How to Form Collective Memory of Poverty Alleviation in China's Z Generation

Shiqi Wang

South China University of Technology, Guangzhou, China
`474836460@qq.com`

Abstract. The comprehensive victory of poverty alleviation has been ingrained into the youth group through grand political narratives, forming a collective memory among young people regarding poverty alleviation, which influences the formation of their political identity. This study adopts an in-depth interview method to investigate the views of Chinese youth on media images and news reports related to poverty alleviation, and explores the mechanisms behind the formation of collective memory. The study finds that the collective memory of poverty alleviation among youth is influenced by mainstream media and guided by interpersonal communication. The acceptance of this topic by youth relies on the translation of symbols within the group, while they obtain different content through different media. During the process of memory formation, there are also obstacles. Due to the generation gap and the distance between poverty alleviation and the daily lives of urban youth, there is a lack of convertible materials for constructing memories. Therefore, many young people have biases and ambiguity in their understanding of this policy.

Keywords: collective memory, Z generation, youth, poverty alleviation

1   Introduction

By the end of 2020, China achieved a comprehensive victory in poverty alleviation, historically resolving the issue of absolute poverty. In the context of 'mass participation', poverty alleviation has become a collective memory of individuals. As an important ideological resource, poverty alleviation has been embedded into the lives of young people through ideological education, media coverage, and other communication channels, forming their collective memory and influencing their political information cognition framework.

Based on this, researchers conducted participatory observations on the youth group and conducted in-depth interviews with 21 young individuals from different backgrounds to answer the questions of what the collective memory characteristics of the youth group regarding poverty alleviation and what mechanisms are are involved. This aims to effectively intervene in the construction and preservation of collective memory among the youth group in the implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, and shape their identity.

2   Literature Review

2.1   Youth and Poverty Alleviation

Young people have played an important role in poverty alleviation in China. As of the end of 2020, a total of 537,000 college students have been selected as village officials, injecting new vitality and innovation into grassroots communities.

After the victory in poverty alleviation, it has sparked new vitality among the youth group through theoretical guidance and concrete practices. On the theoretical level, the spirit of poverty alleviation is highly ideologically compatible and has a solid integration mechanism with ideological and political education. As an important tool for theoretical learning, ideological and political education helps activate and inherit the spirit of poverty alleviation, enabling its core values to take root and be implemented among young people. It helps students understand the Party's century-long struggle in a vertical dimension, establishing precise, historical, and systematic thinking patterns.[1] In terms of practice, it summarizes and reflects on how various subjects mobilize the inherent vitality of the youth group in practice, and proposes optimized paths to activate the inheritance of youth spirit, focusing on issues such as the willingness to return to hometowns and life after returning to hometowns [2].

2.2   Study on Youth Identity

The current youth population, mainly represented by Generation Z's behaviors, thoughts, and values have been deeply marked by the era of new media. Under the background of new media, the exploration of youth identity is conducted from two perspectives: youth behavioral representation and the effect of youth-oriented discourses.

With the rapid development of internet technology, groups formed based on common interests have become the main form of self-organization for young people. Through internal interactions, these groups develop behavioral representations, which reflect a deeper level of identity. Scholars mainly study youth identity from the viewpoint of their behavior practices and language symbols [3]. Another research perspective is based on mainstream discourses. The first approach involves media transformation in mainstream discourses, attempting to engage in dialogues with young people and create daily interactions with them through media integration.[4] The second approach involves ritualized media activities and reporting during important events such as National Day and Spring Festival. These activities continuously evoke young people's memories of these festivals and shape and strengthen their sense of identity.

2.3   Poverty Alleviation as Collective Memory

The creation and maintenance of collective memory is a dynamic process of social and psychological interaction.[6] Collective memory provides an important context and situation for individuals to define and identify themselves, and to a certain extent, lays the foundation for future generations' identity.[7] Therefore, constructing collective

memory is the necessary path for a group to achieve collective identity which plays an important role in the construction and maintenance of collective memory.

There has been limited research on collective memory related to poverty alleviation. Scholar Zheng Suxia conducted field observations and in-depth interviews to investigate the process of shifting from grand political discourses to rural subject narratives and the formation of collective memory in rural areas.[8] Other studies mostly focused on literary works, exploring the construction of collective memory paths regarding poverty alleviation through documentaries, films and TV dramas, and special programs.[9] However, they to some extent overlooked the social interaction brought about by literary works and their ability to evoke memories.

