

ON SOVEREIGNTY, CHOICE AND DESTINY

What is the happiness that we truly seek? This question was answered long ago, in the story of the knight and the witch from the age of King Arthur: what women want most is to be the masters of their own fate. [Editor's note: this is the story told both in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*]

This is not only what women desire, but what every human being wants. Yet for women especially, this goal often appears more difficult to achieve, because they carry so much of what culture and society have laden upon them. To master one's own destiny is, for a woman, a far steeper climb.

And so the counsel on happiness I offer, especially to women, is nothing like the success formulas or inspirational platitudes found everywhere on the market. Our happiness is bound to our own choices, and to our own growth and wisdom. Only by possessing wisdom and learning how to choose can we embrace true happiness.

One of my students was once the editor-in-chief of a magazine. She had a successful career, yet in the prime of her life she was diagnosed with a terminal illness. In the end, she chose to leave the secular world and take monastic vows, bidding farewell to her former life and to what she described as a nightmarish chapter of her past. Later, she devoted her life to practicing a different kind of goodness and beauty, creating a different kind of value for the world. All of this arose from her choice. Her choice determined the course of her actions and her life. Seen from another perspective, every one of us is in a sense a terminal patient; none of us can escape death. But some people live a life barely worthy of the name, while others live like the Sun. The meaning of life lies in moving away from darkness and aspiring toward light; in leaving ignorance behind and advancing toward wisdom; in moving beyond a merely animal existence and learning how to live as a truly human being.

In fact, many people today are not truly “human” in the fullest sense. They are driven by desire like animals, or else function as tools enslaved by certain ideas, systems, and rules. And most of them are not even aware of it. In many of my lectures, I have spoken about this phenomenon. A great number of people are not truly themselves. They are beings seduced and pulled along by this dazzling world, utterly unable to govern their own hearts and minds. Their minds do not belong to themselves. They belong to the external world, to the approval or disapproval of others, to passing fashions and popular trends.

After the publication of my novel *The Gray Wolves of Xixia*, many readers who encountered the experiences of the female protagonist Zixiao felt that they themselves were “Zixiao.” They recognized in her the same spiritual anxiety and inner hunger she faced, and they, too, longed to make a choice that would allow them to independently determine and take hold of their own destiny. Yet others found it difficult to understand why Zixiao chose

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to leave her husband Chang Hao and walk toward faith and freedom. In the novel, Chang Hao represents a type of man commonly found in secular life today — someone without ideals, who does not read, and who is only oriented toward money and material gain, lacking any higher pursuit. Such people can be described as “drifters.” At present, this kind of “drifter” group is not small, and their existence has become something of a widespread phenomenon of our times.

This type of drifter is, in truth, what might be called a harmful companion. Association and contact with such people pull one downward: greed, hatred, and ignorance all deepen in their presence. In the novel, Chang Hao indeed represents a type of man commonly encountered in real life: a man who revolves entirely around the worlds of officialdom and commerce, without dreams, without higher aspirations or longings, without understanding the meaning or purpose of life, drifting through existence in confusion. The fundamental reason the protagonist Zixiao leaves Chang Hao is that she refuses to become that kind of creature who merely muddles through the world. Zixiao carries within her the shadow of every person, the shadow of every woman. In this age, even a woman who is not controlled by a man will find it difficult to escape being controlled by society and by desire. And all forms of control are, at their core, the same thing. The kind of relentless pursuit Chang Hao subjects her to is everywhere and inescapable. Chang Hao is nothing more than a symbol of the world of officialdom and commerce. He “pursues” her under the guise of love. Some people may choose to remain entangled with such a life, enduring it passively, wasting their lives in stagnation and emptiness. But Zixiao is unwilling. We respect Zixiao’s choice, and we also wish well to all those who appear to live comfortably, yet passively accept their condition or are merely getting by. Different purposes in life lead to different choices, and to different values.

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Different value systems lead to different pursuits of life value. I respect Chang Hao, and I also respect Zixiao.

