

# A Study on the Cross-Cultural Comparison of Ecological Civilization Views in *The Bear and Wolf Totem*

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## Abstract

Faulkner's *The Bear* and Jiang Rong's *Wolf Totem* represent the wilderness ethics of the southern United States and the nomadic ecological wisdom of the Mongolian steppe in China respectively. Through parallel comparison, this paper finds that *The Bear* constructs a wilderness ethics with humility as the core, revealing the dual colonization of nature and spirit by capitalism; *Wolf Totem* presents grassland wisdom based on system balance, criticizing the destruction of local ecological knowledge by agricultural civilization. There are differences between the two ecological ethics, but they can complement each other. This paper reflects on the universalist limitations of Western ecocriticism and advocates transforming local ecological discourse into global ethical resources to provide a new path for cross-cultural ecological dialogue.

## Keywords

The Bear; Wolf Totem; Cross-Cultural Ecocriticism; Wilderness Ethics; Grassland Wisdom

## 1. Introduction

William Faulkner (1897-1962) was one of the most influential core figures of the Southern literary revival in the United States and a representative writer of American stream of consciousness literature. His works are deeply rooted in the historical traumas, racial entanglements, and reflections on land ethics in the southern United States. *The Bear* is the longest and central part of William Faulkner's famous work, *Go Down, Moses* (1942), which is often seen as the last work of his heyday. It takes on a powerful emblematic quality of man's relation to savageness, especially the interconnection between preys and hunters.

Jiang Rong, originally named Lv Jiamin, was born in Beijing in April 1946 and is a contemporary Chinese writer. In 1967, he went to Inner Mongolia as an educated

youth and settled there. With this experience, he began drafting *Wolf Totem* in 1971 and spent thirty-three years finishing it through the eyes of a nomadic local and expressed a fierce clash between the ecological nomadic way of life and modernization.

This study goes deep into the text along the path made by this parallelism. It looks at William Faulkner's *The Bear* and Jiang Rong's *Wolf Totem* through a systematic parallel comparison and intertextual reading, and it tries to uncover the Chinese and Western visions of ecology. On the academic side, this study does a comparative reading of Chinese and Western ecological literature, providing new perspectives for Faulkner studies and contemporary Chinese ecocritical scholarship. On the practical side, it invites reflection on the ecological wisdom in different traditions and what happens to that wisdom when modernity hits, pointing toward a more sustainable and ethical conception of civilization.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Core Perspectives of Ecological Theory**

The intensification of the modern ecological crisis has prompted scholarly reflection on the relationship between humans and nature. Leopold's "land ethic" was the first to extend the boundaries of the ethical community from humans to the land, arguing that the rightness of an action lies in maintaining the "integrity, stability, and beauty" of the biotic community (Leopold, 1949). Building on this, ecocentrism and deep ecology emphasize the intrinsic value of nature, demanding that humans shift from conquerors to equal and humble members of the ecological community. Ecological holism holds that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, focusing on the interdependence and dynamic balance of elements within a system. These theories form the basic framework for analyzing the ecological ethics of the two works in this study.

### **2.2. Studies on The Bear**

Western scholarship on Faulkner's *The Bear* has evolved from cultural criticism to an ecological turn. Early studies focused on Southern historical trauma and racial issues, later gradually incorporating ecocritical perspectives, such as the concept of "ecological sublimity" (Zackary, 2014). Recent years have witnessed new approaches in narrative style and ecological discourse analysis, as well as the theoretical construction of the "ecological self" (Hada, 2020). In China, research has moved from cultural reading to cross-cultural attempts. Chen Xiaoyan (2020) made the first comparison between *The Bear* and Chinese writer Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*, providing a precedent for moving beyond a single Western framework.

### **2.3. Studies on Wolf Totem**

Since its publication, Jiang Rong's *Wolf Totem* has been approached by both

domestic and international scholars mainly through its ecological themes, affirming its ethical value of “reverence for nature” (Omar & Qiao, 2011). Subsequent studies have turned to a concrete analysis of nomadic ecological wisdom (Marzluf, 2021) or focused on its cultural metaphors and ethnic narrative (Narantungalag & Jiu, 2024). In China, research has progressed from thematic affirmation to the tracing of ecological ethics. Wang Yanyan (2022) connected “reverence for life” with traditional Chinese ecological wisdom. Hu Zhihong (2023) conducted a cross-civilization comparison between *Wolf Totem* and *Silent Spring*, indicating a new trend in comparative ecocriticism.

