

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Introduction: mobilizing nostalgia in Asia

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### Abstract

What is the role of nostalgia in our increasingly dynamic and interconnected world? This special issue, *Mobilizing Nostalgia in Asia*, assesses the mobilization of nostalgia in the changing international order, and within individuated socioeconomic and cultural spheres. Its four articles examine the political and social dynamics that evoke, utilize, amend, and manipulate nostalgia for collective present needs and demands. This Introduction connects the issue's four contributions to three interconnected themes: the power of nostalgia, the plurality of nostalgia, and nostalgia as a process of creation.

**Key words:** Creative process; memory; narrative; nostalgia; power; remembrance

### Introduction

Nostalgia sells. In times of crisis, memories of the “good old days” provide a comfortable refuge from present difficulties. As people collectively experience stressful and traumatic times, even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, they are emotionally tempted to imagine a “safer” past as a self-protective mechanism.<sup>1</sup> As Europe and the United States encountered their respective economic crises and pressures arising from globalization and immigration, a wave of populist movements has drawn heavily on myths and historical memories.<sup>2</sup> These movements and their followers deploy nostalgia as an emotional defense to deal with deep uncertainty and a sense of loss. In contemporary society, nostalgia has emerged as a response to the experience of modernity, which involves constant change, discontinuity, and displacement.<sup>3</sup>

The contributors to this special issue, *Mobilizing Nostalgia in Asia*, aim to assess the mobilization of nostalgia in the changing international order, and within individuated socioeconomic and cultural spheres. Rather than a study of nostalgia in the abstract, this issue aims to understand the political and social dynamics of processes that evoke, utilize, amend, and manipulate nostalgia for present needs and demands. Based on empirically-grounded observations in China, Japan, and the former Soviet Central Asia, this issue combines perspectives on the political uses of nostalgia for nationalist mobilization, and the commercial uses of nostalgia for developing brands and attracting mass populations.

Nostalgia mobilization has become a regional trend in Asia. Starting in the 1990s, a new era of geopolitical power shifts and rapid socioeconomic changes brought a renewed momentum to the use of nostalgia in politics and commerce. From the growth of tourism industries to the rise of war-related commemorations, sites and objects related to historic events have been rediscovered, restored, and recreated for popular consumption. For their part, political leaders are keen to cultivate nostalgic sentiment for nation building and nation branding. Such efforts include Chinese President Xi Jinping's promotion of the “new silk roads” and “red tourism,” and former Japanese Prime Minister Abe

<sup>1</sup> Campoamor 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Campanella and Dassù 2019; Mason 2010; Subotic 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Boym 2001, p. xv.

Shinzo's attempt to revitalize glorified memories of the Meiji period (1868–1912). The rise of Asian brands has generated new traditional-style and retro products meant to appeal to a buying public that is eager to return to an idealized past in a fast-changing society. Asia has entered a “memory boom” in which multiple types of nostalgia are at play.<sup>4</sup>

Drawing upon a wide range of literature on nostalgia and related subjects, this overview outlines the three interconnected themes that arise from the study of nostalgia mobilization. First, it explains the strong link between nostalgia and power. The second is the plurality of nostalgia and its implications for society. The third regards nostalgia as a process of creation that signals a pathway to the future. The final section of this paper briefly explains how each of the four articles examines these three themes.

### Power of nostalgia

Properly mobilized, nostalgia can be a potent source of power. Collective nostalgia can be an emotional device for or against state authority. Laying out a hegemonic discourse about the nation through education, commemoration ceremonies, and mass media, state institutions can play a major role in mobilizing or suppressing shared nostalgic sentiment among the public. The level of state control over this public discourse will vary between democratic and non-democratic states. This point resonates with the ideas of Antonio Gramsci and other post-Marxist theorists who posit that hegemony is built when the cultural domain of remembrance is controlled by a society's ruling class.<sup>5</sup> These rulers seek to achieve a “collective memory” among their subjects in order to maintain the integrity of their power relationships.

Heritage and commemoration ceremonies are inherently attached to present-day demands and political agendas. In Europe's medieval period, for example, monarchies effectively deployed legends and iconic stories, objects, and monuments to legitimize their authority in society.<sup>6</sup> More broadly, the idea of historical and cultural continuity within territorial boundaries has a strong unifying effect that transcends the fate of any particular dynasty. The question, then, is what past should be remembered and cherished? The answer shapes the collective identity of the present generation.

