

On the Narrative Transformation and Cultural Implications of Ge Fei's Jiangnan Trilogy

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Abstract

As a significant representative of contemporary Chinese avant-garde literature, Ge Fei's creative journey reflects the overarching trend of avant-garde literature shifting from experimental writing towards realism. Centered on the Jiangnan Trilogy, this paper explores Ge Fei's transformation and exploration in narrative structure, characterization, and cultural implications. Through close textual analysis, it reveals how Ge Fei developed a distinctive "avant-garde realism" style during the avant-garde literature's "outward turn," and examines its significance within contemporary Chinese literature. A core characteristic of avant-garde literature is textual "autonomy" – where the fictional world prioritizes constructing its own linguistic system over directly reflecting reality. This trait is particularly evident in Ge Fei's early works. For instance, *The Lost Boat* employs "deficit narration" to create narrative uncertainty, forming a self-contained space of meaning. *Brown Flocks* employs non-linear narration and symbolic imagery to construct a novelistic world suffused with hallucinatory hues, a technique that intensifies avant-garde literature's deconstruction of traditional realist narrative models. This external turn signified writers integrating real-world concerns into their self-contained textual structures. Ge Fei's Jiangnan Trilogy epitomizes this transformation. These three novels respectively examine the Xinhai Revolution (*Peach Blossoms and Human Faces*), the socialist construction era (*Mountains and Rivers Entering Dreams*), and the market economy period (*Spring's End in Jiangnan*). Through the shifting fortunes of three generations in Jiangnan, they depict a century of historical upheaval in Chinese society.

Keywords

Ge Fei, The Jiangnan Trilogy, Avant-Garde Literature, Realism, Narrative Transformation, Cultural Significance

1. Introduction

The 1980s witnessed the emergence of contemporary avant-garde literature in China, with Ge Fei, alongside Yu Hua, Ma Yuan, Su Tong, and Hong Feng, hailed as the "Five Tigers of the Avant-Garde." They gained renown in literary circles through their creation of short and medium-length fiction. Avant-garde fiction emphasized linguistic experimentation and formal innovation within texts, pursuing the construction of "self-contained worlds." Ge Fei's early representative works, *The Lost Boat* (1987) and *Brown Flocks* (1988), both demonstrated his highly experimental writing style. However, entering the 1990s, the experimental tendencies of avant-garde literature gradually dissipated, and avant-garde writers began to return to realism. Ge Fei's Jiangnan Trilogy (*Peach Blossoms and Human Faces*, *Mountains and Rivers Entering Dreams*, *Spring's End in Jiangnan*) emerged precisely against this backdrop, revealing his reflections on the era, society, and history during the avant-garde's "turn towards the external".

Ge Fei's Jiangnan Trilogy observes the sweeping trajectory of modern China with profound attention and a solemn commitment to historical and contemporary responsibility. Spanning a century, it addresses a series of crucial modernist propositions against the backdrop of revolutionary history and the history of ideas. However, this highly experimental approach also rendered avant-garde fiction ill-equipped for profound engagement with reality. As societal ideologies evolved, avant-garde writers gradually recognized that linguistic experimentation alone could not adequately address reality's complexity. Consequently, post-1990s avant-garde literature underwent a transformative shift towards external engagement. In the first installment, *Peach Blossoms and Human Faces*, Lu Xiumi, the daughter of a late Qing dynasty official family, harbors a dream of freedom beyond her household walls and a peaceful existence untroubled by war and upheaval. She dedicates her life to the cause of revolution. The subsequent work, *Mountains and Rivers Enter Dreams*, centers on Xiumi's son, Tan Gongda. Having attained the peaceful existence his mother sought throughout her life, he now serves as county magistrate. His "dream" is to lead the local populace in developing irrigation systems, advancing science and technology, and fostering societal progress. The final installment, *Spring's End in Jiangnan*, follows Tan Duanwu, a descendant of Tan Gongda.

