

Identity Construction in the Perspective of Cultural Memory Theory: The Material Carrier of "My City" as an Example

Tingting Jin

College of Foreign Languages, Tianjin University of Science and Technology, Tianjin, 300450, China

ABSTRACT

Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory emphasizes the intergenerational transmission of cultural memory through material carriers (texts, spaces, symbols), forming the core framework of group identity. Through urban space, daily objects and linguistic symbols, My City constructs a unique narrative, which constitutes an important text for exploring China, Hong Kong's culture and identity. Starting from Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, this paper explores how My City constructs identity through material carriers, helping the public to understand China, Hong Kong's Identity Construction in the context of globalization.

KEYWORDS

Cultural memory theory; Identity; My city; Material carrier

1 Introduction

Jan Assmann put forward the "cohesive structure of memory" (Konnektive Struktur) (Jin Shoufu, 2015: 8) ^[1], outlining the core issues of cultural memory formation, identity construction and cultural continuity, and emphasizing the mediating role of the material and cultural carriers in intergenerational transmission of memory. This paper takes Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory as an outline, through the micro-analysis of My City, explores how literature reconstructs cultural memory through the material carrier. Combining China, Hong Kong's "post-colonial" and "post-globalization" contexts, the study provides new a new paradigm to help the general public understand the process of Identity Construction in China, Hong Kong's literature, and explores the role of cultural memory in preserving the uniqueness of local culture, as well as providing case studies to support the localization of cultural memory theory.

2 Literature review

Astrid Erll and Feng Yalin (2012) have introduced foreign basic theories related to the theory of cultural memory, and in recent years, domestic scholars Zhao Jingrong (2015) and Jin Shoufu (2017) have systematically sorted out its theoretical framework, and many scholars have tried to apply it to literary studies. At present, in the field of literary studies, most of the researches on My City focus on the reconstruction of local identity through "urban root search", but there is a lack of systematic analysis of the material carrier (buildings, dialects, and daily objects) in My City as cultural memory medium, nor has it combined the theory of cultural memory to explain its mechanism of identity construction. Zhao Jingrong (2015: 226-228) briefly analyzes the "storage function" of the small objects owned by the subject of memory in The Museum of Innocence, which is a precedent for combining the material carrier with the theory of cultural memory. On the whole, the field of literary researches mostly remains at the macroscopic narrative level of literature as a medium of cultural memory, and there are few analyses on how literary texts reflect their role as a medium of cultural memory.

3 Cultural memory theory and medium

3.1 Cultural memory theory

Jan Assmann proposed the concept of "cultural memory", arguing that members of a collective cultivate a common identity through the cultural memory, and further suggesting that Identity Construction is "a process of individual history building and social construction." (Zhao Jingrong, 2015:20-21) ^[2] "Memory can construct identity, and it works not only at the individual level, but also at the collective level." ^[3] He argues that "the past is a decisive source of the national identity, and whoever wants to belong to it must share this group memory." (Jan Assmann, 2018:106) ^[4] In his opinion, the first important feature of cultural memory is "identity solidification" or "group relations". (Zhao Jingrong, 2015: 36) ^[2] He mentioned in his discussion on the relationship between cultural memory medium and identity recognition: "All can be

symbols of commonality. It is not the medium that determines what is, but the symbolic function and the structure of the symbol that does." (Astrid Erll, Feng Yalin 2012:478) ^[5] He has emphasized the importance of the cultural memory medium for collective memory and identity. Aleida Assmann further divided cultural memory into storage memory and functional memory, and made a detailed categorization of the specific functions of the material carrier. In addition, Astrid Erll continues the view proposed by Jan Assmann that literature is the medium of "cultural memory", further explains the relationship between literature, the material carrier and identity. We can use a framework to understand it - (literary) medium of cultural memory - the material carrier - collective memory - identity.

