

## Love and Shame: Transcultural Communication and Its Failure in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This essay traces the transformation of Z in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* from a naïve Chinese peasant girl with blind faith in love to a cosmopolitan subject disillusioned with love. Her disillusionment results from her transnational relationship and her failed effort in transcultural communication during her stay in London for a year. Driven by her desire for complete understanding of her lover, she puts all her efforts into learning English; ironically, as her English improves, their relationship deteriorates. This essay illuminates the reasons for the failed communication from two different but related perspectives. The first part of the essay, informed by Pierre Bourdieu's theory on language and culture, locates the reason in Z's incapability to act as an effective minister of her culture and her lover's unwillingness to accept the arbitrariness of his culture and break out of its *habitus*. The second part of the essay, based on Silvan Tomkins's theory of emotions, attempts to demonstrate how intimate feelings such as love and shame operate between the two lovers and how shame interrupts Z from communicating with her lover but also contributes to her newly acquired identity as Chinese in the global context.

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In an interview with Geoffrey Macnab in *The Guardian*, Xiaolu Guo says, "I don't think cultural difference is the essential problem for communication." Despite her assertion, intercultural couples in her fiction and films often fail to communicate; thus, their relationships also fail.<sup>2</sup> *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (hereafter, *Dictionary for*

*Lovers*), Guo's first novel written in English, raises intriguing questions about the dynamics of language, love, culture, and identity. Can individuals with different cultural backgrounds fall in love and stay in love? Can they overcome cultural differences? How much does language matter? How does emotion function in transcultural communication? How does an intercultural relationship affect identity? Out of love, in an attempt to understand each other and to be understood, Z and her lover translate their languages, cultures, and emotions in the novel. However, their communication ultimately fails because they cannot find middle ground between their different culturally formed and embedded perspectives. Although the relationship fails, it shapes the heroine's new cosmopolitan identity, split between her Western perspective and her Chinese self. Love drives her desire to merge with her lover, to speak and think like him, but her sense of shame caused by his rejection of China and Chinese culture marks the boundary of her emerging self.

*Dictionary for Lovers* reflects the "transcultural era" of the new millennium: the interdependent world economy and rapidly developing telecommunication technologies enable "capital and commodities, products and services, businesspersons and migrants, tourists and terrorists" to "move across borders with relative freedom" (Slimbach 205). Richard Slimbach defines the quest of transculturalism as defining "shared interests and common values across cultural and national borders" (206). Transculturalism is driven by a desire to cross borders and find common ground between cultures. Transculturalism seeks to help people realize that each culture, although it seems "absolute" and "universal" to its insiders, contains values and truths that are held only by some people. Building on this recognition, transculturalism searches for universal qualities in others as a means of overcoming differences, seeking common ground on which to build further communication and mutual transformation.

At the center of this transcultural quest is translation. Traditionally, translation refers to the "transfer of information and ideas originally conveyed in one language into another language or languages" (Doloughan 137). This narrow definition of translation assumes a smooth transfer from the source language to the target language. However, Maria Tymoczko believes that this traditional concept of translation is too lim-

ited, considering all the socio-cultural changes caused by globalization. Instead, Tymoczko suggests transference/transmission, representation, and transculturation as possible areas to be included in translation studies (27–29). Translation, in its broad sense, has become an umbrella term for any kind of exchange between languages, signs, media, and cultures. Whatever the subject of the exchange, it is important to note that translation in its broad sense—“the transfer of information and ideas which appear to be rooted in a particular environment (whether . . . linguistic, social and/or cultural) in a way which demonstrates awareness of difference” (Doloughan 137)—is a complex process of constant negotiation between languages and/or cultures.

*Dictionary for Lovers* tells the story of a young Chinese woman’s transcultural quest. At the beginning, as Rachael Gilmour argues, Z naively believes in “translation as a straightforward process of substitution between different yet at the same time commensurable systems” (218), but Z soon feels frustrated because translation is a process of “complex and exhausting negotiations” and constant “movement between languages” (219). Ulla Rahbek relates Z’s transcultural experiences and struggles for communication to the concept of cultural translation. Cultural translation, as defined by Fiona Doloughan, is a postcolonial “condition of migrancy in general, that is people transported from one culture to another” (131). Rahbek argues that Z, caught in a median state as a migrant, having the double perspectives of insider and outsider at once, experiences a “psychological and cultural cognitive shift.”<sup>3</sup>

Each chapter of *Dictionary for Lovers* starts with a new word that Z has learned and its dictionary definition; this is followed by episodes related to the word and Z’s reflections on them. She writes down new words whenever she hears “a new noise from an English’s mouth” (17); the “noise” soon acquires meaning(s) for her. Unlike in an actual dictionary, the words in *Dictionary for Lovers* are not listed alphabetically. Rather, the novel is chronologically ordered, recording Z’s life in England; hence, the novel more closely resembles a journal than a dictionary. At the beginning, Z’s dictionary is merely a means to learn English words. In time, however, it becomes a way to understand her lover: “Every sentence you said, I put into my own dictionary. Next day

I look at and think every single word. I am entering into your brain. Although my world so far away from your, I think I be able understand you. I think you absolutely *charming*. Thing around you *fascinating*" (61).<sup>4</sup> Each word she learns becomes a way for her to enter his brain, to bridge their two worlds, to help her understand him. He is "charming" and "fascinating," like a new world she has just discovered. However, the more she learns English to communicate with her lover, the more she becomes frustrated because true communication is not a mechanical process of coding and decoding sentences according to grammatical rules. She needs to learn more than the language itself. She must learn the *habitus*, the system of dispositions, and the *doxa*, the undisputed, self-evident, seemingly objective structures that surround the English language and its native speakers. In the process, she recognizes the *habitus* and the *doxa* of her own native language and culture, of which she had not been previously conscious. Despite her strong desire to merge her world with that of her lover, their love fails. Perfect transcultural communication is impossible without disrupting or changing the *habitus* and the *doxa* of both parties. Refusing to accept the arbitrariness of his culture and failing to see Z as an individual separate from her national identity, her lover ceases to communicate with her, while Z fails to adequately translate her culture for him because she is too defensive and ashamed of it. The unequal balance of power between them as a foreign language learner and a native speaker of English, as well as their gender and the twenty year age difference, also makes it impossible for her to effectively represent her native culture.