2. Narrative Strategies and Stylistic Innovations in Ge Fei's Jiangnan Trilogy

2.1 Themes and Historical Context

This intellectual living through the 1980s and 1990s naturally inhabits a golden age unimaginable to his ancestors and father. Yet he too carries his own anxieties and pursuits. Three generations, shaped by distinct environments and experiences, each pursue different life goals. Yet like the blood flowing through their veins, their dreams continue to be passed down and evolved. Ge Fei chronicles a protracted pursuit of dreams—a journey without beginning or end, perpetually unfolding. The novel features exquisitely crafted plots, classical and restrained language, while retaining a pioneering spirit. Ge Fei's Jiangnan Trilogy, with its solemn responsibility towards history and reality, gazes intently upon modern China's magnificent journey. Spanning a century, it addresses a series of crucial modernity propositions against the backdrop of revolutionary and spiritual history. The quests of three generations, interwoven with yearnings for liberation and the fervor of dreams, unfold amidst the rise and fall, triumph and defeat, joy and sorrow. Individual character and destiny resonate with grand historical movements and profound value contemplations, forming an artistic world that is both richly detailed and vast in scope. This is a novel imbued with Chinese stylistic sensibilities. With profound cultural self-awareness, Ge Fei explores the restoration and transformation of the Ming and Qing novelistic tradition. Through delicate narration, elegant language, and an internal structure cyclical as the Spring and Autumn Annals, he carves out broader cultural space and new linguistic and artistic dimensions for expressing modern Chinese experience.

2.2 Character Symbolism and Realism-Avant-garde Fusion

Though Ge Fei leans towards realism in this trilogy, his writing retains the intrinsic qualities of avant-garde literature. For instance, his characters often carry symbolic weight. Lu Xicmi in *Peach Blossoms and Human Faces* represents not only the Jiangnan aristocratic maiden but also embodies the fluctuating fortunes of feudal families amid historical upheaval. Tan Gongda in *Mountains and Rivers Entering Dreams* embodies the contradictory character of intellectuals during the revolutionary era. Meanwhile, Tan Duanwu in *Spring's End in Jiangnan* epitomizes the identity crisis faced by intellectuals in the market economy era. Through these characters, Ge Fei explores the issue of identity recognition for modern Chinese individuals amidst the torrent of their times.

2.3 Narrative Structure and Non-linear Techniques

Moreover, the Jiangnan Trilogy retains certain narrative strategies characteristic of avant-garde fiction. For instance, in terms of structure, Ge Fei continues to employ a fragmented narrative approach, with certain chapters arranged in a non-linear temporal sequence, enhancing the text's metaphorical richness and polysemy. His use of "elliptical narration" remains evident, though in the Jiangnan Trilogy, these gaps manifest more as ruptures in history and memory rather than the narrative labyrinths characteristic of earlier avant-garde works [1].

2.4 Narrative Techniques and Literary Style

Ge Fei employs a concise and potent narrative structure in his Jiangnan Trilogy, with phrasing and sentence construction possessing a musical quality that lends the text a poetic beauty in form. However, his use of stream-of-consciousness techniques introduces a degree of uncertainty in the progression of the plot. For instance, in *Peach Blossoms and Human Faces*, Ge Fei's frequent use of stream-of-consciousness writing often interrupts the unfolding of characters' destinies with lengthy soliloquies or situational descriptions. While this narrative approach enhances the text's literary quality, allowing readers to perceive the flow of characters' thoughts, it simultaneously diminishes the story's coherence, rendering certain chapters rather opaque. Moreover, in both *Peach Blossoms and Human Faces* and *Mountains and Rivers Entering Dreams*, Ge Fei adopts a non-linear narrative approach reminiscent of Latin American literature. At pivotal plot moments, the author frequently employs flashbacks or essayistic descriptions, disrupting the reader's tracking of characters' destinies and heightening narrative uncertainty. This technique bears certain similarities to the writing styles of Kenzaburo and Fyodor Dostoevsky, where disrupting linear narrative lends greater intellectual depth to the work.

3. Character, Cultural Symbolism, and Social Critique in Ge Fei's Jiangnan Trilogy

3.1 Character Development and Symbolism

In terms of character development, Ge Fei's protagonists often embody potent cultural symbolism. Take Tan Gongda, the county magistrate in *Mountains and Rivers Entering Dreams*: his portrayal diverges from both traditional revolutionary heroes and stereotypical bureaucrats. Possessing dreams alongside ordinary human emotional needs, he appears profoundly authentic. Yet precisely because of his 'ordinariness', his political ideals ultimately remain unfulfilled. Crushed by the wheels of history, his fate culminates in the deprivation of even his right to survive.

