

‘Sorry of my English’: Lily and Mui in *Sour Sweet* and Z in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*

‘İngilizcemin kusuruna bakmayın’: *Sour Sweet*’de Lily ve Mui ile *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*’da Z.

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Abstract

The cultural aspects, life styles, experiences, beliefs and perspectives of Chinese immigrants and Chinese students in Britain have been incorporated into the literature in English with the arrival of the Chinese immigrants in Britain in the 1960s. *Sour Sweet* by Timothy Mo, which was first published in 1982, mirrors the Chinese immigrants’ lives in Britain in the 1960s with a focus on the Chen family whereas *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* by Xiaolu Guo is about the struggle of a single Chinese woman to learn English in Britain. The latter was published in 2007 and chronicles monthly how Z learns English in 2003. Despite the temporal gap of 40 years between the novels and the dynamics of the characters’ move to Britain, there are many similarities between the women portrayed in the novels as far as their problems, reactions, emotions, thoughts and change during their experience in Britain are concerned. The female characters in these novels, Lily and Mui in *Sour Sweet*, and Z in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, struggle with problems stemming from Chinese culture, tradition, morality and family structure as well as economic, social and cultural difficulties in Britain. The English language seems to be the most formidable obstacle because their linguistic development takes long time, a great deal of energy and much effort on the part of the characters portrayed in *Sour Sweet* and *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* not to mention the lack of communication, misunderstandings and subsequent isolation. Inevitably, their social, financial and cultural hindrances are complicated and exacerbated by their inadequate language skills. Indeed, improvement of their foreign language skills, English, takes precedence over social, cultural and economic elements and their survival and success in Britain are consequential to and conditional on speaking English. No matter how eager or

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resistant they are to the impositions of the British culture, they realize that speaking English is a must in Britain. Although the restaurant business and ensuing isolation in *Sour Sweet* are detrimental to linguistic development for the first generation immigrants, all Chinese people in these novels are exposed to the unassailable effects of the English language sooner or later. Consequently, Lily and Mui in *Sour Sweet* and Z in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* are obliged to develop their English, which parallels their emancipation from male domination. It is obvious that the more adept they become at speaking English, the better and more comfortable their lives become.

Keywords: Timothy Mo, Xiaolu Guo, *Sour Sweet*, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Chinese-British.

Öz

1960'larda İngiltere'ye Çinli göçmenlerin gelmesiyle, İngiltere'deki Çinli göçmenlerin ve Çinli öğrencilerin kültürel özellikleri, yaşam biçimleri, deneyimleri, inançları ve bakış açıları İngilizce edebiyatın içinde yer almıştır. İlk olarak 1982'de basılan Timothy Mo'nun yazdığı *Sour Sweet* Chen ailesi odaklı olarak 1960'larda İngiltere'deki Çinli göçmenlerin yaşamlarına ayna tutarken Xiaolu Guo'nun yazdığı *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* İngiltere'de yalnız başına bir Çinli kadının İngilizce öğrenme çabası hakkındadır. Bu ikinci roman 2007'de yayımlanmıştır ve Z'nin 2003'de nasıl İngilizce öğrendiğini ay ay anlatır. Romanlar arasındaki 40 yıllık zaman farkına ve karakterlerin İngiltere'ye gitme dinamiklerinin farklılıklarına rağmen, romanlarda yer alan kadınlar arasında İngiltere'deki deneyimleri sürecindeki sorunları, tepkileri, duyguları, düşünceleri ve değişimleri açısından birçok benzerlik vardır. Bu romanlardaki kadın karakterler, *Sour Sweet*'teki Lily ve Mui, ile *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*'daki Z, İngiltere'deki ekonomik, sosyal ve kültürel sorunlarla beraber Çin kültürü, gelenekleri, ahlaki değerleri ve aile yapısından kaynaklanan problemlerle de mücadele ederler. İngilizce hayatlarındaki en zor engel olarak görünür çünkü iletişim eksikliği, yanlış anlamalar ya da bunun sonucu ortaya çıkan soyutlanma bir tarafa, dil gelişimi *Sour Sweet* ve *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*'da betimlenen karakterler açısından çok zamana, enerjiye ve çabaya mal olur. Kaçınılmaz olarak sosyal, mali ve kültürel engelleri yetersiz dil becerileri ile karmaşıklaşır ve daha kötü hale gelir. Aslında yabancı dil becerilerinin, yani İngilizcilerinin, gelişimi sosyal, kültürel ve ekonomik unsurların önünde yer alır ve onların İngiltere'de hayatta kalmaları ve başarılı olmaları İngilizce konuşmanın sonucunda ve buna koşullu olarak gerçekleşir. İngiliz Kültürünün dayatmalarına ne kadar hevesli ya da dirençli olurlarsa olsun, İngiltere'de İngilizce konuşmanın şart olduğunu anlarlar. *Sour Sweet*'teki restoran işi ve bunun sonucundaki izolasyon birinci nesil göçmenlerin dil gelişiminin aleyhine olsa da, er ya da geç bu romanlardaki tüm Çinliler İngiliz dilinin karşı konulamaz etkilerine maruz kalırlar. Sonuçta, *Sour Sweet*'teki Lily ve Mui ile *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*'daki Z İngilizcelerini geliştirmeye mecbur kalırlar ki bu durum onların erkek egemenliğinden kurtulmaları ile de eş zamanlıdır. İngilizce konuşmada ne kadar başarılı olurlarsa İngiltere'deki hayatlarının da o kadar iyi ve rahat olduğu açıkça anlaşılmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Timothy Mo, Xiaolu Guo, *Sour Sweet*, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Çinli-İngiliz.

