

Memetic Drift

Chapter 8: Memetic Drift

Observer Commentary

Memetic drift: The accumulation of small changes in transmitted cultural information over generations, analogous to genetic drift in biological evolution.

Mechanism: Information transmission is imperfect. Parent teaches child, but child's understanding differs slightly from parent's intention. Child becomes adult, teaches their own child, introducing further variation. Over multiple generations, accumulated small errors produce substantial divergence.

Example from language evolution: Latin spoken in Rome, 100 CE. Over centuries of imperfect transmission across separated populations: – In Iberia → Spanish – In Gaul → French – In Italia → Italian – In Dacia → Romanian

These are mutually unintelligible languages descended from common ancestor. No single generation experienced a “break” from Latin. Each generation spoke what they learned, with minor variations. But variations accumulated until separate language categories emerged.

Same mechanism applies to cultural practices, political values, social norms, identity categories.

Taiwan case: 75 years of separation = 3 generations of imperfect cultural transmission across the strait.

Generation 1 (born ~1925–1945): Direct memory of unified China. Carried shared cultural knowledge across the strait when they fled in 1949.

Generation 2 (born ~1950–1975): Learned “Chinese culture” from parents, but experienced it in Taiwan context. Modifications accumulated: Different political system, different media environment, different economic development pattern, different international relationships.

Generation 3 (born ~1980–2005): Learned “Taiwanese culture” that already differed substantially from mainland. Parents’ memories of unified China were secondhand. Primary identity formation occurred entirely within separated system.

Result: Current cross-strait cultural difference is not product of intentional divergence but natural memetic drift. Like dialects becoming languages, shared culture fragments into distinct cultures through accumulated transmission errors over generations.

Neither side is “wrong” or “corrupted.” Both are downstream products of same source, evolved in different environments.

Subject under observation: Conversation between Chen Wei (Beijing) and his cousin Chen Ming (originally from Beijing, relocated to Taipei 15 years ago for work). They are genetic relatives with shared childhood environment but have experienced 15 years of differential cultural evolution. The conversation will reveal micro-scale memetic drift observable within single lifetime.

Human Narrative

Chen Wei’s cousin Ming had moved to Taiwan in 2010 for a job at a Taiwanese tech company. At the time, it had seemed like a practical career move—better salary, interesting work, chance to experience life outside the mainland. Ming had intended to stay three years, five maximum, then return to Beijing.

Fifteen years later, he was still in Taipei. Married to a Taiwanese woman. Two children in Taiwanese schools. Mandarin spoken with a slight Taiwanese accent that he hadn’t had before. Hokkien phrases creeping into his vocabulary.

Wei had stayed in touch via WeChat, but they hadn’t seen each other in person in eight years. When Wei learned he was being sent to a conference in Taipei—the same one where he had met Professor Zhang—he arranged to have dinner with Ming.

They met at a Japanese restaurant in Taipei’s Xinyi District. Ming arrived first, and when Wei entered, he barely recognized him. Not physically—Ming looked older but fundamentally the same. It was something else: The way he moved, the way he dressed, the way he smiled when he saw Wei approach.

“Wei! It’s been too long!” Ming embraced him, and Wei noticed he smelled different—different cologne, or different laundry detergent, or something.

They sat and ordered: sashimi, grilled fish, sake. The conversation started with safe topics: Family updates, career trajectories, shared memories of growing up in the same Beijing neighborhood.

But gradually, Wei began noticing discontinuities. Small things.

Ming said “you guys” when referring to mainland China. Not “we” or “us back home,” but “you guys,” as if he were already outside the category.

Ming criticized the Beijing government casually, without the careful hedging that mainland residents used even in private conversations. “Xi’s personality cult is getting ridiculous,” he said, as if this were uncontroversial observation rather than dangerous political statement.

Ming used Taiwanese slang words that Wei didn’t recognize. “That’s very hen,” Ming said about something. Wei knew hen meant “very” in Mandarin, but Ming was using it differently, more like an intensifier that stood alone. It was a Taiwanese usage, imported from English “very” via transliteration.

“You sound different,” Wei said.

Ming smiled. “Taiwanese accent. I can’t get rid of it anymore. My Beijing colleagues here make fun of me—they say I sound like a local.”

“Do you feel like a local?”

