

Nostalgia in Times of Uncertainty

*(Re)articulations of the Past, Present,
and Future of Globalization*

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ABSTRACT

Taking the United Kingdom, the United States, and China as cases, this chapter explores the transnational connections of the rhetoric of nostalgia—or, more precisely, what Roland Robertson (1990) calls “willful nostalgia”—in the current phase of globalization. Analyzing these cases through a lens of global studies enables an understanding of nostalgia both as a response to the paradoxes—such as between the compressed world and the intensified distinctions of clusters of nations, between integration and retreat, and between globalization and deglobalization, generated by the globalization processes—and as a multifaceted construct associated with geotemporality, affect, politics, culture, and history. I contend that the divergent rhetoric of nostalgia reflects these countries’ different empirical stages and experiences of globalization and (re)articulations of the places to which they aspire in the future world. While the willful nostalgia under discussion has revealed the continuing tensions among nation-states, citizens, international relations, and humanity in the context of accelerated global capitalism, the conflictual and mutually constitutive relationship between globalization and nostalgia are also important to consider.

KEYWORDS

China, future, globalization, nostalgia, the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (U.S.)

In recent years nostalgia—exemplified by the “Global Britain” Brexit slogan, the Trumpian “Make America Great Again” (MAGA) in the United States, and the “Chinese Dream” under Xi’s leadership—has become visible across political

regimes and geographies. The rise of nostalgia as a public sentiment, an articulation relating to time (not necessarily linear), and as a tool of political manipulation in an era of uncertainties (e.g., economic, political, public health, and environmental) raises questions about the relationships between globalization and nostalgia. Taking the United Kingdom, the United States, and China as cases, this chapter explores the transnational connections of the rhetoric of nostalgia—or, more precisely, what Roland Robertson (1990) calls “willful nostalgia”—in the current phase of globalization. Seeing nostalgia as a site of articulation comprising both discursive constructions and contestations among multiple forces (e.g., historical, economic, cultural, and ideological), I also attend to how the national temporalities and imaginaries of globalization are narrated and interconnected, as well as to their implications for the future of globalization.

Analyzing these cases through a lens of global studies that pays close attention to the local-global continuum imbued with fluidity, diversity, and complexity (Darrian-Smith & McCarty, 2017), the conceptual framework of this chapter, discussed in the first section, draws on theories on the relationship between globalization and nostalgia. It enables an understanding of nostalgia both as a response to the tensions—such as between the compressed world and the intensified distinctions of clusters of nations, between integration and retreat, and between globalization and deglobalization—generated by the globalization processes and as a multifaceted construct associated with geotemporality, affect, politics, culture, and history.

Guided by this framework, I then present the storytelling about nostalgia in these three countries in the section that follows. Specifically, the United Kingdom’s case illustrates how the history of the Empire has shaped both the meanings of its European Union (EU) membership and imagination about its post-Brexit future by relying on its transatlantic (colonial) ties for a “Global Britain.” The “America First” rhetoric in the United States during Trump’s era symbolizes both its erosion of multilateralism, a foundation of contemporary globalization, and a (wishful) return to the imagined past by neglecting the intensifying inequalities rooted in neoliberalism in the present. In contrast, China’s selective memories about the (ancient) Silk Road—a story of preglobalization cosmopolitan connectivity—aim to legitimize its geopolitical expansions and pursuit of an alternative globalization that parallels the Western-led global order.

I contend that the divergent rhetoric of nostalgia reflects these countries’ different empirical stages and experiences of globalization and (re)articulations of the places to which they aspire in the future world. Despite its ostensible simultaneity on a global scale at this historical moment, the willful nostalgia under discussion should not be simplified as a global trend of local resistance toward globalization. A further nuanced analysis needs to be directed to individual countries’ respective geotemporal dynamics—such as the changes in power, social relations, and structure of feeling across times and places—in the long course of globalization (and not limited to contemporary globalization).

