

Place Identity in New Cultural Geography: Theoretical Lineages, Paradigm Shifts, and Contemporary Issues

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Abstract: This paper examines theories of local identity within the framework of new cultural geography. It provides an in-depth analysis of their theoretical lineage, contrasts them with traditional geographical approaches, elucidates core concepts, explores shifts in contemporary contexts, and reflects on theoretical debates, methodological issues, and practical challenges. The findings indicate that theories of local identity have evolved from static to dynamic and from singular to pluralistic perspectives. In contemporary society, these theories face numerous opportunities and challenges. Future research should further explore emerging issues, move beyond Western-centric viewpoints, and contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of local identity studies.

Keywords: New Cultural Geography; Place Identity; Theoretical Framework; Contemporary Changes; Critical Reflection.

1. Introduction

In the 1970s, new cultural geography emerged as a critical response to traditional geographical paradigms. Environmental determinism in traditional geography simplistically attributed human activities to the natural environment, while spatial science overemphasised quantitative analyses of space, neglecting the dynamic roles of culture, power, and meaning. In contrast, new cultural geography foregrounds the centrality of culture, power, and meaning in geographical research, asserting that space and place are not objective entities but products of socio-cultural construction [1].

Amidst the tide of globalisation, interconnections between countries and regions have intensified, with the unprecedented flow of populations, capital, and information [2]. Within such a mobile society, local identity has become a central concern of new cultural geography. On the one hand, globalisation facilitates cultural exchange and integration; on the other, it provokes anxieties over the erosion of local distinctiveness, presenting local identity with both unprecedented challenges and opportunities. The relationship between local identity, globalisation, and the mobile society is complex and contradictory, profoundly shaping people's perceptions of their own identities and the places they inhabit [3][17].

Theoretically, place identity theory has catalysed a significant shift in geography from "space" to "place." Whereas traditional geography focused on the scientific description and analysis of space, place identity theory emphasises the emotional, cultural, and social meanings embedded in place [5]. This has redirected geographical research toward human subjective experience and socio-cultural contexts, thereby enriching and expanding the discipline's scope and theoretical framework [6]. Practically, place identity theory offers a powerful analytical tool for addressing various social issues, including urbanisation, migration, and cultural conflict. For instance, in the redevelopment of old urban areas, place identity theory helps us understand residents' emotional attachments to their former homes and their commitment to local memory, enabling more human-sensitive urban planning and

development.

Against this backdrop, this paper traces the academic lineage of place identity theory, analyses its core concepts and research paradigms, and explores the challenges posed by contemporary social transformations, aiming to provide a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of this field.

2. Theoretical Context of Place Identity Theory

2.1. The Concept of 'Place' in Traditional Geography

In *Space and Place: An Empirical Perspective*, Tuan proposed a dichotomy between 'place' and 'space' [2]. He argued that space is abstract, geometric, and measurable, whereas place is space imbued with emotion and meaning, serving as a vessel for attachment. People often harbour deep emotional ties to their hometowns; even when far away, the landscapes, streets, and customs carry their memories and emotions, forming a unique sense of place [3][4]. This perspective draws attention to the humanistic connotations of place, laying the emotional foundation for local identity research [7].

From an anthropological perspective, Clifford Geertz regarded place as a system of cultural symbols. Architectural styles, customs, religious rituals, and other elements function as cultural symbols, collectively constituting the unique cultural essence of a place. For example, the Fujian Tulou in China are not merely residential structures; they embody the cultural meaning of clan-based communal living and mutual support, reflecting a distinct regional symbolic system. This approach underscores the cultural attributes of place, providing a rich cultural dimension for local identity studies [9].

2.2. Theoretical Breakthroughs in New Cultural Geography

Doreen Massey critiqued the static nature of traditional conceptions of place. She argued that place is not a fixed entity but is constructed through diverse social and power relations, possessing a fluid, processual, and power-laden character [17]. The meaning and identity of a place are formed

within constantly changing social relations [10]. As cities develop, previously marginalised areas may become new urban centres due to policy support or industrial growth, and their local significance and associated identities shift accordingly. This perspective challenges traditional views and offers a dynamic lens for local identity research[11][12].

Tim Cresswell proposed the concept of 'place as process', emphasising that place identity is dynamically generated[15]. It is not static but continually shaped and reshaped through people's everyday practices. Shenzhen, a migrant city, exemplifies this: its urban culture and place identity have continuously evolved as people from different regions have poured in, with new local characteristics and identities constantly emerging.

