

Photography and cultural memory: a methodological exploration

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Recent years have seen a flowering of research and scholarship on cultural memory across the humanities and social sciences. Among the many facets of this work is a quest to extend and deepen understanding of how personal memory operates in the cultural sphere: its distinguishing features; how, where and when it is produced; how people make use of it in their daily lives; how personal or individual memory connects with shared, public forms of memory; and ultimately, how memory figures in, and even shapes, the social body and social worlds. Personal and family photographs figure importantly in cultural memory, and memory work with photographs offers a particularly productive route to understanding the social and cultural aspects of memory. Beginning with a study of one photograph, this article develops and interrogates a set of interlocking memory work methods for investigating the forms and everyday uses of 'ordinary photography' and how these figure in the production of memory.

The past ten or fifteen years have seen a flowering of research and scholarship on cultural and social memory, across the humanities and the social sciences (Fentress and Wickham 1992; Bal, Crewe and Spitzer 1999; Misztal 2003; Radstone and Hodgkin 2003). Among the many facets of this work is a quest to extend and deepen understandings of how personal memory operates in the cultural sphere: to inquire into the distinguishing features of expressions of memory – how, where and when memories are produced, and how people make use of memories in their daily lives. In terms of objects – and, importantly, methods – this quest is best regarded as a cultural rather than, say, a psychological one. The aim is to seek fresh insights and new ways of conceptualising and understanding the ways in which people's personal or individual memories relate to, intersect or are continuous with shared, collective, public forms of memory – and ultimately how memory figures in, and even shapes, the social body and social worlds. To the latter extent, this is also a sociological project, an exercise in *Verstehen* sociology.¹

Personal and family photographs figure importantly in cultural memory, and memory work with photographs offers a particularly productive route to understanding the social and cultural uses and instrumentalities of memory. Drawing on a case study of one photograph, this article sets out, develops and interrogates a set of interlocking 'memory work' methods for investigating the forms and everyday uses of 'ordinary photography' and how these may figure in the cultural and social production of memory.

In general, studies of cultural memory draw on, and often mix and match, a range of methods of inquiry – sociological, ethnographic, literary – so that a sort of unselfconscious methodological *bricolage*, pragmatic and in varying degrees inventive and productive, prevails in work in the field. My own preference is for a grounded approach that carefully builds up explanations from clues and traces extracted from readings of objects of study: the cultural historian Carlo Ginzburg calls this kind of inductive approach – a way of knowing characteristic of detective work, criminology, psychoanalysis and diagnostics – 'conjectural knowledge' (Ginzburg 1989). In work on cultural memory, the conjectural method involves taking as a starting point instances or cases – expressions of memory of some sort – and then working outwards from them, treating what can be observed in the instances at hand as evidence pointing towards broader issues and propositions about the nature and the workings of cultural memory. This kind of inquiry can be productively conducted with singular instances (a life story, a film or a photograph, for example) and with several or numerous cases; with the researcher's personal memory material or with materials gathered by, with or from others. Methodological approaches and research designs range from textual analysis to ethnographic inquiry, and may include various combinations of the two. One central plank remains, however: the notion that memory and memories are discursive and that through memory work of various kinds it is possible to

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come to an understanding of how memory operates as a type of cultural text (Radstone 2000).

Memory work, a mode of inquiry embodying certain methodological assumptions, may be defined as:

an active practice of remembering which takes an inquiring attitude towards the past and the activity of its (re)construction through memory. Memory work undercuts assumptions about the transparency or the authenticity of what is remembered, taking it not as ‘truth’ but as evidence of a particular sort: material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined, for its meanings and its possibilities. Memory work is a conscious and purposeful staging of memory. (Kuhn 2000, 186)

Memory work takes all forms of remembering, memory accounts and memory texts as material for interpretation, and opens to question the taken-for-grantedness, or the transparency, of acts of memory in relation to the past. Taking expressions of memory as material for interpretation, memory work may deploy established procedures for analysing cultural texts, and these will be as productive and convincing as the practitioner’s craft skills and insight allow.

