

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 6. Issue.4. 2019 (Oct-Dec)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

XIAOLU GUO'S *VILLAGE OF STONE* AS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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doi: [10.33329/ijelr.64.57](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.64.57)



ABSTRACT

As most writers produce works that echo their thoughts and experiences, the study of a novel gives us insight into the life of the author. Xiaolu Guo, a Chinese author-filmmaker is one of those writers who admit to writing fictional versions of their life experiences. Thus, many of her novels contain autobiographical elements. Prior to the publication of *Once Upon a Time in The East* (2017), the author has not published any notable memoir chronicling her life journey. However, glimpses of her past can be gathered from her writings and interviews. *Village of Stone*, a tale that portrays the protagonists coming of age, is perhaps one of the best examples of autobiographical novels. The novel, in the guise of fiction, uncovers the author's grim upbringing and her transition into early adulthood. It brings to light the harshness and tragic incidences that have befallen the author during her childhood and adolescence. Brought up by her grandparents in a deeply-immersed traditional Chinese culture in a rural fishing village in China, the protagonist begins her journey in life bereft of formal education and familial affection. After undergoing a number of hardships including rape, abuse and deaths in the family, she takes off on a quest to find her 'self' and establishing an identity and liberation.

Keywords: memoir, culture, self, identity, liberation.

I stand on the deck weeping, watching my tears fall into the sea, the sea of the Village of Stone, this place where I bury my fish, my childhood, and all the secrets of my past incarnation...

- Xiaolu Guo, Autumn, 2000

Xiaolu Guo was born in 1973 in the Zhe Jiang province of Southern China. She grew up in a tiny fishing village on an island off the southern coast, which in her own words is "a really isolated village in China *where it was all about tradition, morality and everything you 'can't' do.*" (Tonkin)

Prior to the publication of *Once Upon a Time in the East: A Story of Growing Up* in 2017, Xiaolu Guo's biography and writings about her past has been difficult to obtain despite her popularity as an author, critic and acclaimed filmmaker. Her interviews and writings in which she discloses glimpses about her background, have been the main sources of her biography. However, with the publication of this memoir, a detailed portrayal of Guo's life has finally been brought out in the open for the first time. In an interview about her new book, Guo states,

I've published pieces about my story before in different newspapers,...I wrote a novel many years ago called *Village of Stone* based on my own experience, but that was still fiction. So I decided it was time to revisit this – I've now turned past 40 and it was time for this book, which I think of as reflections on early life. (Guo "I am who I am")

Xiaolu Guo's novel *Village of Stone* was originally written and published in Chinese in 2004. It was translated into English by Cindy Carter. Although it was published as a fictional work, the novel can be considered an autobiography as it contains many parallel incidents from the life of the author. The plot of *Village of Stone* is based on her own experiences as a young girl growing up in a patriarchal society. She writes,

I grew up in a very feudal system. The village I grew up in was a pure Communist village – everyone read the Little Red Book. And yet my grandmother had bound feet and *she had been a concubine...I was really confused!* (Tonkin)

Despite her reluctance to admit being affiliated to a feminist school of thought, Guo also affirms,

If you're a writer writing as a woman, it's always based on your own experiences. It wouldn't be a good book if you didn't permit this straightforward writing from your own experiences. (Fitch)

Her experiences thus provides the background to her novel *Village of Stone*.

In her novels, Guo tends to focus on adventurous young female protagonists from rural China, forced into the metropolitan cities to escape the devastating dreariness of impoverished rural life. *And in a way this closely resembles Guo's own biography, ideas of reeducation and internal revolution.* Time and again her engaging protagonists undergo complete, painful destructions of their pasts and their memories in order to survive in the contemporary metropolis, be it Beijing or London.

