

**INVENTING A WOLFISH CHINA - ON JIANG RONG'S *WOLF TOTEM***

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Dongming Shen

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## ABSTRACT

The *Wolf Totem* by Jiang Rong has won great success both in and out of China. Jiang Rong criticizes Han Chinese and embraces the culture of the northern ethnic minority group, the Mongols, because of its stronger sense of competition and domination. In the epilogue of this novel, Jiang argues that the wolf totem was the most ancient totem for all Chinese people and retells Chinese history using this framework. This paper explores the background of the novel and its author, as well as supporting materials the author uses in his proposal concerning the wolf totem, and suggests that the wolf totem is a purely ideological invention of Jiang Rong. This invention reflects Jiang's own philosophy and caters to the cultural needs of modern Chinese people. In inventing the wolf totem, the author uses historical documents, archeological findings, as well as a far-fetched bodily metaphor. However, none of this evidence is validated by scholarly research.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Dongming Shen is currently a graduate student in the Department of Asian Studies at Cornell University. Her field is East Asian Studies. Her research interests include Chinese mythology and Christianity in late imperial China. She received her undergraduate degree in English Literature and Social Science Studies at Nanjing University and her Master of Public Administration at Cornell University.

*To the memory of my grandparents*

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## 1. An Ongoing Miracle

Published in China in April 2004, Jiang Rong's 姜戎 best-selling novel, *Wolf Totem* (Lang tuteng 狼圖騰), has since enjoyed long-lasting popularity in both the domestic and international markets. Although the author put little effort into marketing, the book sold over four million copies within two years in China even with a pirated edition available six days after its release. *Wolf Totem* also earned international fame after being translated into seventeen languages. The American publisher, Penguin Books, paid US \$100,000 for the English rights to the novel, the highest offer ever for the English translation rights of a Chinese book.

The movie rights for the book were also sold to the Beijing Forbidden City Film Company in August 2004, four months after the book's initial release. The film company claimed that it would be the highest-budget Chinese movie ever made, with Peter Jackson as its producer and the special effects team from *The Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy (Zheng). However, despite the intention to release the movie before the Beijing Olympic Games, production did not begin until August 2009, with Jean-Jacques Annaud as the director. The production team expects to complete the movie around 2012 or 2013 (Fang).

In addition to the book's success in sales, its literary merit was confirmed by its receipt of more than 10 literary prizes and recognitions, the most notable being the Man Asian Literary Prize awarded in November 2007. Adrienne Clarkson, chair of the judges for the inaugural prize, praised *Wolf Totem*, remarking, "[a] panoramic novel of life on the Mongolian grasslands during the Cultural Revolution, this masterly work is also a passionate argument about the complex interrelationship between nomads and settlers, animals and human beings, nature and culture."

With the book's impressive successes, the wolf has become a phenomenon and a symbol of strength and power, widely-loved in China in the so-called "post-*Wolf Totem* era". Many other books have been published after *Wolf Totem*, promoting the wolfish culture in all walks of life, from basketball to business. Jiang Rong himself also wrote a children's version of the *Wolf Totem*, named *Little Wolf, Little Wolf* (xiaolang xiaolang 小狼小狼) in 2005, claiming that it would be a pity for teenage readers not to enjoy his book and admire the wolfish spirit due to the length and depth of the original version (Lin).

## 2. Plot Summary

The story is set during the Cultural Revolution, when Chen Zhen 陳陣, a Han Chinese and a high school student from Beijing, is rusticated to the Inner Mongolian grasslands to assume herdsman life, along with thousands of other high school students. He spends a decade living and working in the Ujimchin Banner (wuzhumuqin qi 烏珠穆沁旗). There Chen starts to contemplate the interrelationship between Han Chinese and Mongols. He instantly becomes fascinated with the wolf and wolfish Mongolian nomadic culture and realizes how and why it is superior to sheepish Han agrarian culture. Chen goes so far as to adopt a wolf cub, violating Mongol beliefs, and thus enters into a conflict with his Mongolian mentor, Bilgee (Bi Li Ge 畢利格). The wolf cub inevitably dies not long after. Following this, the Central government of China orders a mass eradication of wolves in order to modernize the mode of production of the herdsmen by developing agriculture in the grasslands. Chen fights for the herdsmen to oppose this policy but ends in ultimate failure.

It is clear that *Wolf Totem* does not intend to function as a fable since Jiang Rong conveys his messages directly through the repeated confessions of faith of his outspoken protagonist Chen Zhen. Jiang Rong's message throughout the whole book is that if China, consisting mainly of sheepish Han

Chinese, ever wants to become competitive in the international arena, it needs to let the superior nomadic culture wash away the historically dominant agrarian culture. To make this idea even clearer, at the end of the book Jiang Rong includes a very lengthy epilogue entitled “Rational Exploration—a Lecture and Dialogue on the Wolf Totem” (Lixing tanjue – guanyu lang tuteng de jiangzuo yu duihua 理性探掘——關於狼圖騰的講座與對話). In this epilogue, which is set thirty years after the main story, Chen Zhen is a social scientist who studies the (diseased) national character (guomin xing 國民性) of Han Chinese. While driving back to the grasslands with his old friend Yang Ke 楊克, who had been sent to the same banner as Chen Zhen for a decade during the Cultural Revolution, to give a talk on the wolf totem, Chen shares the outline of his talk with Yang. Chen claims that “using the wolf totem of the nomadic minority groups as the comb, I have finally combed through the entire Chinese history, which has been made into a mess by Confucian historians purposefully” (Jiang 396). Chen retells Chinese history from before the Yellow Emperor (huangdi 黃帝) all the way to modern day China. He also analyzes the national characters of European countries and Japan, who have greatly surpassed China’s development and defeated China many times in modern history. He interprets the rise of European countries and Japan as due to their wolfish character, which is in turn explained by noting that these countries do not have a strong agrarian mode of production, which tends to give rise to the sheepish character.

