

[H-Diplo Article Reviews 1108- "Spanning Thousands of Miles and Years"](#)

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Lina Benabdallah. "Spanning Thousands of Miles and Years: Political Nostalgia and China's Revival of the Silk Road." *International Studies Quarterly* 65 (2021): 294-305. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa080>.

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This article broadly examines "the instrumentalization of nostalgia in foreign policymaking" (295). Its main focus and case study is China, and China's turn to historical narratives to legitimise its contemporary projects of global ambition. In contrast to much of the existing literature on nostalgia,^[1] Benabdallah's article is especially interested in "positive nostalgic triggers and their political manipulations in shaping narratives of optimistic future outlooks" (295). She argues that such positive triggers have an important role in legitimising future projects of global political order: "The article focuses on the New Silk Road rhetoric as a case where nostalgia is directly deployed by Chinese officials to construct a narrative about reviving China's central position in global commerce and to brand a rival hegemonic order via optimistic, inclusive visions of the future" (295). Benabdallah is especially interested in the way positive nostalgia is giving shape to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

To develop this argument, Benabdallah first challenges existing treatments of nostalgia in the literature^[2] for focusing only on the negative aspects of nostalgia, arguing instead for viewing nostalgia as a "hybrid and versatile concept" (296). She notes that in most definitions, nostalgia has three dimensions: spatial, temporal and affective (296). She also cautions us that nostalgia is not about "recreating the past or recalling history as it was lived" (296) but rather always reconstruction of the past that can be used for present day aims. The rest of the article is devoted to exploring the ways China uses nostalgia for the Ancient Silk Road in service of its contemporary visions of global (re)ordering. Here Benabdallah asserts that "banking on ... emotional triggers of the Ancient Silk Road's rosy past, the BRI attempts at 'offering a Chinese approach to reforming the current global governance system'" (298). She underlines that such uses of nostalgia may have multiple audiences in mind, domestic and international.

These arguments are then demonstrated by a discussion of the way the historical figure of Zheng He (1373-1433) and his treasure voyages to the Indian Ocean and East Africa are deployed in present day Chinese narratives. Benabdallah observes that it is only in the last decade that Zheng He has achieved a central role in Chinese historiography: “In the context of China-Africa relations, for example, it was only in the last few years, basically, since the introduction of BRI—that Zheng He became a symbol of China’s relations to Indian Ocean states” (300). Benabdallah argues that the figure of Zheng He is used to brand China as a non-colonial maritime power (301). She concludes the article by noting that “China’s reemergence and Xi Jinping’s New Silk Road are literally and figuratively built on nostalgia for the Ancient Silk Road and tap into nostalgic interpellations to make Chinese nationals proud of the continuity of their nation’s prowess from Ancient to New Silk Road” (303). She also argues that IR needs to take more seriously the ways nostalgia is used for political ends especially by reemerging powers.

Overall, this is a worthwhile article that should be of considerable interest to scholars who work on memory politics, as well as anyone interested in the narratives around the Belt and Road Initiative. Benabdallah is quite right to draw our attention to way positive connotations of nostalgia can be used to mobilise consent for expansionary foreign policy agendas. And she also adds an extra layer to contemporary analyses of Chinese foreign policy in IR^[3] by underlining the significance of Ancient Silk Road narratives.

At the same time, the article also raises some questions both about the concept of nostalgia and the reconstruction of history by CCP that I hope Benabdallah and others who work on these areas will tackle more directly in future projects.

To begin with, while Benabdallah is perhaps right to observe that recent studies of memory politics, especially in the Chinese case,^[4] have focused on negative experiences, it is also true that the main behaviour she observes about expansionary projects being justified by references to well-remembered historical periods is not exactly new. The Third Reich called the *Third Reich* for a reason. Future looking political projects have often legitimised themselves by appeal to golden ages of the past, and the use and abuse of history is well-studied in many social science fields and sub-fields,^[5] if not IR. It is not clear to me how the concept of nostalgia differs from other similar concepts that deal with the use of the past for political identity construction, and I look forward to seeing sharper iterations of the concept in future scholarship.

Another conceptual difficulty around the term nostalgia lies in its affective connotations. When used for individuals, nostalgia suggests an experiential remembering process. But the example Benabdallah is focused on here as creating this supposed nostalgia effect are the treasure voyages of Zheng He from the fifteenth century and she argues that this nostalgia is aimed at both domestic and international audiences. It is hard to believe that international audiences can be made to feel nostalgia toward a historical event in the fifteenth century that they did not know about until recently. (I am even doubtful about domestic Chinese audiences, but let’s leave that aside for the moment). I am willing to buy that we can be socialised into partaking in a manufactured nostalgia for events and time periods we did not directly experience ourselves: for example, movies and commercials often invoke Paris in early twentieth century, etc. However, I think that the

manufacturing of that type of nostalgia requires something more than a positive narrative about historical period. Benabdallah gestures at some additional affect creating attempts beyond narrative assertion but does not quite develop the argument about how we go from putting a positive spin on the past in service of a present-day project to something thicker that could be justifiably called 'nostalgia' (and this also goes to the first point above).

Finally, the article strongly implies that in emphasising this particular narrative China is being selective, but much more could be said about the focus on Zheng He. For example, while Zheng He has gained great fame for his treasure voyages, his near contemporary Chen Cheng, who was involved in similar expeditions overland gets barely a mention, even though he could be used to justify other parts of the BRI initiative. In other words, we could be asking not only why Zheng He has received all this attention now (as Benabdallah does) but why Chen Cheng hasn't, even though he should have, by the logic set out in this article. Could it be that Zheng He has become more important in Chinese historiography because that historiography is still inflected by various implicit and explicit Eurocentric concerns (and maritime voyages mirror European style expeditions better than overland diplomatic trips)? I am no expert on Chinese historiography. All I mean to say is that there are many reasons why a particular story gets told rather than another one at any given time. Of course, a single article cannot get at all these complexities, but in the future, we will need better ways of theoretically sorting out what gets emphasised and why. Let's assume for argument's sake that at the time Chen Cheng's overland trips were as important for the Ming Dynasty as Zheng He's maritime voyages. (It could in fact be argued they were more important, but that cuts against the grain of current IR thinking). If modern Chinese narratives completely forget one and emphasise the other without anyone really noticing, does that also mean that states could just as easily completely fabricate historical episodes out of thin air? If not, why not? If yes, are we really in the realm of "nostalgia"? And does it even make sense to emphasise 'reemergence' as a precondition of this type of political narrative?

I could go on, but I do not want the questions to detract from the contributions of the article. This clearly an area primed for more scholarship, and I very much look forward to seeing more from Benabdallah on the subject.

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Notes

[1] — See e.g. Jessica Aughter, *The politics of Haunting and Memory in International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[2] — See e.g. Hakan Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire: the Politics of Neo-Ottomanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). See also Mira Sucharov, "Imagining Ourselves Then and Now: Nostalgia and Canadian

Multiculturalism," *Journal of International Relations Development* 16 (2013): 539-65.

[3] — See for example, Xioyu Pu, *Rebranding China: Contested Status Signaling in the Changing Global Order*. Stanford (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

[4] — See for example, Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

[5] — For an overview see Klaus Schlichte and Stephan Stetter, *The Presence of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming).