

Article

From Archive to Cinema: A Study of the Mediatized Communication Mechanism of Qiaopi Memory in Dear You

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Abstract: In 2013, the "Qiaopi Archive" was inscribed on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register, thereby attaining the status of a world documentary heritage. In 2026, the film *Dear You* achieved phenomenal box-office and critical success in both the Chinese and ASEAN film markets. Drawing on mediatization theory as its core analytical framework, this article examines the mechanisms through which qiaopi memory is mediatized and communicated in *Dear You*. The study finds that the film accomplishes this through a threefold operation of material mediatization, narrative mediatization, and emotional mediatization, transforming qiaopi from archival documents confined to the Memory of the World Register into a shared memory capable of evoking widespread public emotional resonance. The mediatization process from "archive" to "cinema" demonstrates that the contemporary transmission of cultural heritage hinges on finding an appropriate mediatized pathway through which it may acquire renewed vitality in a new era.

Keywords: mediatized communication; *Dear You*; qiaopi archive; shared memory; ASEAN Communication

1. Introduction

In 2012, the "Qiaopi Archive" was inscribed on the Memory of the World Register for the Asia-Pacific region. The following year, in 2013, it was added to UNESCO's Memory of the World Register, officially becoming a world documentary heritage. In UNESCO's nomination report, qiaopi are described as "letters, situation reports, accounts, and remittance receipts generated in the course of correspondence between overseas Chinese and their family members back home," recording "the living conditions, activities, and local historical and cultural developments of overseas Chinese in their countries of residence." [1]. Jao Tsung-I, a renowned Guangdong-born scholar and Academician of the International Eurasian Academy of Sciences, hailed qiaopi as the "Dunhuang of overseas Chinese history" and a "Precious cultural heritage overseas." Yet inscription on the Memory of the World Register signifies the recognition of qiaopi as "world memory," not its perception as "public memory." In the everyday lives of the vast majority of people—even within China-qiaopi remain unfamiliar, distant archival documents.

Beginning on April 30, 2026, the Chaoshan-dialect film *Dear You*, featuring an entirely non-professional cast, brought qiaopi to the big screen across Chinese cinemas. Employing qiaopi as a core narrative device, a vehicle for emotional expression, and a symbol of collective memory, the film transformed these written archives into digital moving images, introducing them to Chinese and global audiences alongside remarkable commercial success. As of August 10, the film—produced on a budget of CNY 14 million—had garnered over CNY 2 billion at the Chinese mainland box office. On Chinese film-rating platforms such as Douban and Maoyan, it received an average score of 9.5 from more than 1.3 million viewers, with an average positive-rating rate of 83% [2]. In the ASEAN market, following its release in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, as well as in

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Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Brunei, *Dear You* accumulated over USD 4 million in box-office revenue and earned a high score of 8.4 on leading global film platforms such as IMDb [3,4]. As the film gained traction in ASEAN markets, a growing number of overseas Chinese recalled their own childhood experiences or those of their ancestors sending qiaopi, engaging in memory-sharing and discussion within the public sphere of social media both domestically and internationally.

The unprecedented success of this small-budget, small-cast production about ordinary people in both domestic and international film markets raises a significant theoretical question: How can an archival document from the Memory of the World Register, hitherto little known, be transformed through the medium of cinema into a collective memory capable of evoking large-scale public emotional resonance? This article takes mediatization theory as its core framework to investigate the mediatized communication mechanism of qiaopi memory in *Dear You*.

2. Mediatization Theory: A Theoretical Trajectory from "Mediation" to "Transformation"

2.1. Core Concepts and Theoretical Lineage of Mediatization Theory

Mediatization theory has constituted a major theoretical turn in European communication studies since the 1990s. Rooted in the intellectual legacies of Georg Simmel and Anthony Giddens, and drawing on phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism, and other theoretical traditions, mediatization research has gradually crystallized into two principal research paths: the institutional approach, represented by Stig Hjarvard, and the social-constructionist approach, represented by Friedrich Krotz and Andreas Hepp. At its core, mediatization theory holds that media are not merely instruments for transmitting information but constitutive forces that shape social reality and cultural practice—the very process by which media intervene in social life is itself a process through which social reality is redefined and reorganized.

In the field of memory studies, mediatization theory offers a mode of understanding that transcends the conception of "media as containers of memory." Jan Assmann's distinction between "communicative memory" (typically the everyday intergenerational transmission within an eighty-year span) and "cultural memory" (preserved across generations through media such as ritual, text, and image) already implies a mediatization dimension—cultural memory can span generations precisely because it relies on the reinforcing function of media [5]. Building on this, mediatization theory goes further: media do not merely "preserve" memory; they "shape" it, and different media forms give rise to different memory formations.