CONCEPTUALIZING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GLOBALIZATION AND NOSTALGIA

In its contemporary usage, nostalgia refers to an emotional reaction characterized by a sense of loss, dislocation, and/or “homelessness” (Bonnett, 2015; Davis, 1977: 415; R. Robertson, 1992; B.S. Turner, 1987). In their writing on nostalgia as a sociocultural discursive construction, Bryan S. Turner and Georg Stauth (Turner, 1987; Stauth & Turner, 1988) identified four major components of the nostalgic paradigm: the idea of historical decline, a sense of the absence of personal wholeness and moral certainty, a sense of the loss of individual freedom and autonomy, and the feeling of the loss of personal expressivity and emotional spontaneity. As a response to identity disturbance or discontinuity, nostalgia can be used as the means at our disposal for holding on to, reaffirming, and reconstructing our identities through, for example, searching for familiarity and certainty in the past (Davis, 1977, 1979). In this sense, nostalgia is less about place than about time: in particular, a perceived or imagined “golden age” in which the gulf between past and present can be bridged, one’s desired self can be accommodated, and there is no longing for any other time-space (Tinsley, 2020).

Seeing globalization as a primary root of nostalgia, Roland Robertson (1990, 1992, 1995) is one of the few who have discussed the relationship between them. According to him, the “take-off” phase of globalization (i.e., 1870–1925) witnessed a number of important changes, including the development of various communication means, of international agreements, and of global institutions concerning the world-as-whole, such as the standardization of World Time and the global popularity of the Gregorian calendar. Those technological, economic, institutional, social, and cultural transformations not only provoked a feeling of estrangement or of “homelessness” in individuals; more importantly, they generated willful, politically driven nostalgia as a form of cultural politics—as well as the politics of culture—within nation-states facilitated by the considerable concern across the world with national identity and national integration (R. Robertson, 1990).

Capitalist modernity in the twentieth century involved the homogenizing requirements of the modern nation-state—such as the production of standardized citizens—in the face of local ethnocultural, as well as religious, diversity. This generated the tensions between the universalization of national (and other) particularism and the expectation of the uniqueness of identity, as well as geotemporal distinctions between clusters of nations (R. Robertson, 1992). Despite great variations in the intensity and type of concerns with the past, willful nostalgia was widely observed during that period, from North America to Europe and Asia. While nostalgia in Japan, an emerging economy in Asia and a newcomer to international society back then, was about consolidating “national essence” and strengthening its “unique” identity against the outside world, for example, what

dominated Germany's sociological ideas then was remarkable pessimism about the future and modernity in general (R. Robertson, 1990).

Robertson (1990) argued that nostalgic resistance to globalization would persist, given the continuing changes of the four interdependent components of the global space. Specifically, nation-states are simultaneously experiencing both external and internal pressures to reconstruct their collective identities in the context of increasing heterogeneity and diversity; individuals are increasingly subject to competing ethnic, cultural, and religious reference points; the world system of societies (international relations) has become increasingly multipolar and fluid; and the idea of a common humanity, or of humankind as a species, is being subjected to contested thematization and scrutiny. In the current phase of globalization, nostalgia has become both collective on a global scale and directed at globality itself, given the very fluidity of global change (R. Robertson, 1992). Compared to the willful, synthetic nostalgia that is an ingredient of the cultural politics in the take-off phase of globalization, contemporary nostalgia is both more economic and more cultural, in the sense of being a major product of transnational capitalism (R. Robertson, 1990).

In Neil Brenner's eyes, however, Roland Robertson's analysis—in particular, his conception of space—"reproduces a state-centric image of global space as a timeless, territorial framework that contains historicity without itself evolving historically" (Brenner, 1999: 55). Instead of treating globalization as a static situation or a terminal condition, he conceives it as "a conflictual reconfiguration of social space that unfolds simultaneously upon multiple, superimposed geographical scales" (60), and as an ongoing process in which the spatiality and temporality of social relations is continually produced and transformed based on the extension, restructuring, and acceleration of global capitalism. While this significantly challenges the role of the nation-state as an enclosed container of socioeconomic relations, globalization and nationalization have historically proceeded in tandem as mutually constitutive processes of sociospatial restructuring (Brenner, 1999). In a time of multiple, accumulating crises (e.g., financial, democratic, refugee, public health, and climate), however, resorting to willful nostalgia or a romanticized version of the past not only masks the deep socioeconomic divisions in these societies; it also distracts people from engaging with the present, and from aspiring to and imagining a viable future without insularity and fear (Novack, 2017).

