Chapter 4: Observation, Photography and Poetry – A Methodological Framework of Creative Practice and Social Research

Introduction

> *"…the problem about visual materials is that we have not found that minimal agreement which let's work proceed, which provides the guidelines we can observe and orient ourselves by as we produce and consume the products of a visual social science." Howard Becker (2004:197)*

In this chapter I will offer a novel framework that combines creative practice and social research into a new way of approaching weddings. I will show how a combination of visually-focussed participant observation, the practice of photography and the writing of poetry, can come together to powerfully visualise the social, ethnic and diasporic landscapes of weddings from a semi-autobiographical point of view. Using my unique position as an ex-professional wedding photographer and Chinese Singaporean, I will first describe how I transformed my professional practice in social research, before situating my study in a particular form of visually-focussed participant observation that makes the camera a primary mode of interaction between my informant and me. I then explain how using a camera, writing poetry, and framing photographs as visual poetry are useful tools to evoke my own experiences within my participation in and observations of weddings.

Transforming Professional Practice and Personal Experience into Social Research

Apart from Anthropology, many social scientific studies of weddings often make use of similar qualitative approaches, especially interviews (e.g. Carter and Duncan 2017). This makes sense because methods like surveys and interviews are a useful and effective way of understanding opinions, values and decisions – actions that are core to the consumptive event like a wedding. However, other qualitative methods like participant observation are less obvious, perhaps because most roles in weddings are limited to kin and close social networks. Other roles tend to require specialised knowledge in order to be performed, thus limiting the ability for researchers to immerse themselves fully in the field. With this in mind, my sociological interest in weddings, participant observation and ethnicity stemmed from a realisation that my experiences, professional practice and life-story had the potential to be a semi-auto-biographical resource (Dyck 2000, Wulff 2000) for social research. I experienced the wedding industry's transition from film to digital, saw the changes in fashion and practices between the 1990s and 2000s, and watched as Singapore changed socially, economically,

politically and aesthetically and witnessed how these changes were reflected in wedding rituals and mundane everyday life.

Singaporean Chinese weddings continue to fascinate me. Despite growing up with some of these rituals, I was largely naïve to this aspect of my Chineseness. My family is an example of Singapore's successes as well as its social sacrifices (Kong and Yeoh 2003). I am firmly categorised by my peers and the state as a "cosmopolitan", third-generation Chinese Singaporean (Chua 2003). I speak English as a first language, I attended a private English-speaking mission school and I was educated in a university overseas. I have never lived in state-subsidised housing, and both my parents are university graduates. At the same time my grandparents belonged to a generation that built Singapore but became lost in it. Such was the price for economic progress and the construction of a nation-state (PuruShotam 1998).

Starting my research involved transforming my professional practice as a wedding photographer into social research. Although I began professional photography in 2003, it was only later when I was researching the connection between online wedding forums and offline wedding practices that I chose to use weddings as a site for social research. Instead of gaining access and acceptance from the outside, I had to "de-nativise" myself from an environment I had become comfortable in (being a wedding photographer) and was an insider of (being Chinese Singaporean). The process meant constantly re-evaluating what was in front of me, and treating things I had taken for granted as new and odd again. This act of becoming *less* of an insider also meant that I had to learn to balance my professional responsibilities in a wedding with my academic responsibilities as a participant observer. There would be times one role would overshadow the other, and this process of balancing continues to unfold as my own personal journey. Such difficulties highlight the limitations and pitfalls of insider participant observation and insider ethnographies. For example, becoming the phenomenon that a researcher is studying (Jorgensen 1989) can sometimes mean that the researcher's multiple roles come into conflict, as was the case of Rambo (1987) who studied exotic dancing by becoming an exotic dancer herself. However, such a deep involvement as an insider is also beneficial by preventing othering and personal biases (Hastrup 1992) and allowing one's personal experience to biographically inform the field one is studying (Dyck 2000).