Scholars such as James Duncan and Dennis Cosgrove have driven a shift in place identity research from textual analysis toward everyday practices. They argue that place identity manifests not only in literary and artistic texts but more significantly in daily activities. For example, the lifestyles and neighbourly interactions of residents in Beijing's hutongs constitute vital expressions of place identity. This shift has brought place identity research closer to lived realities [14].

2.3. Key Theoretical Frameworks

Local identity has multidimensional characteristics, including material, symbolic, emotional, and social dimensions. The material dimension is embodied in physical entities such as natural landscapes and architecture; the symbolic dimension appears in cultural symbols and values; the emotional dimension refers to affective attachment to place; and the social dimension concerns the construction and expression of local identity within social relationships[6][13]. For instance, the Eiffel Tower in Paris is not only a physical landmark but also a symbol of French culture, evoking emotional attachment and functioning as an iconic emblem in social interactions.

David Harvey's theory of 'spatial justice' focuses on power and local politics [16]. In place identity research, this theory prompts reflection on who defines the meaning of a place. In urban regeneration, developers, governments, and residents often hold divergent definitions of local significance. The renovation of Beijing's hutongs illustrates this: developers may prioritise commercial interests, the government may focus on city image enhancement, while residents may care more about preserving local memories and sustaining their way of life. These differences reflect the power dynamics among various actors in defining place meaning.

John Urry's perspective on mobility has opened new directions for local identity research [19]. In the context of globalisation, groups such as migrants and tourists are in constant flux. As migrants integrate into new places, they develop translocal identities. For example, overseas Chinese communities retain an identity with their ancestral homeland while gradually integrating into local societies, thereby forming pluralistic local identities. This translocal identity enriches the conceptual framework of local identity [12].

3. Core Issues in the Study of Local Identity

3.1. The Tension Between Globalisation and Local Identity

The flow of global capital has led to cultural homogenisation, with 'Disneyfication' and 'McDonaldisation'

spreading worldwide. While Disneyland parks bring economic benefits to local areas, they have also diluted distinctive cultural characteristics in some places. McDonald's globally standardised store designs and product ranges have, to some extent, undermined the uniqueness of local culinary cultures. This cultural homogenisation erodes local distinctiveness and threatens local identity.

In response, phenomena of local resistance and re-localisation have continually emerged. The concept of 'glocalisation' reflects the adaptive strategies local communities adopt within globalisation. In Japan, alongside absorbing Western culture, there has been a vigorous revival of indigenous culture, including the preservation and innovation of traditional practices such as the tea ceremony and kimono. By combining local and global cultures, Japan has developed distinctive local cultural characteristics and strengthened local identity.

3.2. The Reconstruction of Place in the Urbanisation Process

Conflicts between urban renewal and local memory frequently arise during urbanisation. Urban regeneration often involves demolishing old buildings and transforming neighbourhoods, which may lead to the loss of residents' local memories. During the renovation of Beijing's hutongs, some alleys were demolished and residents relocated; their memories and emotional attachments had no anchor, sparking resistance. Such conflicts reflect the tension between urban development and the preservation of local identity[15][16].

Gentrification is a phenomenon within urbanisation that profoundly impacts local community identity. As gentrification proceeds, the influx of higher-income groups alters existing community structures and cultural atmospheres. In Brooklyn, New York, for example, original working-class neighbourhoods have gradually been taken over by middle- and upper-middle-income residents, resulting in changes to cultural characteristics and social relationships, thereby undermining the local community identity of original residents.

3.3. Migration and Translocal Identity

Diasporic groups, such as the Jewish people, have undergone multiple migrations. Though scattered across the globe, they retain a cultural identity linked to their ancestral homelands while simultaneously integrating into local societies, forming multiple local affiliations. This multilocal affiliation enriches their cultural depth and offers diverse perspectives for local identity research.

Homi Bhabha's concept of 'third space' identity emphasises that within transnational spaces, the collision and fusion of different cultures give rise to a new cultural space and form of identity[14]. In Singapore, the intermingling of diverse ethnic cultures has produced a unique 'Singaporean culture', within which people develop a 'third space' identity that differs from their original ethnic cultures yet possesses its own distinctive characteristics.

3.4. The Reshaping of Local Identity by Digital Technology

There exists a complex interplay between virtual places—such as the metaverse and virtual communities on social media—and physical places. In the metaverse, people can construct ideal virtual spaces that may interact with real-world physical places. City check-ins shared on social media

can turn certain locations into ‘viral hotspots’ through online dissemination, attracting more visitors and altering people’s perceptions of and identification with those places.

