

Cultural memory and identity through street names: A survey of the inhabitants in Nanchang



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Abstract: This study investigated whether street names could evoke the inhabitants' cultural memory and identity in Nanchang, China. In total, 446 participants were surveyed online to answer 16 questions regarding their attitude of the street names with various cultural contents. The result showed although in various degrees, street names did evoke the inhabitants' cultural memory and identity. By and large, the agreement proportion of street names after figures, events, and religious sites or buildings was relatively higher than that of ancient buildings, historical allusions, and ancient myths. It is argued that this variation mainly relied on the respondents' familiarity with the cultural background. It is also suggested to consider how to enrich such cultural knowledge to keep more effective function of street names on cultural memory and identity.

Keywords: cultural memory, identity, street names, inhabitants, Nanchang

1. Introduction

Cultural memory was initiated by Jan Assmann by drawing on the work of Maurice Halbwachs's "collective memory" and Aby Warburg's "social memory" and relating "memory (the contemporized past), culture, and the group (society) to each other" (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p.129). In the theory of cultural memory, Jan Assmann used communicative memory to substitute Halbwachs's "collective memory". The latter was seen narrowly as daily memory which lacked the sense of culture and was informally transmitted via orality on personal and autobiographical memories limited to the recent past only lasting for three to four generations. Then, cultural memory is described as the one that is away from the everyday and is associated with the mythical history or historical happenings in the absolute past some of which could be dated back to about 3000 years ago. In terms of the media of cultural memory, it is formally "mediated in texts, icons, dances, rituals, and performances of various kinds; 'classical' or otherwise formalized language(s)" (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995, p.117). Moreover, it can be preserved, transferred, and reincorporated generation by generation via a series of formally institutionalized methods such as recitation, practice, or observance.

Identity, simultaneously, is closely associated with cultural memory. According to Assmann & Czaplicka (1995), cultural memory passing in multiple generations preserves its own unity and peculiarity which could be perceived and derived by the members of different groups. As such, the knowledge in the cultural memory provides the individuals with a possibility to form different identities "on the individual, generational, political, and cultural levels" (Assmann, 2008, pp.113-4). In other words, by distinguishing the knowledge in cultural memory, the individuals can identify what belongs to them or which group they belong to.

Street names are city-text (Azaryahu, 1996) seeing purely from the perspective of linguistics. The text tells the inhabitants or tourists practical information about the street location or direction by which they are able to get located or navigated. At the same time, however, Savage & Yeoh (2013) argue that place names (including street names) are indicators of a country in history, people, aspirations, and self-image, thus extending street names to cover more complicated and wider aspects. Furthermore, Ferguson (1988) and Alderman (2003) explicitly claim that the street names inherently maintain themselves part of cultural memory. That is to say, on the one hand, street names could be seen as a carrier to transmit cultural memory. On the other hand, the reading of street names can create a series of mental images in the viewers' minds, evoking certain portrait of the content

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bounded to the street names, and accordingly generating certain identities (Bucher et al, 2013).

The available research on street names placed specific interest in commemorative streets with an emphasis on political identity (Alderman, 2002; Azaryahu, 1996; 1997) and little study was done on cultural identity. What is more, scarcer study was conducted on street names' influence on the inhabitants' cultural memory in the cities. Therefore, this study, taking a quantitative method, aimed to explore the inhabitants' attitude of cultural memory and cultural identity brought by street names in a Chinese city, Nanchang. It is hoped that a general trend concerning the inhabitants' perception of cultural memory and identity on street names can be presented.

2. Theoretic framework

2.1 Elasticity of cultural memory and identity

Street names represent the ideology of the political power, thus imposing them a political identity, particularly for the commemorative street names (Pinchevski & Torgovnik, 2002). By attaching famous figures, events, places, or symbols to the street names, the name-givers intend to deliver their political influence on the public who are supposed to commemorate related issues when they read these names. However, we should admit the fact that unlike the "realms of memory" (*lieux de mémoire*) (Nora, 1986), such as national symbols, commemoration days, national ceremonies as well as memorial sites including museums, monuments, and cemeteries which can explicitly and directly bring the attendants back to memorization of the past and meanwhile form a sense of self or belonging (identity forming), such power and influence of the street names may not be that powerful.

What is more, in some cities in China, for example, in order to maintain an atmosphere of being cultural and historic, the city administrations prefer to name a street or road after a famous figure or a historical event, thus making the street names of a figure or an event frequently seen. However, do all such street names maintain the same influence to engage the inhabitants in memorizing something and thus constructing their identity or are there various degrees? That is a question to be answered and explored.

