

Collective Emotion and Memory Construction in Chinese Web Literature from the Perspective of Assmann's Theory

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Abstract. Literature has always been a significant form of expression for popular culture. With the rapid development of the internet, Chinese web literature has exhibited a unique aesthetic style, becoming an important component of the contemporary cultural landscape and a crucial carrier of collective emotion and social memory. Anchored in Jan Assmann's Cultural Memory theory, this study employs case studies and textual analysis to delve into its mechanisms for constructing collective emotion. It reveals how web literature elevates individual experiences into group identity through mechanisms of emotional belonging, symbolic participation, and platform orchestration, thereby constructing a decentralized collective memory system. The research finds that web literature not only reshapes the generative methods of traditional cultural memory but also creates new "sites of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*) within the digital space. Through its reinforcement effect on individual memory and the cohesive function of external guidance on collective emotion, web literature forms a closed loop for collective memory construction.

Keywords: Assmann, cultural memory, web literature, memory construction, emotional community

1. Introduction

Technological iteration has spurred the flourishing development of web literature. According to the 2024 China Web Literature Development Research Report, the scale of Chinese web literature users has surpassed 575 million, exceeding half of China's total netizens, with an annual creation volume exceeding ten million works, forming a unique cultural phenomenon [1]. As a decentralized form of cultural practice, web literature is deeply involved in the construction and reproduction of socio-cultural memory. However, current academic research on web literature primarily focuses on industrial dimensions such as IP development, overseas dissemination, and platform economics, with insufficient exploration of its deep mechanisms as a medium for national cultural memory. Why does web literature possess such potent emotional mobilization power? How does it construct group identity and reshape cultural memory within the digital media environment? These questions have yet to be systematically explored.

Based on this, this paper introduces Jan Assmann's Cultural Memory theory, supplemented by other constructive communication principles, attempting to explore its emotional functions and cultural value in the digital society. This provides academic support for understanding various

phenomena in current internet culture and guiding the healthy development of the online ecosystem. Through textual analysis of representative web literature works and data collection/case observation on platforms like Tomato Novel, China Qidian, and Jinjiang Literature, this paper aims to reveal how web literature constructs a collective emotional space between lived experience and virtual narrative, thereby forming a new cultural memory field in the digital age. This serves to correct the current academic underestimation of Assmann's theory's practical value in the new media context, and provides a new theoretical fulcrum for research on the social functions of web literature.

2. Literature review

Assmann's Cultural Memory originates from Maurice Halbwachs's theory of Collective Memory. The latter posits society as the framework within which memory exists and is referenced, emphasizing the decisive role of the collective on its members' memories [2]. Assmann, building upon this, distinguishes collective memory into two forms: "Communicative Memory" and "Cultural Memory," expanding memory studies from biology, psychology, and sociology into the field of cultural studies. He interprets the formation mechanisms of identity and group interaction from a broader dimension. He particularly emphasizes the reconfigurability of memory, arguing that while the "past" is based on events, its presentation in group recollection is already distinct from the facts themselves. Memory is fictionalized and reshaped through continuous "recontextualization", with writing, images, the body, and places becoming key extensions of cultural memory media.

Regarding current domestic and international research, existing Cultural Memory theory studies mostly concentrate on deepening interpretations of Assmann's theory or attempt to use the theory to prove the communicative value of related "objects" like documentaries, city branding, or intangible cultural heritage inheritance from the perspectives of its extensions—images and places [3]. Researchers are keen to pursue the latest media representations but often overlook the immense role writing, as the consistent medium of memory transmission, can play. One of the main manifestations of writing in the internet age is web literature. Contrary to its importance, current domestic and international web literature research primarily focuses on applied "hypertext" content such as overseas dissemination of web novels, adaptations, IP development, and author labor, or analysis of specific literary texts, while weakening macroscopic research on its most fundamental mechanisms as a textual medium: narrative and genre selection.

