

**Representing the Chinese student in literature:
The case of *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary FOR LOVERS***
(恋人版中英词典)
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Abstract

Very little research on creative productions such as novels or films about international students has been done. In this paper we are interested in Xiaolu Guo (郭小橹; 郭小橹)'s third novel *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary For Lovers* which was nominated for the 2007 Orange Prize for Fiction. In the British-Chinese novelist and filmmaker's narrative, Z, a 20-year-old girl from small-town China is sent to London by her parents to study English. The book recounts her experiences in the British capital and the love story between Z and her English boyfriend over a one-year period. The following themes appear again and again in the novel: the comparison of Chinese and British cultures, belonging and not belonging, and the impossibility of perfect communication between two people. Written in the heroine's broken English, this humoristic and satirical book is laid out as a journal whose rhythm is given by dictionary entries. Adopting an instrumentalist, situationalist and postmodern approach to the construction and representation of the Chinese student in the novel, this paper explores, amongst others, the following topics: fear, loneliness, identity and transformation.

Introduction

“The day 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.”
Z. (Main character of *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary For Lovers*)

In their 2012 volume in French entitled *Faire des Sciences Sociales: Critiquer* (Doing Social Sciences: To criticize), Haag and Lemieux set the following goals for 21st century research in the social sciences: thinking otherwise, showing mistakes, provoking public debates and clarifying one's critiques. Our work on the othering of China and the Chinese has taken into account these principles (Dervin & Gao, 2012a; Dervin & Gao, 2012b) by examining them from postmodern and non-essentialist positions. Chinese students are now prominent figures of otherness in world universities (Dervin, 2011: 41). In this article we examine how Chinese students are represented in literature by a Chinese English writer.

There is a lot of work on the Chinese student abroad in international research literature. For instance, Yan et al. (2011) focus on the demographic trends, motivations, acculturation features and adjustment challenges of Chinese students in the US, while Wan studies (2011) Chinese students' learning experience in American universities. In the UK, Qing (2009) and Wang et al. (2012) look at Chinese students' (inter)cultural encounters. Chinese students and their study abroad experiences are also discussed in e.g. Singapore (Dimmock & Leong, 2010) and Hong Kong (Yang et

al., 2011). This research often emerges from the “West” and is based mostly on the interviews of Chinese students. To our knowledge no publication has been devoted to how Chinese students are represented in literary works.

In popular discourses, politics, and research, China has often been presented as a “monocultural” country, regardless of its very large and diverse population (Dervin & Gao, 2012b: 555). The ‘imagined communities’ that constitute nation-states have created ‘boundaries’ between ‘cultures’ (often national) and ‘identities’ (national identities)” (Brubaker, 2004: 66). Reducing 1.3 billion people to a homogeneous entity is problematic and research on the Chinese student has often done so (Dervin, 2011: 41). Many of the discourses about Chinese students abroad are still based on centuries-old differentialist and essentialist discourses on China, especially in relation to the philosopher Confucius (K’ung-fu-tzu, ‘Master K’ung’; Dervin, 2011: 42; Cheng, 2007). Using Foucault’s concept of heterotopia that refers to “places of otherness and deviation”, Jullien (2012: 17) affirms that China is often constructed as a heterotopia *par excellence* and that it worries, e.g. the West. In this article we are interested in how a Chinese author represents both Orientalist constructions (“West” → “East”) but also Reverse Orientalist constructions (“West” → “East” → “West”) by telling the story of a Chinese student of English in Britain. According to Lau & Mendes (2011: 1), Reverse Orientalism is “based on how cultural producers with Eastern affiliations come to terms with an orientalised East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of Western readers, by playing (along) with them or by discarding them altogether”. In a similar vein, we are also interested in Occidentalism and Reverse Occidentalism (Carrier, 1995).

1. Beyond *Chinoiserie*? Examining how Chinese students are represented

“If one says: “You think like this and we think like that”, then we just stare at each other and “dialogue” stops here” (Cheng, 2010: n. p.)

The word *chinoiserie* is derived from the French words *Chine* (China) and *Chinois* (Chinese). According to the Oxford English Dictionary it refers to “a decorative style in Western art, furniture, and architecture, especially in the 18th century, characterized by the use of Chinese motifs and techniques”. In colloquial French the expression “*Arrête tes chinoiseries!*” means *Stop being silly!* In this section we problematize ways of moving research on the Chinese student abroad beyond *chinoiserie*, i.e. decorative, static and biased ways of understanding this figure in research commonsensical discourses. *Chinoiserie* also correspond to the ideas of Orientalism (how the West constructs the East) and Reverse Orientalism (how the East recycles constructions of the West).

