

Awakening Historical Memory and Innovating Teaching: Applying the “*lieux de mémoire*” Theory in Chinese Middle School History Education

Huanhuan Luo^{1, a}, Jinrong Liu^{2, b}, Chuan Lu^{3, c, *}

¹School of Yangtze University, Jingzhou 434023, China

²Siji School of Jingzhou City, Jingzhou 434022, China

³School of Yangtze University, Jingzhou 434023, China

^a13593640980@163.com, ^b347189598@qq.com, ^c8365652@qq.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract

The theory of *lieux de mémoire* (places of memory) was proposed by the French historian Pierre Nora and has aroused extensive scholarly discussion ever since. Central to this theory is the awakening of national collective memory and the construction of historical memory through tangible and symbolic sites as carriers. History education in China emphasizes the cultivation of a sense of community for the Chinese nation, as well as the shaping of historical memory and national identity. The application of the theory of *lieux de mémoire* to Chinese history teaching is conducive to awakening students' historical memory and offers a new perspective for the innovation of history instruction.

Keywords

lieux de mémoire, Pierre Nora, Chinese history education.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

In recent years, memory studies have emerged as a prominent interdisciplinary field, focusing on how societies construct, transmit, and renew collective memory. As a representative theoretical framework, Pierre Nora's “*lieux de mémoire*” offers a robust lens for understanding national identity, historical representation, and cultural heritage. Proposed by Pierre Nora—a French historian and member of the French Academy of Sciences—this concept builds on and develops Halbwachs' theory of collective memory. Nora re-examined and reflected on the relationship between memory and historical research, expanding the temporal and spatial dimensions of collective memory and contextualizing it within specific locales, thus formulating and refining the theory of “*lieux de mémoire*”.[1] Collective memory theory posits that collective memory is continuously reshaped by the contemporary social context; this theoretical perspective has been reinterpreted and widely applied in historical research. With the compilation and publication of the seven-volume series *Les lieux de mémoire*, the term “*lieux de mémoire*” has become almost ubiquitous in France, symbolizing the “explosion of heritage fever.”[2]

The prevalence of Nora's “*lieux de mémoire*” can be partly attributed to their capacity to forge a close bond between individuals and the nation-state.[3] Notably, the content of history education is also intrinsically linked to both individual experience and national identity. Integrating the theory of “*lieux de mémoire*” into Chinese history education constitutes a crucial approach to moving beyond traditional rote learning, stimulating students' historical thinking,

and fostering core historical literacy. Applying this theory in Chinese history education enables students to transform individual experiences into both personal and collective memories through the processes of exploring, interpreting, and constructing memory, thereby deepening their understanding of historical knowledge.

Against the backdrop of ongoing deepening reforms in Chinese history education, teaching reforms centered on core competencies have raised higher standards for history instruction: teaching objectives are no longer confined to the mere indoctrination of historical facts but instead emphasize guiding students to grasp the essence of history, preserve historical memory, and shape historical identity. As a key framework for interpreting historical memory, Pierre Nora's "*lieux de mémoire*" theory uses "places" as a medium to bridge the gap between individual and collective memory, thereby providing a new perspective for the innovation of Chinese history education.

1.2. Research Questions

This paper primarily addresses the following three research questions:

1) How can Nora's *lieux de mémoire* theory be applied to history teaching in Chinese secondary schools?

By analyzing the core connotations and characteristics of the *lieux de mémoire* theory, this study seeks to apply it to history teaching practice, while aligning with the objectives and requirements of Chinese secondary history education.

2) What types of historical memories are contained in Chinese history textbooks?

Chinese history textbooks contain a wealth of historical memories; analyzing the nature and content of these memories is conducive to the effective application of the *lieux de mémoire* theory in secondary history teaching.

3) What strategies are there for constructing *lieux de mémoire* in Chinese history classrooms?

Based on the three dimensions of memory space theory, this study will formulate targeted teaching strategies for Chinese history classrooms, so as to enrich the practical application of the *lieux de mémoire* theory in secondary history education.

