

Visual Study of Photograph's Roles in Chinese Indonesian's Rites for the Deceased

Rebecca Milka Natalia Basuki

Lecturer, Petra Christian University

Abstract

Births, marriages and deaths are three important events in human lives. In Chinese culture, death is known as a new start for another life. Rituals for the deceased, are parts that connecting the lives and the deaths. Giving pledges to the ancestors, prayer rituals and traditions in annual events. Photograph is one of the elements that presented in these rituals.

Reconsidering the implementations of visual communication in everyday life, this research is aimed to explore and mapping the process and functions of photographs in Chinese Indonesian's rituals for the deceased. Furthermore, this research also trying to find the meaning-making process in its culture between the visual communication process and its artifacts.

This study is using visual ethnography as a research method and cultural studies as an analysis tool. Visual ethnography is used to gain data accuracy which involved cultural activities. In these cultural activities, there are diversities in meaning-making process, which influenced by socio-cultural environments where the rituals take place. Hence, the meanings produced also continually changing.

The advanced goal of this research is to develop a deeper understanding on visual communication functions in everyday life, and its importances to nurture the evolving cultures between Chinese Indonesians.

Keywords: Rites, Visual Communication, Visual Ethnography, Photograph, Chinese Indonesian

Introduction

There are three important events in human lives. Births, marriages, and deaths. Between those three events, the least discussed is deaths. Yet, although deaths are keep mysterious to us, human beings, we tend to find answers and explanation about deaths. In Chinese traditions, death means as a start for a new life, death is not the end of a journey, but it is a milestone that reached before entering the next realm. Thus, the families and relatives who still alive, keep the relationship with the deceased through rituals.

In Chinese Indonesians daily lives, there are some rituals that held. Some in bi-weekly such as 'Sembahyang Ce It' and 'Sembahyang Cap Go' which done every 1st day and 15th day in a month. Certain ceremonies in certain months annually celebrated, like

'Ceng Beng' (also known as Qing Ming Festival) every April 5th, and 'Sembahyang Rebutan' (also known as Ghost Festival) that happened every 15th day in seventh month of Chinese lunar calendar. Also the most celebrated, Chinese new year prayer ritual, 'Sembahyang Imlek/Sincia' which usually continue with 'Cap Go Meh', when the new year celebration ends on 15th day after new year's day. On these rituals mentioned, Ceng Beng and Sembahyang Rebutan is specially concerned with the deceased. Ceng Beng/Qing Ming, is an annual day for Chinese to visit the cemeteries, cleaning the tombs and also praying for the parents and ancestors. While in Sembahyang Rebutan/Ghost Festival, it is a tradition where there is a belief that in seventh month of Chinese lunar year, the spirits come back to the earth to visit their children and grand children. Therefore, Chinese families held a prayer ceremony which also preparing the food for the spirits. Between various beliefs and myths on these traditions, it can be concluded that every rituals held, generally is a pledge to the ancestors.

It is interesting to find how Chinese put a deep respects on ancestors and blend the actions on the matters in their everyday life. Yet, the ritual itself involved a lot of visual elements, either photograph or

Contact Author:

Rebecca Milka Natalia Basuki,

Lecturer, Petra Christian University

Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya, Indonesia

Tel: (+62) 0812 5928 9979

e-mail: milka@petra.ac.id

prayer papers, and decorative artifacts which held many complex symbolic meanings. It put the ritual elements as a sacred, yet artistic and profane in the same time.

Research Focus

This paper is written based on an ongoing research about photograph's roles in Chinese Indonesian family's daily lives. It focused on photograph as one of visual elements that usually used in the Chinese Indonesian's prayer rituals. The reason of choosing photograph as its presence in Chinese Indonesians' family houses, as the most present visual elements of the rituals.

Research Methodology and Data Collection

Visual ethnography is used as research methodology, for its flexibility and compatibility with the case study which need a long recording on the rituals, and nonjudgmental observations/participations from the researcher, which the data need to be recorded as original as it is happened in daily lives, since the meanings and meaning-making processes of research object are subject to change according to the socio-cultural environments and cultural backgrounds where the rituals held.

Data collection methods mainly using photo documentation, and photo-elicitation. It also accompanied by conducting unstructured in-depth interviews, observations and audio visual recordings. Samples categorization is based on family ethnics lines or background and differences on their religions/belief systems, which influenced the cultural activities using the photographs that presented in the houses.

Rites and Death

Koentjaraningrat (1987:77), referred the word 'rite' for religious ceremony which have traits as separation and transition. While the word 'ritual' is used for religious ceremony which have traits such as integration and inauguration. This is the base for using the term 'rite' for this research. As for death rites, as mentioned by R. Hertz, is a form of collective ideas about transitions and initiations. Furthermore, A. Van Gennep also mentioned its function to get the social life spirits in society.