### **I. Love (Im)Possible: To Translate the Untranslatable**

Roland Barthes, in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, writes about the problem experienced by lovers when trying to put their love into words because "language is both *too much* and *too little*, excessive (by the limitless expansion of the ego, by emotive submersion) and impoverished (by the codes on which love diminishes and levels it)" (99; emphasis in original). Love makes one realize the inappropriateness and the impoverished nature of language; lovers stumble over the "*muck* of language" (99; emphasis in original). The irony is that lovers must still depend on language

in their pursuit of love. In their frantic search for words, they create a discourse that “exists only in outbursts of language,” all fragmented and unauthorized (3). Thus, lovers’ discourse is a discourse against its own medium, revealing its poverty, testing its limit, and questioning the unquestioned. Love fuels the lovers’ desire to reach the object of their love beyond the limits of language and makes them attempt to sever language from its everyday usage, from the realm of the natural, to translate the untranslatable (namely, love itself). Barthes foregrounds the subversive power of lovers’ discourse, which is “ignored, disparaged, or derided by them [surrounding languages], severed not only from authority but also from the mechanisms of authority (science, techniques, arts)” despite its pervasiveness (1). His discussion, however, is limited in that he assumes that lovers are a homogeneous group that shares the same culture and speaks the same language. His assumptions about the homogeneity of the culture and the monolingual nature of the society ignore important differences within a group: class, age, ethnicity, educational level, and so forth. The biggest issue is that Barthes believes that every problem in communication is innate to language itself. However, in many cases, communication problems are caused by external factors, namely, social and cultural conditions and differences. Lovers cannot find the right words to describe their love or cannot understand the one they love not only because the signifiers keep sliding from one to another, never reaching the signified, but also because they often lack practical linguistic competence and socio-cultural differences. Despite these differences, lovers continue to try to understand and be understood. Love makes it possible for lovers to dare to overcome differences and to communicate—to translate. Translation and transcultural communication do not happen only in international contexts. Rather, they can occur at any time to anyone who is open to change and willing to try to surpass the social and cultural differences to communicate with people with different dispositions.

In the face of the difficult task of translating the untranslatable, Z is doubly handicapped in her communication with her lover by her lack of English language competence and by cultural differences. Perhaps this is why Ursula Le Guin, in her review of the novel in *The Guardian*,

suggested that *Dictionary for Lovers* is a novel about language, translation, and communication as much as it is about love. Pierre Bourdieu's theory on the praxis of language can complement Barthes' notions of love and language and may serve as a usable framework to understand the communication problem between Z and her lover in its social context. Bourdieu objects to Noam Chomsky's notion of competence which John B. Thompson defines as "the capacity of an ideal speaker to generate an unlimited sequence of grammatically well-formed sentences" (7). Instead of Chomsky's ideal speaker,<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu assumes actual speakers of a language and theorizes their practical competence, the "capacity to produce expressions which are appropriate for particular situations, that is, a capacity to produce expressions [that are] *à propos*" (Thompson 7; emphasis in original). Native speakers of a language acquire this practical competence through "successive reinforcements or refutations" during their earliest upbringing (Bourdieu, *Language* 82); thus, they can subconsciously make their utterances socially acceptable because they have acquired the linguistic *habitus* of their society. The *habitus*, "the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations" (Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* 78), determines one's disposition, "a way of being[,] . . . a predisposition, tendency, propensity, or inclination" (214). People who grow up in different backgrounds have different ideas about *à propos* actions and reactions, which often results in misunderstandings and conflict. Even lovers, who are more lenient toward one another and more willing to overcome mutual differences than people in other types of relationships, are not free from this problem.

Z questions the linguistic *habitus* of English, which has attracted many English-speaking readers to the novel: due to her lack of practical competence in English, she repeatedly questions its neutralized and naturalized use. Her view gives readers a chance to examine their own native language and culture from a new perspective. Z does not understand why the receptionist at the hostel mentions to her that it is very cold that day, something she already knows, because she does not understand the customary conversations about the weather that English people use to break the ice. In her grammar class, she learns the "Queen's

English” (20), the most authoritative version of the language she had been learning colloquially. But the “study of the mechanics and dynamics of language” (20) does not help her learn how English speakers think differently than speakers of other languages. Z questions the basic assumptions embedded in English: the grammatical distinction between *I* and *me*, the centrality of the subject in a sentence, and the gendered use of language. These are not just grammatical singularities because they carry the values and beliefs that are built into the English language and have been normalized over time. Mrs. Margaret, Z’s language school teacher, tells Z that she should “learn when to use *I* as the subject, and when to use *me* as the object!” (22). Z responds with the following question: “So *I* have two *mes*? According to Mrs. Margaret, one is subject *I* one is object *I*? But I only one. Unless Mrs. Margaret talking about incarnation or after life” (22). The clear distinction between *I* and *me* suggests that English requires a certain conceptual distance between the subject and the object, even when they function as different names for the same entity. The differences between *I* and *me* not only mark their different grammatical functions but also show how fluent speakers of English tend to distance themselves from the world and to objectify it (including themselves as the objects of their enunciation and study). These speakers hardly melt into the world because they always consider the matter of the subject vs. the object, the human being vs. the world, and so forth. A belief that human beings always stand at the center of the world—that is, that they give names to objects and create the order of things—is embedded in English. Z questions this worldview by juxtaposing it with the Chinese way of speaking. In Chinese, the subject is not central but peripheral to the time and place to which he or she belongs. Z “disorder[s]” English when she speaks a sentence such as, “*Last autumn on the Great Wall we eat barbecue*” (22). The syntax of the sentence proves that, in Chinese, the priority is given to the temporal and spatial references rather than to the subject. Z’s confused use of present tense also suggests that the subject is peripheral to time. Unlike English, Chinese does not need different forms of verbs to mark the timeframe of an action as the adverbial phrase, “Last autumn,” is enough to show that they ate barbecue in the past.

