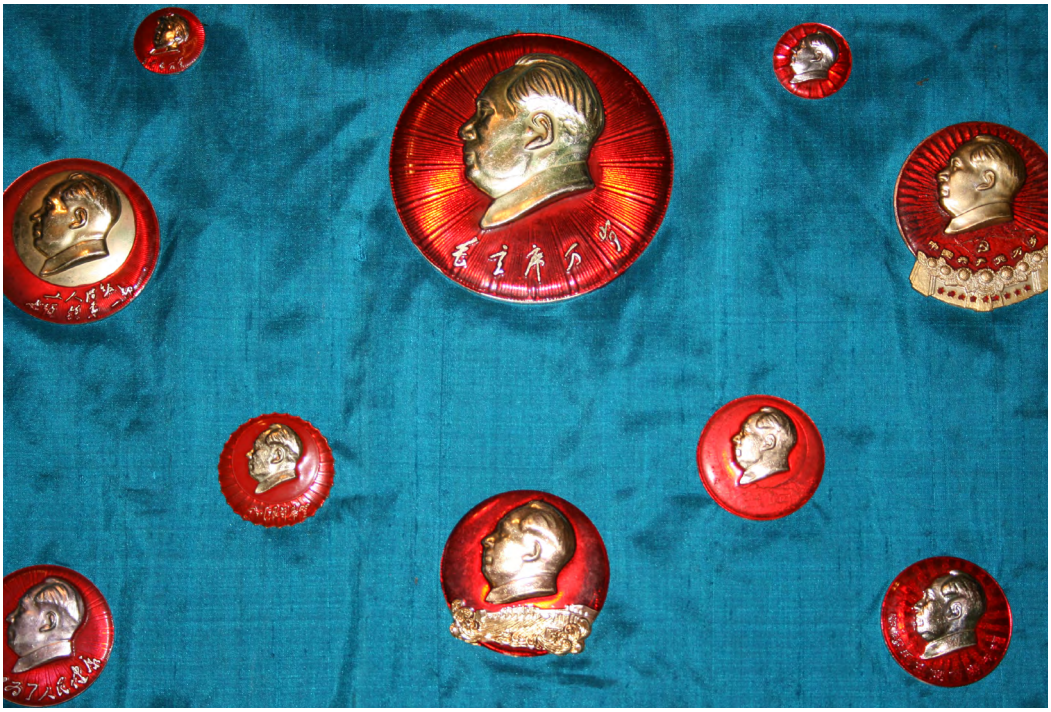

Chairman Mao Cultural Revolution Badges. PC: Gary Lee Todd (CC).

On Nostalgia and Returns

Jennifer HUBBERT

Amid a global pandemic and worsening repression in contemporary China, what does it mean to be nostalgic? This essay explores this question through two disparate but intimately connected lenses. First, it examines changing registers of nostalgia in China over the past several decades, analysing the role of the Party-State and how it is imagined in their production. Second, it examines what nostalgia might mean for scholars who study state–society relations and the production of nostalgia in China, when they confront the potential of not being able to return to China to conduct research, and the ethics of that research should they continue to engage.

When the invitation from the *Made in China Journal* to write an essay on nostalgia appeared in my inbox, I leaned back and allowed myself to engage in a bit of this emotion. While much of my academic work over the past several decades reflects an interest in the ways in which individuals and nation-states exhibit wistful affection for the past, it is one of my earliest fieldwork experiences that I remember most nostalgically and that cemented my interest in public nostalgia as a reflection of state–society relations in China and beyond.

Shortly before leaving for China in 1994 to conduct dissertation research (a study of four generations of Chinese intellectuals and their individual experiences and collective memories of the Maoist past), I was thumbing through *The Washington Post* and came across an article about a collector of Mao Zedong badges named Wang Anting, who had turned his small flat into a museum for the Great Helmsman. The journalist listed Wang's address as 23 Five Riches Street, Chengdu, a day-and-a-half train's journey from where I would soon be based, in Kunming. While the topic was slightly tangential to my research endeavours, I quickly translated the address and dashed off a note to Wang, asking whether I might visit his collection.

