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The Chinese Flâneuse Negotiating the Metropolis: Xiaolu Guo's *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*

1. Introduction

Michel de Certeau's work on the sociology of space, which focuses on the experiential aspects of the city, makes a particularly useful introduction to this article.[1] A journey in terms of a semiotics of the city, with a focus on how the inhabitants or visitors of a city negotiate and read that space, would provide a different view of the metropolis than a focus on structural geographies would allow. The starting point of the study of space is, perhaps, not the existence of the physical structures but the interaction between the latter and the social actors who play out these interactions in determining, constraining or facilitative ways. Indeed, in the words of James Donald,

> 'The city' does not just refer to a set of buildings in a particular place. To put it polemically there is no such *thing* as a city. Rather, the city designates the space produced by the interaction of historically and geographically specific institutions, social relations of production and reproduction, practices of government, forms and media of communication and so forth […] the city then is above all a representation […] I would argue that the city constitutes an imagined environment. [2]

It is no wonder then that literature has played a key role in the fashioning and refashioning of the city. Flânerie, or the activity of strolling and looking, has been a recurrent motif in both sociological and literary explorations of the metropolis. The figure of the flâneur was made prominent first by Charles Baudelaire and then subsequently by Walter Benjamin in his analysis of Baudelaire's poetry as a means of exploring the problem of metropolitan existence in a time of modernity. While the original flâneur, who is tied down to nineteenth-century Paris, would become extinct with the rapid developments in the second half of that century, the figure of the flâneur would manifest itself in subsequent incarnations in a number of European canonical texts as demonstrated, for example, by the contributions to Keith Tester's edited collection.[3]

While the scholarship on the flâneur of nineteenth-century Paris abounds, there has been relatively little in the way of investigations into the flâneur in the twenty-first century, let alone into the phenomenon of the flâneuse. Both Baudelaire and Benjamin presuppose an observer and narrator, male, privileged and defining rather than defined, "The observer is a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes," a man of crowds exulting in both the dangers and delights of the spectacle of the public.[4] He has the ability, through his incognito status, to define the order of things around him, to create for himself the meaning of the metropolitan spaces and the spectacle of the public. The flâneur is a man of means who feels compelled to escape the dullness of domestic life in order to engage with a search for meaning in the urban landscape. In the flâneur's world, women, on the other hand, are associated with superficiality, the hollowness of being commodities or that of desiring meaningless commodities. Indeed, they either form part of the urban spectacle as

objects to be consumed by the male gaze, are prostitutes or are shoppers falling prey to glittering objects.

Baudelaire's poet would sometimes notice them as mere passers by.[5] Moreover, despite the popularisation of the figure of the flâneur and the metamorphoses it has undergone, the meaning of flânerie remains elusive. With Baudelaire, poetry is the raison d'être behind the idling. Despite the fact that the Baudelairean flâneur is poised between creativity and commodification, he remains an artist and producer. With Zola, the flâneur is redefined as consumer ending the connection between flânerie and creativity.[6] Benjamin regarded the flâneur as a direct product of nineteenth-century commodity culture so that although the flâneur remains a producer of texts and is not merely an observer or decipherer, the choice of focus is on consumption rather than production. Benjamin proposes that the flâneur desperately attempts to flee the hollowness of the commodity form through the act of strolling the city and that the nature of this flânerie is a soullessness as empty as the commodity form it seeks to escape.[7] More recently, Chris Jenks has provided a reading of the flâneur through the lenses of postmodernity and as a narrative device while Zygmunt Bauman describes the modern world itself as the original flâneur with the Baudelaire/Benjamin flâneur as but its mirror image.[8]

The figure of the flâneur as defined by Baudelaire and Benjamin provides a point of departure from which this article seeks to explore the Chinese flanêuse from Xiaolu Guo's novel *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*.[9]

