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The Transformation of Family Memory into Public Cultural Memory: A Case Study of Liang Qichao's Descendants

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Abstract. The transformation of private family memory into public cultural memory is a crucial issue in cultural heritage research. Nevertheless, current studies grounded in cultural memory theory primarily concentrate on macro-level national collective memory, while overlooking the unique function of family units. Specifically, the pivotal role of celebrity descendants in facilitating this memory transformation has not been sufficiently examined, creating a distinct theoretical research gap. Against this context, this study aims to fill such gaps by exploring the mechanism behind the publicisation of family memory, with the intergenerational inheritance and dissemination of Liang Qichao's spiritual legacy by his descendants as the research subject. Based on Assmann's cultural memory theory, this paper establishes a "family memory-public memory" analytical framework and adopts a five-dimensional model covering time, media, function, power and construction. It systematically analyses how Liang Qichao's spirit evolves from private communicative memory to standardised public cultural memory through descendants' participation. The research reveals that, thanks to their dual private-public identity, Liang's descendants serve as both guardians of family heritage and constructors of public memory. Via textual, practical and spatial carriers, and amid multi-party memory negotiation and contemporary contextual reshaping, they effectively advance the publicity of ancestral spiritual heritage. This research expands the micro-family application of cultural memory theory and provides an innovative perspective for interpreting the social value of celebrity cultural inheritance.

Keywords: cultural memory, family memory, public memory, Liang Qichao, cultural memory theory

1. Introduction

Within modern cultural scholarship, memory studies have evolved into a vital analytical paradigm for unpacking cultural heritage and collective group identity. From the 1980s onwards, Jan and Aleida Assmann spearheaded a shift in memory research, shifting its scope away from individual psychological processes towards broader social and cultural dimensions [1]. Even so, existing literature largely overlooks family memory as a research subject, particularly the distinctive function of celebrity descendants in the public conversion of private familial memory. Possessing a dual identity as both custodians of household heritage and participants in public spheres, celebrity descendants act as irreplaceable intermediaries who disseminate their ancestral spiritual legacies [2].

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Drawing on the theoretical framework of cultural memory, this paper selects Liang Qichao's descendants as a representative case study. It investigates how such descendants translate intimate family memory into widely recognised public cultural memory, utilising a five-dimensional structural model to dissect the underlying mechanisms of this transformation systematically. This research delivers two key contributions: it extends cultural memory theory to the micro familial sphere, and offers an innovative lens to interpret contemporary inheritance practices surrounding celebrity cultural legacies.

2. Cultural memory theory and the analytical framework of family memory-public memory

2.1. Basic connotations of Assmann's cultural memory theory

Jan Assmann's cultural memory theory originates from the notion of collective memory proposed by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs [3]. Challenging individualistic readings of human recall, Halbwachs argued that memory cannot be reduced to isolated mental activity; instead, social frameworks impose constant restrictions that shape all recollections [4]. Building upon this socio-centred viewpoint, Assmann expanded relevant theoretical discussions and classified memory into two interrelated categories: cultural memory and communicative memory [5].

Communicative memory centres on personal life trajectories and passes down via oral experience. Its temporal scope generally covers three to four generations, roughly 80 to 100 years, marked by informality and everyday features [6]. Cultural memory, by contrast, targets the "absolute past", the formative roots of a community. It adopts highly institutionalised ritual forms and relies on objective externalisations including texts, visuals and ceremonies to realise symbolic encoding and presentation [7]. Assmann stressed that communicative memory fades once its carriers perish; long-term inheritance thus demands its conversion into cultural memory. Deuteronomy offers an archetypal illustration: as the final cohort witnessing the Exodus neared the end of their lives, communal memory faced breakdown. The Israelites converted transient communicative memory into stable cultural memory by codifying covenantal texts and instituting periodic communal readings [8].

2.2. The relationship between family memory and public memory

From the perspective of cultural memory theory [5], family memory is a typical form of communicative memory. Centred on family members, it is inherited primarily through intergenerational oral and written exchanges, focusing on ancestors' life stories and spiritual character and defined by intimacy, privacy and emotionality. Public memory, by contrast, falls into the category of cultural memory. Transcending the boundaries of individual families, it becomes a collective memory shared and recognised by the public. Instead of residing with specific family members or spreading through the routine daily interaction characteristic of communicative memory, it relies on institutionalised channels including book publishing, public commemoration, media reports and educational communication.

