

# **A New Look at an Old Tragedy in Chinese Revolution: Historical Reflections in *The South Anhui Incident***

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## **ABSTRACT**

In his 1987 historical novel *The South Anhui Incident* (Wannan shibian), a controversial product of the Culture Fever raging through China in the 1980s, the veteran writer Li Ruqing adopts a cultural approach in his depiction of a major disaster in Chinese revolution. This cultural approach, in contradistinction to official Communist historiography and revolutionary historical fiction, results in the prominent presence of a critical authorial voice, the emphasis on the feudal mentality in the highest Communist ranks and the focus on the psychological experiences behind the decisions and actions leading to the historical tragedy. At the same time, Li Ruqing envisions history as open-ended, multidirectional and full of unrealized potential, thus raising questions about his own highly subjective, biased viewpoint. In the end a conclusion is implied that history is not completely knowable.

## **KEY WORDS**

“the Culture Fever” (Wenhua re), historiography, Li Ruqing, Karl Mannheim, The New Fourth Army (Xinsijun), revolutionary historical fiction (geming lishi xiaoshuo), The South Anhui incident (Wannan Shibian)



In 1987, the publication of *The South Anhui Incident* (Wannan Shibian), a novel by the Nanjing-based veteran army writer Li Ruqing on the disastrous near eradication of the headquarters of the Communist-led New Fourth Army in 1941, proved to be an instant success with the reading public as it came out in print in a special issue of the literary journal *Fiction World* (Xiaoshuo Jie). Comments on the novel by readers, writers, critics and surviving New Fourth Army veterans immediately appeared in newspapers and on the air. Soon all the copies of the special issue were sold out. To satisfy the increased demand, both the People's Liberation Army Literature and Arts Publishing House and Shanghai Literature and Arts Publishing House promptly reprinted the novel in book form and the latter alone made two large print runs in October and November. As one of the most controversial historical novels since 1949, *The South Anhui Incident* continued to attract strong reactions after its initial publication. In February 1990, one hundred and seventeen New Fourth Army veterans affiliated with the Shanghai branch of the New Fourth Army History Society submitted to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter abbreviated to the CCP) and the Central Military Commission a petition to refute the arguments put forth in the novel. Not long afterwards Jiang Zemin, the general secretary of the CCP at the time, castigated the novel at a national conference attended by writers and artists in the military. In the meantime, a spate of articles and books had been written by survivors and historians on a host of issues related to the South Anhui Incident. At a time when the so-called "serious literature" had already begun its decline in China, how could a historical novel manage to garner so much attention? In the following

pages I will try to answer this question by situating the novel in the context of contemporary cultural discussions and in the tradition of the revolutionary historical fiction, a crucial component of the post-1949 literature in Communist China. In so doing I intend to call attention to the ideological and conceptual premises underpinning Li Ruqing's revision of revolutionary history, premises that, on the one hand, resonated with the "Culture Fever" of the mid-1980s and, on the other hand, revealed their own strengths and limits in the process of narrating and explaining historical events.

To begin with, *The South Anhui Incident* can be seen largely as a product of the "Culture Fever" that was raging through Chinese intellectual and literary circles in the early and mid-1980s. For our purposes, the reflections on China's cultural tradition (*wenhua fansi*) that eventually gave rise to highly controversial, and immensely popular, works such as the TV miniseries *Yellow River Elegy* (Heshang) are especially noteworthy.<sup>1</sup> Instead of following the time-honored Chinese orientation that postulated the past as the repository of cultural norms and ideals, an orientation reinforced by the CCP as it sanctified its own history, those engaged in cultural reflections castigated the past as an ultra-stable pernicious tradition that simply refused to relinquish its hold on the present. As far as Li Ruqing is concerned, the influence of contemporary cultural reflections can be seen not only in his critical attitude to a glorified event in the revolutionary past. More importantly, the influence can be seen in his cultural approach and explanation that emphasize the calamitous consequences of the traces of feudalism, authoritarianism, opportunism and sycophancy in the history of the CCP. In that sense we can argue that the basic tone of his novel was set by contemporary cultural reflections.

