The Shadow of the Past: Ge Fei’s “Encounter” with History

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ABSTRACT

By examining a selection of early short stories by the contemporary mainland Chinese author Ge Fei, this paper traces the writer’s literary emplotment of personal, quotidian history on the one hand, and national, state history on the other. First, the paper explores how h/History initially “shadows” the narratives in “The Lost Boat” and “New Year’s Eve,” before finally stepping more fully into the action in “The Encounter” and “Prognostication Chart.” It is argued that the accumulative demands of constantly re-imagining and critically engaging with personal history and State History in literature eventually weighed too heavily upon Ge Fei’s early creative endeavours, foreclosing his prior more challenging narratives in favor of stories that have more closely followed official State records.

Keywords: Contemporary Chinese literature, Ge Fei, short stories, quotidian history, state History

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Ge Fei, nom de plume for Liu Yong (b. 1964), has typically been grouped amongst the so-called avant-garde writers who began to arrive upon the mainland Chinese literary scene in the late 1980s. Whilst not receiving the same type of (international) acclaim as some of his contemporaries, for instance the 2008 Man Asian Literary Prize shortlisted author Yu Hua, to say nothing of the 2012 Nobel laureate Mo Yan, Ge Fei’s short stories and novels have nonetheless consistently engaged and engrossed many readers and critics alike. In the Anglo-European critical literature, Jing Wang has described Ge Fei as an “archexperimentalist” (1996, 242), a designation accepted to varying degrees by Xudong Zhang (1997), Claire Huot (2000), Xiaobin Yang (2002), and others. A common thread in these and other critical analyses of Ge Fei’s works is that his stories are often labyrinthine in narrative structure, a description certainly apt for his earlier, and perhaps more experimental writings (but less so for his more recent novels).

In much of his creative output, the internal and external emplotments of history are explored, at times in great detail. In this, Ge Fei is not much different from many other contemporary writers who seem almost obsessed with (re-) narrativizing the Chinese past (the aforementioned Yu Hua and Mo Yan included). It is this “obsession” with re-imagining/re-envisioning history (in/from the current perspective of the PRC) that is the key interest of this paper. By the term h/History, I reference the distinction between history written—rather inelegantly in English—
with a lower-case “h” and history transcribed with a capital “H.” I borrow this difference primarily from the work of Reinhart Koselleck for whom History, or Historie in German, is that which is accorded official status by the nation-state. This form of History generally overlooks, obscures, and marginalizes other voices of the past, or Geschichte(n), the “stories” of the everyday. Codified and taught in schools, History of this type is primarily concerned with the nation (in the full Hegelian sense of this term), and pays little heed to minority voices. In the case of the PRC, we might think of official interpretations of revolutionary History: the sacrifices of revolutionary martyrs paving the way for the Party’s ultimate victory; the struggle against internal rightists in the 1950s; the triumphs of Mao Zedong Thought, as well as its tragedies (although they could be acknowledged only after his death); the importance of the reforms under Deng Xiaoping; adherence to the ambiguously defined phrase “socialism with Chinese characteristics”; the “three represents” of Jiang Zemin; and so on. All of this hagiographic memorializing has been on recent display as the PRC has celebrated several milestone accomplishments and anniversaries, notably the Olympics in 2008 and the sixtieth anniversary of the revolution in 2009. The latter term, or Geschichte(n), on the other hand, identifies the histories, or “stories,” outside and on the margins of the officially codified version of events. These would be the quotidian experiences of the working class, marginalized minority groups, women, and so on. For the PRC, we might think of the re-discovery of reportage on the Great Famine in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward, or Liao Yiwu’s stories of the downtrodden in The Corpse Walker (2008). The foundation for Koselleck’s work is built upon Walter Benjamin’s “history from below,” perhaps more well-known by the phrase “to brush history against the grain” (Benjamin 1968, 257). The impetus behind such an approach to history, according to Benjamin, is that “in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is about to overpower it” and to fan “the spark of hope in the past” (1968, 255). At heart, “history from below” underscores a deep concern for the immanent multivocality of bygone times and presents itself as a potential challenge to the normativizing and codifying renditions of the past writ large by the nation-state.

With respect to Ge Fei’s literary output, we could say that his works operate somewhere in between the divide between Historie and Geschichte(n). As Xiaobin Yang states, “Ge Fei’s fiction appears particularly attentive to the technical, or formalistic, potential of narration in dealing with historical and personal experiences. By revealing discrepancies of collective and personal memories in the irreconcilable narrative fragments, Ge Fei challenges the totality of grand history formulated by the master discourse” (2002, 168). Xudong Zhang makes a similar comment when he states that in “most of his stories, history in its various forms—

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1 For an example of more experimental works, see for instance: “Hese Niaoqun” (A Flock of Brown Birds) and “Qing-huang” (Green-Yellow), both published in 1988.


3 See the recent book by Yang Jisheng, 2012.
personal history, family history, group memory […] unfolds itself as a Borgesean puzzle of coincidence and recurrence. It is a shadow that goes with the narrative, constituting a dimension of his stories” (1997, 183).

This effort to narrate the inconsistencies between individual histories, on the one hand, and that of state History on the other is the primary focus of this paper. In short, I contend that Ge Fei’s literary explorations into the often cannibalistic relationship between history on a personal level and History on a national level ultimately overwhelmed his early creative endeavors, culminating in literary works that correspond to a greater extent to official historical accounts. That is to say, the History once emploted as a “shadow” of the quotidian in his early narrative texts, in the end, forced its way into the narrative worlds themselves, dictating greater and greater conformity to official reckonings of the past. In a sense, this accumulative burden of re-envisioning h/History from an individual register can be witnessed chronologically across Ge Fei’s opus, but for the purposes of this paper, three particular short stories will be examined in detail. The first to be discussed is “The Lost Boat” (Mizhou 1987); the second, “New Year’s Eve” (Danian 1988); the third, “The Encounter” (Xiangyu 1993). The analyses of these three texts is then followed by a few words on “Prognostication Chart” (Tuibeitu 1993), an especially derivative account of China’s only female empress, Wu Zetian.