A Visually-focussed form of Participant Observation

Participant observation has been shown by scholars to be a particularly effective tool in understanding meaning-making (Gallimeier 1987, Kellett 2008, Nagle and Stooke 2016) from an insider's point of view (Hall 1976, Voloder and Kirpitchenko 2014) in everyday life (Jorgensen 1989, Powells et al 2014). It is an important aspect of ethnographies (Dyck 2000, Dewalt and Dewalt 2011) but in itself does not constitute ethnography. Participant observation

has been carried out in a variety of social groups, from laboratories (Latour and Woolgar 1979) to fundamentalist Christian schools (Peshkin 1986) to police forces (Holdaway 1982). I argue that participant observation is particularly suited to this study for the following reasons. One, each wedding involves a vastly different set of individuals from another. Whilst I have met the same participant in two different weddings, this was more a case of coincidence than design. Weddings are concentrated and intense events, but they are also brief and fleeting. Research methods which would require a longer period of time spent with the same group of individuals would not have been feasible. Two, my professional practice as a wedding photographer has granted me a convenient path into my field of study as a participant observer. Participant observation appeared to be the most intuitive step at the point where I decided to investigate ethnicity-making in wedding rituals. Three, given my argument involves an investigation into the *making* of ethnicity; it only makes sense that I observe ethnicity as it is made, rather than asking individuals how they make their ethnicity in an interview or focus group format. If weddings are particularly effective windows into everyday life, then participant observation is a particularly effective window into weddings.

Participant observers use various methods to record and collect their observations, including photography. However, photography is rarely used as a *primary* form of observation that complements textual observations. Often it is relegated to a secondary role that supports what a researcher has observed, and this is especially so in Sociology (Twine 2006) with a few exceptions (Back 2004, Heng 2015, Knowles and Harper 2006). In other disciplines like Anthropology and especially Visual Anthropology (Banks 2001, Pink 2007), the photograph becomes more important for the researcher to convey her findings, but this is more an exception than the norm in the social sciences.

I propose that a *visually-focussed form of participant observation* can extend and capitalise on participant observation's strengths, especially when it comes to understanding the processes of ethnicity-making. A visually-focussed form of participant observation makes implicit makings of ethnicity explicit for both researcher and reader. It powerfully exposes the everyday ethnic inscriptions by individuals onto themselves as well as their environments in a concise, compact and layered manner. Making my research primarily *visual* is a way to be sociologically sympathetic to the visualness of race and ethnicity (Solomos and Back 1996).

A visually-focussed form of participant observation has the following characteristics. One, it employs the camera (still or moving) as the fulcrum upon which participant observation is performed, much in the same way Pinney's (1997) camera became a point of mediation between him and his informants in rural India. The camera mediates between the researcher and her informant, providing not just a means for recording, but acting as a way to create rapport, maintain relationships, gain access and generate non-verbal communication. During my participant observation I used the camera as a key tool for my insider role, leveraging on

my skills as a photographer to gain entry into each wedding. As I observed each wedding I photographed it, meaning the camera stood as a middleman between my informants and me. I saw the wedding literally through a lens, and conversely my informants interacted with me through a lens as well.

The camera also acted as a conversation-starter with informants I had only just met at the wedding. Oftentimes wedding participants were curious about my craft, what photographs I was taking and even my role. A common question would be if photography was a full-time job, to which I took the opportunity to tell them about my research and ask them more questions about the wedding. Other times the camera become a tool of reciprocity (Nader 1986, Schensul et al 1999), allowing me to establish rapport with non-key informants like friends of the bride/groom or family members by taking a posed photograph for them (not part of my key responsibilities), or photographing their child and offering to email them the photographs on a non-commercial, personal basis.

Two, a visually-focussed form of participant observation leverages on the persistent presence of a camera to generate visual field notes (Heng 2019). Visual field notes are additional mundane recordings of a field by the researcher. They can include images of buildings and doorways where events are taking place, portraits of informants, sequential photographs of actions and interactions, images of artefacts (both everyday and ritualistic) and so on. Visual field notes are a way for a participant observer to generate field notes without pausing the act of photography (or filming). As Jorgensen (1989) points out, the "camera is an *extension* of visual perception" (1989:103, emphases added).

