Imagined Nostalgia

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Fashion and Remembrance

In 1996, the first issue of the journal *Hua cheng* displayed on its cover a series of Guo Renwen's oil paintings entitled *The Memory Locked Away* (or, perhaps more accurately, *The Eternal Remembrance*), which depict scenes from a bygone era. Under the shadowy and barely lit ceiling lamp, a young girl is fast asleep and sprawled over an old-fashioned sewing machine. The sewing machine seems to emerge from an uneven, decrepit, and defaced mud wall. On another spot-stained, ancient wall, curled and torn used envelopes serve as wallpaper. In front of the sewing machine, in the foreground, is an extinguished red candle. In progress at the sewing machine is an almost finished handmade infant suit. In this set of paintings, which evokes seemingly familiar but elusive memories, the minuteness and material expressiveness stand out: the young girl's faded, coarsely knit wool vest; her long, trailing skirt hem; the old paint-stripped sewing machine without a speck of dust; the long-since-threadbare rag tied to the machine; the red candle and wax on the overturned coarse ceramic bowl.

boundary 2 24:3, 1997.

Hua cheng accompanied this set of paintings with a short essay by Xiao Yen, entitled "The Right to Nostalgia," in which the author writes:

> Nostalgia is not only a kind of remembrance, but a kind of right. We all have a longing for the past—lingering over some mundane objects because these mundane objects have become the memorial to the trajectory of one's own life, allowing us, without a doubt, to construct a human archive. While he [Guo Renwen] sees the expressive materiality of these objects of personal memorial as the magnificent radiance of life, I look at this magnificent radiance as resistance against the desolate experience of alienation from human nature. Whenever one sees the reflection of stainless steel and glass walls cruelly swallowing up all traces of human life, whenever one unwittingly hails a taxi cab with a cloud of exhaust trailing behind, slowly and resolutely advancing on the cold, hard, paved concrete surface, the meaning of modern "progress" truly depends on the expressive materiality of memory to sustain its equilibrium.[1]

Xiao Yen's short essay seems to attribute to or highlight in Guo's paintings the following notions: remembrance, right, individual, human nature, and the struggle for balance in "modern 'progress.'" If we consider these two works as mutually reflective texts, then some symptoms of contemporary Chinese culture may emerge: on the one hand, modernist or Enlightenment discourse—in terms of the individual, the individual's right, and the human archive, the achievement of all of which depends, as a matter of course, on the progress of Chinese society; on the other hand, the persistent doubt of modern progress inherent in the critique and repulsion of stainless steel, glass walls, industrial pollution, et cetera.

From a certain point of view, it is precisely within a social discourse, seemingly fraught with fragmentation, that Chinese cities of the 1990s unassumingly mobilize the ambience of nostalgia. As one of the most important cultural realities of contemporary China, rather than as a trend of thought or as an undercurrent that resists the systematic progress of modernization and commercialization, nostalgia functions more prevalently as a fashion. Rather than originating from the writings of intellectual elites, it is more a pulse of the not inelegant urban noise; the trappings of nostalgia become perfectly suited as alluring commercial packaging, as a fashionable

1. See *Hua cheng* 1 (1996). Guo Rewen's paintings appear on both the front and back cover. Xiao Yen's short essay appears on the back cover.

culture. If, by the writings of the intellectual elites, we mean the passing on of a glimmer of regard, full of contradiction and discontent, then nostalgia as fashion, like the anxiety infused with the feverish exuberance of the last half of the 1980s, veils a self-congratulatory and festive joy. The Chinese, who could hardly wait to "burst through Gateway 2000," are suddenly seized by a nostalgic languor, as if bearing witness to the result of progress. If, however, the sentiment of nostalgia is still accompanied by the desire to "catch up," then the Chinese nostalgic sentiment's invisible correspondence with the world (that is, with the industrial nations') phenomenon of nostalgic reflection becomes a testimony to cultural catching up. Facing a finite closure—taking leave of the eventful twentieth century—the sentiment of nostalgia arrives in an untimely manner at the century's end; for the China that marches in step with the rest of the world, this is a tacit ineluctability. The prevalence of cultural policing supports a posture of discontented backward gazing. Nevertheless, a closer inspection shows that submerged within the nostalgic sentiment of Chinese urban and contemporary culture is not necessarily the inevitable manifestation of a kind of fin de siècle mood. In fact, the imposed calendrical mode that equates China's age with that of anno Domini (setting aside for the moment the incursion of Western thinking into China's long history) has never been the calendar with which the Chinese people, in their hearts, reckoned time; therefore, it is difficult for Chinese to understand and experience the catastrophic connotation of the end of the millennium for Christian culture. For an entire century, in an interesting irony, we have surpassed the present, anticipating the golden future, and have gone past the end, looking forward to new horizons. Thus, in contemporary rhetoric, the voyage of hope in crossing over the century replaces the tragic lingering of the fin de siècle. If, during the conquest of the 1980s and 1990s, one of Chinese culture's ongoing internal efforts is to consciously construct and strengthen a mesmerizing mirror of the West while at the same time relentlessly fabricating Oriental mythology in front of this magical mirror, then the "fashion" of nostalgic sentiment becomes one application of such a construction, as well as a necessary misreading and explication of the construction. No nostalgic writing can be considered a "re-creation of the original scene." Different from a written record that calls up memories of yesterday, nostalgia, as the fashion of contemporary China, uses the construction and embellishment of remembrance to assuage the present.

