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Coming Distractions: Wolf Totem

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In just a few days, famed translator Howard Goldblatt’s latest book, *Wolf Totem*, will be released to eager readers of Chinese literature in English translation. Having proven his mettle as translator of Xiao Hong’s angsty prose and Mo Yan’s morbidly lascivious novels, Goldblatt has now tried his hand at a certain piece of nostalgic drivel that leaked from the pen of Jiang Rong, a newly acclaimed novelist whose original work, *Lang Tuteng*, appeared in 2004 after more than 30 years of labor and immediately shot to the top of the bestseller lists, selling two million bookstore copies and countless more pirated copies. Although he hid his unorthodox ideas behind a pen name, Jiang Rong’s endeavors earned him the very first Man Asian Literary Prize.

This semi-autobiographical novel follows the young Chinese intellectual, Chen Zhen, in Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution. Chen’s drunken admiration for the steppe leads him to kidnap and raise a wolf cub. The novel essentializes ethnic identity as utterly contingent upon nature, and identifies Mongols with the wolf (bold and brave), and Han Chinese with the sheep (meek and, well, sheepish). Despite its artless plot, *Lang Tuteng* appealed to millions of Chinese readers who found double happiness in its pages: romanticization of the Mongolian “wilderness” as the urbanites’ playground, and a symbolic reversal of the woes produced by internal colonization: wolves don’t lose to sheep. The novel’s closing scene underscores the limited capacity of this symbolic reversal, as Han immigration and resource exploitation turn the last of Inner Mongolia’s majestic grasslands to desert and a foreboding sandstorm shrouds Beijing. The ecological disasters of internal colonization come home to roost on Beijingers’ windowsills.

Jiang Rong is following in the footsteps of a veritable army of intellectuals who fanned out across “northwest China” in the first few decades of the twentieth century, most of them traveling on behalf of the Nationalist government. Their published journals evince the same mixture of admiration and befuddlement that makes *Wolf Totem* the latest literary expression of a long-lived Chinese political identity crisis in which fear of emasculation drives Han men to their nation’s cultural frontier in an existential search for virility and assertiveness, qualities believed to be more abundant among the ethnic minorities than among China’s Han majority.

Ten of these early twentieth-century journalists—nine men and one woman—will be featured in my presentation at the upcoming Critical Han Studies conference organized by Tom Mullaney. Among them was the famed intellectual Gu Jiegang, who in the late 1930s stated matter-of-factly that the idea of the Han people as a unified “race” is a mere fiction—an argument that later appeared in Mao Zedong’s 1956 speech, “On the Ten Major Relationships,” and which was of course used to gloss over the very real exploitation of minority groups in the construction of a “unified” nation with the vast majority of power and wealth in Han hands.

Although the Republican-era intellectuals’ prose would put Jiang Rong to shame, none of their journals ever sold two million copies or sparked a pop-culture revolution with global proportions—Penguin is simultaneously launching *Wolf Totem* in the US, the UK, and Australia, with the Indian and South
African editions hot on their heels. Their travel journals also may not have had the ability to spark thousands of blogger debates on the bestial origins of the Chinese race—dragon or wolf?

Despite Goldblatt’s best intentions to enhance Western understanding of China by introducing a Chinese bestseller to an English readership, *Wolf Totem* is likely to appeal to an Orientalist audience. It is already hailed on Amazon.com as “an epic Chinese tale in the vein of *The Last Emperor.*” We know where that leads. Now that China’s eastern seaboard is packed to the gills with people, congested roads, and belching factories, it seems that we can all locate our nostalgia in Mongolia and Tibet (protests and their violent quashing aside, tourism in the Dalai Lama’s homeland is on the rise). At least in this regard urbanites the world over can be united.