

'If Our Love Existed in Chinese Tense': Temporal Tensions in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*

Carissa Foo ^{1*}

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ABSTRACT

This article is a close textual reading of Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007). In the novel, the protagonist Z confesses she is not good at tenses. Her uncertain command of temporality transposes from the context of grammatical tense to her love life, where her desire to forever be with her English partner conflicts with his belief that the future is not in the present. As her language learning struggles mirror the widening fissures in her relationship, temporal tensions arise. For one, Z's first language (Chinese) does not have tenses, while her second (English) is dominated by time-sensitive verbs. This article is interested in the temporal tensions (time as linear or as looping) that illuminate the cultural and linguistic factors affecting Z's perception of love, and reveal the gendered power structure (her male partner's dominance over Z's female subservience) that steers the relationship. Her ruminations on love and efforts at making sense of tenses draw together an ideographic scripting of a kind of love that deprioritises temporality to counteract the discipline and development of love in a linear time culture. Love in 'Chinese tense', as Z desires, is one that defies progression, future-proofed and faithful as a picture is unchanging.

Keywords: Xiaolu Guo, intercultural romance, linear time, language tenses, gendered relations

INTRODUCTION

In Chinese British writer and filmmaker Xiaolu Guo's debut novel *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (hereafter *Dictionary for Lovers*), the protagonist Z confesses she is 'no good at verbs, particularly future tense' (2007a: 299). Her uncertain command of future transposes from the context of grammatical tense to her love life, where her desire to be with her unnamed English partner—'I want future with you'—conflicts with his belief that one 'can't have the future *now*' (301).¹ As her language learning struggles mirror the widening fissures in her relationship, a few temporal tensions arise: one, Z's first language (Chinese) does not have tenses, while her second (English) is dominated by verbs that are 'time words' (Wang and Liu, 2020: 2); two, her idea of love is bound up with an 'image' of future with her partner who conceives the future as 'promise' that one cannot worry about (Guo, 2007a: 300); three, on a formal level, the novel is both dictionary and diary in which Z's first-person 'diary writing' promises a chronology and narrative sequence that are undermined by the 'dictionary format' where logic is arbitrary and entries need not relate to one another (Møller-Olsen, 2017).² Z's fluid and fragmented use of language, as well as her idea of love as unchanging and non-promissory, may be attributed to the deemphasis of tense or temporality in the Chinese language. Temporal tensions thus bring to light the cultural and linguistic factors that affect how

¹ The novel is written in 'bad English', as Z admits, that improves as the story progresses: Z drops articles like 'the' and 'a', and misuses prepositions like 'of' and 'on' (Guo, 2007a: 61). Scholars like Møller-Olsen have argued that Z's illogical sentences and misspellings 'reveal something about the inner workings of language' (2017: 93). In this example where Z wants 'future' and her partner refers to 'the future', the removal of the article 'the' is central to understanding the couple's different perspectives on time and love. Hereafter, this article will refer to 'future' without the article as Z intends, to reflect her particular view of love.

² The dictionary as genre is a resource or reference that arranges content in alphabetical order to facilitate ease of search. It contains lexical items with explanations, grammatical information such as part-of-speech labels for each entry, and even sentence examples. *Dictionary for Lovers* mixes the dictionary format with diary writing, initiating not only language exchange but also exchanges between formalities and colloquialism, the objective and personal, the grand narrative and the polyphony.

lovers perceive and think about love. In *Dictionary for Lovers*, time difference is a real obstacle to the intercultural lovers even as they live together in London, for love is a time-related construct.

Through a discussion of the dominant orderings of time (instituted by her one-year student visa and grammar rules, for example) and Z's own sense of time, this article will first present the ways in which temporalities do not neatly map onto each other. It then focuses on the relation between love and time, contending that Z's understanding of 'for ever' love (Guo, 2007a: 326), tied to having a home, marriage, and children, is not merely Guo's critique of internalised feminine norms and gendered forms of labour but, rather, a reflection of the Chinese tendency to configure the passing of time, actions, and movements, into scripts and situations that are not beholden to or limited by time. More than an interlanguage and cultural struggle and a dialogue between the formalities of language and Z's limited register and appropriation of English, this article argues that Z's ruminations on love and efforts at making sense of tenses draw together an ideographic scripting of a kind of love that deprioritises temporality in order to counteract the discipline and development of love in a linear time culture. Love, in Guo's novel, is one that shows rather than specifies, in the same way the Chinese language prefers depictions to descriptions—a love in 'Chinese tense' (Guo, 2007a: 301), as Z desires, is one that defies progression, insensitive to the tides of time and faithful as a picture is unchanging.

