

From Lived Tradition to Visual Memory: Film, Cultural Memory, and Endangered Ethnic Cultures

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Abstract. In the context of modernization, many ethnic minority cultures face disruptions in lived cultural transmission. As everyday practices weaken, film increasingly functions as a key medium through which cultural memory is preserved and circulated. Drawing on Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory and recent memory studies, this paper examines how film participates in shaping Mongolian minority cultural memory. The study argues that film is not a neutral recording device, but a structured visual system that selects and reorganizes cultural practices through framing, sequencing, and aesthetic emphasis. Through this visual logic, certain practices are transformed into recognizable memory-images, while others remain marginal. As a result, film simultaneously stabilizes cultural visibility and reshapes cultural meaning.

Keywords: Cultural Memory, Visual Logic, Mongolian Minority Film

1. Introduction

In the context of rapid modernization and globalization, many ethnic minority cultures around the world are facing severe disruptions in cultural continuity. Traditional ways of life, oral traditions, ritual practices, and indigenous knowledge systems are increasingly fragmented by social transformation, migration, and technological change. As everyday cultural practices weaken or disappear from their original social contexts, cultural transmission is no longer sustained through lived participation. This loss often results in irreversible breaks in intergenerational knowledge, the erosion of cultural coherence, and the gradual disappearance of ways of life that cannot be fully recovered once they cease to function in practice.

Within this broader condition of cultural disruption, Mongolian culture represents a particularly significant case. Historically grounded in nomadic pastoralism, ecological adaptation, and oral transmission, Mongolian cultural practices have depended on mobility, seasonal rhythms, and sustained interaction with grassland environments. However, as patterns of settlement, labor, and social organization have been reshaped by modernization, many practices that once structured everyday life have become increasingly difficult to maintain in their original forms. Under these circumstances, the continuity of Mongolian cultural transmission faces growing pressure, as traditional knowledge is separated from the social and environmental conditions that once sustained it.

As lived cultural practices weaken, visual media—especially film and documentary—have come to play an increasingly prominent role in making Mongolian culture visible. For audiences who have little direct contact with grassland communities, cinematic images often serve as the primary interface through which Mongolian cultural life is encountered. Film thus becomes not merely a supplementary record, but a central medium through which cultural practices, landscapes, and ways of life are rendered intelligible beyond their original contexts.

In this context, cultural memory theory provides a useful conceptual framework. Cultural memory refers to the ways in which shared understandings of the past are stabilized and transmitted through material and symbolic media, including images, texts, and rituals. In contemporary society, film has become a particularly influential medium of cultural memory, capable of transforming practices once embedded in daily life into durable visual records.

From this perspective, cinematic representations of Mongolian culture are not merely acts of preservation, but processes through which cultural experience is mediated and reorganized. Through visual representation, cultural practices—such as ritual performance, ecological relations, and material traditions—are detached from their original social contexts and restructured within filmic frameworks. For cultures facing the erosion of lived transmission, these mediated forms play an increasingly central role in how cultural knowledge survives and circulates. Examining Mongolian film through this lens clarifies the active role of visual media in conditions of cultural discontinuity, positioning film not only as a record of tradition but as a force that shapes the ongoing construction of cultural memory.

2. Cultural memory and film

2.1. Cultural memory

The concept of cultural memory was developed to explain how societies sustain shared understandings of the past beyond individual experience and lived participation. Jan Assmann conceptualizes cultural memory as a form of memory that is externalized and stabilized through symbolic forms, enabling meanings of the past to be preserved across time and generations [1]. This theoretical framework responds to conditions in which direct transmission of cultural knowledge is weakened, and cultural continuity must be maintained through institutionalized and symbolic structures rather than everyday practice.

Assmann defines cultural memory as memory that is objectified and stored in symbolic carriers such as texts, rituals, monuments, and other culturally produced forms [1]. These symbolic forms do not possess memory in themselves, but function as reminders that activate memory through social engagement. Recent scholarship has further developed this definition by emphasizing the mediating role of cultural forms. Erll argues that cultural memory operates through stable symbolic structures that organize historical understanding, rather than through the preservation of factual past events. From this perspective, memory is shaped by representational forms that allow the past to remain meaningful even when its original social context has changed [2].