In the novel, Zixiao goes through an extraordinarily difficult process of choosing. Her decision to leave Chang Hao and move toward the “Black Singer,” — to turn away from the world of drifters and walk toward freedom and eternity — becomes the most important decision of her life. The greatest transformation brought to her by the Black Singer is that he helps her learn how to discern and choose. This becomes the most powerful form of salvation in her life. Through the experience of his own life, he shows her what is truly most beautiful and most worthy of cherishing in the world. That truly is a masterful form of performance art.

In my novel *Undying Diamond Heart*, the protagonist Khyungpo Naljor spends his life searching for the Niguma in his heart, his lifelong faith. Yet because of his fervor and his blindness, he falls into what might be called “the magic barrel” of belief, encounters a false “Niguma,” marries her, has children with her, and lives with her for twenty-two years. It is only when a family catastrophe strikes that he finally discovers his wife is not the true “Niguma” he has carried in his heart. And so, in a hidden realm, he reveals the truth to Xuemo across a thousand years of time: “Although my wife had the appearance of a celestial being, and resembled very closely the Niguma in my heart — before my son was cursed, I had always taken her to be Niguma. You must understand: the wife I held in my heart was in truth a figure I had fashioned according to the needs of my own soul.”

In your life, don’t you also keep encountering this kind of situation? Those girls who are prone to fantasy often project swindlers and petty people into the image of artists or spiritual practitioners in their minds. These deceivers neither work nor engage in productive labor, nor do they support themselves through their own efforts. Their survival depends entirely on the

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hard work of these girls. Those endearing and pitiable girls believe they are contributing to art and to faith — yet they have no idea that what they are actually sustaining with their youth, their lives, and their love is nothing but a lazy fraud. If they happen to encounter a violent and irrational person, or if they realize they have been deceived but are unable to free themselves, or if the discovery of the truth leads to depression and illness, then their entire life may be wasted. You watch helplessly as women full of longing throw themselves into the arms of swindlers who wave the banners of “faith” and “love,” and your heart is wrung as if by a knife — yet there is nothing to be done. You know that once their minds have been intoxicated by the “fine wine” brewed from “faith” and “love,” they will turn away even from their own parents. You could shout yourself hoarse and it would change nothing. By the time the truth is revealed, the rice is already cooked. Children are already born; life has already been transformed by hardship. They can only accept their fate and swallow the bitter consequences. Those who cannot resign themselves may choose divorce, casting the bitter fruit of their fate upon their innocent children.

The world is always filled with such regrets. And these regrets have also become one of the clearest illustrations of the Buddha’s teaching that “all *sāsaṃ dhammas* lead to suffering” (all contaminated things are sufferings), one of the four Dharma seals.

As I mentioned earlier, that student of mine was a genuinely kind person — yet because she chose a harmful companion, after years of living that life she first fell into depression, and then into a terminal illness. The moment her mother heard she had fallen ill, she said: “I always knew this would happen. Living with someone like that — it would be a wonder if you didn’t get sick.” From the mother’s perspective, an unhealthy lifestyle, persistent emotional distress, and constant suicidal thoughts had directly damaged her daughter’s health. And so, in one online exchange,

I answered a reader's question on this subject in these words: "When a person chooses to live alongside a vicious wolf, they must bear the pain of the wolf's bite. Those who choose harmful bonds will be wounded by them. The meaning of a spiritual guide is to help us approach virtuous teachers and stay away from harmful companions. A guide is only the one who prescribes the medicine; whether it is taken or not depends on the patient. Always remember: the choices you make now will determine the outcomes that come to you. Choose good, and good fruit will follow. Choose harm, and harm will surely come." Yet it was precisely through this ordeal that she elevated her life. She later became a cultural volunteer, engaged in many acts that benefited others, and earned widespread respect.

