

The Novel as a Subversive Discourse: A Study of Selected Novels of Xiaolu

Guo

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Submitted by

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DECLARATION

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I, Annabel Lalhriatpuii, hereby declare that the subject matter of this dissertation is the record of work done by me, that the contents of this dissertation did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the dissertation has not been submitted by me for any other University or Institute.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that “The Novel as a Subversive Discourse: A Study of Selected Novels of Xiaolu Guo” written by Annabel Lalhriatpuii has been written under my supervision.

She has fulfilled all the required norms laid down within the M.Phil. regulations of Mizoram University. The dissertation is the result of her own investigation. Neither the dissertation as a whole nor any part of it was ever submitted by any other University for any research degree.

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Other relevant information :

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CHAPTER I :

Introduction

The present study proposes to examine and analyse Xiaolu Guo's novels namely, *Village of Stone* (2004) *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007), *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* (2008).

Xiaolu Guo was born in 1973 in the Zhe Jiang province of Southern China. She grew up in a tiny fishing village on an island off the southern coast “in a really isolated village in China where it was all about tradition, morality and everything you ‘*can't*’ do.”¹ Xiaolu Guo was “alienated from this big Chinese history, as a small individual. She writes, “I grew up in a very feudal system. The village I grew up in was a pure Communist village – everyone read the Little Red Book. And yet my grandmother had bound feet and she had been a concubine...I was really confused!”²

Guo is the daughter of a fisherman and factory worker whose dream was to run away to to become a writer, a filmmaker, an artist. She is possessed by themes of cultural dislocation. Being an outsider seems to be her natural and preferred state. She came to England to “cut myself off” and did not make a film during the decade she studied in Beijing because “they weren't my people either.”³

When I was in China I was very *xinku*, a very self-driven writer. I wrote a lot and tried to learn a lot. I was eager and hungry for knowledge and understanding.

When I was writing in Chinese, political discussion was the big thing. But when I left I found it to be very trivial ... What's bigger is really humanity, and our relationship to the universe. I think my vision goes so much beyond a political

discussion. I think life and death is so much beyond this institutional structure, like work units, family, administration. Life and death go beyond that. No matter what nationality you have, there's a bigger meaning. So I got over that, and wanted to write something more visionary.⁴

Xiaolu Guo graduated from the Beijing Film Academy. She has been awarded the Grand Jury Prize at the 2007 International Women's Film Festival for her first feature film *How is Your Fish Today?*, and was the recipient of the prestigious Cannes Film Festival Cinefondation Residency grant based in Paris. Her feature film *She, a Chinese* premiered at the 2009 Locarno International Film Festival, where it immediately took the highest prize, the "Golden Leopard". Her documentary *We Went to Wonderland* (2008) was selected for the New Directors/New Films series at the MoMA/Lincoln Center in New York in 2008. *The Concrete Revolution* premiered at the Margaret Mead Film Festival and IDFA 2005, among others. *Once Upon A Time Proletarian* was premiered at Venice Film Festival and Toronto Film Festival 2009, and received "Grand Prix de Geneva" at the Documentary Forum in Switzerland in 2012. Guo's films, now in educational distribution, are shown at universities, museums and art-house cinemas around the world.

Xiaolu Guo has directed 11 fiction features and documentaries over the past decade. *UFO in Her Eyes*, based on her 2009 novel of the same name, is a metaphorical satire that chronicles the rapid, surreal transformation of a rural Chinese village in the aftermath of an alleged UFO sighting. The film was named a "Critic's Pick" by The New York Times, which called it "a political fable in which Mao Zedong's ideals of enforced collectivization, when applied to Chinese capitalism, wreak havoc once the initial euphoria subsides."⁵

After she graduated from the Beijing Film Academy, Xiaolu Guo wrote several books published in China before she moved to London in 2002. Her writing is influenced by writers like Marguerite Duras, the Beat Poets and JD Salinger.

Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth, “about a young woman’s life in Beijing, is partly inspired by Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Vivre sa vie* (1962). Divided into 12 chapters, it follows a young woman called Nana who is beautiful, wild, romantic, dreamy and totally lost. This woman, and the film’s nervous, fragmentary style”⁶ have had a strong influence on her work.

A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers, her first novel published in the United States, was shortlisted for the 2007 *Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction*.⁷ *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* tells the tale of a Chinese girl, Z. Guo’s first book in English became as much a meditation on language as it was an exploration of her opposing themes of love and alienation.

Village of Stone has also been shortlisted for The Independent “Best Foreign Fiction Prize” 2005 and nominated for Dublin International Literature Award (IMPAC) 2006. Her most recent novel *I am China*, set in England, China and America, will be published in 2014.

Lovers In The Age Of Indifference includes stories that have been translated from the Chinese, such as a mountain keeper watching over a temple or the tale of Beijing’s slowest elevator, as well as ones written in English. Some are more experimental: a series of text messages between a Japanese woman and a man from New Zealand who meet in London, or e-mails sent by a Chinese woman to her lover back in England that never get a reply.

“I see the book as three parts of my personal journey,” Guo says.

The first stories, which are translated, have a classic Chinese style and are about peasant life, lost youth, the lonely child looking for meaning that no-one will show them. The second part is set in Europe and the stories are all about sexuality, detached sex and love in the city. The last part is a kind of return, back through my roots where I reinvent ancient Chinese myths and symbols as strange futuristic characters...I lived in China for 30 years and the voice of the country was very strong. It affected my mind, my lifestyle, and I couldn't take it. But then it's not important where you are if you're a writer. What is important is understanding that you're always an outsider, wherever you are. It's good to keep moving.⁸

In 2010, Xiaolu Guo contributed a story in Tim Butcher's *Because I am a Girl* which is inspired by a visit to Cambodia. Compiled to fund-raise for the child-centered development agency known as Plan, this anthology calls attention to the enduring drawbacks, but rising life-chances, that come with growing up female in a developing country. She has also contributed a story to *Ox Tales* (Fire — campaigning for arms control) which raises revenue to fund Oxfam's projects which fight poverty around the world. *Ox-Tales* refers to four anthologies of short stories written by 38 of the UK's best known authors. All the authors donated their stories to Oxfam. The books and stories are loosely based around the four elements (Earth, Fire, Air and Water).

As a writer who used her second language to write, Xiaolu Guo's foremost problem is, the natural flow of language. The difficulties of storytelling and structure are only secondary problems. The challenge of flowing in one continuous outpouring of language in a novel is my killer.⁹

Women's writing is a literary genre closely linked to the question of identity. Xiaolu Guo admits to being a writer at heart, using her work in film as a way of avoiding too much professional solitude."¹⁰ Her novels are short and fragmented, with a mythic, parable-like quality - a style that she describes as "grandmothers' stories". Her novels are both accessible and experimental. "All my novels and films are really about this: dispossession and yearning for love."¹¹ She describes the literary scene in her country in the early and mid nineties in the following words:

The literary scene in my country saw the emergence of a new and iconoclastic group of avant-garde female authors. Their extremely personal and colorful accounts of their own life experience, and the emotionally evocative language with which they painted this experience, drew unfair criticism from some male mainland Chinese critics. These critics, viewing themselves as guardians of the literary tradition that dictates 'Literature is for conveying truth', accused the female authors of succumbing to 'melodrama', 'petty emotionalism' and the impulse to dredge up every piteous detail of their private lives to work into their novels. Even today, this sort of obstinate male critic stakes his position solidly on old-fashioned Freudian thinking. Male authors are allowed to explore, in the most colorful and explicit detail, the private lives of women in their work. In fact, the greater depth and intensity one finds in a male author's portrayal of women's private or sexual lives, the more likely it is the author will be perceived as a great literary or creative talent. However, if a female author attempts to describe her own female experience, or to write about the female experience with some hint of

autobiographical flavor, she will be sneered at or dismissed by the predominantly male critics as a 'lightweight'.¹²

In her works, Guo tends to focus on adventurous young female protagonists from rural China, forced into the metropolis to escape the devastating dreariness of impoverished peasant life. And in a way that closely resembles Guo's own biography, ideas of reeducation and internal revolution. Time and again her engaging protagonists undergo complete, painful destructions of their pasts and their memories in order to survive in the contemporary metropolis, be it Beijing or London. *A Concise Chinese Dictionary for Lovers*, like the rest of her work, is intensely preoccupied with the clash between the past and the future.

Guo's own story begins in a similar way as that of many of her characters, thousands of miles away on a fishing village on the southeast coast of rural China. Born in 1973, her father was a fisherman-turned-artist, who made a living selling his paintings, but, due to the perceived bourgeois nature of his new profession, he was sent to a labour camp during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Her mother was a Red Guard whose duties also took her away from parenthood and so Guo was sent away, to live as a baby with strangers and later with her impoverished grandparents.

Guo describes violence and hardness as themes that pervade her childhood, both in family relationships and in her experience of nature in the typhoon-battered fishing village of her youth, where fishermen often did not return from the sea and children were regularly swept away from the beaches. She only remembers consciously meeting her parents when she was about seven and spent most of her lonely childhood with her silent grandparents, who were virtually estranged aside from living in the same house.

Describing her grandfather's lifelong abuse of her grandmother, a "baby bride" with bound feet, she highlights the outrageous suffering of women in pre-revolutionary China. Although her mother became a revolutionary Red Guard, Guo also describes her relationship with her mother as "violent" and her mother as perpetually resentful of her. The suggestion is that her mother's radical rejection of patriarchal pre-Communist Chinese Confucian values did not fully play out within the nuclear family.

But while the Cultural Revolution split her family apart, it also opened up previously unheard-of educational opportunities for a young girl from a family background that Guo rather harshly describes as "very barbarian". Despite these early hardships, Guo began publishing poetry in her early teens. She was influenced by the Beat Poets and Sylvia Plath, whom she viewed as radical at the time as a woman writing about suicide and who was published in translation only after censorship laws were relaxed in the late 1980s.

Guo has described her early poetry as displaying the "Misty Poets" style, an allegorical, subversive style that became prominent in China in the 1980s in response to heavy political censorship. As a 19-year-old student in Beijing, Guo published her earliest novel, initially titled *Fenfang's 37.2 Degrees*, that later became *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* when republished in English.

Xiaolu Guo's *raison d'être* is to fight indifference, stereotypes and mediocrity of art. She is a fighter, a rebel, a revolutionary. Every novel, every film, every story is a message, and even humour is just a veil, gently covering a tragedy, soul-stirring content, a serious cause.

Chinese Women's Studies is of interest to both Chinese and Western scholars. Chinese women have a unique experience on their way to feminism. It is well known that women have inferior positions in traditional China. Chinese society in Confucian terms was a patriarchal

society with strict rules of conduct. The underlying principles or governing rationale were the teachings of Confucius (551-479 B.C.). The traditional ideal woman was a dependant being whose behavior was governed by the “three obediences and four virtues.” The three obediences were obedience to father before marriage, the husband after marriage, and the son in case of widows. The four virtues were propriety in behavior, speech, demeanor and employment. Education for women was intended to inculcate these virtues. Another obvious symbol of the confinement and subordination of women was the custom of binding the feet of young girls in order to achieve their “female beauty” according to men’s standard. This custom started in the later seventeenth century and lasted until the early nineteenth century.

With the radical social changes and revolutions in the twentieth century, gender relations became a field of conflict in China, and Chinese women’s status was enormously improved. As a result of the contact with the west, western ideologies have influenced and made tremendous impact on Chinese writers. Xiaolu Guo negotiates both traditional Chinese and Western cultures through her writings.

In China, it is declared, and even believed, that today’s Chinese women are half the sky and as equal as men. Indeed, judged by their public and domestic contributions, women are more than half the sky. However, they are still kept in a position subordinate to men.

Feminism, a borrowed Western term, bears layers of historical and cultural connotations to post-Mao women. Under Mao, neither men nor women were allowed to vote and to enjoy human rights. In the sense of human rights, neither sex had privilege. Therefore Chinese women’s criticism of sexual inequality cannot be narrowly examined with the gender binary of male versus female because “what is often assumed to be the central transaction between women and culture—women’s heterosexual relation to men has little relevance to China crisis.”(Hu)

Unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese women did not need to win suffrage under Mao. Without fight, women have been granted the same rights to work and to receive education along with men. Post-Mao women writers may feel, not without limitation, that Western feminism, in promoting gender equality, also promotes gender “sameness”, a rhetoric they feel similar to that of Maoist women’s liberation that denies women of womanhood and sexual identity, which these writers believe is an essential part of the humanity.

