



# Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings

ISSN: 2506-8709

Journal homepage: <https://clitc.research.vub.be/journal>

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**Issue:** 5.2

**Published:** Autumn 2020

**To link this article:** <https://clitc.research.vub.be/volume-5-issue-2-2020-robinson-crusoes-nalatenschap-legacies-of-robinson-crusoe>

**To cite this article:** Song, Zhuyun. "Anti-Orientalism in Guo Xiaolu's *Village of Stone*." *Robinson Crusoe's nalatenschap / Legacies of Robinson Crusoe*, special issue of *Journal for Literary and Intermedial Crossings*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2020, pp. 91-116.



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# Anti-Orientalism in Guo Xiaolu's *Village of Stone*

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## Introduction

Since its appearance in 1719, the story of Robinson Crusoe's survival on an island off the coast of South America has spread across the globe in numerous editions, translations and adaptations and its popularity has encouraged the publication of many other fictional life narratives that introduce diverse cultures and civilizations to readers. Whereas Daniel Defoe followed his English protagonist's travels from an emergent empire to a distant and uninhabited island, in her novel *Village of Stone* (2004) Chinese-British writer Guo Xiaolu reverses and updates this journey by relocating her heroine from a small and remote island to the megalopolis of Beijing. Guo, who herself was born on the small Chinese island of Shitang in the Southeast Sea, takes inspiration from her own life to present an incisive portrait of contemporary Chinese city youth and the development gap resulting from their move from isolated communities to the fast-growing metropolis of China. As small, rural places like the heroine's "Village of Stone" are left behind in the fast city expansion, the urbanized youngsters of the heroine's generation experience a split between their present and past.

This article explores how Guo reflects on China's internal flow of migration and its consequences through the lens of her heroine's modern lifestyle in the city and the cruelty of her island past. Drawing on Joep Leerssen's imagological concepts and old and new reflections on Orientalism, it considers how Guo, with her "auto-image" (Leerssen 2007) of China's imbalanced development, calls the attention of both Chinese and Western readers to

the ways in which contemporary Chinese people view their own nation's developmental issues. It aims to show how Guo's approach in *Village of Stone* is set off against Orientalist European discourses and the images they produced of the East and China in particular, including the descriptions of China offered by Defoe's protagonist three centuries ago.

### **Literature and Orientalism**

At the end of *Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the first of two sequels in which Defoe capitalises on the success of *Robinson Crusoe* by relating the further voyages of his adventurous mariner, Crusoe travels through Southeast Asia and China. "We were twenty-five days travelling to Peking [sic], through a country exceeding populous, but I think badly cultivated," Defoe's hero reports with habitual frankness. Crusoe clarifies his feelings of superiority over the Chinese, by continuing in the same breath: "the husbandry, the economy, and the way of living [I consider] miserable, though they boast so much of the industry of the people: I say miserable, if compared with our own, but not so to these poor wretches, who know no other" (483). Although Defoe never travelled to the Orient and his views are likely to have been inspired by a report by Adam Brand, who travelled from Moscow to Peking between 1693 and 1695 as secretary to a diplomatic mission from Czar Peter the Great to the Kangxi Emperor of China,<sup>1</sup> the fictional hero of *Robinson Crusoe* is quick to dismiss China as a "poor, ignorant and barbarous nation" (Richetti 358).

Crusoe's imaginative othering of China is a clear example of what Edward Said branded as Orientalism in his eponymous pioneering work on the subject. Said attacks the biased Western representations of the Orient for being "premised upon exteriority", i.e. rather than "'natural' depictions" they are conceptualizations of the Orient by the Orientalist writer or scholar who stands "outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact" and

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<sup>1</sup> Bridges argues that Defoe may have taken Brand's travel journal as a source for the last third of *The Father Adventures*, because of the geographical coincidences and the similarities between the tribes, the cities and the pagan idol encountered on the respective journeys (231).

“renders its mysteries plain for and to the West” (Said 20-21). This Orientalism is grounded in Western colonial discourses, and the stereotypes, myths, and prejudices regarding Other societies found in these discourses are evident not only in travel books, but also in literature (Said 20). As in Defoe’s description, the Orient in Western literature usually appears as “primitive” and “backward” (McLeod 44), in contrast with the progressive Occident. This logic of essential difference between the Orient and the Occident, notably captured by Rudyard Kipling’s verse “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” (qtd. Vukovich, *China* 1), has served as a confirmation of the dominant stance of the West since the colonial era.

