One of the paradoxes in the queendom discourse is the elevation of the Suopowa’s feminine image along with their assertion of Khampa Tibetan masculinity. Although concerns and interests are manifested in this approach, their self-representation is not merely a matter of free choice, and it is shaped by a well-established framework of ethnic representations rooted in both the official and popular discourses in China. Minority representations also often reflect state agendas and tourist capital and interests. The roots of the Zangzu villagers’ dedication to the queendom cause and their motives for self-feminization are evident in the landscape of ethnic representations and in the official and popular discourses of ethnic Others that inform sociopolitical change and ethnic relations in China.

What has characterized and come out of minority representations is that ethnicity is sexualized by the fact that minority members are often identified with such images as “oversexed,” “promiscuous,” “hypermasculine,” and “hyperfeminine.” At the same time, sexuality is ethnicized, since these same labels are often reserved predominantly or exclusively for minority members who become the testing ground for the “standard” performances of different categories of sexuality under the umbrella of “masculinity” or “femininity.” Two significant cases of minority representations will be
introduced here for the purpose of examining, on the one hand, how sexualized ethnicity and ethnicized sexuality play out and, on the other, how each of these two cases—a “masculinized” image of Mongols and a “feminized” image of the “Women’s Country” at Lugu Lake in Yunnan, in southwest China—serves as a prelude to the discussion of the Eastern Queendom, in which both masculinity and femininity inform the local villagers’ struggle for the queendom label.

WOLFIGH OTHERS VERSUS SHEEPISH HAN

In the preface to a collection of folk songs from Hunan, Guizhou, and Yunnan provinces in which minority groups have a strong presence, Wen Yiduo, one of the most influential and outspoken poets of the New Cultural Movement generation, wrote: “You say these [poems] are primitive and savage. You are right, and that is just what we need today. We’ve been civilized too long, and now we have nowhere left to go. We shall have to pull out the last and purest card, and release the animal nature that has lain dormant in us for several thousand years, so that we can bite back” (quoted in Oakes 1997, 67–68). This is the representative voice of the New Cultural Movement (1917–23), characterized by a radical intellectual break with the past, and it asserts that China should absorb vital energy and strength from uncorrupted and “wild” Others in order to remove the suffocating yokes of semi-colonialism and feudal dogmas of Confucianism and gain entry to the modern world. In this portrayal, the Han civilization per se is believed to be the fundamental cause of China’s degeneration and the reason it has become the prey of bullying Western powers—that is, Confucianism has stifled the animal nature and wild instinct of the Han, and thus both Han bodies and minds were weakened and emasculated, putting China in a very disadvantaged position in the face of the militaristic and aggressive West.

Such concern and anxiety is resounding again in China at the turn of the twenty-first century, a time of intensified reforms, increasing influence in the world, and skyrocketing nationalism rooted in popular longing for the restoration of China’s great glory. The most representative work of this endeavor is the autobiographical novel Wolf Totem (Lang tuteng)—one of the best-selling and most influential literary works in China in the first decade of the twenty-first century—which claims that only the “wolf spirits”
of nomadic people can cure China’s “civilization malady.” This book has created tremendous controversy and stirred heated debate among its millions of Han and minority readers in China. Many speak highly of its ideas as offering a solution to China’s intrinsic problem, but it also receives enormous criticism for its romanticization or untruthful representations of Mongols and its irrational and excessive degrading of Chinese civilization.

**WHY WOLF TOTEM?**

*Wolf Totem* comes at a time of an aggravated crisis of masculinity as well as rising nationalism in China. The calls for restoring masculinity among Chinese youth and in nationalist discourse occur side by side. The discourse about masculinity is embedded in China’s desire to become a predominant world power and the Chinese public’s wholehearted embrace of this ambitious agenda. These Chinese nationalist aspirations are often conveyed and exhibited through masculinized expressions, such as assertiveness, determination, strong bodies, fearlessness, perseverance, and, above all, virility—the very qualities that are often associated with dominant males.

There is increasing concern about the emasculation of the younger male generation in China. Many intellectuals and the general public express great worry about boys and male youth taking on “weak” and “fragile” personalities that are unassertive, highly dependent, emotional or sensitive, and timid. As to the reason, most scholars are inclined to attribute it to the feminization of preschool and primary school education, meaning that the majority of teachers and instructors in pre-secondary schools and even in secondary schools are female, especially in urban settings. It is said that the problem with such an unbalanced sex ratio among school faculty is that male students are insulated from the virility, courage, determination, and optimism that a male teacher can transmit and inspire in them, while female teachers, serving as authority figures and role models, pass on feminine qualities like sensitivity and tenderness.³ More than that, an intrinsic problem in the Chinese educational system is believed to evolve from the flawed educational philosophy that attaches too much importance to collective discipline and exams rather than (male) individuality—that is, obedience (*tinghua*) and examination scores are often the most important criteria in evaluating students as “good” or “bad.” Many boys who are
“hyperactive” or “naughty” at school, and thus don’t do well on their homework and exams, are susceptible to being labeled “bad students” by teachers. As a result, many of these students become so frustrated with the negative image that they conform to the school norms at the cost of their virile “nature” (tianxing) (Wu Wenyu 2008; Sun, Li, and Zhao 2010).

Another important factor is that China’s one-child policy led to parents (and also grandparents) spoiling their only child to the extent that all children are raised like daughters who have received too much attention and emotional support, which results in overdependence, timidity, and hypersensitivity. Some scholars also attribute feminization to the lack of the dominant male figure in family education (Han 2007). The patriarchal family structure in China is to be blamed for this because the father is traditionally associated with the role of breadwinner while the mother is assigned the duty of taking care of and educating the children. As a result, boys are believed to become “demasculinized” through their mothers’ excessive care and fondness.