In this paper, we adopted the concept of elasticity (Raadik-Cottrell, 2011) which could be seen as a general measurement of peoples' perception or attitude on cultural memory and identity evoked by street names. We assume that there is a continuum with one end being no evocation of cultural memory and corresponding identity formation, the other end being full evocation and various status in between. This elasticity can be measured by the instrumental tool, such as Likert-scale in a questionnaire. The notion of identity is narrowed to refer to individual local/regional identity (Dani, 2017; Bucher et al, 2013) which means the personal attitudes formed from the cultural memory triggered by things in the area where the inhabitants live. Specifically, we focus on the street names, some of which are the carrier of the local/regional culture and which have memory (Assmann, 2008) and then can facilitate individual local/regional identity.

2.2 The cultural features of the street names in Nanchang

Nanchang is the capital city and the largest city in Jiangxi Province, central China. It is a national historic and cultural city with a history of more than two thousand two hundred years. By the end of 2019, the population of permanent residents was 5.06 million. Among them, the urban population is 4.2093 million¹. Six administrative districts constitute the main city and the built-up central urban area is 443 square kilometers². By 2019, the amount of streets/roads is 1727 with over 60 streets/roads named after the historic figures³.

Apart from such "celebrity" street names as Ruzi Road, Zigu Road, or Yuanming Bei Road, there are other forms with cultural and historic features, such as events, ancient buildings, and historical allusions, etc. Table 1 illustrates the main types of street names and related examples.

¹<http://www.nc.gov.cn/ncstjj/tjgb/202004/2b80ea46b1d244e59fcd8cb3b11051cd.shtml>

²https://www.sohu.com/a/392716145_120616028

³http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzIzNjUzNTY1Ng==&mid=2247492239&idx=3&sn=e5cafeeddae7d84488a92c1b449d2980&chksm=e8d4c888dfa3419e655124abed52c9b97778461f190be401a2cf7d1d0ec671553fc5fdc39cfc&mpshare=1&scene=23&srcid=0731IVBmYiVf1x45GJg8wQvj&shareid=1601280148234&shareid=0dd046bf435f577dc5145883bd3dcd1c#rd

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Table 1 types and example of street names with cultural features in Nanchang

| Types | Street/Road/Lane name (example) |
|---------------------------|---|
| Figures | Ruzi Road (孺子路), Zigu Road (子固路), Yuanming Bei Road (渊明北路) |
| Events | Bayi Avenue (八一大道), Erqi Bei Road (二七北路), Changzheng Road (长征路) |
| Ancient buildings | Huandiance Lane (皇殿侧巷), Youying Street (右营街), Donghu Shuyuan Lane (东湖书院巷) |
| Religious sites/buildings | Jinta Dong Street (金塔东路), Dinggongmiao Lane (丁公庙巷), Dashiyuan Lane (大士院巷) |
| Historical allusions | Jiangjundu Lane (将军渡巷), Jimazhuang Street (系马桩街) |
| Ancient myths | Zongmao Lane (棕帽巷), Xiangping Lane (香平巷) |

Based on the cultural property in street names in Nanchang and seeing street names as a medium to evoke cultural memory and identity, this paper tentatively focuses on two research questions:

- (1) What is the inhabitants' attitudes of street names' bringing them cultural memory?
- (2) What is the inhabitants' attitudes of street names' influencing their identity?

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

This study was done in a regional city and meanwhile, it is the capital city of Jiangxi province. Therefore, not only live here the local people who were born and grow up but also other people moved from other places all the province or even the whole nation. In order to avoid identity crisis (Assmann, 2011; Dani, 2017) that is the difference or conflict between the old identity formed in one social-cultural context and the new one, we only selected the local participants who were born in Nanchang and have been living here for at least 18 years, regardless of their age, gender, job, education level, place of living in the city, etc (note that we kept the information in a general way in the questionnaire, with the purpose of examining the diversity of participants). In total 446 inhabitants agreed to take part in this study and answered the questionnaire online.

3.2 Instrument

For this study, we used a questionnaire as the main instrument for a quantitative study. The questionnaire was constructed by the author based on the study of identity on street names in terms of culture (Bucher et al, 2013) and the comprehensive cultural study on cultural identity (Dani, 2017). It consisted of 3 parts. Part one was the basic demographic information (avoiding a single source). Part two aimed to check the general use or understanding of street names in Nanchang and 3 items were included (notice of street names, use of them, and whether knowing various cultural backgrounds embedded in the street names).