History as Shadow: the Personal, the National

“The Lost Boat” opens with an unmistakable historical moment:

On 21st March 1928, an advance task force from the Northern Expeditionary Army suddenly appeared on the banks of the River Lian. Sun Chuanfang’s forces, which were defending the area, surrendered without a fight, and the NEA swiftly took control of the strategic town of Yuguan, where the River Lian and the River Lan meet. Sun Chuanfang, while concentrating large numbers of troops at Linkou, also moved some of his crack divisions to defend a strategic pass in the mountains of Qishan, on the lower reaches of the River Lian. (Translation slightly modified) (Ge Fei 1993, 77, Ge Fei 2002, 9)⁴

The remaining few lines of the prologue introduce the short story’s protagonist, a commander by the name of Xiao, who is in charge of the thirty-second brigade, part of Sun Chuanfang’s defense force. The reader is also informed of Xiao’s impending disappearance, which serves as the climax of the story (although we do not yet know that it is his own bodyguard that executes him for apparent treason). Just a few pages after this prologue, we are treated to a hand drawn map of the area. What is striking about this suggestion of verisimilitude, however brief, is its exactness. Sun Chuanfang (1885-1935) was an actual military commander, part of the Zhili clique, during the Warlord Era (1916-1928). His forces were eventually defeated by the Northern Expeditionary Army (NEA) during the military campaign euphemistically known as the Northern Expedition (1926-1928). This Kuomintang

⁴ The first citation is to the translated text by Caroline Mason in, The Lost Boat: Avant-garde Fiction from China, edited by Henry Yiheng Zhao; the second to the original Chinese version.
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(KMT) led operation would eventually reunify mainland China, ending the chaotic rule of the warlords, and initiating what is known as the Nanjing decade (1927/8-1937). Upon his “historical” defeat in 1927, Sun first fled to the Japanese-held city of Dalian, then eventually to Tianjin, where, nearly ten years later in 1935, he would be assassinated by Shi Jianqiao, the daughter of the military officer Shi Congbin (who was a member of the Fengtian clique, a former rival of Zhili). Her reason for assassinating Sun was plain: revenge for the death of her father. In 1925, during the Second Zhili-Fengtian conflict (1924-1925) for control of Beijing and northern China, Shi Congbin had been captured by Sun Chuanfang’s forces and soon thereafter decapitated. Shi Jianqiao, after the assassination of Sun, turned herself into the authorities and was summarily imprisoned. Her imprisonment, however, caused public uproar and she was before long heralded as a female heroine of the nation. A year after the assassination and her own incarceration, she was pardoned by the KMT government and released. While the above rudimentary summary of the “historical” Sun Chuanfang is not technically part of Ge Fei’s narrative—Sun does not actually appear in the story itself save but for references to his name—it does serve to illustrate how history, in Xudong Zhang’s words, shadows the story. Zhang states:

It [history] is a shadow that goes with the narrative, constituting a dimension of his stories. In a radically timeless fashion Ge Fei reveals the constant movement of time, the often indiscernible turning of the wheels of fortune. As a restored experience, that is to say, as a poetic configuration of names and images, history participates in the self-construction and the self-destruction of the “I.” While history asserts itself as the unconscious of the style, the narrative “I” is a symptom of time at a standstill, of history in conjuncture. (Zhang 1997, 183)

This “self-construction” and “self-destruction” described by Zhang is played out most explicitly towards the end of the narrative: Commander Xiao’s personal (historical) connections to the area are engulfed by the grand History of the nation and the Northern Expedition (more on this below).

“The Lost Boat” revolves around the actions, thoughts, and desires of Xiao, a perhaps less than earnest military officer in charge of a detachment of troops in Sun’s warlord army. His base of operations is, in fact, his hometown area. Receiving news that his father has died, Xiao, under cover of darkness, crosses the river Lan with his bodyguard and enters the as yet neutral (or as yet unfought over) village of Little River in order to attend the funeral. Once there, however, he encounters his old flame, Apricot (Xing), now married to a fisherman named San Shun. He is soon intoxicated by her smell (quite fittingly given her name) and the memories (or perhaps dreams?) of their unrequited love (or perchance we should

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5 For more on this period, see Zarrow, 2005, especially chapter 13.
6 For more on Shi Jianqiao, see Lean, 2007.
say unconsummated love since xing/apricot is, after all, a homonym for xing/sex?). After mulling over his feelings for her, Xiao decides to make his way to her and her husband's home in order to rendezvous with Apricot for a romantic encounter (her husband is conveniently upriver fishing). The meeting, however, leads to disaster for both of them.

Because of her infidelity, Apricot is brutally maimed by San Shun (her genitals are mercilessly cut out) and sent back to her ancestral home in Yuguan, the NEA controlled territory (Ge Fei 1993, 94; Ge Fei 2002, 31-32). Xiao nearly meets his end at the hands of San Shun as well, but is spared by the man because the former sees in Xiao's eyes the desire to see Apricot again, despite her mutilation. Xiao, being spared once, is not so lucky again (98; 37). After apparently making his way to Yuguan, presumably to see Apricot (the narrative conveniently omits details of his journey, leaving it up to the reader to decide as to whether or not he actually met her), Xiao is executed upon his return to Little River by his bodyguard—the latter had been under orders to kill him should he cross the river into territory controlled by the NEA under the command of his brother (100; 39-40).

At various points in the story, the “History” external to Ge Fei's Little River, external to Xiao's self-contained (self-absorbed?) existence, filters in. For instance, there is reference to his father being “one of the lucky survivors” (79; 12) of the Small Swords Society (xiaodaohui), an actual (loosely defined) political and military organization, founded in 1853. The Small Swords Society was one of many such groups active in the Taiping Rebellion against the Qing. They even, if only for a spell, occupied the walled city of Shanghai in 1853 before finally being defeated by a combined force including Qing, British, American, and French soldiers. His father's military background—the narrative relates how he was an avid reader of military strategy manuals, and was one of the few in the Society who had learnt how to fire a gun—suggest that Xiao grew up in an “atmosphere of war” (79; 12).

This flashback to personal history that is latticed together with real events certainly provides the underpinning for Xiao's own enlistment in the military, although his reasons for joining the warlord forces, unlike his elder brother who went south and attended the Whampoa Military Academy, are left unclear (79; 13). Irony it is then that one so familiar with firearms, as Xiao surely was from an early age, is caught without his own weapon at the end of the story—murdered by his own bodyguard wielding his pistol. The satire does not stop here, either. The reader has also learnt that as a young boy Xiao had questioned his father as to why he “had committed himself to an army which was defeated” (79; 13). This is an undoubtedly poignant question; one that Xiao should have perhaps asked himself.

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7 Xudong Zhang, in his reading of “The Lost Boat,” similarly remarks that xing/Apricot may function in the text as a homonym for xing/sex. See Zhang 1997, particularly chapter 6.

8 For more on the Small Swords Society, see the edited volume China at War: An Encyclopedia (Li 2012, 213-15). The reference section directs the reader to further sources, namely those sources dealing with the Taiping Rebellion that contain brief sections on the Small Swords.
before he joined Sun Chuanfang's militia.

Whilst the character Xiao may be unaware of this irony, the narrative is not. His mother, upon first seeing him after several years of separation, reflects that the “expression in his eyes was exactly the same as the expression in her husband's eyes just before he died: they were deep-sunken eyes, without a glimmer of brightness” (81; 15). On a subconscious level, Xiao seems to be aware of his impending demise and the inevitable defeat of the warlord forces. But he is nevertheless entrapped with this fate (suming), unable to escape from it. Like a shadow, history remains unnoticed by the conscious mind, despite its connectedness to the body. That is to say, the mind generally does not take heed of the passage of time until time itself has passed: Xiao seems oblivious of his fast-approaching doom.