Feminized boys are seen as an obstacle to China’s rise, apart from the negative judgment of their sexuality and their “confused” or inverted gender roles. Since feminization is seen as a tendency among the younger male generation throughout the country, especially in urban settings, these feminized children—the pillar and backbone of China’s future—seem unable to fulfill their responsibility for the country’s revival and prosperity, as their “weak” personalities lack virility and the strength to face challenges and overcome difficulties (Sun Yunxiao 1993; Sun, Li, and Zhao 2010). Besides the spiritual or personality weakness of the younger generation, many of its members are also physically weak, due largely to the lack of physical exercise and sports. As a matter of fact, in China, the “sickly bodies” image is often linked mostly with intellectuals who are the equivalent of the “pallid-faced scholars” (baimian shusheng) of old times (Brownell 1995).

What is the relationship between a weak body and a weak mind? There are two explanations: one says that although a weak body cannot be translated into a weak mind directly, those with weak minds are inclined to have weak bodies, and vice versa; the other suggests that a weak body will definitely bring about a weak mind or that a weak mind always goes together with a weak body. Chen Duxiu, a leading figure in the New Culture Movement, cofounder of the Chinese Community Party, and an advocate for the
latter explanation, once commented: “Every time when I encounter the intellectual youth, who are too weak to truss up a chicken, too spineless to assert virility as a man, with pallid face and slim waist, as effeminate as virgins, and as feeble as the sick, [then I cannot help thinking that] counting on such physically and mentally weak citizens, how is it possible for them to take great responsibilities?” (Chen Duxiu 1915).

In this way, the bodies and minds of nationals become the index and point of reference in Chinese nationalist discourse. A strong nation requires strong bodies and minds. The West and/or Japan were the models for China in that they were believed to have successfully integrated these two aspects in their national characters and thus were empowered to dominate other nations. China was weak during its “unhappy” encounters with Western powers beginning in the first half of the nineteenth century and the New Culture Movement in the early twentieth century, and, in the eyes of some Chinese intellectuals, this situation remains true—China continues to suffer from its “weak” national character exemplified by weak bodies and minds. Therefore, the weakened bodies and emasculated minds of the younger generation in China pose a great challenge to China’s ascension to the rank of the great world powers.

Then what is the fundamental cause of these weak bodies and minds? The New Culture Movement intellectuals and other progressive or reform-minded intellectuals attribute this to the corrupted feudal system or Confucianism, which “esteems literacy and despises martiality” (zhongwen qingwu), as the Chinese Communist Party did and still does. Physical exercises and sports are also important components of martiality in a broad sense in China (Brownell 1995). Therefore, many of these intellectuals—including Wen Yiduo, Chen Duxiu, and Jiang Rong, the author of Wolf Totem—have called for the revival of the “animal nature” and virility of the Han that have been stifled by Confucianism and traditional values. Only when this animal nature is restored can the Chinese nation be reinvigorated, achieve a privileged status in this world, and regain its long-lost glory.

It is believed that not only Western Others but also Internal Others are endowed with such virile attributes. Thus, for some intellectuals, those “wild” minorities who have maintained their “natural instincts” in harsh environments and under tough conditions are also models for the Han. As a result, the status of minorities is transformed from being on the periphery
to being at the symbolic center in the sense that minorities are needed to reconstruct and masculinize the Han-self by transmitting their “wild” energies to the Han. Nevertheless, the centralizing of minorities in Chinese national discourse also reflects their challenge to the hegemonic Han-self (see Gladney 1991).

*Wolf Totem*

*Wolf Totem* is an example of this tendency. It is an autobiographical novel in that it is based on the author’s experience of living for more than a decade in the Inner Mongolian grassland. It also expresses his perspective on the wolves’ role in sustaining the ecological system of the grassland, the nomadic lifestyle and national spirit of the Mongols, and the Mongols’ significance to the rejuvenation of Chinese civilization. It also contains his reflections on Han chauvinism and shortsighted governmental agendas. The author’s points of view are elucidated by the two protagonists: Chen Zhen and Yang Ke. These two young students from Beijing are sent down to Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) to be “reeducated by the great masses” in response to Chairman Mao’s call for urban students, referred to as “intellectual youth” (*zhishi qingnian*, or *zhiqing* for short) to go “up to the mountains and down to the countryside.” In the book, the two students, especially Chen Zhen, go through a dramatic transformation, from Han-centric students whose fear and hatred of wolves were rooted in the “petty peasant mentality” of the Han to spiritually reborn Mongolian men and worshippers of the Wolf Totem.

In Han folklore and popular expressions, wolves are the most evil and atrocious of animals. Consequently, as Chen phrases it, “We [Han] call the most malicious people wolves; we call sex fiends wolves; we say the greediest people have the appetite of a wolf; the American imperialists are referred to as ambitious wolves; and any time an adult wants to frighten a child, he cries out ‘Wolf!’” (Jiang 2008, 271–72). With this notion ingrained in their minds, the revolutionary cadres in Olonbulga, where the story is set, and the Ujimchin Banner in Inner Mongolia (both places populated by the Han and Sinicized Mongols who have “forgotten their roots”) blame wolves for inflicting massive damage on their herds and embark on a large-scale campaign of exterminating wolves “until every Olonbulag wolf is dead” (201). Like other Han, Chen has an instinctual aversion to wolves at first. As time goes on, however, he comes to realize that wolves play an indispensable role
in safeguarding the grassland and are part of the Mongols’ identities, and thus the extermination of wolves would mean the complete destruction of the grassland and the Mongolian nomadic way of life. But that is not all. The Han and the government would pay a great price for their destructive acts because the environmental deterioration of the Mongolian grassland would have a devastating impact on northern China, including Beijing. Furthermore, destruction of the nomadic way of life and grassland would mean that China would lose the stronghold for its revitalization.