Feminism, on the other hand, emphasizes gender difference, which Chinese women, writers feel downplays women’s intellectuality and capability through an emphasis of femininity that society always uses to oppress women. They recognize that male supremacy reflects the traditional and stereotypic view of women’s roles as the mother, wife, or daughter—roles that men want women to play for them and roles that largely stop women from developing themselves intellectually and professionally. Singling women out as “nüxing” (the female gender) implies that the female sex is not only different from but also inferior to the male sex, particularly when intellect and profession are concerned. Post-Mao women writers feel that they should be regarded as human first and foremost and then as women when their writing is being judged. They believe that their work is as equally good as men’s, and they do not need “-ism” to help them. The purpose of their writing is not to form -isms but to create art work just as men do. Even without affiliation with any “-ism,” they still write to educate men and emancipate women from the mentality of the “inferior” sex. For these reasons, post-Mao women writers find it hard to have their names associated with feminism.

Leading Chinese literary progress, post-Mao women writers are urban legends and have developed new styles, genres, and themes in response to social, economic, and political changes

since the early 1980s. Despite the changes, they have never deviated from their original goal—a literature by women, of women, and for women. This is in its essence a feminist goal.

Post-Mao women's life under Mao is paradoxical, complicating feminist theory and criticism of women's literature. In the early 1950's, gender equality was written into the constitution to protect marriages of free will, to outlaw concubinage and child marriage, and to ensure equal pay for equal work. Throughout their lives, they have been told that "women are the same as men" and that "women can do whatever men can do." Women had the equal right to receive formal education and participated in socialist construction to hold "half the sky." Ironically, it was exactly the promotion of gender similarity that denied women "the very language in which to express the gender inequality in their daily lives."¹³

Mao's movement has indeed liberated women in the sense that they have gained strong confidence in intellect, professional development, academic performance, and leadership. Since 1977, the year after Mao's death, when universities began admissions again based on college entrance test scores, college-educated post-Mao women have found out that they are not only as intellectually capable as men but in many ways, better, smarter, and more competent because they are able to juggle a full-time job and full load of housework. They are also decision-makers in terms of family finances, children's education, and relationships with relatives. As academics and professionals, they are fully capable of meeting challenges. The one-child policy does not allow them a second birth, and with support from their parents or in-laws, it also allows them to end reproduction and focus on career afterward. Women in post-Mao era challenge the portrayal of China as the home of an entrenched patriarchal family system.

On the other hand, post-Mao women's lives challenge the perception of China as a society where Mao's movement has liberated women from the patriarchal system. Not

surprisingly, the impact of Mao's liberation of women remains a controversy among researchers. Many scholars recognize that the Maoist women's liberation has, to a large degree, overthrown traditional gender ideology and fully placed women in society. However, the investigations of Elizabeth Croll, Mingxia Chen and Yu Xiong demonstrate disparities between the images of equality and the daily reality of inequality. Gail Hershatter concludes, "Women's domestic labour was rendered invisible, and time spent performing it made women less able to rise to supervisory positions." Li Xiaojiang, a leading Chinese feminist critic, and others argue that Mao's liberation of women was mainly to mobilize them as a labour force for national goals, for it held male standards as the norm and required women to meet men's criteria. Chinese women are liberated legally and theoretically, but deep down, within the family and institutions, traditional gender ideology still prevails.

The primary purpose of Mao's liberation of women is to increase industrial and agricultural production. Accordingly, gender equality meant mobilizing women to join men for Mao's revolution. The rhetoric of "answering the Party's calls" and "going to where Chairman Mao directs" deepened the political and physical exploitation of women. Women seemed liberated by joining men in the public sphere, yet they were required to satisfy the double demands from both the state and the family. Mao declared, "In order to build a great socialist society it is most important to mobilize the masses of women to join in productive activity." Involved defenselessly in heavy physical labour under primitive, even toxic and life-threatening, conditions, Chinese women worked along with men without physical and physiological differences to meet the demands from the state.

While women took nontraditional tasks in the workplace, they were also expected to take care of all housework to support their men's careers. In other words, while a woman could be

recognized in public as equal to men, at home she was taken for granted as a wife, daughter, or mother subordinate to male members' needs and careers. The state, while encouraging women to work as men outside the home, also promoted the Confucian ideology to tie women to wifely duties to support their husbands' careers. The double requirements placed a double physical burden on women. Li Xiaojiang points out that "more than forty years of mental and physical exhaustion" made Chinese women endure a heavy burden that "neither women in history nor contemporary men have experienced!" Chinese women were living "the life of beasts." The double requirements taken for granted by society also subordinate women as the inferior sex in the workplace and at home, consequently reinforcing the patriarchal ideology that "men are superior and women are inferior."

In practice, the rhetoric of "being the same as men" resulted in a chain of negative consequences to women, who were encouraged to follow men as the model. Since Mao's primary goal in liberating women was to use them as a labour force, it legitimized de-sexing women in order to assimilate them fully into the male world; yet at the same time, male standards remained dominant and the norm, and in turn, justified the use of male standards to judge women. Accordingly, a woman had to lose her sexual identity to achieve gender equality. Womanhood was thus deemed inferior to manhood and represented lesser human traits that ought to be suppressed. During the Cultural Revolution, female dignity plummeted to its nadir in history. Femininity was criticized as "petit bourgeois." Female-specific apparels were condemned as symbols of bourgeois lifestyle. It was a life risk for women to wear makeup, high-heels, and dresses/skirts, or even to keep long hair because all these were seen as corruptive of the Maoist revolutionary spirit. Love, beauty, emotion, courtship, gender relations, sexuality, and family life were privatized and thus forbidden to be discussed publicly. For example, though the

Marriage Law protected marriages of personal choice, couples who wanted to be married had to obtain the endorsement from their institutes. Arranged marriages for both sexes by parents or bosses of workplaces were mostly taken for granted privately and officially, but dating out of free choice was mostly kept as a secret until marriage was in the plan. A single woman in her late twenties or a divorced woman was often harassed by gossips and suffered from unfair institutional treatment. Many women were married out of family obligation or social pressure. Moreover, many married women who gave birth to girls suffered from family prejudice. But these problems were not allowed to be discussed publicly, because they were regarded as women's problems, private matters that did not deserve public attention. For more than four decades, Chinese women lived supposed "without sexual identity and differences." For such a long time, "woman" as a human concept virtually did not exist in China. As far as body politics go, Mao's transformation of women into semi-men, or men "wannabes," deprived women of their human rights and derogated womanhood.

Not until near the end of the 1970s, when the Cultural Revolution came to an end after the death of Mao and the arrest of "the Gang of Four" (a Party faction headed by Mao's third wife, Jiang Qing), did Chinese people see a loosening of the ideological rein. In the early 1980s, China began an economic reform, which revived a tremendous interest in Western science and technology, ideology, individualism, and humanism as well as Western fashion, entertainment, and art forms. Translations of early Western feminist works also became available. The contact with cultures beyond China disillusioned post-Mao women, who realized that the Maoist revolution deprived not only all the Chinese of human rights but also women of their rights to be women. Under Mao, they lost womanhood and the most precious years of their lives when they should have received a formal education.

The inspiration from Western humanism awakened women's gender consciousness. Starting in the late 1970s, post-Mao literary women, initiated a women's movement with fiction and poetry, a movement no longer enveloped in any political campaigns launched by males, such as the New Women Movement in the early twentieth century or women's liberation regulated by Mao. These women writers made their strong, eagerly awaited debut. Presenting female characters interactive with real life situations in a distinct voice, their literary works focus on the right to seek romantic love and to be women, which is not the end but the means to free women from the political control of the state. Expressed in their texts were strong desires to regain women's human dignity devalued and lost during the Cultural Revolution.

Meanwhile, the economic reform and free market have also brought Western capitalist practices and commercialization to the fore. The female body, after regaining its femininity, is vastly abused for economic and ideological purposes. The tension between the role of liberated women and the traditional role of the daughter, wife, or mother resurfaces with new problems and dilemmas. While under Mao, urban women were required to leave home and work for socialist construction, now a majority of the first group to be laid off under the readjusted economic policy, particularly those over thirty-five. Moreover, it is harder for female college graduates than for their male counterparts to secure professional jobs, because they are around the age when a woman is expected to be married and start a family. At job fairs, some companies even openly announce "No Interviews for Female Applicants." The state policy that a female employee is entitled to a thirty-day maternal leave with pay after giving birth works against women, because businesses simply refuse to hire them to avoid the liability.

Marriage, conventionally perceived as their main life component, imposes extra restraints on women. A woman without a decent job is contemptible to the extent that no man would take

her as a wife. On the other hand, a woman with an advanced degree and career success finds it difficult to establish a family as well, because many men reject these women as wives. Although the pressure on single women for marriage has slightly decreased since the 1990s, a woman in her twenties is still pressured to marry. It is not unusual that a single woman in her late twenties is subject to sexual harassment or institutional discrimination. Ironically, a married woman may also find herself in a hopeless situation, exhausted due to the double burden or abandoned when her husband has achieved success or when there are conflicts between her career and family. She who succeeds in her career is frequently reminded of her motherly or wifely duties. Oftentimes, this tension forces a woman to compromise her ambitions in order to be accepted as “nüren” by the family and society.

At home, a deep-rooted traditional institution, a woman has little control over her life. Chinese tradition holds that the family is the foundation of the country, and the Chinese characters for “country” or “state” is *guo jia* (state and family in one). To make the country strong, the family must be well regulated. Without officially recognizing it, the state rigorously observes the Confucian doctrine on the relationship among the individual, the family, and the government, which states:

The ancients who wished clearly to exemplify illustrious virtue throughout the world would first set up good government in their states. Wishing to govern their states well, they would first regulate their families. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they would first rectify their minds.¹⁴

Family is traditionally a women’s domain, where they are considered important, yet subordinate, to their husbands’ achievements.

The famous modern song “The Mid-Autumn Moon” (*shiwu de yueliang*) repeatedly echoes the centuries-old commandment that “the husband’s success honours the wife” (*fugue furong*). The promotion of the “Family of Five Merits” (*wuhao jiating*), or the model family, encourages a woman to sacrifice herself for her parents, her in-laws, her child, her husband, her workplace, and the state. All of the propaganda uses the label of “liberated woman” to confine her to the position subordinate to her husband and the family.¹⁵

The new problems in the age of economic reforms give incentives to literary women. In the wake of change, they respond to a painfully renewed and evolving gender awareness. While their fiction and poetry in the 1980s stressed the right to love and to regain femininity without polarizing gender relations, their writing in the 1990s criticizes gender inequality at home and in society.

Xiaolu Guo grew up in a tiny fishing village on an island off the southern coast of China, the daughter of a fisherman and factory worker who secretly dreamt of running away to Beijing to become a writer, a filmmaker, an artist. “When I lived in Beijing for ten years after my home town, every day I was angry about anything that happened – politically, culturally. Now, I go back and I don’t feel that strongly...I will never stand aside. I’m a fighter. I love to make some dust, kick up earth. I get bored if it’s too peaceful.”¹⁶

When asked about her experience as a writer when she arrived in London, Guo says, “When I came to London my writing in English became more about the inner self because Western culture is more about the individual,” she explains. She did not speak English when she arrived. “It was very frustrating. You’re compelled to write in a language you can’t use. I write from my life so the English I use is personal and informal, mixed with Chinese meaning.”¹⁷

Xiaolu Guo is presently dividing her time between London, Beijing and Paris. She has published four books in Chinese; *Who is my mother's boyfriend?* (1999), *Fenfang's 37.2 Degrees* (2000), *Film Notes* (2001) and *Movie Map* (2001). Two of her novels, *Village of Stone* (2004) and *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* (2008) were originally written in Chinese but they are revised years later and translated into English. The novelist herself rewrites a number of scenes as she believes that her original works were a bit immature. She has written two novels in English; *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007) and *UFO in Her Eyes* (2009). Apart from these, she has also published *Lovers in the Age of Indifference*, a collection of short stories in 2010. However, not many critical works have been written on the author and her works.

Xiaolu Guo admits to being “a bricolage person” and creates her work from a diverse range of things that happen to be available. Surrealism, of ironic humor and absurdity, has also become an important element that identifies Guo's work.

Strange, humor is some sort of quality I gained in the West, after I left China.

Perhaps I had that long ago, but I didn't realize how important it is to use humor or irony in a dark political context.¹⁸

Most of all, though, the artist is aware that the issues she deals with are not about simple cultural differences. In fact, being an outsider is not always about coming from a different place. Her heroin in *UFO in Her Eyes* has lived her whole life in a small town, but she is still set apart from her community. In fact, many of the issues Guo touches upon, even the seemingly geographically or culturally specific, can just as easily be seen as universal.

“The Chinese leap towards the modernity maybe more radical than in other countries, but is not totally unique. It has happened everywhere in the world, from England, to rural France, to

Latin America,” she argued. “The global environment is forcing the old society to abandon its traditional values. It is a terrible age. And we are all a part of it. We must face that frankly and be able to reflect on it deeply.”¹⁹

Writers like Jung Chang (b. 1952) and Xinran Xue (b. 1958) are witnesses of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Both Chang and Xue feel that the Cultural Revolution that took place under the leadership of Mao Zedong has a negative impact upon the people, particularly the lower classes. This is precisely reflected in their works.

