Yunte Huang. *Daughter of the Dragon: Anna May Wong's Rendezvous with American History*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation. 2023. ISBN: 9781631495809. 400 pp.

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Yunte Huang's book *Daughter of the Dragon: Anna May Wong's Rendezvous with American History* gives a comprehensive and vivid account of the life of Anna May Wong, who "arose literally from a Chinese laundry" and became "the first Chinese American star in Hollywood" (35). Anna Wong was the first Chinese American to receive the honor of "Hollywood Walk of Fame" (315), the first Asian American to be featured on US currency (Anna May Wong quarter), and was crowned as "The World's Most Beautiful Chinese Girl" by *Look* magazine (13). The book *Anna May Wong's Rendezvous with American History* has been rated as "10 Best California Books of 2023" by *The New York Times* and "Best Books of 2023" by Smithsonian, BookRiot.

Based on Anna May Wong's life and career diachronically, this book consists of six parts apart from Preface and Epilogue. Part One, "Fun in a Chinese Laundry," depicts Anna's childhood, growing up in Los Angeles' Chinatown, and her early talent for acting. She was born in 1905, the year of the dragon in the Chinese lunar calendar, indicating a certain predestination of the future film star's performance in the movie *Daughter of the Dragon*. At the time of Anna's birth, America's anti-Chinese movement was on the rise; with the Chinese Exclusion Act passed by Congress in 1882, the white racists' harassment of Chinese immigrants was a common sight. Anna's school life at a predominantly white public school was coupled with harsh bullying from American boys: hair pulling, pushing, and being called ethnic and racial slurs, to name a few. Anna's fight against racial bias originated in her childhood and lasted throughout her life. During the 1910s, Hollywood's silent films became enamored with the exotic charms of Chinatown, and motion picture com-

panies came down into Chinatown to film scenes now and then. Anna became so obsessed with movies that she went to the cinema very often with the tips she saved from laundry deliveries, and she fantasized about becoming a movie actor one day. She playacted with little dolls, imitating movie scenes that appealed to her most. These were the first baby steps that ultimately led Anna to her future acting career.

Part Two, "Becoming Anna May," narrates Anna May Wong's first encounter with Hollywood, as she was playing minor roles in several movies. In 1919, she played an extra Chinese girl carrying a lantern walking by in the movie *The Red Lantern*. She changed her name from "Anna Wong" to "Anna May Wong," so her name would read well on the screen credits. The extra role in *The Red Lantern* marked the start of her brilliant film career, followed by a series of subsequent more significant parts in movies. In *Dinty* (1920), she played a young maid/mistress of a Chinatown gangster and vice lord. In *Bits of Life* (1921), she played the wife of a Chinese man moving to America who ran opium dens. In *The Toll of the Sea* (1922), she played her first lead role, a white man's lover named Lotus Flower, who was abandoned by that man and committed suicide, throwing herself into the sea at the end. Anna May won positive reviews for her "Lotus Flower" role. *Variety* raved about her "extraordinary fine playing," and *The New York Times* gave her a big thumbs-up: "She makes the deserted little Lotus Flower a genuinely appealing, understandable figure" (66). Anna May was becoming a rising star who came to symbolize the East. *The Thief of Bagdad* (1923) was a turning point for her: in contrast to her previous roles as "either a timid Chinese maid or the lovestruck, self-sacrificing Madame Butterfly" (74), she cast an albeit supporting role as the duplicitous Mongol slave—"a mixture of terror and sensuality." The Mongol handmaid played by Anna May had upstaged the Bagdad thief, showing a kind of "exotic beauty and superb talent of the young Chinese actress" (77). Hollywood experienced a China fever around 1927, and several Chinese-themed films were released that year. Anna May appeared in all of them. But due to racial discrimination, Anna May was only on the periphery, playing minor roles as a handmaid to the female protagonist, a nameless Chinese girl, or a vaudeville dancer. In such a toxic cultural milieu, Anna May decided to sail for Europe in 1928 in the hope of a better future.

Part Three, "Orientally Yours," tells the story of Anna May Wong's brilliant career in Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. She arrived in Weimar Berlin in the spring of 1928, at a time when Berlin's artistic avant-garde was in full swing. She was eager to be treated differently than she was when she was discriminated against in Hollywood. Fortunately, Berlin did not disappoint her. "Anna May was seen by Germans as an icon of China, embodying all the exoticism and mystique

of the Orient, thus distinguishing her from other American imports" (102). She was very happy there and soon learned to speak, read, and write basic German. Anna May's first German film, *Song* (1928), was a smash hit, "showcasing for the first time her multiple talents as an actress, cabaret dancer, vaudeville artiste, and a pioneer in that tricky art of racial masquerade" (107), and the German film critics praised for her performance lavishly, commenting that the film was "the drama of Anna May Wong" (109). Even the philosopher Walter Benjamin was fascinated by her.