The shift from family memory to public memory is essentially a transition from communicative memory to cultural memory. This transformation requires three preconditions: first, family memory content must hold public value beyond family boundaries; second, suitable media carriers must be secured; third, dedicated cultural intermediaries are needed to introduce family memory into public space. Celebrity descendants play a uniquely pivotal role in this process. As both direct carriers of

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familial communicative memory and figures with inherent access to the public sphere due to their distinct status, they act as a natural bridge linking the two forms of memory.

2.3. The five-dimensional structure of cultural memory

To systematically analyze the public transformation mechanisms of family memory, this paper draws on work by the Assmann couple and subsequent scholars to propose a five-dimensional structural analytical framework [5]:

The Temporal Dimension: tracks key nodes and processes of memory transition from communicative memory to cultural memory

The Media Dimension: examines memory carrier forms, including texts, practices and spaces

The Functional Dimension: explores memory's role in forging group identity and legitimacy, particularly the interaction between functional memory and stored memory

The Power Dimension: investigates power dynamics in memory construction, including struggles over memory interpretation rights within and beyond the family

The Constructive Dimension: analyses memory regeneration and meaning-making in contemporary contexts, namely how the past is reshaped by present-day needs

Interwoven across these five dimensions, this integrated framework supports analysis of the cultural practice through which Liang Qichao's descendants disseminate their ancestral spirit.

3. Connotations and inheritance context of Liang Qichao's spirit

3.1. The core spiritual pedigree of Liang Qichao

Liang Qichao 's spiritual world is extensive and profound, and its core can be summarized from three dimensions: patriotic spirit, academic spirit and moral spirit. Patriotism stands as the most distinctive marker of his life. He once cautioned his children: "One must first possess genuine patriotism before accomplishing great undertakings" [9], a sentiment rooted in national devotion. Academic spirit defines his standout trait as an erudite scholar. He taught his children that "learning is not about seeking a diploma", emphasised the academic attitude of "pursuing truth, erudition and understanding" [10], and proposed the "burning and simmering" study method [11]. Moral spirit forms the core of his self-cultivation tradition. Advocating the self-cultivation ethos, he instructed his children to temper their character in hardship through a "poor family style" [12], and modelled personal conduct to serve as an ethical exemplar for his children.

3.2. The diachronic context of familial inheritance

Liang Qichao's spiritual familial inheritance follows a gradual trajectory from communicative memory to cultural memory. Before his death, family letters were the main medium of spiritual inheritance. From 1898 to 1928, he wrote more than 400 letters to his children, covering study, life, patriotism and other domains [13]. These letters serve not only as direct guidance for his children, but also as key texts for later generations to trace their ancestral spirit. After Liang Qichao's death, with his children's outstanding achievements in their respective fields including contributions from Liang Sicheng, Liang Siyong, Liang Sili and others, his spirit began to shift from the familial to the public sphere. Since the 1980s, amid growing Liang Qichao scholarship and the public release of his family letters, public dissemination of his spirit has entered a new stage.

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4. A five-dimensional structural analysis of the public transformation of Liang Qichao's spirit

4.1. The temporal dimension: key nodes of memory transition

The temporal dimension traces a clear transition of Liang Qichao's spiritual inheritance from communicative memory to cultural memory. Two pivotal nodes define this shift: Liang Qichao's death in 1929 and the mass public release of family letters in the 1980s. During his lifetime, spiritual transmission relied on intimate family correspondence and daily instruction, bearing all hallmarks of communicative memory. His death triggered the loss of first-hand witnesses, a threshold Assmann's theory identifies as critical to the shift toward cultural memory [5]. Against potential "anxiety of forgetting", descendants' deliberate preservation of family letters represents agent-driven resistance. Since the 1980s, the publication of The Chronological biography of Liang Qichao and assorted Liang Qichao's Family Letters collections [14] have brought private domestic correspondence into public access. Scholarly depth and mass-media-led meaning-making revitalise these texts, enabling Liang's spiritual legacy to transcend blood-kin boundaries and become shared cultural memory.

4.2. The media dimension: texts, practices and spaces

Three core media underpin the public transformation of Liang Qichao's spirit: texts, practices and spaces.

Texts form the foundational medium. Liang Qichao's family letters, alongside his extensive writings and posthumous memoirs [3], constitute a rich textual archive. Crucially, their reclassification from private correspondence to public publications completes the transition from communicative to cultural memory carriers.

Practical media manifest in descendants' tangible actions. Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin remained in Lizhuang and refused to leave for the United States during the Anti-Japanese War; Liang Sili returned resolutely after the founding of New China to devote himself to the aerospace industry, both embodying practical inheritance of ancestral patriotism. Liang Congjie founded the environmental organisation "Friends of Nature", an extension of the ancestral ethos of "repaying society's grace" at a broader societal level.