The cultural approach to the South Anhui Incident made Li's novel stand out from the official accounts of the incident sponsored and propagated by both the CCP and the GMD up to the 1980s. With regard to the official accounts, we should note that whereas Communist historians had unanimously cited the South Anhui Incident as an example of Chiang Kai-shek's treachery, Nationalist historians had taken the New Fourth Army's unauthorized move that triggered the

incident as an act of insubordination deserving of punishment, a claim first made by none other than Chiang Kai-shek himself in a speech delivered on January 27, 1941.<sup>2</sup> Yet in spite of their opposing political standpoints and mutual accusations and recriminations, historians from the both sides had agreed that the South Anhui Incident was a climax in a chain of military conflicts between the Communists and the Nationalists during the Anti-Japanese War. By shifting his attention to the clashes within the highest ranks of the CCP as the major cause for the incident, however, Li Ruqing revealed a historical dimension Communist historians had glossed over and Nationalist historians had probably not been aware of, a dimension that has only recently begun to attract attention from historians working outside China and Taiwan.<sup>3</sup>

The strong urge for cultural reflections in Li's novel results in significant characteristics in the choice of subject matter, plot arrangements, narrative style and authorial reactions. Writing as a highly motivated and emotionally involved cultural critic rather than a historian detached from the object of his research, Li Ruqing does not content himself with making inferences through selecting and arranging historical facts, as historians usually do under the guidance of the principle of impersonality. Instead, he makes his own presence palpable everywhere in his novel, often through direct, forceful authorial comments. In fact, the strong authorial presence makes it difficult even to categorize the novel as a realist novel in the strict sense of the term. Frequently shuttling between historical narrative, fiction and commentary, *The South Anhui Incident* illustrates a process in which a writer tries to come to grips with history from an unabashedly subjective perspective, a process in which boundaries separating different genres can be easily crossed or ignored. In view of the mixture of history, fiction and personal comments, it is therefore not entirely appropriate to measure the novel against historical accounts that purport to offer the "truths" of the South Anhui Incident, although these accounts do constitute a background against which the novel stands out. More interested in how to interpret an expandable historical event from an imaginative standpoint than in finding out what the event was in and of itself, Li's novel uses history as a convenient point of departure to

draw lessons for the present and, as we shall see, to illustrate the ultimate difficulty in the representation of history as it offers alternative historical interpretations. Hence in my reading of the novel I will focus more on its various contemplations than on its adherence to history.

While acknowledging Li's novel as a genre-crossing work, it would still be profitable for us to study it in the context of the tradition of the revolutionary historical fiction, a major tradition in the post-1949 Chinese literature that had come under challenge and revision in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup> This is not just because Li's novel was intended and received as historical fiction more than anything else but also because the cultural reflections in his novel question some of the most fundamental premises underlying the revolutionary historical fiction. Finally, we should note that these premises are, after all, inextricably linked to the basic beliefs in the revolutionary historiography in Communist China, and to question the former virtually amounts to a challenge to the latter.

In *The South Anhui Incident*, Li Ruqing's most obvious departure from the beaten path of the revolutionary historical fiction, and, by extension, the Communist revolutionary historiography, is his demythification of the infallibility of the CCP and the inevitability of the ultimate CCP victory. Indeed what his novel offers is a detailed account of a major setback the CCP suffered in its history without any hint of a future victory in sight. Secondly, and far more importantly, Li explicitly challenges the CCP official interpretation that holds the South Anhui Incident to be the culmination of the treacherous "second anti-Communist high tide" launched by the Guomindang (hereafter abbreviated to the GMD) during the Anti-Japanese War. Putting the rift between Xiang Ying, the autocratic commissar of the New Fourth Army, and Mao Zedong, the CCP chairman, in the center stage while relegating the clash between the CCP and the GMD to a secondary position, Li Ruqing carries out sustained explorations into key historical figures' personal histories and psyches, thus firmly grounding the incident in the context of the CCP political culture. With all his acknowledgment of the incident as a military conflict deeply rooted in the tensions between the CCP and the GMD, his cultural orientation remains intent on disclosing internal factors such as schism,

authoritarianism, incompetence and inflexibility as important causes for the incident as he brings to light facts either concealed or downplayed by the official CCP historical accounts. Arising from a political environment in which the CCP's monopoly over history had been gradually eroded, Li Ruqing's historical interpretation unabashedly reflected the influence of the contemporary criticisms of the CCP and it in turn heuristically used a tragedy in history to promote an agenda that called for fundamental reforms in the CCP.

We should also note that in the 1980s competition had emerged as an important mode of cultural production in China as the CCP began to lose its authority in the cultural field. The erosion of the CCP control made it possible for Chinese writers to develop to a certain degree their own approaches and styles as they discredited the CCP literary decrees in an environment characterized by disappointment and disbelief. The competition among writers for the attention of their audience led to increasingly radicalized ideological and artistic stances, although certain political boundaries still remained inviolable. On the other hand, with the increase of choices in reading materials, not to mention other cultural products such as movies and TV programs, the public began to withhold its favor from those writers who did not make efforts to distinguish themselves from others in various ways. In my view unorthodox works such as *The South Anhui Incident* were to a large degree products of this environment of competition in which writers realized and tried to materialize the profitability of controversy.

