Nostalgic representation here is indeed the best substitute for historical consciousness.

– Dai Jinhua 戴錦華, “Imagined Nostalgia”

Readers may have noticed that most of the fiction discussed in the previous chapters is set in rural regions. In fact, until the urban culture was revived in the late 1980s as a result of Deng’s economic reforms, literature in mainland China had been predominated by rural writings for half a century. Leo Ou-fan Lee 李歐梵 has observed that after 1937 “the countryside [became] the ultimate backdrop of reality,” and that “the city did not dominate the literary imagination in the same way that it did in Western modernism.” For all its historic significance in Mao’s peasant revolts and political movements, the countryside found favor with writers under the red flag. In the Mao period rural representation was hoisted to be the orthodox mode of revolutionary writing. This was followed by root-seeking experiments on the mainland in the 1980s as discussed in the first chapter. It was not until 1988, when Wang Shuo’s hooligan fiction set the fashion, that urban discourse recovered its territory lost for half a century in China.

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2 There are of course a few exceptions produced in the Mao era before the Cultural Revolution, for example, Zhou Erfu’s 周而復 novel *Shanghai de zaochen* 上海的早晨 (Morning in Shanghai) (1958–1962) and Ouyang Shan’s 歐陽山 twin volumes *Sanjiaxiang* 三家巷 (Three Families Lane) (1959) and *Kudou* 苦鬥 (Bitter struggle) (1962).
4 In 1988, four of Wang Shuo’s popular novels and novellas on the subject of contemporary city life are reproduced as films. See Xiaobing Tang, “In Search of the Real
In the symbolic order of modern literature, a contrast between city and country, as historian Raymond Williams characterizes it, is that “of the present and actual with the past or the lost.” Thus, the agricultural countryside, rather than the industrial and commercial city, is normally the locus of nostalgia. In effect, the word xiang, meaning ‘rural area’ or ‘home village’, in two of the Chinese translations of ‘nostalgia’, xiangchou or huaiyang, suggests a penchant for rurality or a countryside complex—be it in the sense of Shen Congwen’s lyricism, Lu Xun’s irony, or post-Mao root search. Yet nostalgia for rural life is impossible without the subjective experience of urban culture. Nan Fan infers that homesickness is merely “a literary fantasy” amid the presence of the urban space. According to Jean Starobinski’s study, the idea of nostalgia emerges in Europe “at the time of the rise of the great cities when greatly improved means of transportation made movements of the population much easier.” Not only do the developed means of transportation facilitate people’s travel away from home and arouse homesickness, but the mobility of urban life also fixes the rural hometown as a stable concept. Zhang Ning has stated that the hometown is often objectified by a “stranger” as a complex affective image, a cultural memory, or a Freudian desire of returning to the matrix. Thus, one must first and foremost identify oneself as an alien, who has escaped or been exiled to the urban distant land, so as to long for a ‘return’ to the rural hometown.

Nostalgia manifests itself in the sensation of pain as denoted in its Greek roots, nostos, meaning ‘to return home’, and algos, ‘pain’, translated into a kind of psychological disorder in the twentieth century. Whether it is a personal feeling or a popular mood, nostalgia is not a simple duplica-