For earlier writers, political concerns have been evident, but such concern is not evident among those of the younger generation such as Guo Xiaolu.

Jung Chang was born in Sichuan Province, China, in 1952. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) she worked as a peasant, a ‘barefoot’ doctor, a steelworker, and an electrician before becoming an English-language student at Sichuan University. She left China for Britain in 1978 and obtained a PhD in Linguistics in 1982 at the University of York - the first person from Communist China to receive a doctorate from a British university.

I had always dreamed of being a writer. But when I was growing up in China, the idea of writing for publication seemed out of the question. In those years, the country was under Mao’s tyranny, and most writers suffered appallingly in endless political persecutions...Even writing for oneself was extremely dangerous...But I had the urge to write, and kept on writing with an imaginary pen.²⁰

Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans* is a biography of three generations of Chinese women in Twentieth century China — her grandmother, mother, and herself. Chang paints a vivid portrait of the political and military turmoil of China in this period, from the marriage of her

grandmother to a warlord, to her mother's experience of Japanese-occupied Jinzhou during the Second Sino-Japanese War, and her own experience of the effects of Mao's policies of the 1950s and 1960s. Chang's 2005 work, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, a biography of Mao, was co-authored with her husband Jon Halliday and portrays Mao in an extremely negative light. The couple travelled all over the world to research the book, which took 12 years to write. They interviewed hundreds of people who had known Mao.

Xinran Xue is a British-Chinese journalist and broadcaster, born in Beijing in 1958. In the late 1980s, she began working for Chinese Radio and went on to become one of China's most successful journalists. In 1997 she moved to London, where she initially worked as cleaner. In London, she began work on her seminal book about Chinese women's lives *The Good Women of China*, a memoir relating many of the stories she heard while hosting her radio show. The book was published in 2002 and has been translated into over thirty languages.

Xinran's first novel *Miss Chopsticks* was published in July 2007. It explores the uneasy relationship between Chinese migrant workers and the cities they flock to. China's economic reform is changing the role of its chopstick girls. Once a disposable burden, they can now take city jobs as waitresses, masseuses, factory line workers and cleaners, They bring bundles of cash home, earning them unprecedented respect in patriarchal villages, as well as winning the respect and hearts of city dwellers. She often advises western media (including BBC and Sky) about western relations with China, and makes frequent television and radio appearances. She is a member of the Advisory Board of the Asia House Festival of Asian Literature.

Sex outside marriage was illegal in China until 1997.²¹ In her essay, "Sex in Chinese Culture" Xinran writes:

Sex was forbidden in Chinese culture after the beginning of the Song dynasty in the 10th century. We had had many books on the subject but they were treated as health handbooks for the rulers, and ordinary people were never allowed to read them. Most Chinese still believe that thinking and talking about sex is ‘dirty and bad’, even between married couples. For a thousand years, family, school and society have taught us to think like this. Therefore many Chinese have grown up in total ignorance...even now, many university students believe babies come out of their mothers’ tummy buttons. China started sex education in primary schools in 2002. ²²

The above statement clearly shows how “sex” and its related issues are viewed in Chinese society. However, writers like Xiaolu Guo and Xinran are not hesitant in mentioning this aspect in their literary works. In fact, Guo openly speaks about sex in her novels.

Xiaolu Guo, Xinran Xue and Jung Chang are all women, writing about the lives of Chinese women. The works of Xinran and Chang are historical and political in nature. They write about the negative impact of the reforms taking place during Mao’s leadership. Guo’s are mostly concerned with an individual’s search for freedom.

I live as an artist who chooses to express my feelings from a very personal experience, both in the east and in the west. Given the fact that I’ve barely worked for any institution, and all my work is sort of born from solitary labours, I don’t think that I approach certain themes in a very self-conscious or even an academic way, but certainly I have been dealing with the themes of home, alienation, an

individual's life in ideological environment as well as in a global scale, naturally.²³

The definition of "subversion" is given by Merriam-Webster as "a systematic attempt to overthrow or undermine a government or political system by persons working secretly from within."²⁴ This definition calls attention to the most prevalent characteristic of subversive literature. Subversive literature is characteristically used to rebel against someone or something, such as the government, persons in authority or parental figures in children's literature. Subversive literature can also be used to go against established moral theories.

Because subversive literature is often used to go against the opinions and rules of those people who are in position of authority, the literature is often controversial. The author strives to get away from common and traditional ways of thinking. The literature may cause anger and unrest, especially from people in authority or from those people who share the views and sentiments of the authority figures.

Subversive literature does not only challenge the views of those in authority, it also often use malicious language to attack the authority figures and devalue them. This means that the literature tries to make people think that the authority figures are not important and that their opinions are of little significance. The literature may devalue authority by making fun of it or belittling it, which often stirs up a lot of controversy and emotion.

Subversive literature is often extremely emotional because the author usually has very strong feelings about the information he is presenting. Although subversive literature often try to make fun of authority figures, the literature may also try to appeal to the emotional side of its readers.

The Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines "discourse" as the use of words to exchange thoughts and ideas or a long talk or piece of writing about a subject.

Discourse is the way in which language is used socially to convey broad historical meanings. It is language identified by the social conditions of its use, by who is using it and under what conditions. Language can never be 'neutral' because it bridges our personal and social worlds.²⁵

For Michel Foucault (15 October 1926 – 25 June 1984), discourse focuses on power relationships in society as expressed through language and practices.

...while the human subject is placed in relations of production and of signification, he is equally placed in power relations that are very complex.²⁶

Mikhail Bakhtin(November 17, 1895 – March 7, 1975) was one of the most important theorists of discourse in the twentieth century. According to Bakhtin, novels are a "phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice,"²⁷ Hence novels can be understood as consisting of "several heterogeneous stylistic unities, often located on different linguistic levels and subject to different stylistic controls."²⁸

It is notable that Xiaolu Guo follows the five linguistic or compositional styles laid down by Bakhtin in "Discourse in the Novel." These are: Direct authorial narration, Everyday, common narration, Literary or written narrations (such as diary entries and letters between characters), "Extra-artistic authorial speech", such as scientific or philosophical presentations and the individual speech of different characters.²⁹The essence and uniqueness of the novel, Bakhtin asserts, comes from the combination of different styles, voices, viewpoints and philosophies that the novel is capable of presenting. The very diversity of voices and perspectives that can exist within novels, then, is the defining element of novels, for, according

to Bakhtin, the essence of a novel comes from the conflict between different voices and, hence, points of view and perspectives that can be presented within such.

Having grown up in rural China, Xiaolu Guo began writing in English not long after moving to the U.K. in 2002 and published *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*—her first novel in the language—a few years later. She believes writing in a foreign tongue was a kind of liberation from self-censorship, implying that it allowed her to be more direct. “If you live in China,” she said, “you need to play around in order to live as an artist. Otherwise, you’re in prison.”³⁰

I am not very interested in naturalist-realism—neither in the Chinese nor the American context. I think our literary tradition has to evolve, has to explore its form and its spirit through writers and thinkers, rather than let the lazy, easy traditional narrative—which is controlled by the publishing industry—roll all over the readers and dominate the market. I think our readers and cinemagoers have been trained to read and watch very mainstream stuff. It’s like being given sleeping pills. It sends people to a non-reflective sleep state. Here I’m talking about the spirit of literature, rather than the trivial technical sides; it goes beyond language and nationality.³¹

A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary, according to Guo, was a part of an “awakening” to the possibilities of literature for her. Its young Chinese narrator has a limited command of English and, as the story opens, she is on her way to London where she will live while the language of her narration matures—sometimes quite awkwardly.

When I came to the U.K. ten years ago, everyone told me I couldn’t send my books directly to publishing houses—that I had to go through a literary agent. So I

did, and then I found out the agents couldn't provide a translator or read my Chinese. There was—there still is—a big shortage of good Chinese-English literary translators. So for two years in London, I was stuck waiting, not writing, with several Chinese books I couldn't get translated. That's when I decided to write in English, since I had been living here and had decided to reconstruct my life here. Even if I wrote in broken English, it was better than getting bored and weary and bitter on the long queue of authors waiting to be translated by a stranger. That decision was really liberating; I managed to find some [viable] ways to approach the foreign language in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. It was written as a linguistic exercise and was an awakening for me in terms of using 'other' ways to create literature.³²

Xiaolu Guo, like many other writers, would not admit to being affiliated to a feminist school of thought. However, her fictional works clearly show her deep interest in gender issues.

If you're a writer writing as a woman, it's always based on your own experiences. It wouldn't be a good book if you didn't permit this straightforward writing from your own experiences.³³

The message of women empowerment runs through most of her novels, particularly the ones selected for the present study. Through her novels, Guo does not hint at a complete overturn of power, but she tries to establish a kind of gender equilibrium in which women can attain self-conscious identity and freedom.

In order to achieve gender equality, Xiaolu Guo feels that a woman has to be financially independent. This clear economic basis has its echo come from the words of Virginia Woolf, "a

woman must have money and a room of her own.”³⁴ In Guo’s novels, the female protagonists strive to achieve financial independence.

Mao Zedong famously said women “hold up half the sky”, and during the Cultural Revolution women worked alongside men. In the 1980s, books on gender theory were translated into Chinese. When the fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing in 1995, the then-president Jiang Zemin announced that gender equality was a “matter of basic national policy.”³⁵ However, in the 1990s feminism was still largely an academic pursuit. According to Liu Bohong, the deputy director of the Women’s Studies Institute of China it is only over the past decade that feminism has gained momentum at a social level, which is a result of women’s competitiveness in the workplace and the internet.

End Notes:

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CHAPTER II :

Negotiating Loss And Alienation

This chapter will explore the themes of Loss and Alienation in the selected novels. It will attempt to focus on the loss, in terms of deaths in the family and dispossession suffered by the protagonists and the impact it has in shaping their characters. Guo's use of the modernist sense of "alienation" in her novels will also be examined in this chapter.

My novels and films are mainly to do with a new generation of Chinese in the West, who discover the idea of freedom and individuality...But their journey to the West is very much a journey towards an American way of life, which generates personal pain and cultural confusion and loss.¹

Lovers in the Age of Indifference is "about plastic love in our modern age... a love that doesn't have true intimacy... Then there is the alienation of the self, even in the environment to which that self belongs. I feel really close to this book. It's like a diary to me. It's a bleak, female look at reality and love. For me, middle-class life is bleak. It's very far away from true desire. The age of indifference is the age of plastic love."²

I lived in China for 30 years and the voice of the country was very strong...It affected my mind, my lifestyle, and I couldn't take it. But then it's not important where you are if you're a writer. What is important is understanding that you're always an outsider, wherever you are. It's good to keep moving.³

Female isolation is a particular theme in Guo's early novels. The female characters tend to be surrounded only by men. Embarking on her first screenplays, Fenfang tries to write a female character before suddenly realizing that she does not understand women and has no

female friends at all. In her words, “It seemed every woman in this city was busy with her children or her mortgage. Money was the only friend she needed. And I wasn’t my own friend either.”⁴ In Guo’s representation of China in the 2000s, the country’s rapid development as a market-based economy destroys any sense of solidarity that might previously have existed between women, especially for women with an artistic, non-conformist tendency like Fenfang.

Village of Stone features the same kind of isolation: main character Coral’s only friend is her boyfriend, Red, a Frisbee fanatic with whom she shares stilted dialogues and a stifling ground floor flat in Beijing. Strangely enough, a massive dried eel mysteriously sent from Coral’s home town, The Village of Stone, acts as the trigger that thaws the iciness in their relationship. Mesmerised by the appearance of this out-of-place and smelly eel, Coral and Red gradually consume it, causing memories of her past to become more accessible to Coral, thus allowing the lovers to achieve a previously unknown intimacy.

Like *Village of Stone*, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary* charts lead character Z’s dependence on her lover, an older English man she meets when she arrives in London. Desperate for companionship, a week after their first encounter she awkwardly misunderstands his invitation for her to be his “guest” and moves into his Hackney house.

Yet despite these early intimacies between the lovers, she finds his liberal, individualistic sense of personal freedom (and his vegetarianism) extremely challenging. Indeed, an argument about splitting the bill at a restaurant leads an angry Z to deploy the choice phrase, “Of course you have to pay. You are a man. If I pay too, why I need be with you?” It is clear that despite being educated within a communist system, Z still holds some very traditional views on the relationship between the sexes. As Z’s broken English improves, the lovers’ clashes become more obvious, their ideological differences more fully expressed. She becomes less and less

dependent on her lover and their relationship begins to fragment into constant arguing and finally, silence.

In her later works, *UFO in Her Eyes* and *Lovers in the Age of Indifference*, Guo seems to dwell on the same themes but with a broader range of perspectives. Both books have multiple narrators. *UFO in Her Eyes* is written as multiple police reports, and *Lovers in the Age of Indifference* as a melancholic and evocative collection of short stories that span ancient and contemporary China in seamless flights.

