

Chinese Period Dramas as "Lieux de Mémoire": Unpacking Dispersion, Ritual, and Narrative in Chinese Society

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Abstract

This study examines Chinese period dramas as lieux de mémoire (sites of memory), as defined by Pierre Nora, to explore how they carry and perform the collective memory of Chinese society. By analyzing three dimensions within these dramas—the "dispersion" represented in spatial configurations, the "rituals" of emotional interaction, and the "narratives" that sculpt time—this paper reveals the significant role of period dramas in constructing cultural identity, maintaining the social structure of feeling, and reshaping historical cognition. The research finds that period dramas, through the intertwined presentation of individual memory, communicative memory, and cultural memory, construct a dynamic memory space and participate in the cultural politics of contemporary China. This study expands the application of Nora's theory of lieux de mémoire and offers a new perspective for understanding the complex relationship between media, memory, and society.

Keywords : Period Dramas; *Lieux de Mémoire*; Dispersion; Ritual; Cultural Memory

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Introduction

Period dramas have become a significant genre in Chinese television, offering a unique lens through which to examine the nation's past and present. These dramas, set in specific historical periods, not only entertain but also engage in the construction and negotiation of collective memory. This study draws upon Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) to argue that Chinese period dramas function as symbolic spaces where memories are preserved, contested, and reshaped (Nora, 1989). Existing scholarship has explored the role of media in shaping collective memory in various contexts (Zelizer, 1995; Hoskins, 2011). In the context of China, scholars have examined the role of television in constructing national identity (Gorfinkel, 2017) and the politics of nostalgia among younger generations (Jinhua & Chen, 2000). However, the specific genre of period dramas, despite its popularity and cultural significance, has received relatively less scholarly attention. This study addresses this gap by focusing on period dramas as a particularly potent site for the negotiation of collective memory. It builds upon the growing body of work on memory studies, which has moved beyond a focus on individual memory to examine the social, cultural, and political dimensions of collective remembering (Halbwachs, 1992; Olick & Robbins, 1998).

Central to this study is Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, which provides a valuable framework for understanding how collective memory operates in the absence of traditional environments of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) (Nora, 1996). Nora argues that *lieux de mémoire* emerge as deliberate sites for memory preservation when historical change erodes the organic relationship between memory and its environment. These sites can take various forms, including physical locations, monuments, rituals, and symbolic figures. In the context of China's rapid modernization and social transformation, which has significantly altered traditional social structures and cultural practices, period dramas can be seen as such sites, offering a mediated space for collective remembering

and reflection. This study also draws upon Raymond Williams' concept of "structures of feeling" to analyze the affective dimensions of period dramas (Williams, 1977). Williams uses this term to describe the shared values, attitudes, and sensibilities that characterize a particular historical period. By representing the lived experiences of individuals in past eras, period dramas tap into these structures of feeling, evoking a sense of nostalgia and connection to a perceived shared heritage. The interplay between Nora's *lieux de mémoire* and Williams' structures of feeling provides a nuanced framework for analyzing how period dramas shape not only what is remembered but also how it is felt and experienced.

By focusing on the interplay of dispersion, ritual, and narrative within these dramas, this paper aims to unpack the complex mechanisms through which they contribute to the formation of cultural identity, the maintenance of social structures of feeling, and the articulation of historical understanding in contemporary China. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions: 1. How do Chinese period dramas function as *lieux de mémoire* in the construction and negotiation of collective memory? 2. What are the specific mechanisms through which dispersion, ritual, and narrative are employed in period dramas to shape cultural identity, maintain social structures of feeling, and articulate historical understanding? 3. How does the analysis of period dramas as *lieux de mémoire* contribute to a broader understanding of the relationship between media, memory, and society in contemporary China? By addressing these questions, this study aims to make several significant contributions. First, it contributes to the field of memory studies by extending the application of Nora's *lieux de mémoire* framework to the analysis of a specific media genre in a non-Western context. Second, it offers insights into the cultural politics of contemporary China by examining how the past is represented and negotiated in popular media. Third, it provides a nuanced understanding of the role of television in shaping cultural identity and historical consciousness. The findings of this study will be of interest to scholars of Chinese studies, media studies, memory studies, and cultural sociology, as well as to

a broader audience interested in the relationship between media, memory, and society. The paper will analyze selected case studies of recent, popular Chinese period dramas, examining how they employ dispersion, ritual, and narrative to construct and negotiate collective memory. By doing so, it seeks to shed light on the intricate relationship between media, memory, and society in contemporary China, offering a nuanced understanding of how the past continues to shape the present. While this study primarily focuses on textual analysis, it is important to acknowledge the active role of the audience in the process of meaning-making. Theories of audience reception suggest that viewers are not passive recipients of media messages but actively engage with texts, interpreting them through their own individual and collective experiences, social contexts, and cultural frameworks. This implies that the meaning of a media text is not solely determined by its creators but is co-constructed through the interaction between the text and the audience. Incorporating this perspective into the study of period dramas would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how these dramas function as *lieux de mémoire* and contribute to the construction of cultural memory, acknowledging that audience interpretations and experiences play a crucial role in this process.

Dispersion in Spatial Representation: The Inscription and Reconstruction of Individual Memory

Space, as a fundamental dimension of human existence and experience, not only constitutes the physical environment in which we live but also profoundly shapes our memories, emotions, and identities. The rise of Chinese period dramas in recent years offers a unique perspective for understanding the complex relationship between space, memory, and the individual. These dramas, through their representation of spatial environments in specific historical periods and their narratives of characters' movements, separations, and reunions within these spaces, demonstrate how the "dispersion" represented in spatial configurations inscribes and reconstructs individual memory. This section focuses on "dispersion" as a core concept to explore how spatial representation in period dramas relates to the performance of individual memory. By analyzing dispersion as a spatial experience, space as a mnemonic site, and memory reconstruction in dispersion narratives, it reveals how period dramas utilize the spatial dimension to showcase the complexity and dynamics of individual memory and situate it within broader social and historical transformations. Furthermore, the concept of *lieux de mémoire* provides a powerful tool for understanding how period dramas function as sites of memory. The following discussion will further expand and deepen the meaning and application of this theory from a spatial perspective.

Dispersion as a Spatial Experience: Mobility, Separation, and Loss

"Dispersion" generally refers to a state of spatial separation and mobility, describing not only physical displacement but also social, cultural, and psychological ruptures and losses. In the fields of sociology and human geography, dispersion is considered an important spatial experience of modern society, closely related to phenomena such as globalization, population mobility, migration, and urbanization in the process of modernization (Clifford, 1994). Chinese period dramas vividly portray the multiple dimensions of dispersion as a spatial experience through narratives of characters moving and separating across different spaces. This spatial experience includes not only geographical movements across regions, such as the family separation caused by the "Third Front Movement" in *A Lifelong Journey* (Ren Shi Jian, dir. Lu Li, 2022), but also the segregation and marginalization in social spaces, such as the rural-urban divide in *Like a Flowing River* (Da Jiang Da He,

dir. Sheng Kong & Wei Huang, 2018). These movements and separations are often accompanied by individuals' sense of loss regarding their homeland, loved ones, and original lifestyles, thus profoundly influencing the construction of individual memory and emotional experience.

