Xuemo. *Into the Desert*. Tr. Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin. San Francisco: Long River Press, 2022. ISBN-10: 1592652549. ISBN-13: 978-1592652549. 274 pp.

Dian Li

(University of Arizona)

"Mountains of sand reached into the sky, dropping the sun closer to the grounds than when they'd set out." This is the first sentence of the Chinese writer Xuemo's novel *Into the Desert* in its English translation. Here, "they," as we quickly learn, are a father-daughter pair embarking on a nighttime trip into the desert. As we appreciate the beauty of the desert led on by this sentence, we are also besieged by the ominous feeling of a coming disaster: the reference to a fox (never a lucky animal in Chinese folklore), the howling wind, and the bitter cold (often, signs of the destructive forces of nature). Two pages later, the daughter, who was just nine years old, was left alone by her father: "She sat down to wait for Papa. Drowsiness slowly descended and enshrouded her like an enormous net."

The abandonment of a child is cruelty that no one can bear; worse yet, imaging how this child would have fared by herself in the unforgiving desert disturbs us endlessly, giving us a lingering anticipation that will foreshadow our transition from the Prologue to the main story of the novel, which turns out to be an extensive journey into the same desert, a place of both fear and spirituality.

"Early in the morning, before the sun made an appearance, Ying'er and Lanlan left their village for the salt lakes in the heart of the Gobi." So begins the long journey into the desert in Chapter 1, which is cast in a detached but suggestive third-person narration rich in verbs but stingy in adjectives. We will find this style to be characteristic of Xuemo, a contemporary Chinese writer who is among the most frequently translated authors in recent times. Xuemo's reputation is steadily rising in the West with the publication of half a dozen novels and short story collections

by several translators. Undoubtedly, his English readers will be enthralled with this novel that was masterfully rendered by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin.

Like many good openings of great novels, Xuemo's line quoted above provides useful information to keep us engaged, such as time, place, characters, and action, while managing to hold us in suspense over many other things, partly because what we have read in the Prologue clashes with our life experiences, which we will inevitably bring to bear in reading literature. Common sense tells us that a journey into a desert is always a risky adventure, and it is often done by men, if at all, so we wonder why these two women choose to take this trip. This is a question that will keep us spellbound with the unfolding of the story in which Ying'er and Lanlan confront risks and challenges along the way.

As Ying'er and Lanlan stocked their supplies—water, food, bedrolls, utensils, guns, and so on, which would be carried by the two camels, we need to do some preparation of our own, particularly for those reading Xuemo's novel in English translation for the first time. The word "Gobi" marks the place in the story in western China, near Liangzhou, where Xuemo grew up. Since he uses his hometown as the background for almost all his fictional works, Xuemo is known as a *xibu* (the west) writer in China. Geographically speaking, the west in China has many unusual features, such as the Gobi deserts, the rolling plateaus, and the rocky massifs, all in proximity to the Yellow River Basin, commonly referred to as the cradle of Chinese civilization. Thus, in the cultural imagery of the Chinese people, the west always conjures up a double image—one of the unyielding spirit of life forces that have sustained Chinese people in time and history, and the other of evocative primitivity, rawness, wonder, and ruggedness, which are often set in opposition to the representation of the coastal east as a place of elaborate rituals and refined culture. In arts and literature, the west has long become a mythologized place where heroic swordsmen roam on horseback, carefree shepherds play lute by the campfire, or exiled official-literati from other parts of China seek spiritual redemption by reconnecting with nature and hard labor.

