

Research on the Social Functions of Silk Road Cultural Heritage: Cross-Border Tourism and the Reconstruction of National Memory

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of the continuous advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, cross-border tourism cooperation between Xinjiang, China and Kazakhstan has become an important link connecting the two countries. Based on the theories of "collective memory" and "cultural memory" in sociology, this paper explores how Silk Road cultural heritage realizes the reconstruction of contemporary national memory and exerts its multi-dimensional social functions through cross-border tourism practices. The research shows that cross-border tourism transforms static material heritage into dynamic memory narratives serving current social needs through mechanisms such as selective activation, narrative integration, emotional attachment, and cross-border dialogical negotiation. This process of memory reconstruction has effectively strengthened the sense of community for the Chinese nation internally, enhanced the cultural confidence and national identity of ethnic minorities in border areas; externally, it has consolidated the emotional foundation of the "China-Central Asia Community with a Shared Future", built an effective platform for people-to-people diplomacy, and laid a solid public opinion foundation for the sustainable development of bilateral relations. This paper not only provides a theoretical perspective for understanding the in-depth role of cultural heritage in cross-border governance, but also offers academic reference and reflection for the formulation of relevant policies.

Keywords: Silk Road, cultural heritage, cross-border tourism, national memory, social functions

1. Introduction

The Silk Road, a historical and cultural corridor spanning Eurasia, is renowned worldwide for its millennia-old commercial exchanges, civilizational dialogue, and religious dissemination. Entering the new era, the proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative has injected brand-new contemporary significance and strategic value into this ancient route. Xinjiang, located at the core of the Silk Road Economic Belt, and Kazakhstan, with their unique advantages of geographical adjacency, cross-border ethnic groups, and cultural homology, have become important frontiers for promoting policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds.

In this context, cross-border tourism centered on Silk Road cultural heritage has been increasingly heating up between China and Kazakhstan. Port cities such as Horgos and Almaty have long transcended their role as mere logistics hubs and evolved into vibrant stages for the interweaving of people and cultures. However, most existing academic research on this phenomenon remains within the paradigms of economics and tourism management, focusing on the driving effects of cross-border tourism on regional economic growth, industrial structure optimization, and infrastructure construction [1]. Another part of the research, from the perspective of cultural heritage protection and planning, focuses on the management, protection technologies, and sustainable development models of world heritage sites [2]. While these studies are undoubtedly important, a more fundamental sociological question arises: how do Silk Road cultural heritage and its cross-border tourism practices profoundly shape contemporary identity politics, memory production, and the maintenance of social order?

The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs profoundly pointed out in his pioneering theory of "collective memory" that memory is not a simple reproduction and storage of the past by individuals, but a process constructed by social frameworks and serving the current group identity and needs [3]. Building on this, the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann developed the theory of cultural memory, emphasizing the stabilization and transmission of a society's collective knowledge and self-identity through objective externalizations such as cultural relics, rituals, texts, and monuments [4]. The Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi in Kazakhstan and the Kizil Grottoes in Xinjiang are both carriers of "cultural memory" on the Silk Road. They are not silent relics but are repeatedly "awakened", "read", and "rewritten" in contemporary tourism practices.

This paper argues that China-Kazakhstan cross-border tourism can be regarded as an open "theater of memory" and aims to explore three core aspects: first, the internal mechanism of this theater, i.e., the specific ways in which it screens, processes, and reconstructs the national memory of the Silk Road; second, the key functions realized by this reconstructed narrative in contemporary Chinese and Kazakh societies; third, the core enlightenment of this process for deepening the understanding of the complexity of border governance, regional cooperation, and cultural identity.

2. Theoretical framework: the interweaving of memory, tourism, and society

To systematically answer the above questions, this paper constructs an analytical triangular framework centered on "memory-tourism-society".