James Clifford, in his book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, argues that diaspora is not only a geographical phenomenon but also a mode of cultural production and identity formation (Clifford, 1997). He suggests that the experience of diaspora can break down established cultural boundaries, prompting individuals to rethink their identity and belonging in the midst of mobility and intersection. Chinese period dramas, by showcasing characters' movements across different regions, such as the southward migration for entrepreneurial pursuits in *A Long Way Home* (Fu Bei De Rong Yao, dir. Honglei Kang & Hanxuan Liu, 2023) and the transnational business ventures from Yiwu to Europe in *Feather Flies to the Sky* (Ji Mao Fei Shang Tian, dir. Yu Ding, 2017), present the cultural collisions and challenges to identity that such movements entail. These movements not only transform the characters' living spaces but also impact their original values and lifestyles, forcing them to constantly adapt and reconstruct their identities in new environments. This process is often intertwined with memories of the past and aspirations for the future, thus becoming interwoven with the formation of individual memory.

From a sociological perspective, "dispersion" is often associated with changes in social structure and the reorganization of social relationships. Zygmunt Bauman, in his discussion of "liquid modernity," points out that one of the characteristics of modern society is the constant flux and change in social structures, in which individuals experience a sense of fragmentation and uncertainty (Bauman, 2000). The urbanization process in China is a typical example, with a large influx of rural populations into cities, leading to the disintegration of traditional rural communities and the formation of new urban migrant groups. Period dramas like *Like a Flowing River* and *The Ordinary World* (Ping Fan De Shi Jie, dir. Weining Mao, 2015) depict this rural-urban migration and the resulting changes in social relationships. In these stories, the hometown becomes a space imbued with emotional attachment and memories, carrying the characters' nostalgia for their past lives. This nostalgia contrasts sharply with the individuals' struggles and endeavors in the city, highlighting the social and psychological impacts of dispersion.

In addition to geographical migration and changes in social structure, the spatial experience of "dispersion" in period dramas is also manifested in the loss and fragmentation of individual memory and emotion. As Pierre Nora argues, an important feature of modern society is the emergence of *lieux de mémoire*, which replace the traditional "milieux de mémoire" (Nora, 1989). When people leave their homeland and their original lifestyles are disrupted, with familiar landscapes, customs, and relationships gradually receding into the past, individuals experience a sense of loss. This sense of loss often triggers memories and nostalgia for the past. For example, in *A Lifelong Journey*, several children of the Zhou family leave their home in Northeast China to support national development or pursue personal growth. This separation among family members not only causes geographical isolation but also leads to emotional distance and a longing for the past when the family was together. These shared memories and nostalgia, despite being tinged with the emotions of dispersion and loss, stubbornly persist in individuals' recollections and are evoked and reinforced in specific contexts, becoming an important part of individual identity.

In conclusion, dispersion, as a spatial experience, is presented in multiple dimensions in Chinese period dramas. It is manifested not only in geographical movements and changes in social structure but also in the loss and fragmentation of individual memory and emotion. By narrating these experiences of dispersion, period

dramas not only recreate the social transformations of specific historical periods but also delve into the inner world of individuals, exploring how dispersion influences the construction of individual memory and emotional experience. This exploration of the spatial experience of dispersion lays the foundation for understanding how period dramas function as *lieux de mémoire* and provides a framework for the subsequent analysis of space as a mnemonic site and the reconstruction of memory in dispersion narratives.

Space as a Mnemonic Site: Home, Region, and Lieux de Mémoire

Period dramas not only depict the spatial experience of dispersion but also emphasize the function of specific spatial settings as carriers of memory. These settings, whether concrete homes and villages or abstract regions and nations, carry individual and collective memories, serving as important anchors for emotional attachment and identity formation. Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* provides a crucial lens for understanding the symbolic significance of these spatial settings. He argues that *lieux de mémoire* are not simply physical spaces but are imbued with special meaning and value, becoming symbolic representations of collective memory (Nora, 1989). In period dramas, homes, hometowns, and other spatial settings are often constructed as such *lieux de mémoire*. They are not merely backdrops for the unfolding narrative but also serve as havens for characters' emotions and repositories of their memories. Through detailed depictions of these spatial settings, period dramas showcase the close relationship between memory and space, as well as the significant role of space in shaping individual and collective identities.

The home, as the starting point and ultimate destination of an individual's life journey, is often portrayed in period dramas as a space filled with emotions and memories. It is not only the place where family members live together but also a carrier of family history and cultural heritage. The old Zhou family home in *A Lifelong Journey* witnesses the joys and sorrows of three generations of the Zhou family, holding a wealth of family memories. This old house is not just a physical space but also an emotional bond and spiritual anchor for the Zhou family. Whenever family members return to the old house, they are reminded of the past and feel the warmth of home and the power of family affection. Similarly, in *The Bond (Qiao Jia De Er Nv)*, dir. Kaizhou Zhang, (2021), the old house where the Qiao siblings grew up also holds similar symbolic significance. This old house witnessed their growth, recorded their laughter and tears, and became a constant source of concern for them. Even after they grow up, start their own families, and live in different places, the old house remains their shared memory space, tightly binding their emotions together. These domestic spaces, through their repeated appearance and emphasis in period dramas, gradually acquire symbolic meaning that transcends the material level, becoming crucial for the audience to understand the plot and empathize with the characters' emotions.

Beyond specific homes, period dramas often construct particular regional spaces as carriers of memory. These regional spaces can be villages, towns, or specific areas or provinces, and they are often closely linked to characters' identities and sense of cultural belonging. In *Where Dreams Begin (Meng Zhong De Na Pian Hai)*, dir. Ning Fu, (2023), Shichahai is not merely a geographical location but a *lieu de mémoire* that carries the memories of growth and dreams of a group of young people in Beijing. This area, rich in Beijing local culture, witnessed their youthful joys and sorrows and nurtured their longing and aspirations for the future. The regional space of "Shichahai" is imbued with rich symbolic meaning in the drama, representing not only a specific regional culture but also a spirit of youth, dreams, and the changing times. Similarly, in *Always on the Move (Nan Lai Bei Wang)*, dir. Xiaolong Zheng, (2024), the old industrial base in Northeast China serves as an important spatial backdrop, carrying the collective memory of a

particular generation of industrial workers. The factory compounds and railroad tracks depicted in the drama are not only physical spaces but also spaces that carry the collective memory of a specific generation of people. Furthermore, *Romance in the Alley (Xiao Xiang Ren Jia)*, dir. Kaizhou Zhang, (2024) presents the small alleys of Suzhou as a microcosm of societal change from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. The interconnected lives of the families in these alleys, particularly the Zhuang, Lin, and Wu families, reflect the broader transformations happening in China during this period. The alley itself becomes a *lieu de mémoire*, where the daily interactions, struggles, and triumphs of ordinary people are etched into the collective memory of the community. The close-knit relationships within the alley, symbolized by shared spaces like the communal kitchen, embody a sense of collective identity that is both challenged and reinforced by the societal changes happening around them. By depicting these regional spaces, period dramas illustrate the role of specific regional cultures in shaping individual and collective memories and the significance of regional identity in constructing identity.