Li Ruqing's historical reflections are undoubtedly focused on Xiang Ying, depicted in the novel as a commander who, with his obstinate choice of a perilous evacuation route for his troops and staff and his repeated delays and hesitations, bears undeniable responsibility for the heavy casualties suffered by the Communists in the South Anhui Incident. In the 1980's, partly due to the rise of New Fourth Army veterans in regional and central leadership, Xiang Ying was reevaluated as the main leader of a revolutionary force long eclipsed by the Eighth Route Army in Chinese Communist historical accounts. No longer maligning him as a representative of a "right-opportunist" line within the Party and a foil to the unerring Mao, as the Party had done in

the past, historians had begun to offer more balanced assessments of Xiang Ying's achievements and mistakes. Li Ruqing, however, strikes out in a different direction by portraying Xiang Ying as a human being who responds to historical exigencies with a mentality he has come to adopt through his personal experience as a guerrilla leader in the Communist movement. He goes to considerable length to describe the meteoric rise of Xiang Ying, a rare industrial worker among the first members of the CCP in the early 1920s, as a result of the Comintern policy of promoting proletarians to leadership positions in the CCP and the subsequent appointment of Xiang, who had never commanded a regular army, to the top position in the New Fourth Army in late 1937 when it was formed. What is broadly implied in this account is that, as a fortuitous product of historical circumstances, Xiang was put in a position for which he was not qualified. Yet as the only Politburo member in the army he far outranked everyone else under his command. In the end, the poignant presentation of the South Anhui Incident as a tragedy largely resulting from the combination of absolute power and lack of professional qualifications in Xiang Ying, the de facto embodiment of the CCP in the New Fourth Army, makes clear the calamitous consequences of the CCP's sacred creed that "the Party should command the gun."

An incarnation of the CCP creed, Xiang Ying in *The South Anhui Incident* remains a self-confident political authority bent on controlling all aspects of daily life in his army before his fall from grace when he deserts on the battleground. On the eve of his army headquarters' evacuation from its base, we are told that Xiang Ying busies himself giving instructions about personnel changes, provisions for the soldiers, the inspection of a pontoon, a mobilization meeting for the evacuees, a farewell party with local residents, the allocation of weapons to local guerrillas and the revision of an editorial for an army newspaper. This exercise of all-embracing power, however, is clearly perceived by the author as a myopic pursuit that falls short of a strategic understanding of the dangers lurking ahead. Intoxicated by the immediate implementations of his orders, Xiang Ying fails to know that it is precisely his hard work that is paving the way for a disaster. In his

authorial voice Li Ruqing makes the following comments:

Xiang Ying also forgot that his unobstructed commands, smooth arrangements and independent preparations were not necessarily correct. That his instructions were carried out to the letter was due to his power, not his wisdom. Whether his decisions could stand the test of harsh reality was still unknown.<sup>5</sup>

In attributing the eventual tragedy of the South Anhui Incident largely to authoritarianism, Li Ruqing ultimately faults the CCP's emphasis on authority and obedience in its ranks. Put in the context of the contemporary discussions on the residues of feudalism in the CCP, Li's criticism of authoritarianism shows that for him historical reflection is, after all, not an act of cogitation performed by a disinterested mind but an act intent on changing the world as well as understanding it. No longer passive objects of knowledge complete in themselves, historical experiences become expandable sources from which investigators, oriented by their own intellectual interests and perspectives, can find lessons for their own times.

With such a critical agenda in his mind, Li Ruqing casts Xiang Ying as a feudal vassal who, while demanding unconditional obedience from his subordinates and rejecting dissenters under his command, defiantly tries to thwart Mao's attempts to eliminate his fiefdom. Tracing Xiang's alienation from Mao back to early 1931, when Xiang tried to correct the excesses committed by Mao and his associates in the Futian Incident, a witch hunt in the Red Army that resulted in thousands of executions of innocent cadres, and highlighting Xiang's aversion to a November 1940 Party center telegram aimed at removing him from his post in the New Fourth Army by recalling him to Yan'an, Li Ruqing portrays Xiang's refusal to move his headquarters north as ordered by the Party center and his determination to move south into the mountainous areas in Zhejiang and Fujian provinces behind Nationalist lines to wage guerrilla warfare, the so-called "three mountains plan," as an act triggered more by Xiang's desire to hold on to his personal power base than by any principled differences of

