# Photo Practices and Family Values in Chinese Households

Connor Graham
Computing Department, Lancaster University
Infolab21, South Drive
Lancaster LA1 4W

c.graham@lancaster.ac.uk

Mark Rouncefield
Computing Department, Lancaster University
Infolab21, South Drive
Lancaster LA1 4W

m.rouncefield@lancaster.ac.uk

## ABSTRACT

In this paper, drawing on studies of photo use by five Chinese families, we make the argument that practices around photographs in Chinese families reflect deeper values of 'diffused' religion that are worked out in the course of family life. We present evidence in the form of three examples to support our argument: the careful documenting of photos as reflecting notions of ancestral worship; 'photowork' as reflecting Confucian 'moral' behaviour and; the propensity to focus on subjects such as flowers, and fields as reflecting the Daoist belief in balance in Nature. At the end of the paper, we argue for the need to reflect on terms describing technology uptake.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5.2 [**Information Interfaces and Presentation (e.g. HCI)**]: User Interfaces – *theory and methods, user-centred design*; Miscellaneous

## General Terms

Human Factors

## Keywords

Photo use, Chinese diffused religion

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the two years of the project *Social Interaction and Mundane Technologies* we have made particular claims about the use of photos in Chinese families based on longitudinal data collection from 5 Chinese families in Chengdu city in Sichuan province in South West China. These claims include that "photowork" (Kirk et al., 2006) is enmeshed in the achievement of family life (Graham & Rouncefield, 2007) and that the notions of 'work' and exchange need revisiting when examining photo use in these settings (Graham & Rouncefield, 2008). Our claims about cultural differences and the need to attend to the specificities of a setting may not be particularly novel or bridge easily into design. Indeed we readily acknowledge that our findings have particular "limits" and "circumstantiality" Geertz (2000:137-8) – the families are closely connected to one of us for one and they represent a total of 10 people in a country with a population of over 1.3 billion[1] for another. Yet this study has represented a genuine (and we think rare) foray into Chinese families lives, a foray that so many people haven't done despite the pervasive use of photos in the families that we have observed and the potential for China as a consumer of new photo products. The latter concern is one that is less our preoccupation, moreover it is a preoccupation that can

lead us, we argue, to entirely miss the values underlying the use of photos in families in our drive to deliver "bullet points of recommendations" (Dourish, 2006) for photo technologies. As Bill Gaver (2001), when responding to criticisms of the 'cultural probe' approach notes:

*"They may seem whimsical, but it would be a mistake to dismiss them on that ground: for unless we start to respect the full range of values that make us human, the technologies we build are likely to be dull and uninteresting at best, and de-humanising at worst."*

We have been reminded of Gaver's observation when working with these families – that we have been confronted with something different from the families that we have been working with in the UK and Australia. These Chinese families' homes and everyday lives have presented "a perspicuous setting" (Garfinkel and Wieder, 1992:184) which "makes available, in that it consists of, material disclosures of practices of local production and natural accountability…". Thus, these family settings have provided us, through presenting "the haecceties of some local gang's affairs, the organisational thing that they are up against" (ibid:186) allowed us to learn "…what their affairs consist of as locally produced, locally occasioned, and locally described, locally questionable, counted, recorded, observed phenomena of order[2]* …".

## 2. STUDIES OF PHOTOS

*"..the family photograph is a ritual of the domestic cult in which the family is both the subject and the object, because it expresses the celebratory sense which the family group gives to itself, and which it reinforces by giving it expression"* (Bourdieu 1990)

There has been a proliferation of studies of photos since David Frohlich's and his colleagues at Hewlett Packard studied family photo use in 2002. This 'crowding' of the space perhaps is an inevitable consequence of conceiving the home as a setting for technology use, consumption and transformation (e.g. Silverstone and Haddon, 1996; Venkatesh, A. 1996; O'Brien et al., 1999). It also marks a shift in considering photos as a representational form to considering them as objects in and of themselves (Edwards and Hart, 2004) with particular "materiality" (Shove et al., 2007). In addition, in many studies there exists an implicit assumption with the way a family *should* be. An idealized notion of family is often put on display for example (Chalfen, 1987). What we argue here is that photo displays, photo sharing and even photo capture is

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[1] http://wikitravel.org/en/China

[2] Garfinkel and Wieder (1992:203) describe this as "locally produced, naturally accountable phenomena, searched for, findable, found, only discoverably the case, consisting in and as "work on the streets.""

revealing concerning a set of values held and played out in and about family.

