

MAY 31, 2013

WHY A GREAT WAVE OF NOSTALGIA IS SWEEPING THROUGH CHINA

AMANDA R. MARTINEZ



At the No. 8 Hot Pot Restaurant in Beijing, a school bell rings at 5:30 P.M. sharp. Diners sit at old-style wooden desks rather than tables. The menu is a multiple-choice test. Instead of waiters, there are class monitors, who respond to raised hands. Not everyone can eat here, though. The restaurant is designed exclusively for people born between 1980 and 1989; I.D.s are checked at the door.

“We don’t mean to exclude anyone,” said Yuan Bao, the owner, an affable thirty-two-year-old with long bangs, dressed in cargo pants and a T-shirt with a skull on it. It’s just that “we know we all have similar memories and experiences.” Yuan’s goal is to create a safe space where his patrons can recall a very specific era of childhood innocence. It appears to be working: when the tinny, saccharine strains of a classic children’s song came on the restaurant’s sound system, one twenty-five-year-old diner said that it made her want to cry.

The classroom restaurant is part of a wave of nostalgia sweeping the generation of Chinese born between 1980 and 1989, known in China as *balìng hóu*, or “post-eighties.” In late 2010, in the eleven days after an online video featuring two young men performing Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean” was posted, the forty-two-minute film was viewed more than seven million times, provoking an outpouring of comments from twenty and thirtysomethings who confessed to being moved to tears. The same generational cohort has also been flocking to the country’s few remaining state-run department stores, which predate China’s economic reform and which have been rendered all but extinct by Western-style malls. With their hodgepodge of merchandise, the stores bear a striking resemblance to America’s five-and-dimes—save for the faded Mao posters and the use of abaci to tally up orders—and are among the only places where young people can

find *guohuo*, the state-produced consumer products they grew up with. Mrs. Zhang, an employee at the Youn'an department store in southwest Beijing, said that, when members of the post-eighties generation started showing up, a couple of years ago, they looked around and were transported back. As if on cue, a twenty-six-year-old man appeared. Reflecting on a cluster of tin cups, he said, "I used to play with these when I was little."

Such outbreaks of bittersweet sentiments are perhaps an expression of China's strong interest in its own history, or attempts at maintaining a sense of cultural continuity—albeit a variant that favors one's personal experience of the past. But recent psychological research on the cognitive function of nostalgia suggests that the cause of this wave could be the post-eighties' contemporary social experience.

A number of studies have revealed that when we suffer from certain psychological ailments—loneliness, social isolation, self-doubt, negative mood, and the feeling that life is meaningless—nostalgia can act as a coping mechanism. Such ailments can cause the mind to sift through its cache of memories, summoning up those with a particular narrative signature. Researchers analyzed hundreds of nostalgic accounts, and found that they typically featured family and friends, a momentous event, or, often, both. The participant describing the memory was almost always the protagonist, and the narrative arc was generally one of redemption: at first, conditions may have seemed grim or hopeless, but eventually things were resolved in a favorable ending. Through nostalgia, the researchers claimed, we bring back to the surface evidence of past triumphs and close relationships, times when our lives felt safe and ordered. Clay Routledge, a psychologist and nostalgia researcher at North Dakota State University, explained, "You're affirming the self—I've done great things—which is presumably predictive of the future. 'I might be uncertain right now, but just look at my past. I'm a likeable person. I'm destined for great things.'"

To illuminate nostalgia's role as an emotional buffer, Routledge and other researchers attempted to destabilize their subjects' sense of self. Participants took tests that could be collectively characterized as psychologically diabolical: performing math in public, reading an essay designed to provoke existential angst, and being told that their answers on a personality survey indicated they would likely end up alone and unloved. In some of the experiments, the subjects who'd been made to feel insignificant or destined for abandonment reported feeling significantly more nostalgic than those who hadn't. In other studies, participants were prompted to evoke either a nostalgic memory or an ordinary event, before or just after having their sense of self assailed. The subjects who indulged in a nostalgic reminiscence reported feeling significantly less stressed, less defensive, more socially supported and content, and more optimistic than their non-nostalgic counterparts.

That nostalgia could be a source of mental resilience and motivation directly challenges certain critics' notion of the sentiment as paralyzing, a harbinger of cultural stagnation. "It's exactly the opposite," Constantine Sedikides, a psychologist and nostalgia expert at the University of Southampton, said. "When you become nostalgic, you don't become past-oriented. You want to go out there and do things."

