

Origin, Transformation and Era Significance of the Traditional Photography Studio of Taiwan: A Documentary Study of the John Photography Studio

Chien-Yuan Tseng, Department of Motion Pictures and Video & Graduate School of Media Arts, Kun Shan University, Taiwan

Hsien-Cheng Liu, Department of Motion Pictures and Video & Graduate School of Media Arts, Kun Shan University, Taiwan

The Asian Conference on Film & Documentary 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The first landscape photograph of Taiwan might be taken by Saint-Julien Edwards in 1865. In early 1870s, Rev. Dr. George Leslie Mackay and missionaries used the technology of photography to capture many photos of Taiwan. After the Sino-Japanese war in 1895, Japan took control of Taiwan due to the Treaty of Shimonoseki, so Japanese photography studio entered Taiwan. In 1901, the Lin Photography Studio and Er-Wo Photography Studio were the earliest Taiwanese photography studios. During the Japanese colonial period, Taiwanese learned the technology of photography to operate photography studios. The most remarkable studios were operated by many Taiwanese charcoal portrait artists who learned photography.

The reasons for choosing John Photography Studio as a documentary theme are: 1. John Chang's aunt, Ms. Chang Cong-Ming, was Dr. Mackay's wife. 2. Mr. Chang, originally a charcoal portrait artist, learned photography from Japanese photographer. 3. The Photography studio, founded in 1934, changed little. 4. John Photography Studio is currently operated by John's son, so it's easy to get John's works. 5. It did not transform into wedding photography studio and fast print shop. 6. During the development of digital photography, John Photography Studio continues to take film and digital portrait.

For the documentary of John Photography Studio, there are three questions: What were the roles of photography studios, when the cameras were not common? What are the fates of traditional industries when confronted with urban transition? How did digital process deconstruct the traditional industries?

Keywords: documentary, Taiwanese photography studio, charcoal portrait artist

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

Introduction

Due to the prevalence of the Internet and image digitalization, the way people seeing photos has been transformed in which photos are not printed anymore. They instead are stored in digital memory devices as “spirit,” and are summoned onto the screen when needed. Photos are undergoing a period of transition. However, photos of family members hung up high in the living rooms and photos kept in albums are still treasures of people. Traditional photography studios left in modern cities are where photos are produced, and they keep the appearance and memories of an era for us. In the epoch of digitalization of photography, traditional photography studios hidden in the cities are like historical remains, exuding exotic atmosphere. In terms of filming a documentary, a traditional photography studio bearing history is seemingly a novel topic to hunt for. According to Sontag (1977), *"The justification is still the same, that picture-taking serves a high purpose: uncovering a hidden truth, conserving a vanishing past."*

Determining the traditional photography studio in Taiwan as a topic of documentary is out of hunting for novelty, or conserving a vanishing past, we are unable to justify. Nevertheless, when focusing on photography by means of traditional photography studio, our interest is obviously triggered, especially in present period when hardcopy photos move towards digital devices as spirit. Think about the reasons for realizing photography in Taiwan through photography studio: timeline is a core element. We are thus in need of a historic photography studio, hoping that it enable us to see the origin of photography in Taiwan, the transformation and significance.

Literature Review

To date, there isn't yet any official book concerning the history of photography in Taiwan, which is still been sorted and discussed dispersedly. Take publication as an example, Wu (1993) separated Taiwanese photography history into seven periods in earlier stage. Huang (1996) then in Introduction to Taiwanese Photography began to explore the time and the photographer of the very first photo taken in Taiwan. One Hundred Years of Taiwan Photography, Annual of Photography in Taiwan, published in 1998, is a development report of Taiwanese photography as well, narrating the looks from Japanese Colonial Period to Government of the Republic of China in Taiwan (Chang, 1998). During the conference, A Retrospective of One Hundred Years of Taiwan Photography, taking place in Taiwan in 2003, Aalsvoort (2003) specifically pointed out that the first photo in Taiwan was taken by St. Jullen Hugh Edwards at Tainan Sugar Factory between 1865 and 1871. In 2010, the book "In sight-Tracing the Photography Studio Images of the Japanese Period in Taiwan" arranges origins and evolution of Taiwanese photography studios under Qing Dynasty Rule and Japanese Colonial Period.

