

Living Faith Across Generations: Narrative Identity, Moral Cultivation, and Lived Religion in a Family-Based Religious Tradition

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Abstract

This study examines how religious faith, moral cultivation, and social responsibility are transmitted across generations within a Taiwanese family affiliated with a syncretic religious tradition. Based on oral history interviews with the granddaughter of a senior religious master, the study analyzes how family memory operates as a mechanism of ethical formation and spiritual continuity.

Drawing on Halbwachs' theory of collective memory, Ricoeur's narrative identity, and the concept of lived religion proposed by Orsi and McGuire, this article argues that religious transmission is not primarily doctrinal but embodied, relational, and narratively constructed. Three interrelated mechanisms are identified: memory as moral framing, narrative identity as ethical formation, and embodied practice as lived religion.

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This study therefore argues that intergenerational religious transmission is fundamentally sustained through narrative reconstruction and embodied ethical practice within intimate family contexts, rather than through formal doctrinal instruction alone.

The study contributes to scholarship on religion and memory by demonstrating how family-based oral histories function as informal yet powerful sites of moral pedagogy, sustaining religious continuity through everyday life.

Keywords: lived religion, narrative identity, moral cultivation, oral history, collective memory

1. Introduction

Religious traditions are sustained not only through institutional structures or doctrinal systems but also through memory, narrative, and everyday ethical practice. Within this process, biography functions as a key mechanism through which religious meaning is transmitted and reinterpreted across generations.

This study explores intergenerational religious transmission within a Taiwanese family affiliated with a syncretic religious tradition. It focuses on how the life of a senior religious master is remembered by his granddaughter and how such memory shapes moral identity, ethical orientation, and social responsibility.

Rather than treating biography as historical documentation, this study conceptualizes it as a form of moral pedagogy. Religious continuity is understood as a process of narrative identity formation in which memory is actively reconstructed to guide ethical life.

Research Questions

1. How is religious faith transmitted across generations through family memory?
2. How does oral narrative shape moral identity and ethical cultivation?
3. How is lived religion manifested through everyday practice and relational experience?

Research Gap

Limited attention has been given to how religious memory operates within intimate family-based oral transmission, particularly in Chinese religious movements.

Contribution

This study contributes to:

- memory studies in religion
- narrative identity theory
- lived religion scholarship

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1 Collective Memory

Halbwachs argues that memory is socially framed rather than individually constructed. Religious memory is therefore shaped by family and community structures that determine what is remembered and how it is interpreted (Halbwachs 1992).

Assmann distinguishes between communicative memory and cultural memory. Communicative memory is transmitted orally within living generations, while cultural memory is institutionalized (Assmann 2011). Family oral history operates within communicative memory but may influence the formation of cultural memory. (Assmann, 2010). (Erl 2011) (Olick, 2007). (Connerton. 1989) (Nora, 1989.)

2.2 Narrative Identity

Ricoeur proposes that identity is constructed through narrative configuration. Individuals understand themselves through stories that integrate past experience and future ethical orientation (Ricoeur 1992).(Yow 2015) (Thompson 2000) (Portelli 1997)

In religious contexts, biography becomes a moral structure through which virtues such as compassion, sincerity, and perseverance are internalized.(Riessman2008). (McAdams 2001.)(Bruner 1990.)

2.3 Lived Religion

Orsi and McGuire emphasize that religion is not only doctrinal but lived through embodied practices, relationships, and everyday actions (Orsi 2005; McGuire 2008).

Religious transmission occurs through observation, imitation, and relational proximity rather than formal instruction. (McGuire 2016) (Hall 1997). (Tweed 2006) (Ammerman2021)

Analytical Framework

This study integrates three dimensions:

- Memory (Halbwachs, Assmann): framing of religious meaning
- Narrative identity (Ricoeur): construction of ethical selfhood
- Lived religion (Orsi, McGuire): embodied transmission of faith

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative oral history approach combined with narrative inquiry. Data were collected through six semi-structured interviews conducted in Mandarin Chinese with the granddaughter of a senior religious practitioner.

3.2 Data Collection

Interviews were conducted in both a family residence and a religious temple environment. Each session lasted 60–90 minutes and focused on:

- childhood memory
- observation of religious practice
- ethical reflection and life decisions

3.3 Data Analysis

Thematic coding was conducted in three stages:

- open coding
- axial coding
- selective coding

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Three core themes emerged:

1. memory as moral framing
2. narrative identity formation
3. embodied religious practice

3.4 Reflexivity

The researcher occupies a dual position as both family member and analyst. This insider position provides depth of access but also introduces interpretive bias. Therefore, interpretation is explicitly reflexive and co-constructed.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained. Sensitive information was handled carefully, and emotional narratives were treated as meaningful data rather than anecdotal content.

4. Findings

4.1 Memory as Moral Framing

Family memory does not function as neutral recollection but as moral interpretation. The religious master is remembered not primarily through institutional achievements but through ethical conduct characterized by humility, service, and discipline.

