When Z lost her reference: language, culture and identity in Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*

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> 'I trying express me, but confusing – I see other little me try expressing me in other language […] Is like seeing my two pieces of lips speaking in two languages at same time.'
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> Z in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* [1]

Half way though Chinese-born British-based writer and film-maker Xiaolu Guo's debut novel in English, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007), the self-named protagonist Z complains about losing her reference in the West: 'But here, in this place in the west, I lost my reference. And I have to rely on my own sensibility. But my own sensibility toward the world is so unclear' (2008: 157). This reflection comes immediately after Z's painful experience of loneliness and her attempt to put this loneliness into words, into English words. Solitude is a concept she is unfamiliar with, having been brought up with Chinese collectivism. Loneliness, individualism, the self, even humour are from her Chinese perspective, Western concepts (2008: 156, 163, 269). *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* is Z's diary-cum-travelogue-cum-dictionary and it charts a specific year in her life – 2002 – when she is 23 and spends a year in London in order to learn English so that she can return to China and get a good job. It is, however, also a novel that tells us about a meeting between East and West, China and England, a woman and a man. But most of all, it tells us about language, culture and identity.

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 and how we perceive the world. This is the linguist Guy Deutscher's contention in *Through the Language Glass*, in which he explores 'the relation between language, culture, and thought' (2010a: 6-7). Admitting that it is a rather old-fashioned, if not notorious approach to take in linguistics, he nonetheless argues the case that language instils 'habits of mind' that relate to 'memory, attention, perception and association' (2010a: 22). He sets out to prove this contention through three concrete examples: colour concepts, spatial co-ordinates and grammatical gender. Like Z, his preoccupation is with ‘the power of cultural conventions’ (2010a: 68). And the best way to understand ‘culture’s role in shaping the concepts of language’ is to think about language as offering a ‘framework of freedom within constraints’ (2010a: 95). We need to move away from the notion that language is a prison house that limits what can be said and thought and embrace what he calls the Boas-Jakobson principle, expressed in a pithy maxim by Roman Jakobson thus: ‘Languages differ essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *may* convey’ (Jakobson quoted in Deutscher 2010a: 151). So languages differ primarily in what information a specific language obliges the speaker to express.[2] The next step Deutscher takes is to suggest that: ‘When a language forces its speakers to pay attention to certain aspects of the world each time they open their mouths […] such habits of speech can eventually settle into habits of mind with consequences for memory, or perception, or associations […]’ (2010a: 152). A mother tongue is by definition a language you are exposed to and immersed in from birth, so speech habits, as Deutscher puts it, are ‘imprinted from an early age’ (2010a: 192). That is why much of what we may think of as natural in fact largely depends on the cultural and linguistic conventions we have been exposed to (2010a: 232).

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[1] Xiaolu Guo, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (London: Vintage, 2008): 38-9. Page references in the text are to this edition.

We can take these insights even one step further, inspired by Deutscher’s question of whether ‘speakers of different languages might perceive the *same reality* in different ways, just because of their mother tongues’ (2010a: 218) and suggest that in a trans-cultural and trans-linguistic moment, such as the year covered in Z’s diary, such habits are brought to the forefront of perception and understanding, and in the process made strange or defamilarised, for all parties involved in the encounter. The novel describes how habits of mind are profoundly affected in a trans-cultural meeting. In this article I argue that the novel is fashioned around Z’s obsession with English habits of speech and habits of thought, and coming from a very different culture with different speech habits she questions how such habits are formed in the first place and then explores the effect that they have on culture and thought. Through Z’s thoughts and her dialogues with her unnamed lover, the novel explores how much of what we think of as natural is in fact the result of nurture, and further, how language shapes much of this thought. But it also shows that even though our mother tongue influences the way we think, it does not mean that our mother tongue limits our ‘intellectual horizons’ or ‘constrains our ability to understand concepts or distinctions used in other languages,’ to invoke Deutscher again (2010a: 324). This is an attempt at forming a distance to the Sapir-Worf hypothesis that would have us believe that ‘our mother tongue restricts what we are able to think’ (2010b). Although the Sapir-Worf hypothesis – that language determines how humans think and perceive the structure of the world and that that structure differs from one language to another – has been out of favour for a long time, it may be useful to rethink it. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is also known as the principle of linguistic relativity, as Deutscher reminds us, and that implicit in this hypothesis is an assumption that ‘languages limit their speaker’s ability to express or understand concepts’ (2010a: 150). It is this idea that language limits what you can think that is the problem, not that language affects how you think. At the very beginning of *Dictionary*, Z expresses in her limited English her thoughts on the difference between English and Chinese:

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[2] This is not unlike Bill Ashcroft’s suggestions in *Caliban’s Voice* that a language, for example English, ‘*can* be an ontological prison it *need* not be’ and, further, that: ‘The language we speak is very often crucial in establishing who we are. But it need not define the limits to what we can be’ (2009: 3 and 97).

> Chinese, we not having grammar. We saying things simple way. No verb-change-usage, no tense differences, no gender changes. We boss of our language. But English language is boss of English user. (2008: 24)

Z, however, will soon learn that this is not correct, and that as she learns more English, she also learns to boss the language around. She learns that one specific language does not, as Deutscher argues, limit understanding of other cultures, even though it affects how you think. Cognitive psychologists who are interested in cross-linguistic differences in cognition, such as Lera Boroditsky, whom Deutscher also cites, are coming up with empirical evidence to support the general ideas behind the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Their findings suggest that language profoundly ‘shapes even the most fundamental dimensions of human experience: space, time, causality and relationships to others’ (2011: 44). Borodistsky even suggests that, ‘changing how people talk changes how people think’ (2011: 45). In many ways, Xiaolou Guo has taken this suggestion up for consideration in her novel. She has Z ask questions about whether language shapes thought through thinking about the effect of grammar:

> So time and space always bigger than little human in our country. Is not like order in English sentence, ‘I’ […] in front of everything, supposing be most important thing to whole sentence […] Person as dominate subject, is main thing in an English sentence. Does it mean West culture respecting individuals more? (2008: 26-7)

In *Dictionary*, the central contention that Z battles with is linked to time, timing and the temporal. The novel charts twelve months in the life of the protagonist and is divided into the months of the year. It begins with a short section called ‘Before’, before a prologue and ends with an epilogue that comes after the subheading ‘Afterwards’. So throughout there is an emphasis on time passing as well as on the temporal. Indeed the novel can also be read as a *Bildungsroman*, since it pivots on the formative year in which Z becomes an adult (2008: 353). It is the temporal aspect and the difference between talking about and thinking about time that causes the most conflict between Z and her lover, in the novel simply referred to as 'him'. One of the text's central discussions on the slippery notion of *time* is linked to the equally complex experience of *love*:

> 'Live in the moment,' I repeat. Why do I have to? 'Live *in* the moment or live *for* the moment. Maybe you only live *for* the moment. That is so hippy. I can't do that as a humble foreigner,' I fight back […] 'Love', this English word: like other English words it has tense. 'Loved' or 'will love' or 'have loved'. All these specific tenses mean Love is time-limited thing. Not infinite. It only exist in particular period of time. In Chinese, Love is (ai). It has no tense. No past and future. Love in Chinese means a being, a situation, a circumstance. Love is existence, holding past and future. If our love existed in Chinese tense, then it will last forever. It will be infinite. (2008: 301)

Z pinpoints one of the central habits of thought that linguistic conventions dictate in this particular novel – that because Chinese does not have linguistic tense in the same way that English does, the Chinese notion of love is infinitive, whereas the English perception of love is affected by time. This is not necessarily true, of course. What we also notice is that even though Z's mother tongue does not force her to convey tense in the same way that English does, it does not mean that Z does not understand the ways in which love can be affected by time passing. What she is in effect doing in such moments in the text is exploring acts of cultural translation.