Visual field notes do not entirely replace textually-driven field notes, but they exist to form the bulk of a researcher's experience. Visual field notes are different from saturation photography or photographic inventories (Collier and Collier 1986). They do not exist to create a literal memory of a place or scene. Instead, they act as guides to remind a researcher of the spaces and places where she has been, what she has observed, and what are the things, people or actions she might have missed (Hall 1976, Vesperi 1985). In this sense, visual field notes take on a realist perspective (Pink 2007, Sontag 1977), but they are only as "realistic" as the researcher chooses to view them. These photographs may differ from photographs presented as data, and I will expand on this in chapter 5 when I discuss the use and presentation of photographs in this book. I will also discuss how I created visual field notes in the next section.

Three, a visually-focussed form of participant observation *produces images* (in this case still photographs) as an integrated part of a researcher's fieldwork, data and findings *in conjunction with text*, building upon a fledgling canon of work that gives text and photography equal status (Knowles and Harper 2009). Images are not relegated to supporting documents

or evocative supplements - they are used more efficiently in situations where text might falter, especially when providing the social, emotional or cultural “texture” of one’s field of study (Rose 2012).

Because of the importance of the visual in this book, I have chosen to discuss my photographic practice; visual methodological framework and the way text and photography interact in a *separate chapter which follows this one*. Suffice to say for now, photographs in this book will do the following things – one, they will immerse the reader into the social, cultural and ethnic landscape of my informants in chapter 5. Two, they will complement textual observations and reinforce my interpretations drawn from participant observation in chapters 7, 8 and 9. Three, they will capture the raw emotions of the productions of transdiasporic ethnicity in my epilogue (Edwards 1997, Pink 2007, Rose 2012), creating an evocative summary of the social costs of economic progress amongst transdiasporic individuals.

Doing Visually-Focussed Participant Observations at Weddings

Every wedding is a single event that involves different sets of individuals. This means that even as an insider at every wedding, I had to constantly negotiate new access to each wedding. In order to participate in and observe weddings, I had to be hired to photograph them. Gaining access was thus a case of marketing myself as a wedding photographer to bridal couples. I achieved this through both word-of-mouth as well as advertising on Singapore’s most well-known wedding portal, Singaporebrides.com. I listed myself under the directory for “Actual-Day” photographers, focussing on the wedding day rather than pre-wedding studio and location photography.

The process of being hired (and gaining access) would typically be like this – one half of a bridal couple, usually the bride, would see my listing on Singaporebrides.com. She would visit my website and view my portfolio and if interested would contact me for a preliminary meeting. I would meet her and her fiancé at a café in the city, where I would show the types of photo albums they could order, and discuss their needs. This was also the point at which I would inform them that I was researching weddings. Some would hire me on the spot; others would let me know a few weeks later. Once the couple had hired me I would draft a contract. We would then not normally be in contact until a week before the wedding where I would be emailed a timetable of the wedding and a time and place for me to start.

As part of my fieldwork I observed and recorded 75 weddings, of which I chose 69 to use for this book. In all, I created approximately 43,000 images for use as data and visual field notes over a period of 7 years. Each wedding I observed would involve anywhere from 4 to 16 hours of participant observation. A typical Singaporean Chinese wedding starts between 5am

to 8am, and depends on various factors like beliefs in “auspicious” start-times, rituals and the availability of the bride’s make-up artist. Morning ceremonies would normally last 5 to 6 hours, followed by an afternoon break, then an evening banquet in which my participation would last another 6 hours. If the couple chose to have a Christian ceremony, there would sometimes be an additional 3 to 4-hour church service between morning and evening rituals.