Xuemo is a western writer who came from the west, which means that he is in this mythology but not bound by it. His *Desert Trilogy*, of which *Into the Desert* is a part, is clearly more a work of imagination than a project of autobiography, but the imagination occurs at the very place, not from a distance of self-serving exoticism. It is also an imagination marked by Xuemo's time as well as his characters'—the late twentieth century, which is a time of unprecedented social and cultural changes in China. The grand narrative of China's rise in modernization and economic prosperity, which started in the 1980s and continues today, should be familiar to all of

us, but there always will be untold stories—stories in the margins and on the side—waiting to be told or written. China is a vast country, so an imbalance in economic development is inevitable, especially in border towns and remote regions such as the western parts of the country. People from these places struggle in the precarious new society created by fervent capitalistic impulses and governmental policies. When "Getting Rich is Glamorous" becomes an official slogan, money has the potential to be the ultimate arbiter of all things of value and meaning in life, which will destabilize the social fabric of rural communities steeped in tradition. The great migration of workers, a historical internal translocation of people from the countryside to the city that has provided the labor force to make China a manufacturing powerhouse, offers a compelling narrative of chasing the Chinese dream while also creating many stories of broken promises, frustrated desires, and agonizing rootlessness.

Now, we are in a better position to understand why Ying'er and Lanlan team up to embark on this trip into the desert. Yes, there was salt waiting at the end of the trip, which they would bring back for money that might help solve their individual problems. We realize they were making a choice in their lives, an unusual choice and probably an unwise one, to be sure, but they chose an uncertain future over a certain present that had been prescribed for them. This is a sure sign that they were living in the new age of precarity and were fully aware of it. On the other hand, they would have to pay a heavy price for their choice during the trip, including life-threatening situations on multiple occasions.

Journey has been a common theme in literatures of the world since antiquity. The best narrative of the journey always involves physical challenges and metaphorical propositions through which self-discovery, communal bonding, and circumstantial change can be substantiated. Xuemo has accomplished all these and more in the novel with the flair of a masterful storyteller. There is no parallel in contemporary Chinese literature that has presented the desert as a subject of nature with such vibrancy and precision: its majestic landscape, its protean personality, and its awesome power to cause death and sustain life. In the same vein, Ying'er and Lanlan's encounter with the desert is presented as a story of negotiated interdependence, a sort of give-and-take that is central to any beneficial relationship. For every danger that the two women experienced, such as the poisonous snake, the vicious jackals, the sinking sands, or the violent storm, there is an element of existential crisis about suffering and joy, about body and soul, about life and death, through which Ying'er and Lanlan got tested not only in their ultimate physical limits but in their mental strength as well. Despite excruciating pains of both kinds, we also wit-

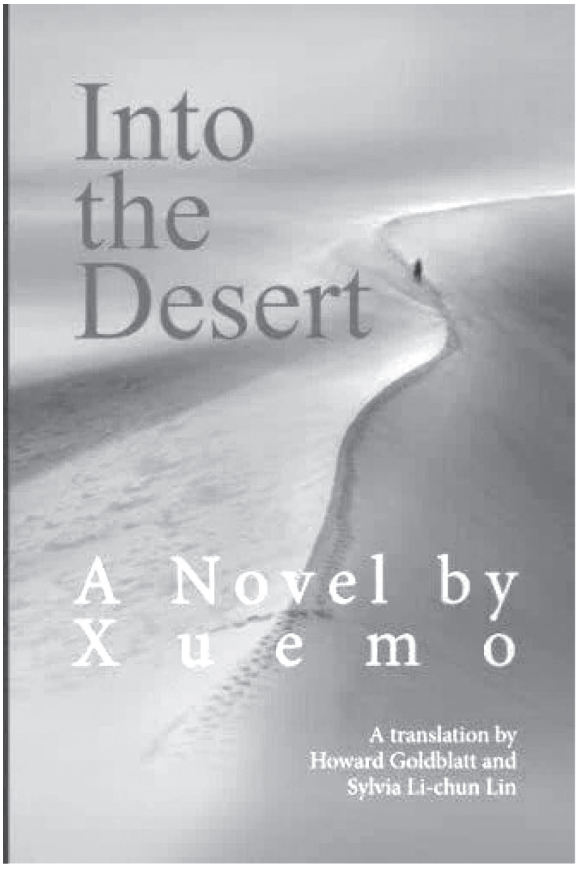
ness the presence of wonders repeatedly—twice they were saved by water extracted from the roots of desert plants—which bonded them more than ever. Perhaps sisterhood is meant to be the focal point of the journey if we consider how they poured their hearts out for each other at moments of near death, when they could live free because constraints imposed by traditional codes and social contracts did not matter anymore. At the end of the novel, before the climatic event of the story, Ying'er changed into a blouse that she had worn while being chased by the jackals in the desert. The narration goes: "It was not made of fine materials, but was a cherished item" (256). This minor detail speaks eloquently about the significance of the journey for the two women.

