

# Communication, generation and cultural memory: Insights from fieldwork in Vietnam

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## Abstract

The chapter examines the complex relations of communication processes, generations and cultural memory in the socio-cultural setting of North Vietnam. It critically reviews present scholarly work in the flourishing, but scattered, field of memory research in communication and media studies, and discusses links to Mannheim's sociological concept of generations. The theoretical concepts of generation and cultural memory demonstrate several commonalities along the lines of time and space, experiences, perceptions and mediation processes as determining dimensions. The chapter presents an exemplary case study of a family in Hanoi and probes a respondent-centred empirical approach to describe these relations in terms of memory-related communication repertoires. The repertoire-oriented analytical framework proved to be an efficient tool to elicit and merge perspectives on memory and communication practices from the research material. The findings indicate on which occasions such practices can interlink, and how they contribute to the communicative construction of cultural memory and generations in Vietnam against the backdrop of individual biographies and perceptions.

*Keywords:* cultural memory, communication repertoires, generation, Vietnam

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## 1 Introduction

2015 was a year of anniversaries in Vietnam: the 85th anniversary of the Communist Party's founding, the 40th anniversary of the end of the war and the 70th anniversary of national independence. On such occasions the capital of Hanoi turns into an urban memoryscape: mass media, exhibitions and street banners often function as public reminders for historical events. They represent examples of the communicative means of the leadership's memory politics. Despite the dissemination of official historical narratives, however, "the past" remains a complex and contested issue within Vietnamese society (Tai, 2001a).

Such public phenomena for dealing with the country's past embody state-initiated constructions of collective memory – a "*generic term for all processes of organic, mediated and institutional nature that have a meaning for the reciprocal influence of past and present in socio-cultural contexts*" (Erll, 2011, p. 6).<sup>1</sup> Cultural memory represents the observable research object (ibid., p. 7) with "*historically and culturally diverse specifications of the theoretical concept of collective memory*" (Erll, 2003, p. 176). This chapter<sup>2</sup> explores these communicatively constructed specifications, not only advanced by state policies, but also by people's everyday practices. In Vietnam, cultural memory appears at the heart of tensions between continuity (e.g. relative political stability) and change (e.g. economic reforms "*Đổi Mới*"<sup>3</sup>). Particularly media change is relevant for the dynamics of cultural memory in contemporary Vietnam: a variety of communicative practices<sup>4</sup> such as sharing information on social networking sites, enabled through increasing internet access (Le, 2013), have become an integral part of urban life.

The object of research, communicative constructions of cultural memory<sup>5</sup>, includes interpersonal and mediated communicative practices and agencies, but also contents and processes of private and (partially) public engagement with the past. Moreover, the chapter examines remediation processes between generations, and therefore addresses the following research questions: In which way is (media) communication relevant for constituting cultural memory in Vietnam? How is it constructed within and across different generations?

1 All German quotations were translated into English by the author.

2 The research presented here is part of the author's PhD project on the "*Communicative construction of cultural memory in transforming societies: A case study on Vietnam and Vietnamese diasporic communities in Germany*" at ZeMKI, University of Bremen.

3 Since 1986 economic reforms called "*Đổi Mới*" (renovation) have led to the liberalization of the economy from a centrally planned economy towards a socialist market economy.

4 Communication practices in the context of this work are generally understood as habitualized forms of communicative action in the sense of social action. Thus, they are not used in the specific tradition of practice theory. Communication practices constitute elements of communication repertoires (Hasebrink 2015).

5 The chapter/PhD research follows a social-constructivist approach to communication (e.g. Berger/Luckmann, 1967) and thus assumes that cultural memory is communicatively constructed.

The chapter first discusses prior research and key literature of memory research in communication and media studies. Second, the concept of generation and its fertility in this field of research is elaborated. This review of scholarly work then provides the ground for an empirical case study on communications and cultural memory in two generations of a family in Hanoi. The exemplary study probes an empirical approach to memory research in communications and discusses its value for future research.

## 2 Memory research in communication studies

The dynamic field of memory research has constantly featured multi- and interdisciplinarity since it evolved (Pickering/Keightley, 2013, pp. 2-3). The complex relationship between history, memory and media is a relatively young academic debate (Garde-Hansen, 2011, p. 1) that was long lacking theoretical input from communication and media studies (Zierold, 2006, p. 5). The past decade, however, has seen an upsurge in studies in communication and media research, adding to prior scholarship in the disciplines of history, anthropology or sociology. These studies extend previous research perspectives by addressing questions of memory, public spheres and media events (Volkmer, 2006), media institutions and journalism (Zelizer/Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014). Other works have examined the role of mass media for cultural memory and memory politics after conflicts (Hoskins, 2004; Sturken, 2007) or looked at single media as memory agents (Kramp, 2011; Gray, 2013).