The Need for Nostalgia

From the mid-1980s to the 1990s, the process of Chinese society's systematic progress toward modernization and commercialization has been accompanied by large-scale urbanization, or urban modernization. Not only have new cities, such as Shenzhen, Haikou, Zhuhai, and Shekou, sprouted from what had been villages and small towns; large cities have also undergone extensive renovation. Along with the foundational structures of the ancient cities, a certain destructiveness of construction work shoulders the burden of the ancient cities' space of history and remembrance; and day after day, high-rise buildings, luxury mansions, commercial centers, shopping complexes, writing galleries, and fitness gyms replace the ripped-open spaces of the new cities, the metropolises encroaching endlessly like greedy monsters toward their surrounding townships. Thus, a fascinating picture typical of Chinese cities in the 1990s is the ubiquitous construction site, similar to images depicting postwar reconstruction: Amid the airborne dust, the towering cranes, and the chorus of the humming concrete mixers, a new city emerges. The old cities—for example, Shanghai, which is a few hundred years old, or Beijing and Suzhou, which are thousands of years old—quietly recede into oblivion in the explosive transformation. If the spaces of old remain the milestones of individual remembrance and of regional history, and if the decay of the space, and the space of decay, is unique in Chinese history—if not its sole explication and trace—then the prosperous, cosmopolitan, anonymous big city already truncates its enduring visible history, truncates the prodigal son's road home.[2] If history reveals its own footsteps in the process of a continuous flattening out of space, then contemporary Chinese people are fortunate to encounter history and to witness this process of revelation.

From a certain point of view, this process of the giddy and aggressively rapid urbanization of the 1990s embodies the most contradictory sentiment of contemporary Chinese people, especially contemporary Chinese intellectual elites. On the one hand, the ideology of progress is undergoing the materializing process of identification and verification, which conse-

2. Chinese people living overseas lament the changes in, or disappearance altogether, of their hometowns. Gu Xiaoyang once wrote in an American Chinese-language journal: "I used to be afflicted by a profound case of homesickness after coming to the U.S." But one day when going to see the film *Beijing nizao* (Good morning, Beijing), directed by Zhang Nuanxin, he discovered that the Beijing in which he grew up was no longer recognizable. He deeply regrets the demise of his hometown.

quently brings the joy and excitement of discovery; on the other hand, even a "homegrown" Chinese is suddenly stripped of hometown, homeland, and home country and abandoned to the beautiful new world. The feeling of family is no longer conveyed by a *hutong* (small lane, Mongolian in origin), a courtyard, a street corner, a city, but by the increasing retreat and confinement to the sleeping quarters, which consist of an apartment's entryway and its four walls. If during the period between the 1970s and the 1980s modernization is still the coveted golden horizon, much like the secret password to Ali Baba's treasure cave, then in the social realities of the 1980s and the 1990s people discover, not without anguish and disillusion, that the cave that is opened by "open sesame" is not only a Pandora's box but a labyrinthine palace and a dangerous wilderness constructed out of concrete, stainless steel, and glass enclosures. The closer one gets to the facile, universal embodiment of modernization—that wealthy and friendly, healthy and rational, democratic and free horizon—the more it seems like the "hope" left behind in the box.

On another level, if one of the most transformative changes of the 1980s and the 1990s is the replacement of the 1980s collective dream of nationalism with the 1990s individualist dream of wealth, then between 1994 and 1995, the vicissitudes and destructiveness of the dream for gold, at least for the intellectual elites, is more swift and poignant than the fragmentation of the nationalist dream. From the point of view of the intellectuals, who struggled with both repression and debilitation, nostalgia is a strategic need, a necessary spiritual space for imagining and for consolation. That is not all. The anguish of the 1980s and the repression of the 1990s and the rapid reorganization and transformation of society caused the Chinese people to experience the most chaotic identity crisis in many decades. In the 1990s, a "continuous loss of language"—except for a certain Wang Shuo stylistic, or the comedy television series *Bianjibu de gushi* (The story of the editorial section), *Feihua* (Useless babble), and *Wo ai wo jia* (I love my family)—effectively produces a tragicomic effect by the transposition, manipulation, and "misuse" of language. The intellectual collective is mostly immobilized by the taboo and ineffectiveness of discourse (in fact, it is the intellectual genealogy that loses touch with reality). As much as Wang and his group strongly disown the grand narrative of the 1980s, they are, however, the sole group to effectively communicate modernist language; it is they, and not the spiritual thinker or the reformer, who have no reservations about embracing modernization or about embracing the era of gold worship and individualism. As for other intellectual circles, the 1990s reality is

fraught with conflicts and contradictions, and is filled with suffering, pain, and superficiality. Therefore, while the important cultural event of 1995, the debate on *Renwen jingshen* (humanistic spirit),[3] undoubtedly has memorable and concrete motivations and arguments, and undoubtedly analyzes and reorganizes the cultural divisions and camps of the 1990s, it nevertheless resembles more a war of signifiers, targeting the foundational ideas and views shared by both discursively warring parties, while, through adroit manipulation of ideological jargon, forcibly producing very disparate views, expressions, and principles. In fact, the ideological support of "progress" and the rush toward modernization forces Chinese intellectuals to drastically promote analytical thinking about modernism; nonetheless, modernization, with its flow of cash and material worship, creates pressure, anxiety, and anguish. What the Chinese people refuse to see is that the "human archive" is "built" on "humanity"—the history of Western civilization has always coexisted with industrial pollution and forests of steel and concrete.