1.3. Research Significance

Integrating the "*lieux de mémoire*" theory into Chinese secondary history education is a vital pathway for cultivating students' core historical literacy. It effectively addresses the current challenges in secondary history education and aligns with the requirements for the innovative development of history pedagogy. This study enriches the application of memory theory in historical teaching practice and provides secondary school history teachers with clear, actionable teaching strategies.

By exploring the historical memories embedded in secondary school history textbooks, identifying resources for memory spaces, constructing historical contexts, and designing inquiry-based tasks, teachers can help students reduce reliance on rote memorization, emphasize the experiential nature of historical memory, foster historical thinking, and strengthen the sense of a Chinese national community. These approaches can serve as a valuable reference for frontline history teaching in secondary schools.

2. Theoretical Foundation: Nora's "*lieux de mémoire*"

2.1. The Relationship Between Memory and History

Before understanding and investigating the "*lieux de mémoire*" theory, it is essential to grasp Nora's definitions of "memory" and "history", as well as the intrinsic relationship between them.[4] A clear distinction between "memory" and "history" is a prerequisite for comprehending the "*lieux de mémoire*" theory. In the General Introduction to *Les lieux de*

mémoire, Nora explicitly differentiates these two concepts, arguing that memory and history are oppositional rather than synonymous. Nora emphasizes that in the contemporary era, as historical experiences fade rapidly, the gap between memory and history has widened, bringing an end to the era when the two were inseparable.[5] Memory is vibrant and requires a tangible community for its sustenance, rendering it constantly evolving. Memory is a phenomenon of the present, whereas history is a representation of the past—a rational, secular intellectual activity that demands analytical methods and critical discourse. Memory is absolute and unadulterated, while history acknowledges only relativity.[6]

Memory manifests as a vivid, dynamic collective experience embedded in daily practices, emotional connections, and group identity, characterized by subjectivity, fluidity, and transmissibility. In contrast, history is a rational reconstruction of the past, primarily shaped through documentary verification and academic inquiry, and is distinguished by objectivity, systematicity, and criticality.

Friedlander argues that the opposition between memory and history is not clearly delineated; although the processes of shaping memory and writing history are fundamentally contradictory, he conceptualizes them as an intertwined and interconnected continuum in the construction of public collective memory.[7] The accelerating pace of modern society has led to the gradual dissolution of the traditional “society of memory.” Memory no longer flows naturally within communities, families, religious groups, or oral traditions; instead, it is gradually being supplanted by history.

Nora observes that while memory technologies—most notably fax machines, the Internet, telephones, and television—continue to proliferate, these technologies are also eroding the traditional nation-state.[8] Nora’s simplistic dichotomy between authentic, living memory and the so-called “false memory” of history is complicated by the persistent existence of memories rooted in everyday life experiences—memories that persist in fragmented and incomplete forms.[9]

Consequently, people attempt to preserve memory through artificial construction, deliberately and consciously creating “places” to anchor, preserve, and re-enact memory. These “places” are *lieux de mémoire*, which serve as the crucial link between lost memory and history. The rise of history is often accompanied by the dissolution of “authentic memory,” and the construction of *lieux de mémoire* is precisely a manifestation of this historicization process. Regardless of their form, historical materials interact with collective memories of specific phenomena or objects to jointly construct *lieux de mémoire*. [10] The construction of *lieux de mémoire* requires the combined influence of memory and history; in this process, memory and history are inseparable. The construction of *lieux de mémoire* is not only the subject of historical research but also the key to the continuity of collective memory.

2.2. The Nature and Characteristics of *lieux de mémoire*

In *Les lieux de Mémoire*, Nora does not offer a precise definition of *lieux de mémoire*. Instead, he suggests that they are at once simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, spanning from concrete objects of direct experience to highly abstract constructs.[6] The “place” in *lieux de mémoire* denotes a site, yet not merely a physical location; it also constitutes a constellation of symbolic signs bearing collective memory. The significance of such a “site” resides not in its material properties, but in the “memory function” attributed to it. A space, object, event, or text becomes a *lieux de mémoire* when it emerges as a focal point of collective memory and becomes invested with identity-shaping meaning. Le Grand Robert de la langue française characterizes *lieux de mémoire* as any ensemble of material or intellectual significance that encapsulates human intention or the passage of time, functioning as a symbolic element of a community’s memorial heritage.[11]

Nora classifies *lieux de mémoire* into three dimensions:

Material *lieux de mémoire*: including museums, archives, monuments, historical sites, and heritage buildings. These sites render collective memory tangible through visitation and direct experience.

