

Scarface the Mother Jackal

By Shen Shixi

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They emerged from the thickets of wild marigolds on the hillside -- seventy or eighty of them, Jackals of every size. They were heading in the direction of the observation hide that Champa, my Tibetan guide, and I had built among the branches of a tree. These were gold-back jackals, peculiar to Gaoligong Mountains in Yunnan Province. I was delighted and promptly raised my new camcorder to shoot. Jackals are a small mammal of the genus *Canis*, thus also called wild dogs. They are medium-sized carnivores. In many places, common jackals are called red dogs or red wolves, so named for their reddish-brown coats. In North America, there is a species known as silver-back jackal by reason of the layer of silver hair along their backs. Several decades ago, a French naturalist explored the canyons of Gaoligong Mountains on foot, and apparently discovered a species of jackals with gold marks on the back and thus named them gold-back jackals. Unfortunately, they are very rare and active primarily above the snow line beyond the normal reach of man. Although the Yunnan Institute of Zoology repeatedly sent search teams into the area, they failed to find even a trace of them.

I could hardly believe my luck! It felt like gold had fallen at my feet, as if I'd found a fat wallet by the roadside.

Gold-back jackals are indeed distinct from other jackals. The coat on their back has a thick layer of gold hairs, giving the effect of wearing a gorgeous fur vest; thick black lines run either side of the nose bridge, eyebrows, eyelids and ears, outlining them and giving prominence and dignity to the facial region; creamy white hair at their heels make them look as if standing in snow. But what most intrigued me was the French naturalist's report of the gold-back jackals being social animals led by an adult female, whereas other jackal species live with a small family as the basic unit, usually led by a young and strong male. Such a group structure, being similar to matriarchal society among mankind, must harbor many little-known mysteries, and would be a perfect topic for my research.

Using the zoom on my camcorder, I clearly saw that the leader in front of the pack, as predicted, was a female. She was slimmer than the other females, and from her belly hung a dozen or so teats, which dangled and swung like little wind bells as she walked. I could see she was aged: the coat on her back had turned from golden-yellow to golden-red and was darker than the other jackals; the inked brush of time had blackened the hairs between her chin and neck; across her weather-beaten face a deep scar ran between her ear and her mouth, making that long face look even

more bleak and careworn. I named her Scarface

About a hundred meters away from the tree we were hiding in, Scarface suddenly stopped, raised her neck and gave a soft howl. Then, like well-drilled soldiers receiving an order from a senior officer, all the jackals, including several juveniles, came to a halt. Some were poised to turn and flee; others seemed about to pounce. They all looked at their leader, awaiting her next order. She flared her nose and moved her ears to catch any suspicious smells and sounds. I was a little nervous, thinking that perhaps she could hear the whirring of the camera motor, so I turned it off at once. Just then, I caught the sound of heavy breathing approaching from behind. I turned and was startled to see Champa, my Tibetan guide. He was the picture of anger; the blue veins on his neck stood out, he ground his teeth, and his chest heaved. He looked just like an angry leopard. He was carrying an old-fashioned shotgun, one that needed filling with gunpowder before every shot. Aiming the barrel at the jackals, he was ready to press the trigger...

As a zoologist, I couldn't tolerate him killing these precious gold-back jackals. With no time to think, I grabbed his gun and lifted it upwards. Bang! With a loud crash, the shot went skywards. It hit the tree canopy, sending a shower of leaves into the air. Scarface gave a long howl and fled into the woods, the rest of the pack at her heels. In an instant, they had vanished.

"What do you think you're doing? How could you shoot like that?" I demanded.

"Evil jackals! Those evil jackals! I... I'll smash their heads in, and then I'll skin them to avenge my dog Snow Queen!" Champa gnashed his teeth in anger, and his eyes glistened with tears.

That night, inside the camp yurt, Champa took a big slug of barley wine and narrated, in an aggrieved tone, the story of the blood feud between the gold-back jackals and the two of them, himself and his beloved dog, Snow Queen.

