

EVERYTHING SHE FAILS TO ACHIEVE

那些少女沒有抵達

Searching for answers after a student suicide, a lead teacher at an elite girls school delves into the dark shadows cast by a culture of overachievement, reawakening the painful wounds that lie buried in her past.

Wu I-kuang never thought she'd live past age seventeen, much less become a teacher at a respected high school with one hundred years of tradition behind it. But even more unimaginable to Wu: one day after classes let out, one of her students leaps from the top floor of a campus building. By the time Wu arrives on the scene the body had been removed, but the crowd of parents that have gathered, the pool of blood on the ground, and the distant wail of the ambulance siren are enough to tell her that an invisible but devastating trial by public opinion is already underway.

After the suicide, a pall of anxiety settles over the elite girls' school. The students, normally quick with an answer, struggle to come to terms with the new questions posed by their classmate's death: what had gone wrong? Had her grades been falling? Was she psychologically OK? What had made a seventeen-year-old decide her life was no longer worth living? Students and faculty alike are in desperate need of answers, whether to clear up their personal doubts and confusion, to deal with the media attention, or possibly to absolve themselves of responsibility.

As a lead teacher, Wu is also trying to make sense of the girl's death. She needs a rational, firm, and comforting explanation she can present to her students, their parents, the public, and, also, to herself. Glimmers of an answer appear in the lives of her young students, but again and again, the threads lead her into the darker corners of her own life: a marriage that exists only for appearance's sake, a lifetime of appeasing a controlling mother, and a youth in which she had also



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considered ending it all.

A master at depicting parent-child relationships, with this novel author Wu Xiaole turns her penetrating gaze to an elite high school, conjuring teacher-student interactions, student social dynamics, and the dilemmas of modern education within an interwoven narrative that spans past and present. Through the eyes of her female protagonist, she painstakingly dissects a suffocating mother-daughter relationship and the costs imposed by society's narrow standards of success. Readers will find much that resonates with their own experiences in this story of one woman's struggle to liberate herself from the shackles of conventional values and assert her right to take charge of her own life.

Wu Xiaole 吳曉樂

Wu Xiaole exploded onto the literary scene with her first novel, *On Children*, which was adapted into a TV series in 2018. Her numerous works of fiction include *The Privileged*, which has already sold rights in numerous language markets including English and French. She loves parrots and tends to look closely at things others take for granted.

EVERYTHING SHE FAILS TO ACHIEVE

By Wu Xiao-Le

Translated by Shanna Tan

1

Back when Wu I-kuang was taking classes for the Teacher Education Program, Professor Wang had often reminded the class: between a teacher and their students there will always be a significant gap in age and life experiences, but that's no excuse for the teacher to wield absolute power. Students may be younger, but their understanding of the world isn't lesser. A teacher's role is not only to impart knowledge, but also to create a nurturing environment for students to explore their potential. And as the common saying goes – *it takes a hundred years to mould a person*. What's important is *time*. Take the Taiwan tree, or what the Rukai indigenous people call "The Tree That Bumps into the Moon". Its seed is tinier than a fingernail clipping, but a fully grown Taiwan towers at seventy meters tall. To be a good teacher, imagination is essential. As you stand behind the lectern and look down at the sea of fresh faces, remember that they are the possibilities of the future. Perhaps they'll go on to achieve the things you couldn't.

Now a teacher, I-kuang would still sometimes think back to Prof Wang's words. What was it that her students would achieve, and she couldn't? Lin, who'd gotten her teaching license one year ahead of I-kuang, found her answer. Over the phone, Lin sounded like she was about to cry tears of happiness as she gave a blow-by-blow account of how she'd kept her eyes glued to the TV screen watching her student, how her eyes had roamed to the beaded sweat on her forehead, how she'd followed the movements of every swing as the girl tried to hit the ball to where her opponent would struggle to hit it back. The girl often had to take time off classes to train. Whenever she handed over the permission form, Lin would stare at her wrist guard and the bulging veins on her forearm. She never quite knew what to say to the girl. Even something as basic as asking about her recent competition felt like an intrusion of sorts when she barely knew anything about tennis. In the end, she'd just stamp on the form and say, "*Jiayou!* Do your best!" and the girl would reply, "Thank you, Teacher." She was always respectful even as she did very poorly in her subject – Mandarin. And this time, at the Olympics, she clinched a silver medal. Over the phone, Lin started sobbing. Prof Wang was right, she said. Even in her next life, or her next next life, she'd never be able to make it to the Olympics. But now she could say a student she'd taught won a silver. She was so proud.

