

Wolves and Wolf Men as Literary Tropes and Figures of Thought: Jiang Rong's *Wolf Totem* and other Wolf Narratives in Eco-poetic and Zoopoetic Perspective

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Abstract

Jiang Rong's international bestseller, *Wolf Totem* (Chinese original 2004, English translation 2009) presents wolves as agents of ecological balance in a world increasingly thrown out of kilter by modernity, and laments their extinction in the grasslands of Inner Mongolia. The novel was greeted in the West as evidence of China's awakening to environmental consciousness. However, its portrayal of wolfish nature also has a darker side. This essay shows how it relates to a tradition of narratives in which wolves and wolf men serve as figures of thought conveying ambiguous social and political messages. The different dimensions of Rong's conception of wolves and wolfishness are examined and his novel is compared with wolf stories by Jack London, Hermann Löns and Otto Alscher. Viewed in an eco-poetic perspective, the wolf is a literary trope through which a complex understanding of nature and our human relationship with it is configured. Seen from a zoopoetic perspective, it is associated with conceptions of human-animal relations and human animality, and serves as a social and political role model. The success of Rong's book is explained not least by the different levels of meaning of the wolf trope and its openness to different interpretations.

Jiang Rong's international bestseller, *Wolf Totem* (Chinese original 2004, English translation 2009) is, like a number of other earlier narratives concerning wolves which will be discussed more briefly in the following, of interest from both an eco-poetic and a zoopoetic perspective.

On the one hand, the novel can be read as an ecological *Bildungsroman*, recounting the protagonist's progression from fear of wolves and desire to exterminate them to appreciation of the part they play in maintaining the ecological balance in the grassland steppes of the Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia, and acceptance of their presence. Engaging creatively and critically with the environmental challenges facing life on earth, and participating in the ongoing

process of defining their ethical implications, it is patently of interest to ecocritics.¹ Although the formal structures and techniques in *Wolf Totem* are neither complex nor particularly innovative, the novel is also an appropriate object for *ecopoetic* study, inasmuch as it depicts ecological systems and processes including the human relationship with the natural environment in narratives, images, tropes and formal structures drawn from and adapting cultural tradition.²

Rong's novel exemplifies a shift in the public perception of wolves which has taken place over the course of the twentieth century (perhaps later in China than in the West), whereby the role these animals play in wilderness ecosystems as top predators, preventing overgrazing by keeping the ungulate population in check, and thereby preserving biodiversity, has gained recognition and caught the public imagination. Once feared as ferocious beasts and reviled as rapacious enemies of humanity, wolves are increasingly perceived as handsome and impressive creatures whose survival is endangered by the loss of their habitat to agricultural and industrial development by an ever expanding human population. The wolf has joined the panda, the polar bear and the elephant as a symbol of disappearing species, a mark of our diminishing and impoverishing of the biosphere. Wolves have become objects of protection, reintroduction and management, exemplifying the plight of the animal kingdom in the age of man (see Marvin). One of a series of Chinese wolf narratives since the 1990s demonstrating the environmental turn in the nation's literature and public consciousness, *Wolf Totem* spells out the damage to the environment caused by Beijing bureaucrats seeking to increase agricultural production by eradicating wolves in Mongolia. It also describes the passing of a nomadic way of life, which was simple and harsh, but dignified and sustainable, and its replacement by a sedentary

¹ The novel has been the subject of three articles alone in *ISLE*, the flagship journal of studies in literature and environment: see Varsava, He, and Hong.

² While the term 'ecopoetics' has been most often used for the analysis and theorising of forms of poetry, it is equally applicable to prose fiction such as Jiang Rong's, nonfiction, drama, and indeed to cinema and art. Jonathan Skinner chose *Ecopoetics* as the name for the literary magazine which he edited 2001-2007, publishing avant-garde work that was "dedicated to exploring creative-critical edges between writing (with an emphasis on poetry) and ecology (the theory and praxis of deliberate earthlings)". (The programmatic statement is repeated in the front matter of each issue.) Skinner has written since, in a blog entitled "What is ecopoetics?": "For some readers, ecopoetics is the making and study of pastoral poetry, or poetry of wilderness and deep ecology. [...] For others, it is [...] not a matter of theme, but of how certain poetic methods model ecological processes like complexity, non-linearity, feedback loops, and recycling.[...] Rather than locate a 'kind' of writing as 'ecopoetic', it may be more helpful to [...] shift the focus from themes to topoi, tropes and entropologies, to institutional critique of 'green' discourse itself, and to an array of practices converging on the *oikos*, the planet earth that is the only home our species currently knows."

existence which, for all the comforts it affords, does not result in greater wellbeing, and is environmentally unsustainable.

