

“The Limits of My Language Mean the Limits of My World”: Translated Migrations in Xiaolu Guo’s Novels

Martina Codeluppi

Università degli Studi di Napoli «L'Orientale», Italia

Abstract In the case of migrant writers, the representation of the female body can be considered the most intimate expression of individuality, as well as an expression of the dislocation that often transpires from their stories. In the context of contemporary Chinese literature, which has now become transnational, Xiaolu Guo is a representative example of *féminité migrante*. Raised in China, she emigrated to the UK as an adult, and relies mainly on the English language to codify her literary creativity. This study focuses on the analysis of the relationship between space and language, and between body and translation. It will explore two novels by Xiaolu Guo through a linguistic/comparative approach and a spatial analysis of the literary text.

Keywords Xiaolu Guo. Chinese migrant literature. Translingualism. Translation. Literary space.

Summary 1 Fragments of Migrant Literature. – 2 Translations, Bodies, and Subjects. – 3 The Language of Displacement. – 4 The Spaces of Migration. – 5 Conclusions.

1 Fragments of Migrant Literature

Nowadays, the panorama of contemporary Chinese migrant literature is undeniably characterised by a geographical variety and a linguistic *mélange* that affect the economy of its articulations. Not only are these features the result of different kinds of migration, but they are also marked by an eloquent polyglossia that reveals the rapid rise of a transnational and translingual lit-

erature to the detriment of the monoglossic national tradition. Over the last decades, the discussion on the new multilingual and kaleidoscopic literary scene has been fostered by the sharp conflict between two main views based on contrasting political claims. Mainland Chinese academia tends to consider national borders and the Chinese language as essential elements for a literary work to be defined as 'Chinese'. By contrast, an overseas community of experts has affirmed the independence and dignity of 'Sinophone literature' as opposed to the literature from the People's Republic of China. Indeed, the fragmentation of the literary scene constitutes an obstacle for the definition of literary categories, but the overall sense of interpenetration of cultural and linguistic contexts allows us to see its richness beyond the apparent confusion. While, on the one hand, the transnational manifestation of the new cross-cultural 'Chineseness' expresses a need for universal categories able to function at a global level, on the other hand it calls for a new understanding of the subject. As a result, each of the articulations of contemporary Chinese literature possesses individual value, as it represents a unique part of a composite whole. Space and language are the two main axes that provide the coordinates for Chinese migrant literature, and they will also be the focus of the following analysis.

This article addresses the interconnections between the representation of space and language in narrative, taking two novels by the Chinese writer Xiaolu Guo as a case study. Born and raised in Mainland China, she emigrated to the United Kingdom in the early 2000s and chose to adopt English as her main language of literary expression. Therefore, most of her literary production is constituted by works that are peculiar cases of self-translation, as every original work is actually born as a translation in the author's mind. By coding her message directly in a foreign language, she is able to express her transnational identity, addressing the hardships of her personal diaspora from multiple points of view. Distance and displacement are reflected in the narrative space, of which the characters' bodies represent the most personal form, while the issue of language permeates the life of the people inhabiting her plots. How does the writer 'translate' the spatial dimension in terms of the female body and of the geographical distance between China and the West? How does the choice of English affect the way in which she depicts the migrant's displacement? The following study will answer these questions by employing a twofold approach that combines linguistic analysis with an exploration of the spatial dimension of the narratives.

2 Translations, Bodies, and Subjects

Born in Zhejiang province in 1973, Xiaolu Guo moved to London in 2002, officially becoming a migrant author. She had already published a number of works in Chinese before that year, but after deciding to leave her country, she also converted her literary production to the English language. The collision of perspectives haunting the soul of a bilingual writer gives his or her works the power to overcome formal boundaries and tackle the gist of a cultural clash exteriorised through translation, self-translation and sometimes even 'back-translation'. The issue of translation has always been considered fundamental by Xiaolu Guo, ever since she started living in Europe and writing in a new cultural environment. Besides, in the last few years she has been increasingly channelling her creative energy towards cinema, starting to show a cross-fertilisation not only between languages but also between artistic forms (Doloughan 2015, 4). In a piece she wrote for *The Guardian* in 2016, the author explained the reasons for her being torn between multiple languages:

My everyday writing life seems to be a battle between the language I think in and the language I write in. [...] 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)

