhelming” (131) – and she is “unprepared” (131) at first for this new experience, her first experience of sex. At the same time, she gets used to it and becomes “addicted by it” (131).

Later in the book, this notion of colonisation becomes more explicitly political in terms of its consciousness of hierarchies and gender. An entry under ‘nonsense’ (179) is followed by two paragraphs in Mandarin with an ‘Editor’s translation’ on the following page (180). Within the context of the novel, whether this editor is Guo herself or someone at her publishing house is unclear. What is clear is that at this point, the monolingual Anglophone reader is at a disadvantage, while the bilingual Chinese-English reader will be able to read and compare the two versions. In terms of the English translation, the language chosen to relate the narrator’s frustration and exhaustion at having to learn this foreign language, is forceful and renders her sense of cultural colonisation. “I have become so small, so tiny, while the English culture surrounding me becomes enormous. It swallows me, and it rapes me. I am dominated by it” (180). Yet as Hwang (2013: 82) points out, two phrases from the (fictional) source text are lost in translation. While this does not make a great deal of difference to the overall meaning, it does impact upon “the tone of Z’s writing. The fictional editor who changes the tone and edits out inappropriate or untranslatable words is a powerful metaphor for translation itself” (Hwang, 2013: 82). In essence the effects of translation are illustrated here in multiple senses:

not only is a text in Mandarin followed by its ostensible translation into English but we also get a sense of what is at stake for the language learner, the bilingual or multilingual cultural intermediary and the Anglophone reader. The power dynamics of language and of translation are made manifest in a double sense. Firstly, given Z's positioning as a Chinese learner of English in England, living with an apparently monolingual English man, she is the one to translate both herself and her culture into another language that she is in the process of acquiring. Yet the presence in the book of Mandarin and the focus on cultural translation have the effect of flagging up to the Anglophone reader his/her dependence on cultural and linguistic intermediaries capable of negotiating and mediating difference.

The novel works on a number of different levels at the same time, given that it relates a love story, while enacting a linguistic and cultural journey. One of the ironies of the story is that as Z progresses in learning English and assumes a voice, her boyfriend seems to have less and less to say for himself and to lose his sense of self. The dictionary entry under 'discord' (Guo, 2007: 181-184), for example, relates the kind of arguments that the lovers (Z and her English boyfriend) begin to have several months into their relationship: they disagree on Tibet and its relationship with China; on food (Z's boyfriend is vegetarian, she is a meat eater); and on career (she sees her boyfriend as a drifter and as someone lacking in ambition, he sees her as overly ambitious). In many ways the differences are stereotypical (e.g. a 'Chinese' vs. a 'Western' view of relations with Tibet) and point to the manner in which relationships can come under pressure through difference, even where recognition of difference has been part of the initial attraction. As with many relationships, whether between countries, social groups or individuals, there is a power dynamic at work here, even if this shifts with time. In the case of Z and her boyfriend, Z's lack of knowledge and initial inability to express herself leaves her feeling disenfranchised and subject to the knowledge, protection and understanding of her 'native informant'.

Yet Z is also ‘translating’ Chinese culture for her boyfriend and by extension for the Anglophone reader whose knowledge of Chinese culture is likely to be mediated by Western sources rather than to have been experienced directly and from a position of knowledge, including knowledge of the language. The narrator is a kind of cultural and indeed linguistic intermediary in the sense that she relates the Chinese words for things such as plants, flowers and vegetables to her boyfriend who is a keen gardener. Z writes down the Chinese names and translates them back into English, providing a gloss for the reader. So, for example, we learn that ‘earth bean’ is a potato; a daffodil is a ‘fairy maiden from the water’; lavender is ‘clothes perfuming weeds’ and so on (Guo, 2007: 63-64). Z doesn’t just want to amass English vocabulary and learn about English habits and customs. She also wants to interest her boyfriend in her own culture but it is not always an equal exchange, given both the context – Z is in England to learn English – and the respective roles occupied by Z and her boyfriend in their relationship – she is the one who is initiated into sex as well as into the English language and culture; he assumes the role of teacher, a role of which he comes to tire.

