We associate the rise of modern Chinese (baihua) literature with the cities in China, in particular Beijing and Shanghai, and we tend to forget that the creators of such works were all, with very few exceptions, especially in the Republican era, immigrants to these cities from towns and villages all over the country.

A glance at any biography or memoir of modern Chinese writers of the Republican era from the May 4th and later will show that they all were born in some provincial town or village and made their own way to the city – usually for education, then spent the rest of their creative lives there – except for bouts of political necessity such as the Sino-Japanese war or the Cultural Revolution. One conspicuous exception being Lao She who was born and bred in Beijing. The lives of Lu Xun’s family from Shaoxing are well known. But to take a few others from the biographical dictionaries, Guo Moruo was born in 1892 in the small town of Shawan, in Loshan county in Sichuan to a land-owning family, who gave him a strict classical education, until he was 14 when he went to school in Jiading, before going to Japan at the age of 22. Mao Dun was born in 1896 in the town of Wuzhen, Tongxiang county in Zhejiang, went to Beijing for preparatory study for entry to Beijing University but left to take up a post in the Commercial Press in Shanghai, where he remained. Wen Yiduo was born in 1899 in a village in Xishui county in Hubei and went to Beijing to the Qinghua School in 1913. Ding Ling was born in Linfeng in Hunan in 1907, grew up in Changde and went for her education in Shanghai in 1921. They were not peasantry, rather they were the children of local gentry scattered around China.
As F.W. Mote has stated, the idea ‘that the city represents either a distinct style or, more important, a higher level of civilization than the countryside is a cliche of our Western cultural traditions. It has not been so in traditional China.’ (1977: 102) The centrism of imperial China, especially as exemplified by its main buttress of the Civil Service examination (keju) was not geographical. Examination candidates were drawn from every province; the lowest level of examinations were held in local prefectures, gentry status was acquired by association; every small town could in theory have its scholar-gentry family that produced examination candidates. While the metropolitan officials with their physical nearness to the emperor were a cut above all others in terms of power, small towns remote from the capital could still have their community of cultured people, who were happy with their base in the provinces, even though there is evidence that there was already a flight of the gentry from rural areas to urban areas from about the sixteenth century according to Mark Elvin. (Elvin, 1977) Fiction from the late Ming and Qing, like The Scholars (Rulin Waishi), showed a wide dispersal of the elite throughout the country. Even in The Travels of Lao Can (Lao Can youji), published between 1903 and 1907, the educated were to be encountered in rural retreats scattered over the country.

The rise of the cities

In the twentieth century, a disparity developed between the new coastal centres and the rest of the country, that destabilized this equilibrium. The Classical education that the provinces had been quite sufficient to provide was now thrown overboard, and the source of knowledge from the West was only easily available in the coastal cities that had access to the West. Residence in the cities with its superior modern technical contrivances, and its access to information from abroad became sine qua non as part of the process of modernization. It was not enough for such a city to be just a treaty port, which did not play such a large role in providing access to foreign learning and new opportunities, unless they already had a cultural importance such as Nanjing and Guangzhou. (Murphy, 1974) Beijing for all its ancientness became such a centre for those seeking the new because of the existence of so many educational institutions, many of which originally were founded by the Qing in the capital to service the empire. Shanghai was undoubtedly a much bigger window on the world in China, to which close attention was being paid and enormous curiosity was engendered, (Yeh, 1997: 468–70) but its stronger foreign character was off putting at first, and until the 1920s, it was regarded as the centre of