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Wolf Totem’s “Rational Exploration” of Civilization and Barbarians

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China Beat has examined the bestselling novel Wolf Totem (Lang tuteng) from a number of different angles, including reviews (by Nicole Barnes and Timothy Weston) as well as several cultural critiques of the book and its media coverage (by Jeffrey Wasserstrom and Haiyan Lee). Now, on the eve of China’s big anniversary, and in a moment, simultaneously, when ethnicity is a crucial flashpoint in the PRC, William Callahan reflects on what the book tells us about China’s nation-building ideology.

By William A. Callahan

The fantastic success of Jiang Rong’s Lang tuteng [Wolf Totem] shows how notions of Chinese identity and culture are moving in new directions (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2004). This novel, which is based on the author’s experience living in the Mongolian grasslands during the China’s Cultural Revolution (1966-76), has sold over 25 million copies since it was published in 2004, making it China’s no. 2 bestseller after Mao Zedong’s “Little Red Book.” The novel is popular abroad as well: its English translation won the inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize in 2007 (Howard Goldblatt, trans., Penguin, 2008).

Wolf Totem is an autobiographical story about a Han student who leaves his intellectual family in Beijing to go to the grasslands of Inner Mongolia at the height of the Cultural Revolution. Chen Zhen, the main character, lives and works with nomadic Mongolians. As a shepherd, Chen becomes fascinated with wolves and the role they play in the local economy and culture of the grasslands. He is drawn to wolves’ strength, cunning and ferocity, and adopts a wolf pup to “scientifically” study how they “think.” But in the end Chen has to kill the wolf pup because it can’t be tamed to live among humans.

Wolf Totem is praised for its environmentalist sensibility: the Han student criticizes his people’s economic invasion of the Mongolian grasslands that complements Beijing’s military invasion. Chen watches as Han settlers ruin the grassland environment as they try to turn it into farmland. The novel ends with a plea to ethnic Han to preserve the grasslands and its ecological balance of nomadic Mongolians, sheep and wolves. This environmental message was popular among foreign readers; the Man Asian Literary Prize judges praised Wolf Totem for giving a “passionate argument about the complex interrelationship between nomads and settlers, animals and human beings, nature and culture.”

But Wolf Totem’s environmental message is wrapped up in a broader political message about China’s national rejuvenation and international politics. Indeed, Jiang Rong is a pseudonym for Lu Jiamin, a political scientist who spent time in jail for participating in the Tiananmen Square movement in 1989. His ideological program is outlined in detail in the novel’s sixty-four page appendix, “Rational Exploration: A Lecture and Dialogue on the Wolf Totem,” which is not included the English translation.
Like Europeans and Americans, Chinese people generally fear wolves, seeing them as a serious problem that needs to be exterminated. This fear is metaphorical as well as literal: in 2008 the Chinese Communist Party’s worst epithet for the Dalai Lama was “wolf with a human face,” and historian Yuan Weishi worries that educating China’s youth with the “wolves’ milk” of xenophobic history textbooks is turning rational citizens into the violent angry youth. *Wolf Totem*, on the other hand, lionizes the ferocity, strength and violence of wolves, turning them from a problem into the solution for China’s future development.

Following a theme popular in modern Chinese literature, Jiang stresses how “reform in China is not just about the transformation of the economic and the political system, but about the transformation of national character” (*Lang tuteng*, 298). Echoing a popular idiom from the early twentieth century that saw China as the “Sick Man of East Asia,” Jiang tells us that the Chinese people have been weakened over the centuries by a Confucian culture that only teaches them how to be followers. Since “the root of China’s disease is sheep disease,” Jiang argues that the wolf-nature of nomads is the best model for China’s national character.

Many Chinese authors now tell us how China needs to reclaim its Civilization to assimilate national minorities and fight western barbarians. Hence *Wolf Totem* is interesting because it reverses China’s guiding Civilization/barbarian distinction by directly criticizing Han Chinese and Confucianism, while praising the freedom and independence of nomadic ethnic groups.

To promote his ideological program in the untranslated “Rational Exploration” Jiang rewrites Chinese history from the mythical Yellow Emperor up through the Qing dynasty. Going against the grain of official dynastic historiography, which he argues is warped by a reverence for Confucianism, Jiang reverses the standard argument of how Civilization transformed barbarians and tamed conquest dynasties. He asserts that the Yellow Emperor came from grasslands in the Northwest, and that China’s first Great Unity [*da yitong*] in the Qin dynasty did not come from Confucianism, but from wolf-nature’s attack on Confucianism.