The emergence of nostalgia answers a cultural need. It attempts to provide not only an imagined haven in the face of a reality of weariness and toil, but also, more importantly, a positive construction—according to Xiao Yen, a reliance on the resistance of remembrance's "expressive materiality" to ensure the "meaning of modern 'progress'." Resembling, while distancing itself from, the 1980s, the construction of historicist historical narration becomes the vehicle of 1990s Chinese culture. Nostalgic representation here is indeed the best substitute for historical consciousness. Even though what the Chinese intellectual culture attempts to resist is the ubiquitous commodity craze, elegant nostalgia quickly becomes precisely one of the most marketable cultural commodities. Thus, whether it is the searching for roots, the homecoming fever, the inauguration of various student group organizations,[4] or the publication of folio-size illustrated journals on "old-style homes";[5] whether it is the popularity in China of the American best-seller *The Bridges of Madison County*[6] or the unrelenting popularity

3. See Ding Dong and Sun Min, eds., *Shiji zhijiao de chongzhuang: Wang Meng xianxiang zhengming lu* (The turn-of-the-century clash: Essays on the Wang Meng phenomenon) (Beijing: Guangming Ribao Chubanshe, 1996).

4. See "Huaijiu qingchao" (The sentimental tide of nostalgia), *Quanqiu qingnian* (Global youth), no. 1 (1996): 1.

5. Several volumes of black-and-white photograph collections of ancient houses and streets from different places have been published under the title *Lao fangzi* (Old houses) (Nanjing: Jiangsu Meishu Chubanshe, 1995).

6. Robert J. Waller, *Lanqiao yimeng* (The bridges of Madison County), trans. Mei Jia,

of its film adaptation at the Chinese movie theaters;[7] whether it is the sentimental meditation of Chen Yifei's films *Haishang jiumeng* (The old dream at sea) and *Renyue huanghun* (The twilight rendezvous), or the novels of Su Tong and Xu Lan, or Wang Anyi's *Changhen ge* (The ballad of eternal remorse),[8] Zhang Yimou's *Yao-a-yao, yao dao waipo qiao* (Shanghai triad), Li Shaohong's *Hongfen* (Rouge), Chen Kaige's *Fengyue* (Temptress moon), or Li Jun's *Shanghai wangshi* (Once upon a time in Shanghai), which gives expression to the delicate texture of the wilderness, to the fragile beauty of the old South, and to the mesmerizing yet corrupt Shanghai; whether it is the appearance of *gudian re* (classics fever) and the *Huaijiu shuxi* (Nostalgia book series)[9] in the so-called publishing market; whether it is the popularity of regional folk songs of Hong Kong and Taiwan, such as "Qianshou" (Holding hands) by Su Rei, "Zai huishou" (Look back again) by Jiang Yuheng, or the ephemeral trend of intimate lyrics in Chinese campus folk songs, such as "Tongzhuo de ni" (Classmate) by Lau Lang, "Tuanzhibu shuji" (The bureaucrat's chronicle) by Wang Lei, "Lutian dianyingyuan" (At the drive-in theater) by Yu Dong (not to mention the nostalgic atmosphere and nostalgic representation that has, in fact, become a trend of 1990s MTV); whether it is the high ratings of television's nostalgic melodramatic soap operas *Fengyu liren* (The belle of misfortune), *Nian lun* (The annal), and *Zaoyu zuotian* (It happened yesterday), or the various appearances of confessional talk-show television programs—together they create a culture, a fashion, a cultural, psychological, and consumerist need and wish fulfillment. Similarly, in Liu Yan's *Yuanqule, Fadaier* (Going far away, Fadaier), an expensive, exquisite antique rattan chair and a bunch of carnations evoke for the heroine a hitherto unknown feeling of languor and an austere, yet elegant vision of a bygone age;[10] in Guo Renwen's oil painting, even

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1st ed., 1st printing (Beijing: Waiguo Wenxue Chubanshe, 1996). Several editions were subsequently published. Sales were still strong in 1996.

7. See "Liu wan ziji de lei, zou hui ziji de jia" (Returning home with tears), *Beijing qingnianbao* (Beijing youth daily), 24 Apr. 1996, 1–2, 5, 8.

8. See Su Tong, *Wenji* (Works) (Nanjing: Jiangsu Wenyi Chubanshe, 1994); *Xu Lan xiaoshu xuan* (Selected writings of Xu Lan) (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe, 1995); and Wang Anyi, *Changhen ge* (The ballad of eternal remorse) (Beijing: Zuojia Chubanshe, 1996).

9. Cai Maoyou and Shan Yuanyang, eds., *Huaijiu shuxi* (Nostalgia book series), 6 vols., 1st ed. (Beijing: Huaxia Chubanshe, 1995).

10. See Liu Yan, "Yuanqule, Fadaier" (Going far away, Fadaier), *Xiaoshuojie* (Fiction world), no. 1 (1996), 56–81.

though the mud wall, the paint-stripped sewing machine, the old-fashioned stationary, the red candle and wax, and the infant suit infer a common childhood remembrance, the long skirt of the young girl, the old-fashioned frosted-glass lightbulb, and the technical realism of the painting's portrayal infer a Western classical ambience that would be difficult to usher into any Chinese historical period.

In 1990, in his film *Xin xang* (The fragrant heart), the Fifth Generation director Sun Zhou transforms, for the first time, the history-forsaking forward gaze and posture of the Fifth Generation into a posture of regarding history and embracing historical culture; he is also the first director to infuse a similar figuration of warm-hearted nostalgia into a successful advertisement. The advertisement, for Black Sesame Beverage of the South, which he wrote and produced for the 999 advertisement firm, featured the warm glow of a red candle foregrounded in a dull-colored setting; a grandmother's old, yet graceful and kind, face; an adorable, traditionally clad little boy with a greedy expression; and some old-fashioned bamboo pails. Nostalgic atmosphere, in embellishing the vacuum of memory and in creating personal identities within the span of historical imagination, simultaneously accomplishes a representation of consumerism as well as a consumerism of representation.

The Harborless Ship of Nostalgia

When the shocking events in Tiananmen Square at the end of the 1980s created a mediated view of the golden horizon, and when the resurgence of a materialist trend after 1993 once again predicted a fragmentation of the realm of experience, the energetically mobilized nostalgic trend faced a historical memory that had no place in the collective remembrance. The arduous periods of revolution and war obstructed the Chinese people's memories of a seemingly authentic "Chinese history." Even for the group of retrospective intellectual elites, the parameter of their visibility still consisted of the steel and iron of war machinery and of blood and anguish. Within the debate of the so-called *jingshen jiayuan* (spiritual homeland) of the 1990s, there exists an ambivalence toward an emergent home for memories to which one can return and whose images one can evoke. An Italian poet can sing, "Those who have not lived in the age before revolution cannot comprehend the sweetness of living."[11] But the Chinese people, hailed by

11. Quoted in Ulrich Gallagher, *Shijie dianying shi* (A history of world cinema) (Beijing: Zhongkuo Dianying Chubanshe, 1987), pt. 1: 110.

the ship of nostalgia in these days of increasingly shrinking space and rapid passage of time, discover that they possess only memories of revolution, before which is the bloodstained story of the dynastic empire. When Chen attempts to construct a memory of an ethnic society, the resistance that he encounters far exceeds the identification that he forges. We remember the history of the revolution, we possess the history of revolution—but the memory of the early revolutionary period of the 1950s and the 1960s is already made into a space for reminiscence. The legacy of the 1970s and the 1980s is once again reframed as "the golden age of spirit"; however, this history cannot provide us with the torment and decay that are necessary for feelings of nostalgia.

An extremely interesting cultural phenomenon in urban China in 1994 and 1995 was the sudden popularity of an American best-selling novel, *The Bridges of Madison County*, which sold millions of copies (not including the incalculable distribution of pirated copies) in China. In addition, the 1996 film adaptation of the book prolonged this wave of popularity. The 1990s novel is popular in the United States because it rewrites a couple's love affair from the 1960s—a revolutionary period in American history—and because it resolves the desolate, isolated, postmodernist space with the imaginary of "true love" among people. (Similar rewriting can also be seen in the Hollywood blockbuster film *Forrest Gump*, which was also well received in China, and in Robert J. Waller's second novel, *Slow Waltz in Cedar Bend*, which is slated for publication in China.) But *The Bridges of Madison County* is popular in China because, besides acknowledging a cultural identification in the process of globalization, it moreover (if not more importantly) indicates a space, a destination, for the contemporary Chinese urbanite's harborless ship of nostalgia, a resting place for the individual's remembrances. It is a noncompromising story of a torrid love affair. Therefore, when individual remembrance emerges through retrospection from the broken debris that was lost in the cracks of memory, at the same time it sexually romanticizes both revolutionary history and remembrance. There are no heroic lovers caught in the vicissitudes of history, no scene of blood and war; instead, we have the aesthetic music of romance. In fact, if we examine another best-selling novel of the 1990s in China, *Manhadun de Zhongguo nüren* (A Chinese woman of Manhattan), we find a similar strategy at work.[12] Although this novel, which sold hundreds of thousands of copies in China, focuses on a "real" American dream, the most moving

12. Zhou Li, *Manhadun de Zhongguo nüren* (A Chinese woman of Manhattan) (Beijing: Guangming Ribao Chubanshe, 1992).

part of the book is not how the character Zhou Li conquers Manhattan and moves into an apartment overlooking Central Park, or the various war stories that authorize the "hidden" personal narrative. The most emotionally satisfying chapters in the book are "Young Girl's First Love" and "The Small House in the Wild North." Here, the various segments of childhood narratives are pieced together into a private love story that effectively erases the emotionally and politically rife, cruel historical backdrop.

If the sexual romanticization of the memory of revolution effectively compensates for the vacuum left by the loss of the grand stage and the failure of the grand narrative, then its own historical narration is also fragmented by the conflictual, disparate authorizing languages and thus is full of blind spots. The representation of history, infused with nostalgic sentiments and revisions, once again regains harmony and continuity in the name of the individual, or consumerism. Among the numerous television commercials for Confucius Family Liquor, the following is a prime example: A background scene stylized into a faded yellow, like that of an old photograph, is accompanied by the words, "That's when I recognized 'home'; that's when I left home; that's when we protected our home." Appearing respectively is an image of a carefree pupil, of a progressive youth leaving home to join the revolution and to resist American intervention, and finally of a family reunion meal depicted in bright technicolor, voiced-over by the commercial jingle, "Confucius Family Liquor makes one think of home." In this nostalgic representation aimed at consumerism, mutually conflicting languages combine to yield a complete, effective historical narrative.

