

Grassland Ecology: An Analysis of *Wolf Totem* from an Ecological Perspective

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Abstract

Much discussion has been done on Jiang Rong's representation of the national character of the Chinese in *Wolf Totem*, so that it overshadows an equally important aspect of the novel: the grassland ecology. Thus, we aim to contrast the different attitudes towards nature of the nomadic Mongols on the one pole, and the Han Chinese, the migrant and young Mongols on the other. Besides, we try to summarize the nomads' ecosophy as reflected in the novel. Ecotheory, especially Arne Naess' ecosophy T offers a very efficient tool for our exploration. One problem yet to be solved, however, is the regression of the traditional ecosophy engendered by the challenges from different social forces such as politics and economy. Thus, how to preserve the traditional positive ecosophy needs efforts from all parties apart from the ecologists.

Key words: Grassland ecology; Nomadic Mongols; Ecosophy; Regression

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INTRODUCTION

*Wolf Totem*³ by Jiang Rong, a Chinese writer, is a controversial novel. Some critics highly comment on the author's representation of wolves as standing for freedom, strength, vitality and teamwork, believing that the novel demonstrates the author's ardent wish to vitalize the nation with the wolf spirit in an age of global competition (An, 2006; Luo, 2005). Zhou Tao, a famous writer and critic, thinks Jiang Rong has sighted the weakness in the character of the Chinese, who are deeply influenced by Confucianism⁴. In an interview with "Inter Press Service", the author of the novel also explains the popularity of the novel in terms of the reflection on the national character. He affirms in the interview once more that "Chinese people are inherently weak" like sheep, and that it is necessary to foster a national character of the courageous wolf (2008). However, some others hold quite different opinions. For example, Wolfgang Kubin, a German sinologist, states that *Wolf Totem* reminds him of fascists (as cited in Zhang, 2008). Such idea is echoed by Li Jianjun (2006), who claims that Jiang Rong advocates pursuing success regardless of means like wolves, but he forgets that true human progress must abide by humanitarian principles and sound value orientations.

Such heated debate with regard to the cultural influence overshadows another important aspect of the novel: the author's delineation of ecological thought of the

³*Wolf Totem* is written in Chinese. Around 550,000 Chinese copies were sold within eight months. It was translated into English by the American translator Howard Goldblatt and won the 2007 Man Asia Prize for fiction.

⁴Zhou Tao's comment is quoted on the outside back cover the *Wolf Totem*.

grassland, which he regards as the ideal one. *Wolf Totem* is about the experiences of Chen Zhen, a young man who came to the Olonbulag grassland in Inner-Mongolia from Beijing during the Cultural Revolution. During his over-ten-year's stay here he learned a lot about the grassland rules and Mongol wolves from such herdsman as Bilgee and Bartu. He witnessed how the wolves hunted gazelles and horses, and how they were hunted by human beings. He was so fascinated with the wolves that he even raised a wolf cub. However, with the arrival of large population from other places and the Production and Construction Corps sent by the central government, the grassland was gradually destroyed and the wolves were almost eradicated. In our study, rather than getting involved in the heated debate about national character of the Chinese, we intend to contrast different ecological attitudes and explore the nomadic Mongols' ecosophy reflected in the novel. The ecotheory, especial Arne Naess' ecosophy T offers a very efficient tool for our exploration.

Ecology, as a scientific discipline, also means "thinking about nature as connected and in an evolving and interactive way" (McColley, 2001, p.58). Ever since the explosion of environmentalism in the late 1960s and 1970s some ecologically scholars have been publishing works of ecotheory and criticism. Since the mid 1980s, scholars have been working collectively to establish ecocriticism as a genre. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (1996) defines ecocriticism as the following: "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii), but Estok (2005) argues that ecocriticism is more than

simply the study of Nature or natural things in literature; rather, it is any theory that is committed to effecting change by analyzing the function—thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise—of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds (p.16-17).

Ecocritics apply the basic ideas of ecology in their research (Yu, 2011). Such scholars as Arne Naess, Kenneth Burke, Cheryll Glotfelty and Aldo Leopold have all made major contribution to the development of ecocriticism. Ecocritics are against anthropocentrism, the human beings' pursuit for better material living condition at the cost of sacrifice in ecology⁵.

CONTRAST OF DIFFERENT ECOLOGICAL ATTITUDES

Wolf Totem gives a detailed account of the ecological thoughts of the Inner Mogolian grassland. The grassland ecological thoughts were voiced through the nomadic

Mongols like Bilgee and Batu. They followed their ancestors' teaching with regard to the relationship between human beings, the grassland and other species. Nevertheless, the ecological attitude of the following groups was different from the nomadic Mongol's: the farmers (mainly the Han Chinese, which is the major ethnic group in China) from other parts of China, the migrant Mongols who had lost their grassland because they had adopted the farmers' way of living, and the young Mongols who pursued modernity in their life. Jiang Rong compares the two different living styles and their attitudes towards nature, strategically letting the students from Beijing who were also the Han Chinese express his appreciation of the former and criticism of the latter.

Jiang Rong demonstrates ecological holism in *Wolf Totem*. Ecological holism stresses more on integrity of the whole ecosystem, and it holds that any species deserves to preserve its integrity, stability and beauty in the community (Murphy, 2000). In *Wolf Totem* the nomadic Mongols thought that grass and grassland were the big life form and that all else were little life forms that depended on the big life form for survival. Even wolves and human beings were little life forms. The nomads tried to keep the integrity and stability of grassland because they knew once the big life was killed off, the little life forms would have no chance of survival. Therefore, they moved to different pastures in different seasons so that the grazed grassland could regain its vitality, and they took care not to exceed the capacity of the grassland with too many sheep.

In ecological holism everything is connected with everything else. The Mongols had a clear understanding of this point of view. They never considered things in isolation. When Bao Shungui, the head of the branch Production and Construction Corps, learned that many horses were killed by the wolves, he became furious and ordered that all wolves be eradicated. However, for the herdsman, although they were also furious that their horses were killed by the wolves, they didn't intend to exterminate the wolves. In their view, the wolves were an important link among grassland, gazelles, marmots, mice, sheep, horses, and human beings. Gazelles, marmots and mice did harm to the grassland, which endangered the existence of sheep and horses, and further the existence of human beings, but wolves could reduce such destructive forces on the grassland much more efficiently than men. Once the important link of wolves was totally got rid of, the grassland and human beings would all be in trouble. Thus, such logic of viewing things holistically could keep the grassland going for thousands of years.

Opposite to the nomadic Mongols' holistic ecological

⁵See Arne Naess (1979), Cheryll Glotfelty (1996), and Harold Fromm (2003).

thought, the migrant Mongols and the Han Chinese were just trying to make excessive use of the grassland. Jiang Rong expresses his anti-anthropocentric thought through his delineation of their unchecked exploitation of whatever on the piece of land. Anthropocentrism believes that human beings are the only creatures that have intrinsic value. Therefore, nature is viewed as just a resource for the living and development of human beings. Human beings have direct responsibilities for their own species and only indirect obligation to nature (Fromm, 2003).

In the novel, the nomadic Mongols understood and abided by the ecological rule of balance, which they had learned from their ancestors, so they never tried to use up anything on the land. However, all that the Han Chinese and the migrant Mongols considered was to take what they needed from the grassland, but never thought of the sustainable development of the land. For instance, when the nomadic Mongols went to take the gazelles that were killed by the wolves and buried by the snow, they took only half the amount, leaving the remainder to the wolves, so that the wolves would have the frozen gazelles to eat in the next spring and would not come to attack their sheep and horses. However, in the next spring some migrant laborers took away all the remaining gazelles and sold them within a single day, leaving nothing for the wolves. In fact these migrant laborers were Mongols, too, but they had destroyed their grassland and adopted the farming lifestyle of the Han Chinese. Now that they adopted the Han Chinese's lifestyle, they accepted the Han's attitudes.

Such unchecked anthropocentric view led to the destruction of the grassland, especially when the whole nation was enthusiastic about carrying out Chairman Mao Zedong's thought that "man is sure to conquer nature". They believed the land could yield as much as people hoped. The Han people asked the grassland to provide for beef and lamb, but to raise the cows and sheep brought an excessive burden on the grass. Furthermore, the Han people needed more grain. They thought the grassland was not productive, so the Production and Construction Corps came and changed some pastures to farms. The result was of course counter to their aim. Not much grain was produced; what's worse, a large part of the grassland became covered with sand instead of grass.