I-kuang listened quietly, murmuring in agreement when she was supposed to. A while later, Lin finally remembered that she had a couple more friends to call and hurriedly ended the

call. I-kuang got up and headed to the kitchen to wash the dishes. Lunch was spaghetti cooked by Wei-che. Or rather, he simply boiled the pasta, drained it, drizzled in some olive oil, and mixed in the pesto sauce. They'd tried many different brands before settling on this one which they both enjoyed. He'd also boiled some frozen squid sent by her mother. When he noticed that I-kuang was partial to it, he set aside two for himself before pushing the rest to her. I-kuang didn't protest, nor did she say, Aw that's sweet but we should share. They weren't in that kind of relationship. Instead, she simply said thank you and allowed herself to relish every bite.

Later that day, I-kuang followed behind Wei-che to visit her parents. As usual, the dishes her mother had prepared were difficult to stomach. Some years back, her mother switched to a strict low-salt, low-oil diet. The way she cooked vegetables made them taste like dried leaves, and her steamed fish was like chewing plain water. However, Wei-che seemed to be like his usual self, enjoying the meal as though the ingredients were meant to be cooked this way. He was now breezily answering his mother-in-law's incessant questions. I-kuang turned to watch her father. Having just returned from a three-day two-night mountaineering trip, a hobby he'd picked up in recent years, his eyelids were heavy, and he ate slowly. Suddenly, he turned to Wei-che. "What do you think of electric cars? The future of mankind? You reckon it's going to take over the petrol car?" Father liked chatting with Wei-che, especially on topics that people usually associate with fathers and sons – cars, watches, investments. Watching their interactions, I-kuang wondered if that was because her father had wanted a son. I-kuang was the only child. "Why didn't you give me a sibling?" she'd asked Mother. "Having you is enough." Only years later did I-kuang realize that there were two interpretations. One spoke of satisfaction, the other, tolerance. She'd never asked her mother which one she meant. Both weren't great anyway.

I-kuang's gaze landed on the wall clock. She amused herself by playing "Count to Sixty". Once the second hand hit twelve, she'd look down and start counting in silence – *one, two, three* – all the way to sixty and she'd look up again. Damn, she was two seconds too fast. I-kuang kept going for a few rounds until she heard her name. Mother was looking at her rather sharply. "You're not listening."

I-kuang cleared her throat. "What were you saying?"

Wei-che replied. "Your mother was asking if we've been trying."

Oh. That. I-kuang raised her eyebrows, but her gaze remained fixed on the table. Mother was asking about children. She nodded. "Yes, we are."

Mother wouldn't have accepted any other answer.

Mother continued watching her with a piercing gaze, as though if she looked long enough, she'd be able to read something from her expression. A moment later, she broke the silence. "It's getting late. You should head back soon." Wei-che quickly gulped down the remaining cold soup and thanked her for the delicious meal. I-kuang kept quiet. Mother should feel satisfied enough with the evening. On the way home, I-kuang stared out the window from the front passenger seat. When they'd left her parents' place, it was drizzling, but now it'd escalated to a downpour. She watched the big droplets hitting against the window. Wei-che sighed. "I can barely see what's ahead." Even when he was grumbling, he still sounded so polite, so kind.

Hsieh Wei-che was the man Mother had chosen for her. In marriage, look for a mild-tempered man, she'd told her. So that even when you two are quarreling, he'll give in to you. She was right. Wei-che always gave in to her, but Mother probably didn't imagine that one day, he'd meet someone whom he didn't have to give in to, and he'd choose that woman, not I-kuang.

I-kuang leant to the side and pressed her cheeks against the cold glass window. Stop thinking about it, she chided herself. Not like anything was going to change. She forced her thoughts to something else, landing on the conversation with Lin a few hours ago.

She must admit that Lin had seeded something in her mind. Would she also see the day where she'd spill hot tears of joy and choke up as she recounted her students' achievements? It was hard to imagine it. She was never good at looking forward to something. Instead, what she'd learned to do best was to extinguish her hopes. That was how it'd always been. Hope was like a cunning wolf. At first, it was small, cute, innocent like a puppy. You couldn't help but cuddle it, feel its warmth, watch its rising and falling chest. You were convinced that both of you would be the best of friends, always. But as time passed, you gave in to the temptation to feed it meat, to satisfy it, and like all wolves, it grew up learning the most obvious fact in life – that those with power, dominate. With each passing night, the wolf grew taller, stronger, its teeth and claws sharpening in its sleep. And one day, while playing together, you ended up bathed in blood. Some people never gave up, believing that hope could be tamed and bent to their command. I-kuang wasn't that type. She simply let go, allowing the wolf to walk away. Even if it didn't have bad intentions, she was sure it'd eventually sniff out her innate weakness and attack.

