



Mabel Tan Jia Wei\*

## The double-edged sword of nostalgia: Holding on while letting go

Received June 2025; Reviewed July 2025; Accepted August 2025; Published September 2025

**Abstract:** Nestled among the private estates and towering HDB apartments, Kampong Lorong Buangkok was a time capsule dating from 1956, buried in plain sight. An oddity in this city-state, which seems to have been engulfed by the ever-advancing era of modernity, serves as a tantalising reminder of the fleeting nature of history and time. The distant hum of cars and the amalgam of city noise in the background were a stark contrast to the tranquility before me, pulling me into a soothing embrace of serenity and calmness. As I ventured inside, the noise seemed to quieten down, replaced by the soft clucking of chickens, rhythmic chirping of the crickets, and the gritty crunch of gravel road beneath my feet. I took a deep breath, and immediately, the unmistakable perfume of the earth stung my nose – the slightly musty scent of petrichor in the air as rain freckled the ground.

*Keywords:* nostalgia, time, memory, past



This work is licensed under a [Deed - Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International - Creative Commons](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Nestled among the private estates and towering HDB apartments, Kampong Lorong Buangkok was a time capsule dating from 1956, buried in plain sight.

An oddity in this city-state, which seems to have been engulfed by the ever-advancing era of modernity, serves as a tantalising reminder of the fleeting nature of history and time. The distant hum of cars and the amalgam of city noise in the background were a stark contrast to the tranquility before me, pulling me into a soothing embrace of serenity and calmness.

As I ventured inside, the noise seemed to quieten down, replaced by the soft clucking of chickens, rhythmic chirping of the crickets, and the gritty crunch of gravel road beneath my feet. I took a deep breath, and immediately, the unmistakable perfume of the earth stung my nose – the slightly musty scent of petrichor in the air as rain freckled the ground.

Down the narrow dirt path were old but vibrant, coloured wooden houses and their tin roofs rusting at the edges, looking worn yet still full of life. Some doors were left open, revealing glimpses into the life and memories each house carried – a child's laughter drifting through the air, home-cooked food overflowing the dining table, and old china and plastic tableware lined the shelves. It exuded a quiet warmth, as though inviting me into a world, one of stillness, simplicity, and beauty.

This refreshing contrast to the fast-paced life in Singapore stirred familiar memories of the simple, unhurried life back home – of Kampung Guar Kepah in Malaysia. I tried to ignore the familiar ache of longing in my chest. As if stepping into a memory I hadn't realised, I was already desperately grasping onto vivid images of home that were flooding my mind. The slow early mornings echo with warm greetings. The fresh smell of laundry in the backyard, and the rhythmic symphony of steel clanging in the kitchen as my grandmother tosses ingredients in a wok, creating a mouth-watering cacophony of sounds. I craved the comforting chaos of my family gathered around the dining table and the warmth of home-cooked meals.

This lingering feeling of homesickness and longing intensified, giving me some pain, some discomfort. I don't know why.

Feeling as though I had just travelled back in time, I wondered why we cling to what once was, longing for the past, even as time relentlessly moves forward. As time once again reminded me of its fundamental transience, I wonder: Why are we so drawn to revisit the past and hold onto what once was, despite knowing what lies ahead with the relentless tide of modernisation?

Clay Routledge (2016) and Jean Starobinski (1966) argue that an underlying scientific reason is behind why we feel nostalgia by tracing its evolution from medical origins to psychological dimensions. Nostalgia, coined from the Greek words “nostos” for homecoming and “algos” for pain or longing, was originally regarded as a merciless disease, attacking Swiss mercenaries serving abroad (Routledge, 2016). Labelled as a strange physiological illness which caused mental distress, specific sounds, melodies, and possible triggers were prohibited in an effort to prevent evoking a profound longing for their homeland (Routledge, 2016). The 18th century saw a surge in worldwide migration, and it was observed that all social classes were vulnerable to this dreadful disease, “nostalgia” (Starobinski, 1966). By the early 20th century, psychologists regarded nostalgia as a psychological condition akin to depression, theorising that it reflected challenges in progressing beyond one’s childhood (Routledge, 2016).

Conversations about home resonate deeply wherever we go because vivid recollections of home draw us back to our humble beginnings. With countless sensory triggers and cues that link us back to the past, the past often invokes us to look back; it is coming back in fragments, hitting us out of nowhere. Time passes, and we continue living, but we never let our past slip away, at least not completely. Nostalgia, which leads to painful memories and emotions resurfacing, happens unexpectedly at times, and sometimes, even if we are not sure why, we want to keep those memories close and intact despite how aching they can be.

