

[ HARDCOVER: UK ]

# Homo economicus, the author of his own demise

*Finally, a book that gives rational economic man the kicking he deserves*

BY **TOM CLARKE**  
THE OBSERVER, LONDON

Back in the dim and distant days of early last year, conventional wisdom held that the multi-trillion US dollar build-up of complex debt deals was making the world more prosperous. The more risks were traded the better, orthodox economists reckoned. Their reasoning started with the atom of their science, rational economic man. If — through the smoldering wreckage of Fannie, Freddie, Lehman and the rest — rational economic man is still visible, then he is surely due for a kicking. In *Basic Instincts*, Pete Lunn metes it out with aplomb.

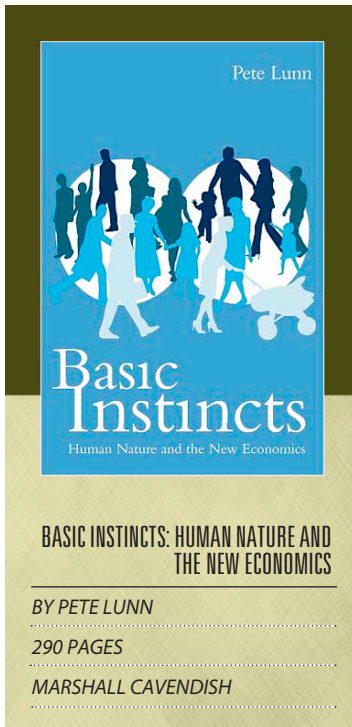
A trained neuroscientist, Lunn came to economics late, bringing with him the psychologist's belief that the first step in understanding how people operate is to watch them behave. He was surprised to discover instead that economists found their theories on a set of assumptions — namely, that people are rational agents, with independent and well-defined goals, which they pursue with intelligence, selfishness and consistency.

These assumptions are not made out of stubbornness: the aim is to simplify the economic terrain in the hope of charting a way through it. But as well as making their mathematical models add up, the assumptions encourage the superstition that the market runs as if governed by a benign invisible hand. After all, whenever rational man trucks, trades and barterers, he knows exactly what he is doing, and so always comes away better off. And when he and his friends haggle over rewards and risks in the financial markets, those risks end up being carried by those who can best bear them, an outcome that seemed rather more plausible 18 months ago than it does today.

Proceedings begin with Lunn bumbling round town in search of new clothes. He records uncertainty about the sort of look he is after, confusion about what he can afford, and an uneasy awareness that he may have been brainwashed by fancy branding. These aspects of high-street alienation are familiar to most of us but none of them would afflict homo economicus, for whom shopping is always a pleasure. It is a neat way to draw readers into an abstract discussion, and is typical of the rest of the book, which breezily mixes readable summaries of econometric evidence with insights from *Gulliver's Travels* and intriguing factoids about Pacific islands where the sole form of currency consists of stones that are too big to move.

We are taken on a tour of

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two towns, Marketopia, which is populated by the solipsistic individuals of the textbooks, and Muddleton, which houses more familiar folk. There is no place for kindness or keeping up with the Joneses in Marketopia, but *Basic Instincts* sets out burgeoning evidence that both envy and altruism do affect financial dealings in the real world. When researchers give subjects money and offer them the chance to donate some of it to an anonymous third party, subjects are frequently generous. A twist in the experiment allows the third party to reject derisory offers to share the cash, which causes all the money to be surrendered, so that both subjects walk away with nothing. An economically rational third party would always rather have some money than none, and so would never go down this road. But seeing someone else walk away with an unfair share, real third parties develop a taste for revenge that makes them perfectly willing to cut off their nose to spite their face.

Mistakes, Misinformation, Surprise, Luck, Events and Dishonesty combine to produce an economic world where, Lunn explains, there is every chance of being MISLED. Face up to that uncertainty, and rational man's habit of endlessly shopping to indulge his own whims at a bargain price starts to look less smart. Instead, people might sensibly stick with what they know — or decide to take a close look at what other people are doing, and then run with the herd.

*Joyce Chiou's massive new opera, 'The Black Bearded Bible Man,' depicts the life of George MacKay, a 19th-century Canadian missionary to Taiwan*

BY **BRADLEY WINTERTON**  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

“When the composer first asked me to write the libretto for an opera he had in mind about George MacKay, I declined. I think he thought of me because I'd combined music and theater as double majors for my degree in the US, as well as because of my experience with opera here in Taipei. But I sensed he also wanted a Christian to do the job, and I knew I didn't fit that requirement,” said Joyce Chiou (邱瑗) in her stylish office at the National Symphony Orchestra's (NSO, 國家交響樂團) Taipei premises. Together with her other work she's the orchestra's Executive Director.

“Later, though, I had second thoughts, largely as a result of discovering MacKay's support of the education for women here in Taiwan. I'd assumed beforehand that everything he did was really a part of his wider program as a missionary — basically that he wanted people to be educated in order to make them Christians. But once I got to know more about him I saw he was a more complex figure, and I so changed my mind.”