Shortly after this encounter with his mother, Xiao and his bodyguard are out walking amongst the villagers. He remarks to himself that the village and the people in it are as unchanged as the day he left. Unlike the Search for Roots (xungen) writers who see this as a (potentially) redeeming value, namely that the bucolic hinterland is where the “real” China still exists—or holds out—against the onslaught of industrial modernity,9 Xiao's reflections conform more readily to the common negative perception of “backward” China that was prevalent in the early twentieth century, the time in which the story is set. For Xiao, the people are ignorant and naive. They pay no heed to the dogs barking at his arrival. They are completely unaware of the conflict raging just outside their isolated hamlet. They foolhardily believe that since the “village had been untroubled by the flames of war for at least a thousand years, […] peace would continue far into the future, just as the river went on flowing past, day after day. […] they only ever speak of the things that have remained unchanged over the years” (translation modified) (82; 16). His contempt is made explicit in the following lines: “A barely perceptible smile of disdain hovered on Xiao's cheeks. He felt that people always lived in a world of illusion. For him, the future was already quietly reaching into the present, and the war had begun” (83; 17). However, despite this apparent awareness of imminent doom for Little River, Xiao, as mentioned above, is not cognitively aware that his own ruin is upon him, for “he too lived in a sort of illusion” (83; 17).

The disparaging attitude shown towards the “unchanging” villagers—or those devoid of (grand) history—does not stop here. The aforementioned mutilation of Apricot is viewed by the temporally static townspeople as quite normal: the “villagers saw nothing strange in the affair—unfaithful wives were quite often sent back home mutilated like this” (94; 32). And yet, outside the rural community, History is rushing full steam towards it. Xiao thinks of the earlier reports concerning the (perhaps cowardly) surrender of Sun Chuanfang's seventy-second and thirty-first divisions, and is “assailed by an ominous presentiment” (96; 35). But again, he brushes aside the foreboding and instead thinks of victory, once more failing to acknowledge that fate is stalking him.

Finally, on the seventh day of his stay in Little River, Xiao comes face to face

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9 For more on the xungen writers, see: Wang 1996; Zhang 1997; Song 2002.
with destiny. Once more reference is made to the external History encroaching upon the town. His trip to Yuguan has not gone unnoticed. Unbeknownst to Xiao, his bodyguard has been under “orders” to keep a watch on him and monitor his comings and goings. Should Xiao cross into NEA-controlled territory, apparently with the intention to supply military information to his brother—for surely, what other reason might he go there?—the bodyguard was to immediately execute him, foregoing even a drumhead trial; after all, bringing him back to base for a formal execution would be “bad for morale” (98-100; 38-40). Thus, the personal, individual history of Xiao is overwhelmed by the authentic History of the Northern Expedition. His feelings for Apricot, in spite of her disfigurement, are insignificant compared to the collective History of those beyond the asynchronous space of Little River. At the climax of “The Lost Boat,” the atemporality of the village is also overcome: the (predestined) battle against the NEA could not help but engulf the isolated settlement in a raging tidal wave of nation-building History.

These historical markers, namely, the time external to the village, pursue Ge Fei’s short story. They assist in mooring the fictional narrative to grand History, and accent the trellises that weave their way in and out of individual and collective time, irrevocably entangling them together. But if in this entanglement the past of the individual is swamped by that of the collectivity, that is to say, if we accept as inevitable Xiao’s melancholic—in fact tragic—end, then the story seems to emphasize the ultimate triumph of grand narratives over the quotidian. Contrary to the supposed objectives of New Historical Fiction (xinlishi xiaoshuo),10 as this story has generally been labeled, we find very little in the way of opposition to the accepted importance bestowed upon official renditions of the past. In many ways, it could be argued that “The Lost Boat” submits itself to normative/bureaucratic renditions of the revolutionary past: collective, state-sanctioned History must far

10 The genre of New Historical Fiction is said to have emerged on the literary scene in the late 1980s. Its overarching creative and intellectual thrust owes much to the reappraisal of Maoist history that was then taking place in the New Era. Summing up the genre’s general approach, Howard YF Choy remarks that many post-Mao writers “attempted to depart from and deconstruct national history by reinventing the past through fiction” (2008, 7). The term itself was first devised by Chen Sihe to describe those then contemporary works of literature that were written about the Republican era, and that employed (quasi) oppositional discourse to challenge, or at least call into question, official accounts of that rather chaotic period. Another feature of the genre, according to Chen, is that New Historical Fiction shifted the focus of attention away from the large, national, or collective themes of socialist-history fiction—the “old” tradition as it were—to the individual stories, or minjian, or history with a small “h” (Chen 1994, 80-81). Since Chen’s early formulation, the term has been employed to describe nearly all works of New Era/post-New Era literature that have playfully re/de-constructed the past of China’s twentieth century. Consequently, numerous writers have been, from time to time, retroactively subsumed under the label. They include, for example, Ge Fei, Qiao Liang, Li Xiao, Ye Zhaoyan, Li Rui, Lian Sheng, and even more internationally well-known writers such as Yu Hua, Su Tong, and Mo Yan. It is important to note, however, that not all of these authors necessarily endorse the description of their works as being New Historical Fiction. Ge Fei, for instance, does not consider his earlier short stories, such as those discussed here in this paper, as belonging to the genre, despite their almost overt re/de-construction of the past. Still, if we consider the “general approach” of New Historical Fiction in the broadest sense possible, then the designation is not entirely unwarranted. Since the new millennium, the genre has lost much of its cultural cachet as these writers have had to manage more and more the demands of the marketplace and thus, at times, have compromised their oppositional stance towards official representations of the past, a theme that is reiterated throughout this paper.
outweigh the individual time of the self. What we see here, then, in one of Ge Fei’s earliest short stories, is a narrative unable to resist the final absorption of personal history into the grand revolutionary account of China’s twentieth century. Commander Xiao attempts to hold out, but he is eventually defeated. His time cannot help but be subsumed and dissipated by governmental reckonings of the past.

The next story to be analyzed, “New Year’s Eve,” deals with similar issues and explores the past in an analogous fashion. But, as we shall see, history is not entirely limited to shadowing the narrative. Rather, it plays a much more active role in the events that take place. What is interesting to note, however, is that “New Year’s Eve” in many ways is more adversarial with respect to its emplotment of PRC literary character-types insofar as these characters, as we shall see, do not conform to the supposed standards of socialist literature in China. In that then, we could say that the story adheres much more to the expectations of New Historical Fiction. In a sense, it represents a push back vis-à-vis the expectations laid upon re-envisioning PRC History in literature.

