

Translator's Introduction

Curses of the Kingdom of Xixia presents a rich tapestry of the history, religion, and customs of a region of present-day northwestern China (including the provinces of Gansu, Ningxia, eastern Qinghai, northern Shaanxi, northeastern Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and southernmost Outer Mongolia) that once fostered a great Sino-Tibetan kingdom. During its heyday, the Xixia kingdom (pronounced *see-sia*; 1038–1227) rivaled the Song dynasty (960–1279) of China, and even invented its own graphic script. It boasted a cavalry so formidable that the Chinese paid tribute to Xixia to maintain peace. The Mongols, who ultimately conquered Xixia, called it the Tangut Empire. So complete was the Mongols' annihilation of the Xixia kingdom that its history and culture were practically lost to the world, until rediscovery by twentieth-century archaeologists.

The former Xixia kingdom and its people were absorbed into the Mongol Empire in 1227 and subsequently into the Mongol-ruled China of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). Xixia remained a part of China thereafter, through the subsequent Ming (1368–1644), Qing (1644–1911), the Republic of China (1911–1949), and the People's Republic of China (1949–present). Because Han Chinese (the main ethnic group of China) have entered the area since its conquest by the Mongols, it is now a region of mixed ethnicities, religions, and cultures—although the original Tanguts practiced a form of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism.

Xue Mo, the award-winning author of *Curses of the Kingdom of Xixia*, is renowned for his deep knowledge of the history, cultures, lore, and topography of this region. He is also an influential writer about Tantric Buddhism and spirituality and has a large following as a spiritual leader. Having spent ten years “shut-in” (voluntary confinement with a rigorous regime of meditation), the spiritual enlightenment he had attained

purportedly enabled him to enter and engage with different realms of reality. Indeed, both his fantastic and mimetic realms are depicted in such graphic minutiae that it is as if he actually visited these places. He claimed to have seen the clownish tutelary god (many tutelary gods are clownish in traditional Chinese operas and rituals), a main narrator in the novel, straddling two mountain peaks with people disliked by the god passing through the valley under his crotch. Apparently, he and some local peasants are able to see the local deity, although most people can't.

Curses of the Kingdom of Xixia uses the discovery of “lost” manuscripts as a framing technique for presenting historical events and tales of the avatars of a local Tantric Buddhist goddess (Diamond Maiden Dakini; Vajrayogini; Snow Feather), a tutelary deity (Ajia), and a monk (Jasper), as well as people related to them, through different time and realms. Titled *Nightmares*; *Crazy Ramblings of Ajia*; *Bodily Incarnations and Cause and Effects of the Dakini* (translated as *Tale of the Goddess*); *Family Instructions of Diamond Clan*; *True Records of the Curses*; and *Historical Mirror of Forgotten Events*, the supposedly rediscovered manuscripts present seemingly unconnected stories. However, the same characters reappear in diverse disguises—not only in different historical periods but also in various spaces and dimensions. Snow Feather's mother, for example, appears in the guises of a female captive of a battle, a girl forced to bind her feet, and a woman forced into prostitution in a modern hotel of the region. Condemned despite the injustices forced upon her, her representations attest to women's plight throughout history as victims of their society and its prejudices.

The historical events described in *Curses of the Kingdom of Xixia* reflect internal battles, the Mongol invasion, clan strife over water, starvation and cannibalism during the Great Leap Forward, and inhumane persecutions during the Cultural Revolution. The variety of locations covered in *Curses* include cities, villages, wilderness, mountain forests, and caves. The dimensions include worlds of the mundane, the ethereal, and dreams. Magical realism and mimesis coexist. Reality merges with illusion, the mundane with the supernatural; good and evil are shown to be two sides of the same coin.

Taking the readers through different historical periods and geographical and cultural spaces, Xue Mo reveals truths in *Curses* by blurring the distinction between good and evil, beauty and hideousness, reality and fiction, permanence and impermanence. One wonders whether the Barbarian Hag is a demonic cannibal, or might she be a Bodhisattva?

Is she real or illusory (apparently, only Jasper is able to see her)? Hers is also the irony and tragedy of someone who becomes so addicted and inured to killing that she ends up slaying her own beloved son. Xue Mo also demonstrates the fleetingness of power by interjecting the “present” with future events, through juxtaposing the supreme arrogance of Braggart and the state priest with their eventual abject downfall.

The novel is also rife with religious lore and practices related to Tantric/Esoteric Buddhism, and local culture and customs. Xue Mo presents the tales behind iconographies in Tanka paintings of the goddess, such as the bull missing a leg and bears; and a portrayal of couple-cultivating (a Tibetan Buddhist cultivation through sexual union). Material culture of the region includes the crafting of ritual implements using human skin and skulls. Unusual Xixia and surviving customs include “riding the wooden donkey” (an excruciating punishment aimed at women); right of the state priest to a bride’s first-night (*jus primae noctis*); celebrating double-suicide; believe in “walking water”; fear of the power of menstrual blood; and “Wearing Heaven’s Headdress.”

While the novel embraces broadmindedness in varied religious beliefs and moral concepts, it is critical of many an accepted historical precept such as Chinese glorification of patriotism and loyalty, and Communist regime atrocities such as widespread starvation during the Great Leap Forward and struggle sessions of the Cultural Revolution. (Notably, although earlier historic conflicts are clearly referenced in the novel, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution of contemporary China are not identified by name but will be obvious to readers familiar with the tragedies and atrocities of those two campaigns.) *Curses* also inverts the oft-touted Communist views about the invariable evil of the traditional landed gentry, the goodness of the poor, and the superior character of government-recognized leaders and officials: all through satirizing the hypocrisy and cruelty of local officials such as Braggart (a bandit-turned village leader under Communism) and city government officials.

I first met Xue Mo in 2014 and was fascinated by the depth of his novel *Curses of the Kingdom of Xixia*. So I decided to translate it. Because this complex novel embraces history, literature, religion (Tantric Buddhist lore, local customs and beliefs), and is infused with local colloquial expressions and religious practices—it was a daunting translation project. During the summer of 2015, I went to Dongguan, Guangdong (where Xue Mo resided at the time), to discuss and clarify with him many of the novel’s Tantric Buddhist concepts and colloquial terms. In 2017, I

visited Liangzhou (present-day Wuwei), Gansu, where Xue Mo's son and spiritual followers took me to some of the sites mentioned in the novel. A few photos from that trip grace this book. I hope this translation of *Curses of the Kingdom of Xixia* will be as fascinating and inspiring for its readers as it has been for me.