In June 1928, Anna May went to France to make her second film in Europe—*Pavement Butterfly*, of which "the reviewers praised Anna May as the lead actress, noting her 'personality and exotic charm'" (118). In the fall of the same year, she arrived in London for her new film *Piccadilly*. At that time, the aesthetics of chinoiserie in London helped to boost Anna May's popularity in the United Kingdom. Though a Chinese American, she was regarded as a Chinese in the atmosphere of vogue of China and received the honorary title of Cultural Ambassador of China even though she had never set foot on Chinese soil by then. Also in London, Anna May performed *The Circle Chalk* on the stage of New Theatre. But her high-pitched, bell-like voice incurred harsh reviews from British critics. Vocal delivery became Anna May's big disadvantage, as talkies were gradually taking over silent films during the late 1920s. Anna May "was one of the greatest treasures of the silent film. With deepest regret, one cannot help noticing that a lot of this appeal has been lost with the introduction of dialogue" (135).

Part Four, "Daughter of the Dragon," describes Anna May Wong's coming back home to America and playing lead roles in several Hollywood movies. Feeling homesick in Europe after two and a half years abroad, Anna May sailed back from Europe in late October of 1930, transforming from a fashionable girl when she left America to a "sophisticated woman attired in elegant European fashions and affecting an upper-class British accent and highborn manners" (146). She was first offered a lead role in the play *On the Spot* (1930) on Broadway and then played the lead role in the movie *Daughter of the Dragon* (1931), her first American talkie. This movie manifested her excellent acting skills on the one hand and brought long-term negative effects to her on the other hand. She was denounced for helping create the stereotypical Asian woman and even was labeled as "the screen's foremost Oriental villainess" (136). In her self-defense, Anna May confessed, "When a person is trying to get established in a profession, he can't choose parts. He has to take what is offered" (157). Facing the same berating when she later came to China, Anna May emphasized that being a Chinese American actress, she did not have much

of a choice. She hoped that people could understand the image of "Daughter of the Dragon" from an artistic point of view and did not equate her with the role she played. However, even if she did not play this kind of roles, a white actress would have picked it up, and Anna May would lose the only chance to play the role of Chinese. In 1932, Anna May co-starred with Marlene Dietrich in the movie *Shanghai Express*. Although this film did well at the box office, and Anna May could have been the best supporting actress had there been the category at that time, she only earned a salary of one-thirteenth of Dietrich's. In the well-known Chinese-themed film *Good Earth,* the male and female lead roles were never intended to be offered to non-white actors and actresses; this, along with the "kissing taboo" at the time, which prohibited romance or kissing between an interracial couple on screen, blocked Anna May from ever receiving the consideration as the female lead. She was offered to play Lotus instead, the youthful concubine of male protagonist Wang Lung; however, she declined. "I do not see why I, at this stage of my career, should take a step backward and accept a minor role in a Chinese play that will surround me entirely by a Caucasian cast" (180). Yet again disappointed with Hollywood's racial discrimination, as well as inspired by her father and her siblings being back to Guangzhou in 1934, Anna May thought about leaving America for a second time, going to China to find out her true identity: whether she was really Anna May Wong or Wong Liu Tsong.

Part Five, "China," tells about Anna May's journey of root-seeking in China. She first arrived in Shanghai, attracting much attention from journalists. Shanghai, which became the fifth largest city in the world in the early 1930s, made Anna May feel like "a Chinese Alice who has wandered through a very strange looking-glass." She "was amazed by the galloping tempo of social life, with invitations pouring in, the telephone ringing steadily in her hotel suite like a burglar alarm out of control" (202). Here, she met Lin Yutang, Mei Lan-fang, Butterfly Wu, and other celebrities. Their hospitality made her feel at home. After her ten-day stay in Shanghai, Anna May went to Hong Kong. Though warmly received by the social elites, she was upset by the local newspaper's headlines, accusing her roles in Hollywood films of being an insult to Chinese people. First in Shanghai, later in Beijing, and in other cities, both in China and in the United States, she received the same accusation. She was not even allowed to visit her father and siblings in Taishan, Guangdong. She had to explain time and again that "she was not responsible for the interpretation of Chinese roles in American films as these parts were given to her by the directors. She had no say in the matter" (211–212). Anna May later visited many other cities, including Suzhou, Hangzhou, Nanjing, and Tianjin. Among the cities she visited,

