

## Linking Ancient and Contemporary

Continuities and Discontinuities in Chinese Literature

edited by Tiziana Lippiello, Chen Yuehong 陈跃红 and Maddalena Barenghi

# The Tradition of Telling and the Desire of Showing in Ge Fei's 'Fictional Minds'

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**Abstract** This paper aims at conducting a preliminary analysis of some results derived from Ge Fei's narrative research, through a close-reading of some narrative patterns in his recent trilogy, *Renmian taohua* (Peach Blossom-beauty, 2004), *Shanhe ru meng* (Mountains and Rivers Fall Asleep, 2007) and *Chunjin jiangnan* (End of Spring in Jiangnan, 2011). On the one hand Ge Fei tends to assimilate and re-invent the traditional patterns of Chinese novel, however, on the other hand, he doesn't ignore, and, on the contrary, tries to adopt also some narrative devices from Western fiction theory and practice. The aim of this research is to detect the evolution of his technique in defining the main characters of the three novels as full-rounded 'fictional minds', and to explore Ge Fei's strategy to link Chinese traditional fictionality with his analysis of the modern Chinese individual consciousness.

**Keywords** Peach Blossom-beauty. Renmian taohua. Mountains and Rivers Fall Asleep. Shanhe ru meng. End of Spring in Jiangnan. Chunjin jiangnan.

A good deal of fictional narrative is based on the fact that thought can be public and available to others as well as private and accessible only to ourselves.

(Palmer 2004, p. 134)

The most recent trends in narratology follow these three approaches: the cognitive, the transmedial, and the comparative. The latter is meant to be a dialogic approach and it is specifically connected with local/national contributions to narratology, in a diachronical perspective.

In this sense, recent works and studies by some prominent Chinese writers who have turned to traditional Chinese narrative patterns in order to create new ways of representing Chinese reality are worth investigation. Besides, new narratology seems to be more receptive in terms of proposing multifarious analysis grids, which can better integrate and assimilate different literary traditions and different language systems.

Basing my essay on a number of issues raised by the cognitive approach, at the same time I wish to integrate concepts from classical narratology, in order to shed light on the results of the encounter between traditional Chinese narrative and Western patterns in contemporary Chinese fiction.

First of all, I wish to explain the concept of 'fictional minds', which is a recent staple in post-classical narratology, and which defines the mental activities of human beings represented in a fictional work. The characters of a narrative (whether a novel, a film or a news item) are usually received and 'decoded' by readers through a continuous process of 'mind reading', in which they, the readers, try to grasp the meaning of the characters' actions and words according to both the direct expression and the indirect report of their thoughts and emotions in that narrative.

'Showing' and 'telling' are concepts which belong to the history of literature since Plato and Aristotle, who used the terms *diegesis* and *mimesis* (respectively *xushi* 叙事 and *mofang* 模仿 in Chinese). According to classical narratology, the binary system of 'telling' and 'showing' is «the contrast between narration proper and enactment» (Chatman 1980, p. 32) in a narrative. The strategy of telling is conducted through a mediated narration (first or third person narrator, characters' recounts, etc.), while the strategy of showing is deployed through dialogues, interior monologues or unreported speech and thought. However, according to most recent narrative theories, this dichotomy is far from being satisfactory for writers and for scholars trying to explain the complex network of elements that contribute to the creation of an independent fictional world. Neither does it fully explain the analysis of these writers' art of representation of the human mind by means of fictional devices (Rabinowitz 2005, pp. 530-531).

Over the last few centuries both strategies have been used in Chinese literature, as in Western or European literature, though given a different weight and with discontinuous interpretations. For instance, we have the debate on the supposed superiority of the mimetic approach that took place in the Western literary field at the end of the 19th century among writers and theoreticians. As stated by Gérard Genette:

One of the main paths of emancipation of the modern novel has consisted of pushing this mimesis of speech to its [...] limit, obliterating the last traces of the narrating instance and giving the floor to the character right away. (1980, p. 173)

In a similar way, Ming Dong Gu reminds us of the Chinese tradition of storytelling as a meaningfully resilient one: «It may be reasonably said that except for some short stories, practically all Chinese fictional works narrated in the storytelling fashion had the overriding aim of telling an intriguing story» (2006, p. 69).

A prominent question, often raised by Chinese scholars, is that since classical narratology is based on a strong linguistic perspective, it tended to be anchored to the structures of Western languages and thus rarely suited non-European language narratives such as Chinese. For instance, free indirect speech is traditionally defined as being built on «the use of

pronouns and tenses», which obviously is different in a language like Chinese where tense is not grammatically marked and the acting/thinking/speaking person is not clearly identifiable solely through the verbal form.

As concerns the dialectic between telling and showing, in traditional Chinese fiction the former seems to prevail. Describing the theory of fiction expressed in *Hong lou meng* 红楼梦 (The Dream of the Red Chamber), Gu states:

As is characteristic of a creative writer Cao Xueqin expresses his theory of fiction in the manner of telling a story. In the opening, the author tells us that the genesis of the novel is related to a Chinese myth; [...] This fable-like genesis of the novel, when analyzed critically and conceptually, reveals an implicit idea of fiction. Unlike the Western conception of fiction as an imitation of the natural and human world, it views fiction as a result of expression. [...] The original source of the novel, then, is not the imitation of life, but the stirring of human desire for creative activity. (2006, pp. 185-186)

According to Gu, though, in the end the great Chinese novel «established the legitimacy of pure fiction pioneered by the *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅 and affirms the blending of first-order imitation and expression» (2006, p. 187). In my opinion, this blending of the two approaches can also synthesize Ge Fei's recent attitude towards this narrative pattern.<sup>1</sup>

When reading a novel, readers' primary focus is to identify what Ann Banfield (1982) calls the «center of consciousness», in other words they try to link the main thoughts and descriptions in a passage to a perceiver who is responsible for the general perspective. Connecting the many hints provided by the narrator or by the author, the reader strives to re-construct the story-world around one or more fictional minds.<sup>2</sup> Story-worlds are mental models used to understand narratively organised discourse, including characters and settings, and the relations between them.<sup>3</sup> This mind-reading activity, according to scholars engaged in this field of study, is highly valuable as a useful way to experience the world.

