Reconceptualising literary translation in three acts : translingual narrative puzzles in Guo Xiaolu's novels

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**NANYANG
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TRANSLATION IN THREE ACTS:
TRANSLINGUAL NARRATIVE PUZZLES IN GUO
XIAOLU'S NOVELS**

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Abstract

This dissertation will approach three of Guo Xiaolu's novels – *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007), *UFO in Her Eyes* (2010), and *I Am China* (2014) – not as separate works, but as three milestone publications to be plotted chronologically along a trajectory of linguistic and literary experimentation. By positioning these novels as palimpsestic representations of the birth, development, and maturation phases of a single performance of translation, this dissertation will argue that these works stage translation through fiction, and in the process creatively reconceptualise the roles of translation and translator in literary works. Although Guo's novels are neither identified as translated works, nor are they ostensibly translations, translation is a central, recurring motif and is carried out across degrees of language competencies and various kinds of blatant and latent censorship regimes. By tracing the continuities and discontinuities across the three novels and relating them extensively to translation theories, I will argue that Guo's performance of translation and play on translation also demonstrate how this reconceptualised method of creative and active translation is a novel literary technique that foregoes easy readability, consistency, and translation equivalence in order to construct translingual narrative puzzles that invite readers to break reading habits and participate in, reassess, and redefine translation as a whole. Common features throughout Guo's writing – such as the form of the epistolary novel, the multimodality of the narrative, and the thematic exploration of sociopolitical and linguistic censorship through the sexual and literary developments of each novel's female protagonists – contribute to the performance of a self-reflexive translation through fiction that subverts translation norms, and experiment with the possibility of a new genre of fiction that positions the ongoing

process of translation as a literary *product*, and prompt the reimagination of writing, reading, and translating as open-ended, simultaneous, and collaborative.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Guo Xiaolu and her Literary Experimentation

“What does it mean a ‘home country’? I hate this national definition.”

– Guo Xiaolu¹

Although British-Chinese author and filmmaker Guo Xiaolu (郭小橧, 1973 -) has vocally rejected nationalistic definition, an introduction to the author benefits from an understanding of her socio-cultural background. Born in a fishing village in the province of Zhejiang, China, Guo moved from the rural village to the city of Beijing around 1993 to study filmmaking. From the late 1990s onwards, Guo began publishing poems, essays, novels, and film scripts in the Chinese language. In 2002, she resettled in London on a scholarship to the National Film School. Influenced by her personal experience of migration and mobility, Guo’s literary works frequently revolve around geographical movements between rural villages and cities, as well as sociocultural movements between East and West. Despite this, she has identified herself as “being part of [a] global migration movement”² and resists being categorically confined to a single nationality.

Upon her migration from China to London, Guo quickly realised that language posed a barrier to her entry into the Western literary marketplace. In 2004, Guo’s 2003 Chinese novel 我心中的石头镇 (*Wo Xin Zhong de Shi Tou Zhen*) was translated into English by translator Cindy Carter, and this translation, titled *Village of Stone*, was

¹ Jaggi, Maya. “Xiaolu Guo: ‘Growing up in a communist society with limited freedom, you’re a spiky, angry rat’.” *The Guardian*, 30 May. 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/30/xiaolu-guo-communist-china-interview>. Accessed 1 June 2016.

² Peschel, Sabine. “Guo Xiaolu: language, exile and her new book ‘I am China’.” *Deutsche Welle*, 9 Sept. 2015, <http://www.dw.com/en/guo-xiaolu-language-exile-and-her-new-book-i-am-china/a-18703004>. Accessed 31 July 2017.

published by London's Chatto & Windus. Despite this, Guo still found it comparatively difficult to get her Chinese work published in London, and she pointed out in an interview that she could not "publish in Chinese [since no one] would translate"³. Perceiving a lack of people who *could* and *would* translate her work, Guo decided that she would translate, even if she had no professional experience and technically could not. In 2007, Guo published her first novel written in English - *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (henceforth referred to as *Concise*), which she referred to in an interview as "a linguistic exercise [that proved to be] an awakening for [her] in terms of using 'other' ways to create literature"⁴. Guo neither goes on to detail what manner of awakening has taken place, nor does she elaborate on the alternative methods she employs in her writing. However, an article she published in *The Guardian* offers a glimpse of her relationship with language:

In one recurrent dream, my dead Chinese grandmother speaks in my hometown dialect to my western boyfriend, and my western boyfriend responds to her in his language. Both seem to understand each other perfectly without a translator. I must have been using a hidden language to narrate the dream – neither Chinese nor English. It is a dreaming language. I desperately want to capture it, and write in it.⁵

It is interesting that Guo's encounter with this *dreaming language* comes after her experience of a *linguistic awakening*, as if the language she wishes to employ is not firmly rooted in the real world. My dissertation seeks to illuminate the nature of this

³ Jaggi, Maya. "Xiaolu Guo: 'Growing up.'" (see chap. 1.1, footnote 1).

⁴ Cooley, Reed. "Why Do We Still Pretend We Are Free?". *Guernica Magazine*, 30 Jan. 2014, <https://www.guernicamag.com/xiaolu-guo-why-do-we-still-pretend-we-are-free/>. Accessed 1 June 2016.

⁵ Guo, Xiaolu. "Xiaolu Guo: One language is not enough – I write in both Chinese and English" *The Guardian*, 13 Oct. 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/13/my-writing-day-xiaolu-guo>. Accessed 3 August 2017.

awakening and the alternative, creative ways that characterise Guo's writing, proposing that this linguistic exercise that begins in *Concise* continues to be developed in her two other English-language novels, one of which was published in 2010, *UFO in Her Eyes* (henceforth referred to as *UFO*), and the other in 2014, *I am China* (henceforth referred to as *China*).

In order to approach Guo's novels as an extended linguistic exercise and literary experimentation, I propose that the three novels have to be acknowledged as translations, even though (1) their status as translations are never acknowledged on the covers of the books; (2) the majority of the language employed in these novels are ostensibly the English language; and (3) there are no corresponding source texts that precede their publications. Despite these missing conventional qualifiers for translation, her novels continue to be self-reflexive performances of translation; and this is achieved through a recurring variety of literary techniques and narrative devices that contribute to the perpetuity of the translation process, which is in itself a literary product. For example, *Concise* is written from the perspective of protagonist Z, a Chinese peasant who travels to London to learn English. Choosing to write from the perspective of a non-native English speaker and English language learner, Guo bypasses the need for a professional translator by simulating an English learner's variety of English that gradually improves throughout the novel. It is important to clarify that since the language of Guo's *Concise* seeks to parody and imitate a learner's variety of English, there are instances in this dissertation where quotes from the novel may appear grammatically incorrect or awkward. These quotes are presented as they are published as much as possible, and alterations and the extensive use of 'sic' to denote the errors have been foregone in order to avoid disruptions to the reading. Therefore, while Guo's *Concise* does not explicitly identify itself as a work of

translation, translational activity can still be traced throughout the novel as Z struggles to express herself in English and in doing so, carries out a process of auto-translation that is similar to the one Guo herself is attempting to do by writing *Concise*.

I favour the term auto-translation rather than its equivalent term self-translation because of the former's association with similar terms like autofiction – a fictionalised biography, and autobiography – a biography of one's own life. Z's auto-translation is, like the other two terms suggest, an act of elaborate and performative fiction, while also being true to life in the sense that it does not simply reproduce the character's non-standard variety of English in Standard English. The intertextual reference to a Chinese-English dictionary in the title of *Concise* already alerts readers to the presence of more than one language in the novel, but I argue that the process of auto-translation is not as straightforward or concise as the title suggests. The translations being carried out *in* the novel by Z and the translations being carried out *through* the novel by Guo may explicitly seem to be from the Chinese language to the English language, but this simplistic unidirectional view of the languages reduces the translation to one that is conducted purely from a monolingual condition to another. This necessarily results in language falling into the similar nationalistic definitions and categorisations that Guo disapproves of and expressedly wishes to resist. Approaching the novels as English-language novels also neglects the heavy Chinese linguistic and cultural influences fundamental to Guo's writing. Even though Guo's novels may seem to be written in what is identifiably the English language, the Chinese language and culture perpetually bleed to the surface of the text, and palimpsestically draw attention to the translation process within the narrative of the novel, as well as the translation process that Guo undertakes at the authorial level.

The inversion of a literary translation norm is apparent here; while readers are usually informed that a text has been translated on the cover of the page and the translation itself avoids reminding them of this fact, Guo's novels call attention to their status as translations, even though they are in fact original works with no source texts. Writing about translation, Guo suggests that she translates by using "one word to find another word [and trying] to write a transcript which is in both Chinese and English, a text that is alive and true for both cultures she is living in"⁶. Evidently, translation as staged through Guo's fiction is not translation as it is predominantly conceived, but one that occurs in perpetuity, and it is in this state of perpetuity that the novels are both products of translation as well as literary embodiments of the translation process. This perpetual translation is alive because it is the process of translation presented as product, as well as a self-reflexive product of translation that invites readers to reflect on and participate in the process, and this approach towards Guo's novels forms the basis of my research.

Two of the recurring stylistic methods in which the novels put up a performance of translation are the incorporating of postmodernist elements like self-referentiality and self-reflexivity, and the framing of the novels in the form of the epistle. Traditionally, epistles referred exclusively to letters, and the epistolary novel was defined as a novel written in the form of a series of letters. However, technological advancements, large-scale changes to the way people correspond, and the blurring of boundaries between the private and public domains make it necessary to go beyond the increasingly obsolete letters to include other modern mediums of correspondence and documentation. For the purpose of this dissertation, the definition of the epistolary novel has been expanded to include other forms such as diary entries,

⁶ Guo, Xiaolu. "Xiaolu Guo: One language." (see chap. 1, footnote 4)

translation drafts, and government records. While the traditional epistle was often used to give a sense of intimacy and authenticity, the epistles in Guo's novels make the *simulation* of the intimacy and authenticity palpable. Postmodernist fiction often seeks to call attention to the artificiality or construction of texts, and the epistles in Guo's novels imply authenticity, while simultaneously demonstrating the constructedness of the fictional epistle. While authenticity and constructedness appear to be mutually exclusive terms, they prove to be highly compatible and complementary in Guo's literary performance of translation. For example, in *Concise*, the simulated learner's variety of English that the protagonist Z writes in is highly performative and unconventional, but is closer to reality in the context of a foreigner struggling to express herself in the language she is in the process of acquiring. Since these postmodernist qualities and the form of the epistolary recur in all of Guo's novels and develop as part of the author's literary style, this dissertation also proposes that rather than treat the novels as standalone publications, the three novels are to be approached as three acts in an elaborate and prolonged performance of translation. Plotting these novels on a three-act trajectory is also fitting considering *Concise* is her first novel written in English⁷ and Guo has stated that her novel *I Am China* "marks the final time she will ever write about China [and is her] goodbye love letter to China"⁸. There is a sense of finality and closure to Guo's novelistic pursuits and extensive linguistic and literary experimentation as she makes the decision to focus on filmmaking. Since the publication of *China*, Guo has not published another novel, but in light of the 2017 publication of Guo's memoir, *Once Upon a Time in the East*, this dissertation's

⁷ I explain at length in this dissertation how the language of Guo's novels may identifiably be English, but is more accurately a translingual language that exists in perpetual translation. In order to differentiate Guo's autotranslated novels from the externally translated *Village of Stone*, I refer to *Concise* as her first novel written in English here, but this is still written with the translingual language in mind.

⁸ Jaggi, Maya. "Xiaolu Guo: 'Growing up.'" (see chap. 1.1, footnote 1).

reopening of scholarly dialogue on Guo's novelistic career and linguistic exercise comes at an opportune time to facilitate further research on the relevance and revolutionising character of Guo's literary oeuvre.

As a female writer who has personally negotiated the movements between geographical locations, disparate cultures, and diverse languages, Guo's choice to write about female characters negotiating these movements in all three of her novels also blurs the boundaries between her life and fiction. Women helm the narratives and performances of translation in each novel, and this parallel between Guo and her female characters in an overarching framework of female engagement with translation can be established in three acts – birth, development, and maturation. In each of these acts, the female protagonist's relationship with translation plays on, subverts, and inverts the norms and expectations of translation. Scholars have also previously identified *Concise* as a *Bildungsroman* (Gilmour 18, Razak 3, Oboe 267, Poon 3) also known as a growing up novel, and as a *Künstlerroman*, which is a novel focused on the development of an artist (Spyra 459). By expanding on the concepts of the *Bildungsroman* and the *Künstlerroman* and extending these concepts to two other novels by Guo in this dissertation, the female characters' and Guo's growth as an artist and author collectively materialise over the course of three novels rather than in a single novel. Additionally, the formative experiences with language and translation that the characters and author undergo throughout the three novels are shared by the emergent reader, who is introduced to the birth of Guo's linguistic exercise and literary experimentation in *Concise*, and goes on to play an increasingly active and participatory role in the translation activity of the subsequent novels.

This dissertation will thus make the argument that central to Guo's novels are the female protagonists and their relationships with translation as theoretical concept

and practice; and by tracing the developments in Guo's linguistic exercise and literary experimentation along a trajectory of self-reflexive, performative translation, a reconceptualisation of the translator and translation's role in literature seeks to redress both the marginal status of literary translation and disenfranchised cultures and communities, while experimenting with the possibility of a creative, translingual translation-fiction that positions translation as both a perpetual process and an open-ended product that necessarily involves writer, reader, and translator in an ongoing literary collaboration.

1.2 An Overview of the Chapters

Thus far, I have introduced Guo Xiaolu as a self-professed global migrant – a literary and geographical nomad who resists the fixity and rigidity of sweeping categorisations. I have also briefly examined the manner of linguistic exercise that was carried out in Guo's *Concise* and proposed a trajectorial approach that traces the developing relationship between women and translation across the span of three novels. This chapter overview will provide a synopsis of the chapters and sections to come, broadly identifying and defining the relationships between women and translation in Guo's novels and positioning each novel as representative of specific developments in Guo's literary performance of translation.

In section 1.3 and 1.4, I will describe the theoretical framework of this dissertation and provide a survey of existing literature on Guo's novels respectively. In order to understand the reconceptualisation of translation that Guo's novels prompt in the reader, the current conceptualisation of translation needs to be identified and assessed. An outline of the theoretical framework of my argument, in which I identify the primary theories on translation and translingualism, allows for a preliminary definition of translation as reconceptualised *in* and *through* Guo's novels. This

definition will inform the ways in which the performances of translation in the novels can be identified and understood in relation to conventional literary translations. An adaptation of Umberto Eco's definition of the model reader and Roland Barthes' concept of the writerly text will also be explicated in this section, followed by a juxtaposition of *écriture féminine* with *Nüshu* that highlights the importance of a feminist reading of Guo's novels that considers the affinities between Western and Eastern cultures and discourses of resistance.

The success of *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*—which was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2007 and has since been translated into more than twenty languages — has generated some scholarly interest, but Guo's other novels have not shared the same critical reception. By focussing on the entirety of Guo's novelistic oeuvre, this dissertation departs from the majority of existing literature that has so far chosen to focus exclusively on *Concise*. In the survey, I will identify the primary strands of research that scholars have conducted so far in relation to Guo's first novel and further distinguish this dissertation's approach from existing work. Guo's seminal first novel is representative of the birth of Guo's linguistic exercise, and remains the most prominent work of the author. In Chapter 2.1, I focus on the concept of birth in *Concise*, and the protagonist's difficult linguistic, political, and sociocultural rebirth in London. Despite her fervent attempts to absorb the English culture and learn the English language, Z is unable to attain fulfilment in her new life in the West. Instead, she is metaphorically suspended in a state of translation, not unlike the hyphen between the words 'Chinese' and 'English' in the title. This metaphorical embryonic state that Z is suspended in never reaches maturity, and the fruitlessness of her attempts are manifested in the decision to abort the baby she conceives with her British lover (271-273). To write about *Concise* as the birth of an

experiment is a deliberate and significant choice on my part because Guo's brief three pages relating Z's abortion were nearly censored by her U.S. publisher, and the subject of Western censorship has come up in various interviews with the author⁹. Guo has also related her own experience of abortion in yet another three pages in her recent memoir (156-158). This desire to be reborn, to mature, and to give birth is continuously revisited in her later works, and this runs parallel to my dissertation's positioning of Guo's novels as going through the stages of birth, development, and maturation. In the case of the character Z, having a conception of English and conceiving a child are neither enough to secure a rebirth for herself, nor sufficient reason to give birth to the child.

In section 2.2, I delve into metatranslation and how degrees of literacy influence when and how translation is conducted. Metatranslation is defined as a text that makes references to its status as translation, and I will make the distinction between the conventional and traditional metatranslative devices in translated texts and those that are used in Guo's novel. A distinction between the common conception of language and the conception of language suggested by the use of language in Guo's novels is also necessary. Demonstrably in *Concise*, language cannot be acquired, mastered, or possessed; and is not a well-defined commodity to be exchanged or transferred. Rather, like the process of translation, literacy in a language is relative and perpetually evolving. Focussing on the ESL (English as second-language) learner's experience, I will argue that translation occurs across degrees of literacies, rather than well-defined categories of nationality, race, and language.

⁹ Tonkin, Boyd. "Xiaolu Guo: Far East to East End." *The Independent*, 26 Jan. 2007, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/xiaolu-guo-far-east-to-east-end-433621.html>. Accessed 1 August 2017.

In section 2.3 and 2.4, wavering language and cultural allegiances are portrayed as the consequences of negotiating a fixed conception and rigid categorisation of language and translation. The perpetually evolving Z – her wavering cultural allegiances and the indeterminacy of her identity in the midst of her reinvention – results in a prevalent deficit discourse and language policing. Exploring the pervasiveness of the deficit discourse that Z experiences and her changing attitude towards the dictionary as an important tool in her reinvention, Z’s redirecting of her attention to the body and sexuality as an escape from language is explicated in section 2.5. In this section, I interpret her many brief encounters with men throughout Europe as a surreal representation of her sexual self-discovery. Obsessive reliance on the physical form – as represented by Z’s newfound sexuality – is merely a futile form of escapism from the confines of linguistic rules and expectations; and proving that the physical form is inextricable from these rules and expectations, body language presents itself as a complex language that also demands negotiation. Although body and language are inseparable, it is not the physical and sexual form of the human body but the physical form of the text and the body of art that gives Z the solace she needs.

Adapting Hélène Cixous’ concept of the *écriture féminine* and juxtaposing it to the leading research of *Nüshu* (女书) researchers Zhao Li Ming and Xie Ming Yao¹⁰, section 2.6 will focus on Z’s coming into terms with her state of suspension and her personal, translingual language that exists in the midst of perpetual translation. While Cixous’ *écriture féminine* encourages women to produce “writing that inscribes femininity” and urges them to distinguish their writing “from “workmanship [that] is

¹⁰ Zhao Li Ming (赵丽明) and Xie Ming Yao (谢明尧) published their research on *Nüshu* in the 2008 book *Nüshu Du Ben* (女书读本). Zhao, in particular, is an eminent scholar on the topic of *Nüshu*. I have translated the quotes from their research from Chinese to English.

in no way different from male writing, and which either obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women” (878), the matrilineal *Nüshu* is a variant of the Chinese script created in the Hunan province of China, and is predominantly used in “autobiographies, letters, folksongs, funeral rites, records of events, transcriptions, and translations” (Zhao and Xie 3), much like Guo’s epistolary novels. *Écriture feminine* and *Nüshu* have very different origins and are fundamentally different in that the former calls for a reconstruction of the female self through writing that does not rely on the same patriarchal foundations that have suppressed them, and the latter is a script shared by generations of a Chinese female community. Yet, the two are similar in their subversiveness and inform the feminist approach to the novels. If *écriture feminine* resisted Western patriarchal values, *Nüshu* – which is described as “the hybrid child of multiple cultures and a historical product, [...] was formed amidst a rich Confucian culture which possessed deeply entrenched feudal values [that] clearly positioned men as superior to women” (Zhao and Xie 14). By considering the subversiveness of both the *écriture feminine* and the *Nüshu* in relation to Guo’s novels, the female voices and narratives of redress and resistance that run through the three novels become even more prominent. It is worth noting that although *Nüshu* is only mentioned in *Concise*, the location of Silver Hill village in *UFO* is suggested to be within the Hunan province since Hunan Agent 1989 speaks the supposed dialect of the locals. Hence, in the developmental phase of Guo’s linguistic and literary experimentation, Guo “transports” her readers to the historical birthplace of *Nüshu*.

After the success of *Concise*, Guo voiced her concern regarding what she would do “if the subject of [her] next book is not language” and adds that she “can

only play this game [of language] once”¹¹. Guo’s second novel *UFO in Her Eyes* appears to be written completely in Standard English, but the fact that the novel is set in the fictitious village of Silver Hill in China and is structured as a series of state documents and interview transcripts make it apparent that translation has been carried out and the language presented in the transcript does not represent the original. In the novel, the sighting of an Unidentified Flying Object (UFO) by village spinster Kwok Yun leads to state officials being sent to conduct interviews with the villagers. Beijing Agent 1919 (BJ 1919), who speaks the Beijing dialect, is unable to understand the villagers’ local dialect and relies on translations and interpretations from Hunan Agent 1989 (HN 1989). In section 3.1, I highlight the telltale signs in the novel that suggest processes of translation have been carried out on the text – from the graphic presentation of the novel, to the contextual clues within the narrative, and finally the many instances in which standard language is made strange. While the Unidentified Flying Object that sparks the investigation remains unaccounted for at the end of the novel, I suggest that what is truly unidentified, alien, and elusive in *UFO* is the language of the novel and the translation process that the reader is not privy to.

