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Bachelor's Thesis:

Eurocentrism and Hybridity in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*

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Introduction

You never really pay attention to my culture. You English once took over Hong Kong, so you probably heard of that we Chinese have 5,000 years of the greatest human civilization ever existed in the world. ... Our Chinese invented paper so your Shakespeare can write two thousand years later. Our Chinese invented gunpowder for you English and Americans to bomb Iraq. And our Chinese invented compass for you English to sail and colonise the Asian and Africa. (Guo, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, 289.)

The words in the epigraph to this thesis are stated by the 23-year-old Chinese woman, Zhuang, (Z), in a quarrel with her British lover. Z is the protagonist and narrator of the novel *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* by the Chinese author Xiaolu Guo. *Dictionary for Lovers*, henceforth called, is set in present time London but makes explicit references to colonialism, as in the above quote. Literature is often assumed both to shape and to be shaped by the surrounding society. It is therefore interesting to see how colonialism is thematized in contemporary literature, such as in *Dictionary for Lovers*. In the novel, Z is sent to London for a year by her parents in order to learn English and return so as to help make the family shoe business more successful. The story takes place during Z's year abroad and is written like a diary, each chapter beginning with a dictionary definition of an English word that relates to an experience that the chapter in question focuses on. Z writes in English, in which she has had very little previous training. Consequently, the first part of the novel is written in a heavy Pidgin English with various syntax and grammatical errors influenced by Chinese language structure, and permeated by Chinese culture and preconceptions:

I getting lost and nobody in China can find me anymore. How I finding important places including Buckingham Palace, or Big Stupid Clock? I looking everywhere but no seeing big posters of David Beckham, Spice Girls or President Margaret Thatcher. In China, we hanging them everywhere. English person not respect their heroes or what? (Guo 14)

The Pidgin English is gradually replaced by a fairly eloquent English as Z day by day learns to understand the English language and English culture better, and develops an interest in writing. The structure of the novel follows Z's lingual, cultural and personal transformation during her year abroad.

Literary scholars tend to view *Dictionary for Lovers* as a bildungsroman or novel of formation. According to Ulla Rahbek, the fact that the novel “pivots on the formative year in which Z becomes an adult” together with its “emphasis on time passing as well as on the temporal” make it the case that *Dictionary for Lovers* “can be read as a *Bildungsroman*” (3). Rahbek seems here to be referring to how the bildungsroman is normally taken to focus on the growth and development of one central character (Hirsch 296), and what Richard Salmon, with reference to Jerome Buckley, calls its “constitutive temporal element”, as well as the way it “takes as its privileged temporal domain the ‘season of youth’” (46).¹ The year in London thoroughly changes Z physically, emotionally, intellectually as well as morally, largely because of her transnational relationship with the older, British male artist, anonymously called “you” in the novel. In Enju Hwang’s view, Z’s willingness to be able to communicate and experience

¹ The term “bildungsroman” originally refers to nineteenth-century literature, such as James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which has “as its main theme the formative years of spiritual education of one person” according to *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 1910, quoted in Boes (231). The bildungsroman has had a revival in the last decades due to how feminist, post-colonial and minority studies in the 1980s and 90s have contributed to an expanded definition of the traditional bildungsroman. One standard taxonomy that both traditional and expanded definitions of the British bildungsroman commonly refer to was published by Jerome Hamilton Buckley in 1974. According to Buckley, no novel is a bildungsroman if it lacks two or three of the following characteristics: “childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy” (18).

intimacy with her lover is her main motivation for the hard work of translating Chinese to English that she persistently undertakes during her year in London. Z is transformed “from a naïve Chinese peasant girl with blind faith in love to a cosmopolitan subject disillusioned with love”, as the relationship falls apart (1).

What has received the most attention by literary scholars is how Z’s personal transformation by and large comes about, and is narrated through, her act of translation. Rachael Gilmour labels *Dictionary for Lovers* a “translingual bildungsroman”, referring to how Z, writing in a language that is, at least initially, a hybrid of Chinese and English, finds herself in a space of linguistic disorder and, with the help of creativity, forges a new subjectivity (222). According to Gilmour, “Z’s shifting English becomes a medium to consider how languages create worldviews; how the self is constructed in and between languages” (218). In a similar vein, Wangtaolue Guo writes that *Dictionary for Lovers* “can be considered as an astute manifestation of the Deleuzian notion of becoming” (103). Like Gilmour, Wangtaolue Guo takes the novel to be about development or self-transformation through the linguistic and cultural transformation involved in translation: “The novel explores the possibility and limitations of living between languages in a translation zone and addresses the changing dynamics of becoming in the process of transculturation” (106). Thus, according to both Gilmour and Wangtaolue Guo, the novel illustrates how language shapes one’s worldview in that Z’s gradual mastering of English is at the same time a gradual shift in worldviews. Angelia Poon connects the translation process even more directly to self-formation. She takes the novel to question the presupposition that there is one stable identity that may be voiced in different languages. Rather, to acquire a new language is to assume “a liminal status - between languages, between bodies, and between selves”, writes Poon (4), and the novel captures the existential pain involved in this: “Self-consciously highlighting the process of translation, the text seeks to embody something of the viscerally-felt violent and ontological disruption that occurs with the acquisition of a second language

