

Dubious Narrative of History Voices in Chinese New History Novel

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Abstract: *This essay uses Li Er's Coloratura, a representative literary work of Chinese New History Novel, as a case study to investigate how voices are used in history novels to deconstructs the narrative of history as a whole. In depicting the influence of personal memories and the discourse in the specific time period on narratives of historical events, Coloratura uses different, sometimes mutually contradictory voices, in the context of one historical event, to demonstrate how unreliable memory can be and how indeterminable historical narration is.*

Keywords: *Narrative of History, Voice, Chinese New History Novel, Coloratura*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1980s, many historical novels that diverted away from traditional historical novels were published in mainland China. They were categorised as New Historical Novel, which ultimately developed into a literary genre that still thrives in the 21st century (Chen, 2010: 43). The New Historical Novel genre started as a movement that drifted away from revolutionary historical novels that dominated the Seventeen Years period (1949-1966) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), providing independent voices and perspectives to the narratives of history within a specific period. This essay uses *Coloratura* (Huaqiang 花腔) written by Li Er 李洱, a representative literary work of Chinese New History Novel, as a case study to investigate how voices are used in New Historical Novels to deconstructs the narrative of history as a whole.

Li Er, born in Henan Province in 1966, is a famous novelist and short story writer in China. He is credited with writing five short-story collections, two novels and around 50 novellas (Li, 2011: 141). Even though very few non-Chinese people have heard of Li Er, he is highly revered in Chinese literary circles and has a thriving and intense fan base of intellectual readers. His debut novel *Coloratura*, published by People's Literature Publishing House (Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe 人民文学出版社) in 2002, took a decade to complete. Short-listed to receive the sixth Annual Mao Dun Literary Prize (茅盾文学奖) in 2002, it is often cited as one of the most original novels in contemporary Chinese literature (Jing, 2003: 43). In 2010, the novel was named as one of the ten best novels in China in the past thirty years (1979-2009) (Li, 2011: 141).

Surrounding the death of Ge Ren (a fictional famous liberal writer and Communism researcher) during the time of the second Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945), *Coloratura* consists of two parts, which are denoted by symbols @ and &, respectively. In the novel, Ge Ren's death has a defined timeline and conclusion in official history - he died when fighting the Japanese army and has become a national hero in 1942. However, in 1943, the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party are informed that Ge Ren did not die fighting the Japanese army and is actually hiding in a remote village. Due to different reasons, Bai Shengtao, Zhao Yaoqing and Fan Jihuai are all assigned to transport Ge Ren from his current hideout village and get involved in his death. The main body of the novel can be found under the symbol @, and these parts consist of interviews with these three narrators from different time periods - Bai Shengtao in 1943, Zhao Yaoqing in 1970 and Fan Jihuai in 2000. They give mutually contradictory stories and perspectives regarding Ge Ren's death, complicating this event, which already has an official version of its timeline and conclusion. The parts marked '&' consist of faux-historical documents and fabricated archival materials such as passages taken from Zhu Xudong's *Chatting with Tian Han* and Antony Swift's *Beauty in Chaotic Era*. In these resources, different narrators give their own perspectives on particular historical events, supporting or challenging the information provided by the three interviewees. Regarding one historical event - the death of Ge Ren - different stories are presented, constructing different and even mutually contradictory narratives.

Prior research into the novel has concentrated predominantly on the characterisation of Ge Ren and how the destiny of intellectuals throughout the revolution is portrayed. Huang Ping likens Ge Ren to Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 (an early Chinese Communist Party leader from 1899-1935) in 'The End of Avant-garde Literature and the Last Man' (Huang, 2015). The existence of different narrators in the novel has been noticed by several critics (Jing, 2003; Song, 2008; Wang, 2014). Nonetheless, there is yet to be research done that analyses the novel's voices systematically. For example, Zhou Mingquan explores different narrators in the novel and the author's use of their tones. However, Zhou's essay primarily concentrates on investigating the extent to which the novel revives narrative language through the application of different tones (Zhou, 2017).

As complementing to the existing research, this essay aims to investigate *Coloratura's* unusual position within the New Historical Novel genre, which, rather than subverting the historical narrative through private and personal perspectives and experiences that construct a pluralistic history such as *Red Sorghum* (Hong gaoliang 红高粱) by Mo Yan 莫言 (1986), *Home of the Poppy* (Yingsu zhijia 罌粟之家) by Su Tong 苏童 (1988) and *Mooring at Qinhuai by Night* (Yebo qinhuai 夜泊秦淮) by Ye Zhaoyan 叶兆言 (1990), deconstructs the narrative of history as a whole. This essay argues that Li Er uses different, sometimes mutually contradictory voices, in the context of one historical

event, to demonstrate how unreliable memory can be and how indeterminate historical narration is. In depicting the influence of personal memories and the discourse in the specific time period on narratives of historical events, Coloratura generates a new insight into the historical narrative which extends the New Historical Novel genre in China.

2. NEW HISTORICAL NOVEL

When viewed within a wider historical context, an apparent and close relationship can be observed between the New Historical Novel and the transformations of the dominant literary paradigms that were occurring in the mid-1980s and are still considered vital events in the history of Chinese literature. Zhao Yiheng believes that the year 1985 signifies a turning point in the evolution of modern Chinese literature (Zhao, 1993: 9). Mainland Chinese literature in the mid-1980s witnessed the dominant literary paradigm that had developed in the Seventeen Years period and the Cultural Revolution being challenged by an alternative cultural and literary movement that manifested through avant-garde writing. The fact that Chinese avant-garde writers were teenagers during the times of various political movements (including the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Cultural Revolution) is no accident. Literary critic Chen Xiaoming asserts that:

To this generation, the colossal historical phantom of the Cultural Revolution hides in the shadows of their memories, which fills their minds with unfathomable illusions: continuous verbal games, inexplicable desires of expression, unfair violent actions, random escapes without return and indifferent deaths. Postmodernism serves as a sort of historical narrative in the face of reality and cultural memory (Chen, 2004: 31).