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"Snow Queen was a hunting dog that I raised from a pup. Her coat was as white as the year-round snow on Gaoligong Mountains. So I called her Snow Queen. She was a pedigree Tibetan Mastiff. I suppose you know about Tibetan Mastiffs? They're the bravest hunting dogs in the world. Snow Queen accompanied me for seven or eight years whenever I ventured into the mountain forests to hunt. Once, I got really drunk and lay down in a wood hut. Somehow, I don't know how, it caught fire, but I still lay on the bed, as drunk as a skunk. Snow Queen rushed through the flames, and tugged me out of the house by my clothes. I have no children, so she was like a daughter to me."

"Three years ago, when the highland barley was flowering and the bucks were growing antlers, I brought Snow Queen into the mountain to hunt. Halfway up the

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mountain, where the snow had not yet melted, a pair of jackals jumped out from the rocky moraine ahead. I fired a shot and it blew off half the brain of the female. Quick as a flash, Snow Queen rushed up and ripped off the tail of the male jackal right at the bottom. He howled and bolted. I carried the body of the female on my shotgun, draped the male's big, fluffy tail around my neck and continued heading for Spruce Plateau, where sika deer were active.

"We'd barely gone a few hundred meters into a bushy area when we found ourselves surrounded by a large pack of jackals. Clearly, the tailless male had brought his gang to get his revenge.

"Snow Queen was very brave. She charged into them to scare them away. But there were so many of them. Afraid that she stood to lose against such odds, I whistled for her to come to my side."

"There's an old saying 'destroy the leader and the gang will collapse, and strike where it will most hurt.' I looked for the leader of the pack. It's been my experience that once you shoot the leader dead, the whole pack collapses into disarray. Otherwise, no matter how many jackals you kill, not only will the pack refuse to retreat, but it will stalk you and fight you to the bitter end."

"It didn't take me long to work out that the pack leader was actually a female! Yes, that's right, the one you saw today, the one with the scarred face. Back then, she had no scar and looked much younger. She gave out long howls and short ones, a series of orders to the other jackals to bite me. I fired a good few shots at her, but she was so agile, dodging this way and that, and I didn't harm a single hair on her head.

"I soon ran out of gunpowder. There was nothing for it but to run for a yacca pine, some two hundred meters away. Jackals are fierce but they can't climb. If I could get up that tree, I'd be safe; as for Snow Queen, once I was up the tree, she would run back to the camp to raise the alarm. Tibetan Mastiffs are strong and can out run jackals. She'd be able to shake them off.

"I shot blindly into the bushes where I could faintly see them, running as fast as my legs would carry me towards the pine tree. I was there in no time. I put the gun on my shoulder, roped the dead jackal onto my back, and began climbing. Meanwhile, Snow Queen was barking at those jackals, in case they might attack me while I was climbing.

"Snow Queen was the most loyal of dogs. She would never leave until I was out of danger.

"The girth of that pine trunk was as long as two arms. It was a difficult and slow climb, thanks to the five-kilo shotgun on my shoulder and the 15-kilo jackal on my back.

"Many of the pack began whining, probably realizing that once I was up the tree they could do nothing to me. Their ugly wailing sounded like the crying of hungry ghosts.

“Just then~~them~~, the lead female and the tailless male jumped out from a ridge, running straight to the pine tree. Snow Queen dashed up to head them off. The tailless jackal fought with Snow Queen to stall for time, allowing the female to creep around to the foot of the tree. She jumped as high as she could, trying to bite my ankles and drag me down. I’d just got to mid-level of the tree and my feet were about two meters above the ground, within reach of her jaws. Hugging the tree tight with one arm, I pulled out my long knife with the other hand. Hacking about, I managed to slash her in the face, which is how she came to look like she does now.

“Wounded, she yelled in agony and fled. I took my chance to climb a fork higher and sat on a horizontal branch.

