Chapter 5

The Power of the Past: Nostalgia and Popular Discontent in Contemporary China

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Introduction

How do workers view the Maoist past? What effects do their views have on the frequency and forms of their collective mobilization? These questions are not as simple as they appear. They have beguiled the field for some time, as scholars disagree over whether or not workers are nostalgic for some perceived better era of the past, and what importance this may or may not have. Before answering these questions, it is worthwhile first to trace what definitions of nostalgia have been offered in the study of Chinese politics generally and the study of workers in particular. In fact, it is clear that there are multiple widely felt subtypes of nostalgia in contemporary China.

After outlining these, I present data on laid-off workers across four regions of China. These show that there are three subtypes of workers’ nostalgia. Each of these has different effects on workers’ propensity to engage in collective action and plays a role in shaping the character of their contention. Finally, I offer some broader hypotheses about the role of nostalgia in collective action beyond the world of Chinese workers. But first, what is nostalgia and why does it matter?

Over the more than twenty-five hundred years since Hesiod described a long-lapsed Golden Age when humans “lived like gods, with carefree
heart, remote from toil and misery,” many scholars have been fascinated by the proposition that things may have been better in the past—or, alternatively, that people may look back on the past with rose-tinted goggles, perceiving bad circumstances during prior times in a kinder light. Many have recently observed such thinking among various segments of Chinese society, from intellectuals and artists, to laid-off state sector workers and rural villagers. A special issue of a journal was recently devoted to discussing nostalgia for the Cultural Revolution, and an entire edited book has been published on collective memories of the pre-reform era.

So far, however, we have an insufficient framework to speak about nostalgia across social groups in China or to measure just what quantity or which sort of nostalgia any particular group feels and what political effects such sentiments might have, though Ching Kwan Lee and Guobin Yang have recently provided a useful starting point. I propose a basic system for categorizing the varieties of nostalgia observed in contemporary China and a series of hypotheses to explain which sorts of nostalgia ought to promote specific forms of collective action and contention.

Defining Nostalgia in Reform China

First, there is a need for a benchmark definition of nostalgia. A minimal definition of the core concept of nostalgia in contemporary China is the perception among members of a clearly defined group that their lives were in some important respect better prior to the advent of reform in 1978 than they are today. Many observations can then be conceptually arrayed around this basic definition.

For fifteen years, Western scholars of China have been concerned with the ways individuals, groups, and the state view the past and mobilize portions of it to serve particular purposes in the present. Though all of these scholars have spoken directly of nostalgia, they have not fully engaged one another’s arguments or data. This relative lack of interchange is largely due to the fact that not all of these authors have deployed the concept of nostalgia in the same way. Working from differing conceptual templates, they have constructed arguments and analyses that are thus necessarily somewhat idiosyncratic. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to develop a coherent literature or make plain the most salient debates or significant empirical findings.

Whether a particular researcher sympathizes with or denigrates a given form of nostalgia is not important. Neither is the question of whether an author who first observed a given form of nostalgia conceptualized it as a