

## TITLE

Family photos in contact: reflections on a participatory research project with East and South East Asian individuals in Liverpool

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will reflect on a participatory research project called 'Traces of Memory', which explored family photographs belonging to individuals of East and South East Asian heritages in Liverpool, England. The project ran from June to September 2023 and was part of my PhD research investigating forms of looking and engagement with photographs of the Chinese community in Liverpool. 'Traces of Memory' focussed on photographs of Liverpool's Chinese community that are rarely present in institutional archives: images from personal and family collections. Drawing on Donna Haraway's notion of 'vision' as a positioned and 'partial perspective' (Haraway 1988), the participants and I initiated situated readings of the family photographs and created artworks that were examples of situated 'visions'. We approached the family photographs through the lens of several overlapping themes, which were also forms of relation. The themes were: place (the photographs' relationships with Liverpool), collective histories (the photographs' relationships with each other), emotions (the photographs' relationship with their owners) and the concept of 'the archive' (the photographs' relationships with those images in institutional archives).

'Traces of Memory' utilised a participatory and practice-based methodology. I facilitated six workshops at Tate Liverpool which culminated in an exhibition display in September 2023. The discussions and outcomes of each workshop shaped the direction of our inquiries, so that the research was shaped by the participants and the process of 'working something through' (Graham, Hill, Holland and Pool 2015). An ethos of reciprocity and care was central to the research, in Kim TallBear's mode of 'standing with' rather than 'giving back' (TallBear 2014). Above all, the workshops foregrounded creative methodologies – collage, mapmaking, walking, qigong – to visualise affective, embodied and non-verbal ways of knowing (Cho 2008).

What happened when family photographs were brought into contact with other photographs, and with other people? Drawing on Margaret Olin, did the photographs actively build a community, and did the photographs themselves comprise a community (Olin 2011)? The workshops gathered together people and photographs in a specific place: we met in the Tate Liverpool building, at the heart of the Royal Albert Dock, in close proximity to the original 'Chinatown' area of Liverpool where Chinese seamen arrived from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The workshops were also sites of contact between participants and materials: photo prints, albums, identity books, maps, scissors, pens and string. People, place, materials and photographs became co-participants in research.

Through such contacts, situated readings of the photographs emerged. A collage-making activity staged affective connections between the family photographs. A group qigong exercise stimulated discussion about the emotional and embodied engagements with family photographs. Participants formed relationships with each other, and there was even a family reunion. Our surroundings on the docks reminded us of the entanglement between Chinese migration and Liverpool's maritime history. Following Ariella Azoulay, we were also in contact and relation with the photographers, who were often not the owners (Azoulay 2008).

Yet there were also moments of friction. The photographs and their stories were heterogenous and diverged from one another; not all photographs were included in the group collage. Each participant formed their own situated readings, with a particular tension between personal and intimate readings of their own photographs and more detached readings of those of others. Over the course

of the project, this resulted in occasional 'awkward encounters' that involved 'subtle negotiations of power' (Brichet 2018). We had differing perspectives on what should be shared and displayed to the public.

Not only did the 'Traces of Memory' project initiate contacts between people and photographs, but between participants and the museum, designated by Clifford a 'contact zone' (Clifford 1993). As a hybrid researcher-practitioner, I enacted 'contact work' between the museum and the project participants. There was a tension between how participants engaged with photographs as an everyday practice and Tate's institutional 'thought-landscape' that centres fine art photography practice (Edwards 2017). This resulted in 'awkward' negotiations over space and agency in the museum.

Nevertheless, Clifford's concept of a 'contact zone' does not fully describe the complexity of interactions between participants, myself and the museum. As someone who identifies with the Chinese diaspora in Britain, I found that my positionalities vis-à-vis the participants were always shifting and always situated in a particular time and space. My interactions with other participants were shaped by gender, class, generation and native language, but in unpredictable and ever-changing ways. Nevertheless, my positionality vis-à-vis the museum was also unstable and in flux, as the participatory project encountered the still dominant hierarchical top-down models of knowledge dissemination in the museum. The dynamics of this 'contact work' was further complicated by my position as an embedded researcher, not an employee, and a practitioner of colour who is 'embodied in difference' (Desai 2020).

The 'Traces of Memory' project ultimately provoked a reflection on the theoretical models available to a researcher of family photography in a diasporic context. Whilst there is important research on diasporic family photography (for example, Camp 2008 and Chandra 2000), I have found fewer theoretical models of diasporic Chinese photography, especially with regard to the diaspora in Britain. The historical specificities of Chinese migration trajectories to the UK and political constructions of race and ethnicity have rendered British Chinese culture an ambiguous and often invisible presence (Yeh, 2018). At the same time, the growing identification with an 'East and South East Asian' political identity suggests an emerging model with potential theoretical use. But perhaps this search for a model is incompatible with the constant 'becoming' of diasporic identities (Hall 1990) and the impossibility of a singular Chinese diasporic identity (Ang 1998). Is a theory of Chinese diasporic photography in Britain possible, or even desirable?

## **KEY WORDS**

Diaspora, family, creative methods, participation