If there is a poster population for nostalgia's self-regulatory effects, it is China's post-eighties cohort. As the nation's first generation of only children—China instituted its one-child policy in 1979—the post-eighties are predisposed to loneliness. They came of age in tandem with China's transition to a more market-based economy, a fateful stroke of timing through which they were enlisted as involuntary trailblazers, tasked with defining what it means to be both modern and Chinese. While their parents received state-appointed factory jobs and government-subsidized housing, they were encouraged to pursue their dreams amidst a fluctuating social structure with few defined paths. Studying hard and making top grades became a generational cornerstone; academic diligence, it was understood, would lead to a more fulfilling professional life, and greater wealth. But the emphasis on education has produced more university graduates than positions with which to employ them. (A 2011 survey cited unemployment among college degree-holders aged twenty-one to twenty-five at just over sixteen per cent. Nearly seven million new graduates are expected this year.)

Now in their late twenties or early thirties, the post-eighties are trying to navigate a desolate job market, often as the sole financial providers for both their children and their parents (as is China's custom). Many left their rural hometowns for the more prosperous cities only to face vicious competition for scarce white-collar jobs. To vie for scant promotions, they work eleven-hour days and engage in brutal office politics. Housing costs are out of reach for most, with the real-estate price-to-income ratio in cities like Shanghai and Beijing as high as twenty-three to one, yet post-eighties men are under tremendous pressure to own a home before they propose marriage. Add to all of this urban overcrowding, unprecedented pollution, and a barrage of food-safety scandals (in the last six months alone, there have been rumors of anthrax in beef, rat meat sold as lamb, chicken laced with unsafe levels of antibiotics, thousands of dead pigs found in a river that supplies Shanghai's water, and the discovery that the country's bottled water may be as bad or worse than its tap water), and the resulting stress presents an onslaught of nostalgia's known psychological triggers. Xinyue Zhou, a psychologist at Sun Yat-sen University, in Guangzhou, whose research has demonstrated nostalgia's ability to bolster a sense of social connectedness among a diverse cross-section of Chinese citizens, said, "The uncertainty, the lack of control over our lives, is most unbearable to the post-eighties, so we have to seek confirmation from the past."

Marketers have been eager to capitalize on the post-eighties' newly materialistic longing: Chevrolet and Hewlett-Packard launched nostalgic campaigns in recent years, while national brands, such as Huili Warrior sneakers, Forever bikes, and Jianlibao soda, have taken the opportunity to revive old products. According to Mary Bergstrom, the founder of the Bergstrom Group, a Shanghai-based consulting firm, and the author of "All Eyes East: Lessons from the Front Lines of Marketing to China's Youth," the most successful nostalgic ads and goods don't just offer temporary relief within a safe moment of the past, they are also relevant to the post-eighties' present reality and their hope for the future—a detail that underscores researchers' findings that nostalgia can mitigate psychological slights and promote optimism.

China's young adults aren't the only ones reeling from the country's dramatic social shifts. Rampant health and safety issues, as well as the general transition from a more community-focussed culture to one that values individual wealth, have people of all ages yearning for a simpler, more trustworthy time. But the post-eighties, as the first generation to come of age in a

China with global consumerism, popular culture, and technology, have, by far, the most universal cultural references through which to express their nostalgia. An emblematic example is the generation's rekindled obsession with Transformers, a toy line and cartoon, introduced in 1984, about robots that morph into powerful machines in pursuit of good or evil. In July, 2007, the American film "The Transformers" opened in China, becoming the country's second-highest-grossing foreign film at the time, and sparking a resurgence in the toy's popularity.

Back at the classroom restaurant in Beijing, a Transformers robot was featured prominently on a shelf strewn with colorful eighties-era toys. At a nearby table-desk, twenty-nine-year-old Jing Liu was laughing over beers with some of her actual former classmates. "Coming here makes us feel like we are back at the age when we didn't have any pressure on us, just happily going to school every day," she said. Just then, the staff handed out copies of an instantly recognizable first-grade English primer, and a young man volunteered to read aloud. A hush fell over his fellow diners, who turned to the appropriate page to follow along.

Amanda R. Martinez, a science journalist and playwright, is writing a book on the global phenomenon of nostalgia.

Photograph by CQSB/ChinaFotoPress/Getty