

Red Memory: Communist Nostalgia and Political Attitudes in Contemporary China

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Abstract

Despite the material hardships of communism, nostalgia persists in post-communist societies. What explains this persistence, and what are the implications of such nostalgia for present-day politics? We examine the formation of political memory and its relationship with individual attitudes toward contemporary government policies in China, focusing on Chinese citizens' memories of the Maoist era (1949-1976). On the basis of 66 semi-structured interviews in both coastal and inland areas, we find that nostalgia is a reaction to the profound spiritual disillusionment many Chinese citizens feel over the complex social challenges arising during China's economic reform. Nostalgia can coexist with trauma where respondents draw a clear distinction between the spiritual and material elements of the Maoist past. We further find that individuals' memories and assessments of the Maoist era are correlated with their attitudes towards contemporary public policies, such as Xi's anti-corruption campaign. This research informs a broader discussion of how political memory influences how citizens evaluate contemporary politics.

I. Introduction

Despite the material hardship of life under communism, nostalgia remains persistent in post-communist societies. Why is this so, and what are the implications of communist nostalgia for present-day politics? Economic scarcity and political repression are well-known hallmarks of communist regimes. Yet, much of the world that may be characterized as post-communist today — either after transitioning into capitalist democracies or after partially shedding state-socialism and totalitarian politics — is experiencing deep dissatisfaction with the political and economic institutions that arose after communism, namely, neoliberal capitalism and democracy (Alexievich 2016; Gessen 2017; Todorova and Gille 2012).

We examine the puzzling phenomenon of communist nostalgia and the relationship between political memory and individual attitudes toward contemporary government policies in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Four decades after the end of the Maoist era, China has grown into the world's second largest economy. Even though the regime remains authoritarian, individual freedoms have significantly expanded under market capitalism. Yet, behind these objective improvements lurks a widespread nostalgia for the communist past (Barne 2000; Mai 2016). For some scholars communist nostalgia has a clear material basis: disaffection, especially among the “losers” of economic reform such as state-owned factory workers, emerges from a weakened welfare state and a longing for a time when employment was more stable and the state provided a stronger safety net (Ekman and Linde 2011; Lee 2007). However, economic explanations for communist nostalgia cannot resolve why some winners of economic transition also exhibit nostalgia. This phenomenon is even more interesting given that China has

experienced *de facto* status gain in the international system, as opposed to status loss—which has been used to explain Stalinist nostalgia in post-Soviet Russia (Boym 2001).

We focus on Chinese citizens' memories of the Maoist era (1949-1976), in which the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) – a “coming of age” political movement for many of China's adult citizens – looms especially large. On the basis of 66 intensive semi-structured interviews conducted in the coastal Yangtze River Delta as well as inland Henan Province, we find that Maoist nostalgia – where it exists – is a reaction to the profound feeling of “disenchantment” (Weber 1958 [1917]) many Chinese citizens feel over the complex societal challenges resulting from China's extraordinary four-decade arc of economic reform. Although citizens' material conditions have objectively improved in the post-communist period,¹ a sizable proportion of our interviewees described the Maoist era as a world of purity and simplicity, where life had clear meaning, people trusted and helped one another, and inequality was minimal. In a theme repeated across our Chinese respondents, their “spiritual life” was richer during the Maoist era, even though their “material life” was poor.

This “spiritual life” resembles the spiritual life under religion. As Schumpeter insisted: “Marxism *is* a religion. To the believer it presents, first, a system of ultimate ends that embody the meaning of life and are absolute standards by which to judge events and actions” (Schumpeter 2006 [1942], 5). In other words, Marxism mirrors two vital aspects of organized religion: it addresses the ultimate meaning of life and offers absolute moral guidelines. Even though state-socialism was far from a Marxist utopia in China and elsewhere, it performed precisely these quasi-religious functions, albeit with significant coercion. Absent available alternatives thanks to propaganda and censorship, citizen experience under state-communism in

important ways resembled that within a tight-knit religious community. A spiritual crisis thus emerged following the dismantlement of state-socialism.

This crisis of meaning in the post-communist era parallels what Weber termed “the disenchantment of the world” following the retreat of “the ultimate and most sublime values” from everyday life (Weber 1958 [1917], 133). While Weber was referring to the erosion of religion—where scientific rationalism stripped the world of magic, meaning, and community—one can see a similar parallel in the retreat of ideology and order in post-communist societies. The lofty ideals of Marxism-Leninism resembled Weber’s “prophetic pneuma,” which “in former times swept through the great communities like a firebrand, welding them together” (Ibid., 134). Whereas the ideological fervor and highly choreographed social-political life under state-communism provided social cohesion, citizens living under post-communism recurrently express the view that community life has been hollowed out and replaced by aimless competition, crass materialism, and decay of values.

However, the way in which many respondents evaluate the Maoist era typifies what Svetlana Boym calls “reflective nostalgia” (Boym 2001). Unlike “restorative nostalgia,” which aims at recreating the past in the present, “[r]eflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance...[it] lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time” (Boym 2001, 41). Accordingly, Maoist nostalgia romanticizes certain elements of the past, but it does not yearn for its return; it ponders and considers, from the material comfort of the present, the loss of what the subject perceives to be a spiritually fulfilling and more genuine life in the communist period. People may believe that

Chinese society has lost a sense of meaning under market capitalism, but they do not want to turn back time.