A central characteristic of cultural memory in Assmann's theory is its institutional nature. Cultural memory is not sustained spontaneously, but is supported by organized systems of preservation, interpretation, and transmission, including educational frameworks, cultural canons, and commemorative practices [1]. Building on this idea, De Cesari and Rigney emphasize that cultural memory is produced and regulated through institutional and transnational frameworks that structure how the past is selected, circulated, and interpreted in contemporary societies. Memory, in this

sense, is not merely inherited but actively shaped by cultural systems that authorize certain narratives while marginalizing others [3].

Another key aspect of Assmann's theory is the selective character of cultural memory. Because cultural memory is institutionally structured, it necessarily involves processes of selection, emphasizing certain meanings of the past while allowing others to fade [1]. Recent studies further highlight that this selectivity is dynamic rather than fixed. Hoskins argues that cultural memory is continuously reshaped through changing media environments, where new forms of mediation alter which elements of the past remain visible and meaningful. This process allows cultural memory to maintain a degree of stability while remaining open to reinterpretation and transformation over time [4].

Together, these studies demonstrate that cultural memory functions as an institutionalized and symbolic system that sustains cultural continuity beyond lived experience. By externalizing memory into durable cultural forms and embedding it within evolving social frameworks, cultural memory structures how societies remember, interpret, and transmit meanings of the past across generations.

2.2. Film as a media of cultural memory

Building on the theoretical framework of cultural memory, scholars increasingly recognize media as crucial carriers through which cultural memory is externalized and circulated in modern societies. As Assmann argues, cultural memory depends on symbolic forms that allow meanings of the past to be stabilized beyond lived participation [1]. In contemporary contexts, film has emerged as one of the most influential media through which this process of externalization operates.

As a reproducible and recordable medium, film transforms cultural practices, gestures, and environments into stable audiovisual forms. Once externalized through film, cultural experience no longer depends on direct presence or participation, but becomes accessible across different temporal and spatial contexts. Recent memory studies emphasize that film plays a central role in enabling cultural memory to travel across time and space. Erll conceptualizes this process as "travelling memory," arguing that film allows cultural meanings to circulate beyond their original social settings while remaining recognizable through shared visual codes [2]. In this sense, film functions as a powerful medium of cultural memory by converting lived practices into mediated representations that can be preserved, revisited, and reinterpreted.

However, contemporary scholars also stress that film does not function as a neutral container of memory. Hoskins argues that mediated memory is shaped by the logic of the medium itself, meaning that audiovisual representation actively reorganizes the past rather than simply storing it. Through narrative structure, visual framing, and aesthetic repetition, film reshapes cultural material into forms that are compatible with contemporary modes of perception and circulation [4]. Similarly, Reading highlights that visual media privilege certain images, temporalities, and emotional registers, thereby influencing which aspects of the past become dominant within cultural memory [5].

This mediating role of film becomes particularly significant in contexts where traditional modes of cultural transmission are weakened. When rituals, oral practices, and everyday participation can no longer sustain cultural continuity, film offers an alternative means through which cultural memory can be preserved and communicated. At the same time, recent studies caution that this process inevitably transforms cultural practices by detaching them from their original social functions and re-embedding them within representational systems shaped by cinematic conventions [3].

Despite growing recognition of film's importance in cultural memory, existing research has tended to focus on narrative circulation, ethical representation, or media platforms, while paying

relatively limited attention to the visual logic through which cultural elements are selected, organized, and stabilized in cinematic form. This gap suggests the need for closer analysis of how film's visual logic structures cultural visibility, shaping which cultural elements are preserved as visual memory and how they are transformed in the process. Addressing this gap provides the basis for the following chapters, which examine the visual organization of cultural memory through film.

3. Visualizing cultural memory

3.1. Visual logic of film and the selection of cultural elements

Film does not document lived reality in its entirety; rather, its visual logic—framing, duration, sequencing, and repetition—structures what can be made visible and memorable on screen. From the perspective of cultural memory, this process of selection is crucial, as memory is sustained not through exhaustive representation but through elements that can be stabilized and circulated via media forms [1]. Film's visual logic therefore operates as a filter that determines which elements of lived experience are transformed into enduring memory images.

