Zaman’s rich account of nostalgia shows how a particular, premodern perspective can destabilize ethnoreligious binaries in contemporary Lahore (Pakistan). Shuttling back and forth in time—primarily between the seventeenth century and the present—Zaman’s study demonstrates how the manipulation of history can reenact, shape, and promote group identity. By excavating the multivalent meanings now associated with institutions of seventeenth-century kingship, the article invites its readers to enter into the psyche of the people of contemporary Lahore. Guided along, readers explore the nationalist binaries, fractures, and divisions informing contemporary conceptions of religious and state identity there. Readers imagine how such fractures might be complicated or repaired through group nostalgia, whose rituals, symbols, and narratives from the past may be used to evoke a former, undivided self.

Another thread of Zaman’s analysis is the memoir of Bhimsen Saxena, a seventeenth-century Hindu soldier and writer. Bhismen Saxena accompanied the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb on his journey to kill his brother, and pretender to the throne, Dara Shikoh. Zaman employs this memoir to illustrate the psychic possibilities for ambivalence and uncertainty. Such ambivalence, she argues, is also associated with the wholeness of kingship, for which contemporary residents of Lahore seem to be yearning.

Zaman’s quest to “knit together the fractured psyche” (p. 19) of a city and people by invoking its royal past is both academically intriguing and politically promising. Its strands of cultural and historical representation challenge readers to imagine transcending time as the people of contemporary Lahore might. This commentary to her work asks how nostalgia sustains or promotes certain forms of group identity and suggests some comparative examples from China. For it is the concept of nostalgia that allows us to uncover the manifold ways people seek to create and recreate group identity as communal sentiments and states of mind.

Notions of identity often appeal to the deep past, just as they harden in moments of struggle or challenge. At moments of crisis, traits associated with any given identity might be challenged, reworked, reinforced, and reformulated with the sharpness and clarity of a poignant story, especially one that transports its audience to a different time and place. Narratives of a particularly well-known incident or encounter among peoples of divergent identities may serve as a collective call to arms, or rouse a dormant
desire or ideal—one that people might attach themselves to at a visceral yet formalized level of being. In turn, this being might be characterized by such heady emotions as yearning, burning, or exhilaration; but at the same time, the distance between the present and the past, and the gaps that must be filled by imagination, allow for the romanticization of the past and the blurring of selected aspects of the past with the present.

Nostalgia is the term that scholars have in recent times used to describe processes that involve strong identification with and yearning for a particular past. Nostalgia is labile, and nostalgic consciousness might attach itself to a variety of sites. The desire to collect and preserve objects from the past, to transmit to the next generation heirlooms (and the stories that go with them) in one’s personal possession, to engage in the copying or creative re-enactment of specific moments in history either through ritual, art, music, architecture, fashion, or stories: all these constitute different ways in which nostalgia might express itself and ways in which it functions through individual contexts in the public realm.¹ Like the writing of history, nostalgia can range in scope from the self-fashioning of an individual psyche to the remaking of an entire political sphere. Nostalgia derives its power not just from the stories of a bygone time and place, but also from specific sensations—fragrances, musical patterns, sounds, instruments, tactile sensations. Such sentiments may unite or divide people, but that depends on the stories told and the symbolism of the historical figures reimagined.

In the history of China’s southern frontier with Southeast Asia, we find at least two prominent examples of modern-day nostalgia—not just for certain figures from the past and what they represented, but also for entire sets of circumstances that help define ethnic or national identity or group sentiment. One such figure is King Goujian of the ancient southeastern state of Yue/Viet (located in and around the larger Jiangsu-Zhejiang region from the sixth through fourth centuries BCE).² In 496 BCE, the young king Goujian of Yue defeated an attack by its neighbor, the state of Wu, killing its old king, Helü. Two years later, the son of Helü, Fuchai, overpowered the state of Yue in a famous battle. Goujian and his army of 5000 were forced to retreat to a mountain in Yue, where the king’s loyal followers and ministers convinced him to swallow his pride and, for the sake of the state of Yue, become the servant of Fuchai for the time being.³ Three years later, Fuchai pardoned Goujian. Goujian returned to the much-diminished state of Yue to bide his time even further. By “sleeping on brushwood and tasting gall” (woxin changdan 臥薪嘗膽), as the Chinese proverb tells us, he maintained his intention to take revenge on the state of Wu.⁴ After many years of humble submission, patience, self-strengthening, and cultivated resentment, Goujian called forth his army to attack Wu decisively in 473 BCE. This time, he secured Fuchai’s surrender and suicide.⁵
That peoples who now consider themselves “Chinese” and “Han” should resort to an ancient king of a “backward” nation to affirm their oppression by foreign powers is perhaps the most ironic or contradictory aspect of this phenomenon. Yet the irony is precisely part of the point. The king’s figure symbolizes universal, personal qualities and emotions that can be tamed and filtered through training in an elevated culture—one that is, despite the geographical remove, still conceived of as Chinese, as represented through various Yue ministers who helped to “civilize” or “transform” (化 hua) King Goujian. This universal culture teaches the value and uses of humility, hard work, and patience. Just as the common Chinese phrase, “eat bitterness” (吃苦 chi ku) suggests, “sleeping on brushwood and tasting gall” embodies the brutal endurance test that reverses outward defeat, transforming it into ultimate victory through intense inner strength, self-sacrifice, and patience.

