

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

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Abstract. Literature has long been an important way for popular culture to express itself. As the internet has developed rapidly, Chinese online literature has formed its own special aesthetic style. It has become a key part of today's cultural scene and an important carrier of people's shared feelings and social memories. Based on Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, this paper uses case studies and textual analysis to explore how online literature builds collective emotions. It shows how online literature turns personal experiences into group identity through emotional belonging, symbolic participation, and platform influence, and in this way forms a decentralized system of collective memory. The study shows that online literature not only changes how traditional cultural memory is formed but also creates new "sites of memory" in digital space. By strengthening individual memory and bringing people's collective emotions together through external guidance, it forms a complete cycle in the construction of collective memory.

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

1. Introduction

Technology has developed rapidly in recent years, and that's really helped web literature grow at a rapid pace. According to the 2024 China Web Literature Development Research Report, over 575 million people in China are reading web literature currently. That's more than half of all Chinese Internet users. And every year, writers put out over ten million new stories online [1]. Web literature is not merely a cultural activity that only a small group of people participates in—it plays a pretty important role in building and passing on social and cultural memory. But most studies on web literature only focus on business-related stuff, like IP development, overseas spread, and the platform economy. Researchers haven't really dug deep enough into how it carries our national cultural memory. Why does web literature touch people so deeply? How does it build group identity and change cultural memory in the digital world? These questions still don't have clear answers from studies.

So this paper uses Jan Assmann's Cultural Memory theory and some other communication concepts to explore how web literature works emotionally and its cultural value in today's digital society. This way, we can understand Internet culture better, and it also helps support the healthy development of the online environment. By looking at typical web novels and collecting information

from platforms like Tomato Novel, Qidian Chinese Network, and Jinjiang Literature City, this study shows how web literature creates a shared emotional space between real life and fictional stories. It also forms a new field of cultural memory in the digital age. This study also makes up for the fact that many scholars don't fully see how useful Assmann's theory is in new media. And it provides a new theoretical support for studying the social influence 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]. Although people are paying more attention to new media, they often ignore one thing: writing is still one of the most important ways to pass on memory. And in the internet age, one of the biggest forms of writing 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.

In many existing studies, people often try to make web literature seem more "high-level" by using theories like hypertext or postmodernism. But these methods often ignore the real nature of web literature: it is a decentralized cultural practice shaped by the logic of the online industry [4]. Instead of forcing these complicated theories onto it, we should see popular online genres as something that forms naturally, based on the collective choices and preferences of readers. In this way, web literature actually fits well with Assmann's idea. People, whether they realize it or not, read texts with their own background knowledge. They give meaning to these works and use them to build their own sense of identity [5]. From this angle, studying web literature through collective memory theory is not only meaningful in theory but also valuable in real life.

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 believes that every culture has its own "connective structure." Over time, it links the past and the present by keeping important historical events and memories in certain forms. People often bring these memories back to life and give them new meanings in modern times [6]. Literary works often mend the gaps in history and shape national identity. They do this through stories with typical events and characters, using narrative structures that feel almost ritualistic.

Unlike traditional literature, historical stories in online literature come from a popular, multimedia environment. They use simpler, more casual language. To attract more readers and follow platform rules, online literature usually abandons grand narratives. Instead, it focuses on personal experiences against a broad historical background and small stories outside official records [7]. Examples include ancient romance novels like *Notes on Crane Watching* and *Long Wind Crossing*, historical works like *The Wisdom of the Great Song*, and national-themed stories such as *Alley Families* and *Heavy Industry of a Great Power*. These works are based on real history or specific eras. They make readers feel close to the characters and resonate with their experiences by highlighting national cultural memory. They create shared memory points through daily-life scenes, allowing readers to form a common sense of memory. These stories revisit and slightly adjust major history, making them feel more realistic and credible to readers.

Some works build imaginary worlds using traditional elements such as ancient power systems, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. For example, there are male-oriented fantasy epics like *Douluo Dalu* and *Zhu Xian*, as well as female-targeted stories including *Black Lotus Survival Guide* (adapted into the drama *The Night Wanderer*) and *Till Death Do Us Part* (adapted into *Till the End of the Moon*). These alternate-history stories combine mythology with real historical events to create fictional cultural backgrounds [8]. Free from real-world restrictions, these worlds let authors and readers imagine freely and pursue exciting life experiences. These works also use family stories and Eastern cultural images. They draw national cultural symbols from reality and reconstruct them, giving readers clear references to feel their group identity. In this way, the memories in these fictional stories are awakened and strengthened in real life.

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

Realist web literature is usually pretty close to everyday life. It uses plain, direct language to observe and reconstruct reality. Drawing from modern life experiences, it selects things readers can easily connect with and pays attention to the social issues people care about today. By depicting ordinary life and common troubles, it helps people reach mutual understanding, letting communicative memory slowly turn into cultural memory [9]. Typical examples include real-life stories like *Mortgage Slave*, workplace novels such as *Du Lala's Promotion*, and suspense stories with fictional elements like *Breaking Through the Clouds* and *The Seven Deadly Pillars*.