However, with China’s undeniable rise, recent decades have witnessed China discourses that are incompatible with the Orientalist cliché of a binary opposition between a superior Occident and an inferior Orient. China is in fast economic development and, as a result of the ensuing process of modernization, it has become similar with the West to some degree. Although Said’s *Orientalism* lacked a specific insight into the area of the Far East, his ideas are further developed in contemporary scholarship addressing the changing face of China. Most notably, Daniel F. Vukovich in *China and Orientalism* (2012) notes how the discursive changes due to the altered position of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) within “the world system and Western intellectual-political culture” give rise to a new kind of Orientalism (1). Vukovich, who investigates a wide range of discourses on China in texts from “film studies, literature, journalism, and current theory” (*China* 9), uses the term “Sinological-orientalism” to refer to such recent production of biased knowledge about contemporary China in the West (*China* 1). For Vukovich, the essential logic of this new Orientalism is “dovetailed more with the logics of capital and modernization: sameness,

homogeneity and teleology” and Sinological Orientalism<sup>2</sup> has to be understood as “a way of understanding and framing China discursively that follows a logic of the PRC becoming the same as the normative and universal U.S./West” (“Battle” 64).

The binarism of this Sinological Orientalism is double-edged, its underlying logic being that “[t]he U.S.-West is what China is not, but which the latter will become” (Vukovich, *China* 1). While China is set to become as “open, liberal, modern, free” as the West (Vukovich, *China* 1-2), these are characteristics China for the time being still lacks. This new Orientalism denies the fact that the People’s Republic of China has “developed, modernized, and [maintains that the PRC] still moves forward under a different mode of production and social formation than that of the capitalist West and their forms of thought” (Vukovich, *China* 150). The obstacle to China’s progress, in Western eyes, is the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), an evil and anachronistic institution whose representative figure is Mao Zedong, founding father and first president of the PRC. As the Western logic goes, without CCP, China will become like the West and join what the West conceives as the ‘normal’ world (Vukovich, *China* 4).

As with Said’s Orientalism, Western literature also contributes to Sinological Orientalism. In his study of fictional and non-fictional works from the post-Mao era, such as Don DeLillo’s novel *Mao II* (1991), Roderick MacFarquhar’s study *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution, Vol. 3: The Coming of the Cataclysm, 1961–66* (1997) and Harry Wu’s *Bitter Winds: A Memoir of My Years in China’s Gulag* (1995), Vukovich remarks on the demonized coding of Maoist political events and movements (such as the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward). In the texts he reviews, the PRC is repeatedly depicted as a totalitarian regime and Mao as a despotic emperor. This formulation draws a straight line from “Hitler, the Storm Troopers, and Auschwitz to the decades of Maoist rule” (50-51),

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<sup>2</sup> While I adopt Vukovich’s term “Sinological-orientalism”, my spelling aims to be consistent with Said’s capitalisation of “Orientalism” and with English conventions by hyphenating the term only when used as adjective (“Sinological-Orientalist”).

regardless of Mao's original intentions and the positive developments during the Maoist era, the "scientific and technological progress (in agriculture, medicine, industry, even archeology)" (52), not to mention the massive amount of aid China accorded to Vietnam during Mao's presidency. The people of China, for their part, are described as a brainwashed and mind-controlled mass whose lives are guided by the *Little Red Book* that collects the political statements of Chairman Mao.

Orientalism is a striking example of what is typically addressed by Imagology, a branch of comparative literature investigating the construction of "national stereotypes" (Leerssen 26). According to Leerssen in his pioneering book *Imagology* (2007), the images which characterize the Other are hetero-images, while those that characterize one's own, domestic identity are self-images or auto-images (27). Although the Orientalist hetero-images of China hold significant sway in the West, the world has witnessed the emergence of literary works in the Chinese diaspora in Europe that detail the modern history of China and demonstrate a more nuanced understanding of the Chinese people, such as Shih-I Hsiung's *Bridge of the Heaven* (1943) and Han Suyin's series of autobiographical works. In recent years, more and more Chinese diaspora authors have written about their motherland and challenged the Orientalist discourses about China in their creative work. Among them is Chinese-British writer Guo Xiaolu, whose *Village of Stone* (2004) offers a socio-economic exploration of contemporary China.