As an approach to source material, evidence or ‘data’, this approach is, of course, qualitative rather than quantitative; and the task of the practitioner in memory work is not merely to analyse but also to understand – that is, to try to enter into the memory-world of the text, the account, the performance (though not of the informant – the task is not to psychoanalyse people but to be helpfully at hand at the birth of new insight and fresh understanding). Negotiation and intersubjectivity, then, are key features of memory work. Moreover, the interpretive procedures used in memory work will necessarily be governed by the nature and the medium of the memory text itself. ‘Reading’ a visual medium, for example, involves a set of procedures rather different from those of interpreting an oral reminiscence; though the researcher’s attitude towards the ‘object’ will remain the same in either case: respectful, open, unintrusive. While there is a certain amount of craft or expertise involved here, a DIY approach to memory work (especially under the guidance of an expert) can work very well.

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In most societies, family photographs have considerable cultural significance, both as repositories of memory and as occasions for performances of memory. A study of these processes can be helpful towards understanding

how the personal and the social aspects of remembering interact in various cultural settings. Drawing on the methodological approach to memory work outlined above, this article sets out a corpus of methods of inquiry appropriate for conducting memory work with photographs. It explores some ways in which these may be refined and extended in future studies of the forms and everyday uses of ‘ordinary photography’, and how these may figure in the cultural production of memory. The substantive starting point of this inquiry is a single, diagnostic case study of one photograph. It builds on a three-pronged methodological approach: first, the interpretive approach to family and personal photographs developed for my own autoethnographic work with photographs and other visual media; second, an extension of this devised for group workshops on family photography and memory in which participants bring along photographs of their own and work on them with others; and third, an adaptation of the ‘oral-photographic method’ developed by the Canadian art historian and curator Martha Langford for work on family photographic albums (Langford 2001, 2006; Kuhn 2002).

For the first approach, work on a photograph starts with a few simple procedures:

1. Consider the human subject(s) of the photograph. Start with a simple description, and then move into an account in which you take up the position of the subject. In this part of the exercise, it is helpful to use the third person (‘she’, rather than ‘I’, for instance). To bring out the feelings associated with the photograph, you may visualise yourself as the subject as s/he was at that moment, in the picture: this can be done in turn with all of the photograph’s human subjects, if there is more than one, and even with animals and inanimate objects in the picture.
2. Consider the picture’s context of production. Where, when, how, by whom and why was the photograph taken?
3. Consider the context in which an image of this sort would have been made. What photographic technologies were used? What are the aesthetics of the image? Does it conform to certain photographic conventions?
4. Consider the photograph’s currency in its context or contexts of reception. Who or what was the photograph made for? Who has it now, and where is it kept? Who saw it then, and who sees it now? (Kuhn 2002, 8)

In the extended autoethnographic context of the photography and memory workshop, participants use these protocols as a guide to memory work with their own photographs and in turn as a means of assisting

others in their own 'performances of memory'. While these workshops may offer a variety of possible objectives and outcomes – personal development, team-building, and so on – two aspects remain central to participants' experience. First, a sort of eye-opening takes place because of this unfamiliar context for, and fresh approach to, something that is very familiar and ordinary and which yet may very well also carry some emotional weight. Second, there is a shared fascination with – and a quest to understand – others' memory accounts; this has a certain 'deep' ethnographic quality about it. This latter aspect becomes particularly apparent where a group is intercultural or multinational in composition.