Anna May spent most of her time in Beijing. She arrived in Beijing on 14 May 1936 and "was greeted by a large crowd of reporters and local cinephiles" (230). She stayed in Beijing for another three months, studying Beijing opera with the hope of presenting it to the world, learning Chinese, collecting books on Chinese drama, asking tailors to make her authentic Chinese dresses. Anna May's trip to China aroused her strong sense of Chinese identity and a deep love for Chinese culture and art.

Part Six, "The Big Nowhere," portrays how Anna May Wong, back in America, contributed what she could to support China's Anti-Japanese War. Returning to California on 28 November 1936, Anna May was "determined to do something in support of China." In a press release, she announced, "Though I am American born of American born parents, I am a full-blooded Chinese and more Chinese than ever" (247). In 1938, Anna May played the lead role in *Daughter of Shanghai*. She was happy that the film outpoured sympathy for China. With a certain degree of popularity in the film industry and a certain amount of personal savings, and more importantly, with a strong sense of Chinese identity, Anna May had the possibility to choose a role now. She refused to play any role detrimental to China. Not only that, she tried every means to support China's Anti-Japanese War: "She auctioned off her film costumes to raise money for China war relief" (261), sponsored a sale of rare Chinese *objets d'art*, helped to host charity events, attended a China Aid Council, directed an evening program for the United China Relief Fund, made a trip to Australia, appearing as an ambassador and spokesperson for China, hosted an "Anna May Wong Ball," autographing photographs of herself at a small charge, and donated the money to the relief fund. "She attempted to rally support for China in any way she could" (270). Anna May's loudest anti-Japanese pronouncement was conveyed by playing roles in anti-Japanese films. Her lead role in *Bombs over Burma* (1942) and *Lady from Chungking* (1942) shaped anti-Japanese images. She expressed her own feelings through the female protagonist's mouth, "China's destiny is victory. It will live because civilization will not die. Tyrants, dictators, the murderers of peace, all will be betrayed" (279). Anna May donated her salary from these two films to the United China Relief Fund. She also wrote a preface to *New Chinese Recipes*, a cookbook reissued in 1942 to raise funds for the United China Relief Fund. She was eager to bring Chinese food to mainstream America, and her efforts paid off. Americans began to go into Chinese restaurants in America in hordes, bringing rare businesses during wartime. It can be said that Anna May Wong worked tirelessly to undo Western stereotypes of China.

Anna May's acting career faced difficulties after World War II. Apart from rac-

ism, there were sexism and ageism in Hollywood. As a minority female actress, Anna May saw her career in film gradually coming to a halt in the 1950s. She then ventured into television but was not very successful. To maintain a roof over her head, she was even forced to sell some of her fine jewelry. Then, she slid into alcoholism, which deteriorated her health greatly. On 3 February 1961, Anna May Wong unexpectedly died of a heart attack at the age of fifty-six. The woman born in the Year of the Dragon, played the lead role in *Daughter of the Dragon*, had been to the Palace of the Dragon Lady, and concluded her acting career with a television episode called *Dragon by the Tail*.

The New York Times and *Los Angeles Times* wrote highly complementary obituaries of Anna May Wong. The former dubbed her "one of the most unforgettable figures of Hollywood's great days" and "a movie symbol of 'the mysterious East.'" The latter called her "one of the first to bring the charm of the Orient to the American screen," "a symbol of Oriental mystery," and "a beauty of poise and culture" (309). Anna May had the "exotic" charm with signature bangs, radiant almond eyes, and second skin-like silky *qipao*, which manifested her Chineseness. One Society of New York named her "The World's Best Dressed Woman". She was a talented multilingual who could speak Chinese, French, German, and English fluently and could switch easily from one language to the other. She was a first-rate actor, a skilled dancer, a fashion lover, and a vaudeville singer all combined. In addition to befriending celebrated directors and popular film stars of the time, she also made acquaintance with German philosopher Walter Benjamin, British writer Somerset Maugham, Chinese writer Lin Yutang, China's "Queen of Peking Opera" Mei Lanfang, Chinese film star Butterfly Wu, and many others, revealing her global vision and broad range of knowledge. Anna May Wong created a miracle in the early Hollywood film industry.