(Poon 4)". Z is frustrated by her becoming a "diminished and diminutive self" when she is trying to express herself in English (Poon 4). She feels split into two selves when her English-speaking self fails to articulate what her Chinese self wants to express. In sum, previous research on *Dictionary for Lovers* tends to focus on its being an original novel of formation due to how the process of self-transformation is narrated through cultural and linguistic translation in the novel.

Far less attention has been given to the ideological premises that underlie the depiction of Z's journey from being a naïve peasant Chinese girl to being a seasoned Westernized woman. An exception is Poon, who discusses Z as a "global subject" writing:

The transformative journey to the West may appear allegorically to underscore a common enough Eurocentric historical narrative that it is the West which inaugurates China into modernity, a narrative which postcolonial criticism has sought to challenge in multiple contexts in the last few decades. Under Western tutelage, the Chinese subject learns how to be modern and global. (3)

Led by her lover and mentor, the Chinese subject Z is westernized in the sense that she becomes modern and global, and this transformation is portrayed as progress, as a sign of maturity or self-development. As textual evidence of this Eurocentric or colonial narrative, Poon points to how Z's lover is "a fount of knowledge in more ways than one, including linguistically, culturally and sexually" and how he teaches her the value of freedom and independence by enthusiastically encouraging her to travel round the European continent by herself (3). Furthermore, the fact that Zhuang calls herself 'Z' because English speakers are unable to pronounce her name correctly, and unwilling to even try, illustrates "the hegemonic tendency

of globalization to simplify or subsume cultural and linguistic differences for the sake of dominant groups” (Poon 2).

Poon does not in any detail connect the Eurocentric narrative with Z’s existential experience of being a split self, positioned in between two cultures and languages. This essay aims to do so by using a postcolonial theoretical framework. Homi Bhaba’s reasoning on ‘hybridity’ will here be used to argue that Z’s in-betweenness, with the kind of agency that such split or double perspective contains, offers a perspective from which the Eurocentric narrative of the novel is questioned or at least nuanced. A close examination of various components of Z’s formation will be conducted in a way that is meant to establish the novel’s Eurocentric narrative with regards to how Z’s westernization – her adaption to Western manners and values – is depicted as progress. Second, it will be argued that Z’s position of hybridity functions to nuance the novel’s Eurocentric narrative, mainly by enabling Z to discover and criticize her lover’s Eurocentric attitudes.

It should be noted that this essay does not take a stand on the issue of how and how much (if at all) Chinese culture actually differs from Western culture.² Instead the subject in focus is the novel’s depiction of Chinese (Eastern) and English (Western) culture; its portrayal of cultural differences is taken at face value. The question of whether values that are considered Western are in fact superior to those that are considered Eastern also falls beyond the scope of this essay.

² An illustration of how China is considered to be culturally different from the West (i.e. The United States together with the European Union), is given by the political economist Martin Jacques (2018). He writes that the rise of Europe and America has led to global hegemony partly due to their having considered themselves as models for, and having imposed their ideals on, the rest of the world in a history of colonialism. Despite China’s increasing economic power, Chinese values do not yet pose any substantial threat to the hegemony of Western or liberal – as they are often interchangeably called – values, according to Jacques. China’s “relationship between state and society is profoundly different from that in the West, and so is its tradition of governance,” according to Jacques. The history and culture of China and the West differ significantly and “China has an essentially hybrid view of the world, yin and yang. Unlike the Western tradition, which majors on singularity, Chinese thinking values plurality. (...) The Chinese are highly pragmatic. (...) The East Asian tradition, China included, for example, is far more communal, collective and familial than the individualism of the West” (ibid.).