The procedures outlined above, especially when combined with a *Verstehen* approach to these familiar and immediately accessible objects, personal photographs, seems to unlock meanings and insights extraordinarily readily, and participants do not feel they have to be 'experts' in order to be able to do the work and find it valuable. However, alongside personal insights, working in this way can also generate findings of considerable scholarly value and cultural significance. The workshop method, I would contend, offers potential in its own right as a qualitative research method, and there is considerable scope for extending it into larger scale, and/or intercultural, studies of 'ordinary' photography and cultural memory. At one level, it may be regarded as a group variant on the oral interview: this is similar in some respects to a method in wide use in social-psychological research, though the 'memory work' application is distinctive in the depth and the degree of interactivity involved. For in this kind of research 'subjects' or 'informants' are actively engaged, in collaboration with the researcher, in producing new knowledge: in this respect, the approach is both empirical and also close to that of 'postmodern' ethnography, whilst bringing a quality of *Verstehen* into play. In this process, those involved may themselves be changed by this knowledge; and to this degree there is also potentially an 'action research' aspect to the work.

The importance of the photographic medium in this process cannot be overstated: a combination of memory work and photography brings something entirely distinctive to the methods and findings of cultural memory research. The power of this combination stems, I would argue, from the very everydayness of photography – from the ways photography and photographs figure in most people's daily lives and in the apparently ordinary stories we tell about ourselves and those closest to us (Hirsch 1997). This, combined

with the capacity of the still photographic image to 'freeze' a moment in time, lends extraordinary impact to an apparently ordinary medium (Bazin 1971; Barthes 1984). As commonplace material artefacts, family photographs and albums contain meanings, and also seem infinitely capable of generating new ones at the point at which photography and memory work meet.

Martha Langford, who works extensively with family photographic albums deposited in museum archives, argues in her book *Suspended Conversations* that people's uses of these albums are governed by the same underlying structures as those of the oral tradition – of oral memories and life stories: 'Our photographic memories are used in a performative oral tradition' (Langford 2001, viii). Not only do photographs operate as props and prompts in verbal performances of memory, but the collection of photographs that makes up a family album itself also follows an 'oral structure': 'An album is a classic example of a horizontal narrative shot through with lines of both epic and anecdotal dimension' (Langford 2001, 175). This in turn informs the interpretive performances that accompany displaying and looking at photograph albums. Developing an 'oral-photographic' method, Langford has tested this through 'performative viewings' of archived albums, conducted both with donors/compiler of the albums and also with informants who have no connection with or knowledge of the families who figure in them. Her findings suggest that even outsiders will weave stories around albums, stories which embody precisely the epic, anecdotal quality that marks the memory text.

Langford's work complements that of visual anthropologist Richard Chalfen, who is interested in how people produce and use their own photographs in domestic settings, or 'how ordinary people do ordinary photography' (Chalfen 1987, 12). Chalfen conducted a large-scale ethnographic study of amateur photography and pictorial communication based on around two hundred collections of 'home mode imagery' (photographs and home movies) made in the north-eastern USA between 1940 and 1980. While Chalfen's interest was in the processes and activities that go on within families around their own 'ordinary photography', Langford's concern is with the family photograph album as it survives, as an artefact, beyond its originary production and reception contexts. But despite these differences of approach and objectives, both find that family photographs and family albums figure as occasions for communication, cross-cultural exchange and cultural continuity, and agree that there is something distinctive



about the discursive features of these image-based communications, the kinds of talk that accompany viewings of family photographs and albums.

Work on personal and domestic photography and memory can unlock doors to understanding not only the ethnography of everyday memory talk but also the workings of cultural memory across wider social-historical spheres. It can do this most effectively by activating a range of potentially interlocking methodological approaches to a set of similar phenomena: a concern with orality and memory as a form of storytelling prompted by the ensemble and sequencing of images in family albums that belong to neither researcher nor informants; an ethnographic tracking of people's practices around their own family photographs – their content, their production, their everyday uses; and a practice of memory work that makes close attention to singular family and personal photographs the starting point for inquiry that then radiates outwards from the image, eventually to embrace ever broader cultural, social, even historical, issues.