Nostalgic Feelings and the Construction of the Individual

Similar cultural movements existed before the juncture of the 1980s and 1990s. The sexual romanticizing of memories of the revolution accompanied by consumer strategies couched in personal values together constitute the many-faceted expressions of nostalgia in the 1990s. Although for the generation of writers born in the 1960s, including Han Dong, Bi Feiyu, and others, the portrait of childhood through the remembrance of the cultural revolution has an entirely different significance (they are more inclined to think of the carefree soberness in "Classmate," "The Bureaucrat's Chronicle," and "At the Drive-in Theater"). Representing another generation, Liu Heng's *Xiaoyao song* (Ode to the carefree) resembles more a fable in the style of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (*Yingwang*). At least in Tie Ning's *Meigui men* (The gate of roses), Wang Shuo's *Dongwu xiongmeng*

(Ferocious animals), and Mang Ke's *Yeshi* (Primitive things), the memory of the Cultural Revolution is written as a story of sexual romance, a personalized history.[13] It becomes a space accessible to retrospection because of the intervention of the point of view of the self. Wang Shuo's story opens with the tone of an extremely anguished, nostalgic narrator:

> I envy those people who come from the countryside. In their memory exists an infinitely recollectable hometown. Even though this hometown may in reality be a destitute and unpoetic shelter, if they want, they can imagine that certain things that they thought to have lost may still be safely kept in that innocent hometown, and thereby restore their self-esteem and comfort their sorrow.
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> I left home for this big city when I was very young, and I have never left here since. I consider this city to be my hometown. Everything in this city is changing rapidly—houses, streets, and people's dress and conversation—everything has changed, becoming a brand new city that keeps up our standard of fashion.
>
> Not a lingering trace of what came before. Everything is stripped clean.[14]

This is the anguish of an urbanite without a hometown, or of one robbed of a hometown. But at the end of the story, the narrator has undoubtedly found in the emotional reminiscence of a youthful romance a space, a haven for remembrance, and a harbor for the ship of nostalgia. If in Wang Shuo an impressionistic expression of the memory of youth filled with emotional turmoil allows another picture of the Cultural Revolution to emerge in an individualized vision, then for younger-generation, first-time film director Jiang Wen, the Cultural Revolution instinctively becomes an "age of magnificent sunlight": "Back then, the sky was more blue, the clouds whiter, the sunlight was warmer. It seems as if it never rained—that there was no rainy season. No matter what was done then, the remembrance is still attractive, still beautiful."[15] The salience of Wang Shuo's and Jiang Wen's work consists not only of sexually romanticizing the remembrance of revolution and

13. Liu Heng, *Xiaoyao song* (Ode to the carefree) (Changsha: Hunan Wenyi Chubanshe, 1993); Tie Ning, *Meigui men* (The gate of roses) (Beijing: Zuojia Chubanshe, 1989); Wang Shuo, *Dongwu xiongmeng* (Ferocious animals), in *Wangshuo wenji* (Literary works of Wang Shuo) (Beijing: Huayi Chubanshe, 1992), 1:406–93; and Mang Ke, *Yeshi* (Primitive things) (Changsha: Hunan Wenyi Chubanshe, 1994).

14. Wang Shuo, *Dongwu xiongmeng*, 1:406.

15. See "Jiang Wen zhishu xiongyi," *Dienying gushi* (Cinema stories) no. 1 (1994): 7.

individualizing the writing of history, but, more importantly, it embodies the "self" and the expression of self. This is manifestly different from the self of the 1980s vocabulary of historical narratives, which is not only encumbered with a certain grand narrative but more closely resembles the embodiment of a newly born or suddenly emerging collectivity.

More interestingly, although the intellectual elites and literatures of the 1980s contributed substantially to the theorizing of 1990s society, the infusion of mass culture from Hong Kong and Taiwan since the 1980s has been more effective in creating and expanding the cultural and psychological space for the self.[16] Undoubtedly, Wang Xiaobo's novella series *Huangjin shidai* (The golden age) is far more successful in carrying out a cultural-political strategy: The grand narrative of revolution is replaced by an absurd dialectic of abuse and being abused, of loyalty and betrayal, of chastity and promiscuity. What his works offer is not so much nostalgia as deconstruction and parody.[17] In the 1990s, if the sexual romanticization of the era of revolution or the recasting of the Cultural Revolution through the evocation of childhood powerfully rewrites the memory of history and of the individual, and eliminates paralysis and anguish, thus making it possible to transform that historical era into a representation of nostalgia and of material desire, then in the 1990s mass media, the expression of self and of nostalgia points to an even more interesting phenomenon. Since *Kewang* (Aspiration, 1990), television soap opera (or television melodrama) has become the most powerful and successful form of narrative of the masses. The immensely popular 1992 soap opera *Guoba yin* (Joys of living), directed by Zhao Baogang, the 1995 film *Yongshi wo ai* (My love eternally lost), directed by Feng Xiaogang, and the 1996 soap opera *Dongbian richu xibian yu* (Eastern sunrise, western rain), directed by Zhao Baogang, all exhibit the important symptom of this form—the metaphor of nostalgia. A product of the popular "Wang Shuo clan," these works successfully transpose the space of nostalgia from the rural countryside of the 1980s to the anonymous metropolis of the 1990s; they effectively open up an individualist space, while at the same time concretely reconstructing moral values, a work ethic, and a value system within the metaphor of nostalgic sen-

16. See Li Tuo, Song Weijie, and He Li, "Si ren tan" (A panel of four critics), *Zhongshan* (Purple mountain) no. 5 (1996): 187, in which Song Weijie mentioned and described this phenomenon.

