

The “Downward Compatibility” of Assmann's Cultural Memory

Qin Wang

School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan Normal University, Sichuan 610101, China

Abstract: Memory is related to the human brain as well as to social and cultural relations. Assmann's theory of “cultural memory” addresses the social relation of human “self”, memory crisis, and existential anxiety. Through the cultural interpretation of the core concepts of memory discourse, the analysis and interpretation of the characteristics of cultural memory, and with a sense of ontological security and history, Assmanns strengthen the cultural attributes and identity reflection in the memory of the past. Cross-cultural exchanges are being strengthened. At this time, we must better rely on the cultural turn of memory to construct national identity, understand cultural differences and particularities, and cultivate macro-cultural concern, due to the urgency in the era of globalization.

Keywords: Assmann; Cultural Memory; Identity Reflection; Downward Compatibility.

1. Introduction

When the concept of “memory” is mentioned, we first think of a purely internal phenomenon of the human body, which is based on the human brain and belongs to the research categories of brain physiology, neurology and psychology; and has nothing to do with the study of history and culture. In recent years, the study of memory has received more attention in the domestic and international academic circles, both because the emergence of electronic media technology has changed the way of information storage, and because the generation of people who have experienced the tragic crimes and disasters in human history has passed away one after another, which has gradually shifted our cognition of the survival of life and death from vivid memory to the stage of history. Memory, as a complex and multi-layered psychological process, not only plays an important role in our daily lives, but also plays a key role in the cultural orientation of collective identity. At the individual and social levels, memory and cultural memory co-construct cognition, identity and social structure, influencing each other and evolving in a complex intertwined relationship. At a time when cross-cultural exchanges are intensifying, as it were, we are faced with an urgency in the age of globalization, namely, the need to better rely on the cultural turn of memory to construct national identity, to understand cultural differences and particularities, and to cultivate macro-cultural concern.

2. Current Status at Home and Abroad

Foreign research on “cultural memory” predates domestic research, and the study of memory, its history, narratives and traumas has long been a hot topic in German-speaking and English-speaking academics, dating back to the 1990s and focusing mostly on books and published papers and reports written by Mr. and Mrs. Assmann over the course of several decades. John Czaplicka's translation of Jan Assmann's *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity* lays out the main ideas of his theory of cultural memory. Robert Savage from University of Oxford, Smith Mark S., Eliza Slavet from University of California, Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins conduct multidimensional studies on the relationship between cultural

memory and religion by Jan Assmann from the perspectives of mythology, theology, and religious beliefs. Regarding the relationship between the theory of “cultural memory” and its related memory concepts, James V. Wertsch and Henry L. Roediger III focus on “collective memory”, “history” and “individual Memory” three opposing relationships. From an interdisciplinary perspective, Renate Lachmann explores the intertextual relationship between “cultural memory” and “literature”; Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney take “culture and the production of cultural memory” as their thesis, aiming to elucidate the role of literature as a medium of cultural memory; and Annette Kuhn interprets the production and functioning of cultural memory in the context of memory performances in visual media such as photographs and photos. Domestic attention and research on Assmann's theoretical work is increasing, and the theory of cultural memory is becoming an interdisciplinary field of study in China. Jin Shoufu (2017), who studied under the German philosopher and ancient Egyptologist Jan Assmann, the founder of the theory of cultural memory, analyzes the significance of Assmann's theory of cultural memory and its genealogical relationship with “collective memory”. Some scholars explore the cultural memory theory's origin (Wang, 2016), evolution (Wu, 2021), dissemination and transplantation (Wang, 2012), focusing on the role of cultural memory in the shaping of identity (Wei, 2022), but they have not focused on the guiding significance of cultural memory's “downward compatibility”, as well as the ways in which it can contribute to the ego's perceptive observation and insightful understanding of macrocultural concerns.

3. Assmann and Cultural Memory

Jan Assmann is a renowned professor at the University of Heidelberg, Germany, and a member of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences. He was born in 1938 in Langelshelm, Lübeck, and after graduating from high school, he studied Egyptology and Classical Archaeology in Munich and Paris, etc. In 1967, he received a scholarship from the German Archaeological Institute and went to Egypt to participate in archaeological excavations, and in 1971, he obtained the qualification of teaching at the university, and in the same year, he was appointed as a professor of Egyptology at the