Nora's theory of *lieux de mémoire* offers a crucial lens for understanding the symbolic significance of spatial settings in period dramas. He argues that *lieux de mémoire* are artificially created memory carriers in response to the fragmentation of memory in modern society. They resist the erosion of time and the threat of oblivion by anchoring memory to specific places, objects, or rituals (Nora, 1989). In period dramas, homes, regions, and other spatial settings are often constructed as such *lieux de mémoire*. For instance, Xiaolei Village in *Like a Flowing River* is not only a geographical location but also a *lieu de mémoire* carrying the collective memory of rural China in the early stages of reform and opening up. The village's transformation epitomizes the historical process of rural reform in China and bears witness to the struggles and sacrifices of a generation. Through the detailed portrayal of Xiaolei Village, the period drama intertwines individual and collective memories, personal destinies, and the changing times, allowing viewers to experience the weight of history and the pulse of the era while watching the story unfold. Xiaolei Village in *Like a Flowing River* exemplifies how a specific location can function as a *lieu de mémoire*. It is not just a geographical setting but a repository of collective memory, particularly regarding rural China's reform and opening up. The village's transformation encapsulates the broader historical process of rural reform, serving as a microcosm of societal change. Through its detailed portrayal, the drama connects individual memories of the village with the collective memory of the era, highlighting the role of place in shaping and preserving cultural memory. The repeated visual and narrative emphasis on Xiaolei Village transforms it into a symbolic space, a *lieu de mémoire*, where the audience can engage with the collective memory of a transformative period in Chinese history.

In summary, period dramas construct homes, regions, and other spatial settings as *lieux de mémoire* that carry individual and collective memories through detailed portrayals. These spatial settings are not merely backdrops for the narrative but serve as havens for characters' emotions and repositories for their memories. By applying the theory of *lieux de mémoire*, we can gain a deeper understanding of the symbolic meaning of these spatial settings and their significant role in the narratives of period dramas. Through the presentation of these *lieux de mémoire*, period dramas not only showcase the close relationship between memory and space but also explore how individuals and collectives maintain their sense of identity and cultural belonging through memory amidst the changing times. This in-depth exploration of the relationship between space and memory further highlights the importance of period dramas as a cultural practice in contemporary Chinese society.

Memory Reconstruction in Dispersion Narratives: Return, Reunion, and Reconciliation

"Dispersion" in period dramas does not merely signify spatial separation and loss; it also provides an opportunity for the reconstruction of individual memory. As Schacter (2001) notes, memories are not fixed records but are actively shaped and reshaped over time. Through specific narrative strategies, such as "return" and "reunion," these dramas demonstrate how characters, after experiencing dispersion, reconnect with the past, present, and future, ultimately achieving a reconstruction of self-cognition and identity. This memory reconstruction is not a simple replication of the past but a dynamic and tension-filled process, echoing Halbwachs's (1992) assertion that individual memories are always intertwined with collective frameworks. It involves the healing of past traumas, the compensation for lost emotions, and the re-planning of future life. "Return" and "reunion," acting as bridges connecting the past and the present, offer individuals the chance to re-examine their experiences and emotions, ultimately leading to reconciliation with the past, with themselves, and with others. This section delves into how narrative strategies like "return" and "reunion" in period dramas drive the reconstruction of individual memory, drawing upon memory studies, narrative theory, and theories of identity, and explores the significance and value of this reconstruction.

"Return," a common narrative motif in literature and film, often symbolizes a quest for meaning and a reconnection with one's origins (Campbell, 2008). In period dramas, this motif is frequently imbued with multiple meanings. It can refer to a return in geographical space, such as a character returning to their hometown after years of wandering, or a return in the psychological realm, such as a character rediscovering their original aspirations after experiencing life's ups and downs. In *Our Ordinary Days (Wo Men De Ri Zi*, dir. Lei Wang, 2023), Xian'an Wang's journey embodies this multifaceted theme of return. His initial departure from his hometown to Shenzhen, driven by the desire for a better life after serving a prison sentence, represents a physical and emotional separation from his roots. However, his eventual return signifies not merely a change in location but also a psychological and emotional homecoming. This return allows him to reconnect with his family, rediscover his sense of belonging, and rebuild his life in his hometown. Xian'an Wang's narrative arc in *Our Ordinary Days* underscores the complex interplay between departure and return, highlighting how the motif of return can be intertwined with themes of redemption, reconciliation, and the enduring power of familial bonds. Their final reunion is not merely a geographical return but, as consistent with Connerton's (1989) work on how embodied practices shape memory, a reaffirmation of their shared history and the emotional anchor it provides. This return symbolizes their commitment and resilience, suggesting a new phase built on a foundation of shared experience.

"Reunion," often intertwined with "return," forms a crucial narrative and emotional climax in dispersion narratives. Reunions are potent sites of memory activation, where the shared past resurfaces and is renegotiated between individuals (Radstone, 2007). They are not merely spatial encounters but intersections of emotions and a collision of memories. In *Romance of Our Parents (Fu Mu Ai Qing*, dir. Kong Sheng, 2014), Jie An and Defu Jiang's reunion on Songshan Island, after years of separation imposed by political circumstances, facilitates the healing of past wounds and a reaffirmation of their enduring bond. The reunion scene, laden with unspoken emotions and shared memories, allows for a re-evaluation of their relationship within the larger context of their shared history. Similar dynamics are at play in *The Bond*, where the Qiao siblings' reunion at their old house triggers a flood of shared memories, both joyful and painful. This shared act of remembering reinforces their familial bonds and allows them to process their individual experiences within the context of their shared past. These reunions demonstrate how the act of remembering, particularly in shared spaces, can contribute to individual healing and the strengthening of social connections.