The Personal, the National: History out of the Shadow
Set during the last years of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), the events in “New Year’s Eve” take place over the last lunar month of the year of the monkey (January 1945, according to the solar calendar) and reach their climax on the first full moon of the year of the rooster (February 1945). Like the previous story discussed, this one also takes place in a rural community. Unlike Little River in “The Lost Boat,” however, which remained more or less untouched by the war raging around it, the village in this story (never identified by name) is in the midst of a severe famine brought on by unfavorable weather conditions and the conflict that has been wreaking havoc on the countryside for the last eight years (they are even having difficulty burying the dead in the frozen earth). There are references to other nearby communities having to deal with similar problems as well, sometimes even at the hands of the communist-led New Fourth Army, or at least according to country gossip (Ge Fei 2002, 42-44). What is clear is that History, in contrast to “The Lost Boat,” operates directly in the narrative on a much greater level.

The main protagonist in “New Year’s Eve” is a young man known by the nickname Leopard (Baozi). And perhaps true to his feral name, he is not the most civilized of the village’s inhabitants, and most definitely not heroic. In truth, he is a social outcast, existing on the margins of society, engaged in acts of petty thievery, which he had first committed at a very young age simply because of the thrill it provided him (46-47). Interestingly, however, he chooses to enlist in the communist-led New Fourth Army in February of 1945, at the still young age of nineteen. His reasons for joining are of course suspect, especially since the war seems to be nearing its end and the Japanese military is in near full retreat (63). In conversation with Tang Jiyao, a village elder and liaison between the community and the communist forces, Leopard outwardly persuades the former that his desire to enlist is because he wishes to be fed (63), a not unreasonable claim to make given the enduring famine. Tang, however, persists in his questioning and finally
maneuvers Leopard into admitting that his reason for wishing to join the New Fourth Army is that he “wants to kill” (64). Whilst he does not openly state who it is he wishes to murder, the narrative makes clear that it is the landlord Ding Bogao (64). Tang assumes as much, for it was Landlord Ding who had ordered Leopard whipped after he had been caught stealing food and supplies from the landlord’s residence some time before (48-50). After enlisting and being given the accoutrements of military respectability, Leopard uses the pretence of class conflict to hastily gather together a motley crew of disaffected village youth to lead an attack on the Ding residence (72).

What happens at the climax of the story is suffused with Historical irony. According to Chinese communist rhetoric, the landlord class is inherently brutal and malicious by nature, exploiting the peasantry at every opportunity.11 This revolutionary perspective, whilst lacking an explicit linguistic presence in the text, underscores the overall narrative developments. It also serves to highlight, I would argue, how official History has stepped from the shadows to be a more active player in Ge Fei’s fiction. That is, unlike “The Lost Boat” wherein the time outside of Little River struggled for much of the narrative to intrude upon the characters’ actions—until Xiao’s execution of course—in “New Year’s Eve” the events in the story kowtow to the historical structure of Chinese communist discourse (at least on the surface). Peasants are supposed to rise up against the landlord class. The New Fourth Army is the herald of revolution. In short, the story seems to hold fast to a “proper” revolutionary development.

For all intents and purposes then, Leopard’s planned (violent) seizure of Ding’s holdings ought to be seen as the correct expression of class consciousness. His intended attack is the proper enactment of peasant (proletarian) realization. It is important to note, then, that Ge Fei’s narrative appears to resist conforming to the dogma of revolutionary discourse. In fact, the majority of the villagers do not support Leopard’s plan, even in the face of famine. The only persons rallying to his “cause” are other ruffians and social outcasts. What’s more, a servant girl attempts to warn Ding of the impending attack, which unfortunately—for Ding at any rate—falls on deaf ears. This failure to take heed of the warning adds to the incongruous nature of the narrative as regards the tenets of communist rhetoric for we learn that Ding and his family are too busy making preparations for New Year’s celebrations to which they intend to invite the entire community; a show of benign, and supposedly out of character, compassion (74).

Nevertheless, and in spite of its haphazardness, the assault on Ding’s residence by Leopard’s ragtag band of communist insurgents is successful. First eluding capture by cowardly hiding away (76)—an instance of stock characterization for the “evil” landlord class—Ding Bogao, once imprisoned by

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11 See, for instance, Yang Xiaobin and his argument on how Chinese avant-garde fiction “unmasks” and “parodies” “Maoist discourse” and the “fundamental framework for Chinese communist literature” which consisted of “narrative archetypes” and “stock topoi” of revolutionary heroes (2002, 153). See also Lin (2005) and Liu (2008) for how New Historical Fiction has interacted with and “deconstructed” socialist realist models.
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the insurgents, deals with his predicament in a most steadfast manner, refusing to even beg for leniency. Leopard, now with the airs of success to go along with his military standing, instructs the villagers to come forward to voice their complaints against the landlord, eerily foreshadowing the struggle sessions which would become a common feature of life in the PRC in the 1950s through to the mid-1970s. Shockingly for Leopard, however, is that no villagers show up (83). This unexpected outcome enrages him even more, and he unremorsefully executes Landlord Ding. The quenching of his thirst for revenge completes the transformation of Leopard from a wayward youth to a beastly man, and accentuates the satire of the last few pages of the story.

What is evident is that Leopard (and perhaps by association the New Fourth Army) is a cruel and nasty young man, character traits seemingly recognized by his mother. At one point early on in the narrative, she arranges for two unknown men to kidnap and murder him, presumably because she fears for him once she has passed on (58). This (perverse) fear, however, is seen for what it is when the tale unequivocally states that his mother believes that there is some inner evil within him (70). Whereas Leopard is, on the one hand, portrayed as conniving, cruel, and petty, adjectives not usually bestowed upon supposed class heroes, Ding, on the other hand, is painted as a generous and thoughtful man, despite his landlord status. To further the story’s contradictory descriptions of communist stock-character types, Tang Jiyao, the opportunist who operates in the interstices between the landlord class (he is good friends with Ding), and the communists (their liaison to the villagers), executes Leopard at the end of the story for military insubordination. As it turns out, the attack and execution of Ding Bogao was not authorized by the New Fourth Army (86). The story ends with a chronicle or gazetteer-like obituary for Leopard: real name Xu Fugui, born in 1926, year of the bull, joined the New Fourth Army in February, 1945. Then, on 15 February, disobeyed orders and murdered the “enlightened gentleman” (kaiming shenshi) Ding Bogao; death penalty for the crime carried out on 17 February (87). Tang Jiyao disappears without a trace a few days later (88).

The narrative, much like the gritty New Realism (xin xieshi) that emerged in the late 1970s, problematizes the communist stock characterizations of peasants/villagers, landlords (Ding), revolutionaries (Leopard), and go-betweens (Tang). Firstly, according to communist rhetoric, the peasantry will eventually awake to class consciousness and struggle against their oppressors (the villagers in this story certainly do not; rather, they seem to conform more to the traditional viewpoint of the peasantry as being subservient and willing to defer to authority figures). Secondly, a landlord must be vile, deliberatively exploitative, and cowardly, only coming to

For more on New Realism, see Siu and Stern, 1983.