This selective logic is clearly observable in films and documentaries depicting Mongolian minority life in Inner Mongolia. In cinematic works such as *The Black Steed*, expansive grassland landscapes are repeatedly foregrounded through wide shots and extended takes [6]. These images do not merely situate the narrative geographically; they function as visual anchors that immediately establish a recognizable spatial imagination of the Mongolian grassland. By contrast, less visually expressive aspects of everyday life—such as administrative labor, routine domestic coordination, or gradual social negotiation—are largely absent. This suggests that selection is guided less by the actual structure of lived practice than by the capacity of certain elements to be rendered legible and evocative within cinematic form.

Erll's discussion of visual memory, drawing on Aby Warburg's concept of *Pathosformeln*, provides a useful framework for understanding this tendency. Warburg argues that certain visual motifs possess stored "mnemic energy," allowing them to be reactivated across different historical and cultural contexts [7,8]. In *The Black Steed* and in various documentary representations of Mongolian pastoral life, motifs such as horses in motion, seasonal migration, and human–animal interaction recur because they condense complex lifeworld into expressive visual patterns. These motifs are not selected simply because they are culturally significant, but because they can function as powerful carriers of memory for audiences unfamiliar with the lived context.

Narrative structure further shapes the selection of cultural elements. In *The Black Steed*, scenes involving herding and movement across the grassland are often positioned at key narrative moments—introductions, transitions, or points of emotional resolution—where they acquire symbolic weight. Similar patterns can be observed in documentary portrayals inspired by Inner Mongolian life, including screen adaptations related to *The Right Bank of the Argun River*, where migration and landscape are repeatedly used to mark generational change and historical transition. Cultural practices are thus selected not for ethnographic completeness, but for their narrative utility within cinematic storytelling. This reinforces Erll's argument that mediated memory reorganizes experience into coherent narrative forms rather than preserving it in its original complexity [8].

An important consequence of this visual logic is omission. Film's temporal and visual economy requires compression, leading to the exclusion of practices that are repetitive, slow, or visually understated. In representations of Mongolian minority life, long-term social processes—such as shifts in land use policy or intergenerational negotiation—are rarely visualized directly. Instead, they are implied through visual contrasts or symbolic scenes, such as departures across open landscapes.

My argument is that this omission does not simply distort cultural memory, but actively restructures it: film preserves cultural visibility by condensing complex practices into stable visual forms, while simultaneously simplifying the internal diversity of lived experience.

In this sense, the selection of cultural elements in Inner Mongolian minority films directly responds to the question raised in Section 2.2. Film mediates cultural memory not only by recording cultural practices, but by reorganizing them according to visual logic. What becomes memorable is shaped by what can be framed, repeated, and symbolically condensed within cinematic form. Film thus participates in cultural preservation while simultaneously redefining how cultural life is remembered and understood.

3.2. From cultural practice to symbol

To understand how cultural practices are transformed into symbols in film, a semiotic approach is essential. Semiotics allows us to examine how meaning is produced not only through what is shown, but through how it is visually and narratively encoded. Following Barthes' model, visual representation operates on two levels: denotation, which refers to the literal depiction of an action or object, and connotation, which refers to the cultural meanings generated through cinematic form, repetition, and contextual framing [8]. This distinction is crucial for answering the question raised in Section 2.2: how film's visual logic shapes the transformation of lived practice into mediated cultural memory.

In film, cultural practices initially appear at the level of denotation as observable actions—such as herding, domestic labor, or ritual performance. However, cinematic techniques actively reorganize these actions into meaningful signs. For instance, the use of slow motion does not merely extend time, but detaches an action from its practical function, encouraging the viewer to perceive it as significant rather than routine. A herding movement shown in slow motion is no longer read simply as labor, but as an expression of endurance or continuity. Similarly, close-up shots isolate specific gestures, objects, or bodily movements from their broader context, shifting attention away from collective process toward symbolic detail. Through close-ups, practices are fragmented and abstracted, enabling individual elements to stand in for broader cultural meanings.