### **China in Guo Xiaolu's *Village of Stone***

Guo Xiaolu (1973- ) is an artist whose work is situated in the realms of film and literature, graduated from the Beijing Film Academy with a master's degree in 2000 and moved to London in 2002 (Delabastita 52). Her migration helped her broaden her career and win international recognition. Her films have been awarded various prizes, such as the Grand Jury

Prize at the 2007 International Women's Film Festival (*How is Your Fish Today?*), the Golden Leopard or highest prize in the 2009 Locarno International Film Festival (*She*) and the Grand Prix de Geneva at the Documentary Forum in Switzerland in 2012 (*Once Upon A Time Proletarian*). After studying film at the UK's National Film and Television School, she started to write and publish in English. Guo has published English-language novels, such as *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007), *UFO in Her Eyes* (2009), and *I am China* (2014). Her publications present her observations on China and the Chinese in the context of the PRC, especially after Mao's socialist regime. *Village of Stone*, which was her first work published outside of China, was shortlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize (2005) in the UK and nominated for the International Dublin Literature Award in 2006 (Lalhriatpuii 3). Set in China in the first decade of the new millennium, the novel opens when 28-year-old Coral, who works in a video rental shop in North Beijing and shares a flat with her 29-year-old frisbee-mad boyfriend Red (Guo 3-5), receives a mysterious package of dried eel and "in an instant, the salt scent of the East China Sea and the smell of a Village of Stone typhoon come rushing back to [her], as if from the body of the eel" (Guo 2). The parcel prompts her to recall her childhood in the Village of Stone, a small fishing village in Southern China:

I spent the first fifteen years of my life in the Village of Stone, but I have left it far behind me. I now live one thousand eight hundred kilometres away, with a man who knows nothing about my past [...]. It has been years since I corresponded with anyone in the village, and yet now I find myself thinking about it, about the things that happened there and the people who lived there – those whose lives I passed through and whose lives passed through me. (Guo 2)

By means of a series of flashbacks that take the reader from contemporary Beijing to Coral's rural childhood, Guo juxtaposes city and countryside, but more importantly also China's past and present. In fact, Guo's social-realistic explorations of the novel's distinctive spatio-temporal settings give insight into that crucial period when China evolved from an

underdeveloped socialist economy dominated by central planning and state ownership into the modern China of today. This change was initiated in 1978 when President Deng Xiaoping launched the Reform and Opening-Up programme (改革开放).<sup>3</sup> Through Coral's account of her childhood life in the Village of Stone, Guo elucidates the social context at the beginning of the Reform when the country's economy remained stagnant and people had low incomes. At the same time, she also sheds light on the modern Chinese city after years of transformation through the heroine's adulthood life in Beijing, where private enterprise has become the foundation of consumption and foreign investment is encouraged.

Nevertheless, in *Village of Stone* Guo moves beyond such a binary opposition of city and countryside. At the novel's close, Coral's return trip home reveals that the village's economy is booming and that its inhabitants have a better life than they used to have. Guo evokes the social context of China's present-day developing rural areas, where the market-driven economy has improved the villagers' living conditions significantly and narrowed the gap between rural and urban life. The liberal economic policies have allowed rural industries to expand, with a growing number of households engaged in non-crop production as well as on town-and-village enterprises (TVEs). The economic performance of these TVEs has contributed significantly to rural areas as they have created about 130 million jobs in the 1980s and 1990s (Zhang 10-11). From the traditional fishing village of the heroine's past to the present-day capital city of Beijing and then back to the village today, Guo proffers a diversified take on contemporary China.

Importantly, Guo does not simply provide a nuanced reflection on the development gap between the modern city and the countryside, she does so from the perspective of contemporary Chinese. It is here that Guo's take on China radically differs from Defoe's,

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<sup>3</sup> Upon the death of Chairman Mao Zedong in 1976, Deng took over the leadership. Between 1977 and 1989, as the PRC's prime leader, he issued a series of market-economy reforms to introduce economic liberalization to China (Shambaugh 457-60).



despite both being autodiegetic life narratives, with life writing understood as “a general term for writing that takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject” (Watson 4). While in *Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* Defoe explores China through the eyes of an English seaman, Guo’s autodiegetic narrator is not a foreign traveller whose views are steeped in Western Orientalism. In the analysis that follows I will demonstrate how Guo’s auto-images of China in *Village of Stone* present a diversified China that is in sharp contrast to the Orientalist hetero-images in Defoe’s Orientalist construction and in recent Sinological-Orientalist discourses.