strategy. Deluded by his vision of self-grandeur and motivated by self-interest, Xiang Ying in *The South Anhui Incident* comes out as a double-dealer who, under the cover of revolutionary rhetoric, resorts to obstruction, evasion and even outright deception to strive for his political survival. To support this characterization, Li Ruqing, for example, offers a detailed analysis of a telegram Xiang sent to the Party center on January 1, 1941. From this ambiguous, verbose telegram that mentions neither Xiang's fateful decision on the southern route nor the date of the impending evacuation, he infers that Xiang intended to turn the evacuation on an unauthorized route into a *fait accompli* by the time the Party center could manage to respond. Significantly, this deception is described in the novel as a trick Xiang has learned from his trusted chief of staff Zhao Lingbo, a wily former Guomindang officer who eventually becomes a traitor.<sup>6</sup> This telegram, we should realize, is also a text excluded from the official anthology of the South Anhui Incident-related documents compiled by the Archives of the CCP Central Committee in 1981. Treating the telegram as a window on Xiang's mind, Li Ruqing reveals the decisive importance of psychological motives glossed over by the CCP official accounts.

As an example, the abovementioned analysis of Xiang Ying's telegram typifies a pronounced psychological approach to the understanding of historical figures in *The South Anhui Incident*. Citing, as his theoretical support, a statement by Marx that history is nothing but the actions people take as they pursue their goals, Li Ruqing makes the following justification for his psychological emphasis:

To study history we must study people. To deal with data exclusively is the task for the librarian, not for the historian, and even less for the fiction writer. History is created by people, therefore to study history we must look into people's mentalities. Only through comprehensive analysis and judgment, only through logical inferences compatible with historical figures' personalities can we search for truths, explore hidden details, understand historical figures and comment on history. To focus exclusively on data at the expense of inference and the exploration of historical

figures' mentalities is a tragedy for the study of history.<sup>7</sup>

A significant breakthrough in the eyes of Shi Yan, Li Ruqing's colleague and supporter,<sup>8</sup> this psychological orientation toward history certainly came from Li Ruqing's familiarity with the mentalities of high-ranking Communist cadres he had gained as a Communist army veteran of more than forty years who had once worked as a secretary for an army corps Party committee. It also brings with it a new conceptualization of historical figures and documents. As it conceives historical figures as human beings influenced by both their specific circumstances and their personal motives, it vivifies historical documents as written traces left by mental activities, as can be seen in the example of the abovementioned telegram.

To further drive home the harm of authoritarianism, Li Ruqing fleshes out Zhao Lingbo and Liu Houzhong, two obsequious aides who eventually betray Xiang Ying in different ways. Whereas Zhao is depicted as a toady who gains Xiang's trust with his outward obedience, support and advice at crucial moments but secretly sells the evacuation route to Guomindang agents, exploits Xiang's desire for control to cover up his own treachery and surrenders to the enemy in the end, Liu, a former guerrilla leader who becomes Xiang's favorite bodyguard for his loyalty, physical strength and marksmanship, is portrayed as an underling who, dismayed at Xiang's impending loss of power when Xiang finally decides to move north, ends up killing Xiang and his lieutenant Zhou Zikun for the valuables they carry with them. Their examples make it crystal clear that the loyalty and servility premised on power are ultimately unreliable when power itself comes under threat.

In sharp contrast to the sycophants in the novel stands an intelligent, competent and courageous character Lin Zhichao, the chief of military operations in the New Fourth Army. A professional with practical experience and practicable strategies, Lin is singled out by the author for his intellectual independence and determination to uphold truth under heavy pressure. As the only junior officer bold enough to oppose Xiang Ying's arguments about guerrilla warfare in the past and refute Xiang's evacuation route to his face on the eve of the evacuation,

Lin obviously puts the interest of his army above personal benefit he could gain from a good relationship with his superior. Yet it is Lin, with all his insights and probity, who becomes a target for resentment, estrangement, and even demotion. Significantly, Lin is closely modeled on a real person Li Zhigao, who, in real life, was suspected to have colluded with the GMD as a secret agent during the South Anhui Incident, put into solitary confinement, subjected to harsh interrogations and eventually driven to commit suicide in January 1942.<sup>9</sup> In heroizing a person who would rather kill himself than cave in to pressure, Li Ruqing clearly tries not only to right a wrong committed by the Communists against one of their own comrades in history but also to extol integrity as a rare virtue in the ranks of the CCP that should be promoted as an antidote to servility.