2. On Being Z in the City

Benjamin argues that the rationality of capitalism, commodification and the circulation of goods, predefines the meaning of existence in the city. In the context of

the political economy of *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, a late capitalist culture has not only imposed its order on the city but is the very reason why the protagonist is in London, albeit reluctantly. Xiaolu Guo's protagonist, a twenty year old woman from the Chinese countryside, has been coerced into going to London by ambitious parents for the specific purpose of learning English. Her background of Chinese provincial marginality, poverty and village dialect, rather than Mandarin, dispossesses her of the sense of agency of Baudelaire's and Benjamin's privileged male observer: "I not intellectual either. In the West, in this country, I am barbarian, illiterate peasant girl, a face of third world, and irresponsible foreigner. An alien from another planet."[10]

Her negotiation of the metropolis is supported by her parents' production of goods and participation in a capitalist economy. As a contrast to the nineteenth-century flâneur's experience of Paris, London is not a site teeming with chance encounters but fraught with risks and, as warned by the Chinese family she stops with temporarily in London, a dangerous places one needs to hide from behind closed doors. Despite the fact that London is full of drunks, junkies, the homeless, muggers and rapists awaiting their prey, she has from day one some of the makings of a flanêuse, a compulsive curiosity to walk the streets:

> With my enormous curiosity, walking down to the night street. First night I away home in my entirely twenty-three years life, everything scare me. Is cold, late winter. Windy and chilli. I feeling I can die for all kinds of situation in every second. No safety in this country, I think unsafe feeling come from I knowing nothing about this country. I scared I in big danger.'[11]

Hers is a curiosity blended with anxiety and fear in a threatening environment. As in much postcolonial or migrant fiction, London is a cold forbidding place known, indirectly and by distance, in terms of both time and space through its reputation. Her references draw from canonical literature (Charles Dickens and Shakespeare in

particular), key tourist sites (Buckingham Palace and Big Ben) and popular culture (Beckham and the Spice Girls). As she walks through the city she discovers different narratives from her expectation of a planned and static place resting harmoniously and imperiously between key buildings surrounded by permanent fog. It is, instead, a dirty, noisy and scary space, which is constantly being reorganized by competing voices:

> All agents sound like from Arabic countries and all called Ali. Their English no good too. One Ali charges Marble Arch area; one Ali charges Baker Street area. But I meet different Alis at Oxford Circus tube station (…) London, by appearance so noble, respectable, but when I follow these Alis, I find London a refugee camp.[12]

In exploring London at the level of the street, a new fiction of the city reveals itself, disentangling itself from the previous one. Those proper names which she associated with the political and cultural imperialism of London and which she identified as heroes have no place in London and gradually lose their signification.

Walking is indeed not only an unstable and un-programmatic activity but a destabilising one, one that disrupts the production of knowledge in relation to both London and her rural Chinese identity. Flânerie is perilous in the encounter with many others but also in the encounter with oneself as other. To walk in London is to lack a place,[13] it is also to lack a language, a name even: "Nobody know my name here. Even when they read the spelling of my name: Zhuang Xiao Qiao, they have no idea how saying it. When they see my name starts from 'Z', stop trying. I unpronounceable Ms Z."[14] In the context of language being a constitutive part of reality rather than a mere mirroring of it, London not only miniaturises the protagonist but renders her foreign to herself. In this ontologically threatening situation, Z perceives her own existence in the metropolis in the form of representations, describing that process of being absent repeatedly as the feeling, indeed, of walking "around like a ghost": "I am

always alone, talking in my notebook, or wandering here and there like invisible ghost."[15] The demeaning reduction of her name to an initial, and the invisibility that derives from her foreignness, give her the status of a spectral spectator in contrast to that of Baudelaire's flâneur.