In summary, existing studies have provided in-depth ecological interpretations of *The Bear* and *Wolf Totem* separately, but systematic comparative readings of the two works remain rare. These two works respectively represent the American Southern wilderness ethic and the Chinese grassland nomadic wisdom. They exhibit profound differences in cultural roots, narrative logic, and ecological practice, while also offering possibilities for mutual complementarity. This study attempts, through intertextual comparison and cross-cultural analysis, to reveal the internal tensions and paths of integration between the two ecological visions, thereby responding to the academic need for pluralistic civilizational dialogue in the face of the global ecological crisis.

### 3. Ecological Views in the Two Works

#### 3.1. Wilderness Ethics and Capitalist Criticism in *The Bear*

Faulkner’s *The Bear* shows the deep ethical tie between humans and nature through the story of the wild land and the hunt, and in doing so it builds what we can call “wilderness ethic”. This way of thinking does not simply say hunting is wrong. It gives hunting a new meaning that is about spirit. In the work the big bear Old Ben is not just one animal in the woods. He stands for the whole wilderness. “he possessed an attribute which made him seem almost immortal” (Faulkner, 2014, p. 384).

The key to Isaac’s awakening of ecological consciousness is what his teacher Sam Fathers tells him to do. Sam asks Isaac to put down his gun and his compass and go into the forest alone. The act of putting things down is a kind of symbol. The gun stands for power, and the compass stands for knowing and controlling. Only by letting go of both, and going in with nothing but his purest self, can Isaac go to meet that bear who is just as pure. So when Isaac finally looks at Old Ben on the ground and they watch each other in silence, they are not hunter and prey. They stand as equals. This moment marks the birth of Isaac’s “ecological self” (Hada, 2020).

So the wilderness ethics in *The Bear* advocates an equality based on humility and respect. At its heart it says that humans and nature should be equal and should treat each other with respect.

But this noble way of thinking about the wild turns out to be weak when faced with the push of capitalism. The forest, which stood for the ancient wilderness, is bought

and cut down by a timber company.

Ironically, the thing that started this ecological tragedy was the choice Isaac made. He gave up his rights to the land in order to get away from his family's slavery. By walking away he left the wilderness with no one to protect it, and that made it easy for capital to move in.

After the disappearance of the forest, the hunting ethic that once had so much meaning turns into a bitter fight among people over what is left. Faulkner criticized human society's greed for nature through his depiction of the aggressiveness of capitalism. The damage capitalism does not just in taking natural resources, but also tears apart the spiritual bond between humans and nature in a way that is systematic.

### **3.2. Grassland Wisdom and Agricultural Civilization Criticism in Wolf Totem**

Unlike the mystical wilderness ethics in *The Bear*, the grassland wisdom in *Wolf Totem* is a highly practical way of managing the whole ecosystem. The heart of this wisdom is in characters like Uncle Bilig, who see the grassland as one living whole where all life is tied together.

The grassland ecosystem is a complex net. Each species has its own job. Wolves are the ones who keep the system in check. They are not just pests. They hunt yellow sheep, but they keep the sheep numbers down so the grassland does not get worn out by too many plant eaters. So the Mongolian people's respect for wolves is not some blind totem worship. It comes from seeing what wolves do for the land. As the novel says, "wolves are the guardians of the grassland" (Jiang, 2004, p. 56), and their being there is what keeps the grassland alive and full of different life.

The work shows the respect and understanding of nature in grassland culture through how the wolf packs act. It asks humans not to stand outside nature and watch, but to be part of it and to look for balance as things shift.

Jiang Rong gives a deep criticism of how modern farming civilization damages the grassland ecology in *Wolf Totem*. The farming settlers, with Bao Shungui as one example, see the grassland as empty land and wolves as pests. Their goal is to turn the complex, uncertain ecosystem into simple farmland that puts out a steady tonnage of grain. This kind of thinking is a simplification of ecology and a kind of violence done to local knowledge. As the scholar Marzluf (2021) puts it, this thinking tries to take the wisdom of survival and force it into numbers like tonnage carrying capacity that fit into how the nation thinks about development.

