

TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

The book you are now holding is not quite the book I first sat down to translate, and the foreword I wrote for the beginning of that work no longer fits it. That earlier piece described a Chinese manuscript with a Chinese shape, its own order of chapters, its own rhythms of repetition, its own long detours. In preparing this English edition we have moved parts of the book, condensed others, and let go of certain passages. The result is a leaner and, we think, a clearer volume than the one I began with. But it is a different volume, and it deserves a different introduction. What follows is that introduction: an account of who Xuemo is, of what this book is arguing, of how it has been reorganized for readers in English, and of the decisions we made in carrying it across.

The man behind the voice

Xuemo is one of the most widely read living writers in China who remains almost unknown outside it. He was born in Wuwei, in Gansu province, in the old territory the local people still call Liangzhou — a corridor of desert, oasis and grassland where the Chinese heartland thins out into Central Asia. He describes his birthplace in these pages as a village so small it could not be found on a map, reachable only by a train journey of twenty-seven hours from Shanghai, then a bus, then another bus winding along a rural road. He wanted to be a novelist. There were no

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books in the village. Nobody could tell him what to read or how to write fiction.

He found what he calls the meaning of his life at twenty-five, and then spent twenty years writing his first book. The account he gives of that apprenticeship in these pages is one of the most quietly startling things in it: he compares himself to a child too weak to lift heavy objects, who therefore begins with something small, discovers it is too light, puts it down, picks up something heavier, discovers that is still too light, and repeats the process for two decades. What emerged at the end of it was *Desert Rites*, a novel that readers assume was written in a single breath, and which was in fact the residue of countless rehearsals.

Since then he has produced well over a hundred books. The *Desert Trilogy* — *Desert Rites*, *Desert Hunters*, *White Tiger Pass* — and the *Soul Trilogy* are the works he returns to most often here, along with *Into the Desert*, *The Gray Wolves of Xixia*, and *Undying Diamond Heart*, his novel of the eleventh-century Tibetan master Khyungpo Naljor. He is also a teacher. He runs cultural forums, creative writing workshops and academies; he meets readers online every morning at five o'clock on a platform called "An Encounter with Xuemo," where he reads, reflects and answers questions. Part Three of this book is divided into one chapter drawn from those morning sessions and another drawn from the questions readers have put to him directly.

This double life — novelist and teacher, artist and something closer to a spiritual director — is the reason the present book exists at all, and it accounts for much of its texture. Xuemo does not argue like a philosopher. He tells stories, reaches for his own novels as evidence, doubles back, repeats himself for emphasis, and addresses the reader as *you*. He is, in the most literal sense, thinking aloud in front of an audience.

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The argument

Beneath the anecdotes there is a single sustained argument, and it is worth naming plainly at the outset, because a reader who grasps it early will find the rest of the book falls into place around it.

The argument is this: your destiny is made of your choices, and your choices are made by your mind. Therefore the only durable way to change your fate is to change what your mind is.

Xuemo builds this in stages. He begins from a premise he takes from Buddhist tradition — that the world each of us inhabits is constructed by the mind that perceives it. He is careful, and I have been careful in translating him, to keep this from collapsing into a cheap idealism. He is not saying that your thoughts conjure the physical world. He is saying that the scope of your world is the scope of your mind: a narrow mind inhabits a narrow world, and no amount of external good fortune will widen it.

From there he argues that most people do not in fact possess their own minds. They have surrendered them — to fashion, to the approval of others, to the drift of the crowd, to desire. He has a striking phrase for those who live this way: they are “drifters,” people who “muddle through the world,” and in his novels they appear as the character Chang Hao, who pursues the heroine of *The Gray Wolves of Xixia* under the guise of love and who represents, for Xuemo, an entire class of men without dreams, without reading, oriented entirely toward money. His judgment of such lives is severe, but it is not contemptuous. What he objects to is not their ordinariness. It is that they have been lived by default.

The alternative is what this book calls sovereignty: to take back the throne of one's own heart, to become the ruler rather than the subject of one's inner kingdom. This is not a metaphor Xuemo uses lightly. It recurs throughout, and it carries the whole weight of the book's ethical vision. A sovereign is someone whose mind is clear, awake and self-governing; someone who chooses

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rather than reacts; someone who can be reached by the world without being determined by it.

Where he goes from there is perhaps unexpected. Sovereignty, in his account, does not culminate in self-assertion. It culminates in benefit to others. He is explicit that a purpose which is not oriented toward the good of others is “merely a desire dressed in the clothing of purpose,” and that walking toward such a desire will make you fall. The section on the *Daodejing* that closes Part One makes the same move in classical terms: hold the ambition of the sun within, and the humility of the earth without. Strength that displays itself is not strength.