We further find that individuals' memories and assessments of the Maoist era are correlated with their attitudes towards contemporary public policies, such as Xi's anti-corruption campaign. One particular subset of respondents, whom we call "nostalgic hardliners" and exhibit stronger nostalgia toward the Maoist era, are more supportive of the current anti-corruption campaign and even more punitive measures to curb corruption. This correlation could indicate causation working in either of two directions: first, Maoist nostalgia leads to support for the anti-corruption campaign, because the campaign reminds some of Maoist politics; second, support for the anti-corruption campaign (which stems from current dissatisfaction with corruption) induces the romanticization of the political past in one's memory. Our interviews find evidence for both effects—attitudes about the political past and present are mutually constitutive.

In the rest of this paper, we begin with an overview of the politics of "red memory" — different ways in which the Maoist period is remembered by Chinese citizens — in the reform era. We then review extant literature on the formation of political memory before we explain our research design, and briefly describe the structure and content of Maoist memory based on our interviews. In the two sections that follow, we first present our central argument that Maoist nostalgia results from citizens' disenchantment under neoliberal market capitalism. We then analyze the relationship between individuals' memories of the Maoist era and their attitudes toward current politics, including Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign. We conclude with a summary of our theoretical contributions to the literature on political memory as well as future directions for research.

II. The Contested Memory of the Maoist Era

To this day, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has maintained a conflicted relationship with the legacy of the Maoist era. As is well known, Deng Xiaoping's regime repudiated the Cultural Revolution and Mao's cult of personality within the first few years after taking power. In 1979, the Party stopped circulation of Mao's "little red book," the iconic symbol of the Cultural Revolution, and ended the deification of Mao (Yang 2016, 166). A 1980 directive indirectly called for the destruction of Maoist paraphernalia: "Chairman Mao badges are to be recalled and recycled wherever possible so as to prevent the excessive waste of metal" (Terrill 1993). Then, in the historic 1981 "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China," the Party declared the Cultural Revolution to be the greatest setback experienced by the country since the founding of the PRC. Yet despite the denunciation of the Cultural Revolution and the acknowledgment of Mao's role in its initiation, the 1981 Resolution distanced the excesses of the Cultural Revolution from Mao himself:

These erroneous 'Left' theses, upon which Comrade Mao Zedong based himself in initiating the Cultural Revolution, were obviously inconsistent with the system of Mao Zedong Thought, which is the integration of the universal principles of Marxism-Leninism with the concrete practice of the Chinese revolution. These theses must be clearly distinguished from Mao Zedong Thought ("Resolution on Certain Questions," 1981).

Fearing that a complete repudiation of Mao would signify the repudiation of the Party itself, Deng, echoing Mao's appraisal of Stalin, declared that Mao's merits outweighed his faults.

Still, the memory of the Maoist era has stayed alive in the Chinese popular imagination, most puzzlingly in the form of nostalgia – given that the Maoist era was one of considerable material hardship and political repression. Scholars noted the rise of Maoist nostalgia as early as the 1990s (Barme 1996). Terrill (1993), for instance, writes of the wave of “Mao fever” that washed over the country in the wake of the Tiananmen crackdown, tracing its source to social problems arising during economic reform: “[t]here arose nostalgia and admiration for Mao on the part of a fresh generation that reflected disappointment with Deng during the late 1980s and disgust at corruption among the top Communist leaders.” Yang (2003) also notes the peculiar progression from the “scar literature” of the late-1970s and 1980s to Red Guard nostalgia of the 1990s; according to Yang, the valence of political memory shifted from one of trauma to one of nostalgia. Maoist nostalgia manifests in kaleidoscopic cultural forms, from the popularity of Mao impersonators to the religious altars dedicated to Mao that often can be found in the countryside.

In recent years, Mao's image and rhetoric have reemerged with renewed fervor, often to the consternation of authorities. Before his dramatic ouster in February 2012, Bo Xilai, a powerful political scion and Party Secretary of Chongqing, alarmed the Hu Jintao-Wen Jiabao administration by combining his state-centric developmental policies with an aggressive Maoist-style populism. His “sing red, strike black” campaign, which rallied citizens to sing old Maoist songs while advocating a crackdown on organized crime, and his decision to send Chongqing officials down to the countryside to learn from the peasants prompted the Western media to declare that a veritable “Maoist revival” had emerged in Chongqing (Hille 2011).

However, memories of the Maoist era are complex and contested. For instance, in January 2016, Mao admirers erected a 120-foot gold-painted statue of the Great Helmsman in rural Henan province, eliciting a wide range of emotions, including negative ones. Some Internet commentators felt the statue disrespected the victims of the Great Leap Forward famine, which hit Henan harder than other provinces. Others felt the garish style of the statue cheapened the legacy of the leader, whom they believe would never have approved of such an opulent tribute. Two days later, in the wake of this media firestorm, the government suddenly ordered the statue's demolition (McKirdy and Lu 2016).

Maoist memory is ever more immanent since Xi Jinping's ascent to power in 2012. Observers have drawn parallels between Xi's and Mao's personal styles—e.g. their wearing of high-waisted pants—with some comparing Xi's burgeoning cult of personality and his harsh and expansive anti-corruption campaign to Mao's Cultural Revolution (Beech 2016; Schell 2016). Xi has even spoken fondly of his time in rural Shaanxi province as a “sent-down youth”² during the Cultural Revolution (Huang 2014), even though his father was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution.³

The evident persistence of Chinese citizens' nostalgic memories of the Maoist era demands explanations for their formation and an assessment of their contemporary political significance. This requires situating China's experience in wider conversations on political memory and communist nostalgia around the world. Before presenting our research design, we review extant literature on historical memory, including existing research on communist nostalgia, which offers four sets of explanations for the formation of memory: lived experience, current socioeconomic status, intergenerational-transmission, and public education.