With the process of digitization, however, the scope of research has widened: media and communication scholars went beyond studying mass-mediated and public forms of memory by also investigating individual (partially public/private) practices of remembering, e.g. on weblogs (van Dijck, 2007, p. 53; Lohmeier/Pentzold, 2014), via smartphones or within virtual fan groups on the social web (Garde-Hansen, 2011, p. 120). With the advent of digital media not only does a binary distinction between interpersonal and mass communication become increasingly problematic, but the one between individual/private and collective/public forms of remembering also does. For this reason, José van Dijck (2007) suggests the more holistic theoretical concept of “mediated memories”, which considers categories of “*self*” and “*the collective*”, of “*past*”, “*present*” and “*future*”, of “*history*” and “*memory*” as continua in constant mutual negotiation. It allows for a joint examination of media, their use and appropriation, and their meaning for memory practices. This approach bears great epistemological potential for media research on memory, but is quite me-

dia-centric in its basic definition<sup>6</sup> and caters less to communication processes at large. Moreover, it does not yet take into account various generational locations (see 3.) in detail, and still needs to be probed further empirically.

### 3 Memory and the concept of generations

The concept of generation is a ubiquitous notion in vernacular terms, but a fuzzy one in academia. In his classical sociological writings, Karl Mannheim (1959) pointed out the significance of the “*social phenomena ‘generation’*” for the transfer of knowledge in the historical process:

[...] members of any one generation can participate only in a temporally limited section of the historical process, and (d) it is therefore necessary continually to transmit the accumulated cultural heritage; (e) the transition from generation to generation is a continuous process (ibid., p. 292).

In communication-oriented memory research the focus should be geared towards the communicative processes involved in inter- and transgenerational knowledge (re-)mediation, and in constructions of the past. In fact, Mannheim (1959) falls short in this aspect in his own work, as he insufficiently considered communication itself as part of biographical experiences, and as a decisive factor in transmission processes between and across generations (Mannheim [1972] 1998). Such transgenerational communicative processes include such practices as referencing to the past in interpersonal conversations among family members, watching history documentaries or keeping and sharing photographs.

Central to Mannheim’s sociology of generations is the argument that the unity of a generation is based on “*a common location in the social and historical process*” (Mannheim, 1959, p. 291) that might coincide with demographic characteristics, but cannot be deduced from it (ibid., p. 290). In her large-scale study on “*News in Public Memory*”, Ingrid Volkmer (2006, p. 6) points out the neglect of Mannheim’s theoretical work within the academic communications discourse. In their media-related memory research, Volkmer (2006) and colleagues regard common experiential locations as common media experiences, and thus define generations as particular media generations (print/radio generation, etc.) (see also Hepp et al., 2014). Following a non-media-centric approach, however, this chapter considers the entanglement of both, lived and

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6 “Mediated memories are the activities and objects we produce and appropriate by means of media technologies, for creating and re-creating a sense of past, present, and future for ourselves in relation to others” (van Dijck, 2010, p. 21).

mediated experience of the past, as qualifying for shared generational locations; and against the backdrop of these experiences, the own generational location is situated in the present.

## 4 Empirical approach: The Vietnam case

*“Uống nước nhớ nguồn”* – “*When drinking water, remember its source*”<sup>7</sup> – the meaning of this popular Vietnamese proverb hints at the prevailing value of remembering in present-day Vietnam, conveying a sense of continuity and the sentiment of acknowledging cultural bonds with the past. Vietnam was selected for field research for two major reasons: (1) media and communication research still lacks empirical studies on non-Western phenomena (Grüne/Ulrich, 2012), particularly from Southeast Asia (Heng, 2002); (2) Vietnam is one of the few remaining socialist one-party states whose past was marked by major disruptions and transformations, and thus provides a dynamic field worthwhile to research.

### 4.1 Cultural memory and media in Vietnam

Most publications on cultural memory in Vietnam are concerned with the individual and collective commemoration of the Vietnam War. Margara (2012), Schwenkel (2009) and Tai (2001) elaborate on relevant places of memory of war times, and memory narratives in Vietnam. These are, on the one hand, official state (mainly North Vietnamese) narratives stated in most public reflections on the war, e.g. heroic narratives or narratives of the national struggle for liberation; on the other hand, the waiting wife, war trauma and restless souls are narrative elements of private individual memory (Margara, 2012, p. 79). This research points at the plurality and dynamics of memory, even within single families (Tai, 2001a, p. 14). The question of intergenerational relations has been addressed by Schwenkel (2011), who discusses the sentiment of “*moral panic*” in older generations – an anxiety that younger generations forget about history and values in the wake of an influx of consumer goods including media products. Based on fieldwork in North Vietnam, she concludes that although the urban youth might be reluctant to take part in or indifferent to state-initiated commemorative projects, they still adhere to traditional and “*revolutionary*” values (family support; development/ progress of the country) in different ways, while embracing the opportunities provided by economic reforms (ibid, pp. 135-136).