Rather than conducting a complete review of studies of photos of various kinds (e.g. digital, paper-based, displays, collections, albums, 'local' and 'remote' photos, sharing, collaboration etc) which represents a considerable body of worthy work, we provide a brief snapshot of the emphases of other photo studies.

## 2.1 Other studies

The literature addressing various aspects of photographs is vast – from sociological to technology-oriented. We have briefly examined 15 technology-oriented studies of paper-based and/or digital photos taken from the CHI or CSCW literature in terms of their participants, unit of analysis, approach and length. Space precludes either referencing or including the table we produced. However, we found that all the studies that were explicit about the origin of their participants drew from people either in Europe or the USA. There was one exception: one of Hakansson et al.'s (2006) participants was from Australia. Six studies did not describe the origin of their participants. There was also a propensity in these communities to study individual people (as opposed to families, the home or households) for relatively short periods of time: for 12 of the studies the single person was the focus of the analysis and only 5 studies exceeded 1 month in length. Most of the studies (11) used some form of field work – interviews, observation etc. – or trial of a particular technology in the field. Only 2 studies used laboratory experiments, 1 a critical literature review and one prototyping. Another observation is that only 7 of the 15 studies were explicit about how participants were recruited and none articulated any direct connection between the 'researchers' and the 'researched'.

A different class of studies exists (e.g. Chalfren, 1996, 1997; Edwards and Hart, 2004; Harris, 2004; Chalfren and Murni, 2004; Sasson, 2004) which are either more explicitly ethnographic in nature (i.e. "I went to a different culture, lived there for some time and here are my observations" – cf. Button and Dourish's (1996) "scenic fieldwork") or present analytic reviews of literature to support conceptual development. In these studies issues of cultural differences are more directly addressed: Hart (2004) for instance discusses the particular circulation, positioning, carrying, temporality and portrayals of photographs in exiled Tibetan communities in northern India.

## 2.2 Our study

A snapshot of the households involved in our longitudinal study is shown in Table 1 below. As with our prior work in these settings (Graham and Rouncefield, 2007), our choice of the term 'household' is deliberate, capturing both the notion of a 'place' (Harrison and Dourish, 1996) where family life plays out and the nuclear family members, their roles and relationships. As Table 1, perhaps surprisingly, shows only a few studies of photos choose this as a unit of analysis (i.e. Taylor et al., 2007, Crabtree et al., 2004). None of the studies have deliberately exploited links between households. The table also shows that all households have been involved in the study for at least a year ('Time involved'). Methods have involved adaptations of 'Cultural Probes' (Gaver and Dunne, 1999), home visits and tours, interviews, observation, photography and the introduction of new technologies. There is also a strong link between Household 1 and 2 (indicated by the bold italic font in the 'Linked to' row) and a weak link between Household 1 and Household 3, 4 and 5.

Household 1 and 2 also have a strong familial link to one of the authors. One participant is widowed and lives alone (Family 1), the other participants are married but the households are peculiar in that only one of them (Household 3) has a child as a member. The 'Age', 'Gender', 'Work' 'Language' and 'Religion' rows capture characteristics of the key participant in each household.