MAKING SENSE OF TENSES

Dictionary for Lovers is a documentary of Z's one-year course in learning English and of loving her Englishman, wherein her development and struggles as a language learner and lover are disciplined by various temporal frames operating on the level of content and form. To begin with, the novel is a quasi-bildungsroman, as Z undergoes formative education in language and life, 'where learning English and growing into a better self come to coincide' (Sinoimeri, 2021: 743).³ The notion of journeying is emphasised by a before-and-after structure: the novel opens with a header 'Before' where Z is on the plane to London and closes with 'Afterwards' where Z is on the flight back to Beijing, to suggest Z's transformation from a stranger to English and its land, who is unable to conjugate verbs and string a grammatically sound English sentence, to one who reads a poetic meditation on Welsh landscape and pens a melancholic epilogue in reminiscence of her time in Wales. Z's growth follows the rhythms of time: the diary-dictionary is chronologically arranged, dated February to the next February, compelling the plot forwards and ensuring Z's incremental progress, just as time marches on. Every month contains a few episodes that are essentially accounts of the words Z has learned. Structured by these monthly logs of vocabulary and reflections, the novel prescribes an inflexible and linear course of development that disciplines Z's life, portioning her experience into periodic reports that must not only correlate to the framing word but also offer reinterpretations, turning her diary into a personal reflection of life and also language. Z's development as an English language learner and a lover abides by a time-based logic and narrative structure similar to Peter Brooks's exposition on plot as

a dynamic logic at work in the transformations wrought between the start and the finish... a logic which makes sense of succession and time, and which insists that mediation of the problem posed at the outset takes time: that the meaning dealt with by narrative, and thus perhaps narrative's *raison d'être*, is of and in time. (1985: 10)

Arguably, time is the fulcrum around which the narrative revolves. Structurally, the narrative is time-bound in its chronological unfolding and divisions into prologue, interlude, and epilogue, providing a stabilising force to the narrative of turbulent love that results from the many misunderstandings Z has with her English partner. Z's 'problem' is also one of time, for her inability to speak English has to do with the lack of time spent with the language (Brooks, 1985: 10). For this reason, despite Z's basic English education in China, her parents arranged for her to 'get diploma from West' (Guo, 2007a: 4). Later in the novel, when Z is praised by her English teacher for her marked improvement, she attributes her performance to her 'living with an English man every day and night' (166). In both examples, being in the West and being intimate with English are tantamount to spending a year in a language school and spending 'every day and night' with an Englishman. Proximity and space are conceived in temporal terms.

The ordering of time is instituted by the dominant language of English whose hegemonic power lies not only in its global influence as *lingua franca*, but also in the 'imagined homologies' of language, ideology, culture, nation, citizenship (Gilmour, 2012: 209). An overt symbol of English power in the novel is the Immigration & Nationality

³ Lea Sinoimeri identifies the overlaps between the educational bildungsroman and the ethnic bildungsroman where the latter is a novel of assimilation. She argues that Guo's novel reworks the genres of the bildungsroman and romance 'through the lens of the linguistic question' (2021: 742).

Doctorate of Home Office (Guo, 2007a: 324). When Z arrives at Heathrow airport, she is greeted by Border Control which separates the ‘alien’ from the ‘non alien’; she joins the ‘queue with all aliens’ which is described to be ‘longly’ and ‘slowly’ (Guo, 2007a: 9). This is the first instance of time slowing down for her, as Z viscerally feels the dreariness of the temporal imposition. Her estrangement and anxiety about being alien—which is defined in her notes as ‘foreign; repugnant’ (9)—are exacerbated by the extensive ‘visa checking’: ‘I feel little criminal but I doing nothing wrong so far. My English so bad. How to do?’ (9). Notably, Z’s reason for her inability to do crime is her bad English, suggesting the power and enabling force of the English language. UK Home Office Immigration control checks are likened to interrogation, enacting a polarity of belonging and rightness where those who do not speak the ‘funny looking and strange language’ are ‘criminal’ and ‘alien’ (9). What is implied in Z’s account is the relation between the immigration authority and the English language—both to which she is beholden. Even as Z is allowed to travel to the United Kingdom, her entry is conditional and freedom constricted. She is permitted one year in the country—a duration that frames the narrative and enforces the countdown of months from February to the next February. Later when she applies for an extension, she is given a ‘doom stamp’ that forbids further stay in the country (Guo, 2007a: 336). The immigration stamp of denial signals a temporal dead end that also forecloses her relationship. The UK Home Office is configured as a stalwart of time, prescribing an overarching timeframe that governs Z’s pace of life as well as the narrative unfolding. It is also a gatekeeper, reminding Z that she is a ‘legal foreigner from Communism region’ (Guo, 2007a: 10). In other words, she is apart from the English in terms of language, culture, nationality, and ideology, forever ‘not belonging’ and ‘conditional’ (Spyra, 2016: 458). Such governing force and the concomitant feeling of unbelonging are felt in everyday living as Z struggles to learn the English language.