Postcolonial Theory

This essay's key concepts 'Eurocentrism' and 'hybridity' can be understood against the background of postcolonialism, an ideologically colored, or critical, theory which studies the traces of colonialization from the perspective of the colonized societies. Even though the great empires of the colonial era have fallen, their continuous global influence makes it the case that colonialism persists, albeit in an indirect and more subtle form, according to this view (Milostivaya et.al. 2018). While colonialism rested on "territorial conquest and dominance", today's world is postcolonial or neoimperial in the sense that the West indirectly controls former colonies and other under-developed countries without there being any formalized ties of power and allegiance (Streeter et.al. 253). According to Sankaran Krishna, a capitalist or neoliberal economic system in today's globalized world is a presupposition for this postcolonial condition, the consequences of which the theory of postcolonialism offers tools to resist:

[P]ostcolonialism articulates a politics of resistance to the inequalities, exploitation of humans and the environment, and the diminution of political and ethical choices that come in the wake of globalization. If neoliberalism is the attempt at naturalizing and depoliticizing the logic of the market, or the logic of the economy, postcolonialism is the effort to denaturalize and politicize that logic and demonstrate the choices and agency inherent in our own lives. (9)

Eurocentrism

Eurocentrism can be understood as the West's dominance "over the world in the realms of knowledge production and culture" and is within the postcolonial framework "an enduring legacy of colonialism" (Krishna 11). As Mel van Elteren writes, the West's dominance may concern various cultural dimensions such as "education, religion, business practice, consumerism, law, government policy, dress, marriage customs" as well as the content and

function of popular culture as well as media and communication (401). Furthermore, the West's dominance is illustrated by the unthreatened position of the English language in today's information society and within academia (Tomlinson 367). Part of the West's dominance is the normative role it plays, being a sort of role model for the rest of the world to follow, similar to how the former colonies were expected to follow the lead of the colonial imperia; Eurocentrism means that "the economically developed and dominant nations invariably set the standards and constitute the model against which others are evaluated or evaluate themselves" (Krishna 11). According to postcolonial theory, power relations, including the perceived superiority of the West, are largely maintained through discourse or our way of talking, categorizing and ranking various features and phenomena. On the "dominant narratives", the West is not only more modern, "modernization [is equated] with civilization, development and progress" (Krishna 11). Postcolonialism critically analyzes the ideologically impregnated discourses where "the epistemic gaze of the West" reproduces hierarchical, colonial subject positions by representing "the western colonial project" as "exotic 'Others'" (Liu 782).³ The notion 'orientalism' is sometimes used to describe the Western, historical tendency to display a patronizing attitude toward the East, consisting of a combination of, a sense of superiority toward, a blunt ignorance of, disinterest in, and exotification of 'the Eastern Other' (Said 1974).

While Hong Kong used to be a British colony, Mainland China was never part of the British Empire, and Chinese authors such as Xiaolu Guo are therefore postcolonial in an indirect way. The term 'neocolonialism' may seem more appropriate in this context as it suggests a new (neo)

³ 'Eurocentrism' and the cultural dominance it points out bears some resemblance to the concept of 'cultural imperialism'. Cf. the *Britannica Academic Encyclopædia*'s definition of 'cultural imperialism' as the phenomenon in which "one usually politically or economically dominant community [imposes] various aspects of its own culture onto another, nondominant community". The colonizers were convinced of the superiority of their own life style and imposed their own "customs, traditions, religion, language, social and moral norms" onto the colonized, and allegedly barbaric and uncivilized population, thereby transforming or partly replacing the "nondominant community's culture". But since 'cultural imperialism' is less precise and more contested than 'Eurocentrism', I will stick to the latter term. (See van Elteren 2014 for an illuminating, critical discussion on 'cultural imperialism'.)

form of colonialism, rather than to point out the state that comes after (post) colonialism. As Helena Liu writes, postcolonialism offers room to go “beyond a geopolitical focus on the colonizer and colonized dichotomy and explore the ways imperialist ideologies permeate the lives of people who were not directly caught in the colonial encounter” (781-782). Just because the cultural dominance of the West largely *stems* from colonialism it does not follow that Western dominance or hegemony is *restricted* to former colonies in today’s globalized world with its “free-market-based, capitalist style of production over an increasing swath of nations” (Krishna 10). Therefore, postcolonialism will be term used in this essay, as a framework for discussing Western hegemony, or the colonial-like dominance that the West holds over the rest, and how this is reflected in Guo’s novel.