Overviewing the discussions and viewpoints above regarding Taiwanese photography history, three main periods could be summarized: Qing Dynasty Rule prior to 1895, when Japanese occupied Taiwan, then Japanese Colonial Period after 1895, and lastly, Government of the Republic of China after 1945. In other words, now that Taiwanese Photography History timeline is divided into three simple subunits, the core of this article is how we span the history of these periods with one photography studio.

Methods

There are three phases divided in research methods. Phase one, information was collected and analyzed. During phase two, in order to pick a photography studio that could connect Taiwanese photography history and progress, a census of traditional photography studios was conducted. Visits to photography studios that may be ideal for the documentary were planned according to reference materials. During visits, this research focused on interviews and comparative conditions analyses. Phase three was filming the documentary of the photography studio. Interview records, from photographers and characters in the photos, were the research method of this stage, in which analyzing the significance of the works was also emphasized.

Results

The results can be separated into two main parts. One is about materials and brief Taiwanese photography history. The other shows that John Photography Studio as part of the documentary.

1. A chronicle of Photography in Taiwan

Regarding materials and brief history of photography in Taiwan, we established a graph to simply explain the chronicle relationship between photography materials and Taiwanese photography history. (Figure 1)

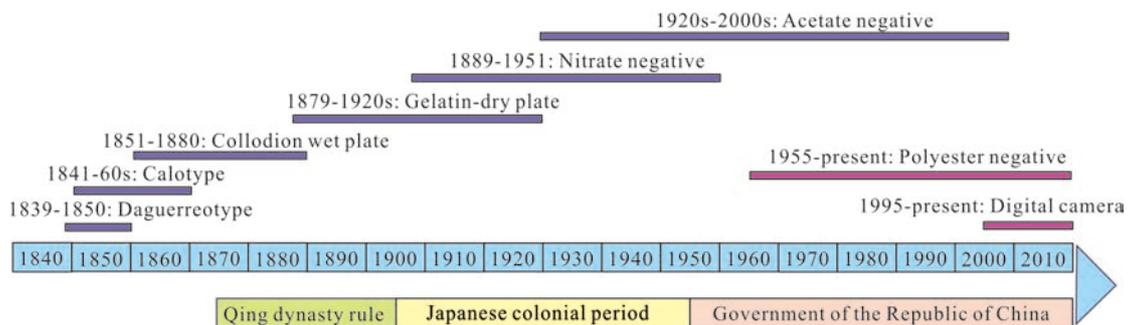


Figure 1. Timeline of photography materials and history of Taiwan. Historical evolution of photography materials is referred to Chien (2010a) and Newhall (1982).

This research divided the photography history in Taiwan into three parts: (1) Taiwan under Qing Dynasty Rule, (2) Japanese Colonial Period, (3) Government of the Republic of China, in the order of time.

(1) Taiwan under Qing Dynasty Rule

Between 1865 and 1871, Saint-Julien Edward, a Spanish consular secretary accredited to Maccau, came to Taiwan and took landscape photos, becoming the earliest images of Taiwan (Aslsvoort, 2003). Then in 1871, Rev. Dr. George Leslie Mackay and missionaries introduced photographic process into Taiwan as they came to preach (Wang, 2010). John Thompson, in 1871, shot a number of photos regarding landscapes, portrait and customs with collodion wet plate process (Chien, 2010b). Afterwards, during Mudan Incident in 1874, Japanese troops were sent to Taiwan

along with the photographers who reported the collision with photos. One year later, in 1875, after Mudan Incident, the first magistrate of Hengchun Zhou, You-Ji took up the official post. He might be the very first Han Chinese photographer in Taiwan, according to Michael Beazeley, a member of Royal Geographical Society, who claimed to have seen photos taken by Zhou (Kao, 2010).

(2) Japanese Colonial Period

During Yi-Wei war in 1895, Japanese troops invaded Taiwan. Photos taken by the accompanying photographer were published by Endo Shashinkan (photography studio in Japanese) in 1896 (Chien, 2010b). In the same year, the Japanese started to open Shashinkan in Taiwan. Nakajima Shashinkan in Taipei and Endo Shashinkan were the examples. Later in 1896-1899, Ryuzo Torii has come to Taiwan for four times in total for anthropology investigation of aboriginals (Chen, 1996). Then, Er-Wo Photography Studio established by Shi, Qiang and Lin Photography Studio established by Lin, Cao, in 1901, were the earliest photography studios owned by Taiwanese people (Chien, 2010b). According to the data from Colonial Production Department of Taiwan Governor-General Office, in 1911, there were thirty-five photography studio in Taiwan, six of which owned by Taiwanese people (Chien, 2010b).