Symbolic *lieux de mémoire*: including commemorative ceremonies, flags, national anthems, and emblems. These sites lack physical substance yet carry powerful symbolic weight; through ritual, narrative, and commemoration, they convert abstract signs into shared collective memory.

Functional *lieux de mémoire*: including textbooks, testaments, associations, and literary classics. These sites primarily take the form of written texts and visual media as memory carriers; they transmit memory through language and also serve as key sources for historical research.

According to Nora, these three dimensions emerge from the interaction of memory and history, which condition and shape one another.[6] Although he distinguishes these three dimensions, they often overlap and coexist in practice. For instance, while an archive may appear as a purely material site, it only functions as a *lieux de mémoire* by virtue of its symbolic significance.

The theory of *lieux de mémoire* exhibits three core characteristics. First, it embodies duality, existing simultaneously as a material entity and a spiritual symbol. The Arc de Triomphe in Paris, for example, is both a physical monument and an embodiment of French national pride. Second, it is constructivist: *lieux de mémoire* are not naturally given but are deliberately constructed or endowed with meaning through political, cultural, and social practices. Third, it is pluralistic: a single site may bear the memories of diverse social groups, and different perspectives can yield divergent interpretations.

3. Historical Memory in Chinese History Textbooks

History textbooks constitute a core medium of history education, encapsulating abundant historical memory resources spanning historical sites, cultural relics, historical events, and prominent figures.

The section on ancient Chinese history in Chinese history textbooks is particularly rich in historical memory resources. Palaeolithic Peking Man Site, together with Neolithic Banpo and Hemudu sites, preserves recollections of ancient ancestral livelihoods and daily life, forming vital avenues for comprehending primitive societal history. Oracle bone inscriptions and bronze artefacts of the Shang and Zhou dynasties mirror contemporary social production, daily life, political institutions, and cultural advancement. The Terracotta Army and the Great Wall of the Qin and Han dynasties attest to the formation and evolution of ancient China's unified multi-ethnic state. The Grand Canal and ancient Chang'an city of the Sui and Tang dynasties embody the era's economic prosperity and cultural openness. Furthermore, landmarks including the Forbidden City and historical sites associated with Zheng He's maritime expeditions across the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties carry accumulated memories of dynastic vicissitudes and cross-cultural exchanges in pre-modern China.

Similarly, modern Chinese history segments within textbooks contain profound historical memories. Sites linked to the Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion chronicle the turbulent onset of modern Chinese history and grassroots anti-aggression resistance. Venues pertaining to the May Fourth Movement mark the inception of China's new democratic revolution and the subsequent founding of the Communist Party of China. Yan'an revolutionary sites embody the Chinese nation's struggle against foreign aggression and pursuit of national independence. Meanwhile, the founding ceremony of the People's Republic of China and the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone established in the post-reform era document the arduous endeavours of the Chinese people in national reconstruction and rejuvenation.

Via memory carriers including historical figures, events, cultural symbols and geographical contexts, Chinese history textbooks convey multilayered and systematic historical memories.

These carriers function as embedded *lieux de mémoire*, crystallising historical remembrance within textual narratives. In contrast to tangible physical *lieux de mémoire* such as museums and heritage sites, history textbooks boast superior accessibility and sustained influence. Through routine classroom instruction, textbooks integrate fragmented historical knowledge into cohesive collective memory for students. Within China's national education framework, history textbooks are far more than compilations of historical facts; they represent deliberately curated and interpreted pedagogical materials tailored to foster students' core historical competencies. Their content arrangement and narrative logic are purposefully oriented toward the construction of distinctive national collective memory.

