

[Skip to main content](#)[Skip to navigation](#)[Skip to navigation](#)

[Fiction](#)

● This article is more than 15 years old

[Review](#)

We're all aliens now

This article is more than 15 years old

Maya Jaggi detects echoes of 9/11 in a story of Chinese totalitarianism

[Maya Jaggi](#)

Sat 14 Feb 2009 00.01 GMT

[Share](#)

"Alien" was the first word quizzically explored in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, Xiaolu Guo's perspicaciously witty 2007 glossary of misunderstandings in language and love. Shortlisted for the Orange prize, and artfully composed in the haltingly improving English of a young woman new to Britain, that novel was followed by *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*, a translation of an earlier book written in a "slangy, raw Chinese". Its funny, melancholy fragments - interspersed with uncaptioned photographs - trace the voracious yet vulnerable Fenfang from the sweet potato fields of her home village to a burgeoning mega-city's margins as an extra in Beijing's film industry. The novels confirmed Guo, who is also a film-maker, as an astute and challenging innovator, slipping between word and image, documentary and fiction, as restlessly as between languages.

UFO in Her Eyes, Guo's second novel written in English, returns in part to the metaphor of terrestrial aliens and alienation. Yet its satirical form takes more risks. Set in the near future, four years after the Beijing Olympics, it centres on a peasant woman, Kwok Yun, who reports seeing a flying metal plate while bicycling in a rural backwater in southern China. As the UFO sighting draws national intelligence agents to Silver Hill village, the novel consists of a kind of X-Files, from witness interrogation transcripts and sketch maps to the agents' emails and jottings.

Yun is unmarried at 37. Yet the description of her as "built like a tree, solid and earthy", hints too at her virtues. After witnessing the flying plate, she tended an American hiker with a snakebite, who rewards the village with a \$2,000 cheque. The catalytic events of September 2012 drag the village into accelerated development. After a monument is erected to the UFO sighting, carp ponds and rice fields give way to parking lots and tourist centres, while migrant construction workers face local xenophobes.

The interrogation documents become an ironic record of this transformation. While the tough young spies from Beijing and Hunan say they "didn't come here for a history lesson", the ageing population, their faces "frozen by hardship", recall the starvation of Mao's Great Leap Forward and the thought crimes of the cultural revolution. "Times have changed, everybody in China is getting rich ... why not me?" the tea grower says. But the fish farmer Carp Li is sceptical of tennis courts and canals. "What for? So that people can hit balls about and pretend to be western, or float down the water in pleasure boats ... like the emperors and their concubines?"

Yun appears a beneficiary of change, gaining an education and a husband. But the couple's fate suggests that the dubious vision of modernisation - or Americanisation - triumphs. Within three years of the UFO sighting, the village, now a town, is engulfed by rioting and a state of emergency. Officialdom monitors the peasants as though they were alien life forms. For Yun, they are "desperate and powerless" as ants.

The book's epigraphs quote Ban Gu, the early Chinese historian, on the ordering of society, and Milan Kundera on the totalitarian erosion of the boundary between public and private: "power, as it grows ever more opaque, requires the lives of citizens to be entirely transparent". That this Orwellian spectre of ID cards and blanket surveillance is not confined to China is perhaps underlined by the date of the UFO sighting: 9/11/2012.

This book was apparently based on an earlier story in Chinese, and is to become a film. Its interview format makes it a sometimes frustrating halfway house between novel and screenplay. The flat, clinical language of party bureaucracy compounds its austerity. Yet there is relief in the simplicity of the peasants' speech. Yun recalls an epiphany beside the pond: "a full moon rose in the east, and I saw my reflection in the water. A breeze came and broke my image, then slowly it formed again. I realised I was leaving this place, and, for the first time in my life that I can remember, tears came to my eyes." It is in such revelations of loss and pain, in silences like those of the ostracised bicycle mender homesick for the snowy Korean border, that the novel resonates.

Explore more on these topics

- [Fiction](#)
- [Xiaolu Guo](#)
- [reviews](#)

[Share](#)

[Reuse this content](#)

Most viewed

Most viewed

- [Film](#)
- [Music](#)
- [TV & radio](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Art & design](#)
- [Stage](#)
- [Games](#)
- [Classical](#)

- [News](#)
- [Opinion](#)
- [Sport](#)
- [Culture](#)
- [Lifestyle](#)

Original reporting and incisive analysis, direct from the Guardian every morning

[Sign up for our email](#)

- [About us](#)
- [Help](#)
- [Complaints & corrections](#)
- [SecureDrop](#)
- [Work for us](#)
- [Privacy policy](#)
- [Cookie policy](#)
- [Terms & conditions](#)
- [Contact us](#)
- [All topics](#)
- [All writers](#)
- [Modern Slavery Act](#)
- [Tax strategy](#)
- [Digital newspaper archive](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [YouTube](#)
- [Instagram](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)
- [Newsletters](#)
- [Advertise with us](#)
- [Guardian Labs](#)
- [Search jobs](#)
- [Patrons](#)

[Back to top](#)

© 2025 Guardian News & Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved. (dcr)