Sound and narrative placement further intensify this symbolic transformation. Musical accompaniment introduces an emotional register that guides interpretation, framing certain practices as solemn, fragile, or timeless. Meanwhile, narrative positioning—such as placing a cultural practice at the beginning or end of a film—assigns it structural importance. Practices shown at moments of transition often come to symbolize continuity or loss, rather than everyday repetition. Through these techniques, film selects and elevates certain practices, making them suitable for circulation as cultural memory, while others remain visually and narratively marginal.

Over repeated appearances, these visually emphasized practices begin to function symbolically. As Erl1 notes, cultural symbols persist when they can be reactivated across contexts, releasing stored "mnemic energy" that links past experience to present interpretation [8]. Film's visual logic enables this reactivation by stabilizing practices into recognizable motifs that audiences learn to interpret in consistent ways. What is remembered, therefore, is not the practice in its lived complexity, but its symbolic condensation.

This process of symbolization necessarily involves abstraction. Once detached from their original social and functional contexts, practices are no longer understood primarily as lived activities, but as visual signs within a representational system. Warburg's insight into the survival of images helps explain this transformation: symbols endure because they condense complex cultural experiences into expressive visual forms that can be transmitted and reinterpreted over time [7,8]. Film

accelerates this process through repetition and circulation, teaching audiences how to "read" specific practices as carriers of meaning.

From the perspective of cultural memory, this symbolic transformation is double-edged. On the one hand, symbolization allows practices to survive beyond lived transmission by embedding them within durable visual memory. On the other hand, the abstraction required for symbolic clarity reshapes meaning, prioritizing interpretability and visual coherence over contextual depth. This directly addresses the concern raised in Section 2.2: film does not simply preserve cultural memory, but reorganizes it through visual logic, balancing preservation with reconfiguration [1].

4. The boundary between cultural preservation and reconfiguration

4.1. Film as cultural preservation

From the perspective of cultural memory, preservation does not mean the complete retention of cultural practices in their original form. Rather, it refers to the stabilization of shared meanings that can endure beyond lived participation and be reactivated across time. Assmann emphasizes that cultural memory depends on durable symbolic forms that are externalized from individual consciousness and preserved through material and institutional carriers [1]. Preservation, in this sense, is less about fidelity to lived practice than about sustaining recognizable reference points that allow memory to persist when direct transmission weakens.

Importantly, film contributes to cultural preservation through mediation rather than direct replication. Cultural memory research stresses that memory survives not as unstructured experience, but through narrative and representational forms that organize and make experience communicable [8]. Film preserves cultural memory by selecting, framing, and sequencing cultural elements into coherent audiovisual forms that can be perceived, remembered, and shared. In this sense, preservation does not depend on exhaustive documentation of cultural life, but on whether cinematic representation succeeds in stabilizing meanings that audiences can repeatedly recognize and recall. Film thus operates as a mnemonic structure, transforming dispersed practices into visually coherent reference points.

Documentary film provides a particularly clear example of this preservative function. Studies of documentary memory demonstrate that film participates in cultural preservation by organizing testimonies, experiences, and practices into publicly accessible narratives that shape collective understanding of the past (e.g., *Remembering Perpetrators through Documentary*, 2022). Although such research often focuses on political or historical trauma, the underlying mechanism extends to cultural contexts: documentary film preserves by gathering fragmented experiences and reassembling them into shared interpretive frameworks. Through this process, cultural practices that might otherwise remain localized or transient gain visibility, continuity, and public presence.

Preservation through film must also be understood within contemporary media environments characterized by repetition and circulation. Research on mediated memory in digital and audiovisual cultures emphasizes that preservation increasingly occurs through accumulation rather than linear transmission (*Cultural Memory Studies: Mediation, Narration*, 2021). Once cultural materials enter audiovisual circulation, their durability depends on repeated viewing, institutional reuse, and ongoing reference. Film contributes to cultural preservation precisely by enabling such repetition: images can be replayed, excerpted, taught, archived, and recontextualized, allowing cultural memory to persist even as the social conditions that produced those practices continue to change.

At the same time, preservation through film is never neutral. While film succeeds in maintaining cultural visibility and stabilizing symbolic reference points, it does so by transforming practices into

mediated representations. The very processes that enable preservation—selection, framing, repetition—also reshape how practices are understood. Film-based preservation therefore sustains cultural memory at the level of visibility and recognizability, while subtly altering the relationship between practice and meaning. Cultural preservation through film should thus be understood as a mediated and structured process, one that secures continuity without guaranteeing completeness or contextual integrity.