The opening chapter, following the “Prologue” in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* is titled “Alien.” The protagonist, Zhuang Xiao Qiao or Z, was sent to London from China by her parents to study English, “I am alien,...I live in another planet, with funny looking and strange language.”⁵ She also says, “In the West, in this country, I am barbarian, illiterate peasant girl, a face of the third world, and irresponsible foreigner. An alien from another planet.”⁶ Unable to understand the language people were using in a foreign country, she carries her “Concise Chinese-English Dictionary” everywhere she goes. She feels lost and isolated. She recounts her first night in England in the following words:

First night I away from home in my entirely twenty-three years life, everything scare me...No safety in this country, I think unsafe feeling come from I knowing nothing about this country. I scared I in a big danger...I worry. I worry I getting lost and nobody in China can find me anymore.⁷

Z had no sense of belonging until she met an older Englishman with whom she later lived-in with. Even then she still feels lonely and isolated. In the chapter “nonsense”, Z proclaims:

I am sick of speaking English like this. I am sick of writing English like this. I feel as if I am being tied up, as if I am living in a prison. I am scared that I have become a person without confidence, because I can't be me. 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. I wish I could just forget about all this vocabulary, these verbs, these tenses, and I wish I could just go back to my own language now. But is my own native language simple enough? I still remember the pain of studying Chinese characters when I was a child at school. Why do we have to study languages? Why do we have to force ourselves to communicate with people? Why is the process of communication so troubled and so painful?⁸

The chapter "isolate" is a discourse on her inability to adapt herself to her new situation.

I don't know anybody in this country. I am alone at home...The house is empty. Is this loneliness an emptiness?... I don't have a family here, and I don't have a house or a job here, and I don't have anything familiar here, and I can only speak low English here. Empty.⁹

Her boyfriend later insists that she visit the "Schengen Space" which she reluctantly agrees to. She lost her backpack on her way home which consists of all the maps and books she carried, along with all the experiences she gathered on her travel. Shortly after her return, Z realized she was pregnant and immediately felt the "need to go to hospital and have an abortion."¹⁰

In an interview with Sheena Patel on the publication of her novel *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Xiaolu Guo explains:

I don't think [Z's] sadness is because she learns more vocabulary or she learns how to speak; her sadness is a kind of existential sadness and her loneliness because people intend or think it is very easy to think OK cultural background is the first thing and is for everything so that's why people are blocked to communicate with each other - that's the problem between people...I think the fundamental problem is between two individuals, how it is impossible to communicate whether you are from the same culture or from different cultures... I think the ending, how this love is broken between them is not really to do with culture, it's about individual loneliness and individual desires which are very different from another one.¹¹

In the novel *Village of Stone*, the protagonist Coral lost both her parents. Her father left the Village of Stone before she was born. Years later, he died of cancer. Coral's mother died soon after she was born and she was raised by her grandparents. She was abducted and raped by the village mute. Her loss of chastity made her live in fear throughout the rest of her stay in the Village of Stone. By the time Coral was an adolescent, both her grandparents have died. Some time later, she was expelled from school for seducing her chemistry teacher. She got impregnated as a result of her brief physical encounter with her teacher. She was forced to undergo an abortion and soon after she fled to Beijing to escape the brutal life she was given in the Village of Stone.

Coral is not the only person who suffers loss and alienation in *Village of Stone*. Her grandmother has been a victim of subjugation. She came to the "Village of Stone" as a child-bride "without so much as a dowry to her name."¹² Coral says that her grandparents "despised each other."¹³ She explains,

My grandfather had always looked down on my grandmother. He had never liked her – not on the day she arrived in his household as a child of twelve, not when she was a grown woman...not even when she was a toothless old woman with white hair.¹⁴

Not only was the grandmother despised by her husband, she was also looked down upon by her in-laws for her lack of knowledge of the traditional norms. She was permanently banned from the family's dining table and "lived most of her life consigned to the kitchen."¹⁵ Coral says that the villagers too "looked down on my grandmother from the very first day she arrived in my grandfather's household."¹⁶ She further states,

As I grew older, I gradually gleaned from the older residents of the Village of Stone the origins of my grandparents' falling-out. They claimed that it was mainly my grandmother's fault. The key, they told me, was that my grandmother did not know how to behave. Later, however, I realized that my grandmother's most fatal error was simply not being born in the Village of Stone.¹⁷

The above passage shows the villagers' biased attitude towards Coral's grandmother – or women in general. As her husband tries to exert his power upon her, she retaliates in the form of silence. "My grandmother refused to speak, nursing her grievances in silence."¹⁸ In this way, she is subverting societal norms by shutting herself off from her husband and the villagers.

Most of Xiaolu Guo's novels dwell on geographical relocation or migration, and the impact it has on the characters. When characters move to other cities, they tend to suffer from loneliness and isolation. However, upon returning to their home village or villages, they feel they no longer belong there too. There is no sense of belonging or security. This in turn instils in them the need to search for an identity.

In the first chapter of *Village of Stone*, Coral reveals:

I spent the first fifteen years of my life in the Village of Stone, but I have left it far behind me. I now live one thousand eight hundred kilometers away, with a man who knows nothing about my past...It has been years since I corresponded with anyone in the village, and yet now I find myself thinking about it, about the things that happened there and the people who lived there – those whose lives I passed through and whose lives passed through me. (pp. 2)

She feels alienated even towards her boyfriend Red, with whom she is sharing a flat. This reveals the breakdown of relationships in the modern world.

Red really knows very little about me. The whole time we've been together, neither my feelings nor my past have figured very prominently in his life. Red and I have different lifelines; our blood runs separately. Each night our flesh may intertwine, but our memories, whether day or by night, never mingle.(pp 6)

Coral's mother died at childbirth, and her father has "fled the village before [Coral's] birth." She was looked after by her grandparents who "hated each other."

My grandparents rarely spoke to me, nor did I speak to them. We were like a family of mutes who still retained the power of speech. I had no real friends and nobody to talk to.(pp 45)

Since Coral and her family lived in a fishing village, every evening, wives and children would wait for their husbands or fathers to return with their catch. Coral, along with the other village children, would wait on the shore.

It was at times like these that I felt the loneliest, because I knew that my own father wouldn't be on any of those fishing boats. Nor was my mother one of the women sitting on the shore. (pp. 17)

At the age of seven, Coral was abducted and raped by the village mute. Her loss of chastity in the form of a rape has led to her "terror of men." After the death of her grandparents, she was put under the care of her neighbours. She went to school and fall into a relationship with her school teacher. She got pregnant and later underwent an abortion. As a result, she was expelled from school and has to go to Beijing to make a fresh start in life.

Coral's background explains how she has been born and brought up in a very harsh condition. She experiences different kinds of trauma in her childhood. Being an orphan and being different from the other kids she was ridiculed and frowned upon during her stay in the Village of Stone. However, these hardships only made her stronger. She becomes determined to leave the village and move to the city to look for a better way of life. Her past made her understand the harsh realities of life and made her emotionally stronger. She understands and accepts the uncertainties of life. In her relationship with Red, whom she shared a flat with, she became the breadwinner and the decision maker.

In Xiaolu Guo's *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, the protagonist--Fenfang, an alienated rebellious teenager who leaves home to make a living for herself in Beijing, faces countless struggles to find a place for herself in the chaotic city. As she leaves old relationships to create new ones and leaves old jobs to accept news ones, she finds herself lost in this new, fast-moving world and at the end of it all, having earned herself one title: a film extra. In this way, Fenfang becomes an extra in her own life, living not for herself, but for those around her. Guo describes Fenfang as an alienated character through her relationships and interactions with

other people, proving that those who live simply to conform to the norms of society inevitably alienate themselves from their own lives.

Guo obviously uses Fenfang's inability to forge a real connection to another person to symbolize her self-alienation. This inability is clear when she describes Fenfang's repulsion toward the Red Sox, her boyfriend's favorite baseball team.

His recent emails and phone calls had been about nothing but the Red Sox and their achievements. He didn't seem to realise how remote the Red Sox and the World Series were to me. It wasn't just that they were 18,000 miles away. It was that I didn't even know what a baseball looked like. Was it the size of a ping-pong ball or a volleyball? I had no idea. The Red Sox reminded me of the chasm between Ben and me, between our experiences. The Red Sox made me depressed.

(p.41)

Guo clearly uses the Red Sox as a metaphor for Ben in Fenfang's life, showing that Fenfang feels incapable of connecting with anyone -- including her boyfriend. Fenfang is unable to express herself to others, leading Ben to go on about something that seems absolutely irrelevant to her life. Guo's consistent use of this metaphor indicates that Fenfang's relationship with Ben does not suffer simply because they have 18,400 miles between them, but are just unable to connect as people. Fenfang has locked herself up in her own world, deprived of the ability to comprehend anything going on outside of it. She does not understand who Ben really is, despite her relationship with him. Guo later mentions that Fenfang does not know anything about Ben's past -- not even his age --, represented here by her lack of knowledge about baseballs: "I didn't even know what a baseball looked like. Was it the size of a ping-pong ball or a volleyball?" Her self-alienation has not allowed her to connect with Ben's interests, to the point

where she evidently does not even care since she has not even asked him to explain to her what baseball is -- in other words, what his past is. By describing Fenfang's relationship with Ben as a "chasm," Guo reveals that the distinction between their paths is too great to reconcile. Fenfang's statement, "The Red Sox made me depressed," shows that any interaction with Ben -- or people, by extension -- makes Fenfang depressed, since she has become so accustomed to her self-alienation. In Fragment 17 she further explains,

Ben was not my family, Ben lived for himself. A Western Body. When Ben and I slept together, he could forget about the love that was lying next to him in the dark. I felt he didn't need much warmth from anybody. His own 98.9°F were sufficient for him. His spirit slept alone. I thought about how, after Ben and I made love, he'd turn his body away from me. His naked body would face me. Even though our bodies were just two or three centimeters apart, I couldn't bear that distance. I felt abandoned...¹⁹

Guo's explanation of Fenfang's inability to connect with others helps describe her as an alienated character. Guo proves that Fenfang's desire to imitate the respected and elite around her, and conform to her society, is ultimately the reason for her alienation. When Fenfang is searching for a job -- an outlet to get famous -- she first turns to the exact actions of people before her.

There was this famous high-school student from Shanghai who had got into Harvard University after learning to recite the whole English dictionary off by heart. I couldn't remember his name, but he became our national hero. I figured I could be like him--that this forgotten dictionary might be my passport to the world too.²⁰

Clearly, Fenfang has no real interest in learning the words of the dictionary, but attempts it so that she could become a “national hero.” She hopes to get famous by mimicking the route another high-school student took, allowing her to please her society and make a name for herself. This desire shows that she chooses to live her life simply to conform to society, and when she loses interest in doing so because it is not truly what she desires; she gives up and alienates herself from others. Guo emphasizes Fenfang’s desire for fame as her “passport to the world,” proving that she attempts to mimic others in order to connect with them, rather than by being herself and following her own passion. Obviously, Fenfang’s alienation proves that living life in an attempt to conform to society results in self-alienation.

Guo compares Fenfang’s life to contemporary China, in order to prove that China has attempted to emulate the lifestyle of other nations to a point where it has forgotten its own culture. When Fenfang is speaking to an American friend of hers who is in Beijing, she finds that he sees Beijing from a rather different viewpoint than she does.

Patton loved Beijing. ‘You know, even when a city looks hard and concrete like Beijing, it’s possible to love it,’ he once said to me. He also said that China was better at being American than America, so he would rather live in China. How could China be more American than America? I didn’t get it. (p. 122)

Guo emphasizes that China has become so heavily concerned with imitating American lifestyle that it has become “better at being American than America.”²¹ This phrase implies that the degree to which globalization has impacted China has caused it to lose its traditional Chinese essence, becoming “hard and concrete.” Fenfang’s confusion at Patton’s statement shows that some Chinese people have just accepted the way their city is, because they do not even remember their culture -- the original China -- enough to see that what is before them now is an

overstretched imitation of another nation. In fact others, such as Patton, are attracted to Beijing because of its emulation of America, which projects a modern and progressive image of China to the world. Guo thus expresses that China has made these changes to its culture in order to conform to international society - to become like other nations. Just as Fenfang has been driven by the demands of her society and the people around her to a point where she does not remember what she truly desires, China has mimicked the lifestyle of America to a point where its people do not recognize it. Essentially, Guo uses Fenfang's self-alienation to represent China's, proving that in its effort to please the rest of its world, China has become an extra in its own country -- this fate mimicked in the lives of its people.

It is impossible to dispute that Guo uses Fenfang's interaction with others to prove that she has alienated herself from her own life and from the people around her. She provides a larger picture of China by establishing Fenfang's lifestyle as a metaphor for her country, conveying that China's desire to emulate a Western lifestyle has made it an extra in its own country. Essentially, Guo proves that living a life which simply conforms to society results in self-alienation, and encourages people not to choose the path taken by Fenfang and by China. The novel provides a lesson to people to lead their lives following their true passion, rather than attempting to meet the demands of their society.