III. Sources of Communist Nostalgia

Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, the academic study of communist nostalgia has blossomed within the humanities (Todorova 2012). In comparison, concepts of historical memory, nostalgia, and trauma have been of marginal interest to social scientists, partly because of the difficulty of measuring something as nebulous and complex as memory and assessing its impact as a causal mechanism linking historical events and contemporary events and opinion.⁴ Social scientific studies have instead focused on historical legacies as a broad category of “deep causes” (Kitschelt 2003), encompassing institutions, culture, and collective experience (Acharya et al 2018; Wang 2019). Although these studies show clear evidence that history matters, they seldom explore the mechanisms that tie the past to the present in the complex formation of individual memory.

Take research on historical violence as an example. Different kinds of political movements – from civil war, to government purges, to mass-mobilizing campaigns – have different kinds of perpetrators and targets; using a measure of death toll simply does not capture the variation of the lived experiences of individuals and how their memory gets passed down. Furthermore, memory is complex – each individual brain is perfectly capable of housing conflicting and contradictory emotions such as nostalgia, trauma, attachment, and estrangement (e.g., the Stockholm syndrome). Such complexity is difficult to tap into without in-depth analyses and fine-grained data.

A critical factor in the formation of memory is one’s lived experience, especially adolescence (Davis 1979), though the relationship between past events and how they are

remembered may be quite convoluted. As Walter Benjamin (1968, 255) remarked, “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it the way it really was.” In psychology, this phenomenon of memory “bias” occurs because people evaluate the past based on how they feel in the present—that is, people are prone to believe that how they felt in the past and how they feel now about a certain event has never changed (Schacter 2001).

In the case of Maoist nostalgia, having benefited from or avoided suffering during the Maoist era may be conducive to the formation of nostalgia. Yet having suffered in the Maoist era does not necessarily prevent one from becoming nostalgic. Yang (2003) finds that the generation of sent-down youth express nostalgia for their time in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, despite the many hardships it entailed, wearing their memories as badges of martyrdom. He writes:

[T]he reflection on past sufferings typically leads to a feeling of exaltation. It is caused not by the sufferings per se but by the ability of the generation to undergo these sufferings with courage or resignation and a mixed sense of sacrifice and achievement. (Yang 2003, 283).

The collective experience of going down to the countryside also instilled a sense of community in the youth; many of them still gather periodically, five decades later, to reminisce about their shared experience.

One’s experiences in the post-communist period may also play an important role in the shaping of memory. The study of communist nostalgia in the post-Soviet space has argued that nostalgia grows out of people’s dissatisfaction with their government’s current performance (Ekman and Linde 2005). In China, it may be hypothesized that the rich, as beneficiaries of the

economic reforms, may conceivably be less nostalgic for the past because they are more satisfied with the present than the “losers” of reform, such as the former employees of state-owned enterprises. Research on the latter group in China finds that laid-off workers and pensioners not only tend to express nostalgia for the Maoist era, they even utilize Maoist nostalgia as a weapon of resistance against factory layoffs and local corruption (Cai 2002; Hurst and O’Brien 2002; Lee 2000, 2007). However, abundant research on the psychology of income tells us that objective wealth does not necessarily translate into subjective satisfaction. Whyte (2010), in fact, finds that rural residents in China exhibit the highest levels of satisfaction with the reforms and economic inequality, despite their disadvantaged position in the reform economy. He argues that the low level of relative inequality in the countryside compared to cities and the improvement in rural life since the Maoist era may explain this acceptance of (if not satisfaction with) the new economic status quo. Indeed, if improved socioeconomic conditions explained whether one is nostalgic for the past, Maoist nostalgia should enjoy little breathing space, since a majority of Chinese citizens have seen their lives substantially improved in the post-Mao era.

While historical memory may be rooted in lived experience during and after the communist period for older generations, the memory of the communist period must be transferred intergenerationally, through family or education, to younger generations who can only “remember” the past indirectly. Existing research shows strong evidence for intergenerational transmission of political ideology and social beliefs: values and worldviews can be passed down from parents to children (Duriez and Soenens 2009, Jennings et al 2009; Moen et al 1997). In the case of “red memories” in China, it can be hypothesized that the younger generations’ beliefs about the political past may be influenced by tales told by their parents.

Finally, the treatment of political events in public education may also shape the formation of memory. Olick (1999, 342) observes that “[p]owerful institutions clearly value some histories more than others, provide narrative patterns and exemplars of how individuals can and should remember, and stimulate memory in ways and for reasons that have nothing to do with the individual or aggregate neurological records.” For example, nation-states manage historical memory as a part of the process of constructing and shaping national identity (Edkins 2003). These different state-provided frames can change the valence of memories through a process psychologists call “suggestibility,” where the framing of the past influences how one “remembers” it (Schacter 2001).

In the case of contemporary China, Wang (2008) argues that the Party has consciously mobilized nationalism through public education about the “one hundred years of humiliation” between the Opium Wars and the establishment of the PRC. It may thus be hypothesized that public memory of the Maoist era is also shaped by officially sanctioned narratives (e.g., propaganda), which can influence how young people remember a past they did not live. Yet, propaganda alone does not explain the complexity of red memory in China, in part because propaganda itself has been ambiguous: if Mao was “70 percent good, 30 percent bad,” who pays attention to the good and who pays attention to the bad remains to be explained.