As a composite model of professionalism and integrity, Lin Zhichao is undoubtedly created as an exemplary figure worthy of sympathy and admiration. Throughout his novel Li Ruqing makes repeated emotional pleas on Lin's behalf as he compares the character with those around him who sacrifice their principles under pressure. The following authorial comment on Lin's refusal to write a self-criticism in 1938 for his article that disagreed with Xiang Ying's views on guerrilla warfare, for example, highlights the rarity and value of Lin's rectitude:

Lin Zhichao, why were you so stubborn and so serious? What could go wrong with you writing a self-criticism? Had you looked up you could have seen how calm, comfortable and carefree the willow branches outside the window were as they flowed with the rain and wind. You were the only one unable to act harmoniously in society. More than two years later, many people suddenly began to look into the deaths of Xiang Ying and Zhou Zikun and claimed you had failed to protect them. While some persecuted you without thinking, some persecuted you to settle old scores and some persecuted you because they coveted your position as the divisional chief of staff, the main reason for the persecution was your intolerable pride. As everyone tried to smooth out the rough

edges of your personality and tame your spirit, you could not take it any more. So you angrily snatched a pistol from a guard, pointed it at your own temple and pulled the trigger. But who would cry over your death? History will laugh at you as an arrogant, naive, and ridiculous person; life will laugh at you for knowing only how to conduct warfare but not yourself in society.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly revealing the gaping discrepancy between the assertions and the author's real intention and feelings, the rhetorical irony employed here reserves its most biting mockery for those who misunderstood and mistreated Lin.

The frequent authorial statements in *The South Anhui Incident* similar to the above passage indicate that for Li Ruqing his account is intended not as a factual summation of a historical event but as an emotionally charged interpretation of a major tragedy in Chinese revolution that still retains profound contemporary resonance. In this regard the undisguised subjective standpoint and its cognitive consequences in the novel remind us of some of the views held by Karl Mannheim in *Ideology and Utopia*, a trailblazing introduction to the sociology of knowledge. According to Karl Mannheim, a knowing subject's location in social space and historical time can become an intellectual asset rather than a hindrance in that it can inspire the orientation of his historical investigation, his choice of historical data for emphasis and de-emphasis and his conceptualization of historical experience. Subjective engagement, in other words, can become an important cognitive force capable of making positive and constructive contributions to knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Bearing Mannheim's views in mind, we see that in *The South Anhui Incident* strong convictions coalesce into an intellectual matrix that motivates the author in his quest for historical truths. What this activist approach to the knowledge of history ultimately entails is the rejection of the belief in "historical truths in themselves." No longer positing "objective" historical truths distinct from their investigators or envisioning historical investigations as "theoretical" acts of pure perception, this approach emphasizes the inseparable relationship between the perceiving subjects and the

objects of their historical investigations. As it acknowledges the influence of its own historical moment as well as its own role in history, it comes to adopt a relational or perspectivist standpoint on the interpretation of history.

For all his belief in the validity of his own explanations and inferences, Li Ruqing is highly aware that his account runs the risk of partiality and, to lessen the risk, he takes into consideration happenings that refuse to cohere into a well-bound event. To begin with, in his novel the South Anhui Incident is, as a whole, portrayed as an open-ended concatenation of both interconnected and independent episodes that unfolds with numerous unforeseeable twists and, perhaps more significantly, lost opportunities that could have potentially changed the course of history. As he begins his account of the evacuation of the army command on January 4, 1941, for instance, he describes a torrential rain, a rare meteorological phenomenon at this time of the year in the region, that greatly slowed down the march as it soaked the evacuees and caused a flood that swelled the Qingyi River and broke a portable pontoon on the river the evacuees had to cross. Coupled with other factors, such as Xiang Ying's refusal to cancel two scheduled rallies to make an early start on the evacuation and his indecision over the movement of his troops after they came into fighting with GMD troops, the unexpected torrential rain is emphasized as a phenomenon that had an undeniable impact on the fate of the evacuation. As various unpredictable circumstances, such as the rain and the misdirection of a New Fourth Army contingent by a local guide, are taken into account, the South Anhui Incident comes out in the novel not as a single event with a streamlined, forward-moving plot but as an aggregate of highly volatile happenings without predetermined outcomes. Even at the time when the GMD encirclement was completed the fate of the evacuees was still not entirely sealed, since, as the author points out twice, most of them could have either broken out of the encirclement or mounted a surprise attack from behind the enemy line had they discovered an overgrown ditch only seven hundred meters away from a village where, on January 7, 1941, the army commanders held a seven-hour marathon meeting to decide the route of

evacuation after fighting had begun. Comparing the ditch to the Kerkoporta, a little gate in the inner city of Constantinople that was left open due to the defenders' negligence during a siege of the city in 1453 and thus enabled a small contingent of Turks to enter the city easily and launch a surprise attack that led to the downfall of the Byzantine Empire, Li Ruqing makes a strong point that, just as a fortuitous opportunity, when exploited, could lead to an unforeseen success, a missed chance could also fundamentally determine the final outcome of an important historical event.