17. See Wang Xiaobo, *Huangjin shidai* (The golden age) (Beijing: Huaxia Chubanshe, 1994). Of particular relevance are *Geming shiqi de aiqing* (Love in the revolutionary era), 3–190; and *Wo de yinyang liang jie* (My yin and yang worlds), 191–352.

sibility and nostalgic aura. In *Guoba yin*, the disjunctive combination of Wang Shuo's three novels (and in its chronological reversal of the novels), an oppositional cultural effort is at work vis-à-vis the 1980s; the various cultural and social roles that Wang Shuo and his clan played during the 1980s and 1990s emerge from the interstices. Interestingly, the attraction of these three stories comes not so much from their romanticization of contemporary urban life as from their ambience of a discontented nostalgia fashioned by the editor. Although these stories effectively generate and shape a representation of the anonymous metropolis, they all return their protagonists to a final destination of a space of the self that is an escape from the urban city: In *Guoba yin*, the male and female protagonists, Fang Yan and Du Mei, ultimately abandon their apartment and return to an old, semicolonial-styled classroom. When Fang Yan joyfully slips toward death in Du Mei's embrace, the camera lyrically sweeps up to a word, written in chalk in childlike handwriting on the blackboard: *love* is shaped into a close-up. Similarly, the protagonists of both *Yongshi wo ai* and *Dongbian richu xibian yu* live in a small cabin outside the city. Although in *Yongshi wo ai* the rural refuge is near a freeway, it is located nevertheless at the margin of the city; in *Dongbian richu xibian yu* the cabin is located in an unnamed forest. The final moments of *Yongshi wo ai* are a representation of the joy and harmony of the nuclear family: As the camera pulls up and away from the scene, the dying central male character's ardent voice can be heard—"My dearest ones, I love you. I will wait for you in heaven." In *Dongbian richu xibian yu*, the male protagonist watches in anguish, in the early light of morning, as a police car speeds away with his beloved. Thus, the bourgeois or petty-bourgeois pretentions and sentimentalism create a metaphorical mood for nostalgia. While successfully transcending the survival realities of contemporary urban life, the film producer, the dream weaver, creates not only an effective portrayal of an urban protagonist—the individual—but also a time-space metaphor through the feelings of anguish and nostalgia, thus enabling him to bypass the filthy, chaotic reality and to call forth a Chinese middle class to reconstruct a work ethics, a morality, and a value theory that corresponds to a consumer market society.

The Emergence of the South

As mentioned previously, the most intense and ubiquitous nostalgic trend of the 1990s is the emergence of the south in novels and films. If the social function of the sudden wave of representation of nostalgia is to

successfully overcome the fragmentation of language in order to rebuild or reconcile the narratives of history and reality, then the south, remembered or imagined, becomes an integral cultural touchstone. Representations in literature and art of the 1980s are saturated with the north (or, more precisely, the northwest and the northeast): whether it is *xungeng* fiction, *zhiqing* literature, Fifth Generation films, or television documentary, what stand out are the decadent glamour, the dry and desolate yellow earth, and the relentlessly rolling Yellow River. If the entire cultural effort of the 1980s is to wholeheartedly construct and disseminate a portrait of the rupturing of Chinese history, then the north, or the figure of the yellow earth, becomes the materialization of this portrait. To quote a saying with wide currency in the 1980s, "Let history tell the future." In the narrative space of the 1980s, the north seems to be the figurative reminder of Chinese history, while the south (particularly the Yangzi delta region and the deep south, brought into prominence by the emergence of Shenzhen) seems to have become the signifier of the future. However, as much of the 1990s is in fact an extension of the development and cultural logic of the 1980s, this period brings about a reversal in terms of cultural representations. If we view the intellectual elite culture of the 1980s as a beautiful painting, then 1990s culture—mass or intellectual elite—is the flip side of the painting, the coarse fabric of the canvas. If 1980s cultural efforts clamorously delineate historical stages and depict the rupture of history, then the 1990s inscribes the continuity of history in a posture of discontented glancing backward. In other words, it is inscribing the flow of life within the narrative of self and destiny.

As part of the reversal of cultural representation, the spatial embodiment of historical China is representationally shifted from the north to the south. The north, with the route of the Yellow River as its nucleus, embodies a spatialized history that has ended or must be bid farewell, while the south imbues history again with the dimensions of time and life. At the end of the 1980s, the south first appears in the works of New Wave writers. Then, between Su Tong's white fields and the decadent glamour, there still exists a tacit complicity with mass consumption. Beginning with the novels *Wo de diwang shengya* (My life as an emperor), *Huozhe* (To live), and *Bianyuan* (The margins), stories that concern the individual and fate emerge from the south.[18] Authors begin to write of the lost ship of life

