



Wild Fox Ridge

Xue Mo

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Fragments from history combine to form an epic collective story in the ghostly novel Wild Fox Ridge.

In Xue Mo's labyrinthine supernatural novel *Wild Fox Ridge*, a man searches for a Silk Road legend, gathering stories as he goes.

Two Mongolian and Chinese camel caravans vanished in Wild Fox Ridge, a desert in China, during the Qin dynasty. A hundred years later, Xue Mo heads to the same ridge to summon the caravans' ghosts and to preserve their reports concerning what happened. Thus begins an unusual, nested story about the thin boundaries between the living and the dead and between the past and the present.

Moody depictions of sand dunes and oceanic desert sounds combine with those of shapeshifting foxes, resulting in otherworldliness. Xue Mo's interviews with the ghosts, which he dubs "Sessions," reveal their humanity. They are outlaws, political leaders, and camel drivers; two camels, Yellow Demon and Brown Lion, also contribute. Wooden Fish Girl, a child bride, faces poverty and the violent loss of her childhood home; later, she seeks to repay her ancestral debts and resolves her grievances through love.

Together, the ghosts reveal facets of ancient China's dense history and culture, covering Buddhism, village life, folkloric songs, and poetry fragments. Mass murder and camel mating habits are also among the topics they discuss. A story about a camel's rape is belabored, though, and the ghosts' family backgrounds lead to tedious digressions.

Meanwhile, a dynastic family's white camel herd—part of the original caravans—symbolizes the caravans' enduring mystique for Xue Mo. Xue Mo's own presence is sparse; he is a mere conduit. As he gathers the ghosts' stories, there are hints at what it means to be a writer—combing through history, taking detours, exploring circling points of view, and traversing time to tell a story. His practical activities in the desert, as when he prepares meals and lights a fire for warmth, are reminders of his vulnerability amid the dead.

Because the steady back-and-forth among the ghosts is established early on, a clear focus on the collective emerges: No single eyewitness account is complete without the others. The kaleidoscopic, overlapping nature of their stories is integral to how the story unfolds. But the sheer breadth of voices almost overwhelms the tale, with balance approached thanks to the earthiness of their petty rivalries and passions. Indeed, the pace slackens as the ghosts rake over the same handful of topics, interrupting each other and obscuring distinctive elements in the process.

In the idiosyncratic historical novel *Wild Fox Ridge*, ghosts from a camel caravan detail their nomadic lives.

KAREN RIGBY (February 12, 2025)

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