Moral learning occurs indirectly through observation rather than explicit instruction. This demonstrates that memory serves as an ethical framing mechanism within family contexts.

This finding extends Halbwachs' theory by showing that memory is not only socially structured but also morally productive. The religious master is remembered not primarily through institutional achievements but through ethical conduct characterized by humility, service, and discipline.

One of the most influential memories recalled by the participant concerned her grandfather's advice during a critical turning point in her life. After her father became seriously ill, she was expected to assume responsibilities within the family business. However, her grandfather instructed her to resign and not return until she had completed a doctoral degree.

Rather than prioritizing wealth or inheritance, he emphasized education as a pathway to self-cultivation and moral development. This memory became a recurring moral reference point that guided many of her subsequent life decisions.

Example 1: Educational Expectations and Moral Discipline

One of the most frequently recalled memories concerns the participant's decision to leave the family business and pursue higher education.

According to the interviewee, after her father's illness, she was expected to assume managerial responsibilities within the family enterprise. However, her grandfather advised her to resign and return only after obtaining a doctoral degree. Rather than emphasizing financial security, he stressed the importance of education, self-cultivation, and personal growth.

This memory became a moral reference point throughout her life. The grandfather's guidance was later summarized in a phrase repeatedly remembered by the participant:

“Read ten thousand books and travel ten thousand miles. Your education is your best dowry.”

The recollection demonstrates how family memory functions not merely as remembrance but as a framework for ethical decision-making and life orientation.

Example 2: Filial Piety as Moral Identity

The participant repeatedly recalled her grandfather's teaching that:

“True filial piety is not only respecting one's parents, but helping others respect them through one's own achievements.”

Rather than emphasizing obedience, this interpretation linked filial piety with self-development and social contribution.

Through repeated storytelling, this lesson became integrated into the participant's understanding of personal responsibility and moral success.

Example 3: Educational and Professional Trajectory

The participant's life narrative reveals how inherited family values were transformed into personal identity.

Despite growing up in a wealthy family environment, she consciously rejected dependence on family resources and pursued an independent educational and professional path. She worked while studying, eventually establishing multiple educational institutions and dedicating more than three decades to educational service.

The participant explicitly connected these achievements to the moral teachings of her grandfather, especially the virtues of perseverance, responsibility, and service.

In Ricoeur's terms, the self is not merely remembered but narratively configured. Family stories become ethical resources through which individuals interpret their own life trajectories.

Example 4: Intergenerational Continuity

The participant also interpreted her children's academic achievements as part of a continuing family narrative.

Both children pursued international education while maintaining religious commitments and cultural traditions. Rather than viewing success as individual accomplishment, she framed it as the continuation of values inherited from previous generations.

This demonstrates how narrative identity extends beyond a single generation and becomes a mechanism for sustaining moral continuity within families.

The lesson was frequently summarized through a phrase remembered by the participant:

“Your education is your best dowry.”

This statement transformed education from a means of social mobility into a form of moral cultivation and personal responsibility.

4.2 Narrative Identity Formation

The granddaughter's identity is continuously shaped through reinterpretation of family narratives. Her ethical values, educational path, and professional decisions are framed as extensions of inherited moral stories.

Following Ricoeur, identity is constructed through narrative integration. The self emerges through the reinterpretation of familial memory into personal ethical orientation.

Virtues such as perseverance and responsibility are thus not abstract principles but narrative outcomes.

The participant later interpreted her academic journey as a continuation of her grandfather's moral expectations.

The participant repeatedly recalled her grandfather's teaching that true filial piety does not merely involve respecting one's parents, but enabling others to respect them through one's own conduct and accomplishments.

This interpretation significantly shaped her understanding of success, transforming achievement into an ethical obligation rather than a personal ambition.

4.3 Embodied Lived Religion

Religious transmission occurs primarily through embodied practice rather than doctrinal instruction. Ritual participation, observation of service behavior, and engagement in community activities constitute key mechanisms of faith formation.

Faith is experienced relationally through proximity and repetition. Everyday actions such as care, silence, and service become vehicles of spiritual meaning.

This supports McGuire's argument that religion is lived, dynamic, and embedded in daily life.

Throughout his lifetime, Master Tzu-Hsin established religious centers across Asia, North America, Europe, and Latin America. Family members remembered these accomplishments not as organizational achievements but as expressions of lifelong religious commitment.

His continuous travels, missionary work, and efforts to establish places of worship were understood as embodied demonstrations of faith.

Religious Service as Everyday Practice

The participant described how her grandfather devoted his entire life to establishing religious centers across Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Yet what remained most significant in family memory was not institutional expansion but everyday acts of service.

For example, in his later years he regularly visited correctional institutions to provide moral education for prisoners. He also quietly supported families of inmates by arranging accommodation, meals, and transportation through temple resources.

Importantly, these charitable activities were rarely publicized. Many family members only discovered the extent of his involvement after reviewing documents following his centennial celebration.