In Chen’s close observations, he discovers that wolves possess the admirable qualities of courage, wisdom, cooperation, organization, discipline, patience, and perseverance, as well as deference to authority and defiance of inhospitable conditions. After having understood this, the Mongolian troops’ crushing military victories in history and the invincible robustness of Genghis Khan and his descendants are no longer a mystery for him, and he is convinced that the wolves had trained the Mongols through their encounters and mutual struggles to be the most skillful, intrepid, and formidable warriors and fighters in the world. Wild animals, such as gazelles, field mice, ground squirrels, hares, and marmots, and livestock such as cattle, sheep, and horses would overgraze and destroy the grassland without the wolves to check their uncontrolled growth by killing them. Wolves also ward off epidemics or plagues and purify the grassland by quickly disposing of the dead bodies of animals killed by natural disasters. Therefore, wolves have a unique place in the Mongols’ lives and form an intricate and intimate relationship with the nomads: on the one hand, both sides constantly battle each other as people try to protect their livestock from these insatiable predators, and in confronting their powerful rivals, Mongols have cultivated outstanding combat skills and remarkable virility; on the other hand, the Mongols regard the wolves as protectors of the grassland and as their totem. This relationship constitutes the spiritual core of the grassland civilization, manifested in the Mongols’ broad-minded attitude of living with nature rather than struggling to overcome it. As a result, the Mongols’ formidable virility is “rational virility” rather than “savage virility.” The latter is a partial or incorrect representation of Mongolian virility that is often associated with bloody ferocity and crude brutality, but instead, the virility of the Mongols is balanced by their profound understanding of nature and respect for life.

In comparison, Chen realizes, the Han civilization is rooted in agrarian
Masculine and Feminine Internal Others

culture characterized by a narrow-minded “petty peasant mentality” (*xiaonong yishi*). This mentality has resulted in conservative outlooks, a lack of pioneering spirit, self-importance, and, above all, a weak and submissive national character. The situation is exacerbated by the detrimental impact of Confucianism embedded in agrarian culture, and the two are intertwined to define the Han-self and national character. According to Jiang, at its very beginning, Confucianism embraced the elements of virility and robustness due to its origin in the seminomadic environment, but it has developed to an extreme since the eleventh century, when its focus on “maintaining the heavenly principle and eradicating human desire” (*cuntianli mie renyu*) was promulgated. If the goal were to eradicate human desire, there would be no place for a “wolfish nature” at all. In essence, this ideology was designed to mold people into submissive and loyal subjects who would not object to the status quo. Therefore, the wolfish nature of nomadic people posed a serious challenge to the ruling order and had to be disputed and demonized. As a result, the wolfish nature of the Han, who evolved from nomadic life, has been stifled, and people have become so docile and soft that a “sheepish nature” has almost come to define the Han national character. Consequently, China has been bullied or overwhelmed by foreign powers who have managed to maintain their wolfish nature while developing sophisticated sociopolitical systems and advanced technologies. Thus, in the novel, Chen refers to the West and Japan as “civilized wolves.” So in order to change the contemporary world order and rejuvenate itself, China must learn from the West and Japan and especially from its own Internal Others, masculinize the national discourse, and shed the sheepish character of its people. Mongols are the best potential mentors for the Han, yet instead of learning from the Mongols, the Han have spared no effort in attempting to destroy the grassland and the Mongols’ masculine, nomadic way of life. *Wolf Totem* is a relentless critique of Han chauvinism and a sincere plea for the Han to become aware of this problem. Jiang describes in a strikingly vivid way the inferior and pitiful nature of the sheep:

Sheep are truly stupid animals. When the wolf knocked the unfortunate sheep to the ground, the other sheep scattered in fright. But the entire flock soon calmed down, and there were even a few animals that timidly drew closer to watch the wolf eat a number of their flock. As they looked
on, more joined them, until at least a hundred sheep had virtually penned the wolf and its bloody victim in; they pushed and shoved and craned their necks to get a better look. Their expressions seemed to say, “Well, the wolf is eating you and not me!” Either that or, “You are dying so I can live.” Their fear was measured by a sense of gloating. None made a move to stop the wolf.

Startled by the scene, Chen was reminded of the writer Lu Xun, who had written about a crowd of dull-witted Chinese looking on as a Japanese swordsman was about to lop off the head of a Chinese prisoner. What was the difference between that and this? No wonder the nomads see the Han Chinese as sheep. A wolf eating a sheep may be abhorrent, but far more loathsome were cowardly people who acted like sheep. (Jiang 2008, 319)

What a dramatic scene this is! Lu Xun (1881–1936), one of the most influential writers in twentieth-century China, known for his sharp and penetrating satirical writing style, lamented the sheepish and slavish national character of the Han. Now Jiang Rong is revealing the same deplorable reality—that is to say, the problem of the soft Han character has never been resolved and continues to haunt China. Although socialist China has replaced (or attempted to replace) Confucianism with a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist creed as the state ideology and has sped up its industrialization and modernization process, state policy and popular conceptions are still rooted in the narrow-minded petty peasant mentality. The cadres in Olonbulag were trying to exterminate “evil” wolves and planning to turn the fertile grasslands into farmlands. Native nomads and “converted” Mongols like Chen and his friend Yang Ke couldn’t resist this hegemonic policy openly, for their actions would be labeled as “local ethno-nationalism” (difang minzu zhuyi) or antirevolutionary.