Village of Stone chronicles the life of the female protagonist Coral. The novel describes Coral's impoverished upbringing as an orphan in a remote fishing village in rural China. Guo's own story begins in a similar way as that of Coral, thousands of miles away on a fishing village on the southeast coast of rural China. *Born in 1973, her father was a fisherman who later became an artist. He made a living selling his paintings, but, due to the nature of his new profession, he was sent to a labour camp during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Her mother was a Red Guard whose duties also took her away from parenthood and as a result, her parents gave her away to be raised by a peasant couple in the mountains.*

I think my story as a young Chinese woman is very typical. As a baby girl you were not desired by your parents. I grew up with this family which adopted me because they didn't have their own children. Like most Chinese people growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, whether you were given away or not, everyone had full-time, factory-working parents that they never saw. Most grew up with their grandparents. All I remember are skinny goats on very barren mountains with a barren couple who only had a few potatoes at home for a skinny girl dying of hunger. I could never know what really happened in those early years. I think that memory is about reconstruction, reshaping and trying to find the continuity in your life. (CBC Radio)

However, two years later, she was given away to her paternal grandparents in the impoverished village of Shitang. At the age of seven, Guo was finally reunited with her parents. *She describes violence and hardness as themes that pervade her childhood, both in family relationships and in her experience of nature in the typhoon-battered fishing village of her childhood. Coral explains this phase in her life in the novel,*

That's as far back as my memory goes, to when I was seven...I had never known my parents, never really had a mother or a father. My grandmother told me that my mother had given birth to me in a rowing boat. It was a difficult birth [and she] died from loss of blood...I have no memory of these events. As for my father,...He had fled the village before my birth to escape the fisherman's life. While he was gone the villagers branded him a 'Capitalist Roader' for his bourgeois views. This was during the Cultural Revolution, and had he returned to the village, he would have been imprisoned. (Guo 8)

The narrative takes off with the narrator receiving a parcel of eel from an unknown sender which brings back memories of her childhood village which is known as the Village of Stone.

It all started with a parcel of dried eel. A parcel of dried, salted eel posted by some nameless sender from some unknown address in the Village of Stone. (Guo 1)

...Synapses connect, the floodgates are thrown open, the torrents of memory unleashed. They rush through the tunnels of the past, threatening to flood the earth and blot out the sky...That was how the memories began. (Guo 2)

Coral spent the first fifteen years of her life in the Village of Stone, which was her “entire world, my fortress without windows, a place where they had dug my grave almost as soon as I was born.” (Guo, 9) But now she says that she “have left it far behind me.” (Guo 2) Guo often looks back on her life in China and as evident in her interviews and articles she published, is deeply concerned about her troubled past. In the past, she has been more hesitant to bring up stories about her life than she is now. Despite her attempts at leaving her past behind and moving into a new city, memories about the horrors of her early life ultimately finds its way in her writings. Thus, in *Village of Stone* she gives a vague depiction of her childhood and early youth. However, she is now more open about her past which can be seen in her recent publications and interviews.

In the novel *Village of Stone*, Coral’s mother died at childbirth. Guo admits that during her childhood, she had a “violent” relationship with her mother, and feels that the latter had been resentful towards her. Her mother was a Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution which took her away from parental duties. This may perhaps be the explanation to her absence in the novel. Coral’s father is an artist who left the village before she was born due to his dissident political views. Similarly, Guo’s father was sent away to a labour camp during the Cultural Revolution. As both her parents were absent since her birth, Coral falls into the care of her grandparents. In real life, Guo was placed in the hands of an impoverished couple as a baby by her parents, who later sent her to her grandparents.

As an orphan, Coral is the object of ridicule in her village. To add to her tragedy, she is abducted by the village mute at the age of seven, and is repeatedly raped by him until she finally escapes. She does not have the courage to tell her gruesome experience to anyone out of fear of the mute. Moreover, she is also convinced that no one really cares about her and her testimony will not matter much to anyone in her village. Thus she resolves to keep it a secret. She therefore lives in constant fear of the mute whom she is certain pursues her and tries to recapture her. In her memoir, *Once Upon a Time in the East*, Xiaolu Guo finally confesses that she has been raped as a teenager by her father’s colleague. She claims that she was raped for two years since she was 12 years old. (Hong) The fear and pain she felt is echoed in the novel. Although she is still haunted by nightmares occasionally, Coral finally lives in peace when a storm sweeps the Village of Stone and the mute is killed when his house collapsed and is crushed by his own roof.

Coral’s grandmother was a young girl when she first came to the “Village of Stone” as a young bride. In addition to being young and naïve, she hails from a different village with a completely different upbringing, so she fails to conform to the values and tradition of her husband’s clan. As a result, she had always failed to impress her husband from the day they married. Thus, their marriage was strained from the very start. She pays her penance by becoming extremely submissive towards her husband. Coral’s grandmother led a quiet life and devoted her whole life to her husband. Coral’s grandparents never talk to each other, and thus she serves as an emissary or messenger to the both of them. For Coral, life was difficult at home as much as it was difficult outside. She did not get to enjoy her childhood like the other children in the village. She led a grim life with no ray of hope awaiting in the future. A description of her domestic life and the loneliness and isolation that Guo felt during her childhood is clearly inscribed in the pages of *Village of Stone*.