“Just then, I heard a yelp from Snow Queen, and turned to see that tailless jackal biting her neck. In a one-on-one fight, she would never lose: a Tibetan Mastiff can fight with two jackals at the same time. But there were five or six jackals surrounding my dog: some were biting at her legs and some at her tail, preventing her moving at all. Like an executioner, that tailless jackal sank his sharp fangs deep into Snow Queen’s neck, jumped and jumped at her, cruelly tearing at her neck. Fearless as she was among dogs, Snow Queen was hopelessly outnumbered by so many jackals. I knew how hunting jackals operate: once they bite a mortal part of their prey, they will never relax their grip. This dreadful feature means that even mountain leopards and tigers fear jackals.

“I wanted to shoot those two damned jackals and save Snow Queen. But when I shook the gourd containing my gunpowder, I knew there was none left. With just a long knife on me, I couldn’t possibly fight off those evil jackals. Not even if I had superpowers.

“I sat in the tree, witnessing my Snow Queen’s neck being ripped apart. She was lying in blood. I’ll never forget the helpless look in her eyes and the desperation in her cries for help. Up there in the tree, I felt a knife piercing my heart, but there was not a thing I could do.

“Within minutes, Snow Queen was a pile of bones.

“For three years now I’ve been looking for those jackals. But they’re very cunning, and kept moving about, so I couldn’t find them. To chance upon them today is really a case of ‘enemies meeting on a narrow road.’

“Just now, I saw clearly that that damned tailless male was still part of the pack. I swear in the name of a hunter that I will chop its head off. No, not just him. I’ll kill every last one of them in memory of Snow Queen.” As Champa swore this, he cracked his knuckles; the fire of revenge burned in his eyes.

Champa went back to the camp to fetch the severed tail. It was about 60cm long and burned black at the severed end. It was stiff and spotted with white mold. Actually, it looked just like a stick for stirring excrement.

He was an experienced hunter. Following the jackals' tracks, he came to a desolate ravine and hung the tail on a small crooked tree beside the path. The footprints left in the wetland indicated their presence in that ravine. He hung it just three meters high in a fork of the tree, clearly visible to the jackals, but beyond their reach.

"I'll have those evil critters know that for every debt there's a creditor and I've come to exact the blood debt from three years ago," said Champa, his voice cruel and cold.

There was nothing I could do to stop him. Unless you've lived among the hunters on Gaoligong Mountains you'll never understand how deeply they love their hunting dogs. They treat them as family. Even when their bodies wear out with age, they will never kill them; nor will they abandon, abuse or put them out on the street. Instead, they keep on treating them as well as ever, looking after them in their old age and burying them with ceremony. Once, when the beloved dog of an old hunter died, the man's grief was so acute he fell ill and never recovered. His last wish before dying was to be buried in the same tomb as his dog. Champa had witnessed his beloved dog being torn apart. For such a man of action and high self-esteem, the memory of that scene coiled inside him like a snake, biting at his heart all the time. For a hunter regarding his honor as his life, the grief of losing his beloved dog was imprinted into his bones and inscribed on his memory. It could never be erased.

Of jackals, wolves, tigers and leopards, he saw jackals as the worst villains. They had mercilessly torn Snow Queen apart and had almost killed him. They had only themselves to blame for being revenged; they had brought punishment on themselves. Of course, we might look at things from the jackal perspective: A jackal couple are walking on the mountain, when suddenly - Pow! Disaster strikes. The female has half a brain shot away, and the male's tail gets bitten off. Is that not an injustice? A tragedy even? And if they reply in kind - an eye for an eye, demanding blood for blood - is that so unreasonable?

But I am a member of the human race. I cannot think only from a jackal's perspective. Since time immemorial, man's attitude to wild animals has been peremptory and uncompromising. Man is permitted to hunt and kill; resistance from animals is not permitted. If animals dare to fight back, they are considered treasonous, are branded as mankillers, rounded up and killed without mercy.

