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Watching Chinese Indonesians through the Lens of Camera

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ABSTRACT

Life narratives have been the object of anthropological studies for decades, as they are used for understanding societies and cultures. While the common method for studying them has been ethnographic research techniques, some scholars have proposed that photography and pictures can be used as a tool in doing the life narratives. This idea finds support in the field of visual anthropology, in which photo-elicitation techniques are mostly used in data collection. In this paper, I use a collection of photographs taken from 1972 to 2001 by Paul Piollet – an enthusiast photographer who has travelled extensively in Indonesia – as a cultural inventory of the lives of Chinese Indonesians. Drawing from the disciplines of anthropology, I discuss how the lives of Chinese Indonesians are far from the stereotypical portrayal of the Chinese, which was prevalent during the New Order era and to certain extent still exists today. I show how these photographs expose the “unseen colors” of the lives of the Chinese in Indonesia, that is, the lives that the Indonesian society may not relate to the Chinese because they are the everyday life of ordinary people in Indonesia.

KEY WORDS

Chinese Indonesian, photography, life narrative, prejudice, stereotypes

ABSTRAK

Selama puluhan tahun, kisah kehidupan telah menjadi objek kajian antropologi. Hal ini terjadi karena kisah kehidupan itu dapat digunakan untuk memahami masyarakat dan budaya. Selama ini, metode yang umumnya digunakan adalah metode penelitian etnografis. Namun demikian beberapa pakar berpendapat bahwa foto juga dapat digunakan sebagai alat untuk mengkaji kisah kehidupan tersebut. Pendapat ini didukung oleh kajian dalam bidang antropologi visual, yang menggunakan teknik *photo-elicitation* dalam proses pengumpulan data. Dalam makalah ini, penulis menggunakan koleksi foto yang dibuat oleh Paul Piollet – seorang fotografer yang antusias yang melakukan perjalanan ke banyak tempat di Indonesia – sebagai suatu inventaris budaya dari kehidupan orang Indonesia Tionghoa. Dengan menggunakan teori dari bidang antropologi, penulis mendiskusikan bagaimana kehidupan orang Tionghoa Indonesia itu berbeda jauh dari stereotip orang Tionghoa yang ada di masyarakat pada masa Orde Baru dan yang sampai batas tertentu masih tetap ada di masyarakat. Penulis menunjukkan bagaimana foto-foto ini mendedahkan warna kehidupan orang Tionghoa di Indonesia yang tak terlihat, yaitu kehidupan yang tidak pernah dibayangkan oleh masyarakat Indonesia pada umumnya karena kehidupan orang Indonesia Tionghoa itu sama saja dengan kehidupan orang Indonesia pada umumnya.

INTRODUCTION

For decades, anthropologists have been studying life narratives as a means of understanding cultures and societies. The making of life narratives as the object of anthropological studies is based on an assumption that “the life story of an individual who was somehow ‘representative’ of his or her culture would be illustrative of the way in which a ‘typical’ member of that group passed through the life cycle” (Angrosino, 1976:133). This assumption makes life narratives a tool for uncovering the ways people “struggle to constitute themselves as particular kinds of actors and persons vis-à-vis others within and against powerful sociopolitical and cultural worlds” (Skinner et al, 1998:5), and for understanding on how people shape the cultural worlds where they live.

Life narrative has also become a research interest in other fields of studies, especially within the social sciences, but the common method many fields of studies used for studying it has been ethnographic research technique. However, some scholars have proposed that photography and pictures can also be used as tools in doing the life narratives. This idea finds support in the field of visual anthropology, in which photo-elicitation techniques are mostly used in data collection.

At first, photographs were used for documentary purpose, that is, for documenting place, people, and events. This kind of photographs is usually “found” documents and quite common as forms of data in qualitative research (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982). The problem with photographs as “found” documents is that they are lack of context. Thus, they function as forms of evidence because they are “stand alone” sources and just seen as records. As forms of evidence, photographs are seen to have objectivity, that is, the situation depicted by the images in them is an accurate representation of the events. Underlining the camera’s ability to record events accurately, Collier and Collier in their book, *Visual Anthropology: Photography as Research Method* (1986), write that

The camera’s machinery allows us to see without fatigue; the last exposure is just as detailed as the first. The memory of the film replaces the notebook and ensures complete quotation under the most trying circumstances. The reliably repetitive operation of the camera allows for comparable observations of an event as many times as the needs of research demand. (1986:9)

In the development of the study of anthropology, the ability of camera to record things accurately is used for establishing cultural inventories. Photographic cultural inventories give people a great amount of detailed information for analysis. Combined with other elements such as context and commentaries, photographic cultural inventories are able to make factual narrative of their subjects.