This illustrates how religious commitment was embodied through service rather than doctrinal discourse.

Learning Through Observation

The participant later discovered that her own prison counseling work closely paralleled her grandfather's ministry in correctional institutions.

Although he never explicitly instructed her to pursue this path, she came to recognize that many of her professional commitments reflected values she had absorbed through years of observation.

This finding supports McGuire's notion that religion is often transmitted through practice, imitation, and relational experience rather than formal teaching.

In his later years, Master Tzu-Hsin regularly visited correctional institutions to provide moral education and spiritual guidance for inmates.

Beyond preaching, he quietly arranged accommodation, meals, and support for prisoners' families through temple resources.

These activities reveal how faith was enacted through compassionate service rather than doctrinal instruction.

4.4 Quiet Moral Leadership

A distinctive feature of the case is the form of “quiet leadership” exhibited by the religious figure. Authority is expressed not through institutional control but through consistent ethical conduct and self-effacing service. (Burns 1978) (Greenleaf 1977.)

This challenges conventional models of religious authority and highlights relational ethics as a form of moral leadership.

Following the passing of senior leaders within the movement, he continued the mission without seeking recognition or institutional prestige.

The participant only discovered years later that her grandfather had quietly financed various youth counseling activities associated with the Chang Teacher Center.

Although he never publicly acknowledged his contributions, he consistently provided practical support for volunteer programs and social service initiatives.

This hidden form of service became one of the most powerful examples of moral leadership remembered by the family.

When an elderly visitor asked whether he still remembered who he was, Master Tzu-Hsin replied:

“What matters is not whether I know who you are, but whether you know who you are.”

Family members remembered this remark as a concise expression of his lifelong emphasis on self-cultivation and self-awareness.

Leadership Through Humility

Although Master Tzu-Hsin held significant leadership responsibilities within the religious movement after the passing of senior leaders, family memories consistently portray him as avoiding personal recognition.

Rather than emphasizing authority, he practiced leadership through quiet encouragement, financial support, and personal example.

One particularly meaningful memory concerns the participant's volunteer service at youth counseling centers. Because funding was limited, volunteers often painted buildings and organized activities themselves. Only many years later did she discover that her

grandfather had quietly financed accommodation and logistical support behind the scenes without seeking acknowledgment.

This pattern of hidden service became one of the strongest moral lessons remembered by the family.

Wisdom Through Everyday Conversation

Family members also recalled his characteristic style of teaching through short conversations.

When a visitor asked him in old age whether he remembered who he was, Master Tzu-Hsin replied:

“It does not matter whether I know who you are. What matters is whether you know who you are.”

Such responses reveal a form of moral leadership grounded not in institutional power but in reflective wisdom and ethical presence.

5. Discussion

This study demonstrates that intergenerational religious transmission is fundamentally a moral and narrative process rather than a purely doctrinal one.

First, memory functions as a mechanism of ethical framing that selectively organizes past experience into moral meaning. Second, narrative identity enables the transformation of inherited memory into personal ethical orientation. Third, lived religion ensures that faith is embodied through everyday relational practice.

These findings extend Ricoeur’s theory by emphasizing the intergenerational dimension of narrative identity formation. They also refine Orsi’s concept of lived religion by highlighting the family as a central site of religious embodiment.

5.1 Family Memory as Informal Moral Pedagogy

The findings suggest that family memory functions as an informal system of moral pedagogy. Unlike formal religious education, ethical lessons are transmitted through stories, shared experiences, emotional attachment, and everyday observation.

In this case, the participant rarely described receiving systematic doctrinal instruction from her grandfather. Instead, moral values emerged through remembered interactions, observed behaviors, and retrospective interpretation.

This process demonstrates how religious continuity is sustained through relational experience and narrative reconstruction rather than institutional teaching alone.

5.2 Narrative Selfhood and Moral Reflection

This statement reflects Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity. The central moral question is not external recognition but the ongoing task of understanding and cultivating the self.

Through such everyday interactions, ethical teachings were transmitted in narrative form and subsequently integrated into the participant's own moral identity.

5.3 Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to the interdisciplinary study of religion by integrating theories of collective memory, narrative identity, and lived religion into a unified analytical framework. While previous studies have examined these dimensions separately, this research demonstrates how they operate interactively within family-based religious transmission.

It further advances narrative identity theory by highlighting its intergenerational dimension, showing that identity is not only individually constructed but also relationally inherited and continuously reinterpreted. In addition, the study refines the concept of lived religion by identifying the family as a primary site where religious meaning is embodied, enacted, and sustained over time.

6. Conclusion

This study has shown that religious faith is transmitted through memory, narrative, and embodied practice within family contexts. The case illustrates how moral cultivation is sustained through everyday relational experience rather than formal doctrinal instruction.

Three conclusions are drawn:

1. Memory functions as moral framing
2. Narrative constructs ethical identity
3. Lived religion is embodied in everyday relational practice

Future research may expand this framework to comparative studies across religious traditions or longitudinal ethnographic designs.

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