

CULTURE MATTERS

Comrades: The Chinese LGBT Film Festival

When Beijing University students tried to launch a gay film festival on campus in 2001, representatives of the Ministry of Public Security showed up in plain clothes and shut down the event. The organizers tried again in 2005, but despite careful efforts to limit publicity for the event, the film festival was exposed and banned from the campus. This summer, several Chinese Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) films were successfully screened with no hassles—this time in New York City. Asia Catalyst, an NGO that supports grassroots human rights advocacy throughout the region, hosted “Comrades: The Chinese LGBT Film Festival” in solidarity with these intrepid festival organizers.

The weekend-long showcase featured four films from the festivals banned in Beijing. These compelling stories reveal glimpses of the lesbian, gay, and transgender experience in contemporary China. *East Palace, West Palace* (《东宫西宫》, 1996) may be the first Chinese film to explicitly explore homosexuality in China. *Tangtang* (《唐唐》, 2004) uses documentary and fictional filmmaking techniques to tell the story of a

September 5–7, 2008
The LGBT Community Center
208 West 13th Street
New York City

For copies or more information on hosting your own showing, please contact Yang Yang at oignon@163.com.



transvestite performer’s cross-gender love affair. In *Butterfly* (《蝴蝶》, 2004), a schoolteacher’s chance encounter with a seductive singer reawakens memories of an adolescent lesbian fling and sparks a journey of rediscovery. Blending realism and fantasy, *Welcome to Destination Shanghai* (《目的地上海》, 2003) features a collection of vignettes that examine the underground sex trade and those living on the fringe in glittery Shanghai.

Letters written to Asia Catalyst by one of the organizers of the original Chinese LGBT film festivals describe the poignant—and often vexing—story of their repeated attempts to screen these films in Beijing. The organizers used a variety of strategies, including cell phone text messaging and underground publicity, but were blocked at every turn. True to its title, “Banned in Beijing, Out in New York,” the film festival was finally brought to fruition on

September 5–7, 2008, at the LGBT Community Center in New York City.

For the full text of the aforementioned letters, see: <http://www.asiacatalyst.org/comrades/history>.

(In)Human Scale

BY CLAIRE KELLS

Up the Yangtze opens with the otherworldly noise of a luxury cruise ship scraping through a lock in the massive Three Gorges Dam, setting the mood for this documentary’s elegiac look at a handful of the two million people to be displaced by the imminent and inexorable rise of the Yangtze’s waters.

Up the Yangtze (2007)
Directed by Yung Chang
Running Time: 93 minutes
Mandarin with English subtitles

Canadian director Yung Chang focuses mainly on the lives of two young people as they go to work on a “farewell cruise” catering to Western tourists taking in the spectral Yangtze River landscape before it is immersed under a colossal man-made lake. Yu Shui, nicknamed Cindy by the ship’s managers, comes from a family of illiterate

subsistence farmers and is sent to work despite her desire to continue schooling. Her parents' struggle against their grim economic situation and their desire to give their studious children a chance to make it in the new China touchingly illustrates the challenges facing multitudes of poor families.

In contrast, Chen Boy, nicknamed Jerry, is a brash "little emperor" who, because he speaks some English, is put to work where he can interact with the tourists, all the while chasing eagerly after their generous tips. Yung Chang makes an excellent choice in following both of these engrossing young people, and viewers are rewarded with the pair's openness as they deal with the frustrations and shocks of adolescence and first jobs.

The film interweaves shots of luxuriating tourists with those of workers toiling to support that leisure, and pits

the spin spouted by tour guides against the cruel realities that displaced residents face. Together, these juxtapositions neatly illustrate the ironies and contradictions caused by the enormous environmental and economic changes in the Yangtze River basin. Thankfully, Yung Chang never dwells too ponderously on the metaphors his film creates; rather, he employs only minimal narration and allows the landscape and people he films to evoke the human and environmental costs of China's unbridled development.

Although the Three Gorges Dam is a monumental project, the human scale of this well-crafted and moving film—echoing recent offerings like *Manufactured Landscapes* and *Still Life* (reviewed in *China Rights Forum* No. 1, 2008)—challenges the inhuman scale of the dam itself.

China's Rich Scientific Past

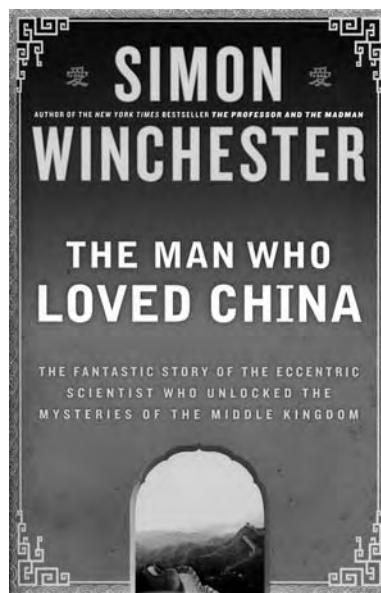
BY ROGER GARSIDE

The book's title refers to Joseph Needham (1900–1995), whose multi-volume *magnum opus*, *Science and Civilization in China*, continued beyond his death under the direction of the Needham Research Institute at the University of Cambridge. After 60 years the work now stretches across 24 books, organized into seven volumes, presenting the history of Chinese science and civilization to non-Chinese readers.

For decades, Needham, whose Cambridge academic career began in biochemistry, was the intellectual and administrative driving force behind this vast undertaking. He conceived the idea for the project, wrote most of the early volumes, and edited later ones.