**Table 1. Description of 5 Chinese households**

| Household | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No. in home | 1 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2-3 |
| Linked to | *2* | *1* | 1 | 1 | 1, 2 |
| Age | 65+ | 40+ | 70+ | 30+ | 40+ |
| Gender | Female | Female | Female | Male | Male |
| Work | Retired | Part-time | Retired | Full-time | Full-time |
| Language | Mandarin, dialect | Mandarin, dialect, English | Mandarin, dialect | Mandarin, dialect | Mandarin, dialect, English |
| Religion | Buddhist | None | None | None | None |
| Time involved | Apr 2007 to Oct 2008 | Apr 2007 to Oct 2008 | Oct 2007 to Oct 2008 | Oct 2007 to Oct 2008 | Oct 2007 to Oct 2008 |

## 3. 'DIFFUSED' RELIGION AND PHOTOS

It is difficult to generalize concerning religion in China given its vast size, considerable population, fusion of ethnicities and cultures and long history. However, the Chinese government claims there are over 100 million followers of various religious faiths in China including Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and Daoists[3]. In addition to these 'formal' religions, there are claims that Confucianist ideas, or more generally a "Chinese value system" (Yin, 2003) infuse society: "…Confucian values and ideologies are deeply rooted in Chinese society" (Yan and Sorenson, 2004).

The fusion of various formal religions and folk beliefs in China is often referred to as "popular religion" or "…a common underlying set of beliefs and practices…that gives rise (along with external influences such as Buddhism, which came from India) to the specific strands of canonical Chinese religion: Confucianism, Daoism and Buddism" (Adler, 2002:12). An important distinction is between what Yang (1967) terms "institutional" and "diffused religion". The former is "religion that is practiced in social institutions that are specifically and uniquely religious" whereas the latter is "practiced in "secular" social settings such as the family, the community and the state" (Adler, 2002:105). Despite China being a Communist country since the 1950's according to Zuckerman (2005) the rate of atheism/agnosticism in China is relatively low: 8-14%. This may be accounted for by a period of change in China with greater religious freedom resulting in a recent survey showing that over 30% of people in China over 16 may have religious beliefs[4].

Here we use evidence from to field to suggest that we 'photo behaviour' reflects three strands of "diffused religion" (Yang, 1967) – Confucianism, Daoism and ancestral worship – simply because this are the aspects of religion that we found most

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[3] http://english.gov.cn/2006-02/08/content_182603.htm

[4] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6337627.stm

evidence for. Our claim is not that participants are actually consciously performing particular religious practices through their 'photo behaviour'. Nor is our claim that we have a unique wisdom concerning their behaviour and practices. Instead these 'photo behaviours' represent the working out of particular aspects diffused religion in family life. Part of our approach has been to use "host verification" (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973:134) and "phenomenon recognition" (ibid:135), presenting these ideas to participants to establish if they are recognizable and reasonable for them.

## 3.1 Confucianism

*"An encountered photograph glows with memories (though not necessarily of nostalgia) of experience, of history, of family, of friends."* (Macgregor Wise 2000)

All families organized their photos carefully (see Figure 1 and 2 below). Figure 1 is a picture taken by the participant in Household 1. Fig 2 was taken by the fieldworker when visiting Household 5.
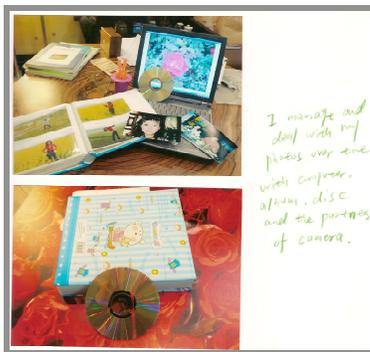


**Figure 1. Household 2's paper-based and digital photo albums**



**Figure 2. Household 5's paper-based photo albums**



**Figure 3. Household 1's 'public' photos**

Only one household put family photos on display in a public area (Graham and Rouncefield, 2007) – see Figure 3 above. This was the first household we visited and we learned subsequently that it is unusual to display as many photos of family members in public areas in a Chinese home. All of the four other households displayed photos of family members in private areas in the home, namely the bedroom (see Figure 4 below).