In Chinese ethnic itself, the concepts of death rites, generally talk about the transition (realms) and reincarnation. The presence of living and dead are together. As a quote by Kong Zi, *Wei ahi Shang yuan zhi si*, which means 'If you do not know about life, how do you know about death?' Therefore, death and life is also a union which interchangeable.

Visual Communication Design

Kress & Leuwen in *The Grammar of Visual Design*, stated that visual communication is a part of public communication where visual literacy is a society's

awareness in everyday life. Other definitions on visual communication design, as Tibor Kalman defined, is a communication medium. The other statements are visual communication design is a shape and form, the unity between aesthetics and functions and communication tools (Paul Rand). Consequently, it also have social function, cultural function and economic function (Malcolm Barnard).

Therefore, considering on these definitions, it is understandable that visual communication presents in our daily life, either it is realized or not. Sometime, the presence can be very 'visual', but most of time they present quietly and missed from our sights and awareness.

Visual Ethnography and Cultural Studies

Visual ethnography is offered by Pink (2001:5), as an alternative approach to visual research methods. It also mentioned its relationships with other disciplines such as anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, photographic studies and media studies. In search of knowledge and understanding about visual in the culture and society, there is a need of interdisciplinary approaches.

There have been some pros and cons about image's roles in ethnographic researches for a long time. In cultural studies, images used as part of study on visual representations and visual cultures.

Culture, as its nature, is interdisciplinary. The study related to it always involved many aspects of human. Therefore, the characters of visual ethnography, which are reflexive and participative, offered (photographic and video) images as a tool to create new ways of understanding cultures.

Photograph

From the eye of a photographer, Stephen Shore classified photographs into three levels, (1) Physical level; discussed about physicals aspects of a photograph, (2) Depictive Level; discussed the basics of a photograph's visual grammar, which structured by flatness, frame, time, and focus, and (3) Mental Level; discussed about mental images and how our brains process the image on mental level, and even reach a moment of truth and beauty, rather than just a piece of printed paper. (Shore, in Grange, 2005:26)

As from the eyes of ones who see the picture, John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*, mentioned that the way we see things is affected by our knowledge and/or belief (1977:8). While Barthes, called that photograph never made by its literal condition. It always has more than one (first-order) message. Therefore, there always lies denoted message and connoted message in a photograph. He stated that photograph is not only natural nor artificial but also historical which he preferred called as 'cultural'. (1977:27) Thus, the signification of a photograph is a combination of natural and cultural aspects of society.

Chinese Indonesian and Indonesia

The term 'Chinese Indonesian' used in this paper is referred to Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent. These are included the first generation of Chinese descent who came and lived in Indonesia as Indonesians and their later descendants. BPS-Statistics Indonesia, in their 2010's citizen statistic survey report, mentioned citizens of Chinese descent placed in 18th rank of 31 sub-ethnics listed, which amounted 2,832,510 people or 1.2% of Indonesian population. While on other record by Ohio University Library in 2000, it recorded that there are 7,310,000 people of Chinese descent in Indonesia. (tonghoa.info, 2016) The differences between one and another sources may lead opinions and questions about Chinese Indonesian's existences in Indonesia. This issue also related with political, religion and socio-cultural contexts in separated discussions from this paper.

Chinese sub-ethnics in Indonesia alone usually came from southeast areas of China mainland. They are classified in five main groups: Hokkian (福建人), Hakka (客家), Canton (廣東人), Tiochiu, and Hainan. Based on this fact, there are a lot of acculturations developed since they lived in Indonesia. Thus, there are a lot of local cultural traits, habits, and traditions of Chinese Indonesian that spread all over Indonesia.

Research Objects

Source 1

The first source is a woman, born in 1947, in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia. Her religion is Kong Hu Cu. She is a second generation in the family. The first generation, her parents, came from Xiamen, China. As the oldest child (daughter) in the family, she keeps the traditions and rites held in the big family. There are two prayer tables in her house. The first one for the gods, the second one is for the families and ancestors, which also held some photographs on it. The photographs that held is the her grandparents' photos (from mother's lines), her parents photos, and her brother, her sister, and her sister-in-law. On the prayer days, sometimes she put cards with names on the table to substitute the photos of the ones that she does not have.



Fig.1. Doing prayer rites in Chinese Lunar New Year, 2018.