Life took another turn for Coral and her grandmother one day when they found out that her grandfather had died of an apparent suicide. This is another incident that is inspired from the author’s life. Upon finding his lifeless body, Coral was unable to show any emotion as she is completely devoid of it. Meanwhile, her grandmother seems to experience some sort of an emancipation with the death of her husband. Although she

does not talk much, she begins to hum tunes and becomes evidently livelier than before. What is remarkable is that she can now begin to exercise her creativity. She would build figurines and sell them and earn her own income. Unfortunately, her grandmother did not live long and she was left on her own. The death of Coral's grandparents echoes Guo's reclamation as a young girl by her parents, thus leaving her grandparents which in turn explains their absence in her life.

As Guo begins a new life with her parents and a brother whom she barely knows, she experienced a lonely and solitary life in this new household. As she was brought up by her illiterate grandparents with no formal education, she starts her journey towards literacy and education only after living with her parents. Similarly, Coral begins her formal education after the death of her grandparents as she reached her teenage years. She joined the local school where she was seduced by the school teacher. Although she does not love him, she enjoys being in the company and receiving attention from her teacher. Eventually, she becomes pregnant but her partner persuades her to undergo an abortion in order to save his reputation. She does not have a choice but to comply. On top of having an abortion, she has to lie about her age and identity at the abortion clinic as she is still under aged which fills her with self-loath. When she comes back to her village, words have already spread that she has gone to the city to have an abortion and people despised her. This intensifies her feeling of alienation and rejection in her own village so she flees to Beijing. She soon looks for a job and finds one in a video-rental shop where she earns meagre income. She does not complain about it though, because she knows that her life is so much better in the city as no one really knows much about her past.

At present, she is 28 years old and lives with her 29-year-old boyfriend Red. She now lives in Beijing, one thousand eight hundred kilometres away from the village of Stone,

...with a man who knows nothing about my past...now I find myself thinking about [the Village of Stone], about the things that happened there and the people who lived there... (Guo 2)

Coral and Red moved into a small basement of a skyscraper. Red is quite immature and is unable to hold a job for long. He relies on the money sent to him by his parents and simply wastes his life. Coral, on the other hand, is worried about their future and contemplates leaving him, but hesitates because she has no one else to turn to. One day, she receives a parcel which contains a huge eel. The sender's name is not written so she begins to worry that someone from her village has found out where she lives. But she soon finds out that the parcel was sent by her father, who lives in Beijing. The latter suffers from a terminal illness and is hospitalised. Coral visits her father who died soon afterwards. The author, Guo also learns that her father is ill after she lives in London for a considerable amount of time. But she says that she did not travel back to China to visit him due to issues regarding citizenship.

Towards the end of the novel, Coral realizes that she is pregnant. She is hesitant to tell the news to Red because she is uncertain about their future and she also doubts that Red will want her to have his baby so she contemplates abortion. But the memory of the abortion that she has underwent as a young teenager haunts her and she is afraid to go through it again. However, she eventually informs Red about her pregnancy and the novel ends with Red embracing her and promising to take care of her and the baby.

Xiaolu Guo is the daughter of a fisherman and factory worker whose dream was to run away to become a writer, a filmmaker, an artist. She relocates to London at the age of 29 to pursue her dream. Although she struggles initially due to cultural and lingual differences, in addition to loneliness and alienation, she has achieved her dream and is currently hailed as a successful writer, critic and filmmaker, among many other acclamations. In *Village of Stone* Coral embodies these aspects by relocating to Beijing in the hope of getting a better life. Although she does not seem to achieve as much success as the author career-wise, she is able to leave her past and for once in her life, she is looking forward to the future with hope and optimism. Presently, Guo is mother to a 4-year-old daughter. Although motherhood came much later, a decade to be precise, after the novel *Village of Stone* was published, Coral is a personification of the author as well as a clairvoyant as she already anticipates the birth of her child who would finally liberate her from her past. In the words of Guo, motherhood is her choice to "bring hope into the world by having a child and creating a person to whom I could give the best knowledge I had." (Hong)

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