2.2. From "Mediation" to "Mediatization": A Conceptual Distinction

"Mediation" and "mediatization" are two pivotal concepts in media studies. "Mediation" emphasizes media as an intermediary in the transmission of information. As a composite medium integrating "remittance and correspondence," qiaopi played a mediating role, serving as a carrier for information transmission. "Mediatization," by contrast, emphasizes the formative influence of media on sociocultural practice. When qiaopi are transformed from paper archives into digital moving images, this entails not merely a change in the carrier of information but a transformation of memory formation itself: words on paper become images and sounds on screen; private reading experiences become public cinematic experiences; static archival documents become dynamic narrative texts. This transformative process is itself a "mediatization" operation.

2.3. Analytical Framework: Three Mechanisms of the Mediatized Communication of Qiaopi Memory

Accordingly, this article proposes that *Dear You* achieves the mediatized communication of qiaopi memory through a threefold mediatization operation. The first is material mediatization, whereby qiaopi are transformed from private paper archives into cinematic symbols on the public screen, completing the media conversion of

memory's carrier from paper archive to digital moving image. The second is narrative mediatization, which weaves scattered historical archives into a coherent screenplay, shaping qiaopi memory through a narrative form accessible to public viewing and discussion. The third is emotional mediatization, whereby the diasporic experience and familial ethics embodied in qiaopi are translated into universal emotional symbols, granting a collective memory originally belonging to a specific historical group intergenerational penetrating power and making it an emotional anchor in the present moment. These three operations proceed incrementally and interact with one another, jointly constituting the complete mediatization chain through which qiaopi memory is transformed from archive to cinema.

3. The Memory Substrate of the Qiaopi Archive: Materiality, Attribute Transformation, and Communication Impediments

3.1. "Integration of Remittance and Correspondence": The Composite Media and Material Attributes of Qiaopi

The character "qiao" in qiaopi refers to overseas Chinese, while "pi" is a phonetic transcription from the Cantonese and Minnan dialects, meaning "letter." In the mid-nineteenth century, when postal delivery was the dominant information and communication technology, large numbers of people from Guangdong and Fujian migrated to Southeast Asia ("going down to the Nanyang"). Through informal channels, they sent qiaopi back to their hometowns to maintain contact with their families. A qiaopi typically comprised a family letter and a remittance receipt, consisting of an envelope (pifeng) and letter paper (pijian). As an integrated carrier for both sending family letters and remitting money, qiaopi transmitted material funds, nostalgic sentiments, and familial relationships alike, transcending the function of a mere information carrier to become a "composite medium"-the so-called "integration of remittance and correspondence." Meanwhile, the texture of the paper, the color of the ink, the imprints of postmarks, the manner of folding, and the traces of merchant-ship delivery all embody distinctive historical characteristics, constituting the material foundation of qiaopi as "archives." The information and material traces recorded in each qiaopi-the sender's life in a foreign land, the recipient's address, the remittance amount, the date of dispatch, and the imprints of cross-border postal routes-collectively constitute the documentary value of qiaopi as "memory archives": they are tangible, verifiable, preservable, and transmissible objects.

3.2. From Private Archive to Public Memory: The Attribute Transformation of Qiaopi Memory

In the historical context of "going down to the Nanyang," qiaopi were originally private correspondence between overseas Chinese and their families back home. According to Jan Assmann's theory of "communicative memory," the scope of such memory's dissemination should originally be confined to within the family and across generations. However, following the inscription of the Qiaopi Archive on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register in 2013, qiaopi no longer belong to a single family or village but have become the collective memory of all humanity, completing an attribute transformation from "private archive" to "public heritage." Yet inscription on the Memory of the World Register is merely an institutional confirmation: it affirms the value of qiaopi as world memory but does not mean that qiaopi are perceived as public memory by the general public. In the everyday lives of most people, both domestically and internationally, qiaopi remain unfamiliar documents confined to archives.

3.3. The Disconnection of Collective Memory: Communication Impediments of Qiaopi as Archive

As archives, qiaopi face three communication impediments. First, the accessibility dilemma: qiaopi are primarily held in archives and museums, making them difficult for the general public to access. Second, the readability dilemma: most qiaopi are handwritten, and some incorporate regional dialects and ghostwriting symbols, requiring specialized knowledge to read. Third, the affectivity dilemma: reading archival documents is a

rational, distanced cognitive activity that struggles to evoke emotional resonance among audiences. Together, these three dilemmas threaten qiaopi memory with intergenerational rupture: qiaopi are recognized as possessing memory value, yet their unfamiliarity to the public may ultimately lead to the disconnection of collective memory.

In sum, although qiaopi as archives have completed the institutional transformation from "private" to "public," they have not yet completed the perceptual transformation from "archive" to "memory," and thus urgently require mediatized intervention.