As for Mother, she was the former. She'd tamed her wolf.

2

It was a Friday afternoon. Sunlight streamed in through the windows, illuminating the tiny dust particles dancing in the air. From the ceiling hung cool white lights. The young author standing on the podium wore a loose-fitting dress, looking even younger than her photos online. As she greeted everyone, she said that it wasn't her first time giving a talk to a room of teachers, but somehow, she was extra nervous today. I-kuang's gaze landed on the author's thin-rimmed glasses in rose gold, and observed the way she maintained her smile despite her nerves. *She must've known rose gold would look good against her pale skin. For most people, it would only draw out the dark undertones of their complexion.*

I-kuang loved rose gold. Before getting married, she'd discussed with Wei-che about not getting a diamond ring because there was so much sorrow in the precious stone's history. But both their mothers were adamantly against it. "Don't you dare try anything funny," Mother frowned. *Fine.* In the end, I-kuang chose a ring with a tiny diamond that was barely visible. Wei-che's mother, Fang, put her hand over I-kuang's and squeezed. "Such beautiful hands you have. A diamond ring would look lovely on you. You sure you don't want a bigger one?" Her voice was gentle. "This will do," I-kuang said. "I'm a teacher. We can't wear flashy accessories." Mother kept

quiet. Instead, she took a step back, crossing her arms as she surveyed the interior of the jewelry shop. Fang had chosen the shop. Mother had her own preferences, but she didn't interfere because according to her, it was important to observe how the groom's side handled the wedding. Her mother-in-law did better than I-kuang had expected. She was very hands-on, making sure everything was done with utmost decorum, and frequently checked in with their family on their opinions. "Everything else about my son is great, but he isn't the most careful person. So it falls on me to make sure everything is taken care of." Outside the shop, Wei-che kept his credit card. He had a terrible poker face, and right now, he looked extremely relieved to cross out another item on the to-do list. Fang was smiling, but her eyes hid a shadow of worry. As for Mother, she was walking ahead of everyone else, so I-kuang couldn't see her expression. She hurried behind her and a few minutes later, they bade Wei-che and his mother goodbye at the carpark.

I-kuang hadn't even fastened her seatbelt when her mother's cold voice rang out next to her. "Rose gold doesn't suit you. We have pale skin with a bluish undertone. That's not going to go well with gold. And that diamond you picked! It looks so stingy. Not as if that family can't afford it, why help them save money?"

"It's not about money," said I-kuang. "I like that one."

Mother said no more but her knuckles were white as she gripped the steering wheel.

Sometime later, I-kuang returned alone to the shop and asked to see the rose-gold band again. The salesgirl with her hair neatly combed back into a bun was the same one who'd helped them yesterday. At the sight of I-kuang, she smiled. "Ms Wu. I had a hunch you would be back." I-kuang slipped on the ring and both of them peered closer. Mother was right. It was a nice ring, but not suitable for her.

She took it off and told the staff, "I'll take this. Payment by card, please."

On the night of the wedding banquet, I-kuang was all smiles as she held the plate of wedding sweets and sent off the guests with Wei-che by her side. Wei-che's father had had a few drinks too many. He came over, supported by his wife, and thumped his son on the shoulder. "Treat your wife well." He burped. I-kuang could smell his rotting breath. Wei-che's maternal uncle hurried over to prop up his brother-in-law on the other side, telling Wei-che not to worry. He hadn't touched the alcohol, so he would get his parents back home safely. Wei-che bowed in thanks. Meanwhile, I-kuang scanned the room for Mother and found her speaking with a lady who was affectionately patting her hands. While I-kuang couldn't make out what they were saying, Mother was beaming, her eyes arched into crescents. Luckily, Mother hadn't caught sight of that scene just now. Somehow, I-kuang felt the responsibility to protect her husband and his family from her mother's judgement. She had grown up under that piercing gaze. She knew how that felt.

The plate got lighter as people took the sweets, but her calves were getting heavy and achy. Hidden by the poufy skirt, I-kuang shuffled her feet, trying to redistribute the weight on her legs. Mother was walking over with Father. His eyes glistened with tears as he glanced at his daughter, and then at Wei-che. "The two of you are family from now on. You'll have to support

each other, okay?" I-kuang kept quiet, letting the moment pass before nodding her head slightly. Wei-che seemed to have detected the whiff of tension in the air. His smile was slightly strained as he nodded. "We will, Father."