However, this reading of the book as a story of conversion from a thoughtless instrumental approach to nature to understanding the limits to growth and the fragility of ecosystems (see for instance Varsava) ignores an important aspect of the work, one which would be more prominent but for the cuts made by its English translator. Rong advocates wolfish ruthlessness as a model for human behaviour and calls for a wolfish regeneration of the nation so as to equip China to triumph over its competitors in a Darwinian geopolitical struggle. The complex meaning of wolves in novels such as *Wolf Totem* and the ambivalent fascination they have exercised in modern culture call for critical scrutiny from a *zoopoetic* as well as a merely *ecopoetic* perspective, in the sense of critical analysis of the use of animals in images and narratives representing not only real animals and their lives, but also human behaviour, human conflicts and dilemmas in animal form.³

The twenty-first-century Chinese novel draws on a tradition of realist wild animal stories portraying wolves as savage, but nonetheless idealising their wildness, in whose shaping Jack London played a central role with his short novel, *The Call of the Wild* (1903). And it shares the curious fusion of diametrically opposed conceptions of nature as a desirable state of harmony and a site of internecine struggle for survival which we find in the early twentieth-century German narratives of wolves and wolf men by Hermann Löns and Otto Alscher. While this idealisation of the wolf was by no means limited to Germany, it found especially clear formulation there in the *völkisch* (racist-nationalist) thinking and writing which was popular from the 1890s on, and which culminated in the National Socialists' fantasies of ruthless Aryan wolf soldiers in the Third Reich. Like London, Löns and Alscher, Rong combines realistic description of animal life worlds and behaviour with use of the wolf as a symbol for a quality of wildness which is perceived as under threat in modern civilisation. While the mixed messages about wolves which Rong sends and the parallels between *Wolf Totem* and the work of Jack London have been the subject of

³ The term is, like 'ecopoetics', a relatively recent coinage. Aaron Moe has restricted zoopoetics to the study of poetry, and defined it intriguingly (informed by recent research in biosemiotics) as "the process of discovering innovative breakthroughs in form through an attentiveness to another species' bodily poiesis" (11). He is above all concerned with the ways in which poets' engagements with the lives of animals yield formal poetic innovations. My understanding of zoopoetics is a broader one, relating to all forms of literary and artistic making, and merely requiring the presence of nonhuman animals as agents within narratives, images, or figures of thought.

critical comment (see Lütkehaus, Kubin, Ma), neither the extent of what Rong shares with early twentieth-century animal stories, nor the role of the ‘wolf’ literary trope in the striking success of his novel has so far received closer attention.

1. *Wolf Totem*: author, story, genre, inspiration

The novel *Wolf Totem* is a fictional account of life in the grasslands of China’s northern border region in the 1970s, which draws on the personal experience of the author. Rong’s studies in Beijing were interrupted by the Cultural Revolution. To avoid being sent to the country and having to live under strict conditions in a military environment, in 1967 he volunteered to work with the nomadic herdsman in one of China’s most backward regions, north-central Inner Mongolia. He was to spend eleven years there, before being permitted to return to the capital, and eventually forging a career as a political scientist. Chen Zhen, the autobiographical figure on whom the action in *Wolf Totem* is focused, is the son of a man branded by Mao’s Red Guards as a capitalist and “reactionary academic authority” (20). Alienated by the destructive ignorance of the Red Guards, he leaves Beijing with a group of friends in search of the “primitivism and freedom” (34) in a part of Mongolia which is given the fictional name ‘Olonbulag’.

The main story in Rong’s novel concerns Chen’s relationship with a wolf. During his time on Mongolia, the author became interested in the Mongolians’ history and culture, including their veneration of wolves. According to the brief information “About the Author” included in the front material of the Penguin edition of *Wolf Totem*, he studied wolves and raised an orphaned wolf cub. From the novel’s opening chapters, Chen is drawn to the animals’ strength, cunning and ferocity. He steals a wolf cub from its den and raises it, justifying his actions as an experiment to study “scientifically” how wolves “think”, and an opportunity to cross-breed the wolf with the Mongols’ powerful guard dogs (166). But the wolf proves untameable. When it bites him, Chen is forced to clip its fangs: this results in an infection from which it never recovers. ‘Little Wolf’ is dying slowly and painfully from injuries sustained struggling for freedom, and Chen eventually kills it to release it from its misery. Towards the end of the novel the reader is told that Chen began to write an account of his experiences in Mongolia as a way of dealing with feelings of anxiety and guilt over his removal of the wolf cub from its mother, and his failed attempt to raise and tame it (164, 388, 495). The manuscript he completes is written with the blood of the

wolf cubs he has killed (521), out of remorse (523). This wolf story is set in the wider context of the author's experience of the environmental impact of population growth, mechanisation and agricultural development in Mongolia in the 1970s. Towards the end of the novel, the short-sighted modernisation policies of the Beijing authorities, which include the extermination of the Mongolian wolves, are held responsible, alongside overgrazing by farmers who have moved there from other parts of the country, for turning the once verdant prairies into a barren landscape.