The overriding humour of the early chapters of the novel gradually gives way to a less playful, more serious tone as the two lovers grow apart, seemingly as a function of Z’s increasing fluency and ability to give voice to her thoughts and desires. Along the way, there are moments when their differing aspirations and temperaments are reflected in the language they use and the meanings they extract from their culturally imbued discourses. The section on home (123-130) illustrates this: Z’s boyfriend who has broken ties with his family takes Z along with him to visit a large Bengali family whom he met in the course of his former job as a youth worker. She muses on the connections in Chinese between house, home and family: “Home, (sic) is a dwelling house for the family to live” (126). Unlike the Chinese character (jia) for ‘home’ and ‘family’ which has “a roof on top, then some arms and legs inside” (126), meanings of ‘family’ as expressed in *Rogert’s Thesaurus* relate the word ‘family’ in

English to other words (such as ‘parental’, ‘posterity’) that don’t connect with place. The coincidence of meanings in Chinese, as perceived by Z, provides a framework for articulating what she wants: a house, a home and a family. Her boyfriend’s tendency to drift -- there is a whole dictionary entry devoted to the word ‘drifter’ in relation to Z’s characterisation of her boyfriend (Guo, 2007: 90-99) – argues against his ability to provide what she needs. From her boyfriend’s perspective, the concept of home is more abstract and doesn’t have to be wedded to place: he is her home.

Apart from the fact that *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary* draws on Chinese-inflected English (e.g. “my heart hanging on high sky” (Guo, 2007: 10)), creating a kind of (at times) humorous hybrid as well as capitalizing on the malapropisms (e.g. Spicy Girls, instead of The Spice Girls) that language learners are wont to employ, the novel draws on other cultural and material resources to create new patterns. A storyline in which a young Chinese woman learns English from her lover and acquires items of language by constantly checking meanings in her *Concise Chinese-English dictionary* is a remarkably good fit with the dictionary form. At the same time, division of the novel into temporal units following the months of the year is a way of ensuring a chronology and driving the plot forward. This hybrid of linear narrative and use of space, combining telling with showing, is also attributable to Guo’s dual career as a documentary film-maker and writer. In this sense, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* already incorporates many of the features typical of Guo’s work which engages critically and creatively with the different resources at her disposal to make a new textual entity. Linguistic and cultural difference provide her with material both literally and metaphorically: her knowledge of (at least) two writing systems and expressive modes permit her to draw on Chinese and English communicational systems such that there is dialogue and interaction between them; her bilingual aesthetics and double vision is a mode of viewing and constructing the world such that the material building blocks

of text – language; cultural and generic conventions – are subjected to scrutiny and reflection. Translation becomes a mode of writing and of seeing the world; cultural and linguistic difference can be sources of conflict but also resources employed to challenge fixed categories and create new forms, new expressions and alternative ways of constructing a fictional universe.

### ***Once Upon a Time in the East: A novelistic memoir***

In a personal communication (email of 16/01/2016), Guo referred to the work she had just submitted to the publisher, *Once Upon a Time in the East* (2017) as “a novelistic memoir”. This self-designation is interesting insofar as it suggests a kind of hybrid form or at the very least indicates Guo’s awareness of the extent to which her memoir draws on a novelistic toolkit in its translation of a slice of life. The very title of Guo’s memoir, *Once Upon a Time in the East* with its sub-title “A story of growing up” already reflects Guo’s ability to send out a number of sometimes competing signals at the same time and to translate the terms of her memoir into an autofictional one. Indeed, the memoir carries a strong family resemblance to Guo’s fictions and is a kind of translation of them in that it reworks motifs and incidents from previous fictions grounding them in Guo’s own life, while at the same time creating a narrative structure that through juxtaposition of the fabular or the mythic (cf. Feigel, 2017), and the documentary and the ‘real’, problematises their mutual exclusion and leaves open the door to the story of a life as a narrative fiction grounded in a collection of auto/biographical facts. In other words, the very categories of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ are being interrogated through a process of cultural encounter and multi-dimensional translation. As will be discussed, Guo’s references to foundational texts and Chinese myths alongside her inscription of her

journey to the West against the backdrop of other historic and epic journeys help to place her work in a reflexive and complementary relationship with previous cultural moments and translational movements. For this is also the story of the making of a writer formed at the confluence of personal and political circumstances, her mother a member of the Red Guard, her father an intellectual and a painter who had fallen foul of the authorities and spent time in re-education. As outlined in her memoir, Guo's horizons and expectations are a product of historical and intellectual formations, material circumstances, and her developing migrant and artistic consciousness, as she leaves China for the West, becoming in the process a translational and transcultural subject.

