

## Rhizomizing the Translation Zone: Xiaolu Guo and *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*

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The inaugural issue of *CR: The New Centennial Review* addresses the dynamics of language, culture, and translation in the Americas as follows:

CR welcomes work that is inflected, informed, and driven by theoretical and philosophical concerns at the limits of the potentialities for the Americas. [...] CR recognizes that the language of the Americas is translation, and that questions of translation, dialogue, and border crossings (linguistic, cultural, national, and the like) are necessary for rethinking the foundations and limits of the Americas. (“Editors’ Note” ix)

To interpret CR’s programmatic statement in a world marked by increasing linguistic and cultural mobility, one may align with George Steiner’s conclusion in *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* that “inside or between languages, human communication equals translation” (49). Translation, in Steiner’s point of view, involves much more than mechanical and cultural transmissions of meaning, saturating the most quotidian life of talking, reading, and traveling.

A more concrete metaphor that calls for reconceptualizing translation studies and debunking the myth of monolingual complacency as norm is Emily Apter’s translation zone. In her seminal book *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, Apter ambitiously conflates translation studies and comparative literature in order to expound the contemporary themes of intercultural (mis)communication. She argues that translation studies needs to break the traditional confinement defined by “problems of linguistic and textual fidelity to the original” and establish “a broad theoretical framework that emphasizes [...] the influence of language and literature wars on canon formation and literary fields [...] [and] the aesthetic significance of experiments with nonstandard language” (Apter 3).

Such a paradigm suggests an epistemological repositioning of translation studies, as well as an inclusion of new materials for research. This paper attempts to add a Deleuzian rhizomatic layer to Apter’s translation zone, by showcasing how translational literature, defined by Wail S. Hassan as literary texts that “straddle two languages, at once foregrounding, performing, and problematizing the act of translation” (754), not only embodies the zone’s in-translation quality, but also reflects a process of becoming. Literature, as Deleuze and Guattari argue in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, is “an assemblage” (4), which encompasses a process of flight, change, and movement. In order to rhizomize—to establish connections between heterogenous elements or subjects—the translation zone, I will draw examples from Xiaolu Guo’s debut novel in English *A Concise Chinese-*

*English Dictionary for Lovers*, which can be considered as an astute manifestation of the Deleuzian notion of becoming. Incorporating translation as a constitutive element into her narrative, Guo highlights the interplay between linguistic creativity and untranslatability, complicates the process of cultural transfer, and underlines the centrality of migration and porosity that Apter neglects to attribute to her framework. The novel, therefore, mimics a rhizomatic translation zone, where migration, transformation, and linguistic heterogeneity are enmeshed.

### **Rhizomizing the Translation Zone: The Case of Translational Literature**

Translation is undoubtedly a polysemous trope, which can be stretched in different directions. In the age of globalization characterized by frequent exchanges, translation is associated with critical jargons that share the common prefix *trans-*. In her 2007 monograph *Can These Bones Live? Translation, Survival, and Cultural Memory*, Bella Brodzki highlights the significance of translation in humanities research, in the sense that,

[it is] inconceivable to overlook translation's integral role in every discursive field. More than ever, translation is now understood to be a politics as well as a poetics, an ethics as well as an aesthetics. Translation is no longer seen to involve only narrowly circumscribed technical procedures of specialized or local interest, but rather to underwrite all cultural transactions, from the most benign to the most venal. (2)

Brodzki reveals that she felt she had discovered a literary paradigm for Walter Benjamin's theory of translation as afterlife when she was teaching the work of Maxine Hong Kingston, the Chinese American writer who "translates" the Chinese culture of her predecessors through her fiction. Fiona J. Doloughan, in her study of Eva Hoffman's 1989 memoir *Lost in Translation*, explores the dynamics between what she calls "narratives of translation" (*English as 31*) and Hoffman's profound sense of dislocation. Other names, as Susan Bassnett observes, include Isabel Hofmeyr, David Damrosch, Djelal Kadir, all of whom engage with translation in one way or another (20).

The extensive terrain of translation serving as a critical trope is set forth by Apter in the format of twenty provocative theses, ranging from "Nothing is translatable," "The translation zone is a war zone," all the way to "Translation is the system-subject" and "Everything is translatable" (xi-xii). Theorized by *trans-* tropes, the potential link between translation and all kinds of intercultural movements is manifested in what Apter designates as the *translation zone*, a site that defines "the epistemological interstices of politics, poetics, logic, cybernetics, linguistics, genetics, media, and environment" (6). Since language wars remain a central theme in Apter's arguments, her translation zone underlies both the centrality of the zone's evolving in-betweenness and the demarcation of intersubjective limits that are signaled by translation failure. The latter—contested spaces where translation turns out to be problematic—is attributed to the translation zone as its prominent feature. In the chapter titled "Balkan Babel: Translation Zone, Military Zone," Apter explains this notion through an example of international conflict:

The expression “translation zone” could well refer to the demarcation of a community of speakers who achieve an ideal threshold of communication (the utopia of Leibniz, von Humboldt, and Habermas). But when war is at issue, it makes more sense to define it as a translation no-fly zone, an area of border trouble where the lines dividing discrete languages are muddy and disputatious, where linguistic separatism is enforced by high-surveillance missions or, where misfired, off-kilter semantic missiles are beached or disabled. (129)

Here, a dystopian inclination, which is instilled into the idea of translation zone, is self-evident: the translation zone foregrounds the anxiety-inducing nature of any interweaving of translational interstices. Furthermore, even in a world of hybrid dialects and identities, some instances are nonetheless untranslatable or resist translation.

This notion of a perpetual and demarcated translation zone is internalized in the *œuvre* of many translingual writers. Since most of them are equipped with an awareness of the co-presence of other languages and their effects, writing, as far as they are concerned, is a process of both interlingual and intercultural (mis)translation, an aesthetic process that takes place in a political sphere and corresponds to “the social engineering of regulated language parks” (Apter 6). On the one hand, translational literature, as a literary embodiment of the translation zone, is a site where everything is “in a perpetual state of in-translation” (Apter 7). Translation forms an integral part of the creative writing process that bilingual or multilingual authors go through, in that most of those choosing to write in an adopted language maintain strong traces of the presence of other tongues, other codes, and other cultures. Their work, as Loredana Polezzi argues, embeds translation, rather than treating it “as an accident that happens a posteriori” (351). Such a feature is eloquently illustrated by Margaret Atwood—though not herself a bilingual or multilingual author—in her W. G. Sebald lecture, where she argues that translational writing is, first of all, rooted in an aesthetic mentality, which serves artistically as “a reminder that words need transcribing and can be puzzling and that all writing is an act of translation” (“Atwood in Translationland”). The bilingual or multilingual writer does not stay within the bounds of a particular language, but attempts to expand the linguistic universe and “search for answers to various mysteries” (Doloughan, *English as 7*). Such an undertaking, as Steven G. Kellman points out, represents “an exaggerated instance of what the Russian formalists maintained is the distinctive quality of *all* imaginative literature: *ostranenie*, ‘making it strange’” (29). The work of the bilingual or multilingual writer usually challenges its own medium by creating a potpourri of linguistic variations and creolized expressions. Thus, it bears “the hallmark of the aesthetic according to [Victor] Shklovsky, Boris Eichenbaum and Jan Mukařovský” (Kellman 29).

To negotiate between languages from a translingual position, on the other hand, is also necessarily to engage, whether explicitly or obliquely, with the politics of language, the issue of untranslatability, and the unresolved conflicts between language, identity, and national belonging. Both scholars and authors have expressed various views towards the “intersubjective limits” (6) or even the “translation no-fly zone” (Apter 129). For instance, using examples of Phyllis Wheatley,

Tom Stoppard, and Kazuo Ishiguro as his point of departure, Kellman argues in *The Translingual Imagination* that translingual writing is the literature of immigration, which “is often reluctant, the product of vast historical forces over which the individual has little control” (17). In *Translating One’s Self: Language and Selfhood in Cross-Cultural Autobiography*, Mary Besemeres studies the life of the Polish American author Eva Hoffman and her autobiography *Lost in Translation*. She points out that the translational writing process, for Hoffman, stands for the loss of self, place, and the first language. This sense of losing reference and fidelity in writing also echoes through Leila Aboulela’s essay “Moving Away from Accuracy,” in which she reveals that,

[t]here is an Arabic word I have tried to translate but I can’t—*bahdala*. There is no equivalent to it in English, no word comes close enough; disheveled, no, undignified, no, harassed, also no. A friend would tell me about her bad day, a raw searing day, child rushed to hospital, husband God knows where, other children screaming in the background, she has had a rough time and she would say, in a Sudanese accent ‘*Itbahdalta yaa Leila*,’ or in an Egyptian accent, ‘*Itbahdilt ya Leila*.’ And I would know what she means straight away and I would wish that she wasn’t saying that. (202)

To Aboulela, who was born in Cairo and later moved to England, *bahdala*, a feminized expression of frightening dissolution and spiritual education, represents a linguistic and cultural entity that resists translation. Besides the issue of untranslatability, the debt to one’s first language and identity resonates with Ha Jin’s reflection on what he calls the language of betrayal. Jin, a renowned Chinese American author, writes in *The Writer as Migrant* that “[n]o matter how the writer attempts to rationalize and justify adopting a foreign language, it is an act of betrayal that alienates him from his mother tongue and directs his creative energy to another language” (31). He also reveals that the linguistic betrayal might lead to an identity estrangement from the author’s own ethnic or language community.