Wolf Totem embraces elements of different genres. Among its most memorable features are gripping accounts of terrifying encounters with wolves, but the book also depicts the vast landscape of Mongolia. Bloodthirsty wolf attacks contrast with moving elegiac passages on the loss of the region's pristine plains, hills and lakes. The autofictional narrative, which includes humorous episodes from Chen's experiences with the wolf cub, is interwoven with ethnographic information about the Mongol shepherds' tough but independent way of life, and ethological observations on the behaviour of the grassland animals. Rong also criticises the government's treatment of the environment in openly didactic passages, and calls for political change.

When Rong left Beijing for Mongolia, he was able to bring with him boxes containing some 200 banned books which he had hidden away in the course of the Red Guards' purges of Beijing's public and private libraries. Alongside Chinese classics and works on Mongol history, these included the novels of Balzac, Pushkin, Tolstoy, Sholokhov, Jane Austen, and Jack London (writing which was considered at the time to promote bourgeois decadence, imperialism and 'old thinking'). In *Wolf Totem*, Chen is mentioned as reading London's novels, *The Call of the Wild* (394) and *The Sea-Wolf* (310). Inspired by London's wolf/ dog narrative set in the frozen North of Canada at the end of the nineteenth century, and by his striking portrait of the tyrannical Captain Wolf Larsen, who personifies wolfish qualities, *Wolf Totem* transfers elements of his thinking to China's wild north in the 1970s. Before examining London's influence and the tensions and contradictions his novels share with Rong's book, it is worth considering *Wolf Totem's* ecological message in greater detail.

2. The book's ecological message

To feed China's growing population, in the 1970s the government imposed increased production quotas for Mongolian lamb and beef, and sent people to Mongolia to open up new farmland. This intensification of agricultural production brought to an end sustainable stock raising as practised by the nomadic Mongols in the region, and it deprived the native herds of gazelles, and the wolves which preyed on them, of their natural habitat. In *Wolf Totem*, army officers who have been sent to oversee agricultural development wipe out the gazelles, which they see as stealing the grass needed for horses and sheep, and hunt down the wolves from motor vehicles, using assault rifles and machine guns. They seek to protect the valuable grassland from the resulting explosion of marmots, field mice, rabbits and ground squirrels by spraying poison, disregarding the fact that this will also kill off the remaining wolves, foxes, and hawks. The second half of the book alternates in tone between lament over the disappearance of the wild animals and plants of the prairies (wolves, marmots, wild geese, grey cranes, hawks, larks, orchids, waterlilies), and increasingly strident apocalypticism: "Now that the age of tractors had arrived, a conflict between those who lived off the grassland and those who lived by levelling it was nearing its end game." (419, see also 376).

In an Epilogue (505-24), Chen returns twenty years later to find that the people he knew are now living more comfortable lives, having abandoned their yurts for permanent houses, with electricity and TV. But the prairies he knew have become a dustbowl. "The system" is blamed, with its damaging pressure to overproduce for unnecessary consumption (509). Extermination of the Mongolian wolves is presented as a key part of this misguided policy. The book ends with the news that 80% of the Olonbulag pastureland is now barren, and a sandstorm shrouds Beijing in suffocating dust, echoing an earlier passage in which the wise old Mongolian shepherd Bilgee had prophesied: "if the grassland dies, so will the cows and sheep and horses, as well as the wolves and the people [...]. Then not even the Great Wall, not even Beijing will be protected" (233-4).

Bilgee has served as Chen's mentor, teaching him the "ancient logic" (45) that the grassland is the "big life" on which the many "little lives" of the plants, animals and people depend for survival. The taboos of Tengrist religion, which combines elements of pantheism and animal totemism, also play an important role in the Mongols' relationship with the natural environment. Environmentally damaging action

is repeatedly associated with the violation of custom and religious taboo. In some passages in the novel (e.g. 92, 94), the god Tengger is presented as an avenging Gaia, taking revenge on greedy humans in the form of wolf attacks and storms. Towards the end of the book, indigenous ecological wisdom and religious prescription are increasingly accompanied by passages reflecting scientific knowledge of ecosystemic relations. The grassland is described as “a complex place”: “Everything is linked, and the wolves are the major link, tied to all the others. If that link is removed, livestock raising will disappear out here. You can’t count all the benefits the wolves bring, far greater than the damage they cause.” (238) This reflects the new understanding of wolves which has emerged in the course the twentieth century as creatures ensuring the stability of ecosystems by regulating the population of other species. Markers of a rapidly diminishing natural environment, wolves have become charismatic animals, imbued with the spirit of a newly valued wilderness (Marvin 159). However, the ecological function of wolves is, as already indicated, only one aspect of the complex animal trope in the novel. *Wolf Totem* also uses wolfish nature as a model for social and political relations.

