

Ethnic Cultures of China

# TOTEMISM

## IN CHINESE MINORITY ETHNIC GROUPS

By He Xingliang

CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS





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## CHAPTER I TOTEM AND TOTEMISM

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## I. What is Totemism

Totemism holds an important position in religious history of Chinese minority ethnic groups and has a profound influence on their culture of later generations. To probe into totemism in minority ethnic groups can help us understand clearly the origin and cause of development of many traditional cultures of ethnic groups, comprehend properly the phenomena related to totemism in archaeological relics, historical literatures and traditional cultures, and probe into the development and changing rules of religions and cultures.

The Chinese word “*tuteng* (图腾)” is a transliteration name for “totem”, a word in Ojibwa language in the Algonquin tongue of American Indians with the original meaning of “family relatives” and “members of the same clan”, etc. Other ethnic groups also have names with the same meaning as “totem”, but as the word “totem” from American Indian was the first one appearing in European literatures, the academic circle called all such things and phenomena they found later as “totem” and other names were all replaced by “totem”.

Totemism was generated in original times and is left over in some modern ethnic groups. Among modern Chinese ethnic groups which still have totemism, their worship customs are different from each other, some reserving more and others reserving less. Totemism can be summed up into five aspects: one is that traditional social organizations such as clans, tribes and kin view some kind of animals, plants or inanimate objects as their own relative, ancestor or protective god, believing that they will not hurt them and will protect them instead. Furthermore, they can acquire supernatural power, courage and skills from it; second is that such social organizations as clans, tribes or kin use totem as symbol and name as well; third is that people treat them in reverent manner and will not hurt them generally speaking; fourth is that people will hold ceremonies regularly every year, doing various activities about totemism; fifth is that people have fairy tales and arts related to totem.

Totemism is very peculiar among various beliefs in mankind's history, and it is hard to understand many relevant customs until today.

It is well-known that the appellations for parents and grand-parents are very sacred. Unbelievably, some ethnic groups in the history actually used the sacred appellations for parents and grand-parents to call some kind of animals. Furthermore,

some ethnic groups not only called some kind of animals by the appellations of parents, grand-parents or other relatives, but also treated them as their relatives; people were charged with various duties and obligations: they were forbidden to hit or kill them and also prevent others from hitting or killing them; once they were hurt by some body, people would condemn the "murderer" and revenged them or claimed for compensation.

In addition to being forbidden to hit or kill those animals viewed as relatives, once people found such animals dead, they would hold funerals for them as if they were their relatives.

Besides animals, plants, inanimate objects or natural phenomena are also always viewed as ancestors by people. It is an extremely common thing to offer sacrifice to human ancestors; but it is strange that some ethnic groups actually offer grand sacrifice to some animals as their ancestors. Academic circle call such kind of animals, plants, inanimate objects or natural phenomena that are viewed as parents, grand-parents or ancestors and relatives as "totem". Various worship phenomena related to totem are called as "totemism".

## II. Origin of Totem

It is impossible to generate any concept or consciousness in human being's brain without any foundation. So does the generation of concept about totem, which is based on certain social existence and physical phenomenon. Such physical phenomenon may be the symbol and name for distinguishing groups and it is originated from misunderstanding and imagination on symbols and names for groups.

Totemism is characterized most evidently by viewing some kind of animals, plants or inanimate objects as people's relatives or ancestors with the belief that the two sides have consanguinity.

Totem can be classified into two categories: proto-totem and hypo-totem. Most proto-totems are animals. As to the proto-totems during the generating period of totemism, the concept of totem relatives and totem ancestors came after the generation of symbols for distinguishing groups.

With the time passing, symbols and names for distinguishing groups were passed from generation to generation, and all groups viewed their symbols and names as the symbol for group and spiritual link for uniting members, sacred and





inviolable, and completely forgot the cause of viewing such animals as symbol. With the development of mankind's thought, people started to recognize nature and mankind, as well as the relationship between nature and mankind. As the symbols for various groups were different from each other, they thought each group had consanguinity with the symbol animal and had the common origin with it. The early totemism is characterized by the fact that subject and object are both groups, that is to say the subject is a group of people instead of an individual, and the object is a kind of animals instead of an individual animal. It can be said that all members of some group viewed all individuals of some kind of animals as their relatives and treat them like their relatives. The generation of such concept reflected mankind's probing into relationship between people and nature, which indicates that early totem groups could not distinguish human society from nature and confused human groups with animal groups. With the in-depth development of mankind's thought, people started to find out their own origin. Although people gradually realized that human and animals respectively belong to different species, due to the rooted concept of consanguinity between totem and human group, people started to view such kind of symbol animals as their ancestors, and all group members were descendants of such kind of animals. After the generation of god concepts, people started to evolve totem to gods.