Z's lover changes her and helps her acquire practical competence in English. Her lover becomes an English teacher and cultural guide to her, being the first patient listener to her "nonsense English" (41), the first person in England whom she can understand because he speaks very slowly to her (50). He becomes her "academy" (149), providing her with practical knowledge of English. Z feels that the rules of polite behavior in England are extremely complicated. After she believes she has wronged her English teacher, she asks herself how she can learn to be polite when she is always alone. She is considered the "rude one" in her language school because she says things like "Are you bit fatter than me?" (31) and "You look much older than me" (32). The first day Z is invited to the house of the man who would become her lover, she speaks only in simple, present-tense sentences: "*I eat. Do you eat?*" To his question if she wants coffee, she answers, "*I don't want coffee. I want tea.*" He immediately corrects her words into proper English: "*A cup of tea would be delightful*" (47). Although her answer is so straightforward and blunt that it sounds almost rude, she makes her choice clear and it would not need any correction if she was speaking only to communicate her preference. Her lover, however, tries to teach her not only the correct way to speak but also the proper decorum of English society.

David Katan, in his article on intercultural communication, introduces a diagram of the levels of culture, synthesizing three levels of representation of culture in anthropology using the metaphor of an iceberg. From the technical to the formal, to the informal level, culture can be divided into visible, semi-visible, and invisible levels: the more hidden from the surface, the closer to the "unquestioned assumptions about the world and our own (cultural) identities" (78). The surface level—the technical level—is comprised of music, art, food and drink, clothing, architecture, institutions, geography, visible behavior, and so on. On the middle level—the formal level—are appropriate behavior, rituals, traditions, and other ways and styles of behavior. On the lowest level, that is, the informal level, operate beliefs and values: people in different cultural groups have different notions of time, space, power, the self, ways of thinking, and so forth; identity is formed at the very bottom of this level. The deepest level, governed by *doxa*, the seemingly objective



structures that surround a culture, is hardly questioned because it seems so self-evident to those who belong to the culture in question. This is the hardest part of the culture for an outsider to learn and understand.

At the beginning of their relationship, Z and her lover overcome many problems that could occur in transcultural communication. At first, their language barrier and cultural differences are more amusing than irritating. Their arguments begin with their inability to understand their more fundamental, deeper-level differences. According to Wilhelm von Humboldt, “the plurality of languages is far from reducible to a plurality of designations of a thing; they are different perspectives on the same thing, and when the thing is not the object of the external senses, one is often dealing with as many different things fashioned differently by each language” (qtd. in Cassin 26). Learning another language means learning about different perspectives on the same subject. To communicate with someone about intimate feelings, on a deep level, one must not only understand different perspectives but also find a point where those perspectives can be compatible.

First of all, different concepts of love cause conflict between Z and her lover. For Z, love is infinite—the Chinese word for love has no tense—but she believes that for English speakers, love is temporary, subject to change at any time:

“Love,” this English word: like other English words it has tense. “Loved” or “will love” or “have loved.” All these specific tenses mean Love is time-limited thing. Not infinite. It only exist in particular period of time. In Chinese, Love is “愛” (ai). It has no tense. . . . Love in Chinese means a being, a situation, a circumstance. Love is existence, holding past and future. If our love existed in Chinese tense, then it will last forever. It will be infinite. (239)

Chinese is an uninflected language, which makes it difficult for Chinese-speaking people to learn different tenses and different verb forms. Even after nearly a year in England, Z still has a problem with the future tense, and her English teacher, who knows that Asian students typically have this problem, tells her not to worry, saying, “It’s an Asian thing” (237).

However, it is not only grammatical differences that hinder Z from accepting her lover's perception of love and time. Her perception of time is of an "endless loop" (237), of circular movement, which comes from the Buddhist idea of reincarnation. In the loop of Buddhist time, love is not a momentary event but something that ties two people for eternity. Z's reference to Buddhism to justify her belief in infinite love, to some, might sound artificial and like an oversimplification of Chinese culture, which has become far more modern than it is portrayed by Z in the novel. However, this portrayal shows Guo's insight, as she demonstrates that each word in a given language is loaded with the cultural beliefs of the people who speak it.

Z's obsessive desire to be married to her lover makes him feel that she is possessive and does not trust him; Western readers also may believe her to be nagging, dependent, and childish. However, her lover may equally be considered irresponsible and unloving by Chinese readers. In modern Chinese *ai-ren* (愛人: love + person) refers to one's wife. With its strong Confucian background, Chinese literature has a long history of depicting love between husbands and wives; according to Jing Zhang, when Western literature was first introduced in China, the native literary tradition made it difficult for Chinese readers to appreciate European literature, which was full of adulterous relationships (295). Just as love and marriage are not interchangeable for her lover, love and romance are not interchangeable for Z. In any case, "romance" does not exist in her Chinese-English dictionary she has brought from China (75). For her, love means marriage, family, and a house to live in (87, 101). When she sees a beautiful man on the street, her first question to herself is "will he possible become my husband? If so, will he having stable incomes and be able buy house for his family?" (81). Z's lover says that he loves her, and Z also says she loves him; however, their love is not equivalent because his love has nothing to do with commitment.