What the English edition has done to the book

The three parts of this edition each do a different job, and the reordering has, to my mind, sharpened the distinction between them.

Part One is the overture. It is the most essayistic writing in the book, and it moves through three linked subjects: sovereignty, choice and destiny in general; the particular obstacles facing women; and the nature of happiness. It closes with the reading of Chapter 28 of the *Daodejing* — “who knows the masculine, yet holds to the feminine” — which functions as a philosophical keystone for everything preceding it.

Part Two is the spine of the book: five steps, presented in sequence, most of them named after one of Xuemo's own titles. *The World Is a Reflection of the Mind* establishes impermanence and the constructed nature of the self. *Reclaim the Throne of Your Heart* turns that insight into a practice of disentanglement from other people's opinions, from systems of rules, from greed. *The World Is a Stage for Training the Mind* reframes ordinary circumstance — work, difficulty, humiliation — as the training ground rather than the obstacle. *Comprehending Life and Death* is the

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book's darkest and, I think, its finest passage, containing the long "Song of Creating Destiny," a verse catalogue of moral instruction in the tradition of Chinese didactic poetry. *Finding Growth Amid the Trials of Life* returns from the metaphysical to the practical: solitude, reading, criticism, anger, boundaries, the choosing of company.

Part Three, "Encounters with Xuemo," gathers short pieces from the early-morning sessions. They are brief — often no more than a page — and they range widely: mitochondrial DNA and the myth of Nüwa, what Confucius meant by women who are "difficult to deal with," how to choose friends and partners, why one should never touch another person's wounds, what determines longevity. These are followed by a chapter of questions and answers with readers. Here Xuemo is at his most direct, and often at his most bracing. Asked what a woman should do when weary of housework, children and elderly parents, he replies that when a horse tires of running it loses the value that belongs to it as a horse — and then, in the same breath, tells her she may hire help, may choose a husband who likes domestic life, may choose to remain single, and must accept the consequences of whatever she chooses. That combination of unsentimental framing and genuine permission is characteristic.

The reordering has cost something. In the original the movement between registers was less tidy, and there was a rougher, more improvisatory quality that some readers valued. A number of digressions have gone, along with a good deal of repetition. I want to be honest that not all of that repetition was redundancy. Xuemo teaches by returning: he will state a principle, illustrate it, move away, and come back to it three chapters later from a different angle. Some of that architecture has necessarily been simplified. Readers who find a point in this edition arriving somewhat abruptly may be feeling the absence of the approaches that once led up to it.

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What the restructuring has bought, in exchange, is a book that an English-language reader can actually enter. The Chinese original assumes a reader already inside Xuemo's world — familiar with his novels, accustomed to his idiom, present at the morning readings. This edition does not. It builds the framework first and fills it afterward, and I think that is the right trade.

On the material about women

The longest single stretch of Part One concerns women, and it is the part of this book most likely to produce friction in an English-language reader. I want to prepare the ground rather than smooth it over.

Xuemo is not writing from within Anglo-American feminist discourse and does not pretend to be. He cites Simone de Beauvoir — “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” — and reads her accurately and sympathetically, but the framework he brings to the question is his own: Buddhist analysis of desire and illusion, Daoist thinking about strength and yielding, and forty years of observation in one of the poorest regions of China. He arrives at conclusions that will often look familiar: that women's disadvantage is structural rather than natural; that economic independence is the precondition for every other kind; that a discourse system shaped over millennia by men continues to define women even when they wish otherwise; that women's beauty has been systematically converted into a consumable good, and that women themselves have been recruited into the conversion.

He also says things that will not look familiar at all. He argues that motherhood — which he regards as among the greatest of human capacities — is also the mechanism by which many women are destroyed, and he tells at length the story of a relative who left an unfaithful husband, began to write, published a book, and then returned to that husband's household to care for a child

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she believed needed her, before developing cancer during the years that followed. He does not say she was wrong. He says the situation was a genuine paradox that admitted no clean resolution, and that only she could have made the choice. Readers who want him to deliver a verdict will be frustrated. The refusal is deliberate and, I think, is the most honest thing in the chapter.

There are moments that are harder still. The story of the monk who kills a child, which Xuemo introduces precisely because he was shocked by it and by the approving tone in which the tradition preserves it, is one. The traditional taxonomy of four kinds of children — those who come to repay kindness, to repay grievance, to collect a debt, to repay a debt — is another. I have translated these passages as they stand, with no softening. Xuemo is not endorsing the monk; he is using a violent story to press a point about the limits of parental self-sacrifice. But the passage is uncomfortable, and it should be.