Indeed, another way of looking at the novel is that in its entirety it is an act of cultural translation. When Z loses her reference, she feels that she is losing herself. Twice in the novel she reaches a crisis point, and has to resort to Chinese characters, which are then on the next page translated by the editor into English for the reader. In the first crisis she expresses how it feels to lose yourself as you gain another language:

> I am sick of speaking 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. (2008: 180)

The second crisis has to do with the conflict – as she sees it – between love and freedom (2008: 196). There are many interesting observations here on language, culture and identity. But we also need to think about how the reader too reaches a crisis point at such stages in the text. Who is the editor, and why is this editor suddenly involved in Z's dictionary-diary? We have to juggle at least two reader responses: one that is linked to the feeling that we are reading a diary-in-progress, noticing how Z's language is improving as time passes and how she becomes better at putting her thoughts into words. This response then needs to be readjusted after the first crisis point, when we suddenly realise that we are in fact reading a novel that has been through the hands of an editor-translator and that Z's language may have been, probably has been, edited in the process. We also notice that at this critical juncture in the novel, Z indeed feels that language imprisons her, not her mother tongue, but English. And that for her, language and culture are in cahoots, constraining her development and her sense of personal identity, the humble foreigner from Communist China with her ridiculous and amusing Pidgin English. It makes her feel belittled, because she is constantly so self-consciously aware of the fact of speaking. She feels small. This, however, is contrary to how the reader and her lover perceive her. Throughout the novel, as she gains mastery of the English language, she grows in confidence and stature, while her lover shrinks. Z knows this: 'I talk and talk, more and more. I steal your words. I steal all your beautiful words. I speak your language' (2008: 293). So there is a sense in which Z is both aware of, and in denial of, how linguistic power is subtly shifting in the house in Hackney where she is living with her lover, where East and West meet and two languages and cultures are forced to interact.

It makes sense here to include a few illuminating comments Xiaolu Guo herself has made in interviews with Western media. She has explained that *Dictionary* is her first novel in English, written in a language she only started learning three years before writing it, and based on diaries she kept when she first moved to London in 2002. In the Danish newspaper *Politiken* (30 May 2009) she makes the same comment that Z makes – she steals the English language in order to make it a useful tool for her own purposes. Why? Xiaolu Guo elaborates that she does not feel at home in the English language, but in order to persuade Westerners to listen to her story in the correct way she feels she has to write in a Western language. She does not explain what she means by 'the correct way'. Couldn't she write in Chinese and have it translated into English? Such a translation would presumably involve a distance that affects the reader's response, and that the writer was at pains to avoid. Thus in Xiaolu Guo's personal act of cultural translation she opts for what she calls immigrant English – a language she claims is bereft of aesthetic linguistic manipulation (*Politiken,* 30 May 2009). In an interview with *Time Out*, she expresses anxieties about her future as an English language novelist, because, as she says, 'I can only play this game once' (*Time Out*, 27 February, 2007).[3]

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[3] Clearly it is not only the language which attracts the author – there is also something to be said for Western freedom: 'Her introduction to Western literature came after the Chinese government opted to publish works by J.D. Salinger, Sylvia Plath and Charles Bukowski on the grounds that they were anti-capitalist: "I remember reading Plath and thinking: Shit, in the West people are free to commit suicide!"' (*Time Out*, 27 February 2007). Xiaolu Guo has since published two books in English: *Ufo in her Eyes* (2009) and *Lovers in the Age of Indifference* (2010). She makes no

In order to substantiate the suggestion that it makes sense to look at the entirety of *Dictionary* as an act of cultural translation, I want to refer to some comments made by the author in connection with the translation into English of her first novel, *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* (2008). In the Acknowledgements to this book, Xiaolu Guo writes about the obstacles involved in turning the text into English. Not only was it hard to translate the language, she was also somewhat unhappy with the original narrative: ‘To rewrite a Chinese book when it has already been translated is a big burden to place on a translator. The only way to do it was to write in English over the top of the translated text’ (2008b: 204). And in order to find a convincing voice for her hero, she spent time with Western women and immersed herself in their language: ‘Throughout the process, I have been caught between two cultures, fighting for a common world between two languages’ (2008b: 204). The layered effect – writing English on top of the Chinese – is not unlike what we witness in the above-mentioned crisis points in *Dictionary*. The reader and the narrator-protagonist are both caught in language, and that trapped feeling engenders a linguistic hypersensitivity. The see-saw act of constant linguistic and cultural translation and the attempt to find a common world between the two languages of Chinese and English is Z’s battle too – for her, as we have seen, the language of love might just be one such common world.