In actual writing, authors often make creative choices that match the changes in communicative memory, especially in terms of language style and narrative methods. Platforms put these works into categories like "serious drama" or "lighthearted". The former are realist works that seriously reflect

reality and express ideas, while the latter are "wish-fulfillment fiction" meant to help readers release pressure and satisfy their desire for pleasure in 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. The female protagonist is totally in charge of the emotions, getting double "wish-fulfillment" in both career and love from a female-focused angle.

Web literature starts as small-group memories, but it can quickly grow into broader cultural memory. There are two main reasons for that. First, the internet lets people communicate across different media, groups and places, so information spreads fast and a lot. Second, online communities are huge, giving people more chances to chat and share. In these close online networks, people's personal memories get shared and strengthened over and over. Eventually, this helps form shared cultural memory for everyone.

3.1.3. Futurist genre: utopian narratives of prospective cultural memory

People's imagination and hopes for the future are what gave birth to speculative fiction. Drawing on memories of real society, creators use their imagination to build all kinds of cyber worlds. These worlds are grounded in modern culture, combining traditional values and meeting what audiences expect from hero stories. They also go beyond real-life development, holding people's longing for the future and their wish to escape reality in this wider imaginary space.

There are mainly two kinds. One looks at the future in a linear timeline, focusing on national development or individual fate, and stretches the limits of time and space for human activities through fictional stories. Examples include sci-fi works like *Swallowed Star* and *The Genius Club*. The other takes "the future" as the basic background of its fictional world and builds utopian societies. We can sort this type by its worldview: infinite flow stories (such as *Ten Days to Die*), Cthulhu mythos works (like *Lord of the Mysteries*), and cyberpunk stories (for instance, *Learning to Slay Gods in a Mental Asylum*).

These worldviews combine folk and subcultural stuff. They're rooted in real-life memories, but also mix common group ideas with the authors' own creations. For example, *Lord of the Mysteries* uses 19th-century Victorian culture as its setting. It adds historical things like churches, labor movements, and industrial pollution. It also has steampunk style, with scenes full of gears, gas lamps, and smog. On top of that, it includes things online communities are familiar with, such as Cthulhu Mythos and the SCP Foundation. All these make the story richer and build a whole new fictional universe. 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.

Continuous symbolic interaction makes the construction of collective memory a lasting, dynamic process. Through regular community interactions, the vitality of finished works can be extended. As time goes on, high-intensity interaction turns some web literature works into classics. The characters, pairings, plots and worldviews in them become symbols, which attract new fan groups. This also creates a new way for web literature to spread: some readers first get to know the characters through derivative works, then look for the original work backwards. That's what we call the "derivative creation traffic diversion" phenomenon.

The influence of this symbolization doesn't just cross industries—like TV adaptations and merchandise production—it also crosses dimensions, realizing the transmission from online texts to real life. Take *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* for example. The plot where the protagonists go to Changbai Mountain to "bring someone home" became a classic through the spread of collective memory. It encourages readers to climb Changbai Mountain every year for a "commemorative date," which promotes local tourism. Fans think that climbing the mountain is not only a "promise" with the fictional characters, but also a real response to their collective memory.

3.2.3. Platform technology-intervention type

In the digital age, people don't just rely on their brains to store memories anymore—they use cloud storage instead. Platforms' comment and messaging features give readers a space to co-create, where they can share their own opinions and experiences. Individual comments pile up into memory fragments, and they get spread and strengthened when people like, comment on, or forward them. In this space, individual memories are built together and discussed, and once they get recognized and accepted, they form group emotional tendencies and stir up collective feelings. With the help of emotional mobilization and algorithm recommendations, the memory community keeps expanding. Through frequent interactions, communicative memory turns into stable digital memory. External users can easily join in, while internal members are really loyal and hard to leave.

It's worth noting that platforms interfere with the construction of collective memory to some extent through algorithms and interface design. The way individual memories spread is controlled by algorithms, and collective memory is shaped dynamically by data feedback. Personalized recommendations driven by big data make users' preferences more fixed, so the collective memory that forms naturally is controlled in a certain direction. Take the Tomato Novel app for example. The "Recommendation Ranking" on its homepage takes up nearly 40% of the screen, with big cover images and synopses that stand out. But the search bar is only less than 5% of the top space. This kind of interface design makes the visual appeal as strong as possible, directly affecting users' choices and strengthening the direction of their memories.

At the same time, the development of electronic media technology means that modern capitalist society has entered a kingdom of signs [13]. After capital gets involved, interaction data like tips and votes are recorded by algorithms in real time, turned into traceable digital memory tracks, and used as symbolic content to decide platform rankings. These behaviors not only define the trajectory of individual memories, but also influence the flow of collective memory through data aggregation. Rankings strengthen the group's emotional orientation, making users prefer popular works and bow to these symbolized "objects." On the other hand, high-quality works with low exposure often get overlooked because they have few collections, struggling to survive when their data is not good.

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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