3.2 Social Critique and Patriotic Sentiment

This characterization renders Tan Gongda a symbol of modern Chinese intellectuals grappling between reality and idealism. Concurrently, the female characters in the Jiangnan Trilogy are equally representative. Take Yao Peipei from *Mountains and Rivers Entering Dreams*: fleeing amidst war and political upheaval, she could have been a pivotal witness to the era's transformations. Yet Ge Fei does not fully explore her exile, instead choosing to have her return to

Meeting where she is arrested. This narrative approach prevents the text from fully revealing the survival conditions of ordinary individuals within the historical context, leaning instead towards a fatalistic storytelling. By contrast, had the work devoted more attention to depicting Yao Peipei's exile journey, it might have achieved greater historical depth while avoiding certain sections' verbosity and lack of focus.

Ge Fei profoundly depicts the transformations of modern Chinese society in his Jiangnan Trilogy, with patriotic sentiment running throughout. Particularly in *Mountains and Rivers Entering Dreams*, Tan Gongda, though limited in capability, consistently strives to plan for the future of his nation and locality. This spirit embodies the sense of responsibility borne by Chinese intellectuals during turbulent times. Yet, while expressing this patriotic sentiment, Ge Fei also delivers a profound critique of modern Chinese society.

In *Spring's End in Jiangnan*, Ge Fei portrays the complex web of vested interests and distorted human nature among the wealthy, officials, and intellectuals of modern society. This critique aligns with Lu Xun's literary ethos, revealing societal ills while simultaneously expressing profound concern for individual destinies. Nevertheless, compared to Russian or Latin American literature, Ge Fei's works exhibit relative limitations in depicting the holistic structure of society [2]. For instance, whereas Dostoevsky offers a macro-level presentation of social environments, the Jiangnan Trilogy focuses more on individual emotions and spiritual worlds. This results in works that, while critically profound in thought, remain somewhat constrained in their social analysis.

3.3 Use of Traditional Cultural Elements

The Jiangnan Trilogy extensively employs traditional cultural elements such as classical music, poetic imagery, and the Peach Blossom Spring, imbuing the work with rich cultural resonance. Yet Ge Fei does not treat traditional culture as mere aesthetic symbolism; rather, he seeks to explore its survival within modern society through his texts. For instance, the Peach Blossom Spring—a symbol of the ideal world in Chinese literary history—is imbued with new meaning in *Mountains and Rivers Entering Dreams*, becoming a space where totalitarianism and utopianism intertwine. This framing not only reveals the disillusionment of traditional Chinese cultural ideals in contemporary society but also further amplifies the text's critical undertones. Nevertheless, in the process of inheriting and transforming traditional culture, Ge Fei's works exhibit certain limitations. For instance, the incorporation of cultural elements in *Spring's End in Jiangnan* appears somewhat fragmented, failing to form a cohesive cultural system and resulting in a somewhat scattered expression of ideas in certain sections.

4. Dreams, Fate, and Regional Symbolism in Ge Fei's Jiangnan Trilogy

4.1 Dreams as Psychological and Societal Symbols

In the Jiangnan Trilogy, dreams serve not only as psychological symbols for the characters but also as metaphors for societal transformation, embodying the construction and collapse of utopian ideals. In *Peach Blossoms and Human Faces*, Lu Xiumi, originally the daughter of a distinguished Jiangnan family, pursued personal ideals amidst the torrent of her era, only to face ultimate disillusionment. She journeyed to Japan to study, dedicating herself to revolutionary causes, yet her ideals crumbled under the weight of reality, ending her life in exile. Her fate echoes Shi Tiesheng's observation: "This shore is forever incomplete; otherwise, the other shore would collapse. Between the flawed mortal and the perfect divine lies the eternal path of the believer." Xiumi's solitary struggle and ultimate failure serve as a profound metaphor for the shattered destiny of idealism.