Conversely, the nomadic mode of production and the wolfish character it produces are the perfect ingredients for the development of democracy and modern science and technology. With the same logic, he analyzes Chinese history, claiming its ups and downs are determined by the percentage of wolfish blood (langxue 狼血) in the veins of the nation. According to Chen Zhen, acting as a mouthpiece for Jiang Rong, each invasion of the northern minority groups and takeover of China in history was a beneficial transfusion (shuxue 輸血) of the wolfish blood to Han Chinese. He argues that these invasions, or in his words, transfusions are what has kept Han Chinese civilization from perishing in history. Therefore, China needs to learn from the wolfish minority culture in order to catch up with the West. Chen continues by providing a genealogy of the wolf totem. Citing several excerpts from *Records of the Grand Historian* (Shiji 史記), *Zhuangzi* (Zhuangzi 莊子), and *Itinerary of the Mountains and Seas* (Shanhai jing 山海經), and referring to some archeological findings, Chen Zhen hastily embraces the conclusion that all Chinese ethnic groups are descendants from a common origin, the nomadic group Qiang 羌 and the wolf totem is the most ancient and most influential totem for all Chinese people (Jiang 377). In this sense, Han people originally share the wolfish character with other ethnic minority groups; however, this character has been overshadowed by agrarian practices throughout history. The revival of the Han people's wolfish character is the key for China to regain her prosperity.

Interestingly, the epilogue is deliberately excluded in the English version of the novel. On the one hand, perhaps both the author and the translator realized that such a lengthy lecture—urging a remedy for China to catch up and win over other countries— would not be appealing to foreign readers the way it was to its Chinese readers. The nationalist rhetoric hence drops out. On the other hand, as mentioned above, the repeated confessions of faith through the mouth of the protagonist make Jiang Rong’s messages to his readers quite obvious even without a systematic summary in the epilogue.

### 3. Appeal to Its Readership

Given the huge market success of *Wolf Totem*, its plot must be appealing to readers all around the world in one way or another. First of all, the vivid description of the breathtaking battles between wolves and sheep as well as the thrillingly close contact between men and wolves is entertaining for both Chinese and foreign readers. However, I believe that the miraculous success of this book has other causes. When interviewed by the British newspaper *Telegraph* in 2005, Jiang commented that he expected readers in the West to understand the novel more fully than Chinese readers (Spencer). Jiang explained this surprising remark in another interview with *News Daily* (xinwen zhoukan 新聞周刊), saying that the fierce lupine spirit promoted in *Wolf Totem* will surely be vigorously denounced in China because of the agrarian economy and the narrow-mindedness of the peasant consciousness (xia'ai de xiaonong yishi 狹隘的小農意識). In this remark Jiang reveals the way he hopes his reader will interpret the novel—as advocating the fierce lupine spirit.

However, Jiang Rong's predictions were wrong, as this book has been vigorously embraced in China. The book's appeal to its Chinese readers, in my opinion, comes from its justification of the current worship of power dominating Chinese society. Luckily for Jiang Rong, his novel came out

precisely when Chinese society was embracing the spirit of wolfish competition. China has witnessed fast economic development in the last three decades. “Orienting ourselves toward profit” (chao qian kan 朝錢看) has become a new popular slogan and a common target of popular interest. While China has enjoyed a great increase in economic prosperity and has become much more competitive than before, there are negative aspects to this social phenomenon as well. In China, people are surrounded by fake products that not only violate intellectual property rights but also present a danger to people’s lives. For instance, in the contaminated milk scandal in 2008, 6 infants died from kidney stones and other kidney damages because a chemical, melamine, was added into infant formula to boost its protein content. An abnormal amount of the same chemical was also found in milk produced by almost all the big dairy companies in China and about 300,000 people were affected (Branigan). Critics have raised the concern that Chinese people have entered into a morality vacuum and are badly in need of reestablishing some moral values, but this cannot be done conveniently as long as the pursuit of profit maximization still dominates. On the back cover of the Chinese version of *Wolf Totem*, the first recommendation cited is from a famous businessman, Zhang Ruimin 張瑞敏, the CEO of Haier Group (Hai’er jituan 海爾集團), a successful Chinese corporation. Zhang’s comments focus solely on how tactics of wolves in a fight can be very inspiring for business. It may be surprising that a novel can be directly related



to business strategy, but such a connection shows what audience this book is geared towards in China. *Wolf Totem* satisfies Chinese people's desires in two ways: first, competition and victory at any cost is justified and celebrated; second, it argues that the very weapon for China to regain her power in the international arena lies right in the Chinese people's blood—there is no need to learn from other nations. From a Chinese perspective, since the late-Qing period (around mid-19<sup>th</sup> century) China has been suffering repeated humiliations. During this time, Chinese people, who for centuries lived with the notion that they were the most highly developed civilization, began to fall behind Western countries, as well as China's close neighbor Japan, and lost to them in wars. These countries then imposed economic demands and colonized several parts of China. Therefore, to wash away this shame has been an acute objective of Chinese people for centuries. The notion that Chinese people have great inner strength proposed by Jiang Rong is hence a great boost to national spirit and is very tempting to Chinese people.

For foreign readers, the power supremacy discourse is viewed as extremely unappealing—a dangerous return to fascism, as German sinologist Wolfgang Kubin warns. Instead, environmental protection and sustainable development are the focus of foreign readers' interpretation of the book/movie. In fact, the French director Jean-Jacques Annaud revealed that he intended to make the *Wolf Totem* movie an epic about the harmonious relationship between man and nature for people who are deeply

concerned about the environment and climate change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Fang).