In his autobiographical piece, ‘The Vernacular Cosmopolitan’, Homi K. Bhabha writes about cultural translation that it

> is not simply appropriation or adaptation; it is a process through which cultures are required to revise their own systems of reference, norms and values, by departing from their habitual or ‘inbred’ rules of transformation. Ambivalence and antagonism accompanies any act of cultural translation, because negotiating with the ‘difference of the other’ reveals the radical insufficiency of sedimented, settled systems of meaning and signification; it demonstrates, as well, the inadequacy of those ‘structures of feeling’ (as Raymond Williams would have put it), through which we experience our cultural authenticity and authority as being somehow ‘natural’ to us and part of a national landscape. (2000: 141)

This is exactly what happens in *Dictionary*. Z’s diary-dictionary reveals what is at stake in the act of cultural and indeed linguistic translation: her habits of thought undergo a profound revision as a result of her negotiation with the English ‘other’, those inscrutable and unknowable folk Timothy Mo’s Chinese immigrant Lily classifies as pink-faced foreign devils in his novel *Sour Sweet* (1982).[4] And in line

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references in those novels to the roles of editors or translators. Her early novels are translated from the Chinese: *Village of Stone* (2004) by Cindy Carter and *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth* (2008) by Rebecca Morris.

[4] See Timothy Mo, *Sour Sweet* (London: Vintage, 1992): 17, 137, 147, 160, 236, and 253.

with Deutscher's argument, she discovers that there is nothing natural in the ways in which the English – or indeed the Chinese – think about ideas such as love, freedom and identity. Not only did her year in the UK force her to become an adult, it also transformed her in other ways. She constantly complains about losing her reference, whereas in truth, she has not really lost any references at all; rather she has gained many new ones. She also complains about losing her self. Yet, she emerges at the end of her book with a more reflective sense of self. It is clear that the West has affected her, as is inevitable in trans-cultural encounters. But for Z it is also clear that Chinese culture does not sufficiently sustain her any more. After her stay in the West, she needs a more flexible and trans-cultural perspective on her newly-adult life and identity. Back home she feels 'out of place in China' (2008: 352), yet she does not want to go back to England. Her mother castigates her: 'You know what your problem is: you never think of the future! You only live in the present!' (2008: 351). This echo does not fail to remind both Z and the reader of how Z once said the exact same thing to her lover. We also remember that Z's English at that time was good enough for her to play with it. Living *in* or *for* the moment – playing with the prepositions, those small words that are so hard to get right for non-native speakers, profoundly changes the whole meaning of the expression.

Throughout the novel, language emerges not only as the central theme, but also as a way of staging the self, as a way of constructing a flexible identity. In *Caliban's Voice*, Bill Ashcroft explains the postcolonial language debate – most vividly expressed in the well-known and often-referenced quarrel between Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o – as typically stemming from a 'confusion between language as a communicative tool and language as a cultural symbol' (2009: 2), or as a confusion between what language does and how it is used (the performative aspect of language) and what language is or stands for (the ontological aspect of language). Ashcroft suggests that it makes sense to think of language as social practice in which language operates a strategic tool for language users. Thus he goes on to claim that, 'This active engagement with language, this constant performative use, is a key to the role of language in constructing a private, religious, national or cultural identity. The language we speak is very often crucial in establishing who we are. But it need not define the limits to what we can be' (2009: 96-7). The last comment here is the most important I think. From this perspective, Ashcroft can suggest that language's most important function is as 'a tool of self-fashioning' (2009: 101) and in this way, as is vividly expressed in postcolonial literature and multicultural literature in general, 'our identity, our subjectivity, is *performed by*, rather than *embodied in* language' (2009: 103). I would suggest that it is precisely this revelation Z reaches during the course of her dictionary-diary. She gradually comes to realize that language is a 'tool of self-fashioning'. Z uses language as mediator, as facilitator and as bridge. She uses language to make sense of who the other is and who she herself is. She uses language to fashion herself as an adult, and to make sense of both Chinese and English culture. Bhikhu Parekh writes thus about culture and the centrality of culture to his vision of human subjectivity:

> Cultures do change, but over a long period of time, and in the meantime they retain a measure of coherence, continuity and identity. Though not all-important, culture is important as the basis of individual identity and self-understanding. It shapes its members, structures their forms of thoughts and views of the world, organizes their lives, provides a system of meaning, values and ideals and so on. (2002: 140)

In short, culture here acts as references for the individual and her community. When Z complains about losing her reference we think that what she means is her Chinese culture and her language. But that is clearly not the case: as her English improves, she teaches her lover about Chinese culture and, as we have seen, slips into Chinese when she reaches crucial and painful moments in her life abroad. Having said that, however, there is one reference that she seems to forfeit: one reference point that she loses in the west is the grand and sustaining discourse of communism and collectivism, with the solidity and security, even timelessness, that has hitherto sustained her. The belief in this master narrative is clearly lost – but her novel reveals abundantly that she also gains something in that particular cultural-political loss.

It has become a bit of a cliché, but it is still worth repeating Salman Rushdie's diagnosis in the essay 'Imaginary Homelands' of his own situation as a translated man: 'Having been borne across the world, we are translated men [and women!]. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained' (1992: 17). Being translated – moving/moved from one cultural place to another – can thus have diverse effects. Migration can lead to fusion – what Rushdie calls straddling two cultures – or confusion – what he calls falling between two stools (1992: 15). Or to a complex and ambivalent mixture of both outcomes, which is where I suspect Z finds herself, as we see at the end of the novel.

Rushdie further elaborates on the notion of translation as affording a 'double perspective' or a 'stereoscopic vision' characteristic of the migrant perspective as simultaneously insiders and outsiders and how this double perspective is perhaps what replaces the loss of 'whole sight' (1992: 19). It is the same double vision Edward Said praises in his *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994): 'Because the exile sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation' (1994: 44). The exile, he writes, 'exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half involvements and half-detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another' (1994: 36). Homi K.

Bhabha makes a similar statement in the Introduction to *The Location of Culture* (1994) commenting on his ‘intellectual twin’ Salman Rushdie, that ‘the truest eye may now belong to migrant’s double vision’ (1994: 5). Yet there is a sense that all of the above celebratory evocations of unique insights, double perspectives and true eyes are only true of those migrants who straddle the fusion of two cultures, and not so much so for those confused souls who fall between two stools and thus lose vistas all together. Albeit only an exile or migrant for a year, Z’s experiences, however, fit these typically 1990s discourses. After weathering her many crises in the West, she emerges not only as an adult, but also as a more mature person, one able to enjoy the benefits of a stereoscopic or dual vision. However, this double perspective, coupled with the loss of the sustaining narrative of collectivism, means that she feels as out of place in China, as she felt in England, where even with a much-improved English, she was still a self-proclaimed ‘humble foreigner’. Yet that way of fashioning yourself or of performing identity may also be a practical label behind which you can hide as you make critical comments on the host society.