3. The Ambiguous Political Orientation of the Chinese Original

Wolf Totem combines elements of political dissidence (support for greater democracy and freedom) with calls for a regeneration of Chinese society through open competition and strong leadership. The novel’s critical edge can be seen clearly through contrast with its adaptation for the cinema, in a Chinese-French co-production filmed in Mongolia and directed by the well-known French animal director, Jean-Jacques Annaud. Annaud’s 2015 film predictably conformed to Hollywood practices, inasmuch as it compressed and dramatized the action, added a romantic interest, and worked with a lavish visual aesthetic, accompanying long shots of the stunning landscape with sweeping orchestral music. But it also elided the book’s dissident politics, by altering the dialogue, changing details of the story, and focusing attention on the appealing wolf cub. Rong takes the Party to task for seeking to lay the blame for ‘natural’ disasters on individuals, denouncing them as counter-revolutionaries so as to distract from the environmental consequences of its policies (see especially Chapter 13). When the official Bao Shungui plans to rid Mongolia of its wolves, Bilgee intervenes to save the cult animal of his people, and Chen supports him (90-91). In the film, however, it is Party officials who voice ecological

concerns. The grim spectre of desertification is omitted, and story ends happily with Chen releasing the wolf into the wild, rather than having to perform a mercy killing.

From time to time, Rong, who had been imprisoned and narrowly escaped the death penalty for his involvement in political protest in the 1970s and 1980s, and therefore kept a low profile after the publication of his novel, has broken silence in interviews with Western journalists and expressed critical reformist views. In 2008, for instance, he said: “The most important thing in life is the capacity to be free [...]. That individual freedom doesn’t just include the freedom to make money. It includes the freedom of speech, the freedom of organisation. [...] On the grasslands and within the nomadic people, I discovered the freedom gene within Chinese society [...]. The Wolf Totem is the Chinese Statue of Liberty.” (Hill) However, the political implications of Rong’s wolves are not democratic in the sense of protecting individuals against abuses of state power, or ensuring good governance through checks and balances. Nor do their economic implications include ensuring a life in dignity for the worst off in society. Rong’s book found admirers among the officer corps of the People’s Liberation Army, and was handed out by corporate executives as a motivational tool. In a *Spiegel* article (Kremb), the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*’s China correspondent, Kai Strittmatter, is cited as claiming that far from serving to democratise China, the book laid the groundwork for the country’s Latin Americanization – its transformation from a communist dictatorship to a fascist government.

The discrepancy between this understanding of *Wolf Totem* and its general reception in the West as a critical environmental and politically ‘progressive’ novel is explained in part by the extent to which, as the Sinologist scholar and translator Wolfgang Kubin has revealed, the American translator Howard Goldblatt adapted the text to the Western market, excising passages containing “awkward political and historical thinking” (Kubin 220). The single most significant change is that the English version lacks the Afterword in which Rong spelled out a political message which Kubin describes as “totally outdated in a globalised world that practices cooperation rather than adhering to the principle of ‘the survival of the fittest’” (221).⁴ Rong espouses a form of radical authoritarian nationalism in which strong leadership is

⁴ See also Ma’s characterisation of Goldblatt’s work as “translation-cum-retelling”, and “radical rewriting” (76, 88).

endorsed, and political violence and war are sanctioned, to address the nation's perceived geopolitical weakness. This political ideology is inseparable from his conception of 'wolfish' nature, which was, for all the references to Mongol tradition, principally inspired by Jack London.