Xiaolu Guo's view of translation has been investigated as a literary reflection of transcultural dialogue. A few studies have addressed its linguistic features, emphasising the influence of her bilingual sensibility on her literary style (Doloughan 2018; Gilmour 2012; Luo Peng 2016), while others have focused on the promotion of intercultural communication encoded in her stories (Wang 2014; Hwang 2012). However, although translation and cross-cultural dialogue are the most immediate consequences of migration, reflection on the spatial shift and, more generally, on the spatial awareness of the subject are no less important. Research has been conducted on Xiaolu Guo's depiction of the female body and on the image of the new woman (Zhang Kaiyi 2012; Poon 2013; Yu Xing 2015), but her representation of space through narrative (Doloughan 2015) has not been adequately explored. My aim, in this study, is to discuss the role of language and the representation of space - including both physical and individual space - conceived as two outcomes of the same displacement, deriving from the experience of migration. Therefore, I attempt to merge these two axes of analysis by conducting a deeper exploration providing detailed evidence. In particular, I have decided to focus on two of Xiaolu Guo's novels that deal with space and

translation in two different yet equally representative ways: *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (Guo 2007) and *I Am China* (Guo 2014). The former work emphasises the connection of language to physical and bodily space, while the latter stresses the role of translation in bridging geographical distances.

A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers was published in 2007 and it is the story of a girl who leaves China for London to study English. Her experience of migration soon evolves into a love story with an older man who makes her privy to his lifestyle, in which freedom and sex play the most important role, as opposed to the money and commodities she was pursuing for her future. Xiaolu Guo's novel strongly relies on the effect of displacement and dislocation, supported by the linguistic challenge the protagonist has to face. As the title of the novel suggests, language plays a fundamental role in the story, which at first is told in a sloppy English – enriched by many references to the Chinese language – that improves as the plot progresses. The cultural gap forces the protagonist to go by the initial of her name, Z., simply because her original name, Zhuang Xiao Qiao, is unpronounceable for anyone in her new social environment (Guo 2008, "Full English Breakfast"). Xiaolu Guo's novel describes the difficulties in a young migrant's life and, in choosing to adopt a woman's perspective, she is able to depict the link between spatial distance and the space of the female body – the theatre of the intercultural dialogue between the two lovers. Sometimes the protagonist is depicted as a brave and independent woman, sometimes as a fragile and naïve girl. Nevertheless, her displaced and sexual body provides the key element holding the story together.

Published seven years later, in 2014, *I Am China* takes the issue of linguistic clashes to the next level, by focusing on the power of translation to erase distances. At the centre of the novel there is Iona, a young British translator who is recruited by a publishing house to translate a series of hand-written letters and diary entries in order to trace the story of two young lovers: Jian and Mu. These are two Chinese independent artists, a musician and a poet, who have been separated by the turn of events in their lives. Jian leaves China for Europe and moves around the Old Continent for a few years trying to flee the ideological pressure in his country. After staying in China for a while, Mu goes on a tour in the United States, where she experiences a new cultural context and its consequences on her old self. By trying to find a logical order in the excerpts she has to translate, Iona becomes increasingly engaged with the people whose past she is 'spying' through the texts, to the point that she starts feeling the urge to act and help Mu and Jian meet again. The distance between the two characters is not only metaphorically bridged through translation, but also concretely faced once Iona decides to leave for Malta, where she believes she will find Jian. The narrative space reflects

the narrated displacement, while the translator becomes the link between two souls lost in migration.

Gilmour has borrowed Wail Hassan's term "translational literature" to define Xiaolu Guo's works, which "dramatize their own multilingualism" (Gilmour 2012, 210). I believe that we could go one step further and see these texts as examples of 'fictions of translation'. This term in an evolution of the concept of 'transfiction', used to define texts that illustrate the use of translation-related phenomena in fiction (Kaindl 2014, 2). Yet, these fictions of translation do not stop at the linguistic level: they conceptualise the process of translation (Woodsworth, Gillian 2018, 2) by employing the plot and the characters to sketch out a metaphor of the restlessness that characterises a world in constant change (Delabastita, Grutman 2005, 23). In order to investigate the consequences of the subject's dislocation, in the following sections the analysis of the role of translation in fiction shall be supported by an exploration of narrative space, whose mapping, according to Franco Moretti, can reveal the "*internal logic of narrative*" (1998, 5; italics in the original).

3 The Language of Displacement

Xiaolu Guo quoted Wittgenstein's famous words "[t]he limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (Wittgenstein 2002, 68; italics in the original) to express the hopelessness she feels towards her incapability to achieve a perfect linguistic command of both English and Chinese (Guo 2016). The pivotal role of language is described in the two novels from different perspectives. *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* has a "mimetic relationship to translation" (Doloughan 2018, 154). The process of learning English represents the protagonist's *Bildung*, which leads her to a new transcultural awareness, whereas in *I Am China* translation is not only an instrument but the real fulcrum of the novel, offering a deeper reflection on its power.

