

A Study of Zibo Barbecue from the Perspective of Structure of Feeling

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Abstract: This paper uses Raymond Williams' structure of feeling as a theoretical perspective to analyze and explain the continuous hot Zibo barbecue. It aims to explore the correlation between its dissemination and acceptance and the structure of feeling of the contemporary Chinese public, while also analyzing the deep-seated motives behind its explosive growth. Food is often the carrier of people's memory, emotions and social activities. Zibo barbecue, a local cooking style, has sparked a craze due to its ability to evoke the contemporary Chinese public's cultural memory, local cultural identity, and collective identity. By immersing themselves in the past, people have completed a collective unconscious emotional summoning.

Keywords: Zibo Barbecue; Structure of Feeling; Identity

1. Introduction

Since March 2023, Zibo barbecue has continued to be a hot topic on major social platforms in China. Many Chinese college students have organized groups to travel to Zibo via high-speed railways to enjoy Zibo barbecue, resulting in related topics frequently appearing on popular search lists. Unexpectedly, numerous foreigners have found themselves drawn to Zibo via international flights, venturing halfway across the globe for a taste of the barbecue. Even the CCTV anchor, Kang Hui, has highly praised it. The Zibo barbecue has evolved into a remarkable and intense cultural asset. According to statistics available online, during the May Day holiday in 2023, the number of accommodation bookings in Shandong Province increased by 400% compared with 2019; among them, the number of accommodation bookings in Zibo increased by 800% compared with 2019, ranking first in Shandong Province. Since 2024, the heat from the Zibo barbecue has continued unabated, even surpassing the intensity of last year's fire. Only during the Qingming Festival holiday did the main Internet hot spots in Zibo receive more than 710,000 tourists, and more than 430,000 vehicles traveled to Zibo via highways. With delicious barbecue as an entry point, travel to Zibo has become a hot word among the youth group, attracting tourists from all over the country to visit. The phrase "Don't ask how much the ticket costs, and just ask how long youth lasts" has even become a popular slogan among contemporary college students who flock to Zibo for the loud barbecue.

The British Marxist cultural theorist Raymond Williams coined the term "structure of feeling." Raymond Williams first introduced the structure of feeling in *Preface to Film* (1954), and he has consistently referenced it in his literary and cultural criticism work. Initially, it "is used to describe the general feelings of people about the reality of life in a particular era."^[1] In order to avoid the large and inappropriate mode of cultural research, Williams attempted to employ a more stable structure that encompasses all aspects of examining the various elements and connections of culture in a specific historical era. This approach aimed to represent the general psychology of the people at that time, as they navigated social conflicts and contradictions.

Over the next thirty years, Williams' cultural studies have deepened and expanded the connotation of the structure of feeling. In *Culture and Society* (1958), Williams analyzed the industrial novels of nineteenth-century England with structure of feeling, discussed the general experiences and feelings of the people reflected in the works, and pointed out the conflict between the popular values of the time and the actual real-life experiences of the authors of the novels. In a subsequent influential monograph on drama, *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1968), Williams went on to highlight the subconscious character of the structure of feeling in order to show that people do not perceive the world consciously but often through experience. Williams published *The Long Revolution* in 1961, deliberately expanding the application of the structure of feeling beyond literary criticism to encompass social critique. In addition,

