

“Nature, Red in Tooth and Claw”: Jiang Rong’s “Wolf Totem”

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Bookshelf,Others

Post by Brenda Black

Jiang Rong’s autobiographical novel *Wolf Totem* was one of the group reads for the **Global Environment Summer Academy** held at the Rachel Carson Center last August. It recounts the experiences of a Chinese college student, Chen Zhen (the author’s alter ego), sent to live among the nomadic herders of Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. The young man is fascinated by the grasslands and the customs and culture of the people he is living among. The sheepherders live in constant conflict with the wolves as they try to protect their herds from attacks by the hungry animals, but also honor and revere them, returning their dead to the heavens (“sky burial”) through the agency of the wolves. This world is in danger, however, from the Chinese government, which is sending immigrants to settle and plow the grasslands in order to help feed China’s growing population.

The novel is a moving portrait of a world and a lifestyle on the verge of extinction, of what happens when outsiders invade this world and try to use it for their own purposes. Even the protagonist, who loves the grasslands and is eager to understand them, manages to commit a grave transgression, one that is the result of ingrained attitudes and thought patterns that he does not succeed in overcoming. Like the rest of the Chinese settlers and workers, he ultimately sees nature as something that can be used and mastered. Although his desire to raise a wolf pup is born of his reverence for the animals and his desire to know them better rather than to destroy or enslave them, his actions nonetheless are an attempt to assert dominance, to control and possess the object of his study. He realizes too late the error that he has committed.

The novel also offers, among other things, a clearly-illustrated lesson on how ecosystems work, how nature consists of an intricate system of checks and balances, and how if any single element is removed, the entire system threatens to collapse. The wolves

keep the mice, gazelles, rabbits, and marmots in check, animals that would otherwise overgraze the grasslands and trample the earth to dust. Yet even the mice play a vital role in maintaining the health of the grasslands, storing grass in their burrows and thus offering food for other animals as well during the winter months.

None of this offers groundbreaking insights into the ways humans interact with their environment. What is unusual, it seems to me, are some of the metaphors the author uses to shape the novel.

Environmental discourses often portray nature as passive, something in need of our stewardship and protection. The language may be gendered, assigning nature characteristics that are symbolically feminine: the fruitful, fertile earth, the source of life but also a receptacle which is acted upon and lacks a will or power of its own. This is where Rong's vision of nature (as seen by the Mongolian nomads) is so refreshing. It avoids a paternalistic approach towards nature as well as sentimental nature worship. Nature is deified, but not as nurturing mother, as harmony: The grasslands are nothing less than a battlefield on which a never-ending struggle among the various inhabitants is fought.

Although the nomads revere the wolf, the grasslands, the sky, and the landscape are the true divinity, the "big life." The wolves are part of the "small life," at most the servants of this divine nature, there to defend the grass from the threats the various grazers present. Survival is a bloody, vicious, and merciless affair: an injured wolf may bite off his own paw in order to be able to continue running and fighting, while a wolf whose teeth have lost their sharpness is doomed to starvation and certain death. Intelligence and sharp wits are necessary, and the wolves are masters of strategy. This is a nature that cannot be tamed and domesticated, as Chen Zhen finds out when he attempts to raise a wolf pup. This refusal to portray nature as something peaceful and harmonious, as "non-dangerous," is refreshing, for it acknowledges nature's wildness.

And yet it is precisely the militarism in the nature metaphor which made me uncomfortable at times. Inevitably, other symbolism often associated with wolves comes to mind: namely the comparison of soldiers with predators who direct their violence against the weak and defenseless, who are full of cruelty and bloodlust. True, there is no cruelty in the wolves' slaughter of the gazelles. But when humans wage war there frequently is.

Do we not already have sufficient evidence of the damage wrought—upon humans and landscape alike—by wars fought for nationalistic or economic reasons, by aggression of humans against humans? In this context, the metaphor “nature as battlefield” suddenly seems less desirable, less a model to be imitated and more a reminder of past transgressions (Agent Orange, the “war” against agricultural pests which took the form of DDT, our fight to outwit nature and tame the various natural disasters which it presents). How then, can one reasonably argue that war is a viable description of what our relationship to nature *should* be? Is there no other way?

Perhaps it is misleading to frame the metaphor this way: this struggle between the inhabitants of the steppes—can we really refer to it as a war?

In spite of the violence, life on the grasslands is a battle waged without hatred. It lacks the attempt to dominate, to subjugate, to gain the upper hand. The terms “enemy” and “ally” are meaningless. The nomads must constantly defend their herds from the ravages of the wolves, they even engage in annual wolf hunts to decimate the packs, but at the same time they honor and respect the wolves, for the wolves prevent the gazelles from destroying the grassland pastures upon which their flocks depend. It is notable that the ecosystem Rong portrays is one in which the nomadic herders are an integral part. Humans are not portrayed as invaders upon or “outside of” nature, but rather part of it—and they must understand and follow its rules or face disaster.

It is perhaps also worth noting that this conception of humans and nature is not an individualistic one. Although the passive, unthinking herd behavior of the sheep is criticized, nonetheless this is not a worldview in which the individual is seen as the highest good, in which one’s own interests come before the interests of others. The individual is an active part of a group, and the needs of this community come first, just as the wolves work together in their hunting parties.

This refusal to reduce the battle to black and white, good and bad, is one important lesson of the book. It asks us to look at nature as a system rather than from an anthropocentric perspective, to consider events based on *all* their ramifications rather than evaluating them based on what their immediate effects are for us. (One might consider, for example, the case of forest fires in the United States, where for decades fires were diligently extinguished because of the danger they represented to human lives and property, without understanding the role the fires played in maintaining the forest

ecosystem. Do we really think that humans are immune to natural disasters? And do we really have the right to try to exclude ourselves from this cycle?)

Unfortunately, the ending of *Wolf Totem* suggests that we may not be capable of abandoning these dichotomies. Throughout the book, the Chinese students constantly make precisely this mistake, assuming that because the wolves are a threat, they must be conquered and eliminated. Even many of the nomads, when given a chance, are quite happy to assist in the slaughter of the wolves. They are motivated by ambition and the desire for fame, cash, or revenge, and the slaughter is further encouraged by government quotas which put a price on each wolf killed. The pressures of modernity on the one hand, and human egoism on the other, are simply too great. And so the wolves die, and the grasslands with them.

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