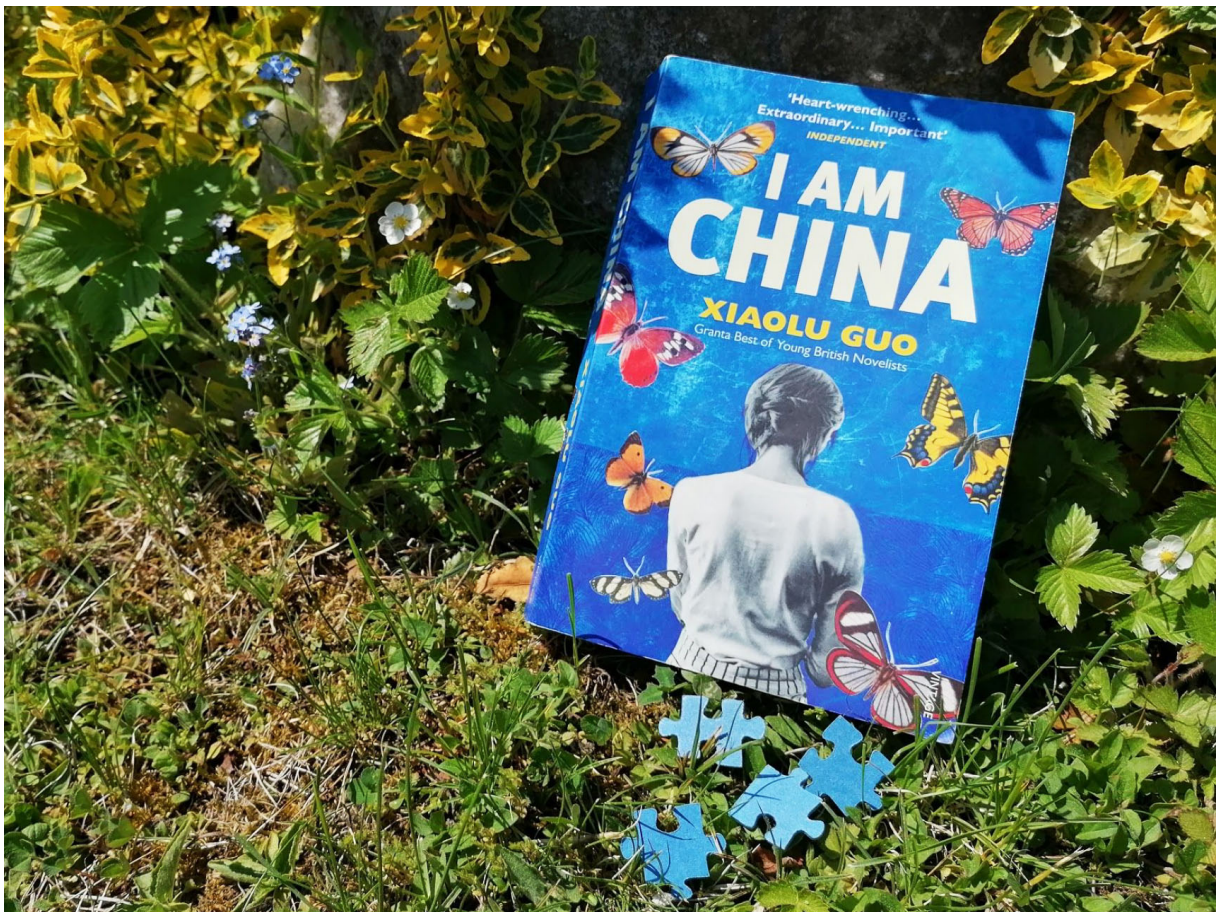


REVIEW

"I am China" by Xiaolu Guo — A Review

by Daniela Poeck



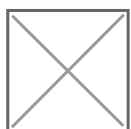
"I am China", the ESL novel about Chinese culture © Daniela Poeck

I am China by Xiaolu Guo is a powerful book about China's politics, oppression of freedom, art as a way out and a love that tries to overcome it all.

Three lives in a nutshell

Xiaolu Guo uses magically poetic prose to introduce us to the worlds of three people: Jian and Mu – two Chinese lovers, and Iona, an English translator who gets hired to translate their letters and diary entries. Through her work, Iona gets drawn into a love life driven apart in time and space by forces beyond its control.

I am China begins with a letter, written by Jian and addressed to Mu: “The sun is piercing, old bastard sky. I am feeling empty and bare. Nothing is in my soul, apart from the image of you. I am writing to you from a place I cannot tell you about yet.” As Iona continues with her translation tasks, we learn more about Jian's whereabouts, his reasons for leaving and Mu's life in the absence of his. But we also learn about their past, together, and apart. As their story unfolds in a non-chronological way, we travel to different places and times. And we watch Iona as she slowly pieces together this puzzle that has been handed to her.



Xiaolu Guo © Beowulf Sheehan/PEN American Center

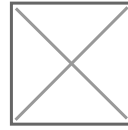
While the book centers on Jian's and Mu's story, we also learn about Iona. Born on a Scottish island, she left for London to “live in a world of possibility.” We learn about her parents, her relationships, and together with her we get to explore

questions of liberty in translation and the extent to which a translator should get invested into their work.

What it means to be Chinese

The book touches on many challenging themes: politics, art, family, love, loss, death, loneliness, alienation, and cultural identity. All the characters bring their own stories, baggage, and unique voices to the book, through which we explore these themes from many different angles and perspectives. Jian and Mu, both artists, have different ideas about the role of art in Chinese politics, a theme which runs throughout the story and a struggle that bears many consequences. Family also plays an important part in Jian's and Mu's lives. Both struggle with their families, but in different ways. While Jian feels alienated and full of anger and resentment for his family, Mu asks herself whether family is a “prison in the name of love and responsibility.”

Throughout the book *I am China*, Jian and Mu visit different places and wonder about what it means to be Chinese. When Mu visits the United States, she ponders the American fixation on the individual and how differently Chinese people see themselves, “In



"I am China" by Xiaolu Guo, book cover

America they don't understand that not every person is an individual. Most of the time I feel we are just a tiny particle within a collective body.” Through the eyes of Iona and together with her we get to learn and reflect on the themes that emerge in the letters and diary entries. At one time she contemplates, “If only life could be lived simultaneously in parallel spaces and times.” The truth is that this wish is unlikely to ever come true, but through this book readers get a bit closer to experiencing the idea of it.

The novel also helps readers to understand the influence of the state's politics on people's everyday lives in China. At a time in which human rights violations in China receive more attention from the media, this is a worthwhile read for everyone who wants to get a better understanding of how ever present and important China's image is in the heads of most Chinese people.

Foreign language as a free space

Xiaolu Guo has turned to English, her second language, to write this novel as she said that she found more “free space within it,” and to escape from self-censorship (find out more about why Xiaolu Guo writes in her second language [here](#)). She says, “China is so immense, it swallows me. I am swallowed by the idea of China.” This is also what the title of the novel suggests: For many Chinese there is no sense of self without China. This novel beautifully captures the essence of and challenges the implications of this notion. Readers won't be able to escape the gloom and doom, but this book also raises hope, for a change.