### **From Fishing Village to Modern Capital**

As mentioned above, Guo constructs an image of China’s rural past through the shifts in temporal and spatial settings. She situates the heroine’s childhood village on a small and isolated island — “[the] tiny corner of the sea that, on a map of China, appears as nothing more than a deep blue stain, with no air or shipping routes to link it with anywhere else” (Guo 7). The village is underdeveloped and nearly all villagers make a meagre living as “sea scavengers” (11). Fishing is also a risky and unstable business, as the heroine’s neighbour confirms: “[t]he only thing separating a sea scavenger from the Sea Demon is the three inches of [the] wooden plank” (11). Coral’s narrative, however, not only captures the plight of the fishermen but also provides details about her life as a village girl. Due to the lack of medical care, Coral’s mother died when giving birth to her; her father had already fled the village before her birth to escape the fisherman’s life. Raised by her impoverished grandparents, the young heroine receives less care and protection. She is kidnapped and raped by the village mute after her grandfather’s suicide, which results from a long unhappy and poor life. As a young teenager, Coral has a secret love affair with her chemistry teacher, but a painful abortion abruptly ends the relationship. When she turns fifteen, her grandmother passes away

due to old age, adding to Carol's sense of loneliness: "I suddenly found myself alone, a single teenager on the verge of adulthood with no parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins, aunts or uncles. I was alone in the world" (124). Consequently, for Coral, the village is a backward and violent place of which she only has unhappy memories.

Although Guo's construction of young Coral's primitive home village echoes Said's Orientalised othering, Guo complicates this simplistic image of China by also drawing a portrait of Chinese urban life through Coral's adulthood in China's capital. In Coral's eyes, Beijing is an "enormous [and] parched megalopolis" (3). The hustle and bustle of the city is evoked by her description of "the sounds of the city, noises of every decibel: taxi drivers cursing each other, cries of 'Every item only ten yuan!' and 'Evening news...get your evening news!' and the non-stop ding-a-ling of bicycle bells" (20). Life in the city is in sharp contrast with the monotonous and lonely life on the island. Not only does the city offer places of leisure, such as zoos and parks, where the heroine and her boyfriend love to spend their free time (82-83), it also provides a fascinating range of professional opportunities. In the text, this is epitomized when the heroine encounters a perfumer who makes fragrant formulas for a living (120-121).

Moreover, Guo offers a socio-realist exploration of the migrant's living conditions in the city by zooming in on the living environment of Coral and her boyfriend: a rented and gloomy flat on the ground floor of a twenty-five storey building in Beijing (4). Although they sometimes feel like a pair of "hermit crabs encased in [this] huge high-rise building" (4), oppressed by the twenty-four floors overhead, they are economically not in the position to rent a better place. To the heroine, her Beijing life is not easy and full of uncertainties: "[l]ove is uncertain, jobs are uncertain, our future in this rented flat is uncertain. My future with Red is, if anything, even less certain" (7). Nevertheless, she still favours life in the city and the professional advantages it offers. Coral appreciates the fact that her job in the video

rental shop not only earns her enough money to pay the rent but also allows her to watch movies while working (4). She also believes her job establishes a valuable link with the city. Although the shop is “small and inconspicuous, not much more than [a tiny speck] on the map” (4), her work meets an urban need: “this city needs us, in much the same way that we need this city” (4). Important in this regard is also Coral’s characterisation of her boyfriend Red, who emerges from Coral’s autodiegetic-narrative as a young man obsessed with playing frisbee. Although it originates in the West, the young man believes that frisbee is uniquely suited to be a universal sport. He introduces the sport to Beijing and voluntarily dedicates himself to its promotion: he designs a scorecard, plans a schedule, organises a location to practice, and assembles a team for the upcoming season. In the latter part of the novel, he even devotes his professional career to the sport, by writing a column and reporting on frisbee competitions in a sports magazine (171).

More than a general city portrait, Guo focuses on constructing the image of Chinese urban youth. Adele Lee observes that Guo’s construction of her heroine does not repeat the selfless, good and oppressed East Asian women immortalised by her predecessors in such works as Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans* (1991) and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976). By characterising her heroine Coral as a “bad” girl who escapes from plight and quests for selfhood (Lee 354-355), Guo not only challenges the old orientalist stereotype of Chinese women, but also counters the Sinological-Orientalist stereotype of the Chinese as duped and brainwashed by an authoritarian Maoist type of governance. By adopting the perspective of an insider, Guo demonstrates the mentality of Chinese young people, who do not appear to be mind-controlled by *The Little Red Book*, but embrace their chosen professions and bravely face the challenges that life presents.