The third part was the perception and attitude of cultural memory and identity. Since the cultural features were diverse, the street names were classified into several types including figures, events, ancient buildings, etc., as is illustrated in Table 1. In terms of the cultural memory, we resorted to memories or images formed or evoked when noticing the street names (e.g. On seeing the street names named after figures such as Ruzi Road, Zigu Road, or Yuanming Bei Road, I will memorize something or have images of the figures named as the street names in my mind). And for cultural identity, we turned to the sense of pride perceived when reading the street names (e.g. I feel proud of having such figures from the region I am residing). Besides, we set an individual item, wanting to know whether they agreed that the familiarity of the cultural knowledge would affect their memory of the contents in the street names. In total 13 items were included in this part. All items were based on a six-point Likert scale including Completely Disagree, Disagree, Slightly Disagree, Slightly Agree, Agree, as well as Completely Agree, ranging from 1

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point to 6 points.

The questionnaire, then after compiling, was sent to ten local inhabitants for a pilot test on validity and reliability verification. For them, the items being tested were concise and clear, with no ambiguity. In addition to understanding, they agreed that the classification of the streets could include the local cultural features in Nanchang. After that, the final version of the questionnaire was sent to the participants for an online survey.

3.3 Results

The data from the responses of the participants were finally collected and used for descriptive analysis, i.e. to find out the percentage concerning the two research questions.

3.3.1 General view of use and understanding of the street names

In the questionnaire, we first examined the participants' general notice and use of street names in Nanchang. In addition to that, we also checked their overall view of whether they know certain cultural knowledge is embedded in the street names. Table 2 illustrated that generally 93.27% (N=446) of the participants, including the ones who responded slightly disagree, agree, and completely agree, noticed the street names in this city, and 95.52% (N=446) of the respondents used the street names for location. In terms of cultural knowledge embedded, 77.58% (N=446) of the participants generally agreed with the inclusion of cultural information in the street names; however, the proportion was less than their notice and daily use of the names, indicating that more than 20% of the inhabitants among these participants may not know the cultural property in the street names.

Table 2 Percentage of participants' view of use or understanding of street names

| | Completely Disagree | Disagree | Slightly Disagree | Slightly Agree | Agree | Completely Agree |
|---------------------------|---------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|--------|------------------|
| Street names noticing | 0.45% | 1.79% | 4.48% | 6.05% | 64.80% | 22.42% |
| Street names using | 0.67% | 1.35% | 2.47% | 11.88% | 60.31% | 23.32% |
| Street names with culture | 5.16% | 8.07% | 9.19% | 13.23% | 41.93% | 22.42% |

Note: In the left column, the item "Street names noticing" refers to "I often notice the street names", "Street names using" refers to "I often use the street names to locate the place" "Street names with culture" refers to "I know there are different street names named from various cultural background".

3.3.2 Question 1: What is the inhabitants' attitudes of street names' bringing them cultural memory?

Generally, the participants' agreement of street names' elicitation of cultural memory was just above the average. From table 3, we can see that the means of the 446 inhabitants' attitude of the street names in six different types in terms of cultural content embedded. Street names named after figure (M=3.95, SD=1.46), events (M=3.76, SD=1.43), and religious sites or buildings (M=3.47, SD=1.45) may more easily evoke memories to these respondents. In contrast, names after ancient buildings (M=3.80, SD=1.49), historical allusions (M=3.38, SD=1.47), and ancient myths (M=3.35, SD=1.46) may less affect their memories. In all, the street names in Nanchang could elicit the inhabitants' memories to a certain degree, but relatively not high.

Table 3 Mean score and SD on participants' view on images (memories) evoked by different street names

| | Mean(N=446) | SD(N=446) |
|---------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| Figures | 3.95 | 1.46 |
| Events | 3.76 | 1.43 |
| Ancient buildings | 3.47 | 1.45 |
| Religious sites/buildings | 3.80 | 1.49 |
| Historical allusions | 3.38 | 1.47 |
| Ancient myths | 3.35 | 1.46 |

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Note: In the left column, the item “Figures”, for example, refers to “On seeing the street names named after figures such as Ruzi Road, Zigu Road, or Yuanming Bei Road, I will memorize something or have images of the figures named as the street names in my mind”. The rest follows the same way by adding different street names of a specific type.