1 Born in 1964, Ge Fei is a contemporary Chinese novelist who emerged in the 1980s as part of the literary movement of the so-called Avant-garde fiction.

2 «Possible worlds do not await discovery in some transcendent depository; they are constructed by the creative activities of human minds»(Doležel 2010, p. 30).

3 In other words a storyworld is «the shared universe within which the settings, characters, objects, events, and actions of one or more narratives exist». Available at: <http://transmediadigest.com/2011/11/>. See also Herman 2005, pp. 569-570.

In his recent trilogy<sup>4</sup> Ge Fei, himself a writer and a scholar, tries to blend the two strategies, combining both Chinese and Western tradition, in order to overcome what he considers diachronic and synchronic narration mismatches in depicting fictional minds. In my paper I examine some of these patterns, raising some preliminary questions to be answered after further analyses: Is this blending of different narrative patterns successful in presenting to the reader the fictional minds of the characters? Which linguistics devices are activated by the writer in order to intertwine the diegetic and the mimetic functions? In which way and to what extent does Ge Fei's strategy link Chinese traditional narrativity with his aim to reveal the modern Chinese individual consciousness?

And last but not least, is the cognitive turn in narratology useful to overcoming the limits of the linguistic approach, allowing us to analyse the fictional minds in Chinese fiction through other narrative devices?

In scrutinizing his recent novels, which are based both on Ge Fei's long-standing concern for narrative structures and devices, and on his revival of traditional narrativity, we can approximately assume that Ge Fei's narrative strategy gradually moves from an indirect approach to a direct one.

Another feature of his recent literary production is a progressive merging of traditional and modernist patterns, such as inserting lines of poetry from ancient Chinese poets in a contemporary context (as he does in the novel *Chunjin Jiangnan* 春尽江南) or highlighting in bold those passages which reflect characters' inner thoughts (a main feature in *Shanhe rumeng* 山河入梦).

We can also point out that direct or indirect expressions of mental activity might not be the only or the best way to convey subjectivity in a narrative. According to Alan Palmer, it is not only the device of thought and speech (direct or indirect, free or tagged) that helps readers construct the characters' mind in a novel, but also that «action descriptions can within the situated thought paradigm be easily and informatively reconceived as consciousness descriptions» (Palmer 2004, p. 222).

As a matter of fact, another classical device exploited by the writer is intertextuality, which, as we will see, can also be a powerful device for expressing mental activity.

The three novels under scrutiny in this paper confirm Ge Fei's attitude towards the need for mapping human consciousness and its relations with the outer world, including other human beings, society, nature, and history. In all his works, his major concern is to reflect upon how the inner

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4 The name of the trilogy, *Jiangnan trilogy* (Jiangnan sanbuqu 江南三部曲), refers to the fact that the three novels are all set in Jiangnan (traditional name of the south-central area of China), historically famous for its rich intellectual history. The three novels are: *Renmian taohua* 人面桃花 (Peach-Blossom Beauty, 2004), *Shanhe rumeng* 山河入梦 (Mountains and Rivers Asleep, 2007) and *Chunjin Jiangnan* 春尽江南 (End of Spring in Jiangnan, 2011).

world of the characters, their subjective strivings and impulses deal with outward reality, but they are always shattered because of the inconsistency between the two realms of the subjective and the real.

The concept of 'life plan', which drives each character in his or her experiencing the world and shapes their mind, can be useful to understanding the development of fictional minds in the narrative space, as Giuseppe Ferrigno says:

La vita psichica è un 'insieme' dinamicamente orientato verso un fine comune: l'unificazione giunge attraverso la tensione verso uno scopo. La personalità è un tutto 'complesso', ma 'unitario', in cui ritroviamo una molteplicità di fattori, di tratti, di disposizioni, di tendenze, di funzioni, fra loro interrelate: un individuo percepisce, immagina, ricorda, desidera, sogna sotto l'influsso ininterrotto e ipnotizzante d'una mèta autocreata, il piano di vita appunto, verso il quale tende. (2005, p. 67)

The 'psychical life' is a 'whole' dynamically oriented toward a common aim: the unification comes through straining for a goal. The personality is a whole both 'complex' and 'unitary', where one can find a range of factors, traits, dispositions, trends, and mutually related functions. An individual feels, imagines, remembers, desires and dreams under the uninterrupted and hypnotizing flow of a 'self created' goal, the so-called life plan toward which he or she tends.