At odds with the normative eulogy of the hegemonic Chinese civilization, the author argues that Confucianism and petty peasant mentality had almost rendered China powerless against invading foreign powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Therefore, it was not the Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty who were to blame for the loss of sovereignty and cession of territory. According to this theory, if it had not been for the “blood transfusion” the Manchus gave to Chinese civilization as well as the residue of their wolfish nature, which was sustained to the end of the Qing dynasty,
the three northeastern provinces, Xinjiang, and Tibet would be absent from China’s map today. This declaration is not a simple challenge to the contemporary Chinese official discourse; it is a complete inversion. Jiang asserts that nomadic peoples, mainly Mongols and Manchus, have contributed much more than the Han to the preservation and continuation of Chinese civilization by constantly providing “wild” and vigorous new blood. The tragedy, however, is that the Han and the state have given these minorities little credit. On the contrary, they are demonized as barbarians or marginalized as ancillary to Chinese civilization rather than recognized as its mainstay and savior. The Party and the Han populace have not been aware of the fact that they are digging their own graves by exterminating wolves and destroying the grassland. If the Han do not act in time to halt their excessive appropriation of natural resources in the vast Inner Mongolian grassland and end the destructive act of turning it into farmland, there will be no way to recover from the loss of the last hope for China’s revival or to repair the damage caused by desertification.

In pointing out the inherent “disease” of the Han, Jiang earnestly calls for the replacement of the Han sheepish nature with the wolfish nature that they can learn from the “superior” Mongols. Thus, the Han must bow to the Mongols as their serious and sincere students. Chen—the novel’s protagonist (perhaps a stand-in for the author himself)—has succeeded in converting himself spiritually to Mongol values after realizing that his unmanliness and cowardliness have been firmly embedded in his Han blood: “‘I’m worse than useless,’ Chen said with a sigh, deeply ashamed. ‘Gutless as the sheep. A dog is worth more than me, not to mention a woman. Even a nine-year-old boy showed me up’” (Jiang 2008, 11).

Here, a Han person unprecedentedly positions himself as inferior to a Mongolian dog, a Mongolian woman, and a Mongolian boy, justifying the legitimacy of the Others as masters and superiors. An unpretentious and self-effacing attitude on the part of the Han is the key to learning the essence of the Mongols’ wolfish nature, and only by being transfused with new Mongolian blood will China be able to strengthen and elevate itself into an unquestioned world power. In this way, Jiang has brought forward both an alternative to the normative discourse of the Han as civilizer and a reaffirmation and reinforcement of the indispensable role of virile and strong-willed Internal Others as the model for and holder of authenticity that the Han may resort to whenever necessary.
In all, *Wolf Totem* not only serves as a serious challenge to the Han-self but also suggests a way of ameliorating and perfecting Han-selfhood. In doing so, it imagines ethnic Others as existing for the Han, and their masculine image is appropriated for Han consumption and nationalist expression as well as for the reconstruction of Han-selfhood. In consequence, the identity of some ethnic Others is defined largely by “us” as masculine and tough in contrast to “our” eff eteness and softness. Although it is true that in this book Mongols take pride in their virility while mocking Han “cowardliness” and “weakness,” it is an outsider, Chen, who acts as the spokesman for the Mongols, whose voices would otherwise be silenced. It is still a Han who has taken the responsibility of telling “us” Han what “they” Mongols really are after having experienced personal rebirth and revitalization. Therefore, “their” identity continues to be represented through the lens of “us.” Thus, “the use of the Other(s) to offer criticism of the self is not necessarily emancipatory for the represented Others,” and, quite the contrary, the impact of the positive stereotyping “on the exoticized represented was often predictably the same—a prelude to control, dominance, and exploitation” (Anand 2007, 40–41). That being so, in essence the tribute to Mongolian virility reflects in inverted fashion the same asymmetric power relationship between the Han and ethnic Others as is embedded in both the official/state and popular discourses in China.

Thus, an examination of how such asymmetrical power is exhibited in these discourses and what implications it has for both Han-selfhood and Internal Others will present a general picture of the ethnic landscape in order to draw a sketch of dynamic ethnic relations in China. As much of the literature on the dominant-subordinate paradigm points out, the symbolization of asymmetrical power relations through gender imagery or sexual metaphor is usually a most effective tactic employed by the powerful to justify their advantaged standing by prioritizing their notion of sexuality and concept of masculinity/femininity as a norm or model. This self-congratulatory stance puts identity politics in a place that is centered on the palpably oppositional characteristics transplanted from gender stereotypes and thus on conflicting identities imposed to fulfill the myth of rule by the “selected.” As will be shown, sexual symbols are more pronounced in Han popular discourse about ethnic Others in China, which is, however, informed and guided to a large extent by the official/state discourse.
INTERNAL OTHERS IN CHINA

The representations of Internal Others in China thus exhibit the collusions or convergences of two streams: the official/state force and the force of the populace.