First of all, returning to Haag and Lemieux’s book on *Critiquer* we agree with the authors that research should lead to a “décalage” (a gap in English) beyond common sense, beyond unquestioned beliefs and categories that often find their ways in research (2012: 15). The anthropologist François Laplantine, who has recently worked on China, suggests that the work of the researcher should introduce “trouble, perplexity and complexity” in his/her research (2013: 30). This is very much what applied linguist and educationalist Adrian Holliday (2010) proposes in his work on intercultural communication, especially in relation to the dichotomy of the West and

the East. He examines how representations of culture and prejudice operate hand in hand in everyday life (*ibid.*: ix) through a postmodern critical qualitative approach that refrains from generalising about self and other (*ibid.*: x), especially as this often leads to the “demonization of a particular foreign Other” (*ibid.*: 1). Holliday shows how, in relation to the Chinese, the following themes are often used to differentiate the West and the East, and put a more positive emphasis on the West: individualism vs. collectivist but also autonomy and the lack of autonomous behaviours and thinking (*ibid.*). The problem with these aspects is that they give an appearance of neutrality but are actually very ideological (*ibid.*: 8), they also lead to inequality (*ibid.*). For Holliday (*ibid.*: 27), like Haag and Lemieux, “the aim must be to put aside established descriptions, seek a broader picture and look for the hidden and the unexpressed”. This does not mean that only discourses produced by the West should be scrutinized for essentialism and culturalism as the “East” (and the Chinese!) also produces such discourses about themselves and others. This is what we call Occidentalism in this article. Reverse Occidentalism means the construction of Eastern discourses on the West by means of discourses created by the West about itself.

For Anne Cheng (2007: 7), Professor of the intellectual history of China at the prestigious Collège de France in Paris (France), this *décalage* (gap) has not really reached full strength in research yet. She criticises for example the fact that the Chinese are always conceptualised as thinking necessarily in ways different from ‘ours’. The consequence is often either admiration or (implicit) denigration from researchers (*ibid.*). This is the case for example in the idea that the Chinese are ‘pragmatic’, that they only believe in efficacy and that they ignore abstraction (*ibid.*: 11). Cheng thus calls for an end to binarism (Orient/Occident-China/Greece) but also to the well-rehearsed argument that Chinese thought ended in the antiquity or that the Chinese do not have a system of thought today (*ibid.*). Amartya Sen (2005: 165) fully shares Cheng’s argument when he writes:

“there is an odd dichotomy in the way in which Western and non-western ideas and scholarship are currently comprehended, with a tendency to attribute a predominant role to religiosity in interpreting the works of non-Western intellectual who had secular interests along with strong religious beliefs. (...) For example, there is widespread tendency to presume that none of the general intellectual works of Buddhist scholars or of Tantri practitioners in India or China could be ‘properly understood’ except in the special light of their religious beliefs and practices.”

A reference to Chinese language and its impossibility to theorize and to develop science is often used to justify such dangerous and ethnocentric arguments (Cheng, *ibid.*). For Chemla (2007: 366) China is often depicted as being intellectually “immobile”. Cheng (2010) counter-attacks this fallacy by explaining that “China has never ceased to move. Today she moves more than ever. Every culture changes, otherwise it is not a culture but a piece from a museum.” In her seminars at the *Collège de France*, Cheng shows for example how Confucius has been remodelled throughout Chinese history and how today his voice is (re-)created as an authority. She adds (2010): “Everyone (In China and elsewhere) does this, it is a big mishmash”. But using Confucianism to explain how 1.4 billions Chinese people function, think and act is “surely as absurd as trying to derive the behavior of

contemporary Europeans from the Bible or from Plato's Republic" (Breidenbach & Nyíri, 2009: 50).

Difference is almost exclusively the element used to analyse phenomena related to China and the Chinese but also to examine interaction between the Chinese and other people. Laplantine (2013) finds this to be problematic and limiting. For example in terms of literary production the anthropologist reminds us that there are many similarities between authors such as Su Dongpo and Montaigne; Lu Xun and Kafka; Shen Congwen and Rousseau or Lao She and Bertold Brecht and that this should inspire researchers to look into these elements. Jullien is of the mind that "difference is not an adventurous concept" (2012: 29).