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7 Translation by Tai (2001b, p. 187)

The authors also argue that cultural memory in Vietnam has progressively changed and liberalized since “*Đổi Mới*”, particularly in literature, film, fine arts (Tai, 2001a, p. 6) and online (Großheim, 2008). Such liberalization and diversification tendencies have also evolved in the Vietnamese media system (Tien, 2002; Müller, 2008) despite prevailing, sometimes ambivalent state control (Cain, 2014).

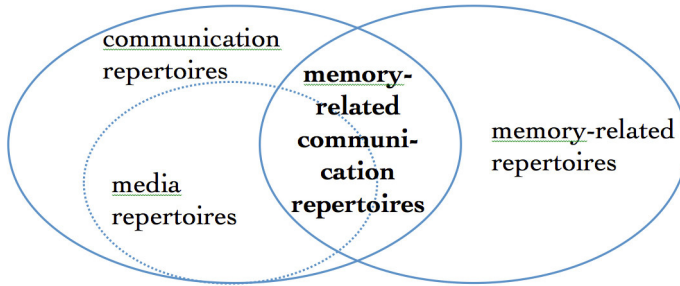
#### 4.2 Methodology and analytical framework

The methods applied in this case study include in-depth interviews, questionnaires and qualitative content analysis. The interviews covered topics such as personal biography, media use, intergenerational communication and various aspects of history (cultural traditions, holidays, mediated history, etc.). They were analyzed by means of qualitative content analysis (Nawratil/Schönhagen, 2009; Mayring, 2010).

Besides the techniques of summarizing, explicating and structuring content (ibid.), the case study utilized an analytical framework proposed by Uwe Hasebrink and Jutta Popp (2006). The concept of “*media repertoires*” refers to “*how media users combine different media contacts into a comprehensive pattern of exposure*” (ibid., p. 369) and allows for a flexible, but systematic analysis of how respondees make sense of their own media practices (Hasebrink/Domeyer, 2012). Repertoires consist of e.g. relevant components (media types, genres, topics, etc.), empirical indicators for (contacts, preferences, frequency, etc.) and relations between components (ibid., p. 760). Recently, Hasebrink (2015) extended this conceptualization towards “*communication repertoires*” (see fig. 1).

Analogously, I suggest a concept of memory-related repertoires, describing individuals’ reflected engagement with the past in present contexts. These denote a combination of e.g. biographical, cultural, (trans-)national, etc. information about the past (components) and preferred historical sources, and habits (empirical indicators) that are not necessarily media-related. The ground, on which communication and memory-related repertoires overlap, is where “*memory-related communication repertoires*” emerge. These can be understood as patterns of individual communicative means to construct and make sense of the past (see fig. 1). The analysis presented here focuses on components and empirical indicators of memory-related communication repertoires in two generations.

Fig. 1: Memory-related communication repertoires



#### 4.3. Memory-related communication repertoires: *Findings from fieldwork in Hanoi*

The findings are based on two selected cases of fieldwork in Hanoi conducted in January/February 2015. Interview respondents were Huong, a teacher in her mid-fifties originally from Central Vietnam, and her daughter Nhung,<sup>8</sup> a senior bachelor student.

##### 4.3.1. Components of memory-related communication repertoires

Components serve as a first indicator for how media users form their media repertoires and at which level they refer to them (in terms of media devices, genres, topics, etc.) (Hasebrink/Domeyer, 2012, p. 760). The same can be applied to components of memory-related repertoires and the levels on which individuals engage or refer to the past in a present context. Looking at overlapping references (to communication and memory in one context), namely the components of memory-related communication repertoires mentioned by the respondents, the complex entanglement of mediated and personally lived experience in past and present materializes clearly.

Huong's memory-related communication repertoire consists of watching a television music show with remakes of songs from the past, attending a commemorative event she learned about through mass media, involvement in Facebook groups with people she shared a time period of her life with (school; work abroad), family photographs and embroidered pictures decorating the walls, childhood memories of media experiences, including watching old

<sup>8</sup> Pseudonyms are used to guarantee the privacy and anonymity of the respondents. For the purpose of easier reading, the quotations were slightly changed from the original transcript.

movies, anniversary television programming and finally, dinner talks with the family about the past. The latter represents an example of non-mediated face-to-face communication considered potent for intergenerational communication processes and “*communicative memory*” (Assmann, 2008).