Spatial media, meanwhile, include Liang Qichao's former residence and Yinbing Room in Tianjin, the Liang Qichao Memorial Hall in Xinhui, Guangdong, and his tomb in Beijing [15]. These sites serve both as family commemorative spaces and public historical landmarks, lending tangible form to the abstract spiritual tradition.

4.3. The functional dimension: the interaction between stored memory and functional memory

Aleida Assmann's dialectic of functional-storage memory [16] highlights their identity-driven interchange. Liang Qichao's contemporary public-memory landscape exemplifies such interactive dynamics.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as early reform-era China urgently needed scientific spirit and modern talents, functional memory centred on Liang Qichao's intellectual spirit and educational concepts; the "one academician, three academicians" narrative became a model encouraging young people to pursue study diligently.

Entering the 21st century, amid advocacy for core socialist values and family style construction, Liang Qichao's patriotism and moral education have moved to the core of functional memory. His

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"cold family style" and patriotic education are repeatedly cited as cultural resources responding to contemporary needs.

Meanwhile, his ideas of "the doctrine of interest" life outlook and the career orientation of "learning but not being an official" remain in stored memory, not yet fully activated. Celebrity descendants shape functional memory composition by selectively emphasising or downplaying specific aspects of their ancestral legacy.

4.4. The power dimension: internal and external games over the right of memory interpretation

Cultural memory is never neutral, with power dynamics embedded beneath its surface. For the publicisation of Liang Qichao's spirit, this power dimension manifests as the game and negotiation of memory interpretation rights within and beyond the family.

Intra-family interpretation does not follow a unified template: different generations prioritise different dimensions of Liang Qichao's spirit. For instance, some emphasise patriotism and scholarly legacy, others personality and family education; some lean toward high-profile public dissemination, while others choose low-profile stewardship. Such internal divergence shapes the pluralistic construction of Liang Qichao's image in public memory.

Extra-family interpretive power holds equal weight. Academic research on Liang Qichao constructs varied images of him through respective disciplinary perspectives. Mass media reports often highlight highly transmissible narrative elements, such as the "three academicians in one family" and "most successful father" tropes. Such simplification boosts dissemination but may obscure the complexity of his legacy.

In this power game, celebrity descendants hold blood-endowed discursive authority, yet remain subject to academic discourse, media logic and social expectations.

4.5. The constructive dimension: the contemporary reconstruction of "Liang Qichao's spirit"

Cultural memory theory holds that the past is perpetually reconstructed in the present [17], a principle framing the ongoing contemporary construction of Liang Qichao's public spiritual memory.

Under core socialist value advocacy, the "patriotism" and "dedication" dimensions are highlighted, with Liang family descendants' "returning to serve the nation after study" integrated into patriotic education narratives. Within family style construction discourse, Liang Qichao's family letters and educational thought have been given new significance, regarded as a model combining traditional family style and modern spirit. Existing scholarship notes that the Liang family ethos "truly realised the integration of Chinese and Western, ancient and modern" [13]. From a cultural confidence theoretical perspective, his cultural renewal proposition of "strengthening what is original and new, and supplementing what is not original and new" is also viewed as a harbinger of upholding cultural subjectivity amid globalisation.

Far from arbitrary misinterpretation, this contemporary construction represents selective highlighting and restructuring rooted in genuine elements of his spirit. Meanwhile, celebrity descendants' own words, deeds and value choices continuously supply new material for this ongoing interpretation.

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5. Conclusion

This study deploys Jan Assmann's cultural memory framework to investigate the public transformation of familial memory, using the descendants of Liang Qichao as a critical case study. Findings reveal that this transition constitutes a fundamental ontological shift: a move from ephemeral "communicative memory" anchored in lived experience to durable "cultural memory" institutionalised via texts, rituals, and spatial practices. The descendants function as natural bridging agents, whose dual positional status as both living bearers and interpreters serves as the linchpin connecting private heritage with public discourse.

Admittedly, the reliance on published archives and biographies limits visibility into the micro-politics of intra-familial negotiation. Future research should integrate oral histories and ethnographic fieldwork to capture the situated agency of actors within specific decision-making contexts. Ultimately, examining this elite lineage provides a vital interpretive lens into the complex articulation between state-sponsored identity projects and grassroots mnemonic practices, revealing how family ethos is actively constructed within broader trajectories of modern Chinese cultural governance.

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