

PRESENTER:

In this audio clip, you'll hear Chinese-born writer Xiaolu Guo discuss her writing process and the challenges of constructing her novel, *A Concise Chinese–English Dictionary for Lovers*.

XIAOLU GUO:

All my novels are really quite autobiographical, if you want. Of course, then everyone thinks *A Concise Chinese–English Dictionary for Lovers* is most really based on my own life, and that's because the style is so direct, something like from diary. And it is, it was based on my diary in the year 2002 to 2003 when I came here, the first year. And I wrote every... everything in my diary, and I basically just transfer the diary pages on to laptop.

And then when I typed everything down, then I start to reconstruct. I remember I print out the typed version of my diary that year, and then I have all these pages, 100 pages in front of me, and then I start to draw the structure, make up the characters, because in the diary there's always a kind of very vague character. There perhaps is another person in my diary, but it's not enough to construct characters. So that was the foundation of that novel.

But I think that when you are... when you're young woman writer, there's a pattern. Your books are very much based... rooted on your own life, because we are not that, kind of, historical writer, and then perhaps when I grow older, you know, in the years to come, I will write more kind of distant from myself. But at the moment, it's really so rooted in my own life. I mean, normally artists are... they approach their work, not from very academic approach, you know, so there's no theme first. There's... there will be a story and details or emotion first.

And in my case, it is like that. I am really a self-taught writer and film maker, so I never really learned how to make film or write novels, but really this kind of overwhelming sense of telling stories through fiction or through film, so in that sense, I'm very primitive artist, which means I write what I know, what I learn or my physical experience, or my emotional experience. So the first two drafts of my novels always completely messy, unreadable, extremely personal. A messy structure or no characters yet, that's always my first two or three drafts.

And that will be leading me to a very difficult or painful process to reconstruct from that first or second draft, to make something have a shape, and to build something for the readers to have access into my own world. So that means that the second stage of my writing or film making is a... is a bit... slightly more academic or with method. So... so the characters, where I should place them, you know, in the geography landscapes now in my novels are very important, whether it's in Beijing or in London, or in Hackney, or a character come from east and live in the west and try to go beyond this geography landscape.

That is quite important, so when I was writing *A Concise Chinese–English Dictionary for Lovers*, I had a problem – how to hook or glue all this material together, this love story in this cultural battle, a man and a woman from different cultures. Then one day I found this style which was inspired, really directly inspired, from Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, and I remember I read the Chinese version of that book when I was 19 or 20 in my university in Beijing.

I loved the linguistic formula which started from a vocabulary, a lover's language, a lover's vocabulary. Then there's an analysis after that vocabulary, and then there's slight kind of a comedy narrative around that vocabulary, and the whole book is constructed in that way, and I thought that's most attractive, interesting way to... it's an essay... essay on love, basically.

Then when I was writing that story, that book, I thought OK, I could use that method which is to pick up the language, the vocabulary, that character Zed use, so as each day goes by, she learn more and more sophisticated a vocabulary, and her vocabulary perhaps more philosophical, for example, about time, about tense, rather than about tea or the word 'properly' or the word 'weather'.

So... so this... once I found that form for that novel, then I was just free. So that... that was really how to build a bridge between the intellectual education you have and then the whole emotional experience you have. I think that's a very important thing as a writer. You learn from making lots

of mistakes when you write in a second language. It's impossible, because still nowadays I couldn't really use tense. So I say I couldn't use tense, because Chinese doesn't have tense.

So I should say I can't use tense, I never managed to use tense, but already the way of I am speaking is... you see the difficulty to adjust. Whenever I speak a line I need to be aware which tense I'm using. In Chinese, we don't use tense. We don't have gender difference, so in one sentence is an extremely simple sentence you construct. Start from the place and then which time, and then who did what, or who does what, but no tense, yeah?

So in English you've got to be very careful which event you're speaking at what time, so as I am speaking now, you... you can hear so many mistakes in my sentence. It couldn't be adjust... I think after 10 years, so that's why I think when I write, I keep writing the same tense, same sentence. Not because of aesthetic problem or plot problem, it's just the mere tense.

So I came here. I couldn't speak English. Already I was writing a novel in English, based on my broken language, so from that novel, the Concise Chinese Dictionary, I learned all the mistakes and I showed all the mistakes, how a foreigner would speak. Now there's... what do you say, discontinuity when I write in English. First I write with extremely messy or difficult tense, to express emotional flow first, yeah, to get the plot going and then to transfer the emotional layer of the characters. OK. Then I read again that page, and I find it's... it's unreadable, although I managed to put a story and a character there, but because it's a messy tense, because you... you type without the notion or the conscious when this be, although I know this, when this happened.

So I rewrite with different tense, then I look through the whole page again. I say no it's wrong, because they couldn't live in the present and the past with that... that moment in my story. Then I was stuck in that page. I no longer know which tense they should belong to, so this is a huge, huge difficulty. It's such a... such a challenge for me. You know, in all different level, and you will read this novel, you will read it, you know, you'll find it very smooth and you know, even entertaining, perhaps. But it was really painful for me to write, but in all kinds of level.