History textbooks for both junior and senior high schools foreground themes of ethnic integration, national unification, revolutionary heritage, and national rejuvenation. Centring pivotal historical events and heroic figures as core components of collective memory, they underscore the continuity of historical development, highlight a shared sense of Chinese national community, and integrate historical remembrance with national spirit and national identity. Textbooks deploy historical photographs, cartographic materials and portraiture as symbolic devices, translating abstract historical knowledge into tangible representational carriers. Historical maps, for example, consolidate spatial perceptions of territorial integrity and national unity; revolutionary sites and portraits of historical figures arouse emotional empathy, shaping enduring memories of heroism and national resilience. Beyond basic knowledge transmission, such cultural symbols deepen learners' engagement with and identification with historical memory through intuitive, emotionally resonant pedagogy.

As Nora argues, memory in modern society no longer emerges organically, but requires deliberate anchoring within designated *lieux de mémoire*. [6] Through unified historical narratives, standardised discourses and consistent curricular content, history textbooks transform fluid, diversified folk interpretations of history into stable, official, and pedagogically transmissible collective memory.

Ultimately, Chinese history textbooks do not merely recount past events. Rather, they actively construct, disseminate and transmit historical memory. Through selective narration and interpretive framing of historical occurrences, they translate macro-level national collective memory into individual historical consciousness among young learners.

4. Integrating *lieux de mémoire* into Chinese History Education

Drawing on the three analytical dimensions of *lieux de mémoire*, this study proposes the construction of material, symbolic, and functional memorial sites within Chinese history education practice.

4.1. Material *lieux de mémoire*

Material *lieux de mémoire* denote tangible, perceptible carriers that encapsulate collective historical memory, encompassing historical sites, cultural relics, museums, memorial halls, and scattered historical remains in daily life. As the most intuitive and concrete manifestation of memorial sites, they translate abstract historical knowledge into tangible experiential content, enabling learners to forge direct connections with the past. In pedagogical practice, instructors ought to construct tangible learning environments in which instructional carriers, processes, and outcomes are all physically perceivable. [12] In accordance with teaching objectives and textbook content, secondary school history teachers are advised to identify eligible material *lieux de mémoire* resources within the curriculum. These resources fall into three primary categories: historical sites (including the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, and the Liangzhu Ancient City Ruins), cultural artefacts (such as the He Zun bronze vessel, the Terracotta Army, and ancient coinage), and commemorative venues (including the Memorial Hall of the Chinese

People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, the Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre, and revolutionary heritage sites). Meanwhile, teachers are encouraged to exploit distinctive local memorial resources, including regional historical sites, folk artefacts, local museums, and intangible cultural heritage, so as to integrate national and local pedagogical resources.

Transcending the constraints of conventional classroom instruction, educators may guide students to engage with material memorial sites through field observation, hands-on interaction, and immersive learning experiences. Furthermore, virtual simulation technologies powered by artificial intelligence and VR can be adopted to reconstruct in-class memorial environments, facilitating multi-sensory engagement and deepening students' perceptual understanding of historical memory. For instance, when teaching the Dujiangyan Irrigation System, AI-enabled virtual field trips can illustrate its structural and operational principles. As a material testament to ancient Chinese agricultural civilisation, Dujiangyan embodies ancient hydrological wisdom and enduring collective memory concerning harmonious coexistence between human society and nature.

Taking material *lieux de mémoire* as instructional mediums, teachers may design inquiry-oriented questions to prompt students to investigate the historical context, cultural connotations, and contemporary implications embedded in physical relics, advancing their thinking from superficial observation to in-depth analytical reasoning. Taking the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall as a representative material memorial site as an example, teachers may first elaborate on the historical background of the Nanjing Massacre, and employ multimedia resources to present historical photographs, cultural relics, and survivor testimonies preserved at the venue. A simulated field visit activity can be organised accordingly: students are divided into groups, each assigned to a specific exhibition zone, with preliminary preparatory research tasks. Subsequently, students act as on-site interpreters to present relevant historical facts and cultural significance to the whole class, followed by reflective sharing and discussion. Through engagement with such tangible memorial carriers, students recognise the atrocities of war and the value of peace, thus cultivating patriotic sentiment and a strong sense of historical responsibility. Endowed with inherent historical authenticity and visual immediacy, memorial halls and heritage sites convert abstract historical knowledge into concrete embodied experiences, thereby substantially improving instructional effectiveness.