4. The Cultural Meanings of Wolves, and the Influence of Jack London

Garry Marvin's concise but illuminating account of the cultural meanings of wolves shows how wolves have traditionally been regarded (with fear), as dangerous, vicious beasts, greedy ('wolfing' down their food), murderous and evil. But at the same time, they have been viewed with admiration, as powerful, where necessary aggressive, cunning, and resilient. They have therefore served as positive role models for hunters and warriors. In Rong's novel, the nomadic herdsmen defend themselves and their sheep and horses against the attacks of wolves, and hunt them periodically, but they live in a symbiotic relationship with the wolves, participating in a delicate ecological balancing act, in which limited losses of livestock are accepted in return for the benefit which the wolves bring by preventing the herds of wild gazelles and smaller grass-eating animals from becoming too numerous. Leaving aside this benefit to the environment, Rong's wolves are distinguished by three qualities: first, ferociousness; secondly, fearlessness and indomitable freedom; and thirdly, a bundle of related positive attributes including loyalty to the pack, discipline, intelligence, patience, and supernatural shrewdness. Wolves and humans behaving like them are presented by Rong as an antidote for the ills of Chinese society. His conception of reinvigoration through 'return' to wolfish wildness draws, via Jack London, on Social Darwinism and Nietzschean thinking, which enjoyed wide currency at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Like the late 19th-century realistic wild animal stories of Ernest Thompson Seton and Charles G.D. Roberts, London's *Call of the Wild* combined animal fiction with elements of nature writing (see Lutts), and presented the natural and social worlds from the perspective of the animal. The story drew on the author's experiences as a prospector in the Klondike gold rush of 1896-9. Kidnapped from a Californian estate, brutalised and sold as a sledge dog to gold prospectors, the dog Buck is plunged from a "lazy, sunkissed" life of leisure in the 'Southland' into a raw struggle for survival in the hostile, frozen 'Northland'. "Jerked from the heart of civilisation," he is "flung into the heart of things primordial," where there is "no law but

the law of club and fang" (17), and morality is "a vain thing and a handicap in the ruthless struggle for existence" (27f.). He is saved by a kind soul, but following the death of his beloved master, he joins a pack of timber wolves, and the story ends with him ranging the wilderness, free at last.

Despite London's patent sympathy for the (literal and metaphorical) 'underdog', *The Call of the Wild* celebrates the right to leadership of the "dominant primordial beast" (51): "Kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, was the law" (93-4). It contains vivid descriptions of ferocious fights between dogs which endorse murderous violence: "Buck got a frothing adversary by the throat, and was sprayed with blood when his teeth sank through the jugular. The warm taste of it in his mouth goaded him to greater fierceness." (34) London sees humans as sharing this blood-lust, writing of a "stirring of old instincts" which drives men to hunt. The "joy to kill" is described as an "ecstasy that marks the summit of life", which "comes when one is most alive" (46). The thrill of excitement associated with the bloodthirstiness of wolves in *Wolf Totem* is no less problematic. In a particularly graphic scene, a herd of horses is attacked by "forty to fifty" wolves who are crazed with hunger. "The herd was being decimated; blood stained the snow on the ground. The merciless grassland was once again a backdrop to ruthlessness, as it had been for thousands of years," Rong writes (76). A later scene borders on Gothic horror in its depiction of the suicidal assault of female wolves who had been robbed of their cubs: "They leapt onto horses, sinking their fangs into the tender spot below the shoulder, then hung there heavily, willing to sacrifice their own bodies." The wolves are "obsessed with vengeance, staring death calmly in the face, devoted to the cause, merging blood and milk." (80 – See also the passage 425f., which similarly invites approval of the wolves' savagery.)

5. The Wolf as Totem Animal in Jiang Rong's Novel

The Mongols in Rong's novel see the wolf as a worthy rival to man, embodying courage, strength and wisdom (98-9), and themselves as living a way of life akin to it. Proud descendants of Genghis Khan, they believe that the military tactics which facilitated his conquests in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were learned from the cunning and ruthless hunting behaviour of wolf packs. (Wolf hunting behaviour is described throughout the book in military terms.) As an emblem of the Mongolians' nomadic, meat-eating, freedom-loving way of life, the wolf is contrasted with the

dragon, symbol of the sedentary Han crop-raising culture and bureaucratic political structure. But it is more than that. Wolves, which are elevated to the status of quasi-divine agents of Tengger (“protective spirits of the grassland” [22], carrying out his will [94]), are presented as totemic animals, the Mongols’ “ancestors” and spiritual alter egos.

Belief in the possibility of acquiring the strength, speed and sharper senses of the totem animal is found in many cultures, and probably underlies the notion of lycanthropy (i.e. the metamorphosis of humans into wolves). Werewolves are usually images for the ‘beast within us’, externalisations of our wild and monstrous inner selves, capable of living out impulses and desires without regret or remorse. In contemporary popular culture they are frequently sexually charged, but originally they were above all warriors (see Tuczay). In modern times, paramilitary groups have associated themselves with wolves to appropriate their qualities of single-mindedness and unchecked aggression, and enable themselves to commit acts of violence and cruelty in the name of a supposedly higher ideal.