These avant-garde writers were strongly opposed to the official aesthetic of the sublime, in which people are portrayed to strongly desire historical subjectivity and the development of themselves in accordance with supposed revolutionary heroes (Wang, 1997: 230). According to Herbert Marcuse, de-sublimation in literature is an invalidation of dominant norms, values and needs, occurring through one's individual perception, namely through their emotions, thoughts and judgments (Marcuse, 1978: 7-8). In this sense, avant-garde writing has long been considered nothing more than extreme indulgence in subjective vagaries, a rebellion against history and the People, a deterioration into the irrational and the corporeal, and ultimately a ruination of communication and language (Yang, 2002: 43-44).

Like other concepts such as New Wave, Misty Poetry and New Realism, critics have described New Historical Novel as including new elements that are unable to be categorised according to the features of prior revolutionary historical novels such as *Defend Yan'an* (Baowei Yan'an 保卫延安) by Du Pengcheng 杜鹏程 (1954) and *Composition of the Red Flag* (Hongqi pu 红旗

谱) by Liang Bin 梁斌 (1957). Following the principles established by Mao Zedong's 毛泽东 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" (Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shangde jianghua 在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话) in 1942, those revolutionary historical novels that dominated between 1949 and the 1970s primarily narrated several selected historical events to canonise the revolutionary struggle led by the Communist Party and rationalise contemporary reality (Huang, 1996: 2). It is widely believed that Hong Zhigang is the first academic to provide a definition of the New Historical Novel (Chen, 2010: 43):

Many novels have been published since 1985 that are part of the New Era literary arena, to name a few: Mo Yan's 莫言 Red Sorghum series (Hong gaoliang 红高粱), Zhou Meisen's 周梅森 War and Human (Zhanzheng yu ren 战争与人), Ye Zhaoyan's 叶兆言 Mooring at Qinhuai by Night series (Yebo qinhuai 夜泊秦淮) [...] Such novels clearly go far beyond the paradigm of traditional revolutionary historical novels, containing different aesthetics and value, which somehow indicates that the evolution of the historical novel is going in new directions. I therefore call these novels New Historical Novel (Hong, 1991: 22).

This concept is also defined by Chen Sihe as a novel describing personal experience and events that occurred prior to the existence of the Republic of China instead of important revolutionary events (Chen, 1992). In accordance with the definition given by Chen Sihe, Wang Yuechuan outlines the key features of New Historical Novel in more depth, namely redeveloping history from personal perspectives and focusing on independent emotions and desires (Wang, 1999). Red Sorghum is a representative New Historical Novel. In this novel, Mo Yan reconstructs history by creating a character, 'my granddad', with conflicting attributes - 'a laborer, a murderer, an adulterer, a bandit and a hero of the anti-Japanese resistance' (Chan, 2000: 495). This character is a real human being with personal needs and desires, rather than a stylised and flat hero that can be commonly found in revolutionary historical novels. 'In Red Sorghum,' David Wang claims, 'Mo Yan sees his family members on a larger-than-life scale, judging them not by what they do but by how they carry out their deeds' (Wang, 1993: 124). By offering access to margins of war and history, the focus of the novel shifts towards personal experience and individual and family history, thus transforming what was a national tale into a family fable.

Coloratura, broadly considered to be part of this genre, complicates the key characteristics of the New Historical Novel genre. Instead of building a new historical narrative using personal experiences, Coloratura applies a variety of voices to show how unreliable memory can be and how intangible the historical narration is. Three interviewees intend to please the interviewers and beautify their behaviour in certain historical events, leading their narratives to be full of exaggeration, concealment and distortion. The editor in the novel tries to reconstruct a flawless and authentic picture of the past, however, his narrative is grounded on indeterminable memories which eventually enhances

the ambiguity of historical narrative. Furthermore, the language used by the narrators, full of idioms and proverbs, political jargon and popular discourse, is pervasively permeated by the features of the era in which the narrators live. The historical narrative is, therefore, enveloped by the voice of authority seizing the power of determining the discourse of a certain era. This enables Li Er to deconstruct historical narrative itself, putting the New Historical Novel in a new light.

3. VOICES OF NARRATORS

Polyphony, according to Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, is Fyodor Dostoevsky's key innovation (Bakhtin, 1984: 1). Bakhtin contends that Dostoevsky does not provide a single vision or an authoritative voice in his novels. Instead, his novels are full of conflicting views and fully valid voices. His main characters are subjects of their own voices rather than objects of authorial discourse:

All of his works treat the character as highly, ideologically authoritative and independent instead of as an object of the writer's artistic vision; the strong and direct power of the characters' words ruins the novel's monologic plane and inevitably generates an unmediated response, like the character is a completely valid carrier of their own words (Ibid, 5-6).

Polyphony features prominently in *Coloratura*. The whole novel consists of various interviews, memoirs and articles. There is a narrator behind each material, who speaks their own words, counterbalancing the monologic authorial voice. Like William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Coloratura* is also an example of the use of multiple narrators (Ross, 1979). Several characters in this novel, who function both as witnesses and actors, illustrate the storyline from different perspectives, and thus readers can decide whether the narrators are reliable or not for each part of the story (Lonoff, 1982: 144).