"Return" and "reunion" not only propel the narrative but also provide a framework for understanding how individuals actively reconstruct their identities in the aftermath of dispersion. This resonates with theories of narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1992), which posit that individuals construct their sense of self through the stories they tell about their lives. By returning to familiar spaces or reuniting with significant figures, individuals gain the opportunity to re-evaluate their past experiences and reintegrate what might otherwise remain fragmented memories into a more coherent narrative. For instance, Yunhui Song's return to his hometown in *Like a Flowing River* is not simply a nostalgic revisiting of his past. It is a critical moment of self-reflection, allowing him to reconcile his personal ambitions with the changes that have transformed his community and the broader Chinese society. This act of reconciliation allows him to integrate his past experiences into his present understanding of himself and his place in the world, demonstrating the dynamic interplay between individual memory, social context, and the ongoing construction of identity.

Through narrative strategies such as "return" and "reunion," period dramas showcase that dispersion is not an end but a catalyst for growth and transformation. These strategies not only drive the plot but also create the conditions for the active reconstruction of individual memory and identity. By revisiting and reinterpreting the past, characters can reconcile with loss, reaffirm important relationships, and ultimately forge a stronger sense of self. This portrayal of memory reconstruction enriches the narrative depth of period dramas and offers valuable insights for audiences grappling with similar themes of displacement, change, and the enduring power of memory.

This section has examined the multifaceted ways in which dispersion shapes individual memory in Chinese period dramas. By analyzing dispersion as a spatial experience encompassing mobility, separation, and loss, we have seen how these dramas reflect the broader social and historical transformations that have characterized modern China. The analysis of specific spaces—homes, regions, and *lieux de mémoire*—has revealed how these settings function as repositories of individual and collective memory, imbued with symbolic meaning and emotional resonance. Furthermore, the exploration of narrative strategies such as return and reunion has demonstrated how individuals actively reconstruct their identities and reconcile with their past in the aftermath of dispersion. Through these intertwined spatial and narrative dimensions, period dramas offer a nuanced portrayal of the complex relationship between space, memory, and identity, highlighting the enduring power of the past to shape the present. This understanding of individual memory within the context of dispersion provides a crucial foundation for the subsequent analysis of communicative memory and its production through ritual in the following section.

Rituals of Emotional Interaction: The Production and Maintenance of Communicative Memory

While the spatial dimension of dispersion shapes individual memories in Chinese period dramas, the rituals depicted within these narratives play a crucial role in the production and maintenance of communicative memory. Rituals, as formalized sequences of actions and symbolic expressions, are not merely customary practices but powerful mechanisms for generating shared emotions, reinforcing social bonds, and transmitting cultural values across generations (Bell, 1997). As Connerton (1989) argues, commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices are integral to how societies remember and construct their identities. In the context of period dramas, these rituals, ranging from everyday family interactions to grand societal ceremonies, offer a rich site for exploring how communicative memory is constructed and negotiated within specific historical and social contexts. This is

particularly relevant in China, where rapid modernization has led to significant shifts in social structures and cultural practices, impacting the ways in which the past is remembered and reinterpreted. This section will examine how rituals function as vehicles of emotional interaction, shaping collective identity and fostering a sense of shared heritage. By analyzing rituals as expressions of emotion, their role in constructing communicative memory, and their adaptation within the changing landscapes of modern China, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between individual experience, collective memory, and the ongoing negotiation of tradition and modernity.

Rituals as Emotional Expression: Norms, Performance, and Resonance

Rituals, in their essence, are performative acts imbued with symbolic meaning. They are not simply habitual actions but carefully orchestrated sequences that follow established norms and conventions (Durkheim, 1915). These norms provide a framework for understanding the appropriate expression of emotions within specific social and cultural contexts. As Goffman (2007) observed in his work on the presentation of self in everyday life, social interactions are often governed by implicit rules and expectations that shape how individuals present themselves and manage their emotions. In Chinese period dramas, rituals often serve as a primary means of expressing emotions, particularly those deemed too complex or sensitive for direct verbal articulation. By adhering to established ritualistic practices, characters can communicate their feelings of joy, sorrow, love, respect, or grief in a way that is both culturally intelligible and emotionally resonant. This performative aspect of ritual aligns with the work of Schechner (2020), who emphasizes the importance of "restored behavior" in ritual, where actions and gestures are repeated and reenacted, carrying layers of historical and cultural meaning. This section will explore how rituals, through their normative structures and performative aspects, provide a structured outlet for emotional expression, fostering a sense of shared understanding and collective experience among both the characters within the dramas and the audiences engaging with them. The emphasis on ritual performance further underscores the importance of embodied experience in the construction and transmission of communicative memory.

One of the key functions of rituals is to provide a socially sanctioned space for the expression of emotions that might otherwise be considered taboo or disruptive. For example, mourning rituals, as depicted in dramas like *A Lifelong Journey*, offer a structured way for individuals to express their grief and commemorate the deceased. These rituals, while adhering to specific cultural norms, also allow for personalized expressions of sorrow, creating a space for both collective mourning and individual grieving. The standardized procedures of traditional Chinese funerals, from the wearing of white mourning garments to the burning of incense and paper money, provide a framework for managing the intense emotions associated with death and loss. This resonates with the work of anthropologists like Van Gennep (1960), who highlighted the importance of rites of passage in marking transitions and facilitating social integration. However, within this framework, individual expressions of grief, such as wailing, singing lamentations, or sharing personal anecdotes about the deceased, are also incorporated, creating a dynamic interplay between collective norms and individual experience. This personalized dimension of ritual performance, as explored by Turner (1969), allows for a deeper emotional connection to the deceased and facilitates the process of mourning and healing.

Rituals not only regulate emotional expression but also provide opportunities for performative displays of emotion. These performances often involve a heightened sense of theatricality, utilizing symbolic gestures, costumes, music, and language to amplify the emotional impact. Wedding ceremonies, for example, are often depicted in period dramas as elaborate spectacles that

showcase the joy and celebration associated with the union of two families. In *Romance of Our Parents*, the contrast between Jie An's Western-style wedding expectations and the more traditional Chinese ceremony that ultimately takes place highlights the cultural negotiation of ritual practices and their emotional significance. This negotiation reflects the broader tensions between tradition and modernity that often play out in period dramas, as discussed by scholars like Jinhua and Chen (2000). Similarly, *Romance in the Alley* depicts various rituals, such as the celebration of the Spring Festival, which are portrayed with a heightened sense of performance. These scenes, often accompanied by traditional music and vibrant colors, contribute to the emotional richness of the narrative. The specific ways in which families in the alley celebrate these events, such as sharing food or exchanging gifts, reflect not only the customs of the time but also the emotional bonds between community members. The ritual performance, even in its adapted form, serves as a public declaration of love and commitment, reinforcing social bonds and creating a shared memory for the couple and their community. This aligns with the anthropological understanding of ritual as a form of symbolic communication that creates and reinforces social cohesion (Geertz, 1973). The use of vibrant colors, traditional music, and symbolic gestures, such as the exchange of tea and the bowing to elders, amplifies the emotional resonance of the event, creating a lasting impression on both the characters and the audience.