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The case study that follows draws upon, develops, and interrogates this corpus of methods, using a photograph that was brought to a photography and memory workshop.² Among the participants was a man in his twenties who had recently moved to Britain from his home in the People's Republic of China. Jack Yu (Yu Zhun) was born in Deyang in the province of Chengdu, in Sichuan in south-west China, and attended university

at Chongqing in Sichuan. In 2000, on completing his studies in International Relations, he joined the British Council in Chongqing, moving to Britain in 2004. Jack brought to the workshop a small, square (no more than 5cm by 5cm) monochrome snapshot with a deckle edge and some writing on the reverse. It shows a youngish woman in medium shot, holding an infant. In the background is a building and, behind that, some trees. Introducing his photograph to the group at the start of the workshop session, Jack explained that it was taken in China in 1979, almost certainly by his father, and that the woman in the picture is his mother and he himself the child. He had no memory of the actual occasion, he said. He had been carrying the photograph (reproduced above) in his wallet for several years.

At first sight, and to the western eye, this photograph may well look like a fairly ordinary mother-and-baby snapshot: the pose and the setting are entirely typical of a very familiar genre. Of the events typically portrayed in the numerous examples of American 'home mode imagery' that he studied, Chalfen observed a rather circumscribed set of subject matters. Most prominent among these are images of family members' babyhoods and early lives, images invariably focusing on the theme of relationships:

This photograph typically shows a parent... holding a baby while standing outside near the front steps of the house or by a side wall of the house. Some form of colourful shrubbery or flowering bush is frequently included. The

picture is usually a long shot, and both participants are seen facing the camera. (Chalfen 1987, 77)

The absence of colour and the closer framing notwithstanding, this could very well be a description of Jack Yu's picture, taken many thousands of miles away and in dramatically different circumstances: the pose of the subjects, the stress on the relationship, the *mise-en-scène* of house and leafy nature (though in a western context this small monochrome snapshot, with its fancy edging, looks like a photograph from the 1950s or 1960s rather than the late 1970s). And if here, too, 'kinship, material culture and aesthetic preference are wrapped up in one snapshot' (Chalfen 1987, 77), there turn out to be historical and cultural singularities, as well as similarities of form and content, at work here. When doing memory work with personal photographs it is not unusual to encounter this mix of familiar and unfamiliar, recognition and surprise – and this on the part of all concerned, including and especially the picture's owner.

This photograph, and the brief account and explanation of it that emerged in the workshop setting, may at first sight seem to reference a migration experience of a relatively recent kind: the movement of large numbers of mostly young people, as students and migrant workers, from parts of mainland China to the West. But there is certainly more in this photograph to explore; and if it evokes a sense of recognition in the outsider, such a response itself calls for investigation. Further inquiry in this case involved extending the workshop method and adapting Langford's 'oral-photographic' method to conduct a 'performative viewing' of the picture with its owner and subject. The procedure began with a close scrutiny of the actual photograph, conducted in a conversation between the author and the photograph's owner, according to the methodological procedure outlined above, and using the original photograph itself as a constant point of reference.³ The two-way talk prompted by the photograph has then in turn been treated as material for interpretation.

Attention to the photograph's aesthetic and compositional attributes highlights details of the pose and setting and the framing and composition of the image. Here, the natural lighting suggests that the picture might have been taken in the afternoon, the leafy trees and the bare arms of the subjects that the season is spring or summer. The woman wears a brightly patterned shirt and supports the child on a sturdy right arm. The little boy has on a striped shirt and his hand rests on a bag that is slung across his shoulder. Jack's

comments on what he is wearing (he calls the shirt 'my favourite', and says about the bag: 'lots of older children, they go to school, they have a school bag so you fancy that, you pretend to be grown up') are unmarked by actual memory of the occasion: he is looking back on his younger self from the standpoint of the present, or perhaps repeating a parent's memories of himself as a child. The house in the background appears rather prominent, and the image is composed so that the human figures appear slightly to the left of the intersection of roofs at the corner of the building.

