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## Digital transcultural memory fosters shared human memory

With the advancement of globalization and the development of digital technology, memory now circulates across nations, cultures, and social groups with increasing frequency. In this context, transcultural memory has become a defining sociocultural phenomenon of the digital age.

### Transcultural turn in memory studies

In the 1980s, disciplines such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, political science, literature, and journalism and communication witnessed a surge of interest in memory studies, elevating memory to a major topic of scholarly inquiry. Entering the 21st century, the rapid expansion of the internet and digital media ushered in an era in which digital memory has become a dominant form. Collective memory theory, a key theory in memory research, focuses on how memory forms and circulates within particular boundaries or social groups. Through canonical texts, festive rituals, commemorative spaces, and other cultural sites or mechanisms, societies generate, sustain, revise, and enrich memory. German scholars Jan Assmann

and Aleida Assmann conceptualized these processes as “cultural memory”—a way of remembering through culture. As a key system through which collective memory is produced and transmitted, cultural memory plays a vital role in human civilization and individual development.

Research on collective and cultural memory has long been dominated by a nation- or state-centered perspective. It concentrated primarily on memory issues closely related to nationhood, ethnicity, or locality, while paying insufficient attention to the transcultural circulation of memory. To address this gap, a transcultural turn has emerged in memory studies. German scholar Astrid Erll introduced the metaphor of “traveling memory” to describe the constant movement of people, media, memory forms, content, and practices in the production process of cultural memory. Tracing these movements entails establishing a global framework for memory studies from a transcultural perspective, which can inspire new practices and new ways of imagining how memory circulates across cultural bound-

aries—a key topic in the study of transcultural communication.

### Transcultural memory in digital age

Transcultural memory is not confined to fixed regions, localities, or geographically defined nations or groups. In the digital age, an expanding volume of transcultural memory takes shape in digital space, where global issues become part of local experience and diverse, transcultural communities engage with one another on the basis of shared memory.

Today, transcultural memory tends to take four primary forms: memory produced through transcultural experience, most often expressed and disseminated digitally; digital memory emerging from the transcultural circulation of identical or similar memory content; transcultural memory created within online communities; and transcultural memory generated through “digital visits.” In addition, global public events represent typical arenas in which transcultural memory forms and circulates.

The flourishing of transcultural memory practices in the digital era has opened new opportunities

for connection and created dense memory networks, while also raising issues that require careful attention. For instance, the producers of transcultural memory are no longer limited to mass media or other traditional social institutions, posing challenges to the authority of memory. Competition—and even conflict—among diverse memory agents, including “non-human actors” such as intelligent robots, further complicates collective memory construction. Digital forms lead to massive, expansive, and accelerating memories, while fragmented and individualized memories challenge the certainty of understanding and the stability of identity. False memories, such as mockumentaries and fabricated “counter-memories,” further threaten the pursuit of truth.

Transcultural memory represents a vital mechanism for fostering shared human memory. In digital form, it can transcend traditional spatial and cultural boundaries and contribute to reconstructing global publicness. By moving beyond single pathways for cultural memory and more effectively connecting global and local memo-

ries—including memories of the self and of the Other—transcultural memory fosters the emergence of common, shared memory and contributes to building a community with a shared future for humanity.

For international audiences, memory plays an essential role in understanding and identifying with Chinese culture. Their existing cultural memory constitutes the starting point for learning about Chinese culture, while the memory they develop throughout the process serves as an entry point for potential identification. Therefore, constructing transcultural memory is also a key aspect of the international communication of Chinese culture. In the digital age, the connections between cultural production, cultural consumption, cultural identity, and the communication of cultural memory should be considered holistically rather than in isolation. The memory resources embedded within Chinese culture should be fully explored.