Sour Sweet by Timothy Mo is mainly about the struggle of an immigrant Chinese family from Hong Kong to make a living in Britain in the 1960s whereas in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Xiaolu Guo explores the process of self-discovery for a young Chinese woman who comes to Britain for a year to learn English in 2003. Despite the 40-year-lapse between them, both *Sour Sweet* and *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* are very informative about the sour sweet experiences of the Chinese people in Britain. Another similarity between these novels is that both Mo's and Guo's narratives of Britain are "viewed entirely through Chinese eyes, and ... the English-language medium" (Skinner, 1998, p. 320).

Apparently the female characters, Lily and Mui in *Sour Sweet* and Zhuang Xiao Qiao in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* have to struggle harder than men to cope with the social, cultural and economic hurdles they face in Britain because they also suffer from taboos, family structure, tradition and gender discrimination inherent in their culture as they discover British social rules, codes of conduct and cultural conventions. The female characters in *Sour Sweet* and *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* realize English is a "stepmother's tongue" for them because "English, for many, was never a tongue automatically possessed; it was laboriously learned rather than painlessly acquired" (Skinner, 1998, p. 160). Cultural obstacles were one of the toughest obstacles hindering or delaying for the Chinese women to learn and improve English owing to the fact that "to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (Fanon, 1967, p. 38).

The members of the Chen family portrayed in *Sour Sweet* are representatives of the Chinese immigrants who headed for Britain until the late 1960s when the need of manpower in Britain after World War II coincided with the rapid displacement of the rice economy in Hong Kong. Moreover, the growing demand for ethnic cuisine and takeaway food in Britain and the British Acts which allowed easy access from Hong Kong resulted in a flow of Chinese immigration from Hong Kong to Britain. However, most of the immigrants regarded themselves as sojourners and Britain as a temporary location where they aspired to work in the prearranged jobs in the Chinese restaurants for some time (Skeldon, 1994, pp. 5-6; Baker, 1994, pp. 296-297).

The restaurant business which "would require little knowledge of English or assimilation into British society on the part of migrants" (Parker, 1995, p. 63) minimized the connection of the Chinese immigrants with the mainstream British society. These people were doomed to remain outsiders in "a largely self-contained and alien world functioning within [Britain]" (Ho, 2000, p. 12) without having a chance to learn or improve English, socialize with the British people, or blend into the British society. The characters portrayed in *Sour Sweet* initially follow this pattern by all means as they live on the upper floor of a Chinese restaurant in Chinatown.