The different notions of love between the two lovers are also tied to their different notions of time. Z's experience in China has taught her to prepare for the future, whereas her lover insists that she should live in the moment. He does not commit to her because for him, a man who lives in the constant present, the future exists only in the form of inde-

terminacy and potentialities that will be actualized only in the fullness of time. He tells her, "It's important to be able to live with uncertainty" (86); she never understands his attitude toward the future. Z wants to prepare for the future by planning because in China she always had to struggle to achieve her goals, and she found it hard to live without careful planning. For her, the future is something that she should make manifest. She writes in her dictionary, "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" (113).

Despite their differences and conflicts (or rather, thanks to their differences), Z thinks she and her lover are "efficient lover[s]" (61):

In China we say hundreds of reincarnations bring two peoples to same boat. Maybe you are that people for me to be same boat. I never met mans like you before. I think we perfect: You quite Yin, and I very Yang. You earthy, and I metal. You bit damp, and I a little dry. You cool, and I hot. You windy, and I firey. We join. There is mutualism. And we can benefit each other. And all these makes us efficient lover. (61)

Efficiency is not a word usually associated with lovers in the West, but it is an important quality for Z to use to judge whether a couple is compatible and can live in harmony. The Asian concept of strong partnership originates from the cultural belief of the yin-yang principle that opposites attract. Of interest is the fact that she attributes all the yin qualities, which are traditionally associated with femininity, to her lover and all the yang qualities, which are traditionally associated with masculinity, to herself; still, her old-fashioned ideas about gender roles become another hindrance to their relationship. She insists that he should pay her bill in a restaurant: "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?" (138). Z's idea of a woman's life after marriage, which she expresses despite the fact

that she and her lover are not married, contradicts the Maoist ideal of equality between men and women. The *Little Red Book* she has brought with her from China says, "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" (139). This reflects the cultural contradiction embedded in Chinese culture: despite the Communists' repeated attempts to sever Chinese people from Confucianist beliefs, those values, deeply rooted in the collective unconscious of Chinese culture, have survived, especially in rural areas like Z's hometown. In her childhood, meat was only available for her father because "[m]an needs meat and man is more important than woman, of course" (101); her mother had hated Z and beat her because her mother was disappointed to have had a daughter instead of a son (101). In the nursing home where she had performed community service in her middle-school days, she found that the residents were not only elderly people but also abandoned babies who were "always" girls (213).

As Z becomes increasingly frustrated in her attempts at transcultural communication with her lover, her desire to overcome the limits of communication becomes stronger. English makes her feel "tied up" as if she were in a "prison," and she feels "so small, so tiny, while the English culture surrounding [her] becomes enormous" (143). The English culture "swallows" her and "rapes" her (143). She believes words are "void" and "dry and distant towards the emotional worlds" (141). She hates her *Collins* dictionary, the "authority" (16) for current English that she bought when she arrived in England; she feels the dictionary does not explain the real meaning of a word in a real situation but only leads her to another signifier and to more confusion. However, her Chinese-English dictionary, limited by its number of words and the difficulties of translation between the two languages, cannot help her to better understand her lover either. Rather, her personal dictionary that she writes becomes her guide and her only map for living in what she feels is an incomprehensible country with an impossible language to learn. As their relationship is going downhill, even when she speaks and writes far better in English than before, she becomes more frustrated with

English. English dwarfs Z, making her feel perpetually self-conscious, like a “person without confidence” (143). At a certain moment, when Z feels that English is too suffocating, she explodes into Chinese. Gilmour interprets this moment as Z’s “resistant refusal of translation”: Gilmour argues that Z refuses to translate because she feels she becomes more a victim than an agent in the process of translation (220). The irony is that this refusal has no effect on most of the novel’s readers. As suggested by the section title, no matter how serious an issue Z raises concerning language, it is “nonsense” to those who cannot read Chinese. Her stormy Chinese, full of anger and frustration, is tamed by the presumably fictional editor who kindly translates for readers. Rahbek assumes that it is a real editor who provided translation for the readers, but it is highly possible that the note, “editor’s translation,” is nothing but Guo’s literary device. The note does not appear in all editions of the novel, but the Chinese text is translated exactly the same; thus, it is perhaps Guo herself who translated the Chinese text. *Dictionary for Lovers* was published first in the United Kingdom by Chatto & Windus in 2007, and later in the same year, it was published in the United States by Nan A. Talese, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Broadway Publishing Group. The original edition by Chatto & Windus and other editions that reprinted the edition (U.K. paperback by Vintage, 2008) or translated it (e.g., Buchet/Chastel [France], and Minumsa Publishing Co. Ltd. [South Korea]) are far different from the Nan A. Talese edition, whose editor seems more demanding than others. The Nan A. Talese edition removed a conversation between “Him” and “Her” at the beginning of the novel, as well as several photos, drawings, handwritten notes, and most importantly, all notes of “editor’s translation.” This edition seamlessly erased any trace of translation except for italicization. Readers who do not know Chinese would presumably not stop to examine Z’s fluent Chinese sentences at all. Also, they would likely not imagine what it is like to read without translation. On the other hand, the same section in other editions includes a note saying that translation was performed by an editor, who perhaps Guo has invented to help readers understand the Chinese text while reminding them of the fact that they are being helped by a bilingual character with more transcultural literacy than

themselves. The note adds more weights to Z's Chinese text as a source text. The fact that Z does not provide the translation herself makes a big difference; it means that she actively wills her entry titled "Nonsense" to be left as nonsense to non-Chinese speakers. It is only the fictional editor who interferes and saves the ignorant readers.

