Cultural memory in the digital sphere: reproducing and localising American sitcoms on RedNote

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Abstract

Introduction. Social media are crucial sites for cross-cultural communication and memory construction. On the Chinese social media platform RedNote (Xiaohongshu), vibrant discussions about classic American sitcoms create a unique space for cross-cultural memory. We examine how Chinese fans reproduce and localise these sitcoms, transforming them from imported media into culturally resonant resources.

Method. Drawing on digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews, we investigate how fans reshape the cultural memory of these shows and contribute to their localisation.

Analysis. Through thematic analysis, we reveal a four-dimensional framework of these memory practices: memory as a toolbox, as play, as identity, and as critique.

Results. Our findings show a dynamic progression of fan engagement. Fans initially approach the sitcoms utilitarianly, applying content to their daily lives. This evolves into playful and creative localisation, ultimately culminating in a deep integration of the shows with their personal identities, fostering critical reflection.

Conclusion(s). We argue that, far from being passive consumers, Chinese fans actively rework American sitcoms into a versatile collection of cultural resources. Ultimately, it underscores the agency, practicality, and creativity that characterize cross-cultural memory practices in the digital age.

Introduction

Globalisation and digital technology have normalised the transnational circulation of popular culture (Chen, 2012). Social media platforms have become pivotal arenas for this exchange. RedNote (Xiaohongshu), a community-driven platform with 300 million users, provides an ideal non-Western digital site to observe the reproduction and localisation of global media. Among the widely circulating products in China, American sitcoms such as *Friends*, *Modern Family*, and *The Big Bang Theory* have maintained enduring popularity. On RedNote, Chinese fans actively transform these shows from static media into vibrant, user-driven cultural resources–symbolic and generative assets such as localised memes, character-inspired lifestyle guides, and linguistic reinterpretations that serve their daily routines, social connectivity, and self-empowerment. Through this creative appropriation, fans negotiate with imported narratives not only to serve their daily routines but to construct unique digital community memories.

Bridging digital memory (Hoskins, 2011), fan culture (Jenkins, 2015), and cross-cultural localisation (Appadurai, 1996), this study uses digital ethnography and in-depth interviews to address the following core questions:

> RQ1. How do Chinese fans' reproduction practices reshape the cultural memory of American sitcoms within RedNote's platform logic?

> RQ2. How do these practices facilitate the localised translation of cross-cultural memory and reflect contemporary Chinese youth's agency within global cultural flows?

We define digital memory as a processual entity embedded within mediatised existence, where the boundaries between *'memory life'* and *'media life'* have coalesced (Hoskins, 2014). Moving beyond a static retrospective of the past, digital memory is conceptualised here as a dynamic flow of continuous reinterpretation enabled by ubiquitous network nodes. Based on this, we develop a four-dimensional analytical framework: Memory as a toolbox, as play, as identity, and as critique. This framework allows for a systematic analysis of how cultural memory is reproduced and negotiated within fan communities.

Research design

Case selection

American sitcoms are one of the nation's most influential cultural exports, resonating with global audiences through their distinctive blend of humor, relatable stories, and social commentary (Chang & Tian, 2020). This study focuses on three iconic examples: *Friends* (1994–2004), *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–2019), and *Modern Family* (2009–2020). Spanning three decades of television, these shows have cultivated a vast, cross-generational audience in China. They are thematically diverse, exploring the *'chosen family'* of urban youth, intellectual subcultures, and contemporary family structures, respectively.

Crucially, their enduring popularity has fostered substantial and vibrant fan communities on RedNote, providing a rich dataset for this research. As of September 2025, the hashtag for *Friends* alone had attracted over 1.8 billion views across 4.2 million posts. *The Big Bang Theory* and *Modern Family* had each accumulated over 700 million views and 750,000 posts, confirming their significant digital presence.

Data collection

Digital ethnography

We employed digital ethnography, conducting participant observation over five months (April 1-September 1, 2025). Following Caliandro's (2018) principle of traceability, a dedicated research account was created to maintain ethical and methodological distance. Daily engagement involved at least one hour of observing community content under hashtags like *#Friends*, *#ModernFamily*,

and *#TheBigBangTheory*. We systematically archived relevant posts, images, videos, and comment-section interactions as structured observational data. Simultaneously, reflective field notes were maintained to critically analyse the researcher's influence on data collection and interpretation, ensuring consistent self-awareness.