The writing on the back of the photograph records the date (July 1979) and the subject ('our Zhun and mummy'). Jack was born in 1977, and the photograph was taken when he was two years old. His mother, he says, would have been about thirty at the time. Jack quickly launches into a dramatic and eloquent account of the picture's backstory. He was born at the end of the Cultural Revolution, and his parents were of the generation whose youth and early adulthood had been very much shaped by the events of the previous decade. In 1979, while they are still relatively young, this part of their lives has come to an end, and mother and child stand at the still uncertain threshold of a new life. Speaking for his mother, Jack says:

I think at that time, '79, her life, the material life in China was still quite tough. She said that there was food rationing. In order to get him bottled milk, to bring up the baby. She had to get up at 6 o'clock in the morning to run across the town to queue up to get a bottled milk, and also the milk is half water, half milk, diluted milk.

Shifting to a more distanced register, he adds:

It was, I would imagine, after Deng Xiao-Ping's policy – the open door policy – was promulgated at that time, so people like her would see the hope, our life will improve.

As Jack tells it, the story behind this photograph, the story of the years just before his own birth, is one of almost unimaginable hardship and trauma. His mother, the privileged daughter of a leader of one of China's ethnic minority groups, was a Red Guard sent to the countryside for 're-education'. Jack's father, previously a professional dancer, was likewise sent to the country where his first wife, with whom he had a daughter, was shot dead in a riot at the hospital where his wife worked as a nurse. These were the circumstances in which his parents met and married, says Jack: the Cultural Revolution had brought them together. This

photograph, then, represents a new phase in his parents' lives, one that coincides with – is made possible by – social and economic changes in China (Deng's 'open door' policy). Jack's account is supported by certain details in the photograph: considered next to the sober uniforms of the Cultural Revolution, his mother's brightly patterned, but simply cut, blouse may be read as emblematic of these still nascent stirrings of change, while her sturdy arm perhaps speaks of her recent past and physical labour as a Red Guard.

Jack's emphasis on the coincidence of his own birth with the end of the Cultural Revolution lends his own arrival a redemptive quality: the new baby would make up for the losses suffered by its parents:

[My mother] would lie all her hope on the baby... There was a big hope, my parents, especially my mum, because she thinks her life is to some extent destroyed because she couldn't get a good education, she was sent to the countryside for a few years and also the family connection, there was no way she could be promoted or... so basically her life is there already. So she could foresee the time when she retires, but the difference it would make is that she has got a baby, the baby will grow up, might make a huge difference.

This is all the more so given that (notwithstanding the existence of an older half-sister, who does not live with the family) Jack is effectively 'that proudest of possessions in any Chinese family, the only child' (Buruma 2001, 227), and a boy at that. Life was still hard, says Jack, and there was still considerable uncertainty in his family, in the whole of China, about how things might turn out. But 'more direct assurance for a person like my mum is that I've got a son... People place more value on boys than girls... So my mum... I've got a son. My son will grow up and become my hope'. If every newborn child embodies renewal and hope for the future, the hope represented by the little boy in the picture is thoroughly and very distinctively overdetermined by its historical circumstances.

If the pose by the house is a typical topos for a mother/infant snapshot, this particular house carries meanings of its own. Jack explains that it was situated in the centre of Deyang, the city where he lived until he went to university; and that it is probably part of a late Qing dynasty *hutong*, or walled family compound, dating perhaps from about 1910 and originally built for a wealthy household. This one, he thinks, would have

been taken over by the government after 1949, and by the late 1970s part of it formed offices for the local government, his parents' employer, and part was living quarters for employees: 'You work here and your employer allocates houses for you, so you live actually within walking distance from your office.' Jack's account of the spaces of the compound suggests that it comprises 'four houses on four sides', with an enclosed courtyard, and that there is another area at the rear with living accommodation for other families. His emphasis on the fact that several families are sharing this compound and its 'not brilliant' facilities (draughty windows, no heating or indoor plumbing, no kitchen) suggests a certain detached attitude on Jack's part towards his first home; and indeed there is no indication in his account of any direct experience-memory of the spaces of the house itself, though his recollection of the natural world surrounding it does have the ring of lived recollection: 'I know as a child, I still remember around me you'd got sparrows, occasionally you can see wild animals... you could get lots of big trees...' The family soon moved elsewhere in Deyang, and Jack remembers the compound being demolished in the early 1990s.