Chiou puts on a CD of some early work on *The Black Bearded Bible Man*, the massive opera about the 19th-century Canadian missionary to Taiwan, George MacKay, that will be given its world premiere in Taipei with the NSO on Nov. 27.

“That's an American, singing in Taiwanese!” she said excitedly. “Isn't that amazing? It's Thomas Meglioranza from New York. OK, his wife's Taiwanese, but he'd never attempted to learn the language until he got this part.”

“The opera's almost all sung in Taiwanese, with only 10 percent in English, such as when MacKay first arrives on the island and doesn't yet know the language. Actually, this was also part of the problem for me in accepting the commission. I'd spoken Taiwanese as a child here in Taiwan, but I wasn't too confident about writing in it, especially with rhymes. Did you know MacKay himself wrote a Taiwanese-English dictionary, using the Roman alphabet for Taiwanese?”

I said that judging from the CD, the music was going to be lyrical rather than abstruse.

“I think Gordon wanted it to be more contemporary, but then when he saw my words he realized it was going to have to be more accessible,” Chiou replied, referring to the opera's composer Gordon Shi-wen Chin (金希文).

As well as producing and helping direct operas, Chiou has written a guide to Broadway musicals, and another called *Behind the Mask: Phantom of the Opera*, so I guessed in advance that her approach would probably be fairly lyrical and popular.

I asked whether, if MacKay wasn't going to be presented only as a missionary, he was going to be shown as a man with conflicts.

“Oh yes,” she says. “I actually had a church service in the first draft, but it didn't seem very dramatic so I cut it. Instead, I concentrated on the theatrical values of conflict and tension. The opera opens with his death, and all the rest is flashback, until you come to his death again at the end, and then in essence we repeat the first scene.”

This is a powerful technique, showing something that the audience doesn't understand the first time round but which, by the time it repeats itself, is understood by everyone; this bodes well for the opera.

Among the other important characters are MacKay's Taiwanese wife (sung by Chen Mei-chin, 陳美津) and two of his male followers, sung by the Korean tenor Choi Seung-jin and Taiwan's Liau Chong-boon (廖聰文). The opera, over three hours long and with two intervals, will be directed by Germany's Lukas Hemleb and conducted by Chien Wen-pin (簡文彬).

“There's no extant film of MacKay, but I believe the production will use a lot of film nonetheless, made up from the many black-and-white still photos of him that do survive. MacKay had always wanted to come to the Far East, but he wandered around a lot — Fujian Province, Guandong, southern Taiwan — before settling in Tamsui. He said it was the sight of Guanyin Mountain (觀音山) that convinced him it was the right place,” Chiou said.

“There's a lot of choral writing in the score. I had the sense that, with some important exceptions, the Taiwanese tended to act in groups rather than as individuals in those days, and as Gordon Chin has also written a lot of choral music in the past, there's a lot in this opera. I took my inspiration for how to use people singing in groups from ancient Greek tragedy and from *Les Misérables*.”

Chiou started to work in her present position with the NSO in June, 2006. She had worked for the National Chiang Kai-shek



PHOTO: TAIPEI TIMES

Cultural Center in various roles before that, and had gained extensive experience in university administration during a long stay in Vancouver from 1997 to 2004.

But *The Black Bearded Bible Man* seemed a more interesting topic than administration, so we returned to that.

“I did a lot of my research about MacKay at Oxford College in Tamsui,” Chiou said. “They have a small library devoted to him. He died in Tamsui in 1901, aged 58.” He'd been there 29 years, apart from a brief period in

Hong Kong. His last six years in Taiwan were during the Japanese occupation, but Chiou said she hadn't included this as the opera was long enough as it was. But anti-foreigner sentiment during the Sino-French war of 1884 to 1885 formed a potent element in the plot, she added.

“Essentially I present MacKay as a man who wanted to improve the lot of the Taiwanese people in any way he could. The villagers were afraid of him at first so he began learning Taiwanese from the children. He

practiced dentistry and founded hospitals. All in all, the more I read about him the more I came to admire him,” Chiou said.

As I left, I found myself wondering how many affluent modern Taiwanese will be interested in seeing a stage show about their under-privileged past. But it was too late to ask Chiou her opinion on the matter. She'd obviously be optimistic anyway, I decided. The attendances at the four performances at the end of the month will settle the question one way or the other.

[ SOFTCOVER: UK ]

# In Inner Mongolia, the call of the wild fades into the past

*Jiang Rong's magnificent 'Wolf Totem,' winner of the first-ever Man Asian literary award, now appears in a new English translation by Howard Goldblatt*

BY **BRADLEY WINTERTON**  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

In traditional Mongolian society, it was believed men and wolves worshipped the same god, Tengger, to such an extent that the dead were left out in sacred sites specifically so that wolves would devour them. This was still happening in China's Inner Mongolia in the 1960s when this gripping novel is set.

It's essentially a story of man and animals based on a close observation, and eventually a close understanding, of the interrelation of the two species, and indeed of most of the other inhabitants of the traditional Mongolian grasslands. Lu Jiamin (呂嘉民), who writes under the pseudonym Jiang Rong (姜戎), was sent to Inner Mongolia in 1967 as one of the despised student intellectuals banished to the countryside to learn the honest ways of the soil. After 11 years he resumed an academic career in Beijing, and only published this fictionalized version of his experiences in 2004. It won enormous acclaim, with over a

million copies circulating in China, won the first Man Asian Literary Prize last year, and now appears in a new English translation by master translator Howard Goldblatt.

In the terminology of modern ecology the book, though everywhere an exciting adventure, is a tribute to mutually sustaining ecosystems, with man as both overseer and central player. The itinerant Mongolian hunters see the wolves as threats to their sheep, yet at the same time understand how their depredations control the teeming gazelle herds that would otherwise consume all the precious grass on which their sheep depend. Thus the wolf is simultaneously hunted and worshipped, and when the central character, the Chinese student Chen, decides to capture and raise a wolf cub to study its nature, and perhaps later cross-breed it with domestic dogs, the Mongolians, who've never attempted such a thing themselves, look on with a mixture of doubt and interest.

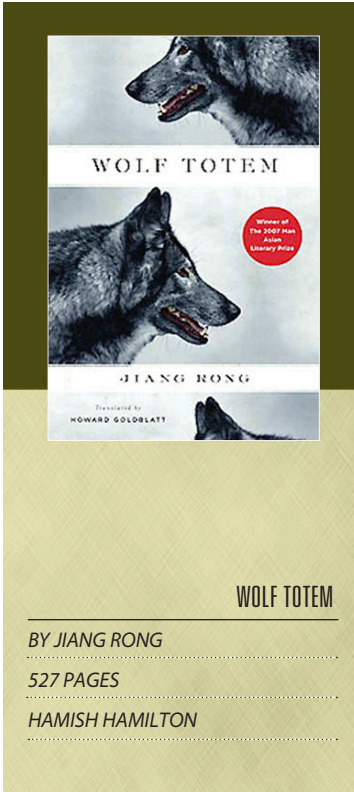
But in the author's eyes there's much more to the wolf than this.

It's the ultimate hunter, he argues, and it was from wolves that the ancient Mongolians learned their unique skill in war. He answers the old question of how it was possible for a small population of hunters from the East Asian steppes to establish the world's most extensive empire, conquering territories stretching into Western Europe, and also defeating the far larger and better-supplied armies of China, by saying that it was because they'd learned their military strategy from the planet's most intelligent predator, the wolf.

From this develop some fascinating comparisons between the psychology of the farmer and that of the hunter. China has been dependent on rice-cultivation and an agricultural life for 5,000 years, Chen argues, and has lost the craftiness and nimbleness of mind of the hunter of the grasslands. This is why the Mongols were able to defeat the Chinese and establish their own imperial dynasty, even within China itself.

But the argument doesn't end here. The author (always

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speaking in the person of the student Chen) also explains the superior technical achievements of the West in similar terms. The Westerners were always closer to their hunting ancestors than the long-civilized Chinese, he claims, and for this reason were able to dominate and exploit China until very recently. Whereas the Chinese maintained a hierarchical social system under their emperors, reflecting their successful but unchanging agricultural round, the West had remained competitive, pressing forward to such things as social mobility and democracy, because of their closer links to the wild. The difference could even be seen in the games of children — cooperative and friendly in the case of the Chinese, aggressive and competitive in the case of the not-inappropriately-named “barbarians” from the West.

Tragedy strikes the grasslands when technicians and marksmen arrive from Beijing intent on exterminating the wolf population and settling the land with migrants from the south who will raise

sheep in pens and live, not in traditional Mongolian yurts, but in red-roofed houses complete with wide-screen TVs. The world of capital accumulation and the year-end bonus had arrived.

This is presented, surely rightly, as a man-made ecological disaster — mice, once the wolves' prey, proliferate, the intensively grazed grass turns to desert (with its sand routinely blowing south into Beijing, not so very far away) and the rivers drying up. This may please enemies of China's relentless modernization and its tendency to apply one system to many different situations, and indeed this book's arguments, explicit and implicit, could equally be applied to Tibet. But tragedy only surfaces in the book's final pages. *Wolf Totem* is in essence a superb and engrossing open-air adventure in a setting that's vanished — though it survives, apparently largely intact, in Outer Mongolia.

Grassland lore is everywhere in this book — thoughtful passages on swans (sacred to the Mongolians), horses, hawks, vultures, marmots,

rabbits, larks — even mosquitoes — proliferate. The intelligence of all living things is central to this culture, although it's an almost entirely meat-eating one. Crawling out of the icy Mongolian sunlight into a wolf's cave, howls across the steppe in the bitter night, horses and gazelles encircled and then savaged even as the hunters look on — this is a bloody but astonishingly vivid world. Only fish are left curiously undiscussed.

Howard Goldblatt, the man generally agreed to be the world's finest translator from Chinese, and who has a Taiwanese wife, also a professional translator, called this a “magnificent novel.”

As you'd expect, his English version reads smoothly and frequently thrillingly, and individuals are well-characterized through their speech, though Jiang includes no major female character. But this is a masterpiece anyway, simultaneously wise and enthralling. It's hard to believe there was a more compelling contender for the first-ever Man Asian literary award.