The claim toward which all of this material moves is stated near the end of the section, and it is worth flagging because it is easy to miss in the flow: love alone is not sufficient. Love without wisdom, he writes, “can be truly devastating.” Wisdom, in his definition, is the ability to choose — to discern, to set boundaries, to understand consequences. That definition is doing an enormous amount of work throughout this book, and it is the hinge on which the women’s material connects to everything else.

Notes on the translation

A few decisions deserve explanation.

心 *xin*

The central term is *xin*, which English divides into two words. It is the heart and it is the mind, and Xuemo’s argument depends constantly on its being both at once — an organ of feeling that is

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also the seat of cognition and the thing you are supposed to govern. I have generally rendered it as “mind,” sometimes as “heart,” and occasionally as “heart and mind” where the doubling matters. Every one of those choices loses something. When you read that the world is a reflection of the mind, or that one should reclaim the throne of one’s heart, the same word stands behind both.

缘 *yuan* and 因缘 *yinyuan*

Yuan and *yinyuan* — the conditions and causes whose coming-together produces every phenomenon, and whose dispersal ends it — appear here variously as “conditions,” “causes and conditions,” “dependent origination,” and, where the affective weight of the Chinese demanded it, “fate.” When Xuemo says that meeting a family member is a rare and precious *yuan*, he is not being sentimental; he is applying a technical concept to daily life, which is exactly the move the whole book is built on.

雌 *ci*

The *Daodejing* passage in Part One presented a particular problem. I have used James Legge’s Victorian translation, which renders *ci* as “female feebleness” — a rendering Xuemo explicitly rejects, arguing that *ci* means softness, endurance, calmness and the capacity to yield, and has nothing to do with weakness. A cleaner modern translation would have removed the friction, but the friction is the point: Xuemo is arguing against exactly the reading that Legge’s English encodes, and leaving the seam visible lets an English reader watch him do it.

善知识 *shan zhishi*

For *shan zhishi*, the good friend or teacher who draws one toward what is beneficial, I have used the Pali *kalyāṇa-mittatā* where precision was needed and “virtuous teacher” or “good spir-

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itual friend" elsewhere. Its opposite, which recurs throughout, I have rendered as "harmful companion."

Regional material has been kept rather than neutralized. The *Hua'er* folk songs of the northwest, the *Xianxiao* narrative singing of Qinghai and Gansu, the Liangzhou sayings — "those who place themselves low become kings; water that flows low becomes the sea," or the custom of calling an elder's death a "white happy event" — are not decoration. Xuemo's entire claim is that a living culture shapes the souls of those who carry it, and the western Chinese culture he is arguing for has to be visible in the texture of the prose for that claim to land. Where a Chinese term is essential I have kept it and glossed it lightly; where a bracketed editor's note appears in the text, it was added for this edition.

Finally, the register. These chapters began as speech. They were delivered to living audiences, transcribed, and edited into prose. I have not tried to disguise that. The direct address, the rhetorical questions, the accumulating parallel clauses, the willingness to say the same thing three ways — these are the marks of a teacher working a room, and flattening them into standard expository English would have produced a more decorous book and a less truthful one.

How to read this

I would suggest not reading it straight through in a week. It was not made that way and it does not reward that. The five steps of Part Two are cumulative and are best taken one at a time, with a gap. Part Three can be opened anywhere and dipped in and out of.

A reader will not agree with all of it. I do not agree with all of it. There are places where Xuemo's confidence outruns his evidence, places where his diagnosis of modern life is broader than it needs to be, and places where a reader formed by a different tradition

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will simply see the world otherwise. He would not, I think, object. His repeated insistence is that nobody can supply your meaning for you, that a meaning received from another person can serve only as inspiration, and that the questions of why you are alive and what you are living for are yours to answer or to fail to answer.

What he offers instead of answers is a lamp. The image is his own, from *Desert Hunters*: within a black shroud, faint threads of light; a single lamp that can dispel a thousand years of darkness. He is unsparing about the darkness. He writes that above every person's head hangs a sword, that in the face of death everyone is equal, and that on the hunting plain of the soul you and I are both prey. But the darkness is not the conclusion. It is the condition under which choosing becomes serious.

That is the book. It has been reshaped for you, and something of its original wildness has gone in the reshaping; but the argument is intact, and the voice — insistent, plainspoken, occasionally exasperating, unmistakably alive — is entirely his.

Riccardo Moratto