



Bottom-Up: The Subject-Centered Stance of Memory Studies in Folklore

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Abstract: Since the early twentieth century, memory research has progressively transcended the confines of individual psychology to become a central concern across the humanities and social sciences. From Halbwachs's "collective memory" and Connerton's "social memory" to the Assmanns' "cultural memory" and Ricoeur's narrative-centred philosophy of memory, the theoretical genealogy of memory studies has grown steadily richer. Drawing on this genealogy, this paper examines the disciplinary pathways and theoretical stance of folklore studies within the field of memory research. It argues that folklore, as a discipline oriented towards vernacular tradition and everyday culture, should uphold a "bottom-up" research position in which ordinary people — rather than states, institutions, or elite actors — serve as the primary subjects of memory. By means of life-history methods and attention to local cultural consciousness, folklore studies can illuminate the agency and subjectivity of folk memory in ways that complement, and critically engage with, the dominant frameworks of collective and cultural memory theory.

Keywords: folklore studies, memory research, subjectivity

1. Introduction

Memory is not merely an individual psychological event; it is equally a product of historical sedimentation, social construction, and cultural transmission. Since the early twentieth century, the "memory turn" has profoundly reshaped the research paradigms of the humanities and social sciences, conventionally traced to Halbwachs's 1925 *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, which established that individual memory is always embedded within social group frameworks [1], subsequently expanding memory research across sociology, history, anthropology, and cultural studies.

As a discipline centred on vernacular tradition and everyday culture, folklore studies stands in a natural relationship of kinship with memory research: folk legends, festival rituals, and oral narratives all carry the recollections and imaginings of ordinary people regarding the past. Yet how folklore should engage with memory research — and where its disciplinary advantages lie — has not been sufficiently addressed. This paper reviews the theoretical genealogy of memory studies, examines the pathways by which folklore has entered this field, and argues for a disciplinary stance in which the "folk" constitute the subject and "transmission" the core.

2. The Academic Genealogy of Memory Theory and Analysis of Core Concepts

The twentieth century witnessed a fundamental reorientation of memory studies away from individual psychology. Halbwachs formulated the theory of "social frameworks" of memory: individuals recall "by placing themselves in the perspective of a group," and "no memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society" [1]. Connerton's *How Societies Remember* (1989) showed that bodily practice and ritual are the principal vehicles of social memory — folkloric rites are paradigmatic carriers of "practical memory" [2]. Jan and Aleida Assmann distinguished "communicative memory" (oral, spanning three to four generations) from "cultural memory" (fixed through writing, ritual, and monuments, transmissible across centuries); the latter's "connective structure" presentizes the past and provides the common foundation of group identity [3][4]. Ricoeur argued that narrative confers coherence upon the past through "emplotment," conjures the absent into presence through "verbal images," and confirms the "it-once-was" through "representation" [5], thus actively shaping rather than merely recording memory [6]. Wang Mingke introduced "historical memory" into the Chinese context, showing that ethnic identity is constructed through selective remembering and forgetting, with memory and amnesia together maintaining ethnic boundaries [7].

In sum, memory studies completed a twofold transition — from the "individual" to the "social," and from the "psychological" to the "cultural" — subsequently widening to incorporate narrative, embodiment, and digital media dimensions.

3. Intersecting Paths of Folklore Studies and Memory Research

From its disciplinary inception, folklore studies maintained an intrinsic connection with the problem of memory. Early

folklorists collecting folk tales, ballads, and customs were motivated by the impulse to rescue a “vanishing past” — itself a form of memory politics. Yet the deliberate theoretical appropriation of “memory” within Chinese folklore studies was comparatively belated, emerging only from the 1990s onward as the memory turn fermented internationally and the ICH protection movement rose domestically.

Existing research can broadly be organized into three categories. Functional research investigates how folkloric phenomena generate and maintain memory, examining how festivals such as the Spring Festival and Qingming transmit collective experience through cyclic re-enactment. Pattern and mechanism research analyses the organizational logic and transmission pathways of folk memory, including oral formulaic operation and the relationship between legend variation and memory reconstruction. Subjectivity research asks who remembers, why, and what remembering means for identity — the pathway most fully embodying folklore’s disciplinary stance.

In contemporary practice, Wang Ziwei’s (2025) study of Sanjiadian Village, Beijing, offers a representative case: the village transformed a “disaster memory” of Yongding River flooding into belief in water deities and ritual cohesion, and during the annual Miaofen Mountain pilgrimage villagers repeatedly activate recollections of shared history within ritually constituted time-space [8].

Zhao Shiyu demonstrated that ordinary people actively construct historical memory through oral narration, collective ritual, and local custom [9]; Wang Xiaokui explored how disaster experience is transformed into a “disaster culture” functioning across generations as warning and consolidating force [10]. These trajectories position ordinary people as active agents in the production of memory rather than mere recipients of elite narrative.

4. The Subjectivity of Folk Memory: The Disciplinary Stance of Folklore Studies

Halbwachs’s “social frameworks” risk reducing the individual to a passive receptacle; cultural memory theory’s institutionalist orientation focuses principally on elite texts and official rituals, obscuring the memory practices of ordinary people; even Ricoeur’s examination of historical narrative remains largely at the level of professional historiography. The distinctive contribution of folklore studies lies in its sustained attention to the “folk”: not an abstract “people” but concrete, living ordinary individuals — the village elder presiding over sacrificial rites, the grandmother recounting family histories, the migrant worker returning to sweep ancestral graves at Qingming. Folklore insists that the everyday practices of these “small figures” constitute the most durable foundation of cultural memory.

Methodologically, the “life history” approach captures individual memory’s subjectivity: through in-depth interviewing and sustained fieldwork, researchers trace how a specific person constructs, revises, and transmits memories over a lifetime, revealing tensions between individual and collective memory and fissures between official and folk oral narrative. Attention to “local cultural consciousness” further reveals how ordinary people form a sense of selfhood through the informal cultural signs of custom, taboo, and place-name legend.

The “bottom-up” stance guards against the instrumentalization of memory research as an accessory to state narrative or cultural politics. When ICH labels are applied on a large scale, a top-down “selection of memory” occurs: certain traditions are elevated while others are overlooked or suppressed. The folklorist’s responsibility is to maintain critical vigilance throughout — archiving “forgotten memories” and lending voice to “silent subjects.”

The digital media age has opened new possibilities for the subjective practice of folk memory: new platforms introduce pathways for the “living transmission” of cultural memory across temporal and spatial boundaries [11], but when algorithmic logic intervenes in memory’s selection and presentation, whose memory is “uploaded” and whose is submerged remains a political question of subject-power. Folklore studies must actively explore technological potential while maintaining persistent critical inquiry into the power mechanisms of memory production.

5. Conclusion

The flourishing of memory studies reflects the modern quest for what makes us who we are. Each successive advance — from Halbwachs to Ricoeur, from the Assmanns to Wang Mingke — has expanded our capacity to understand human historical experience. Folklore’s engagement with this landscape represents both a response to interdisciplinary trends and a reaffirmation of its disciplinary mission: to study the culture that the “folk” transmit, one must first respect the “folk” as subjects. The distinctive contribution of folklore studies to memory research lies not in providing new macro-level frameworks but in deploying meticulous fieldwork and sustained attention to individual life experience to bridge grand theory and micro-level practice; folklore’s commitment to the subjectivity of ordinary people is at once the discipline’s *raison d’être* and its irreplaceable core value in memory research.

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