A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers is strewn with intended mistakes in English and comparisons with the protagonist's mother tongue, which convey the idea of the migrant's confused mind, torn between the excitement of learning and the frustration of repeated defeat. Z. struggles to translate herself and her culture (Doloughan 2015, 7), first and foremost because she is a Chinese migrant, and secondly because she is a Chinese woman. As a story of migration, the difficulties of being in a foreign country provide the background to the whole plot, and the reader's attention is repeatedly brought to the issue of displacement through the wide use of words like 'alien' or expressions such as 'in this country':

I not intellectual either. In the West, in this country, I am barbarian, illiterate peasant girl, a face of third world, and irresponsible foreigner. An alien from another planet. (Guo 2008, "Physical Work")

The foreign land automatically labels her according to a cultural tradition to which she does not belong, and 'this country' becomes opposed to her own country, where her look is not considered 'funny' and her language does not sound 'strange' (Guo 2008, "alien").

Besides her Chinese origin, the fact of being a woman leads her to realise how linguistic habits in English sound unfair to the ear of a Chinese speaker, a result of the differences between Chinese and English grammar:

- English a sexist language. In Chinese no 'gender definition' in sentence. For example, Mrs. Margaret says these in class:
 - Everyone must do his best.
 - If a pupil can't attend the class, he should let his teacher know.
 - We need to vote for a chairman for the student union.
- Always talking about mans, no womans! (Guo 2008, "Pronoun")

Language is seen as the mirror of one's cultural values, which in this case are almost unacceptable for the protagonist. Moreover, the use of broken English conveys the idea of a latent inadequacy, buried beneath the courage of a young girl willing to travel across the world to win herself a better future. Moreover, in Z.'s eyes, linguistic restrictions affect not only gender distinctions but also the true essence of a relationship between two people. Consider the following passage, where she points out how tenses, which do not exist in Chinese, ruin the concept of love:

'Love', this English word: like other English words it has tense. 'Loved' or 'will love' or 'have loved' All these specific tenses mean Love is time-limited thing. Not infinite. It only exist in particular period of time. In Chinese, Love is '爱' (ai). It has no tense. No past and future. Love in Chinese means a being, a situation, a circumstance. Love is existence, holding past and future.

If our love existed in Chinese tense, then it will last for ever. It will be infinite. (Guo 2008, "Future Tense")

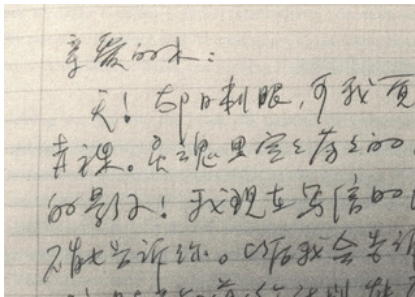
This excerpt is also an eloquent example of what the author means when she states that for her "one language is not enough" (Guo 2016). By occasionally adding Chinese characters, the author creates a sort of 'linguistic grafting' that strengthens the 'Chineseness' of the character as well as that of her creator.

The attempt to merge the two languages is also noticeable in *I Am China*. However, in this case the Chinese words are not merely em-

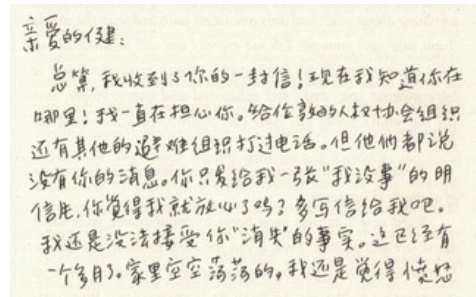
ployed to underline incommunicability – they serve to explain what translation can and cannot achieve. In the following excerpt, by reporting Iona's thoughts, Xiaolu Guo depicts the challenge of filling gaps in terms of cultural references:

Take expressions like 'niu bi' 牛逼 –, 'cao dan' 操蛋 –, 'ta da ye de' 他大爷的 –, 'zhou' 轴 –. How can she find the right translation for these swear words in English? [...] It's like alchemy, but in reverse. She has to transform their gold into her lead. If she translated "niu bi, cao dan, ta da ye de, zhou" literally, it would read "cow's cunt, wank the balls, fuck his father-in-law" or something like that. Western readers would think she was writing cheap porn. The crudeness would repel them. And she would have failed. (Guo 2014b, "11: London, May 2013")