The Official Discourse

A consensus in Western academia is that the hierarchical or patriarchal relationship between the Han and minority Others today has been inherited from the Qing and earlier Chinese empires. This legacy is characterized by the notion that the Han were (and are) at the center of civilization while minorities were (and are) at the periphery. The Chinese empire had long ago endorsed a set of doctrines and practices that came to be characterized as “Chinese Culturalism” (Harrell 2001, 27). This is an ideology that sets Confucian ideals and political doctrines as the model of human civilization. The civility level of minorities and their relationship with the civilizing center were defined mostly in moral-cultural terms. Kinship and origin were not counted as the most important criteria, but the degrees to which minorities adopted Han cultural practices were measured on a scale of their “evolution” and assimilation. Some of them were very close to “civilized” Han or even verged on becoming Han. Based on their civility level, other minorities were classified in two broad categories: “strange barbarians” (sheng fan) and “familiar barbarians” (shu fan). The empire at the center launched a “civilizing project” to educate these minorities about the “proper rites” (li) and correct manners, and it measured their civility based on how much they accepted and absorbed these “high” cultural practices (Harrell 1995, 2001).

With the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party started to revise the empire-civilizing project to fit the socialist ideology of minorities and classes. Based on Marxist-Leninist theories of ethnic relations, the minority issue is understood as one form of class struggle, and social inequality was the soil and “nutrition” of minority difference. So the Party considered its most pressing task to be erasing the sources of such inequality, ultimately bringing minority groups to full and equal status with the Han. The Party also claims that such inequality will not easily disappear and will linger for a long time, but what the Party can
do first of all is to grant minorities full political equality and equal rights to economic and cultural development. In this process, the Han have the obligation to help minorities advance together. According to Stevan Harrell (2001), the Party’s civilizing project in China resembles neither an empire model nor a nation-state model. The empire model, characterized by the paradigm of the polarized center versus the periphery and superiority versus inferiority, was accused of being feudal and oppressive due to its legitimization of unequal relationships between the Han and minorities. As for the nation-state model, seeing that it intends to erase the cultural differences of minorities in order to promote a unified cultural system, the Party views this model as hegemonic and chauvinistic.

As a result, the Party promotes a new model that it refers to as “a unified country of diverse ethnicities” (duo minzu de tongyi guojia) or “a single unity with multiple cells” (duoyuan yiti geju), an expression coined by a leading Chinese sociologist-anthropologist, the late Fei Xiaotong (1910–2005), in 1989. The socialist model proposes that minority cultures are an integrative and indispensable part of the Zhonghua (the pan-Chinese nation including minorities) civilization and enjoy equal status with the Han culture. Nevertheless, in reality, what is promulgated as “a single unity” turns out to be “unified with or under the Han.” Thus, the basic structure of the Han as the core with minorities on the periphery remains. Therefore, although the socialist model claims to be different from both the empire model and the nation-state model, it is actually a combination of the two—that is, the patronizing-patronized relationship between the Han and minorities still informs and shapes ethnic policies and ethnic interactions in China, while “a single unity with multiple cells” means that the minority Others must erase some, if not all, of their differences in order to fit into that unity with the “civilized” Han. In this way, the official discourse of ethnic Others has come into being.

From 1953 to 1957, the Chinese government organized a large-scale ethnic identification project. This project and the Party’s concept of ethnicity were informed by and embedded in the Morgan-Engels paradigm of social evolutionism: primitive society → slave society → feudalism → capitalism → socialism. Minorities were said to be on the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder. Some ethnic groups were thought to be at the stage of primitive society, such as the Jinpo, Wa, Jinuo, Dulong, and Oroqen, among others. Many minority cultural practices were depicted as “primitive” and “back-
ward,” such as the “walking marriage” (zouhun) of the matrilineal Mosuo people (discussed below), and thus in need of reform. In Chinese official discourse, this custom is a remnant of the primitive “matrilineal clan” (muxi shizu), which is not congruent with socialist morality and ideals and thus must be eradicated.13 Ironically, this “primitive” custom has now become an object of tourist fascination and source of revenue. The Party employed the evolutionary paradigm to legitimize its civilizing project of moralizing and “helping” minorities by changing their modes of production, lifestyles, and “outdated” customs, including “primitive” sexuality and even “mentality” (sixiang guannian), in order to accelerate their evolution. In this way, the Han act as fatherly figures or older brothers who will lead minorities in the construction of a socialist modernity.

However, the official discourse about minorities in China has been changing since then. In official propaganda, media, and textbooks today, there has been a growing tendency to incorporate Internal Others into the Chinese historical self through a new narrative that, in contrast to their portrayal as “foreigners” in the early 1950s, claims that they have always been Chinese (Baranovitch 2010, 85). As a result, not only the Han but also all minorities in China become “creators of history.” This shift has to do with the Party’s reflection on intensified ethnic conflicts in both international and domestic political arenas. Therefore, it is of strategic importance to define Tibet, Xinjiang, and other minority regions (as well as Taiwan) as “inseparable parts of China since antiquity [ziguyilai]” in textbooks, media, and other channels by refuting the separatists’ claims. It is undeniable that the natural resources of minority regions, political stability, and support of state agendas by minorities are of great significance to China’s economic and political success in the world. Thus, the state finds it beneficial to bring minorities’ initiatives into play as well as to reassert China’s sovereignty over minority regions and the legitimacy of extracting various resources. Some scholars have also argued that this change is inseparable from the growing influence of minority elites in challenging the Han-centric discourse (though not the unity of multicultural China) (Baranovitch 2010; see also Harrell and Li 2003).