The more unfortunate aspect was that such anthropocentrism was later adopted by the young generation of the Mongols on the grassland. Old people such as Bilgee were devoted followers of the grassland rules of their ancestors, and their sons and grandsons also followed the teaching; but the great-grandson generation forgot the grassland rules. When Chen Zhen later returned to the grassland from Beijing, he found the young people of the grassland cared only about today and wanted to buy whatever they laid their eyes on. They would raise as many sheep as possible, and then they would sell them to purchase new cars and big houses. It is not like what some

scholar claims that ecology interest has replaced economy-orientation (Gao, 2009). Compared with their ancestors, these young people were experiencing regression in ecological ideology. Only when they recollect their ancestors' teaching and understand the importance of ecology, will it be possible to change such situation. In Bill Devall and George Sessions's words, they should go through an ideological change of "appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living" (1985, p.137). This is also one of Jiang Rong's purposes in writing this novel.

ECOSOPHY OF THE NOMADIC MONGOLS

The nomadic Mongols' ecological thoughts were not limited to ecological holism and anti-anthropocentrism; there are more to explore in this regard, Arne Naess' ecosophy T can offer a good basis for further exploration.

In discussing the cruel treatment of animals in the world, Arne Naess (1979) proposes that every living being should have the equal right to live and flourish and should be ensured of maximal self-realization. Under this premise he contends that the general maxim of species of egalitarianism in principle has to be embedded in a philosophy of culture, and that human beings should recognize other species' intrinsic value and equal right. Arne Naess puts forward several maxims in his ecosophy T: maximal self determination, maximal complexity and maximal symbiosis, which lead to maximal diversity and richness of living beings in the ecological community. And diversity and richness increase potentialities for self-realization; however, humans' exploitation and subjection of other animals decrease potentialities for self-realization. Naess' ecosophy T provides important principles for ecocriticism, offering ecocritics a useful theory to address the ecological issues in literary texts. The name "T" represents Naess' mountain hut Tvergastein, and the more important implication lies in its personal nature, that is, anyone can have his ecosophy A, B or C.

The Mongol nomads tried to keep the maximal diversity of species on the grassland. They raised domestic animals, but at the same time they respected the wild animals' right to live as well. Though they killed wolves and other wild animals, they never attempted to eradicate them from the grassland. They knew every kind of species had its own irreplaceable place and intrinsic value in keeping the grassland community going on. However, the non-nomadic people were quite opposite. The Production and Construction Corps, which were mainly composed of the Han Chinese, were stationed on the grassland to promote farming and husbandry. To the leaders of the Corps, the value of the animals consisted in their usefulness to human beings. They protected sheep and horses simply because they were useful. They exterminated wolves on the grassland because wolves

ate livestock. They also tried every means to eradicate marmots because marmots were the possible food for wolves; wolves would not starve as long as there were still marmots.

When Bilgee saw some people killing marmots in a way that left no chance of survival for any marmots, he was very angry and upset, but he could do nothing because the decision to eradicate marmots came from the political leaders. He told Chen Zhen that the particular hole, in front of which the other people were killing, had been in existence for over one hundred years, and that though they had been hunting in the hole generation after generation, they never killed the mother or baby marmots, so the marmots family had always been flourishing.

Bilgee emphasized the flourishing of all species and he also stressed that animals should live a life in their own special way. That's why when he saw Chen Zhen made the wolf cub live like a dog, he was angry. Chen Zhen was so fascinated with Mongol wolves that he finally raised a wolf cub himself to observe the wolf closely. Though he intended desperately to give all his love to the wolf cub, he failed to let it live a life of self-determination. He had to chain it to make sure that it would not hurt any person or sheep. The chain kept it from roaming on the grassland and prevented it from joining in the other wolves. He further deprived the cub's self-determination by snipping off the tips of its fangs, thinking that it could not hurt anybody, and thus other people would not be angered to kill it. However, such act eventually destroyed all possibilities to return the cub to the grassland, because it was impossible for the cub to survive on the grassland without sharp teeth.

Chen Zhen's last effort to change the cub's way of life was to get it pulled along by the ox cart when they had to move to a new pasture. It was not the Mongol wolf's nature to be pulled along with a rope like a dog, so the cub resisted fiercely, so that it almost strangled itself. It fought so hard that blood dropped from its throat. The bleeding and infection of the throat finally led to the cub's death. Bilgee had scolded Chen Zhen several times for depriving the cub of the dignity as a wolf. Chen Zhen himself finally realized and lamented over his mistake. There was no self-determination on the part of the wolf cub, to say nothing of self-realization.

In addition to the ecological maxims of maximal self-determination, maximal complexity and maximal symbiosis, Arne Naess (1979) emphasizes much about ordinary people's role in figuring out ecological principles. Though the ordinary dwellers within certain community may not have the academic training background about ecology, they accumulate rich experiences in dealing with the ecological problems within their community. For Mongol nomads, they had been dwelling on the grassland for many generations. Therefore, it was them who understood the grassland the best. Enlightened by Arne Naess' ecosophy T, we intend to analyze the Mongol

nomads' ecosophy and try to shed some light on the serious ecological problems the world is facing.