Having equal strength in its literary achievement and editorial tour de force, *Coloratura* consists of faux-historical documents, made-up archival materials and pseudo-interviews from the time of the Communist Revolution, the Cultural Revolution and present day. When the interviews under the symbol @ commence, the author always describes details such as the time, the location, the interviewer, the interviewee and the recorder. This adds to both the normalcy and formality of the interviews, giving readers the sense that the interviews are highly objective and representative of the reality. The three interviewees give different stories and perspectives regarding the death of Ge Ren, which presents this event as confusing, despite it having a defined timeline and conclusion in official history, such as that Ge Ren died when fighting the Japanese army and has become a national hero in 1942.

Bai Shengtao is the initial narrator who talks about the death of Ge Ren on his way to Hong Kong, following his arrest by Fan Jihuai. According to Bai

Shengtao, when the Chinese Communist Party is informed in 1943 that Ge Ren did not die fighting the Japanese army and is actually hiding in a remote village, he is assigned by Tian Han (Ge Ren's friend and an influential Communist Party leader) to transport Ge Ren from his current hideout village to Yan'an, the centre for the Chinese Communist Party at that time. However, on route to the village, he is told by Tian Han's subordinate Dou Sizhong that he is actually on a secret mission to kill Ge Ren as a means of retaining his national hero status. He recalls Dou saying:

Comrade Bai, we are all very kind people, yet we must kill him in order to preserve his reputation as a revolutionary [...] Please do not regard him as an individual but a kind of people [...] If we still love them as deeply as usual, we have no choice but to remove them from the scene. It is the best way (Li, 2017: 78).

Dou Sizhong then tells Bai that he does not need to kill Ge Ren himself since he is a doctor and as well as Ge Ren's good friend. He is, thus, merely tasked with sending this information to Zhao Yaoqing. In the interview, Bai expresses his worry and terror of being killed himself if he refuses to partake in the task he is assigned by Dou Sizhong: 'I knew that if I said no, my brain would be blown out. General, until that moment, I found out that the feeling of terror did not start from the head but from the feet. General, I felt that my feet turned ice-cold at first' (Ibid, 79).

Unlike Bai Shengtao, the second narrator Zhao Yaoqing and the third narrator Fan Jihuai are assigned by the Nationalist Party to force Ge Ren to capitulate for 'honoring the Nationalist Party and humiliating the Communist Party' (Ibid, 219). According to Zhao Yaoqing, he possesses a dual identity in 1943 as a Communist Party intelligence agent and a major general of the Bureau of Investigation and Statistics of the Military Council of the Nationalist Party. Thus, he claims in his interview that he began to think about how he could save Ge Ren's life after his assignment by Fan Jihuai. He states that, to facilitate Ge Ren's escape, he tricked and killed his cooperator Yang Fengliang whilst caring for Ge Ren at the same time to 'help him get better following his disease and toil' (Ibid, 230). Fan Jihuai also claims that he was forced by Dai Li to disturb and arrest Ge Ren. 'We got along quite well and built a strong friendship' (Ibid, 316), he says in the interview, 'When being assigned the task of forcing him to surrender by Dai Li, I kept thinking about how to save him' (Ibid, 398).

These three narratives in the story take the form of dialogues as opposed to monologues. They consist of various interviews including input from both the interviewers and interviewees. Although the texts do not take the interviewers' direct words, the three narrators (the interviewees) continually attempt to please the interviewers. They thus constantly alter their stories in accordance with the interviewers' reaction. In the first interview, Bai Shengtao is questioned by interviewer Fan Jihuai. To please Fan Jihuai and in order to save himself, he praises Fan Jihuai at every possible opportunity and agrees with

everything Fan says, for example: 'Yes, general, you are so wise that nobody can trick you' (Ibid, 129), 'Yes, yes, general, you are correct, this is what I actually mean' (Ibid, 139). One historical event is comprised of various elements and details, however, narrators usually state their memories and experiences about it from specific perspectives, selecting those elements and details which they think are relevant and important. In Bai Shengtao's case, his narrative is not only controlled by himself but also controlled by Fan Jihuai. For instance, Bai Shengtao mentions Chuantian when narrating his experiences of living in the Soviet Union with Ge Ren. Even though he is not the focus of his narrative, when Fan Jihuai asks him to tell more about Chuantian, he says: 'What? You are very interested in Chuantian? Well, I will provide more information about him' (Ibid, 99), and then transfers his narrative from his experiences in the Soviet Union to Chuantian. In other words, although the record of the first interview does not include Fan Jihuai's words, he still presents his voice through showing interest in information about one historical event.

The second interview focuses on the interviewee Zhao Yaoqing, who is a criminal held in a labour camp, with the interviewers being investigators. During the Cultural Revolution, speech control was highly strict. It was quite common for people being criticised by others, being sent to labour camps or jails, or even being executed if they expressed politically incorrect views. Also, throughout the Cultural Revolution, it was very precious that someone was allowed the opportunity of being interviewed by an investigation team, especially one that possessed the power to decide about a criminal's future. Therefore, in the interview, Zhao Yaoqing continually seeks clarification for his answers and attempts to please the interviewers, asking 'May I say this in this way?' (Ibid, 160) and 'Can I talk about this' (Ibid, 206)? For Fan Jihuai, the situation is different. During the interview, he is a well-known and respected academic and the interviewer is a beautiful young woman. To demonstrate his charisma and catch the interviewer's attention, he brags about his past and his previous actions. When the interviewer asks specifically about an event, he talks about it in-depth and makes sure to describe his involvement. When asked to justify his actions in a particular event, he continually finds excuses to beautify himself. However, the parts under the section '&' contain materials to challenge the details given by him, allowing readers to identify the make-up parts in Fan's narrative. The dialogical relationship between the interviewees and the interviewers shows that the narratives provided by the three interviewees are controlled not only by their selfish motives and memories but also by the attitude of the interviewers, which both undermine the reliability of the narratives.