4.2. Reconfiguration through visualization

If film contributes to cultural preservation, it simultaneously participates in cultural reconfiguration. As discussed in Section 3, cinematic representation operates through framing, sequencing, and symbolic condensation. These strategies do not simply transmit cultural practices; they reshape how those practices are perceived and remembered. Film therefore cannot be understood as a neutral recording device. It is a structured visual system that inevitably transforms what it represents.

In *The Black Steed*, this process is clearly visible in the repeated image of the horse running across the grassland. At the level of denotation (signifier), the film presents a concrete visual object: a horse in motion within an open landscape. However, through cinematic treatment, this image acquires connotative meaning (signified). The wide framing isolates the horse against an expansive horizon, visually minimizing social complexity and foregrounding spatial vastness. Slow-paced editing and extended takes detach the movement from immediate labor function. As a result, the signifier—the horse in motion—comes to signify freedom, continuity, nomadic tradition, and emotional endurance.

This transformation is not accidental. It emerges from the logic of the medium itself. As Hoskins argues, memory in audiovisual environments is shaped by the medium's structuring principles [4]. Film reorganizes lived experience into coherent and emotionally legible forms. In *The Black Steed*, the practical realities of pastoral labor—economic negotiation, policy shifts, or material hardship—are largely absent from the frame. What remains is a stabilized visual emblem. The grassland becomes a signifier of identity; movement becomes a signifier of tradition. Through repetition, these images solidify into recognizable memory-images.

Reading similarly notes that visual media privilege certain emotional registers [5]. In this case, aesthetic emphasis on openness, rhythm, and duration amplifies timelessness while marginalizing social tension. Reconfiguration therefore operates structurally: what is visually powerful becomes culturally central.

This shift from practice to symbol raises ethical questions. Because film selects particular signifiers and stabilizes their signified meanings, it exercises power over cultural visibility. Who determines that the horse should represent Mongolian life? For whom is this image legible? What dimensions of lived experience remain outside the frame? As De Cesari and Rigney argue, cultural memory is shaped within institutional frameworks that authorize certain narratives [3]. Film participates in this authorization by defining which images stand for culture.

The ethical issue, therefore, is not whether film reconfigures culture—it inevitably does—but how this reconfiguration is acknowledged. Ethical responsibility lies in recognizing that the signifier does not exhaust the signified. The horse in motion may symbolize continuity, but it cannot fully represent the complexity of pastoral life. Reflexive filmmaking requires awareness of this gap between image and lived reality.

Ultimately, film produces a double effect. In *The Black Steed*, the horse as signifier sustains cultural visibility by providing a durable and circulating memory-image. At the same time, its symbolic condensation narrows cultural meaning into a legible emblem. Film thus operates at the

boundary between preservation and reconfiguration: it secures continuity by stabilizing signs, while simultaneously reshaping the cultural material those signs are meant to preserve.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined how film participates in the construction of cultural memory in the context of Mongolian minority representation. Drawing on Assmann's theory of cultural memory and subsequent memory studies, it has argued that film functions as a powerful medium of externalization, enabling cultural practices to be stabilized and circulated beyond lived participation.

However, film does not simply preserve culture as it exists. Through its visual logic—framing, sequencing, aesthetic emphasis, and symbolic condensation—film selects certain cultural elements and reorganizes them into coherent memory-images. These images allow cultural memory to endure, but they also transform practices from functional activities into symbolic representations.

The analysis of Mongolian films demonstrates that preservation and reconfiguration are not opposing processes, but interconnected dimensions of cinematic mediation. Film sustains cultural visibility by stabilizing recognizable visual forms, yet this stabilization inevitably abstracts and restructures lived complexity. Recognizing this dual function clarifies the role of visual media in conditions of cultural discontinuity.

Rather than viewing film as either an authentic guardian of tradition or a force of distortion, this study suggests that film should be understood as a mediating structure that shapes how cultural memory is constructed, circulated, and interpreted. In doing so, it highlights the importance of critically examining the visual logic and representational choices that influence which cultural elements become enduring memory-images and how they are understood across time.

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