Ways of looking into how Chineseness, otherness and self are constructed have been proposed by many scholars in different fields. Wimmer (2013: 1) explains how research into ethnicity for example – and that is also true increasingly for research on the intercultural – has moved from primordialism (ethnicity is natural) to instrumentalism (people choose identities as they see fit); essentialism (ethnicity is stable) and situationalism (people identify with different categories depending on the situation); perennialism (ethnicity is stable) and modernism (ethnic distinctions are changing). In our research on the Chinese and in this article, through applying the more critical sides of Wimmer's continuum we examine how the opposite sides are put into play in discourses of otherness. In relation to Chineseness, we are especially interested in culturalism. For Eriksen and Stjernfelt (2012: 249) this notion refers to the argument that "individuals are determined by their culture only; that these cultures constitute organic and closed wholes; and that the individual, because of this over-determination, is unable to emancipate and free from her culture: on the contrary, she can only blossom in this culture". According to Laplantine (2013: 43) culturalism stops the flux of movement and in a sense it can easily lead to stereotypes about self and other through distinguishing and creating exclusively contrasts. As such culturalism "erects a wall of opacity between continents and isolates "cultures" in unchangeable oppositions" (ibid.).

But all these imagined characteristics of the other often tell us a lot about self. For Laplantine again (2012: 23) "when a Frenchman speaks of China and a Chinese person of France, s/he often talks about themselves through what s/he imagines of the other". As such in the analysis of the novel under scrutiny we shall be able to examine both how the Chinese student represents China and other 'cultures'.

Finally the "magical power of culture" (Eriksen and Stjernfelt, ibid.: 261) can lead people to accept negative phenomena such as attacks against freedom of speech, violation of human rights, misogyny, etc. (ibid.). This is why, for Dhamoon (2009), it is important to analyse and critique how power shapes difference and what the consequences are. Dhamoon calls this examining the critical politics of meaning-making such as culture as a proxy for race (ibid.: 31), and the following list of questions, which will guide us in our analysis:

- "How are meanings of difference constituted relationally through discourse (historically, institutionally, and practically)?
- How do the forces of power constitute subjects differently and differentially, why, and with what effects?

- How are meanings of difference constituted in different historical social contexts, and how do these meanings constitute social-political arrangements?
- How can penalizing and privileging meanings of difference be disrupted?"

Dhamoon calls for the notion of intersectionality to be taken seriously into account in research on the other (*ibid.*: 61), that is the intersection of systems of race, language, gender, class, sexuality etc.

In this article we are examining how a fictional character, a Chinese student in England, expresses, (co-)constructs and imagines both *chinoiseries* and the other (mostly British people). The themes of difference, cultural identity, power and imaginaries are central in what follows.

2. About the study

The novel under scrutiny was written by Xiaolu Guo (郭小櫓; 郭小櫓), a British Chinese novelist and filmmaker. Guo was born in 1973 and moved to Britain in the 1980s. She writes in both English and Chinese. In 2013 she won the Granta's Best of Young British Novelists. The novel we are analysing here is her third novel entitled *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary For Lovers* (2008). The novel was nominated for the 2007 Orange Prize for Fiction and translated into 26 languages. The novel revolves around the story of a Chinese student who moves to Britain to study English. When asked if the novel was her own story by a journalist from *The Independent* in 2007 Guo replied: "What a strange question to ask! We're all the same - writers, songwriters, musicians. We have to write from the inside of our heart. But it's really backward to think of a novel as autobiographical."

The novel's main character is called Z, a 20-year-old girl from small-town China. Z was sent to London by her parents to study English, factory-town peasants-turned-prosperous shoemakers. The plot of the novel relates to a love story between Z and her English boyfriend, a 44-year-old, ex-anarchist, bisexual vegetarian. The novel is set in London but also in Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin, Venice, Portugal, Dublin – places that Z visits during her stay in Britain. The novel covers the entire one-year stay in Europe.

The themes of the novel can be summed up as follows: comparison of Chinese and British ‘cultures’, (not) belonging, the impossibility of perfect communication between two people. The novel contains a lot of satire and humour. As an example let us quote the following excerpt (Hostel, p. 11):

- (1) “First night in ‘hostel’. Little Concise Chinese-English dictionary hostel explaining: a place for ‘people such as students, travellers and homeless people to stay. **Sometimes my dictionary absolute right.** I am student and I am homeless looking for place to stay. **How they knowing my situation precisely?**”

The novel was written in the heroine's broken English to begin with and it takes on the form of a dictionary. With each chapter this broken English gradually improves. The novel is divided in 62 parts, rimed by words and phrases that compose the dictionary. These words and phrases are words and phrases that the main character does not understand and needs to check in the dictionary. Here are some examples of

the words that are related to the intercultural: Alien, Properly, Confusion, Homesick, Misunderstanding, Custom, Humour, Frustration, Identity, etc.

The analysis contains 3 sections:

- Multifaceted fear
- Identity, misidentification and the use of English
- Representing and becoming an Other.