Despite the differences in the pull-demand, push-supply reasons and variations in the dynamics of immigration to Britain in the postwar era, the Chinese immigrants, like all other immigrants from the Sub-Continent, the Caribbean Islands and African countries "tend to arrive in new places with baggage; both in the physical sense of possessions or belongings, but also the less tangible matter of beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviours and

values" (McLeod, 2000, p. 211). As for the Chinese immigrants in the post-war era, their close-knit family structures were the most apparent feature they carried with them. They did not "attach so much importance to the individual, but rather they [saw] themselves as part of a family, and act[ed] accordingly" (Hand, 1995, p. 11). Chinese culture is diverse with "filial piety, a sense of loyalty and deference to elders, a formality of relations between the generations, strict patriarchy and firmly policed racial and linguistic boundaries" (Parker, 1995, p. 51) and these distinct Chinese norms and values are easily discernable in the lives and personal traits of the Chen family in *Sour Sweet*. Chen, Lily and Mui adhere to conventional roles as bread-winner, housewife and babysitter respectively and they are evidently aware of their prerogatives and the limits of their sexes and functions in the family.

Most immigrants were compelled to cope with poverty, alienation, isolation, unemployment or underemployment, ghetto life, climatic differences, linguistic difficulties, racism and discrimination after they immigrated to Britain. However, female immigrants had to struggle with deep-seated prejudices against their sex particularly in male-dominated societies which traditionally favor men and disparage women and the amount of the burden on the shoulders of the female immigrants was twice as much as that of the male immigrants. In *Sour Sweet*, the roots of gender discrimination against female members of the Chen family can be traced back to their childhood days. Lily was brought up like a boy by her father who hoped that she could take his revenge after he had been beaten in a fight whereas Mui was raised as an "uncomplaining, compliant, dutiful, considerate, unselfish, within her limits truthful and honourable; and needless to say, utterly submissive to the slightest wishes of her superiors which included women older than herself and the entire male sex" (Mo, 1999, p. 15). Lily had rigorous Chinese boxing training while Mui was engaged in female pursuits such as "flower arrangements, embroidery, and the arrangement of refreshments on lacquered trays" (Mo, 1999, p. 15), which was a reflection of the traditional Chinese culture based on hierarchies of gender and age.

As expected from a girl and daughter-in-law and as a result of her traditional Chinese rearing, Mui keeps a low profile at the Chen family's home in Britain. She is regarded as Lily's "humble and worthless" (Mo, 1999, p. 53) sister who is "just stupid girl" according to Chen (Mo, 1999, p. 109) as she spends most of her time in front of TV watching soap operas. However, this is an incubation period during which she develops her language skills considerably because watching TV "provides her with a form of escapism but also teaches her about British life" (Ross, 1991, p. 480). In fact, before coming to Britain Mui worked as "a servant for a Cantonese-speaking English bachelor in government service. During her two years in this post she had acquired working English" (Mo, 1999, p. 10). Speaking English evidently provides Mui with extra power and advantage for her later enterprises and ventures.

Although both Lily and Mui feel discontent and that they are "wasting their lives" (Mo, 1999, p. 65) in China Town, their primary concerns are different. Lily's main focus is on her son's future and she wants Man Kee to have a better life and "the opportunities

from which she had been excluded herself because of her sex and ill-fortune” (Mo, 1999, p. 11). For Man Kee’s sake, Lily becomes very eager to open their take-away place and to move from China Town. The opening of a take-away restaurant broadens their horizons beyond the boundaries of their utterly restricted and ultimately isolated life in the China Town. Indeed, “the creation of an enclave within the new homeland is sometimes regarded as an impediment to the process of assimilation, particularly to learning the language and culture of the host society” (Weiner, 1996, p. 53). As Weiner states, when the Chen family move out of their isolation in China Town, they are exposed to the hegemonic British culture and English language. Speaking the English language and behaving according to the rules of the British society become the prerequisites of the survival and success. They are compelled to communicate with the British customers through the medium of English. It is no surprise that the exposure of the members of the Chen family to the language spoken by the customers in their take-away place hastens their linguistic improvement after the isolation in the China Town. However, “the Chen family is content to possess the minimal English necessary to sell the bastardised Cantonese food that appeals to the *faan gwai* (or foreign devils)” (Skinner, 1998, p. 320). Lily’s unwillingness to speak English is evident as she can not speak English as fluently and as clearly as she speaks her native tongue, Cantonese:

... Lily kept back the sharp words which rose to the tip of her tongue. She lacked not the vocabulary but the inflection which might request or admonish without causing offence. Her voice, so expressive and alive in her native Cantonese, became shrill, peremptory, and strangely lifeless in its level pitching when she spoke English. She would have sounded hostile and nervous; a cross between a petulant child and a nagging old shrew, neither of which descriptions adequately fitted the mature and outward-going young woman who was Lily Chen (Mo, 1999, p. 141).

In the meantime Mui transforms from a passive and diffident personality into a “cultural mediator” (Hall, 1995, p. 95) as she turns out to be the one who communicates with the lorry drivers and officials. Although British people remain indistinguishable for Chen and Lily for a long time, Mui can easily tell them apart and she is aware that they have got some regular customers. She changes so drastically that “Chen was unable to connect this young woman with the shrinking creature who had sat next to him all those months ago” (Mo, 1999, p. 86). Unlike Lily and Chen who refrain from interfering with the British people, her easy friendship with the drivers helps her improve her English and hastens her integration into the British society. In spite of “still lack[ing] the self-confidence to do all the counter work” (Mo, 1999, p. 100), Mui is the only one in the family who “after an unvaried diet of English television, makes any genuine headway in the new language” (Skinner, 1998, p. 320). The inevitable difference in their level of English appears when Mui brings one of the lorry drivers to their restaurant to make a deal for selling Whore Lock (Coca Cola). Seeing that Mui and the lorry driver have brought a crate of Coca Cola:

'Ah,' said Lily, 'Whore Lock!' (or a close phonetic representation to that effect), identifying one of the products in question by its Cantonese name.

'Eh?' said the driver, considerably startled.

Lily smiled her charming (for westerners) smile. You like Whore Lock all the time, too, hah! It is the real thing!' she quoted enthusiastically. Mui averted what might have turned into major embarrassment all around. 'My sister not understand English too much,' she explained. 'you please excuse'. Her own command of the language it turned out, its colloquialisms, ambiguities, if not all the inconsistencies of its grammar, was well advanced. Too advanced for Lily to stay abreast of the conversation (Mo, 1999, p. 146).

In comparison to Mui who progresses faster as far as language competency is concerned, Lily tries to stick to Chinese tradition and her language development is delayed. Lily is convinced that English is "an inadequate means of communication and that their native Chinese is far superior" (Chisolm, 2001, p. 1). Lily is content that "it is English that fails" (Chisolm, 2001, p. 1) because she observed that "with smiles, nods, gestures, Grandpa expressed his gratitude -- far more eloquently than in Mui's [English] translation" (Mo, 1999, p. 253) and she is obviously and naturally more comfortable with her native tongue while she is "thinking in Cantonese in which, conveniently for such musing, there was no distinction between plural and singular" (Mo, 1999, p. 95).

As a matter of fact, Chen concedes his absolute authority and unquestionable position in the family and gives "his women the status of colleagues in the new enterprise" (Mo, 1999, p. 111). Changing status of Lily and Mui from housewife and babysitter into working women positively affect their language skills as they feel the need to speak English in their dealings and business. So despite being very careful not to violate the "traditional Chinese wifely writ" (Lee, 1995, p. 26), Lily is obliged to loosen her clutch at the Chinese cultural and social conduct and she has to give concessions from her habits and preferences including her resistance to learning English.