I heard nothing for months and assumed Mr Wang had not received this letter from a random stranger or had received it but, reasonably, had chosen to ignore it. So, imagine my surprise when, in early December, I opened an elaborate red and gold embossed invitation to a party in Mao Zedong's honour on 26 December, the 101st anniversary of his birth. The resulting research never figured in my dissertation but was later theorised through a discussion of the Mao badge as a fetish that interrogates the presumed theoretical divide between the postulated ahistorical, 'private' fetish and its 'public' commodity counterpart (Hubbert 2006). Yet, reflecting on that early fieldwork, nearly 30 years later, it was not the theoretical manoeuvrings that I found myself contemplating, but the visceral and social experiences of studying collecting—the visual saturation of red badges and banners juxtaposed with busts and paintings of Mao, Marx, and Lenin; the extemporaneous bursts of revolutionary opera music; a devotee who sported a Marx-like long grey beard insisting the government could 'chop off my head' for all he cared, but he would continue to resist contemporary capitalism through honouring Mao.

The nostalgia of Wang Anting and his party of elderly Mao enthusiasts was an embodied emotion—reflections on intimate experiences of loss and displacement from a time in which public rhetoric, if not always practice, lauded their working-class subjectivities as vanguards of revolution. Yet, their nostalgia reflected not only a personal sense of injury, but also a growing political sentiment that was manifest in a wave of public nostalgia for the Maoist past that reached a climax in the mid-1990s and reflected the perceived moral turpitude of the Deng Xiaoping era (Deng 1991). The nostalgia of the partygoers was thus both a form of spectacle—to amass sheer numbers of badges that were intended to speak, through their volume, to the greatness of Mao and the greatness of the collector honouring Mao—and a form of resistance to a Party-State that had rejected the communitarian, egalitarian impulses of an earlier ideology in favour of schemes of capitalist enrichment that marginalised these celebrators.

My own nostalgia, as I reflect on theirs, is also both personal and political. It, too, is individually embodied, perhaps idealising the nascent stages of a career that is nearer now to its end than its beginning. At the same time, it is a political response directly embedded within the context of a global pandemic and an increasingly bellicose and repressive Chinese Party-State that renders creative and public manifestations of resistance to power and forms of immersive fieldwork increasingly challenging in contemporary China. Nostalgia, Svetlana Boym (2001: xiii) writes, is a 'sentiment of loss and displacement', a longing for 'a home that no longer exists', but also a 'romance with one's own fantasy'. Here, I explore the forms of nostalgia produced by and in reaction to the Party-State, thinking through the question of how individuals and the Party-State produce romances with a fantasy past and how the Party-State is imagined in nostalgic forms of public culture through sentiments of loss and longing. I approach nostalgia and the Party-State over the long durée, exploring how these relationships illuminate the changing nature of public culture and how power—and threats to power—is embedded in the nostalgic visions of belonging and melancholy. However, as I dissect this changing relationship, I find myself returning not only to nostalgia as a theoretical object, but also to the politics of collecting these nostalgias through fieldwork, and increasingly asking: 'What is at stake in this interest? Is future fieldwork and its attendant knowledge a form of complicity with an increasingly repressive Party-State? Will I ever return?'

Nostalgias Close to Home: Mourning Loss and Celebrating Consumption in 1990s China

It comes as no surprise that nostalgia emerged as a central theme in my scholarship, given my early and sustained interest in collective memory. And yet how I came to experience and theorise it as a form of public culture and reflection of state–society relations has much to do with the critical nostalgias aired and debated in the 1980s. Living and working on a university campus in the late 1980s provided immediate access to the educated population that later became the subject of my dissertation research. As Zhang Xudong (1998: 3) notes, intellectuals at the time were 'semi-independent of state ideology and rhetorical officialdom' and, while the Party-State launched several relatively tepid campaigns against 'bourgeois liberalisation', these years in general were marked by the dynamic development and relative freedom of intellectual discourse. Within this context, I watched the television miniseries *River Elegy* (河殇) in public spaces with friends and colleagues and discussed how this anticommunist program that set tradition against modernisation and portrayed the West as an oasis of science and democracy was also ardently nationalist and revealed a deep-seated nostalgia for an imperialist past (Wang 1996: 122). My notes from the time include commentary from a colleague while we were watching *River Elegy*: 'Here in China we think the United States is perfect.' This sentiment reflects an extreme that was modified in other representational forms, yet it was articulated at a time when the viewing public felt relatively comfortable airing their critiques through analyses of the show, and nostalgia as a cultural practice dug deeply and publicly into recalcitrant histories.