Although nostalgia can be evoked by sensory stimuli – images and symbols, sounds and smells – the cognitive act of remembrance requires the context of a story, that is, a historical narrative. In her research on the use of nostalgia in advertising, Stern explains that storytelling is essential to the mobilization of nostalgia from a distant past. She presents two types of nostalgia: historical and personal. The former is a yearning for a distant past that predates the real-life experiences of the audience, whereas the latter is based on the memory of personal experiences.<sup>7</sup> The more distant the remembered past is, the easier it is to manipulate nostalgic sentiment by involving the consumers in a narrative of something that they have not experienced or remembered only vaguely. Effective advertisement encourages consumers of products to vicariously participate in a historical era that is associated with the products on sale.

Hagström and Gustafsson also identify the power of storytelling in international politics,<sup>8</sup> arguing that such narratives have the capacity to influence the behaviors of a critical mass of people, including children. Political and commercial actors use such narrative, infused with nostalgia, to persuade their audience to adopt policies and norms that they might not otherwise accept. With the growing development of social media as a mass communication tool, the emergence of a dominant or resonating historical narrative will increasingly shape the issue of control in the twenty-first century.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Mansfield 2001; Schumacher 2015.

<sup>5</sup>Molden 2016.

<sup>6</sup>Harvey 2001, pp. 327–30.

<sup>7</sup>Stern 2013.

<sup>8</sup>Hagström and Gustafsson 2019.

## Plurality of nostalgia

Overlap of nostalgic narratives logically leads to narrative competition. But will divergent nostalgias always end up in conflict? This question leads to the second theme of this special issue: the plurality of nostalgia. The mobilization of nostalgia is a multi-layered, multi-directional process of creation, adoption, and rejection, one that imagines and adds meaning to an idealized narrative of the past. Collective nostalgia emerges as a central forum, as political, scholarly, commercial, and other actors spar over the right to interpret the past, including questioning what is to be remembered, what is to be forgotten, and how the past should speak to the needs of the present.

Although there is always competition and conflict over what to remember and what to forget, the dissonance of nostalgias can be maintained without direct interaction. In memory studies, Molden makes the important point that alternatives to historical memory coexist alongside a master narrative.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore misleading to assume that dissonant social collective nostalgia is always a battle between a hegemonic center and its opposition. Rather, the experience of individual communities may neither conform to, nor defy top-down efforts to dictate how they should remember the past, even as these communities retain distinct historical memories and nostalgia. Here again arises the potential of composing alternative historical narratives that do not necessarily directly contradict the master narrative. This continuous plurality of historical memory is part and parcel of the memory landscape. If audiences are not ready to receive the ideological messages directed at them, then the mnemorial pathways that governments or enterprises prepare for their audiences will ultimately not be successful.

Hagström and Gustafsson remind us that actors construct alternative narratives within the settings that other narratives have already created.<sup>10</sup> Some narratives rise to dominance and influence as they are institutionalized and sedimented in society. Even if not recognized as a “counter-narrative” that competes with the official master narrative, the existence of alternative memories prevents the master narrative from becoming dominant.

The variation of narratives has an important implication for the study of mobilized nostalgia. Even if government or political leaders aim to deploy their strategic narrative in society, or if commercial enterprises choose to disseminate their idealistic image of the past, individuals will not necessarily respond to either approach in the intended way. The mobilization of nostalgia is, by nature, always doubted, contested, and questioned. Understanding the plurality of nostalgia provides a space to explore what problems and opportunities might arise in the process of mobilizing a particular nostalgia while excluding others.

## Nostalgia as a pathway to future

The third theme of this issue derives from Boym’s famous description of “creative nostalgia.”<sup>11</sup> This concept signals the potential use of nostalgia for a creative purpose needed to direct future actions. Boym made a distinction between two types of nostalgia: “restorative nostalgia” that yearns to rebuild what was lost, and “reflective nostalgia” that views the past critically and within larger historical context.<sup>12</sup> Within reflective nostalgia, she finds that the process of creatively rethinking the past energizes the spirit of constructing a future path.

Smith and Campbell make a similar argument by presenting the concept of “progressive nostalgia.”<sup>13</sup> They argue that nostalgia can be the basis for envisaging a possible future. A set of political and social values that can be linked to the past is translated into a timeless ethos. In this translation, nostalgia is an expression of values, one that can be used to guide the present or future. Meanings generated through the recollection of the past can create a pathway to a progressive future. Thus, the mobilization of nostalgia should not be treated as intrinsically bad or backward-looking.

<sup>9</sup>Molden 2016.

<sup>10</sup>Hagström and Gustafsson 2019, pp. 10–11.

<sup>11</sup>Boym 2001, p. xvii.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.* p. xviii.

<sup>13</sup>Smith and Campbell 2017.

Although associated with the manipulation and control of present society, nostalgia can also become a source of creation and recreation, of change and of social justice.