Among existing representative discussions, most strive to endow web literature with a literariness or functionality transcending the popular sense, mechanically applying hypertext and postmodernist theories to analyze web literature, neglecting its universal value as a decentralized internet industry [4]. This means we should instead discuss the origins of so-called popular genres from the perspective of subconscious rules of mass free choice. In fact, this bears similarity to Assmann's proposition that "each individual, consciously or unconsciously, brings previously acquired knowledge to the text before them, imparting it with specific meaning and applying it to construct self-identity." [5] Therefore, re-examining web literature from the perspective of collective memory construction holds significant theoretical and practical importance.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Genre classification of collective memory in web literature

3.1.1. Historical reconstruction genre: retrospective narratives based on national cultural memory

Jan Assmann posits that every cultural system possesses a "connective structure": on the temporal level, it connects the past and present by fixing and preserving important past events and their recollections in a certain form, constantly reviving them to gain contemporary significance [6]. Literary works repair historical ruptures and construct national identity through the symbolic expression of typical events and characters and ritualized narrative structures.

Compared to traditional literature, the historical narrative of web literature is rooted in a popularized, multi-media environment, employing more accessible and quotidian writing strategies. To cater to platform click-through rates and censorship requirements, web literature often eschews grand narratives, instead focusing on individual experiences within broad historical backdrops and anecdotes outside official history [7]. Examples include ancient romance like *Notes on Crane Watching* and *Long Wind Crossing*, political intrigue like *The Wisdom of the Great Song*, and works emphasizing national narratives like *Alley Families* and *Heavy Industry of a Great Power*. These literary works are based on real historical events or periods, stimulating readers' identification with and emotional resonance for the protagonists' experiences through the evocation of national cultural memory. They construct memory anchors through everyday experiences, thereby generating collective retrospective memory. These narratives and images retrospectively recall and amend the collective memory of macro-history, further promoting readers' identification with the work's realism.

Some works utilize traditional historical elements like centralized power, Chinese culture of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism three studies, etc., to construct virtual worldviews and unfold imagination. For instance, national epic fantasy or Eastern fantasy genres, primarily targeting male readers, include *Douluo Dalu* and *Zhu Xian*; those targeting females include *Black Lotus Survival Guide* [Transmigrated into a Book] (adapted into the TV drama *The Night Wanderer*) and *Till Death Do Us Part* (adapted into the TV drama *Till the End of the Moon*). Such alternate history novels blend mythological archetypes and historical events to construct non-realistic cultural origins [8]. This environment, liberated from real-world constraints, provides readers and authors alike with a utopia for unfettered imagination and endless pursuit of life's climaxes. Simultaneously, by presenting clan narratives and Eastern cultural imagery, it recreates symbols of national culture from reality, providing symbolic coordinates for group identity. This allows the memories constructed by fictional works to be evoked and reinforced in reality.

3.1.2. Realist genre: realistic narratives transforming communicative memory into cultural memory

Realist web literature "closely observes and recreates reality, filtering identity elements from contemporary experience using plain, sketch-like language. It focuses on current hot social topics, describes the everyday, builds consensus, and facilitates the transition from communicative memory to cultural memory." [9] Popular works include those focusing on social issues like *Mortgage Slave*, urban workplace stories like *Du Lala's Promotion*, and suspense/mystery with fictional elements like *Breaking Through the Clouds* and *The Seven Deadly Pillars*.

In creative practice, authors typically make choices based on the direction of communicative memory transformation (i.e., literary style). Platforms categorize such works as "serious drama" or "lighthearted". The former are realist works seriously reflecting reality and expressing ideas, while the latter are "wish-fulfillment fiction" aimed at releasing reader pressure and satisfying pleasure-seeking within the new media context [10]. Examples: *The White Olive Tree* set against the backdrop of the Southeast Asian war, the male protagonist is a peacekeeping soldier who commits suicide by gunshot due to severe PTSD from battlefield trauma; the female protagonist is a war correspondent ultimately killed by a stray bullet. Although a romance novel, its main narrative focuses on the brutality of war and civilian suffering, featuring a "Bad Ending" (BE) for all characters. This naturally diverges from "wish-fulfillment" but reshapes war memories for readers in peacetime through its text, stimulating strong collective anti-war sentiment. Also a romance novel, *Deep Eyes* centers its narrative on romantic development and "wish-fulfillment" experiences. The female protagonist returns after being framed to seek revenge, achieving repeated successes in her career; the male protagonist, an overlooked illegitimate son, becomes a target for her casual romantic pursuit but finds unprecedented warmth through her. Emotional dominance lies entirely with the female protagonist, achieving dual "wish-fulfillment" in career and love from a female-centric perspective.

