

On the Memory Writing and Cultural Identity in Li Zishu's *The Age of Goodbyes*

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Abstract: As the debut novel of Li Zishu, *The Age of Goodbyes* vividly portrays the ethnic experiences of the Malaysian Chinese within the historical context of the May 13th incident, earning widespread praise for its intricate depiction of everyday life. The novel employs a multi-layered construction of memory to explore personal experiences, the historical atmosphere of Malaysia, and cultural spaces, while engaging with broader themes such as personal growth, identity formation, and cultural construction. This paper seeks to analyze *The Age of Goodbyes* through the lens of memory theory, focusing on the traces of individual, social, and cultural memories within the text. In doing so, it aims to reveal the profound historical and cultural implications embedded in the narrative, as well as to reflect on the memory construction of the Malaysian ethnic community and their marginalized identity.

Keywords: Li Zishu; *The Age of Goodbyes*; Memory Writing; Cultural Identity

1. Introduction

As Li Zishu's debut novel, *The Age of Goodbyes* has stirred significant resonance across China. The novel is notable for its profound depth and nuanced portrayal, skillfully depicting the lives and struggles of the Malaysian Chinese, alongside the fragmented nature of their ethnic interactions. By constructing a narrative rooted in the history of everyday life, the novel offers insight into the evolving social dynamics of the Malaysian Chinese community. This paper aims to explore the themes of memory and cultural identity in *The Age of Goodbyes* through the lens of memory theory, analyzing the text from three perspectives: the personal, the social, and the cultural.

2. Personal Memory: Personal Experience and Character Development

"Memory holds immense significance for humanity. Individual memory has the power to shape one's self-awareness and identity"[1]. Without memory, an individual would be unable to affirm their own existence, and history would become hollow and devoid of meaning. *The Age of Goodbyes* is set against the backdrop of the May 13th incident, using the subtle, fragmented memories and fate of the characters to support a vast historical narrative, where the mundane details of daily life flow smoothly within the machinery of larger historical forces.

The novel is rich in subjective acts of recollection, with the plot unfolding through the protagonist's psychological or autobiographical memories. Among these, Du Li'an's memories are the most fully developed. Du Li'an occupies a space shaped by distinct feminine perception, and through her eyes, 30 years of historical change are laid bare. The novel opens with Du Li'an's perspective, introducing Chen Jinhai: "He chuckled, 'Ali, you're so beautiful, even more so than Fan Li.'"[2]. The casualness of his words makes Du Li'an quickly check if the button on her chest has popped open. The body serves as the source of sensory experience, and Du Li'an, in her youth, inadvertently associates this gaze with a perception of male frivolity. Much of human memory exists in the unconscious; it is only when triggered by external stimuli that the dormant memories resurface. On the day of her wedding, as she faces the lewd laughter of men, Du Li'an feels her ears burn and instinctively looks at her chest once more. The pain of her past is awakened by the present situation, and the shame of being gazed upon becomes an indelible memory for her, resurfacing as an enduring psychological shadow whenever she faces similar

circumstances.

Memories are also shaped by generational experiences, as shared understandings of the world influence individual recollections. As Du Li'an's contemporary, the tragic fate of Juan Hao constantly reminds Du Li'an that no matter how hard she tries to suppress it, memory inevitably resurfaces. Juan Hao's life experiences, her relationship with her husband and children, all become the raw materials for Du Li'an's construction of self-identity and life story. The memory of women's exhausting labor, easily discarded by others, subtly governs her emotions and behavior. Thus, when Du Li'an marries Gang Bo, she, relying on her survival instincts, immerses herself in household duties, accepting her fate as a woman. However, her husband's violent temper and his preferential treatment of his ex-wife's son bring Du Li'an nothing but anxiety and trauma. Initially, Du Li'an tries to please her husband in a bid to salvage her family's happiness, but, like Juan Hao, she finds herself spiraling into a contemptuous abyss.

Traumatic experiences, as special memories, are often locked away in the unconscious due to their pain and the difficulty of confronting them. Like the teasing she endured as a girl, Du Li'an, after marriage, often chooses to endure in silence, suppressing her inner wounds. Yet, under external pressures or stimuli, these traumatic memories can resurface. With improved economic and social status, Du Li'an no longer feels passive in her relationships with men; her inner suffering begins to heal. As she matures, Du Li'an adopts a more confident and charismatic demeanor. She views her affair with Ye Wangsheng as a form of self-expression and amusement, no longer experiencing the passivity and self-doubt she once felt in the presence of men.

Du Li'an's transformation signifies that women, in a powerful stance, have begun to seize control over the narrative of history. Her life story and growth chronicle the gradual shift in the space Malaysian Chinese women occupy—from the domestic sphere to the broader social world. Amid historical turmoil and gender oppression, they search for paths to redemption, seeking spiritual growth and self-identity. [3]

3. Social Memory: Collective Recollection and Cultural Demise

"Individual memory requires a societal framework; it is both constrained and facilitated by social context. Every self is linked to multiple 'we's, forming the foundation of collective memory"[4]. Memory, therefore, is inherently social.

