

# Literary Review of *Into the Desert*

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**Abstract:** The changing culture of the Desert in Western China is described in detail in Xuemo's works. One of his novels, *Into the Desert*, focuses on two female characters, Ying'er and Lanlan, who are bartered into marriage because their families are poor. They come to believe that their hardships in life are due to their poverty and can be alleviated by running away to Salt Lake, a place in the northwestern region, will improve their lives. During this trip, they encounter, overcome and survive many perils. When they reach their destination and struggle to reach their goals, they come to realize that they are still ordinary mortal women who can be abused without mercy by others. They finally admit that against their wills, they and many other women are powerless and must submit to their predestinated fates. The broader implication of this story is that women live at the mercy of men as the ultimate victims. *Into the Desert*, describes this suffering and, in so doing, stresses that it needs to be alleviated, especially among the rural women now being trampled on repeatedly, by reforming the way of life is passed down from generation to generation.

**Keywords:** Xuemo; Gobi Desert; Chinese Civilization; Romanticism; Chinese Desert Literature.

**Titlu:** „Analiză literară a romanului *Into the Desert* [În deșert]”

**Rezumat:** *Cultura în schimbare a deșertului din vestul Chinei este descrisă în detaliu în operele lui Xuemo. Unul dintre romanele sale, „În deșert”, se concentrează pe două personaje feminine, Ying'er și Lanlan, care sunt negociate pentru a se căsători deoarece familiile lor sunt sărace. Ele ajung să creadă că greutățile vieții lor se datorează sărăciei și pot fi ameliorate prin fuga la Lacul Sărat, un loc din regiunea de nord-vest, care le va îmbunătăți viața. În timpul acestei călătorii, ele întâlnesc, depășesc și supraviețuiesc multor pericole. Când ajung la destinație și se luptă pentru a-și atinge obiectivele, ele ajung să realizeze că sunt încă niște muritoare obișnuite, care pot fi abuzate fără milă de alții. În cele din urmă recunosc că, împotriva voinței lor, ele și multe alte femei sunt neputincioase și trebuie să se supună soartei lor predestinate. Implicația mai largă a acestei povești este că femeile trăiesc la mila bărbaților, fiind victimele supreme. Into the Desert (În deșert) descrie această suferință și, în acest fel, subliniază faptul că ea trebuie atenuată, în special în rândul femeilor din mediul rural care sunt acum călcate în picioare în mod repetat, prin reformarea modului de viață transmis din generație în generație.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Xuemo; deșertul Gobi; civilizația chineză; romantism; literatura chineză despre deșert.

Xuemo's novel is set in the Gobi Desert in western China where Xuemo himself grew up. One of the first authors to write about the lives of farmers in the dessert, he has already produced a considerable body of recognized works, including, *Desert Trilogy* 大漠三部曲 (2013), comprised of three novels, *Desert Rites* 大漠祭, *Desert Hunters* 獵原 and *White Tiger Pass* 白虎關 -- considered an iconic work of contemporary literature on western China. The changing culture of the Desert in Western Chinese is described in

detail in Xuemo's works. He not only describes the farmers' poor and harsh life and offers reflections on traditional agriculture and civilization, but also presents the crises and challenges people faced in the transition from traditional lifestyles to modern industrialization. In the process, ordinary people's farming, eating, marriage bartering, cheating, quarreling, coping with illness and feeling grief over death and over an empty life are revealed in detail as well.

*Into the Desert* was co-translated by well-known Sinology translators Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-Chun Lin. It is an excerpt from Xuemo's third novel of the *Desert Trilogy*, *White Tiger Pass*, which vividly depicts the life of farmers in the Gobi Desert. *Into the Desert* focuses on two female characters, Lanlan and Ying'er, who are unwilling to give in to the forces of the outside world and keep struggling against their fate. The rich, well-organized story explores the essential issues of women's lives, existence and dignity. In this regard, Xuemo's novel is similar to French Nobel Prize-winning writer Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio's novel *Désert* (1980), which depicts the leader of desert nomads in Africa organizing resistance to cruel colonial invasion. Through the life experience of Lala, a nomadic girl who escapes marriage to the metropole of Marseille, Le Clezio presents her helpless struggle against an unjust world. Thus, both novels serve to bring the attention of readers to the existential crisis of disadvantaged groups and cultures.