Although bilingual and multilingual authors’ reflections on the politics of in-betweenness seem to justify Apter’s no-fly zone, concrete elements and abstract sensibilities like the untranslatables, linguistic signs, happenings, and estrangement, in fact, constitute a multiplicity. Whether or not an instance is ultimately translated, the process of becoming exists in the Benjaminian transcoding model, in which “translation passes through continua of transformation” (Benjamin, “On Language as Such” 69). Although Apter points out the significance of translation as a medium of tangible subject re-formation, she fails to acknowledge that, for a plurilingual society, translatability is already a pre-condition. Translation, in this case, becomes an assembling act, which establishes or attempts to establish connections or patterning among specific elements and “brings into play not only different regimes of signs but also states of things of differing status” (Deleuze and Guattari 7). Contemporary migrant writers, rather than being tethered to a particular language or languages, are “more aware of the possibilities [...] of living in translation and of moving across cultures” (Doloughan, *English as* 12). Since most contemporary bilingual or multilingual authors write with an awareness of a multiplicity of tongues that need to be presented through (non-

)translation, their literary productions reveal traces of the authors' other tongues, illustrating how (non-)translation proclaims a process of change, flight, or movement within an assemblage. Various types of literary flights include syncretism, bilanguaging, and code-switching (a form of non-translation), all of which work towards a multicultural construction of an unstable unity. For instance, in *Drown*, Junot Díaz makes many of his characters speak in a mixed language of English and Spanish, or even converse completely in the latter. In doing so, he destabilizes the established standard language(s), contests the imperium of global English, and contributes to the willed renovation of one's identity, in that such an utterance "undercuts claims of prevalence, centrality, and superiority and confirms the condition of heteroglossia" (Martin qtd. in Arteaga 14).

As the translation zone has debunked the linear notion of translation, it should have, at the same time, brought to the fore the insufficiency of national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries by embracing the Deleuzian model of assemblage. What shall be highlighted, therefore, is not "the lines dividing discrete languages" (Apter 129), but "what is 'between' [the subsisting elements], the in-between, a set of relations that are inseparable from each other" (Deleuze and Parnett viii). With increasing migrations constantly challenging our traditional conception of geographical and cultural borders, a new translation zone has emerged from a plurilingual society, where "apparent progression can be established for the segments of becoming in which we find ourselves" (Deleuze and Guattari 272), and where different communities are in a perpetual state of movement and resonance and sustain "communication among members of one or more groups" (Polezzi 348).

To renounce the assumption of monolingualism and translation failure and to add a Deleuzian layer to the translation zone, one has to examine translational writing in more depth. A highly representational, yet less studied category is what Rebecca Walkowitz calls the "born-translated novels" (4). Mediated by or written for translation from the very start, born-translated novels offer a corrective to the conventional departure-arrival model of literary circulation by highlighting the movement, the flight, and the change in between—a process of becoming. For example, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's work manifests an assortment of ways in which translation is integral to creative work, such as self-translation of completed books into English and mental translation by composing directly in the ex-colonial language. Xiaolu Guo's novels, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* and *I Am China*, are also literary specimens par excellence to illustrate the translation zone in its new, Deleuzian format. The former tells the story of a Chinese girl's journey to and in the U.K., showcasing not what she becomes in the end, but how she transforms linguistically and culturally during the days of her traveling. The latter is a more ambitious exploration of politics and cultures across three continents, narrated alternatively by Kublai Jian, who experienced the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989, and Iona Kirkpatrick, a young woman who is translating Jian's letter throughout the whole book. Guo's two novels, both placing translation at the centre of the plot (or even as the plot), serve as a source of critical insight into the rhizomization of the translation zone. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari contend that a rhizome "has not beginning or end" (25) and "ceaselessly establishes connections

between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (7). Thus, a Deleuzian translation zone, represented by born-translated novels like Guo’s, is an assembling zone, where translatability is already a pre-condition and priority is given to the establishment of connections.

***A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers: A Translational Bildungsroman***

As one of Xiaolu Guo’s boldest literary experiments, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* is a translational text, which manifests the poetics and politics of translation on linguistic, structural, and thematic levels. The novel explores the possibilities and limitations of living between languages in a translation zone and addresses the changing dynamics of becoming in the process of transculturation. The heroine, Zhuang Xiao Qiao, or simply known as Z, is sent to London by her parents to learn English in a private language school. Her narrative is laid out as journal entries, with each chapter beginning with a word from the concise Chinese-English dictionary she brings with her to London and recounting what she comes across there. Z falls in love with an anonymous British man in the middle of the novel, and the narrative of their love affair “charts the twists and turns of her relationship with English” at the same time (Gilmour 218).