One of Z’s earliest and lasting struggles with the English language is the use of the progressive or continuous tense. Her confusion is tied to the use of tense that marks the use of verbs and how ‘the present progressive can also be used to talk about the future’ (Guo, 2007a: 40). There are two issues here: the first pertains to grammar and tense marking; relatedly, the second is the concept of time. In Chinese the use of verbs does not require temporal markers, as Z notes the use of ‘two go’ in the sentence ‘I am going to go’ (Guo, 2007a: 40), whereas the English language is verb-dominant, requiring verbs to be marked by tenses in order for sentences to be grammatically correct (Wang and Liu, 2020: 3). In his study on the practical and philosophical uses of tense, Bernard Comrie asserts that tense is a way to grammaticise locations in time. He posits that time is ‘a straight line, with the past represented conventionally to the left and the future to the right’, and tense is the ‘grammaticisation’ of any location along the timeline (1985: 2). Even though Comrie recognises that such localisation is purely conceptual, he highlights the precision of the English language:

in English, it is possible to locate a situation before the present moment (by using the past tense), and even to locate a further situation prior to that first situation (by using the pluperfect), but there is no way of quantifying grammatically the time lapse between the first and second situations, or between either of them and the present moment. (1985: 8)

Grammatical time and progression reflect a culture of time-reckoning where there is heightened control over clock time, from digital watches to the calculation of speed (Munn, 1992). The obsession over clock time is a product of Western Industrial Revolution when time was used as disciplinary device to regulate everyday life and its linearity to ensure efficient documentation of activities and production (Thompson, 1967). The rationalisation and linear location of time, then, is in effect and understood in contemporary Western and European societies. No wonder, then, the fine location of time in tense construction and efficient plotting of time are particularly challenging to native Chinese speakers like Z, as corroborated by the English teacher who tells her that ‘verb most difficult thing for oriental people’ (Guo, 2007a: 26). Out of frustration, Z laments the overcomplex and ‘crazy’ nature of verbs:

Verb has verbs, verb-ed and verb-ing. And verbs has three types of mood too: indicative, imperative, subjunctive. Why so moody? (Guo, 2007a: 24)

Her quibble with its complication has to do with temporality, that verbs may be used in reference to the past, present, or future, etc., and they could be used to represent a present command (imperative) and even imagined possibilities (subjunctive). English verbs and nouns are unstable in this regard as ‘they change all the time’ (Guo, 2007a: 98). For Z, the changes are meaningless and ‘just complicated for no reason’ (Guo, 2007a: 326). Grammatical temporality is construed as an imposition, forcing a linearity and structure upon life.

Temporal tension arises in the intercultural exchange of time where Z’s ‘Chinese concept’ of time is juxtaposed against English tense-making (Guo, 2007a, 326). In the episode titled ‘future tense’, Z poses the question: ‘How is “time” so clear in the West?’ (299). She unwittingly refers to the fine locations of time in the English grammar that are foreign to the Chinese language system. The concept of time in Chinese, as Z reflects, has foundation in Buddhist philosophy where reincarnation ‘is not past or future’ (299). Instead of a timeline that clearly demarcates

past, present, future, Chinese time is 'endless loop', where the ending and starting points are the same (299). It is thus not only grammatical differences that bring to the fore Z's incompatible sense of time with her English lover's perception of time, but also the 'cultural beliefs' that have diffused into language (Hwang, 2013: 78). In its circularity, time is unplottable and unclear. For Z who is used to 'Chinese concept' of time that 'continues for ever and for ever', the English grammatical construction of time is profoundly difficult to grasp because of the epistemological implications of time as linear and progressive (Guo, 2007a: 326). As Comrie explains, time as grammatically conceptualised is linear and relatively causal: of all languages, English has the most 'grammaticalised expressions of location in time: present, past, future, pluperfect, future perfect' (1985: 8). Z's sense of time, however, is not longitudinal where one moment leads in succession to another. Rather, locations in time like past, present, and future constitute different planes of being, related but nonetheless differentiated. This seemingly paradoxical idea of time as continuous but differentiated is evident Z's conflicted relation with future. While she admits to fearing future, she also lists 'future' as one of her favourite words in English (Guo, 2007a: 104). To understand this seeming contradiction, we first turn to workings of the Chinese language. In Ernest Fenollosa's seminal essay on Chinese written characters, he discusses Chinese as a pictorial language whose method is natural where each character is a modified thought picture of 'the operations of nature' (2008: 45).⁴ The centrality of natural suggestion and visual representation in Chinese language may be traced back to the cultural tendency to conceived elements in terms of flow or chi (气) as opposed to objects or atoms and the emphasis on 'spatial features of entities shape or size' (Wenzel, 2007: 296; Wang and Liu, 2020: 4).⁵ Following this, Z's sense of future is not an anticipation or prospective per se, but is more accurately conceived as ideographic or pictorial.⁶

A PICTURE OF TIMELESS LOVE

Future, for Z, is bound up with an image as opposed to a point in time causally derived from a past situated along a linear timeline. Z's purpose in the United Kingdom is to study English and what she seeks to achieve—which is also what constitutes her future and would mark the end of her one-year stay—is a mastery of the language. This is confirmed in the final section titled 'departure' which opens with the promise written on the leaflet of the language school:

On finishing our course, you will find yourself speaking and thinking in your new language quite effortlessly. You will be able to communicate in a wide variety of situations, empowered by the ability to create your own sentences and use language naturally. (Guo, 2007a: 342)

This strategic insert at the end of her learning journey and just before she leaves London suggests that Z has indeed finished the course and is able to use English naturally. This is the manifestation of that future Z has intuited at the outset. Rather than attributing her fear of future to her inability to speak English, I posit that her fear has to do with her ability to visualise the 'life in West' that comes with the acquisition of English (Guo, 2007a: 5). As aforementioned, the Chinese language writing system is heavily pictorial. When reflecting on what a Western life might be, Z envisions the following:

American TV series dubbing into Chinese, showing us big houses in suburb, wife by window cooking and car arriving in front house. Husband back work. Husband say Honey I home, then little children running to him, see if he bringing gift. (Guo, 2007a: 5)

Z reflexively rejects this vision of life, for '[she] no speaking English' (5). With a mastery of English, however, she would have this life even as it is not hers. Put differently, Z's future (one intimated by the school's learning goals) comes with an image of Western life. This is an example of the workings of language ideology where the definition and use of language organise the individual, their identities, epistemologies (Woolard, 1998). Accordingly, the

⁴ A much-cited example from Fenollosa's essay is the phrase 人見馬 (man sees horse) where the Chinese characters notate the scene of the man on his two legs looking at the horse on its four legs (Fenollosa, 2008). Meaning is not arbitrarily wrought but naturally suggested between the thing and sign.

⁵ Wang and Liu refer to the importance of spatiality over temporality in the Chinese language, using the example of the classifier 张 (zhang) which means sheet and 块 (kuai) which translates to lump—the first is usually used for flat and thin objects such as paper or cloth and the second is used to denote chunky objects. Spatial features of the thing in question are considered, whereas in the English these are translated into the word piece (Wang and Liu, 2020).

⁶ Some scholars claim the Chinese language is more ideographic than pictorial, as pictographs have evolved and their remnants become symbols of images. In his 1838 cultural exposition of the language, the French linguist Du Ponceau observes the ways in which ideas have 'external shapes' and when written recall impressions of the object even as the initial images have vanished (25). Chinese characters are 'no representation to the eye of natural objects; as to moral sensations' (28).

ability to think and communicate in English naturally would mean Z is living the life and identity that are not hers—a life that is ‘strange’ and would eventually estrange her from her village, its culture and dialect (Guo, 2007a: 5). Truly, by the end of the novel, Z leaves her village for Beijing and quits her hometown job, feeling ‘out of place in China’ (352). Such is the consuming nature and disciplinary power of an English-inflected thinking that enforces the monolingual paradigm which, as Yasemin Yildiz describes, obscures diversity and ‘organizes the entire range of modern social life’, including the ‘construction of individuals and their proper subjectivities’ (2012: 2). This paradigm subsumes the non-native speaker and orientates them towards the dominant language’s way of constructing sentences, scenes, life. Tense-making becomes a way to make sense of reality.

With its dominance and organising prowess, English is configured as a discipline master, at once teacherly and tyrannical. The acquisition of the English language promises cultural capital and global relevance. It is her parents’ ‘wish’ that she would be an English speaker, to possibly ‘increase in Western cultural knowledge and cultural capital’ in the same way they have acquired ‘new wealth’ through their shoe-making business (Guo, 2007a: 4; Poon 2013: 3). Under the nurturance and education of English, Z becomes culturally and globally relevant. This teacherly role is fulfilled by Z’s Englishman who explains words and social mores to her, as though she were a ‘child’ (Guo, 2007a: 199). It should be noted that at first this teacher-student dynamic binds the couple stronger; as time goes on, however, it puts a strain on their relationship as Z is constantly asking for help and he is ‘tired’ of ‘explaining the meaning of words’ to her (Guo, 2007a: 177). He accuses Z of being parasitical, drawing on his energy and cannibalising his words. This turn in the relationship is a glimpse of the violence of language, where the tutelage inadvertently creates a dependent subject who is servile and needing help, whose desperation and inadequacy justify discipline and hostility. The adverse effects of its schooling are further evident in one of Z’s few Chinese scribbles in the novel:

我被它驱使，我被它強暴，我被它消灭。我真想徹底忘記這些单詞，拼法，时态。[I am commanded and compelled by it, I am raped by it, I am destroyed by it. I want to thoroughly forget these vocabulary, verbs, tenses.] (Guo, 2007a: 179; translation mine)⁷

The violence of language inflicted upon Z is reminiscent of colonial territorialisation of mind, body, and tongue. English is likened to what Frantz Fanon calls ‘a language of pure force’ that does not ‘hide the domination’, invading the mind of the native or non-English speaker (1963: 38). More than a slave to its commands, Z’s lamentation and tortured state reveal the gendered dynamics at play. In her words, she feels ‘raped’ and diminished by English. The control exerted by the language is viscerally felt by the body. English, as Rachel Gilmour astutely identifies, is ‘a masculine aggressor, out to consume her, out to violate her’ (2012: 220). English as a means to control a world in which only its tongue is spoken is configured as masculine. More overtly, Z describes her teacher-lover to occupy a happy world constructed by ‘the molded male head, male arms, male leg, male attraction’ (Guo, 2007a: 192). This masculine world is doubly inaccessible to Z who is woman and also foreigner. Conversely, her worries are small to her lover and her needs are dismissed as outdated and traditional: he claims that she is always worrying about the future and marriage (Guo, 2007a: 300). Z is unable to defend herself because of her language incompetency but also because of the structured power of gender that exacerbates her interlanguage struggles. At the end of the relationship, she finally admits to herself that the ‘boundary’ between she and him is ‘so broad, so high’—a boundary that is not only built of temporal and linguistic differences but also of gender (Guo, 2007a: 350). Without the possibility of assimilation, Z’s proposed recourse for herself is to be taken out of the masculine world, ‘to thoroughly forget’ English (Guo, 2007a: 179; translation mine). Her desire is to be un-schooled, to forget parts of the English language; and most salient is her want to forget tenses. In the Chinese, the characters Z writes are 时态 (shí tài) which mean tense; they can also mean attitude towards time or sense of time. Z’s want to forget 时态 (shí tài) is a desire to dilute the structuring of time that has been drummed into her head in a bid to recover herself from the clutches of English. Z’s greatest fear as she writes in Chinese—我害怕从此变成一个小心翼翼的人—is to become a person who is ‘always aware of talking, speaking...a person without confidence’ (Guo, 2007a: 180). She uses the idiomatic expression 小心翼翼 (xiǎo xīn yì yì) which translates more accurately to being overly meticulous and procedural. This reluctance to be detail-oriented is formative to Z’s idea of love which is more open than prescribed in spite of her talks of future, one that allows wiggle room and ambivalence.

Just as Z’s sense of future *vis-à-vis* her language learning journey is disconnected from the temporal logic of English grammar, her want of future with her lover has less to do with a directedness towards heteronormative end points – noted by Sara Ahmed as, ‘the conventional forms of the good life’ including having a good marriage

⁷ In the editor’s translation, this portion reads: ‘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’ (Guo, 2007a: 180). The translation lapses are arguably deliberate, providing a more symbolic than literal reading.

and stable families (2010a: 12). Although critics have discussed Z's financial dependence as 'a reflection of the patriarchal Chinese culture which imposes upon women that they are economically dependent upon men' and her self-discovery as ultimately 'geographically grounded in a masculine and European territory' (Töngür, 2012:170; Sinoimeri, 2021: 743), the analyses often focus on her subservience and limited freedom. Z's sexual discovery, for instance, is initiated by her English lover who teaches her to talk about sex without shame and appreciate her own body: 'I never really know what is sex before. Now I naked everyday in the house, and I can see clearly my desire' (Guo, 2007a: 69). Even her sense of adventure is cultivated upon the request of her English lover to 'see a bit of the world without [him]' (198). Z's self-discovery and sexual awakening are enabled by her deep dive into English culture—be it her relationship with an Englishman or her improvement in speaking the language. This in turn results in a distancing from her Chinese roots, for her 'true self' has been 'suppressed by conditioning, teachings and impositions of her culture (Töngür, 2012:176). While these readings help to make sense of deeply entrenched gender and cultural norms and speak to the symbolic capital of Western cultural knowledge, they are steeped in the intercultural differences in the relationship. For a study on temporal tensions and the relation between love and time, the focus is on the time difference in the relationship—how temporalities are constructed differently because of cultural and linguistic factors—to en flesh Z's language of love that would in turn shed light on her ready and unquestioning subscription to self-limiting expectations of love.

In the same way Z's fear of future is tied to the ideographic nature of the Chinese language where the image of a Western life unfolds simultaneously as the thought of learning English occurs, her favouritism for the word 'future', evident when she lists it as one of her most liked words, is also based in the way in which language constructs her sense of time and so shapes her reality of love. A key and recurring conflict between Z and her English lover is their different views of the future which then affect their views on the progress of the relationship. Their first argument about the matter in question begins with Z's dissatisfaction over her lover's desire to 'come and leave' which, to her, signals that '[he] not care about future (Guo, 2007a: 107). His rebuttal centres on the idea that 'the future is about moving on,' and one must relish uncertainties (107-8). For the English lover, temporality is conceived as movement: even though he embraces non-linearity and the unpredictability of life, his idea of time is very much rooted in a course of progression, where he is 'carried somewhere', ever moving (107). Even though he believes the future to be uncertain, this belief is relative to the present where their relationship is stable; his reticence to 'care about future' is due to his inability to guarantee that their relationship would be as such in the future. His views of life and love, albeit non-conventional, remain faithful to the timeline constructed by grammatical temporality. For example, in an argument with Z about their future, he repeatedly tells her to 'live in the moment'; in response, Z calls him out: 'Live *in* the moment, or life *for* the moment? Maybe you only live for the moment' (Guo, 2007a: 301). The English lover is indifferent to the distinction, shrugging off the difference to say 'that's the same kind of concept' (301). In spite of his apparent carefree disposition, he fails to realise that his unwillingness to conform and desire to live in the moment are aligned with a linear time culture, for a variation is ultimately still a reaction to the existent timeline. Contrary to her lover, Z consciously rejects any linear pattern. Love to her is not a progression but an intensity. In her own words, it is 'a concentrate of love', one that dissolves the boundaries of time and progression (Guo, 2007a: 73). This intensity and oblivion to the norms and rituals of romantic involvement are evident when she moves in with the Englishman after their first date.⁸ Her love is not progressive but more constructively understood as instantaneous, where many instants and images coexist on different planes. Love need not progress from meeting to courtship to marriage, from uncertainty to certainty, or vice versa. Rather, different stages of romance and depths of connection meld together to make a love without temporal distinctions.