Hybridity

The first part of this essay’s thesis is, as mentioned, that the novel is permeated by a Eurocentric narrative. In order for the second part of the thesis to be established – that Z’s in-betweenness serves to nuance such a Eurocentric narrative – another central term in postcolonial theory is useful, namely ‘hybridity’. In the context of postcolonialism, hybridity refers to how the identity of the colonized becomes ambivalent or dual due to being shaped in a bicultural setting (the culture of one’s own colonized group mixed with the colonizers’ culture). Or as a main authority in this context, Homi Bhabha, puts it: “Hybridity [is] a difference ‘within’ a subject that inhabits the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality” (Bhabha 19). According to Bhabha, such in-between reality, or hybridity, is connected to agency. The colonizers’ culture cannot simply be translated and thereby fully integrated into the colonized culture. Instead, there is “an anxiety of the irresolvable, borderline culture of hybridity [with] problems of identification” (Bhabha 322). In addition to its causing difficulties of identification, the hybridity, or position of being in-between cultures, offers a vantage point from which the colonized can resist the cultural influence of the colonizers to some degree (169): Hybridity “is

the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal” (159). The impossibility of direct translation enables the colonized – the ‘subaltern’ – to contest the meaning of any (verbal or non-verbal) utterance made by the colonizers. Bhabha talks about “the articulation of the subaltern agency [allowed] to emerge as relocation and reinscription” as a “movement of hybridity as camouflage, as contesting, antagonistic agency” (177). Thus, being inferior, not being fully a cultural insider nor fully an outsider comes with a certain agency or ability to contest the dominant party’s authority and ways of understanding the world. Hybridity will in this thesis be interpreted as the in-between position that Z inhabits when she is acquiring a new language and learning to understand the foreign culture attached to it. Bhabha’s point that such position offers agency and possible resistance to and criticism of Eurocentrism will here be analyzed in relation to Xiao Guo’s novel.

Eurocentrism: Westernization as Progress

The novel’s depiction of Z’s growth as a person is permeated by Eurocentrism in that Z’s gradually Westernized identity is portrayed as superior to the Chinese identity with which she arrives in London. A first example is her transformation from appearing rude to appearing sophisticated. In the beginning of her year in London, Z fails to pick up on hints such as her English teacher Mrs Margaret’s suggestion that they have tea together, subtly expressed by “Would you like some tea?” to which Z replies with a simple “No” (Guo 36). Z is used to her home country’s frank and direct way of communicating and gets confused by the politeness she encounters in London: “Am I make tea for her before she asking me? But how do I know she thirsty if she not telling me directly? All this *manners* very complication. China not have *politeness* in the same way” (Guo 36-37, emphasis in the original.). Z is puzzled by the way the English ask seemingly pointless questions: “‘Very cold today, isn’t it?’ But why she tell me? I know this information, and now is too late, because I finish my tourism visiting, and I wet and freezing” (Guo 21). When she is reflecting on how badly she is doing in her language school,

she wonders how she will ever learn to be polite when she never gets the chance to talk to people. She writes in her diary about how nobody speaks to her, and that she does not dare initiate a conversation herself, since as soon as she does, she starts “asking the rude questions”:

‘Excuse me, you know there are some red spots on your face?’

‘Are you a bit fatter than me?’

‘I don’t believe we same age. You look much older than me.’

‘I think you are a very normal person. Not a special person.’

‘The food you cook is disgusting. Why nobody tell you?’

I already have very famous reputation in my language school. They say: ‘You know that Chinese girl...’ Which one?’ ‘That rude one of course!’ (Guo 37)

Entering a romantic relationship provides Z with more opportunity to practice her English, and to do so with a person who is not overly bothered by her bluntness. In fact, her lover is entertained by it. Instead of simply explaining to Z the British rules of politeness, and admitting their arbitrariness, he laughs at her puzzlement over them in a way that might appear patronizing and, by extension, Eurocentric:

I say: *‘I eat. Do you eat?’*

You correct me in proper way: *‘I want to eat. Would you like to eat something with me?’*

You ask: *‘Would you like some coffee?’*

I say: *‘I don’t want coffee. I want tea.’*

You change it: *‘A cup of tea would be delightful.’*

Then you laughing at my confusing face, and you change your saying: ‘I would love a cup of tea, please.’