Indeed, it is surprising that ultimately Annaud was picked to be the director, since the Beijing Forbidden City Film Company has always said that they wanted a Chinese director to direct this movie. Furthermore, Annaud received a lifelong ban from entry to China due to his take on the relation between Han Chinese and ethnic groups in his movie *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997). The government of China condemned that movie for intentionally smearing the image of Communist Chinese officers and romanticizing the Dalai Lama. It remains untold why and how Annaud regained his entry to China and was appointed to direct the movie *Wolf Totem*, in which the tension between Han Chinese and ethnic minority groups is clearly a sensitive theme. In his article announcing Annaud as the director of *Wolf Totem*, Fang carefully hides *Seven Years in Tibet* from Annaud's filmography. Also hidden are the three award-winning movies that Annaud is most known for — *Black and White in Color* (1976), *Quest for Fire* (1981), and *The Name of the Rose* (1986). The movies directed by Annaud that Fang cares to mention are the following: *The Lover* (1992), in which the protagonist is a wealthy Chinese man played by Hong Kong actor Tony Leung Ka-fai 梁家輝, *Enemy at the Gates* (2001), a poorly-received Hollywood war movie, *Two Brothers* (2004), a family movie about two tiger cubs, and *The Bear* (1988), a story about how an orphaned bear befriends a grizzly. The last two serve to convey the

impression that Annaud is a seasoned director in bringing animal stories to the big screen.

It is interesting to ponder how a Chinese director, as was originally intended, might have had a very different approach. An environmental take of the book would emphasize the importance of giving wolves back to the grasslands, so that the grasslands can achieve ecological harmony; it seems likely that a Chinese director would be more interested in celebrating the notion of bringing wolfish blood back to the Chinese people, to propel the nation towards becoming a global super power.

Although it is the dominant interpretation, not all Chinese critics of *Wolf Totem* are obsessed with the power supremacy discourse. In fact, only one month after the book's release in China, Zhang Kangkang 張抗抗, a famous writer, published a review of the book in May 2004. In it, Zhang praises *Wolf Totem* as an excellent environmental fiction that deserves attention, since it illustrates that Chinese environmental literature has entered into a new stage and it is the first monograph on Wolf Studies which is solely derived from Chinese native resources (diyibu quziyu Zhongguo bentu ziyuan de langxue zhuanzhu 第一部取自于中国本土资源的狼学专著). The wording is as awkward and confusing in Chinese as in English. It is hard to understand what Zhang means by words such as "resources" that "a monograph is derived from", and "Wolf Studies." Nonetheless, he comments

indicate that she seems to agree more with the interpretation of foreign readers. Zhang does not stop there as she also argues that wolf totem embodies an unsophisticated scientific development concept (pusu de kexuefazhanguan 樸素的科學發展觀). The term “scientific development concept” is the current guiding ideology of the Communist Party of China, referring to the creation of a Harmonious Society (hexie shehui 和諧社會) through sustainable development. This concept was advanced by Chairman Hu Jintao 胡錦濤 in July 2003, not long before the book’s release, and has been included in the Constitution of the Communist Party of China (dang zhang 黨章).

Among the countless comments on and discussions of *Wolf Totem* focusing on competition or China’s ancient totem, Zhang certainly provides a refreshing point of view. She overlooks the novel’s implication on how to deal with ethnic relations; instead, she highlights for its ecological significance and associates it with the guiding policy of the Communist Party, an interpretation which avoiding issues prone to censorship. Of course, this position makes more sense when it is revealed that Zhang Kangkang is Jiang Rong’s wife.

#### 4. Jiang Rong/Lü Jiamin

Since the *Wolf Totem* is a quasi-autobiography, knowing Jiang Rong's background could help us better understand his work. Jiang Rong, a pseudonym of Lü Jiamin 吕嘉民, was born in 1946. The name Jiang Rong has a very strong ethnic implication. As the author explained himself, Jiang was the last name of the Emperor Yan (yandi 炎帝), and the Jiang clan is considered a part of the Qiang ethnic group<sup>1</sup> generally referred to as Western Rong (xi rong 西戎) (Wu). Jiang claims that his grandfather had the last name Jiang, but his father changed it. Jiang's identity remained unknown except to five people for almost three years after the publication of his book, leading Deutsche Welle (Deguo zhi sheng 德國之聲) to describe him as a "shadow author" (yingzi zuozhe 影子作者), until 2007 when he received the Man Asian Literary Prize (Ya). It is said that Jiang did so in order to avoid any trouble with the tightened official censors. Jiang's wife, Zhang Kangkang, described the writing process of *Wolf Totem* as quite mysterious, claiming that Jiang Rong locked himself in a tiny study for a prolonged time without telling anyone what he was doing.

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<sup>1</sup> Qiang is the group Jiang Rong claims to be the most ancient people in China and the ancestors of all the ethnic groups thereafter.

Jiang's family was from Shanghai. Both his parents joined the Communist Party in the 1920s. His father, Lü Bingkui 呂炳奎 started working as a traditional Chinese physician. His mother worked in a factory as a cover for her secret work as an underground Communist Party member (dixia dangyuan 地下黨員) with Jiang Qing 江青, Mao Zedong's 毛澤東 last wife, notorious for forming the radical political group—the Gang of Four (sirenbang 四人幫). Jiang's parents both fought in the Second Sino-Japanese War. After the war, Jiang's father was promoted to several influential posts—first the Chief of the Ministry of Health in Jiangsu Province and then to the national level. Hence the family moved to Beijing and Jiang became one of the elite children of Chinese Communist Party cadres (ganbu zidi 幹部子弟). Sadly Jiang's mother died from cancer when Jiang was only eleven years old. Soon after that his father got remarried and Jiang was mistreated by both his father and his stepmother.

