7-25-2008

A Defense of Jiang Rong’s Wolf Totem

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By Timothy Weston
I have a confession to make: I was moved by Jiang Rong’s *Wolf Totem*, think it’s an important novel and that it’s well worth reading. The reason I say I feel a need to “confess” as opposed to just being able to state this is because recent postings on *The China Beat*, as well as some of the reviews referenced in those postings, attack the book with a sharpness and thoroughgoingness that initially made me question my own taste and to think that I was politically incorrect for liking and being impressed by the novel as I read it. But after finishing Howard Goldblatt’s translation of *Wolf Totem*—a book that we now know is the work of Lu Jiamin, using “Jiang Rong” as a pseudonym—my conviction remains unchanged that this is indeed a major work. Reactions to the novel have varied widely, as Jeff Wasserstrom pointed out in an earlier post to this site. Here, very briefly, I’d like to add one more voice of praise, for in my opinion it would be a pity if, swayed by the negative things they have read about it here or elsewhere, China experts (or other interested readers) were to decide that reading the novel isn’t worth the effort.

Before saying more I want to make clear that I agree with many of the criticisms made of the book: it is didactic, does slack character development, and is too long. Moreover, to the extent that it advocates that Chinese adopt wolfish cunning and aggressiveness as national characteristics, it does open itself to the charge of being nationalistic, though personally I did not find this theme overly offensive. Fully mature and great literature it may not be, but courageous, imaginative, and a deserving winner of the inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize I think it is. No other novel, from any country, has given me so deep an appreciation for the vitally important and interconnected roles played by all creatures and species within the natural environment, or of the fragile relationship between we human beings and the ecological setting in which we live. At a moment when awareness of our endangerment of the planet is rising to new levels, Jiang Rong has produced a profound lament about what it can mean when human beings and human societies carry on with little-to-no regard for the natural environment.

This message is of course universally relevant and highly timely. The fact that is has been articulated so passionately by a Chinese writer is remarkable, given the low level of environmental consciousness usually attributed to contemporary China. Here, then, we have a powerful Chinese contribution to the global discussion about our human-caused planetary environmental crisis. For me, this is a welcome development.

Also welcome, in my view, is Jiang Rong’s willingness to merge his tale of environmental destruction with an open discussion of Han Chinese cultural and political imperialism. In *Wolf Totem* disregard for other cultures (in this case nomadic Mongolian culture) goes hand in hand with disregard for the natural environment; the same unthinking mindset produces both. Having noted with sadness the scarcity of publicly expressed Chinese compassion for the feelings of Tibetans during the recent disturbances in Tibet and elsewhere, I find it refreshing to encounter Jiang Rong’s concern over Han insensitivity to minority peoples.
While Jiang Rong is critical of Han Chinese ignorance and arrogance with regard to minority cultures and ways of life within China, *Wolf Totem* is not a simplistic good guy versus bad guy story, nor an overly determined good ethnic group versus bad ethnic group tale. Ethnicity is not treated in an essentialist fashion in this novel. Chen Zhen, the novel’s protagonist, is a Han Chinese, as are several other important characters, and they develop a deep appreciation for the environment and the brutal and amoral ways of nature. Han Chinese are not irredeemable, in other words. Nor are Mongols portrayed as being wholly in touch with nature; among other things, in fact, the novel narrates fissures within Mongol society along generational, geographic and ideological lines. As with the Chinese, some Mongols are shown to be sensitive to the environment and some are not.

As environmental studies becomes an ever more important part of school curricula there’s a growing need for books that speak to environmental issues in creative and compelling ways. While reading *Wolf Totem* I kept thinking about how to use it in my teaching. Since I am a historian, I thought of pairing it with Mark Elvin’s recent monumental historical study, *The Retreat of the Elephants*, or with Judith Shapiro’s *Mao’s War Against Nature*. My sense is that Jiang Rong’s literary exploration of environmental issues in China would work well with those more academic treatments.

There is of course also the question of why *Wolf Totem* has been so amazingly popular in China. I can imagine an entire class session devoted to that issue alone, for if, as one blurb on the cover of Goldblatt’s translation states, the novel has in fact outsold any other book in Chinese history since Mao’s little red book, that is a truly astonishing fact. What does it tell us about Chinese society today? No doubt many things, not all of them positive (other reviewers are likely right that the macho tone of the novel is at least partially responsible for its extraordinary appeal in China). Nevertheless, at this time, when the price of decades of disregard for the natural environment is becoming painfully obvious to more and more Chinese, my hunch is that a great many of the millions of Chinese readers of *Wolf Totem* have been attracted to the message of environmental warning that is its central theme. Along the way, of course, they are treated to an unusually self-reflective discussion of Han Chinese relations with minority peoples who belong to the Chinese nation. One can hope that in this way, too, the novel is having a positive affect on those who have been reading it.