III. Research Design

To explore the formation and implications of communist nostalgia, we conducted 66 intensive semi-structured interviews between 2016 and 2018 with Chinese citizens of various ages and socioeconomic backgrounds in the Yangtze River Delta and rural Henan Province.

Because of the possible political sensitivity of this topic, we used a snowball sampling technique to locate and interview subjects through a chain-referral process. While this approach does not yield a nationally representative sample, the purpose of this paper is not to describe a representative, national distribution of political attitudes but *to understand the formation of individual political memory and its potential relationship with attitudes toward contemporary government policies.*

Still, we chose research cities that captured important regional and political variation. The Yangtze River delta on the East Coast, consisting of multiple urban metropolises, has become significantly marketized during economic reform. The inland Henan province, on the other hand, is relatively less developed; Henan was also one of the provinces that suffered most losses during the Great Leap Forward. Our interviewees come from a variety of occupations, including teachers, civil servants, lawyers, entrepreneurs, laid-off workers, homemakers and retirees. Table 1 presents a breakdown of our respondents by demographic and socioeconomic variables of interest compared to the latest national census data. Half of the interviewees were female, average age was 42 (51% were at or below the age of 45), and 47% had attended college. Compared to the national population, our sample is older and slightly more educated. Higher educational attainment in our sample may potentially lead to an underestimation of communist nostalgia (since education is highly correlated with income), meaning that the “true” value of communist nostalgia among the breadth of Chinese society may even be higher than our finding.

Table 1. Summary Statistics for Interviewees

	Our sample	National Population
Average Age	42	37

Female	50%	49%
College Degree	47%	43%

It is often assumed that research subjects in authoritarian regimes will provide what they consider politically safe answers as stating their true beliefs might jeopardize them (Kuran 1991); we chose private semi-structured interviews as our method to overcome this problem. Semi-structured interviews in a private setting where the researcher can build trust with a subject allows the subject to speak honestly and safely. Because these interviews were not rushed — fifteen questions took between 30 minutes to 2 hours — subjects were allowed abundant time to reflect and volunteer detailed answers. For example, when we asked a 17 year-old high school senior if inequality was worse before or after reform, she thought out loud before reaching her conclusion:

“Before answering this question we should clarify the concept of ‘equality.’ Should the Maoist system be called ‘equal’? I don’t think so. The Maoist era was not equal; instead, it was ‘absolute egalitarianism’ based on low productivity. A flaw of such absolute egalitarianism was the supremacy of political power. Our current ‘market socialism’ and the Maoist planned economy are two distinct systems, therefore they are not comparable. What we can be sure of is that productivity has increased, and since productivity and equality are a dialectical unity, I think in general equality has improved since Reform.” (Interview MN14).

Semi-structured interviews also allow the researcher to observe the interviewee and assess the genuineness of their answers based on their tones and emotions, and ask follow up questions at any point in order to estimate the stability of the interviewee's beliefs.

As a result, most of our interviewees spoke candidly, including when they expressed criticism of the current regime. For instance, a 28-year old entrepreneur acknowledged that “individual rights and freedoms” have improved significantly during the reform era; however, he did not think the improvement had been enough, and complained repeatedly about the lack of freedom of speech and media freedom, using American media during the Watergate Scandal as an example of effective media supervision (Interview MN06). A 66-year-old housewife, when reflecting on the Maoist era, replied, “One word: bitterness” (Interview MN27). A college student mentioned that his grand uncle was locked up as a counterrevolutionary for ten years because he got drunk one time and made an unsavvy remark about the weather: “The sun is burning me to death!” — the sun being a symbol for the Great Helmsman. A 57-year-old policeman spoke extensively about the poverty of his youth: “Ah, the era before Reform and Opening,” he exclaimed, “Poverty! Bitterness! When I was little I never had enough to eat. I ate wild grass, even tree leaves when I was young!” (Interview MN23). An auction house owner said that he wept bitterly whenever thinking about the political persecution and desolation of his childhood:

My parents were locked up in the cowshed [during the Cultural Revolution]; and I almost could not receive an education. We had trouble getting clothing and food because our family wealth was confiscated. My childhood was truly gray and I weep bitterly when I

think about it. I had so few friends and my classmates would not play with me because my family's class background was so bad (Interview MN24).

However, as we will reveal in the following section, memories are complex, and *trauma may coexist with nostalgia in the same cognitive space*.

Semi-structured interviews also allowed us to detect instances of potential “preference falsification,” when the subject either declined to answer a question or seemed reluctant to discuss an issue. Most of these instances were when the subject was asked to comment on “Mao as a leader” (the last question in the interview), and they either declined to answer or only used officially-sanctioned narratives such as “[his] achievements outweighed his mistakes,” or that “[he] was influenced by Jiang Qing (Mao’s wife)” (Interviews MN02, MN10, MN11). Even though they might still reflect subjects’ true belief, we do not treat these statements as genuine answers to avoid potential bias. Overall, 73 percent of our interviewees held overall positive views about Mao, even though some of their memories of the Maoist era may be negative. Mao’s popularity in contemporary China is well-documented by existing literature (Blanchette 2019).