Overall, these material *lieux de mémoire* enable students to deepen their comprehension of cultural connotations via immersive experience and personalised interaction with historical memory, while concurrently fostering core historical competencies including evidence-based reasoning and historical interpretation.

4.2. Symbolic *lieux de mémoire*

Symbolic *lieux de mémoire* refer to intangible cultural symbols, rituals, festivals, slogans, and historical narratives that encapsulate collective memory and enduring cultural significance. Nora argues that *lieux de mémoire* function as repositories for sustaining commemorative consciousness of the historical past, and that all tangible and intangible social heritage conveys the values of preceding eras.[10] Despite their immaterial nature, symbolic memorial sites transmit profound historical meaning and cultural value, occupying a pivotal role in the formation of collective identity. These memorial constructs are not confined to physical geographical locations, but instead foreground spiritual and symbolic connotations.

With regard to symbolic *lieux de mémoire* embedded within history textbooks, including national flags, national emblems, some spirit and national commemorative festivals, teachers ought to interpret their symbolic connotations and historical origins within their specific historical contexts. This enables students to comprehend the intrinsic link between cultural symbols and collective historical memory. Taking the national flag as a typical symbolic

memorial site, instructors may trace the historical evolution behind its design and official adoption, elaborating on the historical background and significance of the Five-star Red Flag. In doing so, students recognise that this symbol is far more than a visual emblem, but embodies accumulated collective memory of national independence and national liberation throughout modern Chinese history.

Teachers may further unpack the layered symbolic meanings of the national flag: the red backdrop signifies revolutionary struggle and the sacrifices of revolutionary martyrs; the large five-pointed star represents the Communist Party of China; the four smaller five-pointed stars denote workers, peasants, urban petty bourgeoisie, and national bourgeoisie; while the overall arrangement embodies national unity under Party leadership. On this basis, educators may prompt students to correlate the national flag with China's modern history of national humiliation and national resistance, illustrating how such symbolic memorial sites consolidate national sentiment and construct national identity. In-depth classroom discussion may be extended to address critical questions: Among the numerous political emblems that have appeared in modern China, why did the Five-star Red Flag ultimately evolve as the official national symbol? How have the associated historical memories and national sentiments embedded within this symbol persisted and transformed across successive historical periods? Through exhaustive analysis of the historical origins underpinning cultural symbols, students transcend superficial perceptual knowledge to comprehend the inherent correlation between symbolic *lieux de mémoire* and national historical memory, thereby deepening their emotional attachment and historical cognition.

4.3. Functional *lieux de mémoire*

Functional *lieux de mémoire* emphasise the capacity of memorial sites to transmit historical memory, shape value systems, and foster core historical competencies, thereby translating accumulated historical remembrance into learners' cognitive capacities, emotional dispositions, and practical abilities. Primarily anchored in textual and visual mediums as memory carriers, their core function lies in activating curricular texts, illustrations, and relevant historical archives embedded within teaching materials. In doing so, such resources imbued with national collective memory are reconstructed as sustainable memorial vessels. History textbooks, educational visuals, and pedagogical dramatisation all qualify as components of functional curricular memory.[13]

In classroom practice, instructors may fully harness history textbooks in alignment with the cultivation of core historical competencies to define clear functional pedagogical objectives. Such targeted design ensures that the application of functional *lieux de mémoire* effectively advances the development of students' comprehensive historical literacy. For instance, a functional memorial site can be constructed around the theme of inheriting contemporary spiritual legacies. Drawing on curricular content, educators may design experiential learning activities: students conduct oral interviews with parents and elders to trace socioeconomic changes in personal livelihoods, and correlate these lived experiences with the developmental achievements of modern China. Additionally, learners may deliver thematic speeches entitled My Perception of Contemporary National Spirit, articulating their resolve to inherit such spiritual traditions and contribute to national development. Through such practice, functional *lieux de mémoire* fulfil vital value-oriented pedagogical functions, enabling students to integrate historical memory with contemporary social reality, strengthen national pride and historical responsibility, and realise the inherent educational value of history instruction. As Nora contends, *lieux de mémoire* inherently serve to construct and transmit collective memory; functional memorial sites fully actualise this theoretical function in educational settings, facilitating meaningful interplay between historical inheritance and contemporary reality.