## China's Developing Rural Areas

The Beijing chapters are interrupted by the death of Coral's father, who had disappeared from the Village of Stone many years earlier. The heroine finally figures out that it is her father who sent her the parcel of dried eel. However, Coral's father has cancer and only a few weeks to live when he finally comes to Beijing to seek his daughter's forgiveness. His death, the author emphasises, triggers Coral's nostalgia for the village of her youth and encourages her to return there in the company of Red. This return trip results in a radical change in Coral, who is finally able to deal with the traumas of her past, as is illustrated by the way in which the rural village is now shown in a different colour.

More than to simply address the psychological change of the heroine, Guo uses the whole Chapter 23 to present a new image of the village through the focalization of the heroine. The village Coral remembers has undergone some drastic changes: "It is the scene of [her] childhood, but it is no longer [her] childhood home" (Guo 174). Guo associates this new version of the village with vitality and positivity. The first glimpse Carol has of the village of her youth is the long-distance bus station, which has altered beyond recognition. Although situated in the same place, the station is no longer "the tiny kingdom over which the old stationmaster reigned supreme" (173). The scale of the station is enlarged and now also includes ticket sellers, ticket takers and time-tablers. The heroine notices that "the bus timetable in the waiting room now lists frequent departures to and from most of the major cities in China, and that the bus station yard is filled with long-distance coaches from all over" (ibid.). Once a difficult undertaking, travelling to and from the village has become easy, with the fishermen able to freely go anywhere they wish and to return at any time they want.

Furthermore, Guo contrasts the Village of Stone's developing economy with the original one. Through Coral's comments on the village's changes, Guo presents an optimistic

image of the village's new economic industry and the relevant public facilities. Although the Village of Stone still relies on fishing, it is safer and more industrialized than before. The heroine surprisingly finds "all the fishing boats seem to be returning home emptyhanded, the piles of silvery fish [she remembers] from [her] childhood conspicuously absent from their deck" (Guo 176). When she enquires after the whereabouts of the catch, she is told that "the boats no longer bring their catch ashore. Instead, they rake it directly to the seafood cold processing plant to be frozen and shipped" (Guo 176). The industrialisation of fishing leads to more employees and family incomes. Young people in the village now have a choice to work in the seafood factory instead of fatefully becoming the sea scavengers. The author highlights the development as a positive change through the heroine's visit to her former neighbour, who got married to a young man employed at the local seafood factory: "Their life together seems happy and tranquil" (175). The heroine also finds "[t]he wharf is much busier than [she remembers] it. Fleets of fishing boats now ply the coast [...]" (Guo 176-177). A maritime radio station and a loudspeaker are mounted on the roof, which "provide the villagers with the most up-to-date weather forecasts and storm warnings" (Guo 176). The heroine appreciates how these improvements have brought safety to the fishermen: "The village fishermen, it seems, are no longer entirely at the mercy of the elements" (Guo 176). They are no longer sea scavengers who only have the three inches of the wooden plank protecting them from the Sea Demon.

In writing this return trip, the author counters the Orientalist stereotypes of inferiority and backwardness by using the new images of the village to highlight the booming indigenous economy and the villagers' professional opportunities. Moreover, the island society is in sharp contrast with the Sinological-Orientalist stereotype of a totalitarian or despotic regime, as the villagers are not shown to be politically controlled or brainwashed by the Communist government. Instead, they are happy with the local development and free to

choose where to live and work. The text showcases the village as a well-cared for community, with the public facilities such as the bus station and maritime radio station all catering to the villagers' needs and contributing to their welfare.

## **Conclusion**

In my analysis of Guo's autobiographically-inspired novel *Village of Stone*, I have demonstrated how the novel's auto-images of China counter not only Defoe's Orientalised images of a backward and primitive China, but also the Sinological-Orientalist discourses of China's totalitarian political governance and of a brainwashed Chinese population. In the novel, old Orientalist discourses and contemporary and historical clichés of the PRC make way for positive auto-images of a developing post-reform China, although the city and the countryside are developing at different paces. Through the heroine's autodiegetic life narrative, Guo elaborates on the image of the underdeveloped rural areas of China's past, by presenting not only the modern Chinese city but also the developing village of the present. My textual analysis showcases how Guo attributes a dynamic character to the nation as a whole by contrasting China's primitive rural past with its development in the present, both in the city and the countryside. *Village of Stone* offers a positive social reflection on the recent changes after China's economic transition, which is emphasised by her characterization of Coral and her boyfriend Red as Chinese who devote their lives to their loved professions and bravely face the challenges from the past and present. Guo's fictional portrait of contemporary China and its inhabitants thus challenges the Orientalist and biased Chinese images in the West.

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