

Keepers of the Big Life

BY LI MIAO LOVETT

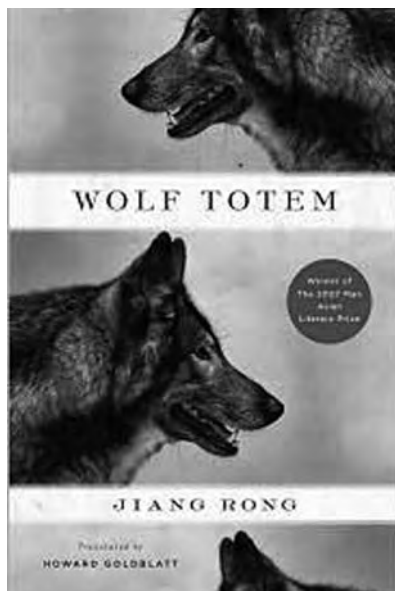
One of the first dramatic scenes in *Wolf Totem* depicts a thorough, seemingly ruthless massacre of Chinese warhorses by Mongolian wolves. In the midst of a blinding “white-haired” blizzard, every last horse groomed for Mao’s Red Army is driven to death by wolves who dominate the grasslands not only through sheer strength and cunning, but also through the willingness of pack members to sacrifice their own lives.

Taken out of context, these depictions of the wolf as king of the savage steppes have fueled the cult-like status that Jiang Rong’s novel has attained in China. Military generals and entrepreneurs are some of *Wolf Totem*’s biggest fans. The novel sold more than a million copies in China in its first year, and some six million copies on the black market.

Yet the larger message delivered by its author has apparently been lost on the masses. Jiang Rong is the pseudonym for a Beijing professor who spent 11 years living amidst the Mongols in the 1960s, during the early years of the People’s Republic. Tucked between the cinematic moments where humans and wolves take their turns in conquest are explicit statements such as these: “Grass is the big life, yet it is the most fragile, the most miserable life. . . . For us Mongols, there’s nothing more deserving of pity than grass.” That’s Bilgee talking, the wise old Mongol who serves as the voice of conscience just as a growing population of Han Chinese infiltrate the grasslands. His words are foreboding: “When you kill off the big life of the grassland, all the little lives are doomed.”

Wolf Totem pays homage to the land as much as it does to its charismatic wolves, whom nomadic Mongols both fear and revere. Wolves kill sheep and horses, but they also eat marmots and field mice. Without predators, these critters would run rampant on the grasslands, denude the landscape and transform it into barren desert.

Wolf Totem
By Jiang Rong
The Penguin Press, 2008
544 pages, \$26.95



The encroaching Gobi desert is a real threat to the Mongol way of life, and the novel’s protagonist, Chen Zhen, can only watch as his countrymen take charge and order the decimation of wolves without awareness of the ensuing disaster. Their attitude is portrayed by a middle school student who has assumed leadership as a Communist Red Guard, and declares that, “Wolves are the true class enemies. Reactionaries throughout the world are all ambitious wolves.” It is ironic that, forty years later, Chinese CEOs have adopted *Wolf Totem* as a symbol of can-do capitalism.

Jiang Rong’s depiction of wolves goes far beyond the dominance of predator over prey and the competitive spirit that today’s upwardly mobile Chinese

are touting. The wolves may seem merciless in killing, but they are in fact the keepers of the “big life.” Little goes to waste on the grasslands. After a pack of wolves drive an entire flock of gazelles into a frozen lake, the Mongols enjoy their share of the meat, and the wolves also have enough food into the next season stored in nature’s icebox.

The novel abounds with passages that convey the Beijing professor’s deep understanding of the complex web of life on the grasslands. At times this detracts from the narrative flow of *Wolf Totem*, which lacks the seamlessness of allegorical novels by the contemporary writer Mo Yan. Yet there are a number of poignant scenes that use a spare means to portray the Mongols’ respect for wolves. When the Han Chinese declare open hunting season on the wolves, Batu, the herder held responsible for the warhorse massacre, manages to corner a wily alpha male wolf at the edge of a dirt road. Having chewed off its injured leg, the wolf is unable to leap onto the raised surface. But instead of finishing it off, Batu quietly smokes his cigarette until the wolf claws away at the topsoil and sand. When it succeeds in getting away, he buries the cigarette butts in the earth, noting that “the grassland cannot tolerate carelessness.”

Chen Zhen's insistence on adopting a wolf cub raises many ethical issues in the latter half of the story. After he and a fellow Chinese student raid a wolf den, five of the seven cubs are destroyed, mostly females, but he keeps the spunkiest male in a warren dug into the ground. When the cub outgrows his pen, he keeps the animal tethered on a leash, yet remains unable to control its wild instincts. Chen Zhen is utterly fascinated with the young wolf's display of strength and intelligence. His devotion is both scholarly and mystical, but ultimately, Chen exhibits a fatal blind spot. The virgin grassland, "a green carpet manicured by Tengger," the god of the Mongols, is fast disappearing under the yoke of his fellow Chinese.

With the influx of Han Chinese, housing developments spring up and the military overtake the grasslands in an all-out showdown with the wolves, who are merely seen

as a threat to the agrarian way of life. The Mongols, who think of themselves as kindred spirits to the wolves, show contempt for the sheep-like mentality of the Chinese. But in the end these nomads succumb, like their wild compatriots, to the relentless onslaught of men and machines from Maoist China.

Years later, when Chen Zhen returns to visit his host family, the Mongol way of life has been destroyed, and dust storms engulf the landscape all the way to Beijing. It is a telling prophecy, as the Communist government today is unable to put more than a dent in the city's air pollution problems in time for the Olympics. With the accelerated destruction of farmland and the natural environment, much more is at stake for the Chinese than their pride. The Mongolian tale bears a lesson for the rest of us, as even the least mystically inclined could heed the message borne by the keepers of the wolf totem.