Semi-structured Interviews
To complement the ethnography, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 9 highly engaged RedNote users to explore individual perspectives (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Participants were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling. To ensure both consistency in content production and social influence within the community, *'high engagement'* was defined by: (1) active production (≥5 original posts on selected sitcoms); or (2) significant community resonance (≥1 post with >3,000 likes and 100 comments). Interviews (20-35 minutes) were conducted in Chinese, transcribed, and translated. All research ethics were strictly followed, including informed consent and the use of pseudonyms.

Data analysis

We employed thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns within the qualitative data (Alhojailan, 2012). Our approach integrated both inductive and deductive coding to ensure a comprehensive analysis. Inductive coding follows a bottom-up logic, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data. In contrast, deductive coding uses a top-down approach to organize data according to our core research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The entire process adhered to the six-step procedure Naeem et al. (2023) outlined, providing a systematic path from raw data to the final conceptual model. Through this analysis, we ultimately distilled four progressive themes that map the evolution of fan engagement:

1. Memory as toolbox: The pragmatic dismantling of narrative

2. Memory as play: The ludic vernacularisation of American sitcoms

3. Memory as identity: Fusing media texts with the lived self

4. Memory as critique: The sitcom as a catalyst for critical engagement

Discussion

Memory as toolbox: the pragmatic dismantling of narrative
The first layer of fan engagement is pragmatic. Fans dismantle the sitcom text into a multi-functional toolbox, extracting resources to navigate and enrich their everyday lives.

This instrumental use is evident at both cognitive and behavioral levels. Fans use the series as a window for learning English or understanding American culture, but also mine it for behavioral scripts. For example, one interviewee, Bella, adopted a technique from Phil in *Modern Family*, using humor to defuse a tense family argument. This pragmatic approach extends to material and aesthetic realms, as fans translate on-screen aesthetics into their physical reality by replicating character fashion and home interiors. For instance, some fans replicate the iconic purple door from *Friends* within their own living spaces, describing it as a portal to a spiritual home. Users demonstrate cultural capital by documenting these replications, leveraging their expertise to gain visibility within the fan community (Grossberg, 1992).

These practices embody Henry Jenkins' (2012) notion of *'textual poaching'* – a process where fans, like nomads, repurpose mass media elements to serve their own ends. On RedNote, users selectively appropriate dialogue, aesthetics, and behaviors, weaving them into their physical reality to derive personal agency (Jenkins, 2015). Thus, these acts of poaching extend beyond individual nostalgia; they serve as social mechanisms that strengthen the connective tissue of the fan

community (Raun, 2018), turning American media artifacts into a localised anchor for collective identity.

Memory as play: the ludic vernacularisation of American sitcoms

Building on pragmatic use, fan participation enters a more creative phase of *'play.'* Through localised and playful practices, fans transform the American sitcom from a foreign cultural product into a cultural playground that reflects Chinese internet culture and invites collective reinterpretation.

It is first evident in creative linguistic adaptations. Fans bridge cultural divides by creating localised nicknames, such as labelling Sheldon from *The Big Bang Theory* the *'socially awkward paragon,'* or by reframing complex character dynamics in familiar Chinese terms, such as *'mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relations,'* to enhance cultural resonance.

This playful spirit then evolves into sophisticated cross-textual meme grafting. For example, fans used a popular Chinese online framework to portray Sheldon as a *'Beagle,'* capturing a complex love-hate dynamic. The meme's meaning was fluid, shifting through community interaction from *'paranoid eccentricity'* to *'clumsy cuteness,'* demonstrating a collective renegotiation of meaning. Such practices embed the original sitcoms within local information flows, creating an advanced form of cultural hybridisation (Stockhammer, 2011).

Ultimately, this engagement culminates in collective creation, turning the fan community into a collaborative space. Users post game templates, for instance, *'What happens if you're trapped in an elevator with these three male characters from Modern Family,'* to prompt improvisational reinterpretations. This practice transforms media consumption from a unidirectional act into a multidimensional social performance. Fans thus become what Fiske (1992) calls *'producers of meaning,'* actively generating community-specific interpretations as they engage with the text.

Memory as identity: fusing media texts with the lived self

The third dimension of fan practice is identity formation, where memory acts as a social badge. At this stage, sitcoms cease to be external tools; they are internalised as core resources for self-understanding and personal narrative. The media text and the fan's sense of self begin to fuse.