18. Su Tong, *Wo de diwang shengya* (My life as an emperor), in *Su Tong wenji: Hou gong* (Literary works of Su Tong: The royal backyard) (Nanjing: Jiangsu Wenyi Chubanshe), 3–154; Yu Hua, *Huozhe* (To live) (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1993); and Ge

that navigates through the brutality of history, the shifting of powers, and human catastrophes. In the 1980s historical reflection, or saga, a narrative tone of misery, melancholy, and torment imbues with a certain nostalgic look and reminiscent flavor the cold, inhumane spectacle of Chinese history. Quietly entering the 1990s scene, the young writer Xu Lan adds a bleak, yet somewhat sentimental, story to the historical perspective with her unique characterization of a vulnerable, indeterminate individual drifting through a series of catastrophes: that flashing moment of "as if," that moment of an absolutely private "indolence."[19] Changing course once again after *Jishi yu xugou* (Facts and fictions), another lengthy work, *Changhen ge* (The ballad of eternal remorse), by Wang Anyi shows the transformation and symptoms of this culture. The grand narrative is replaced by rumors and whispers.[20] The protagonist is an imperceptible woman, subsisting on the margins of history. Like the spectral and wandering individuals of Xu Lan's novels, Wang Anyi's Wang Qiyao slips through historical upheavals in an evasive and illicit manner, like an outdated, forgotten, and therefore clandestinely kept bunch of dry, dead flowers.

Putting aside the specific factors of politics and the cultural market, the wave of long novels written in the 1990s can be seen as a revival of real-time duration in the temporality of narratives. The Chinese attempt once again to grasp time, to grasp the history that extends through time, rather than adopt a certain model, posture, or scene. If the culture of the 1980s identifies Chinese history with the desolate, arid ground of the northwest and places the future of China in Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Haikou, and other newly developed cities, then the seemingly overlooked cities of the south, including Jiangnan and Shanghai, are suddenly "discovered" and lionized by the culture of the 1990s, and are used for writing history and for bearing nostalgic anguish and languor. Obviously, the cultural emergence of Jiangnan and Shanghai is undoubtedly related to the boom in Shanghai's economy during the 1980s and 1990s, and to the prosperous growth in the economy of the Yangzi delta. This cultural emergence is, without a doubt, a result of the fulfillment of regional economic prosperity

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Fei, *Bianyuan* (The margins), in *Ge Fei wenji: Jijing de shengyin* (Literary works of Ge Fei: The silent sound) (Nanjing: Jiansu Wenyi Chubanshe, 1996).

19. See Xu Lan, *Fangfo* (As if), *Xianqing* (Indolence), and *Hong louban* (Red floor), in *Xu Lan xiaoshuo xuan* (Selected writings of Xu Lan), 1–48, 223–60, and 94–183, respectively.

20. *Rumors* is the title of a famous collection of essays by Eileen Chang, who wrote in Shanghai during the 1940s. In *Changhen ge* (The ballad of eternal remorse), Wang Anyi writes about "rumors" in old Shanghai in a style reminiscent of Chang's.

and the corresponding demand for regional culture. Shanghai, Nanjing, and Guangzhou coincidentally have become the gradually formed multicenters in the process of economic and cultural pluralization. However, as a focal point of 1990s national cultural consumerism, the emergence of the south displays a nostalgic penchant/tendency that is extraterritorial and transregional. In fact, in the 1990s, even without the benefit of cultural criticism, people can already sense, through the commercial malls, freeways, fast-food restaurants, designer boutiques, television commercials, billboard advertisements, and computer networks, the change in contemporary Chinese society wrought by an ineluctable global process. A profound identity crisis threatens to intrude on the contemporary Chinese, on various levels and in varying degrees: survival needs versus desires; self versus race, community, or region; China versus "the world." The wave of nostalgia here is undoubtedly an expression of identity construction, one of the many ways of gaining cultural identity. Thus, Shanghai becomes today's important "immigration" city and yesterday's "premier port of the East," "Ten Miles of Foreign Goods," and "Adventurer's Paradise." It becomes the unconscious of contemporary Chinese history—a place in history that must gain its writing through forgetting, that must transform itself into an appropriate and necessary discovery. As a specific historical and existing real space, Shanghai reflects the historical period that includes the beginning of China's belonging to the world. In addition, with its success in the past (or perhaps today or in the future) in setting trends, finding opportunities, and witnessing miracles, Shanghai provides a somewhat infectiously decadent, but alluring, background and setting. In the 1990s cultural reversal, Shanghai suppresses and foreshadows imperialism, semicolonialization, the profound wounding of the race, the uncanny phenomenon of money, and the picture of globalization. Shanghai possesses the history of revolution, as well as the history before revolution. Intellectual elites or the mass public may either accept or reject a narrative of ethnic, cultural paradise, and they may either reject and denounce an ancient obsolete city, but they have never explicitly rejected the historical representation and narrative of Shanghai and Jiangnan. In the imagined nostalgic scenario, the historical Shanghai and Jiangnan succeed in becoming a cultural springboard that allows us to leap unscathed across cultural experiences and to express new freedom.