In contrast to Lily who has "shouldered her duties by conviction and choice ... Mui has had her sense of duty forcibly upon her" (Moss, 2001, p. 463) therefore Mui goes on taking very drastic steps in her life as she gets rid of traditional, societal, moral and familial bonds one by one. Once she unfastens "the grip of a dominant and inherited tradition" (Ho, 2000, p. 6), she starts playing the game rather unconventionally. She becomes pregnant by an unnamed man and rather than feeling shy or guilty, she faces the consequences of her pregnancy bravely. Initially her pregnancy shocks and frightens Lily who still has the mentality of a traditional Chinese woman because pregnancy without marriage was "something she associated with young English girls, not her sister" (Mo, 1999, p. 191). When Mui delivers a girl out of wedlock, she does not want her baby to live with them as she has come to the conclusion that "there is no place for a girl in this family" (Mo, 1999, p. 210).

Another important decision taken by Mui is to marry Lo at the registry office followed by a banquet in a big restaurant just like a British couple. Instead of an ordinary Chinese take-away, they are to open a large fish and chip restaurant, which will appeal to the British taste with the money provided by Mrs Law. As Lee points out, the type of restaurant is rather noteworthy as Mui becomes not “the owner of an ‘English’ Chinese take-away but a ‘Chinese’ English fish and chips shop” (Mo, 1999, p. 26). It is true that their mastery of the English language grows in time but it is not sufficient alone to integrate into the British society. As Weiner (1996, p. 53) says “The willingness to acquire the local language is important, but in itself insufficient. As important is whether the migrant is prepared to acquire a new sense of identity, to declare oneself French, American, British, Israeli, or Australian”. So Mui’s decision to take out citizenship and naturalisation is a milestone in her life which shows she is ready to acquire a new identity.

When Chen is killed by the Triad Society by mistake for misappropriating drugs, Lily never learns the truth and believes that he is somewhere else. However, it is remarkable that Lily and Mui feel that “sense of oppression hanging over them” (Mo, 1999, p. 92) lessens with his disappearance “as if a stone had been taken off her and she had sprung to what her height should have been. She thought she had found a balance of things for the first time, yin cancelling yang” (Mo, 1999, p. 286). Lily “realises that she is content with what her life ha[s] become” (Mo, 1999, p. 286) and she evidently begins “relish[ing] her newfound freedom” (Moss, 2001, p. 462). Although Lily has decisively resisted the influence of British culture and acculturation, in time she changes mentally and emotionally and she involuntarily comes to a point where she is disturbed by the Chinese records she herself brought to the grandfather. Although she scolds Mui as an inferior and treats her accordingly for a long time, her bossy manner is replaced by a respect for her and she feels that “Now there could be the beginnings of comradeship” (Mo, 1999, p. 285) in regard of their almost equalized positions as Chen has disappeared and Mui is about to leave for a new beginning. Another proof of the change in her outlook is seen when she first noticed how similar Chinese people look from behind although neither Lily nor Chen could tell even their regular British customers apart for a long time.

In contrast to *Sour Sweet* in which “‘British’ life is noticeably absent ... and can only be inferred as what ‘Chinese’ life is not” (Ho, 2000, p. 19) Xiaolu Guo’s *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* has a female Chinese language student as central character. As the Chen family is the representative of the economic immigrants in the 1960s, Zhuang Xiao Qiao or Z is a typical Chinese student in the 2000s in Britain. The number of Chinese students in Britain was around 18,000 in 2001; however, their number increased dramatically in the 2000s especially from the academic year 2001-2002 to 2002-2003 when the number doubled to 35,740 and almost quadrupled to 48,175 in the 2003-2004 (Shi, 2006, p. 2). Shen (2006, pp. 1-2) relates this increase to economic reasons:

The rapid economic growth in China requires a vast amount of highly educated talent in the work force. The accession of China to the World Trade Organization again raises the demand for skilled labour with

international qualifications, experiences and standards. Thus it gives great incentives for medium and upper class Chinese families ... to send their children abroad to seek advanced education opportunities.