Ming considered. “Sometimes? I’ve been here fifteen years. More than a third of my life. My kids are Taiwanese—they don’t remember Beijing, don’t have any connection to it. When I go back to visit family on the mainland, I feel like a tourist. Things are familiar but also foreign.”

“Would you move back?”

“To Beijing? No. My life is here now. My wife’s family is here. The kids’ schools, my job, my friends. All here.”

“But you’re still Chinese.”

Ming’s expression shifted slightly—something Wei couldn’t quite read. “Am I? I have a Taiwan ID card. I vote in Taiwan elections. My kids will do military service in the Taiwan army when they’re old enough. At what point does ‘still Chinese’ stop being accurate?”

“You were born in Beijing. You grew up speaking Mandarin, eating Chinese food, celebrating Chinese festivals. That doesn’t just disappear.”

“It doesn’t disappear, but it changes. I speak Mandarin, but with Taiwanese accent and vocabulary. I eat Chinese food, but Taiwanese style—different flavors, different preferences. I celebrate Chinese New Year, but here it’s called Spring Festival and some of the customs are different. Same origin, different evolution.”

Wei felt discomfort rising. “But culturally, fundamentally, you’re still Chinese. Taiwan is just a region of China with local variations.”

“Is that what you think? Or what you’re supposed to think?”

“It’s what I genuinely think. The differences between Taiwan and the mainland are like differences between provinces. Beijing versus Sichuan—different accents, different food, different local culture. But all Chinese.”

Ming shook his head. “It’s not the same. The differences between provinces are superficial. The difference between Taiwan and the mainland is structural. We have a different political system, different values about government, different relationship to history and identity. Those aren’t just local variations—they’re fundamental divergences.”

“Because you’ve been separated for 75 years. But that’s temporary. Once reunification happens, the convergence will resume.”

“And there it is,” Ming said quietly.

“What?”

“The assumption that reunification is inevitable and desirable. You can’t even imagine an alternative.”

“Can you? You’re Chinese, Ming. Taiwan is Chinese territory. How is reunification not the natural outcome?”

“I used to think like you. When I first moved here, I thought Taiwan was just a province with delusions of independence. I thought the people claiming to be ‘Taiwanese not Chinese’ were brainwashed or politically motivated. But after living here, talking to people, raising kids here—I started to understand. They’re not brainwashed. They’ve genuinely developed a different identity.”

“Developed by seventy-five years of separation and American influence.”

“Developed by seventy-five years of different experiences. Taiwan democratized. The mainland didn’t. Taiwan opened its political system. The mainland tightened control. Those aren’t superficial differences. They create different worldviews.”

Wei felt himself getting defensive. “So you’re saying you support Taiwan independence now?”

“I’m saying I understand why people here want to remain separate. I don’t know if I ‘support’ it in some abstract political sense. But I understand it. And I don’t think forced reunification is the answer.”

“No one’s talking about force. The goal is peaceful reunification.”

“Wei, come on. Peaceful reunification means Taiwan voluntarily giving up its sovereignty and democratic system. Why would they do that? What’s the incentive?”

“Historical legitimacy. Cultural unity. Economic integration.”

“Historical legitimacy is just a story. Cultural unity is increasingly fictional as the societies diverge. And economic integration is already happening—it doesn’t require political reunification.”

“So what, Taiwan should just be independent forever?”

“I don’t know. Maybe? Or maybe some kind of confederation, or special status. I don’t have the answer. I just know that the mainland’s insistence on reunification under CCP control is not going to work. The Taiwanese won’t accept it.”

“Then eventually there will be conflict.”

“Probably. And that’s tragic. Because the conflict is avoidable if both sides were willing to compromise. But neither side will compromise because both have locked themselves into positions they treat as non-negotiable.”

Wei was silent. He felt something crumbling inside him—not his beliefs exactly, but his confidence in them.

“You’ve changed,” he finally said.

“I’ve been here fifteen years. Of course I’ve changed.”

“But you used to be—you used to understand—”

“I used to agree with you,” Ming said gently. “I don’t anymore. Not because I was brainwashed or corrupted, but because I experienced a different reality that changed my perspective.”

They finished dinner in subdued mood, avoiding further political discussion. They talked about Ming’s children, about Wei’s research, about mutual friends from their Beijing childhood who had scattered across China and the world.