Fig.1. Configuration of photographs placed on the altar. From left to right on upper side: deceased mother, deceased father, deceased grandmother and grandfather. From left to right on lower side: deceased daughter, deceased brother-in-law, deceased oldest son. (February, 2018)

Source 2

The second source is a woman, born in 1946, in Solo, Central Java. Her religion is Catholic, and her sub-ethnic is Kong Hu and using Canton language. She does not any memories about her parents, yet her big family still held prayer rites in 'big days' such as lunar new year's day, 'sembahyang rebutan', and 'ceng beng' as a pledge to their ancestors. There is a prayer table and few photographs in the house. But rather served as a prayer table, it only used to keep the photographs and few things. The photos presented are her parents' photos, her sister and her brother.



Fig.1. Configurations of photographs placed on the prayer table, consists of the deceased grandparents', deceased parents', a deceased son and a deceased daughter. (December, 2017)

Source 3

The third source is a man, born in 1959, in Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia. His ethnic is Xianyou, and he is the first generation who born and lives in Indonesia. His parents came straight from China to Surabaya, Indonesia. His religion first was not set, but now he is a Christian, yet he still responsible to hold ceremonies as the oldest son in the family. In the interview, he said that he only do the rites as a pledge to his parents. The only photos that held in the prayer table, is his father's photo. The prayer table itself usually used by his mother who still alive and still held her belief as a Kong Hu Cu.



Fig.1. Configuration of the deceased father's photograph on the prayer table. (February, 2018)

Source 4

The fourth source is a man, named Liem Seng Bouw, who lives in Pasar Lama area, Tangerang, West Java. He lives as a single in his parents's house that inherited to him. Liem Seng Bouw comes from a sub-ethnic that used to call as 'Cina Benteng', which derived from there was a fortress around the area where the people lived. From the interview, it is

known that he lives alone, and the last generation in his family since he does not married. About photograph placement, it is found that he placed the photos according to *suhu's* advices, that he should place just those three photographs and pray for them at home.



Fig.1. Configuration of the photographs on the prayer table, consists of the deceased parents's photographs, and the deceased older son/brother.

Analysis

There are no certain rules in Chinese Indonesian families that used as samples in this ongoing analysis on the research subjects. Every family, every sub-ethnicity, can have different opinions on their customs and traditions. There are some general rules on prayer schedules like in lunar new year, ghost festival, and Qing Ming, but it can be different between one to another families in implementations and how they do the rites.

Therefore, as might be expected, they also different treatments on the photographs of the deceased they have in their house. Some may put it as a sacred and placed it in higher places, some put it as a memorial about their families.

Conclusion

So far, there are no single meaning on photographs that used in death rites. Due to its sub-ethnic diversities who live in Indonesia, Chinese Indonesians also blended themselves to local socio-culture environments where they live. Thus, it influenced their understandings and the meaning-making process about the photographs. It is still interesting, that eventhough photographs' presence not always important, but they still keep the photos of the deceased in the house, and also used in prayer rites.

As the world evolving, the people still using photos as a tool of identifying and recognition. So it is made possible to research deeper about the hidden meanings of those photographs, and how it influence the lives of Chinese Indonesians in their efforts to live as diaspora.

References

- Barnard, Malcolm. (2013) *Graphic Design as Communication*, Routledge.
- Barthes, Roland. (1977) *Image Music Text*. Fontana Press.
- Berger, John. (1977) *Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series with John Berger*. Penguin Books.
- Koentjaraningrat. (2007) *Sejarah Teori Antropologi II*, Penerbit Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta.
- La Grange, Ashley. (2005) *Basic Critical Theory for Photographers*. Focal Press.
- Pink, Sarah. (2001) *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*, SAGE Publications Ltd., London.
- Rose, Gillian. (2010) *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*, SAGE Publications Ltd., London.
- Soenarto, Rafael R, Tim Budaya Tionghua.Net. (2012) *Budaya Tionghua Pecinan Semarang: San Bao Long Tang Ren Jie Zhong Hua Wen Hua*, Perkumpulan Sosial Rasa Dharma, Semarang.
- Tsuen-Hsuiin, Tsien, Needham, Joseph. (1993) *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume 5, Chemistry and Chemical Technology, Part I: Paper and Printing*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Suku Tionghoa di Indonesia. Article on <http://www.tionghoa.info/suku-tionghoa-di-indonesia/>, 15 February 2014, accessed on May 26, 2018, 6.37 PM.
- Berapa Jumlah Populasi Etnis Tionghoa di Indonesia? Article on <http://www.tionghoa.info/berapa-jumlah-populasi-etnis-tionghoa-di-indonesia/>, 24 August 2016, accessed on April 25, 2018, 4.55 PM.
- BPS-Indonesia Statistics. *Kewarganegaraan, Suku Bangsa, Agama, dan Bahasa Sehari-hari Penduduk Indonesia: Hasil Sensus Penduduk 2010*. Katalog BPS: 2102032.