I ask: How you use word “love” on tea?’ (Guo 56-57)

Z’s lover fails to recognize that it is far from a given to speak metaphorically of tea as something to be “loved”. In an Orientalizing manner, she, instead, becomes ‘the exotic other’ to him; she amuses him similarly to how grownups are often merely amused by a child’s perspective on the world, thus failing to take it seriously. His amusement implies that he intends to teach her a more mature way of conducting herself. The alternative would be to simply point out that she will blend in better in her new country if she learns to express herself more indirectly. Without granting that there are cultural differences when it comes to expressions of politeness, he seems to see himself as a given role model, similarly to how grownups see themselves as given role models for children, and former colonial powers thought of themselves as given role models for their colonies. In sum, while Z’s lover may be seeing himself as a peer of Z’s, his paternalistic role in their relationship resembles the role the West is still undertaking when dealing with developing countries in the present era of postcolonialism: the West is the adult and the East is the child (Noxolo, 260).⁴

Z’s lover’s attitude towards Z reflects a Eurocentric narrative also by signaling that Western politeness is the unquestionable norm, and a measure of a high level of sophistication and the adult way to conduct oneself, while the value of Z’s culture is ignored; the benefits of a more direct manner of communicating is not even considered. By imitating Mrs Margaret and her lover, Z becomes polite, after hard practice. When she is backpacking in Amsterdam she, at one point, stops to put her heavy rucksack down, and is spoken to by a local who is drinking coffee

⁴ Patricia Noxolo writes: “[D]espite this mantra of mutuality and the uncomplicated meeting of needs, partnerships are elaborated as unequal relationships, with Britain playing the ‘adult’ role of disciplinarian and provider to third world governments who seem to be children presenting potentially ‘challenging’ behaviour” (260). While Noxolo is not specifically talking about Britain as finding former colonies, or “the third world”, amusing, her “critique of the ... infantilization behind the concept of partnership” (254) can be generalized as to claim that various expressions of condescendence prevent relationships on equal terms between the British and former colonies.

on his doorstep: ““Would you like a cup of coffee before you start walking again?”” And instead of simply saying “yes”, Z answers in an indirect, polite British manner: ““Oh, is that convenient for you, to make a cup of coffee?”” (Guo 209), and ends up befriending this local. This episode is an example of how Z’s acquired Western politeness is depicted positively. It makes her appear more mature than what her earlier quoted, typically Chinese, direct way of speaking had her depicted as; she has now cracked the social code and knows what to say in order to get a friendly response, and possibly other benefits, from (Western) strangers. To use Krishna’s (11) description of Eurocentrism, Z is more of a modern woman now; and her modernity is depicted as containing a higher level of civilization, progression and personal development. Z’s westernization, including her growing ability to distinguish between literal and non-literal meaning, is Eurocentric, as it is depicted purely as a positive development by making Z less vulnerable and more of a peer than an underdog, not only in relation to her lover and Mrs Margaret, but within the Western society at large.

A second example of the Eurocentric narrative of Z’s westernization concerns her gradually deeper understanding of Western concepts and the values they convey. To explore the sense of not being able to master concepts in her new language without understanding the culture in her new language community is what makes Z’s dictionary diary become alive: ““What animates Z’s dictionary is the question of whether language influences and shapes thought. Or, to put it in another way, she is interested in understanding if our mother tongue can affect how we think of and how we perceive the world”” (Rahbek 1). Rahbek quotes the linguist Guy Deutcher when suggesting that the novel explores the idea that ‘speakers of different languages might perceive the *same reality* in different ways, just because of their mother tongues’ (2). English is not Z’s second mother tongue. Still, there is a shift in perspective or perception of the world when Z goes from only understanding the Chinese notion of ‘the self’ to understanding the English notion of it, and this is perspective shift is Eurocentric in that it is depicted as a progress.

The episode named ‘Self’ may serve as an example. As Ulla Rahbek notes, ‘the self’ and ‘solitude’ are some of the concepts Z “is unfamiliar with, having being brought up with Chinese collectivism ... Loneliness, individualism, the self, even humour are from her Chinese perspective, Western concepts”(1). In the ‘Self’ episode, Z has returned home from her lonely journey on the continent only to find that her lover – who knew that she would be coming back this very evening – has invited several of his friends. He casually hugs her and pays no particular attention to her. Instead he engages in, for Z, esoteric discussions about transgender issues as long as his friends are around. When they finally leave, Z can “see” her anger “everywhere in the house”, and asks her lover if he did not want to be with his lover “*privately*”:

‘Are your friends more important than your lover?’ ...

‘Of course I love you. But that doesn’t mean I have to abandon my friends. I think you are being a bit selfish,’ you say.

‘Thank you! Yes, I am a very *selfish* person. I am so selfish that I want to have a quiet night with my lover after five weeks travel. (Guo 268, emphases in the original.)