Different social groups or organizations possess their own collective memories, supported by the collective power defined by these frameworks. Malaysia, with its history of colonial rule and population migrations, has evolved into a multicultural society where multiple ethnic groups coexist. Among these, the Malaysian Chinese community, settling at the country's periphery, brought Chinese civilization, customs, and folk culture, while simultaneously integrating Malay cultural elements. This blend of traditions and practices has given rise to a unique collective culture and memory. Li Zishu excels at weaving this rich Malaysian Chinese cultural fabric into the everyday lives of individuals from various social backgrounds. Through depictions of communal life patterns and intergenerational continuity, he crafts a narrative that forms a tapestry of collective memory.

Collective memory emerges through communication, and it is in dialogue that it is maintained and passed down. Social groups strengthen their cohesion and communication through communal activities. "Rituals are the best means to showcase social life, and the re-enactment of original scenes transforms into rituals, rekindling emotions of unity and wholeness"[5]. Social memory is preserved through rituals, with commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices being the most significant means of transmission. *The Age of Goodbyes* frequently portrays folk rituals and celebrations, such as weddings, funerals, and religious ceremonies. These rites, bound by kinship and locality, depict family stories and local gatherings, reinforcing cultural identity and collective memory.

The life cycle—birth, coming of age, and death—is imbued with new meaning through these rituals. Key transitions in life, such as birth and death, are marked by specific rites, including birth ceremonies and funeral rites. For example, when Du Li'an's parents pass away and their bodies are prepared for burial,

the book details traditional funeral customs, such as chanting scriptures and burning paper clothing. Through these bodily practices and the destruction of personal belongings, the deceased's legacy and reputation are memorialized, and the living's recognition of them is transformed into portraits and epitaphs. These acts solidify the end of a life into history. Collective remembrance of the deceased by family members is confirmed through these rituals.

The family altar, where offerings are made, is another form of reverence. When Du Li'an visits her father's grave, she burns incense and bows before the altar, honoring both the Buddha and her ancestors. The altar serves as a symbol of spiritual connection, and the burning of incense is a mark of respect for the deceased. This practice highlights the Malaysian Chinese tradition of honoring direct-lineage ancestors and venerating family names. These folk rituals are seamlessly integrated into the everyday lives of the Malaysian Chinese community. Through ritual, individuals, who might otherwise remain separate, are united. These rituals allow memories to be relived and exchanged at fixed times, ensuring the transmission and continuity of collective memory across generations.

In these rituals and social activities, memory is reenacted and validated through oral traditions, gestures, and bodily practices. For instance, during the incense offering, a stick of incense is placed between the fingers and inserted into a rice husk holder to burn. Furthermore, social rituals are often carried out in specific, prescribed ways that clearly express the cultural meanings at their core. For example, when a family moves into a new house, religious ceremonies accompany the celebrations. Upon entering a new home, Du Li'an arranges porcelain vases, jade cups, copper candleholders, and incense burners to honor the gods.

After entering, a Taoist priest performs rituals at the four corners of the house, invoking deities like Guanyin, the Earth God, the Kitchen God, and the Jade Emperor. Relatives and neighbors gather to share a meal, strengthening social bonds. These acts of worship, which seek divine blessings, represent a folk religious devotion, where the rituals honoring gods, heavenly spirits, and

ancestors are central to the Malaysian Chinese way of life. As Victor Turner noted, "Rituals reveal the values of a group, and what they express is what moves them most" [6].

Foucault's concept of counter-memory refers to memories that challenge dominant narratives and contest the prevailing discourse. Li Zishu's work focuses largely on the collective memories of marginalized, disenfranchised groups—individuals who live at the bottom of Malaysia's social hierarchy or in the mundane lives of everyday folk. The local worship practices and collective memories of these socially and culturally peripheral groups have inevitably been absorbed into the mainstream cultural memory, where they face suppression. Historically, the collective memory of the Chinese community in Malaysia, positioned on the political periphery, managed to persist for a time because of its relative independence from dominant discourses. However, under the control of political powers, this memory has undergone dynamic transformation, caught between "social forgetting" and individuals' efforts at "counter-forgetting". As the original witnesses gradually pass away, these memories face the challenges of erasure, distortion, and loss.

4. Cultural Memory: Metaphors of Medium and Identity Recognition

Assmann argues that "encoding memory content and unforgettable visual formulas, as well as positioning them—placing these images at specific locations within a structured space—not only provides the medium for the occurrence of memories, but also becomes the symbol and metaphor of those memories"[7]. Li Zishu's work is deeply rooted in the local context of Malaysian Chinese culture, excelling at capturing localized experiences and constructing local spaces. The fragmented, ever-changing secular spaces in her stories convey vast historical narratives and contain rich cultural and historical imaginations. These interactions with space form local experiences, which serve as the foundation of Malaysian Chinese identity.