Notably, the reason why web literature, as the communicative memory of niche groups, can rapidly cross the time threshold to transform into cultural memory is twofold: First, the internet provides a development space for collective communication that is cross-media, cross-community, cross-spatiotemporal, and high-frequency. Second, contemporary communities have a vast population base, increasing communication opportunities. The complex relational networks among groups mean individual memories are continuously evoked and reinforced through frequent sharing and interaction on social platforms, ultimately facilitating the generation of collective cultural memory.

3.1.3. Futurist genre: utopian narratives of prospective cultural memory

Human imagination and aspiration for the future have given rise to speculative fiction. Based on memories of real society, creators construct diverse cyber worlds through imagination. These worlds are rooted in contemporary culture, integrating traditional values and responding to audiences' expectations of heroism; simultaneously, they transcend the real-world process, carrying within an expanded imaginary space the group's longing for the future and escapist desires from reality.

One category projects the future with a linear view of time, focusing on national rise or individual destiny, and expanding the temporal-spatial boundaries of human activity through fictional content, such as sci-fi works like *Swallowed Star* and *The Genius Club*. Another category sets the "future" as the foundational premise of a fictional world, constructing utopian imagined societies. Such genres can be divided by worldview: Infinite Flow (e.g., *Ten Days to Die*), Cthulhu Mythos (e.g., *Lord of the Mysteries*), Cyberpunk (e.g., *Learning to Slay Gods in a Mental Asylum*).

These worldviews fuse folk and subcultural elements, born from real-world memory but converging existing group imaginations and authors' individual innovations. For example, *Lord of the Mysteries* uses the 19th-century Victorian era as its cultural backdrop, setting historical elements like religious churches, workers' movements, and industrial pollution. It incorporates steampunk aesthetics, with environmental descriptions filled with gear mechanisms, gas lamps, and smog imagery. It also introduces elements from the collective memory of online groups, such as the Cthulhu Mythos and the SCP Foundation, enriching the narrative system to form a novel alternate universe worldview. Born from the collective creative memory of the internet, and disseminated

widely with the work's popularity, it is cited in new web literature, eventually solidifying into a specific, proprietary narrative style and cultural trend.

3.2. Pathways for externally guided collective memory construction in web literature

3.2.1. Emotionally belonging-oriented type

Emotional belonging primarily acts upon groups with existing collective memory, confirming and solidifying the individual's cognition of their collective identity. Reading, as a cyclical process, means that readers, upon repeated exposure to texts with similar characteristics, naturally form deep impressions of their core attributes. Through repeated "rituals of recollection," these attributes are internalized as personal memory. Using this as an anchor point, individuals actively seek more works aligning with their preferences. In this process, individuals interact actively with the collective seeking recognition, rapidly integrate into the community, and reinforce their sense of belonging through collective labels.

The markers of emotional belonging determine the central traits of the cluster. Author-centered clusters are essentially similar to fandom culture [11]. Readers extend their fondness for the text into "loyalty" to the author. They treat "chasing serial updates" as a ritual of collective interaction, tend to interact with the author in comment sections, and regard the author as the community's opinion leader or emotional guide. Authors possess the ability to lead fans across platforms and even media types, while rejection between groups is not particularly pronounced. For instance, top authors like Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, whose Jinjiang homepage has over 1.63 million collections, created works hailed as the "BL Top Trilogy." Despite causing public controversy due to legal issues, the fervor and loyalty of her fans show no sign of waning. In fan works, there even appear stories where the author is the protagonist and original characters are supporting roles, such as "When Mo Xiang Tong Xiu Transmigrates into Her Own Novel and Gets Pampered by Everyone." Besides author-oriented clusters, genre-oriented clusters take work characteristics as the core, with readers forming stable "genre belonging" by matching genres with their preferences.

3.2.2. Symbolic interaction-participation type

Collective memory facilitated by symbolic interaction is essentially the result of internal cohesion and external expansion within the group. Jenkins' concept of "participatory culture" suggests that the continuous reinforcement of collective memory and emotion within a community generates a strong desire among members to share externally and contribute, hoping to attract newcomers through their sharing. Consequently, readers transform from information receivers into memory producers; "fan derivative creation" is its typical form. Co-created reconstructive memory extracts and encodes elements from existing memories. After selection, it strips the text, transforming into transmittable symbols like internet memes, golden quotes, famous scenes, etc.—all being such fragmented, dissemination-oriented memory symbols [12]. Via diffusion on social media, potential audiences outside the collective are attracted by audio-visual symbols that break the limitations of textual transmission. During the memory re-encoding process, they develop identification with the collective, generating memories of collective identity cognition and achieving cluster expansion.

