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The Functional Sites of “Sites of Memory” in Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual School in Budapest

Abstract

Various aspects of the culture and educational practices of the Hungarian-Chinese bilingual school in Budapest's 15th district, including educational materials, educational drama, and educational rituals, among others, reflect the functional sites of Pierre Nora's memory sites. These sites are crucial in shaping students' cultural identities and connecting them to their heritage. Incorporating sites of memory into their school life can help students understand and identify their cultural roots, develop a sense of belonging, and acquire the linguistic and cultural competencies needed for cross-cultural communication. In this paper, based on related memory theories, I explore the definition of functional sites of memory in schools. Combining the fieldwork in Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual School, it is believed that there are many functional sites of memory in the bilingual school. The three representative functional sites studied here are textbooks, dramas, and rituals. The paper examines how these sites are used in bilingual schools to enhance cultural understanding, promote linguistic and cultural competence, and foster a sense of belonging among students. I will also discuss how these functional sites of memory reconstruct or reinterpret Chinese cultural memory. The conclusion suggests that the three sites of memory discussed in this paper, as typical bearers of memories in school play, on the one hand, a role in reasserting the “Chineseness” of Chinese students' memories. On the other hand, Chinese students' memories also change as school life adds new content to it.

Keywords: functional sites, sites of memory, cultural memory, bilingual school, educational anthropology research



Introduction

Nora offers a narrow conceptualization of “sites of memory”¹, defining it as “memory crystallizes and secretes itself”², focusing on monuments, museums, archives, slogans, and commemorative ceremonies, which have a palpable cross-relationship with reality. In his broader understanding of the term, he defined “sites of memory” as enshrining cultural memories until they are needed again.³ These sites transport people to different times and places or speak of their connection to the past. Sites help people to maintain their identity and serve real, symbolic, and functional purposes.⁴ This paper argues that school is also a site of memory. The study was conducted at the *Budapest Bilingual School*, located in District 15, the only school with Chinese and Hungarian as official languages of instruction. There are other schools in Budapest with Chinese as the official language, such as the *Chinese-Canadian Bilingual School*, the *Chinese-German Bilingual School*, and the *Chinese Hua Wen School*. However, these schools are not part of the official Hungarian education system. This feature distinguishes the Hungarian-Chinese bilingual school from the other schools. Through the discussion, we say that the functional sites of the school site of memory are the physical subjects of the school, the non-physical subjects, and the school activities that carry the transmission and preservation of collective memory. Fieldwork revealed that school textbooks, educational drama, and educational rituals serve as typical representatives of the functions of reconstructing, reinterpreting, and transmitting memory.

Functional Sites of Memory

The concept of “sites of memory” was introduced by French historian Pierre Nora in his seminal work *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1984–1992). According to Nora, “sites of memory” are places where the memory of a particular community or nation is preserved, transmitted, and celebrated. These sites can be physical, symbolic, or functional.⁵ Real and symbolic references to the physical spaces and cultural artifacts evoke memory. Functional sites refer to the social practices that ensure the transmission and preservation of collec-

¹ Nora 1989: 19.

² Nora 1989: 7.

³ Nora 2009: preface XVII.

⁴ Nora 1989: 18.

⁵ Nora 1989: 18.

tive memories. That is, functional sites of memory refer to the processes and practices that enable the creation, dissemination, and preservation of collective memories. These sites are not static. They are dynamic and evolve as societies change and new forms of memory emerge. This dynamic is because collective memory is a dynamic concept that has evolved and developed over time and in history.⁶ Functional sites serve as symbolic nodes connecting memory and history to the present. They are places where collective memory is performed and enacted rather than stored. These sites are not fixed in time or space but constantly evolve and adapt to changing social and cultural contexts, reflecting “an interdependence between space and social relations”⁷.

Examples of functional sites of memory include museums, archives, memorials, and commemorative practices such as holidays and anniversaries. Museums, for instance, are not merely repositories of artifacts but are also important sites for producing and disseminating knowledge about the past.⁸ On the other hand, archives serve as repositories of historical records, enabling researchers to study and interpret past events. In addition to these institutional sites, functional sites of memory include practices and traditions passed down through generations, such as oral history, storytelling, and rituals. These practices serve as a means of transmitting cultural values, beliefs, and memories across time and space.⁹

However, functional sites of memory are not without their challenges. As societies change, the significance of certain practices and institutions may shift, leading to the potential loss or erasure of specific memories. Furthermore, the interpretation and representation of past events in functional sites of memory can be contentious, leading to debates about whose memories are being preserved and whose are being silenced. Marita Sturken supports this perspective. In her book *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, Sturken explores the challenges of memory and its representation, arguing that memory is not a fixed entity but rather a complex and contested process that is shaped by cultural, political, and social factors. Sturken’s work illustrates how the significance of certain practices and institutions can shift as societies change, leading to the potential loss or erasure of specific memories.¹⁰

⁶ Assmann–Czaplicka 1995: 129.

⁷ Gaál-Szabó 2012: 481.

⁸ Nora 1989: 18.

⁹ Halbwachs 1992: 32.

¹⁰ Sturken 1997: 13.

Based on the above, one critical aspect of functional sites of memory is their role in providing access to information and knowledge. Archives, for example, are essential for preserving historical documents and making them available for research and study. Libraries and universities also play a critical role in disseminating knowledge and promoting intellectual inquiry. Another critical aspect of functional sites of memory is their role in shaping our collective memory and identity. Archives, museums, and universities are not neutral institutions but are shaped by the social contexts in which they operate according to what to preserve and how to interpret the past.

Therefore, functional sites of memory in Pierre Nora's theory refer to the social practices and institutions that ensure the transmission and preservation of collective memories. They are dynamic and can evolve as societies change and new forms of memory emerge, but they also face challenges related to the interpretation and representation of the past. In Nora's words, "A lieu de mémoire is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community."¹¹ Thus, the school can be understood itself as a site of memory. The functional sites of Pierre Nora's sites of memory embodied in the bilingual school can be seen in the social practices and institutional structures that transmit and preserve cultural heritage and collective memories. So, in this study, the functional sites of the school site of memory are treated as the physical subjects of the school, the non-physical subjects, and the school activities that carry the transmission and preservation of collective memory. In Budapest, Hungarian-Chinese bilingual school, it was found through fieldwork that the most representative functional sites are school textbooks, educational dramas, and educational rituals.

School Textbooks

Chinese scholars Liu Dawei and Zhou Hongyu have clearly put forward the view that textbooks and educational dramas can serve as functional sites of the site of memory. They argue that functional memory is generally carried in textbooks, educational pictures, and educational dramas in schools. They also suggest that schools can make textbooks a critical site of memory by playing the role of textbooks and writing textbooks with local and school characteristics.¹²

¹¹ Nora 2009: preface. XVII.

¹² Liu-Zhou 2021: 63. All translations are mine – L. M.

Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual School differentiates between groups of students based on whether Chinese is their native language or not and on their proficiency in Chinese. For Chinese students whose mother tongue is Chinese, the school uses the practical textbooks of the compulsory education curriculum standards, compiled by the China Institute of Curriculum and Textbook and the Primary Language Curriculum and Textbook Research and Development Center, and published by the People’s Education Publishing House. This type of textbook is written entirely in Chinese. This textbook type is intended for immigrant students who have just immigrated to Hungary and are not fluent in Hungarian. The aim is to help the children to establish a connection with their home country and to adapt more quickly to school life after immigration while learning other languages, such as Hungarian. The other type of textbook is for non-native Chinese speakers. Depending on the grade level, *Kuaile Hanyu* (快乐汉语) is used for Grade 1, *Easy Steps to Chinese Textbook* (轻松学中文) for Grades 2 to 8, and *New Practical Chinese Reader* (新实用汉语) for Grades 9 to 12.¹³

Especially in Confucian culture, the Hungarian-Chinese bilingual school has set up a Confucius classroom. And the school also has a statue of Confucius in the hall. Therefore, students learn quotes by and stories about Confucius, and about Confucian culture. When students come to the school’s public lobby for play and see the Confucius statue, they will consciously or unconsciously recall memories related to Confucian culture. When students interact with others, they are also regulated in their behavior by the cultural values taught in the Confucius classroom.