This alien language and translation process is further complicated by the evident censorship that has been blatantly carried out on the transcripts in the form of black bars that periodically redact portions of the transcript. In section 3.2, I will approach *UFO* as a censorship playbook and compare the use of the black bars to the translation black box in which translation is conceived as concealing its processes and revealing only the source and product of the translation. My use of the word ‘playbook’ combines the instructive nature of a playbook with the sense of being at

¹¹ ‘O’ Connell, John. “London’s hottest new writers: Xiaolu Guo.” *Time Out London*, 27 Feb. 2007, <https://www.timeout.com/london/books/londons-hottest-new-writers>. 1 August 2017.

play; and the censorship playbook, unlike other novels on censorship, plays with the concept of translation by engaging and instructing readers in the censorship process itself. In section 3.3, I explore the satirical relationships between state, Science, and superstition, and demonstrate how crucial plot points are lost if Guo's novels are not approached through the lens of translation. While I do employ some basic historical and political context from the May Fourth Movement in this section, I will not be focussing on the political background as much as I focus on how translation as performed in Guo's novel calls upon the reader's translational involvement and historical knowledge to convey meaning. In this section, translational involvement of the reader goes beyond identifying the novel as translation product or process, and requires the reader to possess a distrust of the novel itself while paying attention to the visual, linguistic, and ideological differences and contradictions that are implicit in the text.

In section 3.4, I will direct attention to the ways in which *UFO* demonstrates a censoring of female sexuality and reproductivity through language. Translation and language possess castrative potential in the hands of the state, and operating on a loose definition of language, I suggest that there is a state-approved language or "politically correct" discourse that can be translated into and out of. By comparing the agents and Chief Chang, I suggest in section 3.5 that this language of the state has its own measure of literacy, and those who possess a high degree of literacy in the language are able to effectively code-switch in and out of the language to their advantage. By assuming the existence of a state language, the implication is that there is also a language of the people. Drawing from new historicist and revisionist conceptions of the Great Leap Forward, this section will also argue that *UFO* demonstrates the capacity of translations to enable and invite censorship, as well as frustrate and evade

censorship. Thus, translation is both an instrument of censorship and a tool that resists censorship.

I Am China contains the most apparent foregrounding of translation and translator. While the previous approaches to *Concise* and *UFO* as translations required justification, translation is most evident in Guo's last novel since the protagonist Iona is a translator working on a translation of the letters between Chinese lovers Mu and Jian. A maturation of the recurring devices and techniques used in previous novels, this epistolary novel combines the form of diaries, letters, emails, and most importantly, translations. So far, *China* has been positioned as the maturation point of Guo's linguistic exercise and literary experiment, but in section 4.1, I suggest that the novel also makes subtle allusions to the first novel, and seemingly recommends a cyclical return to *Concise* and a rereading of all three novels through the lens of a reconceptualised translation that has taken shape over the course of the first reading. Much like the "self-enclosing circuit" (Costa 553) of Escher's staircase, these intertextual references to her first novel that Guo embedded in *China* not only represent maturation and closure in her experimentation, but also a potential return to the beginning.

In section 4.2, I will propose that a reconceptualisation of translation requires a broader understanding of translation equivalence to include equivalences beyond semantic meaning. I argue that what Maria Tymoczko refers to as "the primacy of semantic meaning" ("Translation" 4) in translation studies leads to the neglect of other kinds of equivalence, such as textural meaning, typographical meaning, and formal¹² meaning. Conventional translation also tends to forego the visual and oral/aural characteristics of the word, sacrificing these for meaning and taking it for granted that

¹² In relation to form.

they are inevitable sacrifices in the rendering of a text into another language. This section addresses how the novel demonstrates the possibility of translating with other equivalences in mind and how translation can retain these equivalences and produce meaning through them. Performing translation through multimodal novels that emphasise the oral/aural, visual, and tactile modes of communicating meaning, Guo also plays on the assumption of equivalence in translation and invites readers to be skeptical towards the translation itself. In section 4.3, I illustrate Guo's problematisation of the translation process as performed through the narrative of *China*. This reconceptualisation of translation envisions it as a perpetual retelling – a palimpsestic sedimentation of narratives that neither promises fidelity to the original, nor should be expected to.

It is in *China* that a professional translator is made visible, specifically the female translator, and this will be the primary concern of section 4.4. Drawing on Lawrence Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility*, this chapter will examine how Guo's *China* brings the professional female translator to the foreground of the writing when previous novels only allude to her presence. I will suggest that fiction is one of the ways in which transparency in translation can be achieved. This requires the translator and translation to become more visible, resulting in a genre of literature that is not merely translated, but embodies translation. Rendering the mental and emotional processes of the translator transparent, the role of a translator as an objective mediator between two languages and cultures is challenged. The role of translation in these novels not only challenges existing translation norms and presuppositions, but also introduces creative ways in which translator and translation can have a more active and visible role in fiction writing. Guo's novels, approached in this dissertation as a three-part performance of translation on the stage of fiction, contribute to a bold "step

[towards] a [literary] basis from which translations can be read as translations, as text in their own right, permitting transparency to be demystified [and] seen as one discursive effect among others” (“Translator’s Invisibility” 13). Having demystified the transparency of translation, the visibility of Iona and her work on translation also demonstrates the productive potential of conceiving translation and writing as a collaborative process between Iona and the Chinese lovers, Mu and Jian.

The final chapter of my dissertation proposes that literary translation can be reconceptualised as a writerly collaboration that involves the reader in the meaning-making process, alongside writer and translator. In section 5.1, I will first call attention to Guo’s brief references to Claude Monet’s Impressionist paintings in *Concise* and M.C. Escher’s Staircase in *China* and suggest that although they are referenced in passing, Monet’s and Escher’s works serve as graphical metaphors for translation. By deconstructing these metaphors for translation and demonstrating their relevance to Guo’s overarching literary performance of translation, I compare these with Theo Hermans’ use of Cornelius Gijsbrechts’ *The Reverse of a Framed Painting* to highlight how metatranslation and the riddle-solving quality of its processes are played out in Guo’s fiction.

The increasing visibility of translation in Guo’s three novels blurs the roles of writer, translator, and reader, suggesting that there are no clear demarcations between these roles. The reader, regardless of his or her linguistic repertoire, is invited to participate in, or at least assess the translation process for themselves as part of the reading experience. By doing so, the reader is no longer a consumer of the translated text, but a producer of the text in translation. This reader’s turn in translation, which I elaborate on in section 5.2, ushers in a new possibility for a translation fiction that foregrounds translation through the construction of narrative puzzles that involve the

reader in the translation process, and prompt the renegotiation and reassessment of language and translation. The following is Barthes' criticism of readerly text and his description of the reader accustomed to readerly texts in *S/Z*:

Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness – he is intransitive; he is, in short, *serious*: instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum* (4).

By blurring the lines between writer, translator, and reader, Guo is writing against the conventional separation of the trio in the classical text and translation. Guo also echoes Barthes when she laments that “readers [...] have been trained to read [...] lazy, easy traditional narrative [and] it’s like being given sleeping pills [that send] people to a non-reflective sleep state”¹³. Thus, I argue in my final chapter that Guo’s fictional works resist these anaesthetic tendencies by analeptically stimulating the emergent reader to engage with the fictions’ complex layers and creative language. This analeptic stimulation recalls the “linguistic awakening” that Guo associated with her writing of *Concise* and thus, her writing serves to materialise her “dreaming language” in reality. Finally, this dissertation will conclude by summarily revisiting the developments of the female protagonists from novel to novel, and suggest that while it might seem like the protagonists are three separate characters, they represent the

¹³ Flood, Alison. “Writers attack ‘overrated’ Anglo-American literature at Jaipur festival.” *The Guardian*, 20 Jan. 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/20/writers-attack-overrated-american-literature-jaipur-festival>. 30 July 2017.

different stages of the fictional characters' *Bildungsroman*, Guo's *Künstlerroman*, and finally the "growth" of the emergent writerly reader.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

An examination of the fields of literary translation and translingualism quickly reveal that the reader has been habituated to certain presuppositions and expectations of translation and reading. These presuppositions, if not rehabilitated or at least acknowledged, prevent the reader from forming new perspectives. Maria Tymoczko compiles a detailed list of these presuppositions in her 2006 work and calls for the reconceptualisation of translation to address and challenge these presuppositions. One crucial presupposition to address is how translations and translators are only deemed "necessary in interlingual and intercultural situations" (Tymoczko, "Reconceptualizing" 16). The *intralingual* and *intracultural* situations in Guo's novels continue to require translation, and to rely on the broad links *between* nationality, linguistic, and cultural groups to determine whether translation is required, ignores increasingly complex and diverse linguistic repertoires *within* these groups. It may seem that these diverse linguistic repertoires *within* groups are a result of what Guo refers to as a global migration movement¹⁴. However, it is crucial to include an excursus here to clarify that while Guo's novels do involve geographical and migratory movements, such as when Z moves to London in *Concise*, there is a need to challenge the presupposition that language repertoires and "translation [are] assuming radically new forms [solely] because of [...] cultural movements and diasporas associated with globalization and [...] the hybridity of the ensuing cultural configurations" (Tymoczko, "Reconceptualizing" 19). Afterall, "diasporas, population movements, cultural and linguistic contact, cultural mixing, hybridity and translation

¹⁴ Peschel, Sabine. "Guo Xiaolu: language, exile." (see chap. 1.1, footnote 2).

have been part of human history since the dawn of our species” (19). Rather than predictably approach Guo’s novels as commentaries on globalisation, migratory movement, and the diasporic experience, this dissertation explores how Guo’s work subverts and plays on these expectations. *UFO* and *China* in particular, demonstrate how interactions between vastly different languages and cultures are commonplace even within the same geographical location and community, alerting readers to the possibilities of translation, language, and cultural contact zones that arise from situations beyond those of geographical and cultural movement. While *Concise* begins and ends with resettlement to and from China and London, *UFO*’s narrative stays within the rapidly modernising village of Silver Hill, only making allusions to movements beyond the village. *China*’s Iona is a work-from-home translator who reads about movements undertaken by characters Jian and Mu from her stationary desk, and literally and vicariously seeks meaning in their stories. The female protagonists of each novel seem to travel less and less, and when Iona does travel in the final chapters of the novel in search of the source of meaning, she is met with disappointment. Thus, instead of external movements in geographical location or culture, it is the movement of texts and the movements *within* the self that I argue is the focus of Guo’s novels.

Another common presupposition a reader is likely to have is that “translators [...] have professional standing; [and are] connected with schooling or training that instructs [them] in language competence, standards of textuality, norms of transposition and so forth” (Tymoczko, “Reconceptualizing” 18). Some translation scholars also favour this view in order to elevate translation and the work of the translator. For example, Snell-Hornby details and expresses her support for Justa Holz-Mänttari’s theory of translatorial action, which “effectively does away with the

popular image of the translator as the man (or woman) in the street who buys a bilingual dictionary and attempts to transcode texts” (59). This image of a translator as an amateur on the streets and translation as a task for anyone with a dictionary is understandably reprehensible to some translation theorists, but this image of a woman in the street buying a bilingual dictionary and attempting to transcode text captures precisely what Z of *Concise* does, and by extension, what Guo herself is doing too. By adopting a more receptive approach, Tymoczko calls attention to the “upper-class emphasis on technical expertise and literacy” (“Reconceptualizing” 15) in the field of translation, and considers it an obstacle to the expansion of translation theory and its reconceptualisation. Rather than rejecting amateur translators like Z and Guo by “doing away” with them, a reconceptualization of translation theory calls for a reconsideration of their roles in translation. The figure of the amateur translator who is not only untrained in translation, but also lacking the literacy to translate is precisely the one I will be exploring.

Another “premise of dominant translation theory [that Tymoczko considers to have] marginalized interpretation as a central activity to be theorized in translation studies [is] the focus on written texts as the subject of translation” (“Reconceptualizing” 17). When elaborating on this premise, Tymoczko contrasts the written form to the oral form, stating “that most translation through time and space has been oral [and] orality is the central condition of human biology and culture, and [thus] translation must be theorized so as to acknowledge these conditions” (17). Although this dissertation continues to focus on “translation as literary practice” (17) by focusing on the novel, the orality of translation is a principle concern of Guo’s *UFO*, which is structured as a series of interview transcripts and state records. Set in the fictional Chinese village of Silver Hill, the transcripts and records are mysteriously

in English and while one may assume that this is Guo's translation, the novel itself draws attention to its own language when the agents refer to the processes of translation that are taking place during the interrogation. Unable to understand the local dialect, Beijing Agent 1919 relies on Hunan Agent 1989 to translate his questions as well as transcribe the interviews. Although Tymoczko suggests that "the premise that translation primarily involves written or fixed texts must be adjusted [since] the majority of human beings in the world still live in cultures where literacy plays a very restricted role" (17), the oral translation is conducted not only between the literate agents and the illiterate villagers, but also between the agents themselves. Orality, in the case of *UFO*, does not merely involve communities and cultures in which the inhabitants are illiterate. Instead, everyone including the agents, the state authorities, and the American hiker that protagonist Kwok Yun rescues, are revealed to be illiterate in one language or another and rely on some form of oral or textual translation. Literacy and orality are thus not more relevant to specific cultures or parts of the world, but are relative to the context in which literacy is being assessed. Once literacy no longer refers to the dominant language of each community by default, translation becomes an act that occurs across different degrees and kinds of literacy.

Not only has the reader been habituated to certain ways of viewing translation, but they have largely been unaware of the presence of the translation and the translator. Lawrence Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility* highlights how the illusion of transparency in a conventionally good translation is an "effect of a fluent translation strategy [in which] the translator [...] insures easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, [and] fixing precise meaning" (1). In order to achieve the conventional good translation, any foreignness in the language that affects the readability and fluency of the translation is further suppressed in its publication.

Brian Lennon identifies the “main conventions for *managing* languages other than English in U.S. trade-published books” as follows:

First, [foreign languages] are *contained* – *confined* to single words, phrases, or brief exchanges of spoken dialogue, as touches of cultural verisimilitude (or its simulation) that ‘season’ the text *ever so lightly* with the foreign without dulling its domestic flavour. Second, they are *tagged* (by convention, with italic type) to *mark* them as voiced (as breaks in continuum of subvocalized prose) and to *mark* them as ‘foreign’ language. [...] Languages other than English are *administered*, so to speak, in an ethnographic or pedagogic mode presuming the lowest common denominator, anglophone monolingualism. (Lennon 207, emphases mine).

Lennon’s diction, such as when he uses “managing”, “contained”, “confined”, “season [...] ever so lightly”, “tagged”, “mark”, and “administered” are indicative of his negative view of translating into the English language and its condescending tendency to limit the foreign presence in texts to controlled amounts. Words like “tagged” and “marked” in particular suggest the foreign is branded as such within its translation, crudely setting it apart from the rest of the translation. Thus, the vocabulary that is used to describe translation norms in the U.S. reveal how multiple languages are suppressed in the production and publication process.

I would argue then that Guo’s novels, in its foregrounding and staging of translation, draw awareness to the translation that mediates the text, and shatters the illusion of transparency by *being* transparent about translation’s methods of obscurity. Lifting the veil between the reader and translation, Guo’s novels achieve the reverse of what a conventional good translation entails. They are not fluent, possess no consistent translation strategy, do not insure easy readability, do not adhere to current usage, do

not maintain continuous syntax, and do not fix precise meaning. Rather than “diluting foreign elements in literary works” (104), translation as performed through Guo’s novels is saturated with the foreign. My use of the word ‘foreign’ here does not exclusively refer to the Chinese language or culture, but also the unconventional and alien rendering of language and translation in Guo’s writing, which I will elaborate on in the subsequent chapters. Therefore, by comparing the current presuppositions in translation studies that Tymoczko has identified and the invisibility of translation and translator that Venuti criticises with translation as it is performed in Guo’s novels, a reconceptualisation of the roles of translation and translator is one that thrusts translation into the foreground by breaking many of the standards and conventional restrictions on language and translation. This reconceptualised literary translation is one that plays on these rules and challenges the need to have them in literary works that seek to illuminate the linguistic and socio-political hierarchies, semantic distortions, and undetected censorship that happen in conventional and traditional translation practices. Apart from being self-reflexive, the reconceptualised literary translation is not concerned with being a finalised product, but is invested in remaining in a perpetual process of translation. The literary possibilities that emerge from reconceptualising translation’s and translator’s roles in literature seem infinite, as it is not so much what it is like, but what it intentionally breaks away from that is crucial. In fact, this reconceptualisation, like translation in Guo’s novels, needs to be perpetual if it wants to avoid merely substituting old presuppositions, habits, and rules with new ones.

It is also crucial to acknowledge the reasons behind the choice of translingualism and transmesis from the many other terms that have been coined and used by scholars of different disciplines to describe, categorise, and name language

phenomena. Many of these terms, such as interlanguage, multilingualism, plurilingualism, polylingualism, translanguaging etc., differ diminutively from one another and are often used side-by-side, or even interchangeably. While their definitions are never entirely the same, they are often so loosely defined or interrelated to one another that a consensus on the precision and appropriateness of each use appears difficult to reach. Harping on this would seem to be a trifling insistence on mere technicality, so instead this dissertation has elected to regard the majority of these terms as approximations of this diversifying phenomenon in which awareness towards language and new ways of approaching and presenting language have been on the rise. For the purpose of this dissertation, I favour Steven Kellman's translingualism and Thomas O. Beebee's transmesis as the primary terms to describe the language play and translation processes that are taking place in Guo's novels.

Kellman, often acknowledged as having coined the term 'translingual', describes translinguals as those who are "impatient with the imperfections of finite verbal systems" and have "an aspiration to transcend language [and] pass beyond words" (16). While this dissertation is interested in borrowing the term 'translingualism' for its emphasis on going *beyond* lingualism and arriving at new conceptions of translation and literature, translingualism – like many of the other approximations – continues to operate under many existing presuppositions of language and translation. For instance, the observation that "texts written in an acquired language [...] sometimes bear traces of the author's mother tongue" (Kellman 16) is an example of the loose premise from which the majority of scholars of translingualism begin their inquiry. Language is regarded here as something to be acquired, not unlike an asset or tangible commodity, and "competence involves distinct compartments for each language one uses" (Canagarajah and Lee 1). Even if

one is to understand this acquisition as involving the practice of a skill, the word “acquired” still heavily implies mastery and possession, and makes the assumption that acquisition of a language can be discussed as an activity of the past rather than a perpetual process.

Transmesis is defined by Beebee as the “literary authors’ use of fiction to depict acts of translation [and] the term is a metaphorical conjunction of translation and mimesis” (3). While this dissertation will not identify Guo’s novels as transmetic, the term provides a useful framework for the illumination of transmetic characteristics in Guo’s novels, such as when Beebee uses the translation’s black box (6-7) to illuminate how fiction can be used to give the translation and translator more visibility. Beebee’s research is primarily concerned with the action of translating as presented through fiction rather than the performative role of translational fiction, which invites the reader to participate in, as well as challenge the performance itself. Rather than simply imitate translation, I argue that Guo’s novels go one step further to critique translation and offer alternative methods of performing it in fiction. By choosing *translingualism* and *transmesis* as two primary theoretical frameworks from which to discuss *translation* in Guo’s novels, I am suggesting that these theories need to embrace what is alluded to in their prefix by knocking down existing paradigms and entrenched biases in favour of radically unfamiliar ways of approaching translation and literature.

Despite the translingual, transmetic, and translational qualities of Guo’s novels, her writing has largely not been identified as such. The general absence of Guo’s novels from these academic discourses is not surprising since her novels are not identifiably works of translation and are not ostensibly written in more than one language. However, Guo plays the role of the translator and the writer, efficiently

occupying the literary positions of both. Borrowing twentieth-century translator Willard Trask's description of translation as the "performing [of] a technical stunt, [...] a psychological workout, [...] something like being on stage [where] translators playact as authors" (qtd. in Venuti, "Translator's Invisibility" 7), I will also examine how the reverse is evident in Guo's novels – where the author playacts as translator, and the visibility of translation and a female translator in *China* subvert translation norms. This playacting, visibility, and subversion introduce imaginative ways that self-reflexive textual production can enable translation to play a more pronounced role in literature. Consequentially, the practice of foregrounding translation in literature and the effects of its visibility are not only a stunt or workout for the translator or author, but also an invitation to readers to participate in the rigorous linguistic and translational play and performance on their own.