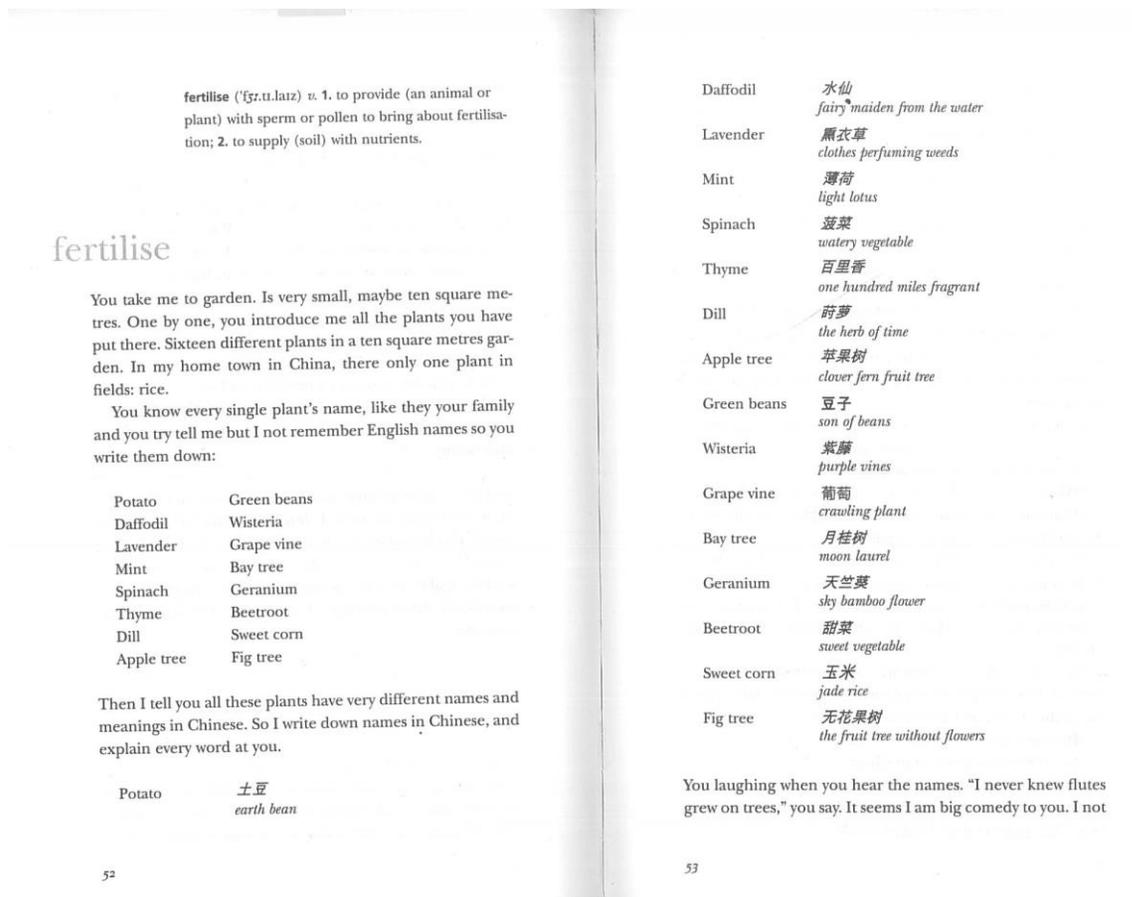


Fig. 1 Layout of Guo’s novel (photo by author)

The most distinctive feature of the novel, as some scholars and book reviewers like Rachel Gilmour and Hannah Tucker have pointed out, is the heroine's translational narrative voice, which epitomizes the Deleuzian notion of becoming. Conducting a highly original literary experiment that shows how a non-native speaker picks up English, Guo deliberately makes the narrator speak in a fragmented fashion with incorrect grammar and syntax in the beginning and gradually alters her narrative for the better as the heroine's English proficiency improves. Opening her novel with Z's soliloquy, Guo writes "Is unbelievable, I arriving London, 'Heathlow Airport'. Every single name very difficult remembering, because just not 'London Airport' simple way like we simple way call 'Beijing Airport'" (*A Concise* 7). Solecisms, run-on sentences, and simple phrases constantly pop up in Z's narrative, since she, as someone who has spent twenty some years in China and hardly had any English education, is confined to a monolingual no-contact zone. But by the end of the book, she has learned to express herself and articulate her ideas much more effectively, as is illustrated by another piece of Z's soliloquy on the flight back to Beijing: "It's a big aeroplane, with so many seats, so many passengers. Air China, with the phoenix tail drawn on the side. This time, it takes me east. Which direction is the wind blowing now, I wonder? Coming to England was not easy, but going back is much harder. I look at the window and it reflects a stranger's face" (Guo, *A Concise* 279). Z, just like one of those "becomings-particles" (Deleuze and Guattari 272), gains a linguistic freedom after staying in London for a year, during which she has been—metaphorically speaking—drawn into another territory.