In addition, both novels also focus on the pursuit of dreams, and on finding a "way out" from the context of the times. Le Clezio brings readers not pessimism and despair, but unquenchable hope. In his story, under the idea that freedom has no limit, the tribe of the "Blue-faced People" continues to move forward until finally the survivors of the ordeal embark on the road that will take them back to their hometown. The female character, Lala, who was born and raised in the desert, initially full of fantasies about Marseille, the French metropolis, witnesses the hypocrisy and ugliness of modern civilization. She longs to return to her soft, singing, and sunny hometown. Her successful return signifies the inheritance of life and the rebirth of the immortal desert.

In contrast, the characters in *Into the Desert* are forced to participate in the industrialization of the countryside. Farmers encounter subversive challenges to traditional moral and ethical concepts. Such pressure on traditional ways of life is one major themes of the novel. The tragedies of the two women Ying'er and Lanlan tell readers that it is impossible to cope with the demands of contemporary life. Nevertheless, they still follow the traditional path. For example, Ying'er says to Lanlan : "...Who doesn't suffer in life? You take what they give you and try to hold on to your dignity." (p. 9) On the other hand, they stubbornly fight against their fates. For example, on another occasion, after anxiety regarding a snake-attack makes Ying'er cry, Lanlan says, "Don't cry. Tears won't buy you freedom...Come on, let's keep at it. We can't suffer the fright for nothing. Don't be afraid, they're small." (p.20) Yet, no matter how hard they fight, "hope" is a luxury and there is no escape from their fate.

Xuemo's works about the desert are comparable to Le Clezio's in terms of exploring themes such as reflections on urbanization, greed, and the existence of a sense of crisis. *Into the Desert's* portrayal of the two female characters Lanlan and Ying'er is even more moving. Their lives are always described around the difficult, closed and backward situation, sometimes thrilling, sometimes touching, and sometimes making readers extremely sad and indignant.

The plot reflects these themes: Ying'er and Lanlan are bartered into marriage because their families are poor. Ying'er marries to Lanlan's older brother, Hantou, who dies soon after the marriage; Lanlan was married to Ying'er's older brother Baifu and had to endure merciless whipping by her husband Baifu. It is stated that "Baifu beat her with a bullwhip like beating a donkey. Red and purple streaks of blood were all over her body."

“(He) sprinkled salt on the wounds, saying it was to prevent infection, because treating it would cost his family money.” Unable to bear the violence of Baifu, and learning that her daughter, Yindi, has died after being abandoned by her husband in the desert, Lanlan flees back to her natal home. Because this kind of bartered marriage is a transaction between families, the Bai family asks the widowed daughter Ying'er to return to her natal family and remarry a butcher to recoup the loss caused by her daughter-in-law Lanlan's escape. Lanlan and Ying'er decide to break free from their marriages and pursue their dreams. Lanlan tries to find spiritual comfort in her religious beliefs, while Ying'er fantasizes about getting emotional comfort from the affair she had with her beloved brother-in-law, Lingguan. Finally, both Lanlan and Ying'er realize that their dreams of spiritual comfort are only illusory and only economic independence can change their destinies. Therefore, they choose to run away together, and set off for Salt Lake, a place infused with a symbolic meaning of unyielding destiny. During this hazardous trip, they overcome and survive many perils but come to realize that they are still ordinary mortal women who can be pushed around without mercy by others. They have to admit that against their wills, they and many other women are powerless and must submit to their predestinated fates.