The emotional resonance of rituals is further amplified through the use of symbolic objects and actions that carry culturally specific meanings. These symbols act as triggers for collective memory, evoking shared emotions and reinforcing a sense of cultural identity. In *Our Times (Qi Hang: Dang Feng Qi Shi)*, dir. Liu Chang & Ma Yiming (2021), the depiction of the changing technological landscape of the 1990s, including the introduction of pagers and early mobile phones, is interwoven with the characters' personal and professional lives. These technological objects become symbolic representations of a specific era, evoking nostalgia and a sense of shared experience among audiences who lived through that period. This use of material culture to evoke memory aligns with the work of scholars like Daniel Miller (2010), who emphasizes the role of objects in shaping and reflecting social relations and cultural values. The rituals associated with these technologies, such as sending coded messages on pagers or making long-distance calls on bulky mobile phones, become imbued with emotional significance, representing the anxieties, aspirations, and social connections of that time. The wedding ceremony in *Romance of Our Parents*, beyond its portrayal of personal emotions, functions as a *lieu de mémoire* by embodying the ritual dimension of cultural memory. It showcases the negotiation between traditional and modern values during a period of significant social change. This ritual becomes a site where individual memories intersect with collective cultural practices, reflecting the evolving social norms and emotional landscapes of the time. By focusing on the ritualistic aspects of the wedding, the drama not only provides a window into the characters' personal lives but also illuminates how collective memory is performed, negotiated, and transmitted through such social rituals. The detailed depiction of the ceremony anchors the audience's understanding of the era's cultural memory within a specific ritualistic context, highlighting the role of rituals in shaping and reflecting societal transformations. The dramas' careful attention to these seemingly mundane details allows them to tap into the collective memory of a specific generation, fostering a sense of shared identity and nostalgia. This resonates with Boym's (2001) concept of "reflective nostalgia," which involves a longing for a particular time and place, often accompanied by a critical awareness of the past's complexities.

In Chinese period dramas, rituals function as powerful mechanisms for expressing and shaping emotions. Through their adherence to established norms, their performative nature, and their use of culturally resonant symbols, rituals create a space for shared

emotional experience and contribute to the construction of communicative memory. This analysis of rituals as emotional expressions highlights the importance of cultural context and embodied practice in understanding how individuals and communities navigate the complex landscape of human emotions and construct a shared sense of the past. It builds on the work of scholars like Assmann (2011), who emphasize the role of cultural memory in shaping collective identity and social cohesion. It provides a foundation for examining the broader role of rituals in the production and maintenance of communicative memory, which will be further explored in the following section.

Rituals and the Construction of Communicative Memory: Sharing, Interaction, and Transmission

Rituals are not merely vehicles for emotional expression; they are also crucial sites for the construction of communicative memory. Unlike individual memory, which resides solely within the individual mind, communicative memory emphasizes the sharing, negotiation, and transmission of memory within interpersonal interactions and social exchanges (Assmann, 2011). As Wertsch (2002) highlights, collective remembering is a fundamentally social process, shaped by the cultural tools and narratives available to a group. Rituals, as social activities, provide opportunities for individuals to participate and experience together, fostering emotional exchange and shared meaning. Through shared actions, language, and symbols, rituals transform individual memories into collective ones, integrating them into the group's cultural traditions. This section will delve into how rituals construct and maintain communicative memory through mechanisms of sharing, interaction, and transmission, analyzing the significance of this communicative memory in shaping group identity and maintaining social cohesion.

The shared nature of rituals forms a crucial foundation for the construction of communicative memory. Within rituals, individuals participate in the same activities, experience similar emotions, and share common meanings. This shared experience breaks down the isolation of individual memories, integrating them into a larger community. For instance, in *Our Ordinary Days*, the drama portrays the lives of several families in a small northern Chinese city over decades, interspersed with scenes of holiday celebrations and neighborly assistance. These rituals, experienced collectively, form their shared memories and strengthen their social bonds. Ritual activities during the Spring Festival, such as pasting spring couplets, setting off firecrackers, and eating dumplings, are not only shared cultural memories for Chinese people but also vital links maintaining family and community ties. Similarly, in *Romance in the Alley*, the shared experiences within the close-knit alley community contribute significantly to the formation of communicative memory. Events like the annual celebration of the Mid-Autumn Festival, where families gather to share mooncakes and stories, create lasting collective memories. These shared rituals reinforce community bonds and foster a sense of belonging that transcends individual experiences, highlighting the role of collective participation in the construction of a shared past. By participating in these rituals together, people share their joys and sorrows, reinforcing their identification with their cultural identity. This resonates with the work of Connerton (1989), who emphasizes the role of embodied practices in creating and transmitting social memory.

The interactive nature of rituals also contributes to the construction of communicative memory. Rituals are not a one-way process of indoctrination or passive reception but rather an interactive and negotiated process. During rituals, individuals construct a shared understanding and meaning of the ritual through communication and interaction. For instance, in *A Long Way Home*, the drama portrays scenes of mutual support and assistance among

forestry workers, including shared labor and celebrations—ritualized activities. These interactions not only enhance their emotional bonds but also allow them to experience the hardships and rewards of forestry reform together, thus forming shared memories. This aligns with the dialogic model of communication (Bakhtin, 1981), which emphasizes the importance of interaction and meaning-making in social contexts. During these interactions, individual memories intertwine and influence each other, eventually forming a shared memory network that closely connects individuals within the group.

The transmission of rituals ensures the continuation and development of communicative memory. Through transmission across generations, rituals pass memories from the past to the present and preserve present memories for the future. This intergenerational transmission not only maintains cultural continuity but also shapes the historical consciousness and identity of the group. This resonates with Assmann's (2011) distinction between communicative and cultural memory, where communicative memory refers to the lived memories shared within a social group, while cultural memory represents the formalized and institutionalized memories passed down through generations. For example, in *Where Dreams Begin*, the drama showcases the growth of young people in Beijing during the reform and opening-up era, including many era-specific ritual activities such as the *gaokao* (college entrance examination), joining the army, and venturing into private business. These ritual activities not only reflect the social landscape of specific historical periods but also carry the collective memories of specific generations. By participating in these rituals, the younger generation not only learns about the experiences of their parents but also inherits their spirit, forming a transgenerational cultural identity and social cohesion.

Through mechanisms of sharing, interaction, and transmission, rituals transform individual memories into communicative memory, integrating this shared memory into the group's cultural traditions. This communicative memory not only maintains the group's cohesion and sense of belonging but also shapes their historical consciousness and cultural identity. In the context of rapid social change in modern society, rituals act as bridges connecting the past, present, and future, playing an increasingly important role in maintaining social stability, transmitting cultural values, and shaping group identity. By depicting various rituals, Chinese period dramas not only enrich their narrative content but also provide valuable insights into the relationship between rituals and communicative memory.