Eating the animal’s flesh and drinking its blood are also encountered in many cultures as ways of appropriating its vitality. In Jack London’s story, ‘Love of Life’, a starving man close to death accesses reserves of energy which enable him to survive by eating a wolf and drinking its blood. In *Wolf Totem*, we are told that Chen, who is by now “bewitched” by the grassland wolves, understands why Lenin asked for this story to be read out to him on his deathbed (267). By the end of the book, Chen comes to revere the wolf as his personal totem. In *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), London had depicted Wolf Larsen as a demonic, superhuman figure living out unbridled instincts. Despite the negative presentation of his behaviour, he is a larger than life figure who clearly fascinates his author, akin to the “blond beast” of Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*. For Rong, as for London, the transformation of man into wolf stands for the release of a suppressed inner nature, a wildness and animality which are banished from modern civilisation through emotional control and religious and social codes.

While wolves and wolf men are the principal manifestation of the ‘animal’ trope in Rong’s novel, forms of hybridity also play a role, as expressions of the possibility of a halfway house between wildness and civilisation. (Hybridity had already featured in Jack London’s *White Fang* (1906), a sequel to *The Call of the Wild*, in which Buck’s trajectory from domestication to life in the wild is reversed.) On

the literal level, it is present in Chen's hopes to breed his wolf pup with a bitch from the litter the pup grew up with. The plan is, however, frustrated by the young wolf's untameable nature. On the level of human relations, Rong appears more optimistic. He contrasts Mongols, as a wolf-like race living a free life of primitive simplicity close to nature, with Han Chinese, who are depicted as docile, domesticated "sheep": after "generations of being raised on grains and greens", the "stupid, fat" and "gutless" Han have "lost the virility of their nomadic ancestors" (9, 11, 23). Rong's language is that of essentialist ethnic identity, but he muses on the question whether effete modern (Chinese) society can be reinvigorated by "a transfusion of roiling wolf blood" (494), and hints at a more down to earth way of reinvigorating the Han, through intermarriage with nomads.

These metaphors of canine and human ethnic hybridity are bolstered by a botanical image. Rong reflects on whether a "wolf totem sapling" might be "grafted" onto the ailing Confucian national character (377), and suggests that nomadic wolfishness might be combined with Confucian traditions of pacifism, its emphasis on education and devotion to study. The trajectory of the narrative makes success seem unlikely, for the impending demise of the old way of life in the Olonbulag is doubly prefigured in the fate of the wolf cub and the death of the old man Bilgee, as a result of injuries sustained from triggering a concealed explosive set by army officers to kill wolves. The extermination of the grassland wolves leaves behind a world of "dejection, [...] withering decadence and boredom, and other more terrifying foes of the spirit, obliterating the masculine passion that had characterised [the inhabitants of the grasslands] for thousands of years". After the disappearance of the wolves, the narrator comments that "the sale of liquor on the Olonbulag nearly doubled" (494). However, this bleak prospect is intended to mobilise readers to realise the author's vision of a China made great again. Rong spells out his political views most directly at the end of the Chinese edition, where the narrative is followed by a 64-page appendix, entitled "Rational Exploration: A Lecture and Dialogue on the Wolf Totem." But they are also to be found in certain passages in the English translation of the novel. For instance, we read that "a people who adopted the wolf's temperament and made it their totem – beastly ancestor, god of war, and sage – would always be a victorious people" (219). There is a striking similarity between this problematic vision of political and cultural renewal and early twentieth-century

German wolf and wolf-man narratives written in the context of *völkisch* thinking (racist-nationalist conservatism).

6. Parallels With German Wolf Narratives in the Early Twentieth Century

One of the best known of these wolf tales is the historical novel, *Der Wehrwolf* (literally, 'The Defender-Wolf', but at the same time a homonym of 'werewolf') published by Hermann Löns in 1910. Löns is remembered as "father of the German animal story", and as "poet of the Lüneburg Heath," for his idyllic scenes of traditional rural life in an idealised German homeland. Hailed by the Nazis as a precursor (he died already in 1914), and subsequently vilified as "pre-fascist", he has nevertheless remained in print for the past century. Löns's breakthrough to a wider readership came with *Der Wehrwolf*. This tale of the aggressive self-defence of a peasant community against marauding soldiers in the Thirty Years War was a militarised and racialised version of turn-of-the-century vitalism, endorsing the breakthrough of destructive bloodthirsty instincts suppressed by civilisation, and celebrating vigilante violence. Löns, who admired London and arranged for publication of *The Call of the Wild* in German, in a translation by his wife, shared many of London's views. He opposed city life, industrialisation, intellectualism and internationalism, and sought social renewal through a return to nature, country life, local traditions, the feelings and instincts. His critique of modernity and proposed alternative have the same ambivalent quality as London's: the self-assertion of the peasants in *Der Wehrwolf* is coupled with graphic scenes of violence, and although this is justified as self-defence, it takes on, as Thomas Dupke notes in his study of the author, a dynamic which sweeps away any scruples or notions of mercy (Dupke 127-131). *Der Wehrwolf* was a source of inspiration for the right-wing paramilitary groups which proliferated in the years after Germany's defeat in the First World War and sought to undermine Weimar democracy, and gave a number of organisations their name.