### III. Functions of Totem

Religious and social aspects are two sides of totemism. Besides satisfying the spiritual living of people in original times, it was also closely related to social organizational system, legal system and marriage system and engendered a complex religious cultural system which played an important role in mankind's initial society.

**1. The idea of totem is an ideology in early human's society and has the function of uniting people and integrating society.**

Before the appearance of totem, there were few contacts between various groups and there was no common collectivity idea. After the generation, totemism has the function of uniting people and integrating society, which played an important role in maintaining social order and stability in original times.

**2. Totem accelerated the forming of organizational system of human society.**

Before the appearance of totem, human groups lived in natural conditions without any necessary mutual relationship between them, and as a result there was no any organizational principle. After the generation of totem, every group used a kind of animals as its name and symbol, and the totems of all groups under one tribe were different from each other. It was a social organizational principle accepted by common practice at that time.

The earliest social organizational system — totem system or totem organizational system — is characterized by two major aspects:

First, every social organization used a totem—animal, plant, inanimate object or natural phenomenon — as its name and symbol.

Second, the totems of all groups (or clans) under one tribe were different from each other.

### **3. Distinguish and identify different groups.**

As symbol and name, a totem played an important role in society of distinguishing and identifying. People could identify any group accurately by totem, and distinguish a group from another one so as to prevent mingling.

The symbol of totem had a role of distinguishing different groups in wars and also played an important role in external marriages in clans.

### **4. Maintain peace and reduce conflicts.**

The totem culture had another magic role, which is to strengthen contacts between tribes, maintain the peace and stability among tribes and reduce conflicts between tribes and clans. Such function of totem was based on the concept that all the people under a same totem were relatives.

Generally the totems of all clans under a same tribe were different from each other, while clans belonging to different tribes could use a same kind of animals or plants as their totems, which was a principle of totem organizational system.

**CHARACTERS OF TOTEMISM  
OF CHINESE MINORITY**

**CHAPTER II ETHNIC GROUPS**



Compared to regions in foreign countries, totemism of Chinese minority ethnic groups has some similar or same qualities and some special characters as well.

## I. Quality of Long Standing

As there is not any literature about totem in American Indians, Australia aboriginal ethnic groups in Oceania or African aboriginal ethnic groups, it is hard to do textual research on the origin and history of their totemism. But the totemism of Chinese minority ethnic groups is different from that of foreign ethnic groups which have no literatures to record. The customs of totemism can trace back to one or two thousand years ago, some of which were recorded in the characters of their own ethnic groups and others were recorded in Chinese characters. For example, the dog totemism of She and Yao ethnic groups has a long history, which was recorded in *Search for Deities by Ganbao* and *History of the Later Han Dynasty—Biography of Nanman* ethnic group written by Fan Ye in East Han Dynasty. According to the two literatures, ancestors of She and Yao ethnic groups, southern ethnic groups, worshipped dogs of “five-color hair” as their totems, and so southern ethnic groups wore five-color dresses in shape of dog tails. Until 1950s, Yao and She ethnic groups have still believed their ancestors are dragon dog—Panhu, and they have kept the ancestral pictures and sticks for long and will offer sacrifice to Panhu on festivals. Women of Yao ethnic group in some regions still have the custom of wearing five-color dresses. There is another example. Wolves were totems worshipped popularly among ancient northern nomadic ethnic groups. According to ancient records, Hun, Wuzu, Turki, and Mongol all had the custom of worshipping wolves and had legends about wolf ancestor. Until modern time, such ethnic groups as Mongol, Uygur, and Kazak have reserved the custom of worshipping wolves. Furthermore, tiger totemism of Yi ethnic group, macaque totemism of Tibetan ethnic group, goat totemism of Qiang ethnic group, tiger and dragon totemism of Yi ethnic group, eagle totemism of Uygur and other ethnic groups, and white swan totemism of Kazak all can trace back to some ancient time according to historical literatures, and some can even trace back to the time before Christ.