Nevertheless, most subjects who held negative views about Mao spoke without reservation. A 67-year-old laid-off worker emoted effusively about Mao’s political campaigns: “Today he (Mao) struggled against this person; tomorrow he struggled against another person. [But] history will tell” (Interview MN03). A 28-year-old entrepreneur remarked that “Mao was the most corrupt because he concentrated all power in himself” (Interview MN04). A 31-year-old former IKEA employee huffed: “[Mao] had been making mistakes since 1949 (the year of the establishment of the PRC). [He] only knew how to fight wars, and had no knowledge of economic development and state building” (Interview MN01). A middle-aged writer lamented

that “the disasters [of the Cultural Revolution] are irreversible” (Interview MN66). At the end of the interviews, we asked the subjects whether any of the questions felt sensitive. Most subjects reported no discomfort, except the very few instances when subjects refrained from commenting on Mao.

IV. The Structure and Content of Communist Nostalgia

When we asked our interviewees to give us their general impressions of the Maoist era, 50 percent expressed a noticeable amount of nostalgia. Notably, this nostalgia emphasized the richness of “spiritual life” (精神生活) in the Maoist period, a statement that was uniformly qualified by the subject’s acknowledgement that “material life” (物质生活) was poor. In contrast, subjects’ description of the present is of an era with significantly improved material comforts, yet their “spiritual life” is poor. Nostalgic respondents focused on the loss of a purer, more innocent time characterized by more contentment despite poverty, fulfillment despite hardship, and cohesion despite upheaval. Their description of a society with uplifted spirit, close community ties, as well as high interpersonal trust and cohesion echos Weber’s description of religion’s effects on individual psychology. Maoist nostalgia appears to function as a critique of the perceived materialism, individualism, and moral degradation of the reform era following marketization and the disintegration of local communities. Yet, the simultaneous focus on the richness of spiritual life and awareness of the material poverty in the Maoist era leads to a nuanced memory that reconciles, at times uneasily, the positive and negative aspects of life in the Maoist and reform eras. Trauma and nostalgia sometimes coexist rather than contradict.

Longing for a Purer Past

A major theme of Maoist nostalgia is the idea of a more simple, cordial, cohesive, and content world; this is almost always contrasted with the perceived moral depravity of contemporary society. A 46-year-old telecommunications worker, born during the Cultural Revolution, remarked that the quality of material life before and after economic reform is “a world of difference”; yet, “social ethos was much better in the past. People helped one another. People’s moral standards were higher” (Interview MN50).

This sentiment is prevalent among those who lived their formative years under communism. “The economy was difficult,” a retired 65-year-old worker recalled, “but it was spiritually better... There is too much fake stuff today, you have to worry about pollution, fake products, fake food. You didn’t have those problems then” (Interview MN07). Similarly, a 64-year-old female retiree reminisced: “In the past, we had good public security, and people were honest. Nowadays swindlers are everywhere. People have become cold-hearted. When you help others, sometimes they don't even say thank you” (Interview MN02). A 70-year-old male retiree marveled at the tight social cohesion and high political trust under communism despite extreme hardship:

During the three years of natural disaster [the Great Leap Famine]—that’s when I was in middle school—life was very hard, but people had unswerving trust in the Party and firmly believed that they could get through the crisis. So not only did this period of hardship leave a deep impression on me, so did the spirit of a people who firmly believed that they could survive a crisis together (Interview MN20).

He went on to praise the lack of corruption and the stability of society in the Maoist era, and the friendliness and strong spirit of people back then.

This contrast between a bygone innocent and morally upright world and a heartless and depraved present may simply be the product of romanticization of their youth by older generations; however, many young respondents described the Maoist era in these terms as well. Although the Maoist era, for most young people, conjured up images of poverty, it also brought to mind a much more virtuous, trusting, and cohesive society. A twenty-year old college student thought that life was definitely better now economically, but that “emotional ties are not as intimate today as before; today people do not know their neighbors. People were more pure and innocent [in the past]” (Interview MN05). Another student said:

People trusted each other and relationships between strangers were good; people didn't doubt each other... Trust was better back then, and people were more simple, in a good way. There was an idea of 'unity is strength.' It's harder to lead people today (Interview M30).

For him, a key feature of the Maoist era was that, despite their material poverty, people could still lead happy, satisfying lives:

People were happier because their spiritual world wasn't based on money... My parents felt less pressure and could enjoy their lives. People didn't feel the need to chase money. Today, people can make half a million Yuan and still think they need to make a million more (Interview M30).

Modernity — economic and even political — is alluded as the cause of such moral degradation. A widely shared impression of the communist era was one of contentment despite

poverty. A 45-year-old professor recalled that “every household lacked the ‘four bigs’: bike, TV, fridge, and watch,” yet, “everyone was content, and had a positive outlook on life; everyone was poor so there was nothing to complain about” (Interview MN52). He felt that the reform era has seen the “equalization of human rights,” yet, economic inequality has significantly increased and “the poor no longer seem spirited.” Similarly, a 46-year-old female teacher recalled that “everyone was poor, there was no jealousy and sense of imbalance between people... It was fulfilling, even though material standards could not be compared to the present” (Interview MN54). A college student thought that life today was extremely convenient thanks to technologies like AliPay and Taobao; however, people in the communist period did not have to worry about “becoming slaves to their phones and computers,” and enjoyed greater interpersonal intimacy in the absence of these technologies (Interview MN45). A 46-year-old telecom worker simply put: “Marx was right. People are greedy. Unlimited growth is bad” (Interview MN50).

Even some subjects who expressed no nostalgia observed that communal life was better under communism. A 31-year-old former IKEA worker who held no positive view of the Maoist period observed: “There were fewer social conflicts [before Reform]... The [current] government should be stronger... and cultivate children’s moral quality to prevent them from becoming unruly citizens” (Interview MN01). Another 20-year-old college student, who is a vocal critic of authoritarian political systems, nevertheless submitted that “the baseline moral standard *per capita* in the past was slightly higher than that in the new era. This is because people now use laws and regulations — instead of morality — to guide their thoughts and behavior” (Interview MN36).