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## Agricultural transformation through prism of body and memory

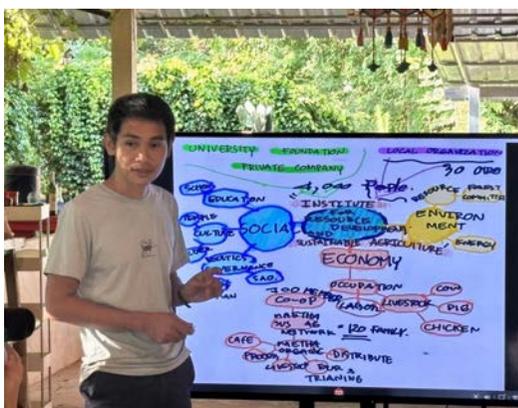
Since 2019, the School of Ethnology and Sociology at Yunnan University (China) and the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development at Chiang Mai University (Thailand) have collaborated on short-term field investigations, sending mixed teams of students and jointly led faculty to rural sites across Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces in northern Thailand.

In 2025, the author's team carried out fieldwork in Mae Tha Village, where a transition toward sustainable and organic agriculture has gathered momentum in recent years and injected new vitality into local farming life. Both older and younger villagers speak with evident attachment to agriculture. Their accounts usually begin with lived experience, framing the village's agricultural transformation through the intertwined perspectives of the body and memory—a vantage point that differs from mainstream narratives and offers a more textured understanding of how this transformation has taken shape.

In the era of subsistence agriculture, production in Mae Tha relied primarily on oxen plowing and manual labor. Family members supported one another, and the need for hired labor was minimal. In villagers' recollections of this

period, the natural environment and bodily well-being figure prominently—“people did not easily fall ill” because “everything they ate was natural.” These bodily perceptions are shared by both older residents, who recall past experiences directly, and younger villagers, who recount what they learned from parents and elders. Such embodied experiences form the core of Mae Tha's collective memory. Traditional agriculture is depicted as a holistic socio-ecological system characterized by good health, harmonious family relationships, stable social ties, and a beautiful natural environment. This memory later became a key reference point for critiquing industrial agriculture and advocating for organic farming.

In the 1960s, the Thai government and private companies began to promote monoculture farming practices, requiring villagers to plant cash crops, along with the extensive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Although farmers retained ownership of their land, they no longer had full autonomy over what to grow, how much to grow, or when to grow. “Farmers were like hired laborers” is the main recollection of this period. Heavy reliance on agrochemicals led to declining soil fertility, polluted water sources, and ecological degradation. At the



A Mae Tha villager explaining the history and framework of the village's organic farming system. Photo: PROVIDED TO CSST

same time, many villagers began experiencing health problems due to pesticide exposure.

To comply with the monoculture directives, many villagers borrowed money to buy seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides. Household debt mounted, yet income often fell short, forcing many families to turn to migrant work, causing family ties to weaken. Because monoculture depends on capital and technological inputs to raise yields, cooperation among farmers diminished while competition intensified, straining relationships within the village. The negative consequences of monoculture became part of villagers' profound

embodied and lived memories.

In the 1980s, a small number of villagers began experimenting with chemical-free and diversified farming, drawing attention and support from non-governmental organizations. In 2000, villagers established the Mae Tha Sustainable

Agriculture Cooperative based on family and neighborhood networks. In recent years, young rural returnees, recognizing the potential of organic agriculture, founded the Mae Tha Organic Agriculture Community Enterprise. Beyond selling agricultural products, the enterprise has expanded into tourism, experiential activities, and community cafés, integrating organic farming with consumer culture and the experience economy.

Villagers generally believe that agrochemical use causes illness and physical debility, whereas organic farming “restores their health.” This embodied experience serves as a

powerful justification for the shift to organic agriculture. For most villagers, organic farming offers substantial labor autonomy and serves as an important means of rebuilding family and community ties—key reasons why many young returnees choose to engage in organic farming.

For Mae Tha villagers, the narrative of body and memory serves a dual function. On one hand, it provides an experiential logic that guides individual and family decision-making. Values centered on physical health and family cohesion lead them to persist with organic agriculture, even when economic returns remain modest. On the other hand, this narrative constitutes a form of collective social imagination. Through intergenerational transmission and local institutional arrangements, villagers pass these stories to younger generations, sustaining the continuity of organic practices and community life. In this sense, Mae Tha's agricultural transformation is not only an economic and ecological adjustment—it is also a process in which individual experience, bodily perception, and collective memory underpin social practice and reinforce shared values.

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