4.2 Dreams, Love, and the Fragility of Human Aspirations

In the Jiangnan Trilogy, dreams signify not only hope but also the potential for shattering. Such is the case with the affection between Tan Gongda and Yao Peipei. Constrained by their disparate social standing and age difference, Tan Gongda consistently restrained his feelings. Yet when he finally resolved to confront his inner emotions, both their lives were already nearing their end. This emotional void intertwines with shattered dreams, imbuing the trilogy with profoundly tragic undertones. Dreams are both fragile and enduring, much like the characters perpetually oscillating between reality and illusion, seeking meaning within their fractured visions.

This epic work, spanning the late Qing dynasty, the early Republican era, the founding of New China, and the new millennium, takes the water towns of Jiangnan as its geographical setting and the fictional stages of Liuzhou and Meeting. Through the three generations of intellectuals from the Chen family of Liuzhou—Lu Xiumi, Tan Gongda, and Duanwu—weaves a spiritual map charting the arduous journey of modern Chinese intellectuals navigating the tensions between idealism and reality, enlightenment and ignorance, and the individual against the tide of history. Ge Fei not only reconstructs the historical folds of a century in China, but also, with a cool and compassionate pen, interrogates humanity's eternal spiritual predicament: when ideals shatter in the mire of reality, how can one guard the faint light within? The Jiangnan depicted by Ge Fei possesses both the poetic texture of "small bridges, flowing water, and dwellings" and the gritty folds of reality—damp, gloomy, and permeated by a stench of decay [3]. The persistent drizzle of the rainy season, decaying leaves floating in the waterways, and the musty odor lingering in ancient residences—these concrete descriptions of scenery serve not only as an accurate portrayal of Jiangnan's regional characteristics but also as metaphorical expressions of the characters' inner worlds.

4.3 Regional Symbolism and Interplay with Character Fate

Simultaneously, Ge Fei intricately weaves the region's cultural fabric with the characters' destinies. Lu Xiumi's gentleness and resilience mirror the region's flowing waters-seemingly delicate yet capable of carving through solid rock. Tan Gongda's idealism and innocence resemble Jiangnan's meticulously crafted gardens, destined to be shattered by reality. Duanwu's decadence and confusion evoke the region's plum rains-damp and gloomy, yet harboring the potential for rebirth. It may be said that 'Jiangnan' serves both as witness to the fates of three generations of intellectuals and as a mirror to their inner worlds. Through this mutual reflection of regional culture and personal destiny, the narrative of the Jiangnan Trilogy attains richer layers and profound intellectual depth.

5. Dreams, Utopia, and the Intellectual's Dilemma in the Jiangnan Trilogy

5.1 Utopia as a Central Theme

Utopia constitutes another pivotal theme within the Jiangnan Trilogy. Through the fates of diverse characters, Ge Fei illustrates the establishment, perseverance, and ultimate collapse of utopian ideals. In *Mountains and Rivers Entering Dreams*, the relationship between Duanwu and Xiurong embodies such a utopian pursuit. That night twenty years prior, their encounter at Zhaoyin Temple set in motion a lifetime of wandering. Yet this love remained unrealized in reality. Duanwu perpetually navigated society's margins, while Xiurong ultimately chose exile in Tibet to achieve spiritual resonance with him. This unfolding of fate represents not merely personal tragedy, but the ruthless shattering of utopian faith by the tides of historical change.

5.2 The Intellectual's Dilemma and Social Exclusion

Foucault observed that societal moral orders possess latent coercive power, and intellectuals resisting mainstream ideologies are often branded as heretics or even mentally ill. Though the protagonists of *The Jiangnan Trilogy* walked at the forefront of their era, they remained unaccepted by mainstream society, facing instead exclusion and suppression [4]. This pursuit of utopian ideals ultimately becomes the root of personal tragedy, mirroring the enlightener's dilemma revealed by Lu Xun: "The enlightener's spirit is worn down in hostility towards the masses." Through this theme, Ge Fei further explores the complex relationship between history, society, and the individual.