Guo states:

I tried to understand the power of novels, good novels, like Kafka's 'Metamorphosis', Camus' 'the Outsider', or Boris Vian's 'Foam of Daze'... They are born from the most secret individual experiences, but at the same time, these experiences reflect collective life and fate. I guess that's the reason I write, I want to share my anger and my joy, I want the public to be my warm dinner party in

which everyone exchanges yesterday's obsessions and frustrations, so we know we are not insane and we don't have to go to hell immediately. Humans are spiritually saved because of some great novels, great books, and great poems.²²

Xiaolu Guo's draws her characters from the lower-middle-class peasant background.

These characters are usually physically unattractive and have no possession as such to boast of.

Guo is obsessed with the theme of relocation and all the protagonists of the selected texts have moved out of their rural homes to urban Beijing, or London, in the case of Z in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. This has ultimately led to the feeling of isolation, the inability to adapt to their new environment. As a result they all feel alienated from the people and their surroundings. Modernisation and rapid industrial development has also played a pivotal role in bringing about these crises in the individuals.

End Notes:

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- ¹ Dave Marr. "Global Georgia Initiative brings author and filmmaker Xiaolu Guo Feb. 27-28." <<http://news.uga.edu/releases/article/global-georgia-initiative-brings-author-and-filmmaker-xiaolu-guo-feb-27-28/>>. Web. 2 May 2014.
- ² Chitra Ramaswamy. "Interview: Writer Xiaolu Guo." *The Scotsman*. 17 January 2010. <<http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/books/interview-writer-xiaolu-guo-1-473349>>. Web. 3 December 2013.
- ³ Chitra Ramaswamy. "Interview: Writer Xiaolu Guo." *The Scotsman*. 17 January 2010. <<http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/books/interview-writer-xiaolu-guo-1-473349>>. Web. 3 December 2013.
- ⁴ Xiaolu Guo. *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* York: Random House, 2008. Print. Pp 140.
- ⁵ Xiaolu Guo. *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. London: Random House, 2007. Print. pp. 99
- ⁶ ibid 154
- ⁷ ibid 13-14.
- ⁸ ibid 180
- ⁹ ibid 155-56
- ¹⁰ ibid 271
- ¹¹ Sheena Patel. "The Only Place Humans Can Go is the Moon." *Booktin*. 25 March 2009. <<http://www.booktin.com/xiaolu-guo-interview/>>. Web. 2 May 2014.
- ¹² Xiaolu Guo. *Village of Stone* . London: Random House, 2004. Print. Pp 29.
- ¹³ Xiaolu Guo. *Village of Stone* . London: Random House, 2004. Print. Pp 28.
- ¹⁴ Ibid 29.
- ¹⁵ Ibid 34.
- ¹⁶ Ibid 32.
- ¹⁷ Ibid 32
- ¹⁸ Ibid 35.
- ¹⁹ Xiaolu Guo. *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* York: Random House, 2008. Print. Pp 138.
- ²⁰ ibid 13
- ²¹ ibid 124
- ²² Xiaolu Guo. "Visions in a Whirling Head." 5 April 2008. <http://www.guoxiaolu.com WR_visions_whirling_head.htm>. Web. 3 December 2013.

CHAPTER III :

The Radical Individual

Individualism is “the belief that the needs of each person are more important than the needs of the whole society or group; the actions or attitudes of a person who does things without being concerned about what other people will think.”¹ Yuriy Gorodnichenko and Gérard Roland wrote in “Culture, Institutions, and the Wealth of Nations”,

Individualism emphasizes personal freedom and achievement. Individualist culture therefore awards social status to personal accomplishments such as important discoveries, innovations or great artistic achievements. On the other hand, individualism can make collective action more difficult because individuals pursue their own interest without internalizing collective interests. Collectivism makes collective action easier in the sense that individuals internalize group interests to a greater degree. However, it also encourages conformity and discourages individuals from standing out.²

Modern individualism emerged in Britain with the ideas of Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham. Individualism encompasses a value system, a theory of human nature, and a belief in certain political, economic, social, and religious arrangements.

According to the individualist, all values are human-centred, the individual is of supreme importance, and all individuals are morally equal. Individualism places great value on self-reliance, on privacy, and on mutual respect. It embraces opposition to authority and to all manner of controls over the individual, especially when exercised by the state. As a theory of human

nature, individualism holds that the interests of the normal adult are best served by allowing him maximum freedom and responsibility for choosing his objectives and the means for obtaining them.³

Individualism is the idea that the individual's life belongs to him and that he has an inalienable right to live it as he sees fit, to act on his own judgment, to keep and use the product of his effort, and to pursue the values of his choosing. It is the idea that the individual is sovereign, an end in himself, and the fundamental unit of moral concern.

Collectivism is the idea that the individual's life belongs not to him but to the group or society of which he is merely a part, that he has no rights, and that he must sacrifice his values and goals for the group's "greater good." According to collectivism, the group or society is the basic unit of moral concern, and the individual is of value only insofar as he serves the group. As one advocate of this idea puts it: "Man has no rights except those which society permits him to enjoy. From the day of his birth until the day of his death society allows him to enjoy certain so-called rights and deprives him of others; not...because society desires especially to favor or oppress the individual, but because its own preservation, welfare, and happiness are the prime considerations."⁴

The collective identity of the Chinese people is partly the result of a civilization that for several thousand years has been built on agriculture. Each successive generation of peasants farmed the same soil and lived with the same neighbours and relatives as their parents and grandparents before them. Thus, the family and village identity takes on a much greater importance.

Collectivism is a cultural value found in China that contrasts with the more Western emphasis on individualism. According to Bob Riel,

The collective identity of the Chinese people is partly the result of a civilization that for several thousand years has been built on agriculture. Each successive generation of peasants farmed the same soil and lived with the same neighbours and relatives as their parents and grandparents before them. Thus, the family and village identity takes on a much greater importance. The Chinese have also been deeply affected by the teachings of Confucianism, which emphasizes the importance of extended families and interdependent relationships.⁵

This chapter focuses on the notion of individualism and will also attempt to focus on the quest of identity of the female narrators.

In his essay “Self-Reliance” Emerson writes:

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater.⁶

China has long been a family-run country. It has also been, and still is, primarily a rural nation. Family and agriculture are two important aspects of Chinese culture. Both the family and rural environment are collectivist in nature. They depend on working together and aiming for harmony. When Mao ZeDong came into power, he reinforced the collectivist view by eliminating landowners and individualists and sending nearly everyone to work in collectivist

communes. Thus, China has been more collectivist than individualist in both its ancient and modern history.

Until the 1990s, the Chinese were closed in for thousands of years. Xinran Xue, author of *The Good Women of China* (2002) says that the Chinese “are not used to having our own ‘personal’ opinion.”⁷ Each individual has to conform to the state’s regime and work for the society’s well-being. Henry David Thoreau adamantly states, “Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine.”⁸ According to Thoreau, “Everyone has an obligation to himself and himself, alone... To become a true individual is to make every decision based upon your own personal belief of its morality, no matter what society says, and to act upon your belief accordingly.” Thoreau went further asking, “What is it to be born free and not to live free? What is the value of any political freedom, but as a means to moral freedom? Is it a freedom to be slaves, or a freedom to be free?”⁹ The common idea in Emerson’s “Self reliance” and Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” is the fact that in order to be an individual one must be a non-conformist. In “Self- Reliance,” Emerson writes, “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, -- that is genius.”¹⁰ Xiaolu Guo, too, gives importance to the individual and she explores the element of non-conformity in her novels.

When Fenfang and Xiaolin met in Fragment 3 of *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, he asked her age, and she asked his.

That’s the tradition in China. If we knew each other’s ages we can understand each other’s past. We Chinese have been collective for so long, personal histories are not worth mentioning. Therefore as soon as Xiaolin and I knew how old the other was, we knew exactly what big shit had happened in our lives. The

introduction of the One Child Policy shortly before our births, for instance, and the fact that, in 1985, two pandas were sent to the USA as a national gift and we had to sing a tearful panda song at school.¹¹

The above passage shows that Fenfang is critical of collectivism. In the same chapter she continues, “But when [Xiaolin] said he had never once left Beijing, I changed my mind. It was clear he wouldn’t understand why I had left home.”¹²

Xiaolu Guo “falls in the gap between the collective background and the modern life.” She says,

When I was in university, for all seven years there were six people in my dormitory. We had three bunk beds and my entire youth was spent with five other people. We shared secrets, but we also have to be careful what we talk about because we live as a group. This was like the past, but at the same time I was living in politically open times – from the 90s to now – and then I came to the West, which is overwhelmingly individual, and the challenge that gives is partly what the book is about, the individual idea of freedom and love.¹³

In Guo’s novels, the protagonists leave their village to seek their fortune in big cities. This indicates that the youth of her novels flee what can be said as Chinese collectivism and move towards individualism. In Fragment 5 of *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, Fenfang narrates how she has been arrested by the police.

It was only as I was leaving that I finally understood what it had been about. On the steps outside, I overheard one policeman saying to another, ‘So, she didn’t

have anything to do with the supermarket murder then.' The other policeman leant towards him conspiratorially, 'Don't worry, she deserved it anyway. She's no good, that girl. Much too individualistic.'¹⁴

The above passage shows how there is little or no room for individualism in communist China. However, Fenfang has no regard for it and continue to violate societal norms throughout the novel.

In the beginning of *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, the protagonist Z declares: "I must re-educate."¹⁵ In *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, Fenfang alludes to Chairman Mao who stated, "We must be excellent at learning" and "To adapt one's thinking to the new conditions, one must study."¹⁶ Education plays a significant role in the development of the self. Thus upon her arrival in Beijing, Fenfang "decided to get myself an education...a girl from the countryside needed some schooling if she was going to catch up with the city girls."¹⁷

In all of Guo's work it is left unclear whether the heroines will achieve the full re-education that they constantly seek. And ultimately what seems more likely is that *f nsh n*¹⁸ itself will remain constant, as the characters perpetually change in response to the needy, inconstant and ever-demanding contemporary world.¹⁹

"When I came to London my writing in English became more about the inner self because Western culture is more about the individual," Xiaolu Guo explains. "It was very frustrating. You're compelled to write in a language you can't use. I write from my life so the English I use is personal and informal, mixed with Chinese meaning."²⁰

In her novels, Guo tells the stories of individuals-- their personal journeys and experiences. She says

Chinese people think in terms of family, not individuals. Older people in China they talk about collective memory, like the Cultural Revolution for example, or a certain kind of story that belongs to the collective memory. And they're not sure how to bring in the personal point of view, which for me is crucial when writing about your life as a Chinese person. For me it's important for my personal voice to be heard.²¹

She states further,

In the west I've noticed a lot of newspaper stories about China in the abstract, but there is a lack of personal stories and that is what I am writing. I don't try and represent a group of people. I just tell my own story.²²

A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers tells the story of a Chinese woman, Zhuang Xiao Qiao who is sent by her parents to study English in London. Upon her arrival in England, she renames herself "Z" as she thinks that the people there will not be able to pronounce her name properly. She soon meets a nameless English man. Through the encounter, and the puzzles of tense, verb and adverb, they both get to discover their own identity as well as the impossibility of two lovers to communicate.

The novel is written in the protagonist's broken English to begin with, in an experimental dictionary form. With each chapter this broken English gradually improves, reflecting the improvement of the heroine's own English over the year in which the novel is set.

We don't have much the individuality concept in China. We are collective, and we believe in collectivism. Collective Farm, Collective Leadership. Now we have *Group Life Insurance* from the governments as well. When I was in middle

school, we studied *Group Dancing*. We danced with 200 students as part of the school lesson. We have to dance exactly the same pace and the same movement in the music. Maybe that's why I never feel lonely in China.²³

Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth is a story about a young girl named Fenfang. The novel is in the form of a first person narrative with Fenfang narrating her own story. In the novel, the protagonist speaks about her journey to discover her identity. Fenfang is a rebel who refuses to conform to any of the societal norms and values. She is a nihilist who disregards any established institutions. She has no regard for family, marriage or religion. In fact, her disregard for religion is obvious by the way she addresses God. Throughout the novel she swears in the name of God whom she refers as "Heavenly Bastard in The Sky." She has no intention of getting married or settling down to raise children. For her, independence becomes the most significant aspect in her life. She left her family to see if she belongs in the city. However, Beijing left her feeling lost and disillusioned and in the end she decides to live in a cabin by the sea.