Ge Fei’s short story “Harmonium” (Fengqin), published in the same year (1988), employs similar and again nonconforming re-imaginings of PRC standard character-types. Set also towards the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War, in many ways “Harmonium” operates intertextually with “New Year’s Eve,” insofar as they both problematize standard Historical interpretations of the downtrodden.
the realization of his faults at the end (Ding, while he does die, is decidedly not vile nor does he exploit the peasants. In fact, he has tried his best to do right by them). Thirdly, a revolutionary is generally considered to be beyond reproach, dedicated to the cause of revolution, unquestionably heroic, and victorious at the end (Leopard, of course, is a vindictive, ill-willed sort of man who fails miserably). Lastly, a go-between is invariably considered untrustworthy, the opportunist who gets his/her comeuppance at the end of a story (this does not happen, or at least the narrative is open to speculation as to Tang's fate). In sum, even though official History has emerged from the background to involve itself more directly in the narrative of “New Year's Eve,” the story resists, at least to a degree, the demands made upon it by standard PRC reckonings of the past. This is accomplished by the emplotment of character-types that do not conform to the uniform artistic representations of such characters in communist China. In a sense then, “New Year's Eve” demonstrates Ge Fei's holding out against the expectations of engaging with History in the PRC. Unlike “The Lost Boat,” the story refuses to accept the tenets of revolutionary History by undermining the representations of stock character-types. However, as we shall see in the final story to be examined in detail, Ge Fei's narrative art is unable to maintain this creative resistance.

Return to Grand History
From here, we turn our attention to “The Encounter,” a story that decidedly moves History into the spotlight. And, while the text does on some level resist official History, compared to the previous stories discussed, it adheres much more closely to standard PRC historical interpretations of an actual historical event: the British expedition into Tibet in 1903-1904. Above, it was argued that “The Lost Boat” and “New Year's Eve” emploted history more within the margins of the narrative, allowing it to shadow the action and events. Assigning history to the background permitted a degree of narrative resistance vis-à-vis the official past. “The Encounter,” however, is burdened much more heavily with the geopolitical time of its chosen historical moment, and as a result, the narrative cannot help but conform more closely to the bureaucratic understanding of the event.

Akin to “The Lost Boat,” “The Encounter” begins with direct reference to the event. In contrast to the former story, however, the prologue in this instance does not provide the same degree of specific details concerning the impending British mission. Rather, the imminent military operation is said to have been foretold in

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14 It is also worth pointing out that the character Tang Jiyao shares the name of a real military general and warlord who was active in Southern China, mostly in Yunnan and Guangxi. The only difference in their names is the character “Ji,” which for the actual person was 继 (the pinyin is identical). General Tang was a “colorful” character, constantly switching allegiances based on the prevailing political winds. He was also engaged in the illicit opium trade and other disreputable actions. An opportunist par excellence, General Tang eventually died in Kunming in 1927 after a successful military coup by his rivals Hu Ruoyu and Long Yun. As a possible template for the fictional character Tang Jiyao in “New Year's Eve,” Ge Fei’s short story certainly opposes the socialist realist description of the opportunist as it seems that Tang is the only person to escape with his skin intact. For more on the real General Tang Jiyao, see Meyer and Parssinen, 1998.
Buddhist prophecy, delivered by an unidentified lama, in some unspecified time in the distant past (Ge Fei 2001, 77; Ge Fei 2007, 1). The result of this immediate intermixing of fact and often religiously-tinged fiction is perhaps the defining feature of this short story.

For one, Colonel Younghusband, one of the central characters in the story, is the name of the actual commander who led the British contingent into Tibet. In this instance, unlike “The Lost Boat,” which employed characters only related via the narrative to real persons outside the text, “The Encounter” employs real persons directly (But, as we will discuss below, Ge Fei’s characterization of Younghusband veers greatly away from reality or at least the reality exterior to the PRC’s version of the man.). Another character, Reverend Newman, bears the family name of an actual Reuter’s journalist, Henry Newman, one of the few reporters to have accompanied the expedition into the area. About midway through the story, we briefly encounter a character by the name of “Henry” Naylor, an English war correspondent (85; 10).

This entwining of actual and re-imagined history into a convoluted whole leaves the reader to surmise on their own what is based on fact and what is not. The figurative possibilities opened up by this latticing of fact and fiction certainly present opportunities to resist the corresponding PRC History external to the narrative, but as the story progresses, the descriptions of various encounters and skirmishes between the British and the Tibetans underscore the story’s fidelity to PRC interpretations of the affair. In short, the narrative is overtaxed by the History of Tibet in mainland China. To assist in supporting this argument, the next few pages will mesh together an analysis of history and fiction in an effort to highlight the limitations of this story vis-à-vis resisting the all-consuming shadow of History in the PRC. I do not, however, make claims as to which account can be believed to be more accurate, the British or the Chinese. Rather, what I wish to highlight is the differences between the two. That said, it must be acknowledged that the PRC version does contain an overtly political persuasion that is at least less plain in the British versions.

Most accounts suggest that the central objective of the British force was to counteract the expanding interests of Tsarist Russia in Central Asia. The Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon (1859-1925), who was perhaps singularly obsessed with Russian encroachments into the Tibetan plateau, firmly believed that the establishment of formal and direct relations with Lhasa, instead of going through Beijing, was imperative in order to create a buffer area between the British and Russian Empires. London, which nominally accepted Beijing’s suzerainty over Tibet, was at first hesitant with respect to military action, but finally relented to Curzon’s entreaties when it became abundantly clear that the Tibetans and the Qing government were stalling, failing to even respond to overtures for negotiations. Subsequently, a force was put together and dispatched to Lhasa.

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15 The first citation is to the translated text by Herbert Batt in, Tales of Tibet: Sky Burial, Prayer Wheels, and Wind Horses; the second to the original Chinese version.
via Sikkim (Hopkirk 1995, 159-63; Powers 2004, 80). According to its chargé d'affaires commander, Colonel Francis Younghusband, the objective was “to get the frontier defined and recognized, to have the conditions under which trade could be carried on determined, and to have the method of communication between our officials and Tibetan officials clearly laid down” (qtd. in Hopkirk 1995, 163). While Younghusband's matter-of-fact rendering of the mission's goals seemed genuine enough (if couched in diplomatic niceties), and relatively free of the imperialistic jingoism of the time, he was not the sole person in command. Rather, Younghusband's responsibility lay principally in the arena of diplomatic and trade affairs, and therefore, despite having just been promoted to the rank of colonel by Lord Curzon—a move designed to enhance his standing in the eyes of the Tibetans—the military escort that accompanied him was put under the command of the somewhat hawkish Brigadier-General J. R. L. MacDonald (1862-1927), a choice that would unfortunately lead to conflict.

