

Empty space behind a glossy label: 20 fragments by xiaolu guo

[Business](#)



In Xiaolu Guo's *20 Fragments*, Fenfang, an alienated rebellious teenager who leaves home to make a living for herself in Beijing, faces countless struggles to find a place for herself in the chaotic city. As she leaves old relationships to create new ones and leaves old jobs to accept new ones, she finds herself lost in this new, fast-moving world — and at the end of it all, having earned herself one title: extra.

In this way, Fenfang becomes an extra in her own life, living not for herself, but for those around her. Guo describes Fenfang as an alienated character through her relationships and interactions with other people, proving that those who live simply to conform to the norms of society inevitably alienate themselves from their own lives. Guo obviously uses Fenfang's inability to forge a real connection to another person to symbolize her self-alienation. This inability is clear when she describes Fenfang's repulsion toward the Red Sox, her boyfriend's favorite baseball team. " His recent emails and phone calls had been about nothing but the Red Sox and their achievements.

He didn't seem to realise how remote the Red Sox and the World Series were to me. It wasn't just that they were 18, 000 miles away. It was that I didn't even know what a baseball looked like. Was it the size of a ping-pong ball or a volleyball? I had no idea. The Red Sox reminded me of the chasm between Ben and me, between our experiences. The Red Sox made me depressed.

" (p. 41) Guo clearly uses the Red Sox as a metaphor for Ben in Fenfang's life, showing that Fenfang feels incapable of connecting with anyone — including her boyfriend. Fenfang is unable to express herself to others, leading Ben to go on about something that seems absolutely irrelevant to

her life. Guo's consistent use of this metaphor indicates that Fenfang's relationship with Ben isn't suffering simply because they have 18, 000 miles between them, but are just unable to connect as people. Fenfang has locked herself up in her own world, deprived of the ability to comprehend anything going on outside of it. She does not understand who Ben really is, despite her relationship with him.

Guo later mentions that Fenfang does not know anything about Ben's past — not even his age —, represented here by her lack of knowledge about baseballs: “ I didn't even know what a baseball looked like. Was it the size of a ping-pong ball or a volleyball?” Her self-alienation has not allowed her to connect with Ben's interests, to the point where she evidently does not even care since she has not even asked him to explain to her what baseball is — in other words, what his past is. By describing Fenfang's relationship with Ben as a “ chasm,” Guo reveals that the distinction between their paths is too great to reconcile. Fenfang's statement, “ The Red Sox made me depressed,” shows that any interaction with Ben — or people, by extension — makes Fenfang depressed, since she has become so accustomed to her self-alienation. Clearly, Guo's explanation of Fenfang's inability to connect with others helps describe her as an alienated character.

Guo proves that Fenfang's desire to imitate the respected and elite around her, and conform to her society, is ultimately the reason for her alienation. When Fenfang is searching for a job — an outlet to get famous — she first turns to the exact actions of people before her. “ There was this famous high-school student from Shanghai who had got into Harvard University after

learning to recite the whole English dictionary off by heart. I couldn't remember his name, but he became our national hero. I figured I could be like him—that this forgotten dictionary might be my passport to the world too.

” (p. 13) Clearly, Fenfang has no real interest in learning the words of the dictionary, but attempts it so that she could become a “ national hero.” She hopes to get famous by mimicking the route another high-school student took, allowing her to please her society and make a name for hers. This desire shows that she chooses to live her life simply to conform to society, and when she loses interest in doing so because it is not truly what she desires, she gives up and alienates herself from others. Guo emphasizes Fenfang's desire for fame as her “ passport to the world,” proving that she attempts to mimic others in order to connect with them, rather than by being herself and following her own passion. Obviously, Fenfang's alienation proves that living life in an attempt to conform to society results in self-alienation.

Guo compares Fenfang's life to contemporary China, in order to prove that China has attempted to emulate the lifestyle of other nations to a point where it has forgotten its own culture. When Fenfang is speaking to an American friend of hers who is in Beijing, she finds that he sees Beijing from a rather different viewpoint than she does. “ Patton loved Beijing. ‘ You know, even when a city looks hard and concrete like Beijing, it's possible to love it,’ he once said to me. He also said that China was better at being American than America, so he would rather live in China. How could China be more American than America? I didn't get it.

” (p. 122) Guo emphasizes that China has become so heavily concerned with imitating American lifestyle that it has become “ better at being American than America.” This phrase implies that the degree to which globalization has impacted China has caused it to lose its traditional Chinese essence, becoming “ hard and concrete.” Fenfang’s confusion at Patton’s statement shows that some Chinese people have have just accepted the way their city is, because they do not even remember their culture — the original China — enough to see that what is before them now is an overstretched imitation of another nation. In fact others, such as Patton, are attracted to Beijing because of its emulation of America, which projects a modern and progressive image of China to the world.

Guo thus expresses that China has made these changes to its culture in order to conform to international society – to become like other nations. Just as Fenfang has been driven by the demands of her society and the people around her to a point where she does not remember what she truly desires, China has mimicked the lifestyle of America to a point where its people do not recognize it. Essentially, Guo uses Fenfang’s self-alienation to represent China’s, proving that in its effort to please the rest of its world, China has become an extra in its own country — this fate mimicked in the lives of its people. It is impossible to dispute that Guo uses Fenfang’s interaction with others to prove that she has alienated herself from her own life and from the people around her. She provides a larger picture of China by establishing a Fenfang’s lifestyle as a metaphor for her country, conveying that China’s desire to emulate a Western lifestyle has made it an extra in its own country. Essentially, Guo proves that living a life which simply conforms to society

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results in self-alienation, and encourages people not to choose the path taken by Fenfang and by China.

The novel provides a lesson to people to lead their lives following their true passion, rather than attempting to meet the demands of their society.