In this paper, I use a collection of photographs taken from 1972 to 2001 by Paul Piollet – an enthusiast photographer who has travelled extensively in Indonesia – as a cultural inventory of the lives of Chinese Indonesians. This collection was published in 2014 as a book, entitled *The Unseen colors: Photographic Journeys into the Lives of Chinese Indonesians from 1972 to 2001*, by Center for Chinese Indonesian Studies, Petra Christian University, Surabaya, Indonesia. Drawing from the disciplines of anthropology, I discuss how the lives of Chinese Indonesians are far from the stereotypical portrayal of the Chinese, which was prevalent during the New Order era and to certain extent still exists today. I show how these photographs expose the “unseen colors” of the lives of the Chinese in Indonesia, that is, the lives that the Indonesian society may not relate to the Chinese because they are the everyday life of ordinary people in Indonesia.

PHOTOGRAPHS AS CULTURAL INVENTORIES

When they go to the field, anthropologists hardly forget to bring camera, which serves as a “toolkit” in their fieldwork. The pictures they take provide information on the cultures and societies they studied. However, it has been in recent years that approaches to photographs and pictures are thought to enrich the anthropological understanding of societies and cultures. Before, photography was seen for

documentary purposes only. Shifts in paradigms of seeing photographs are due to changes concerning the value of photographs.

At first photographs were seen as essential works of art and documentation, namely, photographs were used for accurately describing places which are difficult to access, unknown people or events. However, in their development, people start to ask “what next?”. This question is also propelled by the possibilities interpretative strategies offer in relation to photography as an ethnographic method. This happens because photographs carry signifying properties which could lead to different meaning in the connotative level, especially when photographs are placed in social space, which renders them in a state of flux. Images in photograph are fixed. However, the meaning they convey may change, dependent upon the cultural and historical locations of viewers, as well as the social and political contexts in which the subject of the photographs is situated. Seen from this perspective, photographs function as a form of visual communication laden with social, political, and cultural aspects. Factoring these aspects when they view photographs, people can grasp better what the photographs represent. In this way, they may comprehend the experiences the photographs tell, as well as the memories and emotions they evoke. Hence, photographs have dynamics in their social use (Strassler, 2010) and provide a productive way of thinking about the lives they picture (Pinney, 1998). Thus, photographs can give the subjects a voice to articulate their position, rather than providing an illustrative history. These contribute to the increasing recognition of photographs as ethnographic resources.

As ethnographic resources, photographs should not be separated from their contexts. They cannot be seen as images printed on paper. When photographers choose certain subjects, they must have intention or reason why those subjects are chosen. Surely there is meaning attached to the photographers’ choices of their subjects. But that does not mean that the meaning of photographs is fixed. Photographs travel across time and space. In this process, the meaning behind them changes as they move from one context to another. Describing how photographs change the meaning attached to them, Elizabeth Edwards succinctly said that photographs are “a metaphor of power, having the ability to appropriate and decontextualize time and space and those who exist within it” (1992: 7). In other words, the power that photographs have is not in the images seen in the printed paper, but in their abilities to transform the hidden into the visible. Photographs, in this context, are not just passive and fixed images. Rather, they serve as the dynamic representation of reality because photographs have “the constitutive importance, agency, and affective qualities of things in social relations” (Edwards, 2012:222).

This dynamic representation leads photographs to being powerful. They are not just “snaps” because they go beyond what they replicate. They elucidate by providing vivid images of their subject, which can evoke emotion and trigger insights that might not be thought of before. In this way, photographs’ semiotic signs, as seen in their dynamic representations of reality, should be viewed not only as a mode of replication or communication, but also as signs that can give “rise to and transform modalities of action and subjectivity regardless of whether they are interpreted” (Keane, 2005:186).

Using the idea that photography can function as an ethnographic method, that photography has the abilities to transform the hidden into the visible, and that photography can go beyond what the image replicate, I discuss how Paul Piollet’s collection of photographs gives new insights on the lives of the Chinese in Indonesia.

