

A Brief Conclusion: The Discursive Space within and outside *Wolf Totem*

In Terms of Criticism: Interpretation and Necessary “Over-interpretation”

In 1962, China had just emerged from three years of disaster.

At that time China had not opened up, nor had we opened our minds. Within a closed social environment, reading and literary criticism as an individual was difficult.

It was different in the West.

It was also in 1962 that the Italian scholar Umberto Eco published *The Open Work*, a thorough affirmation of the positive role of criticism, revising interpretation by bringing reading into “the age of the reader.”¹ What followed was a boom, a deluge even, of interpretive studies, causing Eco, twenty-eight years later, to have to clarify: “the open-ended reading I was supporting was an activity elicited by (and aimed at interpreting) a work. In other words, I was studying the dialectics between the rights of texts and the rights of their interpreters. I have the impression that, in the course of the last decades, the rights of the interpreters have been overstressed.”² He used Christianity as an example to pose the problem of “overinterpretation” in 1990, pointing out: “If there is something to be interpreted, the interpretation must speak of something to be interpreted, the interpretation must speak of something which must be found somewhere, and in some way respected.”³

The present study might well be taken as a Chinese textbook of hermeneutics.

According to basic principles of interpretation, in the analysis of works, one is concerned as much as possible with the rights of the text. Whether deconstructing writing or interpreting allegory, one does not give rein to the horse and dare to leave the work. But when one arrives at the point where one can reach conclusions, I believe that it is somewhat appropriate to indulge in the rights of the interpreter, to offer a necessary explanation for the criticism that this text below may incur. As far as *Wolf Totem* is concerned, the following text

1 As Eco pointed out, in 1957 J.M. Castillet published the study titled *La Hora Del Lector* (The hour of the reader), the title translated in Chinese as *Duzhe de shidai* (The age of the reader).

2 Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 23.

3 *Ibid.*, 43.

will contain the excesses of overinterpretation. But without the text below, people will find it difficult to understand the ground that *Wolf Totem* has produced, nor will they understand the category of ‘post-utopian’ analysis that I have espoused in this study, together with a series of questions related to the ‘post-.’ I am quite sure that these are issues that “must be found somewhere, and in some way respected.”

6.1 ‘Post-’ Discourse Encounters Danger while Traveling

Why should a novel from China written in Chinese be labeled ‘post-’?⁴

“How can a relatively poor, third world, developing nation that is just carrying out building modernization, with modernization still not completed, suddenly leap into the age of postmodernity?”⁵ This question about the scope of ‘post-’ discourse usage involves discursive rights. Being a Chinese scholar, I need to examine myself: to what degree can you ‘legitimately’ and ‘reasonably’ employ ‘post-’ discourse?

Faced with a Chinese-language text, I originally hoped to be able to throw off the shackles of the ‘post-’ and write spontaneously.

However, during the course of research, the ‘post-’ came in of its own, and this made me aware that whatever the language, it is there, and we are within it, that we are, as the theologian Don Cupitt wrote, “living in a ‘postmodern’ period—a term that we use not by way of signifying that we have successfully completed the transition to a new understanding of the human condition. We do see that our new leaders are stripping out all the old content from liberalism, socialism, and the other typically Modern faiths ... We have lost an old world-view, but we do not yet see very clearly what will replace it.”⁶

I term the ambiguous phenomena above ‘post-’ as a convenience and an approach that is somewhat evasive, preserving the historical vein of things

4 See Zhang Xudong's 张旭东 criticism: “Phenomena of any kind in China today can only be explained within others’ conceptual framework, as though if we abandoned others’ system of naming, we would have no way to understand what we are doing. The meaning of our lives comes from others’ definitions. These are very serious questions for the individual and the collective. If the price that Chinese have paid for ‘modernity’ is to know ‘modernity’ but not China, this is something sad and ridiculous.” “Quanqiu hua shidai de Zhongguo wenhua fansi “全球化” 时代的中国文化反思 [Reflections on Chinese culture in an age of globalization],” *Zhonghua dushu bao* September 17, 2002.

5 Wang Ning 王宁, *Houxiandai zhuyi zhi hou* 后现代主义之后 [After postmodernism] (Beijing: Zhongguo wenxue chubanshe, 1998), 193.

6 Don Cupitt, *Mysticism After Modernity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 1.