The Popular Discourse

Apart from the official discourse, there is also a popular discourse deeply grounded in mainstream Chinese society that informs the images of minor-
ities and ethnic relations, which range from demonization to romanticization in the eyes of both elites who do not represent the state or officials and the common Han populace. The official discourse sets the framework for representations of minority groups, and, to a large extent, the popular discourse about minorities echoes the same theme of high (Han) culture versus low (minority) culture with the image of the Han as father or elder brother to minorities. As both discourses are embedded in each other, any attempt to separate them is doomed to fail. The popular discourse is characterized by the debasing of certain minorities as “wild,” “dangerous,” “barbarian,” or “backward,” on the one hand, and fascination and mystification of the “exotic” customs and cultures of minorities, on the other. Tibetans and Uyghurs have been denounced as ungrateful and treacherous largely as a result of the 2008 Tibet riot and 2009 Xinjiang upheaval. This negative labeling is the result of large-scale political propaganda about the nature of these rebellions, which describes them as separatist riots undertaken in collusion with vicious anti-China Western powers and diasporic cliques as well as violent incidents characterized by ruthless attacks on innocent civilians, governmental agencies, and other facilities. As this rhetoric invoked anti-Tibetan and anti-Uyghur sentiments, the whole Chinese nation, including minorities, united to condemn the violence of the rebels. Often such indignation among the general public was extended to innocent Tibetan and Uyghur people, who, as members of their ethnic groups, were also reviled and discredited.

On the whole, however, the popular discourse is overloaded with the exoticization of minority culture, and Others continue to be fetishized for their exoticness. According to Dru Gladney (1991, 1994) and Louisa Schein (1997, 2000), this is an exemplary manifestation of internal orientalism. A most prominent orientalist image is the portrayal of minorities as the embodiment of purity, simplicity, and unaffected optimism, while many urban Han people argue that they are lacking in such qualities because of the negative effects of modern life. In modern society, the common obsession with authenticity and traditions typically reflects nostalgia for something that has been lost, and these “virtues” are often promoted as models for “corrupted,” “desperate,” and “civilized” Han that will allow them to lead authentic and meaningful lives.

Throughout Chinese history, some negative qualities normally associated with Others, such as wildness and savagery, have been praised and
promoted as the remedy for the Han’s deadly and morbid civility. In this way, some reform-minded individuals employ the “savagery” of Others as a critique of the “too civilized” Han. *Wolf Totem* is the best illustration of the Han’s self-reflectivity in this respect, and the author’s call for the Han to “go wild” by absorbing the wolfish nature of nomadic Mongols subverts dominant discourses about minorities and acknowledges the indispensable role of Internal Others in sustaining Chinese civilization. Once again, the Han construct selfhood as opposed to minorities but this time elevate minorities as masters and models for the Han to imitate. In so doing, this image of “noble Others” reverses the normative Han-self, which is culturally and morally superior to the “barbarian” Others.

Besides these two images of “authentic Others” and “noble Others,” the image of “sexualized Others” is a common representation of Internal Others in China. In this portrayal, some minority men are recognized for their virility, toughness, and fearlessness—quintessential masculine properties that Han males are seen to lack and which they badly need in order to invigorate themselves. 

This masculinized image of Others is consistent with the popular image of minority men, such as Tibetans and Mongolians, as hypermasculine or oversexed—well-built, courageous, rough, wild, and sexually potent. As a result, Other men become the object of both desire and fear for many Han men and women, in whose eyes Others qualify as “real men” for whom scholarly, “weak,” urban Han men are no match. Other men could also be dangerous and unpredictable due to their unfettered wildness.

Likewise, minority women are often pictured as sexually open and promiscuous (Harrell 1995; Davis 2005). Some Han men complain that Han women are too rigid and “conservative” (baoshou) in sexual relationships, while the minority women of their imaginations are not confined by Confucian and traditional ideals and are more “open” (kaifang) and “free” (zijyouth) in their selection of sexual partners. As a result, Other women became objects of sexual desire or of the male gaze. Propelled by this fantasy, many a male tourist goes to “the land of seductive women” to “have fun,” and in some ethnic-tourist destinations, prostitution is booming. Real minority women and Han women in ethnic costumes use their bodies to satisfy Han men’s thirst for wild romance (Hyde 2001; Davis 2005, 10). The most popular image of free love in China is associated with the Mosuo people living by Lugu Lake.
THE LURE OF LUGU LAKE:
DISCOURSE OF THE WOMEN’S COUNTRY

Lugu Lake is located at the border between Yunnan and Sichuan in southwestern China and is well known as the Women’s Country throughout China. It is inhabited by the Mosuo, whose official status is contested. The unique practice of walking marriage among the natives—a sexual partnership based on “romantic” love between a woman and her lover(s)—is highly popularized in China. The Han and other minority ethnic groups tend to react in two distinct ways to this practice. Many detest the “looseness” and “barbarism” of this custom, which seems completely at odds with the Confucian ideal of marriage and family and so-called universal standards practiced all over the world; many others are amazed by and envious of the free love at Lugu Lake, viewing it as an antithesis of or resistance to the rigid Chinese institution of marriage, which stifles people’s sexuality and barely has any place for romance. Whatever the reaction, the practice at Lugu Lake is exotic to the Han and triggers their curiosity about the Women’s Country. As a result, it has become a popular tourist destination and attracts tens of thousands of tourists each year, both from home and abroad.

Mosuo society is often advertised as “the last matriarchy on earth” or “the living fossil of matriarchy.” Its walking-marriage practice fuels the imaginations of Han men, who imagine that Mosuo women can have relations with any man they like, that they just wait in their chambers for their lovers at night, and that they can also break up with and change their sexual partners at will. For some, the best part of it is that men are not obligated to take any responsibility for the possible consequences of their romantic love with these women, namely, children, who will be taken care of by their maternal families. This is believed to constitute the essence of free love. This myth appeals to an increasing number of Han and other male and some female tourists. It also contributes to the popularization of the idea of the Women’s Country all over China.