This can be examined by the proportion collected from the survey, i.e. if calculating the percentage of agreement (including slightly agree, agree, and completely agree), we can double-check this trend in table 4. The percentage of the 446 respondents’ agreement of the street names’ bringing them memory by names named after figure, events, and religious sites or buildings was more than 58%, being 63%, 59.64%, and 58.74% respectively. On the contrary, names after ancient buildings (49.55%), historical allusions (45.96%), and ancient myths (44.39%) were responded all lower than 50%. However, while we concluded the average attitude of street names’ eliciting the inhabitants’ cultural memory, we should not ignore the percentage of “slightly agree” ranging from 19.06% to 25.78% which could be seen as wavering between agreement and disagreement. And this part may affect the overall attitude to be more positive if the respondents were more decisive.

Table 4 Percentage of the participants’ view on images (memories) evoked by different street names

| | Completely Disagree | Disagree | Slightly Disagree | Slightly Agree | Agree | Completely Agree |
|---------------------------|---------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|--------|------------------|
| Figures | 7.85% | 9.19% | 19.96% | 19.51% | 29.82% | 13.68% |
| Events | 9.64% | 10.09% | 20.63% | 20.63% | 31.84% | 7.17% |
| Ancient buildings | 11.66% | 15.47% | 23.32% | 19.28% | 24.44% | 5.83% |
| Religious sites/buildings | 8.52% | 13.68% | 19.06% | 17.71% | 29.15% | 11.88% |
| Historical allusions | 13.23% | 16.14% | 24.66% | 17.26% | 22.87% | 5.83% |
| Ancient myths | 13.45% | 16.37% | 25.78% | 15.70% | 23.77% | 4.93% |

3.3.2 Question 2: What is the inhabitants’ attitudes of street names’ influencing their identity?

Table 5 provides the statistical description of the inhabitants’ agreement of identity elicited by street names with different cultural contents. Generally, these 446 respondents held a positive attitude towards these names when asked whether they could feel a sense of pride to keep the cultural information existed in Nanchang. Particularly the ones named after religious sites/buildings (M=4.48, SD=1.17), figures (M=4.35, SD=1.31) as well as events (M=4.28, SD=1.30), indicated a higher degree than that of ancient buildings (M=3.99, SD=1.41), historical allusions (M=3.69, SD=1.43), and ancient myths (M=3.56, SD=1.52) which showed an above average-degree. However, generally speaking, although in various degrees, street names did evoke the inhabitants’ identity.

Table 5 Mean score and SD on the participants’ attitude of identity evoked by different street names

| | Mean(N=446) | SD(N=446) |
|----------------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| Figures having | 4.35 | 1.31 |
| Events having | 4.28 | 1.30 |
| Ancient buildings having | 3.99 | 1.41 |
| Religious sites/buildings having | 4.48 | 1.17 |
| Historical allusions having | 3.69 | 1.43 |
| Ancient myths having | 3.56 | 1.52 |

Note: In the left column, the item “Figures having”, for example, refers to “I feel proud of having such figures from the region I am residing”. The rest follows the same way by adding different street names of a specific type.

Similarly, the percentage in Table 6 could consolidate our conclusion of street names’ influence on the respondents’ identity.

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As is shown in the table, among the 446 participants, the agreement proportion (including slightly agree, agree, and completely agree) in streets named after religious sites or buildings (82.29%), figure (79.15%), and events (75.78%) exceeded three quarters, far more than that of ancient buildings, historical allusions, and ancient myths, with 63.45%, 56.73%, and 54.26% respectively. It is interesting to see that in the undecided proportion of “slightly disagree”, the percentage of the latter three (ranging from 18.83% to 20.63%) was nearly double that of the former three (ranging from 10.54 to 13.26%). Again, the response from this section could potentially enrich the agreement rate in the respondents who were not that indecisive.

Table 6 Percentage of the participants’ attitude of identity evoked by different street names

| | Completely Disagree | Disagree | Slightly Disagree | Slightly Agree | Agree | Completely Agree |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|--------|------------------|
| Figures having | 4.71% | 5.61% | 10.54% | 26.46% | 34.08% | 18.61% |
| Events having | 4.26% | 6.73% | 13.23% | 23.09% | 37.67% | 15.02% |
| Ancient buildings having | 5.83% | 10.09% | 20.63% | 19.96% | 29.60% | 13.90% |
| Religious sites/buildings having | 2.24% | 3.81% | 11.66% | 27.13% | 35.87% | 19.28% |
| Historical allusions having | 8.97% | 13.90% | 20.40% | 19.96% | 29.82% | 6.95% |
| Ancient myths having | 13.68% | 13.23% | 18.83% | 18.16% | 29.60% | 6.50% |

4. Discussion

Although the statistical figures in this study were not too high to show the street names’ influence on the inhabitants’ attitude of cultural memories and identity, it goes without doubt that street names do function as a medium to evoke cultural memory (Alderman, 2002; Bucher et al, 2013; Ferguson, 1988). In fact, the text contents in the street names are indirect in that they are from various sources and can be seen as second-hand information. Therefore, compared with some live sites, such as museums, relics, or monuments, etc. (Assmann, 2008), the ability of street names’ bringing people to specific cultural memory could be relatively weak.