Sometimes, true "evil" is very difficult to transform, especially when such harmful conditions refuse repentance and self-reflection. In many cases, those who try to transform what is harmful may instead end up being slandered, deceived, or harmed themselves. Therefore, when it is not possible to change harmful influences, the appropriate response is to distance oneself from them. In Buddhism, this is described as "avoiding bad companions and drawing near to good spiritual friends." When dealing with disruptive monks, the Buddha is said to have adopted the method of "silent disregard," simply paying them no heed and keeping his distance. Zixiao also acts in this way. Harmful companions are extremely difficult to save, for changing the human heart is the most formidable undertaking in the world.

Each choice leads to a different destiny. We may not be able to control society, but we can determine our own choices. In that sense, each person's destiny is, at its core, shaped by the choices they make. Therefore, we should not place all blame on society. Whatever fortune or misfortune comes our way, whatever we gain or lose, whatever we succeed or fail at, all of it is intimately bound to the choices we ourselves make. For this reason, we must take

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hold of the innate right to choose, and learn to use it wisely. In this sense, the most important thing in life is choice itself. A correct choice benefits one for a lifetime; an incorrect choice can mislead and bring regret for a lifetime.

Choice and Destiny Revisited: Reflections through the Novel Desert Hunters

When discussing *Desert Hunters*, many readers like to compare it with my earlier novel *Desert Rites*. In *Desert Rites*, the inner worlds of the characters seem almost still, calm and undisturbed. There, I simply portrayed the most authentic and unadorned state of survival among farmers in western China. In *Desert Hunters*, I continued to focus on the lives of western farmers, but the question of “living” is no longer confined to mere physical existence. It extends to the life of the soul itself. Deliberately, I set certain characters in motion and placed them at the center of turmoil. When storms arise from the outside world, every heart is stirred by the wind. There is confusion, struggle, anxiety, and pain; but there is also hope, awakening, and, above all, a spirit of rupture and release. In the struggle over the grasslands, the nobility and baseness of human nature, the greatness and smallness of the soul, the dignity and triviality of life, are all laid bare for everyone to see.

The place called Zhudujing is a tiny world unto itself. Though it bears the outward appearance of the Chinese West, what it reflects is humanity as a whole. Everyone who enters Zhudujing carries a dream. The dream is a simple one: to escape poverty. Yet in the end, every dream is shattered. One after another, people are consumed by their own greed and ignorance, and they end in complete defeat. Why? Because the human heart is like a vast “hunting plain.” Though invisible, it is a place where the struggle between the divine and the bestial is constantly unfolding. Hu-

man beings are the prey of their own desires. As I wrote in the epigraph to *Desert Hunters*: “On the hunting plain of the soul, you and I are both prey.”

Yet not many people can truly understand these words. The reason is that so many have been numbed by the routines and distractions of worldly life that they fail to notice the struggle taking place within the soul. They do not realize that their suffering arises from the anguish generated by the clash between desire and the soul. For many, it is in this very process that the soul is quietly slain — yet they remain unaware, continuing to live inside the demonic vat of desire. In *Desert Hunters*, you can witness this struggle and conflict in all its ferocity: brutal, heartbreaking, and deeply moving. Yet, in the end, it is all a matter of individual choice. It is their choices that shape and forge their destiny. In this sense, one might say that choice itself is destiny.

Some people say that when reading my works, they are left with the impression that human suffering is overwhelming, that tragedy dominates, and that destiny feels unbearably heavy. Yes, it is heavy. I tell them: this is the truth of human fate. It has always been so, in every era, at every moment. Because above each person’s head hangs a sword of death, ready to fall at any time. In the face of death, everyone is equal. That is why my works are often enveloped in a dark shroud of mortality, giving readers a profoundly weighty feeling. Yet many readers also discover that behind this heaviness, there burns a quietly glowing lantern — a single light that can pierce a thousand years of darkness. I only hope it offers a form of illuminating light.