When I initiated my study of collective memory in the mid-1990s, the possibilities for such nationwide, public nostalgia had undergone a metamorphosis. After June 1989, and its unleashing of extraordinary violence on its citizens in Tiananmen Square, the Chinese Party-State launched comprehensive patriotic education and national propaganda campaigns that rendered such critical forms of public culture more challenging. In the place of critical nationally televised shows like *River Elegy*, what emerged were more privatised forms of nostalgia, enabled through consumption. Deng Xiaoping had gone south, declared money-making worthy of more complete embrace, and citizen romances with the past were often deeply embedded in the capitalist project, with the Party-State both an enabler of nostalgia and an object of its derision. Badge collector Wang Anting and his partygoers articulated their nostalgia for this past through lamentations about disjuncture and distance from an idealised egalitarian ideology that critically framed the present in reaction to an erosion of earlier social hierarchies of value. The Party-State, in rejecting the proletarian-led and anti-capitalist premise of Mao's revolution, had driven them to the outside of official ideology. As such, Mao emerged as a nostalgic symbol of authenticity, worshipped in this capacity to contest public discourses of value and belonging. Although the promise of the Maoist revolution was a future-oriented one, these individuals' memories of it redirected that orientation to the past, fashioning paths around mourning and loss that laid implicit blame on the contemporary Party-State.

Nonetheless, as Kathleen Stewart (1988: 227) notes, nostalgia is a 'three-ring circus of simultaneous images in the arenas of life-style, spectacle, and loss'. While Wang Anting in his nostalgia—manifest through amassing Mao badges—grieved for China's neoliberalisation of socialist ideology, other Mao badge collectors embraced it, buying and selling badges for profit rather than to honour Mao. Their allegorical readings of Mao badges—Mao's profile perpetually turned to the left—moved collecting to the right through instrumentalist pursuit of capital accumulation in a marketplace enabled by the Party-State. Nostalgia—always already a cultural rehearsal—shifts with context, depending 'on where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present' (Stewart 1998: 227). And these collectors-for-profit thus rewrote

their acts of accumulation as paeans to a new ideology of belonging through entrepreneurialism that recoded this nostalgia in relation to the Party-State as one of empowerment rather than loss.

The diverse nostalgias of the Mao badge collectors in the 1990s paralleled another privatised public expression of nostalgia similarly manifest through consumption: Cultural Revolution–themed restaurants that memorialised both contemporary gluttony and historical deprivation (Hubbert 2005, 2007). The owners of these restaurants were members of a generation who directly suffered the wreckage of the Cultural Revolution. Like Wang's nostalgia, theirs was personally embodied and they envisioned their restaurants as mini-museums that refused to accommodate an amnesiac nation. And yet, like the for-profit badge collectors, they performed a similarly complicated dance around culpability and the Party-State, for their mini-museums simultaneously served as *guanxi* grounds for the production of class status, with walls of business cards providing professional updates on former sent-down youth. 'Nowadays,' one restaurant owner explained to me back in 1995, 'connections are really important … You need to have relationships with these people' (Hubbert 2005: 137). In contrast to the era these places were meant to memorialise, there was little threat of Cultural Revolution–type persecution inside these restrained spectacles of rusticity that ratified the Party-State's new forms of belonging.

In contrast, many of the Cultural Revolution restaurant diners with whom I spoke were young adults who did not directly experience the ravages of the recent past; their 'vicarious' nostalgia was for the Cultural Revolution youthhood of their parents' generation. While nostalgia is frequently implicated in reveries about one's youth, this generationally contiguous longing was a disembodied one, often founded on popular culture representations of the Cultural Revolution as a time of camaraderie and ideological fervour rather than tragedy and devastation. And yet, while they commoditised a troubled past from a privileged place in the present, their nostalgia—mirroring that of Wang and his cohort of elderly collectors—was equally sentimentalised as feelings of displacement.