If to walk, in de Certeau's terms, is to lack a place, it is also, in effect, to take over the city; to claim it in the image of one's own story. Lacking the ease with which the gentleman of leisure traverses the city, her negotiations are the more impactful. The very act of walking transgresses the interdictions from China based on her age, gender and culture; extricating herself from various myths of belonging at once:

> First three days in this country, wherever I walk, the voice from my parents echo in my ears:
> *No talking to strangers.*
> *No talking where you live.*
> *No talking how much money you have.*
> *And most important thing: no trusting anybody.*
> That was my past life. Life before in China.[16]

Driving herself out of the safe, familiar, private home of a Chinese family in London and projecting herself into the public, she shares with the original flâneur the sense that an engagement with the metropolitan spectacle will allow her to come to terms with her (new) existence.

There is an impetus, in turn, to miniaturise London. The impulse to create a microscopic image of a smaller more manageable city takes a metaphorically suggestive form: the urban exotic. The cinema becomes a place of refuge allowing her to read the city, and her relationship with it from a distance and providing her with a non-threatening way into a disruptive urban environment. As in postcolonial and migrant fictions of the city,[17] we witness the reduction of the city to a spectacle as a

means of managing the sense of dread in relation to a city which is diverse, unsafe and both linguistically and culturally unfathomable.

Movie going is part of the rambling during which she meets a different kind of deviant urban exotic. Her lover, the rag-picker is an urban scavenger who sifts through the debris of second-hand markets in an attempt to salvage what is usable. He is a marginal city-dweller who, while rejoicing in other people's cast offs, also wields a certain exotic appeal to her: "You walk in the rubbish market with your old brown leather jacket and your dirty old leather shoes. The jacket is so old that the sleeves are wore out and the bottom is pieces. But you look great with these rubbish costumes in the rubbish market." Unlike hers, her lover's journey is one of declining flânerie. Feeling physically and mentally sick in London, he longs to be in the countryside and wanders, in the meantime, aimlessly, having lost his connection with the city. Contravening the interdictions, relating to her status as young Chinese woman in London, against lonesome nocturnal street wandering and communication with strangers, she meets, walks with, talks with and shares sexual intimacy with a stranger in London with whom she cohabits as a lover for a year. Ironically, by breaking those rules, she achieves the goal desired by her parents as she learns more English from him and her flânerie across the city than she does from her language school.

3. Spatial and Linguistic Trajectories

The connections made by de Certeau between flânerie and language have a particular resonance in relation to Guo's Chinese flâneuse. In de Certeau's terms the act of walking in the city is comparable to the relationship between the act of speaking and the language spoken, "the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language."[18] Walking is defined as "a space of enunciation," a process of

appropriation of the typography on the part of the pedestrian just as the speaker appropriates and takes on language.[19] It is a spatial acting out of the place just as the speech act is an acoustic acting out of language. For the protagonist, the act of exploring the city is indissociable from the exploration of the English language, in terms of the hearing, the learning, the imbibing, the enunciation and the appropriation. Her physical flânerie of the city is both the result of the desire for that which she seeks to consume and the means by which she engages in the act of flânerie across its language. Absorption of elements of the city are closely linked to the absorption of new linguistic elements:

> So we talk, and talk, and talk, through Hyde Park, then to the West End, then Islington, walk towards my place. Nearly four hours walking. My legs is sore, and my throat is so dry, but I enjoying it. Is first time a person is walking beside me through chilly night. Is also first time person being patience listen my nonsense English, and learning me bad language. You much better than Mrs Margaret. She never let us talk freely.[20]

In the above diary entry, both activities are painful but compulsive, "Now I studying hard on English, soon I stealing their language too"; "I want write these newly learned words every day, make my own dictionary. So I learn English fast. I write down here and now, in very second and every minute when I hear a new noise from an English's mouth."[21] She is, increasingly, an avid walker and consumer in London, giving in to the exhilaration of wandering and looking around in order to engage with linguistic display and collect linguistic knowledge.