Educators should further exploit textual passages and historical imagery within textbooks to guide students in close reading, content systematisation, and the activation of embedded historical memory. Taking the Self-Strengthening Movement as an example, a functional *lieux de mémoire* can be established around the transmission of associated historical memory. Textual accounts and visual records are employed to mobilise curricular content and supplementary archival materials, converting relevant historical remembrance into students' cognitive understanding, emotional resonance, and practical analytical skills. Curricular narratives, historical illustrations, and extended primary sources pertaining to the Self-Strengthening Movement constitute the core carriers of this functional memorial framework.

Students are prompted to synthesise textual and visual evidence to analyse the characteristics and founding objectives of modern enterprises established throughout the movement. Through interpreting the era's socioeconomic backdrop via the guiding mottos of "Self-Strengthening" and "Wealth Seeking", learners comprehend the movement's historical significance as the initial stage of China's modernisation drive. On this basis, inquiry-based practical tasks are devised, with students exploring the theme of Achievements and Limitations of the Self-Strengthening Movement. Drawing upon textbook texts, historical images and other memorial resources, groups reconstruct the exploratory historical journey through role-playing and short dramatic performances. Subsequent reflective analysis enables learners to evaluate both the progressive implications and inherent historical constraints of the movement, thus honing core competencies in historical interpretation and evidence-based reasoning. Meanwhile, through textual exegesis, visual analysis and creative expression, students transform textbook historical materials into tangible, communicable memorial carriers, achieving the internalisation of historical memory into practical competence and emotional identity.

In essence, functional *lieux de mémoire* centre on textual and visual pedagogical resources, and are tightly integrated with the content of secondary school history curricula. By positioning textbooks and educational imagery as core constituents of functional curricular memory, this pedagogical framework fully actualises the inherent educational value of memorial site theory in history teaching.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Material, symbolic, and functional *lieux de mémoire* do not operate in isolation; instead, they constitute an integrated, mutually reinforcing system. Material *lieux de mémoire* lay the foundational basis for their symbolic and functional counterparts, providing tangible carriers for the embodiment of collective memory. Symbolic *lieux de mémoire* represent the conceptual core, which endows physical sites with cultural connotations and spiritual significance. Functional *lieux de mémoire* act as the practical extension of material and symbolic dimensions, actualising the inherent educational value embedded within memorial sites. In secondary school history education, teachers ought to integrate these three dimensions comprehensively, circumvent one-dimensional instructional approaches, and establish a holistic pedagogical framework centred on *lieux de mémoire*.

The application of Nora's *lieux de mémoire* theory requires contextual adaptation to China's unique historical and cultural landscape, as well as the practical conditions of domestic history education. Educators are advised to refrain from mechanically transplanting Western theoretical frameworks. Instead, instructional strategies ought to be tailored to the cognitive development of Chinese secondary school students and the core competency objectives of history curricula.

In conclusion, the construction and pedagogical application of material, symbolic, and functional *lieux de mémoire* in secondary history education effectively transcend the constraints of conventional history teaching. Such integration renders history instruction more

vivid, experiential, and educationally substantive. It facilitates students' comprehension of historical memory, inheritance of cultural heritage, and development of core historical competencies, carrying considerable practical implications for the ongoing reform of secondary history education. As curriculum reform in Chinese secondary history education proceeds further, subsequent research should deepen explorations into the interdisciplinary integration of *lieux de mémoire* theory with classroom practice. Continuous empirical investigation and pedagogical refinement will enable memorial sites to function as a vital bridge between historical knowledge and learners' internalised cognition. Ultimately, such approaches empower history education to fulfil its fundamental missions of historical enlightenment and cultural cultivation, guiding students to safeguard collective historical memory, consolidate national identity, and assume their contemporary historical responsibilities.

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