The young diners I interviewed found themselves in a liminal space marked by the demise of a job-assignment system that guaranteed them post-college positions and an underdeveloped job market. Their ambivalence about their waning social capital in the face of a market that rewarded entrepreneurial over intellectual endeavours rendered the Cultural Revolution—in contrast—as a moment of time in which youth were empowered and had ideological purpose. Their reflections on the rickety values of both past and present and the concomitant fears of potential loss of social capital led to romanticised visions of a past they had never experienced, but one their parents, in their frequent unwillingness to explore the depravity of the era and the Party-State's role in its construction, left ripe for reinterpretation. Thus, through reclaiming the legitimacy of earlier values and forms of belonging in the face of dispossession (both real and imagined) in the present, these students avoided complicated assessments of state-sanctioned destruction at the same time as they consumed the fruits of its contemporary neoliberalisation.

For All the World to See: Performing Nostalgia on the Global Stage in the Second Millennium

In more recent years, we find the dominant forms of nostalgia are far more about state power than about individual loss and are no longer embodied in personal or contiguous generational experience. The closer one comes to the present, the further away is the object of nostalgia. And the public stages for this nostalgia are massive, with badge collections and restaurants ceding to the Beijing Olympics, the Shanghai Expo, and Confucius Institutes. These newer forms of nostalgia reflect a mandate set in the geopolitical future, constructing promises of a globally authoritative modernity through claiming ownership over a long-lost imperialist antiquity. This is a teleological nostalgia that undergirds the Party-State's quest for superpower

status; the Party-State has emerged as the dominant producer of public nostalgia as it increasingly forecloses other forms of memory and value. While these nostalgias are not uncontested (see Hubbert 2015, 2019a), they dominate public expressions.

The nostalgia of Cultural Revolution restaurants and Mao badge collectors both rendered the past more palatable—as a mechanism for buttressing previous state destruction and contemporary ideological change—and manifested as critiques of the Party-State. In contrast, the contemporary forms of nostalgia at these globally facing events and institutions are not about addressing social anomie but about winning the hearts and minds of local and global populations through glorifying a romanticised past that offered ostensibly alternative forms of modernity (Hubbert 2010, 2013, 2015, 2017). While the Party-State plays a central role in all these invocations of nostalgia as object and subject, the dominant contemporary form is one promoted by and in support of the Party-State rather than one that laments its distance from its idealised forms. So, for example, rather than dine on the rustic fare of the Cultural Revolution or collect Mao badges to fashion memories of an inconvenient and contentious past, Shanghai Expo exhibits lauded Daoist environmentalism as a model of contemporary sustainability and Olympic Games cultural displays drew on Confucian themes of harmony among diversity. These 'landscapes of power' (Zukin 1992) selectively constructed a public nostalgia that naturalised historical forms of culture as laudatory precursors to a better global modernity, and a specifically Chinese one at that. Confucius Institutes have taken this message around the globe through pedagogical materials that actualise the imperial past in a present political context and situate resistance to the Party-State's narrative as anti–Chinese culture and the Party-State as that culture's guarantor. Where the 1990s nostalgias of Wang's badge collectors and the younger college students emphasised disjuncture, the new Party-State–sponsored nostalgia offers continuity with an ancient past as a form of contemporary national communion and a global model for nation-building.

The Changing Stakes of Memory

During my years of research on the Olympics, Expo, and Confucius Institutes, the Party-State's willingness to proactively scrub representations of China free of warts has become increasingly fraught for those implicated in the Party-State's webs of predation. Chinese citizens and critical scholars, both local and global, who refuse to tell the 'correct' China Story, are increasingly being answered by the Party-State through silencing, visa refusals, and/or incarceration. Susan Stewart (1984: 23) has characterised nostalgia as a 'social disease' and I am concerned about what contagion means when memory and nostalgia reside as strange bedfellows in a context that renders research in China an uneasy ethical question.