The rhizomatic mapping of Z's becoming is achieved both geographically and emotionally. In the first chapter, Z is placed abruptly at Heathrow, and in the last, on a plane. Both locations can be associated with movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Z's trip back to China, although suggesting a linear trajectory on the surface, proposes another set of potential relations and events. Z, after landing in Beijing, calls her mother and simply tells her that she "ha[s] decided to leave [her] hometown job" (Guo, *A Concise* 280). The elusiveness of Z's decision, as well as that of her future plans, blurs the divide between entry and departure points. In addition to the geographical movement, Z's state of mind is rhizomatic as well. Guo's description of Z's change is intentionally subtle. Rather than attributing disparate characteristics to the old and new Zs, Guo's observation—"She will never look at the world in the same way" (*A Concise* 279)—indicates that identification is a multidirectional, liminal process, leaving an emotionally rhizomatic space where readers can work out their own mappings. The emphasis of the story does not lie in a fixed identity that can be ultimately pinned down, but in an adventitious mode of transformation that highlights "the eventness of identity" (Puar 58).

For an immigrant author like Guo, the process of translational writing, which can also be considered as the process of becoming, proves to be painful as we have seen, but also liberating. Translingualism serves as a distancing technique, which exacerbates the agony of writing in another tongue but frees her from "the tyranny of a specific syntactical structure" (Kellman 28). The linguistically and culturally double perspective, gained from having access to more than one language,

is undoubtedly an important asset to Guo, since it helps her exploit language as a vast resource for creativity and deconstructs untranslatability. In her autobiography *Nine Continents: A Memoir In and Out of China* (published in the U.K. under the title *Once Upon a Time in the East: A Story of Growing up*), Guo reveals some of her thoughts on putting together her first novel in English:

An idea for a novel was already forming in my mind: I would make an advantage out of my disadvantage. I would write a book about a Chinese woman in England struggling with the culture and language. She would compose her own personal English dictionary. The novel would be a sort of phrasebook, recording the things she did and the people she met. (303)

The novel she refers to in her memoir is indeed *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. In it, Guo sinicizes the English language with a narrative that is characterized by malapropism, mishearings, and misinterpretations.

Mis- and non-translations, which act as both the basis of the narrative and one of the motifs in the novel, deterritorialize the long-existing linguistic and cultural demarcations. From time to time, words and expressions in Chinese are transliterated and then explained in the text or not at all. But, instead of solidifying the translation no-fly zone, I argue that such tactics engage the reader in a process of adding, subtracting, and recombining linguistic signs and cultural elements in the literary assemblage. In the chapter titled “Weather,” Z expresses her confusion over the complexity of British weather reports by drawing a comparison between them and their Chinese counterparts:

Weather report also very difficult understand. The weather man not saying “rain” or “sunny” because they speaking in complication and big drama way. He reporting weather like reporting big war: “Unfortunately ... Hopefully ...” [...] Not like my home town, often several weeks without one piece cloud in sky and weather man has nothing more to say. Some days he just saying “It is Yin,” which mean weather is negative. (Guo, *A Concise* 27-28)

Z, who has spent only a week in the language school at this moment, is obviously not able to understand the convoluted expressions used in British weather reports. Yet, she is not completely enclosed in a translation no-fly zone. There is still one piece of information she can take from them, which she can translate into and out of Chinese: 天气阴 *tianqi yin*. It is partly transliterated in the text as “It is Yin” (Guo, *A Concise* 28) and followed by its dictionary meaning “[the] weather is negative” (Guo, *A Concise* 28). Meanwhile, it intends to posit the monolingual reader in a Deleuzian translation zone as well, in that it implies the internal connection between the linguistic signs *yin* and *overcast* and encourages the monolingual reader to search for cultural connotations and lay out the relations.

Besides transliterating and (mis)explaining what she would like to say, (mis)hearing and (mis)interpreting are also aspects of the process of Z’s becoming. For instance, a somewhat hilarious scene takes place when Z is having afternoon tea in a café:

I thirsty from eating dry scones.

Waiter asks me: “What would you like? Tap water, or filthy water?”

“What? Filthy water?” I am shocked.

“Okay, filthy water.” He leave and fetch bottle of water.