An apparently undistinguished soldier, it is suggested by Peter Hopkirk that MacDonald perhaps resented the fact that he was ordered by Curzon to accompany the expedition, especially over such difficult terrain, and was, as a result, more inclined to give the Tibetans a bloody nose rather than let Younghusband negotiate (1995, 166). While the veracity of MacDonald's resentment cannot be proven beyond all doubt, what seems clear is that Younghusband wished to avoid direct military conflict whenever and wherever possible. At one point in the early part of the expedition, he even reacted furiously at MacDonald for occupying a fort north of the town of Yatung, in spite of the fact that the occupation was relatively nonviolent. It was Younghusband's contention that “by seizing the fortress they had shown bad faith to the Tibetans and through this seemingly hostile act had prejudiced their claim to be a peaceful mission” (qtd. in Hopkirk 1995, 166). This concern for appearing “peaceful” and ostensibly non-military, even when the Tibetans had surrendered the fortress without belligerency, underscores Younghusband's desire to advance into Tibet with the least amount of conflict as possible, an interpretation supported by John Powers' fascinating analysis of Tibetan historical works (to be discussed more below), particularly that of Tsepon Wangchuk Deden Shakabpa. The Chinese historical works examined by Powers, on the other hand, resolutely denounce this point of view with regard to Younghusband's intention to maintain the peace. According to Chinese accounts, Younghusband was a cold-hearted, warmongering imperialist (Wang and Suo 1984, 123).

This apparent desire to avoid violence perhaps had much to do with Younghusband's personal background. He was actually born in the area, in the town of Murree, India (now Pakistan), and had traveled extensively across inner Asia. His travels had afforded him an intimate knowledge of the peoples inhabiting the Tibetan plateau, and thus it is not beyond the realm of imagination to suggest that he was deeply connected to the area and its peoples; a sort of Robert Hart (1835-1911) type character for Inner Asia, as it were. Younghusband's twenty-six books published between 1895 and 1942 would further attest to his knowledge of the Himalayan region of northern India and Tibet, despite what claims may be
made to the contrary. The characterization of Younghusband in Ge Fei's narrative on the other hand, stands in stark contrast to the actual man.

In Ge Fei’s “The Encounter,” Younghusband is early on described as having a “young and headstrong character” (Ge Fei 2001 78; Ge Fei 2007, 2). This is in spite of the fact that when the Tibetan expedition began, he was, in reality, a man of forty who, at the “young” age of twenty-three, had already trekked through Manchuria, crossed the Gobi desert, and scouted a path to India via the Muztagh Pass (for which he was elected to the Royal Geographic Society in 1887) (Younghusband [1896] 2009, 58-290). A few lines later, Ge Fei describes him as being “impulsive and irritable,” often “failing to take into consideration the outcomes of his actions” (Ge Fei 2001, 78, translation modified; Ge Fei 2007, 2). Later, when they encounter their first armed resistance outside the town of Guru, the fictional narrative describes the military engagement as a massacre. What starts as a tense standoff, the Tibetans having been given orders not to fire on the approaching army first, soon degenerates into mayhem and bloodshed. The “conniving” British, under the pretence of a “peaceful” mission, march up the canyon towards the Tibetan force to demand that their “troops hand over their weapons” (85; 11). The Tibetans, having “heard no order to retreat, no order to resist” stoically surrender their arms. Younghusband's force, having now neutralized their enemy, open fire with their Maxim guns, mercilessly mowing down the Tibetan troops, well over a thousand (Of note, there is no General MacDonald in the narrative.). Younghusband is portrayed here—and elsewhere in the story—as a ruthless soldier, glibly remarking that “war is war, not some kind of puppet show, […]. Blood gives the soldiers a chance to let off steam” (85; 11).

According to British eyewitness accounts however, the engagement happened somewhat differently. Edmund Candler (1874-1926), a well-known and highly respected Daily Mail reporter who, like Henry Newman, had accompanied Younghusband's contingent into Tibet, criticized that while MacDonald was hasty and unprepared in setting about disarming the Tibetan force, it was the Tibetan general in charge that had fired first, killing an Indian soldier. The result of this exchange set off an uncontrollable chain of events that led to the inevitable slaughter. In just over four minutes, the superiorly armed British militia decimated the essentially premodern Tibetan force, killing nearly seven-hundred men. In plain contrast to Ge Fei's narrative retelling of the battle, Younghusband, who actually wrote that it “was a terrible and ghastly business” (qtd. in Hopkirk 1995, 175), had not even taken part in the clash. Indeed, once the full extent of the carnage had dawned on the British troops, they ceased fire (although it seems that the hawkish MacDonald had never in truth given the order to do so), and began to try and “make amends by saving the lives of as many of the Tibetan wounded as possible” (qtd.

16 After the expedition, Candler would write and publish an account of it in 1905 entitled The Unveiling of Lhasa, an informative and fascinating inside look into the march across the Tibetan plateau. It has, since its original publication, been reissued numerous times, the most recent edition having been published in 2009.
in Hopkirk 1995, 176). Whilst the British force cannot, and should not, be excused from responsibility for these actions, they were after all the “invading” army, they do not seem to have shown the bloodlust attributed to them by Ge Fei’s narrative. One could even surmise that as public opinion back in the UK had become increasingly more diverse and vocal with respect to the actions of Britain’s military in the East, the thirst for carnage had perhaps waned somewhat, at least amongst the officers.\(^{17}\)

As John Powers makes note in his aforementioned examination of both Tibetan and Chinese versions of Tibetan history, including the Younghusband expedition, what is surprising is that the histories written by Tibetan exiles provide a generally “positive characterization of the British,” despite the fact that they had invaded their country and “killed more than a thousand Tibetans” (Powers 2004, 84). One such example is the work by Tsepon WD Shakabpa. In his retelling of the event, Shakabpa is most explicit in his description of the British: “the British army had not engaged in looting in the course of their advance and had respected the religion of the country. It had paid generously for the transport and supplies it obtained from the Tibetans” (Shakabpa 1967, 218). And just before this summation, Shakabpa claims that “Younghusband was known to be sympathetic with the Tibetan soldiers” (214). These interpretations assuredly stand in contradistinction to not only the Chinese historical records, but to Ge Fei’s narrative as well.

To furnish but one example of a Chinese study, the 1981 (translated into English in 1984) work by Wang Furen and Suo Wenqing serves to illustrate the patently political nature of PRC interpretations. In their explanation of what they refer to as Britain’s “imperialist invasion” of the Chinese motherland, they claim that during the Guru battle, Younghusband “had machineguns set up on the sly around the Tibetan troops. Taken unawares, the Tibetans were mowed down in cold blood by heavy fire” (Wang and Suo 1984, 123). This pointed and politically charged description rings eerily similar to Ge Fei’s narrative.