3. Multifaceted fears

A constant theme that runs through the novel is that of fear, in different forms. Z.'s language skills being limited and because this is her first stay abroad, she fears many things and people in Britain. These fears are always related to the concept of power (Dhamoon, 2009).

At the beginning of the novel the authorities worry her. When she reaches the customs at Heathrow airport, she writes:

(2) “**I worry bending** passport bring trouble to immigration officer, he might doubting passport is fake and refusing me into the UK (...) (Prologue, p. 4)”

This fear seems to be related to her status as a foreigner or as a strange and different person, who is potentially a “phoney”. On page 9 while she is queuing she voices the following fear:

(3) “I standing in most longly and slowly queue with all aliens waiting for visa checking. **I feel little criminal but I doing nothing wrong so far.** My English so bad. How to do?” (Alien, p. 9)

The power aspect is often related to language skills in the novel: Z. is conscious of her poor English, especially during her first months in London, and seems to be scared of the consequences of this on her life in England and relations with the ‘locals’. Moreover, based on how she imagines the way the authorities are going to treat her, one can hear stories of illegal Chinese migrants that she may have heard about from a Western perspective (see Laplantine, 2013). But Z is allowed to enter the country. Here is how she constructs her relief when this happens:

(4) “Immigration officer holding my passport behind his encounter, **my heart hanging on high sky.** Finally he stamping on my visa. **My heart touching down like air plane.** Ah. Wo. Ho. Ha. Picking up my luggage, now I am a legal foreigner.” (Alien, p. 10)

This symbolic passage means a new identity for her: from a potential ‘little criminal’ (excerpt 2, p. 9) to a ‘legal foreigner’. The theme of (il)legality runs through the novel and it will become an issue with her future English boyfriend, who fails to understand this status of the ‘(il)legal foreigner’. The failure of understanding this status seems to clarify the boundary between “you free-man” and “me not-free” (excerpt 4), the Self and the foreign Other, and thus emphasizes the power differences between her and the Englishman (Dhamoon, 2009). When Z and her boyfriend discuss the possibility of

travelling to other European countries together, she needs to remind him that she is not “free” or as free as the man is:

(5) “everything good so far, but from one thing – you don’t understand my visa limited situation. I am native Chinese from mainland of China. I am not of free world. And I only have student visa for a year here. I not able just leave London English Language school and go live somewhere e only have trees and sea, although is beautiful. And I can’t travel to Spain and France just to fun – I need show these embassy officer my bank account to apply my Europe visa. And my bank statements is never qualify for them. **You a free man of free world. I am not free like you**”. (free world, p. 112)

Legality, freedom and the fear of not ‘fitting in’ legally are concerns that many Chinese students also experience when they study abroad (Fong, 2011). In Europe for example if a Chinese student studies in Finland s/he will need to apply for a visa to attend a conference in the UK, which is not part of the Schengen area through which 26 European countries have abolished passport check and control. The name of this now famous place in Luxemburg appears many a times in the novel.

Besides her own status in England, the new environment and new people are also constant sources of fear. At the beginning of the novel Z. experiences rather unpleasant and violent episodes. First of all, she is scared of her new environment, influenced by what she had heard about Britain back at home and the Western films that she had seen (Occidentalism, Dervin & Gao, 2013). She says in the chapter called Hostel (p. 13):

(6) First night I away home in my entirely twenty-three life, everything scare me. Is cold, it winter. Windy and chilli. I feeling I can die for all kinds of situation in every second. No safety in this country, I think unsafe feeling come from I knowing nothing about this country. **I scared in big danger. I scared by cars because they seems coming from any possible directing. I scared by long hair black man passing** because I think he beating me up just like in films. **I scared by a dog.** Actually chained with old lady but I thinking dog maybe have **mad-dog-illness** and it suddenly bite me and then I in hospital then I have no money to pay and then **I sent back to China**. (hostel, p. 13)

The utterance about the black man and her being potentially beaten up by him includes a direct reference to the influence of the media (“just like in films”). This shows that what she experiences is related to intertextual references, brought with her from China. We also have here an example of Occidentalism (The West constructed by the East), or even Reverse Occidentalism (The East constructs the West by means of how the West constructs itself) (Dervin & Gao, 2013). The fear of being sent back to China because of potential financial woes is present here too and works hand in hand with the fear of people and dogs.

Encounters with people, at the beginning of the novel also take place within the framework of fear. The following excerpt relates an incident with new people that frightened Z. because she did not understand what a potentially violent taxi driver asked her to do (‘please shut the door properly!’). But she didn’t know the word ‘properly’. The driver repeats again and again the same sentence by shouting it.