In the face of all heaviness, and of all the solitude embedded in destiny, every person needs a lamp. Once the lamp is lit, the ancient darkness disappears. Thus, in each of my works, within that vast black shroud, there are faint threads of light. This is humanity’s inquiry into the eternal question: how can one take autonomous control of one’s fate and transcend the spell of de-

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sire? From this question arise so many practitioners in search of truth. They all wish to find the sun behind the dark curtain — the innate sun of human wisdom — so that it may radiate with immense brilliance, illuminating the mind and transforming all heaviness into the light of dawn. This is my dream — perhaps also yours — and even more so, the dream of all humankind.

In the last century, Lu Xun once said: “The most painful thing in life is to wake up from a dream and find no way forward. Those who are still dreaming are fortunate; if there is no path to be found, the most important thing is not to wake them.” Lu Xun was right. To wake up and find no road ahead is indeed the greatest suffering. In *Desert Hunters*, you can see that “black lamb” (that figure called Heigaozi) who has awakened into a world with no way out — that was my former self. I too went through a dark period in which no path seemed available. Fortunately, after the tempering of the soul, I eventually emerged from the ignorance of the mind and achieved a form of transcendence. Thus, even knowing that “there is no path,” I still choose to “seek a path.” Without seeking, there would be no me as I am today. Without seeking, none of the works that followed would exist. Without that seeking, everything would lose its meaning. Therefore, I have always wanted to carve out, within a world where no path seems to exist, a path that belongs to me alone.

Today’s world resembles a vast, frantic stage, where everyone is performing their own dance of desire. True poverty is not material deprivation, but spiritual impoverishment — the absence of inner grounding and the homelessness of the soul. In this era, the loss of faith and the rupture of humanistic continuity have produced a new form of poverty. Many people are material aristocrats, yet spiritual paupers. On the inner “hunting plain,” they remain prey — pursued and driven in all directions by desire. The question of “how to live” has not been resolved; rather, it has given rise to an even deeper inquiry. Although many people be-

lieve that we only begin to think about spiritual and existential matters after our basic material needs have been met, this is actually something of a paradox. A spiritually impoverished mind tends to be narrow. Without the nourishment of a broad and enriching culture, a person may never be able to step outside their small circle of concerns or transcend the limitations of their immediate circumstances. In such a case, the possibility of truly changing your destiny becomes very slim.

Therefore, the key to changing your destiny lies in enriching your mind and strengthening your soul — shifting from being someone who passively seeks everything from the outside world to someone who possesses dignity, wisdom, inner autonomy, and the capacity to love. This is what true transformation of destiny looks like. It is also the way in which culture redeems the human spirit.

Everything originates from clarity of heart and mind.

In *Desert Hunters*, there is another fundamental inquiry: the way out of human destiny. I have my own understanding of what a road is, expressed through the reflections of one of the characters in the novel: “A road is something that, once one person has walked it, thousands upon thousands will continue to follow. What is walked by only one person cannot be called a road.” In truth, this is also my own thought. The cultural forums I organize, the creative writing workshops I open, and the academies I establish are all extensions of this reflection. I have realized my own dream, and I also hope that more people can have dreams of their own. For those who have dreams, I try my best to help them fulfill them. For those who have none — those whose hearts have no place to rest — I also try to help them learn how to dream. I know how important dreams are for a person. Humanity is great precisely because it has dreams. Those who truly set foot on the road of their dreams live with greater joy, greater happiness, greater

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peace, and greater clarity. And naturally, their fate will change along with it.

So where, then, does your dream lie?

Accepting impermanence and finding the meaning of living

A student of mine, who lost her husband two years ago, told me that she feels very sorry for her mother-in-law. The reason is that her mother-in-law has never been able to emerge from the shadow of losing her son and is living in great suffering. In just two years, she seems to have aged by ten years; her hair has turned white, her lumbar spine problems have worsened, and she can no longer walk far. My student very much wants to help her, but feels powerless. Why is that? Because her mother-in-law cannot find the meaning of living, and she cannot let go.