As Venuti suggests, "we [the readers] typically become aware of the translation only when we run across a bump on its surface, a nonstandard item, an unfamiliar word, an error in usage, a confused meaning that may seem unintentionally comical" ("Translation" 110). By creatively including these bumps, Guo's novels reject the "valorizing [of a] purely instrumental use of language [and the emphasis on] immediate intelligibility and the appearance of factuality" ("Translator's Invisibility" 5). Instead, the reader is left to navigate these discrepancies on their own. By approaching Guo's novels as narrative puzzles that frustrate easy readability and call for the involvement of the reader in the translation process, these disturbances to reading are reinterpreted as stimulating narrative puzzles to be engaged with. This involvement of the reader is not unlike Barthes' birth of the reader, in which the reader's relationship with the text is at the center of the meaning-making process. However, the birth of the reader in Guo's novels does not require the corresponding

death of the author that Barthes describes in “The Death of the Author”. In fact, Guo’s writing painstakingly reminds readers of the author’s and translator’s presence, both in and outside the narrative.

It comes as no surprise that the work of Barthes is crucial to the understanding of Guo’s works since *Concise* is explicitly inspired by Barthes’ *A Lovers’ Discourse*. Apart from Barthes’ “The Death of the Author”, I also draw from his arguments in *S/Z* extensively in my dissertation to argue that the use of multimodality in the novels and the play on image and text to encourage interaction with the narrative serve an important pedagogical and writerly purpose. Barthes differentiates classic writing or readerly text from the writerly text by suggesting that “classic writing is quickly winded, closes down, and signs its final code quite soon” (140). According to Barthes, authors of writerly texts, like Flaubert, work with:

an irony impregnated with uncertainty, achieves a salutary discomfort of writing: he does not stop the play of codes (or stops it only partially), so that [...] one never knows if he is responsible for what he writes (if there is a subject *behind* his language); for the very being of writing (the meaning of the labor that constitutes it) is to keep the question *Who is speaking?* from ever being answered (140).

This description of Flaubert’s work applies to Guo’s novels, as her writing too conveys the same ironic uncertainty, the salutary discomfort of writing, plays with codes a lot, and obscures the editorial interventions that have been involved in its making. By drawing from Barthes’ distinction between the writerly and readerly literature, I propose that the emergent readerly readers of translingual, multimodal novels like Guo’s, are not attuned to reading translations as translations. Translation is staged in Guo’s fiction as self-reflexive narrative puzzles to be solved, and the

emergent readers of Guo's novels are thus enrolled in a renewed writerly reading experience.

Having identified specific translation, linguistic, and literary theories of Tymoczko, Hermans, Venuti, Kellman, Beebee, and Barthes as the primary influences of my dissertation, I would like to address the feminist theoretical frameworks that inform my dissertation. A feminist reading of Guo's novels is evidently necessary, considering the strong female presence in every single one of her novels, and the recurring themes of female sexuality and struggle with language and hegemony. By proposing a reading of Guo's three novels as milestone publications on a trajectory of extensive linguistic exercise and literary experiment, the development implied in the narrative shift from female language learner to female translator – represented by Z from *Concise* to Iona from *China* – becomes difficult to pass off as a coincidence.

By foregrounding the female presence in her writing and using the form of the epistolary novel extensively, Guo's novels respond to Cixous' call – for writing to be “the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structure” (879) – by identifying fiction in the perpetual process of translation as one such space. The subversiveness that Cixous encourages is also evident in the historical *Nüshu*, which is described as “a solitary script that exists and operates beyond the perimeters of government policy, planning, as well as mainstream society and culture” (Zhao and Xie 13), and a script motivated by a Chinese female community's “unwillingness to silently give in to society's engulfment of their voices” (19). Cixous too, talks about “women *seizing* the occasion to *speak*” (880) through “a feminine practice of writing [...] conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate” (883). The female author and translator within Guo's

narratives and the female author and translator represented by Guo continue to exert their influences through subversive female writing and expression. Hence, Cixous' call for women to "write her self [...] write about women [...] bring women to writing" (875) and the role of *Nüshu* as a medium of expression, play, and lamentation between a Chinese female community are responded to and fulfilled through the evolving relationships between Guo, her female protagonists, and the act of translating and writing. By establishing similarities in Cixous' *écriture féminine* and the Chinese *Nüshu*, I argue that Guo's novels occupy this intricate overlap in which Western and Chinese female methods of redefining their relationship with language and translation are juxtaposed, put into contact, interact, and suggest new possibilities.

In detailing the theoretical framework of this dissertation, the gaps in the current research on Guo's works are also being suggested. Apart from the lack of a sustained focus on translation's central role in her novels, scholars have also largely neglected the many important and apparent continuities and discontinuities throughout Guo's literary oeuvre.

1.4 Survey of Literature

The paucity of scholarship on Guo's novels and the fact that the majority of scholarship only focuses on *Concise* raise the need for more in-depth investigation and comparative research on Guo's entire literary oeuvre. The majority of current research on Guo's novels focus on the language and cultural aspects of her work, and while they acknowledge the key role of translation in Guo's novels, none of them involve translation theories to a significant extent or approach the novels through the lens of current research in translation studies. Often, they are focussed on translation-*related* research that touches upon the cultural and political effects of translation (Douloughan; Hwang) rather than translation in itself. Despite referencing Tymoczko when highlighting how a "traditional concept of translation is too limited" (Hwang 70-

71) for any discussion on Guo's writing, there is no move towards a new conceptualisation of translation using Guo's writing. Translation is also presented as a mere conduit and assessed only in terms of its functional capacity to "stage cultural differences" (Doloughan 113) and serve as a "metonym for human relationship" (Gilmour 12). Departing from this function-oriented approach to translation, this dissertation approaches translation in Guo's novels not as a means, but as an end in itself.

The function-oriented approach that many of these scholars adopt inevitably leads to an evaluation of translation as insufficient or lacking. Translation, when assessed by its function to bridge relationships in Guo's novels, inevitably fails its transcultural quest (Hwang 69). By approaching the translation in the novel as a failure, Hwang goes on to recommend a compromise between cultures and languages, expounding a "middle ground between [...] different culturally formed and embedded perspectives" (70). In doing so, Hwang does not consider the possibility of a fulfilling relationship between those of different cultures and languages that actively foregoes this middle ground in favour of a unique and new relationship dynamic that transcends linguistic and cultural norms by forming new ones of their own.

Additionally, existing scholarship largely takes a cultural studies approach and is primarily interested in developing Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity (Doloughan; Gilmour; Kong; Rahbek). Instead, my dissertation wishes to distance Guo's works from this concept of the hybrid, since the use of this term by these scholars predominantly implies that cultures and languages can be understood in definitive, mutually delimitable terms. Rather than a simplistic combination of two cultures and languages, I favour a nuanced approach towards Guo's works that takes into consideration the minute differences within, rather than between cultures and

languages. Guo is also not linguistically performing hybridity per se, but creating and performing her unique personal language.

While existing literature acknowledges how “in the era of globalization and postmodernity [...] many writers of works in English are the product of more than one culture and language [and] depend on access to and the ability to transform a range of cultural and material resources” (Doloughan 103), they do not delve into the specific linguistic resources that are available and more importantly, unavailable to Guo. Operating on the assumption that extent of access determines productivity, “the process of meaning-making [is ascribed to] creative agents [who] draw on the resources available to them at [a] particular moment in their career” (Doloughan 103). However, in Guo's case, it is perhaps more precise to say that it is the inaccessibility of resources that is generative. Considering it is the unavailability of a translator that led Guo to embark on her linguistic experiment and since the language of *Concise* is focussed on systematically reproducing gradual improvements to a learner's variety of English, it is not so much the availability of linguistic resources, but the limited resources that inform the writing.

Still operating on the notion that language's role in the novel is merely functional and inextricably tied to culture, Oboe also attributes chaotic and destructive propensities to the use of language in *Concise* (267, 271). In focussing on the concept of love and the relationship between Z and her lover, Oboe positions Z as a victim turned aggressor and considers Z to have progressed from “an instrument of enslavement replicating crippling power dynamics” (272) to later “draining [her lover] dry of all words, in an almost vampiric act of possession” (272). Oboe's interpretation of Z as someone who has taken “flight from [her] roots” (273) and who has “recreate[d] the [English] language anew” (274) presumes that the language in

Concise is a derivative of the English language and positions Z's learning of English as parasitic rather than productive and creative. This interpretation also does not recognise Z's struggle with her Chinese language and the Chinese culture's influence on her throughout the novel, seemingly assuming that Z's Chinese roots and language have dissolved in this flight from origin and that language can be substituted or displaced completely.

Sexuality and the body is also one of the recurrent themes explored in existing literature, and "the idea of corporeal transformation through language and the fantasy of the body as free from language" (Poon 6) is explored. While I also write about the body, my dissertation is concerned with the censorship of the body and the inseparability of body from language. Apart from the sexual body of the female, I am also interested in exploring the textual body, arguing that it is the body of the text in terms of image, form, textuality, and sensorial impressions that is creatively formed in the course of the three novels.

Recent scholarship on Guo's works (Spyra; Kong) have begun to explore other aspects of Guo's novels, departing from the discourses of cultural translation and hybridity that have previously dominated the literature. These new directions seem to indicate a broadening interest in Guo's work and in developing previous scholars' approach towards *Concise* as Z's *Bildungsroman*, Spyra briefly suggested that *Concise* is also Guo's *Künstlerroman*, redirecting the focus from the personal and language-learning achievements of Z to the artist and author. While a *Künstlerroman* typically refers to a single written work that is concerned with an artist's developments, the artist that is developing in Guo's novels is Guo herself; and rather than a single narrative, the developments are taking place across all three of her novels. Taking this narrative of growth another step further, I suggest that the growth experienced by the

characters and the author is also experienced by the reader, who plays a participatory role in the novel's meaning-making process. In order to flesh out the complete growing-up narratives of character, author, and reader, I go beyond *Concise* to look at these developments across all three of Guo's novels.

Kong depicts the state apparatuses that unanimously condition the lives of citizens in both the People's Republic of China and the United States of America, broaching dialogues regarding surveillance and totalitarianism in Guo's *Concise* and *UFO*. Kong highlights how the state and publishing industry are pervasive apparatuses that produce a climate of uncertainty and terror, but does not conceive of the possibility of resistance and subversion within the narratives. By demonstrating how language and translation is the medium through which censorship is carried out, I also go on to suggest that it is through a weaponising of translation that censorship and totalitarian regimes can be countered.

In this survey, I covered a few of the primary differences between existing research and my research on Guo. Moving beyond Guo's first novel, my dissertation calls for a new approach towards Guo's novels that conceives of them as works of translations rather than novels that contain instances of translation. In approaching them as works of translation, I wish to foreground translation rather than culture, and argue that translation as performed by the novels is productive and creative rather than functional and deficient. I also depart from the geographical and national configurations that frame existing research, choosing instead to highlight the literary space where the act of writing, translating, and reading takes place. In emphasising language and translation, I also call attention to the implicit references to Chinese language and culture within the novels.

Chapter 2: The Woman Suspended in Translation

2.1 *Concise*: The Birth of an Experiment

“When a body floating in air, which country she belonging to?”

- Guo Xiaolu¹⁵

Inspired by Roland Barthes’ *A Lovers’ Discourse*, the form of *Concise* resembles that of a dictionary, diary, letters to a lover, and an English learner’s notebook. This combination of forms identifies the novel as a modern epistolary novel – which is defined as being contained or carried on in letters and other kinds of documents. Zhuang Xiao Qiao or Z, the protagonist and the fictional author-narrator of the novel uses this dictionary-diary-letter-notebook to document her experiences as a Chinese migrant and English language learner in London. Since Z has limited command of the English language and no professional understanding of translation, she is not equipped with the linguistic competencies to carry out oblique translation¹⁶ techniques or other forms of formal translation. Despite this, Z continues to convey her experiences in the limited English she possesses and translation continues to take place even though neither Z nor Guo overtly acknowledge this. The result is not so much writing in an acquired language, but writing in an interim language that exists in the midst of this acquisition – a novel that is not merely a product of translation but also in the midst of being translated.

Documenting her own experiences with the conception of *Concise* in her memoir, Guo refers to the novel as the female protagonist’s’ “own [self-composed] personal English dictionary, [and] a sort of phrasebook, [in which she recorded] the

¹⁵ Guo, Xiaolu. *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2007, pp. 3

¹⁶ Oblique translation, also referred to as free translation, occurs when direct or literal translation is not being carried out and the translator achieves equivalence through other methods.

things she did and the people she met” (260). Guo brings together the formal dictionary and phrasebook with the private and personal diary, and in so doing negotiates between the linguistic strictures and conventions of both. By inserting personal writing into the structure of a formal text, the new language that Guo seemingly adopts (258) is neither English as one may presume, nor a mixture of English and Chinese, but a translingual language that exists in a state of translation and is contingent on translation. In negotiating their attachments to their geographic and linguistic origins and adaptations to a new location and language, and in attempting to write about the people they have encountered, Guo and her character Z write in neither of the languages and instead write freely in a language that resists comprehension by defying language and translation norms.

Neither writing in the English language or Chinese language, the language that Z writes in is in fact held in suspension. Significantly, the first entry of her dictionary-diary is written when she is on the plane to London and she contemplates which country she belongs to when her body is floating in air (3). When recalling her mother’s warnings to her about living in London alone, Z says in her garbled form of English, “That my past life. Life before in China. The warns speaking in my mother’s harsh local dialect, of course, translation into English by Concise Chinese-English Dictionary” (18). Not only does “past life” suggest her life in China is a previous incarnation, but the garbled words also draw attention to the layered translation process that went into the construction of the text that the reader receives. Her mother’s local dialect undergoes at least two rounds of linguistic rebirth – first from her local dialect into Standard Chinese, then from Standard Chinese into the learner’s variety of English of Z. Thus, the creatively garbled expressions on the page are a product of a multi-layered process of translation that the reader has no access to.

Translation as it is performed on the page, like Z's identity, exists in a perpetual state of uneasy negotiation between multiple languages and geographies.

Although Z is enthusiastic to leave her "past life" behind and embrace her new life in London, she also laments pessimistically that in light of the limited things she knows about the West, she is not likely to have a life in the West (5). Despite the difficulties Z faces in her negotiations between language and culture, her desire for this "life" does not wane. However, when Z's time in Europe finally results in her pregnancy and she is given an opportunity to create life, she is unsure if the baby belongs to her lover and decides to go for an abortion (271). On the way to the clinic, Z comments that her lover is her life (272), and she seems to decide that her rebirth in the West depends solely on him. The conception of a child, like her rudimentary conception of the West, are not enough for the rebirth Z desires. When Z returns to China at the end of *Concise*, however, a letter from her lover is what gives Z the closure she needs, and she refers to his words as the "best gift" (354) her lover has given her. Considering the association of her mother's language with a past life at the beginning of the novel, Z's rebirth appears to be achieved through language, and this language is not the English language as one might expect, but the creative, personal language that Z, and by extension Guo, uses in *Concise*. It is also the embracing of a language suspended between languages and perpetually in the midst of translation that characterises the birth and beginning of Guo's linguistic exercise and literary experiment.

2.2 Metatranslation and Degrees of Literacy

In order to outline this language in suspension and perpetual translation, *Concise's* metatranslative and translingual qualities must first be acknowledged. In writing about metatranslation in his 2007 book *The Conference of the Tongues*,

Hermans describes translation as an “inherently self-referential form [...] framed by the entry on the title page identifying the text as a translation” (41). Since Hermans is writing about metratranslation in relation to the conventional, translated text, the self-referentiality is confined to the framing of the translation as such in the form of a conspicuous entry on the cover that “invites the reader to enter into a contract [...] to read the text as simulating a discourse in another language” (41). However, in the case of Guo’s novels, the ‘contract’ does not exist on the cover page, even when translation is being carried out and performatively enacted in the subsequent pages.

To begin with, Z does not seem aware of her own role as a translator. She observes that the “English version [of Mao’s *Little Red Book*] is without translator name on cover, [agrees that] no second name can be shared on Mao’s work [and comments that] the English translators of [the] book [...] are like feather compare with Tai Mountain” (28). The absent acknowledgement of a translator on the cover of an apparently translated piece of work and Z’s belittling of the translators’ importance compared to the writer of the source text parallels the general tendency to disregard or diminish the importance of the translator, even when the work is undeniably a translated work. Approaching the novel as Z’s autotranslation, Z noticing the lack of a translator’s name on the cover of Mao’s *Little Red Book* also self-reflexively calls attention to the absent acknowledgement of Guo or Z’s autotranslation on the cover of the novel itself.

Hermans also suggests that the “translator’s preface [that announces the text’s status as translation] prevents an uninhibited reading of the translation because its echo can still be heard while the performance is under way” (41-42), and since there is no preface or entry on the cover in Guo’s novels acknowledging the novels as translations, the reader encounters Guo’s performance of translation without

inhibitions. These encounters in *Concise* are most pronounced in the instances in which Z is thinking in one language but employing the locutions of another, and this sense of a Chinese subtext is prevalent throughout this novel. Like a palimpsest, the Chinese subtext bleeds to the surface and what Ursula Le Guin referred to in her review of *Concise* as “mangled language”¹⁷ is in fact part of an orchestrated novelistic performance of translanguaging and translation. The urtext, defined as the original or earlier version of a text, is constantly being evoked in the novel through the surfacing of Chinese words and phrases in their original form, in the form of Z’s amateur translations, and Z’s attempts to understand English by comparing it to the Chinese language. Unusual sentences like “talk doesn’t *cook rice*” (16) and Z’s literal translation of the Chinese word for thyme (百里香 *bai li xiang*) into “one hundred miles fragrant” (63) produce a defamiliarizing effect, and readers with or without competency in the Chinese language are able to identify the strangeness of Z’s translations.

In fact, the monologic entries in *Concise* also serve as an outlet of uninhibited expression, where Z expresses herself with whatever English she can put to use. The garbled product of this uninhibited expression is free from external language policing, and Guo demonstrates how languages similar to the one she presents in her novel already exist and are in fact well-recognised, even when they do not conform to current English standards. For example, Z is confused by Shakespeare’s expressions in his poem and reflects that “Shakespeare write bad English. For example, he says ‘*Where go thou?*’. If I speak like that Mrs Margaret will tell me wrongly” (27). Z also adds “I not understanding at all. What this ‘*tis*’, ‘*execut’st*’ and ‘*sett’st*’? Shakespeare

¹⁷ Le Guin, Ursula. “Sorry of my English.” *The Guardian*, 27 Jan. 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jan/27/featuresreviews.guardianreview33>. 3 August 2017.

can writing that, my spelling not too bad then.” (27). Shakespeare’s Early Modern English is identified as “bad English” (27) by Z, and her disapproval towards Shakespeare’s language reveals the selective bias that operates behind the general consensus on what qualifies as bad and good English. Z also indicates a preference for the way her two friends from her language school speak using simple expressions like “are we eat?” and “cook, you?” (160) and feels that the three of them “understand each other easily” (160). By communicating via their simple but inaccurate learner’s variety of English, Z is able to communicate and develop an understanding with her friends, demonstrating how effective communication sometimes requires the foregoing of language rules and the reinvention of language.

Concise also highlights how a person’s competency and literacy in a language are relative to the context of their interaction. While she faces a lot of language policing in London, her travels through Europe allows her to meet other Europeans who commend her English language competency. She is repeatedly told that “[her] English is very good” (216, 235) and notices that “the door man answers in very rude and bad English” (232). During her conversation with the Italian Andrea, he tells her he works as an avocado (234-235) and Z manages to provide him with the word lawyer when he explains that people “can hire [him] to help [them] in court” (235). *Avvocato* is lawyer in Italian, and this interaction is a demonstration of how intralingual and interlingual translation occurs across literacies, and even between the two non-native English speakers, translation continues to occur due to the varying linguistic competencies and linguistic repertoires of each speaker. This is also evident in yet another example when Guo’s lover tells her that “people will forgive [her] for not being *au fait* with the nuances of British customs” (119), which not only reflects the entrenchment of a deficit discourse that does not find it unusual that forgiveness

needs to be given to those unfamiliar with one's customs, but also demonstrates the ironic unawareness of the lover towards his own borrowing of a French phrase as if it is a given part of English literacy. Guo is also playing on the sounds of words across languages during Z's and Andrea's conversation since *avvocato* sounds like avocado and readers without competency in Italian are likely to share Z's confusion and wonder how "a fruit also a job" (235). Guo is thus inviting readers to consider language across linguistic competencies and also consider the aurality and orality of the words on the page. Since the actual Italian word *avvocato* never appears in the novel and it is never explained why Andrea said he was an avocado, the use of the English word to allude homonymically to the Italian word suggests that a creative method of translation that focuses on the sound of words being translated is possible as long as the contextualisation allows meaning to be conveyed.

This attention to the aural and oral quality of words recurs throughout the novel. When Z is unable to differentiate the words "b-e-e-c-h [and] b-e-a-c-h" (110), she points out that English is complicated since it "does not even have any change in accent like [...] Chinese [in which there are] four intonations, so every tone means different word" (110). Giving an example in Hanyu Pinyin, Z explains that "*mi* in first tone means to close eyes. *mí* in second tone means to fancy something. *mǐ* in third tone means rice. *mì* in fourth tone means honey" (110) and while she does demonstrate how intonations in the Chinese language produce different meanings, the repetition of this homophone for "me" is indicative of her inability to locate her individuality in English since aurally and orally, there is no Chinese equivalent. In giving this example, Z also ignores how in the Chinese language, there are also homophones such as when *mì* in fourth tone can also mean secret rather than honey.