I so curiously about strange water. [...] How they putting bubbles in water? Must be highly technical. I drinking it. Taste bitter, very filthy, not natural at all, like poison. (Guo, *A Concise* 30)

Here, Z mishears fizzy water for filthy water and misinterprets it as “not natural at all” (Guo, *A Concise* 30). Issues of language and problems of translation are not only the source of the novel’s playfulness and humor, but also a driving force behind the plot and a constitutive element of the translation zone as an assemblage. As Rachel Gilmour contends, Z’s relationship with her British lover starts, in fact, with a misinterpretation (218). The chapter titled “Guest” ends with “You [the anonymous English man] look in my eyes. ‘Be my guest.’” (Guo, *A Concise* 44) and the next chapter starts with Z’s hindsight: “That’s how all start. From a misunderstanding. When you say ‘guest’ I think you meaning I can stay in your house” (Guo, *A Concise* 45). Clearly, Z interprets the phrase literally, which leads to her packing her suitcase and moving into the man’s Hackney home. As the narrative progresses, Guo shifts to a more stable and expressive interlanguage, complementing and complicating both the English and Chinese “systemic constraints and functional preferences” (Doloughan, *English as* 12). Literal translation is used in the novel to transfer the cultural-linguistic character of Chinese into English, as is illustrated in the following soliloquy, in which Z discloses her growing affection for her British lover by translating Chinese idioms and alluding to the five basic elements in Ancient China: “In China we say hundreds of reincarnations bring two people to same boat. [...] I think we perfect: You quite Yin, and I very Yang. You earthy, and I metal. You bit damp, and I a little dry. You cool, and I hot. You windy, and I firey. We join. There is mutualism” (Guo, *A Concise* 61).

Although Guo’s text design demonstrates aesthetically what Sherry Simon argues in *Cities in Translation: Intersections of Language and Memory*: “Accents, code-switching and translation are to be valued for the ways in which they draw attention to the complexities of difference, for the ways in which they interrupt the self-sufficiencies of ‘mono’ cultures” (1), the monolingual English reader may prefer to see it as grammatical deficiency rather than inventiveness and playfulness, because it does not conform to what they believe to be good writing. For instance, Carole Cadwalladr writes in her book review in *The Guardian* that “the cod-pidgin is not so much grittily authentic as a stagy literary device that never really convinces.” She admits, at the end of her article, that “[t]here is a poignant and moving novel here.” But she “didn’t quite get it.” What is reflected in Cadwalladr’s review is the politics of readership and linguistic choice. One of the consequences of Guo’s translational writing, regarding reception and circulation, is that the monolingual English reader, the monolingual Chinese reader, and the bilingual reader of both languages will react to the text very differently. Although it may cause discomfort to the monolingual English reader, Guo’s plurilingual

expressionism brings into the spotlight “conceptually abstract considerations such as the literary appropriation of pidgins and creoles” (Apter 4). The sentiment of loss, which is traditionally felt by bilingual immigrants, is now felt by the monolinguals within a multilingual zone, because the latter do not always possess a comparative perspective. Interestingly, although Guo felt it “an absurdity for the book [*A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*] to be translated into Chinese” (Doloughan, “Text Design” 112), the traditional Chinese edition of her novel (published in Taiwan) might actually infuse her intentional performance of cultural invention into the monolingual Chinese reader, in that it turns out to be a bilingual book with her original text on the left side of the page and the translation on the right. The narrator’s Chinese-inflected English, regarding enunciation, rhythm, and solecism, is lost in the Chinese translation. However, by revealing side by side the growing union (wholeness of the bilingual layout) and sustained differences between two languages and cultures (divergence of the bilingual layout), the translation oxymoronicly corresponds to “the social engineering to regulated language parks” (Apter 6) and symbolizes the Deleuzian notion of abstract machine, a network of external relations.