My role as a wedding photographer meant I had a particularly intimate and inside look into the lives of my informants as they prepared for the wedding. Rather than seeing the bride only during rituals, I was privy to her getting her make-up done, and could witness the goings-on in her home as her family made their own preparations. This level of access was granted because of the dominant market expectations of wedding photographers in Singapore. My primary responsibilities at each wedding included the following

- Chronologically photograph all wedding preparations and rituals
- Photograph various core wedding artefacts like the wedding gown, rings, jewellery, bridal car, wedding decorations and so on
- Photograph posed group pictures of the bridal couple, their family and friends, including one photograph per table (anywhere from 10 to 90) at the wedding banquet

While I carried out these responsibilities I would also photograph individuals, artefacts, environments and interactions that exposed the way Singaporean Chineseness was made. These would sometimes overlap with the “mandatory” images I had to take at each wedding, but at the end of the wedding all photographs were handed over to the bridal couple in a DVD-Rom.

Autobiographical Poetry and Participant Observation

Participant observation also meant interpreting the wedding from my own perspective as a Chinese Singaporean. This meant that my observations and interpretations of weddings and ethnicity-making were textured by my own life and my own experiences. Such texturing meant that this study was at some points semi-autobiographical, drawing upon my own understandings of what it meant to be Singaporean Chinese, similar to Ang’s (2001) autobiographical account of overseas Chinese in Australia, Europe and Indonesia. Auto/biographical narratives have been proven to be especially useful in the study of race and ethnicity making (Alibhai-Brown 1995, Kenan 1999, McBride 1996, Merton 1988). It “reveals some of the dynamics of lives and the activities of living…exposing the substance of the lives in which ethnicity and race operate tactically…” (Knowles 2003:53).

Unlike other sociology-related autobiographers (Ang 2001, Kenan 1999, McBride 1996) whose narrative genre tend to be in prose, my own autobiographical narrative is embedded in the *poetry* that I write. Poetry in this book acts as a sociological tool for self-reflexivity *and* autobiography. I have been a poet longer than a photographer, publishing in various poetry anthologies in Singapore (Heng 2000, 2002) and in 2004 published my own collection of poetry, acting as an evocative diary of my life as a Chinese Singaporean in both Singapore and the United Kingdom. I continued to write poetry as I conducted participant observation, especially when I was particularly affected by the lives of my informants. Poetry was my way of documenting my own diasporic journey and my own ways of making Singaporean Chineseness. My poetry created a semi-autobiographical layer which I mapped onto my visually-focussed participant observation. Poetry in this sense also became a sociological tool to further expose the everyday lives of both informant and researcher (see also Furman et al 2008 and Szto et al 2005).

Although participant observation remained as the primary way for me to collect data, a poetic, semi-autobiographical layer added two important things. One, it allowed me to create an emotional link with some of my informants. It was a way to understand from an insider point of view the difficulties some of them (particularly first-generation Chinese Singaporeans) experienced in interacting with others because I experienced the same thing with my grandparents. Two, it generated an extra layer of meaning onto my visual field notes and photographs by superimposing a *personalised* lens onto my observation. I arranged the photographs that I wished to present in the form of visual essays and then matched, where appropriate, a poem I had written that sympathised with a specific photograph. The poems acted both as evocative captions that transcended mundane realist captions, and developed the photograph in a non-linear, multi-layered manner. In the rest of this chapter, I will expand on the relationship between poetry, photography and Sociology.

Poetry and the Photograph as 'Visual Poem'

> *"We should avail ourselves of all the techniques of expression … literary techniques, where we teach people how to record, how to photograph, and how to use all these different media." – Loïc Wacquant, quoted by Farrar (2010:29)*

In this section I will outline a set of guidelines on how photography can be framed as "visual poetry" and propose areas in which sociologists can improve the aesthetic quality of the photographs they take and present. Seeing a photograph as a visual poem solves two obstacles to using photography in social research – a lack of a sufficient and robust framework for reading photographs and a lack of aesthetic rigour in photographs presented. Visual poetry distinguishes itself from photography-as-text by espousing an aesthetic quality

that creates an empathetic relationship between reader and subject, thereby immersing the reader in ways text alone cannot achieve.