In her novels, Li Zishu constructs small-scale artistic spatial metaphors, which act as physical containers for both the unfolding of the story and the transmission of cultural

heritage. In *The Age of Goodbyes*, common life spaces such as inns, restaurants, and alleys feature prominently. For example, in the tea rooms where people pass cigarettes and pour tea, or in the brothels where historical paintings and figurines are displayed, these spaces serve as both gathering points for characters and hiding places for culture. Symbols like tea, historical paintings, and cultural icons become vessels for the transmission of tea culture and seasonal customs, vividly showcasing the details of Chinese traditions and the living memory of history.

Public buildings, which serve as cultural landmarks within regional communities, evoke a shared cultural imagination and play a unifying role. The bustling tin townships, Chinese markets, and landmarks like the stone lion statues in front of temples on the riverside are examples. These secular spaces are filled with various elements—ranging from the small shop signs to larger town buildings and temples, creating a rich texture and tension. The experience of merchants, the sounds of the market, and other everyday details ultimately contribute to a complex world of lived experiences. These everyday spaces reflect the Malaysian Chinese community's original ecological life scenes, connecting the lives of ordinary people with the rich regional customs and cultural imaginations.

Space, as a fixed cultural carrier, is intertwined with the written word as a medium for preserving memory. Writing acts as a repository, separating memory techniques and symbolic carriers from the fixed carriers of recollection, creating external, movable objects that transcend time and space. In *The Age of Goodbyes*, Li Zishu repeatedly mentions books, libraries, and Chinese schools—terms that are all deeply connected to written media. Books serve as the material vessels for words, traditional education primarily uses text as its tool, and libraries preserve cultural classics. Historical records rely heavily on textual media. One prominent metaphor in the novel is that of the "library", which represents Li Zishu's reflection on the development of Malaysian Chinese literature. The library, filled with a vast number of books, symbolizes the Malaysian Chinese literary world. In Li Zishu's narrative, the

"great book" is the history of the Malaysian Chinese community. The book contains memories of the past, encoded through text, inscribing a history of identity anxiety and transformation, of searching for and reshaping cultural identity.

The act of transmitting the text is more significant than the act of writing itself. The artistic rendering of memory is not a straightforward recounting of the past, but a construction of the past through metaphor. The story begins with Du Li'an reading a book in *The Age of Goodbyes*, and the starting page is marked as page 5·13. This overt metafictional device reflects the narrative's use of metaphor. The number "5·13" refers to the May 13th incident, symbolizing a significant historical moment. The page number placed at the beginning serves as a retelling of the past and marks the beginning of the story. The May 13th incident, which was marked by ethnic riots and political marginalization, has since become a collective memory and a psychological trauma for the Malaysian Chinese community. Du Li'an's personal attack subtly reflects the larger assault on the Chinese community, while her changing fate mirrors the changing fate of the nation. The metaphor of text not only reinforces the narrative but also suggests the enduring readability and manipulability of memory. The core principle of the text lies in its interpretation—text alone cannot guarantee the transmission of cultural meaning; it requires continuous interpretation to activate the meanings stored in the "great book".

Through the layered narrative structure of Du Li'an, the "you" residing in the Mayflower Inn, the "Fourth Person", and Shaozi, the characters, readers, writers, and critics together weave various textual spaces. These narratives interconnect from the inside out, revealing the role of text in deconstructing, preserving, and interpreting historical and cultural memory across different communities. Once formed, cultural memory develops into a relatively stable knowledge system. However, this solidified knowledge must constantly evolve and adapt to changes in the times [8]. *The Age of Goodbyes* is repeatedly read by different generations. As characters shift across generations, cultural memory, due to its unspeakable and timeless nature, must continuously engage with the active memories

of each new generation. This process produces new interpretations and, ultimately, leads to the formation of new cultural identities [9].

5. Conclusion

Li Zishu has long transcended the grand narratives of history, quietly delving into the subtler realms of human nature. First and foremost, her works present the diverse conditions of human existence, unfolding the memories of an individual's life before us. Through the exploration of one's personal journey and transformation in the past, she reveals the intricate threads of grand historical events. Secondly, in her novels, Li Zishu meticulously constructs collective memory, preserving social memory through bodily practices such as marriage, funeral rites, and birthday feasts, while also documenting the generational shifts and the challenges posed to collective memory by the encroachment of mainstream culture. On the other hand, Li Zishu's novels create spaces rich in meaning, portraying local experiences through multiple narrative techniques that expand the influence and function of the written word. In doing so, she reveals the hidden struggles and isolation of the Malaysian Chinese community behind the official history of Malaysia. As a writer of the new generation of Malaysian Chinese authors, Li Zishu uses her pen to dissect the plight of the Malaysian Chinese people, constructing a collective and cultural memory for the Malaysian Chinese diaspora, and

offering profound historical and cultural insights.

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