On top of paying attention to the orality and aurality of translation, *Concise* also shows how language and translation can focus on how the words look rather than how they sound and what they mean. This linguistic play and performance is most evident when Z points out that “in France, their fish is *poisson*, their bread is *pain*, and their pancake is *crepe*. Pain and poison and crap. That’s what they have every day” (203). In doing so, she is subverting the translation equivalence of the words by focusing not on the equivalence of meaning, but the visual similarity of the French words ‘*poisson*’, ‘*pain*’, and ‘*crepe*’ to the English words ‘pain’, ‘poison’, and ‘crap’. Thus, translation goes beyond mere equivalence in meaning, and it is only through such instances of comical wordplay that this possibility is entertained. The aural/orality of language and translation that accentuates these aspects of language and retains it even after the process of translation will continue to be a recurring feature in Guo’s later novels, but it is in these instances in *Concise* that Guo begins exploring translation in fiction as encompassing the visual composition of the word, as well as the word in the form in which it is spoken and heard.

Translation can go beyond the meaning of words to capture the visuality, orality, and aurality of the language and establish the literary value to be had in retaining these in translation. Translation, like identity, does not occur exclusively between two languages, but also within the same language and across different literacies within that language. This staging of translation in *Concise* suggests that translation is capable of having a liberating effect for the sociolinguistically troubled Z, and it is by performing translation at the forefront of fiction that Z’s unique perspectives on language and culture are represented.

2.3 Wavering Language and Cultural Allegiances

The indeterminacy of Z's ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identification is also demonstrable in the novel's suspension of translation and the negotiation of degrees of literacies. In negotiating this suspended state of translation, Z often exhibits contradictory views, such as when she alternates between expressing contempt for China-made goods and taking pride in them. When her "large man-made-in-China-suitcase [...] lost all [its] wheels [after] one over-the-sea trip" (12-13), Z swears she will "never buy any products made from [her] home town again" (13). However, Z later demonstrates immense pride regarding her hometown when she comments that Mrs. Margaret "should know [that her] "shoes are all made in [Z's] home town (23). She also attempts to educate her lover on the Chinese inventions that the West have relied on, proclaiming that "our Chinese invented paper so your Shakespeare can write two thousand years later. Our Chinese invented gunpowder for you English and Americans to bomb Iraq. And our Chinese invented compass for your English to sail and colonise the Asian and Africa" (289). The falling apart of Z's suitcase is symbolic of the gradual disintegration of her Chinese allegiances and the distance she places between herself and the identifying occupation of her town. The inability of the "man-made-in-China" products to withstand travel also hint at the short longevity of the man-made-in-China values in the West, and also foreshadows the self-made values and woman-made values that Z will eventually follow. Unable to "locate herself at the correct [social] margins" and failing to represent "the variety of colonial cosmopolitanism [...] or [...] undifferentiated racial otherness" (2) that is expected of her, Z's contradictory attitude is not only indicative of the pressures on her to pledge allegiance to one of the two cultures, but also shows how the two identities and the perceived need to pledge allegiance to either one are ultimately constructs.

Z's wavering language and cultural allegiances are also evident in her fluctuating attitudes towards racial, ethnic, and cultural stereotypes. On one hand, Guo enacts a farcical performance of stereotypes when presenting the language of the character Z as involving a stereotypically East Asian English learner's mispronunciation of the 'L's and 'R's¹⁸. Z's expressions like "Heathlow Airport" (9) and "the Loyal family" (19) may seem to reinforce this stereotype, but in fact call attention to the performance of language that is taking place in the novel. Afterall, this stereotypically East Asian confusion in pronunciation, or the "l/r mix-up" occurs in speech, not in the spelling of the words 'Heathrow' and 'Royal', and the presentation of the l/r mix-up in the written form does not reinforce the stereotype as much as it mocks the stereotype by virtue of its recognisability to the reader. This accentual difference alerts the reader to the constructedness of the language in the novel, and the fact that the reader is able to recognise the stereotypical Chinglish and understand what Z means to say challenges the need for English to be proper for meaning to be conveyed.

Stereotyping also occurs when Z does not see any Chinese demonstrators when she encounters a protest in London and suggests that "maybe they busy and desperately earning money in those Chinese Takeaways" (29). Later, Z contemptuously imagines that the people she meets in Faro "just think of Chinese food when they see [her]" (247). In doing so, Z self-reflexively reduces the Chinese community to the stereotype of Chinese takeout employees, seemingly oblivious to how she does not conform to this stereotype to begin with. She also stereotypes the English by pointing out that "all Western look the same" (48). Later, she also observes

¹⁸ Smith, Ben T. "An Accent Myth? The East Asian L/R Mix-Up." *Dialect Blog*, <http://dialectblog.com/2011/12/30/the-east-asian-l-r-mixup/>. 9 July. 2017.

that “Westerners [also] can’t tell the difference of a group of Chinese [and] in their eyes, [they] all look the same” (231). By highlighting Z’s self-contradictory attitudes of shame and pride towards her Chinese origins and her tendency to stereotype while expressing contempt towards such stereotyping, Z’s attempts to negotiate between these seemingly conflicting attitudes become pronounced.

Z is willing to adapt, as seen in her willingness to abbreviate her full name “*Zhuang Xiao Qiao*” (18) to Z when people in London “have no idea how saying it [and] when they see [her] name starts from ‘Z’, stop trying” (18), but she continues to retain some of her Chinese values even while adapting and this is evident in how she chooses to retain the ‘Z’ of her family name, rather than the ‘XQ’ of her given name, demonstrating a typical Chinese practice and custom of prioritising and retaining the family name. Z vacillates between resisting these cultural and linguistic stereotypes and reinforcing these stereotypes, and this seems to be the primary source of emotional and identity conflict. As a “translating subject [...] who works deliberately between cultures, [Z’s wavering between her linguistic and cultural allegiances enables] an understanding of identity as a learned or constructed allegiance rather than an innate condition” (Carol Maier qtd. in Doloughan 102). Thus, the problematising of wavering allegiances and the language policing and deficit discourse that wish to stabilise these uncertainties rest on the assumption and insistence that identity and language cannot remain suspended.

The purpose of a “Chinese-English” dictionary, like conventional translation, is to render the former language into the latter, but in Z’s situation, the Chinese language appears to be of no use to her, yet her English is not good enough either. She is thus linguistically and socially situated in a middling spot. Zadie Smith defines the middling spot in her seminal essay “Speaking in Tongues” (2009) as the “interim place

[...], a [tragic] split [...] between worlds, ideas, cultures, voices” (182) and suggests that those who find themselves in the middling spot are required to sacrifice “one voice [...] for the other [and must make] what is double, singular” (182). However, rather than acknowledge this middling spot, existing literature on Guo’s *Concise* tend to approach a single instance in the novel when Z writes a full entry in Chinese as a turning point in which she breaks away from the domineering and repressive control of the English language in order to reassert her Chinese language and identity (Gilmour 15; Hwang 7; Poon 4; Rahbek n.p.; Oboe 272-273; Spyra 454-455; Kong 8-9). Such a conceptualisation of translation in *Concise*, however, misconceives of languages as mutually exclusive and that between the apparent Chinese entry and the other English entries of the novel, there are no other perceivable languages.

Being the only part of *Concise* that is ostensibly presented as a translation, Z’s cathartic rant in Chinese, “我变得如此渺小，而与我无关的这个英语文化变得如此巨大。我被它驱使，我被它强暴，我被它消灭。” (179), which is translated into English on the following page as “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), climactically marks her temporary departure from her English-learning and demonstrates the figurative violence that the English culture and language has committed on her. The entry titled “nonsense” (179) is in Chinese, and on the next page, the rant is presented in italicized English and as an “editor’s translation” (180). While a reader unfamiliar with Chinese may consider the Chinese version to be aptly titled nonsense since it “makes no sense” (179), those with both Chinese and English language competencies are able to read both versions of Z’s rant. The entry and its presentation strategically perform the Chinese language and English language, in their “proper”, grammatically correct, and conventional forms. The translation is

grammatically sound and does not have the language mistakes that Z's writing has had throughout the novel and thus, the process of autotranslation that Z carries out throughout the rest of the novel is not happening in this instance; and it is an invisible editor that renders the Chinese text into English. Performing conventional translation by presenting the two standard languages back-to-back, this parallel text draws awareness to translation by inviting comparisons between the two versions. The appearance of the parallel text alerts readers to what Venuti refers to as "the loss in translation [that] remains invisible to any reader who does not [or cannot] undertake a careful comparison to the source text" ("Translation" 110). By identifying the back-to-back translation from Standard Chinese into Standard English as a legitimate instance of conventional translation, Z's garbled language throughout the rest of the novel does not have a legitimate place and is reduced to a mere deficiency. However, by recognising the difference between the legitimised translation instance and the perpetual autotranslation that Z is carrying out in the rest of the novel, the appearance of conventional translation draws even more attention to how the majority of the language in the novel does not follow the rules and standards of either language, and should thus be considered a middling or interim language – one that bears traces of both languages and exists in a state of perpetual translation.

By approaching Guo's *Concise* as a translingual text and calling for the creative language of the novel to be considered as a third language, this dissertation explores the possibility of an inventive language that does not conform to the syntactic rules of English and Chinese language while also possessing and relying on linguistic characteristics that belong to both languages. It is precisely because this language that Guo refers to as a dreaming language is so hard to place within existing categorisations that it attracts resistance and disapproval, or worst of all, dismissal of

the language as being incomplete, broken, unintelligible, and problematic. This is further affirmed by how the people Z meets do not take issue with her foreignness, but instead resist any kind of ambiguity or ambivalence in relation to language, culture, and ethnicity. Likewise, there is no resistance towards works existing in the English language or the Chinese language and no resistance towards translated works that comply with translation norms and fulfil the conventional requirements of a good translation.

The resistance is towards an intermediate language that exists outside the rules of either language and does not conform to the standards of conventional language presentation and translation. This resistance and Z's arduous relationship with language and culture is presented through the agricultural metaphors throughout the novel. Visiting Kew Gardens in London, Z notices that while the garden does not have a Chinese garden, there are "lotuses and bamboos [...] growing in India garden [and] plum trees and stone bridge [...] growing in Japanese garden" (52). Associating these features with Chinese culture, Z is indignant about the lack of a Chinese garden and what she considers to be the misplaced or misappropriated icons of a Chinese garden. Kew Gardens become a site of orientalist contestation, revealing the performativeness and pointlessness of essentialisation and cultural categorisations. When Z wants to grow Chinese plants in her lover's garden, he replies "No, honey, it's too small for so many Chinese plants" (10), metaphorically revealing how foreign languages and cultures are expected to occupy their predetermined, allocated spaces like in Kew Gardens. It is when the foreign intrudes on another's space and threatens to radically change the nature of that other space that it attracts criticism and resistance. Defying the conventional representations of language and representing an ambivalent, if not ambiguous, linguistic and cultural allegiance, Z's identity becomes problematised as

incomplete and unsettled. Moving away from the presentation of physical space, the next section will carry forward this societal disapproval of ambivalence and ambiguity into the semiotic space of the dictionary.

2.4 Dictionary Ownership and the Deficit Discourse

The narrative structure's allusion to the dictionary underscores the dictionary's function as an intermediary medium, establishing correspondence between two languages, as well as between signifier and signified. Although Z repeatedly declares her dictionary as a language authority and heavily relies on it, a dictionary's negotiation of language and meaning is revealed to be a fluid and dynamic process rather than a fixed and definitive one. Upon her arrival in London, Z holds the dictionary and its contents in high regard, pointing out that she "carry important book, even go to the toilet, in case [she] not knowing the words for some advanced machine and need checking out in dictionary" (10). Her over-reliance on the dictionary to the extent of bringing it with her to the toilet is not only symptomatic of her insecurity with the English language, but is also indicative of her obsessive need to understand the words and the world that surrounds her. The authoritative role of the dictionary in Z's life is also made evident when Z observes that her dictionary's red cover "look just like [Mao's] *Little Red Book*" (10) and she "must learning this stylish English because it high-standard English from authority" (12). Z's reverence towards Mao is comparable to her reverence for the dictionary and this obsessive reverence underscores an underlying deficit discourse with regard to language use and presentation.

Z refers to her English as "my nonsense English" (50) and "my bad English" (61), highlighting her shame about her own incompetence. This self-acknowledgement

of deficit and shame due to a perceived inadequacy is also evident in the paratext¹⁹ of the novel, where the apology “sorry of my english” (2) is scrawled diagonally across a page to mimic the script of casual handwriting. The novel’s introduction in the front flap clarifies that the “bad English” of the novel is deliberate, seemingly anticipating and pre-emptively responding to the disapproval of a harsh critic, reader, or publisher. Not surprisingly, the pre-emptory response was proven to be founded when Jonathan Mirsky, writing in the *Spectator*, concluded dismissively that he looked forward to reading Guo’s next novel in grown up English (Doloughan 13, Spyra 448) and William MacNamara of the *Financial Times* marvelled that broken English was no bar to the Orange prize Literary Award (Spyra 448). The repeated emphasis on Z’s incompetence in the English language embedded within *Concise*’s self-reflexive paratext and the apologetic tone of these disclaimers reflect how the deficit discourse is prevalent beyond the individual’s private and personal space, but also the publication and review space.

Although Z’s self-consciousness and sense of shame are demonstrated as partially being self-induced, her awareness of her own language deficiency is also the result of external factors that actively contribute to a ritualistic shaming within the narrative that materialises onto the publication’s paratextual space. Within the narrative, encountering her English lover provides Z with a human referent and standard with which she compares and evaluates her own English language. She states that her “bad English don’t match [his] beautiful language” (61) and feels ashamed that he is “forced to listen [to her] messy English [and am] unlucky to be [her] lover” (186), revealing an even lower estimation of her own value in terms of the

¹⁹ Paratext is defined by Gérard Genette in the 1997 *Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation* as the “verbal or other productions, such as an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations [that] surround [the text] and extend [the text]” (1).

incomparability of her language to her lover's. No matter which public, educational, and private domains Z occupies, she is confronted by old men in the pub who laugh at her and tease her for her English (88), her English language teacher who corrects her English in the classroom, and the lover who corrects her at home whenever she commits a language error or a cultural mistake. Constantly at the mercy of their corrective impulses, Z even points out that her lover talks to her "like [she is his] child [and] maybe [Z is like an] idiot in front of [him and he] love the idiot" (199). By having Z's apology for her English appear as a disclaimer at the start of the novel, Guo makes use of the paratextual space to complement the narrative's presentation of the rampant deficit discourse and language policing, and demonstrates how pervasive the shaming and how keenly felt the shame.

Initially, Z passively documents these incidents of language shaming and does not seem aware of the derogatory nature of some of these corrections, even when the barman offensively jokes that Stilton cheese is "handmade by Communist cows" (88). In fact, Z seems to encourage some of these corrections and appears to be in awe of those who possess a greater command of the English language. Z describes her lover as a "*noble* man with *noble* words" (79) and when a young man buys her a drink at the pub, Z tells him that his "words are very noble" (87). Z appears to equate nobility with one's competency in the English language, and the inordinate value she places on the latter is reflected in her willing subordination to the authority of the "*Collins English Dictionary*", which she describes in parentheses and in block letters as "THE AUTHORITY ON CURRENT ENGLISH" (20). However, Z's relationship with her dictionary and her reliance on the dictionary as a bridge that mitigates differences evolve, and her initial reverence towards authorities of the English language and the

apologetic, ashamed tone towards her incompetence in English changes as she progressively “acquires” the language.

Although she continues to consult the dictionary, Z also devotes her attention to writing in her dictionary-diary-journal, and she actively “[writes] these newly learned words everyday [and] make [her] own dictionary” (20), demonstrating the revisionist potential of the personal dictionary she compiles. The ability to make her own personal dictionary is not only a rewriting and revising of a formal, publicly acknowledged and authorised form, but also a translating of the dictionary into a version that she understands. The process of revising the dictionary is also accompanied by Z’s revising of her opinion towards the dictionary. The previously established authority of the Concise Chinese-English Dictionary is challenged when Z purchases another dictionary and describes the previous dictionary as “small [and] not having ‘properly’ meaning” (20), establishing her expanding English vocabulary and her growing ability to evaluate the dictionary’s authority for herself.

The translation of a dictionary exposes the fixity and univocality of dictionary meanings as myth, and *Concise* as an epistolary novel that combines dictionary with diary plays on narrative forms to reveal the fluid and interpretive potential of the dictionary. Guo’s and Z’s rewriting and autotranslation of the dictionary make the public dictionary a personal, private, one. While Z was previously possessed by the authoritative dictionary, her subsequent creation and ownership of her personal dictionary lead to her attempt to rise above the languages and create a language of her own. Frustration towards the deficit discourse also results in Z’s experimentation with her physical body, which she misconstrues as a site of expression that is separate from the verbal and written languages, and the next section will investigate this exploration

of her physical body and sexuality as a possible alternative to the English and Chinese language.

2.5 Body Language

This section will emphasise the inextricability of body and language, suggesting that Z's exploration of her gender and sexuality as a misguided alternative to language can only be futile. Frustrated with the limitations of language, Z claims, "I desire become prostitute. I want to be able to expose my body, to relieve my body, to take my body away from dictionary and grammar and sentences, to let my body break all disciplines" (138). The subversive inclinations that Z expresses here are a stark contrast from her reverence towards the dictionary at the beginning of the novel. On her trip to Wales with her lover, Z imagines a space "in this remote countryside, in this nobody's wonderland, [where] it doesn't matter if one speaks Chinese or English [and] it doesn't matter if one is mute or deaf. Language is not important anymore [and] only the simple physical existence matters in the nature" (283). In associating the remote, unpeopled natural landscape with pure physicality, the man-made quality and constructedness of language are being highlighted. Language is perceived as unnatural, yet it is inextricably tied to the body and any attempts by Z to separate the two are presented in Guo's *Concise* as ultimately futile.

Initially, Z expresses her aspiration to be like American celebrity and sex symbol Mae West because "men all her slaves; men used by her. [And Z] want play that role" (147). Z's wish to enslave men and her fantasy of being Mae West appears to be fulfilled when she goes on her trip around Europe and has different encounters with four men. In Amsterdam, Peter invites Z to "stay with [him] for a bit until [she wants] to go", they hold hands, and he later runs to meet her on the platform, hugging her, and offering her a chance to not go (209-212). In Berlin, she meets Klaus who

invites her to come to his house, and they sleep in the same bed when he falls ill, and mutters for Z to “stay with [him]” and “holds [her] naked body” (214-228). In Venice, Andrea invites Z to spend the night in his hotel room (238). At Tavira, Z masturbates in the roof garden of her hotel and “came by [her]self [before pronouncing that she] can be on [her] own [and] can rely on [her]self, without depending on a man (245). But in Faro, Z meets a man and although she initially tells him she wants to have sex with him (251), she later changes her mind but is unable to stop him (252). The circumstances of Z’s encounters with these men are highly improbable. They appear almost immediately upon her arrival and unanimously express romantic or sexual attraction towards her. The circumstances are highly suggestive of a departure from reality, and the entering of a fantasy in which Z attempts to keep “word and flesh [...] separate and distinct [and rely on] the body as free from language” (Poon 6). It is significant that her encounters with these men becomes increasingly less romantic and more and more sexual, symbolically representing Z’s growing but unrealistic reliance on her body as a means of expression that is separate from language.

The eventual rape in Faro is partially a consequence of Z not knowing how to convey to the man her desire for intimacy without intercourse, and that she “want to have sex with [him, but without] plugging in” (252). Z’s romantic and sexual journey throughout Europe establishes the body as being inseparable from language, and by approaching Z’s successive encounters with European men as a metaphor for her reliance on the body, it can be concluded that her reliance on sexuality fails to exclude language as thoroughly as she had hoped for and this leads to her sexual violation. In fact, Z’s wish to depend on a bodily existence rather than one that is burdened by linguistic trappings parallel her lover’s frustrations at her increasing devotion to the language. He expresses that “[he wished he’d] never given [her] books [because] now

all [she does] is sit there reading and writing” (175). Additionally, he also states that “[he] just feel[s] so tired of [her because she is] always asking [him] words, how to spell them, what they mean [and he] cannot spend [his] whole time explaining the meaning of words to [her], and [...] can’t be questioned by [her] all day long” (177). Earlier in the novel, Z contemplates the possibility of her wanting “a man in [London to] save [her], take [her], adopt [her], be [her] family, be [her] home” (38). On the surface, it seems like she desires companionship, one in which she is a clear dependent. However, Z’s contemplation of this desire is cut short when she reflects on the language she uses to express her self hood, cryptically describing it as “see other little me try expressing me in other language [and] seeing [her] two pieces of lips speaking in two languages at the same time [...] like Austin Power with his Mini Me” (39). The metaphorical splitting of her identity and language, the ambiguous relationship between the two, and their effect on her understanding of her self as representing a coherent “me” makes it necessary to revise the superficial understanding of why Z desires a man. Apart from companionship, Z is learning and practicing her use of the possessive noun “my”, and the relationship she desires also involves her active possession of not just a man, but of a language.