The parts marked '&' consist of faux-historical documents and fabricated archival resources including passages taken from Huang Yan's *Dream Back to One Hundred Years Ago*, Zhu Xudong's *Chatting with Tian Han*, Antony Swift's *Beauty in Chaotic Era*, Ferran's *Endless Conversation*, Yu Chengze's *Hundred*

Schools of Medicine, Bill and Alice's Ceremony in the East, Liu Qinrong's Tea People and Xu Yushen's Dream on Qiantang. In these resources, different narrators give their own perspective on particular historical events. In contrast to the three interviewees described above, the narrators in these documents do not talk particularly about the demise of Ge Ren. Their statements are merely used to support or challenge the narratives given by the interviewees regarding specific people, places and historical events, giving different perceptions and thus challenging the official accounts. Some of the narrators are closely acquainted with Ge Ren, the three interviewees, and/or other key players in the given events. Others, however, are not affiliated with Ge Ren, nor are they known to the three interviewees. They are mere strangers and only have small roles in the demise of Ge Ren, yet their words somehow offer diverse details in the narrative surrounding his death.

On the task of getting Ge Ren out of the small village, Bai Shengtao's narrative is supported by passages taken from Zhu Xudong's *Chatting with Tian Han*. These excerpts add Tian Han's voice to Ge Ren's story. Bai Shengtao's account, as well as other documents supplied by the editor, show that nearly everybody believes that Ge Ren encountering the Japanese army is a tragic accident. However, in *Chatting with Tian Han*, Tian Han claims that Ge Ren was deliberately arranged to encounter the Japanese by him (Ibid, 23). Due to the dire conditions of the Yan'an Rectification Movement (1942-1944) and Ge Ren's intricate past, as well as inappropriate comments, Tian Han believes that the Chinese Communist Party would consider him a Trotskyite at some point. 'In order to protect him' (Ibid, 25), Tian Han claims in the book, 'I assigned Ge Ren that task' (Ibid, 25), a task which would lead him to encounter the Japanese army and thus render him a national hero. Tian Han's words bring about a different perspective on Ge Ren's death, in which it is not a tragic accident or a difficult decision that the involved parties are forced to make, but the unavoidable fate of a liberal writer throughout the revolutionary period. The narratives given by the three interviewees under the '@' heading, alongside various historical documents and archival materials provided in the '&' section are thus now interrelated in the dialogue.

The book's editor is also a key narrator. It says in the preface, that the editor is Ge Ren's only relative who is still alive. Instead of providing his own information about Ge Ren, the editor primarily focuses on compiling documents relating to him, such as the data from the interviews, newspapers, academic journals and memoirs of third parties. He claims that his aim is to reveal the truth behind Ge Ren's demise. In this book, to achieve this goal, the editor carefully chooses the historical documents and materials, from which he cites passages that he believes to be useful. These passages are found under the heading '&' and are positioned after every interview to allow the reader to verify or falsify the details given, supporting or challenging the information provided by the three interviewees. Therefore, the book's editor plays the role

of a detective, attempting to collaborate and clarify the facts surrounding the demise of Ge Ren. The whole novel serves as a survey manual and an investigation guide for the detective.

The editor expresses his own voice in the book through the collaboration of interviewees' narratives, historical documents and archival materials. His voice also forms a dialogical relationship with other stories. He collates relevant interviews, reports, memoirs, articles and fuses them together, allowing these materials to dialogue with each other and provide different perspectives on one historical event. Meanwhile, he also uses various other materials to comment on or challenge the details given by the three interviewees, attempting to identify the truth in a sea of contradictory information. The editor's voice gives a broader perspective on Ge Ren's death by revealing different versions of the story of his demise, both diversifying and complicating the historical narrative.

4. AUDIBLE VOICES

Robert Frost asserts that despite being silent, some texts can be characteristic of idiomatic speech, giving readers the sense that they can hear the words:

Texts are all essentially silent, but a majority of readers feel that texts can give the sense of sound, an illusion that we can really hear the words [...] the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination (Frost, 1995: 713).

Some audible elements in spoken language such as pitch, speed, accent and rhythm can carry meaning. In some texts, these elements can be expressed by particular techniques. As a result, these texts can provide readers the sense of sound and thus have audible voices (Elbow, 2007:176). The audible voice is prominent in *Coloratura*, where the narratives of the three interviewees serve as a record of their speech instead of an inaudible prose that cannot be connected to actual speech. In this novel, the three narratives are written colloquially using slang such as Zhao Yaoqing's 'What a fucking shameless bitch' (Li, 2017: 162), buzzwords such as Fan Jihuai's 'Our main task is anti-leftist' (Ibid, 353), dialects such as Bai Shengtao's 'As I say', which is used in the Henan (a province in northwest China) dialect (Ibid, 3). Audible voices from the past can provide interesting insights into history, in which individuals are actually quoted, revealing the atmosphere of the time and the characters and assumptions of the people involved, as well as how they thought and how they expressed themselves (Goodall, 2003: 43). Thus, for some historians, audible voices can diversify the narrative of history and make historical narratives closer to the so-called historical truth (Ibid, 43). However, all the nuances and communicative characteristics in *Coloratura*, which are present in speech and not in writing, deconstruct the objectivity of historical narratives and refer to

their textual and fictional features. In *Coloratura*, the narratives of the interviewees are largely interrelated with their everyday lives and living conditions at a certain time. The discourse in a different era significantly affects the narrative of the three storytellers, with the editor using the distinct characteristics of a certain period of time.