Despite the temporal difference and the dissimilar impetuses, many parallels can be drawn between the female characters in *Sour Sweet* and *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*. Zhuang Xiao Qiao's very first days in Britain reveal that Z is anxious and scared for not being able to speak English and for "knowing nothing about this country" (Guo, 2007, p. 10). Although it takes some time for Mui and Lily in *Sour Sweet* to realize that their economic success is conditional upon their improvement of linguistic skills, learning English for economic reasons is the primary reason of Z's presence in Britain. In her first night in the hostel, Nuttington House, Z concludes that:

I must learning this stylish English because it high-standard English from authority. Is parents' command on me: studying how speak and write English in England, then coming back to China, leaving job in government work unit and making lots money for their shoes factory by big international relations. Parents belief their life is dog's life, but with money they save from last several years. I make better life through Western education (Guo, 2007, p. 9).

Z's inability to speak English turns out to be an inferiority complex which surfaces as her most important concern in her contact with other people. She regrets speaking "humble English" (Guo, 2007, p. 66) unlike her companion's "beautiful language" (Guo, 2007, p. 51). She amuses a man she meets in a pub with her deep respect and admiration as he can speak English. She thinks his face and words are noble and he sounds confident and proud just because he can speak English properly (Guo, 2007, p. 72). Her displacement and foreignness to the British society and culture is obvious at the very first days because, in a very similar manner to that of the Chen family in *Sour Sweet* who can not tell apart their British customers, Z assumes "Western name are un-rememberable, like all Western look the same" (Guo, 2007, p. 40).

Like Mui who "speaks a language vividly appropriated from TV soaps like *Dixon of Dock Green*, *Crossroads* and the endless soccer broadcasts" (Lee, 1995, p. 27) but unlike Lily who behaves rather reluctant towards learning English during her prolonged stay in Britain, Z spends a lot of time at the movie theatres watching movies in English before she meets the man. Although initially "not understanding very much the English speaking" (Guo, 2007, p. 35), watching movies offers Z an advantage to develop her English just as watching TV helped Mui improve her English.

Z is one of those Chinese students who "live[s] independently abroad, away from home, from the close-knit family support and the unspoken shared values and cultural norms" (Shen, 2006, p. 4). Although Chinese families, Chinese people around, pre-

arranged jobs and even the Triad Society ease the pain of survival and adjustment for the Chen family in *Sour Sweet*, Z has to survive alone without the supporting structure of family, relatives or friends. Z starts feeling lonely soon after she arrives in London and voices her discontent bitterly with her broken English as “In China I not have loneliness concept. Always we with family or crowd. But England, always alone, and even waiter always remind you you are alone” (Guo, 2007, p. 27). The feeling of loneliness and lack of family, relatives and friends exacerbate her despair over not being able to speak English. She goes on to say that something is missing in her life because of not having a family or a house or a job or anything familiar here and she can speak “low English here” (Guo, 2007, p. 125). Throughout her stay in Britain, Z attempts to get used to loneliness. She finally concludes that individualism must be the culprit for her troubles in Britain and that she needs to change her outlook profoundly to adapt to the Western individualism. Apparently it is challenging for her to become accustomed to solitude because a typical Chinese life-style is marked with communality. Chinese people do not possess the individuality concept because they “believe in collectivism. Collective Farm, Collective Leadership ... have Group Life Insurance ... studied Group Dancing” (Guo, 2007, p. 125).

In the form of a diary written in English, she writes down her experiences which enable her to compare and contrast Chinese and British cultural features. In her diary she records her daily activities, observations, feelings and ventures. Hutchings (2007, p.1) claims her diary which “presents poignant, reflective snapshots of Z’s new life” indicates her attempt “to combat her confusion and isolation” although “her early entries overflow with improper grammar, misspellings, and jumbled syntax”. She desperately realizes that the word order of the English language reflects the individualistic character of the British culture and it is quite different from that of the Chinese language. “So time and space always bigger than little human in our country. Is not like order in English sentence, ‘I,’ or ‘Jake’ or ‘Mary’ by front of everything, supposing be most important thing to whole sentence” (Guo, 2007, p. 22). She also finds out that “English a sexist language. In Chinese no ‘gender definition’ in sentence” because there is no generic he, his, -man. (Guo, 2007, p. 23). She realizes that “Person as dominate subject, is main thing in an English sentence” in contrast to Chinese who use plural names and community as the subject (Guo, 2007, p. 24). She wonders if it means “West culture respecting individuals more?” (Guo, 2007, p. 24).