Since his first novel, *Diren* 敌人 (The Enemy, 1991) Ge Fei has focussed his research on the aporia of any attempt by the individual to negotiate between his/her own subjectivity and the objective world around them; this aporia is powerfully and lyrically represented in the *Jiangnan trilogy*, which is devoted to the theme of revolution and utopia in 20th century China. The first novel of the trilogy, *Renmian taohua* 人面桃花 (Peach-Blossom Beauty, 2004) is set in early 20th century China and tells the story of Xiumi, the young daughter of a landlord who disappeared after he lost his mind while devising an obscure plan of revolt. When her family is about to marry her to a rich family against her will, Xiumi is kidnapped by a gang of outlaws and ends up being mysteriously connected with plans to establish a utopia on an island in the Jiangnan area. Living through bewilderment and violence, Xiumi undergoes a sort of *Bildungs* experience, her life plan becoming that of being the unhappy spokeswoman making social and egalitarian pleas in pre-modern China. Her final defeat is but the symbolic defeat of those premature though widespread pleas. In the second novel, *Shanhe rumeng* 山河入梦 (Mountains and Rivers Fall Asleep, 2007), the central figure is Xiumi's son, Tan Gongda, who is an official of the Communist Party in the 60s, vainly pursuing the construction of great public works in his village. Here, the communist utopia is only the general frame

for a deeper and more complicated entanglement of unfulfilled desires, both personal and social. On the one hand the main character is driven by his revolutionary zeal and the utopic aspiration of improving the lives of his people (similarly to his mother), even against their will; on the other hand, his personal life plan is unsettled by the different women who attract him, and especially Yao Peipei, his smart, young secretary. In the third novel, *Chunjìn Jiāngnán* 春尽江南 (End of Spring in Jiangnan, 2011), a new temporal dimension is deployed, and the storyworld is placed at the end of the 20th century, when another utopian project falls apart: the new economic dream. The protagonist here is Tan Duanwu, an irresolute intellectual of the post-Mao era, the son of Tan Gongda, married to an ambitious lawyer, Pang Jiayu.

Each of these three protagonists holds a specific life plan, but the frailty of those plans is revealed over the course of the plot, confirming the traditional Chinese idea of the deceptiveness of all human desires and of real life in itself.<sup>5</sup>

The aim of this study is to scrutinize the evolution of Ge Fe's narrative technique by which, especially in creating his key characters, he focusses on the representation of their minds. I want to show how the author, in depicting history and reality as perceived by these fictional 'centres of consciousness', tends to gradually move from an indirect approach to a direct one: in narratological terms, he deals with the «thought report as the most diegetic» pattern, but often recurs to the «direct thought as the most mimetic mode of thought presentation» (Palmer 2004, p. 21) or narrated report of action.

In Ge Fe's novels, the more the social context approaches present day China, the more the narrative mediation gives way to a non-mediated thought presentation or, as Palmer maintains, to the direct representation of 'fictional minds' through the description of action. However, the complexity of Ge Fe's narrative strategies deserves further and more detailed analysis. Traditional patterns such as expressive devices and intertextuality are also very common in his works, along with more daring and experimental patterns.

Before I carry out my brief analysis of Ge Fe's oscillating between the 'tradition of telling' and the 'desire of showing', it would be pertinent to

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5 Zhang Qinghua believes that Ge Fe's novels share this issue with the *Honglou meng* (Dream of the Red Chamber) and other important Chinese novels: «其实《红楼梦》讲的是,世界是一场梦,宇宙、时间是一场梦,一个家族的荣华富贵是一场梦,一个人的一生,他全部的爱情、美好的经历都是一场梦» (Wang Xiaowang 2012, p. 16) (As a matter of fact, the *Dream of the Red Chamber's* main theme is that the world is a dream, the universe and time are a dream, the splendor and wealth of a clan are but a dream, the whole life of an individual, his/her experience of love and beauty, is a dream). In his opinion this same concept in Ge Fe's works «变成了一个中国人生命经验、文化经验的最经典和最敏感的部分» (becomes the most classical and sensitive part of a Chinese man's life and culture experience).

analyze how the trilogy was received by Chinese critics and their assessment of Ge Fei's narrative strategy. Soon after the publication of the third novel, many Chinese scholars pointed out the hybrid nature of the *Jiangnan sanbuqu*, which has been welcomed as an evident mark of the author's artistic maturity and literary accomplishment.

In reviewing *Peach-Blossom Beauty*, Chen Zhongyi 陈众议 (2012) points out the inner contradiction of Ge Fei's style, which he defines as 'classical' (*gudian* 古典) and 'avant-garde' (*xianfeng* 先锋) at the same time. Actually, I would define it as a sophisticated merging of both styles rather than a contradiction, or as the sublimation of some modernist techniques within a more traditional, essentially Chinese, narrative frame.

Professor Zhang Qinghua 张清华 analyses the same novel from the viewpoint of its structure,<sup>6</sup> which he sees as a re-proposal of the *Honglou meng* model. The whole trilogy, in his opinion, is structurally and thematically based on the same philosophical structure of the ancient novel.

我觉得格非的这三部书却会给我们带来类似读《红楼梦》之后的那样一种深深的绝望,一种深刻的宁静,一种哲学的处境。(Wang Xiaowei 2012, p. 16)

I think Ge Fei's trilogy can give us a similar deep sense of despair, a kind of profound stillness, a philosophical plight as when reading *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Chinese critics' multifarious attitude towards Ge Fei's exploits in the art of fiction, and especially about the way he deals with narrative patterns such as time, mode and structure, is more than apparent.

On the one hand, Chen Zhongyi emphasizes the tendency to adopt a range of Western techniques in creating an intricate web of narrative modes:

小说有非常先锋的生活流、意识流,或任意的延宕、有意的歧出,也有以后当如何如何的全知全能,分号、单引号,人称代词省略的明叙与暗叙或亚叙并立所造成的混乱。(2012, pp. 9-10)

The novel presents an extremely avant-garde stream-of-life, stream of consciousness, either an arbitrary delay, a deliberate inconsistency. There are also an omniscient and omnipotent telling what will happen later, semicolons as well as single quotation marks, and the confusion provoked by the coexistence of straightforward narration with omitted pronouns and metaphorical narration, or subnarration.