Commercial Rituals: Collective Memories of a Changing Era

Chinese period dramas not only focus on traditional rituals but also keenly capture the "commercial rituals" that have emerged alongside socio-economic transformations. These commercial rituals, such as commodity trading, entrepreneurial celebrations, and business negotiations, may lack the religious or cultural connotations of traditional rituals, but they have gradually formed their own norms and symbolic systems amidst the wave of the market economy, becoming a significant component of collective memory in specific eras. They reflect the economic activities, social relations, and values of people during particular historical periods, and also carry the collective memories and emotional experiences of specific groups. This section will explore how period dramas depict commercial rituals and how these rituals participate in constructing the collective memory of changing times.

Commercial rituals reflect the economic development and social changes of specific eras. *Family on the Go (Wen Zhou Yi Jia Ren)*, dir. Kong Sheng & Li Xue, (2012), through the entrepreneurial journey of the Wanshun Zhou family, showcases the pioneering and enterprising spirit of Wenzhou merchants in the early stages of reform and opening up, as well as their struggles and sacrifices amidst the tide of the market economy. The various commercial

activities depicted in the drama, such as street vending, running small shops, and setting up factories, all bear strong characteristics of the era, becoming distinct marks of the collective memory of that time. These commercial activities, while seemingly ordinary, carry profound social significance. They symbolize China's transition from a planned economy to a market economy and bear witness to the country's economic takeoff and the improvement of people's living standards. This resonates with the work of anthropologists like Appadurai (1986) who explore the social life of things and how commodities circulate within specific cultural and economic systems.

Commercial rituals also shape the collective memory and identity of specific groups, such as merchants. *Feather Flies to the Sky* vividly portrays the entrepreneurial legend of Yiwu merchants "bartering chicken feathers for sugar" and their journey of developing the small commodity trade after the reform and opening up. The various commercial rituals depicted in the drama, such as business negotiations and trade fairs, not only embody the business acumen and entrepreneurial spirit of Yiwu merchants but also represent an essential part of their collective memory and identity. Through repeated practice and transmission, these commercial rituals have gradually formed the unique culture and values of Yiwu merchants and shaped their distinctive image in the Chinese and even global business arena. This aligns with the work of scholars like Yang (1994) who examine the cultural and social dynamics of entrepreneurship in China.

Commercial rituals are closely related to emotions and values. While the essence of business activities is the pursuit of profit, commercial rituals in period dramas are often imbued with emotions and values that transcend economic interests. For instance, in *Like a Flowing River*, Yunhui Song and Dongbao Lei represent two different development models, state-owned enterprises and collective enterprises, respectively. They demonstrate not only their economic acumen but also their sense of responsibility to the country and the collective, as well as their pursuit of ideals and beliefs, in their commercial activities. By showcasing the characters' emotions and values, these commercial rituals transform business activities from cold economic behaviors into social practices filled with human touch and the spirit of the times, thus resonating more readily with the audience. This reflects the broader trend in memory studies to explore the affective dimensions of collective remembering (Olick, 1999).

Commercial rituals, as a new form of ritual, play an increasingly important role in Chinese period dramas. They reflect the changing times, economic development, and transformations in social relations, and also shape the collective memory and identity of specific groups. By depicting commercial rituals, period dramas not only showcase the course of China's socio-economic development but also delve into the emotions, values, and spirit of the times embedded in business activities, allowing viewers to gain deeper insights into history and reality while watching the story unfold.

This section has explored the multifaceted roles of rituals in Chinese period dramas, examining their function as expressions of emotion, their contribution to the construction of communicative memory, and the significance of commercial rituals in reflecting the changing tides of the era. Rituals provide a normative framework and a performative stage for the expression of emotions. More importantly, through shared experience, interaction, and intergenerational transmission, they construct and maintain communicative memory within groups. Furthermore, the emergence of commercial rituals reflects the shifting currents of the times and participates in shaping new forms of collective memory. By depicting a variety of rituals, period dramas not only enrich their narrative content but also provide a crucial lens for understanding the complex relationship between individual experience, social change, and cultural transmission. This in-depth analysis of rituals allows us to further understand how period dramas, functioning as *lieux de mémoire*, integrate individual

memories into broader social and cultural memory, ultimately shaping our understanding of both the past and the present. This understanding of ritual and communicative memory lays the groundwork for the subsequent analysis of how narratives sculpt time and the representation and interpretation of cultural memory.

Narratives That Sculpt Time: The Representation and Interpretation of Cultural Memory

Period dramas do more than simply recount the twists and turns of individual destinies; they represent and interpret the cultural memory of specific eras. Through carefully constructed narrative structures, character portrayals, and plot developments, these dramas weave individual and communicative memories into grand historical narratives, thereby shaping and transmitting cultural memory. As Hayden White (1973) argues, history is not merely an objective record of past events but a narrativized construction. Period dramas, as a form of historical narrative, do not strive to restore the "truth" of history. Instead, they express the cultural values and spiritual pursuits of specific eras through artistic adaptation and interpretation of historical events and figures. This section will explore how period dramas employ narrative strategies to "sculpt time," how they represent and interpret cultural memory, and ultimately how they shape our understanding of the past and present. We will analyze the ways in which period dramas function as historical narratives, the influence of media evolution on memory transformation, and the role of cultural symbols in evoking and interpreting cultural memory, gaining a deeper understanding of the significance and value of period dramas within the contemporary Chinese cultural context.

Period Dramas as Historical Narratives: Representation, Reconstruction, and Imagination

Period dramas, set against the backdrop of specific historical periods, inherently undertake the task of historical narration. They represent, reconstruct, and imagine history through artistic means, expressing their understanding and reflection on history. By artistically processing and fictionalizing historical events and figures, period dramas explore the possibilities of history and the complexities of human nature, prompting audiences to reflect on both history and the present. This section will delve into how period dramas "tell" history through their unique narrative approaches and how this "telling" seeks a balance between representation, reconstruction, and imagination, ultimately shaping our cognition and understanding of history.

Period dramas "represent" history by bringing past landscapes to life for the audience. This representation is not a mere replication or imitation but an artistic presentation based on historical materials and cultural contexts. For instance, *A Lifelong Journey*, through tracing the lives of three generations of the Zhou family, portrays the dramatic transformations in Chinese society over nearly five decades. The drama meticulously depicts details of social life in specific eras, such as clothing, food, and living environments, striving to recreate the social landscape of specific historical periods and providing audiences with a more intuitive understanding of social life in those times. While striving for authenticity, this "representation" is not entirely objective. It inevitably incorporates the creators' understanding and interpretation of history, as well as their choices and applications of narrative strategies. Nostalgia theory (Boym, 2001) offers a valuable lens for understanding how the representation of the past in period dramas evokes emotional resonance in audiences and how this resonance contributes to the construction of collective identity.