Because Han are soft and weak, Jiang explains, outsiders prey on them – just as wolves prey on sheep on the grasslands. Jiang thus argues that throughout history fierce nomads from the Mongolian grasslands and the Northwest have continually conquered and occupied China proper. This is not seen as a problem, but as an important contribution to the greatness of the Chinese race. It is not simply a metaphor of nomadic cultural influence; one of Jiang’s main arguments is that the soft “sheep-nature” of the Chinese race has been strengthened, again and again, through transfusions of Mongolians’ ferocious blood (through rape and/or intermarriage?).

*Wolf Totem*’s revision of history also explains why what he calls “the Western race” was able to dominate China, and become the most advanced civilization in the world. Europeans are ferocious, Jiang explains, because they have wolves’ blood from the same Inner Asian grasslands as a result of attacks from Huns, Turks, and Mongols. The Europeans’ wolf-nature then was used to conquer Asia: “The Westerners who fought their way back to the East were all descendents of nomads. … The later Teutons, Germans, and Anglo-Saxons grew increasingly powerful, and the blood of wolves ran in their veins. The Han Chinese, with their weak dispositions, are in desperate need of a transfusion of that vigorous, unrestrained blood. Had there been no wolves, the history of the world would have been written much differently” (*Wolf Totem*, 217-218).

So while nomads are dismissed as China’s most backward element by Beijing minority nationalities policy, according to *Wolf Totem* China must now look to them since “the most advanced people today are descendents of nomadic races. … What is hard to learn are the militancy and aggressiveness, the courage and willingness to take risks that flow in nomadic veins” (*Wolf Totem*, 303).

Like with nomadic Mongolians, Jiang revalues the Western race from “barbarian enemies” to “civilized wolves” who should serve as the model for China’s national character. His goal then is to transform Han Chinese from being “civilized sheep” first into “civilized wolves,” and finally into “civilized humans” who have democracy and the rule of law. The main problem for Jiang is how to release and contain the power of what he calls the “thermonuclear reaction” of wolf nature – whose ferocity can not only save a nation, but also destroy a society (*Lang tuteng*, 399-402).
By reversing the Civilization/barbarism distinction to value Mongolian nomads over Han civilization, Jiang certainly is offering a fresh perspective. Indeed, a few years before the novel was published, cultural theorist Wang Hui lamented that in the PRC there was "not a single Chinese postcolonial critique of Han centrism from the standpoint of peripheral culture" (*China’s New Order*, 2003:170).

Yet while Jiang’s narrative reverses the Civilization/barbarism distinction, it still reproduces the same zero-sum structure of feeling that divides humanity into binary opposites: wolves and sheep, nomads and farmers, Chinese and Westerners. Such reversals don’t question the logic of essential identity, and actually tend to reinforce its logic of violent confrontation. Rather than looking to international society’s rules and norms, Jiang sees international relations as a series of violent Darwinian race wars between wolf nations and sheep nations. In this struggle for the survival of the fittest nation, wolf-nature is worshiped for its strength, ferocity and violence.

This is an odd way to get to Jiang’s goal of democracy and the rule of law, and provides a rather negative counterpart to *Wolf Totem*’s generally positive calls for environmental conservation. This argument, which is the main topic of the "Rational Exploration," is only hinted at in the novel itself. Readers of the English translation thus largely miss Jiang’s promotion of race war and violent struggle between the strong and the weak.

Lastly, it is important to note how Jiang’s ideological program shifts our attention from the particulars of the Mongolian grassland wolf to general prescriptions about wolf-nature as the key to success in today’s ruthless social environment. Indeed, the story’s popularity comes from more than its nostalgic description of an exotic past; businesses and the military use *Wolf Totem* to train managers and officers with strategies for success in today’s dog-eat-dog world. The novel itself ends with the disappearance of wolf-nature on China’s Inner Mongolian frontier: Chen returns thirty years later to find that the wolves are gone, the grasslands have been turned into desert, and the Mongolian nomads have been overwhelmed by Han settlers.

The wolf survives only as a ferocious metaphor for what Han Chinese need to succeed in the twenty-first century. Once again, the minority is sacrificed for the majority; discussions of outsiders like national minorities tell us more about the insiders, mainland Han Chinese.

When thinking about China’s grand celebration of sixty years of the PRC or 5000 years of civilization, it is necessary to appreciate how such nation-building also involves nation-destroying, where glorious Civilization depends upon violent barbarians.

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