Z’s ability to use the word ‘selfish’ sarcastically – indicating that she knows that she is caring about herself to an appropriate degree as she entirely entitled to being prioritized by her lover – presupposes that she is comfortable with the connotations of ‘selfish’ and its stem ‘self’ in English. She has understood that ‘the self’ is something to cherish whereas being ‘selfish’ is to cherish one’s self to an exaggerated extent at the expense of others. This understanding of ‘the self’ is different from the Chinese concept of ‘the self’ she grew up with. In Z’s culture, ‘the self’ is seen as being in opposition to the group and collectivism and thus to the (Communist) Party. Z has been told in middle school that ‘the most admirable person’ should forget about himself and shouldn’t satisfy his own needs” (Guo 269). ‘The self’ is not something to be

emphasized in Z's mother tongue and so when she uses the concept in English she is not making a direct translation but is rather trying to master a new concept. The concepts are different because of the different cultural understandings of individuality and collectivity which in turn explains why 'the self' is perceived as something positive in English, but not in Chinese. At least, this is Z's own experience: "We Chinese are not encouraged to use the word 'self' so often. The old comrades in the work unit would say, how can you think of 'self' most of the time but not about others and the whole society?" (Guo 269). As Hwang notes, "Z questions the basic assumptions embedded in English ... because they carry the values and beliefs that are built into the English language and have been normalized over time" (75). It should be noted that, though, that Z's initial questioning of the positive connotation of 'the self' represents Z as a collectivist, which is, according to Helena Liu the most common characterizing feature ascribed to the Chinese, not unproblematically:

Indeed, the prevalent and persistent use of collectivism, Confucianism, Daoism, paternalism and communism to describe (and ascribe) a homogeneous Chinese cultural essence can perpetuate an abiding view of Chinese difference, while ignoring the relational, contextual and political character of identity. (783)

Z's collectivism – which, in the narrative, to a certain degree reproduces historical stereotypes of the Chinese – becomes less prevalent as she gradually learns what she takes to be Western concepts. She is now able to perceive reality in two different ways – one in which the collective is superior to the self, and another in which the self is superior to the collective. In that sense she is in-between or in a place of hybridity. Her understanding of and evaluation of 'the self' is modified – at least temporarily – when she learns to master this concept in English. As Gilmour comments on Z's "movement between languages" (208): "to travel between languages is to

recognize the world-creating power of language” (209). Only when Z uses ‘selfish’ at the same time as she is, at least to some degree, embracing the positive connotations that the word ‘self’ has in English (unlike in Chinese), does she give the impression of mastering it fully. This impression is given by the confidence with which she uses the word ‘selfish’, that is, her emphasis on the word and the fact that she uses it in a fight where emotions can easily stand in the way of one’s eloquence, and not least one’s ability to speak in a second language.

Such a deeper understanding of, and largely embracement of, Western concepts and the values they convey are part of the Eurocentric narrative by being depicted as progress: Not only is Z now able to go beyond literal expressions and phrases signaling politeness, mastering the tool of sarcasm evens out the power imbalance between her and her lover as it functions to increase her status in conversations. Again, it is clear that the West is the unquestionable norm and constitutes the model against which Z is evaluated (Krishna 11). The more she acts, thinks and speaks like a Westerner, the more personal growth and power she seems to have achieved.

Hybridity as Critical Resistance

The Eurocentric perspective on Z’s personal development is, nevertheless, nuanced by the critical resistance of Z’s hybridity. Her becoming more and more westernized does not mean that she forgets her Chinese point of view. Rather she is, as Gilmour puts it, “travelling between languages”, and, at in a sense travelling between selves, since “the self is constructed in and between languages” (217-218). Her in-betweenness involves an ability to see the world from both a Chinese and British perspective as well as to note and question the West’s authority and, by extension, the hierarchy behind the two cultures. She notices that her being Chinese makes her inferior but there is also a “re-cognition of the immediacy and articulacy of authority” (Bhaba 160), that is, a realization that this hierarchy is arbitrary.