The use of characters produces an effect of alienation in the reader, who can see hybridity with his or her own eyes. Moreover, the shadow of failure emphasises the difficulties of the process as well as the translator's responsibility towards the original language and culture. Doloughan points out that the structural interplay between the fields of literature and film in Xiaolu Guo's works results in her enhanced "visual and spatial awareness" (Doloughan 2015, 4). One interesting example is the increased 'grafting' effect that the author obtains by adding to the text the images of the pieces that Iona has to translate:



(Guo 2014b, "2: London, April 2013")



(Guo 2014b, "8: London, May 2013")

Although the novel is strewn with pictures that enrich the reading experience, the images of the letters are particularly effective because they suggest a deep reflection on the embodiment of language through handwriting. By commenting on the characters' personalities, as revealed through the signs they trace, the author exploits the permeable border between space and language, endowing the latter with an exclusive and peculiar form.

Unlike *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers, I Am China* does not stop at the level of describing translation challenges. Through the depiction of the translator's pivotal character, it reflects the author's insight into the strategies behind a successful transfer from one language to another, as well as from one speaking subject to another translating individual.

– You know, Charles, translations only work because we get inside a person's inner culture. And how does one do that? How does one get inside someone?

Charles has his beaming, kindly eye upon her. – You have to imagine. Allow yourself to be opened up. The great translator, now and then, has to go beyond what they know. You have to go beyond translation and its techniques and tricks, and be absolutely human. (Guo 2014b, "4: London, August 2013")

Just like Xiaolu Guo, Iona sometimes finds herself lost in translation, and her questions betray the displacement of the individual stuck between two worlds, just as the migrant is torn between two homelands.

4 The Spaces of Migration

As fictions of translation, these texts give considerable space to translation. However, as 'migrant fictions' they also represent a 'translation of space,' which can be analysed from the point of view of two dimensions: the individual's most intimate and most familiar space, namely the body, and the distance that the migrant actually covers during his or her cross-cultural journey, represented by narrative space. In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Zhuang Xiao Qiao's body becomes a metaphor for her development of intercultural awareness. Through the interactions with her English lover, she discerns not only the forbidden pleasure of the flesh, but also the power mechanisms it can trigger.

The way you make love with me, is totally new experience in my life. Is sex suppose be like this? Penetrating is way for you to enter into my soul. You are so strong. And your strength is over-

whelming. For you, I am unprepared. You crush me and press me into your body. Love making is a torture. Love making is a battle. Then I get used it, and I am addicted by it. The way you hold my body is like holding small object, an apple, or a little animal. The force from your arms and your legs and your hip is like force from huge creature living in jungle. The vibrate from your muscle shakes my skins, the beating of your heart also beating my heart.

You are the commander.

[...] My whole body is your colony. (Guo 2008, "Colony")

At first, she experiences a devoted submission, due to the fact that she owes the discovery of her femininity to her man. The female body is reflected in her naïve eyes as a territory that has fallen under the control of foreigners before its rightful owner could realise its potential. Nevertheless, the man subsequently persuades her to leave London and travel around Europe for a few weeks with an inter-rail ticket. It is precisely this occasion that makes it possible for her to learn independence, in her everyday migrant life as well as in the sexual sphere, through the exploration of autoerotism.

Masturbating, I never tried it before. Nobody Western would believe that I never try to masturbate as a twenty-four-year-old woman. Or maybe I did but I didn't know what I was doing. Sex in my understanding means something to do with a man, but not to do with myself.

[...] For the first time in my entire life, I came by myself.

I can be on my own. I can. I can rely on myself, without depending on a man. (Guo 2008, "Tavira")

At the end of her personal coming of age, Z. forges her modern identity in Europe, which is no less than a renewed image of the Eastern woman in the Western world. She is the reflection of an author who migrated to become able to raise her voice, against the traditional silence imposed by a chauvinist culture (Yu Xing 2015, 82).

While in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* the dimension in which to locate the effect of the protagonist's most real journey is that of the individual's body, in *I Am China* the migrant's dislocation is represented through the narrative space. This interest in the connections between literature and space is a result of the epistemological transformation also known as "spatial turn" (Collot 2015, 2). When analysing *I Am China* as a product of migrant literature, the exploration of the novel's inner geography is particularly significant because the text is permeated with a sense of disorientation, owing to the three parallel narrative threads through which the novel develops (the stories of Iona, Jian and Mu) and the disordered superposition of chronotopic references.