Bai Shengtao's interview is conducted in 1943 after his arrest for being a Trotskyite in the Rectification Movement of 1942 in Yan'an. In his words, the readers are easily able to identify the features of the Rectification Movement. When discussing why he was arrested for being a Trotskyite, he indicates recognition of his mistakes and uses political terms relevant to the Rectification Movement to self-criticise. He asserts that:

I am fully aware of my mistakes. Forgetting everything else for a moment, I can focus on the mistake I made in the collecting dung movement. I claimed that it wasn't necessary to deliberately leave dung for the leaders to collect, since donkeys excrete it. It was a terrible mistake [...] As an intellectual, I failed to think about the donkeys' side. My mistake is on par with the Stereotyped Party, Sectarianism, and Subjectivism (Li, 2017: 21-22).

Stereotyped Party, Sectarianism, and Subjectivism were key terminologies used to describe rectification targets during the Rectification Movement. Bai uses these political terms to carry out a ridiculous self-criticism acknowledging his failure to think from a donkey's perspective. These terminologies are not randomly selected, but rather are key factors underpinning the basic ridiculous logic at a certain historical time.

Zhao Yaoqing's interview is set during the Cultural Revolution. He refers to discourses from that period, including Mao's speeches and lyrics from red songs that support the Cultural Revolution and praise Mao for decorating and rationalising things, concepts and behaviours that were forbidden during that time. When retelling his story regarding how Ge Ren taught him English as a child, he instantly added that he learned English to 'be able to criticize capitalism and reveal its ugly truths' (Ibid, 146). Of course, criticising capitalism is neither the reason for why Ge Ren taught him nor why he learned English, but this was a safe and popular excuse given during the Cultural Revolution. Without this discourse, his narrative and Ge Ren's behaviour in his story would be criticised. This is also true of his description of Bai Yin, Ge Ren's wife, whom he credits as being 'the most beautiful woman he had ever seen' (Ibid, 151). However, he instantly replaces the word 'beautiful' with 'swellish': 'No, that's wrong. She is swellish. Not beautiful. Beautiful things corrupt and degenerate people, but swellish things improve one's firmness and bravery' (Ibid, 151).

Fan Jihuai's interview takes place in the year 2000. Even though the political environment at the time is far more liberal than in the previous interviews, he still uses many examples of political discourse in his story. For instance, when

discussing his experience in the Soviet district, he speaks of the danger associated with leftist ideology, stating that: 'Anti-leftist and anti-rightist are both our tasks, but our main task is anti-leftist' (Ibid, 353). This is a significant assertion made by Deng Xiaoping to correct the errors made throughout the Cultural Revolution, then becoming one of the most representative and important political discourses after the Cultural Revolution. By using these political slogans, Fan shows his status as a famous scholar and a member of the National Committee of Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. Also, as a former lieutenant general of the Bureau of Investigation and Statistics of the Military Council of the Nationalist Party and a returned overseas Chinese person, Fan represents his political position through the use of popular political discourse.

5. UNRELIABILITY OF PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Traditionally, there are three basic historical views, that is, the providential, the cyclical and the progressive. For the cyclical view of history, history shifts in circles, cycling successively and endlessly; in contrast, the providential and progressive views of history believe that history is a linear process moving from a beginning to an end (Turner, 1973: 198). Although these three views have some different features, they all share a basic viewpoint to regard history as a totality or whole, and thus it is possible to construct the so-called universal history (Stern, 1973). Postmodernists oppose the conventional view of history both ontologically and epistemologically. Postmodernism ontologically believes history to be fragmented, pluralistic and discontinuous, while epistemological postmodernism tries to challenge the objectivity of history, referring to textual, fictional and ideological features (Jenkins, 1999: 5). Conventional revolutionary historical narratives reflect the traditional discussion of history, believing history to be something whole and that it constructs a so-called grand narrative. The New Historical Novel subverts this historical narrative by offering different civil and personal views that collaboratively construct a pluralistic history. However, they do not deconstruct the historical narrative as a whole and this is the key theme in *Coloratura*. Thus, whereas other New Historical Novels ontologically oppose the conventional grand narrative of history, *Coloratura* extends the New Historical Novel genre through its epistemological deconstruction of conventional historical narratives.