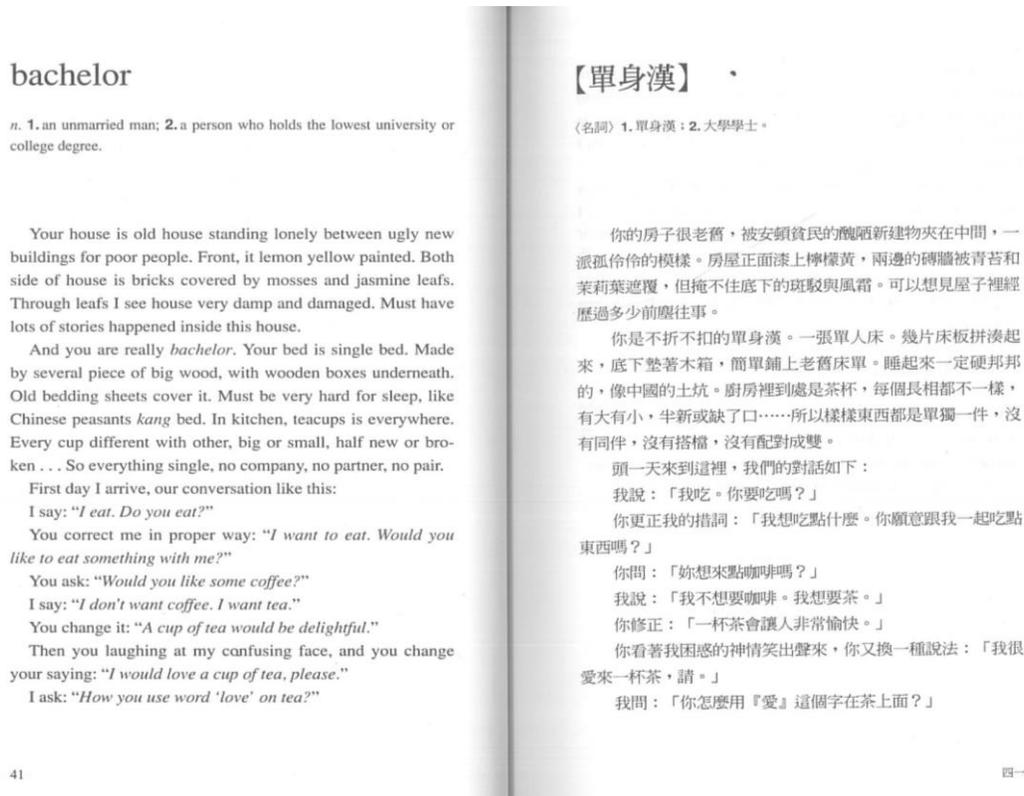


Fig. 2 Layout of 戀人版中英詞典, the traditional Chinese translation of *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (photo by author)

If one views the readership issue in a different light, linguistic and cultural (in)expressibility is another repeated theme in Guo’s novel. The linguistically complex and baffling London, in which Z

finds herself adrift, is signaled in a mixture of registers, languages, and scripts in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. Embedded in Z's narrative are coffee shop menus, quotations from Mao, Shakespeare's sonnets, condom instructions, song lyrics, handwritten letters, all of which constitute a rhizomatic semiotic system into which Z is reterritorialized. Her sense of disorientation is a dynamic one, not only because "in every second and every minute [...] [she] hear[s] a new noise from an English's mouth" (Guo, *A Concise* 17), but also because of her unrootedness—caused by linguistic disorientation—in a foreign city. Even after she moves into her lover's apartment, she constantly feels lonely and desperate like "[a] cat without master". (Guo, *A Concise* 74)

Since the physical and emotional sense of disorientation is so overwhelming, Z's attitude towards incomprehensibility and bilingual expressibility is always shifting. At one point in the novel, she believes that bilingualism can rescue her from the abyss of loneliness, because "I see other little me try expressing in other language. [...] I always can talk to other 'me'. Is like seeing my two pieces of lips speaking in two languages at same time" (Guo, *A Concise* 33). By the end of the novel, Z has even gained an awareness of a split self, developed and found in two languages. On the plane back to China, Z looks into the porthole and sees a stranger's face. Later in her soliloquy, she writes: "When I first saw you, I felt I saw another me, a me against me, a me which I contradicted all the time. And now I cannot forget you and I cannot stop loving you because you are a part of me" (Guo, *A Concise* 279). Her new self no longer threatens the old one, but coexists with it, enabling Z to leave her hometown job and move to Beijing.

But throughout the novel, Z also feels constrained in, what appears to be, a relatively monolingual society. At one moment, she is even willing to become a prostitute in order to free herself from the exhausting process of translation that takes place in the new linguistic and cultural environment:

While I am standing there watching, I desire become prostitute. I want to be able expose my body, to relieve my body, to take my body away from dictionary and grammar and sentences, to let my body break all disciplines. What a relief that prostitute not need speak good English. She also not need to bring a dictionary with her all the time. (Guo, *A Concise* 110)

Furthermore, in a moment of crisis in Z's relationship with her lover, she has no choice but to resort to Mandarin Chinese—her mother tongue—to get the anguish off her chest in a chapter ironically titled "Nonsense": "我真他妈地厌倦了这样说英文，这样写英文。我厌倦了这样学英文。我感到全身紧缚，如同牢狱。我害怕从此变成一个小心翼翼的人，没有自信的人。因为我完全不能做我自己，我变得如此渺小，而与我无关的这个英语文化变得如此巨大。我被它驱使，我被它强暴，我被它消灭" (Guo, *A Concise* 142). By including a longish passage in written Chinese in her novel, Guo attempts to push what Lourde Torres calls "radical bilingualism" (86) to its limit. However, she still adds an italicized English translation of the aforementioned paragraph on the next page. The translation, interestingly, is presented as an editor's note:

*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 very aware of talking, speaking, and I have become a person without confidence, because I can't be me. I have become so small, so tiny, while the English culture surrounding me becomes enormous. It swallows me, and it rapes me. (Guo, *A Concise* 143)*

To Z, who refuses to write in English at this moment, English has taken on the role of an abuser and translation an accomplice, attempting to destruct her identity. To Guo, the translational movement between languages is constantly enmeshed with cultural, political, and dominant poetic structures of power.