4. From Archive to Cinema: The Threefold Mediatization Mechanism of Qiaopi Memory

4.1. Material Mediatization: From Paper Archive to Cinematic Image

The visual presentation of qiaopi in *Dear You* is itself an act of material mediatization: through a carefully designed documentary-style audiovisual language, the film renders the material objects that exist in reality into cinematic images, while reinforcing the persuasiveness and authenticity of the transformation of paper archives into cinematic symbols. For instance, the film uses close-up shots to present the yellowed letter paper, mottled ink, and overlapping creases of qiaopi; natural lighting design emphasizes a quasi-authentic historical texture; sound design-including the sounds of turning paper and folding letters-reinforces the material characteristics of qiaopi; and long takes with fixed cameras enhance the authenticity of characters reading or writing letters. In the film, qiaopi are no longer exhibits separated from viewers by glass cases; rather, they are elevated from concrete "objects" to "symbols" bearing collective memory and cultural identity. In a qiaopi archive, they are "read"-a rational, individualized cognitive activity; on screen, qiaopi are "viewed"-an affective, collective perceptual experience. From "reading" to "viewing," qiaopi shift from being "objects to be understood" to "images to be felt." The materiality of qiaopi (paper, ink, postmarks) achieves unprecedented visual and emotional magnification on screen-audiences see not merely a letter but a "true story" about letters.

4.2. Narrative Mediatization: From Scattered Archives to Coherent Narrative

Weaving scattered historical archives into a coherent narrative text constitutes the film's most central mediatization operation. In reality, qiaopi are dispersed and fragmented: each qiaopi is an independent unit of correspondence within a particular family, and they may be separated by temporal gaps, informational discontinuities, dialectal peculiarities, and regional differences. The film reorganizes these fragmented qiaopi stories into a complete screenplay, constructing a narrative thread spanning seventy years and three generations, and positioning qiaopi as key nodes along this narrative arc-including Zheng Musheng's first qiaopi upon arriving in Siam, Xie Nanzhi's twenty years of ghostwritten "fake" qiaopi, and Ye Shurou's recollections while organizing qiaopi in her later years. The core mechanism of this narrative mediatization lies in "emplotment": the film imparts a unified narrative structure to the scattered qiaopi-beginning (departure and promise), development (waiting and vigil), climax (revelation of the truth), and resolution (reconciliation and transmission). Qiaopi are no longer a pile of isolated archival documents but a story with a beginning, development, climax, and ending. The film also generates distinctive narrative tension through the "ghostwriting" plot: Xie Nanzhi writes family letters in Zheng Musheng's name, and the fissure between the "real author" and the "nominal author" renders the qiaopi text a polyphonic space of meaning production. Narrative mediatization endows qiaopi memory with a narrative form that can be publicly viewed, discussed, and disseminated-audiences need not be qiaopi specialists to "enter" the world of qiaopi.

4.3. Emotional Mediatization: From Historical Document to Emotional Symbol

The film's most critical mediatized treatment is its transformation of qiaopi from historical documents into emotional symbols, and from familial affection perceptible only within the family into universal emotions accessible to diverse audience groups. This is

accomplished through three specific strategies. First, decontextualization: the film downplays the specific historical contexts in which qiaopi emerged, such as anti-Chinese policies and economic hardship, treating them instead as period background that enriches the plot while focusing on universal emotional themes such as longing, waiting, promise, loyalty, and mutual aid. Second, emotional focusing: the film concentrates the multiple functions of qiaopi—remitting money, transmitting information, and bearing emotion—onto the emotional dimension. In an era of low literacy and limited communication channels, qiaopi transcended their identity as mere letters and remittance receipts, becoming emotional outlets for people separated by vast oceans and a vital channel through which they expressed longing, responsibility, and commitment. Third, emotional amplification: the film magnifies the emotional energy embodied in qiaopi through performance, cinematography, and musical design. For example, in the scene where the grandmother (Ah Ma) learns the truth about the ghostwritten "fake qiaopi," her performance avoids hysterical weeping—she simply turns calmly to cook in the kitchen. Cinematographically, the director does not immediately cut to a close-up or medium shot of her facial expression but maintains a wide shot, allowing the audience to observe her back from a distance. Musically, no lyrical background score is inserted; instead, diegetic sounds of rain and slippers scraping the floor amplify the grief. The film chooses to convey immense emotion through an everyday-life, documentary-style audiovisual language. Emotional mediatization transforms qiaopi from a history that is seen into an emotion that is felt, rendering qiaopi memory a distinctive emotional symbol endowed with the power of intergenerational and cross-regional dissemination.