Nhung’s repertoire is composed of historical movies on television, television music shows about and songs of the past in general, attending a commemorative event she learned about via Facebook, childhood memories of media experiences, conversations about the past with family members, teachers or tourists, family photographs and anniversary television programming.

The two cases show great parallels in the subcategories of components derived from the interview material (although differences in detail occur). One reason might lie in the same spatial, social and biographical context mother and daughter share, but another reason might emanate from methodological side effects, as some topics such as “media memories” are part of the interview guidelines. These parallels, however, also provide a common ground for comparison along the lines of these subcategories. Both, for example, mentioned conversations about food at the table with family members, connected with narratives of hardship in the past and appreciation in the present. In contrast to her mother, Nhung, being an undergraduate student in her final year, brings in her present experiences as a student:

I think the story that comes (up) a lot in my family even now is about the hunger (at) that time. Like every meal when we show it on the tray. When me and my brother [...] don’t want to eat that dish, [...] my mom and dad always said that when they were young, they (didn’t) don’t have that kind of thing to eat, so they just come back with the time they were in hunger. [...] And even with my lecturer, he was born in 1949. And I just had class with him yesterday. And every week, when I have class with him, he always talks about that time, the hunger time that he experienced. (Nhung, 22, Hanoi)

This example demonstrates how the same component of “*face-to-face conversations about hardships of the past*” can be situated in different everyday social contexts (Hasebrink/Domeyer, 2012, p. 760), but still conveys similar meanings of the past. The fact that this narrative has also become a component (even though from the perspective of a recipient) of Nhung’s own memory-related communication repertoire represents an incident of inter- (conversational) and transgenerational (transfer) knowledge transmission about the past. It also shows the blurring boundaries between communicating personal and institutionalized (university setting) memory.



#### 4.3.2. Empirical indicators of memory-related communication repertoires

In the repertoire-oriented approach, empirical indicators mark references to frequency of media use, preferences for and attitudes towards certain media products (Hasebrink/Domeyer, 2012, p. 761). The adoption of these categories by memory research is useful in terms of exposure to, involvement in and opinions on memory practices such as participating in commemorative events.

Both respondents mentioned several times having very little free time when not working or studying, so that habitualized media use and memory-practices combined, which derive e.g. from cultural traditions (such as visiting historical pagodas), are not necessarily everyday practices. This differs from the above-mentioned conversations about the past embedded in everyday contexts. Concerning media products related to the past, both mention a preference towards Chinese historical movies because of the better quality of production, the selection of actors/actresses and the movies' moral messages. One of Hương's favourite movies is "Tây Du Ký" ("The Journey to the West") based on a classic Chinese novel:

It is shown every year and we never get bored with it because of the beautiful actress, [...] and very talented actor. [...] When I was a child, I saw it. I like it because the monkey is very intelligent, the pig is very funny. But now, when I become old, I see it with many comments in mind. They are not only very funny characters but they are very intelligent [...] the film teaches us about behavior and we learn a lot from the film. For example, when I was a child, I dreamed of becoming a soldier. Why? Because then in the war, so many soldiers lived in our village, I admired them, I respected them, I wanted to be a person like them. (Huong, 55, Hanoi)

The memory-related communication dimension in this quote is three-fold and again illustrates complexity: Hương's talk on this movie includes (1) childhood/youth memories of the movie as a historical artefact, (2) transnational memory regarding historically rooted Sino-Vietnamese relations and transcultural influence and (3) childhood memories during war times that she used as reference point to explain how perceptions and attitudes change in the life course, also regarding media experiences.

Nhung, who at that time was currently watching the television drama "The Empress of China", focused her review on the aesthetics and production, but also the historical authenticity of the story. Assumed inaccuracies in the representation of history are condoned as long as the basic story line matches history and the visuals are high quality. In her view, Vietnam cannot compete with China in historical television production.

For Vietnam, both noticed an upsurge in historical media products on special occasions such as anniversaries. Although they did not explicate their own use of such content, they voiced a strong opinion on media's memory politics with respect to national history:

[...] it is not enough for us if we use only papers or magazines to repeat, or revise history. [...] we have to use propaganda<sup>9</sup> in the media to remind children to remember the past. [...] we often say about it, for example, it's nearly Điện Biên Phủ victory, so we, on television, in newspapers say many things about it, but it is not enough. (Huong, 55, Hanoi)

Huong's standpoint on how memory practices in the media should work cannot be explained by her own personal media use or preferences alone, which is the limitation of media-centred research. But the biographical information provided reveals her personal attachment to this historical period, namely her parents who devoted their lives to the revolution.