The story is full of romanticism, with nature as background. It uses exaggeration and metaphor to emphasize Lanlan and Ying'er pursuit of their dreams. The story is a typical romantic text. Xuemo uses an exaggerated style of writing to describe the vigorous and brutal vitality contained in the desolate and boundless yellow sand. In the desert, there are reeds, the rushing desert wind, wild animals including snakes and even more terrifying jackals. During Ying'er and Lanlan's journey to the Salt Lake, they are constantly stalked by packs of jackals. At night, a giant snake gets hold of Ying'er's pants while she is sleeping. Even worse, they lose the camel that was carrying their critical water supply leaving them in danger of fatal dehydration. However, their determination to survive and succeed is not stifled by the cruel but thrilling desert; on the contrary, the dangers made them stronger and more determined to pursue their dreams. The arduous and brave journey symbolizes Ying'er and Lanlan's longing for survival and rebirth. They have transcended the experiences and limitations of ordinary peasants. Subjects with this temperament are characteristic of romantic literature.

Xuemo also uses metaphors with ingenuity. He uses the image of the Salt Lake and the flower to represent the things women desire in the depths of their hearts. Salt Lake is a symbol of vitality in the vast expanse of desert region in Western China and is closely linked to survival in such an environment. Before industrialization camel-equipped salt teams would go to the salt lakes to collect salt in the spring to trade for other necessities in the fall. In order to make themselves economically independent, Ying'er and Lanlan make a long, hard trek with a similar hope to earn money by collecting the white, sandy crystals of salt. As they move on, they see the towering, salt-encrusted mountains in the distance. “The sun shining down on a brilliant white, like a crystal palace.” (p. 180) Doesn't the pure and dazzling white symbolize the holy life crystals that Lanlan and Ying'er desire? For every soul that approaches it, this Salt Lake symbolizes peace and purity far away from the hustle and bustle of ordinary life. At the sight, even their “camel cried out spiritedly.” (p. 180)

In the story, the faiths of Ying'er and Lanlan are also full of symbolic meaning. Ying'er loves her brother-in-law, Lingguan, deeply. But he leaves her and goes to the city. She can only sing the folk songs of the “flower tune” to express her longing for him:

*“A wolf bays three times in the ravine. A tiger runs out of the forest.  
I call your name three times. My heart nearly leaps from my chest.”*

*At Jiayu Pass, thunderclaps. By the yellow River, the rain falls.  
I cry so much my eyes are swollen. When I see a stranger, I think it is you.”  
(p.143)*

*“A white peony falls into the water gray. Fish it out quickly or it will float away.  
Make sure to enjoy life in this world. Hurry up, before you grow old one day.*

*The little chicks are chirping away. Fighting over kernels of rice in a tray,  
Do not be fooled by my silence amount others. I think of you no matter what  
they say.*

*Reputation is nothing but an empty word. It all depends on how you wish.  
Would you come to my little room? Will talk to our hearts' content, free as fish.”  
(p. 25)*

The flower-imagery conveys Ying'er faith in love. It is this faith that has rekindled her hope of life when she was in despair; it is this faith that gives her the courage to fight against the jackals when faced with the threat of death. It also this faith that allows her not be tempted by money and be able to reject the marriage proposal of a wealthy businessman. However, she also believes that her love for Linguan is unethical, and socially unacceptable. Ultimately, Ying'er, who once wept and sang of flowers ends her flower-like life. Lanlan, on the other hand, has pinned her faith on religion. She hopes the power of religion will grant her peace of mind as she continues to walk on the road of life. When she finally abandons all distractions and decides to practice her religion, her practical life in the real world does not leave her any chance to breathe fresh air. In the end, her wishes come to nothing, and she still has to return to the world and continues to endure a life that will eventually drag her down.

The two young women have both experienced rough and unhappy marriages. The rose-like faces they once had are short-lived and last only briefly, wilting like a flower. In the vast and boundless desert, they drag their dying bodies like walking corpses searching for their dreams in bright sunlight. Seeking and searching, they can't imagine where the desert ends. It seems that their destination, the Salt Lake, is remote and unattainable. What's even more frightening is that they believe that “women are born to suffer” (p.22) and “everyone thinks this is women's fate” . All this means that there is something more terrifying than poverty in women's lives, and that is the dignity of women's existence being completely ignored. Their youth was corroded and destroyed by living in a difficult environment, staying in a marriage without love and respect at immense psychic cost.