in this book, he provided a comprehensive analysis of British society in the 1840s, summarized the seven major events that had a significant impact on society, and combed through the values common to popular novels of the time to come up with the concept of social characteristics. Williams categorized societal cultures into three types: dominant, declining and emerging, which are constantly changing, absorbing, struggling and suppressing each other. [2] The dominant culture's ideal values are represented by its social characteristics. According to Williams, the structure of feeling is an important entry point to understanding people's way of life and cultural style in a period of time. It is a culture specific to a certain era, and the shared emotions of each age shape the emergence of new cultural trends. Williams mentions that the structure of feeling is the culture of an age: it is the particular, living result of all the factors that come into play in organizations in general. He believes that all genuinely existing communities possess the structure of feeling to a wide and deep extent, primarily because communication and dissemination rely on it. [3] Structure of feeling is rooted in people's lives and condenses common values and life experiences. Zeng and Shi believe that "a new structure of feeling tends to be embodied in some kind of material cultural practice or cultural trend, and it keeps changing with the changes in social life." [4] That is to say, there is a reason why people are suddenly interested in a certain tradition or popular fashion during a period of time. Therefore, through Williams' theory of structure of feeling, one can dig deeper into the deeper motivation of a new popular culture from the perspective of the formation of common emotions of the people. Through the study of hot social events and fashion trends, it is possible to capture the extensive and vivid common cultural experiences of our society, and then explore the structure of feeling of contemporary Chinese people. Therefore, this paper takes Raymond Williams' structure of feeling as the theoretical perspective to analyze and explain the Zibo barbecue hotspot, in order to explore the correlation between the dissemination and acceptance of Zibo barbecue and the social and cultural psychology, and try to analyze the deep motives behind it.

Chinese people closely relate barbecue, a common form of food culture, to their daily lives. The Chinese have a unique and deep emotional connection to food. People express their emotional and social ties by sharing food, passing on family traditions, and organizing various celebrations. Food is often a vehicle for memories, emotions, and social activities. Zibo barbecue serves not only as a method of cooking, but also as a cultural symbol that embodies the unique characteristics of the local community. Not only has Zibo barbecue caused a boom due to Chinese people's love for delicious food, but it also has the ability to evoke the cultural memory, local identity, and collective identity of the contemporary Chinese public through its unique market atmosphere and rich texture. Tasting Zibo barbecue immerses people in a cultural journey, evoking the yearning and memories of tradition. They have reconnected the past and present, completing a collective unconscious emotional summoning.

2. Nostalgia

Nostalgia, as the name suggests, means nostalgia for the past and for the people who have dealings with in the old days. The English word for nostalgia consists of the Greek words "nostos" and "algia." The former means going home, and the latter means feeling pain. In 1987, Bryan Turner first made a systematic explanation of the source, meaning, and characteristics of nostalgia. [5] Eleven years later, Linda Hutcheon has also teased out the concept and origins of nostalgia. [6] Johannes Hofer, a Swiss army doctor, originally coined the term in 1688 to describe symptoms like insomnia, loss of appetite, and depression that Swiss soldiers experienced after being away from home for a long time and being eager to return home. Since the 19th century, the term nostalgia has no longer been limited to the medical field but has gradually become a concept interested by experts in psychology, sociology, and literature. Over time, the connotation of nostalgia has become richer, expressing not only the desire for a particular place but also the reminiscence of past times. This emotional experience is not just a memory of a specific place, but a broader and deeper emotion. The concept has thus expanded from its original single spatial dimension to both time and space. Nostalgia can help to alleviate the distress caused by geographical dislocation or the untraceability of time. Nostalgia thus implies a spatial and temporal movement, i.e., a geographic migration, a temporal retrospection, a guest returning to one's hometown from a foreign land, and a return to the past from the present. Among the two dimensions of nostalgia, the irreversible influence of time appears to be more evident. Nostalgia no longer points solely to homesickness and its external object of home or hometown but also contains an internal structure of feeling. It includes not only the handling and processing of memories, but also emotional attachment to other people and other things. Nostalgia is not just a simple recollection of the past, but a deeper psychological and emotional experience that helps individuals understand their own growth process and how the past has shaped their present self. Nostalgia can awaken good emotions, activate positive experiences, and help people find psychological comfort. People always want to embrace their

hometowns and be in the past again.

