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The Lord of the Wolves?

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By Haiyan Lee

Since hitting the bookstores in China in 2004, *Wolf Totem* has been a most unlikely bestseller and a phenomenon to be reckoned with. From the start, it has been riddled with paradoxes: it was written by a political science professor who had to remain anonymous because of his run-ins with authority in 1989; it went on to win ten domestic literary prizes with the endorsements of party officials, scholars, and business tycoons alike; the audio version was serialized on Radio Beijing; its sales figure is dwarfed only by that of Mao’s Little Red Book in the history of modern publishing in China; the author (Lu Jiamin) has come out of hiding after winning the inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize, but is not allowed to travel abroad to promote his book.

The novel also has the distinction of attracting unprecedented international attention *after* and largely *because* it had become a mass cultural sensation within China, thereby breaking the pattern of writers and their works achieving fame overseas only to be ignored or spurned by mainland readers and critics—thanks usually to censorship, but not always. It is perhaps one of very few bestselling Chinese novels that has genuinely stirred up some controversy among international critics and managed to split critical opinion (almost always strongly-worded) pretty much down the middle (see Jeff Wasserstrom’s earlier *survey of the reviews* for this site). And to top it all off, *The New York Times* reported in 2005 that Peter Jackson, director of the *Lord of the Rings* series, has bought the movie rights to *Wolf Totem*.

What will the movie be like? With a rumored budget of $48 million, the expectations are understandably high. As a fan of the *Rings* series, however, I am a bit uneasy with the way Jackson seems to have rushed into the deal—before he could have possibly read the novel since the English translation by Howard Goldblatt came out only a few months ago. I cannot help but slip into typical fan behavior and busily speculate how he is going to deal with this cinematic hot potato, as it were.

If you have read (or attempted to read) the novel, you’ll know what I mean. It’s notorious for its many lecture-like passages, where the author lets his professorial self get the upper hand of his story-telling self, browbeating the reader with grandiose theory about wolves acting like (brave) men and (Mongolian, European, and Japanese) men acting like wolves. No doubt it’s the macho textbook aspect (a bit like a take-no-prisoners guide to succeeding in business) that drew kudos from the likes of the highly successful Zhang Ruimin, the C.E.O. of the Haier Group and the hero of a 2002 bio-pic by Wu Tianming (one of whose personal mottoes is said to be “Tread on eggs always”). But what is there for
the popcorn munching crowds at the multiplex? Into what Hollywood genre will Jackson’s adaptation fall? If we rule out romance, adventure, cops and robbers, mystery, and the buddy genre, the only viable option seems to be the “man and his pet” type, as in “everything I learned about life, I learned from my dog.”

As it happens, there is a pet of sorts in the novel. The main character Chen Zhen and his fellow “educated youths” (zhiqing) are so obsessed with the steppe wolves that they raid a wolf lair and steal a cub, intending to raise it outside their tent with the help of a nursing dog. Their Mongolian host and surrogate father objects vehemently, but they ignore him and embark on their experiment to raise the cub (Little Wolf) with pious dedication and reverent circumspection. My hunch is that the film adaptation will make much of this doomed experiment that nonetheless supplies some of the most heart-breaking episodes in the novel. These episodes will likely appeal to a broad audience because they dramatize, in the sweeping-shots-of-glorious-landscape-friendly setting of the Mongolian grasslands (even negative reviews of the recent film “Mongol” enthuse about the region’s cinematic potential), humankind’s familiar predicament of romanticizing nature while trying to subjugate nature.

Chen Zhen develops an intense affection for Little Wolf. Little Wolf’s make-shift lair becomes his private shrine which he visits several times each day to observe the restless creature with rapture and to meditate on the way of the wolf. But chained to a pole and confined to a human routine, Little Wolf is no less pathetic than a common domesticated animal destined for the slaughterhouse. The loving gaze that elevates it to a mythic being is also an epistemological gaze that reduces it to a lab creature. Chen is acutely aware of the paradox of trying to domesticate a wild beast in order to study its wild nature. His absurd experiment, however, is enthusiastically endorsed by the commune head, who considers it a laudable application of Mao’s know-thy-enemy dictum. Indeed, what Chen is doing is no different from the many monumental projects undertaken in the Mao era that sought to tame nature with bloated human will, until nature rebels against man’s hubris with “natural” disasters and ecological deterioration. In the novel, nature’s revenge takes the form of the desertification of the grasslands, after the wolf population is decimated by extermination campaigns and reckless development.