Interviewees unanimously believed that things were, materially, much better today, and only rarely did they discount the material comforts of today when reminiscing about the past. An exception is a retired worker living on the coast: “Yes we worried about not having enough to eat [back then], but it wasn’t that bad...you could get everything you needed from the state. Today people have to spend all of their money on the three ‘bottomless pits’ of school, healthcare, and real estate” (Interview MN07). This kind of linkage between current economic anxiety and nostalgia for the *material* benefits of the Maoist era is rare in our interviews, however. Even when this linkage appears, it tends to reflect the widening visible *inequality* of the reform period.

These accounts of nostalgia indicate that those who are nostalgic for the Maoist era do not seek to restore it and instead use it as a way of *reflecting on the deprivation of moral and spiritual life in China today*. The lack of a desire for restoration of communism is evident from the fact that the vast majority of respondents reported general satisfaction with their present lives. Among those who are dissatisfied with current life, only one (a writer) had political complaints (about censorship).

Mixing Nostalgia and Trauma

For 47 percent of our interviewees, nostalgic memories of the communist period coexisted alongside traumatic ones. Respondents freely and frequently commented on the suffering during the Maoist period, due to material hardship or political persecution, while finding value in the rich spiritual life of the time. A 46-year-old worker remarked that: “Life was poor but stress was low. [We were] poor but care-free and free” (Interview MN50). A 63-year-old retiree who spent all her life in Shanghai remarked extensively on the bitter poverty during her

childhood, the exhaustion of getting up at 2am to queue for goods, and the extreme chaos during the Cultural Revolution; she even held that low inequality under communism was not so much a good thing since it made some people lazy. Yet, her most vivid memory of the Maoist era was its public safety:

“[We could] sleep with our doors open. Some of us kids did an experiment; we put a bottle of alcohol on the table to see if anybody came into the house [to take it in the middle of the night], and nobody moved it” (Interview MN02).

Overwhelmingly, subjects remarked on better experiences with interpersonal relations under communism. A 58-year-old civil servant used a turn of phrase to describe how his current life was “satisfying but not fulfilling,” whereas life before reform was “very fulfilling, despite extreme poverty.” He explained that: “Now we eat well, drink well, and play well. But interpersonal relationships in the past were unguarded, cordial, and harmonious” (Interview MN37). A 49-year-old teacher lamented the Maoist regime’s poor treatment of her grandfather: “My grandfather was a landlord and township head [before the PRC], he was executed in 1950. I heard grandfather treated tenants well and did not live a luxurious life.” Yet, she remained positive about spiritual life under communism: “People were pure. We all lived in the same compound, neighbors were close to each other. There was more communication between people” (Interview MN54). Another 46-year-old teacher remarked that: “[We were] poor. [We] did not have enough to eat; every day we ate steamed bun and salted cabbage, and only could afford to eat meat once a week. But [our] spiritual life was extremely rich. I knew all the kids around the block” (Interview MN55).

The younger generation holds the same impression about the dichotomy between poor material life and rich spiritual life. An 18-year-old student explained his parents' recollection of the communist period: “[they were] very poor, and didn’t have enough to eat. But holidays felt happier and life had a purpose. Even though material conditions are better now, people were happier in the past” (Interview MN35). A 38-year-old housewife described people of the Maoist period as “poor but happy and fulfilled; more fulfilled than young people today” (Interview MN43).

Table 2 presents the most important findings from our interviews. Among interviewees who expressed nostalgia for the communist period, 83% emphasized the spiritual-material division; only 20% of non-nostalgic interviewees mentioned the spiritual-material division.

Table 2. Spiritual-Material Division among Nostalgic and Non-Nostalgic Interviewees

	Nostalgic Interviewees (50% of total)	Non-Nostalgic Interviewees (50% total)
Emphasizing spiritual-material division	83%	20%

Sources of Nostalgia

Lived experience featured prominently in how older subjects formed their memory of the Maoist past. They readily drew concrete and vivid examples from their memories during the interviews; most of these examples, as mentioned above, concerned material poverty and spiritual fulfilment (and occasionally, bluer skies). However, those who experienced persecution during the Maoist political campaigns were much less likely to be nostalgic. An interesting comparison comes from two neighbors (and good friends) in Shanghai. Both pensioners in a

similar socioeconomic position, one had been a factory worker and Red Guard in the Maoist period while the other was a former government official who had been politically taken down during the Cultural Revolution. For the retired worker, he remembered fondly the equality of factory life, where everyone made roughly the same salary and where one's work unit provided everything for their workers. A particularly distinct memory was his trip to Beijing to see Chairman Mao, whom he deeply respects, in Tiananmen Square during the Cultural Revolution. He said, "If you want to know why people still respect Chairman Mao today, it is because there were no special privileges back then. Chairman Mao emphasized honest and clean governance, not just economic development" (Interview MN07). His neighbor, however, was far more critical of the Maoist period:

Mao didn't understand economics... Things were good if you were a worker, but not if you were a peasant or an intellectual. The Great Leap Forward killed millions, the Anti-Rightist Campaign devastated China's intellectual class, and the Cultural Revolution was, in the Party's own words, a ten-year catastrophe (Interview MN08).