In obsessively trying to possess language at the start of the novel, Z ends up feeling dispossessed and the irresponsive medium in which she writes is filled with her interior monologue in which she is “always alone, talking in [her] notebook [and] wandering here and there like an invisible ghost” (37). In attempting to distance herself from language by making connections with others using her physical body and sexuality, Z finds herself confronted once again by the ambiguities of body language and realises that language and body are inseparable. Like her lover’s misshapen nude sculptures with “no head, [...] body twisted, with enormous hands and enormous feet”

(66), the physical forms continue to convey language, and while her lover uses the material art of sculpting to express the inexpressible parts of himself, Z uses the material art of writing in the form of her dictionary-diary.

2.6 *Écriture Feminine* meets *Nüshu*

Z's awakening to the possibility of using the art of writing to express herself comes when the newspaper that she reads included a story about the death of a Chinese woman who "is the last speaker of [a] womans-only language: 'Nüshu' (121)". Z adds that the language is "used by Chinese womans to express their innermost feeling [and] no womans practise that secret code anymore" (122). This language death inspires Z to "want create [her] own 'Nüshu' [and she even suggests that] maybe this notebook which [she] use for putting new English vocabularies is a 'Nüshu'" (122). Recalling an earlier section on dictionary ownership and rewriting, Z's identifying of her personal diary and notebook as a *Nüshu* not only attempts to resuscitate a dead language by recreating one of her own, but witnesses her first acknowledgment of her writing in a personal, intimate language that like a "secret code", needs to be deciphered. Z believes that by writing the *Nüshu*, she can "have [her] own *privacy*" and seemingly addressing her lover, she says "You know my body, my everyday's life, but you not know my "'Nüshu'" (122). Also reminiscent of Cixous' *écriture féminine*, Z's wish to have a private, female language that is unknowable to her lover represents the shifting power dynamics in their relationship. While she has unwittingly invaded the privacy of her lover by reading his diaries and looking through his photographs, the incident brings to her awareness the concept of privacy; and by considering her notebook as a potential *Nüshu* that is unknowable to her lover, she is able to withhold her private world from him and "invent [an] impregnable language" (Cixous 886) of her own.

By establishing a private *écriture féminine* in her dictionary-diary, Z is able to possess and write in her own language, free from the language policing she faces elsewhere. The Queen's English that Mrs. Margaret promises Z will soon be speaking (24, 25) ultimately remains elusive, and Z's language is her own rather than the Queen's. In the midst of constructing her own language, Z depicts herself as a language thief, pointing out that "soon [she] stealing their language too" (18) and that she "can't stop talking. [She] talk and talk, more and more. [She] steal [her lover's] words. [She] steal all [his] beautiful words. [She] speak [his] language (293).

Language-learning is akin to theft, and this is very much akin to translation, which has a tendency to view translators as thieves and traitors of the source text. However, Zhao and Xie have clarified that "while [*Nüshu*] has exclusively been used by women, the script is free for all to use and is publicly available, if only the community of men cared for it" (3). While the historical *Nüshu* is made public in the name of language and cultural preservation, Z's attempt at creating her own private *Nüshu* ultimately *becomes* the public novel we are reading, and is decipherable as long the reader cares to make sense of it. *Concise* thus documents both the creation of the personal and private female language, but also the giving of the language to the public world within the constructed form of the novel.

The deliberate nature of Z's stealing of language and her writing of the *Nüshu* emphasise the constructedness of the novel and its awareness of its own use of a language amidst translation. While existing literature has approached *Concise* as realist fiction, there are many hints in the novel that suggest the entire novel is to be approached as an elaborate construction. The paratext of *Concise*, for instance, makes the disclaimer that "nothing in this book is true, except for the love between her and him", alerting us to its status as fiction. This strange disclaimer and its validation of

the love between Z and her lover is also suspect considering how Z states in the first few pages of the novel that “I not met you yet. You in future” (3). Considering how Z addresses the lover directly in her dictionary-diary entries as “you” and she had yet to meet her lover in the first few pages of the novel, these inconspicuous words suggest that Z’s entries are written in retrospect, rather than during the narrative events themselves. The anticipation to meet “you in [the] future” (3) challenges the linearity of the events depicted and the veracity of the “bad English” and its improvements. Considering the deliberateness of Z’s stealing of a language and her expressed desire to write her own *Nüshu*, *Concise* does not portray itself as a piece of writing that has had no choice but to use non-standard English, even if Guo herself insists that the choice to write the way she does is circumstantial rather than deliberate. Instead, it seems more likely that this is a deliberate strategy of the author to perform a self-reflexive language in perpetual translation. Z’s language is then characteristic of the private *écriture féminine* or *Nüshu* that Guo creates.

Chapter 3: Women Weaponising Translation

3.1 *UFO*: The Development of an Alien Language

From the outset, *UFO* differs largely from *Concise*, and it is not surprising that little has been said about the continuities and discontinuities between the two novels. While *Concise* is set in London and briefly in other parts of Europe, *UFO* is set entirely in Silver Hill, a fictional village in China. The novel revolves around the state investigations into a mysterious UFO sighting by the female protagonist, Kwok Yun, who is the eponymous “her” of the title. While the premise of the novel is entirely different from *Concise*, Guo uses some similar narrative devices and techniques and I will argue in the sections to come that in *UFO*, Guo develops some of the linguistic and literary experiments carried out in *Concise* to a different effect. Mainly, *UFO*’s performance of translation is in relation to censorship and addresses other translation presuppositions and norms, while also expanding the definition of translation yet again to include languages of control and censorship. One similar narrative technique is the use of the epistolary novel, and while *Concise* combines and mimics the dictionary, diary, and English learner’s notebook, *UFO*’s narrative structure attempts to simulate interview transcripts and government records. Presented as a series of archival documents, *UFO* is replete with tape marks, email screenshots, and sticky notes.

While Guo reproduces a unique learner’s variety of English in *Concise*, one that I suggested in the previous chapter reflexively announced its construction and ultimately resists essentialisation by identifying itself as a private subversive female language rather than simply a learner’s variety of English, what is being reproduced in *UFO* is not the language, but the visual and multimodal elements of transcripts, state records, email correspondences and other such documents. From Post-it-sized information that have been taped onto some of the pages to the row of holes on the left

side of the page that imitates the features of the “original” document (see fig. 1), these elements lend the documents a sense of authenticity while also alerting readers to the need to pay attention to the visual elements on each page.

Fig. 1. Examples of multimodality in *UFO* (1, 51)

Even though the reproductions of these visual elements are the primary focus of this chapter rather than language, it does not mean that translation is absent in *UFO*. In fact, translation has a more prominent role in *UFO* than in *Concise*, even though the language on the page is identifiably Standard English and the presence of translation is once again not overtly recognised in the narrative or in the paratext. The state authorities that are sent to Silver Hill to conduct interviews are referred to as Beijing Agent 1919 and Hunan Agent 1989, and while the entire novel is rendered in Standard English, the interactions recorded in the transcripts make it abundantly clear that BJ 1919 does not speak the same language as the dialect-speaking villagers. Since the former relies on the latter as an interpreter and point of liaison, the transcripts have undergone the first layer of translation from the local dialect to the Beijing dialect or Standard Mandarin. The oral interviews are then rendered into transcriptions which is

the second layer of translation, since the oral translation necessarily undergoes changes as it is rendered into the written form. Since the novel is in the English language, then there is a third layer of translation, in which written Chinese is then translated into English. Thus, the interview transcripts that form the bulk of *UFO* have minimally undergone three layers of translation, and while the novel itself does not explicitly acknowledge these multiple layers of translation and re-translation, there are enough contextual clues embedded within the narrative that allows the reader to arrive at such a conclusion.

There are also a few instances in which other kinds of translations occur, such as when Headmaster Yee translates a letter from an American hiker since Yee “is the only person in [the] village who speaks some English” (83). The English language of the original letter is rendered into written Chinese before the Chief relates the translated letter into the local dialect during her address to the villagers, resulting in yet another example of multi-layered translation. While *Concise* presents readers with the process of translation and a language that exists in a state of translation, the entirety of *UFO* is uniformly presented in English, and thus presents readers with the product of translation. This product of translation is self-reflexive and aware of its own status as translation, and apart from overtly mentioning translation, the language of the novel continues to imply translation and draw attention to the latent processes of translation underlying the novel.

Due to the multiple layers of translation, the reader is alienated from the translation process and the extent and nature of each translatorial or editorial intervention remains uncertain. While there is no way for the reader to determine the veracity of the information that is presented, Guo strategically manipulates the narrative form and content to produce jarring ambiguities and logical conundrums that invite readers to

question the veracity of the records and take notice of the irregularities in the narrative that seem to be indicative of the translation process. One particularly bizarre example of a language and translation ambiguity in the novel is with regard to the character Fu Qiang, who tells the agent that his “name is Fu Qiang, but in the village they call [him] ‘Rich and Strong’” (31) instead. His words are presented entirely in English in the novel, but a reader with the relevant competency in the Chinese language would be able to identify that the Chinese name ‘Fu Qiang’ is likely to be an English Romanisation of the Chinese characters ‘富强’, which literally signifies “Rich and Strong”. In the absence of the corresponding Chinese ideographs for his name, it becomes unclear why Fu Qiang perceives a need to elaborate that the villagers call him Rich and Strong, if that is already implied in the ideographs of his name. It is through the setting up of language puzzles like these that the novel confronts and poses questions regarding language and translation norms.

Another way in which *UFO* calls attention to its status as a product of translation is in its use of phrases that are unfamiliar in the English language. Phrases like “Shady Place” (55), “eat bitterness” (7), and “five metals’ stall” (14) are used in *UFO* without the common translation practices in place to facilitate comprehension for readers unfamiliar with the Chinese language. They are neither italicised to signal foreignness, nor explained in the narrative, and Guo resolutely does not provide a glossary of terms to explain these foreign phrases, leaving readers to figure it out on their own. These phrases are in fact literal translations of Chinese expressions – “Shady Place” refers to “阴间” (*yin jian*), the Chinese expression for the Underworld, “eat bitterness” refers to “吃苦” (*chi ku*), which means to endure hardship, and “five metals’ stall” is a translation of “五金店” (*wu jin dian*), the Chinese expression for hardware store.

While a reader with Chinese language proficiency may be able to identify and

decipher the English phrases as literal translations of familiar Chinese expressions, Guo's choice to conduct a literal translation of these Chinese expressions rather than a semantic translation purposefully and playfully disregards common translation practices, and in so doing produces a defamiliarising effect in which even the reader proficient in the Chinese language will likely find the expressions unfamiliar since the same expressions are unlikely to be rendered in the same way in other conventionally translated materials. Hence, both *Concise* and *UFO* refashion standard language by disregarding translation norms and challenging presuppositions, and in so doing produces an alienating new language of sorts that draws attention to translation.

Earlier, I prefaced the chapter by describing how BJ 1919 relies on HN 1989 to translate the local dialect for him. This is evident when he professes that he “hardly understood a word [and tells HN 1989 that his] fucking dialect is incomprehensible” (24). The frustrated BJ 1919 later sends an email to his Senior Officer to inform him that “since the villagers have virtually no understanding of [their] Beijing language and are only able to talk in dialect, [he has] concluded that it would be better for HN 1989 to interview the villagers alone [...] and then translate the interviews for [him]” (25). It can be inferred that BJ 1919 serves as a intermediary between the state and HN 1989, and when his Senior Officer rejects his recommendation, the veracity of the transcripts become even more suspect, since between HN 1989 and BJ 1919, the actual process and responsibility of transcribing and translating are not entirely transparent to the reader. *UFO* also alienates the reader from the events in Silver Hill by enacting situations in which efforts to translate are frustrated. When the agents interview the Bicycle Mender, his responses to BJ 1919's questions are uniformly indicated in the transcript with a “?” (57). The ‘?’ signifies the agents' futile attempts to interview the Bicycle Mender, yet in the uniform use of the question mark, there is no indication or

detailing of the Bicycle Mender's response to their questions. The agents are unable to get answers from the Bicycle Mender, but the readers are doubly distanced from the Bicycle Mender since the lack of details on his response further alienate the readers from the character and in so doing, raises the readers' awareness to the narrative distance between themselves and the original source, emphasising their reliance on translation.

Like *Concise*, *UFO* is also interested in drawing out sociolinguistic hierarchies and establishing and challenging their power. Liu Shi, an elderly woman in the village with dementia, points out that BJ 1919 "[talks] like them, with those big words nobody can understand [and asks him why he] can't [...] talk like everybody else" (54). While BJ 1919 is meant to represent the educated, linguistically superior government elect, in the immediate language domain of Silver Hill and in the face of the demented Granny, language hierarchy is inverted and the language of the capital and state authority is problematized, deemed inappropriate and irrelevant. The Beijing dialect effectively becomes the minority language – the linguistic other and the locals become the language police. This is emphasised when Fu Qiang complains about the Bicycle Mender by exclaiming "that Bitch Bastard migrant should learn to speak our dialect or fuck off back to where he came from. How can you work somewhere when you can't talk to anyone?" (32). Although Fu Qiang's rant is directed at the Bicycle Mender, his words are also a snub directed at BJ 1919, who is also working in Silver Hill despite being unable to communicate with the locals. Like in *Concise*, the foreigner is subjected to criticisms from the locals, who criticise their inability to communicate in the local tongue. Unlike *Concise*, however, Granny and Fu Qiang's vocal challenge of the authority of the Beijing language and demands for the linguistic other to conform to local customs fail to have any lasting effect and the authority of the politically-

dominant, state-sanctioned minority continues to assert itself. For instance, Chief Chang “disapproved of Kwok Yun’s rough way of speaking” (61), and this recurrent disapproving attitude in *UFO* towards one language or another highlights the overwhelming atmosphere of language policing and the power struggle between different languages within different contact zones and language domains.

The text self-referentially reminds readers of its constructedness and the various factors that undermine the narrative fidelity. Although the epistolaric form is suggestive of documentation and authenticity, there are many clues embedded within the text that reveal gaps in information, lapses in documentation, blatant and latent agendas, questionable authorship, as well as fabrication and alteration of the text by unknown persons. During the secretary’s interview with the agents, he reveals unwittingly how he is inconsistent in carrying out his role as a scribe when he says “[he] stopped at ‘rule six’ [when recording the lecture] because [he] had to go and make some Oolong tea for [the speaker] and Chief Chang” (92). Chief Chang herself also blatantly attempts to manipulate the interview to achieve her own ends when she tells the agents that “[she] want[s] [them] to record [her] official and sincere gratitude for the Provincial Government’s support” (95). By strategically raising during her interview how “[their] Great Leader Chairman Mao was born only fifteen kilometres away” (4) and how the “village is not unheard of in China” (4), Chief Chang makes use of the state interrogation to promote the village, even though Mao was only born in the village’s proximity and the village cannot be said to be heard of either. These lapses in documentation and the manipulation of information encourages skepticism in the reader and promotes the challenging of the narrative veracity by metafictionally calling attention to the instances in which the narrative does not reproduce truth as much as it engineers a semblance of it.

While *Concise* disrupts normative language and publication requirements for language competency and accuracy by creatively presenting the bulk of the novel's language as garbled, inaccurate, and inconsistent, *UFO* also defies language purity by celebrating a non-standard rendition of language and proposing its instrumentality. While Z's language is often regarded as a liability and attracts plenty of criticism and correction from those around her, the famous businessman in *UFO* capitalises on language deficit and "made his fortune [...] by teaching what he called 'Ltd English', the 200 words [the Chinese-speaking] need to do business with foreigners" (91). Considering the metafictional quality of the novel, the businessman's effective monetisation, commoditisation, and commercialisation of a limited English not only legitimises its usage, but testifies and celebrates its instrumentality and relevance in the modern world and global marketplace by suggesting limited language, while unconventional, is in demand and necessary. If Z's retreat into the private and personal narrative fiction and fantasy of the *écriture féminine* in *Concise* is the birth of Guo's linguistic exercise, then *UFO* materialises her fantasy into the public and socio-political sphere, where the reality of globalisation and modernisation makes demands of rural, non-speaking villagers to acquire an alien language that is more accurately described as 'Ltd English' – a linguistic product that resembles English, but does not play by the rules and conventions of the language.

Departing from her comparatively more straightforward portrayal of Z's insecurities and uncertainties with regards to language and translation, Guo's portrayal of language and translation in *UFO* is heavily politicised and nuanced. From the disregard of authority demonstrated by Fu Qiang and Liu Shi, to the manipulations of the state interrogations by Chief Chang, and finally to the celebration and monetisation of 'Ltd English', translation is no longer conceived as a private and personal activity,

but a political one that can be weaponised to resist invasive control over personal lives. The celebration of ‘Ltd English’ in Guo’s second novel serves as an intertextual nod at the success and critical reception of the first. By introducing even more plays on words through translation in *UFO*, frustrating the readers’ ability to make sense of what is happening in the village, and drawing attention to how translation can obscure and reveal meaning, Guo makes many interesting developments in her linguistic exercise and literary experiment. Continuing the game she started in *Concise* and which she had previously claimed she could only play once²⁰, the language and translation processes that are alluded to in the novel are what is truly unidentified and alien in the narrative and the village of Silver Hill.

3.2 Translation as a Censorship Playbook

One primary difference between the first and second novel is the domain that the protagonists occupy. While *Concise* revolves around the personal and private, and Z’s experiences in London are mitigated through the processes of uninhibited and individualistic auto-translation, the translations that occur in *UFO* are of a public and sociopolitical nature. The novel’s epigraph quotes Milan Kundera, who suggests that “Totalitarian society, especially in its more extreme version, tends to abolish the boundary between the public and the private; power, as it grows ever more opaque, requires the lives of citizens to be entirely transparent”. This epigraph foreshadows the inscrutability of the state and the invasive demands for control over the people’s lives. The premise of *UFO* supports this and witnesses the intrusive presence of state agents in Silver Hill and the destructive consequences of the rapid modernisation and capitalist projects in the rural village. While the PRC government represented by the state agents overtly intrude upon the lives of the citizens and repeatedly demand to

²⁰ ‘O’ Connell, John. “London’s hottest.” (see chap. 1.2, footnote 8).

know more, the capitalist forces represented by the ambitious Chief Chang, the businessman, and the American hiker are just as inclined to manipulate the citizens and the texts to fulfill their own profit-making agendas. Thus, Guo's novel portrays the opposing communist and capitalist regimes of Silver Hill as totalitarian in their efforts to contain citizen life, and one of the ways that this containment is carried out is through the control of messages and documentation. While it is never made clear who is behind the editorial interventions performed in the novel, the inability to pinpoint the faceless translators and identify their motivations draw even more attention to how the text, especially the translated text, often erases any evidence of the processes and manipulations that have influenced its production.

The most evident and recognisable censorship and manipulation of text in *UFO* is the frequent use of black bars to redact portions of the text (see fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Example of the black bars redacting a portion of a transcript in *UFO* (59).

The use of these black bars, also known as censor bars, call attention to the editorial intervention that the documents have undergone, and like *Concise* and the translation

of Mao's *Little Red Book* in *Concise*, the nature of the editorial and translational intervention are neither detailed nor acknowledged on the cover or anywhere else in the book. Guo's use of the black bars self-reflexively highlights the production of the text and the text as artefact, and metafictionally calls attention to the possibility of narrative and real world editorial intervention that have hidden these interventions from the reader. Recalling the Kundera epigraph, the state appears to be the most likely candidate responsible for these redactions, but rather than leave no traces of these omissions, Guo's black bars call even more attention to the censorship process itself.

The black out bars as a narrative device and method of censorship parallels the black box of translation (see fig. 3), which Beebee describes as "a device with a known function but an unknown method or algorithm" (6).

Fig. 3. Translation's Black Box as illustrated by Beebee.

The black box has often been used to describe translation as a process in which a source text enters a metaphorical black box and undergoes a series of unknown processes carried out by a translator; before emerging from the black box as target text and in the target language. The black box emphasises the elusive and often effaced processes of translation, as well as the tendency to neglect the process in favour of the product. The black box of translation functions like the black bars in *UFO*, alerting the readers to the effacement of information and editorial intervention, while obscuring

the details of the effacement and intervention. Like the black box, readers understand what the black bars do and the function it serves, but can only speculate about the processes within and the extent of its influence on the text. Applying the discourse on the translation black box to understand the black bars, it is apparent that the “blackness means that we [as readers] cannot see inside” (Beebee 6), but in inserting the black bars into her novel, Guo not only invites readers to conjecture at what the black bars may obscure, but also draws attention to the blackness itself. While what is beneath the black bars and what is inside the black box remain obscured, their blackness itself is rendered visible and thus demands to be acknowledged. The next section attempts to illuminate the rapid modernising of Silver Hill, the many contradictions that are inherent to the modernising project, and the importance of approaching this project through the lens of a reconceptualised translation.