“PHOTOGRAPHIC JOURNEY INTO THE LIVES OF CHINESE INDONESIANS”

On Saturday, September 6, 2014, I went out to meet Rizal, an old friend of mine who is of Javanese ethnic background. Since I know that he likes photography, albeit amateurish, I brought Piollet’s book because I wanted to show him the photographs Piollet took. It was interesting to see his reaction when he saw the two photographs below.



Singgarang, Riau, February 7, 1988 (p. 39).



Welahan, Central Java, 20 November 1983 (p. 32).

At first, there was nothing special in his reaction. However, when I told him that those houses belong to Chinese families, he expressed his disbelief. He said in Javanese, “*mosok tha?*”, which mean “no way!” in English. It was understandable that he did not think that Chinese families lived in those houses as there were no sign that Chinese families owned them. His disbelief was getting bigger when I showed similar pictures but this time, there was an inscription board (*biǎn'é*, 匾額) which indicated that the houses belonged to Chinese families, as seen in the two pictures below.



Tanjungbatu, South of Singkawang,
West Kalimantan, 6 December 1991 (p. 45).



Belinyu, Bangka, 11 September 1982 (p. 19)

The images of houses in Singgarang, Welahan, Tanjungbatu, and Belinyu above are like any other ordinary houses in villages in Indonesia. However, what is special about them, namely, the thing that makes my friend surprised, is that those belong to Chinese families. People may wonder why the fact that they belong to Chinese families matters.

In his article, “Seeing through Pictures: The Anthropology of Photography,” Ruby writes that photography is “a culturally conditioned visual communication system amenable to ethnographic analysis” (1981:19). Viewed from this perspective, in studying photography, one should pay attention to context in which images are taken in order to understand their full meaning. The four pictures above provide a good example of how context helps us grasp the idea they reflect.

During the New Order era, the Chinese were described as an ethnic group that dominated Indonesian economy. Popular discourse on Chinese Indonesians was that they came to Indonesia as poor people, but after some time, they became successful businessmen, as a scholar formulated, “a personal career from rags to riches” (Sukisman, 1975:63-64). But their success stories do not reflect the reality, as

not all overseas Chinese are “the new emperors,” and those stories only highlight the bright side of the life of the successful overseas Chinese. Yet, the impact of the success stories is so great that they become the target of the social jealousy. In his book which was published in 1983, Coppel notes that the image of the Chinese Indonesians is that they were opportunistic group of people who often used dubious methods in their business because of their interest in money and oppressed the “real” Indonesians. Other ethnics in Indonesia often thought that the ethnic Chinese were rich because they exploited the former. This public perception conjured the image of the ethnic Chinese as an exclusive and rich people. *Reformasi* (the Reform) has indeed opened up opportunities for the Chinese to challenge the institutional discrimination and stereotypical portrayal, but they were unable to challenge their marginal position without articulating their interests as an ethnic minority. In their effort to do so, they tended to re-affirm the public stereotypes portraying them as an exclusive group.

In a fieldwork I did in 2004, one informant said that the Chinese “colonized” other ethnic groups economically and did not have social concern. This informant grew up in a remote village in East Java, and there was a Chinese shop owner whom he thought was very cruel. The Chinese lent the money to villagers and charged a very high interest. His experience taught him to think that the Chinese were rich by exploiting other people. Describing that the Chinese did not like mingling or having interaction with people outside their ethnic group and hence were considered exclusive, one informant shared his opinion.

When I was still a university student, there were some students of Chinese descent in my batch. But I don't know them quite well. We rarely had any contact. What they did were, coming to school, going to classes, listening to the lectures, and then going home. As far as I know they never participated in any activities the students held. They prefer to get together with their fellow Chinese students. My interaction, as well as my *pribumi* friends' interaction with was limited to academic matters. Although my friend and I tried to get them involved in our social circle, still they did not show any responses. They just like being together with other Chinese students. (Fieldnote, November 6, 2014)

In real life, people of other ethnicity could have the same attitude as that of the Chinese described by the two informants above. Yet, they associated that attitude with the Chinese. What my two informants above said showed that public opinion about Chinese Indonesians, that they were moneyed class and earned their wealth through exploiting other ethnic group still exists, although nowadays it is not as pervasive as it used to be.