In short, while nostalgia is rooted in the "time-space compression" that resulted from globalization and is part of the "global-human condition" (Harvey, 1990; R. Robertson, 1992), globalization itself is also continuously reconstituted by such a highly conflictual dynamic. In the next section I explore the complex dynamics embedded in the rhetoric of nostalgia, through which the story about globalization as a multiscalar, historical process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization is (re)articulated in each of the three selected country cases.

THE THREE CASES

The UK: Brexit and Global Britain

The debate around the 2016 Brexit, with its keynote themes of immigration, “sovereignty,” and free trade, was really about Britain’s place in a world in which its global influence has been in decline. In the 1950s the Suez crisis, for example, not only damaged the country’s imperial confidence; it also exposed the limits of its ability to act independently of the United States, an emergent hegemon in the postwar order (Reiss, 2021). Although the United Kingdom’s entry into the EU’s predecessor, the European Economic Community, in 1973 was in part about its attempt to exert its influence within the growing European Community, over time its membership was increasingly viewed, especially by Eurosceptics, as a symptom of its decline and loss of privilege, and a threat to “Britain’s historical narrative of the self” (Beaumont, 2017: 380; Saunders, 2020). In an extreme version, the victory of the Leave campaign was declared by UKIP leader Nigel Farage as the country’s “independence day” (BBC, 2016). Seeing that that “identity” mattered as much as economics, Paul Beaumont argues that a nostalgic vision of what made Britain “great” in the past—Empire and World War II—has provided fertile ground for the long-term Euroscepticism that enabled Brexit, which can be understood as “a radical attempt to arrest Britain’s decline by setting sail for a future” (2017: 379).

In the context of the Brexit debate, Theresa May, then prime minister, also relaunched “Britain” as “Global Britain” (Selchow, 2020). Presented as an alternative to the EU after Brexit, Global Britain is framed by the UK government as both the story of Britain escaping the confinement of the EU “prison” and a grand strategy to renew a global leadership role in the “new,” post-Brexit world (Daddow, 2019). This rhetoric brings together two ostensibly contradictory yet interconnected visions: an imperial longing to restore Britain’s place as *primus inter pares*, which was built upon colonial conquest and hierarchy, and an insular, Powellite narrative of the islands’ retreat from a “globalizing” world that is no longer recognizably “British” (Virdee & McGeever, 2018). While some scholars criticize Global Britain as a vision of “Empire 2.0,” others have sharply pointed out that the idea is less about the United Kingdom’s global consciousness than about a rhetorical strategy to downplay its colonial past, to detach it from the stigma of empire, and also to minimize the significance of decolonization (Saunders, 2020; Selchow, 2020; O. Turner, 2019). In other words, it was not a “narrative of empire,” but a narrative of greatness, the distinctive identity of Britain as a small but heroic nation that once “ruled the world” (Beaumont, 2017: 380; Saunders, 2020).

The amnesia—manufactured by conflating imperial nostalgia with its positive global aspiration—inherent in the Global Britain rhetoric may indeed have contributed to its ability to attract Brexit supporters from a wide range of social, economic, and political spectrums. Although the typical Brexit voters are often described as those who are white, older, less educated, and poorer, for example,

many younger voters (about one-quarter of 18–24s and over one-third of 25–34s), people with university degrees (slightly over two-fifths), and a significant portion of ethnic minorities (one-third of Asian voters and one-quarter of Black voters, among others) supported Leave (Ashcroft, 2016; Martill & Rogstad, 2019; Mintchev, 2021). Although hostility to immigration and multiculturalism is one of the characteristics associated with a Leave vote, the enthusiasm for Commonwealth—which may mean white “Dominions” for some, and the multiracial states of the “new” Commonwealth for others—is simultaneously palpable. Attributing the Black and Asian votes to the difficulty in differentiating between Commonwealth and imperial loyalties, Robert Saunders further argues that the legacies of empire—as it manifested in the Global Britain discourses and critiques—are a common cultural inheritance affecting all sides of the Brexit debate, rather than “a disorder to which only half the population is subject” (2020: 1140).