5. Effects of Mediatization: The Publicization and Intergenerational Communication of Qiaopi Memory

5.1. From "Recognized" to "Perceived": The Publicization of Qiaopi Memory

The inscription of qiaopi on the Memory of the World Register granted them a "recognized" status as an institutionally confirmed world memory. Yet the post-release dissemination effects of the film demonstrate that, through cinema, qiaopi memory has truly entered the domestic and international public sphere and has begun to be "perceived." Domestically, visits to the Shantou Qiaopi Museum in Guangdong have increased by 47.29% year-on-year since May, with daily visitor numbers during the May Day holiday reaching three times the usual level. In response to growing visitor numbers, the China Overseas Chinese History Museum in Beijing launched a special exhibition entitled "Across Vast Rivers and Seas, No Distance Feels Far: Film Props and Qiaopi Cultural Relics from Dear You" on July 10. In ASEAN countries, the film has been widely acclaimed in Malaysia, where the Malaysian Chinese Museum specially hosted a Dear You-themed sharing session, at which numerous overseas Chinese shared their reflections. In Singapore, the dialect-restriction policy implemented since the 1980s has shown signs of loosening due to the film's dissemination impact; tickets for the Teochew-dialect version were in such high demand that screenings sold out. Han Yonghong, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Singapore's *Lianhe Zaobao*, even traveled to the Chaoshan region of Guangdong to watch the Teochew-dialect film in person.

These phenomena indicate that the mediatization of qiaopi memory has successfully transformed it from a "recognized archive" into a "perceived emotion." No longer merely an entry in the Memory of the World Register, qiaopi have entered everyday public discussion, social-media sharing, cultural consumption practices, and even the realm of policy influence.

5.2. From Older Generations to Younger Ones: The Intergenerational Communication of Qiaopi Memory

Because most young people outside the Guangdong-Fujian region in China and in ASEAN countries have little knowledge of their ancestors' experiences of "going down to the Nanyang" and of qiaopi culture, qiaopi memory originally faced the risk of intergenerational rupture. However, the dissemination effects of *Dear You* demonstrate

that the mediatization of qiaopi memory can effectively achieve intergenerational communication. Young ethnic Chinese in Indonesia have "begun to actively ask their elders about family history, with some making special trips back to their ancestral hometowns to trace their roots and pursue educational exchanges," while others "use short-video and social platforms to record the stories of their grandfathers and grandmothers" [6]. After watching the film, young ethnic Chinese in Malaysia "returned home to rummage for qiaopi and press their grandparents for stories from those years," spontaneously recommending the film on social platforms, where "Have you watched Dear You?" became a common greeting at Chinese community gatherings [7].

These intergenerational viewing responses indicate that the mediatization of qiaopi memory has enabled it to transcend generational boundaries. Here, mediatization serves as an "intergenerational bridge," transforming the private experiences of older generations into a public memory perceptible to younger ones, who need not have personally experienced "going down to the Nanyang" to feel the emotions embodied in qiaopi through the film.

5.3. Mediatization and the Construction of Collective Memory: A Theoretical Reflection

The mediatization process from "archive" to "cinema" reveals a deeper relationship between media and memory. Traditional views conceive of media as passive tools for preserving memory. Yet this study demonstrates that media are not merely containers for storing memory but its constructors: the very operation of mediatization shapes the formation, content, and mode of dissemination of memory. The transformation of qiaopi from paper archives to cinematic images also shows that the mediatization of memory is not "transportation" but "transformation." The material traces, historical information, and emotional core of qiaopi remain unchanged, yet their mode of presentation in the film after mediatization endows them with entirely new communicative power. This is precisely the core logic of mediatization: media do not merely transmit information; they shape it.

6. Conclusion

Through a threefold operation of material mediatization, narrative mediatization, and emotional mediatization, *Dear You* transforms qiaopi from archival documents confined to the Memory of the World Register into a collective memory capable of evoking public emotional resonance. These three mediatization operations constitute a complete transformative chain through which qiaopi memory moves from "archive" to "cinema": material mediatization addresses "in what form memory is presented," narrative mediatization addresses "through what structure memory is organized," and emotional mediatization addresses "by what means memory is perceived." Media are not merely "containers" of memory but its "constructors." The mediatization process from "archive" to "cinema" demonstrates that the dissemination of memory is not simply "information transmission" but "formation transformation"-different media forms give rise to different memory formations and communication effects. The key to the contemporary dissemination of cultural heritage lies in finding an appropriate mediatized pathway that allows "dormant" memories to "come alive."

The study of the mediatized communication of qiaopi memory provides a theoretical reference for understanding the cinematographic dissemination of cultural heritage-how historical documents in archives may re-enter the public cultural sphere through mediatization operations. The film is scheduled for theatrical release in Thailand, the United States, and elsewhere, and the mediatized communication practice of qiaopi memory will continue to unfold, warranting ongoing follow-up research.

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