According to Jan Assmann, "Cultural memory operates on reconfigurability, and it is always related to the present social context." ^[6] "The purpose of the person who undertakes remembrance is to identify and define the immediate self-image." ^[7] In *My City*, the author's intention to construct identity can be seen in many places. "Our country is shaped on the map like the leaves of a begonia." ^① By emphasizing the most complete geographical map of China, it inspires generations to explore the history of collective memory. "The seamen on the Orient are all Chinese. Half speak Mandarin, half speak Cantonese." ^[1] Through the emphasis on identity community, the unified sense of belonging and identity behind different languages is brought out. "She knows him. No identity certificate is required, nor is a birth certificate." ^[1] By emphasizing the cultural community, it is demonstrated that cultural memory can transcend any form and a collective memory community can be found.

"China, Hong Kong has been called 'borrowed time, borrowed space' by some passers-by in the past. However, for most of those who have lived and grown up here, it is indeed an entity in time and space, is by no means 'borrowed'." ^[8] In the context of globalization, in order to respond to the crisis of China, Hong Kong's identity and cultural identity, it is indispensable to analyze the process of the construction of identity by analyzing how *My City* embodies collective memory through the material carrier (the medium of cultural memory).

3.2 Cultural memory medium

Only when cultural memories are symbolized and transferred to the material carrier can the construction of identity be achieved and memories be stabilized in intergenerational transmission. As Aleida Assmann said, "Cultural memory shows cultural change through the material carrier, and continues the 'non-temporal co-temporality' in the narration." ^[9] And the memory of literature is "based on the reconstruction of symbols and the reconstruction of meaningful elements in the text." (Feng Yalin, Erll Astrid 2012: 427) ^[10]

The material carrier (architecture, dialect, daily objects) in *My City* serves as a medium of cultural memory and constructs the identity of China, Hong Kong people. By displaying the symbols carrying collective memory, it showcases the cultural memory of China, Hong Kong in its historical form.

4 The material carrier in my city

4.1 Spatial symbols - realm of memory

According to Jan Assmann, "Cultural memory is rooted in the space (erlebte Raum) in which it is awakened." (Jin Shoufu, 2015: 31) ^[1] and "groups and places together constitute symbolic communities." ^[11] Cultural memory is first rooted in space, and through the space of remembrance, people confirm their self-identity. "Memory is attached to places just as history is attached to events." (Feng Yalin, Erll Astrid, 2012: 239) ^[12] The French historian Pierre Nora proposed the concept of "Realm of Memory", believing that it is the carrier of cultural memory. "The term 'Realm' has three characteristics: real, symbolic and functional." (Pierre Nora, Huang Yanhong, 2017: 40) ^[13] We can understand it as a field that can carry, shape and pass on memories. *My City*, is itself a Realm of Memory. Many places in it can make present-day China, Hong Kong people recall the period that carries the dual history of colonization and localization.

Houses are the best spatial symbols for writing a history. For example, the "Old House with 17 Doors" ^② in which A Guo lives is the best representative of local history and culture, and is the perfect Realm of Memory for passing down culture. "The raised oracle bones script on the window panes" ^[2] is a reproduction of the ancient Chinese characters; "Outside the archway is the long corridor" ^[2] "The latticework of flower tiles on the ground" ^[2] gives us a glimpse of the construction and decorative art of the houses of that past era. "Dining in a tea house" ^[2] bring back to mind the historical scenes of people drinking tea and chatting. The teahouse plays the role of a witness to history. We can also see some houses influenced by other ethnic cultures: "Domed roof, tiled through paper pattern, pink walls" ^[2], "Greek temple-like buildings in the square" ^[2]. These houses have received foreign cultures and blended them with the local culture to form a unique piece of

①Xi Xi, *My City* (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2010), 185, 182, 201.

②Xi Xi, *My City* (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2010), 7, 9, 9, 10, 111, 122, 219.

local history.