In reading *Once Upon a Time in the East* in relation to Guo's previous fiction, I wish to suggest that these works have incorporated aspects of her biography in non-trivial ways and can be considered as pre-texts or fore-runners of her memoir. Moreover, for readers familiar with the Guo corpus, it is difficult to read the memoir in isolation, given the shared structural and thematic features with the rest of her work. For example, inclusion in the memoir of an italicised and intercalated Chinese folk tale is made available to the Anglophone reader in English translation. From the Acknowledgements page where Guo expresses her gratitude to Wu Cheng'en, "the ancient writer who wrote *Xi Yon Ji (The Journey to the West)*, a legend that has inspired me since I was a child" (Guo, 2017: 317), it is clear that we are dealing here with a text in translation. It begins with the sentence "Once upon a time, there was neither East nor West" and goes on to relate the creation of the natural world, the passage of time and the birth of a monkey of extraordinary energy and force whose job it is to aid a monk called Xuanzang in his search for the purest Buddhist scripture so that human beings can "achieve real knowledge of life and death" (Guo, 2017: 7) through translation of the sutras or Buddhist scriptures. This tale, intercalated into the narrative at various junctures – there are five excerpts in total prefacing every new part of the memoir - provides a kind of introduction and

counterpoint to the unfolding biographical narrative. The inclusion of an italicised story in English translation in this work is reminiscent of the Chinese creation myth, the story of Pangu, in *I Am China* (2014), also rendered in italics to indicate its source as published material. So alongside the translation of a life in *Once Upon a Time in the East*, we have an extract in translation of an important Chinese work first made available to Anglophone audiences in 1942 in abridged form by translator Arthur Waley.

What Guo's memoir displays is a strong sense of structure: yet alongside the conventionally chronological is a sense of the cyclical nature of things: a kind of eternal return. The work is divided into 5 parts, each with a geographic reference followed by a summary designation of the tenor and substance of that section. So, for example, Part 1 is entitled "Shitang: Tales of the East China Sea", while part 2 is called "Wenling: Life in a communist compound" and part 3 goes under the banner "Beijing: The whirlpool of life". These designations all serve to refer to phases of Guo's life as they unfold relative to particular places. While parts 1-3 refer to Guo's life in China, part 4 deals with the move to Europe and is entitled "Europe: In the land of nomads". Only part 5 has no place-specific designation but is called "In the face of birth and death", recounting, as it does, the arrival of a new life – that of Guo's baby daughter Moon – and the deaths of first her father, then her mother. What precedes parts 1-5 is a short section entitled "The past is a foreign country", which may be an allusion to the first line of L. P. Hartley's *The Go-Between*. In any case, this opening section begins by characterising the nomadic years of Guo's life since leaving China as "fifteen years of transit, change, forgetting and adapting" (Guo, 2017: 1). Such a characterisation incorporates movement or travel, allied to ideas of transformation initiated by geographic and cultural, as well as temporal, change. The twin notions of "forgetting and adapting" are pertinent insofar as they suggest linkage between accommodation to a new environment and an ability to let go of or overcome aspects of the past. The workings of memory are of course complex and alter with

age and experience but the articulation of twin gerunds is suggestive of an act of will or of self-transformation in meeting new circumstances rather than simply a reference to the cognitive and emotional effects of the passage of time and the tricks played by memory. A further indication of Guo's engagement with the theme of self-translation and of what it means to be translated and to live in translation is reflected in the paratextual reference in *Once Upon a Time in the East* to a quotation from Eva Hoffman's 1989 memoir *Lost in Translation*. Specifically, the quotation relates to the sense of alienation which can arise when living in a culture not one's own or with which one struggles to identify. Hoffman's memoir recounts her sense of loss as she leaves her beloved Poland for North America, detailing her struggle with and eventual accommodation to life in a new language. She talks about the way in which she became a kind of observer of 'foreign' rituals, rather than a participant in them and points to the consequences of "an excess of critical distance" (Hoffman, 1998: 209). Like Hoffman, Guo is signalling the need to "find a way to lose my alienation without losing myself" (209). So the reader can assume identification on the part of Guo with the plight of Hoffman, a fellow translingual writer whose memoir charts the pain but also the triumph of movement across languages and cultures. In addition, Guo's dedication of her memoir to Marguerite Duras "who gave me the faith to become an artist during my low and hard years of struggle in South China" (Guo, 2017) is significant insofar as Duras, who was of French parentage, grew up in Indochina, speaking Vietnamese before moving definitively to France and studying at the Sorbonne. Like Guo, she was a film-maker and screen writer, as well as a novelist. Of her internationally successful book, *L'Amant* (*The Lover*), described as "a despairing, sensuous novel about an affair between a 15-year-old French girl and a 27-year-old Chinese man" (Garis, 1991), she claimed it was autobiographical. A recent article on Marguerite Duras's oeuvre designates *L'Amant* (1984) "her most significant autofictional novel" (Simoglou, 2015: 720) and characterises "the act of

writing as an always renewable opportunity for identity reconstruction”. This notion of renewable identity construction has purchase in the case of Guo as well.