Jiang became very involved in politics at a young age. In 1964, when Jiang was still a high school student, he wrote an essay which was viewed as counter-revolutionary. Later Jiang joined the Red Guards (hongweibing 紅衛兵), a paramilitary youth organization mobilized by Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution; shortly after his own father was denounced by the Red Guards. In 1967, the 21-year-old Jiang volunteered to go to the East Ujimqin Banner (dong wuzhumuqin qi 東烏珠穆沁旗) in the Xilin Gol League

(xilinguole meng 錫林郭勒盟) in Inner Mongolia to be re-educated by the herdsmen, just like Chen Zhen in the novel does, and stayed there for twelve years from age 21 to 33 (Wu). He was among the first group of Rusticated Youth (zhishi qingnian 知識青年) to be sent to Inner Mongolia. Talking about this decision when interviewed by *Beijing Youth Daily* (Beijing qingnian bao 北京青年報), Jiang said that he chose to go to the grasslands because that was something he had always been fascinated with. He was very attracted to Russian culture, especially the grasslands depicted by Michail Aleksandrovich Sholokhov in his *And Quiet Flows the Don*. For Jiang Rong, the grasslands represented freedom. In the grasslands he could continue to read books which were categorized as “feudalistic, capitalistic, and revisionist” (feng zi xiu 封資修) and hence banned by the Communist Party and to listen to foreign radio programs (Wu). In this interview we can see that Jiang portrayed himself as an activist who, from a young age, opposed the lack of political freedom under the Communist Party’s rule of China. However, feudalism, capitalism, and revisionism were exactly what the Red Guards, of which Jiang Rong was a member at that time, had vowed to overthrow. There appeared to be an inner conflict within Jiang Rong’s political belief—on one hand, he was supporting Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution; on the other hand, he was opposing it. How can we account for this apparent contradiction? It is apparent that, while Jiang Rong painted himself as opposing the oppressive policies of the Communist

government, his actions clearly position himself in support of it. Zhang Hongjun 張紅軍, Jiang's first wife, recalled that before going to Inner Mongolia Jiang Rong said "Why do I go to Inner Mongolia? To go there is to reform my ideology and thoughts so that I can return to Beijing to become a Communist Party power figure" (wo weishenme shang Neimeng shang Neimeng jiushi yao ba sixiang gaizao hao gaizao hao jiu keyi shahuilai zhangquan 我為什麼上內蒙？上內蒙就是要把思想改造好，改造好就可以殺回來掌權。) (Yang).

While in the grasslands, Jiang soon became the leader among the Rusticated Youth, but he became associated with factionalism (bangpai zhuyi 幫派主義) and gradually lost his popularity among his fellows by 1969. In 1970 Jiang and two others publicly denounced Vice-Chairman Lin Biao 林彪, a major Communist military leader who was favored by Mao and named as Mao's successor during the Cultural Revolution, and were jailed for this counter-revolutionary crime against Lin. Jiang's brother Lü Jiaping 呂嘉平 and his wife were also jailed and sentenced to death and death with reprieve respectively. As Lü Jiaping later revealed, he and his wife were both framed by Jiang Rong. After the September 13<sup>th</sup> Event (jiuyisan shijian 九一三事件) when Lin Biao's plane crashed in Mongolia following his failed attempt to oust Mao Zedong, not only did Jiang Rong get released from jail immediately, he also became a hero for fighting against Lin Biao. This turned



out to be a great political resource to him when he returned to Beijing in 1978. Upon his return, Jiang became the chief editor of the *Beijing Spring* (Beijing zhi chun 北京之春) magazine. “Beijing Spring” is also the term characterizing the period of 1977 and 1978 when Chinese people enjoyed a brief political liberalization and could criticize the government with greater freedom. Jiang later was admitted into a graduate program in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan 中國社會科學院) studying Marxism, Leninism and Maoism. Upon graduation, Jiang became a professor at the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) Cadre School (Zhongguo gongyun xueyuan 中國工運學院), presently known as the China Institute of Industrial and Labor Relations (Zhongguo laodong guanxi xueyuan 中國勞動關係學院). However, he soon lost his professorship because he participated in the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 (*liusi yundong* 六四運動). Jiang was sent to prison for the second time and was not released until January 1991. From then on, Jiang abstained from taking an active role in politics and faded out of public life until 2007 when he revealed his authorship of the best-selling *Wolf Totem*.

However, once his real name was revealed, several people who had gone to Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution with him, including his first wife, criticized him. The gist of such criticism was that although Jiang might seem like a dissident, he was in fact someone with great political

ambition and the ability to be cruel even to his own family. Jiang, of course, in his interviews with *Beijing Youth Daily*, recounted all the major events in his life and labeled himself a romantic freedom activist and a victim of China's politics. Yet, he has undergone all the preferred training and steps needed to stay in elite society and become a Communist Party leader. In addition, in the same interview, he publicly admitted that he was proud to be a member of the elite society. For example, in response to many readers of *Wolf Totem* who argued that the notion of environmental protection was a rather new idea that had just become popular and therefore, the Rusticated Youth in the 1970s, like Chen Zhen in the novel, could not have known about it, Jiang declared that, as the son of a Communist Party cadre, he had access to semi-secretive journals, such as *Reference News*(cankao xiaoxi 参考消息), which were available only to cadres and their families at that time, and thus he was aware of the notion of environmental protection even before the Cultural Revolution. This kind of information was certainly not available to common people (laobaixing dou kanbudao 老百姓都看不到). Jiang Rong has thus given many mixed signals suggesting that he only presents himself as a historical freedom activist in order to achieve political recognition in modern times.

Another possible interpretation of his politically ambiguous life is that he has always been practicing his wolf philosophy. In order to succeed, he has been willing to change sides depending on who is in power, and he has

even been willing to sacrifice his family, as he did to his brother's family. As Jiang's first wife pointed out, the core of Jiang Rong's political ambition is the emperor complex (diwang qingjie shi Jiang Rong zhengzhi lixiang de hexin 帝王情結是姜戎政治理想的核心) (Yang). Jiang states in his epilogue that the reason why nomadic culture is superior to Han agrarian culture is because the latter lacks a sense of cruel competition as a matter of life and death (Jiang 365). Jiang certainly embraces this idea of competition wholeheartedly and faithfully records his belief in his story of the wolf.