Private book vendors, who peddle the most commercialized cultural commodity of the 1990s, report that, in addition to literature and art, the culture of the south has become a small-scale best-seller: from the promi-

nence of the Jing Pai (Beijing School) and the Hai Pai (Shanghai School); to the publication and republication of *Chengshi jifeng* (The seasonal wind of the city);[21] to the encouragement of "reconstructing the humanism of southern China" and the fever of Eileen Chang; to the popularity of the disciplinary study of the city of Shanghai; to the Qian Zhongshu craze, a part of the classical craze, which spread from campuses to the book market to the black market. In terms of cinematic expressions, this sudden surge of southern vistas is in fact more variegated and chaotically pluralistic. However, in the pioneering works—for example, Chen Yifei's *Haishang jiumeng* and its sequel *Renyue huanghun*, Li Shaohong's *Hongfen*, Zhang Yimou's *Yao-a-yao, yao dao waipo qiao* (which was originally translated as *Shanghai Story*), Chen Kaige's *Fengyue*, the commercial films of the Sixth Generation (or the "New Generation"), or Li Jun's *Shanghai wangshi*—the one outstanding common feature is the construction of a representation of nostalgia and the southward move of the narrative space of history. Although in Chen Yifei's film it is a specter-like presence briefly passed over by the gaze of the wanderer, the images of bygone times are represented by MTV-style collage; what courses through the films is a nostalgic person's unmediated anguish. *Fengyue* is the retelling and collapse of a historical fable. In *Hongfen*, *Renyue huanghun*, and *Yao-a-yao, yao dao waipo qiao*, the "old tale" is valued as much as any other emotional entanglement in the aura of nostalgia. On an implicit level, instead of seeing the sudden surge of nostalgic tendency and its representation as a historical sense of lack or need, it is better to see it as testimony to the real and profound anxiety over the aggressively speedy process of modernization; instead of seeing it as a self-conscious cultural rebellion, it is better to see it as another effective process of legitimization. If one of the cultural functions of the 1980s reflection on historical culture is to identify, through a new cultural "enlightenment," as absent the presence of certain so-called historical, political, and cultural catalysts (in other words, we may see the 1980s culture as an instance of "clearing the arena," or cultural exile), then we, in the 1990s, must construct a narrative about the rupture of history in order to promote new historical progress. But the modernization of the 1990s, or the globalizing burst of progress, causes people to panic, as if they are teetering on the edge of the abyss. The wave of nostalgia brings new representations of

21. Yang Dongping, *Chengshi jifeng: Beijing yu Shanghai de wenhua jingshen* (The seasonal wind of the city: On the cultural spirit of Beijing and Shanghai) (Beijing: Dongfang Chubanshe, 1994).

history, making history the "presence in absentia" that emits a ray of hope on the Chinese people's confused and frenzied reality. A kind of familiar yet strange representation of history, a long repressed memory emerging from the horizon of history, through the repeated identification of contemporary Chinese history, allows people to receive consolation and gain a holistic, imagined picture of modernized China. In this picture, modernization is no longer the miracle of the 1979 reform of an old China in decline but an always integral part of the history of China. The difficulty of life is undoubtedly an incontrovertible fact, as is the impossibility of annihilating the pressures or the inner anxieties of reality. Nevertheless, the mesmerizing allure of this picture is that it rebuilds a kind of imagined link between the individual and society, between history and the present reality, in order to provide a rationale for our contemporary struggle and to impart to us some sense of comfort and stability.

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The painting *New Literati Painting* (*Xin wenren hua*) by the young Nanjing painter Xu Lei perhaps provides a new perspective and insight. In this exquisite painting, the skillful old-style brushwork recaptures the body of a stallion.[22] Instead of a nostalgia for an elegant bygone antique, or a postmodern collage, what is exposed by the incompatibility of this beauty is the disintegration of history's representation in its emergence and restoration. While the painting transmits a certain Oriental secret, it also exudes a certain uncanniness, or even an omen. It is a kind of cultural memory that is more profoundly eternal than *The Memory Locked Away*, a kind of memory that can capture its representation but never again evoke its spiritual aura. What we can capture is merely an imagination; what we are able to achieve is merely a kind of writing. If, by borrowing the springboard of nostalgia, we are trying painstakingly to piece together a narration of history, spattered with the miscellany of language and crisscrossed with scars from its rupture, then whether it is an enigmatic sentiment of nostalgia or a consumption of such nostalgic representation, all will swiftly go the way of oblivion. The first example is Zhou Xiaowen, adroit in depicting urban cities and in writing about the anxiety of contemporary people, filming the historical epic *Qin song* (1996) with a capital of 40 million yuan. Even though the gravity, the authentic old style, and the concise conceptualiza-

22. Xu Lei, "The Mystery of Absence," in *Selected Works of Xu Lei* (Hong Kong: Asian Fine Arts, 1994), 17.

tion of the film all successfully evoke an imagined Qin dynasty–Han dynasty ambience, the anxiety of contemporary male intellectuals is still prevalent throughout. Surpassing Chen Kaige's epic film *Ci Qin* (Assassination of the Qin emperor) with its impressively grand cinematic setting, which was slated to open later as a theme park called Zhonghua Riyue Cheng, the film's budget reached 120 million yuan.[23] This transnational capitalization is in itself a more precious windfall. The film's exhorbitant capital investment far exceeds any possible return from the as yet unformed Chinese cultural and film market. If the 1990s nostalgia movement has not yet been able to provide an integral, globalized picture of China because of its instability, then the emergence of the representation of a history further back in time will mobilize the gigantic and anonymous economic machine behind the scenes to complete the scenario.

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Another city of mirrors and lenses, another alienation closing in on the center.

23. See the special issue on *Ci Qin*, *Xiju dianying bao* (Theater and film weekly), 10 May 1996, 4.