Peng, Rui-Lin, graduated from Tokyo College of Photography and ranked at the top of his class in 1931, opened Apollo Photography Studio after returning Taiwan (Chien, 2010b). Another example is that in 1934, charcoal portrait artist Chang, John acquired photography process through Japanese photographers and self-studying. In fact, 1935-1945 was the heyday when charcoal portrait artists transformed into photographers (Chien, 2010b). Finally in 1945, Pacific War (World War II) terminated in which Japan was defeated. Japanese returned to their country, whose photography studios in Taiwan were closed. Meanwhile, Taiwanese people who specialized in photography in Japan came back to Taiwan to open new studios.

(3) Government of the Republic of China

After Taiwan Retrocession in 1945, Nationalist government of R.O.C. took over Taiwan and Peng-Hu Islands from Empire of Japan. Business registrations of Shashinkan (photography studios) were then invalid. Instead, photography studios needed to apply for new business registration. Then in 1949, the government of R.O.C. retreated to Taiwan from Mainland China. Photographers came along with the government and open business in Taiwan. They primarily operated around military dependents' village and military bases such as Zuo-Ying and Gang-Shan, marine and air-force base respectively. Photographic Society of China was founded in 1953. Pictorial photography and Salon became the trend of photography and the mainstreams were in pursuit of beauty and conception.

In late-1960, color-photograph was introduced from Japan and the U.S.A. into Taiwan and in 1970s, color-photograph has become a product of fashion while black-and-white photograph faced tremendous challenges. At the same time, departments of art design, advertisement, industrial design, craftwork and printing were founded in vocational schools, polytechnic schools and art institute (Wu, 2003). Courses regarding photography were taught in education systems. Moreover, "portrait photographer," which used to stand for professional photographer was replaced with

“commercial photographer.” Also since large flashlight appeared to the world, changes came in both portrait and commercial photography accordingly. High speed shutter opportunity enabled the possibility of capturing more movements in motion. Commercial competition increased since traditional photography studios were transformed into wedding ones (Wu, 2003; Lee, 2004).

Due to vast alterations in photographic techniques throughout 1980s, a portion of traditional photography studios were changed into wedding photography studios or color-photo printing stores (Lee, 2004). From 1995, Kodak released DC40, a consumer digital camera, marking the inception of the digital camera being operated by the mass. With the progress of digital technique and internet application, photography has merged into lives, becoming the necessity among social networks and smart phones.

2. John Photography Studio

John’s photography studio is located at No.118, Chung-Shan Rd., Qi-Shan District, Kaohsiung City, southern area of Taiwan (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Geographical location of Qi-Shan District, Kaohsiung City.

(1) Introduction of John Photography Studio

Mr. Chang, John (1909-1995), named after one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, was born in Wu-Gu Township, Taipei County. His religion of Christianity originated from his aunt Chang, Cong-Ming, spouse of Rev. Dr. George Leslie Mackay. Influenced by Dr. Mackay, brothers of John were all named after figures in Bible.

John was a charcoal portrait artist. He was once greatly attracted by the Japanese photography studio operating next door, realizing that the immediacy and simulation of photographing was incomparable to portrait paintings. John then opened a photography studio to keep up with the trend in 1934 after acquiring photography process through self-studying and a Japanese photographer working in sugar refinery.

Owing to his professional background in portrait painting, John was capable of capturing the lighting and emotion of the portrait, making the portrait in photography

aesthetic and charming. John therefore gained a huge success and was able to have a foothold in Qi-Shan area. Mr. Chang, John relocated the studio on Chung-Shan Rd. (Figure 3), the current site, after having earned some reputation. He then got married with Mrs. Chang, Cai-Hu. Their eldest son Chang, En-Ci and Chang, Shou-Dao, the second son as well as the present owner of John photography studio, were both born here. John passed away in 1995. A number of beautiful portraits he left for Qi-Shan residents in 1930-1990 became a memory (Figure 4).