## 5. The Invention of the Wolf Totem

A common practice in the field of social science research in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in China was to look for a Chinese counterpart of Western ideas. This occurred in the field of mythology when scholars attempted to construct a system of Chinese mythology as just as coherent and complex as Greek or Norse mythology. The same ambition has been pursued with totems as well. There has been an initiative to find totems for Chinese people that correspond to the totems of American Indians and Australian aborigines. In anthropology, a totem is a symbol, usually an animal or a plant, which represents an ethnic group. It is used to analyze and explain primitive cultures. The term totem was introduced into China in 1903 by Yan Fu (嚴復 1854-1921) in his translation of *History of Politics* (shehui tong quan 社會通詮) by Edward Jenks. Hence it became very popular in the academia in China. However, the assumption that every culture has a totem is dubious. Maybe Chinese people have never had a totem that matches the scientific sense of the term. Therefore in order for totems to be found, the term had to be used very loosely. But since the term itself has such a strong scientific connotation, when used, it tends to make the argument sound much more convincing. After all, it becomes another handy tool for ideological mass marketing.

Jiang Rong's *Wolf Totem* inspired tremendous new interest in totems. After its publication, the word "totem" became a buzzword in the pop culture in China. Several critics on the novel, in questioning the credibility of the wolf totem, found alternative animals to be the original totem of Chinese people, such as the bear (Ye). Novels on other animal totems also came out, such as Wang Han's 王晗 *Dog Totem* (gou tuteng 狗圖騰), which tells the story of how a dog won in his battle with wolves in the wild. Another example is a recent new Chinese translation of Herman Melville's famous novel, *Moby Dick* that came out three months after the release of *Wolf Totem*. Published by the People's Art Publishing House (dazhong wenyi chubanshe 大眾文藝出版社) the new translation was entitled *Whale Totem* (jing tuteng 鯨圖騰) in place of the old translation, *White Whale*. They introduced this book as an epic of maritime civilization just as the *Wolf Totem* is an epic for the inland civilization (Tong). The term totem was rarely seriously used in China and now the use of it has become part of pop culture due to the popularity of *Wolf Totem*.

Jiang Rong's invention of the wolf totem is ideologically oriented. The foundation of his idea of wolf totem and the evidence he draws from to support it, including historical documents and archeological findings, are both problematic. This might be overlooked since he is writing a novel, not an academic paper. However, the fact that Jiang Rong especially excluded the part of inventing the wolf totem from the text of the novel and included it in

his epilogue, originally intended as the outline of an academic talk, indicates that he intends it to be taken seriously. Choy argues in his critique that the style of the book “makes one wonder whether his selection of the fictional form merely compromises what began as a research paper.”

Jiang Rong’s proof of why the wolf totem is the most ancient totem for all Chinese people goes like this. First, recorded in *History of the Later Han* (hou han shu 後漢書) and *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government* (zizhi tongjian 資治通鑑), there were tribes with the names of White Wolf Qiang (bailang qiang 白狼羌) and White Dog Qiang (baiquan qiang or baigou qiang 白犬羌/白狗羌) and Dog Rong (quan rong 犬戎) appearing repeatedly from the Han to the Tang Dynasty. These prove that the White Wolf was used by some Qiang tribes as their totem. As for why the name White Dog also appears, Jiang Rong simply states that there are two possibilities: either the word gou/quan (dog) is just another way to say wolf; or, if not, it must refer to a wild dog that is even taller and fiercer than a wolf (Jiang 376). In fact, Namu shows in his studies that the word quan is a transliteration from the language of the Quanrong Tribe, an Altay language, and means wolf. However, Jiang Rong’s assertions were not based on solid research; they were merely bold statements.

Second, according to *A Brief Account of Chinese History* (Zhongguo tongshi jianlun 中國通史簡論) by Fan Wenlan 範文瀾, the tribe of Emperor

Yan with Jiang as its last name was descended from one tribe among the Qiang people. Therefore, Emperor Yan, a commonly-acknowledged ancestor of Han Chinese, was connected with the Qiang people. This is why Jiang Rong picks Jiang as his last name in order to associate himself with Emperor Yan and the Qiang people.

Third, according to one commentary of *Records of the Grand Historian: Annals of the Three August Rulers*<sup>2</sup>, (Shiji: sanhuang benji 史記：三皇本紀), whose title and author Jiang Rong does not specify, both the Yellow Emperor and Emperor Yan were sons of Shaodian 少典 (Jiang 369). Therefore the Yellow Emperor, the other commonly-acknowledged and perhaps more famous, ancestor of Han Chinese was also tied to the Qiang people. Therefore Jiang Rong concludes, since the ancestors of Han Chinese—the Yellow Emperor and Emperor Yan—were both ancestors to clans among the Qiang people, and one clan of the Qiang people used a wolf as its totem, then the wolf totem is the most ancient and influential totem for all Chinese people.

Jiang Rong's proof is problematic on several points:

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<sup>2</sup> The existence of *the Annals of the Three August Rulers* has not been proven. Some scholars over the centuries felt that there should have been a chapter about the three august rulers, so they assumed it was missing. Sima Zhen (司馬貞 679-732), an important commentator on the *Shiji* in the Tang Dynasty, wrote a chapter titled *the Annals of the Three August Rulers* in order to fill the vacancy. However, it is only included in some versions of the *Shiji*.

- 1) The fact that the White Wolf was used by some Qiang tribes as their totem cannot be generalized to conclude that each tribe of the Qiang had used the wolf totem.
- 2) The fact that some Qiang tribes used the wolf totem, and that Emperor Yan was descended from one Qiang tribe does not mean that Emperor Yan must be the descendent of the very Qiang tribe that used the wolf totem. Therefore, the association between Emperor Yan and the wolf totem cannot be validated.
- 3) Jiang Rong associates the Yellow Emperor and the wolf totem by arguing that the Yellow Emperor was a brother of Emperor Yan and thus must share the same ancestor. However, since the statement that Emperor Yan's tribe used the wolf totem is without foundation, nor is this one.