A person who cannot let go tends to take everything in an extremely literal way. She keeps hoping that her child has not died and is still by her side, and she cannot accept the impermanence of the world. But she does not understand that the world will not change simply because she refuses to accept it, and that nothing can ever return to how it was. When she immerses herself in happy memories, returning to reality creates a huge sense of contrast, which brings intense pain. She does not realize that what causes her suffering is not the event itself, but her unwillingness to accept it. It is this unwillingness that traps her in an unrealistic desire. Yet from another perspective, this also shows that she has no other expectations left in life; she cannot find a reason to live, yet she must continue living. As a result, she lives in repression, pain, and profound emptiness.

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My student was able to emerge from her suffering because she accepted impermanence and found the meaning of living. Over the past two years, she has continually worked toward that meaning, without clinging to the past or forcing the future. As a result, she lives with a sense of fulfillment and inner richness, and her spirit has found something to rely on. That reliance is on truth. As for whether she will ultimately realize that meaning, it is no longer important.

Everyone is the same in this regard. If one lives for material things, one's spiritual foundation will eventually collapse, because material things are impermanent and cannot last forever. This "material" includes objects, events, and even people themselves. From the day we are born, we are already moving toward death. No matter how much we gain or lose, nothing can change our final destination. So why not treat everything as scenery along the journey — without attachment, without discrimination — simply resting in a state of experiencing and feeling? Once you transcend all love and aversion, you will find that every landscape is beautiful. For when all things have passed away, what they leave behind is nothing but a gentle trace of warmth.

But first, you must ask yourself: Why have I come into this world? Why am I living? And then keep searching for the answer. When you find that answer, you will have a direction in life, as well as a framework for making choices. Then your life will not be wasted. It will not be lived in vain. Therefore, you must regard this as the foremost and most important question in your life.

Interestingly, some people are too lazy to seek the answer themselves, and instead come to ask me, wanting me to set a reason for living on their behalf. I am, of course, grateful for their trust in me, but I must tell them that this is not something that can be delegated to someone else, nor can anyone do it on their behalf. Because each person can only live according to their own

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meaning. Another person's meaning can only serve as a source of inspiration or motivation for someone else's journey forward.

You must understand that if you want to live happily and freely, you cannot live within the framework of others' opinions and judgments. You must cultivate a mind that truly belongs to yourself. In other words, you should strive to become the person you wish to be, without being overly concerned with how the world may view you — of course, unless what you seek to do would cause harm to the world, in which case that is a different matter entirely. What matters most in this life is to remain faithful to your own aspirations and longings. Your attitude toward this commitment often determines the direction of your actions and your drive for progress. In this sense, it also determines the height, quality, and value of your life.

If you choose to be petty, you will inevitably become petty. If you choose to be a person of integrity, you will inevitably become such a person. If you believe selfishness is good, you will naturally contribute little value to the world. If you aspire to figures like Confucius or Mencius, your character will continually be elevated, and you may ultimately come closer to them. It must be understood that what determines the trajectory of your life — and what determines your destiny — is not others, nor the world, but your aspirations and your attitude toward those aspirations. That is what gives you the reason to live.

That reason for living is what truly distinguishes human beings from animals.

On the surface, the difference between humans and animals does not seem very large. Both eat and sleep, sleep and eat; after eating, they work, and after working, they eat again, then sleep again. If a human lives merely for survival, they become a kind of "animal in human form." Both are like bubbles that appear and disappear without leaving anything behind — drifting through days of routine, numbness, and conformity, passively waiting for

death. When breathing finally stops, a life that has been flat and devoid of meaning is marked by an equally meaningless full stop. This is what we call a “creature that merely muddles through the world.”

The culture of China’s western regions stands against this way of living and instead pursues the meaning of life. It holds that every person is constantly moving toward death: the poor are no exception, nor are the rich; officials and ordinary people alike; those who ride donkeys and those who drive luxury cars all share the same fate. Therefore, money, fame, and many other such things do not ultimately carry real meaning. So how should we fill the space between birth and death? What constitutes genuine meaning? On this question, many people of the western regions have their own answer.