Iona's journey is mostly metaphorical: she virtually traces the two lovers' paths by translating their writing and trying to find a connecting thread. She is able to cross cultures while sitting at her desk in the centre of London until the end of the novel, when she decides to leave for Malta. Analysing Jian's letters, Iona has reason to believe he is located on the Mediterranean island, and finds the courage to go there in person to try and find him. On the other hand, Jian and Mu's journeys are real, unexpected, and exhausting. Their separation dates back to 2006, after the sudden death of their baby due to fulminant meningitis. Lincolnshire, Dover, Berne, and Paris are only a few of the cities through which he travels as an asylum seeker, after having been forced out of China. His fight is against both the ideology of his motherland and the feeling of displacement that gnaws at him continuously. Mu, instead, does not turn to Europe but to America. After having lost hope of seeing Jian again in China, she becomes a member of the Underground Slam Poetry Group and leaves for a tour in the United States. As she travels from one state to the next, Mu discovers cultural diversity and explores new lands also in her personal life, embarking on an affair with their American-Chinese manager Bruce. After having travelled across North America, Mu goes back to her homeland. Yet, shortly after, she is offered a job in London and decides to move there, hoping to find "the new spirit of the age" (Guo 2014b, "12: Zhejiang Province, July 2012"). The spatial structure of the novel reflects the (geographical and ideological) distance between the two lovers, as well as the stabilising role of their translator Iona.

Mu and Jian, separated by their beliefs, and now separated by space, dropped on different alien planets. Both of them grappling with their own reality. Both of them trying to build a bridge on which to meet. And it's like Iona is building this bridge again, through her reading, her translation. (2014b, "11: London, May 2013")

To help the reader keep track of the changes of scenery that occur repeatedly in the novel, Xiaolu Guo makes strategic use of chronotopes. Indeed, every chapter begins with a specific indication about the place and the year to which it refers, although the disorder compromises the function of these landmarks. Moreover, despite the author's precision, the novel begins with a general uncertainty, expressed by the aura of mystery surrounding Jian's position in the very first pages:

Dearest Mu,

The sun is piercing, old bastard sky. I am feeling empty and bare. Nothing is in my soul, apart from the image of you.

I am writing to you from a place I cannot tell you about yet. Perhaps when I am safe I will be able to let you know where I am. I don't know what the plan is and what my future might hold. (2014b, "Prelude")

The anxiety of not knowing Jian's plan captivates the reader and torments Jian's lover Mu, especially when she is in the United States. Wherever she goes, she wonders whether he may have walked the same streets at a different time:

I look around and I imagine that I will be an immigrant here one day. [...] Thinking of Jian. My heart aches as I see a succession of young Chinese men pass with a melancholy look on their faces. Have I just missed him? Where is he now? Did he walk by half an hour ago while we were having lunch? (Guo 2014b, "2: London, May 2013")

The geographical structure of the novel reproduces the experience of migration not only through the representation of spatial mobility, but also through the depiction of the underlying sense of loss. Doloughan stated that 'translational' texts "engage with the human consequences of mobility and migration for characters who experience disorientation as a result of relocation" (2015, 2). In *I Am China*, Xiaolu Guo gets to the heart of the matter, splitting the complex identity of the migrant into three different characters, who together recompose the picture of a dislocated, misunderstood yet extremely aware subject.

5 Conclusions

This article has focused on the case of Xiaolu Guo in order to analyse how the cultural complexity deriving from migration processes influences the creation of a 'transnational Chinese literature'. By addressing the issue of the representation of linguistic contamination, the role of translation, and literary spaces, I have shown how these factors reflect the dislocation experienced by the migrant subject. In both *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* and *I Am China*, the depiction of linguistic challenges emphasises the indissoluble link between migration and translation, which is expressed through the description of incommunicability and through the author's questions about the limits and the potential of translation. Furthermore, the epistemological transformation known as 'spatial turn' in literary studies has proved fruitful to show another side of the narrated migration, namely the dimension of space. In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, by employing the feminine body as a metaphor for cross-cultural development, Xiaolu Guo depicts the journey

from China to the West in the form of the evolution of an unsophisticated young girl into a cosmopolitan and independent woman. Instead, in *I Am China*, the traumatic change from one culture to another is represented through the general effect of the disorientation due to abrupt spatial shifts.

Language and space are bound together by an indissoluble link. As fictions of translation, these texts “blur the boundaries between creation and translation” (Woodsworth, Gillian 2018, 4), turning the practice of translation into an exquisite personal matter. Indeed, in both novels translation occupies multiple spaces, but the most important one is the ‘in-between space,’ the ‘contact zone’ that represents hybridity. Moreover, their connection is particularly significant in the case of Chinese migrant literature. It is precisely through translation that a text is able to ‘strike roots’ into a new literary space; therefore, investigating the ‘situatedness’ of Chinese literary texts means addressing the issue of a ‘deterritorialised’ literature by tracking its ‘reterritorialisation’ through translation.

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