That afternoon, Champa went back to the camp for rice, so I went by myself to the mountain stream to catch red frogs, an amphibian creature, and make a specimen. While I was busy in this activity, I heard the faint howling of jackals coming from the desolate ravine. I immediately ran over there, crawled behind a rock halfway up the mountain, and observed through my binoculars. Wow, it was the gold-back jackals,

led by Scarface. They gathered under the tree where the jackal tail was hanging. Scarface raised her head, staring at the tail dangling above her head, her eyes full of concern and terror; the rest of the pack paced about restlessly, like ants on a hot pan; the tailless jackal kept on jumping up at it, like a high jumper making repeated attempts to clear the bar. But he was no super-jackal, nor a flying-jackal; however hard he tried, it remained beyond reach.

Clearly they recognized that the tail hanging on the crooked tree belonged to the tailless jackal, the tail bitten off three years earlier by the hunter's dog. Jackals are among the smarter creatures of the animal world, so they must have understood the implications of the sudden appearance of the jackal tail in the ravine that they frequented, and of its hanging on the tree like a flag summoning the spirit of the dead.

It was a portent of imminent disaster, a secret order of encirclement and extermination.

Normally, when faced with a threat to life, an animal's first reaction is flight, especially when the threat comes from man. All things being equal, flight will be the first choice. But I knew these jackals would not leave the ravine, at least within the next month or two. The reason was simple: we were at the transition between spring and summer, a time of year in which, according to their reproduction cycle, infant jackals are born. Some of the females must have given birth already and, unlike felines, canines cannot pick up their pups in their teeth and move them elsewhere; field studies indicate that jackals usually give birth in a secret den or hole and remain there until their pups are three or four months old and ready to learn how to hunt. Until that time, the pack will never leave their territory.

The disordered pack were restless and at a loss until Scarface finally calmed them with several long howls. With heavy steps, they left the crooked tree, the tree that threatened them with such ill fortune.

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It was almost dark. Champa said he was going to hunt a pheasant to improve our diet, so he left the field observation camp. Early next morning, while the dew was still lying, he returned, carrying a bulging sheepskin sack on his back. He strode into the camp and threw the sack to the floor. His square-set face looked tired but happy. He said proudly:

“Hey. Take a look at what I've got!”

Inside the sheepskin bag, something live was wriggling. I untied the knot and was amazed to find eight jackal pups, still not weaned. They had dense coats, and their back had a layer of soft and golden hair and there were white hairs between their toes. Undoubtedly, it was a litter of gold-back jackals.

Champa gave me a brief account of how he'd caught these little jackals. "Oh boy! Those jackals are so crafty. Their den's hidden at the end of the bushes and behind the moraine. It took me all night to fumble my way to it. Just after dawn, Scarface led the pack away to hunt. I fired a shot outside the den and scared away the two old jackals left behind to tend the pups. Then I put my hands into the den and picked them up, just like picking mushrooms."

How much courage it took to intrude into a jackal den, all alone and at dead of night!

"Why bring them here? What do you intend doing?" I asked.

With these pups in our hands, we needn't worry about Scarface and the tailless jackal coming here to court death." As Champa spoke, his eyes were stern. His tough lower jaw twisted; he looked determined to kill.

I understood. He was going to keep these pups as bait and execute a dreadful revenge plan. It was clever all right, but despicable.

"No way. Gold-back jackals have state-level protection. You can't do this," I tried to dissuade him firmly, motivated by my conscience and duty as a zoologist.

"What? You want to protect these evil jackals?" Champa's eyebrows shot up in shock. "Try finding any herder on Gamaer Grassland who agrees with you!"

"Gold-back jackals are wildlife. China has the *Wild Animal Conservation Law*, and it prohibits any act that harms them!" I took out the weapon of the Law, hoping to argue him out of such a reckless action.

"Bah. So are mosquitoes, flies, cockroaches, and rats – all of them are wildlife. Are we going to protect them all?" Champa sneered in reply.

"This is completely different. Mosquitoes, flies, cockroaches and rats are harmful to humankind. In the past, they were classed as the 'Four Pests' to be eliminated. But gold-back jackals are classed as a rare, endangered species. They eat rodents like rats and wild rabbits, so, to some extent, they are useful animals and should not be hunted or killed indiscriminately." I argued from the zoologist's stance.