In the subsequent decades until today, the interpretation of nostalgia has broadened significantly, being reframed as a psychological phenomenon, one that we all share (Starobinski, 1966). With the advancement of medical science, nostalgia began to be recognised as a beneficial emotional state marked by a longing for the past, regarded as a heartfelt and pleasurable experience; a significant shift in understanding (Routledge, 2016). Aspects of our pasts – such as cuisines, aromas, and flavours – engage our senses and ignite our imagination, initiating a series of vivid and intense sensory and imagery associations (Routledge, 2016). Nostalgia possesses the ability to trigger associated recollections that can evoke emotions, be it pleasure or pain, with an intensity comparable to their original experience (Starobinski, 1966).

In a hawker centre, the first bite of the Penang Hokkien mee I ordered dulled my longing for home and instantly filled me with warmth. The lingering hunger I had softened with each bite, soothing the emotional void I carried with me. It afforded me a sense of fulfilment and brought out the comfort and familiarity of home that I was longing for. In

tough moments or unfamiliar places, the memory of home shines brighter than ever – like a lighthouse that offers light amid the thickness of fog. And when coupled with an insatiable thirst for a sense of familiarity and comfort, which can only be quenched in the refuge we call our past, I find myself turning back into my past, seeking not an escape, but to stay grounded. Nostalgia is such a continuity, not escapism; one that allows us to move forward while carrying pieces of the past with us.

Nostalgia holds to be a protective buffer or a double-edged sword. It is a complex emotional state that can recreate sensations of grief and sorrow; however, when navigated effectively, it can yield benefits (Routledge, 2016). Serving as a healing mechanism for coping with the time we have lost, it revives the recollections of our happiest experiences, thereby improving our overall well-being (Starobinski, 1966). Nostalgia enables us to progress and avoid remaining anchored in the past, a powerful tool for cultivating confidence and motivation to confront an uncertain future, reminding us of the inherent meaning and worth of our lives (Routledge, 2016).

Birthdays, a celebration of life, a poignant reminder of my existence in the world, signify the passage of another year. Despite it being a joyous occasion, I could not dismiss the growing anxiety I feel about turning twenty this year. Stemming from the myriad unknowns and uncertainties, I fear the future that my twenties may hold. The mounting pressure to transition into adulthood weighed heavily on me, further intensified by the melancholic realisation that I must relinquish the distinctive identity I once had during my childhood. A transition which evoked a complex mix of emotions, forcing me to navigate the delicate balance between remembering my meaningful past and confronting the challenges ahead.

As I gazed outside the window from my apartment, my eyes were drawn to a group of children playing on the swings at the nearby playground. Their joyful laughter echoed through the once tranquil neighbourhood, accompanied by the rhythmic creaking of the swing chains as they swung to and fro. It was at that very moment that memories of my childhood came to life in an instant, allowing me to relive a fragment of my past in Penang that I shared with my family, before it slipped away to a vivid imagination of an inevitable future I will have to face. Such a weight of emotions that I have to bear.

Nostalgia is a complex emotion that emerges fleetingly from the depths of forgotten memories. A continuum in which we relish in the warmth of the past and imagine what our future could be. A conscious decision which we make, to either shift our focus to what's

right in front of us by appreciating the past and living in the now or be anchored by the weight of what once was, blinded by our past and unable to move forward.

Regardless of our earnest efforts to alter its course, the passage of time is inevitable, and it will continue moving unabated. Nostalgia, which operates akin to a yo-yo, is not simply a back-and-forth motion, but instead, a dynamic relationship of tension; one that holds on, even as it implores us to let go. A rhythmic movement, a tug towards the past, followed by a release into the present. It is not a linear movement, but a dance of motion and memory that we are caught in, oscillating between revisiting our unattainable past and imagining an unforeseen future.

Yet, despite that, we do have a choice. It is normal to worry about the future and about lost time; however, I have come to understand the importance of concentrating on the present.

Nostalgia is not about staying stuck in the past, but about learning when to hold on tight and when to let go to find that delicate balance. Yes, time never fails to remind us of its omnipresence, and neither does life of its inherent impermanence. But neither does it forget to remind us of the value our memories hold, the depth of our connections with our ancestors, and the love we have received, guiding us to navigate life with insights acquired through managing what once was.

This is the beauty of nostalgia, which lies not in clinging to what once was, but in carrying it forward, like a quiet shadow that walks with us, accompanying us every step of the way.

### **Declaration of Conflict of Interest**

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

### **Bionote**

**Mabel Tan Jia Wei** is an undergraduate student pursuing a Bachelor of Computing (Hons) in Computer Science at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore.

### References

Routledge, C. (2016, November). *Why do we feel nostalgia?* [Video] TED Talks.

[https://www.ted.com/talks/clay\\_routledge\\_why\\_do\\_we\\_feel\\_nostalgia](https://www.ted.com/talks/clay_routledge_why_do_we_feel_nostalgia)

Starobinski, J. (1966). The idea of nostalgia. *Diogenes*, 14(54), 81-103.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/039219216601405405>