That different entities may coexist independently and yet collectively string a meaningful whole is a distinctive feature of the Chinese language formation. Z demonstrates this in the episode titled 'fertilise' where she writes down the Chinese names of plants, explaining every character to her lover because each has its own meaning.

| | |
|--------|------------|
| Potato | 土豆 |
| | earth bean |

In this example given by Z, potato in Chinese is made up of two characters 土 (tu) which conjures the image of earth or soil and 豆 (dou) which not only means bean but also outlines shape (Guo, 2007a: 63). Put together, the Chinese characters depict a scene of an oval-shaped vegetable grown in soil. A similar example is the fig tree whose

⁸ While the development of romantic love differs according to socio-cultural contexts, in East Asian societies romantic relationships usually progress from informal dating to courtship. For example, dating typically begins privately between the involved parties and subsequently becomes semi-private 'with incremental increases in the public expression of commitment', and usually ends in marriage (Karandashev, 2016: 251). In context, while the move is a result of Z misunderstanding the phrase 'Be my guest', assuming the man had asked her to move in with him, her readiness to attach herself to him attests to her disregard of the norms and sequence of romantic involvement (Guo, 2007a: 54).

Chinese characters literally means a tree without fruit; yet, in response to Z's Chinese depiction, her English lover proceeds to 'describe' how fertilisation does not occur for the fig tree (64). Where Z's sense-making is reliant on depictions, her lover's is descriptive. One is picture-based, the other is detail-oriented. As a non-alphabetical language, the Chinese language writing system is built on symbols and evolved pictograms to represent written characters. Meaning is simultaneously derived; the writing or speaking process recalls the impression or image. Whereas languages like English require visible signs before speaking and writing, ideas have no shapes in the Chinese language except for 'those that the words [have] given them' (Du Ponceau, 1838: 26). In an interview for *NPR Weekend*, Guo elaborates on the crucial difference between English and Chinese:

when you write a Chinese character you can picturise that object. If you write the word moon, in Chinese it is yue, and then you see the moon, the shape in your writing. When you try to express something in English you need to be very sharp. (2007b)

At the core of Guo's explanation is the way language constructs reality. Derivatively, the Chinese language affords two things. First, it allows for meaning to manifest as the words are written and combined. Specifics and details are not quite determined until the characters are written or spoken in combination and in relation. In sinologist Francois Jullien's important study on Chinese thought, he describes the correlative structure of thought in the Chinese culture that pervades language, ideology and human bonds:

most generally, Chinese thought is relational. Not only are all of its terms paired, each with its counterpart; but from this interdependence, each gains its consistency. And this is true in their view of nature as well as of society. (2000: 376)

In Chinese language two is the smallest plurality: correlative thinking happens in writing, thinking, and also in living. Z affirms this correlative mode of engagement with the world when she recalls how she was taught in school that 'the most admirable person' should 'forget' herself and 'shouldn't satisfy [her] own needs' (2007a: 269). One attends to relatives and others, just as one character requires another to form a 'consistent' picture (Jullien, 2000: 376). The focus is on consistency, that the interaction formed offers a frame or larger picture within which individuals may manoeuvre. In addition to relationality, the second affordance of the Chinese language is ambivalence. Even as an idea comes into formation as one character relates to another, it is not the details that stand out but the larger picture, even as this picture is a mere recall of an impression or a remnant of something pre-established. There is a degree of ambivalence and allowance for interaction, compared to the precision of the English language. When her lover declares that the future is uncertain, he anchors his view in the indisputable fact that Z 'can't have the future *now*' (Guo, 2007a: 300). This is factually correct and absolute, leaving no room for ambivalence. Z's construction of reality as pictorial, however, allows interpretation. In their analysis of photographs, John Berger and Jean Mohr discuss how images can be 'restored to a living context', specifically to the context of the person experiencing the image (1982: 289). In a similar way, images evoked by the written characters of the Chinese language lend themselves to appropriation, allowing 'frozen' worlds and contexts to become 'tractable' (Berger and Mohr, 1982: 289). So when Z speaks of wanting future with her lover, she is not referring to the future as plotted on a timeline *per se*. Instead, she is presenting a picture of togetherness that at once offers some context and invites contribution. It is then understandable that she would fault her lover for his tendency to 'come and leave' (Guo, 2007a: 107), for these are acts that remove him from the picture of togetherness and the opportunities to reinvigorate stock images of love. She thus views his refusal to 'care about future' as a threat to 'break' their lives, effectively breaking the picture and possibilities for creating a living context for their love.