The first aspect of the Mongol nomads' ecosophy is reflected in their love for the grass and wise use of the grass. Being a people living on the grassland, the Mongol nomads' greatest concern was for the grass. They lived on animal husbandry, so they must try to find enough grass for the sheep, horses and cows. The Olombulag grassland was abundant with grass, but they saw not only the abundance but also the fragility of the grass. Bilgee compared the grassland to men's eyelids: Once the grassy surface was ruptured, the grassland became blind. Therefore, they learned to make use of the grass wisely. Over the years they had found they must move to different pastures at different time of the year instead of settling down on the same place. They understood the functions and limitations of different seasonal pastures and used the pastures accordingly; therefore, the pastures were protected while the livestock always had grass to graze, thus forming a benign development.

The second aspect of the Mongol nomads' ecosophy lies in their dialectical attitude toward the animals. The nomads were open-minded, and they did not go extreme. They hated wolves when their sheep or horses were killed by wolves by a large number, but they didn't deny the wolves' right to live. They didn't try to exterminate the wolves, because they realized clearly that wolves played a crucial role in keeping the ecological balance on the grassland. The wolves ate not only sheep and horses, but also the gazelles, mice and marmots to keep these animals from damaging the grassland.

Besides, the Mongol nomads realized clearly the wolves' role in keeping the quality of the horses. Even Batu, who was on duty when the whole herd of horses were killed in a blizzard by the wolves, admitted that the wolves helped to ensure the good quality of the horses on the grassland. Without wolves' threat of killing, horses wouldn't run so much and they would be fat and lazy. Moreover, if all the foals survived, the herd would grow too fast so that they would lead to the ruin of the grassland. For one thing, they damaged the grassland very seriously by trampling on it; for another, one horse consumed as much grass as that consumed by dozens or even one hundred sheep. Hence, they knew if all the wolves were killed and the unchecked development of horses would reduce the grassland to a desert little by little.

The nomads' attitude toward the goats was the same. Though goats did harm to the grass by eating the roots of the grass, they still took up four to five percent in the entire flock. Jiang Rong provides three reasons to explain why the Mongols did so: the cashmere produced by the goats brought a high income for the nomads; the goats were fearless, so when the flock got attacked by the wolf, they would bleat to warn the shepherd and they dared to fight against the wolf with their sharp horns; and the goats

could be the pacesetter for the whole flock.

The three reasons might be right to some extent. But are there any deeper reasons for this? Why the percentage must be four to five? We conduct some research and finally get the reasons that can really explain the ecosophy of the Mongol nomads. According to Da Lintai (2003), the grassland ecologist in Inner Mongolia, the horse, the goat, the sheep, the cow, and the camel evolve together with the ecological system of the grassland, and they are the principal members in the grassland ecology. The contribution that the goat and the camel make to the grassland ecology is that they can eat the shrub on the grassland, so that the shrub will not dominate the grassland. This is quite a crucial contribution, because once the shrub gains the dominant position over the grass, it will prevent the grass from growing. Without the grass, the soil loses protection from the erosion of sand and water, and the grassland will turn to be Gobi gradually. And four to five percent of the goat in the total flock can make goats exert their function to the grassland and at the same time the percentage limits the goat's destruction of the grass by eating the roots of the grass (2003). From this analysis we can see the Mongols' ecosophy does have its feasibility and scientific basis.

From the nomads' treatment of the wolves, horses and goats, we can see they were good at striking a balance, weighing the pros and cons of each kind animal, so that the least harm and greatest benefit were achieved. They were good at utilizing the strong points of every animal in the grassland.

The third aspect of the Mongol nomads' ecosophy finds its expression in their protection of water resources. All living beings from humans to livestock depended on the limited amount of water. Therefore, the Mongols treasured water greatly. When the military representative Bao Shungui ordered to burn the reeds in the valley to kill the wolves hiding there, the herdsmen were furious. One of the reasons they gave to oppose his plan was that the river would turn black because of reeds burning, and the water gods would give them no water to drink in the coming year.

When the students from Beijing first arrived at the grassland, they were told that they must respect the local people's customs and religion. And one thing they were specially reminded of was that water fell short on the grassland. The Mongols worshiped water gods so much that they didn't even dare to wash clothes in the river, let alone to bathe in the river. Thus, the students all held in their desire to swim in the river in hot summer. And that was why Yang Ke, one of the Beijing students, felt so shocked and furious when he saw the migrant Mongols jump into the river with dirty towels to swim and bathe.