A second wolf-man narrative reflecting the stance of the national-conservative right in the early 1920s is Ernst Wiechert's novel, *Der Totenwolf* (The Death Wolf, 1924).⁵ This tells the story of the despair of a demobbed soldier, Wolf Wiedensahl, who seeks to revive the spirit of the nation through suicidal acts of violence.⁶ Otto

⁵ Here and in the following, translations of German titles are mine.

⁶ The link between wolfishness and aggressive nationalism is, however, notably absent in the one German wolf-man story of the time which found an international readership, Hermann Hesse's novel,

Alscher (1880-1944) is, however, the German author whose treatment of the wolf trope prefigured Rong's most closely, inasmuch as it already combined the Social Darwinist cult of aggressive nationalism and authoritarian politics with elements of a conservationist ethos and concern for the survival of wolves as a species. Alscher lived in the mountainous Carpathian Banat, a German-speaking area of the Austro-Hungarian empire which fell to Romania after 1918. The short realistic wild animal stories which he specialised in are unsurpassed in their evocation of the landscape and precise observation of the lives and behaviour of animals, including wolves, with which he had frequent contact. As a young man, Alscher hunted wolves, but he learned to live with them. The title of his 1917 collection of stories, *Die Kluft: Rufe von Menschen und Tieren* (The Gulf: Cries of Men and Animals) alludes to the divide separating humans from animals, but the stories suggest that wild animals possess a wisdom we lack, and that we can learn from them. Writing at a time when a proper understanding of the ecosystemic role wolves play as keystone predators had yet to develop, his acknowledgement of the right to life of the wolf, and of the lynx, with which he came to identify more in the 1930s, resulted principally from dubious fascination with their ruthless will and survival instinct. Passages such as the following in 'Der Marder' (The Marten) reflect a concern with animality, instinct and the will to power at the expense of humanity and morality: "Is there anything more splendid than the will to power? The will to violence, to overpower others, to cruelty if need be, so long as we only exercise it in the knowledge that we could suffer it ourselves, and it is a test of our strength against others." (Alscher, *Die Kluft* 20-21) There is a direct parallel here with the fantasies of strength, self-sufficiency and strong leadership in *Wolf Totem*. However, Alscher also pleads for co-existence with wild animals, including predators, and in the story 'Der Fremde' (The Stranger),⁷ he calls explicitly for tolerance of loss of livestock to wolves. As in *Wolf Totem*, the clashes between humans and animal predators in Alscher's writing result from a growing population and economic development encroaching on their habitat.

A further parallel between Alscher and Rong lies in their conception of ethnic outsider groups as animal-people characterised by the intuition and instinct needed to reinvigorate an ailing society. The role of Gypsies in Alscher's novels *Ich bin ein*

Steppenwolf (1927 – the title, which is the same in English, alludes to the 'steppe wolf', or Caspian Sea wolf).

⁷ Alscher, *Die Kluft* 34-60. See Goodbody 2003, 199-200.

Flüchtling (I am a Refugee, 1909) and *Gogan und das Tier* (Gogan and the Animal, 1912) is not dissimilar to that of the Mongols in *Wolf Totem*: associated with vitality and sensuality, they live a life free of material considerations and social conventions, close to nature and in tune with their feelings and bodies. *Gogan und das Tier* explores the possibility of a reconciliation of civilisation with wildness, reason with instinct, through the story of the illegitimate offspring of a Hungarian countess and a travelling Gypsy. Gogan searches for his father in order to rid himself of the “curse of animality” which he has inherited (112). However, he comes to accept what he owes to his father, and to work to “grasp and transfigure” the animality within him (113). Rong similarly acknowledged the need to temper wolfishness with ‘sheep’ nature in an interview in 2008, in which he defended *Wolf Totem* against the charge of fascism. Equating wolfishness with neoliberal capitalism in a world of cutthroat Social Darwinist economic competition, he stressed that “wolves have two sides. I think that capitalism is exactly like a wolf – it’s also two-sided. [...] *Wolf Totem* is about the good side of the wolf [...]” He went on to claim: “I observe critically in my novel that a too-strong wolf spirit led to the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and the creation of the Red Guards. So I don’t advocate at all an absolute wolf spirit.” (Messmer and Chuang)