Jack's limited memory of, and apparent lack of sentiment about, the house in the photograph is perhaps connected with the fact that for him it clearly represents old China – not just the China that had been swept away in 1949 by Mao, but Mao's China as well: in fact, Jack's account emphasises the house's associations with a moment of transition between Maoism and a new order. Today, all traces of the compound have been wiped away and the place remains only a memory – and for Jack a vague one at that – an unmourned victim of China's recent urban regeneration. At the same time, the building remains strikingly prominent in the photograph: the composition and framing (mother and child positioned close to the junction of two roofs in the background, a point of intersection of old and new, past and future, perhaps) suggests that this place, the compound, may carry greater meaning for the photographer, the father whose voice is largely absent from Jack's account, than it does for Jack himself.

While he has no memory of the actual occasion, Jack is certain that the photograph was taken by his father, with a borrowed camera:

I think probably it's a brand... a Chinese brand called Seagull. If you talk to a Chinese person asking what's a big Chinese brand, make of a camera, must be Seagull because all the industry stayed all in one or two makes of a

camera so the Seagull was quite dominant and popular, so I would imagine it was a Seagull Chinese camera.

In China in the 1970s families rarely owned cameras, and having a photograph taken was regarded as a major event. Cultural historian Nicole Huang notes that during the Cultural Revolution family photographic portraiture, though not officially encouraged, flourished at a semi-public level, in the form largely of monochrome studio-produced images, often of entire families, made (as in earlier times) to mark some important family occasion. Now, though, says Huang, it was the 'separation, distance, displacement, longing, homecoming' (Huang 2005) that went with the massive urban-rural migration of the Cultural Revolution that provided occasions for family visits to the local photography studio.

Taking one's own photographs was a far less common practice, however, since few families or individuals were in a position to own cameras. Portable cameras like the Shanghai-made Seagull twin-lens reflex could be hired on a daily or weekly basis, and Jack's father might well have rented rather than borrowed the camera that took this picture. It was not, in any event, his own. Nor would it have been an easy-to-use snapshotter's camera: such things were simply not available in China at the time. All in all, then, family photography in 1970s China was far from the casual, everyday affair that it was in the West. Maoism discouraged any activity, including domestic photography, that might be seen to promote family ties; and Huang says that the studio family portraiture she describes was conducted as a 'discreet and distinctly private' activity 'in an era when the private was inevitably politicised' (Buruma 2001; Huang 2005). Interestingly, too, she notes that these photographs were (and still are) rarely put on display in the home, and that people did not make photograph albums either. In 1979, then, the very making of a family photograph like Jack's is itself a marker of change, of a reinscription of family ties.

And yet the conditions of production of Jack's picture are in some respects out of the ordinary as well. Rather unusually in the circumstances, it is not a studio portrait, but has been made outdoors at home using a borrowed or rented camera, a camera that in fact requires a certain amount of skill to use. This, together with the composition and framing of the picture, itself suggests that Jack's father is a fairly skilled, and an exacting, photographer. The framing of the subjects, barely off-centre against the just-visible junction of the rooftops, the

angle of the mother's arm in relation to the frame edge, the composition of the trees to span the top edges of the frame – all betray a 'good eye' and some expertise or natural aptitude on the part of the photographer.