The reason Mosuo society is said to be a matriarchy has much to do with the fact that it is founded largely on matrilineal kinship: the children born out of the union of a woman and her partner(s) belong to the mother’s lineage and are brought up by the immediate members of this lineage; the genitor doesn’t normally participate in the economic life of this lineage.
mentioned above, the label of “matriarchy” is sanctioned by the official discourse stemming from the Morgan-Engels evolutionary pattern of human societies, and the popular discourse also takes it as such. The concept of the Women’s Country is extremely popular with the Han and other minorities due to the unprecedented influence of the novel and adapted TV series *Journey to the West*, which is based on a legend about a Tang dynasty monk and his three disciples overcoming hardships as they travel all the way to Buddha’s Land (India) to acquire holy scriptures. In one of their adventures, they set foot in the Women’s Country, which is populated exclusively by women who become pregnant and give birth to female offspring by drinking from the Motherhood River. The Han and others can easily connect the Women’s Country with Mosuo society.

In the popular imagination, the Women’s Country or Mosuo society represents a number of features: (1) an abundance of good-looking women; (2) high female status, with women (usually elderly) taking the role of household head and women’s opinions being more important in public affairs; (3) the popularity of female-centered local customs, such as the girls’ puberty ritual and worship of the female mountain deity; (4) practices associated with women’s freedom and control in matters of love, such as the ability to walk out of ordinary marriage and initiate as well as terminate sexual relationships; and, last but not least, (5) the predominance of cooperative, caring, and devoted relations among members of the extended family as well as in the whole community. In the eyes of many Han people, this utopian way of life contrasts with that of the Han at every point.¹⁹

**THE WOMEN’S COUNTRY—AN UNFULFILLED DREAM**

A novel titled *The Remote Country of Women* (Yuanfang youge nüerguo), written in 1988 by the famous Chinese writer Bai Hua, is one of many works that have contributed to the creation, popularization, and essentialization of such images. As one of the most influential books on the Women’s Country, this work distinguishes itself from most media products (movies, documentaries, travel brochures, books, blogs) on this “mysterious” land by being a serious reflection on and sharp critique of Han “civility” and mentality.²⁰ Like *Wolf Totem*, it juxtaposes the “sophisticated” Han with “innocent” minority people, namely the Mosuo, as a way of expressing the
protagonist’s, as well as the author’s, frustration with the Han’s shallowness, arrogance, and chauvinism. Mosuo society is portrayed as a paradise where people live a simple but happy life and celebrate and savor free love.

The main character, Liangrui, is swept up in the revolutionary tides of the 1960s and 1970s that undermined personal conscience and human nature. He shows no sympathy for his parents, who commit suicide at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, declaring that their deaths are “as light as a feather.” Appalled by the political chaos, he grows more and more disturbed by his own impassivity and cruelty. He becomes a pained but awakened observer of the craziness and consequences of endless political struggles: distrust, hypocrisy, hatred, mercilessness, violence, and betrayal. His life is overwhelmed by darkness, and he is unable to see any hope ahead. His only light is his girlfriend—the daughter of the former vice mayor—who provides a temporary refuge from the harsh and stifling reality. However, when her life returns to normal after the Cultural Revolution, their relationship comes to an end. Liangrui decides to leave his sufferings and urban life behind and work in a faraway land. His accidental encounter with two hospitable Tibetan girls when he arrives at his destination convinces him that he has come to a place where the people are simple and pure of heart.

The other thread in The Remote Country of Women is the story of Sunamei, a beautiful and innocent Mosuo girl who has grown up in a totally different environment where people are sincere, caring, warm, trustworthy, lighthearted, free-spirited, and good-natured. In her harmonious society, there is no murder for love, conflict between in-laws, family discord over money or power, or abandonment of the elderly and orphans, and women are free to love or not to love and, above all, are the soul of society. They are diligent in work, dedicated to their families, and capable of managing a big household. However, their most distinctive quality is that they love just for the sake of love without considering external factors such as wealth, “morality,” or family pressure. Therefore, Mosuo men are the luckiest men in the world because their lovers devote their whole hearts to them. Likewise, Mosuo women are the most blessed because the Mosuo men here are unusually understanding and broad-minded, never starting fights or making trouble if their women find new loves. Since this culture doesn’t keep a rein on people’s hearts and allows them natural expression, Sunamei’s life is full of joys. Her lovers treat her as a priceless gem, and she enjoys passionate
moments of physical and emotional unity with them. However, her life is transformed when she is selected to work in the county’s performance troupe due to her extraordinary singing talent.

The two threads converge when the disillusioned former revolutionary youth and passionate and “wild” Sunamei—two people from totally different worlds—meet at the county theater where Liangrui works and Sunamei performs. They fall in love and live together in secret. She is lonely and homesick in the county seat where people (Han) are afraid of expressing love in either words or actions. She is watched and guarded against all the time because of the assumed promiscuous and unbridled nature of Mosuo women. The women in town are worried that she will slip into their houses at night to sleep with their husbands. She becomes a target of gossip. Liangrui is also concerned about her “wildness” and hopes to use marriage to curb her unruliness. As he wishes, she turns into an obedient “small wife” (xiaoxifu), and he assumes that she belongs to him only. This dream is shattered when they go to her natal home and she and her ex-lover are caught cheating on him. In a fury, he beats her and causes a big fire. She disappears, and he realizes that he will never belong to this world and so must return to the world he has tried to escape.