4.2 Language and dialect: storage memory

Aleida Assmann specifically divides “cultural memory” into storage memory and functional memory. She thinks that the storage memory is an unorganized “‘hodgepodge’ (Jameson’s words), and the Assmanns call it the ‘Uninhabited hidden domains’” (Zhao Jingrong, 2015:41-42) [2] Storage memory contains everything in the course of social history, and since it can be transformed into functional memory in a certain context, it is the information reserve for future functional memory. If “functional memory” is compared to the “foreground” (Vordgrund), then “storage memory” is the “background” (Hintergrund). (Aleida Assmann, 2016:147). [14] In a certain socio-political context, the retained functional memory is selected and not comprehensive. Storage memory, on the other hand, is much richer, providing an external perspective that “complements, corrects and renews functional memory.” (Aleida Assmann, 2016:150) [14]

My City use China, Hong Kong-style language to constitute the city’s unique linguistic culture and sense of identity. In the process of simplification of Chinese characters, many ancient characters are no longer in use. China, Hong Kong’s local dialect have retained the pronunciation habits of ancient Chinese characters, reflecting the inheritance of language; and because of its history of colonial rule, China, Hong Kong has received English and integrated it into its local language, forming a cultural attitude of “use for my own purposes”, reflecting the identity of the city in the blending of Chinese and Western cultures. Language and dialect are one of the material carriers for storage memory.

China, Hong Kong’s local “dialects”, such as “hoeng¹hau³gaau¹”^③ (chewing gum, “kǒu xiāng táng” in Mandarin), “soey³lung²hau²”^③ (water tap, “shuǐ lóng tóu” in Mandarin), “din⁶zai⁵”^③ (circuit breaker, “diàn zhǎ” in Mandarin), “gaab⁸maan⁶”^③ (safe box, “bǎo xiǎn xiāng” in Mandarin); and we can also see the local dialect ballad sung by China, Hong Kong children since childhood: “tyun²tyun²zyun⁵, gug⁷faa¹yun², caau³mai⁴beng³, no⁶mai⁴tyun²”^③ and the “Mosquito Song”^③ (sung when fighting mosquitoes), these languages have preserved the way people call things from one generation to another.

Apart from the dialects, we can also find “China, Hong Kong-style Mandarin” in the book. These are loan words, which are phonetic translations or paraphrases of words introduced from another language. For example, “baa¹si³”^③ (“gōng gòng qì chē” in Mandarin) comes from English “bus”; “sin¹gei⁶lim¹dung⁵beng³”^③ (“xiān nǎi yóu dàn gāo” in Mandarin) means whipped cream cake, “gei⁶lim¹”, comes from English “cream”; “saa¹ding¹yu³”^③ (“shā dīng yú” in Mandarin), comes from English “sardine”; “faad⁸laan²sai¹do¹si³”^③ originated in France and comes from “French Toast”; “o¹waa²tin²”^③ comes from English “Ovaltine”; The word “min⁴zi⁶” in “min⁴zi⁶ngau²yug⁹faan⁶”^③ (Mince Beef Rice) is translated from the English word “mince”; “sing¹zau¹caau³mai⁴fan³”^③ (Sin Chew Fried Rice Noodle) was created by China, Hong Kong people and named after the old name of Singapore (Sin Chew) because of its unique Southeast Asia flavour due to the addition of curry powder and turmeric powder.

4.3 Daily objects: storage memory

My City shows the daily life of China, Hong Kong people, and also the daily objects and food culture that are closely related to them. These are the symbolization of storage memory.

The food culture of China, Hong Kong is a reflection of the reshaping of eating habits in the process of China, Hong Kong’s rapid economic development. For example, in order to save time in cooking, the “three-minute paper-wrapped noodles” have become popular. It is packed in newspaper, a delicacy from Malaysia. In My City, these paper-wrapped noodles are half-finished and take only three minutes to make. After China, Hong Kong people introduced it, they turned it into a food that facilitates their lives. In addition, some of the local dishes such as “zyu¹coeng²fan³”^④ (Pork Intestine Noodles), “yu²daan³min⁶”^④ (Fish Egg Noodles) and “yim²gug⁹daan⁶”^④ (Salt Baked Eggs), have reinforced their “China, Hong Kong-style” eating habits and lifestyles.