6 Zhang Qinghua defines Ge Fei's style in *Renmian taohua* as a 'jiiegouxing de chuli fangshi' (结构性的处理方式 structural method), in Wang Xiaowang 2012, p. 16.

On the other hand, in analysing the hybrid nature of the trilogy as well as its guiding principles and artistic effects, Lu Jiande 陆建德 underestimates Ge Fei's bond with Western narrative theory and highlights instead the Chinese 'flavour' and 'poetic structure' of the trilogy:

格非对西方文化的接受,对西方文化的阅读都是非常充分的,但是,他却没有受西方文化或者说西方小说翻译文体或者说欧化的影响, [...] 相反,却呈现出纯粹的,精致的,高雅的,书卷气的文体形态)。[...]我相信,精于小说叙事学理论的格非,他肯定会在他的理论和他的写作实践当中找到一种非常适合他的小说结构,这应该是一个诗学的结构。(Wang Xiaowei 2012, p. 27)

Ge Fei has fully absorbed and has a full reading experience in Western culture, however he is not influenced neither by Western culture and by Western novels translation style nor by the Europeanized style. [...] On the contrary, he displays a pure, delicate, elevate and bookish literary style. [...] I believe that Ge Fei, with his proficiency in narratology, will succeed in finding a suitable narrative structure between his theory and writing practice, and this must be a poetical structure.

According to Wang Kan 王侃, Ge Fei's narrative «已经回到中国文学的叙事传统和美学传统当中去了» «has completely reverted to the traditional aesthetic approach of Chinese narrative» (Wang Xiaowei 2012, p. 29).

Taking into account the positions of these scholars, who, to different extents, salute the return to Chinese tradition of one of the most prominent Chinese avant-garde writers, I would argue that he successfully combines both the traditional and the modernist approaches to narrative, especially by offering an original solution to the representation of mind activity in a fictional space. In this sense the trilogy should definitely be considered a meaningful example of «continuity and discontinuity» in Chinese literature. A recent essay by Du Huixin 杜慧心 affirms that Ge Fei's narrative strategy has reached a well-balanced (and I would say fascinating) mixture of two narrative traditions:

格非也可以说是创造了一种类似现代性的“内心时间”,赋予小说中的人物一种特殊的禀赋——在迷离、恍惚、模糊的诗性感受中把握存在和永恒,敏感地体悟并彰显人生的悲剧诗意。这种叙事的风神与特性,既可以与欧洲的意识流小说传统连起来看,当然也可以视为是《红楼梦》的现代版。(2014, p. 120)

We can also say that Ge Fei created a sort of modern 'inner time', providing the characters of the novel with a particular endowment: although immersed in a poetical set of emotions made of confusion, obscurity, and mystery, they can nonetheless grasp existence and eternity, they sensitively recognize and manifest the poetic meaning of human life in its tragedy. This specific narrative attitude can both be connected with



the European tradition of stream of consciousness and be considered as a modern version of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

I wish to emphasize here that this study is still a work in progress: in this phase I would like to identify the specific markers which reveal the presence of an individual consciousness, also in those cases when, as Palmer states, «presentations of consciousness» are almost inseparable from «descriptions of action» (2004, p. 15).

In developing my study on these patterns I will focus on signifiers used to mark particular passages, such as:

1. free direct speech (untagged speech/thought);
2. length of section and presence of words characteristic of stream of consciousness and indicating thinking, believing, contemplating, wondering, feeling, or interior monologue;
3. markers of subjectivity;
4. deictics (such as expressions of time, pronouns, family appellations etc.);
5. last but not least, another source of subjectivity are the so-called intercalated texts (diary, poems etc.) and intertextual insertions.

To give a few examples of this process, I will quote excerpts from the three novels, which may help us deconstruct or decode Ge Fei's representation of fictional minds. In *Peach-Blossom Beauty*, Xiumi's *Bildung* begins with her meeting with Zhang Jiyuan - an event that coincides with the disappearance of her mad father - and, later, with her reading his diary. Her reactions to both her first love experience and her first involvement in (making) revolutionary pleas are represented through a rather traditional diegetic technique, such as in the following example, where Ge Fei adopts a somewhat conventional descriptive style:

她开始在心里用最恶毒的念头诅咒他们，而每一个念头都会触及到她内心最隐秘的黑暗。(p. 29)<sup>7</sup>

She begun to curse them with the most vicious thoughts, but each thought would touch the most obscure and hidden corner of her heart.

Just a few lines above, the girl's bewilderment, stemming from her still immature knowledge of the adult world of desire, is similarly represented through a descriptive report:

<sup>7</sup> Page numbers in parentheses refer to pages of the consulted editions of Ge Fei's novels. Translation provided is mine.

她觉得所有的人和事都有一圈铁幕恒在她眼前，她只能看到一些枝节，却无法知道它地来龙去脉。(p. 29)

She felt that everybody and everything was covered from her eyes by an iron curtain, she only could see some trivial matters, but had no clue of their cause and effect.