In *Coloratura*, when asked about Ge Ren's death, the three interviewees offer differing and contradictory stories, complicating the understanding of this event against a defined timeline and conclusion that exists in official history. As Ge Ren's close friend and former assistant (Bai Shengtao claims so continually throughout the interview), Bai Shengtao says that although he was worried about his own future, he was also concerned about Ge Ren's fate. On his way to the village, he always felt sad and guilty and decided to save Ge Ren's life even if there was just a small possibility. When he saw the Milky Way, he asked

himself: 'Is Ge Ren watching the Milky Way as well? Does he know my task? If he knew, how would he have felt?' (Li, 2017: 89) In Bai Shengtao's interview, he continually expresses his deep love for Ge Ren and that he tried very hard to save him, constructing an affectionate image. The narrative given by Zhao Yaoqing almost subverts the concerns and efforts described by Bai Shengtao. Opposite to Bai Shengtao's narrative, Zhao Yaoqing, in his interview, talks about doubting Bai Shengtao, who surrendered to Fan following his arrest. He continuously emphasises Bai's indifference to Ge Ren's fate and how Bai made very little effort to help Ge Ren escape the village:

I was very angry. Bai Shengtao's words made my blood boil. I asked him: 'Do you remember your task? Your task is to save Ge Ren from this situation. Now is the key moment, but you are planning to step back!' Until he surrendered to Fan Jihuai, I finally understood why he hesitated to save Ge Ren. From the very beginning, he did not want to save Ge Ren. He procrastinated on purpose to take credit for helping Fan Jihuai capture Ge Ren (Ibid, 284-285).

In Zhao Yaoqing's interview, he goes as far as to blame Bai Shengtao and Fan Jihuai for Ge Ren's death whilst describing in detail his efforts to facilitate Ge Ren's escape.

A very different account of Ge Ren's death is given by Fan Jihuai in his respective interview. Like in the interviews of Bai Shengtao and Zhao Yaoqing, he continually emphasises his close friendship with Ge Ren and describes himself as the only person who spared no effort to try to save him. He tells the interviewer that they first met on a ship as they sailed to Japan to start studying and lived together there for a long time. After coming back to China, they both worked in Shanghai and regularly visited one another. Prior to the Long March, Ge Ren aided him in escaping Yan'an to evade the Rectification Movement. He claims that he selected Yang Fengliang and Zhao Yaoqing deliberately, knowing very well how close they were to Ge Ren. Yet neither of them tried to trick Dai Li into believing that the information about Ge Ren being killed when fighting the Japanese army was true. None of them aided Ge Ren in escaping the village prior to him being forced by Dai Li to meet Ge Ren. He holds Yang Fengliang and Zhao Yaoqing responsible for Ge Ren's death, stating that their passive actions and attitudes led to his demise.

In the three interviews, many details provided by the three narrators are also mutual contradictory. In Bai Shengtao's story, he says he was going to tell Zhao Yaoqing about Tian Han's mission to murder Ge Ren and use the secret letter given to him by Dou Sizhong to mislead Zhao into helping Ge Ren flee the village:

If we see this from another angle, we can understand 'kill them all' as they asking me to kill A Qing. If A Qing has not contacted with Dou Sizhong, I can give that letter to him directly. Possibly, A Qing will appreciate that I give this letter to him

after reading it. If A Qing is moved by conscience, maybe he will set Ge Ren free or leave the village with Ge Ren. That is the best (Ibid, 138).

Nonetheless, Zhao Yaoqing, in his interview, points out that Bai only informed him that Tian Han had requested his help in getting Ge Ren out of the village and that there was no mention of a secret letter or an ulterior motive. In the interview, Bai Shengtao continuously emphasises that he was very concerned about Ge Ren, however as far as Zhao Yaoqing is concerned, Bai was a time waster and was too slow in organising Ge Ren's escape, which shows 'his real intention was actually to stop Ge Ren from leaving' (Ibid, 285). Zhao Yaoqing consistently highlights how he did his best to help Ge Ren until Fan Jihuai came to the house where Ge Ren lived and prevented him from seeing Ge Ren again. Nonetheless, Fan Jihuai asserts that he stayed in a little church for some time after arriving in the village rather than going directly to Ge Ren. Zhao Yaoqing was his first visitor at the church and advised him to meet with Ge Ren:

A Qing's nose is more sensitive than dogs'. Not the ordinary dog, the police dog. The day after I arrived, A Qing came here in person [...] As I understand, he came here to clarify his attitude: although Ge Ren helped him in the past, he was not that close with him. Now no matter how to treat Ge Ren, it is none of his business [...] After he finished, he stood up and suggested me to visit Ge Ren. He said that he would help me to meet Ge Ren (Ibid, 444-445).

All three narrators are personally close to Ge Ren. They all had the common desire to safeguard him in a dangerous situation but were forced by intense external pressure to disturb him, to make him capitulate, and even to end his life. Bai Shengtao was arrested for being a Trotskyite in the Rectification Movement in Yan'an. If he failed to complete his task, he would be killed, and it was highly likely that his father-in-law and son would soon be affected as well. Zhao Yaoqing had a dual identity during the event described in the book, as both a major general of the Bureau of Investigation and Statistics of the Military Council of the Nationalist Party and an intelligence agent of the Communist Party. If he failed in his task, he would be withdrawn from his role in the Nationalist Party. This would mean that the whole intelligence system of the Communist Party would be affected. For Fan Jihuai, the lieutenant general of the Bureau of Investigation and Statistics of the Military Council of the Nationalist Party, a failure to complete the task would result in a loss of trust from his leader, as well as a loss of his position, his wealth, and maybe his life. Due to their dilemma, all three attempt to exonerate themselves and blame others during the interviews; meanwhile, they consistently assert that they are telling the truth: 'I call things as I see them' (Bai Shengtao) (Ibid, 1), 'Oath to Chair Mao, I did not lie. What I said was true' (Zhao Yaoqing) (Ibid, 146), 'Birds cry plaintively before they die, men speak kindly in the presence of death. All I said was true, really true' (Fan Jihuai) (Ibid, 299). It seems though, that the

more they promise, the less authentic they seem to be, moving the narrative further away from the truth. In this regard, the historical narrative of Ge Ren's demise is highly fictional, coaxing, concealing, and deceiving. The so-called truth is covered by various personal narratives. This is what Burgo Partridge terms as carnival, which is an ultimate release caused by tension (Partridge, 2005: 106). The tension in the novel results from the dilemmas faced by the three narrators, and this causes an irrational release. The characteristics of various personal narratives, like coaxing, glossing and covering, are borne out of irrational releases and cause a subsequent deconstruction of the rationality and neutrality of historical narrative.