Le Clezio's Nobel-Prize winning novel, *Désert*, describes how the Blue-faced People, a nomadic tribe in the Sahara Desert of Africa, migrate from south to north in search of an ideal homeland a century ago. Both their men and women are massacred by Christian soldiers, and they suffer exhaustion, thirst and hunger on their way through the Western Sahara, but they do not stop and never lose hope. They believe that “under the sky of the plateau, there are still stars shining.” Their desire for, and belief in, freedom as a source of happiness, let them climb mountains without stopping, and keep walking to “where the sun rises.” Lala, the heroine, in the story is a descendant of a Blue-faced man who left her Moroccan hometown alone to find happiness in a big French city. Her disappointment and then return to her hometown and the story of her return vividly

reproduces the living conditions of the nomadic African people and their pursuit of freedom.

Xuemo's novel, *Into the Desert*, describes a similar trek but into a different desert by a different people in a different era, the twenty first century, and the results are also different. The people living there "cannot see their way out" to freedom and happiness. Lanlan is tortured by her husband in various ways and his behavior was no different from that of "man-eating" jackals. Such violent crimes are still frequent in these remote areas. In January 2023, a brutal video came to light: A householder was found dressing and feeding the children, while his wife was chained around the neck and tied to the dilapidated shake next to the main house. It was stated that she has been subjected to this treatment for 20 years and she has given birth to 8 children during that time. The local temperature was reported close to zero degrees Celsius. Her clothes were shabby, her teeth were missing and her food was terrible. The official account of this case has changed several times, but it is generally believed that she was kidnapped and abused from other places to carry on the family line. In June of this year, a beating occurred at a barbecue restaurant in Tangshan. Surveillance footage shows that four women were punched and kicked, and beaten with chairs and wine bottles by a group of vicious underworld figures. Such incidents are not uncommon annual occurrences. It seems that social dysfunction continues to ferment in remote areas, and social norms continue to regress.

The China that many foreigners understand is to a large extent the China that is widely publicized in popular media: China with socialist characteristics, China with the "Chinese Dream", China with excellent culture, China with high economic growth and development, China with cutting-edge technology, and China with advanced military weapons. However, in reality, there are several Chinas. China with highly developed Eastern coastal areas, high living standards and beautiful natural scenery but also a China with poverty-stricken mountainous areas. Although China's economy has advanced by leaps and bounds since the implementation of the reform and opening up policies, there are still a series of problems that need to be solved urgently, such as poor education, the low quality of medical care, and so on. In the barren northwestern region, a historical center of underdevelopment, farmers are at the bottom of society and women live at the mercy of men as the ultimate victims.

Xuemo's touching novel *Into the Desert*, describes this suffering and, in so doing, stresses that it needs to be alleviated, especially among the rural women now being trampled on repeatedly, by reforming the way of life currently from generation to generation. This subject is one that may expand readers awareness of other Chinas that are urgently crying out for long-awaited attention.

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**BIONOTE:**

Before joining the faculty at Northwestern University, **Dr. Hsiu Ling ROBERTSON** taught at Tunghai University in Taiwan. She was also a visiting scholar at Department of East Asian Languages and Civilization at Harvard University in the academic year 1999-2000. She retired from Northwestern University in 2020.

She has published two books: *Women's Self-recognition in Modern Chinese Literature*. Taipei: Li Ren Books, 2004 (in Chinese); *Wings of Life: The Road Less Traveled by Nine Brave Women*. Taipei: Nv Shudian (Women's Publisher), 2003 (in Chinese).

She directed a documentary film, "The Lives of Taiwanese Foreign Brides" which was accepted at two International Film Festivals: Athens International Film Festival, Ohio and Sheffield Doc/Fest, at Sheffield, UK.