Outside the restaurant, they said goodbye. Ming hugged him again. “Take care of yourself, Wei. And think about what I said.”

“I will.”

“I mean really think. Not just dismiss it as Taiwan brainwashing me. Try to imagine what it’s like to live here, to raise kids here, to see what democracy actually looks like in practice. It changes you.”

“I’ll think about it,” Wei promised, though he wasn’t sure he would.

On the taxi ride back to his hotel, Wei scrolled through his WeChat, looking at Ming’s Moments feed—the Chinese equivalent of Facebook status updates. He rarely checked it, but now he read through months of posts.

Photos of Ming's family hiking in Taiwan's mountains. Comments on Taiwan political news, written from insider perspective. Complaints about traffic in Taipei. Jokes in Taiwanese slang. Links to articles about Taiwan-mainland relations that took Taiwan's perspective as default.

The accumulation of small signals: Ming was no longer living in Taiwan. He was living as Taiwanese.

Or maybe not fully Taiwanese—he still had mainland connections, still spoke standard Mandarin when he chose to, still maintained relationships with mainland family. But he wasn't mainland Chinese anymore either.

He was something in between. Or something new.

Wei thought about memetic evolution—the concept he had encountered in his research. Cultural traits mutating and drifting across generations, creating divergent populations from common ancestors.

Was that what he was witnessing? Not betrayal or brainwashing, but natural evolutionary process?

The taxi passed through Taipei's night streets, neon signs in traditional Chinese characters that looked almost the same as Beijing's but were rendered in slightly different aesthetic style. The language was the same but the fonts were different, the design sensibilities were different, the entire visual culture was different in subtle ways that created different emotional resonance.

Seventy-five years of drift.

How much longer until the languages became mutually unintelligible? How much longer until “Chinese” identity meant nothing to people who had grown up thinking of themselves as Taiwanese?

Or was it already too late?

The next morning, before his flight back to Beijing, Wei met with Professor Zhang for coffee. He told her about the dinner with Ming, about the discomfort of watching his cousin become foreign.

“Cultural evolution is faster than biological evolution,” Zhang said. “Species take millions of years to diverge. Cultures can diverge in generations.”

“But we're the same ethnicity, the same language—”

“Language is already diverging. Taiwanese Mandarin has different vocabulary, different grammar patterns, different phonology from Beijing Mandarin. Give it another hundred years of separation and they might be mutually unintelligible dialects. Give it another three hundred years and they're different languages.”

“That’s horrifying.”

“Why? Languages diverge. It’s natural. Latin became Spanish and French and Italian. No one mourns the loss of unified Latin.”

“But we’re not talking about dead languages. We’re talking about living people with shared ancestry who should be unified.”

“Should be according to what standard? Your standard, based on your values, shaped by your cultural context. Ming has different standard based on different values shaped by different cultural context.”

“So there’s no objective truth? It’s all just perspective?”

“Truth is observer-dependent,” Zhang said. “That doesn’t make it less true. It just means you can’t appeal to universal truth to settle political disagreements. You can only appeal to power.”

“That’s depressing.”

“Reality often is.”

Wei flew back to Beijing that afternoon. As the plane climbed above the clouds, he looked down at Taiwan’s coastline disappearing below. From this altitude, the island looked small and temporary—a fragment of rock barely visible in the vast ocean.

But 24 million people lived on that fragment. They had lives, families, dreams, identities that felt as real to them as his identity felt to him.

If China attempted reunification by force, many of those people would die. Their culture would be suppressed, their language would be homogenized, their political system would be dismantled.

In a hundred years, maybe the integration would be complete. Maybe future historians would describe it as inevitable historical process, the restoration of natural unity.

But in the present, it would be experienced as conquest and destruction.

Was that acceptable? Was historical inevitability sufficient justification for present violence?

Wei didn’t know. For the first time in his life, he genuinely didn’t know.

Observer Commentary

Duration of narrated events: 18 hours. Cognitive transformation in organism Chen Wei: Significant.

The organism encountered direct evidence that cultural divergence is real and substantial, embodied in his cousin's transformation from mainland Chinese to Taiwanese (or hybrid). This forced confrontation with empirical reality rather than abstract political theory.

