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).¹

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—

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.