Currently, there are two limitations in the research on collective memory related to poverty alleviation. Firstly, the subjects involved in current studies are mainly from the perspective of memory recorders, including those who write about media memory and academic memory, as well as those who personally experienced poverty alleviation. From the perspective of memory inheritance, the construction of collective memory is a continuous dynamic process that plays a crucial role in shaping identity. It should include horizontal interactions of memory content among all social members, as well as intergenerational memory transmission. This means that the research on collective memory related to poverty alleviation needs to expand the selection of memory subjects. Secondly, current research predominantly focuses on the horizontal unfolding of memory content, lacking a comprehensive summary of the mechanisms and formation of collective memory related to poverty alleviation. Therefore, this study is primarily focused on the collective memory of young people regarding poverty alleviation, exploring its memory characteristics and formation mechanisms.

3   Research Methodology

This study employed a semi-structured, in-depth interview approach, which involves face-to-face, open-ended communication with participants to facilitate in-depth exploration and discussion. Based on the research focus, the researchers formulated interview guidelines that addressed the participants' media information exposure, emotional memories, and acceptance of poverty alleviation efforts. Interviews were conducted from February to August 2022, using a combination of online and offline methods.

A total of 21 participants were engaged in the in-depth interviews, identified as M01-M21. Among them, 16 were university students and 5 were working professionals, aged between 18 and 35. The gender ratio was 38% male and 62% female. On average, each interview lasted for 53 minutes. The researchers utilized the iflyrec website for voice-to-text transcription, resulting in a total of 14.68 words in the interview transcripts. The researchers thoroughly read, analyzed, and extracted common characteristics of young people's collective memories regarding poverty alleviation efforts.

4   Features of Memory Construction

4.1   Cognitive Formation: Mainstream media dominates, interpersonal communication deepens

The macro-level framework of young people's understanding of poverty alleviation mainly comes from mainstream media and ideological and political education. Ideological and political education and the promotion of mainstream media tend to favor mass communication, serving as a means of framework building. Researchers found that young people generally have high credibility for mainstream media's coverage of poverty alleviation, but have lower preference for related reports and fewer subjective choices. They have grand, distant, and abstract impressions of the reports, with an obvious tone of praise and a lack of 'human touch' (M03, M04).

On the other hand, micro-level individual narratives and relevant situations mainly come from self-media and oral expressions of relatives and friends. Young people trust the poverty alleviation stories narrated by people they personally know. These stories can be categorized into two frameworks: in the first framework, the poverty-stricken individuals are portrayed as 'lazy', with traits such as laziness, low quality, and being unreasonable. The grassroots officials who provide assistance are portrayed as 'selfless contributors' and endure a difficult life, placing them in a disadvantaged position in the story. Young people strongly empathize with them, showing understanding and reverence for their work. In the second framework, the poverty-stricken individuals initially escape poverty with the help of the poverty alleviation officials, but due to various reasons, they fall back into poverty. However, the problems they face after reverting to poverty have not been resolved, leading to sympathy from the young generation. The grassroots officials are portrayed as being in a 'dilemma'. In the memory of young people, the grassroots officials in both micro-story frameworks exhibit positive characteristics, but their notable features are the difficult living environment and challenging work issues that are not easily resolved.

4.2   Life Transcription: Relying on interactive group symbols

Symbolic interaction is not only a way of transmitting and sharing collective memory but also a means of reshaping collective memory.[10] The interpersonal relationships of young people, mainly from Generation Z, are flatter compared to traditional society. They freely communicate with each other and form a unique interactive symbol and discourse system. Publishing content related to the topic on platforms mainly used by young people attracts more attention, such as the documentary series 'Endless Journey' on Bilibili, which sparks more discussions and has a stronger dissemination power among the young population compared to other platforms. Furthermore, young people create symbols through internal group interactions and spread political representations in the form of group symbols, achieving the transformation of political discourse within the young population. For example, some young people edit the dialect catchphrases from the TV drama 'Shan Hai Qing', making the stubborn rural character in the drama

more adorable, deepening the acceptance and understanding of the character among the young population.

5   Factors that hinder the construction of memory

5.1   Obstacles from mainstream discourse

Mainstream discourse refers to the propaganda carried out under political or social demands, including political information spread through ideological education and ideological propaganda disseminated by mainstream media through media platforms. Currently, the mainstream discourse is not highly favored by young people. There are mainly two reasons for this. Firstly, young people have a stereotype impression of 'official talk' about mainstream media. Secondly, there is a deviation between the positioning and cognition of mainstream discourse in the young minds and its actual function.