5.3 Literary Construction of History and Utopia

In *The Jiangnan Trilogy*, Ge Fei deliberately distances himself from mainstream historical accounts, constructing his own literary realm. He eschews grand narratives, instead reflecting the tides of change through the chronicling of individual destinies. In his view, the writer is "one who takes up the pen to record," presenting historical truth through meticulous observation of society's myriad facets. As T.S. Eliot wrote in *The Waste Land*: "I sit and fish on the shore, and behind me lies a wasteland. Have I at least cleared the fields?" Ge Fei weaves "dreams" and "utopias" into a distinctive literary symbolism, revealing the intellectual's spiritual predicament and the wasteland of history.

5.4 Evolution of Intellectual Idealism Across Generations

From Lu Xiumei's revolutionary participation in pursuit of the utopian ideal of a 'Great Harmony World', to Tan Gongda's practical exploration in building a 'New Socialist Countryside' after the founding of New China, and on to Duanwu's spiritual disorientation amid the commercial tide of the new century, the idealism of three generations of intellectuals reveals a trajectory of gradual "hollowing out". This very trajectory mirrors the profound upheavals of a century in Chinese history. From Lu Xiumi's revolutionary participation and pursuit of the utopian ideal of a 'Great Harmony World', to Tan Gongda's practical exploration of building a 'Socialist New Village' after the founding of New China, and then to Duanwu's spiritual disorientation in the face of commercialization in the new century, the idealism of three generations of intellectuals reveals a trajectory of gradual "hollowing out," a trajectory that precisely mirrors the profound upheavals of China's century-long history.

6. Exploring Intellectual Identity and Cultural Subjectivity in Ge Fei's Jiangnan Trilogy

6.1 Avant-garde Narrative Techniques and Literary Style

Discovering Myself in Jiangnan: I accept life's imperfections, yet refuse to submit to fate's dictates. Truly great classics are those that take but a week to read, yet linger in one's memory for a lifetime. Elegant prose meets avant-garde techniques in perfect harmony; a multi-threaded structure, interconnected like tendons, evokes a distant, ethereal atmosphere. This is truly Chinese in form, tone, structure, and narrative-China's own "One Hundred Years of Solitude." Some avant-garde novels bear the hallmarks of modernism, others those of postmodernism. Their shared trait is an advocacy for returning to literature's essence, emphasizing linguistic experimentation and formal sensibility. Unlike many avant-garde writers, Ge Fei's novels largely retain the appearance of a narrative, skillfully weaving tales that are both enigmatic and captivating. Yet his fiction distinctly diverges from traditional storytelling. Primarily, Ge Fei's works seek to convey the authenticity of sensation rather than the factual veracity of the plot itself. Secondly, rather than constructing a coherent narrative, his writing deliberately deconstructs the very notion of story.

6.2 Intellectual Identity Crisis and Utopian Pursuits

Ge Fei's *Jiangnan Trilogy* stands as a seminal work deeply exploring the identity crisis of intellectuals. Within this

trilogy, intellectuals from different eras grapple with doubts about their personal and societal value amidst turbulent times, plunging into a dual predicament of self-identity and social identity. To escape this predicament, the protagonists of the trilogy embark upon distinct life choices centered around the "utopian dream" [5]. When intellectuals confront the awkward inability to "save the world", turning to traditional culture and steadfastly upholding their own convictions becomes a viable path to "self-rescue" – a means to achieve "dwelling poetically". The interior and exterior of Huajia She represent two starkly contrasting worlds. The internal harmony and utopian dreams of a secluded paradise are merely a facade, fundamentally undermining the very essence of utopian ideals. Huajia She is not synonymous with pastoral living, but rather a paradise of hedonism.

6.3 Cultural Subjectivity and Historical-Poetic Depth

The lust for pleasure drives the head of the household to plunder with increasing ferocity, while the craving for survival ultimately leads to internecine strife among the inhabitants of this "paradise." Ge Fei's incisive pen lays bare the flaws of this pastoral utopia. His sweeping, chillingly beautiful love epic, chronicling three generations' partings and sorrows, serves as a captivating footnote to our era. Ge Fei's works exhibit a natural classical elegance precisely because he masterfully draws upon classical resources. In terms of ideological depth and emotional resonance, he employs intricate themes to interpret the return to and transcendence of traditional Chinese philosophy, achieving a retrospective and re-enactment of poetic history. The breadth and depth of his historical references, the subtle and delicate portrayal of human warmth, and his poetic reflections on the countryside and tradition collectively construct the profound and expansive "emotional depth and spiritual essence" at the core of his novels. This provides a paradigm and reference point for exploring the subjectivity of Chinese literature.