Period drama narratives also often "reconstruct" history. Based on the needs of the narrative, they rearrange and combine historical events and figures, even engaging in bold fictionalization and imagination, presenting a historical picture different from that found in history textbooks. Hayden White (1973), in his work *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, argues that historical writing inevitably involves a process of narrativization, with historians selecting and interpreting historical events based on their own perspectives and standpoints. As products of popular culture, period dramas often exhibit a more pronounced "reconstruction" of history. For example, in *Like a Flowing River*, the fates of the three main characters, Yunhui Song, Dongbao Lei, and Xun Yang, though fictional, reflect the circumstances and choices faced by different social groups during the early stages of reform and opening up. They also metaphorically represent the exploration and development of Chinese society during this transformative period. This reconstruction of history is not a distortion or denial of the past but a means of better demonstrating the complexity and multifaceted nature of history, prompting a deeper reflection on the past and its connection to the present.

In addition to "representation" and "reconstruction," period drama narratives also incorporate elements of "imagination." This imagination is not fabricated out of thin air but is based on reasonable conjecture and artistic creation within historical and cultural contexts. It can involve speculation about the inner lives of historical figures or hypothetical scenarios about the trajectory of historical events. *Where Dreams Begin*, for instance, sets the story of a group of young people in Beijing against the backdrop of the reform and opening-up era, showcasing their struggles and growth amidst the tide of change. While the drama does not depict specific major historical events, it captures the spirit and social atmosphere of the era through portraying the characters' daily lives and emotional experiences, resonating with audiences on themes of youth, dreams, and the passage of time. This "imagination" is not a fictionalization of history but a capturing and artistic expression of its spirit, enhancing the emotional impact and artistic quality of the drama and enriching our understanding and imagination of history. This creative interpretation aligns with the concept of "historical fiction" as a genre that blends historical accuracy with imaginative storytelling (Hutcheon, 1988).

As a form of historical narration, period dramas seek a balance between representation, reconstruction, and imagination, shaping our cognition and understanding of history through these approaches. They do not strive to restore the "truth" of history but aim to stimulate reflection on history and reality through artistic representations of the past. This "telling" of history requires both respect for historical facts and attention to artistic expression, endowing period dramas with both historical weight and artistic appeal. By representing, reconstructing, and imagining the past, period dramas create a narrative space that combines historical awareness and artistic sensibility, allowing viewers to engage in deeper thought and reflection about history and the present while enjoying the story.

Media Evolution and the Reshaping of Cultural Memory

Period dramas, as media products, not only reflect the media environment of specific historical periods but also actively participate in reshaping cultural memory through their narrative strategies and use of media technologies. This section will explore how period dramas depict media technologies from different historical periods, how media evolution influences the representation, interpretation, and dissemination of cultural memory, and ultimately how it shapes our understanding of the past and present. We will analyze how different media affect the reach and persistence of cultural memory, how they alter the authority of memory, and how they shape collective identity,

thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the cultural significance and value of period dramas in a mediated society.

Different media technologies imbue cultural memory with varying reach and persistence. In the era of oral culture, cultural memory relied primarily on collective storytelling and ritual performances, limiting its dissemination and making it susceptible to the constraints of time and space. As Ong (1982) notes, oral cultures depend on presence and memory, with knowledge and traditions transmitted solely through face-to-face communication. The advent of printing technology transformed the preservation and dissemination of cultural memory, with written records like genealogies and local gazetteers extending the reach and enhancing the persistence of cultural memory. As Eisenstein (1979) argues, print culture fostered the standardization and dissemination of knowledge, freeing the transmission of cultural memory from its reliance on individual recollection. Period dramas often depict print media such as letters, diaries, and newspapers to reflect the cultural memory of specific historical periods. For example, in *Romance of Our Parents*, the exchange of letters between Jie An and her family not only sustains familial bonds but also documents the social landscape and personal emotions of that era, becoming a precious form of cultural memory. This exemplifies the crucial role of media as carriers of cultural memory (Assmann, 2011).

Media evolution also influences the authority of cultural memory. In traditional societies, the authority of cultural memory often resided with family elders, religious leaders, and other figures of authority. With the rise of mass media, such as radio and television, the production and dissemination of cultural memory shifted, and its authority gradually transferred to state and media institutions. McLuhan (1964) famously asserted that "the medium is the message," arguing that the form of media itself shapes how information is conveyed and received. In period dramas, radio and television frequently appear as significant narrative elements. In *Like a Flowing River*, for example, national policies are disseminated through radio broadcasts, and social events are reported through television news. This media content not only influences the characters' perceptions and actions within the drama but also shapes the audience's cultural memory of that specific historical period, highlighting the powerful influence of mass media in constructing and disseminating cultural memory.

In the new media era, the proliferation of digital media, including the internet and mobile devices, has further transformed the production, dissemination, and consumption of cultural memory. The interactive and participatory nature of digital media enables ordinary individuals to participate in the construction and dissemination of cultural memory, aligning with Jenkins' (2006) theory of "participatory culture," which argues that in the new media environment, consumers also become producers and disseminators of culture. In *Our Times*, the depiction of the rise of the internet showcases the impact of emerging media technologies on people's lifestyles and social interactions, also foreshadowing profound changes in how cultural memory is produced and disseminated. By portraying the evolution of media technologies, period dramas not only reflect the changing times but also prompt audiences to contemplate the transmission and development of cultural memory. This echoes Hoskins' (2011) observation that media, memory, and metaphor are intricately linked. The development of media technology changes not only how we remember but also how we understand and express history.

The shift from individual to mediated memory represents a significant transformation brought about by the development of media technologies. Through their portrayal of media technologies from different historical periods and their depiction of characters' memory activities, period dramas vividly illustrate the influence of media evolution on the transformation of memory. The development of media technologies has not only altered the externalization and persistence of memory and the ways in which it is shared, but it has also reshaped historical narratives and cultural

identities. By exploring the complex relationship between media and memory, period dramas not only enrich their narrative dimensions but also provide valuable insights into the transformation and cultural transmission of memory in a mediated society.

Cultural Symbols and the Awakening of Era Memory: Symbolism, Metaphor, and Resonance

Cultural symbols are like pearls scattered along the river of time, carrying the cultural memory of specific eras and evoking emotions and memories of the past. Period dramas, as cultural products, utilize a rich array of cultural symbols to depict the social landscape and cultural atmosphere of particular historical periods, resonating with the audience. These symbols can be popular songs, fashion styles, or objects and scenes with symbolic meaning. They act as triggers of memory, awakening emotions and memories associated with specific eras and helping people better understand history and culture. This section will explore the use of cultural symbols in period dramas, how they awaken era memory, and how they shape the audience's understanding of history and culture through symbolism, metaphor, and resonance.