The migrants were also the Mongols, but they had destroyed their grassland by farming. Yang Ke simply could not understand why these Mongols forgot the grassland rules so easily once their lifestyle had changed

to be like the Han Chinese. In fact, this is also one problem that has not been met by Arne Naess' ecosophy T, that is, the conservation of the traditional ecosophy of an ethnic group or a nation. These migrants forget about the grassland rules readily, so did the young Mongol generations. What causes them to abandon their ecosophy? How to conserve the ecosophy? These are questions worth further study.

One more aspect that is not covered by Arne Naess' theory is the Mongol people's love for animals. Arne Naess only argues that human beings should ascribe rights to the animals; in other words, human beings should do so out of their responsibility for the ecosystem. However, different from Naess' idea, in *Wolf Totem* the nomadic Mongols loved animals. When one does something out of responsibility or out of love, there is of course the difference.

The nomadic Mongols loved their dogs. The Mongol women treated the dogs like their children and took good care of the dogs in their daily life. After the hunting, they would give the dogs both material reward of meat and emotional reward by patting the dogs on the head. When the wolves were finally eradicated, the Production and Construction Corps ordered to reduce the number of the dogs, so the puppies were killed. At the sight of the puppies' death, "The women wailed; the men shed silent tears" for the dogs (Jiang, 2008, p.505).

They loved the animals not only when the animals served them; they treated the animals kindly even when the latter caused trouble for them. In the spring after the sheep gave birth to lambs, the Mongols must match up the lambs with their mothers, which did not have enough milk and rejected the lambs. This was time-and-energy consuming, but the Mongols were not angry; instead they sang songs to persuade the sheep to accept their lambs.

Their love was not limited to the domestic animals. They loved wild animals as well. When they went to take the gazelles that were killed by the wolves, Chen Zhen found some gazelles were still alive but were trapped in the deep snow. The nomads did not kill these gazelles. On the contrary they helped them out of the deep snow. And after they packed to move to a new pasture, Bilgee would intentionally leave some food for the old and sick wolves, because he knew these wolves had lost ability to hunt, and he sympathized with these wolves.

Why did the nomadic Mongols have such ecosophy? Jiang Rong mentions in the novel that the nomads followed the religious teachings of Shamanism and Lamaism and the laws of ancient emperors. As Arne Naess (1979) claims, the ecological principle has to be embedded in a philosophy of culture. Their faith and awe in the religions and traditions prevented them from going to extremes, and restrained themselves from damaging the grassland or eradicating the wolves.

Another reason is related to the characters of the nomadic people. They are friendly, generous, warm

hearted and open minded (Liu, 2008). Their generosity and open-mindedness prevent them from egocentrism, and enable them to accept the animals as their equals. Different from the Han Chinese who emphasize adapting nature to human beings' needs, they try to adapt themselves to nature (ibid). The Mongols' character and attitudes towards animals are also related to the ecological environment. They live on the vast and even grassland; they needn't struggle painfully against others for space to live. And because they live far away from each other, they have fewer chances to meet other people. For this reason they are more easily attached to animals.

CONCLUSION

Wolf Totem presents the readers with the gradual change of the Olombulag grassland from a sound ecological system to a devastated one. In describing such change caused by humans' excessive exploitation of the grassland, Jiang Rong airs his anti-anthropocentric and holistic ecological thoughts. Furthermore, Jiang Rong reflects the nomadic Mongols' ecosophy of loving grass, water and animals, and their dialectical attitudes towards animals. In fact, their ecosophy is an ecosophy of love that is deeply rooted in their history, traditions and religions as well as their ethnic characters. However, Jiang Rong also notices the regression of such ecosophy on the part of the migrant Mongols and Mongols of the young generation. Once their lifestyle changed, they abandoned the traditional ecological thought.

Jiang Rong tactically presents their regression through the Beijing students' observation. Though being the Han Chinese, these students developed an affinity with the grassland and all species, and they had adopted the nomads' ecosophy; that's why when they saw what the migrant Mongols did, they were angry and puzzled. Terry Gifford (2000) claims that notions of nature are socially constructed. While education as a social force may help one to adapt to a positive ecological viewpoint, the social forces from politics and economy may easily override the influence of the traditional ecological thoughts. Therefore, how to reverse such power relations and construct a love for nature needs efforts from all parties of society apart from the ecologists.

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