3.3 Unlocking Secrets: State, Science, and Superstition

The transition from feudal superstition to science resulted in a major socio-political and ideological upheaval in modern China and this transition was one of the central preoccupations of modernist Chinese literature, especially those after the 1919 May Fourth Movement. Although the events of *UFO* are dated in the 2000s, the village’s rural setting and its general backwardness has led to a delay in its transition from superstition to science. Kwok Yun and her family’s reliance on the lunar calendar (15, 35-36) demonstrate the superstition of the villagers, while the inclusion of the palm reader in the “List of Traders in Silver Village” (40) establish palmistry as a practice and legitimate trade in the village. However, by the end of the novel, an updated version of this list of traders reveals that the palm reader along with many other occupations have been dissolved and rendered obsolete by the modernisation that has taken place in the village.

Chief Chang is responsible for much of this obsolescence and she criticizes Kwok Yun for her superstitious beliefs, informing her that they “are living in the twenty-first century” (64) and lecturing her to “stop this nonsense, rid [her] mind of all these superstitions and educate [herself] to be a modern peasant!” (64). The Chief’s exaltation of Science is also evident when “she raised her voice [...] when she said the word ‘Science’ (68). Despite the seemingly thorough eradication of archaic superstition and Chief Chang’s criticism of Kwok Yun’s superstition, the Chief proceeds to call the head of the Science Department at the Town Bureau and seemingly arrives at the conclusion that the flying metal plate Kwok Yun witnessed might have been an Unidentified Flying Object (65), completely disregarding how UFOs are considered pseudoscience. Mao Tse-Tung’s New Democracy called for the end of superstition and advocated the pursuit of Science, but in Guo’s *UFO In Her Eyes*, the superstition that Chief Chang condemns has been substituted by pseudoscience and the renewed faith of the Chief in the possibility of “alien life forms” (65) in the village is equally misplaced.

However, considering the Chief’s deft manipulation of the interviews, it would be a mistake to not consider her motivations in exalting Science, specifically as a marketing strategy to promote the belief that a UFO was sighted in Silver Hill village and may be proof of alien life. Her subsequent explanation of the Universe to Kwok Yun (68-71) is telling of her political outlook and acute awareness of political hierarchy. Perceiving the village as a metaphorical planet, the villagers as satellites, and “America [as] the sun for the Chinese government” (70-71), Chief Chang not only demonstrates a capacity to locate the ranks of political power, but also attempts to gain the unwavering support of Kwok Yun through a veiled threat that as a villager, Kwok Yun has “no life if [she does not] spin around the planet which is spinning around the

sun” (71). While the Chief’s explanation seems to suggest the satellites within an orbit are reliant on and subject to the object which they orbit, the act of circling also evokes a more duplicitous, aggressive, and vulture-like act of running circles around something or someone. Rather than the passively dependent, unreciprocated attraction that the Chief wants Kwok Yun to adopt towards the state, the relationship between the satellites, planet, and Sun are much more complicated than the Chief lets on. With the Chief reminding Kwok Yun to “always use Science to arm [her] brain, not Superstition” (71), it is highly probable that rather than believing in UFOs, the Chief is weaponizing pseudoscience to fulfil her agendas and garner state and commercial attention to the village.

While Chief Chang considers superstition to be backward and believes that modernisation requires the eradication of superstition from Silver Hill, the novel satirically demonstrates how superstition continues to surface in the modern, capitalist, commercial business that Chief Chang idealises. After promoting his range of goods, the businessman that Chief Chang invites to give a lecture tells the villagers to “call 0813 8888888 and [he] will give [them] a discount” (93). Despite his financial success and the supposed modern rags-to-riches story the businessman represents, the number he provides the villagers reveals his superstition. The area code “0813” belongs to Zigong, the third largest city in the Sichuan province, but also in Chinese pronunciation, the digits “813” are homophones for 发一生 (*fa yi sheng*) which literally means to be prosperous for a lifetime. The remaining seven digits of the number are also uniformly the numerical eight, and those with Chinese language and cultural competency will recognise the number eight as an auspicious number in Chinese culture due to its similar pronunciation with the Chinese word 发 (*fa*) for prosperity and fortune. I mentioned in previous sections how translation is staged in

Guo's fiction as a palimpsest, with the Chinese language of the original seeping to the surface of the "translated" text. In this case, Guo's use of the businessman's number to insert a linguistic and cultural referent that readers would be oblivious to without back translation further emphasises the importance of recognising and acknowledging the processes of translation in fiction. The businessman's telephone number with its chain of auspicious eights reveal how modernity and superstition are not as mutually exclusive as Chief Chang suggests.

While the May Fourth Movement and modernist movement in China saw many intellectuals advocating for Science and the abandoning of tradition and backward superstition, Guo's *UFO* establishes science and superstition as not entirely distinct from one another. The pseudoscience that Chief Chang prescribes to consists of the same fanaticism and unsubstantiated conjectures and speculations that palmistry and traditional Chinese superstitions had, and the state's support of one over the other is a mere substitution of one uneducated and uninformed belief system for another. By approaching the novel through the critical lens of a reconceptualised translation reveals hidden messages and "secrets" that would only have been noticeable to a reader with Chinese cultural and linguistic competency. These crucial narrative "secrets" that radically alter the reader's understanding of the novel are scattered throughout Guo's performance of translation, and in seeking out these narrative "secrets", the reader inevitably has to translate. Having used the lens of translation to "unlock" the implicit contradictions of the state's modernising project, I will now go on to identify another state project – the One Child Policy – in the next section and explore the effects and consequences of the policy on the women of the fictional Silver Hill.

3.4 Censoring Female Sexuality and Reproductivity

Yet another crucial discontinuity between *Concise* and *UFO* is in the portrayal of the female characters and femininity. In *Concise*, Z's struggles with her newfound sexuality and attempts to live up to Western paragons of female sexuality like Mae West. The women of Silver Hill, on the other hand, are desexualised despite the blatant efforts of the government to affix and regulate their gender roles. Kwok Yun, the female protagonist of *UFO* is repeatedly compared to an earthworm, and in one such instance, a villager comments that "it's not surprising [Kwok Yun] hasn't got married. A manly woman is like an earthworm: both male and female in one body" (33-34). The hermaphroditic quality of Kwok Yun is considered undesirable and the villager expresses that he feels sorry for Kwok Yun and her grandfather (33-34). Kwok Yun also describes herself as an earthworm, suggesting that she felt "like [...] an earthworm [...] seeing a big bird above [her] and knowing [she is] going to get eaten" (61) and "when [she] bleed[s], [she feels] like one of the earthworms [her] grandfather used to chop in half with his spade when he had his chive patch, an earthworm who has lost its tail, bleeding in the dark soil without anyone caring for its pain." (16)" The finality and inevitable death of the earthworm in each instance not only foreshadows Kwok Yun's unhappy fate, but also serves as a portent of the later barren, concrete jungle that Silver Hill village will become. Paralleling her menstrual experience to that of a dying, bleeding earthworm also serves as a metaphor for Kwok Yun's barren reproductivity and unfulfilled sexuality. Not unlike the surgical abortion that Z undergoes in *Concise*, Kwok Yun's sense of loss at her absent femininity and her abortive hermaphroditic qualities are expressed through a visceral castration, a castration that I argue is inextricably connected to the state's obsessive and dehumanising control over its people.

The state's classification and profiling of its people, presented through the Post-its that are taped to the start of each interview, relies on a specific set of data – one of which is family status. Kwok Yun's status as a spinster seemingly does not fit into the state's pro-family stance and hence, Chief Chang's subsequent enthusiasm in marrying her to Headmaster Yee. Ironically, the female chief of the village has an ambiguous marital and family status herself, and her data is partially redacted (3). The conspicuous comma after her marital status (3) emphasises the complications in her family status and the interview with Secretary Zhao that is immediately conducted after Chief Chang's includes the phrase "no children" (9) after his marital status. This gives a clue as to the nature of what may have been omitted from Chang's status, namely her child-bearing background. Another family status that is redacted is that of Liu Shi, whose family status mentions she is a widow, but information about her husband has been redacted (53). Liu Shi's subsequent interview reveals that her husband was from the People's Liberation Army and was involved in the struggle to incorporate Tibet into China (54) and in the margin of her interview, the information in a further "NOTE ON LIU SHI'S HUSBAND" has also been redacted. The censorship that has been carried out on the backgrounds of these two women stands out even more when considering how there are only three female interviewees including Kwok Yun. In each instance, the marital status or reproductive history of each woman prompts censorship. The power of the state to contain and erase entire portions of their citizens' identities that do not conform to the state's grand narrative becomes even more evident. Specifically, the subject that the state contains is female and the containment is with regard to their absent sexuality and reproductivity, and like the chopping of the earthworm, the censorship of their marital status and reproductive history is violent and castrative.

Female sexuality and reproduction, as explored in *Concise* and *UFO* are recurring thematic concerns in Guo's novels, and while *Concise* depicts Z's uncontainable sexual curiosity and surreal sexual magnetism, *UFO* portrays the women of Silver Hill as desexualised individuals without reproductive potential. Kwok Yun is considered too masculine and too old to be an ideal candidate for marriage. Chief Chang, whose husband and son have died in state mining sites, is driven by her political and economic ambition. The elderly Liu Shi also lost her husband to the revolution. Although the three women represent three different generations, they share the common experience of desexualisation. Ironically in Kwok Yun's case, the state eventually intervenes and arranges for her to marry Headmaster Yee before moving the newly wedded couple to the city for close state supervision. While Kwok Yun's delayed wifehood comes with "state assistance", it is the state's negligence and political activity that brings Chief Chang and Liu Shi's roles as mother and wife to a premature end. In all these cases, the state's control over the women's sexuality and reproductive systems reveal a ritualistic castration in which these women, and Silver Hill by extension, either lose their reproductive and productive capacities or are forced to utilise them. With Kwok Yun's removal from Silver Hill, the absence of a younger generation in the ageing Silver Hill shows how the castrative censorship and control of the state systematically wipes out the Silver Hill population and hides the brutal consequences of the state's endeavors. The "One Child Policy" (11), for example, is referenced in *UFO* and although the agents report that the villagers have not adhered to the policy and seem to have more than one child, the profiles of their interviewees contradict this claim, suggesting instead that most of the interviewees do not have any children at all. In fact, Secretary Zhao confesses that he and his wife are fruitless and are unable to bear children right after BJ 1919 asks if the

local Hundred Arm trees are precious because they “produce a valuable fruit” (10). The insensitivity of BJ 1919’s question to a sterile Secretary Zhao and his wife is indicative of how the the state authorities associate and assess value based on the productive and reproductive capacities of person and place, yet the “One Child Policy” indiscriminately curbs the reproduction of its people, and in the case of Silver Hill, has gradually diminished its population. Like Kwok Yun who describes herself metaphorically as a bleeding earthworm that has had its fertility and sexuality violently severed, Silver Hill is implied to be a barren land and this is alluded to many times in the novel, especially when the Butcher recalls the parasites that had previously infested the fields and led to famine outbreak (42-43). It is the state funding and Chief Chang’s capitalist and modernisation projects that eventually penetrate the rural village in order to revitalise it with potential and development.

While the women in Z’s life – her peasant mother, her dildo-gifting female friends from language school, the staid Mrs. Margaret – represent different aspects of femininity, Z is unable to find solace in any of them, and only through resuscitating a dead female language and writing her own *Nüshu* does Z find comfort. Likewise, the different generations of women in *UFO* find no solace in adhering to the state sanctioned models of femininity, and instead use language to escape state control and reclaim what little autonomy they have over their own lives. Censorship and the translation which have been previously established as the state’s apparatus of control become instruments of evasion for the people, who manipulate language in order to evade censors and complicate translation. Despite the redactions to their marital and reproductive backgrounds, the stories of these women in Silver Hill continue to reveal themselves, suggesting that translation and censorship can potentially enable a process that Rahbek describes as a “way of fashioning yourself or of performing identity

[which] may also be a practical label behind which you can hide as you make critical comments on the host society” (9). Z briefly acknowledges this possibility in *Concise* when she considers writing her name on the cover of her *Niushu*, but eventually makes this decision:

I am too ashamed to use my real name on the cover of the book because I know as soon as I get famous in West, Chinese will find out immediately and make a fuss. A writer who doesn't write history or serious novels, but write about cooking noodles for English people – that would be a scandal in China. So I choose 'Anon' as my name, the person who has no name (296).

While she claims she is ashamed at having written about cooking noodles for English people, implicit in her claim is her evasion of censure by strategically removing her identity from the cover of the book. The fact that translation is being used by Z to evade public outcry demonstrates how possessing an understanding of translation facilitates the weaponising of translation as an offensive towards the state, and a defensive shield to evade censure. The redactions made to the narratives of the women of Silver Hill ultimately fail to obscure them, and the other interviews continue to tell and corroborate their stories.

3.5 Negotiating Between the Language of the State and the People

Recalling the Kundera epigraph once more, in which he states that “as [the power of a totalitarian society] grows ever more opaque, [it] requires the lives of citizens to be entirely transparent”, in relation to the translation black box and the use of black bars in *UFO*, which were described in section 3.2, another possible interpretation of the Kundera epigraph can be garnered if opacity and transparency are not perceived as the descriptions of the window from which power is seen, but as descriptors of the power in itself. The opaque power of the totalitarian society does not

occlude power in this case, but renders it visible like the black bars that call attention to the processes of censorship the text has undergone. This alternative interpretation demands a revised approach to the novel. During the 2014 Jaipur literature festival, Guo points out during a session on the global novel that “language is a passport, [a] dubious, dangerous passport”²¹. By approaching *UFO* through the lens of New Historicism and repositioning the citizen as capable of retaliation, the passport that Guo describes is quite evidently a counterfeit – dubious in authenticity and dangerous if found out. By suggesting that the opacity of translation’s black box and the black bars call attention to the effacement and renders visible the existence of the process and the power of those behind it, the increased visibility of totalitarian power requires the lives of citizens to be less perceptible if the citizens are to evade the control of said power, hence the increasing transparency. The provocative use of black bars in *UFO* to indicate censorship is thus inextricably tied to translation, and censorship becomes a form of translation in which the taboo is rewritten into the acceptable language of the state.

The apparent editing and translating that the text of *UFO* has undergone does not merely represent language and translation issues, but also reveals the uneasy relationship between the state, the people, and the agents that serve as their go-betweens and points of contact. Apart from the translation that is being carried out in the rendering of the dialects of the villagers into the English language of the novel, censorship is also a form of a translation from taboo into the approved state language. While Venuti suggests that “a translation strategy may also be affiliated with a national discourse because it employs a dialect that has gained acceptance as the standard dialect or the national language”, I am not merely referring to the Beijing

²¹ Flood, Alison. “Writers attack” (see chap. 1.2, footnote 9).

dialect or Standard Mandarin of the nation's capital. Instead, I am referring to a state-approved discourse that emphasises "cultural materials that are defined as national, [...] enable a self-recognition in a national collective, [promote an apparently] homogenous national identity" ("Translation" 119) and offers a sense of harmonious cooperation with the government. The language of the state is perceivable in the way in which HN 1989 employs the language of the state to emphasise the plurality and larger collective represented by his individual presence, asserting his power over the villagers by continuing to refer to himself as "we" (32), even when he is conducting the interviews alone. The chief of the village also demonstrates a strong command of the state language when she utilises the interviews to project positive images of the village to the state in an effort to raise state funding and gain state support. By suggesting that there is a state language that HN 1989 and Chief Chang are well-versed in, the implication is that there is also a corresponding language of the people. In the previous sections, the language of the state and the language of the people are the Beijing dialect and the regional dialect and vernacular of Silver Hill respectively, but in this section, I will propose that the language of the state and the language of the people extend beyond the Chinese language and dialects, and consist of distinguishable sets of vocabulary and subject matter. Like HN 1989's use of the personal pronoun "we" and Chief Chang's shrewd use of patriotic language to gain state support, the language of the state and the language of the people and the negotiation between the two languages are not differentiated by mere locality, but by other characteristics.

BJ 1919 and HN 1989 enact the stereotypical good cop/bad cop routine when interrogating the villagers, and while the negative portrayal of BJ 1919 and his blatant disregard for the welfare and woes of the villagers can be interpreted as a

personification of the state's dictatorial and tyrannical control over the people, the fact remains that in the absence of BJ 1919, HN 1989 adopts an ostensibly firmer approach and assumes a similar tone to BJ 1919. His reliance on the personal pronoun "we" is not only indicative that there is a state language to be utilised as a method of intimidation, but also hints at the need to assert control over the villagers who do not necessarily speak the language of the state, both in terms of the Beijing dialect and the state's favoured language of collectivity and patriotism. Although Kong generally takes the stance that the state is pervasive and powerful, she briefly acknowledges "the nontotality of [their] gaze" and points out how the mysterious UFO sighting "is the consummate metaphor for totalitarian's intolerable blind spot" (14). However, Kong does not attempt to shed light on this blind spot or consider the possibility of the blind spot being manufactured to circumvent state interference. It would be myopic and reductive to suggest there is a state language and dictatorial control that is emphasised through language, yet still assume the villagers are victims of the state with no means of resisting state control through a language of their own. In other words, if the state's power over the people is evident and effected through language, then to resist control is to resist translation and frustrate easy comprehension.

One of the telltale signs of frustrated translation is the fact that interviews conducted by the state do not seem particularly productive in explaining the UFO sighting, and there is a sense that there is a concerted effort to resist the state's interference in the village. In fact, many of the villagers demonstrate a tendency to digress, evade questions, and exaggerate details, opportunistically redirecting the interviews to idle village gossip and complaining, and this section will examine the many negotiations between the language of the state and the language of the people, and the translation processes that facilitate such negotiations. The agents repeatedly

complain about the locals' many digressions and refusals to cooperate. Previously, I acknowledged Chief Chang's prowess in speaking the state's language. This mastery of the state's language also extends to her ability to code-switch out of this language when it suits her. When interrogated, she does not deliver her reports on the village efficiently and comprehensively but instead waxes lyrical about the village's importance, the obedience and fidelity of the village to the state, and also airs the village's grievances, poverty, and lack of government support. Annoyed by her digressions, BJ 1919 attempts to bring her back on topic by saying "we didn't come here to listen to a history lesson" (3-8). The agents also repeatedly face the same problem when interviewing the other villagers. BJ 1919 complains that he "can't believe [he] came all the way from Beijing to hear this old hen shriek and moan" after interviewing Liu Shi and rebukes her to no avail when he proclaims "listen, Granny, I don't have time for your bullshit. I'm only interested in the bloody UFO" (54). The novel's female protagonist Kwok Yun, who is the only witness of the UFO and who appears to be a simple-minded individual, digresses the most in her interview and talks about the calendar and fortune-telling (15), her menstrual cycle (14-16), her marriage woes (16-17), the Olympics (20) and what she was wearing, and even her private fantasies of herself "as a small tea bush" (20). Her digressions lead to BJ 1919 instructing her to "forget about the Olympics and what [she] was wearing" (20) in an effort to redirect the interview back to the events that preceded the UFO sighting. While these digressions are arguably genuine and a result of there being nothing of significance to report, this is unlikely in light of the rapid changes that occur in the village and the increasingly vocal rebukes and challenges to the state's authority.

An early instance of such a challenge to the agents' and state's authority ironically begins with the preemptive qualifier "I do not wish to challenge your

authority”, but immediately goes on to challenge the authority of the agents by saying “but [...] you said this investigation would only last for one day and now it’s been almost a week” (59). The secretary who is responsible for this, not only challenges the authority of the agents by questioning their continued intrusive presence in the village, but also reveals the locals’ unhappiness with their presence. He later challenges them once again in an interview when he points out that they said their “accommodation [wasn’t] satisfactory and [they] want [redacted] [redacted]”

(59), strategically including the agents’ complaints and demands on the record and demonstrating the underlying resistance of the Silver Hill interviewees towards the demanding and inept officials. Although the precise demands of the agents are redacted, the secretary’s incrimination remain intact and we get a sense that some kind of abuse of authority has been obscured from the documents. This redaction invites readers to speculate on the agents’ demands and the motivations for the redaction, and the subsequent abrupt transition from the secretary’s complaint to “Yes I was there on the afternoon [...]” (59) when he goes on to relate the events on the day of the UFO sighting calls even more attention to the fact that parts of the interview, when the secretary is redirected back to the investigation of the UFO, do not even make it onto the transcript.

While the secretary’s resistance of the state’s authority through language is more subtle and strategic, the uneducated and more unruly interviewees also express resistance towards the state’s authority, albeit in a more forthright and less artful manner. The butcher displays outright hostility from the start, threatening the agents by saying “I’ll swear on Chairman Mao’s dead soul that your life will end here if you say that kind of thing again, even though you wear that police uniform” (43) and when

told to report his age at the start of the interview, turns the table on HN 1989 by confronting him with the counter, “at that time, you were perhaps not even born, young man. Can I ask your age?” (44). The contemptuous attitude towards the agents and the state are evident in the interviews with the secretary and the butcher, and when these acts of resistance are juxtaposed with Chief Chang’s strategic manipulation of the interviews, the possibility that the digressions in the other interviews are instances of resistance increases exponentially.