2.1. Theoretical foundations of collective memory and cultural memory

The traditional view regards memory as a purely psychological activity, but Halbwachs' theory subverts this traditional cognition. He believes that memory is not a purely psychological activity but is deeply embedded in social frameworks. Specific social groups (such as families, religions, and classes) provide us with frameworks for memory, and it is these frameworks that shape the content, methods, and reasons for our memories. Therefore, memory is essentially a reconstruction based on the present, which is continuously reshaped according to our current concepts, interests, and expectations [5]. Assmann's "cultural memory" further extends people's attention to the form of memory. She argues that the continuity of cultural meaning is ensured through "solidified" objective externalizations such as writing, images, and ritualized repetition, and its core function is to stabilize a society's "symbolic meaning system" and "identity knowledge" [6]. The cultural heritage of the Silk Road can be seen as "solidified" memory carriers, which can be reawakened through the

"activated" ritual of cross-border tourism. In this process, these static historical traces are transformed into living media for constructing contemporary identity.

2.2. Tourism as a social field of memory practice

Tourism activities are far more than simple leisure consumption; they are themselves profound social and cultural practices [7]. In the context of heritage tourism, tourists' "gaze" is not passive reception but active search for meaning and construction of narratives [8]. Tourism practitioners, including governments, travel agencies, tour guides, and scenic spot managers, guide and shape this gaze through carefully designed tourism scripts, including route planning, scenic spot selection, commentary writing, and performance arrangements. This process is a typical social process of memory production and transmission. Tourism destinations package complex and diverse histories into a set of consumable and standardized "heritage" products, which in itself is a powerful act of memory selection and reconstruction. Therefore, the cross-border tourism field has become an excellent laboratory for observing how national memory is negotiated, competed, and reconstructed.

2.3. Theoretical perspective of social functions

From the perspective of structural functionalism, we can see that the existence and continuity of social phenomena often lie in their satisfaction of certain specific social needs [9]. Furthermore, memory reconstruction can realize its social functions. These functions can not only promote economic development and international friendship but also maintain the strengthening of internal cohesion, the shaping of national identity, and even the legitimacy of power structures. This paper will systematically analyze the multiple functions of this tourism-mediated memory reconstruction in areas such as border governance, national identity, and international relations.

3. Reconstruction of memory: narrative mechanisms and power practices in cross-border tourism

In the specific context of China-Kazakhstan cross-border tourism, the reconstruction of the national memory of the Silk Road is a highly structured process, profoundly marked by specific narrative logics and power practices, and mainly realized through the synergy of the following four mechanisms.

3.1. Selective activation: extracting themes of "sharing" and "harmony" from complex history

We must recognize the multifaceted nature of history. History presents not only a single aspect but also more internal contradictions and tensions. For the long course of the Silk Road, there were not only envoys of peaceful exchanges but also wars, conflicts, and frictions. However, in the narrative discourse of contemporary China-Kazakhstan cross-border tourism, both sides choose to display the peaceful and friendly aspects of history. For example, in the commentary part of cross-border tourism projects, the events focused on are mostly the wisdom and courage of merchants as messengers of civilization, or the spirit and perseverance of Xuanzang during his western pilgrimage. The prosperity brought by the circulation of silk, spices, porcelain, and gems in commercial exchanges is also emphasized. On the contrary, memories that may arouse historical estrangement and emotional discomfort between nation-states are glossed over. For instance, the wars between the Han Dynasty and the Xiongnu, and small-scale frictions between oasis regimes, are often downplayed in commentaries and ultimately interpreted as "growing pains necessary for

cultural integration", shifting the focus to how they objectively promoted the development of world civilization. This model of "selective" memory activation has its deep logic. In the vastness of history, how we extract the past determines how we view the past in the present. The selectively extracted past is a specific past, a "shared" past, and a "harmonious" past. The purpose of this is to serve the present; a positive past is conducive to political mutual trust and economic cooperation between China and Kazakhstan. It endows history with a more pure character, thereby providing a profound historical legitimacy and emotional justification for the Belt and Road cooperation in the new era.