Although the divide between the winners and losers in globalization, exemplified by the increasing socioeconomic inequalities, was a key driver of the vote (Martill & Rogstad, 2019), its highly divergent geotemporal dynamics—another result of globalization—also merit a nuanced understanding. At a national level, the United Kingdom’s four countries (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales) have different experiences of migration, political sovereignty, and economic policy; and their trajectories of support for Leave and Remain are also different (Mintchev, 2021). St. Andrews, a seaside town in Scotland (which voted to Remain), for example, is a place where “everyday life has for decades been defined by cosmopolitanism,” which has been “a cornerstone of previous temporalities of Scottish European belonging,” but now is suspended by the UK’s Brexit vote (Knight, 2017: 238). The vote to Leave in the town of Margate (in England) was enabled by the attachment of its residents, even the economically well-off, to a shared working-class history (including pride in their ancestors’ participation in World War II and local histories of manufacturing) that was seen as marginalized from a mainstream political culture (Balthazar, 2017). The complex geotemporal dynamics are also clear in London: while this global city predominantly supported Remain, “left-out” working-class people in East London voted the opposite as a way of expressing their anger toward decades of poverty and political invisibility (Mckenzie, 2017).

During the Leave campaign, terms such as *CANZUK* and *the Anglosphere* gained currency. While *CANZUK* refers to a union of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, the Anglosphere is a broader conception of uniting English-speaking polities around the world (Bell & Vucetic, 2019; Gamble, 2021; Wellings & Baxendale, 2015). The ideas can be traced back to Charles Dilke’s *Greater Britain* (1868), in which he characterized Britain as the center of a world system bound together by a common identity—mainly racial (i.e., the Anglo-Saxon race), but also cultural and linguistic—or what Penelope Edmonds (2009) calls “trans-imperial Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism” (Kennedy, 2021). While

the rhetoric appeared effective to mobilize sizable clusters of the British populace by instilling a (false) sense of hope and renewal, it has also bolstered populism, ethnic nationalism, racism, prejudice, and homophobia in society, given its deep entanglement with the politicization of “culture” and national identity (Koegler, Malreddy, & Tronicke, 2020; Mondal, 2020; Virdee & McGeever, 2018).

In reality, however, resorting to a late-Victorian imaginary centered on the integration of Britain and its white settler colonies can never be a viable alternative to European integration, especially when it comes to trade and security (Dougall, 2023; Gamble, 2021; Steel, 2015). Despite its aims to restore its global influence in the world and its globalist outlook, at the heart of Global Britain are actually bilateral agreements (with individual countries) to compensate for the loss of EU ties (Major & von Oндarza, 2018). In a world where Russia’s threats and China’s power are growing, the United Kingdom may indeed be forced to concentrate more on Europe (Major & von Oндarza, 2018; Reiss, 2021). Seeing Global Britain as a *domestic* rather than an international narrative, Oliver Turner (2019) argues that the narrative constitutes an actively problematic component of the United Kingdom’s foreign policy, given its inherently regressive worldview. Against the interests of Brexiters and their aspirations, as well, the UK’s postimperial decline is likely to continue due to loss of the structural advantages accrued by European economies (Mondal, 2018).

The US: MAGA and America First

Since the 1970s, American hegemonic power has been contested or at the very least under challenge due to various international and domestic conditions, including the Vietnam War, massive loss of manufacturing jobs, large trade deficits (especially with China), the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and even the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Take job loss and international trade, two interconnected hot topics pertinent to both globalization and the 2016 election. From the early 1980s to 2015 the United States’ share of global manufacturing declined from nearly 30 percent to 18.6 percent, and its manufacturing jobs fell from almost 19 million to just over 12 million (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, n.d.; Levinson, 2018).