Unlike most Han, Liangrui thinks highly of Mosuo culture, including walking marriage, and asserts that Mosuo society has a higher moral standard than the Han’s, thanks to their unfettered passion for life and the ability to be true to their own hearts. In spite of this, he attempts to subjugate his “wild” Mosuo wife and educate her with the ethics of “modern” marriage. His failure is manifested not only in his marriage but also in his life more broadly, when he ends up being unable to belong to either the Other world or the “civilized” modern world. The word “remote” in the book’s title doesn’t simply refer to geographic distance but reflects psychological distance and a cultural gap that make the remote land even more alluring.

Bai Hua’s work essentializes and idolizes Mosuo culture and practices, especially free love, catering to and enhancing the Han’s craving for this mysterious and faraway land. His reflections on Han sophistication and chauvinism also reinforce the image of “innocent,” “carefree,” and “sensual” Mosuo people, especially the women. The protagonist represents merely one of millions of Han tourists and others who travel to Lugu Lake with extravagant yearnings.
Being Real for Tourists

The utopian way of life at Lugu Lake and especially such “exotic” customs as walking marriage have great appeal for Han tourists who flock to Lugu Lake to explore or experience this unusual tradition. Many of them are eager to find out how many partners locals have and how they form such relationships. In 2004, when I first visited this lake, a local woman told me that tourists always liked to ask these private questions, which embarrassed or even irritated her a lot at first, but she eventually got used to it. In fact, many locals engage in “auto-orientalism” in order to cater to the curiosity and desires of tourists (see Blumenfield 2010). For instance, some Mosuo people joke with inquisitive tourists about their so-called free-love practices and tease them about “tasting” local women or men. Many Mosuo counteract the negative effect of their reputation for free love or promiscuity by emphasizing their loving and harmonious family structure in front of visitors (Walsh 2005).

Nevertheless, locals know that the free-love myth is the part of their culture that attracts tourists’ interest and money. Yang Erche Namu, a highly controversial female celebrity in China, a writer and former singer originally from Lugu Lake, plays an important role in promoting the image of Mosuo as carefree lovers. Yang’s portrayal of the innocent and sexually “instinctual” Mosuo is so influential that several minority members told me that Yang was causing not only Mosuo but all minorities to lose face. To quote one Tibetan woman, “Yang Erche Namu must be out of her mind. What is she doing? She created the image that we minorities are luan gao [having chaotic sexual intercourse]” (luan means “chaotic,” and gao means “doing,” “making,” or, in this case, “sexual intercourse”). Yang Erche Namu’s self-orientalizing and sexualizing of the Mosuo have also been mentioned by critics of her coauthored English-language autobiography Leaving Mother Lake (Yang Erche Namu and Mathieu 2003).

Lugu Lake is thus imagined by many Han and others as a land for romantic encounters, where one can leave behind all one’s sexual constraints and live purely for love—at least for one amorous night. It happens that some local women and men may want to “taste” outsiders, too, but surely such impulses are not enough to meet the demands of the tourist market. As a result, prostitution appeared and returns from time to time in spite of governmental crackdowns. The sex workers, mostly non-Mosuo
from other poor regions, all wear Mosuo costumes and satisfy the desires of guests who seek free love with “authentic” Mosuo women, even though it is obvious that this love is not free (Walsh 2005).

The matriarchy discourse plays into such essentialized erotic scripts, and escalating tourism revenues have spurred further commercialization of the Women’s Country and local traditions (see Blumenfield 2010). Drawing from Lugu Lake’s successful experience, Danba County in Sichuan and some other places also hope to promote their versions of the Women’s Country.

In the tourist markets of China, the Eastern Queendom is well known, too. Like the Women’s Country at Lugu Lake, Danba is also advertised by the local government and media as the land of beautiful women who are higher in status than men and engage in romantic love at will. This advertisement has contributed to the infl ow of tens of thousands of tourists each year, many of whom are fascinated with this myth. Therefore, the popularity of the matriarchy discourse emanates at least in part from the market value of the sexually charged label “Women’s Country,” which is, however, deeply rooted in the official and popular discourse about minority women and men.

Although women in the Women’s Country tend to be depicted as “feminine” or “gentle and soft” (wenrou), Yang Erche Namu is notorious for her wildness and bluntness. The most common comments I heard from people, both the Han and minorities, are that she is “crazy,” “thick-skinned,” and “unashamed.” She is inclined to make audacious remarks to the media. For instance, her proposal of marriage to French president Nicolas Sarkozy during his visit to China in 2007 became sensational news in China and abroad. She has labeled herself “the biggest bitch in China.” Since Yang often speaks as if she were the spokesperson for all minorities, her self-portrayal reaffirms the image of “unruly” minority people in the Han popular discourse in China. A popular myth even credits Miao women with poisoning outsiders by magic (see Diamond 1988; Harrell 1995; Schein 2000). Nevertheless, the “wild” nature of minority women may make them even more attractive to Han men, who see their own ability to tame the former’s wildness as a public declaration of their heroism and virility.

*Wolf Totem* and the discourse on the Women’s Country help illustrate how minorities are represented in both the popular and the official discourse in China. In the popular discourse, minorities are often sexualized, normally
portrayed as either hypermasculine or hyperfeminine. These images are shaped and structured by the official discourse, which is dominated by Han-minority patronization. Although minorities sometimes become symbolically central in the Han endeavor to rediscover themselves through Internal Others, this doesn’t necessarily bring about due respect or even liberation for minorities. Minority images, whether feminized or masculinized, positive or negative, are often appropriated by the state and the Han for their own consumption and nationalist self-absorption.

This is mostly a one-sided fantasy. The voices and self-expressed interests of Others are often not of concern; thus, minority people’s intentions and opinions can be brushed aside and their identities defined and interpreted through the lens of the Han or the state. In this context, the Suopowa’s struggle for the queendom label is of particular significance.