A case in point is her response to her lover’s making fun of the way she talks. He finds her amusing, not only, as described above, when she is puzzled by the indirectness and metaphoric

ways of Western politeness, but also when she is pronouncing ‘fruit’ that grows on trees as ‘flute’. He pretends not to understand what she means and thus makes fun of her inability to pronounce the letter ‘r’: “‘I never knew flutes grew on trees,’ you say” (Guo 64). His comment mirrors a historical tradition of demonstrating the inferiority of Chinese immigrants by exoticizing them. Using an American motion picture context, Björn Schmidt describes how “the inability to speak the letter ‘r’ and exchange it for an ‘l’ ... served to amuse audiences and convey Chinese immigrants’ cultural and racial distance from white Americans” (46). Similarly, Z’s lover shows an exoticizing amusement with this mispronunciation, similar to his amusement with Z’s earlier mentioned puzzlement with Western politeness, as well as with her tendency to make literal interpretations in other contexts, such as, when she moves in with her lover after having misunderstood his ‘Be my guest’ (Guo 53-54). Z’s hybridity does however enable her to formulate a critical stance toward the Eurocentric attitude of her lover. When he makes fun of her mispronunciation of ‘fruit’, Z criticizes his patronizing attitude only by thinking to herself: “It seems I am big comedy to you. I not understand why so funny” (Guo 64). Further into her westernization, though, Z starts to see herself and her countrymen from her Western lover’s perspective, can better turn her gaze against him, and better formulate her critical stance toward what appears comical to Westerners:

‘I think Asian people have a great sense of humour,’ you say.

‘No, we don’t,’ I clarify.

‘Why not? You and Yoko make everybody laugh all the time.’

‘No. We Chinese don’t understand humour. We look funny just because the culture difference, and we just being too honest,’ I say. (Guo 163)

On the one hand, this quote expresses how Z's hybridity, in Bhabha's words, involves anxious identity formation, as she has been made to objectify herself. Similarly to how women tend to adjust their behavior due to seeing themselves through the eyes of men (Calogero 2004), Z has now started seeing herself through the eyes of Westerners. Borrowing the terminology of W.E.B DuBois, we may say that Z is experiencing a "double consciousness" as a consequence of living beneath her western lover's gaze, "a peculiar sensation . . . of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (quoted in Liu 783). As noted above, the novel's positive portrayal of this development is Eurocentric: the way forward is to adapt a Western worldview and way of being. This depiction is nevertheless nuanced by the way Z's hybridity or double consciousness enables her to criticize structures of Eurocentrism when she encounters it in the shape of condescension from her lover. By viewing herself from her lover's perspective she becomes aware of the hierarchy between them but is also able to develop a kind of resistance that Bhabha talks about. Her hybrid perspective is multifaceted and carries a certain kind of agency with which she can contest Western superiority. Her lover exoticizes her, generalizes over all "Asians", and is ignorant of and uninterested in finding out how they work and what kind of humor they actually have. Furthermore, his attitude has an orientalist touch: he is being condescending when he believes he is laughing with them while in fact he is laughing at them. Z, however, uses the agency that her in-between perspective provides her with and brings attention to her lover's ignorance and condescension. She does so by telling him that she and her Asian friend do not have a great sense of humor, but are rather being too honest, the subtext being that he does not care to really see her and her friend for who they are. Bhabha writes that "[h]ybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects" (159) and what Z does is to question her lover's stereotyping and reproduction of subtle discrimination of the Chinese.

Another example of when Z's hybridity enables her to turn her gaze to her lover and his orientalist attitudes is when he remarks that she rarely tells him about Chinese medicine, after having been baffled by its apparent efficiency. Z answers at length:

But you never really ask me. You never really pay attention to my culture. You English one took over Hong Kong, so you probably heard of that we Chinese have 5,000 years of the greatest human civilization ever existed in the world...Our Chinese invented paper so your Shakespeare can write two thousand years later. Our Chinese invented gunpowder for you English and Americans to bomb Iraq. And our Chinese invented compass for you English to sail and colonise the Asian and Africa. (Guo 289)

Z has by this point in their relationship realized that her lover has never really cared about her culture, but only assumed that his culture is superior to hers, which, as she remarks in the quote, is an ahistorical assumption. Initially, though, Z has by and large shared such assumption. She has assumed that England and the English represent higher moral qualities than China, or at least the rural part of China from which she originates. This is apparent partly in how all Englishmen, even random men that introduce themselves to her in bars, are *noble* just by virtue of speaking English. Most of all, her lover is noble, and she does not consider herself his equal. "I think you are a *noble* man with *noble* words. I am not noble. I am humble and I speak humble English. I from poor town in south China. We never see noble" (Guo 79, emphases in original). This quote reflects the stereotypical image of the West's being civilized and noble, where particularly "noble" is linked to the idea of white superiority which was a premise of the colonial era (Looma 117).⁵ The more Z learns to understand English language and culture, the