During the 2016 election increasing socioeconomic divides and polarization, consequences of neoliberal globalization, were a palpable contributing factor to Donald Trump’s victory. For example, the Rust Belt, a region that experienced industrial decline since the 1980s and played an unexpected role in Trump’s victory, was one of the targets of his rhetoric of nostalgia (Mutz, 2018). Many voters there strongly responded to his popular message of “Make America Great Again” (MAGA), in which he promised to bring manufacturing jobs back by stimulating its economy through deregulation, new trade deals, and a reversal of many of the energy policies of Obama and his other predecessors (Van Winkle, 2020). Despite the fact that some jobs have been permanently lost to technologies, the affective nature of MAGA rhetoric was especially appealing given these voters’ desire for

a past in which they were viewed as valuable to the country's industry, culture, and politics (James, 2018; Van Winkle, 2020). Although Trump's success was often attributed to the support of those who were "left behind" economically, Diana C. Mutz argues for the importance of "status threat" felt by the dwindling proportion of traditionally high-status Americans (i.e., whites, Christians, and men) and by those who perceive the United States' global dominance as threatened in the contexts of growing domestic racial diversity and global economic competition. In her words, "The 2016 election was a result of anxiety about dominant groups' future status rather than a result of being overlooked in the past" (2018: E4338). While such a sense of loss (of one's status in the domestic or international hierarchy, for example) is nothing new, this sentiment was highly politicized through the course of the 2016 presidential campaign.

Seeing the loss of authenticity (i.e., "true" Americanness and nationhood) as a core of the United States' decline, Trump's supporters are particularly proposing the need to return to a past in which an "ideal" status hierarchy or social order built on Christianity and race prevailed (Mayne, 2018; Mutz, 2018). Despite variations in their framing of how religion and race intersect—by using either white supremacist or color-blind language when talking about ideal Americanness and American history, for example—as markers of American belonging and power, Ruth Braunstein (2021) argues that a wide range of right-wing movements are bound together by their adherence to a nostalgic vision of the United States as a Christian nation. Although the temporal specificity of the golden age appears vague in these narratives, its relational future is clear. That is, it is an age, or time-space, in which heterosexual, white, Christian men had a monopoly on social and political power, and in which the now-lost moral virtues and religious values that are essential to the "authentic Americanness" should be revived and recaptured (Al-Ghazzi, 2021; Braunstein, 2021; Murphy, 2009). Such a singular and essentialist articulation of Americanness through a distorted past became a base for Trump to mobilize and consolidate power against his political opponents (Gul, 2021; Tinsley, 2020: 2354).

As pointed out by Michael Mayne, white nationalism and the rhetoric of nostalgia share three elements of *doxa* (i.e., self-evident truth): authenticity, home, and restoration. To legitimize a return to an imagined home where "the present has degenerated into a cosmopolitan amalgamation," however, further rhetorical components are also indispensable (2018: 85). Through his speeches over time Trump has compiled a long list of enemies and historical humiliations, ranging from the democratic elite and the media to Muslims, Mexicans, and China (Al-Ghazzi, 2021; Braunstein 2021). Making self-victimizing claims creates "a chain of equivalent binaries" between *us* as the patriots, faithful and authentic, versus *them* as the traitors, faithless and intruders, and solidifies the divisions in a pluralist society, both of which are central to popularistic discourses (Al-Ghazzi, 2021: 47). More importantly, as pointed out by Omar Al-Ghazzi, "projecting victimhood

onto meta-historical narratives about a conflict between victims and oppressors allows for imagining the trajectories of communities along a ‘zigzag’ historical timeline, wherein the present is portrayed as a juncture similar to fateful junctures in the past” (2021: 46). Positing the United States, like Europe, as lost to the waves of (nonwhite) immigration, for example, its future becomes an existential crisis for its historical glory, its identity, and even its civilization. In Trump’s (2017) words, “The fundamental question of our time is whether the West has the will to survive.” Confronting the stark choice between its “tragic decline” and MAGA, accordingly, Trump is portrayed as the leader, the hero, and the embodiment of his supporters (as the hijacked “American people”) whose destiny is to direct the zigzag structure (of the desired emotion and memory) into the right direction and time-space (Al-Ghazzi, 2021).