Indeed, her quest in Britain is hampered by her broken English, misunderstandings, and lack of skills to truly understand British people and their culture like Lily and Mui in *Sour Sweet*. These experiences inevitably require changes in her outlook, value judgments and behavior. In other words, although she intends to improve her language skills, she is inevitably compelled to change as an individual and as a foreign language learner as her diary reflects because “as Z’s love deepens, the English of her diary subtly shifts. From the stumbles and snarl-ups of an absolute beginner, it grows into a vehement and plucky personal idiom that catches an outsider’s headstrong, and rather heroic, assault on the heartland of a culture, and a man” (Tonkin, 2007, p. 2). As O’Connell (2007, p. 1)

states, “the ‘bad’ pidgin English of the early chapters gradually improves as its narrator, Z, becomes more confident” as a result of her encounters with the British people.

Throughout the novel, Guo also offers brief glimpses of the patriarchal Chinese society Z was brought up in, which evidently discriminates and marginalizes women as inferior to and less important than men as it is in *Sour Sweet*. Z sourly remembers how her father was privileged as a man to eat meat whereas all the other members of the family had to be satisfied with other food:

Occasionally there was some fried porks on the table, and it smelled like heaven. But I dared not to reach my chopsticks to the meat, which prepared only for my father. Man needs meat and man is more important than woman, of course. I looked at pork and my heart was squeezed by the desire. I give away anything for could bite one piece fried pork!
(Guo, 2007, p.101).

Another far-reaching effect of male-dominant society becomes evident when Z’s companion finally raises his objection and wants Z to share the bills. As a result of her upbringing and training Z believes that he has to pay as he is a man and that “When couple is live together, woman loses social life automatically. She only stays at home doing cooking and washing. And after she have kids, even worse. So woman can’t have any social position at all. She loses ... what is that word ... financial independence?” (Guo, 2007, p. 139). This is a reflection of the patriarchal Chinese culture which imposes upon women that they are economically dependent upon men and they must act accordingly.

It is interesting that the first generation Chinese immigrants about whom Guo offers a very small picture in the novel still lead very isolated lives like most immigrant Chinese families in the 1960s in *Sour Sweet*. The Cantonese family Z lives with for a short period of time seems to have created a microcosm of their life in China just like the Chen family during their early settlement phase. They speak Cantonese at home. “Chinese moon calendar is on wall. Wok, chopsticks, Mah Jong, Chinese cable TV programmes ... everything inside house is traditional” (Guo, 2007, p. 36). As an inevitable result of this segregated life style, they are unable to speak English and they can not blend into the British society linguistically or socially.

Her discovery of her body and her sex is simultaneous with the development of her linguistic skills and her adaptation to the mainstream British society. In order to find her true self which has been suppressed by conditioning, teachings and impositions of her culture, she must adapt herself to the new environment. She is obliged to revise her value judgments, moral values and taboos in the process of self-discovery and “extra-curricular activities” (Thomas, 2007, p. 1). Initially she can not help being alarmed by the instructions on a condom pack as she feels it “Is like pornography. We cannot have words like this in Chinese. We too ashamed. Westerner has nothing too ashamed. You can do anything in this country” (Guo, 2007, p. 59). Her perception of Westerners is shaken as she reads “Even if you are not planning on having sexual intercourse, it’s

sensible to carry condoms with you, just in case” because she can not help wondering if it is “Sensible to carry condoms all the time? Westerner can always have sex whenever they go shopping, or waiting for bus or train. Sex in this country is like brush the hair or the teeth” (Guo, 2007, p. 59). However, it is not easy to understand and adapt to the new cultural milieu. Although she has protested so much about their promiscuous behavior and low morality, she sees nothing wrong with reading a porn magazine in a café as she believes she is studying English as a result of her misunderstanding that “everything to do with the sexuality is not shameful in the West” (Guo, 2007, p. 94). Moreover, she does not hesitate to indulge in a sex shop for a long time.