With this social and historical background, viewers of the pictures of the houses above understand why the knowledge of who the owners of the houses matters. It matters because those pictures do not fit with the image of Chinese Indonesians, that is, being rich and exclusive. The houses in the pictures are like the houses that belong to Indonesians who are in the low-rank of the society. However, public opinion may not think that the Chinese could live in houses like them because those houses are not typical houses where the Chinese live. Rizal said, “I know that not all Chinese are rich. There are Chinese who are poor. However, I cannot imagine that there are Chinese living in houses as such.” Rizal's statement reflects the stereotypical portrayal of the Chinese, which is still pervasive in Indonesian society. In this context, Piollet's pictures refute the stereotypes of Chinese Indonesians and bring their real condition, which is like that of other ethnic groups, into the limelight. These pictures could give an awareness that not all Chinese belong to the rich class.

Besides the pictures of the houses above, the pictures below, which depict images of children, also reflect that the lives of Chinese Indonesians are like those of other ethnic groups.



Tanjung Pandan, Belitung, 11 May 1983 (p. 24)



Sungai Purun Kecil (Seliung), Pontianak, West Kalimantan, May 14, 1983 (p. 25)

These pictures show children of Chinese descent. Nothing distinguishes them from those from any other ethnic background, except perhaps their phenotypical features. As shown in the pictures, these children do not live in big and fancy houses. Instead, they live in an old wooden-walled and wooden-floored house, which looks like that it needs renovation. Even they do not have nannies that accompany them. In fact, an older sister has to take care of their younger sibling, as seen on the picture on the left. The picture on the right depicts two Chinese boys whose parents are farmers. It seems that they are helping their parents in farming the land. The lives of the children seen in the pictures above are definitely not like their co-ethnic peers who live in big cities such as Jakarta and Surabaya, many of whom, if not all, are from rich and middle class Chinese families.

Images of Chinese as moneyed class can also be seen in many prestigious private schools in big cities in Indonesia. Every morning when the school starts and afternoon when the school ends, people can see a lot of cars jam-packing streets around these schools. Many of these cars send and pick up student who comes from Chinese family background. Their drivers are mostly people of non-Chinese ethnicity, who serve as the guards of these Chinese students. Scenes as such prove that students who study there are definitely from well-to-do families. Describing his educational experience, a Chinese Indonesian coming from a well-to-do family in Jakarta says, "The natives go to public schools, which are cheap and the quality is not so good as the private schools where most of the Chinese send their children. I went to a private school where my classmates were all Chinese" (quoted in Djao, 2003:137). However, not all Chinese Indonesian students are like what Wei Djao's informant says. This can be seen in Paul Piollet's pictures below.



Merawang, Bangka, 7 September 1982



Pasuruan, East Java, 28 November 1992

The school in Merawang (Bangka) and Pasuruan (East Java) are far from the image of elite private schools which usually charge a very expensive tuition fee. Yet, people make a generalization that

Chinese students usually go to expensive private schools usually found in big cities across Indonesia. They overlook the fact that there Chinese students attending the schools like the ones in the pictures above. In the eyes of the public, Chinese students never ever go to this kind of school, where classes are conducted in a dilapidated building as in the case of the school in Merawang, or in the temple compound as in the case of the school in Pasuruan. Pilloet's two pictures here counter the stereotypical portrayal of the Chinese as a moneyed class. Chinese students depicted in these two pictures are like native students as described by Wei Djao's informant.

Piollet's other interesting pictures are the pictures of Chinese temples. As far as I know, there are almost no new Chinese temples in Indonesia. All temples – with the exception of Chinese Buddhist viharas – were built many years ago, despite undergoing renovation or facelift. There are temples which are still proper buildings, as seen in the following pictures.



Temple in Kampung Manggis, Jambi, December 7, 1992 (p. 99)



Rogojampi, East Java, December 2, 1995 (p. 99)

But there are those which are in a condition that seems to be relatively inappropriate for a religious building, if they are compared to other places of worship. The pictures below depict temples as such.