He was especially upset that the government to this day has stymied efforts to establish museums about the Cultural Revolution. Mao, he concluded, was nothing more than a "Marxist-speaking Qin Shi Huang⁵" (Interview MN08).

For younger age cohorts who did not personally experience the Maoist era—that is, those under 45 years of age as of 2018⁶—their depiction of the Maoist era drew mainly from their parents' experiences. In the absence of such intergenerational transmission of memory, the Party's official narrative fills the void, when subjects' evaluation of Mao hews closer to the CCP's official narrative. For example, although almost all young respondents referred to the

Cultural Revolution as a chaotic and terrible era, they often noted that Mao's overall "achievements outweigh his mistakes," a standard phrase in the Party's official account of Mao's leadership. One young college graduate mentioned that her parents told her little about their experiences in the Maoist period, though she knew that they did not have a positive opinion of it. She said:

It was an exciting but horrifying era. Many people deify Mao and think of him as a savior. But I cannot relate to or understand it. Secondly, the Cultural Revolution was horrifying because you could be killed for saying one thing wrong...[Mao] liberated China. But it was chaotic after the Cultural Revolution, maybe because he got older, but more so because he was influenced by others such as Jiang Qing (Interview MN04).

Her opinion on the Cultural Revolution appears to be drawn mainly from the official account that condemned the movement, attributed blame to the Gang of Four, and criticized Mao's extreme leftism in the final years of his life.

Younger respondents who held positive opinions about Mao emphasized his role in liberating China, his military savvy, and his refined poetry, while acknowledging the errors he committed in his later years. These impressions of Mao can be sourced to popular propaganda. An entrepreneur in his late-twenties said that he did not hear many stories about Mao growing up, but he remembers seeing many images of him swimming in the Yangtze river⁷ (Interview MN06). Another student who has spent a considerable amount of time studying abroad said that his grandfather, who fought against the Japanese, would tell him many stories about the war and life in the Maoist era. However, when discussing his understanding of the Cultural Revolution he referred only to what he "read in books" about how it was a time in which people blindly

believed everything Mao told them. Not just his parents but also his teachers, he said, shaped his understanding of the past (Interview MN30).

V. Political Memory and Contemporary Politics

Are there implications of Maoist nostalgia that go beyond merely reflecting on the anxieties of modern life—that is, does this kind of reflective nostalgia have any connection with how citizens view contemporary political and social issues in China? In this final section, we present evidence that Maoist nostalgia is related to how Chinese citizens feel about corruption and the state’s role in economic development. Here we make a distinction between “critical reformers”—those who are not nostalgic for the Maoist era and advocate institutional reform as a solution to corruption—and “nostalgic hardliners”—those who are nostalgic for the perceived lack of corruption in the Maoist era and are more supportive of the anti-corruption campaign and its intensification as a solution to corruption, as well as state-led economic development. Interestingly, Maoist nostalgia has less bearing on how subjects think about socioeconomic inequality today, primarily because subjects overwhelmingly reported that inequality is extremely severe today, with only four out of 66 reported that inequality was not a serious contemporary problem. This renders a statistical comparison between the nostalgic and non-nostalgic subjects untenable.

Table 3 presents a breakdown of the political opinions of our interviewees in various issues areas by whether they had exhibited nostalgia for the communist period. Nostalgic interviewees are more likely to support state-led economic development (48%) than non-nostalgic interviewees (36%). Another significant factor determining subjects’ developmental

orientation is their geographical location: among those living in coastal areas, only 22% believe that the state, instead of market, should play a larger role in economic development, whereas 73% of inland residents believed in the state’s role in economic development.

Our interviews were conducted at the height of Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign, thus we asked our subjects whether they thought the anti-corruption campaign had been effective, and what should be the solution to corruption. 60% of nostalgic interviewees believed that Xi’s anti-corruption campaign had been effective; they were also more likely to believe that corruption is caused by greed and to express support for more punitive measures in anti-corruption. Only 36% of non-nostalgic interviewees believed that the anti-corruption campaign had been effective; they tend to see it through the lens of factional politics and recommend systemic political and legal reform as an alternative solution.

Table 3. Political Opinions of Nostalgic and Non-Nostalgic Interviewees by Issue Area

Issue Area	Nostalgic Interviewees	Non-Nostalgic Interviewees
Advocate State-led Economy	48%	36%
Believe in Effectiveness of Anti-Corruption Campaign	60%	36%
Believe in Institutional Reforms to Solve Corruption	36%	50%

Nostalgic hardliners are just as likely as critical reformers to believe that corruption is a serious issue, but they tend to use the Maoist past as a comparison point to underscore the severity of corruption today as well as the need for vigorous anti-corruption measures (such as Xi’s anti-corruption campaign). A retired worker complained bitterly about corruption, especially

since he came from a family of police officers. He believed that Mao was a good role model for a leader because he sent his own son to war; he criticized Deng and other top leaders' for sending their children into business instead. He said, "Isn't the Party supposed to serve the people? Now it's the people serving the Party. [In Mao's time] you used to be able to report people and they would be punished" (Interview MN07). A young respondent, who was not nostalgic himself, recalled his daily lunches with his uncle, who was an extreme nostalgic hardliner:

He keeps the little red book at home. He thinks corrupt officials did not exist in the past. He was a peasant-turned-worker, [but] his current situation is not as good compared to life in the past and the lives of those around him (such as my mom who is a civil servant). He is very dissatisfied with [reform-era] politics. When I was young I often heard him saying that 'everyone says workers are the backbone of revolution, but today... ' (Interview MN29).