Figure 3. The storefront of John's photography studio has remained mostly identical to when it started. The couplet at the front door of John photography studio, saying inviting ladies to take elegant photos on the right and shooting photos of truth for gentlemen in the academy, left. The horizontal scroll says "as though genuine appearance of Mt. Lushan." This set of couplet was presented to John photography studio by Mr. Tseng, Dan-Chun from Qi-Shan Agricultural and Industrial Vocational Senior High School.



Figure 4. The glass panel that John photography studio used in the earlier period.

Mr. Chang, Shou-Dao started to learn photography from his father full time when he finished military service. He stayed at John studio thereafter, assisting in taking and developing photos. At the age of 37 (1974), he officially took over the studio from John till today (Figure 5).



Figure 5: In September 2016, Chang, Shou-Dao still took wedding photos with negative film. The background scenery is hand-painted. Photo provided by Chang, Jia-Xing.

(2) Works of John Photography Studio and their significance

In earlier period, family photos were positioned in the order of seniority (Lai, 2009). The host (or whoever with the highest hierarchy) was usually positioned in the middle. The second eldest in hierarchy order was beside the eldest. Usually female family members were seated and male stood in the next row behind them. Young children were usually seated in the front row and babies carried by females.

In Taiwan, Han Chinese prefers to take photos of whole clan in Lunar New Year. Photography studios usually aren't close during Lunar New Year. Instead, they're very busy. Arrangement in the photo was according to seniority, different from the past: male standing backwards and female seated forwards. Family host, however, located in the front-middle could still be identified easily. Seated on the right of the host are sons or sons-in-law and daughters or daughters-in-law on the left. The two new-year family photos of Huang, Wan-De and Huang, Jing-Xin, taken in 1982 and 2012 respectively bear significance of inheritance of the clan (Figure 6).



Figure 6: On the left is a family photo of five generations on the 91st birthday of Huang, Wan-De, taken by Chang, Shou-Dao from John Photography Studio in 1982. On the right is a family photo of five generation on the 94th birthday of Huang, Jing-Xin, the eldest son of Huang, Wan-de. It was taken by Chang, Shou-Dao in 2012. Both were copied in the living room of Huang, Jing-Xin's. Photo size 12*16 inches.

Commemorative photo of the clan was one of the important events during the wedding. The photo was usually taken in front of their own house, (ancestral) shrine or temple in order to show solemnity. During Japanese Colonial Period, Peng, Rui-Lin has once petitioned for the rights to take wedding photos in front of (Shinto) Shrine (Figure 7). This wedding photo was taken right in front of the Guo's ancestral shrine, in the center of which sat the couple (Figure 8). Parents and the elders were beside the couple. Female family members were positioned behind the couple and male further behind. Children were in the very front as usual. The arrangements according to seniority in both wedding and family photos were similar.



Figure 7. A Taiwanese wedding photo during Japanese Colonial Period in front of a Shinto Shrine. Provided by Zeng, Mei-Zen. Photo size 8*10 inches. Photographer unknown. Taken in around 1940s.



Figure 8. The wedding photo of Guo, An-Cun and Liang, Xiu-Ying, taken in front of the Guo's ancestral shrine in Xi-Zhou, Qi-Shan District in 1969. By Chang, Shou-Dao. Original size 6*8 inches. Contact print in 2016.

Discussions

1. The Significance of John Photography Studio as a Documentary

The history of photography in Taiwan can roughly be divided into three main periods, under Qing Dynasty Rule, Japanese Colonization and Nationalist Government of R.O.C.. Being able to elaborate the history that covers all three phases from a single studio appears to be a key factor of choosing John photography studio. Even though the studio opened during Japanese Colonial Period, John's aunt, Chang, Cong-Ming, is the wife of Dr. Mackay. Both of them had left many images during Qing Dynasty Rule, which could be used to tell part of the history of photography in Taiwan.

Mr. Chang, John was a charcoal portrait artist who acquired photography process through self-studying and Japanese photographers, the same way for most Taiwanese artists transforming into photographers. The studio started in 1934 and the site as well as the building was barely remodeled, which can be studied for the building pattern of photography studios. John photography studio is kept by Chang, Shou-Dao, John's son. This gives us an easier access to John's photographic works. John photography studio has remained as the traditional photography studio but not transformed into wedding photography studios or chromo-photo printing store. In the progress of digitalization, John photography studio still operates with digital portrait photos and negative wedding photography.

