



Xiaolu Guo

Nine Continents: A Memoir In and Out of China

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reviewed by [Wei Miao](#)

1. Xiaolu Guo (b. 1973) is an accomplished contemporary UK-based Chinese migrant with multiple statuses: a writer, filmmaker, essayist and poet. Trained in script writing and film aesthetics at the Beijing Film Academy, Guo published one novel and four collections of film scripts and film essays before heading for the National Film and Television School in England to study documentary film directing in 2002. On turning thirty, Guo made a bold decision in the foreign land: she would switch her writing language to English in order to avoid the self-censorship she experienced in China and root herself in the place she is currently residing.
2. Guo's first English fiction: *A Concise Chinese–English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007),^[1] which is based on her own thwarted experiences of picking up English at the age of twenty-nine, was shortlisted for the 2007 Orange Prize for Fiction (now the Women's Prize for Fiction), one of the UK's most prestigious literary prizes. After that Guo continued to publish fictional works which, however, are all loosely associated with her past in China and her current globe-trotting identity. In 2013 Guo was named one of *Granta's* Best of Young British Novelists. Guo's most recent book, *Nine Continents: A Memoir In and Out of China* (2017, hereafter *Nine Continents*),^[2] won the 2017 National Book Critics Circle Award in the US.
3. Following Jung Chang's *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1991)^[3] and Hong Ying's *Daughter of the River: An Autobiography* (translated version, 1998),^[4] *Nine Continents* is the third popular memoir authored by a Chinese migrant writer in the UK. The autobiography traces the arc of Guo's story from her abandoned childhood, in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, to her experiences as a rebellious and painful adolescent and frustrated youth in China's reform and opening up era, and finally to her new identity as a diasporic writer and filmmaker in London in the new millennium.
4. The memoir consists of five parts. The first four parts record Guo's life experiences in four different places against diverse sociohistorical backgrounds: Shitang, a small fishing village in Southeast China, where Guo spent her lonely childhood with her deprived paternal grandparents in the 1970s (1975–80); Wenling, a medium-sized town where Guo for the first time reunited with her parents and elder brother at the age of nearly seven, and started to experience sharp pains of growing up as a female teenager—social trivialisation and marginalisation, sexual harassment and abortion (1980–93); Beijing, the cultural hub of China, where an elite education in the avant-garde art of film not only

opened Guo's horizon, but also made her keenly aware of the state oppression of experimental art and the disadvantages facing a female working in the male-dominated film industry (1993–2002); and London, the international metropolis, where Guo has managed to establish herself as a self-exiled artist living and working between cultures (2002–17). The last section of the memoir deals with a life circle: the birth of Guo's daughter and the death of Guo's mother, implying the closure of a distant and bitter mother-daughter relationship and the anticipation of something new and different.

5. Similar to the previous generation of Chinese migrant writers who favour presenting Chinese culture in their works, Guo adroitly weaves classical Chinese literature, folklore, and opera, as well as Taoism and Buddhism into her narrative, helping non-Chinese readers gain a glimpse of the cultural background in which Guo has grown up. For example, the 'Nine Continents' in the title alludes to the prediction by a Taoist monk of Guo's fate when she was a little girl. The monk foresees that Guo will 'cross the sea and travel to the Nine Continents' when she grows up (p. 63). Moreover, Guo ingeniously attaches excerpts from classical Chinese literature *Xi You Ji* (Journey to the West)^[5] to the beginning of each part, illuminating its theme through the story of the monkey Wukong (Emptiness Knower), an embodiment of Guo herself.
6. However, unlike most Chinese migrant writers who are keen to expose the dark side of China but avoid or only slightly touch on sensitive issues of their adopted western countries,^[6] Guo employs a critical stance as a true diasporic intellectual in her memoir. Guo unflinchingly expresses her strong criticism of not only gender inequality, ideological control, artistic censorship, development-caused environmental and health crises in China, but also her disillusion about British society and culture. Guo honestly describes her disenchantment in the following paragraph:

Before I left China, I was desperately looking for something. Freedom, the chance to live as an individual with dignity. This was impossible in my home country. But I was also blindly looking for something connected to the West, something non-ideological, something imaginative and romantic. But as I walked along the London streets, trying to save every penny for buses or food, I lost sight of my previous vision. London seemed no more spiritually fulfilling than home. (pp. 285–86)

It is thought-provoking that transnational migration and first-hand observation turn out to contradict Guo's expectation of finding a spiritual and artistic home in her adopted country. In this respect Guo experiences cultural displacement a second time but in a different dimension.