With Modern lifestyles gradually replace many traditional food cultures as society and urbanization develop. However, some specialties, such as Zibo barbecue, can still be prevalent in modern society, not only because of their unique taste but also because they represent the continuation of a cultural heritage and social memory. Zibo barbecue, as a representative food of Zibo, conveys people's emotional attachment to their hometown and nostalgia for the past. In the process of enjoying Zibo barbecue, people can't help but link food, environment, and emotion together to form an immersive experience that can evoke people's memories of the same scenes in the past, as well as a sense of belonging to their hometown and emotional memories. The structure of feeling has a developmental nature, which is most prominent in times of social transformation, when the collective unconscious hidden in the hearts of the masses is activated by the accelerated changes in society and manifests itself as a kind of nostalgic emotion. Nostalgia not only serves the purpose of beautifying the past, but it is also an important way of building self-identity.^[4] Through nostalgia, people can reexamine their past experiences and emotions to find their identity and orientation. Zibo barbecue, as a local specialty food, triggers people's nostalgia and emotional connection to the past. For many people, Zibo barbecue is not only a kind of food but also a collection of memories and emotions related to childhood, family life, or specific scenes. Therefore, when people taste Zibo barbecue, they tend to associate it with the good old days, which triggers strong nostalgia. This nostalgic experience not only brings emotional fulfillment but also deepens an individual's connection to his or her own past, family, and culture.

In the process of urbanization, the floating population continues to increase, and a large number of young people leave the countryside for the modern city in pursuit of education, employment, and other opportunities. However, the alienation and indifference of the big city intensify the nostalgia for their hometown and emotional ties. A small Zibo barbecue grill ignites these lingering common emotions and collective memories. As a traditional food culture deeply rooted in local customs, Zibo barbecue carries strong local characteristics and evokes people's emotional memories, inspiring them to connect with their hometown, childhood memories, and family emotions. When people sit in front of the barbecue grill to taste, they often feel nostalgic about their childhood in the countryside, reminiscing about the good times they shared with family and friends, as well as the customs of their hometown. Nostalgia and emotional memories of the past gradually resurface. Therefore, people have a sense of intimacy and warmth for the traditional and rustic cooking method of Zibo barbecue. In the hustle and bustle of city life, people are eager to find relaxing and intimate experiences. Zibo barbecue, with its shared taste memory, has developed into an emotional bond, reconnecting young people who have moved away from home and their hometowns. Then they can find emotional support and a sense of belonging in the unfamiliar cities. This nostalgia can be emotionally satisfying and soothing for people. With it, they also reinforce their sense of self. It is precisely because of this general nostalgia that Zibo barbecue is gradually getting hot.

3. Local Cultural Identity

Zibo barbecue, a local specialty food, stimulates people's identification and emotional connection to the local culture. In a cultural sense, memory belongs to both the collective and the individual, and it influences people's identification of their own identity.^[7] In the book *Cultural Memory and Identity* (2016), Zhao comprehensively explores the nature and value of memory, initially establishes a complete memory research system, defines the concept and types of globalized memory, and also analyzes the relationship between memory and identity.^[8] Jan Assmann argues in the book *Cultural Memory* (2015) that memory is in a constant state of reconstruction, the constantly evolving present creates a constantly shifting frame of reference; and memory not only reconstructs the past but also organizes the present and future experiences.^[9] Thus, in some way, every memory is grounded in the present. In addition, according to British sociologist Smith, the modern nation-state is both a legal-political and historical-cultural community.^[10] Therefore, in a sense, cultural memory is not only a process of meaning production but also a process of building a cultural community. Cultural memory plays a central role in the production of meaning. By recording and transmitting historical events, people and customs, cultural memory forms a collective memory system that not only reflects past experiences but also shapes people's expectations and identity for the future.^[11] The transmission and reconstruction of cultural memory can enhance individual and collective identity, thus building a more harmonious and inclusive cultural community. These studies show that cultural memory helps individuals and groups construct and confirm their identities through the recollection and transmission of the past. "The self-identity of a social group is constructed through external uniqueness and internal permanence... in order to form a solid social image and a homogeneous cultural identity within the

cultural system.”^[12] Cultural memory is the basis of identity, national identity and state identity.