2. The Epochal Characteristic of Traditional Taiwanese Photography Studio

John photography studio started in 1934, recording and taking photos of people, families, varieties of groups, e.g. classmates and comrades, in Qi-Shan area. Many of earlier images of Qi-Shan area were from John photography studio. Image is exactly the fundamental assets of local culture as well as common memory of the group. Without memory in common, there is hardly any link in between. From 1896 of Japanese Colonial Period, there have been increasing photography studios opening. Just like what John photography studio does in Qi-Shan District, all images of each place in Taiwan bring together memories in common of the Taiwanese.

Conclusions

Choosing John Photography Studio, which was established in 1934, as the topic of the documentary is to narrate the development of Taiwanese photography history. The studio is a stage of time, being able to explain the origin, progress and contemporary meaning of Taiwanese photography history. Photographs from the traditional photography studios are databases for history, which store memories of the past. Traditional photography studios from all over Taiwan has been going through time just like John photography studio and commemorating the history of Taiwan.

Acknowledgements

By courtesy of the assistance and interviews with Chang, Shou-Dao from John photography studio, the documentary could be filmed with barely any obstacles. Would like to thank Mr. Chien, Yun-Ping for providing materials about photography studios during Japanese colonial period and personal guidance. Also would like to thank Ms. Tseng, Mei-Zen, Ms. Chen, Cui-Bi, Ms. Liang, Shiu-Ying, Ms. Huang, Ju and Mr. Huang, Ying-Yu for the assistance during interviewing.

References

- Aslsvoort, L. V. (2003). The Quest for Taiwan's Earliest Photographs. In Editorial Board of National Museum of History (Eds.) *A retrospective of one Hundred Years of Taiwan Photography*. (pp. 76-85). Taipei: National Museum of History.
- Chang, C. T. (1998). Shadows and footprints- the development of Taiwan photography. In S. Q. Lin (Eds.), *One hundred years of Taiwan photography, Annual of photography in Taiwan*. (pp. 1-64). Taipei: Yuan Yi Art Space.
- Chen, J. X. (1996). *The Development of Photography under the Government of Japan in Formosa* (Master's thesis). Department of Mass Communications, Fu Jen Catholic University.
- Chien, Y. P. (2010a). Transformation of photography processing and material usage along the timeline. In Y. P. Chien (Eds.), *In Sight- Tracing the Photography Studio Images of the Japanese Period in Taiwan*. (pp. 314-316). Taipei: Sunnygate Corp.
- Chine, Y. P. (2010b). Dialogue with the Mirror Image Allegory. In Y. P. Chine (Eds.), *In Sight- Tracing the Photography Studio Images of the Japanese Period in Taiwan*. (pp. 6-29). Taipei: Sunnygate Corp.
- Huang, M. C. (1996). Introduction to Taiwanese Photography. *Taiwan historical materials studies*, 7, 3-18. (in Chinese)
- Kao, J. (2010). Photography Pioneers of 19th Century Taiwan. In Y. P. Chien (Eds.), *In Sight- Tracing the Photography Studio Images of the Japanese Period in Taiwan*. (pp. 32-45). Taipei: Sunnygate Corp.
- Lai, P. C. (2009). *A study of Taiwan Family Photographs* (Master's thesis). Western Art History, Department of Fine Arts, National Taiwan Normal University.
- Lee, Y. Y. (2004). The Bride Maker: The Formation and Development of the Bridal Industry in Taiwan. *Feng Chia Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 8, 183-217. (in Chinese with English abstract)
- Newhall, B. (1982). *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.
- Santag, S. (1977). *On Photography*. New York: Picador.
- Wang, Y. L. (2010). The Photography History of Rev. Dr. George Leslie Mackay during his Mission in Taiwan from 1872 to the Early Period of Japanese Rule. In Y. P. Chien (Eds.), *In Sight- Tracing the Photography Studio Images of the Japanese Period in Taiwan*. (pp. 46-64). Taipei: Sunnygate Corp.
- Wu, J. B. (1993). *A Brief History of Photography in Taiwan*. Conference on Photography from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Arts Center. (in Chinese)

Wu, J. B. (2003). Unique visual performance of Taiwanese wedding photography and its historical development. In Editorial Board of National Museum of History (Eds.) *A retrospective of one Hundred Years of Taiwan Photography*. (pp. 11-28). Taipei: National Museum of History.

Contact email: chienyuan.tseng@gmail.com