7. Muddled Thinking and the Ambiguity of the Wolf Trope

Wolf Totem has come in for criticism as a work compromised by weaknesses of form, factual inaccuracies and confusion of thought. In terms of form and style, the book suffers from repetition, characters who lack psychological depth and development, and wooden dialogue. In terms of factual accuracy, doubt has been cast on whether the wolf has played the central role in Mongol culture which Rong ascribes to it (see Hong 7-8). More importantly, the extermination of the wolves in Inner Mongolia is not generally recognised as a root cause of the region’s desertification. Population growth, intensification of farming and economic development have rather been the main factors, and Rong misleadingly concentrates the long history of Mongolian environmental deterioration in the period from the 1970s on. *Wolf Totem* exaggerates the ecological impact of the wolf, just as it does the cultural superiority of the Mongols in terms of ecological consciousness.

The aspect of the book which has received the most vehement criticism is, however, its “muddled” political thinking (see Ma 84-6). At different points,

wolfishness stands for a back-to-nature retreat from modernity and an embracing of neoliberal economics which reinforces modern materialism; it is the vitalist amorality required for survival in a harsh social environment and yet subordination of the individual to the collective; it is both libertarianism and socialism. The author's stated aim to promote democratic freedom and self-determination is undermined by his Social Darwinist conception of society and its authoritarian implications. His orgies of Dionysian bloodthirstiness present as 'true' nature a wholly unacceptable yardstick for human behaviour. And Rong offers no coherent answer to whether or how the new might be reconciled with the old, wolves with sheep, the Han with China's ethnic minorities, culture with nature. It is, however, worth noting that while Rong's philosophy of revitalisation through return to the wild continues impulses behind the Cultural Revolution (Maoist antipathy to bourgeois society, regard for a simpler form of life, and violent proclivities), he realigns wildness, strength and instinct with respect for ancestors, cultural traditions and even religious practices.

8. Conclusion: Animal Stories and Tropes as Objects of Eco-poetic and Zoopoetic Study

My aim here has not been political, but literary analysis. *Wolf Totem* was a sellout in China (the official print run exceeded four million copies, and a greater number of pirated copies are said to have been in circulation), and became an international bestseller. The novel owes its success not least to the fact that, far from merely being a product of Chinese political thinking at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it belongs to a long lineage of wolf narratives, in which the inherent polysemy of the trope appeals to a broad readership, its different meanings resonating with diverse anxieties and fantasies. As a literary figure, the wolf is thus able to combine the seeming opposites of emancipatory self-empowerment and violent oppression, individual self-assertion and subordination to the collective good.

If one considers *Wolf Totem's* formal properties, the novel has been aptly described as a work of 'environmental sentimentalism' (He 2014): it is an emotionally charged narrative, arousing empathy with nature and animals in order to foster moral disapproval of damage to the environment. The presence of wolves is referred to at one point as an "ecological index to the existence of the grassland" (509), prompting reflection on the applicability of Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic categorisation of signs as iconic, indexical and symbolic, according to the nature of the relationship

between the sign-vehicle and the object it represents. In *iconic* signs, the signifier bears a physical resemblance with the signified: this is the kind of literary mechanism with which Aaron Moe is principally concerned. Rong's *zoopoiesis* does not make use of such signs. His narration of the ecological tragedy through the story of the extinction of wolves is rather an *indexical* technique, inasmuch as the demise of the wolves points to, or indexes, the wider process of loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation which it represents – as smoke may index the presence of a fire, by means of its spatio-temporal proximity to the entity signalled. However, the novel works, like much other fiction, above all with symbols, that is, with signs neither related to their objects by virtue of qualitative likeness nor co-occurring with them. *Symbol* of an alternative way of life, the wolf totem is ultimately a culturally determined sign.

Wolf Totem merits ecopoetic examination on the one hand, because of its depiction, through a semi-autobiographical narrative of awakening to ecological understanding, of the human/ nature relationship in Mongolia and its exploration of the reasons for the region's environmental deterioration. On the other hand it has rewarded consideration from a zoopoetic perspective, assessing its deployment of wolves and other animals as figures of thought for human behaviour and collective identity. Focusing his novel on wolves and wolf men meant Rong was able to draw on a complex literary trope which critiques modernity's instrumental reason and domination of other species, and figures the repression of our own animality, and the need to overcome our alienation from nature and our own bodies. In this sense, *Wolf Totem* makes a valid contribution to cultural self-renewal, not only in China. Work examining the representation of animals and analysing conceptions of human/ animal relations in literature, film and art has until recently only been loosely connected with ecocriticism. My discussion of Rong's novel has sought to explore the ability of simultaneous reading of animal narratives in both ecopoetic and zoopoetic perspective to draw together insights from the two fields of research.

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