"What? Jackals useful? Hah! Now you're being ridiculous!" Champa looked as amazed as if a tree had started talking. His eyes grew big, as he argued back, "If my fellow villagers heard what you just said, they'd spit at you. Most definitely. We people of Kaza Village, Han and Tibetan alike, loathe these evil jackals, we see them as vermin, like rats, and the sooner wiped out the better."

"You are so wrong to say that," I told him.

"Fart! Oh, sorry, please forgive my crude language." Champa's face turned red and his chest heaved violently. He kept pulling at his hair. I could tell he was trying to rein in his anger and calm himself down. But the words he uttered were still as hard as stone, "We Kaza people have the saying 'when friends come reach for the good wine; when jackals come reach for you gun.' As for jackals and wolves, jackals rank as

even more evil and hateful than wolves.

I certainly knew the common term “jackals and wolves” as a synonym for bastards, but as an idiom only in Chinese daily life. It certainly can’t be used to signify that these two animals are vermin that perpetrate every conceivable crime, are unpardonably wicked and thus should be cursed with suppurating boils on their head and under their feet. Human prejudice against them and cultural differences also play a part in this attitude. But I am not at all eloquent; my words came out stiff and clumsy. Having failed to convince him, I chose to keep silent for fear of really offending him.

A while later, when Champa had calmed down a little, he drew a breath and continued, “You’ve never been a herder, so you don’t know how formidable these jackals can be. They’re so savage and sly they do terrible harm to many herders. When a pack encircles a bullock they jump onto its back and bite its tail, forcing the tail to stick up; then, they use their claws to poke into its back passage. Like iron hooks, their sharp claws hook onto the bullock’s guts and pull them out, and they fall to the ground, still bloody and warm, like a tangled hank of yarn. Once the guts are pulled out, the bullock, no matter how strong, will fall to the ground and can’t get up again. These evil jackals have more dirty tricks to play. Having eaten one sheep, they keep its head and fur intact and drape it over one of their number to disguise it as a sheep, while crouching low in the bushes until a real sheep approaches the fake one. Then they leap out and bring it down. On top of this, the jackal thinks faster than a wizard. No matter how clever your trap, and even if you cover the dirt with sheep footprints, it will not step onto it; even if you rub lard on the trap and hide it in the thick grass, it will still sense something not quite right. Our village has set more than a hundred traps, but we’ve never caught a single jackal with them. Even if you fix a hunting net among dense branches and tether a frisky lamb under the tree, the cunning jackal can sense something amiss and, unlike other beasts, will never move to take the lamb and get itself caught in the process. In our community, the jackal is seen as a devil incarnate, as a wild and evil ghost reborn in this world. It’s the worst thing in the world.”

“Jackals are carnivorous beasts and of course they hunt herbivores, cattle and sheep included. Using their claws to poke the anus and disembowel other animals, using sheepskin to disguising themselves as sheep... such things are food-getting skills. It’s comparable to us using bows and arrows to shoot birds, and hooks to catch fish. You can’t use that to conclude that they are evil beasts and should be killed.” I tried my best to refute him. “As for them not stepping into the traps and never touching the bait under the hunting net, this just indicates how very clever they are and good at protecting themselves. Knowledge of self-protection and the ability to survive in a very dangerous environment... how can such things be called crimes?”

“Pah! Why do you always argue for the jackals? Are you a relative of theirs? A friend of theirs? Perhaps you’re their lawyer? Maybe their patron saint?” Champa

fixed me with a surprised gaze. His mouth turned slightly up at the side and his face was scornful. “How can you compare man with jackals?”

“Man and jackal alike are inhabitants of earth and have the right to exist,” I countered.

“There’s lives and there’s lives. It’s like forest fungi – you’ve got the delicious edible Boletus and the Greencracking Russula, but on the other hand you’ve got deadly poisonous ones like Gilled Toadstools and Sickener Russulas,” Champa argued.

