During the mid- and late 1980s, various creative trends emerged in fiction. They were either started by the writers themselves, or were creative tendencies induced by critics. Among the more important was “root-seeking literature” during the mid-1980s, and “avant-garde fiction” and “new realist fiction” during the late 1980s.

From 1983 until 1984, “intellectual youth writers”, both young and middle-aged, such as Han Shaogong, Li Tuo, Zheng Yi, Ah Cheng, Li Hangyu, Zheng Wanlong, and Li Qingxi, had an exchange of opinions and a symposium on the issue of “root-seeking” in literature.¹ In an essay published in early 1984, Li Tuo used the term “root-seeking” to express the “desire to be able one day to use the Daur language of which I’ve already forgotten so much, to have a stuttering conversation with relatives and the people of my hometown, to give expression to the inspiration Daur culture has given me” .² In the summer of 1985, they wrote a succession of essays for periodicals, proposing and propagating views on root-seeking literature. Han Shaogong’s ‹The “Roots” of Literature›³ was later seen as the “manifesto” of this literary movement. He believed, “literature has roots, the roots of literature should be situated deep in the soil of national traditions and culture, and if the roots are not deep, it’s difficult for the leaves to flourish”; he believed our responsibility is to “release the thermal energy of modern ideas to recast and give a bright plating” to “the nation’s self”. Other essays included ‹My Roots› by Zheng Wanlong, ‹Put Our “Roots” in Order› by Li Hangyu, ‹Culture Restricts Humankind› by Ah Cheng, and ‹Stride Across the

¹ See: Li Qingxi, ‹Root-Seeking: A Return to the Thing Itself›, Literary Reviews, no. 4, 1988.
² Li Tuo, ‹Correspondence on Writing›, People’s Literature, no. 3, 1984.
³ Han Shaogong, ‹The “Roots” of Literature›, Author, no. 6, 1985.
Fault Zone of Culture by Zheng Yi. In their differing explications there was an important point in common: Chinese literature should be established within a broad, deep “exploration and expression of culture”, as there can only be a dialogue with “world literature” when there is a deep exploration of this ancient land’s “rock formations of culture”. In these theoretical elaborations, some previously published literary works (primarily fiction) were listed as models of this literary proposition by its advocates. Short stories by Wang Zengqi (such as ‘The Love Story of a Young Monk’ and ‘A Tale of Big Nur’) published during the 1980s that drew their subject matter from the habits and customs of the small towns of his home area (the Gaoyou area of Jiangsu Province) in the old days were seen as successful illustrations of an emphasis on the details of national culture. Jia Pingwa’s works about the Shangzhou region in Shaanxi Province that he began publishing in 1982, and the somewhat later “Gechuan River fiction” series by Li Hangyu (such as ‘Traditions of Shazao’ and ‘The Last Fisherman’) were recognized as embodiments of “root-seeking in literature”. Following this, the discussion of this topic gradually unfolded in literary circles and its influence rapidly expanded. Due to both the deliberate creative pursuits of some writers and the necessity of critics to seek out texts on which to expound their theories, within a short period, there was a rapid increase in the number of works considered “root-seeking”. Examples of this were Jia Pingwa’s “Shangzhou series”, ‘The King of Chess’ and ‘Unconventional Everywhere’ by Ah Cheng, ‘Distant Village’ and ‘Old Well’ by Zheng Yi, ‘Pa Pa Pa’ and ‘Woman Woman Woman’ by Han Shaogong, the “Strange Tales from Strange Lands” series by Zheng Wanlong, ‘Xiaobao Village’ by Wang Anyi, and ‘A Soul Tied to a Leather-Strap Buckle’ by Zhaxi Dawa, as well as some of the fiction of such writers as Zhang Chengzhi, Shi Tie-sheng, Lu Wenfu, Deng Youmei, and Feng Jicai. During this period, some critical essays did not limit themselves to using the phrase “root-seeking in literature” in describing this literary trend and used concepts such as “root-seeking literature” (“root-seeking fiction”) and “root-seeking writers”. However, could the features of the recognized writers and literary works of this trend be so characterized? Moreover, most of the authors

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