Given that the flaws in Jiang's reasoning are quite obvious, the degree of acceptance of Jiang's account is sad and shows the power of writing. Citing early documents brings out a sense of sacredness and mythic authority that serves to make the conclusion seem more convincing. There is no doubt that this power of writing to persuade people has largely been exploited by Jiang here.

Evidence Jiang Rong uses to support his invention of the wolf totem also includes jade dragons discovered in Hongshan 紅山, Liaoning 遼寧 province, and Sanxing Tala 三星他拉, Inner Mongolia, in 1971. These



eighteen pieces of jade dragons, found in great numbers and a variety of shapes, were dated from about 4700 BC to 2900 BC.

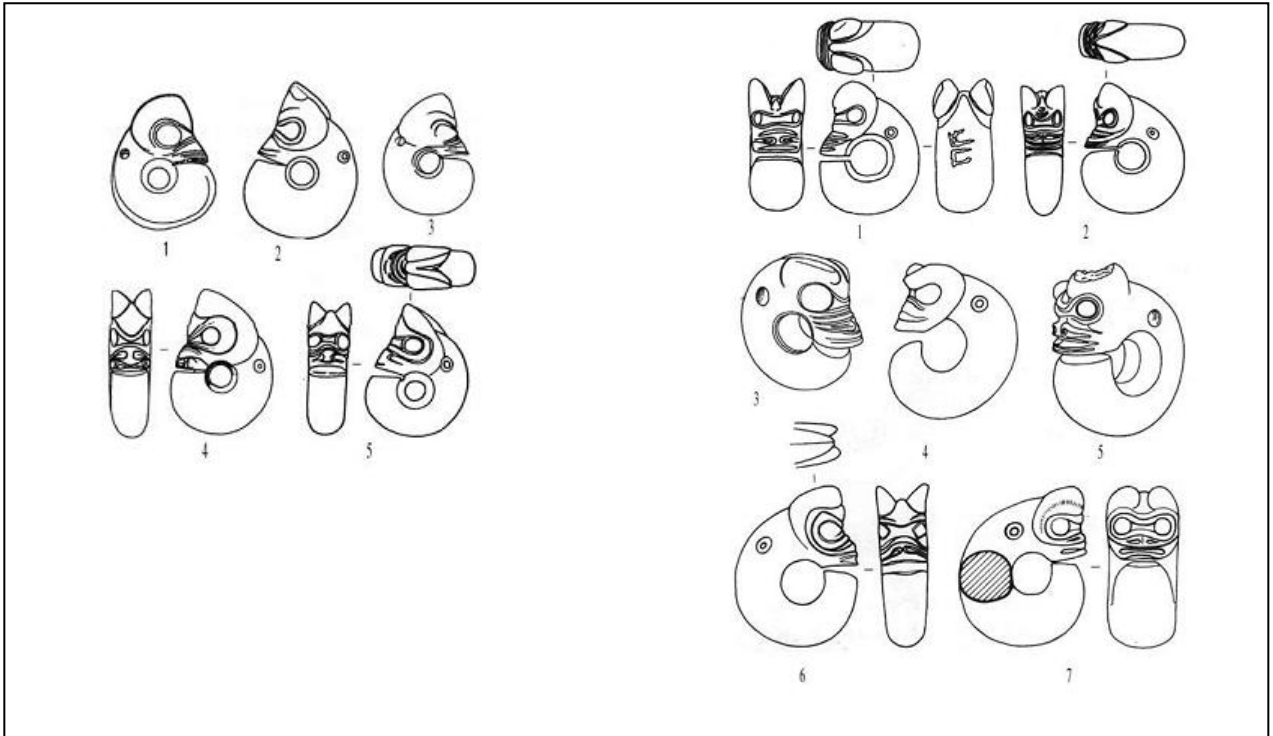


Figure 1

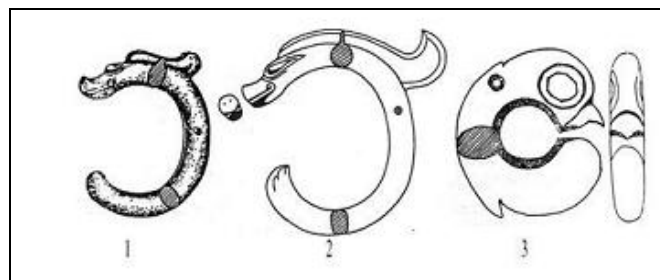


Figure 2

Indeed to identify these items as jade dragons was an arbitrary choice. It was done largely because the idea of a dragon totem is already deeply rooted in people's minds. After their initial naming, scholars and archaeologists further worked to differentiate the pieces. The jade pieces in the Figure 1 are commonly categorized as animal-headed dragon (shou shou long 獸首龍). The first two jade pieces in Figure 2 are categorized as pig-headed dragon (zhu shou long 豬首龍), while the third piece in Figure 2 is categorized as a bird-headed dragon (niao shou long 鳥首龍) (Suo and Li 62). These three categories are commonly used in this field but, as one can see from the illustrations in Figure 1 and 2; assigning these names is still very arbitrary. There are certainly other possibilities for categorizing their appearance. Jiang Rong unsurprisingly claims that they actually resemble a wolf head and therefore, they should be renamed as jade wolves. Jiang Rong, in the voice of his character Chen Zhen, gives readers an emotional account of how these jade dragons/wolves resemble the wolf cub he found, raised and lost in the novel. After Chen lists seven similarities between the wolf totem and the dragon totem, he makes another bold conclusion—that the wolf totem and dragon totem are in fact the same, and the dragon totem is derived from the wolf totem, with more features added. The added feathers, for instance, the body of a snake, fish scales and deer horns, show traces of an agrarian culture. Therefore, his final argument is that the wolf totem is the most ancient totem and it was created by Chinese people who lived in the

grasslands in ancient times. As Chinese ancestors moved into an agrarian culture, they added features of animals found in the central plains into their original totem, and hence the dragon totem came into being.