The construction of memory exists both in the public domain and in the private domain [11]. Although young people have grown up with the Internet, the development of self-media and media transformation in our country has only begun to rapidly develop in the past 10 years and has had a significant impact on young users in various platforms in the past 5 years. Therefore, there is a certain degree of temporality between media transformation and the perception of media transformation by young people.

In addition, there is a deviation between young people's understanding of the positioning of mainstream media and its actual function. Young people often evaluate and measure the content quality of mainstream media based on the multidimensional functions of self-media, if mainstream media should meet the highest standards in technology, content, emotion, and interestingness, reflecting the role of mainstream media as a 'media benchmark' in the minds of young people. However mainstream media, while undertaking political tasks in its propaganda, needs to accurately disseminate political information, which requires certain sacrifices in more micro-level emotional narratives.

5.2   Lack of transformable memory-building materials

The materials that can meet the conditions to become collective memory content are gathered to form a content repository. Members of this group will extract, use, modify, and add or delete memory materials in their production and daily life, thus completing processes such as recalling, experiencing, and forgetting [12]. The fragments of memory related to poverty alleviation formed by the youth group are scattered and sparse, presenting a state of disconnect between macro policies and individual narratives. The main reason for this phenomenon is the insufficient materials for memory construction. One manifestation is that poverty alleviation has not been integrated into the daily activities of young people. It is only emphasized in propaganda work and lacks periodic presentation in daily life, making it difficult to form connections in memory.

The second manifestation is the lack of a systematic political knowledge framework in ideological and political education, resulting in limited basic understanding of poverty alleviation. It also unconsciously leads to the inappropriate use of basic concepts

related to poverty alleviation in daily contexts, causing the serious significance of poverty alleviation to be diluted.

6 Conclusion

This study focuses on 'indirect participants' who have not personally experienced poverty alleviation work. It summarizes the characteristics of the collective memory of young people regarding poverty alleviation in terms of cognitive formation, life translation, and media selection. It further explains the issues that arise during the memory construction process. On the one hand, due to the stereotypes and cognitive biases of young people towards mainstream discourse, obstacles appear during the sinking of mainstream discourse. On the other hand, because the propaganda content is disconnected from the daily lives of young people, there is a lack of convertible memory construction materials. In the future, research on collective memory in grand political strategic studies can further expand the users of memory, explore the mechanisms of abstract memory formation, and continue to seek the direction of collective memory construction through the horizontal laying of memory content and the vertical transmission of memory, to optimize the path of group identification.

Acknowledgment

References

1. Li, J. (2022). Integrate the great spirit of poverty alleviation into ideological and political education. China Higher Education (01),24-26.
2. Wang, H. (2021). The Path Choice and Attribution Analysis of Youth Returning Home to Start Their Own Business. Contemporary Youth Research (03),25-31.
3. Li, J & Wu ,Q. (2020). Youth identity and discourse practice of network buzzwords in recent five years. Modern Communication(Journal of Communication University of China) (08),39-43.
4. Ge, B. (2022). Persuasion and Reward: How Mainstream Media Enter Young Users. Journalism & Communication, 29(10), 64-79+127.
5. Cheng, J & Wang, Y. (2022). The Current Situation and Development of CCTV Spring Festival Gala in the Social Network Era. Journal of Huaqiao University(Philosophy & Social Sciences), 4, 130–140.
6. Ai, J & Wang, X. (2011). Collective Memory: New Study Way of Group Identity. Social Science in Xinjiang, 2, 121-126+148.

7. Pennebaker, J. W., & Banasik, B. L. (1997). On the Creation and Maintenance of Collective Memories: History as Social Psychology. In Collective Memory of Political Events. Psychology Press.

8. Zheng, S. (2022). How Do Countryside Remember Poverty Alleviation: Collective Memories of Poverty Alleviation in Countryside and Its Reproduction. Journalism & Communication Review, 75(2), 69–77.

9. Bai, Q. (2022). The collective memory construction of poverty alleviation in the new media era: A case study of poverty alleviation TV series "Minning Town". New Media Research, 8(13), 93–96.

10. Guan, J & Guo, Q (2020), The Psychosocial Logic of Collective Memory Transmission: Sharing, Reshaping and Identification. Journal of Nanjing Normal University (Social Science Edition), 5, 69–79.

11. Kansteiner, W. (2002). Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies. History and Theory, 41(2), 179–197.

12. The construction of collective memory from the perspective of communication: from traditional society to new media era. (2016). China Social Sciences Press.