There is even more, I think, to the contemporary Chinese fascination with this erstwhile alien king than the fact that his person signifies a transformation of character and the capacity to accept culturally-strategic truths about the value of enduring pain and humiliation in times of defeat. Just as Zaman shows that the people of Lahore in part yearn for a lost era of kingship on top of the symbols associated with particular historical figures, the contemporary Chinese valorization of King Goujian is an appeal to an idealized era and all it represents for the fully nationalized, twentieth-century citizen. The period in which King Goujian lived was the harbinger of the notorious Warring States period, a period of disunity in Chinese history that signifies a fractured and confusing time beset with contradictions, radically-differing opinions, different languages and customs. The yearning for this historical moment might be understood as nostalgia for an epic and heroic time of nation building. Indeed, such yearning represents the warring of the states writ large in the body of a single individual. King Goujian’s body is the site on which warring factions of a distant era come to life to help define one’s ultimate self-identity as well as the resilient foundations upon which Chinese nationhood should ideally be based.

The story of King Goujian has become a deeply-politicized narrative for the proper way to respond to national defeat and humiliation. The nostalgia associated with it underscores the crucial role that deep, culturally-inflected emotions such as humiliation and pride play in the very make-up of a collective national psyche. By turning to this story, frustrated citizens seeking a clearer incarnation of Chinese identity could find an outlet for shared suffering and humiliation, define yearnings and goals, and collectively transform such sufferings into strategies for a victorious and united nation as well as people.
The act of sparking and channeling powerful emotions through the remembrance of things, events, figures, and times past has not only been instrumental in the making of Chinese identity in the twentieth century. Nostalgia was strategically and effectively utilized to create and maintain group and national identity by peoples on the edges of the Chinese world, such as the Vietnamese, who would invoke their own figures and moments from the deep past to signal differentiation and, most importantly, a collective desire to depart from the Chinese world to their north. The story of the rebellion (40-43 CE) of the two female sisters of Yue/Viet descent of the Han era gained popularity in Vietnamese traditional lore, eventually becoming the reference point for the earliest signs of a nascent Vietnamese identity that would later win the mantle of independence from its northern overlords, the Chinese.

As Stephen O’Harrow has noted, the status of the Trung (Zheng 征 in Chinese) sisters in Vietnam “as genuine national heroines has meant that their hagiographies play a prominent role in the pages of Vietnamese schoolbooks, and no major city in Viet-Nam is without a main thoroughfare bearing their name.” The narrative of the two sisters as epic heroines standing at the beginning of a deep history of collective identity is powerful on a variety of counts. First, although actual histories from the first centuries CE provide broad details only about the first sister, Trung Trac (Zheng Ce 徵側 in Chinese), the solidarity of the two as both sisters and rebels looms large in the popular imagination. Never is the second sister, Trung Nhi (Zheng Er 徵貳 in Chinese, which merely means “second”) completely omitted from the equation, even though little beyond her presence and name is mentioned in early texts. Furthermore, the fact that these early rebel leaders were women reinforces a sense of distinction and departure from paradigmatic models of political revolt. The mystique of female power and the gendered sense of the archaic South as being the site of such power could each in its own right conjure a strong sense of local Vietnamese identity. This identity, as seen through the memory of the Trung sisters’ revolt, reached into the timeless expanse of pre-civilization, when matriarchal societies were thought to flourish and women reigned supreme. Furthermore, the ancient sources mention that the eldest sister had rebelled after having been “ensnared by a legal matter” by her local Han administrator. The fury of her humiliation and indignation, magnified through the bond of sisterhood, would represent to later people a uniquely female, emotionally-charged act against patriarchal, colonial encroachments.

The nostalgia for the revolutionary fury of the Trung sisters is thus a nostalgia not merely for specific figures but also for their affective emanations as unique expressions of an archaic, timeless, and latently-gendered Vietnamese past. Yet if we examine this nostalgia carefully, we
notice that the past captured in the image of the wronged sisters is one both whole and ruptured. This nostalgic experience points specifically to a crucial moment in which an idyllic period of local culture was fractured and destroyed by foreign colonialists. And even though the sisters were ultimately unsuccessful in their bid for lasting, local rulership in the region (they were vanquished by the famous Han colonialist Ma Yuan in 43 CE), the image of rebellious sisters in the very act of rebellion—in that moment of the fracturing of the old and the outrage that follows—is precisely what has remained vivid in the local Vietnamese imagination. In such a way, we see how nostalgia uses not just history but also very specific past moments, sensations, and perceptions of time to help solidify and shape a particular form of identity.

These stories of nostalgia in modern China and Vietnam provide contrapuntal support for Zaman’s rich account, showing how modern-day conceptions of self and other sometimes are recreated through processes that reimagine and truly embody—if only momentarily—past, alternative configurations of the self and other. These configurations are cast according to an altered sense of time and a differently-structured social, cultural, and political way of being in the world.

Notes


2. Paul Cohen’s book highlights the various moments in China’s twentieth century in which the story of King Goujian was re-enacted and revivified. I draw much of my understanding of this phenomenon from this book. See Paul Cohen, Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-Century China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

3. One of the most explicit scenes of self-imposed humiliation in the story occurs when King Goujian, in servitude in the state of Wu, tastes the sick King Fuchai’s stool in order to make a positive prognosis about Fuchai’s health.

4. This phrase is so popular that it was the title of a 2007 television series in China that told the story of King Goujian and the struggles between the states of Wu and Yue.

5. The full story, which is quite an elaborate tale of hardship and strategy, can be found in the Wu-Yue Chunqiu (Spring and Autumn Annals of the Kingdoms of Wu and Yue), which dates to the latter Han empire (25-220 CE). A vivid account in English can be found in Paul Cohen, pp. 1–28.


7. The fullest, relatively early, account of the rebellion and sisters occurs in Fan Ye’s fifth-century account, which draws upon earlier Han-period documents and histories that are no longer extant. See Fan Ye范曄, Hou Han shu後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1995): pp. 2836–37.

8. Ibid.