The fictional editor, however, simultaneously limits Z's authority. In the process of translation, the editor takes control over the meaning of the text by leaving out a few words from the source text. Two phrases are lost in translation, namely, *tamadi* (他妈地), a vulgar slang term used to express annoyance, and *gushi* (驱使), meaning "push around" or "impel," which Z uses to describe what English does to her, paralleling other actions she ascribes to English such as "rape" and "swallow" (142). Although the omission of these two phrases does not make a huge change to the general meaning of the passage, it does to the tone of Z's writing. The fictional editor who changes the tone and edits out inappropriate or untranslatable words is a powerful metaphor for translation itself. A great deal of emotion is lost in translation; her stormy Chinese, full of emotion, gives way to a weary complaint that sounds even pensive from time to time.

The relationship between Z and her lover deteriorates because the couple fails to effectively communicate transculturally not because of Z's lack of English competence but because of the unwillingness of Z's lover to compromise on his beliefs and values and because of Z's inability to accept the possibility of other ways of life. Thanks to her hard work and her lover's help, Z achieves a certain level of practical competence in English, but she still fails in love because one year is too short a time for her to acquire the cultural *habitus* of English speakers and because her lover will not let her disrupt the *habitus* of his world. He never doubts his values: the priority of the individual over the group, of privacy over intimacy, and of freedom over love. He might argue, if he saw the dichotomies which Z accumulates in her dictionary, that they do not make sense because those ideas are not incompatible in his world. The *doxa* of his culture naturalizes the arbitrary nature of its own concepts; Z's lover cannot see beyond what his culture has taught him. In his world, unlike in Chinese collectivism, an individual is separable

from the group to which he or she belongs; privacy does not imply selfishness or loneliness, as it does to Z, whereas intimacy does not inherently mean family, house, or home, all of which are interchangeable in Z's world. To Z's lover, freedom is freedom to do what he wants to do, whereas to Z, freedom is always freedom from something that limits her life—freedom from her obligation to her parents, from immigration law, and from the Chinese government. His love is a part of his freedom; however, in Z's world, one must choose between freedom and love because love means commitment, obligation, and a binding force for her. The *doxa* of her lover's world has a different "sense of limits, sense of reality" (Bourdieu, *Outline* 164) from hers. His insistence on the *doxa* of his culture and his unwillingness to learn about Z's world make it impossible for them to find common ground.

From the beginning of their relationship, Z's lover is not interested in Chinese culture and does not intend to learn about it. At the end of a conversation about Z's host family, a strange Chinese couple, he adds, "I don't understand you Chinese at all. But I would like to get to know you" (45). By this remark, he makes his point clear that he does not want to continue talking about the couple whom he does not understand, but that he would like to "get to know" Z now since she is moving in to his place. His desire to learn about her, however, is more oriented toward their relationship than learning about her culture. His idea of China is so limited that Chinese people are nothing but Communists to him. When Z tries to explain what a real family means to her by listing things she associates with the word, namely, "house, husband and wife, then have some children, then cooking together, then travel together," he cuts her off and ends the conversation by saying, "I thought the Chinese were supposed to be Communists" (98). Maybe it is not completely his fault that he does not understand Chinese culture even after he meets Z because her culture has equipped her with limited resources. When her lover wants to know why Chinese regard pregnancy as taking ten months while Westerns nine months, she cannot answer because she was never taught that "properly" at school (54). When Z later explains the concept of *qi*—a vital force within and outside one's body whose interaction and flow affect one's health according to Chinese pathol-

ogy—her lover, impressed by her knowledge, listens to her. When he asks why she had never told him about that concept, she answers, “you never really ask me. You never really pay attention to my culture” (228).

The one-way traffic of information becomes exhausting to Z’s lover, who becomes tired of telling her the meanings of so many words. As the story goes on, he speaks less and less. He complains, “It is so hard for me. I don’t have my own space to think about my sculptures, my things, and my own words. I don’t have time to be on my own. Now when I talk to other people, I become slower and slower. I am losing my words” (141). Z wants to persuade him that it is not their fault but the fault of cultural differences: “It is just because we live in such different cultures. It is very difficult for both you and I to find the right way to communicate” (141). Her effort to heal the breach, however, is frustrated by his sarcastic comment, “you really are starting to speak English *properly*” (141; emphasis in original). Z suggests that they should only find the “right way to communicate” by locating a nodal point where their two cultures can meet and transform each other, but her lover’s sarcasm foretells their failure in transcultural communication. Z’s lover is not willing to let her culture change his own; she, though willing, is equally incapable of changing hers. Hence, the possibility of transcultural communication between them dies not long after its birth.

As if to suggest that some words are untranslatable, Z ends her story by saying that she and her lover have no *yuan fen*. This time, she does not translate the meaning of this term into English. *Yuan fen* (緣分) is a Buddhist concept of the predetermined principle that binds two people by fate. Although Z fails in her love and becomes frustrated with transcultural communication, her change from a naïve peasant girl from China to an “adult,” a “woman” with some cosmopolitan experience and an increased sensitivity to cultural differences suggests a certain level of cosmopolitan literacy in the future (282). She also starts to distance herself from her own culture. Her new sense of individuality makes her angry at the Chinese government for “order[ing]” her back to China (256). In China, she feels out of place because her home country has become even more materialistic than before (281–82). She cannot join in her friends’ conversations because they no longer share the same ideas



and values she holds; they think only of the capitalist value of Western education (281). Z refuses to live as her mother wants or as her friends expect her to. Her mother's complaint that Z lives only in the present reverberates ironically with Z's conversation with her lover about the future (254, 281).