### ***Village of Stone: Translation and transformation***

As previously indicated, *Village of Stone* is a Chinese work in English translation. In a review of the translated work, there is reference to its challenging nature and to the fact that Beijing-based American translator Carter “has done the book justice in her valiant effort” (Hutchison, 2004). *Village of Stone* is a work that alternates between Beijing and a fishing village in south east China which the reader knows to be modelled on Guo’s home town, since she dedicates the work to Shi Tang (sic), “where everything began” and the features of Shitang foregrounded in her memoir yield many similarities in terms of what Guo chooses to focus on in her fiction: the topography, the difficult conditions, both climatic and environmental, and the “coarseness of life” (Guo, 2005: 16) for all concerned. The familial set up and names of streets also resonate in both fiction and memoir, even though the contexts of presentation are different. *Village of Stone* is a work which oscillates between Beijing where characters Coral and Red share a ground floor flat and Coral’s descriptions and memories of her home town triggered by the arrival of a mysterious package containing a large dried eel. Preparation and eating of the eel over a period of time set off and punctuate reminiscences of life in the village.

While first-person narrator Coral is not Guo, there are many points of contact between the novel’s protagonist and Guo’s biography (Barton, 2004). So for example, in *Village of Stone*, the house where Coral lives with her grandmother and grandfather who no longer goes out fishing, is on a lane called “Pirate’s Alley” (10) in English translation. They live in a stone

house and have the same meal three times a day: “a bowl of sweet potato gruel garnished with a pungent paste of pickled fish” (Guo, 2005: 19). In Guo’s memoir we read: “Our street was originally called Anti-Pirates Passage” (Guo, 2017: 15). Here she lives in a “small green-coloured stone dwelling right on the horn of the peninsula” (14). Her grandfather lives upstairs, where he prefers to eat alone; she and her grandmother share a room downstairs and eat the leftovers or “the cheapest creatures from the sea – small crabs and fiddly shrimps for making a kind of pickled-fish mash” (25). In other words, quite a lot of the substantive detail is shared across the two works, even if they serve a slightly different purpose in context and were originally written in different languages.

The point here is that just as we have seen evidence of linguistic and generic hybridity in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, a hybridity arrived at via translation in terms of movement across languages and cultures, and have noted the cross-cultural design of Guo’s memoir with its conscious references to the work of other translingual writers, what *Village of Stone* embodies is another link in the translational chain. For not only is the work the result of linguistic and cultural transfer; it is also in essence an early version of one of many stories about a young Chinese woman who has moved from rural China to the city, leaving behind a troubled past and anxious to create for herself a new identity. Connections between this early fiction and Guo’s novelistic memoir are more extensive than space will allow. Suffice to say that her depictions of love, sex and the treatment of women in society are areas that she both imagines and documents in her work. The revelation in her memoir of having suffered sustained sexual abuse in her childhood is dramatised and contextualised; a series of events with particularly traumatic consequences for the young Xiaolu is reviewed later in the memoir in relation to disclosure by many of her college peers that they too had been victims of sexual violence. At the same time, it is difficult not to see in earlier fictional presentations of rape and sexual violence a working out of aspects of Guo’s biography. For as

Hatavara and Mildorf (2017: 68) suggest, “on the level of narrative technique, fictional and nonfictional storytelling may not be as different as one might think”.

## **Concluding remarks**

This chapter has shown the extent to which Xiaolu Guo’s work embodies and is the product of a series of translations and transformations both literal and metaphoric and has examined the ways in which she has employed hybrid language, forms, and genres to create works at once critical and innovative. Rather than be viewed in isolation, her works can best be seen as a series of overlapping and complementary texts that interrogate one another, while drawing their force from cross-cultural contact, critical exchange and creative re-invention.