A student who expressed a certain degree of nostalgia for the Maoist period was generally supportive of Xi's campaign:

What Xi is doing is quite good. It sets a good example for others who need to realize that corruption is not a 'natural' thing and is illegal. What [Xi] is trying to do is change the image of the government. It has kind of worked: if you give someone a red envelope they'll say 'no, no, no, it's ok.' People realize that [being corrupt] is a problem... The campaign can't solve corruption but I hope it will. One generation can't change the whole thing. [The anti-corruption campaign] is good for younger generations because they will learn that corruption is bad (Interview MN30).

He added that once attitudes start changing then the campaign can be pushed harder. A striking commonality between the responses of nostalgic hardliners is that few of them called for political reform such as the rule-of-law as a solution to corruption; rather, they suggested either intensifying the current anti-corruption campaign or strengthening internal Party discipline and supervision.

Critical reformers are far less convinced of the efficacy of Xi's anti-corruption campaign and they do not view the Maoist era as an ideal period devoid of corruption. One Shanghainese retiree acknowledged that Mao was good at fighting corruption and that corruption scandals back then pale in comparison to those today, though he considered Mao to be a tyrant. He criticized Deng Xiaoping for failing to reform the political system and believed that what China needs today is political reform that implements constitutionalism (Interview MN08). A college student temporarily living in Shanghai was not only highly critical of the Maoist era but also of the current anti-corruption campaign. The campaign, in his view, is arresting and punishing those who are not careful and is probably just a cover for factional politics; he believes it is a way for Xi to attack rival factions. Nothing will change without significant legal reform, he contended. He also dismissed the idea that the Maoist era was any less corrupt: "If there was less corruption in the Maoist era, it was because there weren't a lot of [economic] opportunities to be corrupt" (Interview MN05). An entrepreneur who was also critical of the Maoist era voiced similar concerns about the anti-corruption campaign:

Public servants have too much power to decide things. The Party discipline system punishes corrupt people, but people up top can protect their underlings because there isn't an independent system of accountability or judicial system...The [anti-corruption]

campaign can't do anything about it. It's just hurting the luxury industry which can no longer can make money off corrupt officials; corrupt officials just hide their corruption better (Interview MN06).

What China needs, he argued, was an independent judiciary or a genuine opposition party.

VI. Conclusions and Future Directions

In this research we have found communist nostalgia to be far from a peculiar and isolated phenomenon in post-Mao China. To what extent can we call this phenomenon “widespread,” of course, depends on how we would define “widespread” as well as how well our sample represents the general population. However, given our snowball sampling method which radiates from nodes of highly educated persons (the researchers and their contacts), the “true” value of nostalgia is arguably larger than what we have captured. We contribute to the existing literature on nostalgia that mainly focused on the decade immediately following economic reform by demonstrating that nostalgia can prove far more sticky than a temporary response to the initial shock of economic reform, and that this nostalgia has stronger spiritual than material foundations.

Most of our respondents were generally satisfied with their current material life. The kind of communist nostalgia we have identified thus is primarily reflective in that it rarely seeks the restoration of the political economy of the Maoist era, quite unlike the minority of true Marxist-Maoists featured in the literature on China's “new red guards” (Blanchette 2019). Subjects, though comfortable in their material life, lament the loss of a purer spiritual life characterized by

strong moral convictions, trust, and a sense of solidarity, which provides an analytical foil to the perceived moral depravity and emptiness of the materialist present.

Finally, Maoist nostalgia does seem to have implications that go beyond its reflective value: “nostalgic hardliners” are more likely to believe in the efficacy of Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign and support its intensification, while non-nostalgic “critical reformers” are less convinced by the anti-corruption campaign and instead advocate systemic institutional reform. Nostalgic hardliners are more likely to believe in state-led economic development, whereas non-nostalgic individuals are more likely to believe in the role of the market.

Future research should further explore how communist nostalgia in China resembles or differs from communist nostalgia in other post-communist societies such as the former Soviet Union. It should further isolate general nostalgia from the particular phenomenon of communist nostalgia in order to explore how much of such nostalgia is caused by economic modernization instead of subjects’ pining for their lost youth. It should also compare communist nostalgia with political nostalgia in non-communist societies caused by urbanization and migration. Is communist nostalgia, which bemoans the disintegration of community, simply a variant of “bowling alone”?

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Endnotes

¹ We use “post-communist period” to refer to the period of economic “Reform and Opening” after Mao’s death, sometimes known as the “reform era.” We use “Maoist nostalgia” and “communist nostalgia” interchangeably to refer to nostalgia for the Maoist era. In our discussion, we distinguish between subjects’ evaluation of Mao and life during the Maoist era.

² These were young urbanites who travelled to rural areas (voluntarily or under coercion) during the Down to the Countryside Movement and later during the Cultural Revolution after its most violent stage.

³ The same complexity can be seen with Bo Xilai, whose father was also a victim of the Cultural Revolution.

⁴ For notable exceptions, see Alexander (2012); Lee (2000, 2007); Lee and Yang (2007); O’Brien and Li (1999); Olick (1999); Olick and Levy (1997); and Yang (2003, 2016).

⁵ First emperor of China.

⁶ Mao died in 1976, and economic reform officially started in 1978. People who were entering pre-school in 1976 would be 45 years-old in 2018. We therefore use 45 years-old as the generational cut-off.

⁷ On the eve of the Cultural Revolution, a 72-year-old Mao went swimming in the Yangtze River, possibly to send a signal to the people and his rivals within the Party that he was in robust health.