University of Heidelberg, which he held until his honorable retirement in 2003. In 1988, Jan Assmann published *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity* and introduced the concept of "cultural memory" for the first time. It is generally believed that the theory of cultural memory was put forward by Jan Assmann, and then formally established by Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann in a series of works on the topic of "cultural memory", and in recent years, they have continued to extend and improve the original theoretical foundation. In recent years, they have continued to extend and improve their original theoretical foundation. Based on the preceding theory, he developed the theory of collective memory proposed by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the 1930s, and explicitly put forward the concept of "cultural memory" to summarize the various phenomena of cultural transmission in human society. The theory of cultural memory focuses on memory activities and contents with cultural significance. The Assmans extended the study of memory to the field of culture. Memory research has undergone an evolution from psychology to sociology and culture, from individual and collective memory to social memory to cultural memory (Wang, 2016). The emergence of the theory of "cultural memory" expanded the study of memory into the interdisciplinary scope of history, philosophy, and socio-cultural studies (Wu, 2021). In his book, *Cultural Memory: Texts, Memories, and Political Identities in Early High Culture*, the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann defines the external dimensions of memory, of which "cultural memory" is one, and which include, inter alia, mimetic memory (learning to act in imitation), memory of objects (one is always surrounded by objects, either everyday or with more private meanings), interactional memory (language and communication), and cultural memory (transmission of meaning). In short, "cultural memory" exists in human society as a pervasive form, which is a collection of objects in which historical and cultural information of a longer period of time is stored and transmitted.

3.1. The Evolution of the Theory of Cultural Memory

The evolution of the theory of "cultural memory" is due to both the logic of its own theoretical development and the development of social reality. Hermann Ebbinghaus, a German psychologist, conducted a systematic theoretical study of memory, which he regarded as a device for storing representations of personal experience. He brought the study of memory into the period of scientific psychology. Psychologist Frederick Bartlett inherited his predecessor's approach to the problem of memory, pointing out that memory is placed under social conditions for examination, and this emphasis on social factors breaks new ground in memory research (Wu, 2021). The French sociologist Halbwachs put forward the theory of collective memory in the 1930s, shifting the focus of memory from individual memory to collective memory. Collective memory is not a simple sum of individual memories, that is to say, collective memory is not equal to collected memories. Anthropologist Paul Connerton explores the question of "how group memory is transmitted and maintained" (Connerton, 2000,p.1). Halbwach's and Connerton's theories reveal, respectively, the social framework that exists beyond memory and the medium through which memory is transmitted, which lays the foundation for the subsequent development of cultural memory theory (Wu, 2021). Art historian Abraham Moritz

Warburg examines the role of the image as a symbol in the storage and transmission of memory, with an entry point at the material level of culture, arguing that the image form carries collective memory, or "social memory". The French historian Pierre Nora began to focus on the important role of memory in the construction of cultural identity and national homogeneity. According to Nora, the field of memory is the symbolic element of the memory heritage of any community (in this case, the French community) that any kind of visible subject, whether material or immaterial, becomes, by human will and time (Nora, 1989,p.12). The "lieux" of the field of memory exists as a mediator of cultural memory. In the late 1980s, Mr. and Mrs. Assmann developed and elaborated on the theory of cultural memory. New modes of collective memory and recollection had to take into account both the feelings and identities of the dead and survivors, as well as of the Germans who had fought in and had only heard about the war. Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory was born in this context (Jin, 2017). "Cultural memory" is "the notion of the totality of a society's knowledge that governs human behavior and experience within a particular framework of interaction and that requires repeated knowledge and mastery from one generation to the next in order to be acquired" (Assmann, 2015, p.126). The formation and transmission of cultural memory occurs within the framework of specific social interactions that govern individual and group behaviors and experiences. This means that cultural memory is gradually formed and transmitted through the interactive processes of communication, education and cultural activities in society, and it reflects the overall cultural atmosphere and value system of society.

3.2. Genealogical Relationships of Cultural Memory

Assmann's research on the relationship between the concept of "cultural memory" and its related concepts of memory has provided a broader thinking space for the interpretation of the theoretical boundaries of "cultural memory". The first is collective memory versus individual and social memory. Aleida Assmann makes a brief distinction between individual and social memory. She examines memory from three dimensions: neurological, social and cultural, which are carried by the brain's neurological system, the social communication system and the symbolic media system, based on which she divides memory into individual memory, social memory, political (national) memory, and cultural memory, the first two of which are short-term memories that last for 3-4 generations, i.e., 80-100 years, although there is a difference between individuals and groups in terms of their focus. The latter two are long-term memories, but the difference is that they are based on national or cultural references, and among them, cultural memory, which has a broader spatial and temporal scope, is the center of her research. Halbwach (2020) divides memory into individual and collective memory, which are not in opposition or simply additive, "Rather, the individual remembers by placing himself in the place of the group, but it is also certain that the group remembers by means of the individual memory and embodies itself within the individual memory"(p.71). The following are collective memory and memory of interaction and cultural memory. In his book *Cultural Memory: Text, Memory and Political Identity in Early High Culture*, Jan Assmann expands and refines the relationship between the three in terms of content, form, medium, temporal structure

and bearer. “We use (collective) memory as a superordinate concept, under which we distinguish between the two forms of 'communicative' memory and 'cultural' memory” (Assmann, 2015). The content of the memory of interaction is the history experienced in the framework of an individual's biography, in an informal and unformed form, while the content of the cultural memory is the events that took place in the absolute past, created in the form of festivals for celebratory and ritualized social interaction; the vivid memories that exist in the memory of the human brain, the personal experiences, and the contents that are relayed according to other people are the mediums of the memory of interaction, while the mediums of the cultural memory are reflected in objective externalized objects that are fixed. The medium of cultural memory is represented by fixed and objective externalized objects such as words, images, monuments, or rituals; the time span of interactional memory is three or four generations in a time horizon that is simultaneously advancing with the ever-moving present, so its bearers are part-time or personal witnesses of a certain era in a community of memories, whereas cultural memory is the absolute past in a mythological prehistoric era, with full-time bearers of traditions.