There are other uncanny resemblances between “The Encounter” and Wang and Suo’s study. Later, when a small contingent of Ge Fei’s Tibetan forces attempt to penetrate Younghusband’s camp near Gyantse River and kidnap him, upon their failure, Younghusband is described as having “ordered the machine guns turned on them,” even though the infiltrators, obviously defeated, were meekly hiding in a stable (Ge Fei 2001, 98; Ge Fei 2007, 26). While this is a supposedly fictional episode in Ge Fei’s narrative—perhaps used only for intensifying the drama of the story—one wonders as to where the idea for such a clandestine attack came from in light of the fact that Wang and Suo so verbosely claim that the Tibetan forces had launched a “massive counterattack” on the British in the area around Gyantse that

\(^{17}\) For a recent study on this period of history and the interaction between western colonial powers and China, see: Bickers, 2011. Bickers notes how there were two (and often more) prevailing impressions of China, depending on whether one was a “China Brit” or someone far removed from intimate contact with the Far East. See also Brook and Wakabayashi eds., 2000, for a detailed and more nuanced study on foreign-Chinese relations at this time via the framework of the international opium trade.
had caught them unawares, leaving them unable to offer “any effective resistance”; it had only been by chance that “Younghusband with a small retinue escaped southward” (Wang and Suo 1984, 124). Again, the likeness between Ge Fei’s narrative and Wang and Suo’s “History” is striking. But, as Powers makes clear, this entire event seems to have been fabricated by Wang and Suo themselves, “as it does not appear in any account of the expedition by either British or Tibetan observers” (2004, 86).

The only moment when there is synergy amongst the British, Tibetan exile, and PRC accounts of Younghusband’s expedition, and Ge Fei’s narrative recreation of it, is with respect to the expedition’s aftermath. For it cannot be ignored that, in spite of Younghusband’s actual success in making his way to Lhasa, the agreement signed between the Dalai Lama’s representative and Younghusband would turn out to be unenforceable (The Dalai Lama himself was not present for the negotiations as he had fled to Outer Mongolia some weeks before, only to be deposed by the Chinese authorities after the successful British entry into Lhasa.). The primary reason for the treaty’s failure, known as the Anglo-Tibetan Convention of 1904 was plain: the Tibetan government simply did not have the financial resources to pay an indemnity of just over half a million pounds sterling. Heralded by Lord Curzon as a hero of the Empire, Younghusband was to return to London to face parliamentary censure for having signed such a treaty without proper authorization from the cabinet (Hopkirk 1995, 190-193). Two years later the agreement signed by Younghusband would be null and void, and the Anglo-Chinese Convention (1906) would take its place. In this newer treaty, the status of Tibet vis-à-vis the British and the Qing was made clear: “Act I. The Government of Great Britain engages not to annex Tibetan territory or to interfere in the administration of Tibet. The Government of China also undertakes not to permit any other foreign State to interfere with the territory or internal administration of Tibet.” The objective to create a buffer area between the Russian and British Empires appeared to have succeeded, if only by default. The Younghusband expedition was, in retrospect, a success in spite of itself.

Ge Fei’s narrative does not end with the actual historical details of the treaty, but rather simply comments that it was “a document over which one would not know whether to laugh or cry” (Ge Fei 2001, 104; Ge Fei 2007, 33). And aside from commenting on the mystical effect the journey into Tibet had had on Younghusband (104; 33), a claim Younghusband makes himself in his India and Tibet (1910), the narrative ending is decidedly anticlimactic. What the above analysis suggests, however, is that Ge Fei’s narrative re-imagining of the Younghusband expedition is so overtaxed with the visibly propagandistic Histories produced in the PRC that it unfortunately reinforces the government’s one-sided interpretation of the event. As Powers makes note, “much of the Chinese version of events is clearly a fabrication that attempts to insert Chinese influence into Tibetan affairs and to create a narrative of patriotic Tibetans fighting on behalf of their beloved motherland (emphasis added)” (Powers 2004, 89-90). And while Ge Fei’s story is not as explicit in creating this so-called “narrative of patriotic Tibetans,” for it must be noted that it is a Tibetan soldier who, for no apparent reason, murders
the main Han Chinese character, He Wenqin (Ge Fei 2001, 102; Ge Fei 2007, 31), the story nonetheless buttresses the standard PRC version of events by painting the British troops as merciless, brutal, warmongering invaders intent upon carving up the motherland as they looted, pillaged, and raped their way to Lhasa (96; 23). This, I believe, is unfortunate. It is unfortunate because the story itself holds the potential for so much more. That is to say, “The Encounter,” like the earlier stories discussed, figures a resistance to official History but then prematurely seals it off by the questionable representation of Younghusband and the British; an interpretation that seems blissfully unaware of British and Tibetan versions of Younghusband's mission.

I would like to emphasize that I am not trying to excuse the actions of Imperial Great Britain, as any such attempt would simply be open to the same criticism I am now leveling at Ge Fei's story. What I am trying to illustrate is that the potential for working-through the traces of this h/Historical trauma in the present via Ge Fei's short story is tragically stillborn. This state of affairs is even more disappointing, I believe, when we realize that it is not entirely unexpected. As suggested above, the burden of Tibetan History in the PRC is simply too great to maneuver out from under. Powers makes a similar point when he relates his experience whilst in mainland China gathering materials for his study. He notes that despite “what appeared to a Western visitor as PRC propaganda,” was to the average citizen in China, History, “and most were clearly moved by what they read” (Powers 2004, 94).

My reading of this short story is not an attempt to heap blame upon Ge Fei for seeming to have failed to challenge vigorously enough the standardized Historical version of the Younghusband expedition. Such an attempt would be pure folly. But this particular story does serve to underscore the ultimate emergence of PRC History from the shadows in Ge Fei's narratives. No longer is it something that operates external to the narrative action. In “The Encounter,” official History is the driving force of the narrative; it is simply dressed up with a number of fictive accoutrements. To conclude this analysis of Ge Fei's early short stories and their relationship to personal and state h/History, I will now devote a few words to the novella “Prognostication Chart.”

This story, for all intents and purposes, is an unimaginative retelling of the life of Empress Wu Zetian, the only woman to reign over the China as its divine

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18 The noticeable absence of patriotic Tibetans in “The Encounter” is interesting insofar as it suggests, on the one hand, that Ge Fei has not been totally cowed by the standard PRC narrative of the event. In some ways, it could be suggested that the narrative consciously and deliberately chooses not to follow the official version which highlights the heroic (and hopeless) attacks the Tibetans made against the British in support of the Chinese Government. This perspective, in some measure, problematizes the above reading of the text. On the other hand, however, the lack of patriotic Tibetans could be construed as acceptance of the more contemporary popular belief that many Tibetans have been, and continue to be, ungrateful with respect to the sacrifices the Han majority population have made on their behalf (a belief, it must be noted, that is not necessarily held by the authorities, at least not in public). Consequently, portraying the ruthless murder of He Wenqin at the hands of a Tibetan reinforces the popular image of the latter group's thanklessness towards those who are ostensibly trying to help them. Whilst I would like to believe the former interpretation, the omission of such “patriots” does not free the short story from the burden of Tibet's History in the PRC.
ruler (reigned 690-705, dynasty name Zhou, interrupting the Tang). And while it is a rambunctious narrative riddled with court intrigue, assassinations, sex, and over a hundred different real historical characters, Howard Y. F. Choy is quite accurate in stating that it represents “a triumph of commercialism over the author’s avant-gardism” (2008, 236). In fact, the story was one of five commissioned by Zhang Yimou in 1993 for an eventually abandoned film. Ge Fei, at first unaware that other authors had also been paid to write on the same historical person, which according to Dai Jinhua need not have been an entirely factual account, was angry after learning of the situation. But, as Dai also points out in the same round-table symposium, “if you had accepted payment, you had to do the work” (1999).