## 6. Retelling Chinese history

In the chapter “Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative” in *The Pursuit of Signs*, Culler presents a detailed analysis on narrative schemes. Narrative consists of two basic elements—its story and its discourse. A clear distinction between the two elements is the first step in understanding narratives. Following that, the narrative analyst needs to assume a definite temporal relationship between events that are presented, even though this temporal relationship is not specified in the narrative. Only after assuming a time frame for the events can the analyst establish a structure where the events can be fit into an order to be interpreted and valued. Therefore, the assumption of the time order of events is really important in narrative analysis. However, the author often intentionally hides the temporal relationship between events or misleads his readers to assume a false relationship in order to make the reading experience more intriguing, as Culler states:

Positing the priority of events to the discourse which reports or presents them, narratology establishes a hierarchy which the functioning of narratives often subverts by presenting events not as givens but as the products of discursive forces or requirements. (172)

Therefore, readers, or narrative analysts, have a risk of misinterpreting a story when “the convergence of meaning in the narrative discourse” (Culler

174) leads them to assume a non-existing temporal order of events. Culler uses the example of Oedipus to illustrate this point.

It had been prophesied that Oedipus would kill his son; Oedipus admits to having killed an old man at what may have been the relevant time and place; so when the shepherd reveals that Oedipus is in fact the son of Laius, Oedipus leaps to the conclusion, and every reader leaps with him, that he is in fact the murderer of Laius. (174)

When the meaning converges in different layers of the discourse, reader tends to assume a logic that could accommodate all the events together and assume that is what has happened instead of carefully examining the sequence of events. However, from the writer's perspective, if he intends to lead his reader to believe in groundless events, he could achieve this by making the meaning converge in his discourse.

Whether or not he is aware of this ability, Jiang Rong employs this manner of discourse often in his epilogue. An example of this is how he associates Emperor Yan and the Yellow Emperor to the Qiang tribes that used the wolf totem analyzed in the previous chapter. In his wordy rhetoric, Jiang Rong scatters some eye-catching phrases that have "convergence in meaning," such as "Emperor Yan's last name is Jiang" and "Emperor Yan and the Yellow Emperor were both sons of Shaodian," all in direct quote from early documents, in order to "leap to" his conclusion.

Narrative also has the power to establish an imagined community, a notion advanced by Benedict Anderson to describe a nation. A nation is an

imagined and limited political community. It is imagined in the sense that each member of it, under a common belief, assumes the existence of others without really knowing them. It is also limited in the sense that even the biggest nation has a boarder. According to Jonathan Culler, by manipulating the discourse one can tell “a competing narrative of origins” for a nation. (12) Every representation of history, including the version that is commonly known and accepted, has the agency and interpretation of the story-teller in it, so, in a sense, there can never be a “definite” or “true” historical narrative. Therefore, as long as the re-teller can find a consistent structure to rearrange all the historical events and fit them into his structure, it is possible to “produce a different identity” (12).

Jiang Rong creates his narrative structure by extensively employing bodily imagery of blood in the epilogue of the book. He uses the term wolfish blood three times, sheepish blood (*yangxue* 羊血) twice, transfusion forty-seven times, mixing blood or hybrid (*hunxue* 混血) fifteen times, and receiving blood (*shouxue* 受血) twice.

The basic idea is that wolfish blood is characterized by being strong, competitive and fierce; while the sheepish blood is characterized by being weak, submissive and conservative. The type of blood decides the personality or character and hence the strength of a person, here discussed on the national level. Jiang Rong connects bodily vitality to political power.

Jiang further argues that the type of blood is determined by the living environment. The grasslands will produce wolfish blood and character and the farmland will produce sheepish blood and character. Therefore, since in the very origin, before agriculture was invented, everybody was a herdsman, everybody must share the same kind of blood—the wolfish one. However, blood changed once the nomads became settled down in an agrarian culture. Since the agricultural economy is a self-sufficient one, people no longer had the need to compete with each other. Therefore, the sense of competition was lost as well as the strength. This is what has happened to the Han people, whereas since the northern ethnic minority groups have retained a nomadic lifestyle in the grasslands, their wolfish blood has not been diluted. Neither too much wolfishness nor too much sheepishness is a good thing, since too much sheepishness will lead to a weak nation, while too much wolfishness will lead to chaos. Balance is the key.

Based on this framework, Jiang Rong retells Chinese history, which is a history of the battle between wolfish blood and sheepish blood as well as of blood transfusions. Jiang uses four basic patterns in his retelling (Jiang 369-397):

- 1) For every war that Han people lost to northern minority groups, Jiang Rong explains it by sheep losing to wolves.

- 2) If both sides in the war were nomadic groups, then the one who entered the central land earlier would lose, since its wolfish blood would have been diluted for a longer time by agriculture. For example, despite the fact that they originated from the same ancestors, Emperor Yan was defeated by the Yellow Emperor. The reason for that is because Emperor Yan entered the central plains a couple of centuries earlier than the Yellow Emperor.
- 3) After each nomadic group won the war against Han Chinese, it would enter into the central land and begin a transfusion. This produced a better race with a good balance of the wolfish and sheepish blood.
- 4) The fact that each minority group's reign in China failed in the end is due to the fact that their wolfishness was worn down by the agrarian culture. For example, during the late-Qing period, when China was ruled by Manchus, China fell behind Western countries as well as Japan economically, politically and militarily.
- 5) The Han people who overthrew the minority group's reign and established new dynasties were extremely strong because they had a good balance of wolfish blood and sheepish blood to start with. For example, the founding emperors of the Sui and the Tang Dynasty (after the Period of Sixteen Kingdoms (shiliu guo 十六國) when almost all rulers of the kingdoms were from a northern ethnic group) and the Ming Dynasty (succeeding the Yuan Dynasty when China was ruled by Mongols) were both very worthy emperors.