Based on continuous symbolic interaction, collective memory construction becomes a sustained, dynamic process, extending the vitality of completed works through periodic community interactions. Over time, high-intensity interaction leads to the canonization of web literature works. Characters, pairings, plots, and worldviews within them transform into symbols, driving the

generation of new fan groups. This also constructs a new channel for web literature dissemination: some readers first encounter characters through derivative works and then search for the original work in reverse, forming the "derivative creation traffic diversion" phenomenon.

The influence of this symbolization not only achieves "cross-industry" effects, such as TV adaptations and merchandise production, but also "cross-dimensional" effects, realizing cross-border transmission from online text to real life. For example, the plot in *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* where the protagonists go to Changbai Mountain to "bring someone home" achieved canonization through collective memory transmission. It inspires readers to climb Changbai Mountain annually for a "commemorative rendezvous," boosting tourism. Fans believe that climbing the mountain is both a "promise" with fictional characters and a real-world response to collective memory.

3.2.3. Platform technology-intervention type

In the digital age, memory shifts from the human brain to cloud storage. Platform comment and messaging mechanisms provide readers with a co-creation zone to express personal views and share experiences. Individual comments aggregate into memory fragments, disseminated and reinforced through actions like likes, comments, and forwarding actions. Individual memories achieve co-construction and negotiation within this space, gaining recognition and adoption to form group emotional tendencies and stimulate collective sentiment. Leveraging emotional mobilization and algorithmic recommendations, the memory community continuously expands. Communicative memory ascends into stable digital memory through high-frequency interaction. External users enter easily, while internal members exhibit high stickiness, finding it difficult to detach.

Notably, platforms, through algorithms and interface design, intervene to some extent in collective memory construction. The dissemination path of individual memory is controlled by algorithms, while collective memory is dynamically shaped by data feedback. Big data-driven personalized recommendations solidify user preferences, making naturally forming collective memory subject to directional manipulation. For example, on the Tomato Novel app homepage, the "Recommendation Ranking" occupies nearly 40% of the interface, prominently displaying large cover images and synopses, while the search bar occupies less than 5% of the top space. Such interface design maximizes visual attraction, directly influencing user choices and reinforcing memory orientation.

Simultaneously, the development of electronic media technology means modern capitalist society has entered a kingdom of signs [13]. After the intervention of capital forces, interaction data like tips and votes are recorded in real-time by algorithms, transformed into traceable digital memory trajectories, and serve as symbolic content determining platform rankings. These behaviors both define individual memory trajectories and, through data aggregation, influence the flow of collective memory. Rankings reinforce group emotional orientation, prompting users to favor high-popularity works, bowing down before the symbolized "object." Meanwhile, works with low exposure but high-quality content often remain marginalized due to low collection counts, struggling to survive under the shadow of poor metrics.

4. Discussion

4.1. The logic of memory construction in web literature and theoretical breakthroughs in the digital age

From the perspective of cultural memory, the collective memory construction of web literature reveals a dynamic transformation mechanism between "communicative memory" and "cultural memory," and between individual and group memory. After confirming memory belonging, readers spontaneously deepen existing memories through online interaction. Through interactive means like comments, sharing, recommendations, and derivative creations, along with the ritual symbols they produce (like fan fiction and art), they form emotional consensus and identity. This process promotes the reproduction of memory and facilitates the condensation and elevation of communicative memory into cultural memory through negotiation within the group, ultimately embedding it into the cultural memory system as a new memory resource. The particularity of the digital age manifests precisely in this high-frequency, high-efficiency memory transformation process.