In recent years, as I engage with scholars, politicians, and human rights activists, among others, and hear less often from my friends and contacts within China, I see these webs of predation expanding. I hear reports of precarious faculty at US universities censoring their in-class commentary on China for fear of Chinese students retaliating in teaching evaluations. I talk with scholars who return to China to engage in fieldwork and face prohibitions on travel to previous field sites, the removal of sponsorship, and interlocuters unwilling to engage. Others have been banned entirely. No new research visas are being granted and multiple-entry visas are no longer honoured. Internally, the forms of political repression and cultural compression grow apace. Uyghurs are disappeared or detained *en masse* in 'reeducation' camps (Byler et al. 2022), public representations of 'effeminate men' are banned (Timmins 2021), and foreign textbooks are expunged from classrooms (Cheung 2020). I increasingly find my scholarship at the vortex of impossibility as I publish and give talks on these state-sponsored forms of nostalgia. When I express scepticism about US media representations of Confucius Institutes as spy outposts and communist propaganda training grounds, I have been accused of being in the pockets of the Chinese Government. And yet, critiques seem to land me in a similarly awkward position. After

a talk that referenced debates about freedom of speech at Confucius Institutes, I was accused of being a racist by one online audience member and a 'sad, hate filled monotonic chirping American monkey' in the colourful words of another. One long-time Chinese friend declaims of the contemporary period: 'It hasn't been this bad since the Cultural Revolution' (no nostalgia for the era noted). And yet, I also cannot discount the possibility that my knowledge is constituted through absence. I am no longer there, and my nostalgia is embedded in earlier privileged access to lively forms of resistance and empowerment.

What are the changing stakes of memory—my own and that of my interlocuters? China is witnessing a massive expansion of the Party-State's nostalgic presence in the public sphere and a global expansion of what counts as that space, and a contraction of both authorship and possibility for resistance to state-mandated nostalgia. The forms of loss that can be publicly recognised have narrowed—a dominant romance for an ancient past mandated for all. How far back must one go to find an acceptable object of desire? Embodied pasts are dangerous in constructions of nostalgia. People remember. I wonder whether my growing sense of unease manifests in a form of nostalgia, for my memories remain intensely tied to the visceral and affective aspects of the research: soaking in the pride of a Beijing resident who waxes rhapsodic over China's hosting of the 2008 Olympics, amid a tsunami of global critique about the 'Genocide Olympics' of 2022; sweat dripping down my back as I waited in seemingly interminable lines to see the massive national pavilion at the Shanghai Expo; giggling with high school students in US Confucius Institutes over the anthropomorphised characters in their Chinese-language textbooks. Do such memories empower their objects or gloss over the decreased possibilities for a more politically powerful nostalgia? How am I navigating my scholarly conclusions in relation to state-sponsored constructions of the past?

Does my nostalgia, then, mirror an inverse progression of the nostalgia I have studied? In *Veiled Sentiments*, an ethnography about gender relations, poetry, and morality among the Bedouin, Lila Abu-Lughod (2016) makes evident how such sentiment plays a central role in the construction of knowledge. In a rewritten epilogue to the book, she pushes this discussion of sentiment in new directions, thinking nostalgically about her initial desire for belonging, as a 'shy twenty-six-year-old with strong feelings, deep insecurities, and a desperate urge to understand their world as I lived in it' (Abu-Lughod 2016: 264). Abu-Lughod notes how anthropological research involves 'caring in common' despite different positionalities and geopolitical realities, despite incommensurate worlds. This has manifest in one form in my work through the years in China, through insisting on the humanity of my interlocuters. For example, Confucius Institute teachers are often regarded by parents and program sceptics as inevitable sources of propaganda and/or objects of repression (Hubbert 2019b). Through interrogating the frameworks—in this case, the notion of freedom of speech—as culturally and politically constituted, we can see how different forms of speech (i.e. Chinese teachers' representations of China) are not necessarily the result of state repression, and thus construct a form of subjectivity often denied them by critics of China and Chinese global productions. Yet, despite the possibilities for sentiment, after decades of work among the Bedouin, Abu-Lughod, too, seems to be questioning the inherent conflicts of the process. 'It is not clear to me,' she writes, 'what good would come from more revelations, however insightful, meant for audiences that do not really include them' (2016: 298); or, in my case, for citizens' decreasing ability to express themselves publicly through their nostalgia and my own ability to reflect their memories in a manner that honours their experiences. ■

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