**Figure 4. Household 5's 'private' photos**

All families indicated that they shared photos with family members while co-present. When asked if she would usually share photos on computer and with paper the participant in Household 2 stated:

*Any of them would do for the same thing because they want to share the happiness together.*

When asked about a sharing situation regarding her niece the participant from Household 2 said:

*...she just came back from, uh, Singapore to China and, uh, she is extremely lovely and she, she always, uh, shows her pictures to her friends because she likes...show [her neice] off...*

The participant in Household 1 noted:

*...when she has new pictures, um, if she receives new pictures or if she has new pictures she normally, it's normal, she normally will show her family members when they come to visit her...*



**Figure 5. Household 1 and 2 sharing photos**

The participant in Household 1 noted the following about Fig. 5:

*Um it was the day they went to visit her mother-in-law...the mother-in-law just went out to take pictures in the countryside. It was the Springtime so they came to visit her so, um, they app, appreciated the pictures together at that time.*



**Figure 5. Member of Household 2 looking at photos of his son displayed on a digital photo frame in Household 1**

The regularity with which families shared photos showed there was a strong sense of obligation to the family and the group. This was illustrated by an instance where Household 1 loaded photos on a digital photo frame for her son (see Figure 6 above):

*Didi always emails [Participant in Household 1] his pictures and [her son] doesn't have any time to look at his son's photos because he doesn't use email so [Participant in Household 1] puts all his, uh, photos into the photoframe for [her son] to look at*

Much has been made in the past of Confucianism contributing to Asian economic success, a view which clashes with many Chinese scholar's view of Confucianism as "feudal" (Adler, 2002:112). In fact, there is a very real tension between the 'old order' that Confucianism represents in Chinese society and the 'new order' ushered in by Communism. Thus we have to be extremely careful and grounded in our observations regarding Confucianism in family life.

That given the examples of photo sharing presented here illustrate three issues particularly important in Confucianism. First the sharing described emphasizes and reinforces existing family relationships. These relationships extend across distance (Figure 5) and even mortality as discussed in section 3.3 below. Secondly photo sharing (and in one case display) emphasizes a particular family order with particular members having particular status. Thirdly these behaviours and practices were less driven by a rational moral sense than a normative one. There is a sense these photos are shared because it is simply a good thing to do. For Confucius a key concept in a 'good society' was 'ritual' or practices – "all those "objective" prescriptions of behaviour, whether involving rites, ceremony, manners, or general deportment, that bind human beings and the spirits together in networks of interacting roles within the family, within human society, and with the numinous world beyond" (Schwartz, 1985:67). This was a concern with moral behaviour not just the details of ritual. Confucius placed more importance on competence in moral matters than on practical matters. This is exactly what we see here in the 'good behaviour' represented by the participant in Household 1 loading photos on the digital photo frame for her son to see.

## 3.2 Daoism

A striking commonality among all families was that they included nature photos in the photo diaries they returned to us. Table 3 below shows the number of different kinds of photographs taken by the 5 households – some photos were coded using two categories accounting for the aggregate of the categories exceeding the total number of photos for each household.

**Table 1. Frequency of photo types in the 5 households' returns**

| Households | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Photos (no)** | 33 | 32 | 8 | 30 | 68 |
| *People* | 13 | 5 | 8 | 20 | 12 |
| *Vistas* | 6 | 11 | 0 | 15 | 51 |
| *Events* | 11 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 2 |
| *Objects* | 20 | 16 | 0 | 1 | 11 |

The frequency of the category 'People' consistently ranked highly across all 5 households. 'Objects' ranked most highly for Households 1 and 2 probably because they were given the particular brief to photograph photo equipment and technologies.

Household 3, 4 and 5's returns were much more 'freeform' and, among these, Households 4 and 5 included a high number of 'Vista'-type photos. Two households in the UK included 4 and 5 'Vista'-type photos from a total of 58 and 12 photos included in a similar exercise.