An example is presented by the Confucius quote that students learn in class: “When three people walk, there is a teacher in them”¹⁴. Students are taught to learn humility when interacting with others. There must be something to learn from the words and actions of others. Choose the good things to learn from others, and when you see their flaws, reflect on whether you have the same flaws, and if so, correct them. After taking such a lesson, students will be consciously influenced by the class. In addition, in the textbook, the chapter content contains Chinese cultural knowledge with Chinese characteristics. For example, in “*Kuaile Hanyu* (快乐汉语),” there is a chapter on “Where is your home.” There are two children in the picture in the textbook with the text:

“One child asks, ‘Where is your home?’

*The other child answers, ‘My home is in Beijing.’”*¹⁵

¹³ Sources are from the author’s fieldwork in Hungarian-Chinese bilingual school in Budapest.

¹⁴ Sources are from the author’s fieldwork in Hungary-Chinese bilingual school in Budapest.

¹⁵ Li-Luo (eds.) 2003: 8.

Then the teacher asks the students where they are from based on the textbook content. When Chinese students talk about their hometowns, they easily substitute their memories with China.¹⁶ Through the classroom discussion, it was easy for the children from China to tell their memories of their hometown. This form of classroom interaction through collective participation is the same as Maurice Halbwachs's argument that memory is produced collectively. It is only through participation in concrete social interactions and interactions that individuals can create memories.

With regard to the relationship between individual and collective memory, individuals recall by placing themselves in the position of the group. Still, it is also certain that the group's memory is realized through individual memory and crystalizes itself within individual memory.¹⁷ The essence of collective memory is the reconstruction of the "past" based on present needs with "the capacity to convey [...] to consolidate and retain individual and group identity"¹⁸. According to Halbwachs, how people construct and narrate the past depends mainly on contemporary ideas, interests, and expectations. The construction of memory is subject to the control of power.¹⁹ Collective memory is always a reconstruction of the past based on the needs of the present, on specific existing ideas, interests, and demands. In this sense, collective memory is also called "social memory" by Halbwachs. Harald Welzer defines social memory as the sum of the social experiences of all members of an ego group.²⁰ The purpose of the materials used in bilingual schools is to enable students to learn Chinese and understand Chinese culture. These materials also help students understand and deepen their impressions of Chinese culture and awaken their own "Chineseness"²¹. The social memory of the group also gives Chinese students a deeper understanding of their identity.

Using textbooks, we draw on the cultural coherence gained by interpreting and annotating the text. Texts are cultural carriers that appear after the creation of texts. The text is not a form of transmission but an object to be transmitted, and "meaning is present only when one transmits the text. Once a text ceases to be used, it ceases to be a carrier of meaning. It becomes its tomb when only the exegete has the possibility of reviving meaning by means of the

¹⁶ Sources are from the author's fieldwork in Hungary-Chinese bilingual school in Budapest.

¹⁷ Halbwachs 1992: 71.

¹⁸ Gaál-Szabó 2019: 120.

¹⁹ Halbwachs 1992: 43–45.

²⁰ Welzer 2007: 111.

²¹ The quality or state of being Chinese.

art of exegesis and annotation”²². Jan Assmann argues that the classical texts of great faith value and intellectual significance produced in the history of the nation, which were widely disseminated through recitation, copying, and printing, became normative documents that shaped the beliefs, ideas, and behavior of the country, and were thus considered religious sacred texts or classics of philosophy, history, and literature. Each subsequent generation has maintained a consistent understanding of these holy texts or classics through interpretation and annotation, thus ensuring the continuity of national culture.²³ The way cultural memory is preserved requires the interpretation of texts.

For example, in the Chinese culture class at the Hungarian-Chinese bilingual school, the teacher searched for a text that tells the story and legend of the Chinese New Year to make the students understand the origin of the Chinese New Year. The main storyline is:

“According to legend, a monster called ‘Nian’ in ancient China had a long green face and fangs, sharp horns and claws, and viciousness. The Nian beast lives in the mountains. Every New Year’s Eve, to come down to the hills to eat livestock to harm people. Therefore, every New Year’s Eve on this day, every family people are away from home to avoid the harm of the beast; this is called ‘New Year.’