The influence of, among other things, Karl von Clausewitz's tenet that war is not an activity governed by scientific laws but the most uncertain and hazardous human endeavor in which chance and luck constantly play their significant roles results in the highlighting of flexibility as the most important quality of a successful army commander in *The South Anhui Incident*. Unfortunately, all the commanders in the novel fail the test as they are described as human beings molded and, more crucially, hampered by their past experiences. This is true not only of Xiang Ying, who is depicted as a guerrilla leader without the competence to command a regular army, but also of Ye Ting, the titular commander of the New Fourth Army who is usually lionized in official Communist historical accounts as a military genius and a heroic foil to the irresolute Xiang Ying. While poignantly telling the reader that Ye Ting's battlefield experience consisted of little more than his stint as a regiment commander for several months in the Northern Expedition of 1926 and his brief involvement in a number of failed armed uprisings launched by the Communists in 1927, Li Ruqing creates a character who is, for all his intelligence and audacity, incapable of transcending his personal limitations at the most critical moments. To foreground the rigidity in Ye's personality and mentality, he goes to considerable length to describe Ye's decision to fight to the last man in the face of overwhelming GMD troops and unfavorable terrain as well as Ye's rebuff of the now disgraced Xiang Ying's sensible advice to break out of the encirclement in small groups. As he debunks the official myth of Ye Ting by calling attention to Ye's fateful decisions, Li Ruqing manages to bring his character down to the size of

a fallible human being who should bear at least some responsibility for a historical tragedy. We should further note that, motivated by a desire to create realistic characters rather than flawless idols, Li even portrays Lin Zhichao, his favorite in the novel, as an officer who fails the flexibility test by supporting the decision to fight until fighting proves to be completely futile. On the other hand, Li Ruqing readily acknowledges that there were factors other than inflexibility that led to the tragedy of the South Anhui Incident and, in consideration of the interactions among these factors, to attribute the tragedy solely to inflexibility would miss the complexity and dynamics of historical reality. He demonstrates, for instance, that Ye Ting's final attempt to break through the enemy encirclement with concentrated forces ended in failure because of faulty intelligence more than anything else. Keeping in sight the interactions of various elements with shifting importance at different times, the causal chain created in the novel to account for the South Anhui Incident stands out with its multi-directionality and changeability. History, in other words, is perceived as a drama without a script and the eventual course of this drama is influenced, or even determined, by accidental elements that are, in the final analysis, beyond the complete control of historical participants.

Behind Li Ruqing's account is a keen awareness that the course of history could have been dramatically changed by potentialities that failed to play out in reality. Since various scenarios remained real possibilities at any historical moment, prudence on the part of historical participants became at least justifiable. This message is borne out by Zhou Zikun, the New Fourth Army deputy chief of staff. For much of the novel Zhou remains a meek lieutenant who, with all his military experience, always ends up siding with Xiang Ying on important issues. After the South Anhui Incident Zhou tries to defend his behavior in a candid discussion with Lin Zhichao. As he confesses that his unwillingness to take responsibility was the real motive for supporting his superior rather than the low-ranking Lin, a confession that reveals a habit common among high-ranking Communist cadres, he also points out that Lin's proposals can only be perceived as correct in hindsight

and against the background of a fully materialized military failure. As he lists the charges that could be heaped on Lin for the unavoidable heavy casualties Lin's proposals would have entailed if implemented, even Lin has to acknowledge the legitimacy and the persuasive power of these accusations. Self-justification aside, Zhou's argument is also premised on an awareness that, given the unpredictability of history, it is impossible to prove conclusively the validity of any course of action before history is fully played out. Patently sympathetic with this view, the author begins to hedge his support for his favorite character at this point. He goes on to make the following remarks:

It seems that Lin Zhichao was correct. Only following what was right, he refused to trust authority blindly and was even less cowed by power. To uphold what was right he dared to defy anyone. Isn't it a Communist's first oath to fight for what is correct?