This distribution alone does not show anything conclusive until we examine the frequency of photos of flowers and rural landscapes in both the photo diaries from China and those from the UK and considered a particular example of photo sharing. The first analysis showed that all the 'Vista' pictures for the participant in Household 1 depicted flowers or rural landscapes and 9 out of 11 for the participant in Household 2 depicted the same. The participant in Household 4 included 4 pictures of flowers and 2 of rural landscapes while the participant in Household 5 included 9 photos of flowers and 8 of landscapes. The two UK households only included a total of 5 pictures of flowers and rural landscapes and only 1 of these depicted a flower. Both Household 1 and Household 2 also included pictures depicting people sharing photographs of flowers.

When asked about this the participant in Household 2 noted:

*She, she especially…likes flowers and she has a special album for flowers.*

*Um, okay, different seasons suits different flowers so every, every year during the special season for the flowers, for different flowers she will go out to take pictures of flowers.*

The participant in Household 1 noted:

*Because she likes Nature, so she likes take photos of flowers and nature views and she feels very comfortable and she, when she takes photos of these nature features she feels very comfortable, very happy, it, it seems that, um, she feels like she is in arms of the Nature and when, when she comes back with the photos she normally appreciate them by herself if her friends are not there but when the friends are with her she will share the photos with them as well.*

The participant in Household 5 noted how these photos acted "like a bridge":

*So if you can do something make yourself close to the Nature or being in part of that Natures it's a very meaningful things for, for Chinese. So when you take some photos you can feel you are very close to Nature or part of the Nature…It's connected the human being and the natural world…and the photos is like a bridge: you can just cross the bridge to get to the, be part of the Nature.*

Thus there is a strong sense that these photos are not only celebratory but support personal feelings and accomplishment – they are part of what Saito (2007) would call an 'everyday aesthetic'. In Daoist thought Nature and the elements are extremely important – Nature is thought to exhibit balance and it is important to nurture a good relationship with Nature. This conflicts with Confucian thought that celebrates moral order in society. As Saito reminds us, such everyday aesthetics are not inconsequential; *".. everyday aesthetic tastes and attitudes often do lead to consequences which go beyond simply being preoccupied with and fussing with the surface, and that they affect not only our daily life but also the state of society and the world."*

## 3.3 Ancestral worship

The participant from Household 2 noted the following when asked about the importance of taking photos of family members:

*Very…extremely important*

When asked about what these photos were used for she commented:

*Eh, she was, eh, keep them in the computer of course because time flies and she would like to keep the memory of the family members…*

The participant in Household 1 noted the following with regard to the placing of photos in the public areas of here home:

*I put on these pictures according to three considerations. First I have already recovered from the death of my husband therefore I want to look at him every day and therefore I centralise my husband and chose the meaningful photos during our life around him. Secondly my grandson Didi was about to go to Vancouver with his Mum and my husband was very fond on Didi and thought he was very important so in order to let Didi remember his grandfather forever and also realise grandfather's expectation of him so I chose lots of pictures of Didi and grandfather together. Thirdly my granddaugher [granddaughter's name] birth brought the whole family a lot of joy. In order to introduce her to everybody I chose some pictures from [granddaughter's] birth until she was 2 years old to put on the wall.*

These considerations also relate to the need to celebrate existing, living family bonds and relationships. Thus they also support our observations regarding photo practices reflecting Confucian values such as filial piety and hierarchical relationships. A general observation is that the households showed photos of people who were alive not dead during fieldwork. Conversation rarely drifted to death and the dead. However the oldest participant in Household 3 carefully documented many photos of friends and family from the past. All the photos in her photo diary were of people. The photo albums that she showed us over several visits were dominated by photos of people, including a picture of her as a child and young person before the Cultural Revolution (Graham and Rouncefield, 2008).