One New Year’s Eve, people are taking refuge in the mountains with their young and old, and from outside the village came an older man begging. Some people sealed the windows and locked the doors, some packing, everywhere a scene of panic, and no one cared about the praying older man. Only an old woman at the east end of the village wrapped dumplings for the older man to eat and persuaded him to go to the mountains to escape the beast. In return for the old woman’s kindness, the older man told her that the beast feared red, fire, and explosions. And he asked her to wear red clothes, red paper on the door, red candles, and burning bamboo in the yard to make explosions.

The year beast broke into the village in the middle of the night. Found the village lights, its eyes were blinding red and forced to open, and heard loud firecrackers from home, so the body trembled and fled. Since then, people have known how to drive the Nian beast away. At every New Year’s Eve, every family pastes red couplets, firecrackers, and household candlelight. Early in the morning of the first day, but also to visit friends and relatives to say hello and congratulate each other over the ravages of the year beast. Later, this custom became more and more widespread and became the grandest traditional festival of Chinese folk.”²⁴

²² Assmann 2011: 89–90.

²³ Assmann 2011: 87–88.

²⁴ Sources are from the author’s fieldwork in Hungary-Chinese bilingual school in Budapest. The text was obtained from the website provided by the schoolteachers. <http://hmcc.hhtnews.com/p/229419.html>

As a household story in China, the story contains cultural elements of the Chinese New Year tradition. The name of the Chinese New Year comes from the Chinese character “Nian” (年). Dumplings, red couplets, and firecrackers can all be found in this story. This story easily recalls the collective memory of students who have just immigrated to Hungary. As Maurice Halbwachs argues, memory is a social construct shaped by collective experiences and social interactions.²⁵ In other words, memory is not solely an individual phenomenon but is embedded in collective identities and shared experiences. This is consistent with the idea that Pierre Nora’s sites of memory are physical and functional sites created and maintained by social groups to preserve their collective identities and histories. The textbook is the physical memory site, while the “New Year” story is the non-physical memory site. Even the dumplings and the red couplets in the story serve as physical memory sites, while the Chinese red serves as the non-physical memory site for Chinese students. It is evident that textbooks with Chinese characteristics, and the Chinese cultural course that serves them, are integrated into the student’s lifeworld and imprinted into their memories through collective experiences.

Educational Dramas and Rituals

Drama can also be thought of as a special school ritual. As Liu and Zhou argue, educational dramas can also be performed for the functional memory of the sites of memory. In their perspective, through the integration of historical performance dramas, by passing on the performance from generation to generation, a historical and cultural identity is thus formed.²⁶ For example, on October 23, 2022, and March 14, 2023, the school held drama performances commemorating the Hungarian Revolution of 1848. The two performances were performed at different grade levels, and the costumes for the performances were styled differently. But what is the same is that in order to involve both Hungarian and Chinese students in the theatrical performances, the school designed the drama performances in such a way that Chinese students would also be involved in the commemoration of the Hungarian Revolution. And by holding such theatrical performances every year, different grades participate in the performances, and the actors change, but it becomes a representative site of memory for the school. According to Assmann, cultural memory is

²⁵ Halbwachs 1992: 120–121, 188.

²⁶ Liu–Zhou 2021: 63.

fixed by objective externalizers such as words, images, dances, etc. It serves as a dedicated bearer of tradition due to the reliance on highly formed rituals, festivals, etc. Therefore, educational dramas become “ritual forms that through repetition inscribe cultural memory in the identity”²⁷ and serve as containers for preserving memories in the sites of memory.²⁸ As Assmann says, “Sites of memory are places where groups of people engage in public activity through which they express a collectively shared knowledge of the past, on which a group’s sense of unity and individuality is based.”²⁹ Therefore, we can assume that Chinese students’ collective memory is rewritten by participating in school plays and watching drama performances. Since most of the plays performed in the Hungarian-Chinese bilingual school are about historical events in Hungary, when Chinese students participate in these activities, new elements are added to the cultural memory of the Chinese students. In this way, the cultural memory of the Chinese students is reinterpreted – it becomes a synthesis of Chinese and Hungarian cultural memory.