Meanwhile, the inhabitants’ attitudes varied to different types of street names. A relatively higher proportion of agreement was given to names after figures, events, and religious sites or buildings than the rest. This is probably because of the explicit cultural features in these street names. For the figures, they were famous wise men, great writers, or politicians in ancient China. For example, the name in Ruzi Road refers to a famous wise man Xu Ruzi⁴, who was born in Nanchang and he did not get any official post from the government but he indeed contributed a lot to the nation. He is honored as the first wise man, in Jiangxi Province, having good virtue of being humble and indifferent to worldly aspirations. His philosophy of life influences people in the local area to a certain extent and people may spontaneously be evoked to have an image of him and memorize the good personality of him when seeing the road name named after him. For the events, for example, Bayi Avenue⁵ was named after the first armed uprising led by part of the National Revolutionary Army under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in Nanchang. This event is vivid and fresh to the local people. In terms of religious sites or buildings, for example, Jinta Dong Street, it is named after Rope Gold Pagoda⁶, a pagoda seen as the treasure of Nanchang. It has Buddhism characteristics; however, it is now a place of interest being a destination for the tourists to Nanchang. Therefore, street names from these three sources are vivid, tangible, and explicitly locally wide-spread and could activate the inhabitants’ memory and thus helping form strong

⁴<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%BE%90%E7%A8%BA/10542621?fromtitle=%E5%BE%90%E5%AD%BA%E5%AD%90&fromid=10251581&fr=aladdin>

⁵<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%85%AB%E4%B8%80%E5%8D%97%E6%98%8C%E8%B5%B7%E4%B9%89/31440?fromtitle=%E5%85%AB%E4%B8%80%E8%B5%B7%E4%B9%89&fromid=10322705>

⁶<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%BB%B3%E9%87%91%E5%A1%94>

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cultural identity.

By contrast, the names after ancient buildings, historical allusions, and ancient myths are kind of obscure. For instance, Youying Street was named after a military camp in ancient China, but the building was no longer there, only a name left. Jimazhuang Street was named after a place where horses were tied. Zongmao Lane was named after a mythicized official in the ancient Jin Dynasty, whose palm hat was blown down by the wind when he passed by a street in Nanchang. But this myth was not well-known. This can possibly explain why such street names were weak in bringing the inhabitants' cultural memory.

What is more, we could also pay attention to the statistics between "Disagree" and "Agree", i.e. the two columns of "slightly disagree" and "Slight agree". These in-between figures constituted around 40% in the proportion of every single survey statement. In the result section where we displayed the questionnaire result, we tentatively included the "slightly disagree" into the agreement, which may strengthen the agreement percentage. However, the "slight agree" section could also be added to the disagreement, which of course will lessen the agreement proportion. The existence of such a situation was mainly due to the indecision of the inhabitants who were not familiar with the cultural background of some street names. In the last statement of the questionnaire, we specifically set the item "If I am familiar with the history or origin of the street names, I will have clear images of the events in my mind". Nearly all 446 respondents responded "agree" or "completely agree". In other words, their background knowledge determined their judgment of agreement and disagreement in this survey. If they are familiar with the history and origin of these street names, they will probably be decisive in transforming the disagreed into agreed ones, which could potentially strengthen the agreement proportion. This inspires us to consider how to provide more additional information to facilitate the street names to evoke the inhabitants' cultural memory and identity.

Conclusion

Street names, on the one hand, provides information to the ones in practical locational needs when they are on the street. On the other hand, they serve as a medium to transmit cultural information, evoking the inhabitants' cultural memory, and helping them form cultural identity (Assmann, 2008). This survey attested to the function of street names in terms of cultural memory. However, it should be noted that unlike rituals, museums, or monuments, street names which are rich in cultural contents, their capability to evoke the residents' cultural memory, to a certain degree, relies on the residents' cultural knowledge. More such knowledge could guarantee the activation of more cultural memory and thus solidier cultural identity.

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