## II. Shame and Identity

Love makes Z desire to be like her lover, speaking his language, removing all distance between them, but shame shapes her new identity in a global context. Although she learned in school to be proud to be Chinese, she does not know what this means outside China until she arrives in England. In England, she feels that her whole being is reduced to her Chinese nationality and feels shame (134). Silvan Tomkins, in his discussion of children's development, says that children learn to enjoy many things while growing up, but above all, they enjoy identifying themselves with their parents mostly and secondly with their peers (85). However, he continues, shame arises when children are thwarted from the joy of identifying themselves with their parents or peers (97).<sup>6</sup> In the words of Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank who put it in a more general way, shame is an affect "activated by the drawing of a boundary line or barrier" into a relationship (22). Shame is often experienced as a "torment of self-consciousness" because it is "the most reflexive of affects in that the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost" as one in shame becomes conscious of his own face burning with shame (Tomkins 136). Shame is even more tormenting than guilt because the former is "experienced less as about what the self has done but what the self is" (Biddle 115). Though tormenting, shame has an important function in identity formation: it helps individuals shape their identity by negatively differentiating themselves from others.

In an interview with Boyd Tonkin in *The Independent*, Guo says, "as she [Z] gains more sophisticated English, she also gains depression from the English culture"; however, it is not exactly depression but shame that dominates Z's emotional state and delineates the contour of her new identity. Drawing from Tomkins' concept of shame, Jennifer Biddle writes that being a foreigner is a "terrain of shame" because one becomes

acutely self-conscious (118); she also mentions how the experience of shame affects her identity as an anthropologist in fieldwork: “The rejection by the other in a direct shame event makes for a most distinct self boundary, for what differentiates the self from the other constitutes self, dependent as identity is necessarily on difference” (116). A person in a foreign culture may experience rejection by others and feel shame; this shame delineates the boundary of self-identity and structures “the difference(s) we call cultural” (Biddle 122). In England, Z sharply feels her differences from other people; she experiences negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and loneliness at the beginning of the novel. She only feels shame after she finds her lover; before meeting him, she responds to British culture with contempt because Chinese culture is still her major source of reference. However, love, in her words, makes her “fragile” and “vulnerable” (51). Because she desires to be like her lover and be loved by him in return, she cannot respond to their differences with contempt. As Z wishes her lover to “save” her, “take” her, “adopt” her, and be her “family” and “home” (33), she regards him as if he were her adoptive parent, someone with whom she can identify. When her lover rejects Chinese culture, she feels shame like a child who has been thwarted from the joy of identifying with its parents. That shame produces a new boundary of the self, a new self-identity. She is Chinese first and foremost, but being Chinese becomes something of which she is no longer proud.

Z’s Chinese identity is circumscribed by many shame-inducing stereotypes. She feels that her identity starts to reshape itself according to the popular image of “typical Chinese”:

The day when I arrived to the West, I suddenly realised I am a Chinese. As long as one has black eyes and black hair, obsessed by rice, and cannot swallow any Western food, and cannot pronounce the difference between “r” and “l,” and request people without using *please*—then he or she is a typical Chinese: an ill-legal immigrant, badly treat Tibetans and Taiwanese, good on food but put MSG to poison people, eat dog’s meat and drink snakes’ guts. (148)

On the day of her arrival in London, seeing a sign at the immigration office that reads “Alien,” she becomes self-conscious of her “funny looking and strange language”; she is “alien, like Hollywood film *Alien*” (7). The gap between the two worlds seems unbridgeable; in her words, “‘Birds have their bird language, beasts have their beast talk.’ English they totally another species” (7). At the beginning, she accepts her differentness with no problem; as long as the Chinese and the English are like two different species with two different languages, as long as they do not need to communicate, she does not have to feel ashamed of her different looks and so-called strange language. Her basic response toward these differences is contempt: she asks herself, “English words made only from twenty-six characters? Are English a bit lazy or what? We have fifty thousand characters in Chinese” (12); she comments that baked beans taste “like somebody put beans into mouth but spit out and back into plate” (14); she thinks the receptionist is odd when she asks her, “Very cold today, isn’t it?” giving unnecessary information (18); London seems “so noble, respectable” by appearance, but when she looks for a place to live, London is nothing more than a “refuge camp” (19).

Love makes Z “fragile,” and she starts to feel shame about her appearance and her rudimentary English: she says to her lover, “I think you too beautiful for me, and I don’t deserve of you . . . I am ugly peasant girl” (50). A hierarchy sets in, and he becomes a role model she wants to emulate: his Western looks instead of her Asian appearance, his Queen’s English rather than her rudimentary English. Language plays a crucial role in this process of establishing hierarchy. Z and her lover have an unequal relationship because he is a native speaker of English but she is not. Z thinks her lover is “beautiful” and “noble” because he speaks the Queen’s English; she feels inferior to him because, in her words, “my bad English don’t match your beautiful language” (51). The unequal relationship between his mastery of the target language and hers of her mother tongue reinforces the hierarchy between the lovers. Correct English, rather than his or her linguistic background, is seen as the sign of one’s “nobility.” A man she has just met at a bar is “noble” to her because she thinks his words are “noble”; however, she does not

understand why people around them laugh when she says this. She is sure that he is “a *noble* man with *noble* words” (66). The man’s nobility has nothing to do with his heritage or his character, in her definition. He is “noble” to her simply because he speaks proper English while she speaks “humble” English (66).