- (7) I am bit scared. I not understanding what is this ‘properly’
 ‘I beg your pardon?’ I ask. ‘What is properly?’
 ‘Shut the door properly?’ Taxi driver turns around his big head and neck
 nearly break because of anger.
 ‘But what is ‘properly’, Sir?’ **I so frightened that I not daring ask it once more again.**
 Driver coming out of taxi, and walking to door. **I think he going kill me.**
 He opens door again, smashing it back to me hardly.
 ‘Properly!’ he shout. (p. 19)

There is a clear power differential here between the taxi driver, who is (maybe) a native speaker of English, who appears to be in control of his language, while Z. is struggling to make sense of what is happening.

In the novel fear is also related to the “West” as a whole, that is to say England here and also to the fear of violence and the people Z. meets. As her language skills are quite limited at the beginning she fears about her future life:

- (8) “I not having life in West.- I not having home in West. **I scared.**
I no speaking English
I fearing future.” (Prologue, p. 5)

A final fear that runs through the novel is the fear of being lonely. Her strange boyfriend forces her in the middle of the novel to travel throughout Europe on her own. The essentialist argument of Chinese people not being used to being lonely – as there are so many people in China – is recycled many times by the characters and is used to determine Chinese people who the characters believe live in a collectivist society (Eriksen & Stjernfelt, 2012: 249). For instance on a postcard that Z. receives from her English boyfriend when she is travelling in Europe, he writes:

- (9) “**In the West we are used to loneliness.** I think it’s good for **you to experience loneliness**, to explore what it feels like to be on your won. After a while, you will start to enjoy solitude. You won’t be so scared of it anymore.” (p. 222)

The essentialising argument of “in the West we...” is a typical example of “Seeing culture everywhere” (Breidenbach and Nyíri, 2009). When Z. returns to England after her travels through Europe she notices that her boyfriend had had sexual relations with both men and women while she was away. This makes her question the claim that the boyfriend is using in (9) to urge her to travel throughout Europe on her own. Did he try to get rid of her so he would have his own space? This could be a good example that reveals the usage of the Western vs. Eastern identity as an excuse and the inequality in such power relations – “We Westerners are better, we “are used to loneliness” (Dhamoon, 2009; Holliday, 2010; Eriksen & Stjernfelt, 2012: 261).

The multifaceted fears that have been described above are often accompanied by a reference to voices in China that warned Z. of potential dangers. On many occasions, especially at the beginning of the novel, Z. refers to the voice of her parents in relation to their expectations but also to what representations of the “West” they have

infused into her. As such her parents appear to have a rather negative image of the unknown “West”. It becomes clear on pp. 17-18 of the novel that prior to her departure Z. has had conversations with her parents about certain issues. Mistrust and silence in front of the other seem to have been the core of these discussions:

- (10) “First three days in this country, wherever I walk, the voice from my parents echo my ears:
‘No talking strangers’
‘No talking where you live’
‘No talking how much money you have’
And most important thing: ‘no trusting anybody’” (pp. 17-18)

At the beginning of the novel Z. finds a room in a Chinese family’s house in the suburbs of London. One evening she returns late and finds the Chinese host family very worried. The mother of the family says:

- (11) “we were so worried about you! We never come back as late as you do!”
nervous voice remind me of my mother. My mother always talk to me like that.” (p. 50).

There is clear intertextuality here again: the host family mother reminds Z. of her own mother, of the fears that she experiences when her daughter is away.

4. Identity, misidentification and the use of English

In the novel Z. is often misidentified, i.e. she is not allowed to have a full (her full) identity. This starts with her name which is in full Zhuang Xiao Qiao. Throughout the novel she comments on people not being able to remember or pronounce her name:

- (12) “Nobody know my name here. Even they read the spelling of my name: Zhuang Xiao Qiao, they have no idea how saying it. When they see my name starts from ‘Z’, stop trying. **I unpronounceable Ms Z.**”(pp. 17-18)

When she meets her future boyfriend for the first time, she asks him to call her Z. to make it easier but at the same time, depriving herself of one essential aspect of her identity (Lapierre, 1995):

- (13) “you ask my name. I say name start from Z, ‘**but please no worry to remember**’, I say, ‘my name too long pronounce’”. (Homosexual, p. 48)

When she gets to meet her boyfriend’s family, she has to face yet again the humiliation of people not being able to pronounce her name. This is her boyfriend’s grandmother’s reaction:

- (14) ““Zhuang? **What kind of a name is that?** How do you spell it?””