The triumph of Ying'er and Lanlan against the elements of nature by itself is a story for the ages, and Xuemo's riveting portrayal of it will place him among the best writers of the survival-in-nature genre. However, the novel is more than that. Like anything else on earth, the desert does not exist without the touch of humans. After all, we have been in the so-called Anthropocene epoch for quite some time. It is no surprise that "into the desert" also means to be mingled with humans who exploit the desert for profit. The salt lakes, the destination of the road trip for the two women, are both part of the desert and separated from it. It turns out that there was a society of salt miners already there. Initially, similar suspense continues to haunt us following Ying'er and Lanlan's new start at the makeshift mining village: Will they get the salt that they came for? Is there a happy ending around the corner? The hope is quickly dissipated in the harsh life of salt mining, constrained by an unforgiving environment and the social fabric contaminated by profit. In fact, there is a certain familiarity to an experienced reader of literature: cut-throat infighting among workers, brutal exploitation of the laborers by the entrepreneurs, sexual rivalry between men, and ruinous jealousy among women, even though details of each theme manifest themselves differently. Their aspirations frustrated, Ying'er and Lanlan have no choice but to return home by the way they came.

The last part of the novel finds Ying'er and Lanlan back in village life, where they struggle anew under "the bondage of the exchange marriage" (111). On the surface, everything was the same: the demands from their families kept coming to them for more sacrifices at the expense of their own interests and desires. Their responses this time, however, would be fundamentally different. For the first time, we see a resolve from both women not to comply. Lanlan went to a Buddhist cave for meditation. She would be reciting the Vajravarahi Mantra to keep the oppressive nagging out of her ears. Ying'er would pretend to agree to remarriage with a man of her parents' choice because he would provide enough money for her brother to get

a new wife, which is, in essence, another bondage of the exchange marriage. In the middle of the wedding ceremony, however, Ying'er made a life-altering choice that would turn the exchange marriage inside out.

Xuemo's choice of resolution for Ying'er and Lanlan is an echo of classical Chinese literature in the genre of tragedy, which finds plenty of examples in suicide and *chujia* (leaving home life), even though Lanlan's embrace of Buddhism does not adhere to the strict definition of leaving home to become a practicing nun. What the two women share is a similar conviction to the triumph of the spirit over the forces of earthly desires and materialistic demands. For that, Buddhism is a natural ally for both women, and it figures prominently in Lanlan's progress toward self-determination, but Daoism, Confucianism, or some folkish spiritual beliefs such as Fatalism are all referenced repeatedly throughout the story. In this connection, spiritualism, rather than a particular institutionalized religion, would more appropriately reflect the richness and complexity of the novel. Xuemo once said, "I am spiritual but not religious." This is true of the novel as well. Xuemo seems to suggest that, to counter the ruinous effect of materialistic patriarchal society where a transactional relationship always begets more relational transactions, spiritualism may be our last choice of resistance.



Author Profile:

Dian Li is a Professor of Chinese Literature at the Department of East Asian Studies, the University of Arizona, USA. His primary research interests are modern Chinese films and poetry, critical theory, translation studies, and comparative literary studies. He is the author of three monographs, two book-length translations, and over seventy papers, essays, and reviews, and his most recent book is *The Aesthetics of Empathy in Modern Chinese Literature* (2022). He is Associate Editor of C*omparative Literature & World Literature.*