This concerted effort to resist authority could be understood as collective peasant counter-action, which is defined as the “difficult to detect [...] fabricating [of] excuses, [...] evasive behavior, [...] loaf[ing] on the job [and taking] advantage of the situation in order to achieve its own purpose” (Gao 274). Specifically, “idling” or “foot dragging” (276) was the main strategy employed by the peasants to resist state quotas and economic policies. By borrowing this revisionist and new historicist approach to the Great Leap Forward, which was arrived at through the “conducting of oral histories [...], analy[sing of] local records and a few restricted materials” (273) not unlike the fictional investigations in *UFO*, and applying it to the interview transcripts, the possibility of counter-action and underlying peasant resistance in the novel becomes even more likely, and the intentional prolonging of the interviews and the wilful digressions are reinterpreted as performances of labour that disguise procrastination and unproductivity.

BJ 1919’s skepticism and distrust towards the villagers and his fellow colleague do not seem unfounded in light of this possibility. BJ 1919 not only states that he has “a feeling people [t]here are hiding things” (51) and “[the noodle seller] won’t be able to fob [him] off with stories of noodles” (51), he also makes a report to the state in relation to HN 1989, whom he accuses of “not always [giving him] a full

translation of what was said [and whom he suspects] had excessive sympathy for the residents of the village” (75). Not only do the villagers seem to be evading questions and redirecting the interrogation to mundane topics, HN 1989 who is the good cop in the bad-cop-good-cop routine, is suspected of sympathising with the villagers and leaving out information in the translation in order to protect them. In light of an earlier example in which the secretary implies the agents have been negligent in their tasks and have prolonged investigation, this phenomenon of “feet-dragging” or wilful procrastination also evidently occurs throughout the ranks, and the agents like BJ 1919 who “spends his whole time at Niu Ping’s liquor stall drinking” (36) also have their own methods of evading government control even when they are government officials. The novel thus performs translation with regard to both the struggle to achieve effective communication across Chinese dialects and the negotiation between the language of the state and the language of the people.

The translation process from local dialect to Beijing dialect or Standard Mandarin and finally into English are thus complicated by censorship and manipulation, and these manipulations of language and the text are not the prerogative of the state, but a mutually conducted process between the state and its people that bespeaks mutual distrust and suspicion. Like the metaphorical “machines [that] have been doing their duty for decades, driving back and forth like a comb going through the same head of hair thousands of times, until the teeth of the comb begin to break and the hair starts to fall out” (*UFO* 6-7), the agents’ repetitive interrogation of the same group of villagers is a labour in futility that wears out both the interrogator and the people being interrogated.

Chief Chang’s response to the innocuous interview procedure of confirming her name and status is telling of the distrustful socio-political atmosphere and Chang’s

uneasy relationship with the state authorities. Rather than carry out the identity confirmation as instructed, Chang immediately responds with a question of her own and asks if the machine is on, drawing attention to the recording of the interview and demonstrating her acute awareness of the machine's presence. Ironically, in her apparent enthusiasm to please the authorities and demonstrate her fidelity to the Communist Party by assuring them that the villagers of Silver Hill are not unhappy, have nothing to hide, and are loyal, Chang's response not only fails to confirm her status, but alludes to the opposite of her claims – that there is an assumption of unhappiness, that the villagers have something to hide, and not everyone's heart is transparent for the Communist Party (3). The recognition of this irony in the novel requires the approaching of censorship and self-censorship as having a crucial role in translation, as well as an acknowledgement that the languages of the state and the people are fundamentally recognisable and distinctive. Translation goes beyond conventional translation or the individually mitigated, personal translation conducted by Z and Guo in *Concise*. Instead, translation becomes the site where political tensions and power plays are implicitly conducted. Translation is also strategically weaponised as a method of executing censorship and evading censorship, and rather than maintain fidelity to meaning, the translation's capacity to not maintain fidelity becomes an opportunity to take creative liberties with the text as a means of political action.

Chapter 4: *Women United through Translation*

4.1 *China: Reaching a Cyclical Maturation Point*

Although the three acts – birth, development, and maturation – imply a unidirectional advancement from stage to stage that culminates in a conclusion of sorts, the maturation represented by *China* is not synonymous with conclusiveness. In fact, the maturation stage of Guo's writing alludes to the birth of her linguistic experimentation in its very title – *I Am China*, which is a play on the grammatical mistake that arises from trying to say "I am Chinese", a mistake that would likely have been made by Z of *Concise*. The trajectorial and cyclical approach I propose is therefore significant since studying *Concise* as a standalone novel will bring us to the unfortunate conclusion that "progress in English can be interpreted as a process [...] whereby the Chinese migrant gradually gets absorbed into a dominant, proper, and publishable English" (Kong 7). However, by considering Guo's three novels along a trajectory, the proper English at the end of *Concise* naturally continues to be ostensible in the subsequent novels. The grammatically incorrect title of the last novel also suggests a more hopeful vision in which language does not absorb the migrant, but becomes a creative and expressive tool for her.

Another one of the narrative resonances between the first and third novel that suggest a cyclical approach to the three novels is necessary is that *Concise* ends with a letter from Z's lover, and Guo refers to *China* as a lover letter to China, suggestive yet again of the connections between the first and last novel. In both cases, writing is a final memorabilia of love, and this allusion to the first novel and the beginning of Guo's linguistic exercise suggests that the pursuit of language and meaning ends where it begins, and rather than concluding this experimentation and performance of translation, the end has been left open-ended and hints at the possibility of returning to

the start once more in a perpetual staging and restaging of the performance. The importance of rereadings and retellings are emphasised through these allusions to her other novels, and the importance of rereading to the production of the writerly text is not a coincidence. As Barthes suggests, “rereading draws the text out of its internal chronology and recaptures a mythic time” and when “we immediately reread a text, it is in order to obtain, [...] not the *real* text, but a plural text: the same and new” (“*S/Z*” 16). By drawing the three novels by Guo out of their internal chronology, considering them within the chronology of Guo’s publication timeline and developments as a writer, and considering the female protagonists as representatives of these developments, what Barthes refers to as the “ludic advantage” of rereading and the necessity of “multiply[ing] the signifiers [rather than] reach some ultimate signified” (“*S/Z*” 165) are exemplified.

As a final instalment in Guo’s trajectory of linguistic exercise and literary experimentation that also makes a cyclical gesture back the beginning of the trajectory, *China* brings together all the elements of *Concise* and *UFO* in a final self-reflexive performance of translation. While translation has an underlying presence in the previous two novels, it makes a grand appearance in *China* with the Scottish protagonist, Iona Kirkpatrick, working as a translator of Chinese documents. Iona has been commissioned by a publication house to translate into English a set of letters and diaries belonging to a Chinese couple named Jian and Mu. Framing the narrative of Jian and Mu within the overarching narrative of Iona, the novel alternates between the experiences of Iona as a reader and translator of the documents and the experiences of Jian and Mu, who travel from China to London and the States respectively in search of a place to accommodate them and their liberal, revolutionary views.

While this dissertation approaches *Concise* as an individual's autotranslation and *UFO* as public and sociopolitical translation in the form of censorship, *China* combines both of these by documenting the translation and thought processes Iona experiences during her translation, engaging in the private, public, and sociopolitical underpinnings of Jian's and Mu's documents, while also negotiating state and commercial censorship. In section 2.2 of this prospectus, I mention the palimpsest in an explication on how Chinese subtext bleeds to the surface of Guo's "English" novels. In this section of my prospectus, the palimpsest emerges once more, but as a metaphorical representation of the sedimentation of Guo's novels. This thesis' chronological examination of these three novels traces the movement and development of Guo's linguistic exercise and her gradual accumulation of experimental ideas. *China* concludes the exercise by addressing both the movements and experiences from East to West through the Chinese characters Jian and Mu, but also from West to East, through the character of Iona Kirkpatrick. Apart from the continuities and cyclical resonances I have already detailed in the overview, Iona also uses the English-Chinese dictionary, mirroring the beginning of this linguistic exercise when Z uses the Chinese-English dictionary in *Concise*. The dual and non-linear narratives thus represent a translingual's experience of a literary tug-of-war between identity, culture, and language.

While the other two novels ended on ambiguous or pessimistic notes and the presence of translation and translingualism are more subtle, *China* represents a maturation of the linguistic and literary experimentation by seemingly offering a positive resolution and conclusiveness to the performance of translation and translingualism that has been enacted throughout Guo's novels, as well as fully foregrounding translation and translingualism through form and content. If the

previous two novels embarked on a linguistic or literary enquiry, this enquiry is realised to a significantly larger degree in *China*. One instance of this is how *Concise* had an entry in Chinese and an entry in Standard English, performing translation within the novel while also allowing readers competent in both languages to assess the translation on their own. While this entry and its English translation only occupy two pages in the novel, *China* juxtaposes the fictional source text and target/translated text to an even larger degree by having graphical representations of the copies of Chinese material Iona is working on within the same page. While the copies are often partial or illegible, they still serve as an invitation for readers with knowledge of Chinese and English to translate and assess the translations being made by Iona, and this juxtaposition of source text and target text draws even more awareness to the processes of translation in the novel.

4.2 Translation Equivalence Assumed and Neglected

Translation is most evidently not to be relegated to the background in this novel, and calls more attention to itself and its processes. First and foremost, while the previous two novels have English titles only, translingualism in *China* is apparent in its bilingual title, which is in English and Chinese. The English and Chinese title are presented in the front matter of the novel in the following manner, “**I AM CHINA | 最蔚蓝的海**”, with the vertical bar glyph implying an equivalence of the titles on both sides. However, a literal translation of the Chinese title “最蔚蓝的海” (*zui wei lan de hai*) is ‘the bluest sea’ (translation mine), and Guo performs in this paratextual space the unreliability of translation equivalence and warns of the dangers of assuming equivalence when equivalence is implied. The Chinese title’s reference to a blue sea also references Jian’s last letter, in which he tells Mu that “the sea [at Crete] is the bluest and purest [he has] ever seen [and he wants] to go out with the blue” (342).

Paralleling Jian's displacement and isolation as a detainee and refugee whose "life [was] charted by locked doors and high walls (45), the Chinese title referencing his last words is confined to a single appearance in the front matter and does not appear on the cover of the novel. Hence, the Chinese title of the novel "最蔚蓝的海" represents the Chinese-language narrative as primarily told by Jian. This narrative is delivered sporadically throughout *China* in the form of fragmentary letters and diaries that are handwritten by Jian, and in assigning a Chinese title to this alternative narrative thread that exists on the margins, Guo acknowledges the difference and non-equivalence of the two narratives and like her character Iona, establishes how translations are fundamentally not equivalent to the original while demonstrating the peripheral status of the original Chinese text as compared to the English translation.

In previous chapters, I have explored the possibility of translation and translingualism in literature involving how the text looks and sounds, rather than the meaning of the text. This concept of visibility and aural/orality of the text resurfaces in *China* with the visual and aural/oral nature of wordplay. For instance, each chapter of *China* begins with a quote in Chinese, which is then followed by an English translation, and a rendering in Hanyu Pinyin. By doing so, Guo once again makes language strange to her reader. This effect of defamiliarisation unanimously affects each reader regardless of their language repertoire because rather than uniformly write in one language, Guo subverts the monolingual paradigm by presenting and re-presenting the same quote in various incarnations of the language, with each incarnation stressing a different aspect of the language (see fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Example of Guo's presentation of language in *China* (151).

The Chinese characters accentuate the form of each ideogram and focuses on the way the quote looks. The Hanyu Pinyin incarnation is a romanisation of the Chinese words and thus focuses on the sound of the words in Chinese. Even if a reader is familiar with the Chinese language and Hanyu Pinyin, the juxtaposition of these incarnations on the same page continues to perform and defamiliarise translation, expanding the perimeters of translation to include the rendering of one language into other forms of semiotic expressions within the same language. The consumption of language no longer becomes a sheer consumption of meaning, and instead fulfils the “longing for foreign words: the alien sound, the unknown syllable, the mysterious sign” (*China* 11), all of which indicate a need to consume language and read with an attention to intersemiotic transfers that have heretofore been largely neglected.

Another aspect of linguistic and literary equivalence that is often lost in translation is textuality, and this is demonstrated in *China* through the juxtaposition of the original source texts of Jian and Mu with Iona's translation. Jian's writing is described in vivid detail in the novel, and Iona notices how “his handwriting is angry: the pen is pressed deep into the page; there are crossings-out and repetitions” (14).

Despite Iona's description of Jian's writing, the reader is unable to witness the handwriting's anger for themselves in the translation, except when Iona shares partial images of the source text. The reader is also unable to feel the texture of the page where the marks made by the pen can be felt, and is unable to see what the crossings-out and repetitions might be. These visual anisomorphisms, or visual asymmetries, between Iona's translation and the original alerts readers to his/her own alienation and distance from the original text, and this is made even more apparent when a portion of Jian's diary (22) includes the crossing-out of words, but Iona's neatly typed translation does not have the same. Unlike *Concise*, when the availability of a English translation of Guo's Chinese text on the next page "would presumably not [encourage] readers who do not know Chinese [...] to examine Z's [...] Chinese sentences at all [and] they would likely not imagine what it is like to read without translation" (Hwang 81), the visual dissimilarity of Jian's handwritten letters and Iona's typed translation draw attention to translation's natural tendency to smooth out or pass over textuality, as well as other salient features of a text, ritualistically and perhaps even unconsciously reorganising the text to achieve easy readability even if meaning is lost during this process.

Not unlike the previous novels, *China* is also an epistolary fiction and it combines the private epistles of *Concise* with the public and political epistles of *UFO* by including a range of epistles from letters and diary entries to emails and official documents issued by government organisations. Since Iona is the translator, she represents the translational intervention, yet there is a sense that other unknown and unaccountable editorial interventions have also taken place. To begin with, the documents that Iona is translating are photocopied (11), and are thus reproductions of the original rather than the originals themselves. The contents of the documents also

include “hardly legible Chinese characters” (11) that have become “half legible due to the deep black stain of the photocopier” (12) and the “pages are completely muddled and in no particular order” (12). When attempting to trace the origins of the documents, Iona also realises that it is unclear how many people have handled or mishandled the documents. The illegibility of the words, the ink stains, and the disrupted chronology of the documents make any of Iona’s translations even more questionable. In Iona’s translations however, these features of the documents are entirely elided, alerting readers to how translation potentially changes more than just the language of the text, and how translation equivalence has entirely neglected other measures of equivalence that are inevitably lost in translation.

4.3 Translation as Perpetual Retelling

Concise focussed on the phonetic accents of words and translation across degrees of literacy and *UFO* focussed on translation across Chinese dialects, translation from oral to written form, and the translation between languages of state and people. The two novels primarily extend the definitions and applicability of translation in their performance while challenging some of the common presuppositions in the field of translation. *China* continues these inquiries by posing questions that challenge existing definitions and presuppositions regarding translation. For instance, does translation occur when an incomprehensible message is rendered comprehensible? If that is the case, then other situations in which translation is required such as when “the words, words, words that the nurses fling at [Jian] in a language he can’t fully understand, despite what he learned at university” (15), provide sufficient grounds for translation to be carried out since Jian does not comprehend the medical jargon that the nurses use and which his language-learning does not prepare him for.

By this definition, differences in sociolinguistic accents that lead to incomprehensibility may also justifiably result in translation being a necessity. Jian is not only unable to understand the nurses of Lincolnshire despite being educated in the English language, but is also unable to understand his legal representative Brandon, whose “Glaswegian brogue [...] took a lot for Jian to finally understand” (53) and which Jian describes as a “voice [that] is wrapped in bed sheets, obscuring all meaning and clarity” (53). The interactions between Jian and Brandon parallels Z’s interactions with the Italian Andrea. Z and Andrea are both non-native learners of the English language, but continue to experience certain difficulties in understanding one another and possess different degrees of competency in the English language. Likewise, Jian and Brandon communicate through “repetitions and gesticulations like actors in the Beijing Opera” (53) and their conversation wades through “a thick treacle of accents [and] nothing seems to cut through” (54). Translation is no longer the rendering of one language into another, but a rendering of incomprehension into comprehension.

This differs from translation’s expressed purpose in *UFO*, in which translation between the state language and the language of the people is frustrated and used to hinder comprehension. Iona’s description of her father’s account of his honeymoon may suggest that translation can also serve as a mode of retelling, and retellings are able to provide clarity while also potentially causing further ambiguities. Her father’s account “seemed to change with each retelling, as her father embroidered and exaggerated, and the truth – whatever that may be – was submerged in a swirl of youthful images, as turbid as the sea itself” (28). The diction used here in approaching translation as a retelling suggests translation can have a decorative function, be visually captivating while being dishonest, and also result in the truth being entirely unknowable. Thus, Guo’s three novels in exploring these possibilities are not merely

“texts whose mimetic object is the act of translation, the translator, and his or her social and historical contexts” (Beebee 6), but goes beyond the practical and technical situations where translation might be conventionally required, to introduce and perform new possibilities for translations and storytelling to creatively produce literature. In the final section, I suggest that gender and sexuality as a recurring theme in all three of Guo’s novels climactically concludes with the foregrounding of the female translator who at the end of the novel, or rather throughout the course of the novel, becomes involved in the creative production of such a literature.

4.4 The Female Translator’s Visibility

The title of this section is a play on translation theorist Lawrence Venuti’s *The Translator’s Invisibility*. Against the obscuring and diminishing of the translator and the process of translating, Venuti attributed this tendency to:

producing cultures in the United Kingdom and the United States that are aggressively monolingual, unreceptive to the foreign, accustomed to fluent translations that invisibly inscribe foreign texts with English-language values and provide readers with the narcissistic experience of recognizing their own culture in a cultural other. (15)

Venuti also points out that “the effect of transparency conceals the numerous conditions under which translation is made [and] the more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and presumably, the more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text” (1).

In light of Venuti’s criticism, the character Iona and her role in *China* can be interpreted as Guo’s creative response to Venuti’s concerns. Not only does Guo thrust the female translator Iona into the narrative foreground, Iona’s subsequent translingual and metafictional rendering of Jian’s and Mu’s translingual letters and journals

provide high levels of visibility to the translator, translations, and the experience and process of translation. The novel details Iona's three attempts to translate a "two-line poem [called] 'A Generation' from Gu Cheng" (58-59), and she states that "it is hard to tell which version is more accurate" (59). Her struggles with the translation process are made apparent and her various attempts to translate and re-translate are documented on the page. Once again, the source text and the target texts are presented in this novel alongside one another, allowing readers an active role in the translation process. Thus, the visibility of the fictional translator and translation in the novel also encourages the reader's role as translator to gain visibility, and Guo's fictional translators, and the reader-translator that is invited to participate in the translation of the novel's materials, serve as agents or actors in Guo's performance of translation.

In the previous two novels, Guo has explored female sexuality and language considerably. *China's* Iona shares some of the characteristics of the sexually curious Z of *Concise* and the desexualised Kwok Yun of *UFO*, but Iona is also much more assertive and self-assured than the previous two women. Like *UFO*, the novel highlights society's tendency to shame and pathologise desexualisation by problematising women that are without expressed sexuality or femininity. Iona is "given a prescription for antidepressants" (60) and told she might have low self-esteem by her general practitioner. Contemplating this diagnosis, Iona admits to herself that she "isn't able to think of herself romantically [and] doesn't have the language to connect with a man emotionally" (60). Earlier on in the novel, she also muses that "food, like men, has a certain problematic position in her life [and] it's the pleasure of reading these Chinese texts that is sustaining her" (22). Also described as "a nun in her cell [who] has barely eaten anything all day" (22), Iona is associated with sterility, celibacy, and ascetism in matters of sexuality and food, with Chinese texts and

translation as her only means of deriving pleasure and sustenance. Consumed by the learning of languages (11), Chinese texts and her translation work appear to replace food and sex for Iona, fuelling her both sexually and appetitively. Language and translation, once again, provide the female protagonist with the solace and comfort she needs. Iona who represents the figure of the female translator, occupies the narrative centerstage rather than the margins, deriving all of her satisfaction from her work as a translator. By the end of the novel, Iona forms a relationship with her publisher in the midst of pursuing her translation, bringing an end to her desexualisation and impotence. Unlike Z, Iona's newfound sexuality does not become an obsession or a desperately sought alternative to language. Unlike Kwok Yun, Iona's sexuality is also not involuntary or arranged. Rather, Iona's relationship with her publisher is nothing more than a subtext as she continues to actively pursue language, translation, and writing. In fact, the publisher whom Iona has a relationship with barely makes an appearance in the novel, and quickly fades into the narrative background once Iona returns to her translation work.