7. Returning to Classical Roots: Narrative Strategies and Cultural Memory in Ge Fei's Novels

7.1 Return to Classical Traditions and Philosophical Integration

In his Preface to the Zhao Family Poetry Anthology, Yang Weizhen of the Yuan dynasty remarked: "The evaluation of poetry differs not from that of human character. Just as people possess features, bone structure, temperament, and spirit, so too does poetry exhibit beauty, ugliness, excellence, and mediocrity." Here, "features and bone structure" correspond precisely to the artistic form of the work, while "temperament and spirit" correspond to its intrinsic thoughts and emotions. Ge Fei's return to classical traditions in his creative work manifests not only in linguistic tone, systematic narrative structure, and technique, but also in thematic substance. He achieves both a return to and transcendence of traditional philosophy, embodying the creative mission of "discerning right from wrong, rectifying hearts and minds, and purifying customs." Thus, he fully constructs the profound and expansive covenant of "emotional disposition and spiritual essence." In both *The Jiangnan Trilogy* and *Looking Toward the Spring Wind*, he not only focuses on chronicling and interrogating personal spiritual histories but also observes societal transformations. He endeavors to capture the enduring "spirit" beyond shifting circumstances, writing of the "unchanging" essence amidst change. From a linear temporal perspective, Ge Fei masterfully fuses the triple realms of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism through his portrayal and narration of characters' destinies. Within the Confucian ethos of worldly engagement, he integrates Taoist spontaneity and serene detachment alongside Buddhist existential philosophy, ultimately reaching a state transcending life and death, nature, and the duality of self and object [6].

7.2 Narrative Strategies and Classical Resources

This represents a breakthrough in Ge Fei's literary return to classical themes, offering a novel paradigm and perspective for contemporary fiction's exploration of classical roots. The seamless embedding of the ancient historical narrative tradition of the "Peach Garden Dream" within the tumultuous currents of modern history achieves such perfect recreation that it never feels jarring to the reader. This is precisely the brilliance of Ge Fei's novelistic artistry in drawing upon classical resources. Turning to *Spring Winds*, the novel conspicuously adopts the biographical approach of the *Records of the Grand Historian*, employing a biographical narrative style for each character to achieve narrative coherence.

7.3 Cultural Memory and Documentation of Rural Transformation

The collective memory of the entire village of Ruli Zhao is, in fact, woven, stitched, and pieced together through the life narratives of different individuals. From this perspective, one can discern Ge Fei's deliberate appropriation of classical novelistic resources, achieving a new artistic dimension that inherits the tradition of classical historical biography. Furthermore, resisting oblivion and writing of constancy are also among Ge Fei's narrative aspirations and missions. In his author's note for *Looking Towards the Spring Wind*, he confessed that witnessing his hometown's decay inspired him to write this work. Within the novel, Ge Fei narrates and constructs the rural space of "Ruli Zhao Village" through the lens of a village historian, chronicling its past development, prosperity, transformation, and decline, while documenting the fluctuating fortunes of its inhabitants [7]. In essence, this work offers a poignant solace to those who have "permanently lost their homeland." It is Ge Fei's personal account, imbued with profound bewilderment and the acute pain of witnessing his native place's demise.

8. Conclusion

Ge Fei's creative journey, evolving from the "autarkic" writing of avant-garde literature to the "outward turn" of realism,

exemplifies a significant trend in the development of contemporary Chinese literature. The Jiangnan Trilogy, while continuing the experimental spirit of avant-garde literature, actively incorporates reflections on social reality, forming a distinctive avant-garde realist style. Ge Fei's writing not only offers new possibilities for avant-garde literature but also broadens the expressive scope of realism, achieving a fresh synthesis between form and content in contemporary literature. This approach, combining avant-garde innovation with a concern for reality, establishes Ge Fei as one of the most representative writers in contemporary Chinese literature.

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