4. Conclusion

As globalization continues to deepen, various peoples, countries or other communities are gradually moving from a state of division to intermingling and becoming an integral part of the global cultural chain, and thus unconsciously moving towards homogenization. A cultural identity crisis may be caused by a variety of factors such as historical events, cultural conflicts and globalization. Rapid changes in society, increased dissemination of information, and intensified cross-cultural exchanges may lead to challenges to traditional cultural identities, thus triggering identity crises. In the face of such a crisis, the theory of cultural memory provides ideas for preserving and repairing identity, because the ultimate goal of cultural memory is not to form an objective understanding of people or events of the past, but to construct the past into a consensus that can sustain the present and point the way to the future. The theory of cultural memory emphasizes the role that societies and groups play in constructing common perceptions, histories, values, etc., which in turn influences the construction of sameness and cultural transmission of individuals and societies. Cultural memory should start from the people's own choice, not just copy the state's ideas. So it can only be said that the presentation of ancient cultural memory especially reflects the care of literate elites when they runicize information, and offers the possibility of decoding the lives of people at the non-elite level of society or in other countries in Eastern societies (Lai, 2016). The democratic and inclusive nature presented by cultural memory emphasizes its importance in meeting the potential needs of people to make their own choices, to transcend the idea of the State, to focus on real life experiences, and to serve the non-elite levels of society and other nations. Shared historical experiences, traditions, and values are preserved and transmitted in cultural memory, providing a common framework of identity for group members. Through participation in cultural memory, individuals are integrated into this shared experience,

resulting in a shared sense of sameness. Shared cultural memory forms a bond between members of the community, contributes to the establishment of common values and the development of macro-cultural concerns, and promotes social cohesion and cooperation.

References

- [1] Assmann, J., & Czaplicka, J. (1995). Collective memory and cultural identity. *New German Critique*, (65), 125-133.
- [2] Assmann, J. (2015). *Cultural Memory: Writing, Memory, and Political Identity in Early High Cultures* (S. F. Jin & X. C. Huang, Trans.). Beijing: Peking University Press.
- [3] Assmann, J. (2011). Communicative and cultural memory. In *Cultural memories: The geographical point of view* (pp. 15-27). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- [4] Connerton, P. (1989). *How societies remember*. Cambridge University Press.
- [5] Erll, A., & Rigney, A. (2006). Literature and the production of cultural memory: Introduction. *European Journal of English Studies*, 10(2), 111-115.
- [6] Halbwachs, M. (2020). *On collective memory*. University of Chicago press.
- [7] Jin, S. F. (2017). Jan Assmann's Theory of Cultural Memory. *Foreign Languages and Literature*, (02), 36-40.
- [8] Kuhn, A. (2010). Memory texts and memory work: Performances of memory in and with visual media. *Memory studies*, 3(4), 298-313.
- [9] Lachmann, R. (2004). Cultural memory and the role of literature. *European Review*, 12(2), 165-178.
- [10] Lai, G. D. (2016). Traversing History and Reality: A Review of Jan Assmann's Cultural Memory: Writing, Memory, and Political Identity in Early High Cultures. *Historical Theory Research*, (01), 152-156.
- [11] Nora, P. (1989). Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire. *representations*, 26, 7-24.
- [12] Smith, M. S. (2009). Theism and violence in the Ancient world: the argument of Jan Assmann. *Sefarad: Revista de Estudios Hebraicos y Sefardies*, 69(1), 229-235.
- [13] Slavet, E. (2010). A matter of distinction: on recent work by Jan Assmann. *ajs Review*, 34(2), 385-393.
- [14] Steinmetz-Jenkins, D. (2011). Jan Assmann and the Theologization of the Political. *Political theology*, 12(4), 511-530.
- [15] Wertsch, J. V., & Roediger III, H. L. (2008). Collective memory: Conceptual foundations and theoretical approaches. *Memory*, 16(3), 318-326.
- [16] Wang, J. (2012). On Cultural Memory Theory: An Analysis of the Dissemination and Transplantation of Literary Theory. *Learning and Exploration*, (11), 130-134.
- [17] Wei, L. C. (2022). Cultural Memory and Identity: Reading Jan Assmann's Cultural Memory. *Teaching of Ideological & Political Courses*, (12), 88-89.
- [18] Wu, S. B. (2021). The Evolution and Practical Significance of Cultural Memory Theory. *Journal of Foreign Languages*, (06), 123-126.
- [19] Wang, M. (2016). Cultural Memory: The Logic of Its Rise, Fundamental Dimensions, and Media Constraints. *Trends of Foreign Theoretical Research*, (06), 8-17.