The intersection of identity and nostalgia also applies in U.S. foreign policy. On a discursive level, America First is a mixture of American exceptionalism and historical amnesia (Braunstein, 2021; Löffmann, 2020). The rhetoric of MAGA is underpinned by the historical construction—not just by Trump—of the United States as “a City upon a Hill” or a “unique,” superior, singular, and “God-favored” country, which is integral to its grand strategy in a post-Cold-War world (Löffmann, 2020). In this “forked historical consciousness,” however, there is little acknowledgement of its associated dark history. As a code for nativism and white nationalism, according to Sarah Churchwell (2018), America First, which Trump repeatedly employed in his inaugural speech, is a phrase and ideal historically entangled with the country’s brutal legacy of slavery, xenophobia, and isolationism, exemplified by its early appearance in 1884 as a slogan to fight trade wars with the British and the America First Committee formed in 1940 by a coalition of Americans against U.S. entry into World War II. On a practical level, the Trump administration’s retreat from multilateralism—exemplified by its role in eroding the World Trade Organization (WTO) and its withdrawal from the World Health Organization and the Paris Agreement—not only contributes to and reinforces the multiple real crises faced by the world in the present; it also endangers the system of “the liberal world order” in the future (Larik, 2018; Löffmann, 2020).

Neither antiglobalization (including anti-immigration) sentiments nor economic protectionism is new in the history of the United States (James, 2018; Park & Stangarone, 2019); but the recent victory in American politics (and in the United Kingdom and China, as will be discussed) of the identity-policy nexus of willful nostalgia, or the political manipulation and exploitation of collective nostalgia, represents a dangerous trend. The intersection of nostalgia and popularism not only constrains the possibilities for exploring and promoting an alternative, progressive American jeremiad about the past (e.g., epitomized by the thought of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass)—not without paradoxes, of course (Murphy, 2009). It also misdirects public attention and political actions away from the very present, troubled by intensified socioeconomic inequalities, toward the

scapegoated Others (e.g., racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual and gender minorities) in the names of patriotism and a “great” future for the country (Braunstein, 2021; Mayne, 2018).

China: The Silk Road and the Chinese Dream

The goal of the official rhetoric about the Chinese Dream of Great Rejuvenation, initiated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government after the accession to leadership of Xi Jinping in 2012, is to sustain the country’s rapid economic growth and enable it to join, or even surpass, the wealthy countries of the world (Carrai, 2021; Whyte, 2020). In the following year China announced its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure development strategy with two components: the Maritime Silk Road Initiative and the Silk Road Economic Belt (Blanchard & Flint, 2017). Departing from the low-key stance that his predecessors had pursued since China’s Open Door policy (introduced in 1978), Xi’s adoption of an explicitly outward-looking foreign policy also reflects the CCP’s growing confidence in global affairs. In 2008 China, which was largely immune to the blows of the Global Financial Crisis, surpassed Japan to become, at around \$600 billion, the largest holder of U.S. debt (BBC, 2010). In 2011 the U.S. trade deficit with China rose to an all-time high of \$295.5 billion (CFR, n.d.). In its *World Development Report 2012*, the World Bank (2011) for the first time ranked China an “upper-middle-income country” (UMIC); only a decade before, it was still a low-income nation. This spectacular rise, no less than its tragic decline before, requires (re) articulation for both domestic and global audiences.