Mother was watching I-kuang. This was one of her talents – to demarcate "territory" by her gaze. No matter how obtuse Wei-che was, he must've picked up the vibes that when it comes to some things, he'd always remain an outsider. A trail of goosebumps popped along her neck. The air-conditioning in the hotel was too cold. She resisted the urge to press them back down into her skin. Until Mother made her next move, it was best to lay low.

Mother smiled, looking somewhat sincere for once. "Go back and rest. Both of you must be tired."

Indeed, they were. An hour later, I-kuang and Wei-che finally stepped into their new home that still smelt of fresh paint. He plonked himself heavily on the sofa, a hand resting against his forehead, while she went into the master bedroom and slowly sat down in front of the mahogany vanity table Mother had gifted them. Looking into the mirror, she removed her fake lashes and her pearl earrings. From her bag, she fished out a velvet case. Inside lay the rose-gold band that didn't get Mother's approval. She pulled open the drawer and pushed the box into the deepest corner, like a small creature hiding their precious treasure, or humans burying something....

Feeling a sharp jab in her ribs, I-kuang stirred from her reverie, returning to the seminar room once more. Shu-fan had elbowed her, signaling with her eyes for I-kuang to look at the podium. The author was looking at her eagerly before realizing that I-kuang hadn't been paying attention. Embarrassed, she scratched her cheek with a finger and said, "Let me explain it again." I-kuang was both grateful and guilty. It was rare for her to allow her private life to intrude in her work. **It was all that woman's fault.** Pai-he. That woman's appearance had turned her life upside down. On the surface, she seemed indifferent, but deep down, she could feel herself crumbling.

I-kuang's anxious gaze searched for Teacher Hsieh. The veteran teacher was sitting in the corner, her face hard as she gave a cold smirk. I-kuang's slip-up hadn't escaped her eyes. Before the event, when they passed by each other in the corridor, I-kuang had greeted her with a smile, saying that she was about to receive the author at the main gate. Teacher Hsieh had given her a once-over, her lips slightly curled when she said she'd also be attending the seminar. Before I-kuang could say anything, Teacher Hsieh interrupted her. "I'll be retiring soon, so it makes no difference to me. You all are the ones who'll suffer, not me." Teacher Hsieh never bothered to hide where she stood when it came to the new curriculum. She was strongly against it, calling it the sad child of naivety and rashness. According to her, teachers should band together and stand their ground, not embrace the changes.

The day I-kuang had sent out the announcement for the seminar, Teacher Hsieh came by her desk. "That author you invited. I flipped through her book. Her writing isn't impressive. Couldn't you find someone better to invite?" She proceeded to rattle off a few titles which she thought of as classics. I-kuang dutifully searched them up, but a good majority of the authors had stopped putting out books a long time ago. She found someone's social media page, but after scrolling through a few posts, she felt an inexplicable frustration welling up in her. She sent the

link to Shu-fan, who laughed as she read. “This is just another Teacher Hsieh, but with better writing? No wonder she likes him.” In response to I-kuang’s question on how they were similar, Shu-fan took a moment to think before stifling her laughter. “They both hate living in the present?” I-kuang’s eyes widened. The present? she repeated. Shu-fan nodded, looking wise and smug. “Yes, like right now. As if they can’t wait to return to the past. I’m also not a hundred percent supportive of the new curriculum, but it doesn’t make sense to invite someone who hates living in the present to talk about what’s ahead of us.” I-kuang let out a long sigh. “You’re so smart.”

Shu-fan patted her hand, but her expression turned serious. “I-kuang, it’s not your responsibility to please everyone. That’s impossible.”

Shu-fan’s words pierced something in her. I-kuang knew it wasn’t on her, but she had become used to it and she had learned from experience that it was easier to please someone than not.

To organize the seminar, I-kuang had dedicated several hours of her own time to liaise with the speaker over email, confirm the schedule, the topics, and her presentation materials. Teacher Hsieh was convinced that I-kuang was supportive of the new curriculum, but in fact, I-kuang didn’t have strong views either way. News reports claimed that in the next ten years, AI would replace ninety percent of all jobs. I-kuang wasn’t embracing these changes, she just thought she had neither the voice nor the power to go against the times.

But if Teacher Hsieh were simply accusing I-kuang of not being interested in the fate of teachers as a collective, she would’ve acknowledged it. Unlike the veteran teacher, she didn’t associate the profession with lofty phrases engraved on a plaque, like *teaching is a calling* or *shaping the next generation*. To her, teaching was just like any other job. She wasn’t looking for glory, and she wasn’t planning to suffer in the shadows for glory’s sake.

They were so different.

But this time, I’m the person-in-charge. I just need to do my job.