Z starts to feel ashamed of her Chinese nationality in her lover’s presence, anticipating his rejection of China and Chinese culture. For instance, she is ashamed when a Chinese waitress acts rude and unkind:

Why Chinese people becoming so mean in the West? I feel bit guilty for horrible service. Because I bring you and you maybe thinking my culture just like this. Maybe that why some English look down of our Chinese. I am shameful for being a Chinese here. (62)

In China she had learned to be proud to be Chinese:

“The size of China is almost the size of the whole Europe,” my geography teacher told us in middle school. . . . “This is Soviet. Only Soviet and America are bigger than China. But China has the biggest population in the world.” I often think of what he said, and think of how at school we were so proud of being Chinese. (169)

As the country’s name, *Zhongguo* (中国: middle kingdom), suggests, China has a long history of thinking of itself as the center of the world; even now, words like *Zhongxi* (中西: China and the West) or *Zhongwai* (中外: China and other countries) are used to refer to the world, reflecting the same attitude. When asked, Z can innumerate many of the contributions China has made to world history, which certainly results from her nationalistic education at school. She says to her lover, “You never really pay attention to my culture. . . . Our Chinese invented paper so your Shakespeare can write two thousand years later. Our Chinese invented gunpowder for you English and Americans to bomb Iraq. And our Chinese invented compass for you English to sail and colonise the Asian and Africa” (228). She learns, however, to be ashamed of being Chinese, which torments her because this shame reduces her whole self

to her Chinese nationality, as if this naïve peasant girl from a small town in China represented the entire Chinese population.

In a section entitled “discord,” Z gives examples of “typical arguments” between her and her lover. These episodes show that Z is highly sensitive about her lover’s criticism of China and Chinese culture because she takes it personally. For example, he rejects her ideas about Tibet. When he says he cannot believe that she thinks that Tibet belongs to China, she becomes defensive out of shame. She accuses him of seeing things from “a white English’s point of view” and defends her country by saying that Tibetans “always need rely on others, rely on powerful government” (144). Her lover pushes the issue further and tells her to “look how many Tibetans you’ve killed” (144). By saying “you,” he means the “Chinese government,” but Z takes his statement personally: “I didn’t kill any Tibetans! No any other Chinese I know in my life killed any Tibetans! In fact, nobody in China wants go to that desert!” (145). Out of shame, she accuses the BBC of reporting only negative aspects of China. Her lover does not understand that she overreacts to his criticism because his rejection of the Chinese government makes her feel personally rejected and triggers her shame. In another episode, her lover accuses Chinese people of indiscriminate eating: “But you Chinese eat anything, even endangered species. I bet if dinosaurs roamed the forests of China, someone would want to see what dinosaur meat tasted like. How come you people have no sense of protecting nature?” (145). In her effort to defend Chinese cuisine, she offends her vegetarian lover by telling him to stop eating if he is “so pure” so that he “can have no shit” (145). She feels that, to him, she is always *the* Chinese, which makes her feel ashamed. Her lover is also responsible for her overreaction. In an episode, he asks her, “How did you burn the rice again? A Chinese woman shouldn’t burn rice, you eat it everyday [sic]” (152). Although he tries to teach her individualism and encourages her to be an individual, he cannot see her as an individual, separate from other Chinese people. Ironically, however, her sense of shame makes her delineate her personal boundary and find her identity in a global context.

Writing becomes the major tool with which Z individuates herself and her voice. Her notebook for English vocabulary becomes her private

“Nushu (女书: woman’s writing).” *Nushu* is a syllabic script secretly created in the Hunan province hundreds of years ago and used by women “to express theys innermost feeling” (97). Z explains, “I want create my own ‘Nushu.’ Maybe this notebook which I use for putting new English vocabularies is a ‘Nushu.’ Then I have my own *privacy*. You [her lover] know my body, my everyday’s life, but you not know my ‘Nushu’” (97). Privacy is a concept that Z has the most difficulty in understanding because she believes it is incompatible with intimacy. When her lover asks for privacy, she asks herself, “How can *intimate* live with *privacy*?” (87). She thinks that English people have problems with being intimate with others and that is why Westerners are “much more separated, lonely, and have more Old People’s House” and why they have more cases of pedophilia and perversion (87). Despite this negative view of privacy, she begins to feel a need for privacy, a need to write about her “innermost feeling” in secret, and thus she embarks on a long trajectory to individuate herself: the creation of her “Nushu” is her first giant step.

Her lover, however, does not understand that her notebook has become her *Nushu*, the secret history of their love. At the news that her application to extend her United Kingdom visa—Z’s last-ditch effort to keep their sinking relationship afloat—has been rejected, she looks through all the vocabulary words in her notebook, looking back on all of her memories with her lover. On a new page, she writes down the title of the last film they watched together, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. She is angry at her fate and disappointed with her lover. She now knows that he cannot be her reason to stay in England. She thinks, “And you [her lover] can’t save my life. You, a possible *Anarchist*, always want to be free” (270). Her lover’s sarcasm horrifies her: “I know what you are writing, actually. . . . AT LEAST YOU’RE STILL LEARNING A LOT. EVEN IF EVERYTHING IS BROKEN” (271).

Her newly-developing self, forged by shame, neither makes her happy nor grants her self-sufficiency. After her lonely journey to other countries in Europe, she recognizes that her “big obsessed ‘self’” separates her from her lover: “The night when our bodies lie down side by side, I feel I am detached. We are not one body anymore. There is a big obsessed ‘self’ separating itself from my body and looking at your body” (213).

