

RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Asian nostalgia?

Rana Mitter

Oxford University, Oxford, UK

Author for correspondence: Rana Mitter, E-mail: rana.mitter@history.ox.ac.uk

(Received 8 November 2020; accepted 8 November 2020)

Abstract

Searching for common themes, this afterword questions the meaning and experience of nostalgia in Asia today. The collected essays show the important roles that conflict, trauma, and the need to create a new modernity shape, and are shaped by notions of nostalgia through much of Asia. Perhaps more so than in Europe, nostalgia in Asia seems very national. The case studies in this collection are excellent examples of how nostalgic longings are deployed to enhance national power, as well as a demonstration of the enduring influence of the nation-state over individual imagination across the region.

Key words: Asia; China; East Asia; imperialism; nostalgia

One of the Greek terms, “algos,” within the word “nostalgia” refers to pain. The other word, “nostos” is a reference to homecoming that has had significance for travellers from Odysseus onwards. The pain within nostalgia is ineluctably tied to the idea, immortalized by the title of Thomas Wolfe’s 1940 novel, that you can’t go home again. In twentieth-century Asia, that idea is perhaps stronger than in the USA or Britain, the latter being countries having experienced a slower evolution rather than the violent rupture of their domestic narratives, such as that experienced by Asian regions in the turbulent twentieth century. Many institutions which seemed immovable for much of that period – the Japanese empire, the Soviet Union, and the Shanghai International Settlement – really are gone for good. As the captured by the essays in this collection, this has not stopped plenty of contemporary Asians from trying to construct some sort of “homecoming” in those long-lost arenas of memory.

The four essays collected here seek ways to understand the wider issue of what “nostalgia” might be in modern Asia, and whether there might genuinely be some sense of homecoming in the midst of pain. Ryoko Nakano examines the way that the Meiji state has been turned from harbinger of industrial, imperial modernity to a heritage site that commodifies the past without much questioning of it. Maria Adele Carrai interrogates the Chinese discourse of the “Great Rejuvenation” of the nation under Xi Jinping, showing how historical nuance is sanitized to feed a nationalist narrative, whereas Thomas Dubois shows that the revival of “time-honoured” Chinese brands involves more than a sauce-bottle-sized dash of invented tradition. Timur Dadabaev’s essay then examines the way in which Central Asian states that became independent in 1991 turn back, half-resentful, half-longing, to an increasingly faded construct of the Soviet past. All provide detailed, nuanced accounts of phenomena based in the past but very much of the present moment.

If “pain” is inherent to nostalgia, where does it emerge in these studies? In all the cases discussed by the authors, there seems to be a sense that to make nostalgia warm and responsive, there has to be a radical forgetting of important elements of the past. One particular element that stands out is how empire is to be commemorated. As Ryoko Nakano points out, the celebration of the Meiji Restoration in the heritage site at Gunkanjima elides one immensely important element of the prewar Japanese state, its drive towards the violent acquisition of empire. The elision of empire can be seen as

a constant theme elsewhere in Japanese popular culture. To note one example, the 2016 manga film *In this Corner of the World* [*Kono sekai no katasumi ni*], directed by Sunao Katabuchi, tells the story of a young woman, just married, living near Hiroshima in the last few years of World War II. The film became a sleeper hit, taking over ¥2.5 billion at the Japanese box office so far. The film is a poignant and touching piece of work, whose appeal comes in part from precisely that sense of nostalgia for a wartime world where Japan had not yet lost, and the atomic bomb has not yet fallen. Costumes, food and the general austerity of that wartime year are portrayed with acute sensitivity but with a clear attraction to a viewing public seeking a past that can never be recovered. There are occasional references to goods being shipped in from the colony of Taiwan and the client state of Manchukuo, but the connections between the war and the empire are never spelled out; they simply would not fit with the nostalgic feel of the film.

The nature of this imperial nostalgia is related to, but different from similar sentiments in Britain. The British empire ended gradually rather than suddenly, and to some extent on Britain's own terms as a victor of World War II: indeed, a comforting narrative was able to build up on the right wing that Britain was forced to give up its empire as the price it paid for valiant resistance to the Axis (primarily Germany but also Japan). The Japanese empire ended suddenly in August 1945 and in the most devastating of circumstances. British imperial nostalgia has in general tried to find ways, often stretched, to find the "good" and "bad" in empire. Japanese discourse, outside the far right, has not been able to define the empire as "positive" in any meaningful way. Thus elision of empire becomes the only meaningful way to burnish the reputation of the rise of Japan in the late nineteenth century. However, elision of empire does not mean its absence. It is the presence of empire behind its elision that rankles in China, which has its own political reasons for finding Japanese historical nostalgia problematic, and feels that the final reckoning on the Japanese empire in Asia has never come.

The experience of the former central Asian states, as written about by Dadabaev, falls between these positions. The old Soviet Union was certainly an empire, as Russia was before it. Yet, the nostalgia that has emerged in those states seems to draw from a conception that the Central Asian states had equal standing, rather than a realistic memory of the realities of rule from Moscow. The Brezhnev period was stagnant politically and culturally, yet the uncertainties of post-imperial life perhaps make the Soviet past seem more attractive because those Central Asian states technically gained independence from another sovereign state, rather than formally from an empire.