The creative nature of nostalgia brings us back to the first theme of this special issue: nostalgia as a source of political and commercial power. The mobilization of nostalgia benefits those who wish to inform and navigate the direction of the future. Yet, because the sharing of nostalgic memory is ultimately an individual exercise, the exercise of nostalgia as a collective social and cultural force depends on the audience. The second theme of multiple nostalgias must be taken seriously to understand the dynamics of mobilizing nostalgia.

### The papers and their scopes

The fundamental transformations of Asia's geopolitical landscape and its twenty-first century socio-economic structures demand a critical assessment of mobilized nostalgia, examining both the content of nostalgic narrative and the actors who initiate or resist the mobilization. The end of the Cold War era precipitated both the redefinition of Asia's regional order and the new ability of national and transnational public spheres to discuss and debate the memories of modern Asia.<sup>14</sup> Accompanied by both physical and ideological confrontations, these power shifts eroded the post-Cold War patterns of regional integration, and set in motion Sino–United States and Sino–Japanese competitions that affected the sociopolitical environment of the entire region. Even as space for citizens' participation in the construction of mnemonical discourse has widened, the rise of strongman-style leadership, or the aspiration to it, encourages new uses of both domestic and international apparatuses to promote particular historical narratives worldwide. At the same time, the rise of a new middle-class of Asian consumers and the commercial actors that seek to mobilize their affective emotions further introduces the use of nostalgia as a saleable entity in which audiences are an essential part of the process of production.

The articles in this special issue address the growing importance of nostalgic narratives within these geopolitical realities and within social changes in contemporary Asia. The first two papers show how politically mobilized forms of nostalgia that are based on highly selective readings of the historical past may limit the space for dialog and mutual understanding. Focusing on the political discourse of Chinese President Xi Jinping, Maria Adele Carrai discusses how the complexity and diversity of China's historical memories are reduced to a strategic narrative for national unity and global positioning. This "chosen amnesia" forgets history which is inconvenient to the Chinese government under Xi, and is crucial to maintaining the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. Illustrating how Xi's policies orchestrate a sense of national unity and pride among the Chinese people, Carrai warns that China's current historical narrative may not attract support and sympathy within more diverse international memory arenas.

Ryoko Nakano's article makes critical observations of a recent World Heritage nomination by Japan. Deploying the language of shared heritage, Japan's formation of the "Sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution" symbolizes the conservative government's intention to redefine Japan in the current world by emphasizing traditions of creativity and innovation while celebrating its national legacy of rapid industrialization and modernization. This article illustrates how local, national, and international players who have different interests and aspirations have engaged in the process of nomination, which fed into the government's domestic agenda of removing the negative connotation of remilitarization. This act was destined to promote Japan's willful amnesia regarding its history of war, colonialism, and militarism.

Thomas DuBois' article elucidates how nostalgia marketing of heritage enterprises is characterized by constant changes and innovation in the dynamic interaction between producers and consumers, the private and public sectors, and the domestic and international stages. DuBois explores Chinese food enterprises as an innovative way to understand variety in nostalgia marketing in China. Contrasting the revival of authenticity-based branding and the "creative nostalgia" of "retro" advertising, he argues

<sup>14</sup>Jager and Mitter 2007.

that fast-changing marketing techniques and a globally competitive landscape open new paths for old brands to become relevant to current generations.

Timur Dadabaev focuses on post-Soviet nostalgias in the Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. He contrasts two different types of nostalgia that coexist in the same space and time but do not interact. On the one hand, the political leaders act as restorative nostalgics aiming to benefit from the mobilization of nostalgic or anti-nostalgic feelings about the Soviet era. To date, their attempts have not been successful. On the other hand, people with experience under the Soviet administration, instead of idealizing their past, often look to the past to make sense of social change and their existential being. Dadabaev highlights the quiet autonomy and memory resistance of these older citizens. With their ownership of memory and nostalgic sentiment, they are social agents of history and memory production.

Despite its prominence in social and political theory, nostalgia has not occupied a central position in discussions of political and socioeconomic changes in world affairs. This special issue posits nostalgia not as a symptom or inert discourse, but as a constitutive factor that drives a wide range of state and commercial actions and provides a critical angle to the complex web of memories, motives, and identity, which are crucial to the creation of order and disorder in society. Closely connected with broad themes such as power competition, commercialization, and identity politics, it presents nostalgia as a key theoretical concept available to analyze sociopolitical phenomena in fast-changing contemporary societies. The mobilization of nostalgic sentiment and associated actions signals the current form of sociopolitical themes and agendas, and actively shapes the imaginative pathways that produce certain futures. Along with the authors, I hope this special issue opens a creative space for dialog among researchers in humanities and social sciences to advance the sociopolitical reading of nostalgia that envisions the future of our world.

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