"In the era of oral transmission, the group's identity depended on historical recollection between generations... emphasizing ritual, long-term nature, and identity binding. Manifested in the transmission form of cultural memory, this took the form of periodic rituals like ceremonies, objects of non-everyday social interaction." [2] According to this form of memory transformation, the high-frequency output of cultural memory in web literature is undoubtedly a paradox. However, relying on digital media, web literature breaks traditional temporal logic and ritual structures through a "connective turn." [14] Digital memory escapes spatial and temporal constraints, existing in the dynamic flow between nodes. Thus, real-time interaction on social media and paragraph comment sections replaces the low-frequency, inefficient periodic rituals between generations. Co-created "memes," "emoticons," "ghost edits," etc., based on works, rapidly replace texts and monuments aimed at minorities, becoming markers for cluster memory storage. Therefore, memory is no longer confined to specific moments or events but is continuously expanded through constant connection and interaction [15]. The once "solemn and normative" cultural memory becomes popularized and instantiated in decentralized dissemination, achieving the democratization of memory production.

Furthermore, algorithms have joined the dissemination channels of web literature, becoming significant external factors affecting the efficiency and persistence of memory production. Despite concerns about "information cocoons," it is encouraging that the recommendation mechanisms of current mainstream web literature platforms are still dominated by user evaluations and data feedback. This indicates that the choice of digital memory largely remains in users' hands, and memory production exhibits a certain characteristic of "community autonomy."

4.2. Transformation and upgrading of web literature's cultural memory in the decentralized era

Web literature provides "heterotopian" spaces for marginalized groups to store non-mainstream memories. Introducing Foucault's concept of "heterotopia": within the social system, there exist certain real yet heterogeneous spaces whose function is to subvert and protest the mainstream order [16]. Web literature, originating as a "secondary dimension" space satisfying the primal desires of youth, is gradually being rebuilt into a gathering place satisfying the higher desires of emerging marginalized groups [17]. Here, "marginalized" refers to ideological expressions counter to traditional collective memory. Unlike the direct and clear sensory stimulation provided by TV

dramas and short videos, web literature, constructed through text, is rich in countless novel values and worldviews. These often diverge from mainstream aesthetic cognition, becoming a self-defense mechanism for marginalized groups against traditional values and a medium for transmitting internal ideological currents within the heterotopia.

You-Quan Ouyang once commented that web literature "is a community of human limit experiences, a community where humans assign value and meaning to themselves, and also a community for creating and realizing self-value." [18] Marginalized groups explore here the possibility of "resisting reality through fiction." By the mid-2020s, web literature was popular with genres like strong female leads, matriarchy, and gender transformation. Female-oriented works like *Mulan Has No Elder Brother* were widely popular, and BL novels remained highly popular. In these liminal situations, the memories pointed to by web literature works are "opposed to reality"—cultural recollections that have been sublimated and processed [2]. The worldviews they point to become utopias in political and social senses. Recollection transforms into expectation, and revolutionary "mythic drive" guides the massive generation of works opposing mainstream ideology [2].

Since directly altering the structure of cultural memory in reality is difficult, web literature achieves memory reconstruction through fictional worlds. Individuals holding similar ideologies aggregate here, form clusters, consolidate identity, and continuously disseminate externally via the internet. Marginalized groups can thus identify and resist the explicit and implicit oppression of old memories in reality, accumulating strength for the innovation of cultural memory.

5. Conclusion and prospects

The core of Assmann's "Cultural Memory theory" is that cultural memory is society's conscious shaping and continuous updating of its own historical experience. Web literature is a vivid manifestation of this memory renewal mechanism. It stitches individual emotional fragments into the fabric of group memory, shaping a digital memory community characterized by both fluidity and stickiness within a decentralized, de-authoritized communication structure. This study demonstrates that web literature enables marginalized groups to enter the main arena of cultural narration. The imaginative space of cultural memory is expanded; "memory" is no longer a predetermined historical archive but becomes a living system constantly reconstructed, negotiated, and circulated.

However, a point of caution: as memory generation increasingly relies on algorithms and traffic, will the cultural memory constructed within web literature also slide into the paradox of "instantaneous oblivion"? Does a new type of technologically disciplined "cultural amnesia" lurk between the democratization of memory and the consumability of emotion? These questions are precisely the deep issues that cultural memory research in the digital age cannot evade. Future research on web literature should transcend textual analysis and delve into the subtle relationships between web literature and social structures, economic development, and mass demands. Only then can we truly understand how, in this era of information surplus yet memory scarcity, web literature carries reality within fiction. We look forward to further discussion with colleagues in the academic community.

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