Digital mapping technologies, such as Google Earth, allow people to conveniently access geographical information from around the world, changing how people perceive places. Through digital maps, people can learn about distant locations; this remote perception means that understanding of places is no longer limited to personal experience, broadening the scope of place identity, but it may also lead to more abstract and superficial perceptions of place.

4. Contemporary Challenges and Critical Reflection

4.1. Theoretical Controversies

Place identity research carries the risk of ‘essentialism’—that is, overemphasising the uniqueness and essential characteristics of a place while overlooking its diversity and fluidity. Such a perspective may lead to the ossification of place identity, hindering local development and cultural exchange. Although places differ, they also share many commonalities; excessive focus on uniqueness may neglect these shared traits, which is detrimental to the integration of diverse cultures[12] [17].

From a posthumanist perspective, the role of non-human actors—such as climate, flora, and fauna—in local identity is gradually receiving more attention. In some island communities, climate change affects the local ecological environment and people’s livelihoods, thereby influencing local identity. The flora and fauna are integral components of the local ecosystem, closely intertwined with residents’ lives and constituting significant elements of local identity[18]. However, traditional research on local identity has often overlooked these non-human factors.

4.2. Methodological Challenges

Local identity is dynamic and ever-changing, and traditional research methods struggle to capture these changes comprehensively. While ethnographic methods allow for in-depth understanding of local culture, their lengthy research cycles make them ill-suited to rapidly changing local identities. Visual methods, such as photography and film, can intuitively depict local changes, but the analytical process may be subject to subjectivity. Big data analysis can yield vast amounts of information but falls short in uncovering the deeper meanings of local identity. Therefore, a combination of multiple methods is required to study local identity more comprehensively[19].

Research on local identity spans multiple disciplinary fields, with theories and methodologies from sociology, anthropology, and media studies offering valuable insights[20]. Interdisciplinary research facilitates the integration of disciplinary strengths, enabling a deeper understanding of the formation and evolution of local identity. However, current interdisciplinary research faces challenges such as insufficient integration across disciplines and a lack of methodological consistency, necessitating further exploration and refinement.

4.3. Practical Challenges

Climate change has a profound impact on local identity, particularly in areas with high local vulnerability, such as island communities. Rising sea levels pose risks of

submersion for some islands, threatening inhabitants’ lifestyles and cultures and leading to a crisis of cultural identity. In some Pacific island nations, for instance, residents may lose their sense of belonging to their original homeland due to its disappearance, forcing them to relocate elsewhere and confronting the challenges of cultural transmission and identity reconstruction.

Extreme forms of localism, such as exclusionary local identity, may lead to social division and conflict. In some regions, certain residents harbour hostile attitudes towards newcomers; such exclusionary local identity undermines social harmony and stability and hinders the exchange and integration of diverse cultures. For example, discrimination against migrant workers observed in some cities is detrimental to urban development and social progress[21].

5. Conclusion and Outlook

The theory of local identity has undergone a shift from static to dynamic, and from singular to pluralistic. From the static conception of place in traditional geography to new cultural geography’s emphasis on the constructed, fluid, and power-laden nature of place, the theory of local identity has continuously evolved and refined. In terms of research paradigms, perspectives and methods have become increasingly diverse—shifting from a focus on textual analysis to everyday practices, and from single-discipline research to interdisciplinary approaches.

In the future, research on local identity could be further deepened in relation to emerging issues. The rapid development of digital technology and the intensification of climate change present new opportunities and challenges for this field. On the one hand, there is a need for in-depth research into how digital technology profoundly influences local identity, and how it can be used to promote the transmission of local culture and identity construction; on the other hand, attention must be paid to the long-term impact of climate change on local identity, and strategies to address the crisis of cultural identity must be explored.

Currently, research on local identity is predominantly set against the backdrop of Western developed nations, while the voices of Global South countries remain relatively underrepresented in this field. Moving forward, it is essential to move beyond a Western-centric perspective and strengthen research on local identity in Global South countries. These nations possess unique historical, cultural, and social contexts; studying their local identities will help enrich the theoretical framework of local identity and provide a more comprehensive perspective for global research in this area.

Theories of local identity continue to evolve within the field of cultural geography. Future research must make sustained efforts in theoretical deepening, methodological innovation, and the broadening of perspectives, in order to better understand and address the various challenges facing local identity in contemporary society.

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