The story in the novel shows what has to happen when these two ways of seeing the world come up against each other. When an outside force that does not know or respect local ecological knowledge steps in, it breaks apart a stable system that took thousands of years to grow. The author of the *Wolf Totem* reproduces the scene of human destruction of the grassland before the readers' eyes and introduces the

various crimes committed by human beings in violation of natural resources in the development of society.

### **3.3. Comparison and Mutual Learning: Conflict and Integration of Two Ecological Ethics**

The ecological differences in *The Bear and Wolf Totem* are not accidents. They come from the distinct cultural roots and ways of thinking in Chinese and American civilizations. When we put them side by side, we can see that Faulkner's wilderness ethics is built on individualism, with Christian ideas of original sin and redemption underneath. Jiang Rong's grassland wisdom, on the other hand, is a collective practice, a way of living that holds together as a system, and it carries the push and pull between farming and nomadic cultures. We will look at this now.

*The Bear* shows wilderness and modern civilization as two things set against each other. It brings out the difficulty of living in harmony with nature. The wilderness ethics puts its weight on spirit and on moving beyond the self.

As we saw earlier, Isaac gives up his gun and his compass under Sam's teaching. This marks his letting go of power and of the need to know and control. Faulkner considers the watch and compass, symbols of civilization, as polluting objects from a "nature-based" perspective and appreciates them negatively to make people aware of the bad effects of civilization on nature, which is an ecologically beneficial appreciation. Later, when Isaac meets Old Ben in silence, Faulkner writes that Old Ben "didn't move" and "it just looked at him" (2014, p. 392), and Isaac is like "a tree or rock" (2014, p. 393). In this moment the wilderness takes Isaac in as something equal and harmless, part of nature. This shapes Isaac's ecological awareness. Later he says of the land that "the earth was no man's but all men's" (Faulkner, 2014, p. 249). His choice to give up the right to the land also shows the cultural pattern in Puritan ethics where "moral redemption" stands above "worldly possession". As the ecocritic Hada (2020) explains, this is the central ritual in the birth of Isaac's ecological self. So the kind of protection the work points toward is about drawing lines, about people coming into nature in the purest state with no material things, so they can hold onto a place untouched by human civilization.

*Wolf Totem* carries the meeting of grassland culture and ecological wisdom. It asks humans to become part of the ecosystem and to keep the balance through active work. The heart of its grassland wisdom is practicality and the sense of how things fit together.

The belief that wolves are the protectors of the grassland is not about making nature into a god. Seeing the grassland as one whole and each life as a branch of it can be understood as a system of life where big life holds many small lives together. This shows the kind of systematic thinking in the Chinese tradition where the whole and the parts work as one. Later Chen Zhen comes to see that "the grassland people worship the spirit of wolves, the wisdom and strength of wolves, and the

achievements of wolves to the grasslands” (Jiang Rong, 2004, p. 215). This kind of respect, rooted in what wolves actually do, fits with Roszak’s (1992) idea of the “ecological unconscious” deep in the human mind, a collective wisdom shaped in the act of survival. And grassland wisdom is how this ability shows itself and is put into practice in a specific culture.

The limits of these two ecological visions show up in the world today. Pure wilderness protectionism of the American kind looks weak against the reach of human activity. And pragmatism without reverence, no matter how wise in practical terms, will fall apart when it meets economic interests.

But the tension between the two also opens a door for bringing ecological ethics from different cultures together. The humility and reverence in *The Bear* can fill the ethical gap in grassland wisdom and keep it from turning into pure calculation. The systematic management in *Wolf Totem* can give protectionism a way forward, moving it from passive separation to active work with the land. A Xue (2023) makes a similar point, saying that Faulkner’s narrative calls for an ecological vision that holds everything together and moves past putting humans at the center.

However, the ecological vision within *Wolf Totem* is not without its own internal complexities. For instance, the author compares the grassland wolves to the man with strong will, showing the image of unyielding wolves. It is just Chen Zhen’s feeling, which delivers eco-ambivalent meaning.

Both works point to the need for balance between humans and nature, but they show it in different ways because of their cultural roots. In the end they both lead to the same place: to deal with the ecological crisis in our globalized world, we need both a real respect for ecological values and a practical way to manage how humans and nature live together.