Just as the author Yunte Huang emphasized in the "Preface" of *Anna May Wong's Rendezvous with American History*, it is not a typical cradle-to-grave biography. The book has a deeper meaning in Anna May Wong's rendezvous with American history. Anna May is a prism through which one can have a clear understanding of the misfortunes Chinese Americans encountered in the early twentieth century due to racism in the United States, the development of the Hollywood film industry, and the significance of Chinese American icons as world cultural heritage.

Anna May's life and career were filled with racial discrimination and misunderstanding. Her rise from a laundryman's daughter to a global celebrity was accompanied by injustice, racism, sexism, and ageism. Her unique sign "Orientally yours" signed on her publicity photos revealed "both a quiet acquiescence and a tongue-in-

cheek defiance of the public perception of her as an exotic icon" (107).

The Chinese Exclusion Act added to her school year's bullying by white children. Discrimination against Chinese and Chinese Americans made Anna May play roles of the weak and the marginal most of the time—either to be rescued so as to highlight the heroic behaviors of the white protagonists or to fall into misfortune to set off the compassion and love of the white heroes. As a Chinese American actress, she was not allowed to outshine white actors or actresses. The submissive Madame Butterfly and the mannish Dragon Lady were the roles she had no choice but to play.

The anti-miscegenation laws were a significant barrier to Anna May's career. She was not allowed to kiss or even be kissed by a white man on the screen. This interracial marriage prohibition also affected her own love and marriage prospects. She could not marry a white man due to racism, nor a Chinese man, because the Chinese traditionally looked down upon a woman involved in the entertainment industry.

The story of Anna May's life and career also revealed the history of the American film industry, while giving us a glimpse of the prospects of television, which drastically changed the cultural landscape of America in later years. As an actress, Anna May not only made a successful transition from silent films to talkies but also lived through the shift from film production to television series. Through the prism of Anna May Wong, we have a bird's-eye view of Chinese Americans' social history, world film history, and popular culture history all together. Prejudice, discrimination, misunderstanding, and identity dilemma still exist in today's multicultural era, and intercultural dialogue becomes more and more important. Anna May Wong's life story might provide some inspiration for marginalized groups to defend themselves, to determine their identity, and to open intercultural dialogues. Her "Orientally yours" probably would echo in our ears constantly.

Containing fifty-four black and white photos, and well organized, *Daughter of the Dragon: Anna May Wong's Rendezvous with American History* is an interesting, inspiring, and worth-reading book.

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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.

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"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-

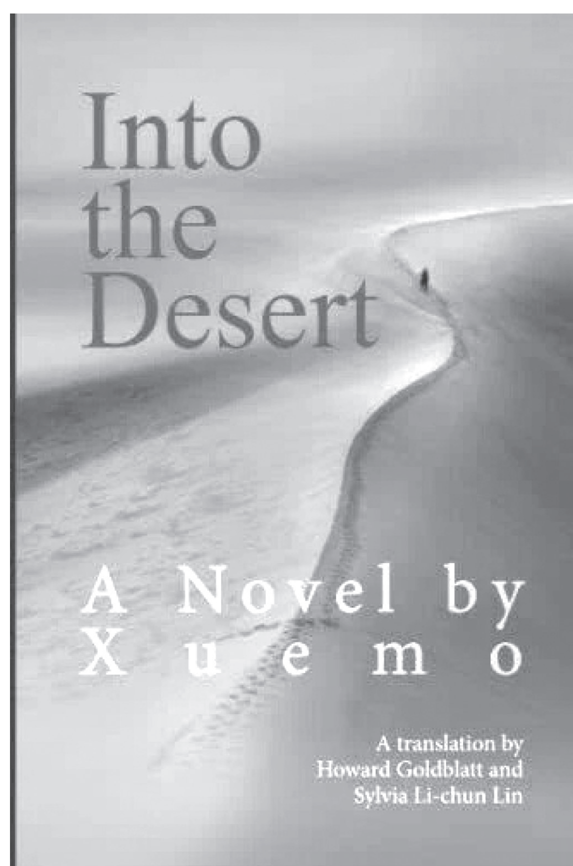
ness the presence of wonders repeatedly—twice they were saved by water extracted from the roots of desert plants—which bonded them more than ever. Perhaps sisterhood is meant to be the focal point of the journey if we consider how they poured their hearts out for each other at moments of near death, 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.



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