Panji, near Belinyu, Bangka, 11 September 1982 (p. 65)



Elaja Temple, Bintan Island, Batu 14, Jalan Gesek, Riau, 3 February 1988 (p. 89)

On Thursday, October 30, 2014, during a discussion on race and ethnicity in my *Asian Studies* class, I showed the picture of Elaja Temple above to my students, the majority of whom were of Chinese descent. I told them that the building was in Indonesia and asked them what building it was. All answered that it was a house in a village. When I asked them further about the ethnic background of the owner of that house, most answered that the owner was certainly a indigenous Indonesian. Out of 30 students, only three – all of them were Chinese – said that the owner was probably a Chinese Indonesian. The answer of these three students triggered my curiosity, so I asked them to explain why they thought that it belonged

to a Chinese Indonesian. One of them said that the discussion in class was about race and ethnicity, so my question about the ethnic background of the owner made them think that he or she was Chinese Indonesian because it was very rare to see a Chinese living in that kind of house. She said further that I would not use it as an illustration of race and ethnicity if the owner of the house was an indigenous Indonesian. She also explained that in a normal circumstance, she would not think that the house belonged to a Chinese Indonesian. Such an answer was another proof that many in Indonesian society, both the Chinese and the non Chinese perceived the image of Chinese Indonesians as rich people. None of the students in my class would think that the owner was Chinese, so most were surprised when I told them that the owner was Chinese. They were even more surprised when I exposed to them that it was a Chinese temple and showed them the picture of a small temple in Sungai Pangkalan (see the photograph above). Another student who was of Javanese ethnic background commented that he never thought that there was such a Chinese temple. He elaborated further that he did not expect that a Chinese temple was like a luxurious place of worship, but definitely he also did not expect that it was like a building in a poor condition as such. Their surprise continued when I showed them Piollet's other photographs (see those pictures in previous pages). One student who was from Spain said that it never occurred to him to see living condition and properties of Chinese Indonesians like those photographs exposed. When I asked him what he thought of the Chinese in Indonesia, this Spaniard student said that based on the information he got from the books he read and his experiences in living Surabaya for more than two years and visiting big cities such as Jakarta, he thought that Chinese Indonesians belonged to middle and upper class. That was why he said that he was surprised to know that the lives of Chinese Indonesians, as depicted by Piollet's pictures, were not like what he thought before.

The people's reaction toward Piollet's photographs as I discuss above reflects the perception of the society toward the Chinese. It is a result of the legacy of the past where there was much distrust between the Chinese and the non-Chinese. This perception is based on prejudice and stereotype, which are founded on inadequate evidence. In this case, the Chinese are often seen as an exclusive group, rich people, and economic animals. The prejudice and stereotype are the results of the government's effort that focuses on the economic development without thinking of equal distribution of economic pie. This is exacerbated by the opinion that ethnic Chinese dominated the Indonesian economy. This opinion may hide the fact that although ethnic Chinese dominates Indonesian economy, those are a handful of Chinese who are close to the bureaucracy, as much more Chinese have to work hard to make ends meet. Nevertheless, there are also people – some are Chinese, and some are non-Chinese – who said that they were aware of the situation exposed in these pictures because they lived in that kind environment. However, their number is very minuscule compare to those who never imagine that there are Chinese Indonesians experiencing that kind of life.

Seen from the context, Piollet's photographs expose "the unseen colors" of the lives of Chinese Indonesians. The lives captured in these photographs are the lives of ordinary Chinese Indonesians who do not belong to the rich category, the lives that may have been neglected because they are part and parcel of the daily life in Indonesia. This situation leads the society to overlooking it. These photographs are also able to expose various nuances of life of the Chinese in Indonesia, the life that Indonesian society may not identify with the Chinese, as it is weaved tightly into the life of the society itself, and the exposure to various nuances of life enable the viewers of these photographs to understand the history and the trajectories of Chinese Indonesians.

CONCLUSION

Although photography was originally used for documentary purposes only, it has the potentials for being used as a tool in ethnographic studies. Photographs, as the product of photography, can serve as a life narrative that provides a new perspective. They are also able to give new information or to change people's point of view on the photographs picture. All these happen because photography can introduce different voices into the images it captures.

Paul Piollet's collection of photographs that depicts images of the lives of Chinese Indonesians provides materials that function as an eye-opener for Indonesian society. It gives a startling revelation on

the lives of Chinese Indonesians that many do not imagine, as seen in the opinions of various people I discuss above. As Piollett himself writes, "The photographs presented in this book ... record the lives of the Chinese in Indonesia. They are ordinary Chinese and live in their surroundings whose lives may be forgotten without preserving them" (2014:7). It is the ordinariness that makes Chinese Indonesians' lives pictured in his photographs thought-provoking because they challenge the prejudice and stereotypes of Chinese Indonesians, that is, the prejudice and stereotypes that lead them to experiencing racial and discriminatory practices. This ordinariness is something Indonesian society rarely see, or even think about.

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