Secondly, objects that symbolize “childhood memories” reflect the transmission of cultural memories between generations. For example, “zau⁵zi³”^④ (crepe paper, which can be seen as soon as we open the lid of a candy jar), “zin³zi³”^④ (paper-cutting, a Chinese folk non-legacy craft that embodies the traditional oriental aesthetics), “Animal Newspaper”^④ (a popular pastime in those days), “gaab⁸maan⁶”^④ (safe box, used to store valuable items), “sog⁸gaau¹faa¹”^④ (plastic flowers, In the 1970s, China, Hong Kong was known as the world’s plastic kingdom, and plastic flowers were the most prosperous industrial product at that time. Nowadays, this handicrafts have vanished into history).

Many of the foreign objects are also a dismantling and historical restoration of the shaping process of China, Hong Kong’s cultural memory. For example, “Paper with angels blowing trumpets”^④, “Christus Dominus’s sign”^④ are the

③Xi Xi, My City (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2010), 18, 23, 181, 137, 17, 156, 156, 156, 151,101, 101, 101, 101.

④Xi Xi, My City (Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2010), 147, 150, 150, 26, 186, 111, 137, 225, 24, 25, 73, 49, 222, 197-198, 208.

propaganda and implantation of western religious culture by the West in the process of colonization. There is also the exotic plant “chili pepper”⁴, which was introduced to China at the end of the Ming Dynasty. During the Republican period, many Cantonese regional dishes were served with chili peppers. But due to the climate, water and soil, chili peppers were incompatible with this region. As the protagonist in the text said, when we grow peppers, we must consider whether the peppers can be “healthy” and “happy” on this land. It reflects an attitude of selectively and non-compulsorily integrating foreign things and prioritizing local culture. This is not only a respect for foreign things but also the best way to inherit and promote local culture.

4.4 Consumerist Products: Deconstruction of Functional Memory

According to Aleida Assmann (2016:147), functional memory is “inhabited memory”.^[14] Unlike the personalization of storage memory, it is linked to political demands. Secondly, “Functional memory as a construction is linked to a subject, through the selective and conscious domination of the past.”^[15] The functional memory medium points not only to the past it contains but also to itself.

In the process of China, Hong Kong’s rapid economic development, consumerist products have emerged. Behind these phenomena, there is a close relationship with political functions, hiding deep-seated changes in the social structure, which are not only recalled by the public as the medium itself, but also recall the history. This chapter will analyze the material carrier of functional memory (books, mass media) and conduct analysis of the dissolution of functional memory.

Books appeared with the purpose of spreading culture. But instead, the situation has arisen where “human beings do not want to think.”⁴ As a result, a variety of critics have appeared, who analyse texts from a fixed perspective, “What comes out of the measure is a whole lot of isms.”⁴, that fits well with the reality, which likes to apply all kinds of theories to characterize and categorize texts, and people like to listen to critics’ and theorists’ analyses, while forgetting that the purpose of books is to encourage us to come up with our own insights through reading. In *My City*, there is such a newly introduced consumerist cultural product, “Apple Brand Instant Novel, which features the novel concentrated into a can like powdered milk. People who drink it will have the plot floating in their minds scene by scene, as if they are watching a movie.”^④ In this fast-paced city of China, Hong Kong, people have no time to read in-depth texts, and Apple Brand Instant Novels do the job of using simple narratives to allow readers to quickly understand the content of a novel in the shortest time, so that readers no longer think deeply, this dissolves the functional memory of the book.

