5-8-2008

The Fur is Flying—Or, There’s More than One Way to Skin a Wolf

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive

Part of the Asian History Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Chinese Studies Commons, and the International Relations Commons


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
The Fur is Flying—Or, There’s More than One Way to Skin a Wolf

May 8, 2008 in Uncategorized by The China Beat | 4 comments

Every once in a while, a book linked to China comes along that garners such widely varying reviews that I begin to wonder if the reviewers all had the same text in front of them. I had this experience last with Mao: The Unknown Story, a book that I reviewed myself (hint as to my take: George W. Bush claimed to think the tome excellent; he and I rarely see things the same way; this instance was no exception). And now, along comes Wolf Totem. And, once again, disagreements are not just about one aspect of the book but about many.

One veteran reviewer of China books, Jonathan Mirsky, for example, calls Wolf Totem “the best Chinese book I’ve read for many years,” and presents it as both a gripping tale and one with a nicely subversive anti-authoritarian political edge. He sums up his fondness for it by saying it is “enlightening, poignant, mysterious…a miracle.” Another writer with a long engagement with China, Linda Jaivin, by contrast, noting that the book’s fans liken it to Herman Melville’s best known novel, writes that the prose is “so bloated with banality, repetition and cliché, that comparisons to Moby Dick, to my mind, relate only to the ratio of blubber to ambergris.” As for its politics, she finds these worrisome enough to inspire the rhetorical question: “Is sentimentality the last refuge of the crypto-fascist?”

I’m not going to enter the reviewing fray here, but do I think, given how much interest the book has generated, a quirky sort of list of five is in order. By the time readers get to number 5, they will have more than enough links to get a sense of the incredible diversity of the responses Wolf Totem has generated. And it is a book worth coming to terms with, even if one agrees with Jaivin’s assessment of it, since it is a rare work of fiction that sparks interest at four different points in time. Wolf Totem did so first when the Chinese edition became a runaway bestseller. Second, when Penguin announced it would pay more for its English language rights than had ever been paid for a Chinese novel. Third, when it was nominated for and then won the first Asian Man Literary Prize. Fourth, when the English language translation appeared earlier this spring, just after Nicole Barnes published her “Coming Distractions” review of it here on China Beat. And that’s not even counting the smaller bursts of interest that came along when news broke that the author, who wrote under the pseudonym of Jiang Rong, was in fact Lu Jiamin; when a young adult version of the book came out in Chinese; and when word circulated about film and manga versions being in the works.)

1) London Calling. One intriguing thing about the Wolf Totem affair is the frequency with which Jack London is invoked in reviews—Jaivin’s, for example, and also the one Ursula K. Le Guin did for the Guardian—as a point of comparison and a likely inspiration for Lu. One of the most thoughtful reviews of the English language edition, that Pankaj Mishra did for the New York Times, is even titled “Call of the Wild”—though the reviewer takes Lu Xun rather than Jack London as his starting point (as is particularly fitting for a review that appeared on May 4th). And I’m pleased to learn (from a Google search that led me to an online copy of her c.v.) that a doctoral student at the University of Heidelberg, Lena Henningsen, has already presented a scholarly paper on the Jack London to Jiang Rong progression in lupine literature. I’ll look forward to reading this when it appears, as this is a particularly rich subject for exploration, due not only to London’s canine concerns, but also his Social Darwinism (something that some see at play in Wolf Totem’s vision of ethnicity), his popularity in China (something Le Guin notes in her review), and the fact that he wrote both fiction and essays that dealt with Chinese themes.

2) A Hundred Blooming Puns. For some reason, perhaps the animals involved, writers have been having a field day with clever turns of phrase in their writings about Wolf Totem. (This made it hard, in fact, to come up with a title for this posting, as many of the best bits of word play I could think of had already been used.) My favorite turn of phrase appears in an introduction to the Danwei.org reposting of Linda Jaivin’s Australian Literary Review piece. The introduction’s author, Geremie Barmé, refers to “Wolves in chic clothing”—a phrase that stings and sums up a lot when read in context. Runner-up (and winner in the title of a review that sums up the reviewer’s main point
subcategory) is the Seattle Times piece on the book: "Wolf Totem is a prizewinner—but it’s still kind of a dog."

3) Imitation is the Sincerest Form of Flattery. What do Wolf Totem and the Harry Potter books have in common, besides high sales figures? Why they’ve each inspired fakes and knock-offs in China, of course.

4) A Man Bites Dog Story? One of the trickiest things to unpack about the whole Wolf Totem phenomenon is how it can simultaneously involve a tale so subversive that the author needed to remain anonymous, and yet find the novel being promoted in the official press. In a sense this just reveals how far removed from, say, the Soviet situation in Cold War times the Chinese mix of market and Communist Party forces can be. Still, it is an interesting thread of what Mao might call “contradictions” to try to unravel, and a good place to start pondering the complexities is with Beijing Review’s story about the book. This story describes a surreal-sounding global launch of the English language edition that will include such things as a “seminar on nomadic culture in Melbourne” and “an eco-friendly tour to Inner Mongolia where author Jiang Rong once lived,” but never mentions (though the news was out well before it went to print) that we now know the author’s actual name (he is just referred to as “Jiang Rong” throughout) and that he had a tie to the Tiananmen protests of 1989.

5) Novel Aspects of the Novel. What was perhaps most striking of all about the book as a reader (full disclosure: I didn’t try to read it in Chinese, just waited for it to come out in English, and didn’t get very far in it when it did, finding the pace far too slow for my tastes) was simply how unlike a typical work of fiction it is. Its peculiarities are summed up neatly by Financial Times reviewer Donald Morrison (whose piece ends up stressing above all the ecological themes of the book) in the opening to his review: “The bestselling novel in modern Chinese history features lengthy lectures on anthropology, agriculture and husbandry – but no sex, hardly any women, a leading character with overlarge teeth and not a single word of dialogue.” That is not quite as snappy as Linda Jaivin’s opening—“Boy meets wolf. Boy loses wolf. Boy writes Wolf Totem, wins inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize”—but it does convey a lot about the book’s distinctive style.