The cross-cultural dialogue on ecology is about building an ecological ethics made of many parts, one that holds deep reverence and systematic wisdom together, so that “philosophical thought and practical concern” (Wang, 2022) become one. Reading *The Bear* and *Wolf Totem* side by side is a strong step toward that unity.

## **4. Cross-Cultural Reflections on Ecological Criticism**

### **4.1. The Boundaries of Western Ecological Criticism**

Western ecological criticism often sets up a fight between anthropocentrism and nature, and it usually builds on a hard line between wilderness and civilization. This way of thinking shows the limits that come from its own cultural roots when it tries to deal with ecological crises around the world. Isaac’s ecological awakening is tied to the specific historical wounds and the wrongs done to the land in the southern United States (Han, 2020).

The land ethic Faulkner lays out in *The Bear* does carry universal weight, but the model of “marking off protected areas” and “keeping things separate” is typical of wilderness protectionism. This model often does not work well when it meets

ecosystems that human activity has already touched deeply, because it cuts itself off from the needs of the people living there. As Weins et al. (2023) put it sharply, Western protectionism and China's way of building an ecological civilization are different at the root. Western protectionism tends to "separate nature from human activity", while the Chinese way puts into practice "harmonious coexistence between human and natural life".

The grassland wisdom in Wolf Totem pushes back against the idea that the Western wilderness model is universal. The grassland is not a wilderness that humans have left alone. It is a cultural landscape made by a long back and forth between people and the land. Grassland wisdom carries an ecological way of thinking rooted in practical balance. Marzluf (2021) shows that trying to fit this local knowledge into a single standard or translate it through one lens makes it lose its rich meaning.

Therefore, the first job of cross-cultural ecological criticism is to look at the blind spots in Western theory when it tries to explain non-Western texts. We have to see that this theory is not the only way to measure things, and that opens up a real space for the ecological wisdom of other cultures to be heard.

#### **4.2. Enhancing the Global Translatability of Local Discourse**

If we want to bring local cultures like Chinese grassland wisdom into the global conversation on ecology, the key is to make their way of talking about things something that can travel. This is not just about changing words from one language to another. It is about taking their core ethical ideas and turning them into forms that can speak to ecological concerns shared around the world.

What this means is that we need to take the wisdom of the grassland, which starts in one place, and lift it into a language that can connect with global issues. Take Uncle Bilig's idea of "big destiny and small destiny". This can be understood as a simple ecological thought about how the health of the whole ecosystem and the survival of each species depend on each other. Wolves are a key part of this, a good example of what keeps an ecosystem running, and what they do and why they matter is something the global ecological community can understand and hold onto.

Chen Zhen's awakening, "He began to understand that the wolf totem of the grassland ethnic group worships not the wolf itself, but the ecological balance represented by the wolf on the grassland", is itself a kind of translation. It takes something felt and local and turns it into ecological ethics that can be understood across cultures.

Through what literature can do, this local knowledge that once belonged only to the Mongolian grassland can step beyond its own place and become part of how we build global ecological ethics.

In conclusion, cross-cultural ecocriticism must first critique the cultural boundaries implicit in Western theoretical frameworks, and then actively translate indigenous ecological wisdom into ethical discourse that can resonate globally. It shows that

such a dialogue is not only possible, but urgently needed. Future research can further build a more systematic paradigm that integrates ecological, cultural and narrative dimensions.

## 5. Conclusion

The wilderness ethics of *The Bear* takes individual humility and spiritual redemption as the path, and pursues the equal gaze of man and nature; The grassland wisdom of *Wolf Totem* takes collective practice and system balance as the core, reflecting the ecological holism of nomadic civilization. Both have their own historical limitations: wilderness ethics are difficult to resist capitalist expansion, and grassland wisdom is easily reduced to instrumental calculations by economic rationality. However, it is the differences that open up the space for dialogue in cross-cultural ecocriticism.

Western ecological criticism has long taken its own wilderness conservation model as the general standard, ignoring the practical wisdom of coexistence between man and nature that is not the West. Effective cross-cultural dialogue requires critiquing the cultural boundaries of Western frameworks and translating local ecological wisdom into ethical discourse that resonates globally. Literary narrative undertakes a special mission here. The future task is to build a systematic paradigm that integrates ecological, cultural and narrative dimensions on the basis of criticism and translation, so that deep awe and systematic practice can jointly respond to the global ecological crisis.

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