Observation on memetic drift mechanics:

The cousin Chen Ming did not intentionally become Taiwanese. He relocated for career reasons, intending temporary stay. But immersion in Taiwanese cultural environment produced gradual changes: – Language: Acquired Taiwanese accent, vocabulary, syntax patterns – Social norms: Adopted Taiwanese communication styles, political discussion norms – Identity markers: Shifted from “we” (mainland) to “you guys” (mainland), indicating cognitive reclassification of group membership – Values: Absorbed democratic political values through daily exposure

These changes occurred below conscious awareness level. The organism didn't decide to become Taiwanese—he simply adapted to local environment through normal social learning mechanisms. This is standard memetic evolution: Organisms absorb culture from environment through imitation, practice, and social reinforcement.

The process is largely automatic. Conscious resistance is possible but exhausting. Most organisms default to cultural conformity within their local environment because conformity reduces cognitive load and social friction.

Result: Fifteen years was sufficient for substantial identity drift, though not complete transformation. Chen Ming is hybrid—retaining mainland origin but incorporating Taiwanese cultural elements. His children will be further along the divergence spectrum, having no direct mainland experience.

Observation on language divergence timeline:

Taiwanese Mandarin and Beijing Mandarin currently exhibit: – Accent differences (easily recognizable) – Vocabulary differences (~5–10% of common words differ) – Syntax differences (subtle but measurable) – Pragmatic differences (how language is used in social context)

These are characteristics of dialect divergence. At current rate of separation, projected timeline: – 100 years: Distinct dialects requiring conscious effort to communicate – 300 years: Mutual intelligibility lost without formal education – 500 years: Recognized as separate languages, like Spanish and Portuguese

This assumes continued separation. If reunification occurs, divergence would be arrested or reversed through linguistic homogenization policies (mandatory standard Mandarin education, media control, suppression of Taiwanese linguistic features).

Observation on Chen Wei's cognitive crisis:

The organism is experiencing paradigm shift—recognition that his framework for understanding cross-strait relations may be incorrect. This produces cognitive dissonance that could resolve in multiple ways:

1. Rejection: Dismiss Ming's transformation as individual aberration, maintain original framework
2. Compartmentalization: Acknowledge Ming's experience but treat it as exception that doesn't invalidate general theory
3. Integration: Revise framework to accommodate evidence that cultural divergence is real and substantial

The organism appears to be moving toward option 3, though resolution is incomplete. This creates vulnerability—he is losing certainty without gaining new stable framework.

From authoritarian state's perspective, this cognitive state is dangerous. Intellectuals questioning foundational assumptions about national unity are potential sources of ideological contamination. The organism's position at state think tank means his doubt could spread to policy-making circles.

Prediction: Within 30–60 days, the organism will face pressure to resolve his doubt in acceptable direction (option 1 or 2) or face professional consequences. The state cannot tolerate ambiguity on core issues of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

However, the organism has now experienced direct evidence that challenges state narrative. Evidence cannot be unseen. He may perform conformity publicly while maintaining private doubt—standard adaptation for intellectuals in authoritarian systems.

Alternative: The organism may experience radicalization in opposite direction—conclude that reunification is unjustifiable and defect ideologically or physically. Probability: Low but non-zero, increasing if personal stakes rise (e.g., if someone he cares about is harmed by state policy).

Regarding memetic drift as natural process:

The observer perspective treats cultural evolution as neither good nor bad but simply as process following identifiable patterns. Organisms assign moral valence (“we must preserve unity” vs. “we must protect our distinct identity”), but from evolutionary perspective, both unity and divergence are neutral outcomes shaped by environmental pressures and historical contingencies.

Unity is advantageous when: – Cooperation yields benefits that exceed costs of coordination – External threats require coordinated response – Resource sharing creates efficiency gains

Divergence is advantageous when: – Local conditions favor specialized adaptations – Coordination costs exceed cooperation benefits – Freedom from larger system enables more rapid innovation

Taiwan–mainland case: Both unity and divergence have costs and benefits depending on what values you’re optimizing for. Mainland optimizes for territorial integrity, national strength, civilizational continuity. Taiwan optimizes for democratic governance, autonomy, distinct identity. Neither is objectively correct. They’re competing optimization functions.

Conflict arises when both functions cannot be simultaneously satisfied. One must yield, or both must be modified. Absent negotiated compromise, power determines outcome.

End observation log.

[Chapter 8 Complete]