It’s possible, of course, that Jackson knew exactly what he was doing when he allegedly beat the crowd to the film rights. Perhaps he sensed that a social Darwinian parable that repackaged the “might makes right” doctrine with spectacular imageries and environmentalist sentiments may appeal to Western and Westernized audiences against their better judgment. After all, the novel affirms not only the origin myth of Western capitalism, but also what some have characterized as the neoliberal and neoimperialist world order of our post-September 11th era. And yet, if we go against critical orthodoxy for a moment and imagine that we could hold a director to the message of his best known films (The Rings series did very well in China despite the SARS interruption, thanks in part to their liberal borrowing of action sequences from Hong Kong cinema), then we might be able to find some silver lining.

In the Lord of the Rings, the slight and insignificant Frodo Baggins is the reluctant bearer of a magical ring that is coveted by all and tempts all, including himself. Whoever wields it is necessarily corrupted by it. The mission entrusted upon Frodo by the great Council is to dispose of it in the Fire of Mordor so
that no one can have it. The story has been claimed by religious groups as a Christian allegory. In my view, it is also a political allegory about democracy. The French radical political theorist Claude Lefort tells us that democracy thrives on a contradiction: between the idea that power emanates from the people and the idea that it is the power of nobody. Symbolically, he says in one of his most influential books, popular sovereignty is tied to the image of “an empty place” that can never be occupied by anyone. If Tolkien's magical ring is the forbidden embodiment of power, then it must be destroyed so that the “empty place” can be restored to its emptiness. It is significant that the ring bearer is a humble Hobbit who is assisted by the representatives of the hoi polloi of Middle-Earth—who together stand for the political category of the “people.” It is the people who save democracy.

In the long appendix of Wolf Totem (which the English translation omits for good cause), the author makes a passing mention of democracy, which he concedes is the only thing that can harness the “nuclear power” of the wolf nature. But very quickly he returns wolf totemism to the position of first principle: democracy is but a castle built on sand without a prior engineering project of transforming the national character—from sheepishness to wolfishness. And this can only be accomplished via a transitional stage of “roaming in the wild.” As to what this entails exactly, the author is vague. But we may be able to glean something from the way Chen Zhen fantasizes about the outcome of his “scientific experiment” of raising Little Wolf:

“It’s been my dream to have a friend in a real wild wolf. If I rode a horse to the slopes off the Northwest border highway and called out to the deep mountains on the opposite side: “Little Wolf, Little Wolf, mealtime!” Little Wolf would lead its entire clan—a pack of genuine steppe wolves—running towards me full of cheers. They would not have chains on their necks; their fangs would be sharp and bodies strong; they would roll around with me on the grass, lick my chin and nibble my arms, without actually biting.” (My translation; the University of Hong Kong Library I use doesn’t yet have the English version on its shelves.)

But the dream is dashed when Little Wolf dies of a throat infection after nearly breaking his neck while resisting being dragged on an oxcart leash during a move. It seems that Little Wolf’s tragic death is a warning sign that the wolves let out to roam the wilderness and yet so endearingly responsive to the beckons of the intellectual are but the specters of a cruel fantasy, much as the idea that democracy will grow out of some sort of national character laboratory where people are programmed to undergo a spiritual rebirth and recover their “wolf nature.” The intellectual does not and should not have the ring.

To my knowledge, there has been no follow up reporting to the initial 2005 story of the film rights deal, and maybe Peter Jackson will be spending his next few years more productively, making the long-awaited “Hobbit” film or films (there’s been talk of not just one but two of them serving as a prequel to his Tolkien trilogy). That the Wolf Totem deal might be a mere rumor almost comes as a relief: for the time being at least, we don’t have to fret about an international blockbuster fanning the flame of civilizational clash by portraying the Chinese prostrating before a lupine symbol. Let wolves be wolves, neither “an enemy species” to be extirpated as in Mao’s China, nor a heroic species to be worshipped as is advocated in the novel.

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