3.2. Narrative integration: from spatial fragments to a linear "epic journey"

Silk Road cultural heritage is highly fragmented in physical space, scattered as "points" across vast deserts, grasslands, and mountains—such as isolated beacon towers, abandoned ancient city ruins, and grotto complexes. These relics are inherently silent, with vague and ambiguous meanings. One of the core tasks of cross-border tourism is to connect these spatial fragments into a logically coherent and meaning-clear linear epic journey through careful narrative integration. The design of tourism routes is the core embodiment of this mechanism. Thematic routes such as the Transnational Tour of Tianshan Corridor World Heritage, the Journey in Search of Xuanzang's Footsteps, or the Grassland Silk Road Adventure are not only transportation path plans but also the unfolding paths of memory narratives. Tour guides' commentaries, exquisitely printed travel brochures, explanatory signs at heritage sites, and even the sign system along the way together form a powerful narrative device, weaving isolated scenic spots into a grand story about exploration, exchange, faith, and prosperity. For example, a tourist departing from Xi'an, passing through Dunhuang, Turpan, Urumqi, exiting the country through the Horgos Port, then traveling to Almaty, Taraz, and finally reaching Samarkand. Each heritage site experienced along the way is assigned a specific role in this grand narrative: Dunhuang is the "Palace of Art", the ancient city of Gaochang is the "Junction of Civilizations", Horgos is the "Witness of Ancient and Modern Ports", and the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi is the "Holy Land of Islamic Culture". Tourists no longer consume individual scenic spots but the entire recounted "Silk Road myth". This process effectively integrates originally fragmented, vague, and even forgotten local memories into a unified, highly attractive, and appealing national and even world-class narrative framework.

3.3. Emotional attachment: from knowledge acquisition to embodied and ritualized experience

The stability and communication effectiveness of memory largely depend on the strength of its connection with individual emotions. Pure knowledge indoctrination is often limited in effect, and one of the greatest advantages of cross-border tourism is its ability to transform cold historical knowledge into vivid, personalized emotional memories through rich embodied experiences. This emotional attachment is reflected at multiple levels. First, sensory immersion. Tourists gaze at the peeling colors of millennium-old murals in the Kizil Grottoes, touch the weathered soil among the ruins of the ancient city of Jiaohe, listen to traditional dombra playing on the grasslands of Kazakhstan, and taste authentic pilaf and naan at border markets. History becomes tangible and perceptible through these visual, tactile, auditory, and gustatory channels, leaving a deep impression on tourists' cognition and emotions. Second, ritualized participation. Many tourism projects are designed with a strong sense of ritual. For example, when visiting the national border, tourism projects include photo opportunities of "crossing the national border", making the visit more ritualistic and memorable, leaving a deeper impression in future recollections; in addition, some

tourism projects offer simulated ancient caravan departure ceremonies, hands-on production of ethnic minority pottery or embroidery, and the opportunity to wear traditional costumes of ethnic minorities. These interactive projects create a strong atmosphere and performative tension for tourists' visits. Tourists are no longer bystanders of history but temporary participants. It is this immersive identity transformation that can stimulate deep emotional resonance and vivid cultural imagination among tourists. Third, pilgrimage and pursuit. For tourists who come with admiration, they may have specific cultural or academic backgrounds, and retracing the Silk Road is itself a cultural pilgrimage. They may follow in the footsteps of predecessors such as Xuanzang or Marco Polo, endowing this act with sacred emotions, thereby greatly deepening their spiritual identification with the reconstructed Silk Road memory narrative. Such emotional memory is far more profound and lasting than words in books. It not only effectively integrates the reconstructed Silk Road narrative into tourists' personal cognitive systems but also further realizes its social education function.

3.4. Cross-border dialogical negotiation: from single narrative to a public sphere of memory

The uniqueness of cross-border tourism lies in its creation of a cross-cultural field for memory dialogue. When Chinese tourists set foot on Kazakh soil and hear local guides' potentially different perspectives on the same historical events—such as the period of the Mongol Empire or the history of the Zunghar Khanate in the Qing Dynasty—their inherent national memory formed based on their own educational system will be impacted and challenged. Conversely, Kazakh tourists will face similar cognitive adjustments when visiting museums and heritage sites in Xinjiang. This process transforms memory reconstruction from a one-way top-down indoctrination within a single country into a dynamic process of constant fine-tuning and negotiation through transnational interaction. Tourists' discussions during trips, sharing on social media, and exchanges with local residents all constitute part of this negotiation. It makes both sides aware of the relativity and constructiveness of national memory. Although official grand narratives still dominate, this cross-cultural dialogue undoubtedly opens up potential space for the formation of a more inclusive intersectional memory or shared memory that can reflect the complexity of history. It suggests that what is ultimately widely accepted may not be an absolutely "true" past, but a "story" that can be mutually understood and accepted by both sides.