Walking, through a series of turns and detours can be compared to "turns of phrase" or "stylistic figures." Composing a path, which implies and combines styles and uses, has an equivalent in the art of turning phrases. While both style and use relate to a "way of operating", that is a way of speaking and walking, style involves a

peculiar processing of the symbolic, an individual's fundamental way of being in the world, and use refers to elements of a code. They intersect, as de Certeau proposes, to form a style of use, a way of being and a way of operating.[22] The flâneuse's "rhetoric of walking,"[23] the ways in which she ignores certain spaces but engages with other spaces that are unusual or illegitimate, is more deliberate than the activity of strolling. She visits specific interior and exterior public spaces of the city, from the cinema, to a sex shop and a greasy café in Hackney, practising the "art of doing" the city and allowing herself to be drawn by intriguing sights and places: "I need develop my Western life so I go Charing Cross Road … Soho, Berwick Rd. My feet can't move away from a sex shop."[24]

In the context of the unease with which she moves across the city, she displays surprising confidence in allowing herself to enter secret and mysterious places. There is increasing evidence from her style of flânerie that no space is forbidden to her, be it spatially, morally and culturally. She is mesmerised by the peepshow at which she spends money compulsively and to which she keeps coming back to watch a woman who is first nude, then masturbates and eventually has intercourse with a male actor: "Two petals blossom in her wet garden. The petals are fresh like rose. Her bush is dark, like a fertile delta, a delta connecting to a secret path. She looks light headed. But her face disappears, only the desire talks to people."[25] (137)

The association of the walking woman with the figure of the prostitute, a seller who is also a commodity and object of desire, is turned on its head in this case as the flâneuse focuses on her own desiring female gaze, losing herself in what she observes. Both Janet Wolff's and Priscilla Pankhurst Ferguson's revisionist works on the nineteenth-century flâneuse[26] have already drawn attention to the female ambiguities and instabilities along a continuum of gender possibilities which were obliterated by

the superficial negotiations of the male and female figures as portrayed by Baudelaire and Benjamin. In twenty-first-century London, the connections the Chinese flanêuse makes between the fluidity she discovers in the metropolitan environment and her physical negotiations of space not only work to her advantage but have surprising effects. The peepshow scene is the only time when she is unobserved but observing. Her gaze is not that of lesbian desire. In tasting the delights of the city and giving in to the intoxication of consumerism, she is very much at the centre of this spectacle, rather than remaining hidden from it. If she could be seen she would be unable to observe. Her anonymity is clearly a pretend one, "a play of masks"[27] without which she cannot transform the raw material of the peepshow into the disturbing insight into her own relationship with the linguistic capital of English: "While I'm standing there watching, I desire become prostitute. I want be able expose 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."[28]

She checks in her dictionary the meaning of prostitute, "a person who offers himself for unworthy purposes", a person become commodity in Benjamin's terms. The playfulness described by Bauman "between looking and making the looker into an object of looking, between buying and being bought" is particularly enlightening here. [29] The hollowness of the commodity form brings a realisation of the hollowness of her own pursuit of English language, a commodity prized by her socially ambitious parents. Although, like the flanêur, she desires the city as a whole rather than objects spread before her, it can, of course, be argued that what she comes to buy, the English language, is the most glittering object of all: the commodity that will allow her to transcend further class barriers, having moved from a rural peasant to a goods manufacturing background, to a professional and independent woman and author in

Beijing. There is, indeed, in this scene a blurring of boundaries between commodity and consumer, a revelation that lives are managed by the larger narratives of production and consumption. Through her negotiation of the complex networks of codes in the arena of erotic activity, she acquires the knowledge to decipher the inequities involved in the relations of power that dominate the linguistic market surrounding her. Linguistic relations, as Bourdieu points out, are always relations of power.[30] Even the simplest linguistic exchange brings into place a complex web of historical power relations between the speaker and the hearer. This takes us back to an earlier observation: "And how to learn be polite if I not getting chance talk people? (…) Nobody speak to me and I do not dare open my mouth first because when I start talking, I asking the rude questions."[31] The linguistic market takes the form of sanctions and censorship, defining what cannot be said as much as what can be said. The forms that these sanctions take include self-censorship in this case.