## **REFERENCES**

### **Primary sources**

- Guo, X. (2005). *Village of stone*. Trans. by Cindy Carter. London: Vintage Books.
- Guo, X. (2007). *A concise Chinese-English dictionary for lovers*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Guo, X. (2014). *I am China*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Guo, X. (2016). Xiaolu Guo: ‘One language is not enough – I write in both Chinese and English’. *The guardian*, October 13. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/13/my-writing-day-xiaolu-guo#maincontent/> [Accessed 7 Aug 2018].
- Guo, X. (2017), *Once upon a time in the East*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Guo, X. and R. Hertel (2016). Writing China across the globe. In U. Berns and J. Mathieson eds., *Anglistentag 2016 Proceedings*. Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, pp. 1-12. Available at: [http://www.wvttrier.de/top/Proceedings\\_2016\\_WVT.pdf](http://www.wvttrier.de/top/Proceedings_2016_WVT.pdf).

## Secondary sources

- Barton, L. (2004). The rise and rise of little voice. Review of *Village of stone*. *The guardian*, May 13. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/may/13/fiction.china/> [Accessed 13 Aug 2018].
- Bhabha, H. (1994). How newness enters the world: Postmodern space, postcolonial times and the trials of cultural translation. In: H. Bhabha, *The location of culture*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, pp. 303-337.
- Carter, C. Paper Republic – Chinese literature in translation. Available at <https://paper-republic.org/cindycarter/> [Accessed 7 Aug 2018].
- Doloughan, F. and Guo, X. (2013). Audio interview with Xiaolu Guo conducted by Fiona Doloughan, October 5, on behalf of The Open University for E302 Language and Creativity. Transcript by Rachel Salaman.
- Duras, M. (1984). *L'amant*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit.
- Feigel, L. (2017). *Once Upon A Time in the East* by Xiaolu Guo – between two worlds. In FT.com, January 13. Available at <https://searchproquestcom.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/docview/1867403573?accountid=14697/> [Accessed 6 Sep 2017].
- Garis, L. (1991). The life and loves of Marguerite Duras. *The New York Times*, October 20. Available online at <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/10/20/magazine/the-life-and-loves-of-marguerite-duras.html?pagewanted=all/> [Accessed 11 Oct 2017].
- Guo, X. (2018). Hybridism, on migrant literature. Seminar series at University of Bern. Available at [http://www.wbkolleg.unibe.ch/about\\_us/friedrich\\_duerrenmatt\\_guest\\_professorship/xiaolu\\_guo/hybridism\\_on\\_migrant\\_literature/index\\_eng.html/](http://www.wbkolleg.unibe.ch/about_us/friedrich_duerrenmatt_guest_professorship/xiaolu_guo/hybridism_on_migrant_literature/index_eng.html/) [Accessed 13 Aug 2018].
- Hartley, L. (2004) *The Go-Between*. London: Penguin Modern Classics
- Hatavara, M. and Mildorf, J. (2017). Hybrid fictionality and vicarious narrative experience. *Narrative*, 25(1), pp. 65-82.
- Hwang, E. (2013). Love and shame: Transcultural communication and its failure in Xiaolu Guo's *A concise Chinese-English dictionary for lovers*. *Ariel: A review of international English literature*, 43(4), pp. 69–95.
- Hoffman, E. (1989). *Lost in translation: A life in a new language*. London: Vintage Books.
- Hutchison, L. (2004). Review of *Village of Stone*. *City weekend. Beijing and Shanghai*, 11. Available at [http://www.guoxiaolu.com/REV\\_WR\\_VS\\_cityweeken.htm](http://www.guoxiaolu.com/REV_WR_VS_cityweeken.htm). [Accessed 26 Mar 2018].
- Kellman, S. (2000). *The translingual imagination*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.
- Mailand 2016 ???
- Schneider, E. (2016). Hybrid Englishes: An exploratory survey. *World Englishes*, 35(3), pp. 339-354. Available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/10.1111/weng.12204/pdf> [Accessed 15 Mar 2018].
- Simoglou, V. (2015). On love and melancholia in Marguerite Duras's autofiction. *The psychoanalytic quarterly*, LXXXIV(3), pp. 719-744.
- Sommer, D. (2004). *Bilingual aesthetics: A new sentimental education*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Spyra, A. (2016). On labors of love and language learning: Xiaolu Guo rewriting the monolingual family romance. *Studies in the novel*, 48(4), pp. 444-461.

- Tymoczko, M. (2007). Framing translation: Representation, transmission, transculturation". In M. Tymoczko, *Enlarging translation, empowering translators*. Manchester, UK and Kinderhook (NY), USA: St. Jerome Publishing, pp.107-139.
- Wang, Y. (2014). Learning across borders – Chinese migrant literature and intercultural Chinese language education. *Language and intercultural communication*, 14(3), pp. 339-351.
- Wilson, R. (2011). Cultural mediation through translingual narrative. *Target*, 23:2, pp. 235-250.