4. Realization of social functions: current effects and in-depth implications of memory reconstruction

The Silk Road memory reconstructed through the above mechanisms is no longer a pile of old papers sealed in historical archives but has been transformed into cultural capital and social resources that can generate practical effects, realizing its profound social functions in multiple dimensions.

4.1. Internal functions: strengthening national identity and integrating border societies

First, forging a sense of community for the Chinese nation is one of the core internal functions of memory reconstruction. By deeply embedding the history of Xinjiang into the glorious shared narrative of the "Silk Road" for the entire Chinese nation, national-level historical writing effectively demonstrates that Xinjiang has been a key channel for extensive exchanges and cooperation between Chinese civilization and the world since ancient times, and an indispensable

part of the diverse and integrated pattern of Chinese civilization [10]. This narrative elevates the history of border areas from local history to an important part of national and even world history, providing a rich historical and cultural heritage and emotional appeal beyond political preaching for patriotic education and the forging of national identity.

Second, enhancing the cultural confidence and national identity of ethnic minorities. For the indigenous ethnic groups in Xinjiang such as the Kazakhs and Uyghurs, the reconstruction of Silk Road memory brings a dual identity effect. First, witnessing their own ethnic music, folk epics, handicrafts, and various festival customs being displayed, respected, and appreciated and experienced by tourists at home and abroad, they will naturally feel a strong sense of cultural pride and identity. Subsequently, this emotion derived from their own ethnicity is organically integrated into the grand narrative of the Chinese nation. They gradually realize that their own culture is not isolated but an indispensable star in the brilliant starry sky of Chinese civilization. It is this cognition that significantly enhances their centripetal force and sense of belonging to the unified multi-ethnic country. This process plays an irreplaceable role in social integration in alleviating potential identity tensions and promoting long-term harmony and stability in border societies.

Third, promoting the stability and development of border areas. The identity-strengthening effect brought by memory reconstruction, combined with the direct economic benefits of tourism, forms a joint force for promoting border stability. Tourism development creates employment opportunities, increases local fiscal revenue, and improves people's livelihood. The positive identity brought by memory reconstruction enhances social cohesion and reduces the risk of social instability. A border area that achieves economic development, maintains social harmony, and has people with a high degree of national identity is naturally stable and secure.

4.2. External functions: building a regional community and optimizing national image

First, constructing the emotional and cultural foundation of the "China-Central Asia Community with a Shared Future". One of the core outputs of the reconstruction of Silk Road memory is the shared historical perception that "we once jointly created glory, and we are destined to move towards the future together". This provides a profound emotional bond and cultural resource for building a future-oriented "China-Central Asia Community with a Shared Future" beyond realistic geopolitical games and pure economic interest calculations. It subtly redefines the Belt and Road Initiative from a modern economic plan sometimes perceived as "China-led" to a "common rejuvenation" plan based on shared historical heritage. This discursive transformation has significantly reduced the psychological vigilance of social publics in countries along the route, especially Kazakhstan, and increased their acceptance of the cooperation initiative.

Second, an effective platform for conducting flexible people-to-people diplomacy and optimizing national image. Tourism is the most direct and emotional way of communication between people. When citizens of the two countries develop a sense of cultural affinity based on shared Silk Road memories, it can effectively dispel negative stereotypes formed due to history, ideology, or media bias. The civilized literacy, consumption capacity, and respect for Kazakh culture displayed by Chinese tourists, along with the simple folk customs, rich cultural heritage, and hospitality of Kazakhstan, are mutually displayed through the window of tourism, collectively shaping a positive, friendly, and favorable national image. This bottom-up improvement of public opinion is an indispensable supplement and support for intergovernmental diplomatic relations, and can create a more favorable social atmosphere for resolving complex political and economic issues.

Third, leading the construction of regional cultural discourse power. China's narrative on the Silk Road is not merely participation but a strategic leadership. China has always maintained a peaceful,

open, inclusive, and cooperative attitude. Instead of treating history with a single narrative framework, China transcends its historical limitations and takes the initiative to shape the image of a civilized power advocating peace, openness, and cooperation, fundamentally enhancing the country's cultural soft power and international discourse power, and laying a solid foundation for long-term strategic layout.