Cultural symbols condense and express the cultural connotations of specific eras in symbolic forms. As Barthes' (1957) semiotic theory reveals, symbols are not merely simple referents but carry rich cultural meanings and ideologies. In period dramas, seemingly ordinary objects or scenes are often imbued with specific symbolic meanings, becoming a concentrated expression of the spirit of a particular era. For example, in *Where Dreams Begin*, objects like military-green satchels and "28" bicycles symbolize the material scarcity and simple life of that era. These symbols are not just objects but emblems of the era's spirit, evoking memories of youth for those who lived through it and helping younger generations understand their parents' experiences and the social landscape of that time.

Cultural symbols often express deeper cultural meanings through metaphors. Lacan (2001) argues that metaphor is a crucial mechanism in language and culture, expressing complex and subtle meanings by substituting one concept for another. For example, in *Our Times*, the recurring image of "setting sail" not only refers to the beginnings and development of China's information industry but also metaphorically represents the era of transformation brought about by reform and opening up and the shifts in individual destinies. This metaphorical expression allows cultural symbols to transcend superficial symbolic meanings and prompt the audience to engage in deeper reflection on the spirit of the times and social change.

The use of cultural symbols can evoke emotional resonance in the audience, thereby enhancing the emotional impact and persuasiveness of period dramas. Fiske's (2011) theory of "textual pleasure" suggests that popular culture texts attract audiences because they offer emotional and intellectual satisfaction. Cultural symbols in period dramas, by evoking the audience's collective memory and shared emotional experiences, can trigger strong emotional resonance. For instance, in *Romance of Our Parents*, popular songs from specific eras, such as "Moscow Nights," evoke shared memories among audiences who lived through those times, resonating with their feelings about love, family, and friendship. This emotional resonance transforms period dramas from mere representations of history into awakenings of emotion and memory, strengthening the emotional connection between the drama and the audience.

Period dramas weave the memories and emotions of specific eras into their narratives through the use of rich cultural symbols. These symbols awaken the audience's era memory and deepen their understanding of history and culture through symbolism, metaphor, and resonance. The use of cultural symbols transforms period dramas from simple representations of history into emotional links connecting the past and present, the individual and the collective,

playing a significant role in cultural transmission and emotional communication in contemporary society.

This section has explored how period dramas "sculpt time" and represent and interpret cultural memory through three dimensions: historical narrative, media transformation, and cultural symbols. Period dramas construct a narrative space that combines historical awareness and artistic sensibility by representing, reconstructing, and imagining history (White, 1973). They reveal the impact of media evolution on cultural memory by depicting different media technologies (McLuhan, 1964). And they evoke era memory and emotional resonance in audiences through the use of cultural symbols (Barthes, 1957). These narrative strategies transform period dramas from mere retrospectives of the past into cultural bridges connecting the past, present, and future, playing a crucial role in transmitting cultural memory, shaping collective identity, and fostering social cohesion. These narratives ultimately contribute to a richer and more nuanced understanding of the ongoing dialogue between individual experience, collective memory, and the historical forces that shape contemporary Chinese society.

Conclusion

This study, framed by the theory of *lieux de mémoire*, has explored how Chinese period dramas construct, perform, and negotiate collective memory through three dimensions: the dispersion of spatial representation, the rituals of emotional interaction, and narratives that sculpt time. The research reveals that period dramas do not merely represent the past but create a dynamic and tension-filled memory space by skillfully employing space, ritual, and narrative, interweaving individual, communicative, and cultural memories. The significance of this study lies in its application of the *lieux de mémoire* theory to the study of Chinese period dramas and its in-depth exploration of the cultural memory function of these dramas through the lens of space, ritual, and narrative. Specifically, it extends the application of Nora's framework to a non-Western context and a specific media genre, enriching our understanding of how *lieux de mémoire* can be formed and function in a mediated and rapidly changing society. Moreover, this study offers valuable insights into the cultural politics of contemporary China, revealing how the past is selectively represented, interpreted, and negotiated in popular media to construct a shared cultural identity and foster social cohesion.

The study found that spatial dispersion plays multiple roles in period dramas. It is not only the backdrop against which stories unfold but also a significant factor shaping characters' destinies and influencing individual memory. Homes, regions, and other spatial settings are imbued with rich symbolic meaning, becoming *lieux de mémoire* that connect the past and present, the individual and the collective. For example, the experience of dispersion evokes longing for homeland and family, which in turn translates into an affirmation of traditional culture and values. Regarding rituals, the study found that rituals in period dramas are not merely displays of cultural customs but also vital avenues for emotional interaction and shared meaning-making. Traditional rituals, such as weddings, funerals, and holiday celebrations, strengthen social bonds and transmit cultural values. Meanwhile, commercial rituals have emerged, bearing witness to the changing times and symbolizing the identity of specific groups. In terms of narrative, period dramas construct multi-layered cultural memories through the representation, reconstruction, and imagination of history, along with the use of media technologies and cultural symbols.

The significance of this study lies in its application of the *lieux de mémoire* theory to the study of Chinese period dramas and its in-depth exploration of the cultural memory function of these dramas through the lens of space, ritual, and narrative. This not only enriches our understanding of period dramas but also offers new perspectives on cultural memory and identity formation in Chinese

society, particularly by revealing how period dramas construct *lieux de mémoire* to connect individual and collective memory, and how, in the context of rapid social change, they sustain cultural identity and social cohesion through narratives of the past. However, this study also has limitations. Due to the limited scope of case selection, the conclusions may not be applicable to all types of period dramas. Furthermore, the study primarily focuses on textual analysis of the dramas themselves, paying less attention to audience reception and interpretation. Future research could incorporate audience studies to explore the specific mechanisms through which the construction of cultural memory in period dramas operates at the audience level, examining how different demographic groups or social communities engage with and interpret these narratives. Additionally, exploring period dramas from other cultural contexts and comparing them with Chinese period dramas could provide valuable insights into the similarities and differences in how collective memory is constructed and negotiated through this genre across different societies.

Building on the findings and limitations of this study, future research can be developed in several directions. First, the scope of case studies could be broadened to include comparative analyses of period dramas from different eras and genres to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their cultural memory function. Second, cross-cultural comparative studies could be conducted to explore the similarities and differences in the construction of cultural memory in period dramas across different cultural backgrounds. Finally, more diverse research methods, such as combining textual analysis with interviews and surveys, could be employed to conduct more in-depth and comprehensive research on the construction of cultural memory in period dramas.

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