In "Fragment 3 : Xiaolin, Before He Got Violent" of *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, Fenfang explains her boredom over the monotonous life and lack of personal space she had being in a relationship with Xiaolin as:

I lived with his family in the tiny one-bedroom flat that was their home. A collective of three generations: his parents, his father's mother, his two younger sisters and us, not forgetting two brown cats and a white dog—all sleeping and coughing in the one bedroom. A solid family life, no *romance*, and I knew there would never be any.²⁴

She went on explaining:

For every meal, the three animals and six humans in Xiaolin's family (seven, if you included me) huddled round the small, circular table in the small, square room. The food was the same, the whole time I lived there... We lived so close to each other, every milimetre of the floor was used... After three years, the grandmother was even more decrepit, and the two little sisters were getting on my nerves. There was no oxygen left in the room, I was worn out. I wanted to run and run and run.²⁵

Fenfang left Xiaolin as she feels there was no room for her to grow as an individual. She yearns for freedom and independence so she moved into a new flat on her own after leaving Xiaolin.

The day I moved into that little apartment on the estate, I felt a secret joy at finally having a space of my own. I would never again have to share my space with a family or stinking animals. Never.²⁶

In *Village of Stone*, Coral left her village—the only place she knows—so she can be free from her dreadful past.

In *A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers* Z is fed up of the constraints of human language and societal norms. She wants to break free from these clutches so that she can attain freedom and be her real self. She blurts, “I want be able expose my body, to relieve my body... to let my body break all disciplines.”²⁷

Although the author would not admit to it, Xiaolu Guo's novels often bear autobiographical elements. Her childhood is depicted in *Village of Stone*. *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* reflects her struggles upon coming to the big city of Beijing. Her arrival in

England and her confusion with the language and culture can also be seen in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*.

Village of Stone is a novel about memory, loss and the search for redemption.

In this novel, Coral the narrator and her boyfriend Red, live in a cramped tower block in modern-day Beijing. She was raised by “silent” grandparents among the stern and superstitious fishermen of the remote “Village of Stone”. At fifteen, she escaped to the big city and shut the door on the darkness of her past. But when a sick old man appears on Coral’s doorstep, the past and present shockingly converge, and she is forced to confront the secrets of her history in order to realize her dreams for the future.

A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers is an account of the cultural differences between the east and the west. It is written in the form of diary-entry with each chapter beginning in a dictionary form. The novel portrays the journey of a twenty-three-year-old Zhuang, the daughter of shoe factory owners in rural China, who has come to London to study English. She calls herself Z because English people cannot pronounce her name, but she is no better at their language. She winds up lodging with a Chinese family and thinks she might as well not have left home. But then she meets an English man who changes everything. From the moment they met, she enters a new world of freedom, and self-discovery. Drawing on her diaries from when she first arrived in the UK, Xiaolu Guo writes the story in steadily improving English grammar and vocabulary. *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* is an utterly original novel about language, identity, and the cultural divide. The story is told in a first-person narrative by the female protagonist. In this novel, language becomes the mode of subversion.

Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth tells the story of Fenfang who left her village for Beijing to seek fortune in the big city. Fenfang is “the face of a post-modern woman,”²⁸ a non-conformist, nearly nihilist who questions established norms and institutions. This novel projects the breakdown of social institutions and the degradation of human values. It is composed of twenty chapters or “fragments,” in the protagonist Fenfang’s decade-long sojourn as an upwardly mobile migrant worker in Beijing. Its texture, rhythm, and form resemble a film script. Fenfang, a girl from a small village in southeast China but with a “big brain” or intellectual appetite just like Guo herself, moves at a dizzying pace from factory floors and coffee shops to the margins of the film world, first as an extra and then as a self-taught scriptwriter. Along the way, she gets involved with several Chinese and American boyfriends while moving from one apartment to another, traversing the rapidly transformed Beijing urban landscape--from a hybrid of the old imperial and socialist capital to a post-socialist global city.

The evolving image of a lone peasant girl who wants to find herself in the big city but constantly gets misunderstood, betrayed, and even abused by men--boyfriends, employers, or film directors and producers--and who in the end decides to leave behind both the monstrous city and pathetic men for the open sea landscape in the south, encapsulates the feminist tenor of the novel.²⁹

Guo emphatically describes the novel as the outcry of an outsider, an “angry youth lost in the big city.”³⁰ Yet, Beijing, the city that Guo and her heroine dreamed of as a place of emancipation and self-realization, turned out to be a harshly masculine battleground. The novel is about “a young woman fighting with a city that’s very much male, and violent.”³¹ The city’s blatant sexism is poignantly revealed in Fragment 18, centered on an encounter between Fenfang, by then a self-styled scriptwriter, and a producer nicknamed “Comrade loaded with

gold.” The latter turns out to be the “Manager of the Anti-Piracy Group,” who has wide connections for making money in the film and TV business. After flipping through her script while taking care of a stock sales deal on his cell phone, he gives her the following verdict:

So, you’re a woman writer. I, eh, I’ve never read anything by a ... you know... woman before. And, eh, don’t be angry, but let me tell you women can’t write. You tell me which great writer in China was a woman? There just aren’t any. Qiong Yao, that woman writer from Taiwan, maybe she counts.³²

As for his preferred material, he cites sensational stories from tabloids like *The Police Review*, sources for the TV series called *I Kidnapped a Woman* that he is producing. Hungry, angry, and desperate to get out of this greedy male city preying on young women, Fenfang manages to sell her script to an “underground director” for a meager fee. Even the latter tried to seduce her after handing her 5,000 yuan. “Fenfang, I never expected you to be so young--or to have such a red face and hot hands. You look like you could play the Bloody Mary woman [a prostitute] in your story.”³³ Fenfang declines the offer and races back into the stormy Beijing night.

The difficulty for Fenfang to get her stories told and seen, apart from dictates of the chauvinist male power, reflects Guo’s view of Chinese literature in general. It’s a literary tradition dominated by a ‘male tone,’ a tradition continued through the Cultural Revolution that ‘devalues small voices, female voices.’ It hardly counts ‘if you don’t write about big history or epics.’ The acceptable alternative to this grand masculine narrative seems to be stuff like *I Kidnapped a Woman*, which harks back to time-honored misogynist traditions. There was simply no

breathing space for girls with a ‘big brain’ like Fenfang. If they refuse to be preyed on, they are perceived to be threatening.³⁴

Guo’s debut novel, first published eleven years ago in China and now reworked in English, distills the rush to modernisation through the experience of Fenfang, a young peasant who leaves her village for Beijing. Part of the post-Cultural Revolution generation, Fenfang is untethered from history and profoundly alone, and Guo imbues her flailing efforts to establish herself with a raw, adolescent pain. Pirated books and DVDs provide an education, as Fenfang takes cues from “Betty Blue,” “Chungking Express,” Marguerite Duras, and Tennessee Williams, progressing from work as an extra in state film productions to a screenwriting career. Fenfang’s rage to express herself, carries an unmistakable autobiographical intensity.

Guo uses her fiction as a medium to ridicule both cultures of the East and West. Xiaolu Guo is possessed by themes of cultural dislocation. She uses film and literary language to explore themes of alienation, personal journeys in a global sense, memory, and daily tragedies and develops her own vision of China’s past and its future.

Through novel writing and film making, I try to discover how someone who has always felt like an outsider reveals the truth of human existence in a chaotic reality. I find the distance between our inner worlds and the outside world can be so far.³⁵

Cixous writes:

To write. An act which will not only ‘realize’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal;...A woman without a body, dumb,

blind, can't possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow. We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman.³⁶

Through her writing, Xiaolu Guo hopes to empower herself, her characters, and her social self which in its present state disturbs her individual identity.

End Notes:

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- ¹ Merriam Webster's Dictionary
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CHAPTER IV :

Subversion of Male Authority

In her essay “A Room of One’s One,” Virginia Woolf states:

The title women and fiction might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like; or it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them; or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together...¹

The above statement shows the complexity of women and fiction writing. Fenfang, the protagonist in Guo’s *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* confirms the difficulty of writing as a woman and for a woman in Fragment 18 of the novel:

I wanted to write a female character who could be everything: wife and mistress, servant and warrior, all at once. But I had no idea how to do this. I didn’t understand women. In all my time in Beijing, I’d never managed to have a female friend. It seemed every woman in this city was busy either with her kids or with her mortgage. Money was the only friend she needed. And I wasn’t my own friend either. So I gave up on women and started writing about something else.²

In her essay “Cinema and Adam’s Ribs”, Xiaolu Guo declares,

It is said that this world in which we live is still very much ‘Adam’s world’, or to put it in more contemporary academic language: it’s a male-dominated world.³

However, Guo tries to subvert this established notion through her fictional works. On the other side of this gender binary, she explores her belief about women's social and biological prospects which may contrastively recall Shulamith Firestone's radicalism.

According to Helene Cixous,

It is time for women to start scoring their feats in written and oral language. Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away-that's how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak-even just open her mouth-in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine. It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn't be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem.⁴

In "The Subject and Power", Michel Foucault said that there are three types of struggles:

...against forms of domination; against forms of exploitation that separate individuals from what they produce; or against that which ties the individuals to himself and submits him to others in this way (struggles against subjection, against forms of subjectivity and submission.)⁵

Shulamith Firestone (January 7, 1945 – August 28, 2012), a Canadian-born radical feminist, argued that gender inequality originated in the patriarchal societal structures imposed upon women through their biology; the physical, social and psychological disadvantages imposed by pregnancy, childbirth and subsequent child-rearing. She advocated the use of cybernetics to carry out human reproduction in laboratories as well as the proliferation of contraception, abortion, and state support for child-rearing; enabling them to escape their biologically determined positions in society.

Firestone described pregnancy as “barbaric”, and writes that a friend of hers compared labour to “shitting a pumpkin”. Among the reproductive technologies she predicted were sex selection and in-vitro fertilization. Firestone explored a number of possible social changes that she argued would result in a post-patriarchal society, including the abolition of the nuclear family and the promotion of living in community units within a socialist society.

Perhaps most famously, and inherently relevant to mothers, is Firestone’s argument that in order to achieve equality, women must eliminate their role as the sole biological producers of children. In Firestone’s view, the biological restriction upon women as child-bearers will consistently keep them in their place as second-class citizens until they relieve themselves of this burden. Less shocking is her complimentary view that women should not be solely in charge of child-rearing. In calling for her vision of feminist revolution, she would like to see

The freeing of women from the tyranny of reproduction by every means possible, and the diffusion of child-rearing to the society as a whole, to men and other children as well as women.⁶

Throughout the course of her argument, Firestone is correct in questioning historical male domination over women, but does a disservice to women by insisting that biological motherhood is inherently oppressive. Shulamith Firestone's radical feminism, as relevant and reactionary in the 1970s as it is now, tends to make the assumption that child bearing and child rearing hold women back from achieving true progress. This is an issue Xiaolu Guo deals with in her novels. Xiaolu Guo defies the traditional biological role of a woman by letting her female characters undergo abortion.

Xiaolu Guo shares Firestone's radical views about gender roles. As such abortion and its impact upon characters became an issue she deals with from time to time. In her novels, she ensures that women are free to choose between pregnancy and motherhood—procreation or abortion.

In her poem "Second Sex, Or Not?" Guo alludes to Beauvoir and also echoes Firestone's philosophy, saying:

Woman is not born, but becomes.

Woman is not the opposite sex, but the sex.

Woman is not the sexual object, but the object.

Haunted by femininity, I say:

woman never exists,

Nor has she ever been born.

Only wombs, ovaries, eggs,

A uterine universe.

Not even female spirits,

Not even woman when 'woman' ruled.

In the matriarchal world –
the womb is the credit, no woman there

The womb produces the man

But no woman is born

Haunted by femininity, I say:

Cut the womb!

Shrink the womb!

Or, be constructive,

Let the womb be transplanted universally!

Grown in men, in every boy-child's bowel!

Everyone shall carry the womb!

And woman shall rise from her tomb!

Haunted by femininity, I say:

Cut the womb!

Shrink the womb!

Or, be constructive,

Let the womb be grown in every creature.

Grown in men, grown in drone,

Grown in bull, cock, or ram,

Grown in buck, stag, dog, and President!

In every creature grown.

China's past is critical to understanding the role of women in China today. In Imperial China, women assumed a relatively subordinate position to men. Women did possess some power. Within the family context, for example, they would often assume a role of leadership. However, this power did not generally extend beyond the home and familial affairs. In the period between the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the role of women in Chinese society began to change dramatically.

In the article titled "The Role of Women in China" Kira O'Sullivan opines:

Although women are longer repressed by the immobilizing foot-binding tradition practiced for generations, they now experience different limitations and social pressures. Whilst communism pushed men and women to work together, China's traditional Confucianism, which berates 'strong women', lingers. This ideological contradiction results in a society wherein female high-flyers experience difficulty finding partners and women face prejudice in higher education and the workplace. Consequently, financial constraints are common, and many women admit that financial incentives are often more important than personal compatibility when searching for a partner.⁷

In China, as in all societies today, the question of "the role of women" is debated across different social groups. Rapid economic development has had major implications for China's population. Whereas there are increased opportunities for all, there continues to be a barrier for many.