I argued, “Scientists have concluded on the basis of field studies that the number of these jackals is already very small. Even if there are cases of stealing cattle and sheep from herders, they’re few and far between, and they hardly pose a serious threat to animal husbandry. In actual fact, dissections of dead gold-back jackals show that their main food source is red snow hares, which are wild rodents.”

Champa remained unconvinced. “Even if what you say is true, it doesn’t prove that jackals shouldn’t be wiped out. Red snow hare meat is delicious and their fur can be sold. If all the jackals are put down, the red snow hare population will increase and we can organize hunting teams to catch them. It’s sure to make a profitable sideline, and perhaps we Kaza people can soon get to be well-off.”

Champa was as stubborn as a mule and convinced that he was right, so it was hard for me to convince him. All I could do was sit on my hands and watch how he intended to deal with this pack of jackals.

The pups were a couple of weeks old and already able to walk. They wormed their way out of the bag and, suspicious and curious, sized the two of us up. Initially, they were timid, and huddled up against one another, but before long their irrepressible mischievous and energetic nature meant they were bouncing about and chasing each other around the camp. I made up a bowl of milk from powdered milk to feed them; Champa made a large basket from strips of pliable willow to keep them prisoner.

That night, the mournful howling of jackals in the surrounding forest could be heard inside our field study base. It was a shrill, hoarse and trembling sound; a sound to produce goose bumps all over. It was a pitch-black, moonless night, but we could see the green lights of their eyes, circling in the dark night like will-o’-the-wisps. For sure, these jackals had returned to their den from hunting and discovered their pups missing, and their acute sense of smell had led them to the camp.

As a precaution against animal attacks, we had dug a protective moat three-meters wide and two-meters-deep, and erected a stout fence with posts as high as three meters and as with a diameter the size of a bowl. However ferocious these jackals were, they couldn’t possibly get in.

In the second half of the night, several daring jackals did manage to cross the three-meter-wide moat and threw themselves at the fence. They poked their pointed muzzles into the gaps between the posts and howled, a ceaseless howling that sounded like a stream of abuse and vicious curses. At the sound of the howling from the adult jackals, the pups in the wicker cage grabbed at it with their claws and bit at it with their teeth. The crying and yelling from the jackal pups stimulated the adults further, so they began head-butting the posts. Dong dong dong! It sounded like the beating of wooden drums.

Champa fired a shot over the fence to scare them off. But within half an hour they were back outside the camp, howling away.

“They can throw their weight about for two days at most. And then I’ll send the lot of them to hell,” Champa vowed.

Not until the rosy first rays of the morning sun rose above the eastern mountain did the anxious rescue party withdraw to their ravine.

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Informed of the presence of a herd of wild asses along the southern Gaoligong Mountains, Champa accompanied me there, but after searching for a day and a half, we found not a trace of them and decided to head back. When passing the ravine at dusk, we saw those gold-back jackals again. They were gathered under the small crooked tree, on which the jackal tail hung. The adults had formed a big circle, facing inwards to the center where the tailless jackal was standing, the one whose tail had been bitten off by Champa’s beloved dog, Snow Queen. With grave expressions they gazed at the tailless jackal, all the time making strange, low sounds. For his part, the tailless jackal trapped in the circle, yelled loudly and bared his teeth. I could tell he was nervous and fearful. The setting sun cast a ghastly shaft of bloody light into the woods.

I’d never witnessed jackals behaving so strangely: the surrounding of one individual by the pack looked like a public trial: the jackals forming the circle were playing the role of judge, while the individual at the centre was like a defendant awaiting sentence. If my hypothesis was correct, then the strange, low noises made by these jackals were the charges laid against the defendant, and roars of the tailless jackal were his attempt to defend against the accusations.

As an academic zoologist, I was attracted by this little-known phenomenon, so I observed them through my binoculars.

Just then, Scarface raised her head and emitted a long howl; instantly, the judges and the defendant fell silent and held their breath, waiting for the chief judge to pronounce sentence.