Aside from the narrative of Ge Ren's death, an important historical event, even the narrative of historical fragments is indeterminable throughout the novel. Zhao Yaoqing states in his interview that upon meeting Bai Yin in Chongqing, he was completely unaware that Ge Ren was still alive. Like everyone else, he thought Ge Ren had died battling the Japanese army. Nonetheless, Bai Yin's narrative differs, stating that after meeting Zhao in Chongqing, he instantly visited the village where Ge Ren was residing. It is, thus, not possible that Zhao was unaware of Ge Ren's situation when they met. As is the case with many other historical events in the novel, multiple voices are heard within this narrative. Bai Yin and Zhao Yaoqing are two parties here. They both personally experienced the event and thought that they knew everything about it, yet there are still a lot of contradictions between their stories. In this case, it is the unreliable nature of memory (on which the narrative of history is based) that made the overall narrative uncertain. Despite the fact that Zhao Yaoqing and Bai Yin have lived through the same event, their memories of it are different. The editor believes neither of them has a reason to lie. Thus, the uncertainty of memory is clearly prevalent. The determinacy of the historical narrative is shaky and unreliable since it is based on a memory of nondeterminacy.

6. UNCONSCIOUS NARRATIVE LANGUAGE

Hayden White largely focuses on the linguistic features of the historical narrative. He describes it as being a collaboration of processes of linguistic condensation, displacement, symbolisation, and secondary revision (White, 1989: 297). In *Coloratura*, the interrelationship between the words spoken by the interviewees and their everyday lives in their respective time frames shapes the audible voice. Audible voices can also be found in some other New Historical Novels such as Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* series and Zhou Meisen's *War and Human*, which deconstruct the conventional narrative of the history of the Chinese communist revolution through audible voices providing civil and personal stories. However, in *Coloratura*, the interviews, which are full of political language, popular discourse, idioms and proverbs, demonstrate an unconsciousness regarding the language of the other. Jacques Marie Émile Lacan

describes the unconsciousness of language as being the unconsciousness of life, the surrendering of one's own voice and remaining passive to others' language out of fear and loyalty to authority (Lacan, 2017: 99). The words spoken by the interviewees in the novel is largely impacted by the features of the eras in question, thus demonstrating the unconsciousness of the language used in historical narrative.

Bai Shengtao states in his interview that he acknowledges his mistakes and uses political language relevant to the Rectification Movement to criticise himself. He states that, as an academic, he fails to 'see things from the donkey's perspective. My mistake was as bad as a Stereotyped Party, Sectarianism, and Subjectivism' (Li, 2017: 21-22). In Bai's narrative, he borrows these political terms to criticise his inability to see things from another perspective. The readers are given the opportunity through Bai's narrative to see how absurd his self-criticism is. Nonetheless, as the subject of self-criticism, he does not notice how senseless his words sound. Seemingly, he tries to use political language to create his own narrative. However, political discourse appears to reversely limit his thoughts and ultimately creates a ridiculous logic framework for his thought processes. He is not able to reflect on the preposterous reality within this framework. Instead, his narrative is heavily influenced by the framework formed by the ridiculous reality, thus lowering the liability of his narrative.

Zhao Yaoqing's story involves more of political discourse. He aims to please the interviewers, and thus always adds politically correct comments and repeatedly reassures them that his words are true. In contrast to Bai Shengtao, he adds political language not just unconsciously, but deliberately, in order to protect himself from the dangerous environment he finds himself in. As the interviewers have the power to decide his future, when they express disagreement or doubt about his story, he always implements more political language. A great deal of manipulation is involved in this process. When telling the interviewers that Bing Yin argued with her father for refusing her request to go to Japan with Ge Ren, Zhao Yaoqing retells Bing Yin's statement, who quoted Mao Zedong saying that: 'Times have now changed. Now men and women are equal. Women have the power to hold up half the sky. Why can't I go to Japan?' (Ibid, 188) Bing Yin said this in the 1920s while Mao Zedong made the statement that 'Women have the power to hold up half the sky' in the 1950s. Thus, it is not possible that Bing Yin can quote this statement. However, going to another country to study was not politically correct at that time. Quoting Mao Zedong's words can decriminalise Bing Yin's request and also protect Zhao Yaoqing himself as narrator. Indeed, for Zhao Yaoqing, blending political discourse and past memories is a technique to defend himself in a specific time period. Nonetheless, his deliberate manipulation of memories is what Lacan calls the surrendering of one's own voice and making room for others' voices out of fear (Lacan, 2017: 103). In this case, although certain historical events are presented by the narrator, due to the unconsciousness of the language of

the other, the narrator loses the control of his or her narrative language. In other words, the narrator uses others' language to make his or her own narrative, losing the ability to control the narrative and thus further deconstructing the liability of his or her words.