Thus here we argue that the diligence with which photos are taken, recorded and shared is less 'worship' than remembrance supported by particular 'interaction rituals' (Goffman, 1967) with regard to what is said when these photos are shared. In being so it is not linked to particular religious beliefs regarding a spiritual world but rather practices grounded in their values. There is a sense too that the use of these photos actually help reify family, similar to the tourist gaze (Urry, 2002) helping to achieve family, and to sustain and maintain relationships with others on the fringes of the family such as the distant or the deceased similar to what was observed by Chalfen in Asian pet cemeteries (Chalfen, 1996).

## 4. DISCUSSION

*"Images are not something that appear over and against reality, but parts of practices through which people work to establish realities."* Crang 1997

We obviously have to be very cautious not to make trite statements about the relationships between value systems, technology and design. So what we have documented here are not the stereotypical ethnographer's 'strange tales of faraway places' but a far more subtle record of people living their everyday lives, part of which involves the taking, organization, display and showing of photographs. There is nothing especially remarkable about this and so we would argue that we clearly have not sought the 'astonishment' that is sometimes argued to be a typical by-product of ethnographic enquiry (e.g. Taylor et al 2007). And yet, despite this, there is astonishment, or better, surprise, here – but that surprise is both ours and our respondents, suddenly reminded of things they already know but don't generally care to enquire about, as they display and construct their culture and cultural practices both for the 'professional strangers' and, importantly, for themselves.

We suggest the work presented here contributes to a growing corpus of studies, a corpus that documents both similarities and differences in "photowork" (Kirk et al., 2006), providing confirmation of a range of practices already documented, of family obligations and their realization through the sharing and display of photos, (Chalfen 1987) but also important detail of the specifics of how these activities are accomplished or mutually achieved. So while a number of writers have commented on the idea that family photos might be regarded as essential in turning a 'house into a home' in delineating the public and the private space (Rose 2003, Chambers 2002); precisely and exactly how this is done, achieved or accomplished varies according to the particular characteristics of the setting. It is precisely these characteristics that we are simply attempting to understand and appreciate. Thus we document a range of practices that suggests that all family photos and photo collections are not the same (Chalfen 1987) and how and in what ways these differences are manifested such that they are very far from the "great wasteland of trite and banal self-representation" indicated, for example, by Slater (1995).

We have been cautious in using the word 'reflect' to describe the relationship between these three notions and photo practices in the Chinese homes we have been working with – as if photos can simply mirror a set of social norms. Instead we prefer a stronger, and slightly different, argument; that these practices involve both the 'working out' of these values and their 'diffusion' into everyday life. As Crang (1997) argues, *"Images are not something that appear over and against reality, but parts of practices through which people work to establish realities. Rather than look to mirroring as a root metaphor, technologies of seeing form ways of grasping the world"*. In such a process the material aspects of photos, the time that they capture and the ecology in which they are placed are all exceptionally important. There is a sense that these practices are 'left over' from those that have pervaded Chinese society at particular times and that the process of diffusion (Yang, 1967) has involved a 'reworking' – through different material objects – and 'replacing' – through a recontextualisation from institutions to the household. These findings have been cast in relief through a similar ongoing study of photo use by 3 Australian and 2 UK families making them starker and more distinct. And yet this 'reworking' is taking place in a setting that, as Harvey Sacks reminds us, already has what organization it has, and so there is a sense in which the photo work we document acts a reminder, another instantiation of "people's nastinesses and niceness".

In our focus on documenting a range of photo practices we have deliberately avoided rushing towards delineating any obvious (and usually trite) implications for design. Design issues – both of policy and technology – are obviously important but await further reflection and analysis. Clearly there are practical arguments concerning how we can approach policy with these particular research findings and notions in mind. If we think photo technologies support Confucian notions of 'moral behaviour' then should we hand them out? Instead of outlining design

recommendations we are pointing towards and arguing for a more sophisticated notion of technology uptake that extends beyond 'adoption' and 'domestication' because these words don't quite capture what is happening here as we are forced to consider 'mundane technologies' within the broader context within which they sit and their relationship to this context.

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