As Chen Zhongyi notes, in the four chapters of the novel, the narrative mode undergoes an apparent shift from the first to the third person:

第一章、第二章和第四章中的第三人称明叙与第一人称暗叙的交织主要由“父亲”，“母亲”的指代及张季元日志、无引号第一人称叙述所体现；第三章则主要依靠单纯的第三人称敷衍开来，从而“父亲”“母亲”变成了老爷和夫人，女主人公秀米变成了校长。(2012, pp. 9-10)

In the first, second and fourth chapter the interweaving between straightforward narration of the third person and the metaphorical narration of the first person is mainly embodied by the use of reference names ‘father’ and ‘mother’, as well as of the first person without quotation marks in the diary record by Zhang Jiyuan; on the contrary, in the third chapter the narration is mainly based on a pure third person narrator, thus ‘father’ and ‘mother’ become ‘master’ and ‘madam’, and the protagonist Xiumi becomes ‘the principal’.

Here, however, I do not completely agree with Chen on considering the narrator in the third chapter as a ‘pure third person’ narrator: if in the first, second and fourth chapter it is through Xiumi, as the centre of consciousness, that the reader experiences the recounted events, in the third chapter the subjective centre of narration (or point of view) clearly becomes Laohu, a servant of the family who witnesses Xiumi’s evolution into a utopian leader, and the decay of her clan in the village of Puji. A clear example of this shift in point of view is the fact that it is from his status of servant that ‘mother’ and ‘father’ become respectively ‘master’ (*laoye* 老爷) and ‘mistress’ (*furen* 夫人), and Xiumi is here addressed as *xiaozhang* 校长 (she is the principal of a revolutionary school that was built in the village). Laohu’s inner emotions and thoughts are scattered throughout the narration and expressed through simple statements, such as «果然是个婊子» (p. 98) (she is indeed a whore), when Laohu is seduced by the female servant Cuilian.

No matter who is the feeling or thinking agent, all four chapters are deeply imbued with a sense of mystery and a strongly subjective mode, but these feelings and thoughts are most often represented through a telling strategy, by making abundant use of sensory verbs like *juede* 觉得, *xiangdao* 想到, *kandao* 看到, *zhidao* 知道.

Fragments of direct conscience are presented only in a dispersed manner, through free untagged discourse, especially where connected with emotionally intense scenes involving sex and fear, as when Xiumi is deflowered by the old outlaw, Fifth Master Qingde:

天哪，他竟然……竟然说出这样的话来！老头正用力地将她的腿扳开。天哪，他竟然来扳我的腿，难道他真腰…… (pp. 48-49)

Heaven, he dares... dares say such things! The old man forcibly pulled her legs open. Heaven, he dares pulling my legs open, can it be that he really wants to...

In the 'Xiumi's chapters', the more conventional telling patterns are intertwined with some free direct speech, and the 'centre of consciousness' sometimes shifts to other characters, only to reinforce the sense of bewilderment and inconsistency of the main character's life plan, by describing her aporia from a different viewpoint, such as, for instance, the one of the young maid Xique. However, the inner thought of each character is still ascribable to a 'telling' frame that introduces or comments its direct expression:

这个中年人是谁？从何而来？金蝉是怎么回事？秀米为何看见后会落泪？她为何放着好好的官家小姐不做，要去搞什么革命？可秀米的世界，不用说，她完全进不去，甚至连边都挨不着。似乎每个人都被一些东西围困着，喜鹊觉得自己也一样。 (pp. 122-123)

Who was that middle-aged man? Where did he come from? What did that golden cicada mean? Why did Xiumi cry after seeing him? And why did she give up being a well-educated young lady, to engage in what revolution? But there was not need to say, Xiumi's world was totally inaccessible to her, she could not even get close to it. Xique felt as she was besieged by something, like everybody else.

We can infer some of the female protagonist's innermost feelings and thoughts through verbal phrases and sentences, or through samples of direct speech; the text is interspersed with such subjective verbs as *juede* 觉得 (feel), 看见 (catch sight of), *benxiang* 本想 (originally think), or phrases, sentences, and interrogative clauses expressing feelings of puzzlement and embarrassment, for instance: *buzhi ruhe shi hao* 不知如何是好 (don't know what to do); *nandaoshuo* 难道说... (is it really...?), 羞得涨红了脸，她的脑子里乱七八糟的，心头扑扑乱跳 (p. 3) (her face became red with shame, her mind was in a mess, her heart beating fast).

In the novel, Ge Fei often recurs to *chengyu* in order to metaphorically describe complex states of mind. It is a highly literary, indirect but at the

same time particularly condensed way to suggest rather than explain, to evoke rather than tell. To give just one instance, the mutual gaze of mother and daughter when confronted with the upsetting news that father has disappeared is described without explicitly revealing the content of their thoughts, but hinting at their contrasting feelings through idiomatic expressions or visual imagery:

母女俩目光相遇，就如刀锋相接，闪避不及，两双眼睛像是镜子一般，找出了各自的内心。

The glazes of mother and daughter met like two knives' edges too late to avoid each other. Two pairs of eyes were like a mirror, bringing out each one's innermost feelings. (p. 29)

As we see in these examples, Ge Fei adopts a twofold technique, freely mixing the forms of telling with those of showing; but the reader is never directly immersed in the characters' subjectivity, for whenever their inner world is revealed, it is mediated, as the author provides an explanatory frame.