For Fan Jihuai, he has no need to defend himself from a dangerous political environment, but he still uses political language as a way of showing off his status. When asked why he changed his studies in Japan from medical to law, he responds that because 'the country craved the rule of law, a reform and opening up' (Li, 2017: 304). When talking about the Soviet district, he discusses an arrangement that was made for him to teach children. He took the job even though he did not really enjoy it, since 'it was part of the strategy for improving the country through science and education' (Ibid, 339). It is evident that all the thoughts expressed in his narrative are not true. The political discourse that he uses does not come about until after the Cultural Revolution, yet the action of his story happens prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Like with Zhao Yaoqing, by manipulating Fan's narrative, the reliability of his narrative is deconstructed. Nonetheless, he is part of a different political setting to Zhao Yaoqing and manipulates his narrative for different reasons. Through his narrative, Li Er is able to show the various conditions and possibilities regarding the manipulating of a narrative, and thus how easy it is to construct and manipulate a narrative.

Deconstructing the editor's narrative is more complex than deconstructing the three interviewees' narratives. As a narrator, the editor's voice in the novel has two purposes: to search for the truth about Ge Ren's death and to pursue the historical truth. In this novel, besides the records of the three interviews, the editor also collects many historical documents and archival resources, trying to figure out the mysteries surrounding Ge Ren's death. Yet, the history becomes more intricate with the more answers he finds. Eventually, it becomes impossible to reveal the truth about Ge Ren's demise because the search for truth depends on narratives which offer an abundance of different and even contradictory information, clues and experiences regarding the event. Another purpose of the editor's voice is to pursue the historical truth. All his endeavours in the book focus on verifying or falsifying the narratives of other narrators and attempting to tell fact from fiction. He attempts to remain objective throughout the process, which is a crucial element within historicism and modern scientific historiography. Ranke, for instance, supports the idea of writing history 'as it actually happened' or 'as it really had been' (Ranke, 1973: 57). New historians oppose the objective stance taken by historiography. They emphasise the experience of historians and highlight the differences between history and natural sciences. Furthermore, Keith Jenkins asserts that:

The belief that it is possible to write an objective, neutral and disinterested text [history or historical narrative], when explaining or describing something is not

an ostensible position, but rather a naive one (Jenkins, 1999: 1).

On the surface, it seems that the editor has the most chances to be objective. He has no personal experiences in any of the events in question, thus he has no need to hide anything. The editor serves as both the detective and the data manager and is very much like Gilles Deleuze's new manager who creates innovative methods for managing documents (Deleuze, 2001: 129). Positivistic techniques are used by the editor to unveil the truth about Ge Ren's demise. Nonetheless, although the truth lies in the narrative of all the historical occurrences, the narrative's coloratura features still cover it. The editor is able to reveal the nature of the narrative, containing the truth behind the historical events whilst also including things that aim to coax, deceive and act as metaphors and rhetorics. Historical narrative in the novel presents its fictional nature. As Keith Jenkins asserts, history is essentially a fiction of language, a discourse shown through narrative prose (Jenkins, 1999: 35).

7. CONCLUSION

In *Coloratura*, when asked about the death of Ge Ren, the three interviewees offer differing and contradictory stories, complicating the understanding of this event against a defined timeline and conclusion that exists in official history. Aside from the narrative of Ge Ren's death, an important historical event, even the narratives of details and historical fragments are indeterminable throughout the novel. Thus, the uncertainty of memory is clearly prevalent. In the novel, the three interviewees intend to please the interviewers and beautify their behaviour in certain historical events, leading their narratives to be full of exaggeration, concealment and distortion. The editor in the novel tries to reconstruct a flawless and authentic picture of the past, however, his narrative is grounded on indeterminable memories which eventually enhances the ambiguity of historical narrative.

Furthermore, the language used by the three interviewees, full of idioms and proverbs, political jargon and popular discourse, is pervasively permeated by the features of the era in which the narrators live. The historical narrative is, therefore, enveloped by the voice of authority seizing the power of determining the discourse of a certain era. The editor's narrative is also deconstructed. As a narrator, the editor's voice in the novel has two purposes: to search for the truth about Ge Ren's death and to pursue the historical truth. However, the history becomes more intricate with the more answers he finds. Eventually, it becomes impossible to reveal the truth about Ge Ren's demise because the search for truth depends on narratives which offer an abundance of different and even contradictory information, clues and experiences regarding the event. Moreover, although the truth lies in the narrative of all the historical occurrences, the narrative's coloratura features still cover it. The editor is able to reveal the nature of the narrative, containing the truth behind the his-

torical events whilst also including things that aim to coax, deceive and act as metaphors and rhetorics. Historical narrative in the novel presents its fictional nature.

Narrative representations are based on authenticity. The switching of roles between the narrators and narratees thwarts the stability of representation and makes the relationship between the speaker and the recipient more complex. The monologic continuity is interrupted, meaning that it is impossible to generate a flawless picture of the past. The deconstructive force does not only concern personal history but also national, local and familial histories. The various voices in the story do not only bring about a new, innovative type of Chinese novel but have also altered the structure of the narrative of the history of Chinese communist revolution, making them full of uncertainty and self-contradiction.

The New Historical Novel subverts traditional historical narrative by offering different civil and personal views that collaboratively construct a pluralistic history. Coloratura, broadly considered to be part of this genre, complicates the key characteristics of the New Historical Novel genre by deconstructing the historical narrative as a whole. Thus, whereas other New Historical Novels ontologically oppose the conventional grand narrative of history, Coloratura extends the New Historical Novel genre through its epistemological deconstruction of conventional historical narratives, transforming them from mere objective descriptions of history into fictional stories.

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