Seeing photography as visual poetry enriches my study into productions of Singaporean Chineseness in the following ways. One, it deepens my understanding of the places and spaces of Chinese Singaporeans by creating a photo-ethnographic space in which we can base our observations. It enriches our understanding of unfamiliar fields of study and situates us in a visually navigable context. If weddings are concentrated bursts of everyday life, then each photograph is a concentrated, detailed and layered understanding of a wedding. Two, photographs expose concealed relationships of intimacies and distances that individuals are unwilling or are unable to talk about. They transcend language barriers amongst informants whose first language is not English by interrogating their actions and interactions with other individuals and their material environments. In doing so, photographs show productions of ethnicity in ways that textual observations are unable to. Thirdly, photographs undermine the photographer's own judgements of taste and present a reflexive portrait that challenges the viewer to make her own decisions about individuals' ethnic tastes. The photograph thus acts as a visual audit to the researcher's interpretations and observations.

I will also outline how I will use photographs and poetry in this book. I will rely on photographs to provide an immersive visual introduction to my field of study (chapter 5), to extend my observations of ethnicity-making in text-heavy chapters (chapter 6, 8 and 9) and to expose the emotional journeys and social sacrifices of Singaporean Chinese diasporic experiences (epilogue). Textual poetry will be used largely to underscore photographs in chapters 6 and my epilogue as a richer form of evocative captions and as a contextualising, semi-autobiographical tool.

Poetry as a Tool of Sociology

The first way that poetry can be used in Sociology is as another path into the lived experiences of a researcher. Poetry could be seen as an autobiographical narrative (Alibhai-Brown 1997, Ang 2001) in race and ethnicity-making and how my own poetry acted as a set of semi-autobiographical notes. Throughout my research and in other parts of my life I have charted my own diasporic journey from Singapore to the United Kingdom in the form of poetry. I intend to use these poems *in conjunction* with photographs in chapter 5 and my epilogue as poetic captions.

Poetry can also be applied to Sociology (and especially the Sociology of race and ethnicity) in a non-autobiographical manner. It does this in two important ways – one, it exposes the emotional texture of social relationships between individuals and between individuals and their environment. Two, it develops layers of meaning through manipulation of text and literary

symbols that weave a more vivid tapestry of an ethnicised individual's everyday living spaces, both social and material. Poetry is especially suited to exposing the racialised and ethnicised social relationships that researchers observe and try to make sense of. It generates additional layers of meaning to relationships that normal text cannot, particularly that of an individual's emotions. These social relationships may be between individuals, or between an individual and objects or her material environment. Examples of such poetry in relation to race making include *I, too Sing America* by Langston Hughes (in Stanford 1971:103) which vividly depicts the imbalanced relationship and living arrangements between Black servant and White master in the 1950s and *Telephone Conversation* by Wole Soyinka (see Nwoga 1980:173), which narrates a conversation between an African man pleading to rent a room from a White landlady. Both of these examples capture the raw emotion, frustration and *pathos* of the protagonist, giving us a deeper insight into the imbalances of power between racialised and ethnicised individuals.

The density and ambiguity of poetic text means that poetry can create more layered and richer accounts of a researcher's observations. Seemingly mundane objects can take on powerful and significant meanings, thus mapping the social, material and emotional landscapes of ethnic groups and individuals in ways other forms of text could not do. Consider the example of British poet Jackie Kay's poem *Crown and Country* (1998), who uses the metaphors of dentistry (teeth, caps, smiles) to expose social class, racial inequalities and commercialistic materialism in Great Britain. As Hácová puts it

> "…the white British in Kay's poems have to resort to false teeth whereas the black people seem to enjoy perfect teeth. The dentures of the whites substitute the real teeth and, according to the poet, are as false as their artificial smiles…" (Hácová 2005:64)

Poetry can thus be a powerful tool to create Sociology by exposing social relationships and adding layers and weaving textures to social researchers' observations and interpretations. Poetry is able to do this because of its evocative nature, its manipulation of language, imagery and rhythm. It creates and suggests meaning deeper than the text it presents. It hosts a canon of literary devices that normal text struggles to contain like similes, metaphors, onomatopoeia and so on. We can leverage on poetry's strengths by applying its devices as a framework onto our data. I have done this by mapping literary devices *onto* photography. Before I explain how I did this, I will outline the difficulties in using photography in social research that led me to create a new methodological framework.