In the context of modern China’s urbanization and globalization, people are paying more and more attention to the value and inheritance of local culture. Returning to local culture has become an important part of people’s cultural identity and emotional belonging. Nowadays, barbecue, as a kind of traditional Chinese food, brings a sense of closeness and familiarity to people in the city with its unique way of eating. People often express their emotions and draw closer to each other through barbecue. Barbecue is the collective experience, historical memory, and shared cultural symbols of the Chinese people. It is the common cultural memory of the Chinese people. Therefore, in the process of tasting Zibo barbecue, people not only evoke their own cultural memory but also stimulate their emotional identity and sense of belonging to the local culture of Zibo at the same time. Zibo barbecue has regionally iconic and distinctive cultural characteristics, carrying Zibo’s history, traditions, and folk culture. It is both a type of food and a cultural symbol. At the same time, Zibo barbecue caterers also pay attention to the transmission of cultural charm and emotional resonance. For instance, people incorporate traditional elements into their barbecue dishes and decoration designs. These elements can represent the history and regional culture of Zibo, stimulate people’s emotional resonance, and help build an emotional community. When people enjoy Zibo barbecue, they also taste and feel the culture and emotions implied behind it, as well as the folk culture and eating habits of Zibo, thus triggering the identification and emotional connection of local culture. This contributes significantly to the inheritability and perpetuation of the Zibo barbecue culture. Food is more than just a way of life; it is also a carrier of cultural memory. While people are enjoying the food, communicating with each other, and sharing their happiness, they are also perpetuating and passing on the local culinary culture, reconstructing the cultural memory in the current society, and promoting the dissemination and identification of the local culture.

4. Collective Memory Construction and Identity

Recognized as the originator of the study of collective memory, Halbwachs proposes that collective memory is the process and result of past events shared by members of a particular social group, and that the condition for ensuring the transmission of collective memory is the need for social interaction and group consciousness to extract the continuity of that memory, with the main emphasis on how memory is socially constructed. ^[13] Connerton in *How Societies Remember* (1989) further points out that the collective memory shaped by a group through various rituals is not only the product of the addition of the private memories of each group member, but also belongs to the group itself, and regards the collective as the main body of memory formation. ^[14] Collective memory refers to the past events and experiences shared by members of a specific social group and these memories are not simply the summary of individual memories, but are jointly constructed and passed on through cultural symbols, historical experiences and social practices. ^[15] Collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of past events based on the present. ^[16]

Zibo barbecue evokes people’s collective memory of the past in the form of eating barbecue and chatting together around the grill, and it has become a common way for people to express joy. When deeply exploring the cultural connotation of Zibo barbecue, it is not difficult to find that it has gone beyond the simple category of individual emotion and memory expression and then evolved into a significant representation of collective cultural memory, which is a recognizable group emotion memory, marking, and expression. Zibo barbecue is not only a kind of food but also a symbol carrying rich historical, cultural, and emotional connotations. Through the cultural symbol of Zibo barbecue, people can find a kind of emotional resonance and identification and then maintain a kind of cultural self-identification and belonging in modern society.

Therefore, as the Internet spread, the Zibo barbecue set off a huge wave that inspired people’s emotional resonance, constantly calling them to Zibo to relive the warm memories of friends and family. Different social members form and pass on collective memory through social interactions and communications, gradually integrating differentiated individual memories into collective memories and building group identity. ^[17] This identity is based not only on shared cultural tools and values but also on cognitive and emotional resonance with the group to which one belongs. ^[18] Therefore, while people are tasting Zibo barbecue, they are also building a more complete and three-dimensional collective memory of the Chinese people. Building collective memory is actually a process of forming and strengthening self-identity. Identity is a psychological process in which an individual confirms his or her own identity and recognizes the group to which he or she belongs, as well as integrating the accompanying emotional experiences and behavioral patterns. ^[19] Group members acquire perceptions

about the wholeness and uniqueness of themselves and the group from collective memory, thereby forming perceptions about their self-identity. ^[20] In addition, through emotional identification and emotional evocation, people can construct identification with emotions, which can then be transformed into identification with identity as well. ^[21] This sense of identity not only helps individuals understand their place in society, but also promotes trust and interaction between individuals and groups.