This merging of observer and observed, buyer and commodity, brings the realisation that she is at once consumer and imprisoned by that which she seeks to consume. Language, not her style, but the use which is governed by codes, inflicts binding restrictions on her which she can only imagine breaking out of through the free expression of her body. The English language, she feels is "boss of English users", in a way that Chinese is not. As pointed out in the introduction, the observation in princely incognito mode means for the Baudelaire poet that he defines the order of things, rather than allowing things or appearances to define themselves. Indeed, as Robert Shields points out, the downside of focusing only on the agency of the masculine figure and the superficiality of the feminine figure is that Benjamin forgoes the opportunity of finding more complex connections between archetypal responses and the commodification of social relations.[32] In the case of the flâneuse,

the only time when she does come close to that state of being incognito turns into a moment where she is at her most nakedly and insightfully observed. The different nature of the cultural capital with which she approaches the city facilitates less constrained readings of the city, allowing it to speak back to her. Her critically self-reflexive flânerie in Soho sets in motion a new aesthetic of perception, a reappraisal of the perceived freedom one acquires from the language endowed with the most powerful political economy.

Her flânerie produces further unexpected connections. By bringing pornographic material from the street into a café in Hackney, the flanêuse makes spatial and reading possibilities emerge that transgress both cultural and gender roles. She invents a reading and learning posture by improvising on her English textbook, rewriting pornography as public English language material. Like the Baudelairean flanêur who admires women as one would do art, Z reads pornography as one would do an English language textbook, "Checking the dictionary really took lots of time," (118) she confides to her lover.[33] He admonishes her behaviour on the basis that it will shock people, interpreting the presence of the magazine in the café unambiguously as matter out of place. She responds by pointing out that pornographic magazines are sold at every street corner and even in the respectable supermarkets. She actually goes straight out to buy another one. Her lover's patronising response is that in Hackney people might forgive her for not being au fait with the nuances of British customs. She calls into question the assumed acceptability of one of the men ogling page three of The Sun in the same café, thereby pointing out that cracks already exist in his system of beliefs and that his attempt at relating form to function to make a unity of experience is fraught.[34] Ignoring her justifications, his reaction condemns a transgression which is likely to confuse or contradict gender

classifications rather than British propriety. Despite the buoyancy and permissibility of London, epitomised by her lover, her flânerie demonstrates that social spaces, being social products which are the result of past decisions and practices which are themselves inevitably embroiled in power relations, remain highly conventional.

Nonetheless, her efforts to push spatial and mental boundaries provide her with a sense of agency. Her attempts at transforming cultural and institutional practices and modifying the structure of assumptions that support them in order to accommodate her style of spatial and linguistic flânerie bring out surprising parallels with Baudelaire's flâneur. Like him she is caught between creativity and commodification but is, above all, a producer, an artist in the insights she develops.

Style and creativity in trajectory are closely linked to style and creativity in language. As she breaks free of grammars and dictionaries, she transforms her notebook, previously the recipient of practical and painful vocabulary logging, to the recipient of her nushu, the now extinct secret woman's language used to express innermost feelings: "then I have my own privacy. You know my body, my everyday's life, but you no know my nushu."[35] (122) She resurrects a four-century old Chinese tradition through the appropriation of an alien language, which at one point used to silence her, transforming it from the language of formal instruction to one that allows her idiosyncratic turns of phrases to come through. Having been reduced to silence in her early linguistic trajectory, she later bends language to her style in creative ways, choosing in enabling fashion, at that point, to share those with neither her lover nor the reader. Rather tellingly so, as she finds her voice, the conversation dynamics with her lover change, reducing him to silence and accelerating the degeneration of their relationship.