## II. Quality of Regions

Totemism of Chinese minority ethnic groups is also characterized by quality of







regions. In each region, there is a major totem worshipped by several ethnic groups there. For example, in northwest region, wolves are major totems jointly worshipped by Turki-speaking ethnic groups and Mongolian-speaking ethnic groups (including Turki, Oghuz, Gaoche, Wuzu, and Monglia in ancient time and Uygur, Kazak, Kirgiz, and Mongol ethnic groups in modern time); bears are totems jointly worshipped by Ewenki, Oroqen and Hezhen ethnic groups in northeastern region; dogs are totems jointly worshipped by She and Yao in middle-south and southeast; snakes are major totems jointly worshipped by Min, Man and Guyue people in south and southeast regions in ancient time as well as Gaoshan ethnic group in modern time.

It is no wonder that several ethnic groups worship a same totem. In six tribes in Iroquoian Alliance in American Indians, bear clan, wolf clan and tortoise clan can all be found. According to *Ancient Society by Morgan*, among nearly 400 clans listed in the book, about 30 clans use wolves and bears as totems, and about 20 use deer and tortoises as totems.

The situation of several ethnic groups jointly worshipping a same totem might be resulted from division of clans and tribes in remote antiquity. A totem clan was divided into several sub-clans and each sub-clan still worshipped the same totem. After the development of thousands of years, a sub-clan evolved into two single ethnic groups, and as a result, several ethnic groups worshipped a same totem. Oroqen, Ewenki and Hezhen all belong to Manchu-Tungus-language ethnic groups and they have the same origin. They might come into being from division of one bear clan or tribe, so they still worship bear today. So do various Turki-language ethnic groups in northwest. They might be descendants of a wolf clan or tribe in ancient time. Shezu and Yao are both descendants of Nanman ethnic group, which can be proved by historical literatures. According to historical records, the ancestor of Nanman was a dog named Panhu, and hence its descendants—She and Yao ethnic groups—have worshipped their Panhu ancestor for long.

### III. Quality of Diversity

The customs of totemism in Chinese minority ethnic groups are different from

(1) Tao Yunkui: *Clan and Totemic System of Dazhai Heiyi*, *Frontier Human Culture*, 1943: Vol.1(1) & Ma Xueliang: *Totemic System in View of Names of Luoluo Clan*, *Public Opinion on Frontier Politics*, 1947, Vol.6(4).

each other and diversified. Totem objects include animals, plants and inanimate objects. For example, the clan totems of Yi ethnic group include roe, buffalo, sheep, cliff goat, green turtledove, toad, swine groove, banana, etc<sup>(1)</sup>. Totems of Lisu ethnic group include tiger, bear, sheep, fish, sake, bee, mouse, bird, monkey, buckwheat, bamboo, teak, fiber crops, mushroom, vegetables, plow, boat, frost, fire, rabbit, chicken, dog, cattle, dragon, wheat, cowpea and swine etc<sup>(2)</sup>. Totem taboo is also diversified, including action taboo, food taboo and language taboo. In China, Yizu, Naxi, Pumi, Khmu, Blang, Lisu, Bouyei, Zhuang, Yao, She, Miao and Li ethnic groups all have totem taboo, and generally they will not hurt their own totem. For example, the totem taboo of Yi in Lukuishan Mountain in Xinning, Yunnan Province was still very strict in 1940s. According to the investigation of Tao Yunkui in 1940s, one day in Yi ethnic group "a Mr. Zhang of green turtledove totem shot down a bird from a tree, and found it was actually a green turtledove. As it was in the tree, he did not see clearly and thought it was other bird. After finding it was a green turtledove, he was terrified and kowtowed with hands and knees on ground. He said 'old ancestor, I'm sorry. Please forgive me for ignorance. I will never do such thing in future.' Then he went away quickly." <sup>(3)</sup> She and Yao use dogs as totems and they are forbidden to eat dog meat. It is taboo for many ethnic groups to directly call the name of totem, and instead they will call it another appellation. The fairy tales about totems are more colorful. They can be classified into three kinds in accordance with the contents: benefactors of ancestors, birth of ancestors and creators. Fairy tales about benefactors of ancestors tell us that some object or phenomenon was the benefactor of ancestors and people worship it as totem. According to some fairy tales, ancestors in danger got help from some animal, plant or other object or phenomenon and could manage to escape; and other fairy tales tell us that some animal benefited mankind and helped people acquire some thing hard to access. Fairy tales about birth of ancestors tell us that the birth of ancestor was closely related to the totem. Such fairy tales can be divided into several types: animal birth and plant birth. Fairy tales about animal birth tell us that the birth of the ancestor of some group was related to some animal: the ancestor was born by or changed from an animal; the ancestor was born by a female consorted with a male animal (or a person incarnated

(2) Tao Yunkui: *Lisu Ethnic Group in Biluo Snow Mountain*, Corpus of Historical Language Research Institute, 1948: 17  
& Chen Zongxiang: *Totemic System of Lisu Paddy Field Ethnic group in Xikang*, *Public Opinion on Frontier Politics*, 1947: Vol. 6 (4).