In the maturation phase of Guo's literary and linguistic experiment, the female characters finally assert their independence. Feminist theorists have considered translation as sharing affinities with feminism, and feminist translation theorist Sherry Simon defines the objective of feminist translation theory as seeking "to identify and critique the tangle of concepts which relegates both women and translation to the bottom of the social and literary ladder" (qtd. in Munday 129). Seemingly performing feminist translation theories through fiction, Guo deliberately portrays her fictional translator Iona as an employee of a male publisher and the former pupil of a male professor, before subverting the expectations of her subordination by demonstrating how Iona rejects her professor's repeated offers of a research position and how she

defies her publisher's instructions to shelve her translation project. At the end of the novel, Iona does in fact succeed in publishing the book and meets with Mu in a bookshop to watch her perform. The meeting of the two women and the postscript that describes them both clutching copies of the final publication symbolically represents the female characters taking ownership of the story. Thus, translation can take centre stage in fiction and *empower* the translator, rather than emphasize their *lack* of power. Guo's performance of translation in the span of her three novels is thus significant in that it posits translation as instrumental to the breaking of boundaries and restrictions that writing and translation itself are grounded in.

Iona's and Mu's ownership of the story may seem preposterous considering how the majority of the documents belong to Jian, and this tendency to persecute the translator for betraying the original source and authorship is common in Translation Studies. As Beebee points out:

When the translator crosses the limen of language into the function of go-between, society sees itself as freed of any ethical responsibility toward [her]. The paradox is as follows: if the translator works literally, then she is reduced to a mere machine or mouthpiece of the author, unworthy of ethical treatment; if she alters the text, then she may be persecuted for incompetence, for unethical behaviour, or for expressing her own heretical opinions rather than merely conveying those of another. (54)

Evidently, the translator has to operate within a very narrow space of approval, and any perceived transgression quickly attracts persecution. However, in the case of *China*, Jian, the author of the letters, has already been persecuted, and like the man on his album cover for "YUAN VS DOLLARS" (21), Jian is metaphorically "a young

[Chinese] man with a blindfolded face” (40) who stands before a vertically-oriented title of the album that forms a noose before him (see fig. 5).

Fig. 5. The album cover of Jian’s YUAN VS DOLLARS (21).

Unable to escape the persecution of state authorities in China and unable to shed his status as a political refugee and gain freedom in the West, the struggle to find his autonomy and space between the two currencies and economies is Jian’s death sentence, since he is not free to determine his fate. Attempts to stop the publication of Iona’s translation and obscure Jian’s story can only be overcome when Iona and Mu take ownership of the narrative. As mentioned in section 3.4, [the] performing [of] identity [...] produces a practical label behind which [one] can hide as [one makes] critical comments on [...] society” (Rahbek 9), and it is the identity of the translator that gives Iona and Mu a practical label to hide behind. Like the other novels, it is also implied that the novel the reader is reading is the one that is being written, and if we are to approach *China* as the book that Iona and Mu publishes at the end, then the novel while including Jian’s writing, foregrounds and documents Iona’s translation processes and Mu’s responses to Jian, making the final novel a co-authorship rather than a work by a single author.

The relationship between translator and author, as exemplified through the relationship between the two ladies and Jian is one of collaboration, in which neither are placed hierarchically above the other. This collaborative effort between writer (Jian), mediator (Mu), and translator (Iona) is reminiscent of Simon's "concept of the committed translation project and feminist translation, in which "fidelity is to be directed toward neither the author nor the reader, but toward the writing project – a project in which both writer and translator participate" (qtd. in Munday 129). By legitimising and celebrating the female translator's active involvement and visible presence in *China*, the novel performs "the feminine translator['s] affirma[tion of] her critical difference, her delight in interminable re-reading and re-writing [and] flaunts the signs of her manipulation of the text" (Barbara Godard qtd. in Munday 129). Although Guo's foregrounding of the female translator gives her visibility and celebrates the translator's involvement in the text, she is not uncritical of the translator's involvement and calls attention to how there remains an unbridgeable distance between the translator and the material that she translates.

As a translator, Iona's unfamiliarity with the subject of her translation is evident in the novel, alongside the presuppositions and biases Iona possesses in her approach towards the material she translates. While Jian questions "how [Mu and him] are to know anything if [they] have never been outside of China" (38) and this partially motivates their travels outside of China, their mobility and the association of mobility to knowledge call attention to Iona's stagnation and limited understanding of the very subject matter she attempts to translate. Iona's perception of China as a young girl exposes the tendency to orientalise and essentialise the Chinese identity and culture. Prior to her first trip to China, her superficial impression of China involves a schoolmate telling her about the "Chinaman with his pet dragon" (39). Despite Iona's

subsequent two-month long travel in China, she reaches the verdict that “China [was] fascinating but impossible to grasp, and the people she met [were] scarred by their traumatic pasts” (39). Iona also recalls her childhood fantasy in which “she would pop out under the Forbidden City [where] Chinese faces would crowd around to gawk at the fabulous foreign girl (39). Describing this bizarre rebirth in the Forbidden City, Iona describes it as a “breaking out of the earth’s membrane, like a bird cracking an egg [and imagines that] she would make a Chinese friend like Tintin does in his Tibet journey” (39). Inserting herself dramatically into the center of her oriental fantasy, Iona fetishises her own relationship with her fictitious Chinese world. In this fantasy, Iona exoticises China while also exoticising herself as a foreign spectacle.

This fetishisation and orientalisation are also evident in Iona’s disappointment upon researching Kublai Jian via online search engines. Disappointed by the:

millions of pictures of Chinese- and Mongolian-looking men [...] standing by some tacky tourist spot or smiling a plastic smile with the backdrop of fake Mongol people in a yurt, or here again among a line-up of fat bureaucrats wearing ridiculous Khalkha Mogol hats, [...] none of [which] remotely matches her idea of a young and vigorous musician who writes angry manifestos (41),

Iona fails to see how her preconceived notion of what Jian looks like is no different from the stereotypical images she considers tacky, fake, and ridiculous. Her romanticisation and idealisation of Jian as a young and vigorous musician who writes angry manifestos are equally misconstrued and not entirely different from the other outlandish oriental fantasies she has had of China as a child. Relying on these stereotypes and her limited knowledge of China and Chinese culture, Iona does not seem to notice the relevance of the question Jian poses to Mu when he asks how they

can know anything if they have never been outside China. The opposite applies to Iona, begging the question as to how she can know anything about the material she is translating when she has never really been inside China, and is literally and metaphorically on the outside looking in at Chinese culture and identity.

Although the novel explicitly challenges Iona's reliability and objectivity as a translator, it still elevates the female translator to a creative position in literary fiction. In Guo's vivid description of Iona's rebirth in the Forbidden City, she is also drawing from Chinese mythology by comparing Iona to Pangu (盘古) – a well-known character known to be the first living being, and who is said to have emerged from an egg and subsequently gone on to create the world. This is not an unreasonable conjecture since the myth of Pangu breaking out of a cosmic egg and creating the world is cryptically embedded within *China's* narrative (333), confirming the deliberateness of the similar imagery used to describe Iona's rebirth. Inviting readers familiar with Chinese mythology to draw parallels between Iona and Pangu, Guo emphasises Iona's role as the first woman who emerges into the literary world after a long incubation period, and who subsequently goes on to create a fictional world of her own through translation. In the last chapter, I will share some other metaphors of translation that Guo uses to illustrate the process of translation, and finally juxtapose Guo's novels with Barthes' notion of the writerly text, arguing that Guo's three novels are written to be reread and in the process of rereading, literary translation is reconceptualised as a writerly collaboration between author, translator, and reader.

Chapter 5: Literary Translation as Writerly Collaboration

5.1 Metaphors of Translation

Theo Hermans uses Cornelius Gijsbrechts' 1670 painting *The Reverse of a Framed Painting* (see fig. 6) to illuminate how artworks can "[remind the viewer] that the pictures are visual puns, representations playing on the idea of representation, [and] what makes the paintings work is both the natural likeness and the implicit reference to convention" (40-41).

Fig. 6. Cornelius Gijsbrechts' *Trompe L'oeil. The Reverse of a Framed Painting*.

Depicting how the back of a framed painting may look like, Gijsbrechts' artwork plays with the expectations of its viewers, who "expect paintings to be framed and to be hung with the front, not the back, facing the viewer" (41). Hermans describes the painting as a "kind of trickery [that] consciously exploit[s] the illusionistic effect brought about by their realistic depiction" (40). He adds that "the painted truth that we think we see is deceptive [and] are momentarily wrongfooted when the paintings deliberately thwart these expectations" (40-41). These descriptions imply deception on the artist's part, but in this chapter I will suggest that Gijsbrecht's

painting, like Guo's literary simulations of translation, intrigue rather than trick and unveil the truth behind the curtain rather than deceive with normalised obscurity. Like Gijsbrechts' painting, Guo's novels have the same *trompe-loeil*²² effect, and in its self-referentiality and thwarting of its readers' expectations, achieve a defamiliarizing effect that is both unsettling yet undeniably realistic and recognisable. As much as the back of a framed painting is obscured from sight and is often viewed as external to the artwork itself, Gijsbrechts foregrounds quite literally, the reverse of a painting, establishing it as art in itself and an inherent part of art that needs to be acknowledged as such. Likewise, Guo's novels, by refusing conventional translation and drawing attention to the translation process, establish raw, unpolished translation as an art form that is largely effaced by the demand for a translation process that normalises the text so that it becomes easily recognizable and readable. Rather than deceive the viewer and reader, Gijsbrechts and Guo lift the veil from the original deception and reveal the previously obscured and the effaced. In so doing, their works have a specular function in that they reflect and challenge the norms of their respective artistic fields by offering an alternative to convention. While Gijsbrechts reveals the reverse of the painting, Guo simulates and reveals the translation processes of the novel by using visual elements and multimodality to a metafictional effect, and the epistles of all three novels contribute significantly to this visual performance of translation. Gijsbrecht's painting is a simulation of the reverse of a framed painting, but there is not a framed painting to be found on the other side. Likewise, Guo's novels simulate translations, but there are no source texts to trace them back to.

²² French for the fooling of the eye, *trompe-loeil* is defined as "visual deception, especially in paintings, in which objects are rendered in extremely fine detail emphasising the illusion of tactile and spatial qualities". "Trompe l'oeil." *The Random House Dictionary*, Random House, 2017. *Dictionary.com*, <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/trompe-l-oeil>.

Hermans employs the painting as a metaphor for the self-reflexive quality of metafiction, and by comparing Gijisbrecht's painting to Guo's novels, I propose that Guo also incorporates graphical metaphors in her novels to a similar effect. For example, in *Concise*, Z describes the impressionist paintings of Monet that she sees at the Musée D'Orsay with "the colour and the subject in these paintings [are like] somebody looking through a dirty window glass. [...] Everything blurred, the wave, the sea, the sun, the clouds are all blurred" (205). The "obscure water lilies, obscure gate, and obscure sunrise" (205) of Monet's paintings are metaphorically like the products of Z's translation, providing an obscured impression of the language. Not just a brief digression, Z elaborates on this impressionist effect by writing about the Bates Method, which she explains is a method used by an American eye doctor to teach his short-sighted patients "how to use eyes *properly*" (206). Reflecting on her short-sightedness, Z wonders if she is unable to use the Bates method "to see things *properly* [and] like Monet, Van Gogh, and all these impressionists, see the world [as] blurred too" (206). Impressionist paintings and short-sightedness are paralleled here and described as perceiving things through an unclear medium or a dirty window glass. While the latter presents such a perception as a defect to be corrected, the former presents this as celebrated fine art. These different attitudes towards a blurred perception symbolically represent the varying attitudes towards the obscurity of translation.

In previous chapters, this dissertation has pointed out how translation has generally been evaluated based off how transparent the process is. Translation functioning like the dirty window glass of impressionist paintings and the short-sightedness that blurs perception does not allow for vision *through* it, but vision *of* it. Therefore, the transparent windowglass, like the clean translation that effaces its own

processes is in fact a distortion of perception rather than a clear image since the viewer barely perceives the medium through which the image on the other side is being viewed. On the other hand, the dirty windowglass provides clarity by ostensibly revealing the translation process. To perceive the blur is to recognise the effect of the lens and medium through which we view language, literature, and the world at large. Thus, Guo's novels as impressionist writings expose the blurry nature of translation and the translator's roles in fiction-writing. The transparency and opacity of translation is reminiscent of the black box, which is also metaphorically represented by Z's experience going through the train tunnel of the English Channel. Z "find [herself disappointed] in the [...] darkness [since she] thought the tunnel [would be] made of glass [and allow her] to see the blue seawater" (*Concise* 204). Contrasting the opacity of the tunnel to the opacity of the translation black box, this metaphor of Z's ride through the tunnel represents how the processes that occur within the opaque tunnel or black box are alienated from the world beyond the tunnel. While it is impossible to look inside it and determine its nature, it is possible to enter the tunnel or the black box, and understand translation from the inside. It is worth noting here that Z's allusion to and expressed desire for the clarity of the blue sea in *Concise* foreshadows Jian's desire for the bluest and purest sea (342), which once again affirms the approach of the novels along a cyclical trajectory.

Yet another graphical metaphor for translation is the Escher's staircase, which appears in *China* as follows:

As he writes and rewrites his sentences, he imagines an immigration officer in the Border Control HQ opening a pile of letters. Probably this tired and over-routinised officer will simply glance at the [...] letter, then throw it into a second pile of papers which he will take to another immigration officer; then

another officer in another office will open these letters and read them again and put them in another pile, and then this officer will take the papers to another officer...like a crazed man crawling up an Escher staircase, unable to reach the top (47).

The Escher staircase represents the reception of Jian's letters, but also Jian's own fruitless writing and re-writing process, Iona's repeated attempts to translate the documents, and Guo's attempts at writing a layered narrative such as this one. Jian's repetitive rewriting followed by a seemingly endless and equally repetitive reading and passing on of his writing is likened to an Escher's staircase, in which the staircase presents a visual conundrum by creating an optical illusion of perpetuity. Approaching Guo's novels as an Escher's staircase suggests that the structure and language of Guo's novels form a confounding visual puzzle of sorts that is not entirely resolvable. Rather, the entire novel requires deciphering before it can be decoded and accessed. This notion that Guo's novels can be approached as narrative puzzles is further supported by what Guo cryptically claims is a "need to *play around* in order to live as an artist"²³ (emphasis mine). In the next section, I will be relating Guo's novels to Barthes' concept of writerly and readerly texts, suggesting that the act of 'playing around' is not exclusively the author's, or the characters', but is one that is shared by the reader.

5.2 The Reader's Turn in Translation

Rather than pave a clear and easily negotiable path for the reader, translation in Guo's novels present a variety of alternative perspectives to the narrative, to the translation process, and to the fiction-writing process, and challenges the existing presuppositions regarding translation and language. Recalling the visually and

²³ Cooley, Reed. "Why Do We Still Pretend We Are Free?" (see chap. 1., footnote 3).

logically confounding Escher's staircase of the previous section, "it is for the reader [...] to climb the stairs up and down, trying to make order of the characters' different perspectives" (Costa 558). In order to navigate these many unfamiliar alternatives and seek out meaning, the reader has to personally make the intellectual, mental, and linguistic ascent and descent to become translators of the text themselves.

The concept of a reader taking an active role in the interpretation and meaning-making process of the literary text recalls Barthes' death of the author and the birth of the reader, as well as his concept of a readerly text. In the preface of Barthes' *S/Z*, Richard Howard reasons that:

We require an education in literature as in the sentiments in order to discover that what we assumed – with the complicity of our teachers – was nature is in fact culture, that what was given is no more than a way of taking. And we must learn, when we take, the cost of our participation, or else we shall pay much more. We shall pay our capacity to read at all (vii).

What Howard suggests is that the reader needs to form an active relationship with the text, rather than be content to passively receive the narrative, and that education – as represented by the complicity of the teachers – has encouraged this passivity in reading. In the case of Guo's novels, the author-translator's presence and textual design is apparent while an emergent reader of translingual text and translational literature is being produced. Rather than the reader "trained to read [...] lazy, easy traditional narrative [and who are lulled into] a non-reflective sleep state"²⁴, Guo's novels provide the literary conditions for Umberto Eco's "model reader", who actively participates, "filling in spaces resulting from presuppositions or allusions, [and]

²⁴ Flood, Alison. "Writers attack 'overrated'". (see chap. 1, footnote 9).

interpreting the text to recognize as many of its multiple layers as possible (Susan Bassnett qtd. in Snell-Hornby 107). Eco conceives of translation as an “interpretative cooperation made public [with the] translator [as] an empirical reader who behaves like a Model Reader” (Snell-Hornby 107). Adapting his conception of translation in the exploration of Guo’s novels, conceiving of translation as a writerly collaboration becomes a natural development. Rather than Barthes’ call to suppress the author and restore the status of the reader (3), approaching literary translation and Guo’s novels as a writerly collaboration allows for the author, translator, and reader to collaborate in the process of meaning-making.

In light of the *Bildungsromans* of the characters in the novel and the parallel *Künstlerroman* of the author herself, the developments and subsequent maturation of Guo’s linguistic and literary experiment across three of her novels point at another crucial development in this trajectory and that is, the inclusion and growth of the reader. The emergent reader, in the case of Guo’s novels, is someone unfamiliar with the self-referential narrative performances of translation and translingualism in literature. Like Z, this emergent reader is required to engage with the novels imaginatively and learn a new mode of reading that pays attention to translation, translingualism, and the literary and translation conventions that facilitates the perception of difference. Recalling what Howard calls “an education in literature”, Guo’s novels have a formative and pedagogical role as narrative puzzles that foreground and perform translation and translingualism, encourage the breaking of existing reading habits, and promote the recognition and challenging of existing translation norms and presuppositions.

Conclusion

While the trajectory of Guo's linguistic exercise and literary experimentation seems to have concluded, the final image of Iona and Mu holding their published book in their hands and the final image of Z clutching on to the letter from her lover is significant in its suggestion of a cyclical return to the beginning. Symbolically, words and languages – and the thoughts and beliefs that accompany them – cannot be given or gifted, but have to be worked towards independently. Seemingly aware that her novels might ironically have given the emergent reader the words, languages, thoughts, and beliefs, this implicit cyclical return to the first novel seems to encourage readers to make the literary journey from *Concise* to *China* again and independently arrive at their own conclusions. In *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Z is grudgingly suspended between degrees of literacy and culture and makes many frustrated attempts to bridge the two. Although she eventually finds solace in a personal *écriture féminine* and *Nüshu*, Z's journey – which represents the birth and preliminary stage of Guo's self-reflexive performance of translation – come with many painful lessons and sacrifices. As Guo herself points out, Z “is quite a young and naïve character, [and] her very basic reaction to another culture is manifested quite directly and childishly”²⁵. But by the time Guo writes *UFO in Her Eyes*, the developments are clear. Although the three female characters of the Silver Hill community – Kwok Yun, Chief Chang, and Liu Shi – are largely separate in their individual endeavors to reclaim autonomy through language and translation, their weaponising of translation against powerful, hegemonic forces are still significant and commendable departures from Z's solipsistic relationship with language and translation. Chief Chang, in

²⁵ McEwen, Stephen. “Xiaolu Guo interview: ‘Westerners have to read more non-western materials’.” *Spectator*, 3 Jun. 2014, <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2014/06/xiaolu-guo-interview-westerners-have-to-read-more-non-western-materials/>. 3 August 2017.

particular, who is arguably the most successful in her negotiation of language and translation, largely succeeds in the modernising project that she takes pride in. This success, however, comes at the expense of the others villagers and the village itself. Kwok Yun, Liu Shi, and the other villagers are eventually sacrificed to this modernising project and Silver Hill at the end of the novel is almost entirely unrecognisable when compared to the village at the start of the novel. Ultimately, *UFO* reveals that it does not matter who wields translation as long as translation is approached as a weapon or an instrument of manipulation. Translation, being versatile, shapes itself to the function desired, and translation as a weapon or instrument of censorship and control, no matter to whom it is directed at, is dangerous. It is in the final novel, *I am China*, that Guo's linguistic exercise and literary experiment reaches a cyclical maturation point. It is in *China* that the female translator becomes visible, and it is in *China* that writing and translation are conceived as being creative, collaborative, and productive.

Negotiating all the techniques and thematic concerns that were broached in the previous novels, the final chapter of *I am China* is titled "Women Without Men". However, in light of Iona, Mu, and Jian's collaborative writing; in light of the three acts of self-reflexive performance of translation that witnesses the reconceptualising of the translator and translation's roles in fiction; and in light of the progressive strides proposed by the novels to acknowledge and foreground feminist translation in fiction, I conclude that the final chapter of *China* cannot and should not be interpreted as an exclusion of men from this linguistic exercise and literary experimentation. Instead, in line with Guo's literary oeuvre, this English title can be re-read and reinterpreted translingually as "*wo men* without *men*" or "我们 without 们". By deconstructing and rewriting Guo's final title in *China* in the same style that she has used to perform

translation throughout her three novels, this translingual reiteration of the title does not alienate men from the collaboration. Rather, 我们 without 们” – which reduces the Chinese word for ‘we’ - 我们 (*wo men*) into the Chinese word for ‘me’ - 我 (*wo*) – invites the participation of the self in a collaborative effort to reconceptualise translation and the translator’s role in fiction. The entire trajectory of birth, development, and maturation cannot be undertaken by proxy of a translator or an author. The self, who plays all three roles of author, translator, and reader – has to make the journey on his or her own.

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