Jack explains that his dance-trained father 'is artistic... he likes to manipulate people', and that his own memories of later picture-taking sessions make him 'pretty much sure that my dad sort of directed this'. He even imagines his mother telling his father to stop faffing about and just get on with taking the picture. Unusual in the circumstances, too, is the fact that this picture is not a one-off but part of a rather substantial collection, filling several albums, of photographs of Jack (some of them studio-made) taken from his infancy up to the age of six or seven. Jack explains the absence of pictures of himself after that age as, paradoxically, to do with the fact that at just around this time, the early to mid 1980s, his parents bought a camera. Significantly, though, Chalfen found that photographs of children in his American collections of 'home mode imagery' also tend to tail off at this sort of age.

It is clear that for Jack this picture condenses myriad meanings about his own origins and about the – universally fascinating, it seems – period immediately preceding his own arrival in the world. These meanings are heightened and transformed here, however, because the period concerned is widely experienced as a 'caesura', a past removed from the present by an historical event (in this instance the change from Maoist revolutionary to reform politics) that acquires a mythical quality and particularly readily absorbs personal histories into greater events (Feuchtwang 2005, 180).⁴ For Jack, the photograph is about the upheavals of the Cultural Revolution that came to an end just before he was born, about his parents' roles in the drama and trauma of that earlier time, about the paradox that he owes his very existence to the Cultural Revolution, and above all about himself as marker of hope and talisman of an as yet uncertain redemption. In this regard, the photograph, along with all the others taken of Jack in his early childhood, lends particular meaning to the commonplace impulse to record a child's early years, meaning that would in all probability be shared by Jack and his parents.

But for Jack alone, the photograph carries a further – and probably a more intensely experienced – set of meanings. These it acquired only after Jack had left home for university: at the age of nineteen or twenty, he recalls, he returned to Deyang and spent some time at his parents' house. He offers a recollection – perhaps the

most vividly expressed memory in his entire story – of being ‘captured’ during that visit by this particular photograph out of all the others in the family albums. As he tells it, it is as if the picture reached out and seized him, so that ‘I immediately said yes I need to get this one’; and he took it out of the album. He has carried it around with him ever since.⁵

Asked if he ever shows the photograph to anyone else, Jack says no, because (and this recalls Barthes’ explanation in *Camera Lucida* for not publishing his own treasured photograph of his mother) it is far too ‘personal’, too ‘special’, and others could not possibly understand how much it means to him. In fact, he rarely even looks at it himself:

J I always carry it around. I don’t sort of scrutinise it like this... I just feel... I don’t really need to look at it all the time. I just feel I want this thing with me in my bag or whatever. I just feel that my mum or my parents or my whole background is with me. So I don’t really need to physically look at it.

A So it’s part of you in a way?

J Yeah. I don’t... You know, like you’ve got your hand is part of you, but you don’t need to look at your hand, but if you want...

A It’s part of you, you couldn’t do without it.

Clearly for Jack the photograph is as much about his life now, far from where he was born and grew up, as it is about his own, his family’s or his country’s past; though in a way these pasts and the present are folded together in his account. He says on behalf of his mother as she was in the photograph, as she is now perhaps, that the two-year-old boy is *her* (significantly perhaps not *their*, i.e. both parents’) ‘treasure’. And speaking for himself now, Jack says that the photograph is *his* ‘treasure’. At several levels, then, this photograph embodies something of unmeasurable and almost incommunicable value, and it speaks of a present as well as – perhaps more than – of a past, or pasts.

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An interactive performative viewing of Jack Yu’s photograph brings to light depths and details of meaning and association that had not emerged in the group workshop, as indeed it opens up readings that at least begin to unpack the intersections and continuities between the personal, the familial and the social that lie embedded in the image’s many layers of meaning. But this ‘oral-photographic’ exercise in memory work is

really only one more stage of what could, if taken further, become an even deeper and wider investigation. Memory work is rather like peeling away the layers of an onion that has no core: each level of analysis, while adding more knowledge, greater understanding, also generates further questions. Analysis, as Freud might have it, can be interminable.