The narratives of ancient Silk Roads are neither novel nor static, however. Western audiences are familiar with the term through, for example, the work of Ferdinand von Richthofen, a German geographer and geologist who first proposed it in the 1870s to refer to the East-West connectivities emanating from Han dynasty China, as well as Steven Hedin’s *The Silk Road* (1938). With the intention of reducing hostilities, the concept was also embraced, and broadened, by post-World War II Japan to emphasize the mutual benefits of centuries of exchange and peaceful dialogue between Japanese civilization and other cultures and societies, and later by UNESCO for its decade-long multilateral initiative Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue at the end of the Cold War (Winter, 2019, 2021). Seeing the Silk Roads as one of the most compelling geocultural concepts of the modern era, Tim Winter (2021) argues that this strategic concept enables China to present itself as a civilizational state in order to build regional and continental connectivities through BRI as a new way of imagining both its past and a new future to come.

In the context of BRI, the Silk Roads—through various activities such as museum exhibitions, filmmaking, art performance, and heritage-making—have become a remarkably elastic concept to tell stories of trade, exchange, cooperation, friendship, prosperity, and cosmopolitanism (Benabdallah, 2021; Thorsten, 2005; Winter, 2021). In these narratives the Tang Dynasty (618–906 ad), the borders of

which expanded far into Korea and central Asia, is portrayed as the highest point of Chinese civilization, a model for imperial rule, and a golden age of cosmopolitan culture (Fong, 2020). Employing computer-generated imagery (CGI), as well, a documentary titled “Maritime Silk Road” created a historical nostalgia both to help present the BRI to the countries of Southeast Asia and to instill a sense of diasporic nostalgia for the overseas Chinese (Gu, 2018). In 2020 the legacy of Zheng He, a Muslim Chinese admiral and navigator of the Ming Dynasty (fifteenth century), was promoted by the state-run media as a symbol of China’s harmonious relations with Indian Ocean states through his having forged links between Taicang (a city in China) and cities in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Kenya (Benabdallah, 2021). The fluidity—also reflected by chosen glory and amnesia—between time and space in nostalgia serves as both a vehicle and a demonstration of China’s geocultural power: that is, its capacity “to write and map geocultural histories, steering which events, places and people are assembled into strategically expedient narratives” (Benabdallah, 2021; Carrai, 2021; Winter, 2021: 1393). According to Winter (2021), such power is not so much territorial, but nodal, weaving together a multitude of locations, events, and actors along certain routes across times and spaces.

Romanticizing the Silk Roads as a story of “our lost civilization” and of premodern globalization is integral to China’s narration about its “dream” and place in the world (Thorsten, 2005: 301; Winter, 2021). The story expresses nostalgia for a time when universalism—in such forms as common humanity, connectivity within and beyond Asia, and “global community”—was a norm (Thorsten, 2005). Recalling past splendors as a precedent, it naturalizes and legitimizes China’s geo-economic and geopolitical expansion and “return” to the center in global commerce and multisector connectivity as a form of historical continuity (Benabdallah, 2021; Carrai, 2021). The expanded Chinese exceptionalism—a millennial civilization portrayed as historically global and “inherently peaceful” despite its violent imperial history—also helps present it as a unique and, indeed, better alternative to the U.S.-led global order (Callahan, 2017). In this light, framing its present engagement with the world (especially in Asia, Africa, and Latin America) in a language of openness and inclusivity—for example, “[The BRI] originated in China, but it belongs to the world”; and, “We can embark on a path leading to friendship, shared development, peace, harmony and a better future”—enables an imaginary going beyond Western-led globalization and the confinement of the past and the present of globalization (cited in Benabdallah, 2021: 302, 294). Despite its globalist and allegedly conflict-free rhetoric, however, BRI on the ground—involving bilateral relations with many weaker states—is imbued with tensions and challenges.