Obstacles to using Photographs in Social Research

Photography is an underutilised and oversimplified method in Sociology. It has often been accused of being either too ambiguous or not ambiguous enough (Knowles and Sweetman 2004). Photographs are also often treated as identical facsimiles of observations made by the photographer, to the point that they are perceived as an illustrative device supporting written text. As such, many sociologists find little benefit in using photographs. Despite scholars making strong cases for photography in social research (Twine 2006, Prosser 1998, Knowles and Sweetman 2004, Back 2004, Harper 1987), and proposing various useful ways to understanding photographs (Becker 1998-1999), photography remains a relatively unpopular and underappreciated resource. Two problems underscore this current state – the lack of an accessible path into visual literacy for social researchers, and the lack of technical ability on the part of sociologists to fully maximise the potential of photographs as a core component of social research (Heng 2016).

I will address the first problem by creating a set of tools in which photographs can be read and appreciated in social research by casting the photograph as a *visual poem*. I will argue that seeing a photograph as a visual poem provides sociologists with a suitable metaphor and toolbox in which they can read and interpret photographs without encumbering themselves with an entire canon of art history and visual theory. I will address the second problem of technical expertise by using and presenting photographs in a manner that maximises and exceeds their descriptive and illustrative capacity. I will demonstrate that it is necessary for sociologists to improve their photographic abilities as much as their writing abilities if they wish to use photographs in their research. As I have argued elsewhere (Heng 2016), it is not good enough to accept a photograph "as is", just as it is not good enough to accept a set of text "as is".

Photography as Visual Poetry

Photography as a form of text that can be read and interpreted is not a new idea (Knowles and Sweetman 2004, Pink 2007). However, these allusions to text have only served to homogenise photographs as another form of text that can easily be replaced by other text. The reasoning is that if photographs are interpretive text, then interpretive text is just as good as photographs and removing photographs reduces methodological issues and complications in one's research. I argue that photographs need to do things that text *cannot do*, such that they are not a dispensable or replaceable aspect of a sociologist's work.

To do this, I propose that the photograph is recast and re-read as *a visual poem*[1] *– a meaning-laden and thickly-layered artefact that is interpreted on multiple levels, exposing a greater human condition than what it mundanely depicts*. Visual poetry is an *expressive* form

[1] Although some work has been done about the interface between poetry and photography (Szto et al 2005), little attention has been given to the idea of photographs *becoming* poetry.

of photography that is encoded in *realist-style* depictions of everyday life (Edwards 1997). Like poetry that mundanely depicts life (Heaney 1998) but belies a much deeper meaning, visual poetry is a framework that allows us to engage with seemingly realist-style photography in a deep, meaningful and ethnographic manner. Realist photography tends to document and illustrate, with the intention of showing a picture as a visual fact. Expressive photography on the other hand is more akin to other creative literary products. Although these categories have been seen to be complementary rather than mutually exclusive (Edwards 1997), they have not yet been reconciled into a coherent whole.

My framework of visual poetry reconciles the problem of reading a realist-style photograph in an expressive way, granting further insights into images that seem one-dimensional and factual. This involves understanding a photograph as having certain poetic characteristics. There are four characteristics that we need to consider. One, visual poems are cryptically descriptive – mundane depictions of individuals, environments, objects, actions and images are coded into literary devices that expose the wider and more complicated circumstances that the photograph's subjects dwell in. One only needs to read Wole Soyinka's Telephone Conversation (2003:670) to understand that the poet is not just talking about telephone booths and rental negotiations, but about the racial dynamics between black and white individuals in Apartheid-era South Africa. Two, they are *aesthetically evocative* – visual poems combine elements of light, composition, subject matter and context into an artefact that triggers both a rational *and* emotional response from the reader. Doing this creates a temporary sympathetic relationship with the reader, immersing the reader into the subject's circumstances and enriching the viewer's understanding of the message the photographer is trying to convey.