In 1984, Lynn White Jr., Professor Emeritus of History at UCLA and a past president of the American History of Science Society, called Needham "the world's greatest scholar in

The Man Who Loved China: The Fantastic Story of the Eccentric Scientist Who Unlocked the Mysteries of the Middle Kingdom
By Simon Winchester
HarperCollins, 2008
316 pages, \$27.95



the comparative study of civilizations . . . unique in the grandeur of his vision, and his epic ambitions." According to White, Needham was prolific in his publications while driven by one clear vision.

Needham was inspired to undertake his ground-breaking work during World War II while he was in China directing the British government's program of assistance to Chinese scientists. He discovered that, contrary to the view almost universally held in the West at that time, China had been the world's most technologically-advanced society from about 500 BC to 1500 CE. He set out to research the history of this phenomenon and make it known to the Western world. In addition, he questioned why "modern science" did not continue to develop in China after the sixteenth century?

According to scholars like White, while

Needham brilliantly succeeded in researching and presenting Chinese scientific achievements, he never answered this final question to the satisfaction of himself or others. Indeed, White argued that Needham posed the wrong question. He would have done better to ask why “modern science” developed in Europe, rather than address the negative question of why it did not in China.

Winchester is the first person to publish a book-length biography of Needham. He is not a scientist, an historian, or a China specialist, but rather a talented and enterprising freelance writer who once served as a foreign correspondent in Asia for various publications. He is also a gifted raconteur, bringing to life Needham’s adventures in China during World War II, his relationships with both his fellow academics at Cambridge and his wives, and his disastrous foray into world politics. Winchester does justice to Needham as an exciting, intensely passionate, and highly adventurous man with great intellectual ambition. In addition, he usefully reproduces Needham’s impressive list of Chinese inventions and discoveries with dates of first mention. However, Winchester ultimately fails to convey the brilliance and excitement of Needham’s deep and scholarly exploration of a vast range of topics.

The core of this book should have been in Chapter 5, *The Making of a Masterpiece*, but in the meager 30 pages accorded to Needham’s monumental work Winchester does not adequately examine the intellectual challenges that Needham addressed. He could have allowed passages of Needham’s own elegant prose to speak for themselves and included assessments of other writers, such as Professor White; Maurice Cowling, the Cambridge historian whose excellent biographical essay for *The New Criterion* in 1993 captures—in just over a dozen pages—something of the greatness of the man; or the brilliant Cambridge polymath (and authority on early Chinese music) Laurence Picken, who called an early volume of Needham’s *magnum opus* “perhaps the greatest single act of historical synthesis and intercultural communication ever attempted by one man.”

It is distasteful that a biography of a man who possessed great intellect and noble spirit—of whom the literary critic George Steiner once wrote, “Proust and Needham have made of remembrance both an act of moral justice

and of high art”—should be given a title as vulgar as this one. The book is marred by slapdash writing that a good editor would have corrected. There are glaring repetitions and inconsistencies. Furthermore, the dust-jacket description of this reviewer’s edition is seriously misleading: it states, quite wrongly, that the work “tells the sweeping history of China . . . through the story of one man,” when in fact the book does nothing of the sort. It also asserts that Needham solved “one of the great unanswered questions of history.” We have already seen that in the opinion of highly qualified scholars Needham did not succeed in answering the great question he posed.

In the prologue, Winchester claims that Needham’s *Science and Civilization in China* “stands today alongside the greatest of the world’s great encyclopedias and dictionaries as a monument to the power of human understanding.” In the epilogue, however, he acknowledges that Needham never fully worked out the answer to his own question, commenting that he was perhaps too close to his subject, “seeing many trees but not enough forest,” and then concludes that “the great strength of his books lay in their ability to catalog the early promise of Chinese science.”

A monument to the power of human understanding or a great catalog? Winchester does not seem to have a clear answer in his own mind.

Winchester also asserts that Needham was “unarguably the foremost student of China in the entire world.” How could he make this claim without considering Professor John King Fairbank of Harvard, a close contemporary of Needham’s, doyen of China scholars in America and joint initiator of the sixteen-volume *The Cambridge History of China*?

Those who would like to read a book that sets Needham’s intellectual achievements in the context of his life and times will find Winchester disappointing. One hopes that a biographer will soon come forward who will give the educated layman who has neither access nor time to read the many volumes of *Science and Civilization in China* an assessment and presentation of his work that does justice not only to the ambition and the cataloguing, but also to the true greatness of the man.

Keepers of the Big Life

BY LI MIAO LOVETT

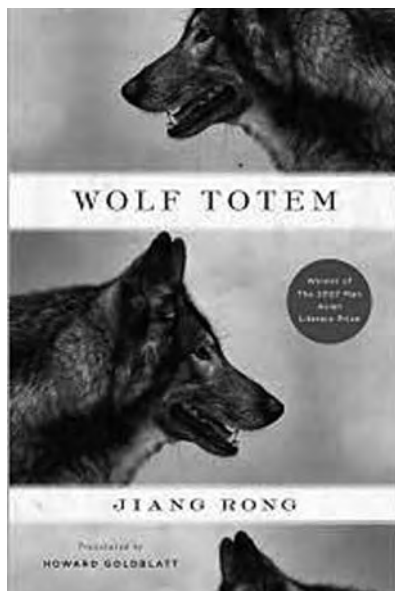
One of the first dramatic scenes in *Wolf Totem* depicts a thorough, seemingly ruthless massacre of Chinese warhorses by Mongolian wolves. In the midst of a blinding “white-haired” blizzard, every last horse groomed for Mao’s Red Army is driven to death by wolves who dominate the grasslands not only 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.