But so far we have only resolved half of the problem. The question remains whether what you Lin Zhichao wanted to fight for was really right. The Decembrists in Russia naturally believed they were doing the right thing when they launched armed uprisings against the Czar, but Lenin thought they were wrong. So the question boils down to this: were you Lin Zhichao the only person fighting for what was right? If you dared to defy anyone in pursuit of what was right, then what about Xiang Ying? He was also fighting for what he believed to be right! In his view to move north was the wrong strategy whereas to move south was the right direction. For that he dared to defy anyone. In this light his resistance against the decision of the Central Committee becomes understandable.<sup>12</sup>

Mindful of the perspectivist nature of historical actions on the one hand and the unpredictability of their outcomes on the other, Li Ruqing often leaves room for what could have happened in his enchainment of events and refrains from making categorical judgments on the characters and their actions. Take his treatment of Xiang Ying's telegram that I cited above as an example. Although he obviously sees

the telegram as an act of evasion and deception largely motivated by Xiang's self-interest, no moralistic verdict is rendered on the trick. Instead, he juxtaposes his inference of psychological motivation behind the telegram with a story about a ploy the famous Russian general Alexander Suvorov used in 1790 in the siege of the impregnable city Izmail. As Suvorov waited for roosters to crow as a signal for a general assault on Izmail in the wee hours on the morning of December 11, 1790, Li Ruqing tells us, an order came that called off the assault. Loath to let go a major victory within his reach, Suvorov began to crow like a rooster and, as the roosters in the neighboring area followed suit, he announced to his troops that the assault should proceed as planned and asked the messenger to tell his superior that the cancellation command came too late. That similar ruses were used in situations with drastically different outcomes, a smashing success in Suvorov's case and a humiliating failure in Xiang Ying's case, proves the precariousness in judging stratagems in and of themselves. The juxtaposition of the contrasting cases obviously implies that, if Xiang Ying's plan to move south had succeeded, a possible scenario in view of the numerous opportunities that could have been exploited to change the course of history, the deceitful telegram could be considered a stroke of genius. Ultimately, this amoral approach attentive to historical possibilities raises questions about after-the-fact unilinear historical evaluations in general.

Besides his sensitivity to the missed opportunities in history, another factor that significantly contributes to the complexity and richness of Li Ruqing's historical vision is his awareness that, although history is nothing but the activities of human beings pursuing their aims, what finally transpires in history is the outcome of innumerable individual human actions that interact with each other and with their specific circumstances. As incompatible human actions interact with each other in changeful circumstances that are often beyond human control or even prediction, the end result of this dynamic process will generally be different from, or even opposite to, what is desired by individual participants. This awareness leads to what I would like to call a "agnostic" point of view in his novel, as can be seen in the

following presentation of thoughts that occur in the minds of Xiang Ying, a newspaper reporter named Bai Sha, and Lin Zhichao as they are waiting to cross the Qingyi River on their evacuation march:

Oblivious of his own existence, Xiang Ying had merged himself into a "collective I." As he thought that this enormous force would fight for one common goal, he became uncontrollably excited. He felt the bond he had formed with this force through life-and-death struggles and the rise of a heroic spirit intent on sweeping away all the enemies.

Unwilling to cross the river by wading, Lin Zhichao and Bai Sha waited for the return of the cavalry platoon's horses. Neither of them said anything. The unfathomable darkness ushered in a dim, soul-stirring picture in the agitated mind of the chief of military operations, presaging an approaching catastrophe. His were probably the only eyes in the whole army that were not blind.

Bai Sha's understanding was entirely different from Lin Zhichao's: what he perceived in Xiang Ying, standing firmly in the cold rain and wind, was a revolutionary's calmness and indefatigable will to fight. Xiang Ying's deportment, his gestures and the tone of his voice all carried a sublime beauty, a puissant beauty, a beauty that drove history forward! He was a symbol of authority that gave rise to a feeling of allegiance in the people around him.<sup>13</sup>

True to their Marxist conviction, both Xiang Ying and Bai Sha conceive of history as a purposeful process propelled by collective forces into which individual human beings are assimilated to play different roles. As historical agents, they are also characterized by their self-confidence, optimistic outlook and a strong belief in their ability to understand the course of history. In contrast, skeptical of any grand vision, Lin Zhichao remains alert to the changeful and unexpected elements in the reality of war. On his part, by describing Lin as the only clear-headed person in the whole army whose premonition is eventually vindicated in reality, the author unambiguously tips the

cognitive balance in Lin's favor. We should also note that, with its abstract, macrocosmic conceptualization of history and sublime discourse, the grand vision embraced by Xiang Ying and Bai Sha is not just an important cornerstone of Marxist historiography but also a most essential motif in revolutionary historical fiction, a literary genre eagerly promoted by the government in Communist China for ideological purposes. By implicitly criticizing this grand vision as an illusion and then supporting his criticism with the tragedy of the South Anhui Incident, Li Ruqing obviously intends to prove that the specific course of history, shot through with ambiguities and possibilities, is anything but inevitable.