The Zibo government and the people have worked together to transform Zibo Barbecue into a distinctive business card, enhancing emotional transmission and fostering a collective memory that belongs to the Chinese people. Meanwhile, this process has shaped the public's sense of self-identity by splintering the past and present to form a complete identity practice. Its internal logic stems from the fact that Zibo barbecue aligns with the values of social interaction and reunion that are inherent in traditional Chinese culture. The Chinese value family and community ties and advocate the idea of family and friends reuniting and cooperating with each other. The process of barbecuing usually requires family members to work together. Therefore, the traditional Chinese culture imbues barbecue with the meaning of family reunion, friendship and affection, joy, and happiness. While people taste the food, they also savor the emotions and cultural connotations behind it. In today's fast-paced world, the distance between people has increased, and people are eager to spend time with their families and friends. Zibo barbecue's cooking process and dining environment provide a space for people to participate and communicate together, which is a collective cultural experience. People are able to enhance their emotional ties in social interactions and promote communication with others, thus strengthening social ties and emotional connections and helping to build collective memory and identity. Zibo barbecue's popularity is a testament to its concentrated expression of ordinary people's needs. People, particularly young people, often invite three or five friends to enjoy a barbecue together, which is a truly joyous occasion. Zibo barbecue can evoke positive memories of family and friend reunions, providing emotional support and fulfillment amidst their busy lives. A barbecue trip will naturally resonate with young groups. From individuals to groups, college students are increasingly traveling to Zibo via high-speed rail. As they sample the delicious Zibo barbecue, they simultaneously contribute to its increasing popularity. In fact, many people go to Zibo not only to eat barbecue but also to cure themselves. Zibo serves as a remedy for the apathy and alienation people experience, allowing them to re-experience the warmth of the world around the barbecue fire with friends and family, thereby strengthening their sense of identity. Zibo barbecue is not only the satisfaction of food, but also an important way to build collective memory and identity. As a result, Zibo barbecue has become a unique collective memory of our time.

5. Conclusion

Nothing soothes the human heart like fire and smoke. A small stick holds together a kind of food, a kind of culture, and a kind of life. Zibo barbecue embodies a culinary tradition and a deep-rooted sense of life that have evolved over millennia. What we consume from Zibo barbecue not only satisfies our palates but also embodies the essence of human kindness and cultural significance. The fire of Zibo barbecue closely aligns with the emotional structure of contemporary Chinese people, mirroring their growing emphasis on social interaction, identity, physical and mental health, emotional memories, and other related aspects.

In terms of social interaction, barbecue, as a collective eating method, provides an occasion for people to sit around a table, share food, and talk freely, satisfying people's desire for communication. The laughter at the barbecue table not only narrows the distance between people but also builds a unique social culture. Whether in their hometown or in a foreign country, people are eager to obtain a spiritual level of identity and belonging. Zibo barbecue, a tradition of dining around the stove, undoubtedly provides people with a nostalgic form of homesickness, allowing them to express feelings they cannot express elsewhere and fostering a sense of self-belonging in modern society. Furthermore, barbecue serves as a collective experience, a historical memory, and a shared cultural symbol among the Chinese people, thereby forming a collective cultural memory. While enjoying the food and communicating with each other, people are also continuing and inheriting the local food culture, reconstructing the cultural memory in the current society, and enhancing the dissemination and identification of the local culture. Simultaneously, Zibo barbecue will establish an emotional connection with public gatherings, fostering a collective memory of the Chinese people, molding the public's self-identity, connecting the past and present, and creating a comprehensive identity ritual.

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