(3) Tao Yunkui: *Clan and Totemic System of Dazhai Heiyi*, *Frontier Human Culture*, 1943: Vol.1 (1).





by a male animal); the ancestor was born by a female animal (or a person incarnated by a female animal) consorted with a man; the ancestor was born from an egg; or the ancestor was born by a female influenced by some object. Fairy tales about plant birth can be divided into two kinds: one is that people were born by or changed from some plant; the other is that people were born by a female who ate some fruit or plant. Totemic arts and ceremonies are also extraordinarily splendid and colorful.

## IV. Quality of Intermixing

The academic circle generally holds a viewpoint that totemism was most prevalent in later period of Paleolithic Age. After entering class society, totemic culture just continued to exist as survivals. In ancient and modern time in China, most ethnic groups had entered class society and just a few still stayed at the situation of the last stage of primitive society. Hence, the acknowledged totemism customs kept by various ethnic groups today are not proto-form but survivals, and are intermixed with other religious beliefs created later.

Besides totem worship, the original worship includes ancestor worship and natural worship, and with the appearance of class society, the religious forms gradually came into being, including Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islamism. And religious beliefs have kept evolving and changing, and influenced and absorbed each other. Under the influence and penetration of other religious beliefs, totemism of various Chinese ethnic groups can hardly keep the original face. It is not longer a pure totemic culture, but a totemism intermixed with many other religious factors. For example, the village flag of De'ang ethnic group was evolved from totem flag. Besides the symbol of ethnic group (tiger) and symbols of each village (cattle, sheep, rabbit, elephant, etc.), on each village flag there is also figure of mankind ancestor, sun, tea tree, and even Buddha pagoda, which reflects the mixing and integration ancestor worship, natural worship, religious belief and totem worship. The totemic ceremony of She and Yao ethnic groups are mixed with Taoism and other religious beliefs. So does the totemic breeding ceremony of Qiang ethnic group, which is more or less related to other religious beliefs.

## V. Quality of Variation

As there are historical records about totemism customs of minority ethnic groups in all passing dynasties, and the social development of various ethnic groups is in different levels, the reserved customs of totemism are in different developing stages and various forms of evolving totemism can be found in totemism of Chinese minor ethnic groups.

In Australian aboriginal ethnic groups which have typical totemism, the totem concepts mainly have two categories: totem relative concept and totem ancestor concept. In various ethnic groups in China, however, there are three kinds of concepts, totem relative, totem ancestor and totem god, which offered evidence for the development and evolvement of totem concepts. Totem names are not as popular as those in Australian aboriginal ethnic groups and American Indians, but many family names, person names, place names, and official names originated from the evolvement of totem names. Totem symbols are not typical but the evolving way is some representative; the first is the course from animal model to semi-human and semi-animal model and to separate models of human and animal, the second is the course from reality to symbolization, and the third is the course from single model to compound model. The totem taboo in some ethnic groups is strict and in others is not strict, and its evolving way has two types: loosening and centralizing of totem taboo. It is rare to find external totem marriages, and most of such phenomena have evolved to the rule that persons with the same family name cannot get married. In Australian aboriginal ethnic groups, there are only two kinds of ceremonies: joining ceremony and breeding ceremony. While in various ethnic groups in China, there are three kinds of totemic ceremonies: joining, breeding and ancestor worship ceremonies. There are few survivals of the former two ceremonies, but the ancestor worship ceremony is very colorful. Totem bearing beliefs can be divided into two types; one is belief of feeling life, the other is belief of bearing due to eating totemic thing (bird egg or plant fruit): The latter one is rarely seen in foreign ethnic groups.

In a word, the totemic cultures of various Chinese ethnic groups have their own characters, which not only enrich the treasury of world totemic cultures, but also offer a great deal of new resources for researching the origination, development, evolving rules and general theories of totemic culture.





# TOTEM OBJECTS CHAPTER III AND TOTEM TYPES