In the second novel of the trilogy, Ge Fei adopts the technique of highlighting certain thoughts of the central figures in the novel (the male hero Tan Gongda, and the female protagonist, Yao Peipei) using boldface characters. Here below are some examples:

谭功达一看她的脸，立刻就吃了一惊，像是被锋利的锥子扎了一下，身体软软的，难以自持。古人说的倾国倾城虽有夸张之处也不是完全没有道理。不然何以我一看到她身体就摇摇如醉。(p. 58)

As he looked at her face Tan Gongda was suddenly amazed, as if he had been pricked by a sharp awl. He felt his body softening and unable to restrain himself. **Although the ancient saying «a beauty that can ruin a country» is somewhat exaggerated, it is not completely unfounded. Otherwise, for what reason did I feel shaky as if drunk as soon as I saw her?** (Emphasis of the Author)

此刻，他的脑子里只盘算着这两个念头：第一，姚佩佩已经不在。她不在不在不在…… (p. 343)

In that moment, only two ideas kept on revolving in his mind: first, Yao Peipei had already left. **She's not here, she's not here, she's not here...** (Emphasis of the Author)

The difference with the previous patterns is apparent, though not radical: these fragments of the mental activity of the main characters expressing

their innermost though not unconscious thoughts are presented by the author and accordingly felt by the reader as their deepest and most instinctive reactions. Ge Fei himself explained the reason for adopting this pattern (which reminds us of Faulkner's and Joyce's novels, where direct thoughts are placed in italics): he wanted to overcome what he considers to be diachronic and synchronic narration mismatches, and avoid interrupting his description of the action in order to present the characters' mind activities (Ge Fei, Wang Xiaowang 2007, p. 4).

If compared with the first novel of the trilogy, *Shanhe rumeng* deploys an increasingly inward narration, the subjectivity of the main characters prevails over the plot, disclosing larger spaces of their inner life. These flashes of thought – which actually correspond more to instantaneous emotions rather than rational and well-articulated reasoning – are often inserted within socially relevant situations, their aim being to highlight the mixing between private feelings and social actions. Bruner argues that «[e]motion is not usefully isolated from the knowledge of the situation which arouses it. Cognition is not a form of pure knowing to which emotion is added». (2009, pp. 117-118). Therefore, I would argue that Ge Fei successfully constructs the story of his characters not so much through a well-developed *fabula*, as through the labyrinth of intersubjectivity, where each actor vainly pursues his or her life plan. Tan Gongda fails both as a utopian socialist and as a lover, while Peipei is defeated by her sticking to her values and beliefs. The inability to see through this labyrinth is expressed in these lines referring to Yao Peipei:

她悲哀地意识到，每个人的内心都是一片孤立的、被海水围困的小岛，任何一个人的心底都有自己的隐秘，无法触碰。(p. 189)

She painfully realized that everybody's inner life was just an isolated small island besieged by water. Everybody in the bottom of their heart kept their untouchable, hidden secret.

In addition, the author constantly provides descriptions of mind activities, through a variety of 'telling devices', as in the quotation above; in this novel reported thought is often intertwined with direct expression of mind:

佩佩听他这么说，有点不好意思，可心里倒觉得莫名其妙地畅快。他要是当官也许就能变得聪明一点。这傻瓜被撤了职也未尝不是一件好事 (p. 190)

Peipei listening to his words felt slightly embarrassed, but her mind was crossed by an inexplicable sense of lightness. **If he is not an official, he will become smarter. This fool has been dismissed from his post, this is not necessarily a bad thing.** (Emphasis of the Author)

Finally, in the third novel, the main centre of consciousness is built upon a character, the poet Tan Duanwu, who is possibly closer (both in terms of historical context and of life experience) to the author; his fictional mind is seldom represented through the patterns of free direct thought or through a mediated narration. Instead, the mind presentation is mostly based on his gestures, life preferences, free associations as well as through dialogues and actions, in a more 'mimetical' way. Palmer's analysis of unmediated presentation of the mind adequately explains this method:

Narrators make regular use of associations in thought processes such as the chains of correspondences in which memories and sensations accompany immediate experiences. It can form an important part of the presentation of mind, not just in stream of consciousness novels, but also in more plot-oriented fictions. (Palmer 2004, p. 103)

In the third chapter, as it happened in the previous novels, the centre of consciousness shifts to the other main character, Duanwu's wife Jiayu: by means of this alternated perspective, the author manages to show two different subjectivities, successfully adopting what has been defined the 'reflector mode', which interplays with the reader's activity of inference based on his or her own experience.<sup>8</sup>

In some cases Ge Fei resorts to unusual signifiers or 'mirrors' of mind activities, which belong to everyday experience and might reflect the character's subjectivity in an objectified way; I'm referring here, for example, to sensorial activities, such as smell and visual perceptions, easily ascribable to the reflector character, but plainly reported as an objective landscape:

刚过了五月，天气就变得酷热难当了。出租车内有一股陈旧的烟味。司机是个高邮人，不怎么爱说话。道路两边的工厂、店铺和企业，像是正在疯狂分裂的不祥的细胞，一座挨着一座，掠窗而过，将梅城和鹤浦完全焊接在一起。金西纸业。梅隆化工。华润焦化。五洲电子。维多利亚房产。江南皮革。青龙矿山机械。美驰水泥。鹤浦药业。梅赛德斯特许经营店…… (p. 19)

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**8** The concept of 'reflector character' as opposed to the 'teller character' was first theorised by Stanzel (1984), in order to distinguish a narrative mode where the story is told directly by one of the characters (teller) from the one where the information is indirectly mediated through his/her conscience (reflector). In Fludernik's reworked version of this theory, these mediated instances are integrated with the possibility of a 'neutral' narrative, and reinforced with the role played by the reader in interpreting the perspective from which things are narrated: «Experiencing, just like telling, viewing or thinking are holistic schemata known from real life and therefore can be used as building stones for the mimetic evocation of a fictional world. People experience the world in their capacity as agents, tellers and auditors and also as observers, viewers and experiencers» (Fludernik 2002, p. 20).