4. Conclusion

To walk in the city, for de Certeau, is to experience a unique and individual text. In the case of the Chinese flâneuse, there are interesting parallels between verbal figures and the figures of walking. Wandering/linguistic rudeness results from unusual choices in new spatial and linguistic territory, and walking, like talking, transgresses old trajectories and tries out new ones. Reorientating herself spatially and reorientating herself verbally are akin to a reorientation of both her own and the urban consciousness. Far from offering a minority, exotic or marginal discourse, Guo traces, through her protagonist's traverses of London, a means of cultural intervention and a redefinition of the urban exotic. By creating unusual contracts between words and spaces, the flanêuse's experience of the city is as revealing about the intoxication of the metropolis as that of its dominant language. She draws attention at once to their liberating possibilities and conservative natures.

The Chinese flâneuse, as depicted in Xiaolu Guo's novel, is a social actor transforming the physical and structural dimensions of the city's spatial system, incrementally altering it along with other many different waves of migrants and visitors. It is not, however, at the end of a journey of increasing linguistic and gender awareness and confidence that she engages in this role. While she is aware upon, and even before her, arrival to London of the oppressiveness of the city's history, which also determines the social capital of its language, she is also aware of the changing economic politics which have enabled her. In her first encounter with the English teacher, she notices: "She wearing women's style shoes, high heel black leather, very possible her shoes are all made in home town Wen Zhou, by my parents. She should know it, one day I tell her. So she not so proud in front of us."[36] In speculating at the very beginning of her stay in London that this particular commodity is produced by

her family and in confronting her teacher at the end of her stay with this possibility, she highlights the fact that a provider of cultural distinction through linguistic capital is also a consumer of goods produced in China which, in fact, facilitate her construction as a glamorous figure of authority. The figure of the flâneuse thus serves to point out the shifting discourses of marketing strategies and mechanisms in late capitalist London.

This dialectic between an urban space and its social actors is summed up perceptively by Henri Lefebvre: "The pre-existence of space conditions the subject's presence, action and discourse, his competence and performance, yet the subject's presence, action and discourse, at the same time as they presuppose this space, also negate it."[37] These dialogic relations find an equivalent in the relations between a city and its literature.

Notes

1 Michel de Certeau,, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (California: University of California Press, 2002).

2 James Donald, "The city as text", in Robert Bocock and Kenneth Thompson eds., *Social and Cultural Forms of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 422.

3 Keith Tester ed., *Flâneur* (London: Routledge, 1994).

4 Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Artists* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 400.

5 See Charles Baudelaire, "A une passante", *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

6 Emile Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1971).

7 Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

8 Chris Jenks, "Watching your step: the history and practice of the flâneur", in *Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995),142-60; Zygmunt Bauman, "Desert Spectacular", in Keith Tester ed., *Flâneur*, 138-157, 139.

[9] Xiaolu Guo, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (London: Vintage, 2007).

[10] Guo, 154.

[11] Ibid., 13.

[12] Ibid., 22.

[13] De Certeau, 103.

[14] Guo, 18.

[15] Ibid., 20.

[16] Ibid., 18.

[17] See John Clement Ball, *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2004); Sukhdev Sandhu, *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City* (London: HaperPerennial, 2004).

[18] De Certeau, 97.

[19] Ibid., 98.

[20] Guo, 49-50.

[21] Ibid., 18, 20.

[22] De Certeau, 100.

[23] Ibid., 99.

[24] Guo, 135.

[25] Ibid., 137.

[26] Janet Wolff, "The invisible flâneuse, women and the literature of modernity", in *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Berkeley: Calfornia University Press, 1990); Priscilla Pankhurst Ferguson, "The flâneur on and off the streets of Paris" in Keith Tester, *Flâneur*, 22-42.

[27] Keith Tester, *Flâneur*, 4.

[28] Guo, 138.

[29] Zygmund Bauman, "Desert Spectacular", 146.

[30] Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1991).

[31] Guo, 37.

[32] Robert Shields, "Fancy footwork: Walter Benjamin's notes on flânerie", Keith Tester ed., *Flâneur*, 61-, 66.

[33] Guo, 118.

[34] See Mary Douglas's classic *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1991), 2.

[35] Guo, 122.

[36] Ibid., 22.

[37] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 57.