7. Consistent with her previous focus on women's issues, *Nine Continents* provides a vivid account of three generations of women in Guo's family: her poverty-stricken yet kind-hearted grandmother, who has borne the brunt of feudal society, such as illiteracy, superstition, feet-binding, child marriage and domestic violence; her undereducated mother, who is descended from an ill-fated farmer's family but who persecuted intellectuals as one of the Red Guards in the Cultural Revolution; and Guo herself, a self-made figure who has succeeded in breaking away from the social restrictions on women and gives full play to her artistic talents.
8. However, Guo's memoir is unnerving at certain points. For example, when her mother learned that Guo had taken condoms to the classroom, though mistakenly, she hit her fiercely with a broom. Guo honestly but also shockingly records her resentment towards her mother, 'In my bitterness I imagined killing my mother one day. I would strangle her and watch her die' (p. 137). Not long after she started middle school, Guo fell in love with her physics teacher and dated him secretly. One day when her mother caught Guo returning home in the early morning, she beat her violently and locked her inside the bedroom for a whole day. Guo again writes, 'I hated her. I secretly wished she would die in an accident, be mangled in a car crash or be swept away by a natural disaster. I cursed her every second of that day and swore to myself in desperation' (p. 181). Guo's brutal straightforwardness not only projects herself as ruthless, but also makes soft-hearted readers

shudder.

9. Moreover, though she condemns gender inequality and the oppression of women in China as well as Confucianism, which is the ideological source of the afore-mentioned phenomena, many times in her memoir, Guo suddenly turns from a liberal-minded woman into a 'traditional' woman when she is dating Western white men. For example, after she meets her first American boyfriend Paul, Guo writes:

Although I had only met this man a few hours before, I had an absolute conviction that I should *belong* [italics in original] to him. In traditional Chinese culture, women *belong* to their beloveds. In my conscious mind, schooled by modern communist ideas about women, there was meant to be no place for it. We had been taught such thinking was utterly feudal and against feminism. Nevertheless, there it was, bubbling up from some inner recess of my psyche. The hidden memory of my body was much stronger than the frequently recited ideas in my head. Tradition, as a kind of deeper, underlying skin, was now in charge. I was convinced that Paul would be the man to show me the world, the enchanting America that I had heard so much about for so long. (pp. 241–42)

Guo's confession shows she has internalised the white saviour myth, which is in fact prevalent among Chinese young girls in the 1990s when foreigners were uncommon in China and when China was not strong economically. However, this fantasy subordinates Guo to an inferior and passive position, thus maintaining the traditional gender paradigm.

10. Though she initially fantasises about being saved by Western white men after experiencing sexual abuse, unprotected sex, and intimate relationship violence with Chinese men, Guo actually discards that fantasy and makes her own efforts to realise her life dreams. Her previous trampled experience as a female only makes her stronger. In this sense, Guo is an exemplar of a self-reliant and tough woman.
11. Overall, Guo's memoir *Nine Continents* is worth reading. It is an inspiring example of showing how women of a humble origin can become agents of their own destiny, against all odds. The book will be engaging and insightful to a wide readership including not only those who are interested in Chinese women's stories, but also those who are interested in literature, arts, transnational migration, cultural and spiritual dislocation.

Notes

[1] Xiaolu Guo, *A Concise Chinese–English Dictionary for Lovers*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2007.

[2] The UK edition's title is Xiaolu Guo, *Once Upon a Time in the East: A Story of Growing Up*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2017.

[3] Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, London: HarperCollins, 1991.

[4] Hong Ying, *Daughter of the River: An Autobiography*, translated by Howard Goldblatt, London: Bloomsbury, 1998.

[5] *Xi You Ji*, published in the sixteenth century, is one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature. It is the fairytale version of the heroic pilgrimage of the Buddhist Monk, Xuanzang, who travelled to India to fetch the Sutra during the Tang Dynasty.

[6] The works of another UK-based Chinese migrant writer Xinran and US-based Ha Jin, Yiyun Li and Anchee Min illustrate this point. A notable exception is Ouyang Yu, an Australia-based Chinese migrant writer, who is vocal in condemning the racial hierarchy in Australia.

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