With this framework, Jiang Rong fits in many well-known historical events, although this does not make his retelling credible. Despite appealing to some people, it is by no means a scholarly approach. In his framework, Jiang Rong groundlessly establishes a connection between blood in the biological sense and character/personality. Then by using the term “transfusion”, which also has a clear biological connotation and which most people will easily understand and accept, he obscures the fact that the mixing of blood is not analogical to the mixing of character.

By employing scientific terms, Jiang Rong gives his position some authority. However, if we really think about his arguments scientifically, they do not make sense. To say that the offspring of two people with different characters will end up with the average character of their parents is simply groundless. Yet that is what Jiang Rong has been doing in his entire lengthy epilogue.

## 7. Ideological Intension of *Wolf Totem*

As previously analyzed, the wolf totem is a concept invented by Jiang Rong. Then the question is why does he want to invent a totem for Chinese people now? In one interview, Jiang Rong revealed that he wrote *Wolf Totem* because the national identity crisis of Chinese people has to be given great attention to and to be properly dealt with now (Zhongguo de guomin xingge wenti yijing dao le bixu renzhen zhongshi he jieju de shihou le 中國的國民性格問題，已經到了必須認真重視和解決的時候了) (Ding and Ying).

Clearly, Jiang's work has a strong ideological intension and wolf totem is his means of helping Chinese people alleviate the identity problem. Attention to the national identity is not a novel idea in China. Ever since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when Chinese people suddenly realized that they could not compete with Western countries and Japan, especially after the gate of China was opened by force, generations of Chinese people have suffered an acute crisis of national identity.

Lu Xun (魯迅 1881-1936) and Wen Yiduo (聞一多 1899-1946) were two famous figures among others who first tried to address this issue. Lu Xun and Wen Yiduo both focused on how to unite people because in their time when China was facing the Japanese invasion, Chinese people acted as “a

plate of loose sand without a national idea (*meiyou guanjia guannian de yipan sansha* 沒有國家觀念的一盤散沙) (Wen 365). Since China was weak, it was ridiculed by the West as a “sleeping lion” (*shuishi* 睡獅). This produced anxiety and led to all kinds of responses to try to reform the nation. The weapon Wen Yiduo employed to convey his idea was the totem. In his “Research on Fu Xi” (*Fu Xi kao* 伏羲考), Wen draws supporting evidences from early documents as well as archeological findings to declare that the dragon is the totem for all Chinese people.

The dragon totem did help unite Chinese people during the first half the 20<sup>th</sup> century as China won against Japan in the Second World War and the People’s Republic of China was founded on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1949. The idea that Chinese people are the descendants of the dragon has perpetuated its popularity, in the sense that people easily identify themselves with the dragon. The dragon has also become a symbol of China and Chinese people that is internationally recognized.

However, this symbolic animal has not solved the identity crisis for Chinese people. It is true that when talking about totems, Chinese people would most likely think about the dragon. However, this is only true in a literary sense. Chinese people threw away their long-time dominating ideology, Confucian values, during the Cultural Revolution; they stepped away from class struggle after the Cultural Revolution, and have pledged

less zealously to Communism since now the market economy has brought prosperity into people's lives. In fact, the identity crisis of Chinese people might be most severe right now.

Jiang Rong was aware of this and aimed at prescribing a timely solution for Chinese people. In early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the government of China phrased its foreign policy as China's peaceful rise (Zhongguo heping jueqi 中國和平崛起), which was later rephrased as China's peaceful development (Zhongguo heping fazhan 中國和平發展) in order to remove the connotation of a threat indicated by the term "rise." At such a time, a promotion for fierce competition and celebration of strength matched perfectly with the nation's ambition. Foreign readers were surprised to see how *Wolf Totem* could be permitted for publication as it harshly criticized Han Chinese (Mirsky). However, there is really no reason to ban this book as what it does is to wake up the "sleeping lion" once and for all by waking up the inner wolf in Chinese people's minds, Han or non-Han (Jiang 377).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have studied the best-selling novel *Wolf Totem* by Jiang Rong, with a focus on its epilogue, where the author gives a systematic summary of the concept of the wolf totem and a far-fetched narrative of Chinese history. This novel has won great market success both in and out of China. Apart from its entertaining value, I argue that its popularity with Chinese readers is because it satisfies Chinese people's desires in two ways: first, competition and victory at any cost is justified and celebrated; second, it argues that the very weapon for China to regain her power in the international arena lies right in the Chinese people's blood—there is no need to learn from other nations. This implication could be a great boost for the spirit of Chinese people who have suffered the national identity crisis for a prolonged period. Quite differently, this novel's appeal to foreign readers lies more in its concern about environmental protection as well as its implication about the proper way to deal with the relationship between nomads and settlers.

Focusing on the invention of the wolf totem, I have examined the supporting evidence Jiang Rong employs including early documents and archeological findings. However, all of them are invalidated by scholarly research and cannot stand up to scrutiny. In his retelling of Chinese history,

Jiang Rong associates a bodily metaphor—blood—with character/personality and uses scientific terms to add some authority to his statements. Again his statements are groundless. But his success with the readers shows the power of science, history, and writing, which can be dangerously exploited to serve ideological purposes.

If we look at the tradition of conveying an ideological agenda by inventing history, it can be traced all the way back to the Classic period. Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 started the debate on Ancient History (gushi bian 古史辨) almost a century ago, trying to tackle down this unscientific tradition of distorting history. Yet *Wolf Totem* shows us that tradition is far from dying out; on the contrary, it enjoys great popularity and will likely continue to do so as long as its inventions fit people's cultural desire.

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