Z's imaging of love that draws on pre-established conventions as well as invites fresh involvement is evident in her conceptualisation of the family. At first glance, her perspective on romantic relationship appears to be all-consuming:

I thought we together, we will spend time together and our lives will never separated... I thought I will not scared to live in this country alone, because now I having you, and you my family, my home. (Guo, 2007a: 84)

She seems to succumb to the 'risks' of love which include 'fusion between persons' and 'losing her identity in the impersonality of *one*' (Irigaray, 1996: 76). To her, individuality and privacy are reasons why 'Western couples split up so easily' (Guo, 2007a: 175). What is perhaps more frustrating is her continued subscription to this life of oneness despite her awareness of the loss of freedom, 'social position', and 'financial independence' when a woman lives with a man (Guo, 2007a: 174). Almost willingly and helplessly, Z falls into the trappings of gendered labour in which, according to Luce Irigaray, a woman's love is 'familial and civil duty' without her own desires (1996: 22). She is unable to think of love beyond the family structure of 'House, husband and wife, then have some children,

then cooking dinner together, then travel together' (Guo, 2007a: 125). Yet, while it is true that Z's idea of love is undergirded by a familial structure, her appropriation of conventions is far from self-effacing. Consider her reflections on family in the episode titled:

In Chinese, it is the same word '家' (jia) for 'home' and 'family' and sometimes including 'house'. To us, family is same thing as house, and this house is their only home too. '家', a roof on top, then some legs and arms inside. When you write this character down, you can feel those legs and arms move around underneath the roof. (125-6)

Because home, house, and family mean the same in Chinese, Z naturally assumes that she and her partner are a family unit comprising the symbolic home when she moves into his house. The physical house ensures proximity which translates to intimacy in Z's configuration of love. She thus cannot understand her partner's anger at her for reading his diaries and is unable to comprehend the idea of privacy which is against her understanding of intimacy. This is Z's 'Chinese love'—a love where physical proximity is emotional proximity is symbolic proximity. Her conflation of proximities affirms what has been established about her construction of reality where different layers of meaning coexist under the same roof. Inhabitants of this house of love live under the same roof; it is the proximities that make them a family, not privacy and individuality. In fact, the individual is 'peripheral' to the places they inhabit (Hwang, 2013: 75). Z too acknowledges that 'We Chinese are not encouraged to use the word "self" so often' (Guo, 2007a: 269). For a Confucius society whose nationalism is rooted in 'a sense of community' and 'common past', the self is deprioritised (Levenson, 1968: 108). Instead sympathetic bonds between oneself and fellow-nationals, a cultural past, history are prized above one's individuality. Notwithstanding their unique identities and personal time and space, what is central to an understanding of being in Chinese is the context to which they belong. Each is entitled to their personhood and, to use the picture of a house, has their separate rooms, but all are subject to the context, i.e., the family, home, and house. Such close proximity and togetherness preclude privacy. Notably in the Chinese, the formation of privacy does not mean individuality. Whereas the English privacy has Latin origin meaning 'single' and 'one's own', the Chinese equivalent comprises two characters 隱 (yin) and 私 (si)—the first character is an evolution of a more complex character that picturises an architectural maze with slopes and obstructions, to paint a scene of a dense covering; the second character means personal. To sum up, then, the Chinese word for privacy implies a deliberate hiding of something personal. And under the same roof, each has wiggle room, though not quite a secret hiding place. This is substantiated by the pictorial formation of the word. The roof 宀 is the only constant, functioning as an overhead shelter, while the strokes within are described as legs and arms which are moving parts. The provision of a frame to work around while affording allowance within is a discursive strategy—what is sometimes understood as a strategy of 'obliquity' (Jullien, 2000: 49)⁹—that encourages re-routes and detours in everyday life and familiar grounds that altogether cultivate 'tactics' of living. As de Certeau affirms, 'Sly as a fox and twice as quick: there are countless ways of "making do"' (1998: 29). To return to the context of love, by implication we can say that love is anchored in a broad overview or frame that is unchanging, which then affords space or rooms for experimenting with living and loving, for varied manoeuvrings within, all happening underneath the roof that hangs over the lovers' heads.

FUTURE-PROOFING LOVE

After almost a year of studying grammatical tense, Z concludes that it is needlessly difficult and questions the way tenses arbitrarily mark time:

Does that mean English tense difference is just complicated for no reason? Does that mean tenses are not natural things at all? Does that mean love is a form that continues for ever and for ever, just like my Chinese concept? (Guo, 2007a: 326)

Here, Z reflects on time in language and in love. She unequivocally states that without the unnatural markers of time, love would be 'a form that continues for ever and for ever, just like in my Chinese concept' (Guo, 2007a: 326). Grammatical time has bearing on how one perceives time, as established in this article. For Z, love is unchanging to the extent that time is an 'endless loop' (299). This relatively static view of love is supplemented by

⁹ The notion of 'obliquity' has history in Chinese military strategy where a detour and more cunning tactics are preferred to a frontal attack. Jullien discusses how such oblique strategies allow for surprise attacks, where artful manipulation of the field is misunderstood by the enemy to be defective footwork (2000). A simple effort thus has the ability to effect massive destruction. While my point on ambivalence and obliqueness in the context of love does not refer to manipulation in the sense of conquering the lover as enemy, a brief overview on obliquity illuminates how Z's model of love shares the same principle of remaining within established parameters in order to love constructively.

her tendency to picturise and form scenes out of words, as the Chinese language writing system encourages. Consider the image that forms in Z's mind when she talks about future:

ME: 'I want future with you. A home, a house in beautiful place with you, plant some bamboos, some lotus, some jasmines, some of your favourite snowdrops' (When I describe this, the image is so strong that it must be a will from my Last Life). (Guo, 2007a: 300)