The United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report (2010) gave China a "Gender Equality Ranking" of 38, just below the US (37) and far above Brazil (80), another member of the "Big Four." Nevertheless, women's positions of leadership in employment can be graphed as a pyramid: the nearer to the top, the fewer women to be found. The Central Government recognized this disparity within the civil service sector, and, since 2008, it has actively encouraged local governments to employ more women in leadership positions. The unequal gender representation in the workplace, however, is symptomatic of diverse underlying issues.

Globalization and the economic development of China present increased opportunities along with increased competition. Characterized by over-population and a high percentage of educated citizens, China is a society wherein women lose out to their male counterparts. The one-child policy introduced in 1978 places huge pressures on young families, as the care for elder grandparents falls to one grandchild and his or her spouse. Because enterprises tend to favor male employees, child-rearing falls primarily to the women.

Today, the role of women in China differs across social boundaries. Although there are, in theory, endless opportunities, only some women can access them. There is no accepted role for women. The rapid development of China has shifted the issues faced by women, and many are now beginning to scrutinize their role within society, the economy and politics.⁸

Xiaolu Guo writes in "Cinema and Adam's Ribs,"

Simone de Beauvoir said, "To put it bluntly, class struggle has done nothing to liberate women. I firmly believe that women must make themselves into ardent feminists, and work to solve their problems for themselves...one thing I am sure

of is this: while the overthrow of capitalism will quickly create favorable conditions for the emancipation of women, we will still have a very long road to walk before we gain our true liberation.’ In a similar vein, it would perhaps be fair to say that the “women’s revolution” is the longest, most protracted revolution in human history.⁹

Xiaolu Guo admits that she has a “long standing interest, or roots, in fringe culture. I have always felt an instinctual identification with non-mainstream culture.” Guo’s female protagonists are non-conformists who refuse to yield to male authority. This chapter will highlight the subjugation of and the subversion of male-authority as seen in the novels of Xiaolu Guo. Guo has her own concept of “time”. In her narratives, the “past” and the “present” bear significant meanings. The shift from past to present signifies the favourable change in the status of the female protagonists. Feminists texts of Helene Cixous; and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar will be incorporated in the study of the women’s subversion of male authority.

Fenfang, the protagonist states in *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, “They [Chinese men] think there are only two kinds of young women in China: good girls or prostitutes,” (pp.31) women are categorised into these two extreme polarities. Women have to conform to the norms and conventions of patriarchal society and the refusal to do so will earn them the label “prostitute”. But throughout the novel, it is clearly evident that Fenfang defies societal norms by continuing to maintain the so-called “immoral” relationship with her boyfriend.

In the novel *Village of Stone*, Xiaolu Guo tells the story of Coral Xiang. The plot revolves around Coral’s life – her past and present - which is told in alternating chapters. It is a rather dark

novel in which subversion of power takes place in the form of death. In the novel, Coral's father who had left her wife and unborn Coral died a painful death. After disappearing from their village for years, Coral's father came looking for Coral to seek her forgiveness and later died a tragic death. Her grandfather, who had been cruel to his wife eventually committed suicide.

After my grandfather died, my grandmother seemed to grow much sunnier, her mournful sighs less frequent. It was as if his death had freed her from the penance she had been living under since she first arrived in the Village of Stone as a child bride. His death was her liberation.¹⁰

Upon visiting her grandparents' graves, Coral notices,

In life they occupied separate floors, one above the other,...In death they occupy adjacent graves.¹¹

The above statement explains how during their lifetime, Coral's grandfather always had the upper hand, living one floor above his wife. However, their graves signify that death does away gender inequality that existed in life.

Then there is the village mute who has abducted Coral as a young girl and repeatedly raped her, died during a storm as his house crumbled over killing himself and his parents.

Now, twenty years later, I still have the power to speak, to write my story, to voice the ocean of hatred I feel towards him. But the mute has lost his language and his life. He will lie buried in this cemetery for all eternity, powerless to speak, as silent in death as he was during his wretched life. I hope that the time mute will be reincarnated as a person with the power of speech, so that he can know how it feels to speak, to scream and to cry. (177)

Shulamith Firestone opines

The heart of woman's oppression is her childbearing and child-rearing role. And in turn children are defined in relation to this role and are psychologically formed by it; what they become as adults and the sorts of relationships they are able to form determine the society they will ultimately build.¹²

Speaking of abortion, Guo writes:

There's an abortion section in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary*. In the beginning my U.S. editor wanted to take it out. She said the Bush government had just issued some policies and that middle-class readers wouldn't like it, which would reduce the market. I was very angry. I couldn't believe it. I had lived most of my life in China, and I didn't know that political and commercial censorship for fiction existed in the United States. Perhaps I was really naïve but you could imagine that in China we're told the West is a free world. I had a big argument with my editor, and eventually that section was saved.¹³

In *Village of Stone*, a fifteen-year-old Coral Jiang is impregnated by their teacher Mr. Mao. The latter insisted that she has an abortion so as to save his reputation.

Chairman Mao wrote in the *Little Red Book*:

In order to build a great socialist society it is of the utmost importance to arouse the broad masses of women to join in productive activity. Men and women must receive equal pay for equal work in production.¹⁴

In her essay "May My Dream Come True" Fang Fang writes:

A magazine polled whether or not women wanted to be 'full-time wives.' Surprisingly, many women responded affirmatively—they were willing. Many of the respondents were even college graduates. The answer poses a dilemma for us

who fight for women's liberation. On the one hand, it is indeed hard for women to meet professional demands because they seem to be born with additional domestic responsibilities—taking care of their children, their parents, and house chores. On the other hand, without income of their own, women cannot achieve financial independence. And without financial independence, women's liberation stays merely as empty words.¹⁵

In all her novels, Guo's female protagonists strive to become financially independent. For instance, Fenfang left her hometown for Beijing to look for a job. She met and lived in with her boyfriend Xiaolin. She was soon fed up of life with Xiaolin and left. Since then she endeavours to remain independent financially and otherwise. She takes up any job she was offered in order to remain independent. At the fact end of the novel, she sold her script for a huge sum of money and decides to live by the sea—a place she has dreamt of all her life.

In the chapter “equal” in *A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers*, the protagonist Z has an argument with her English boyfriend on the issue of gender equality. After having dinner in a restaurant, her boyfriend insists that they split the bill saying, “I'm always paying for you. In the West, men and women are equal. We should split food and rent... You are from China, the country with the most equal relationship between men and women. I'd have thought you'd understand what I'm talking about. Why should I pay for everything?”¹⁶ Z retorts:

You are man. If I pay too, then why I need to be with you?..You are man and I am woman, and we are live together. When couple is live together, woman loses social life automatically. She only stays at home do cooking and washing. And after she have kids, even worse. So woman can't have any social position at all. She loses...what is that word...financial independence?¹⁷

The above statement clearly shows women's position in the family and how gender equality or women's liberation can be brought about by financial independence. Due to her lack of knowledge of English culture and language, she was trapped within the four walls of her boyfriend's apartment.

A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers is a story about a girl's attempt to reform a bisexual English gentleman. Although the protagonist is young and inexperienced, she manages to reform her middle-aged lover. The author puts two contrasting characters together in this novel. Due to their age and cultural differences the two lovers were constantly at war with each other. Z states:

You know I like to fight. I am woman warrior. I like to do everything through fighting. I fight for everything. Struggle for everything. We Chinese are used to struggle get everything: food, education, house, freedom, visa, and human rights. If no need struggle then we don't know how to live anymore.¹⁸

Towards the end of the novel *A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers* Z's boyfriend finally gives in by saying "AT LEAST YOU'RE STILL LEARNING ALOT. EVEN IF EVERYTHING IS BROKEN."¹⁹ In this novel, language becomes a significant tool of subversion. In the beginning, Z had to rely on her boyfriend as she did not know how to speak or write in English. She had no understanding of the English culture and had to live in fear. However her mastery over the language granted her independence from her boyfriend and she no longer has to rely on anyone else. It also paved way for financial independence as she no longer has to worry about getting jobs whether in England, or China as she can now fluently converse and write in English.

Helene Cixous writes:

Writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural-hence political, typically masculine-economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition, where woman has never her turn to speak--this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures. Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallogocentric tradition.²⁰

In her novels, Guo always make sure that her female characters get the upper hand in relation to their male counterparts at the end.

...if one were to say the Bible is part of male culture, then the story of God fashioning Eve from one of Adam's ribs is the story of two beings, one a being of substance, one simply an adjunct of another's substance. This story has long predetermined the relationship between man and woman, the substantive and the adjunct...Feminists and female intellectuals must use all of the media outlets at their disposal to challenge and even ridicule this system - an outdated system in which woman is looked upon as a type of 'scenery'... Future societies must work to eliminate the division of the sexes into 'first-class' and 'second-class' citizens, and must allow Adam and Eve to live as equals in the Garden of Eden, so that Eve

will never again be merely someone fashioned from Adam's rib, but a whole person with a substance all her own.²¹

End Notes:

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- ³ Xiaolu Guo. "Cinema and Adam's Ribs" Cindy Carter (trans.) 1999.
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- ⁴ Helene Cixous. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 The University of Chicago (Summer, 1976), pp. 875-893. Web. 23 February 2014.
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- ⁶ Shulamith Firestone. *Dialectic of Sex: A Case For Feminist Revolution*.(1970) Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. pp. 221
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- ¹⁰ Xiaolu Guo. *Village of Stone* . London: Random House, 2004. Print. Pp 113
- ¹¹ Ibid 177
- ¹² Shulamith Firestone. *Dialectic of Sex: A Case For Feminist Revolution*.(1970) Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. pp. 50
- ¹³ Reed Cooley. *Xiaolu Guo : Why do we still Pretend we are Free*. <<http://www.guernicamag.com/daily/xiaoluguo-why-do-we-still-pretend-we-are-free/>>. Web. 21 March 2014
- ¹⁴ As quoted in Xiaolu Guo. *A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers*. 175
- ¹⁵ Hui Wu. *Once Iron Girls*. Pp 45.
- ¹⁶ Xiaolu Guo. *A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers* London: Random House, 2007. Print. Pp 174
- ¹⁷ Ibid 175
- ¹⁸ Ibid 142
- ¹⁹ Ibid 338
- ²⁰ Helene Cixous. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 The University of Chicago (Summer, 1976), pp. 875-893. 23//2/2014
- ²¹ Xiaolu Guo. "Cinema and Adam's Ribs" Cindy Carter (trans.) 1999.
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CHAPTER V :

Conclusion

Xiaolu Guo admits that the “most important thing for an artist or an author is to continue her work. Languages and settings are the tools but not the first thing.”¹ She is an experimental writer who uses various media and forms of writing to tell her story. She says,

...we are in the time of postmodern narrative... the newspaper, the text message, the iPhone conversation and the internet. Those elements should be the form of literature as well. By saying that, I’m not despising the power of narrative and the character-based story. But if character and narrative don’t open to the modern forms of communication, how is literature going to get back to the young people’s hearts?²

In most of her work, Xiaolu Guo refuses to follow the traditional form of writing. *Lovers in the Age of Indifference* is a collection of short stories. “Junk Mail” consists of six junk mails sent to different addresses from the same person. “Address Unknown” too is a collection of e-mails sent to an English man by his Chinese lover. “The Third Tree” is a text message conversation between a man and a married woman. Most of the stories featured in this book are open ended. In *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* she employs the stream of consciousness method. The book is divided into twenty “fragments” in which the protagonist narrates her journey to find her “self.” *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* is written in the form of diary entry and is based on the author’s diary when she first arrived in England. *UFO in Her Eyes* is a compilation of police investigation on an UFO sighting in Ginger Hill Village. It consists of interviews and police reports and the story is told from the point of view of different

characters. Although the form of narrative vary, most of Guo's novels touch upon the themes of loss, loneliness, isolation, alienation, rapid industrialization and its effects as well as the breakdown of social institutions. For her, it is important that a woman's story be told. She lets her female characters narrate their own story—their journey and experiences. She consistently portrays how patriarchal society subjugates women, disabling them to live to achieve their dreams.

In Guo's novels, female isolation is an important aspect. Her female protagonists are surrounded by men and they seem to have difficulty to be in good terms with other women. Cixous has an explanation for this. She says, "Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove."³ She explains further:

Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.⁴

In the beginning of *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, the protagonist Z declares: "I must re-educate."⁵ This hints at the passing away of old customs and traditions and the acceptance of new values and social order.

In all of Guo's work it is left unclear whether the heroines will achieve the full re-education that they constantly seek. And ultimately what seems more likely is that *f nsh n*⁶ itself

will remain constant, as the characters perpetually change in response to the needy, inconstant and ever-demanding contemporary world.⁷

In her novels, Xiaolu Guo depict the lives of common people. Her stories dwell on the daily lives of these people. She feels that unfortunately, this is something the reading public often wants to ignore.