In this particular case, further questions centre most pressingly around the *absences* in the photograph and in Jack’s memory-story. Perhaps the most eloquent, the most insistent, of these is Jack’s father’s voice – silent everywhere but in the picture itself, where it hints in the most tantalising way at issues which are not, cannot be, addressed in Jack’s account. A further absence is itself an absence: the empty space in the family photograph album left when Jack took away the picture that so ‘captured’ him. This absence surely resonates with all the different ways family albums can be used in different contexts, by different generations and at different stages in a family’s lifespan. How are the albums, created by Jack’s parents and still in China, used now that the child whose early years they documented is grown up and far away from home? How does the empty space in one of them speak to those who keep, and perhaps sometimes look at, that album today? And what of all three or four albums as an ensemble of meanings and stories: what stories – similar, divergent, overlapping – might these elicit from Jack’s mother and Jack’s father or indeed from Jack himself?

This exercise raises important issues of methodology, among them questions concerning the role and activity of the researcher in what is in effect a collaborative, intersubjective, autoethnographic inquiry. For example, how important for the depth or the productivity of the inquiry is the researcher’s prior knowledge of the photograph’s social, cultural, historical, even technical, contexts and antecedents? Is it necessary, or even helpful, for the researcher to be immersed in the culture from which the memory text emanates (Smith 2003)? What might a cultural anthropologist, or a cultural historian, or even a photography specialist, do with such material? Would a ‘lay’ cultural insider be better placed than any ‘expert’ outsider to interpret it? Each would certainly be sensitive to different aspects of the material at hand – the photograph, the memory-stories – so that we might expect overlapping stories or stories told from different angles to emerge.

To suggest that analysis may be interminable and that interpretations may vary is in no way to detract from the value of this kind of inductive, diagnostic inquiry. As a demonstration of the productivity of a particular

combination of methods in investigating the meanings and uses of family photography across a range of contexts, both private and public, the value of this small exercise in memory work is self-evident. A qualitative approach to memory work that combines close readings of a photograph or photographs with the ethnographic work of performative viewing can clearly be usefully deployed on a small scale, as here with a single informant and one photograph. However, it could well be equally productive when used on a larger scale, in inquiries on 'home mode imagery' and its forms and uses across a range of cultural and historical contexts, inquiries involving larger numbers of images and informants. Indeed, in a rapidly changing world of domestic image-making technologies, this mixed approach to memory work with photographs might even offer tools for predicting future forms and uses for 'home mode imagery'.

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NOTES

- [1] Developed initially by Max Weber in relation to sociological inquiry, *Verstehen* is an approach that involves understanding the object of inquiry from within, by means of empathy, intuition or imagination; as opposed to knowledge from without, by means of observation or calculation (Weber 1968).
- [2] The workshop was conducted by the author at a British Council Conference, 'Eye to Eye', London, November 2004. See <http://www.counterpoint-online.org/cgi-bin/item.cgi?id=553>; INTERNET (accessed 19 December 2006). Of the thirteen workshop participants, around ten nationalities, and many backgrounds and current circumstances, were represented.
- [3] The conversation took place in December 2005 in the British Council office in Manchester. Because it is in effect an auratic object, the importance of having the actual photograph to hand in this kind of memory work cannot be overstated. The interview was audiotaped and quotations in the text are taken from the transcript.

- [4] My thanks to Stephan Feuchtwang for drawing attention to the concept of the caesural event and its specific relevance to Jack's memory-story.
- [5] On wallet photographs, A. D. Coleman relates a telling anecdote about a group of students, most of whom, on being asked how many were carrying snapshots of themselves, family and friends, reached for their handbags or wallets. When warned not to produce the photographs unless they were willing to burn them, 'not a single photograph came forth' (Coleman 1979, 132).

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