Nhung shares her mother's thoughts about the need for the transmission of historical knowledge and its improvement and creates many concrete scenarios about how this can be done, from online campaigns on Facebook to co-operation with celebrities visiting historical places. Her ideas compared to the mother's statements are very precise and address the young urban youth she herself belongs to. The youth, as described by Schwenkel (2011) embrace new opportunities in post-reform-Vietnam, but still preserve traditional values. On several occasions Nhung even expresses a perceived obligation to remember the past.

#### 4.3.3. *Generational aspects of memory-related communication repertoires*

The previous paragraph already touched upon different generational views concerning remembering, e.g. how to tackle a perceived decreasing interest in national history by the younger population, or the nature of intergenerational conversations about and the transfer of past lived experience.

A quite new media phenomenon on Vietnamese television, the show "*Giai điệu Tự hào*" ("*Proud Melodies*"), addresses different generational viewpoints on newly interpreted songs from war times. Both respondents know and have watched the show together. Huong described "*a generational gap*" and where-by her children are largely detached from her past life.

We have two ideas too, one is for, one is against (laughing). My daughter and my son are young, so they are for the young people and me and my husband are the same here (laughing). So we stand in the generation of the adults, the older generation, and we talk about it. I say "I like it" but my children say "I don't like it". (Huong, 55, Hanoi)

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that the term "propaganda" is not necessarily negatively connoted in Vietnam.

Huong described the perceptions and conversations during the joint family media experience in very clear-cut dichotomous terms. That narrative goes in line with Schwenkel's (2011) anthropological observations of elderly people in North Vietnam worrying about the youth's growing distance to traditional roots (often meaning the spirit and values from revolutionary times). However, Nhung's views on the show are more differentiated and more in tune with her mother's opinion than expected:

I agree more with the older generations. [...] Maybe with this song they do it better but most of the songs are [...] a little bit better in the old version. Because it's like the thing that I always have in my mind when I listen to that melody, listen to that voice. I know this song comes from that time and how they feel about it. And I feel like I can get through that time. I can really experience that time with them. But now, when the youngsters [...] do it in a new way, they don't really experience that time. They don't really know it. They just sing it maybe using their voices. They don't really have feelings about it. (Nhung, 22, Hanoi)

This quote coincides with Nhung's childhood memories of listening and singing along to the music of her parents. So again, the music had a previous place in the personal biography, some emotional attachment, and thus had more appeal in its authentic version to her, a quality criterion she seems to value in media products.

In terms of the Mannheimian definition of generation as communities of shared experience, this example raises questions for future elaboration: Although both do not belong to the same experiential location with respect to music, Nhung agrees more with "*the older*" generation whereas her mother distances herself from "*the younger*" generation. From what both say, it also seems that the staged debates within the show are quite confrontational. Thus, generational differences are also communicatively constructed and contrasted within the television show. The example shows on the one hand, diverging perceptions of belonging and identity, both of oneself and others concerning the memory-related communication experience and on the other hand, the potential of past communication experiences and a particular socialization to create generational overlaps. It illustrates that shared common experiential locations and thus generations are not a sequence of consecutive entities with clear-cut boundaries as genealogy suggests.

## 5 Brief conclusion

Communication processes are key to the construction and the transfer of knowledge about the past in specific socio-cultural settings. They also account for different perceptions of the past over time and thus may result in the tran-

scendency of generations and continuity across them. They do not exist in isolation, but need to be explored against the backdrop of mediated and biographical experiences. It is such communicative processes that need further investigation in research on communication, generations and cultural memory. The concept of generations as communities of common experiential locations is fertile in this research context, as it parallels conceptualizations of cultural memory, particularly in regard to transmission processes and the relations of “self” and “the collective”.

The proposed analytical framework of memory-related communication repertoires provides flexible, but systematic analytical tools to empirically detect and describe such entangled relations, and allows for a respondent-centred interpretation of results. It represents an interdisciplinary effort that goes beyond a limited focus on media practices. The repertoire-oriented framework, however, still needs to be probed on other research material and within other socio-cultural settings. As future research, the PhD project will expand the analytical procedure by applying it to more cases, and will add further comparative perspectives by including fieldwork conducted in South Vietnam and Vietnamese diaspora communities in Germany. The aim is to further examine communication processes accountable for the construction and mediation of “the past” between and across different experiential locations, and how related practices are embedded in everyday life.

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