This fusion manifests through immersive performance and psychological identification. Fans move beyond mimicry to temporarily become characters as a form of self-healing. For instance, interviewee Daisy found solace during a difficult period by adopting Sheldon's persona from *The Big Bang Theory*, allowing her to embody an idealised, accepted self. This identification is dynamic, evolving alongside personal growth. As interviewee Eric noted regarding *Friends*, *'First I hate Phoebe, then I understand Phoebe, then I want to become Phoebe.'*

These texts also offer powerful emotional compensation. By recognizing their own experiences in a character's struggles, fans find validation unavailable in their real lives through parasocial relationships (Sheng et al., 2025). Irene, for example, saw her own feelings of neglect in Alex from *Modern Family*. A scene where Alex's mother apologises provided her with comfort and psychological compensation, turning the show into a secure psychological container for her emotions.

Ultimately, these individual identifications coalesce into a collective identity through community interaction. The fan community becomes a space for friendship and establishing *'who we are'* (Chadborn et al., 2017). Members negotiate and reinforce group boundaries through specific social practices (Norris & Bainbridge, 2009), where a carefully crafted *'bait post'* or meme can identify fellow insiders through shared, knowing humour, thereby strengthening the group's internal cohesion.

Memory as critique: the sitcom as a catalyst for critical engagement

The final stage of fan practice is reflective, where memory becomes a '*prism*' for examining both the media and the real world. At this level, fans move beyond passive acceptance to engage in a dual critique: first, a meta-criticism of the media text itself, and second, a projective criticism aimed at their social reality in China.

Fans engage in meta-criticism by stepping outside the narrative to scrutinise a show's limitations through contemporary values. Some critique *Modern Family* for using comedy to trivialise women's struggles, while others object to the *Friends* finale, arguing that Rachel's choice to abandon her career for love undermines her character's entire arc. Such critiques demonstrate the fans' evolution from consumers to independent critical interpreters.

More significant is projective criticism, where sitcoms become, in a Chinese saying, '*a stone from another mountain*' (他山之石) used to reflect on domestic issues. For example, the relaxed, middle-class lifestyles depicted in the shows stand in stark contrast to the reality of '*internalised competition*' (内卷) faced by many young Chinese viewers. This idealised vision paradoxically accentuates the pressures of their own lives, sparking anxiety and critical reflection.

The most intense projective critiques center on gender. The largely female fanbase uses the shows to project and debate their concerns about issues like the value of full-time motherhood and patriarchal norms. For instance, a scene showing a female character's pre-marriage career can ignite fierce discussions about the sacrifices women are expected to make for family. In these moments, the fan community transcends entertainment. Fans forge a sub-cultural public sphere by channelling discussions about fictional characters into potent critiques of real-world social structures (Çela, 2015).

Conclusion

Research reveals that within the digital space of RedNote, Chinese fans' cultural memory of classic American sitcoms constitutes an active, evolving practice, progressing from functional engagement to critical reflection. We have developed a four-stage analytical framework to trace this journey: it commences with fans pragmatically deconstructing media texts, transforming them into toolkits for everyday life. Subsequently, through playful localisation, the texts are transformed into a playground for collective re-creation, grounded in their own cultural context. Within this deep engagement, the media texts become internalised, serving as core resources for constructing identity. Ultimately, this identity grants fans a meta-critical perspective, enabling them to utilise the texts as intellectual resources for reflecting upon both the media and broader social realities.

This study contributes to the intersecting dialogue among digital memory studies, fan culture research, and cross-cultural communication. Firstly, it reshapes memory from a retrospective concept into a present-oriented, productive practice. Secondly, it offers a dynamic, layered model of agency for fan culture studies. Our proposed four-stage model, comprising '*toolbox*,' '*game*,' '*identity*,' and '*critique*,' demonstrates the spiral deepening of Chinese fan memory practices within social media spaces, progressing from external to internal and individual to societal dimensions. This provides an explanatory analytical framework. Finally, this study's micro-level reveals the power mechanisms through which global cultural products are semantically appropriated within local contexts, offering vivid evidence for understanding the micro-mechanisms of cultural circulation and meaning negotiation in a globalised world.

As an exploratory study focused on a specific platform, this research also has limitations. The fieldwork was grounded in RedNote and centred on the '*light*' genre of sitcoms. Future research could shift to other platforms and genres to explore whether fan memory practices might exhibit different patterns.

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