Shortly after the end of May the weather become unbearably hot. The taxi was pervaded by an outmoded tobacco smell. The driver came from Gaoyou, he was not particularly talkative. Factories, shops, and companies on both sides of the road looked like unauspicious cells insanely splitting up, one next to one, they passed over sweeping the window, tying together the two cities of Meicheng and Hepu. Jinxi Paper Industry. Meilong Chemical Engineering. Huarun Coking. Five Continental Electronics. Victoria Housing. Jiangnan Leather. Qinglong Mining Machinery. Meichi Cement. Hepu Pharmaceuticals. Authorised Mercedes Dealer.

A mimetical reflection of mental activity (a sort of induced stream of consciousness) is the sequence of short messages – some of which are quite trivial – received by the protagonist and read together simultaneously with the notice from the hospital where his former wife has just committed suicide:

他在排队等候出租车时，手机上一下出现了好几条短信。

欢迎您来到成都！中国移动成都分公司祝您一切顺利！

若若已去上学，诸事安好。勿念。随时联络。珠。

关注民生，共创和谐。河畔生态人文景观，凸显价值洼地。南郊水墨庭院震撼面世！独栋仅售 200 万，新贵首选。送超大山地庭院果林，露台车位。

速来成都普济医院或致电黄振胜医师。(p. 356)

While he was waiting for the taxi suddenly a long list of short messages appeared on his mobile phone.

Welcome to Chengdu! Chengdu China Mobile wishes you everything fine!

Ruoruo already went to school, everything is OK. Don't worry. Call me anytime.

Care for people's livelihood. Create harmony together. Riverside Ecological Human Landscape, we give prominence to the value of depression. Shuimo Courtyard in the south outskirts, a shocking debut! Only 200 thousand for a single building apartment, priority to newcomers. We offer a huge courtyard with fruit trees on a hillside.

Please come quickly to the Puji Hospital of Chengdu or call doctor Huang Zhensheng.

Mingling life-important content with ordinary information messages and commercials allows the author to reveal the character's mind without any filter between his inner life and readers, apart from the short introductory sentence. The tragic meaning of the event he is going to learn of is thus paradoxically highlighted by the triviality of other, minor facts passing only superficially through his mind.

A striking example of the subjectivity entrusted to descriptions, or merely suggested by behaviours, appears at the end of the novel, when Tan's reactions to the suicide of his wife are revealed only through hints in his talk with the doctor,

端午一脸麻木地听他说完，中间没有插一句嘴。似乎黄大夫正在谈论的，是一个与自己毫无关系的陌生人。最后，端午感谢黄大夫在最近一个月中，对妻子给予的救治和照顾。至于说追究院方的责任，他从未有过这样的念头。何况，他也从来不为院方在处理这件事的过程中存在任何过错。(p. 358)

Duanwu listened to his words with a numb expression on his face, without interrupting, as if doctor Huang were talking about a complete stranger, someone who had nothing to do with himself. Finally, Duanwu thanked him for taking care of his wife during the last month. Concerning the possibility of suing the hospital for its responsibility, he never had this intention. Moreover, he had never thought that the hospital had committed any mistake in dealing with this thing.

or through ordinary gestures: 他戒了烟 (p. 371) (He gave up smoking).

In this novel we find that more emotionally resonant forms of mind representation are conveyed – in perfect continuity with the classical Chinese novel – by poems. Moreover, a parallel, but opposite, device is employed in order to enlighten intersubjectivity, that is, the adoption of subtexts, the so-called «inserted genres» (Michail Bakhtin), such as letters, short messages and long QQ<sup>9</sup> dialogues; in the latter case, the verbal interaction between Duanwu and his wife is particularly meaningful, as an instrument of the author's to provide the reader with information about the main characters' mental activities, thus creating a flow of communication rarely possible within their direct conversations. It is through this supposedly instantaneous and superficial channel that Jiayu informs Duanwu that she has cancer.

Regarding the use of poetry as a powerful revealer of fictional minds, Ming Dong Gu (p. 99) highlights the presence of a «lyrical preconscious» in the writing of Chinese traditional fiction as a «desire to compete and

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9 An instant messaging software service developed in China and extremely popular in the previous years, it has now been replaced by newer technologies, such as Weixin (We Chat). Compared to traditional letters and even to emails, this interaction system involves a faster, almost immediate time of reaction, and different ways of expressing thoughts and feelings.



emulate with lyric poetry». He reminds us that: «the practice of mixing fictional prose with lyric poetry is so prevalent that even storytelling meant to cater to the illiterate could not forgo it» (p. 99). In his opinion, «the lyric in Chinese prose fiction has remained a ‘dark continent’, a metaphor Freud employed to describe the unknown mechanism of the mind» (p. 100). This practice went on until the modern era, and continues to inspire contemporary novelists, like Ge Fei. Not only is the protagonist himself a poet, but the whole novel is interspersed with more or less overt quotations from ancient or contemporary poets, both Chinese and Western, as well as by poems composed by the main character himself. In particular, there are direct references to such contemporary Chinese poets as Haizi<sup>10</sup> and Zhai Yongming<sup>11</sup> and to leading Western poets such as T.S. Eliot, R. M. Rilke, and Pablo Neruda, to mention only a few. Each of the crucial events that configure (and subvert) the protagonist’s (as well as a few other characters’) life plan is marked by poems evoking the complex processes and the states of his mind, without necessarily revealing them.