The educational drama performances mentioned above can be seen as special educational rituals. As Emile Durkheim proposes, the social function of ritual suggests that rituals have collective and symbolic significance and can help individuals establish social connections and a sense of belonging.³⁰ Through contextualized scenarios, role-playing, and emotional experiences, educational dramas can help students develop knowledge and emotional relationships and promote identity development.

Assmann argues that cultural memory can be embodied through rituals and that it fixes in some form the experiences and memories that should be engraved in mind and keep them relevant.³¹ This is done by drawing scenes and histories that occurred in a previous period into the framework of the present that continues to move forward, thus producing memories. Therefore, cultural memory is not just about recalling the culture of the past but, more importantly, about establishing its connection to the present and seeking its meaning for the gift. This provides the conditions for cultural memory to be reinterpreted. Educational dramas pull the students’ memory back to the last time through their performance and viewing, which provides the scene and space for the students to reconstruct their memory. In addition to educational

²⁷ Gaál-Szabó 2017: 78.

²⁸ Assmann 2011: 74.

²⁹ Assmann–Czaplicka 1995: 132.

³⁰ Durkheim 1912: 56.

³¹ Assmann 2011: 42.

drama, other school rituals in the Hungarian-Chinese bilingual school undergo construction in the context and needs of the present. The rituals are equipped to store, retrieve, and communicate in such a way that the knowledge that consolidates identity is preserved in a solid, living, and lasting way. An example is the annual “Chinese Ambassador’s Scholarship Award Ritual”, which is unique to the Hungarian-Chinese Bilingual School. This is a ritual that distinguishes the school from local schools based on the particular context in which it was established. The use of Hungarian and bilingual interpretations of the rituals in the course of the rituals makes them more characteristic of the school. This reflects the function of the cultural memory of the ceremony and the need to dynamically reconstruct the procedure of the ritual in the course of the ritual in order to keep it consistent with the present.

Conclusion

The study was completed in a bilingual school with a dual Hungarian and Chinese background in District 15, Budapest, Hungary. By discussing the functional sites of memory, the paper argues that the school is also a site of memory. There are a number of functional sites that exist within this site of memory. The functional sites of memory in the school are the physical subjects of the school, the non-physical subjects, and the school activities that carry the transmission and preservation of collective memory. The fieldwork revealed that school textbooks, educational drama, and educational rituals as typical representatives carry the functions of reconstructing, reinterpreting, and transmitting memory. The textbooks serve as the functional site of the physical sites of memory, while the content related to Chinese culture presented in the book serves as the functional site of the non-physical sites of memory. In the Chinese cultural courses, the textbooks serve thus to foster the students’ understanding of and identification with Chinese culture. These physical and non-physical functional mnemonics enter students’ memories through collective memory experiences and, in the process, awaken Chinese students’ Chineseness and deepen their cultural memories in China.

Educational dramas serve as an additional functional site of memory in the school. The background of the dramas in the Hungarian-Chinese bilingual school is Hungarian historical events. The research reveals that the school consciously included Chinese students in the drama performances, changing the cultural memory of the Chinese students. In this way, the culture of the Chinese students as well is reinterpreted as having a combination of Chinese

and Hungarian cultural memory. According to the survey, it was found that the school has one-third of Chinese students, so the number is not as high as the number of Hungarian students. However, the school consciously controls the ratio of Hungarian and Chinese students' participation in the activities. It is ensured that Chinese students are also involved in various school activities. In this context, new elements are added to the cultural memory of Chinese students, and their memory is reconstructed and reinterpreted in Hungary.

Educational dramas can be seen as educational rituals. Rituals are the functional sites of the school's typical sites of memory. School rituals are constructed through the context and needs of the moment, which makes them have the role of storing and transmitting memories. This means that the Hungarian Chinese bilingual school offers some rituals to take place in the school by combining the characteristics of both the Hungarian and Chinese contexts. For example, the school does not only hold plays with Hungarian background events but also cultural events with Chinese characteristics. For example, the Chinese Lunar New Year celebration, the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival, Chinese National Day, and other ceremonial events.

In this paper, by discussing the functional sites of memory in Hungarian-Chinese bilingual schools, I argue that these functional sites carry the role of storing and transmitting memories. Through these functional sites, Chinese students are either awakened to the “Chineseness” of their memories or reconstructed and reinterpreted in Hungary during their school life.

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