As is partly demonstrated above, what Guo tries to highlight in her novel is that, even though translatability serves as a pre-condition, language is never a one-to-one correspondence between word and referent; translation is not a straightforward process of substitution between different linguistic systems either. On the linguistic front, she sets language as both the central character and the site of (mis)communication between the narrator and the people around her. On the cultural front, she demonstrates the state of untranslatedness in rendering one's experience of ways of life to the self and to others. One of the cultural differences in the novel that Z has been struggling to come to terms with is 家 *jia*/family. As her relationship with her British lover progresses, she finds out that, to her, 家 *jia* does not only mean one's family members, but also refers to a permanent place where a family can live and settle down. She explains that 家 *jia* has "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" (Guo, *A Concise* 100). In the meantime, when she resorts to her English thesaurus, she realizes that "it seems like that 'family' doesn't mean a place. Maybe in West people just move around from one house to another house? Always looking for a house, maybe that's the lifelong job for Westerners" (Guo, *A Concise* 100). Such cultural divergence is also epitomized by Z's confusion over the dynamics of intimacy and privacy. Although she came to understand that privacy was something alien to the Chinese culture and to her relations with her close friends and her lover, problems ensue when she reflects upon the differences between Chinese and British views on intimacy. Those reflections suggest Z is ultimately going to leave her lover in the end, because his nomadic nature is not very compatible to her envisioned life. They also exemplify the glacial pacing of becoming by highlighting the insufficiency of translation as a vision of the movement between cultures and the business of human communication.

It is worth noting that the story in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* is set in London, one of the most polyglot cities in the world, and Beijing, a vast and emerging translation zone. Gilmour argues that mass immigration from Britain's former colonies, alongside the effects of globalized capital, has transformed and continues to transform the linguistic and cultural landscape of London, and the literature produced within it (210). And Z's narrative, which, as Guo's memoir

shows, is based on the author's own experience of traveling back to Beijing several times, illustrates an ever-changing megalopolis in the era of globalization:

Beijing has changed as if ten years passed. It has become unrecognisable. I am sitting in a Starbucks café in a brand new shopping centre, a large twenty-two-storey mall with a neon sign in English on its roof: *Oriental Globe*. Everything inside is shining, as if they stole all the lights and jewels from Tiffany's and Harrod's. In the West there is "Nike" and our Chinese factories make "Li Ning," after an Olympic champion. In the West there is "Puma" and we have "Poma." The style and design are exactly the same. (Guo, *A Concise* 281)

From Z's description, one can tell that Beijing has become another transnational contact zone, where neologism breaks down "the normal barriers of resistance to language change" (Apter 161). Just like the transformations that Z has gone through, translation and indigenization taking place in Beijing should be characterized as a process of becoming, rather than a simple imitation. Deterritorialization and reterritorialization occur when a trademark name like "Puma" becomes "Poma" in China, while the merchandise remains the same in other senses. London and Beijing, from the point of view of linguistic, cultural, and metropolitan praxis, are both complex and ever-shifting translation zones. They are both geographical and cultural embodiments of assemblage, where one may find interlinguaging, capital flow, literary creativity, miscommunication, and non-translation going full throttle.

## Conclusion

As a translational text, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* celebrates the creative possibilities of plurilingual expression and explores how the space between languages and cultures instils the philosophy of becoming into those who travel in it. In such a rhizomatic zone, where heterogenous elements, such as languages, ethnic groups, and cultural mechanisms tend to enter into relations with one another, translatability is an a priori requirement for understanding in-betweenness and establishing connections between singularities.

Since the image or figure of a language, as Naoki Sakai argues, is projected in the pairing of one figure with another, translation as becoming can only function organically when it sustains, instead of denying, the multiplicity of languages and voices. In turn, translation as becoming deconstructs any attempts to restrain events, actions, and encounters between narratives, bodies, and identities. Translation is timeless, existing before language unity or divergence. In a world characterized by multiple alterities, it is high time we rework Apter's translation zone into a new site, where the plurilingual complexity of communication is made visible, the myth of language as the ultimate marker of a fixed identity is debunked, and the demarcation of intersubjective limits is destabilized.

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