⁵ The following quote from the German anthropologist Theodor Waitz's *Introduction to Anthropology* from 1859, quoted in Looma (117), may serve as an illustration: "If there be various species of mankind, there must be a natural aristocracy among them, a dominant white species as opposed to the lower races who by their origin are

more demystified and less noble it appears to her. Hybridity is here again nuancing the view of the Eurocentric narrative of the novel. In the earlier quote, Z is questioning her lover's ignorance of, and lack of interest in, her culture, which again reflects an orientalist attitude. In her eagerness to learn English and understand her lover thoroughly, she has not really questioned him, nor has she had the linguistic means to do so. Her lover's assumption that Asians have a great sense of humor, and his assumption that Chinese medicine has nothing to offer, both show how Z's lover, as Hwang notes, is "refusing to accept the arbitrariness of his culture and failing to see Z as an individual separate from her national identity" (72). Z's in-betweenness enables her to realize that his culture and his utterances or judgments are not necessarily more authoritative as in more important or valid than hers, even though these are the signals she is given by him and her surrounding Western society. In this, her hybridity functions as a tool to question, if not subvert, the Eurocentrism that the novel depicts.

A final example of when Z's hybridity offers resistance to the ethnocentric narrative is the passage in which her lover encourages her to go on a trip to the Continent. When she does not know where that is, he answers that she will know where it is when she returns. "You talk to me like I am your child," Z notes to herself. "Maybe I am like an idiot in front of you. Maybe you love the idiot" (Guo 199). Here again, ethnocentrism is present in that Z gets the role of a child whereas her Western lover is the adult, which reflects the West's paternalistic relationship to the East. Like the above "Asian humor" example, though, Z does not uncritically accept her lover's perspective, but exercises autonomy from a position of hybridity: she sees and partly incorporates his point of view but without entirely abandoning her original perspective. She understands that she is attractive to her lover in part by being someone that he can teach and take care of, and while this does not make her leave him, she becomes more in control of her

destined to serve the nobility of mankind, and may be tamed, trained, and used like domestic animals, or...fattened or used for physiological or other experiments without any compunction."

own destiny in that she is better aware of the premises of their relationship. The relationship reflects colonial structures in that her lover occupies the role of the grown-up who teaches her his language and culture whereas she has been given the role of the child. While Z's scrutiny of her lover's Eurocentrism does not make them equals, it is a strategy "of subversion that turn(s) the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power" (Bhabha 159-160). The Eurocentric narrative is thus nuanced by how the critical awareness of this power balance that she creates from her dual perspective or hybridity reinforces her agency.

Conclusion

This essay has examined the role of Eurocentrism and hybridity in the novel *A Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* by Xiaolu Guo. The novel is postcolonial in the sense that it reflects subject positions occupied by a Western male and an Eastern female in a contemporary Western, Eurocentric context where Western culture is considered as the unquestionable norm, deviations from which are considered less modern, less civilized and less developed. The Eurocentric narrative of the novel is prevalent in part in how Z's gradually westernized identity is depicted as being superior to her original, Chinese (Eastern) identity. The more she improves her ability to speak the English language and adopt to the Western norms that surrounds and in part impregnates it, the less of a child and more of a mature and civilized woman she appears in the novel. The Eurocentric narrative is also prevalent in Z's lover's orientalist attitudes and behavior towards her. He exoticizes her in virtue of her initially blunt manner, and her mispronunciations; he is being ignorant of, and uninterested in, finding out who Z is beyond a representation of his view of the Chinese; and he is acting superior in taking the role of a parent assuming that she, being Chinese, can only learn from him and not vice versa. The element of arbitrariness in cultural norms, including rules of politeness, is not recognized.

The Eurocentric narrative is, nevertheless, nuanced by the more or less subtle criticism or resistance Z articulates from her position in-between languages and cultures. Such hybridity

involves an ability to move between languages and different perceptions on the world. Although Z starts to objectify herself as she learns to see the world and herself from her lover's perspective, her agency is also reinforced in that she becomes able to turn the gaze towards him and the Western values he impersonates. Hybridity functions as a critical tool in that her in-betweenness makes her see the hierarchy between the two cultures that she is in a sense travelling back and forth from when she translates between Chinese and English. Once she has discovered this hierarchy, such as when she realizes that her lover sees her as a child or mistakes her and her countrymen's brutal honesty for humor, it becomes easier for her to criticize the authority and superiority of the Western culture. Overall, the novel does not simply reproduce Eurocentrism, but is rather a nuanced depiction of, both the lingering presence of Eurocentrism, and some ways in which it is likely to be resisted, in the globalized world of today.

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