The most striking example is given by the six verses written by Duanwu to Jiayu after their first night of love: the poem is merely mentioned in the first chapter and then quoted again only in chapter 2; the importance of this short text is pivotal in evoking the complicated intersubjectivity between Duanwu and Jiayu, and strongly determines their respective life plans. For them the poetic language is really a conveyor of otherwise unexpressed meanings and emotions; the few words spoken here are not only a hint of the conflictive beginning of their love story, but eventually turn out to be a tragic prophecy of its ending.

诗中“祭台”一次，还是让她明确意识到自己作为“牺牲者”的性质，意识到自己遭到抛弃的残酷事实。(p. 4)

the word ‘sacrificial altar’ in the poem made her clearly feel herself as the ‘victim’, she realised she had experienced the brutal reality of being abandoned.

The six lines of the poem are revealed only later in the novel, in the chapter devoted to the narration of Jiayu’s and Duanwu’s story from her perspective:

十月中旬，在鹤浦 / 夜晚过去了一半 / 广场的飓风，刮向青萍之末的祭台 / 在花萼闭合的最深处 / 当浮云织出肮脏的褻衣 / 唯有月光在场。(p. 140)

10 海子 (1964-1989) Representative of the post-romantic trend of Chinese poetry he committed suicide in 1989, and he is presently much revered and discussed in literary circles for his tragic poetics and life-attitude.

11 翟永明 Born in Chengdu (1955), she is one of the most important poets in contemporary China.

Mid-October, in Hepu /half of the night has passed away/the typhoon of the square blows towards the sacrificial altar on the top of green duck-weeds/in the depths of the closed flower calix/ only the moonlight is on the spot/while floating clouds weave filthy underwear.

Again, as for Xiumi in *Renmian taohua* and Peipei in *Shanhe rumeng*, these lines allude to the irremediable inaccessibility of the character's inner world, like a closed flower calix, and to the fundamental lack of mutual understanding in personal relationships.

The last time this poem is mentioned is at the very end of the novel, when Duanwu finds the old sheet of paper among Jiayu's belongings.

纸质发脆,字迹漫漶。时隔多年,星移物换之中,陌生的诗句,就像是命运故意留下的谜面。(p. 373)

The paper had become crisp and the words blurred. After so many years, things had changed, and those unfamiliar lines seemed to be a hint to solve the riddle deliberately left behind by destiny.

Jiayu's suicide is somewhat foreshadowed by her attachment to the Chinese 'suicide icon', the poet Haizi - his work is first mentioned in the second of the four chapters (which is mainly presented through her fictional mind, p. 133), and then his collection of poems is found among Jiayu's personal belongings after her death (p. 359). As if death and the group of mental reactions to it were impossible to describe by other means, another meaningful example of poetic intertextuality can be found on the same page of the novel, when Duanwu's repressed suffering for the sudden suicide of his former wife is symbolically revealed through the lines of a Tang poem comparing death to a trip:

黄泉无旅店。  
今夜宿谁家? (p. 359)

There are no inns at the Yellow Springs.  
Where, then, this evening shall I lodge?

The deep significance of this poem, 'Lin xing shi' 临行诗 (Before the execution),<sup>12</sup> has to be connected with the occasion on which it was written, as it is the last testimony of the poet Jiang Wei 江为 (fl. 10th century) before he was killed for criticising Wang Yanzheng, the king of the state

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<sup>12</sup> The poem is collected in the *juan* (chapter) n. 741-749 of the *Quan Tangshi* 全唐诗 (Complete Collection of Tang Poetry).

of Yin. The 'Yellow Springs' is a traditional symbol for the underworld. Duanwu recalls this poem when emerging from the dull scenery of the funeral parlour where the body of Jiayu has just been burnt (p. 359). In a commentary on this poem, Li Jialin 李加林 states (2012, p. 51):

全诗未有铿锵之语，也无引典作据。四句二十字短诗，不着一个“悲”字，然大痛大悲尽含其中 [...]。加之此诗有一个特殊的前提，系诗人临刑前所发，字字句句也就显得格外有分量，读之令人怆然涕下，感叹不已。

There are no clanging words in the whole poem nor there are any quotations from the classics. Among the twenty words of the brief four-lines poem we can't find a single word expressing sadness, but the immense suffering is completely contained inside them. In addition, there is a special premise in this poem: the poet seems to measure every single word, and this makes the reader sigh and cry with sorrow.

The same effect is produced in the novel's readers by the dry and bleary gaze by means of which Ge Fei makes them see his fictional minds' inner states of sorrow and bewilderment: only through outer devices, such as visual perceptions, objects, poetry, without explicitly recurring to a conventional lexicon of emotions.

For Ge Fei, intertextuality, and poetry most of all,<sup>13</sup> is a powerful conveyor of emotions and a valid pattern for representing the human mind, as well. In the tragic ending of the novel, we cannot directly read the protagonist's mind nor can we be sure of what his real feelings are; however, the author gives readers certain hints through material details, such as the character's gestures and physical perceptions; or, as in this case, mental activity is reflected by the lines of a poem which flashes in his mind.

The coexistence of such traditional subjectivity and implicitness, along with modern devices such as stream of consciousness, as well as the description of actions and objects, or the use of poetry to represent emotions and mental activities - which is certainly not uncommon in traditional fiction - is the path chosen by Ge Fei to narrate the human mind in its fragmentary complexity and its constant interaction with outer reality. Achieving both continuity and discontinuity with Chinese tradition, he manages to create a completely new and independent narrative style.

13 «Poetry affects us more than other arts because, not in spite, of its distance from concrete imagery and its evocation of complex networks of verbal and conceptual association» (Richardson 2010, p. 40).

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