Though vastly different from the first image conjured by her thought of future in the opening episode, this second image confirms Z's mode of thought to be heavily picture-based. In this example, the image is rooted in a place animated by life springing forth, a living context constructed without future or continuous tenses. In fact, she presumes future is gathered from a mould of the past, reiterating the endlessness of time as well as the loose structure of togetherness as demonstrated in the Chinese word 家 (jia) which first erects a frame overhead and then allows ambivalence within. The image is governed by its own temporal logic, given the activity of planting and nurturance in the scene. The act of planting is leisurely and slow, unlike the march of clock time. The activity here stands in stark contrast to the first image associated with her fear of future. In the previous example, the American housewife cooks while waiting for her husband; the life of the house begins with his return home. In the latter image, however, the pace of life is neither dependent on the woman waiting and the man working. The idea of planting and building alludes to a temporal logic that is dependent on nature—each plant has its own vegetal temporality, its growth cycle, and life span—and more crucially the act of planting together. Emphasis is neither on temporal progression nor the development of relationship. It is almost as though love springs forth in the image, *in medias res*, without beginning or end, already concentrated.

Z's illuminating rumination towards the end of the novel posits love as supertemporal and existential.

'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. No part and future. Love in Chinese means a being, a situation, a circumstance. Love is existence, holding past and future. (Guo, 2007a: 301)

Love is not a verb or noun; it is 'a being, a situation, a circumstance'. The Chinese character for love, 愛 (ai), has evolved from a more ancient form depicting two hands holding a heart 心 (xin), which still remains in the traditional Chinese character 愛. In being held, love is able to hold time. Love's capacious existence is enabled by the hands that hold it. This existence, I argue, is a dual one, comprising two parties. Love as an image, therefore, requires two to frame and hold up. That Z visualises love as an image or a scene that has 'heart' at the centre accounts for her anger towards her lover whenever he leaves her. To him, her actions and demands are possessive: she is a needy woman who is dependent on him. Yet, her charge against him is not entirely about her dependency and subservience as the feminine ideal. When he leaves the home, he exits the frame; without two people, love is unable to hold the image up. This explains Z's articulation of her desire for him: 'I want you are in my view' (Guo, 2007a: 325). To use the vocabulary of image and photography, when her lover leaves, he is no longer in the viewfinder, outside the frame of love. There is no moving of hands and legs but only the roof remains (Guo, 2007a: 106). Z is left alone with the convention of love hanging over her. Like a Barthesian image, Z is 'excluded' and no longer in the scene (Barthes, 2010: 132). The image of love becomes what Barthes calls 'a sad image' in which Z's absence is reflected (133). In the novel, Z, too, is conscious of the autoscopic experience: 'I am seeing myself walk towards the end of the love, the sad end' (Guo, 2007: 340-1).¹⁰ Given Guo's repeated interactions with Barthesian love, this moment of Z reckoning her own departure is a moment where the self becomes object, still in love but nonetheless distant. On a similar sad image the novel concludes: 'The rain was ceaseless, covering the whole forest, the whole mountain, and the whole land' (Guo, 2007a: 353). It is an image of the Welsh scene in which Z and her lover once visited. No person inhabits the scene so, as Barthes predicts, Z 'pictures' him standing on the field against a backdrop of a mountain scape and sea (Guo, 2007a: 353). More poignantly, Z is not in the scene; she is merely witnessing a love that is held by no one. Without the hands holding the heart in place, what remains of love 愛 (ai) is a drifting heart 心 (xin).

Ultimately, Z leaves London proficient in both writing and speaking English. Yet, her proficiency and imbibement of English culture fail to reshape her supertemporal image of love. Even after countless arguments on future and working through the fissures in their relationship, Z holds on to the house of love built on Chinese characters. She concludes that the only salve to their fracturing relationship is to move past the linear time culture

¹⁰ Guo's references to Barthes are indirect though evident in her montage-like arrangement of episodes of love and inquiry on the constructions of love. Her dialogue with Barthes is fleshed out in her most recent book *A Lover's Discourse* (2020). In addition to the title, the novel also opens with a quote from Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* and contains episodes that interact with Barthesian love which according to the narrator has 'no female point of view' (2020: 80).

as practiced by the English and their language. On English terms, their love will never succeed, for a love that embarks on a linear, normative course that promises happiness and fulfilment inevitably faces pressure. A course that has milestones and checkpoints plotted out is embedded by multiple 'must happens' that, according to Sara Ahmed, persuade reactions and affects that may not be sincere (2010b: 581). To move away from this course is to first reject the prescriptive grammar rules, to expel herself from the English, masculine world and its happiness (Guo, 2007a: 192). This happiness is inconsistent like 'English weather', coming and leaving according to the progression of life and time (192). There is a 'timing' for everything, as Z learns: 'I understand falling in love with the right person in the wrong timing could be the greatest sadness in a person's entire life' (Guo, 2007a: 326). Time and timing, however, are of less relevance in the Chinese language. For Z, a love on Chinese terms would be starkly different. It would be constant and forever. As she reflects after an argument on future-planning or the lack thereof with her partner: 'If our love existed in Chinese tense, then it will last forever. It will be infinite' (2007a: 301). A love in Chinese tense is one without temporal tensions and pressures of development, future-proofed and picture-ready.

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