While the state propaganda of the Chinese Dream is also aimed at domestic politics, its core constituents and messages are articulated somewhat differently than those of its international counterpart. The selected trauma—in particular, China’s “century of humiliation” starting with the Opium Wars with Britain in the late nineteenth century—emphasizes its historical victimhood at the hands

of “foreign powers,” generating patriotic anxiety about and hope for the nation’s future (Callahan, 2017; Carrai, 2021). As well, promoting the combination of the individual dream (for a good life) and the collective dream (for a wealthy and powerful nation in the world) fosters associations between the “self-realization” of individuals and their national belonging, and between nationalistic sentiments and support for the CPP (Callahan, 2017; Hizi, 2019). In this sense, the Chinese Dream of Great Rejuvenation has also been a tool for both nation-building and legitimizing the power of Xi and the CCP. In Xi’s (2021) speech on the CCP’s one-hundredth anniversary in 2021, for example, the glory of the Chinese Dream was talked about interchangeably with the glory of the CCP. Meanwhile, the rhetoric provides a cognitive and emotional framework in which its political elites and ordinary citizens can interpret the world and create a sense of unity needed to continue both the engagement with global capitalism and the rule of the CCP (Carrai, 2021). Although it is hard to assess how different clusters of population in China have responded to the rhetoric, William A. Callahan (2017) argues that it surely favors those who follow the collective path to the dream, and who also know what they do not dare to dream (e.g., democracy).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite the differences in their articulations, the willful nostalgias of the cases discussed have features in common. First, nostalgia—with its hybrid, multidirectional, affective orientation of time—allows the political leaders in the respective countries to move back and forth in time to bring back the “glorious” past, not even, necessarily, for the sake of the present, but rather for the promise of an imagined future. In a time of uncertainty, sitting at the intersection of time, space, and affect also enables their selective and fluid narrative (re)constructions and political manipulations to shape, contest, and/or consolidate their places in the world (Benabdallah, 2021). Second, identity politics—defining the Self against the Other—has become an important tool with which to create a dichotomous or oppositional trajectory of national belonging and to narrate the nation at the respective turning points of globalization. The idea of a historic juncture at which the nation’s future can take a route only of either rising (“a golden age”) or falling (“humiliation”) is salient in all three cases, encouraging public support for the leaders so as to avoid a dramatic change of course (Al-Ghazzi, 2021; Callahan, 2017). Third, while trade is integral to the rhetoric of nostalgia in all three cases, the politics of culture is also apparent. Culture, according to Jennifer Robertson (1997, quoting Comaroff and Comaroff 1992), can be understood as “a space-time manifold ‘in which human beings construct and represent themselves and others, and hence their societies and histories’” (J. Robertson, 1997: 98). This protean quality is confirmed in Roland Robertson’s argument about the importance of economic and cultural aspects of nostalgia, where “the very fluidity of global change has invited [. . .] nostalgia for

secure forms of ‘world order,’ as well as a kind of projective nostalgia for the world as a home” (R. Robertson, 1992: 162).

Meanwhile, the simultaneity and seeming paradox of their respective state-centric or nationalist articulations and consciousnesses about the world in the rhetoric of nostalgia merit a more nuanced attention, given the different geotemporal dynamics within and among these countries when it comes to globalization (not limited to contemporary globalization) and its effects. In addition to viewing the willful nostalgia as a response to the continuing tensions among nation-states, citizens, international relations, and humanity as resulting from the acceleration of global capitalism (R. Robertson, 1990), the conflictual and mutually constitutive relationship between globalization and nostalgia are also important to consider (Brenner, 1999). Despite the partial retreat of the United States and the United Kingdom—the two leaders and advocates of neoliberal economic globalization since 1978—from the systems of global economic and political integration, the former’s “non-territorial empire” (Strange, 1988) and the latter’s aspiration to reterritorialize, based on Britain’s “imperial circuit of the globe,” have also coexisted. As a late participant or newcomer in globalization, by contrast, China has now become a defender of economic globalization—as illustrated by Xi Jinping’s (2017) speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos—and an expansionist explorer of an alternative globalization. Although the United States must have wished its present would be China’s future—that is, integrating into the Western-led global order—when supporting the latter’s participation in the WTO two decades ago (with the decisive help of the Clinton administration), China’s trajectory has challenged both the temporal and the spatial status quo (including geotemporal ordering) of contemporary globalization. At a global level, however, these parallel yet contractionary changes appear consistent with Brenner’s (1999) conception of globalization as a multiscalar, ongoing process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. In this sense, a highly divergent and conflictual future of globalization should be expected.

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