Along with the book, the mass media are one of the material carriers of functional memory. But nowadays “mass media dominate the structure of the public sphere” (Zhao Jingrong, 2015: 188)^[2] The virtual social space created by mass media constantly encroaches on the space of public memory, which has a great negative impact on public. In *My City*, “a TV station organizes a jackpot game show, and the whole city participates in the contest, which eventually overwhelmed the machines.”^④ Entertainment programming directly affects the daily lives of residents by overloading telephone lines, it reveals the encroachment of entertainment media on the space of public memory. The relationship between cultural memory and identity is mutually fluid and complementary, traditional media and mass media each play a certain role in it, but it cannot be ignored that they may also become obstacles. How to avoid the negative role played by the media in it requires our joint efforts to seek solutions.

5 Conclusion

My City provides a powerful textual basis for understanding the positioning of China, Hong Kong’s cultural identity under the dual contexts of “post-colonial” and “post-globalization”. Through in-depth reading of the text and focusing on the four key material carriers in *My City*, this study analyzes how they function as the medium of cultural memory, what kind of collective memory they carry and shape, and how they are involved in the construction of identity. This process of analysis is not only a process of dismantling and reorganizing Jan Assmann’s theory of cultural memory, but also a substantive response to the crisis of identity that China, Hong Kong is facing, providing a referenceable example for literary studies to intervene in social issues. It is expected that this study will serve as a catalyst for wider attention in the academic community and jointly promote the in-depth exploration of this field.

References

- [1] Jin, S.F., Yang, X.C. (translate) (2015) Jan Assmann. *Cultural Memory - Writing, Recollection and Political Identity in Early Advanced Cultures*. Peking University Press, Peking.
- [2] Zhao, J.R. (2015) *Cultural Memory and Identity Recognition*. Sdx Joint Publishing Company, Peking.

- [3] Assmann, J. (1992) *Communicative and Cultural Memory*. // Erll, A., Nünning, A. (2008) *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Walter de Gruyter, Berlin.
- [4] Assmann, J., Huang, Y.P. (translate) (2018) *Religious and Cultural Memory*. The Commercial Press, Peking.
- [5] Erll, A. (2005) *Literature Serves as a Medium of Collective Memory*. // Feng, Y.L., Erll, Astrid. (2012) *A Theoretical Reader on Cultural Memory*. Peking University Press, Peking.
- [6] Assmann, J., John C. (1995) *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*. *New German Critique*, (65):13.
- [7] Jin, S.F. (2017) On Jan Assmann's Theory of Cultural Memory. *Foreign Languages and Literature*, 33(02):36-40.
- [8] He, F.R. (1999) One Way of Reading "My City". // Xi Xi. (2010) *My City*. Guangxi Normal University Press, Guilin.
- [9] Assmann, A. (2006) *The Three Dimensions of Memory: The Neural Dimension, the Social Dimension, and the Cultural Dimension*. // Feng, Y.L., Erll, A. (2012) *A Theoretical Reader on Cultural Memory*. Peking University Press, Peking.
- [10] Erll, A., Nünning, A. (2003) *The Memory Program of Literary Studies: An Overview*. // Feng, Y.L., Erll, A. (2012) *A Theoretical Reader on Cultural Memory*. Peking University Press, Peking.
- [11] Assmann, J. (2011) *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- [12] Nora, P. (1998) *Between History and Memory: Realm of Memory*. // Feng, Y.L., Erll, A. (2012) *A Theoretical Reader on Cultural Memory*. Peking University Press, Peking.
- [13] Nora, P., Huang, Y.H. (translate) (2017) *Realm of Memory: A Cultural and Social History of French National Consciousness*. Nanjing University Press, Nanjing.
- [14] Assmann, A., Pan, L. (translate) (2016) *Memory Space - The Forms and Changes of Cultural Memory*. Peking University Press, Peking.
- [15] Assmann, A., Assmann, J. (1994) *Yesterday Reappears - Media and Social Memory*. // Feng, Y.L., Erll, A. (2012) *A Theoretical Reader on Cultural Memory*. Peking University Press, Peking.