Not only does Z. have no name in her new life in Britain but she is also very often confused for an Asian with different origins. When she travels around Europe she meets a man in Amsterdam who asks her:

(15) “Are you Japanese? Or philippino? Or maybe Vietnamese? Or thailandese?”

In her answer Z. shows how frustrated she is by this recurring question: (17) “I a little annoyed: **why I couldn’t be a chinese?**”(p. 209).

Interestingly, going back to the author, Xiaolu Guo’s own experience of Britain, one finds a similar incident:

(16) “Some years later, on an April day, I left China, and I ended up in a rich and dead village in England. Each house surrounded by an army of thorny roses. The place was called Beaconsfield, 30 minutes on the train from London. One day in the post office, a Beaconsfield lady asked me:

“**Are you the girl from Hong Kong who visited here last year?**”

“No, it’s my first time here. And I’m from China.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. You know, all Chinese look the same to us.”

Writer XiaoluGuo: Fragments of my life (*The Independent*, London, 10 May 2008)

But for Z. the misidentification that she suffers from in England is not always a negative experience. In the novel she remembers how her mother criticised her for not looking typically Chinese back in China:

(17) ““your skin is too dark and your hair too thin. you don’t look like me and your father at all. You are like your barbarian grandmother!” she said to me: “look at your big feet. a real peasant’s feet! nobody will marry you!””.

The words are strong and aggressive (use of “too”, *barbarian*, *peasant’s feet*, etc.). Yet her stay in England makes her identify with the Chinese as a whole. She writes:

(18) “The day when I arrived to the West, I suddenly realized I am a Chinese. As long as one has black eyes and black hair, obsessed with rice, and cannot swallow any western food, and cannot pronounce the difference between ‘r’ and ‘l’, and request people without using please – the he or she is a typical Chinese: an illegal immigrant, badly treat Tibetans and Taiwanese, good on food but put MSG to poison people, eat dog’s meat and drinks snails’ guts”

All these essentialising arguments, or *chinoiseries*, probably heard from the mouth of her “Western” interlocutors urge her to realize that she is a Chinese person, regardless of what her mother used to say about her, and regardless of China’s very large and diverse population (Dervin & Gao, 2012b: 555). *Chinoiseries*, Reverse Orientalism but also Occidentalism at the same time become tools she can use to construct an identity for her in the novel (Holliday, 2010: 1; Laplantine, 2012: 23; Jullien, 2012: 17).

Z’s identity in England is very much related to her skills in the English language. Z. often apologizes for her English skills ("SORRY OF MY ENGLISH"). Gilmour (2012) has written an article about language use in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary FOR LOVERS*, which she describes as follows:

“At the outset, it is extremely unpredictable and fragmented, characterized by calques (where she is thinking in Chinese and translating word-for-word into English), malapropisms, mishearings, and misinterpretations. As the narrative progresses, Z’s English becomes more complex and more stable, developing into a flexible and expressive interlanguage, inflected by Chinese grammar and peppered with East London slang, which remains uniquely her own”.
(Gilmour, 2012: 218)

Like in many dramas, misunderstandings often lead to funny and even dramatic situations in the novel. For example when her future boyfriend invites her over for coffee he says “be my guest”. Z. understands that he is asking her to move in with him – so she prepares her bags and moves in with him. This is also how their love story begins.

During her language learning process, she feels confused about the English language, and her use of English is often humorous because of her pronunciation. Here are some examples:

- Heathlow airport (instead of Heathrow airport).
- Fizzy water (instead of filthy water).
- A rocksack(instead of a rucksack)

On p. 24 she comments on the intricacies of the English language. She says:

(19) “‘A table is neuter,’ she says.
But, who cares a table is neuter? **Everything English so scientific and problematic**. Unlucky for me because my science always very bad in school, and I never understanding mathematics. **First day, already know I am loser.”** (p. 24)

This utterance is interesting for two reasons. First of all there could be here a hint at the commonly held belief that the Chinese “ignore abstraction” in the West (Cheng, 2007: 11). As such a reverse orientalist argument could be identified here. Secondly in the humorous comment “I never understanding mathematics” Z. takes on the position of the “loser”, the powerless before the English language.

During the language learning process, Z often comments on the differences between the English and Chinese languages. In what follows she comments on the linguistic characteristics of the two languages:

(20) “Chinese, we not having grammar. We saying things simple way. No verb-change usage, no tense differences, no gender changes. **We bosses of our language. But, English language is boss of English user.”** (p. 24)

Interestingly Z. alters a widespread argument that the Chinese are not autonomous while the West is (Holliday, 2010) in this excerpt. The following is also a differentialist comment on the two languages:

(21) Chinese we starting sentence form concept of time and space. Order like this:

Last autumn on the Great Wall we eat barbecue.

So time and space always bigger than little human in our country. Is not like order in English sentence, ‘I’, ‘Jake’ or ‘Mary’ by from of everything, supposing be most important thing to whole sentence.” (p. 25)

5. Representing and becoming an other

In intercultural communication comparing two ‘cultures’ or ‘peoples’ appears to be a ‘normal’ process. Yet this is very problematic as when one compares two entities one places one of them above and below the other (Holliday, 2010). This view is increasingly criticised in research.

In the novel comparison takes place for the first time in relation to what Z. had experienced of Britain in China compared to what she notices in her new environment:

(22) “I looking everywhere but not seeing big posters of David Beckham, Spicy Girls or President Margaret Thatcher. In China we hanging them everywhere. English person not respect their heroes or what?” (p. 14)

The absence of those “big posters” of big stars disappoints Z, as the England that exists in her mind is supposed to fit her expectation. This is a typical example of Occidentalism.

Most of her comparisons lead to moral judgments about England (and the West) but also at the same time about China:

* privacy (talking to her English boyfriend)

(23) “‘You’ve invaded my privacy! You can’t do that!’ First time, you shout to me, like a lion.

- ‘What privacy? But we are living together! No privacy if we are lovers!’
- “Of course there is! Everybody has privacy!”

But why people need privacy? Why privacy is important? In China, every family live together, grandparents, parents, daughter, son, and their relatives, too. Eat together and share everything talk about everything. Privacy make people lonely. Privacy make family fallen apart. (Privacy, 106)

In the novel, the theme of privacy is very much related to that of collectivism. Collectivist individuals, as described by culturalist researchers such as Hofstede (1994: 2-3), need others to survive. The group and e.g. families take over individual needs, attitudes and behaviours. On the Hofstede Centre website (<http://geert-hofstede.com/>), China is defined as a collectivist country: “Collectivism, represents a preference for a tightly-knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. A society’s position on this dimension is reflected in whether people’s self-image is defined in terms of “I” or “we.””. In the novel, Z. shares explicitly this construction of the Chinese:

(24) “We don’t have much the individuality concept on China. We are collective, and we believe in collectivism. Collective farm, collective leadership. Now we have Group Life Insurance from the governments as well. When I was in middle school, we studies Group Dancing. We danced with 200 students as part of the school lesson. We have to dance exactly the same pace and same movement in the music. Maybe that’s why I never feel lonely in China.” (pp. 156-157)

The game of comparing English and Chinese ways leads to both ethnocentrism and essentialism in these excerpts. In excerpt 23 English privacy becomes the enemy of the Chinese family, English individualism leads to loneliness – that she never experiences in China (excerpt 24). Interestingly some of these representations contradict the general doxa about the Chinese (e.g. that they are overly polite). Nevertheless, by “distinguishing and creating exclusively contrasts”, such essentialism thinking “easily leads to stereotypes about self and other” (Laplantine, 2013: 43).

On a few occasions, Z. looks beyond her ‘stereotypical spectacles’ and notes similarities between people and places and what she is familiar with in China. For instance when she visits Berlin, she sees a lot of commonalities with Beijing:

(26) “I feel, this is a city made for mans, and politics, and disciplines. Like Beijing.” (Berlin, p. 218)

The many and varied comparisons that occur in the novel are also accompanied by signs of transformation, especially towards the end. One of the consequences of student mobility is often described as leading to change of self, becoming an Other (Yang et al., 2011). Though these arguments would need to be critically evaluated the novel is full of assertions about change and transformation. Interestingly transformation is often linked to fear (see section 3).

The first obvious transformation for the main character is the improvement of her English language skills and the resulting ability to express herself in the language in a more convincing way. In the first excerpt below, Z. shares her fear of having become someone who worries about language as she has to concentrate on her production in English:

(27) ‘I am sick of speaking English like this. I am sick of writing English like this. I feel as if I am being tied up, as if I am living in a prison. I am scared that I have become a person who is always aware of talking, speaking, and I have become a person without confidence, because it can’t be me. I have become so small, so tiny, while the English culture surrounding me becomes enormous. It swallows me, and it rapes me. I am dominated by it. I wish I could just forget about all this vocab, these verbs, these tenses, and I wish I could just go back to my own language now’. (p. 180)

Strangely enough this transformation seems to be seen as negative by Z. as she wishes to be able to go back to the Chinese language – as if she refused linguistic transformation in order not to ‘lose’ herself. Yet this feeling evolves towards the end of the novel. On pp. 266-267 she meets friends of her boyfriend and discusses her trips to Europe:

(28) “so you went to Dublin?”
‘Yes’
‘How was it?’
‘It was good’
Another person says:
‘How was Paris?’
‘Paris was good,’ I answer
The third person asks,
‘Did you like Venice?’
‘Yes I did’
‘That’s good,’ she replies
Is that how English people speak? If so, then I must be a bit English now.”
(October, pp. 266-267)

There is, in this excerpt, a slight sign of transformation. Despite the rather meaningless content of the conversation, English does not seem to scare her any more as she feels somewhat competent in interacting with English-speaking people (native speakers). This is reminiscent of what Dervin (2013) has coined *intercultural pygmalionism* in reference to the Ovid's Cypriot sculptor Pygmalion who sculpted his own ideal statue with which he fell in love.

One aspect of Z.’s transformation that has rarely appeared in research on Chinese students abroad is her discovery of sex first with her English boyfriend but then in a strip-tease place and in other European countries. In the section called Instruction, here is what she has to say about love-making:

(29)“we have so much sex. We make love every day and every night. Morning, noon, afternoon, late afternoon, evening, early night, late night, midnight, even in the dreams. We make love in sun, we make love in grey afternoon, and we make love at raining night.” (Instruction, p. 68)

Later on, while reading instructions on a packet of condoms, she compares Chinese and English attitudes to sex:

(30) “I needing several seconds to imagine that scene. Is like pornography. We cannot have words like his in Chinese. We too ashamed. Westerner has nothing too ashamed. You can do anything in this country.” (Instruction, p. 70)

This is yet another example of Occidentalism. Through the comparison, the Chinese are depicted as prude while the English (or the Westerners in the excerpt) does not feel any shame at all in doing this. The theme of sex and desire is very strong in the novel and might be explored further in relation to mobility in other data related to Chinese students abroad.

The major transformation that is presented in the novel is related to Z.’s reactions when she goes back to China after a year stay in London. Already on the plane she problematizes the fact that she does not recognize herself as follows:

(31) “I look at the window and it reflects a stranger’s face. It’s not the same Z as one year ago. She will never look at the world the same way. Her heart is wounded, wounded, wounded, like the nightingale bleeding on the red rose.” (epilogue, p. 349)

The pain that she experiences in leaving her English boyfriend does seem to add to this feeling of strangeness, the stranger in the mirror. This feeling is even clearer when she starts her new life in China:

(32) “I feel out of place in China. Wherever I go, in tea houses, in hotpot restaurants, in people’s parks, in Dunkin Donuts, or even on top of the Great Wall, everybody talks about buying cars and houses, investing in new products, grabbing the opportunity of the 2008 olympics to make money, or to steal money from the foreigners’ pockets. I can’t join in their conversations”. (epilogue, p. 352)

This feeling of “strangeness in one’s own place” has often been described in relation to study abroad. The concept of “reverse culture shock”, i.e. difficulties in re-adjusting to one’s home “culture” upon return, has a long history in research (Oberg, 1958). This is clearly what Z. experiences but it is not so much in relation to culture than economic and political aspects (see the reference to the 2008 Olympics in China in the excerpt above).

Conclusion

This article represents a first attempt to examine the construction and representation of the experiences of a Chinese student in England based on a literary ‘testimony’. Our analysis shows a lot of similarities with previous studies on ‘real’ Chinese students but also a few differences that we suggest should be explored. For example the issue of sexuality is rarely touched upon in research on Chinese students – even though it could tell us a lot about intercultural encounters. Is the topic simply avoided by researchers with the students as it represents a potential taboo?

Going back to Dhamoon’s questions in section 1 of this article (2008), which guided us through our analysis, we can see that meanings of difference were constituted relationally (face-to-face encounters), institutionally (the authorities) but also historically (reference to differences between the East and the West) through discourse. Furthermore the forces of power were noted as being central in the construction of Chineseness, Occidentalism and the experience of Chines student mobility. The effects of power differentials were largely illustrated in the novel (language, verbal violence, statuses, etc.) as well as the penalizing and privileging meanings of constructed differences (Dhamoon, *ibid.*).

In the constructions of multifaceted fears, identity and misidentification but also signs of transformation in the novel, the main character, Z., through the ‘manipulation’ of the author of the novel, uses many imaginaries to share her experiences. As such we found clear signs of both (reverse) orientalism but also (reverse) occidentalism. We believe that these two forms of essentialism and culturalism should work systematically hand in hand when one analyses the intercultural from a constructivist

and postmodern approach. Just like self and other represent two sides of a same coin, Occidentalism and orientalism should be considered in parallel.

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