For example, during the Ming Dynasty, there was a scholar in the western regions who established a family tradition: to record, from his own perspective, the events unfolding in these regions. When he died, he passed the task to his son; when his son died, it fell to his grandson; the grandson passed it on to his own son in turn. Each generation carried on this work, and humanity gained a historical record unlike the official histories — a thousand-year chronicle of the western regions as seen through the eyes of their own people. To this day, their family tradition continues to be passed down. That was their reason for being alive.

I too have my own reason for living. At the age of twenty-five, I found the meaning of life. Then I spent twenty years of my life writing the first book of my life.

At first, I was still a child. A child’s arms are too frail to lift heavy things; one can only start with what is small. When I found that what I had lifted was too light, I put it down and picked up something heavier. Still too light, I would discard it again and move on to something even heavier. In this way, I trained for twenty years — lifting, discarding, lifting again. That is why *Desert*

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Rites, as readers see it, may appear to have been written in a single breath. But behind that “single breath” lies countless rehearsals and repetitions. During that process, I had no particular purpose. I was not eager to publish it, nor did I expect it to bring me any benefit. Writing itself was the purpose. I did not think about success or anything else — I simply wanted to complete the work. Because it was my reason for living. In practicing that reason, I grew day by day. And one day, I finally grew into a giant strong enough to lift a massive stone.

Many people of the western regions of China are like this. Life in the west is hard, and when survival comes into sharp conflict with the surrounding environment, a person must seek answers in the spiritual realm. For example: Why should I continue living? Everything changes and disappears — what can I rely on? What should I pursue? In answering these questions, many people of the western regions have chosen love.

The passionate, burning love expressed in northern Shaanxi folk songs is also one of the most important things in western Chinese culture. For example, the western folk tradition of *Hua'er* expresses, in a vivid and powerful way, the steadfastness and intensity of western people's love — an emotion so strong that they are even willing to sacrifice their lives for it.

My novel *White Tiger Pass* contains a large number of *Hua'er* folk songs. Many friends who have read the book have been deeply moved by the simple yet intense emotions they express, because they represent the most authentic form of love. These songs speak of love's actions and love's choices with a simplicity and sincerity that is utterly disarming — the spirit of devotion and sacrifice that shines through them is enough to shake a person to the core, to move them deeply, and to reveal the powerful faith in love that western women carry within them.

Love is enough to transform the most fragile woman into the strongest person in the world — so strong that she can protect

and stand guard over the one she loves. Love is enough to turn the smallest and weakest child into a giant, capable of shouldering a mountain countless times their own weight. For many people in the western regions of China, love is thus a tremendous life force. Ying'er, the female protagonist of *White Tiger Pass*, sings *Hua'er* and becomes the strongest woman in the world. Or rather, by singing *Hua'er*, she inherits the power of love contained within those songs. This too is one of the wonders of western Chinese culture.

Western Chinese culture is a living culture, one capable of touching and shaping the human heart. Those who inherit this culture have enriched it with love; and the western culture that carries love forward has in turn strengthened the souls of those who pass it on. And so the western regions have many people who live for love — I am one of them. The foundation of whatever I have achieved rests precisely on love and wisdom. Many readers have also found in *White Tiger Pass* a great symbolic resonance. They feel that the desert in the book is like life itself — and this is true. The *Desert Trilogy*, composed of *White Tiger Pass*, *Desert Hunters*, and *Desert Rites*, transcends the land of the western regions and the farmers of Shawan, rising to the level of the world and humanity, with a depth that reaches into the soul. They all carry the wisdom I have verified through the experiences of my own life, and they carry my deepest love for humanity and for the world. The same is true of the *Soul Trilogy*. As long as you bring sufficient sincerity to them, they will nourish your heart like a mother's milk and bring your soul to wholeness. One day, you will come to understand the meaning behind these words.