The new self makes her feel lonely but also stronger and wiser. The new self now knows that her lover cannot save her. She now has secrets—and thus, “privacy,” as she puts it—because she does not tell her lover about Klaus, a man she meets in East Berlin. In Tavira, Portugal, she discovers that she does not need to depend on men to have sexual pleasure. Z thinks of new possibilities for her life: “finally I wasn’t so afraid of being alone. Maybe I should let my life open, like a flower; maybe I should fly, like a lonely bird. I shouldn’t be blocked by a tree, and I shouldn’t be scared about losing one tree, instead of seeing a whole forest” (259). When she looks at the window in the airport on her way back to China, she finds a reflection of a “stranger’s face”—her own face (279). She knows that “it’s not the same ‘Z’ as one year ago” and that “she will never look at the world in the same way” (279). As she predicted, she cannot look at the world in the same way again. She feels “out of place in China” (281), and she cannot join in conversations with other Chinese people because they always talk about money (282).

After her journey in the West, Z has grown out of her provincialism and is one step closer to the ideal “cosmopolitan citizen” (Lee 308), or in Z’s words, “a citizen of the world” (148). Ironically, Z’s Chinese identity is fortified in a foreign country. It becomes a mark of shame and alienation rather than pride, which makes her feel split and confused. Back in China, she finds Beijing foreign and ludicrous:

During my year of absence, Beijing has changed as if ten years passed. It has become unrecognisable. I am sitting in a Starbucks café in a brand new shopping centre, a large twenty-two-storey mall with a neon sign in English on its roof: *Oriental Globe*. . . . In the West there is “Puma” and we have “Poma.” The style and design are exactly the same. The West created “Chanel no. 5” for Marilyn Monroe. For our citizens we make “Chanel no. 6” jasmine perfume. We have everything here, and more. (281)

Z’s contemptuous attitude toward Beijing proves that she can maintain distance from her own culture now; the distance is wide enough for her to criticize the Chinese desire to “have everything, and more.” Though her use of the plural pronoun “we,” she simultaneously examines the

scene from inside and outside. She will never again feel completely at home in China.

The novel ends with the final letter from Z's ex-lover. She is still in love with him, but she knows there will be no more "crossing over" between them (282). What strikes her is the place where her ex-lover has settled and found inner peace: a place in Wales where they had once travelled together, where Z had thought, "It doesn't matter if one speaks Chinese or English here; it doesn't matter if one is mute or deaf. Language is not important anymore. Only the simple physical existence matters in the nature" (224). Picturing him in that setting, she thinks that the mental image she can keep, thanks to his final letter, is the best gift he ever gave her (283). She dreams of a place where language does not separate lovers, and she desires to keep her ex-lover in that imaginary place of her mind. This sentimental ending undermines Guo's insights into the possibility of transcultural communication. Until the end of the novel, Z thinks the language barrier is what has separated her lover and herself; however, the real reasons are neither the language barrier nor cultural differences but the unwillingness of each partner to let the other disturb his or her cultural *habitus* and their mutual inability to accept fundamental differences between them on the deepest cultural level that is governed by *doxa*. As Guo insists, cultural difference itself is not the essential problem in transcultural communication—the problem is obstinacy in maintaining one's own cultural orientation.

## Notes

- 1 I want to thank Prof. Dongchoon Ryu of Chinese at Sogang University, who kindly helped me with Chinese language and culture while drafting this article.
- 2 Across Guo's films and works of fiction, intercultural relationships nearly always face obstacles in communication; the couples almost never develop deep understanding beyond their sexual encounters because of language barriers and cultural differences. In *She, A Chinese*, Mei is seen as merely an exotic sexual object to her Muslim boyfriend, who deserts her when he learns she is pregnant. Mei does not mind his being Muslim but will not accept that he does not eat pork. FenFang's relationship with Ben in *Twenty Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* is merely physical and superficial. He is simply a "Western body," whose "spirit [sleeps] alone" (138). Sometimes, those relationships finish with an abrupt full stop of communication. In "Address Unknown," a short story from the collec-



tion *Lovers in the Age of Indifference* that was made into a short film in 2007, a Chinese woman's temporary visit to Beijing after four years of living in London becomes permanent because she cannot reach her boyfriend by phone or mail. She realizes, only at the end of the story, that her boyfriend has taken advantage of her visit as a chance to completely disconnect her from his world. She complains about his friends, who do not tell her where he is, but it is clear that she complains equally about her lover. She says, "People don't say straight things in the west. That's what I hate" (110). "The Third Tree," in the same collection, is composed as a series of text messages exchanged between a Japanese woman and a man from New Zealand. The relationship ends with the woman's silence. The short film *An Archeologist's Sunday* (2008) covers a young Chinese woman's relationship with her Italian boyfriend whose life interest is archeology, which means only "no money, no future" to her. Her mother's disapproving inquiry about his future foreshadows the deadlocked state of their relationship.

- 3 Ommundsen, in "From China with Love: Chick Lit and The New Crossover Fiction," also places the novel in a transcultural context. According to Ommundsen, the "two-way patterns of migration and return" induces an "on-going dialogue between contemporary settings" (342). She categorizes *Dictionary for Lovers* as chick lit despite Guo's professed hatred of the genre because the novel, with a wider readership across countries, has the "capacity to accommodate cultural difference and produce local variants which speak directly to the pressing concerns of women in a wide variety of circumstances" (333).
- 4 In this essay, unless necessary, I will not correct Z's English when I quote because her rudimentary English itself is the most important formal characteristic that directly speaks to all thematic aspects of the novel. Also, all emphasis in the quoted excerpts from the novel was supplied by Guo.
- 5 Noam Chomsky defines an ideal speaker as a speaker in an idealized situation, namely, someone "who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interests, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance" (3).
- 6 Tomkins here outlines the basic mechanism of shame and its function in identity formation through a case of children's development. Later in the book, he explains how shame takes different shapes in adults' responses, such as shame-humiliation and shame-disgust, but the basic mechanism is the same.

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