If “The Encounter” seemed to validate, if only unintentionally, the PRC standard historical version of events concerning the British expedition into Tibet, then “Prognostication Chart” wholly conforms to the recorded materials on Wu Zetian’s humble origins, her rise from mere concubine to regent, and then finally empress, with little or no attempt to challenge the standard record. In fact, one finds essentially the same narrative on the Wikipedia entry for Wu Zetian. And whilst we could suggest that these same documents were written after the fact and thus intimately connected to the politics of that time—think here of state historiography in imperial China and the dictum that required state historians to praise the good and excoriate the wicked—to explore this issue further is beyond the scope of this paper and would take us to far back into imperial historiographical practices. Nevertheless, if we were to plot a trajectory for the works examined in this paper, then it would be from configuring resistances to official representations of Chinese History as codified in the PRC to the unspectacular reiteration of that past.

**History has Stepped from the Shadow**

All told, the stories discussed above illustrate how Ge Fei’s earlier works challenged, resisted, but ultimately succumbed to the weight of History in the PRC. The process was perhaps a slow one, but it took place nonetheless. In “The Lost Boat” and “New Year’s Eve,” we witnessed how personal, individual tales interacted with the larger History around them and in turn fictionalized spaces where officialdom had yet to take charge. Xiao had refused to accept, consciously or not, the coming onslaught of History; he attempted to stand against the shadow of the past, however fatal his stand turned out to be. In “New Year’s Eve,” the narrative refused to kowtow to stock communist character-types, underscoring the greyness of reality and the multitude of inaccuracies between what is written on the page and what actually takes place in life. But what we observed in the final story discussed, “The Encounter,” was a greater affinity between Ge Fei’s fictional encounter with the past and national History. The latent challenge to yesteryear that was present in the earlier stories has now become noticeably absent. “Prognostication Chart” culminated this trajectory.

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19 For more on this issue, see: Ng and Wang, 2005; Schmidt-Glintzer, Mittag and Rusen, eds., 2005.
In many ways, these works highlight several of the prevailing social and artistic concerns of the 1980s and 1990s across the PRC cultural scene, if only indirectly. The two earlier examples problematize the autonomous, modernist subject that was of great concern for China's cultural workers in the New Era. Xiao is torn between personal love—or maybe just lust—and Historical duty. He is aware of the History outside of Little River, but becomes its victim nonetheless. Leopard, the earnest radical, reveals himself as a petty, cruel, and ultimately insubordinate buffoon—hardly a burgeoning revolutionary hero. It could be said that by the purposive emplotment of History as “shadow” in these two narratives, the stories operate on the margins of official records, resisting standard reckonings of the past.

But this seemed an untenable position for Ge Fei to maintain. In the final story discussed, we see how PRC History has stepped from the shadow to dominate his historical fiction. In a sense, what we observe in “The Encounter” is a playing out of the aforementioned traditional historiographical practice in China: the customary excoriation of the wicked (Younghusband and the British), and praise for the good (the “patriotic” Tibetans). With “Prognostication Chart,” we notice an almost complete subservience to the past. The story possesses none of the challenges to History that can be seen in the earlier tales discussed. It is an interesting literary progression. Ge Fei shifted from a position of emphasizing the shortcomings of historical records to accepting them almost carte blanche. Perhaps we must conclude that History in the PRC has revealed itself to be much too large and powerful to remain forever in the literary shadows.

Postscript
In the above paper I explored how History in the PRC at first operated in the shadows of Ge Fei's early short stories before finally stepping out, as it were, onto center stage to demand a sort of acquiescence to official, bureaucratic CCP narratives of China's (revolutionary) past. In short, PRC History seemingly required fiction to conform to the Party's construction of historical reality. In light of Mo Yan's recent Nobel win, I would like to suggest that, in a sense, literature in the PRC now stands in the shadow of Mo Yan's literature. That is to say, works of fiction in the PRC post-Nobel Mo Yan cannot help but be judged in relation to his “international” accomplishment. The effusive official praise that has been showered upon him by the cultural establishment is certainly an alluring and envious position to be in, after all—at least for a writer in the PRC. And as expected, the establishment, along with Mo Yan, has revelled in the “international” acknowledgement and supposedly growing acceptance of Chinese contemporary literature, and cultural production in general we might add. In a nutshell, Mo Yan's win is considered a triumph of Chinese soft power and should be rightly celebrated.

Of course, beyond the PRC's borders, there has been criticism levelled against the committee for choosing an establishment writer from a totalitarian country, echoing the condemnation of the Nobel committee in 1965 when they, apparently under Soviet pressure, awarded the prize to Mikhail Sholokhov. And some of this criticism has been quite damning, most notably the Nobel laureate
Herta Müller's denunciation of the selection committee for making a “catastrophic” decision in awarding the prize to a Party author. We must also admit that Mo Yan himself has made things easy for those wishing to criticize his win. After all, the character of the man has (supposedly) been called into question upon his stated support for censorship in China, arguing as he did that it is as necessary as airport security. And yet, to my mind, the real issue at hand has never really been addressed. That is, what we have witnessed by this debate is the intense struggle over the manner in which the PRC is represented and by whom.

I am therefore left to ponder several questions in the aftermath of Mo Yan's win. These are as follows: has the world community shifted in terms of how it relates to and sees the PRC? To be precise, have we witnessed a critical shift to greater and greater carte blanche acceptance of official representations of the PRC put forth by those ensconced within the Party apparatus? Should Mo Yan's victory be praised as a triumph for contemporary Chinese literature, or a warning call for how the PRC is beginning to dominate the discursive realm of China itself, including Hong Kong and Taiwan? Have we observed the ascendancy of a totalitarian governmentality controlled soft-power that endeavours to dictate on the sly how China is represented, both within and beyond its borders? Alas, answers to these questions will have to be postponed, at least for the immediate future. My only fear is that as the PRC exercises its financial might more and more, and as a growing number of national governments, as well as cultural and academic institutions across the globe, become progressively more reliant on Chinese largesse, then perhaps these questions might forever remain unexplored.

GLOSSARY

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The Shadow of the Past: Ge Fei’s “Encounter” with History

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