Today's China is also the inheritor of an empire, expanded over centuries by a succession of dynasties. Yet, its nostalgia today emerges from rather different sorts of memories, with the painful element coming from the humiliations of China's tortuous journey into becoming a nation-state. As Maria Adele Carrai suggests, the Chinese narrative of the Great Rejuvenation argued for by Xi Jinping reflects both "chosen traumas" and "chosen glories." In concentrating on China's own undoubted suffering at the hands of foreign invaders, complexities in the longer sweep of history are filtered out. Therefore, the story of admiral Zheng He's voyages during the Ming dynasty is sanitized into a fable about peaceful Chinese expansion around the world. In reality, Zheng He was quite prepared to use force (as in his visit to present-day Sri Lanka) in conflicts with local rulers (Brook 2020). This did not make him very different from Europeans who came to the region; but it complicates a narrative which wishes to argue that there is something less imperial in the Chinese expansion over the centuries (Mahbubani 2020).

Yet, if historical memory of the more distant past can be sanitized to create a contemporary political discourse, then, as Thomas DuBois shows, there are also uses of nostalgia about the more recent past that can show flashes of irony and multiple meanings. DuBois shows that the revival of pre-1949 brands can be understood in a variety of modes, including irony, and that a process of commodification lies behind these brands' revival. DuBois's fascinating essay should be read in the context of the groundbreaking new monograph by Karl Gerth, *Unending Capitalism*. Gerth's argument is that, in some form, consumerism (as opposed to consumption) never really ended under Mao, even in the context of a socialist economy: "many aspects of consumerism that had developed before the founding of the People's Republic – including advertising, branding, fashion, and social differentiation through the consumption of mass-produced products – had not disappeared but in fact quietly persisted"

(Gerth 2020, p. 2), Gerth's book provides the missing link for the phenomenon of consumerism that emerges as part of China's 1980s reforms, the era that DuBois writes about so eloquently. Numerous scholars (including the present author) have written in the past as if there were a gap between 1949 and 1978 into which the "Republican fever" (*minguo re*) of the 1980s and 1990s emerged (Weatherly and Zhang 2017). We are now much more aware of a continued development of affection for branding, alongside the ways in which pre-1949 stories were handed down within families through oral transmission. Although very few of the people who respond to the nostalgia brands of today would have been alive during the era of their first appearances, back in the 1930s, there is no doubt that the transmission of particular ideas of nostalgic remembrance have created an ecology where they can thrive, and that the belt of transmission runs through the Mao period; it does not bypass it.

China's own complex relationship with nostalgia continues to be a source of concern to the state. On one level, a constructed memory of the pre-1949 state threatens the legitimacy of the PRC. The nationalist, pro-CCP *Global Times* warned in 2015 that a revival of the aesthetics of the Republican period (1912–1949) was acceptable, but that this should not be confused with a desire to go back to what it characterized as the political chaos of the era (Zhun 2015).

A different sort of nostalgia surrounds a rather different political project, the rise of neo-Maoism that has been compellingly analysed by Jude Blanchette (2019). Blanchette points out that the "New Red Guards," Neo-Maoist bloggers and activists have constructed an idea of Maoism that is designed to pressure the CCP from the left. Their version of Maoism depends on a sanitized version of the Cultural Revolution, which concentrates purely on the feelings of camaraderie and self-improvement through living an austere lifestyle, without engaging with the violence that underpinned the movement. Nor is this entirely new; as early as the 1990s, there were restaurants in China celebrating the "Cultural Revolution" lifestyle with simple, peasant-style dishes served at enormous prices.

Yet, another arena for nostalgia surrounds another twentieth-century trauma, the Second World War. Since the 1980s, China began to encourage a wider, more inclusive collective memory of this period which took into account the contribution of the Nationalists (Guomindang) to the war effort (Mitter 2020, ch. 5). Since then, locations in China heavily associated with the old Guomindang regime, notably Nanjing and Chongqing have used memories of those periods both to engender nostalgia and to commodify it. In both cities, cosplay-style actors have been hired to play Chiang Kai-shek (gown, moustache and all) outside historic sites associated with the old National Government. In Chongqing, old air-raid shelters have been turned into restaurants (rather long and thin ones).

What, in the end, is the meaning of nostalgia in today's Asia? It would be overly neat to try and find one clearly-defined meaning across such a wide region with divergent collective memories. However, perhaps one reason for the continued devotion to nostalgia has to do with the potent combination of conflict, trauma, and the need to create a new modernity through much of Asia, all of which erased much of the past or made it hard to access. The shape of postwar Asia was just as radically reshaped as was postwar Europe, with new geobodies and insurmountable divisions (for instance between the two Koreas and two Vietnams, not to mention the two Chinas), just as Europe became divided by the Cold War. As in Europe, a desire emerged to capture the prewar past as if it had never occurred. In Europe, after 1989, to some extent that nostalgic urge was fulfilled; today, one can travel across borders as one did in 1939. In Asia, many of the divisions still remain, and there is little shared sense of an "Asian" identity that goes beyond sloganizing. Nostalgia still seems very national, not regional, in Asia. The case studies in this collection are excellent examples of how nostalgia continues to exercise its power, as well as a demonstration of the endurance of the nation-state in the region's imagination.

References

- Blanchette, Jude (2019). *The New Red Guards: The Return of Radicalism and the Rebirth of Mao Zedong*. Oxford University Press.
- Brook, Timothy (2020). *Great State: China and the World*. Harper Collins.

- Gerth, Karl** (2020). *Unending Capitalism: How Consumerism Negated China's Communist Revolution*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mahbubani, Kishore** (2020). *Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy*. PublicAffairs.
- Mitter, Rana** (2020). *China's Good War: How World War II is Shaping a New Nationalism*. Harvard University Press.
- Weatherley, Robert and Qiang Zhang** (2017). *History and Nationalist Legitimacy in Contemporary China: A Double-Edged Sword*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Zhun, Liu** (2015). "Republican nostalgia shouldn't overlook era's real flaws." *Global Times*, 31 January 2015. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/905027.shtml>.