Once history is freed from the notion of inevitability, it becomes in *The South Anhui Incident* an agglomerate of localized, fragmented events without any overarching structure. In turn the author describes at great length not only critical decisions made by the CCP and the GMD commanders but also personal relationships among low-ranking Communist cadres that seem to have no discernible bearing on the central event in the novel. As he includes both "relevant" and seemingly "irrelevant" episodes in his account, Li Ruqing clearly indicates that for him history taken as a whole contains no immanent unity or coherence. Unity or coherence in historical representation, he implies, is a mental construct that reflects the historian's ideological orientation rather than history itself. To a certain degree, he is aware that his own work is a product of a certain ideological environment. Hence instead of making absolute truth claims he would leave room for alternative interpretations of his characters, or even let them defend their behaviors targeted for authorial criticism, as we have seen in Zhou Zikun's self-justification. Expandable in narrative scope and amenable to a variety of interpretative viewpoints, history in *The South Anhui Incident* refuses to be grasped once and for all in a definite shape.

Given Li Ruqing's agnostic inclination, it is not surprising that he creates out of whole cloth a Buddhist monk Jingxin (Mirror Heart) as a source of wisdom far superior to anyone else in his novel. A former brigadier who abandoned the secular world after being disillusioned by the internecine wars among his fellow commanders and by an

assassination attempt on him made by his favorite concubine and his most trusted lieutenant, Jingxin has a premonition of the danger the New Fourth Army would face on its evacuation and is the only character in the novel who knows beforehand the overgrown ditch through which the army could have broken through the GMD encirclement, yet he, with his transcendental perspicacity, remains aloof from the happenings of the mundane world. As he debates with the self-claimed Marxist and atheist Bai Sha after the South Anhui Incident, the persuasive power in his arguments contrasts sharply with his opponent's confusion and diffidence. In locating a source of insight and solace in a religious belief, Li Ruqing reveals the inadequacy of all the cognitive attempts, including the materialist explanations of the world, that refuse to acknowledge the difficulties in understanding the complexities of human affairs. Through Jingxin's mouth he expresses the view that the human world, in the final analysis, is not completely knowable, particularly for those still entangled in it, a view that is paradoxically presented as wisdom because of its recognition of human cognitive limitations. Ultimately, the creation of Jingxin as an embodiment of wisdom shows the author's awareness that, confronted with all the ambiguities and potentialities in historical circumstances and historical participants, any attempt to straighten out the course of history may turn out to be a Sisyphean effort. At this point we cannot but wonder if Jingxin, with his detached standpoint and dispassionate mind, is consciously created as a corrective for the author himself who is so subjectively involved in his interpretation of the South Anhui Incident.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For discussions, in English, of the cultural reflections in the "Culture Fever," see Jing Wang's *High Culture Fever*, especially pp. 118–36 and Xudong Zhang's *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms*, especially pp. 35–99.

<sup>2</sup> See Chiang Kai-shek's "The Function of Revolutionary Discipline," in *The Collected Wartime Messages of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, 1937–1945* (Rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969) 544–45.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Lanxin Xiang in *Mao's Generals* pays attention to the personal conflicts between Mao Zedong and Xiang Ying in the history of the New Fourth Army.

<sup>4</sup> For a recent book-length study of contemporary Chinese writers' revisions of the revolutionary historical fiction, see Lin Qingxin's *Brushing History Against the Grain*, especially pp. 27–56 and pp. 83–113.

<sup>5</sup> Li Ruqing, *Wannan shibian* 233.

<sup>6</sup> Li Ruqing, *Wannan shibian* 287–93.

<sup>7</sup> Li Ruqing, “Benlai shi yitan qingshui, weishenme bei jaihunle? Guanyu Wannan shibian chuanguo jingguo da bianzhe wen” (Why muddy clear waters? Answers to the editor's questions about the process of writing *The South Anhui Incident*), *Wannan shibian* 855.

<sup>8</sup> See Shi Yan, “Xu,” *Wannan shibian* 5.

<sup>9</sup> See Yang Gang's “Wannan shibian de lishi zhenshixing hezai” in Run Shijiong and Yang Liping, eds., *Jinian “Wannan shibian” wushi zhounian zhuanji* 289.

<sup>10</sup> Li Ruqing, *Wannan shibian* 131.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Mannheim's views in this respect can be found, for example, in “The Sociology of Knowledge,” *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* 264–311.

<sup>12</sup> Li Ruqing, *Wannan shibian* 759.

<sup>13</sup> Li Ruqing, *Wannan shibian* 347–48.

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