Literary works that describe a human life or explore the psyche of a certain character tend to be dismissed as ‘trifling’ or ‘dealing with the world in microcosm.’ On the other hand, works of literature that describe tumultuous eras in human history or chart the path of dynastic change tend to be viewed as ‘master works’ of major literary importance. This perceptual gap is not only superficial, but also indicates a certain misanthropic view of the world. When it comes to deciding which works are loftier or more important – works dealing with a clearly delineated reality and the hard facts of our existence, or works that move beyond fact into the realm of the personal, the abstruse or the eternal – it is clear that none of us are fit to make this judgment.⁸

Xiaolu Guo’s protagonists are non-conformists who refuse to follow the rules laid down by established institutions like family, religion or the state. Rather than contributing to the society and its well-being, they rather follow their own desires. For them the individual’s desire is more significant as opposed to the state’s regime. Women’s writing is a literary genre closely linked to the question of identity.

Individual self-examination and the search for meaning, as well as our human ability to show concern for others, are qualities often overlooked or glossed over

by the powers that be. The analysis of an individual's spirit need not be the purview of any one sex. And if it is true that women writers have tended to focus more upon writing about women's lives or their own personal experiences, perhaps this is because women's lives, by definition, illustrate and embody such a wealth of ideological issues and historical problems.⁹

This research studies the shift from Chinese collectivism to Western individualist ideology. By probing the struggles – class, gender and cultural – encountered by the female protagonists in their search for identity, this study examines women's subversion of male authority.

The First chapter which is an introductory chapter contains the brief biography of the author and an introduction of the selected novels. It also locates Guo among her contemporary Chinese novelists.

Subversion is as a systematic attempt to overthrow or undermine a government or political system by persons working secretly from within. This definition calls attention to the most prevalent characteristic of subversive literature. Subversive literature is characteristically used to rebel against someone or something, such as the government, persons in authority or parental figures in children's literature. Subversive literature can also be used to go against established moral theories. This study explores the various ways in which Xiaolu Guo subverts the present socio-cultural and political situation.

Guo admits "if you're a writer writing as a woman, it's always based on your own experiences. It wouldn't be a good book if you didn't permit this straightforward writing from your own experiences."¹⁰ While the works of Guo's contemporaries Xinran Xue and Jung Chang are historical and political in nature, and are more concerned with the negative impact of the reforms taking place during Mao's leadership, Guo's are mostly concerned with an individual's

search for freedom. She scorns at the patriarchal order of her society and openly revolts against male chauvinism in her novels. However, these women writers depict the struggles faced by women in the patriarchal society, as well as their emancipation in their works.

The Second chapter “Negotiating Loss and Alienation” explores the themes of loss and alienation in the selected novels. It focuses on the loss, in terms of deaths in the family and dispossession suffered by the protagonists and the impact it has in shaping their characters. Guo’s use of the modernist sense of “alienation” in her novels will also be examined in this chapter.

In the novel *Village of Stone*, the protagonist Coral lost both her parents. Her father left the “Village of Stone” before she was born. Years later, he died of cancer. Coral’s mother died soon after she was born and she was raised by her grandparents. She was abducted and raped by the village mute and by the time she was an adolescent, both her grandparents have died. Some time later, she was expelled from school for seducing her chemistry teacher, forced to undergo an abortion and thus fled to Beijing to look for a job.

Loss or individual alienation in Guo acutely projects the passing away of old protections and the pressures of a conformist society as well. Guo’s novels establish that alienation and the search for identity are the results of the socio-economic and political order in Chinese culture.

The third chapter is titled “The Radical Individual.” Guo says, “Chinese people think in terms of family, not individuals. Older people in China they talk about collective memory, like the Cultural Revolution for example, or a certain kind of story that belongs to the collective memory. And they’re not sure how to bring in the personal point of view, which for me is crucial when writing about your life as a Chinese person. For me it’s important for my personal voice to

be heard.”¹¹ This chapter studies the aspects of individualism and radicalism in the selected novels of Xiaolu Guo.

In Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “Self Reliance” and Henry David Thoreau’s essay “Civil Disobedience”, both transcendentalist thinkers speak about being individual and what reforms and changes need to be made in society. They attacked the dominant religious, political, and cultural values of American society in order to make people aware that they are more important than everything, including government and society. The common idea in Emerson’s “Self reliance” and Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience” is the fact that in order to be an individual one must be a non-conformist. Xiaolu Guo, too, gives importance to the individual and she explores the element of non-conformity in her novels. Her female protagonists refuse to conform to the norms and values of patriarchal society. Fenfang, the protagonist in Guo’s *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* and Coral Jiang of *Village of Stone* disregards all moral, religious and social institutions. What matters most for them is financial independence which they strive to achieve throughout their journeys. *A Concise Chinese Dictionary for Lovers’* Z came to London to study English so that their shoe-making factory can profit from her knowledge. Upon her arrival in the West, she left her past life behind and her search for identity begins. Western individualism engulfs her and she by the time she went home, she no longer have the desire to contribute to the society or her family’s well-being. She instead ventures on her own in an attempt to find her “self.”

Guo admits, “There is absolutely nothing wrong with writing about the world of the heart or describing the life of the individual. For these are realms in which art, philosophy or science alone cannot provide a complete answer.”¹²

The Fourth chapter is titled “Subversion of male authority”. By probing the struggles – class, gender and cultural – encountered by the female protagonists in their search for identity, this chapter examines women’s subversion of male authority. In her essay “Cinema and Adam’s Ribs”, Guo declares, “It is said that this world in which we live is still very much ‘Adam’s world’, or to put it in more contemporary academic language: it’s a male-dominated world.”¹³ Fenfang, the protagonist states in *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, “They [Chinese men] think there are only two kinds of young women in China: good girls or prostitutes,” (pp.31) women are categorised into these two extreme polarities. Women have to conform to the norms and conventions of patriarchal society and the refusal to do so will earn them the label “prostitute”.

Guo’s female protagonists are non-conformists who refuse to yield to male authority. This chapter highlights the subjugation of and the subversion of male authority as seen in the novels of Xiaolu Guo.

Guo has her own concept of “time”. In her narratives, the “past” and the “present” bear significant meanings. The shift from past to present signifies the passing away of old tradition and beliefs and the plunge into a new system of values and beliefs. It also denotes the favourable change in the status of the female protagonists. In the light of feminist discourses of Helene Cixous; and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Guo’s subversive criticism of her world projects the women’s subversion of male authority.

For her personal voice to be heard, Xiaolu Guo says that it is important to write. In her 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”, Helene Cixous explored for the first time the point of view of the female author, and advocated a style of writing that would free women from the

“phallogentrism of language”¹⁴. In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous writes, “I would like to talk of women writers, to discuss their usefulness. Women must enter into the community of writers. They must write about themselves, and they must write about women “and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement.”¹⁵

In order to achieve gender equality, Xiaolu Guo feels that a woman has to be financially independent. Or to put in in the words of Virginia Woolf, “a woman must have money and a room of her own.”¹⁶ In Guo’s novels, the female protagonists strive to achieve financial independence. The message of women empowerment runs through most of her novels, particularly the ones selected for the present study. Through her novels, Guo does not hint at a complete overturn the system of power, but she tries to establish a kind of gender equilibrium in which women can attain self-conscious identity and freedom.

For Guo, “Words are the essential tool to express visions. With their words, writers are searching for meaning, and gaining meaning.”¹⁷ Cixous asserts women to “write.” She says, “Let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty, obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not yourself. Smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don’t like the true texts of women-female-sexed texts.”¹⁸

Xiaolu Guo’s novels depict the individual’s search for identity in the face of adversities. She, however feels that “It will take some time before the work of female authors, writing about their own personal experiences, struggles and scars, is finally accepted into the cultural mainstream.”¹⁹

Xiaolu Guo encourages “Feminists and female intellectuals must use all of the media outlets at their disposal to challenge and even ridicule this system”²⁰ - an outdated system in which woman is looked upon as a type of “scenery” by the men or the public in general. She says, “Future societies must work to eliminate the division of the sexes into ‘first-class’ and ‘second-class’ citizens, and must allow *Adam and Eve* to live as equals in the Garden of Eden, so that Eve will never again be merely someone fashioned from Adam’s rib, but a whole person with a substance all her own.”²¹

A close examination of Xiaolu Guo’s novels reveal that the author is not using her novels merely to tell stories. But she is consciously using it as literary discourse to subvert the Chinese socio-political and cultural situation through her writings.

End Notes:

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- ¹ Reed Cooley. "Xiaolu Guo: Why do we Still Pretend we are free." *Guernica: A magazine of Art and Politics*. 30 January 2014 <<http://www.guernicamag.com/daily/xiaolu-guo-why-do-we-still-pretend-we-are-free/>>. Web. 2 May 2014.
- ² Boyd Tonkin. *Global villager: Xiaolu Guo on the joy and pain of lives in transit*. The Independent. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/global-villager-xiaolu-guo-on-the-joy-and-pain-of-lives-in-transit-1860919.html>> 08 January 2010. Web. 2 November 2013.
- ³ Helene Cixous. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 The University of Chicago (Summer, 1976), pp. 875-893. 23//2/2014
- ⁴ *ibid*
- ⁵ Xiaolu Guo. *A Concise Chinese English Dictionary for Lovers* London: Random House, 2007. Print. Pp 10.
- ⁶ meaning 'to turn the body' in Mandarin.
- ⁷ M. Lý-Eliot, "To Turn the Body: A Look at Xiaolu Guo" *The F Word: Contemporary UK Feminism*. 2 August 2013 <http://www.thefword.org.uk/reviews/2013/08/xiaolu_guo_novels>. Web. 2 March 2014.
- ⁸ Xiaolu Guo. "Cinema and Adam's Ribs" Cindy Carter (trans.) 1999. <http://www.guoxiaolu.com/wr_essay_cinema_adam%27s_rib.htm>. Web. 2 January 2014.
- ⁹ Xiaolu Guo. "Cinema and Adam's Ribs" Cindy Carter (trans.) 1999. <http://www.guoxiaolu.com/wr_essay_cinema_adam%27s_rib.htm>. Web. 2 January 2014.
- ¹⁰ Laura Fitch. "Interview: Xiaolu Guo." *City Weekend*. 17 October 2013. <<http://www.cityweekend.com.cn/shanghai/blog/interview-xiaolu-guo/>>. Web. 2 May 2014.
- ¹¹ Justin Hill. "Interview With Xiaolu Guo." 2007. <http://www.justinhillauthor.com/Interview_with_Guo_Xiaolu.htm> . Web. 23 February 2014.
- ¹² Xiaolu Guo. "Cinema and Adam's Ribs" Cindy Carter (trans.) 1999. <http://www.guoxiaolu.com/wr_essay_cinema_adam%27s_rib.htm>. Web. 2 January 2014.
- ¹³ Xiaolu Guo. "Cinema and Adam's Ribs" Cindy Carter (trans.) 1999. <http://www.guoxiaolu.com/wr_essay_cinema_adam%27s_rib.htm>. Web. 2 January 2014.
- ¹⁴ Helene Cixous. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 The University of Chicago (Summer, 1976), pp. 875-893. 23//2/2014 pp 2
- ¹⁵ Helene Cixous. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 The University of Chicago (Summer, 1976), pp. 875-893. 23//2/2014 pp 2
- ¹⁶ Virginia Woolf. "A Room of One's Own." Victoria: Penguin Books Ltd. 1928. Pp 6
- ¹⁷ Xiaolu Guo. "Visions in a Whirling Head." 5 April 2008. <http://www.guoxiaolu.com/WR_visions_whirling_head.htm>. Web. 2 May 2014.
- ¹⁸ Helene Cixous. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 The University of Chicago (Summer, 1976), pp. 875-893. 23//2/2014
- ¹⁹ Xiaolu Guo. "Cinema and Adam's Ribs" Cindy Carter (trans.) 1999. <http://www.guoxiaolu.com/wr_essay_cinema_adam%27s_rib.htm>. Web. 2 January 2014.
- ²⁰ *ibid*
- ²¹ *ibid*

APPENDICES

<u>NAME OF THE CANDIDATE</u>	: Annabel Lalhriatpuii
<u>DEGREE</u>	: M.Phil.
<u>DEPARTMENT</u>	: English
<u>TITLE OF DISSERTATION</u>	: The Novel as a Subversive Discourse: A Study of Selected Novels of Xiaolu Guo.
<u>DATE OF PAYMENT OF ADMISSION</u>	: 03.08.2012
<u>(Commencement of First Semester)</u>	
<u>COMMENCEMENT OF SECOND</u>	: 01.01.2013
<u>SEMESTER/DISSERTATION</u>	
<u>APPROVAL OF RESEARCH PROPOSAL –</u>	
1. BOS	: 26.04.2013
2. SCHOOL BOARD	: 07.05.2013
3. REGISTRATION NO. & DATE	: MZU/M.Phil/119 of 07.05.2013
4. DUE DATE OF SUBMISSION	: 30.06.2014
5. EXTENTION IF ANY	: 1 Semester

HEAD

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