As a matter of fact her five-week-travel in Europe helps her get accustomed to loneliness and to stand on her feet as an individual. It is not a coincidence that the more adept Z becomes in language, the less fearful she gets in her dealings with her surroundings just like Mui. However, “Z’s insight and intelligence continue to shine through the language barrier” as her “emotional development [is] reflected by her increasing mastery of English” (Hutchings, 2007, p. 1). Brief and casual affairs she has, having an abortion with her own decision and masturbating for the first time in her life help her gain her confidence in her body and her identity as she comes to a conclusion that “[She] can rely on [her]self, without depending on a man” (Guo, 2007, p. 194). This is a milestone in her struggle to discover herself just like Mui who changes her life radically and courageously.

Obviously, “she has not only survived but flourished, against all the linguistic odds” (Wallace, 2007, p. 1). and she has grown up as a young woman in Britain where she “became an adult, where [she] grew into a woman, the country where [she] also got injured, the country where [she] had [her] most confused days and [her] greatest passion and [her] brief happiness and [her] quiet sadness” (Guo, 2007, p. 282). When she returns to London five weeks later, her outlook and her mentality have significantly changed. She feels that she and her companion are “detached and [they] are not one body anymore” (Guo, 2007, p. 213) because, for the first time, she begins to see the age difference, his grey hair and wrinkles. When her language skills have improved her rapture at her friend has diminished as she states:

The life in the past and the life at the present are very different. When I first met you, I remember you always talked about interesting things in an interesting way, and you had a charming language. You used beautiful words, funny words, sexy words, electric words, noble words. Your language was as attractive as you. But what happened? It has changed. After all these fightings, all these miseries, you don’t talk as the way you did before. You just listen; listen to my words; then stop listening and think of your own world. But I can’t stop talking. I talk and talk, more and more. I steal all your beautiful words. I speak your language. You have given up your words, just like you gave up listening (Guo, 2007, p. 232).

Her companion's virile, strong and secure position in Z's eyes has been shaken just like Chen's in *Sour Sweet* when Mui has grave "misgivings about Brother-in-law's ability to fend for them all" as a result of Chen's inefficiency in dealing with the state officials (Mo, 1999, p. 170) for not being able to speak English at all. Like Mui and Lily, Z enjoys freedom and non-interference of men in her life.

In spite of the 40 years between these two novels, it is obvious that language barriers exacerbate all Chinese characters' lives portrayed in *Sour Sweet* and *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* because their limited language skills hinder their social, cultural and economic successes. As far as their strategies of language learning are concerned, it is obvious that the traditionally-minded Chinese immigrant, Lily, is disadvantaged from the beginning in contrast to her sister, Mui, who is responsive and receptive to her new environment, the British society and the English language and she is eager for improving her limited language skills. In a very similar manner to Mui, Z is the representative of the new learning culture which is "shifting from a traditional, 'Confucian' one to a modern, individualistic one" (Shi, 2006, p. 138). As long as the female Chinese are contented with their segregated life styles which will require minimum English, they can barely make it in Britain. They will have no chances to adapt, to blend or to fulfill their dreams without English and their integration into the mainstream British society is consequential to and conditional on speaking English. Despite all the setbacks their language skills improve considerably and their linguistic development parallels their emotional growth as an individual who has survived in a foreign soil and their emancipation from familial, traditional, moral, and social bonds. They have broken the chains of male-dominance and interference in their decisions, preferences and life-styles. Even Lily who resents and resists change and assimilation so long has to transform drastically in order to survive and make a living in Britain. It almost takes seven years for Lily and Mui to achieve what Z has achieved in a year as a consequence of direct exposure to English language and fewer male figures in her life.

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