We can say that Z’s year in England has afforded her a trans-cultural, or perhaps even a multicultural perspective on life, since she has submerged herself in a very different culture and language from that with which she has been brought up. Parekh elaborates on the effect of a multicultural perspective on life:

> For the multiculturalist, we are human beings but also cultural beings, born and raised within and shaped by a thick culture, which we can no doubt revise and even reject but only by embracing some other culture […] By engaging in a critically sympathetic dialogue with other cultures, it [i.e. the culture] comes to appreciate its own strengths and limitations, becomes conscious of what is distinctive to it as well as what it shares in common with them, and enjoys the opportunity to enrich itself by judiciously borrowing from them what it finds attractive and can easily assimilate. (2002: 141)

Charles Taylor makes use of Hans-George Gadamer’s hermeneutical notion of the ‘fusion of horizons’ in this multicultural context. This is how Gadamer activates the concept in *Truth and Method*:

> In fact the horizon of the present is continuously in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past […] *Rather, understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves.* (1993: 306)

For Gadamer, then, the fusion of horizons is something that inevitably occurs in the encounter between our present cultural preconceptions and those of the past, and this encounter leads to increased understanding of the present position. In a similar manner, Taylor argues, we learn to manoeuvre in a multicultural world:

> We learn to move in a broader horizon, within which what we have formerly taken for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the formerly unfamiliar culture. The 'fusion of horizons' operates through our developing *new vocabularies of comparison*, by means of which we can articulate these contrasts. (1994: 67, my italics)

By way of conclusion, I want to explore Taylor's notion of vocabularies of comparison in more detail, because it seems to me that that particular idea works well as a worthwhile perspective on what happens to language, culture and identity in *Dictionary*. But first, by way of comparison, and to add to the discussion, I want to briefly read Xiaolu Guo in tandem with Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart* (2008/2011). *A Life Apart* tells the story of protagonist Ritwick's short life, first in an abusive family in India, and then as a student in Oxford, and finally as rent-boy in London. The moment I want to discuss is when Ritwick discovers that an Oxford friend works for the NSPCC helpline and how her talk about childhood abuse affects Ritwick's sensibilities, as he thinks about 'the lost innocence of the word "abuse"':

> The English he has grown up with in India is slightly different from England English; there is *a touch of a phase-lag* somewhere – they do not superimpose on each other perfectly. 'Abuse' for Ritwick has always meant the hurling of loud, angry, possibly filthy words at someone else – you call someone a motherfucking bastard and that would be abuse. But to have it upgraded like this, in the casual, snap of two finger, to his entire childhood, to his relationship with a mother who is not there anymore to answer questions or even to listen to him – no, that can't be right. And surely this has happened, more or less, to every child in India? He feels a sudden rush of irritation for this business of other cultures, other countries, renaming and recategorizing things, using their own yardsticks, for other people, as if their definitions were universal. But this fades away as swiftly as it has arrived with the question: 'What if they're right?' The momentousness of the answer is always kept at bay by that classic reasoning: it happens to other people, not to me. He hasn't got around to *the cognitive shift* 'abuse' has undergone (2011: 182-3, my italics).

In the cracks between slightly different semantic content of (similar) words – the phase-lag – is where the opportunity arises to develop vocabularies of comparison, and such new vocabularies have the potential to change your entire mental perspective on life and indeed your references. It is not only a linguistic cognitive shift that takes place in such moments in these texts, it is also a psychological and cultural cognitive shift, as we see for Ritwick, and for Z. Learning a new language – England English – also changes the way they think about life. Ritwick and Z are forced to think about the same reality in new and different ways. For Ritwick this readjustment pivots on the word ‘abuse’, for Z on ‘love’. In one of the last instalments in her dictionary, appropriately entitled ‘Timing’, a more mature and wise Z contemplates the notion of grammatical tense again, this time via a sentence by the old sage Ibn Arabi: ‘The universe continues to be in the present tense’. This sentence activates her new vocabulary of comparison, her cognitive shift, and her understanding of the power of cultural and linguistic conventions:

> Does that mean English tense difference is just complicated for no reason? Does that mean tenses are not natural things at all? Does that mean love is a form that continues for ever and for ever, just like in my Chinese concept? (2008: 326)

Z is beginning to understand that our mother tongue instils habits of thought that we might not be aware of until we are faced to rethink them in a trans-cultural moment of cultural and linguistic translation. For her, this moment was the year she grew up and discovered love in the shape of a middle-aged Englishman.

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