5. Discussion and reflection: tensions and limitations in memory reconstruction

While affirming the positive impacts of the reconstruction of Silk Road memory, we must also recognize the contradictions and risks it contains. This requires us to adopt a critical perspective to examine the inherent tensions and potential risks, thereby avoiding blind optimism.

First, the issue of memory competition and narrative hegemony. Although China and Kazakhstan have reached a consensus on cooperating to build the "Silk Road" brand, there are inevitable competitions and even conflicts in the interpretation of specific historical events and the ownership of cultural symbols. For example, both sides may show different tendencies to claim historical figures or cultural heritage of certain cross-border ethnic groups. Moreover, the official-led grand national narrative may suppress local and ethnic micro-narratives, leading to a homogenized and flattened memory that loses the complex texture that history should possess.

Second, there is a potential rift between official narratives and folk memories. The reconstructed narratives led by the state are not always fully consistent with the folk memories maintained by local ethnic groups through oral history and family legends. When the staged reality presented by tourism development conflicts with the memory versions passed down orally by local people, it is inevitable to arouse a sense of alienation or resistance within the community.

Third, the crisis of heritage hollowing-out lurking under the wave of commercialization. Excessive tourism development is prone to triggering the commercialization and "Disneyization" of memory. To cater to tourists' curiosity, history may be reduced to superficial symbols, stereotypes, and entertaining performances, with its underlying historical depth, memories of suffering, and complex connotations emptied. Ultimately, "heritage" becomes a purely profit-making tool, losing the solemnity and educational function it should have as a carrier of cultural memory.

Finally, the functionalist perspective has its limitations. Overemphasizing the social integration function of memory reconstruction may make us overlook the potential power inequalities and structural contradictions hidden within it. It should be noted that memory reconstruction is always intertwined with power operations. We must deeply ask: who is leading the reconstruction process? Which memories are highlighted and which are obscured? While promoting social integration, is this reconstruction also quietly reshaping a certain power structure?

6. Conclusion

The practice of cross-border tourism between Xinjiang, China and Kazakhstan is rewriting the contemporary significance of the Silk Road. This ancient route spanning thousands of years is no longer merely a collection of historical relics but a dialogue across time and space, a process that endows cultural relics and sites with new life. Focusing on the in-depth interaction between China-Kazakhstan cross-border tourism and Silk Road culture, this paper aims to reveal the complex operational mechanisms within it. The author believes that the protection and tourism development of cultural heritage are far more than cultural inheritance or economic benefits; they are a highly complex social practice. Its in-depth connotation lies in the construction of social identity and the integration of public order. The historical memory of the Silk Road has transformed from static

material remains into dynamic social resources and cultural capital. This crucial transformation is achieved through the social device of cross-border tourism. It completes the reshaping of memory through dynamic processes such as selective activation, narrative integration, emotional implantation, and cross-border dialogue.

This memory reconstruction mechanism has demonstrated significant social effectiveness in two dimensions: internal integration and external interaction. Internally, it has enhanced the cohesion of the Chinese nation community, improved the sense of identity and belonging of ethnic minorities in border areas, and provided cultural support for the long-term stability and coordinated development of border areas; externally, it has built the emotional foundation for regional community awareness and optimized the national image through people-to-people exchanges, thereby serving the country's long-term strategic layout.

In international communication, the social functions of China-Kazakhstan Silk Road cross-border tourism also show profound significance. Looking forward, with a clear understanding of the powerful social functions of cross-border tourism, both sides should pay more attention to tourism development and management, incorporating the inclusiveness, dialogicality, and critical reflection of narratives into their considerations. An ideal memory reconstruction is not a monologue of power by one party, but an effort to create a public sphere where multiple voices can participate in negotiation. The memory of the Silk Road not only serves the grand goals of politics and economy but also promotes sincere understanding, spiritual resonance, and civilizational mutual learning between people of different ethnic groups and countries. This is perhaps the most precious mission that this ancient route can carry in the 21st century.

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