Three, they are *infinitely encoded* – readers of photographs will easily interpret them in ways never intended by the photographer, granting alternative and longitudinal insights into the field of study the photographer is portraying (Stoller 1997). In this way, the photograph is never simply about a straightforward depiction of social reality (Twine 2006), neither is it a single direct message of the photographer. It is also an opportunity for viewers, both present and future, to make up their own minds about what they see and about what they think they see. Finally, and this is unique to *visual* poems – they are *visually confrontational*. When presented with photographs readers are immediately treated to set of visual images. Unlike interpretive text or poetry, the reader is not left to derive a mental image from words. Rather, her first encounter is imposed by the photographer, and it is up to her to reinterpret the photograph as she sees fit. In other words, visual poetry *demands* a visual encounter from the moment it is read, and because of this is eminently suited as a method for approaching visual matters like ethnic taste.

How to Read and Write Visual Poetry

Seeing photography as visual poetry provides us with a familiar framework in which we can achieve visual literacy without encumbering ourselves with a new canon of visual theory[2]. I argue that this can be done by drawing upon the tools scholars use when analysing textual poetry and applying it to visual poetry. The contemporary poem is usually a short series of verses that do not necessarily rhyme. The poem often contains a variety of literary devices in the form of similes, metaphors, personification, alliteration, onomatopoeia and couplets. Poetry can be cathartic, a simple expression of the poet's emotions. It can be political, written as a way of subverting established authority or speaking out for marginalised individuals or groups. It can simply be descriptive, a way for a poet to capture scenes in front of herself as a way of remembering. It can be any one of these things or all of these things. A visual poem contains the same literary devices that one might expect to find in a textual poem. People, scenes and artefacts are described and depicted in the photographer's aesthetic vision / style, like how Paul Strand (1915, see Golden 2008:242-243) portrayed his subjects in *Wall Street, New York*. There is often a message, an opinion or a theme embedded in poetry, and likewise, one has to look for the messages, opinions and themes in the photograph.

Scholars have regularly compared photography to poetry, but these connections tend to be fleeting or superficial. For example, Morris (2003) notes how poets like Walt Whitman and Rainer Maria Rilke see and write things very much in the same way that photographers take pictures, but his connections between photography and poetry ends there. Clarke's (1997) treatment of Alfred Stieglitz's photos *Dancing Trees* (1921) and *Music* (1922) also allude to these photographs as "mood poems" (1997:170), but he stops short at analysing the photograph in a poetic context. A social researcher who wishes to read photographs as visual poetry could thus ask the following questions when analysing photographs.

- What are the literary devices used and how effective are they? What do the items in the photograph mean – people, objects, environment, etc?
- What is the photographer trying to say?
- In what context is the photograph being taken and what how is the photograph engaging with that context?
- Is the photographer criticising, challenging, describing, supporting or simply creating a unique view of the human condition?
- What is the wider issue at stake here?
- What is the effect of the aesthetic quality of the photograph?

[2] I am not arguing that visual theory is redundant or not useful – I have made several references to proponents of visual theory in this chapter (Sontag 2003, Clarke 1997) which have enriched my own practice and my understanding of photography in social research. What I am arguing for is a robust framework that is accessible to a wider group of social researchers who wish to incorporate photography into their work in a meaningful and efficient manner. My approach contributes to this bridge between mainstream social research and more abstract notions of photography.

The aesthetic quality of the visual poem is especially important because it is what distinguishes photography from text, making the two complementary but mutually exclusive. The problem remains as to *how* that aesthetic quality is achieved. It is true that all photographs have ethnographic value (Pink 2007), but some photographs have *more* value than others. This is similar to bodies of text that social researchers put so much effort into crafting so that their ideas and observations are valid, interesting and useful. A photograph requires the same amount of care, attention and skill to maximise its potential for communication and evocation. Based on my own photographic practice, I argue that the researcher needs to take into account the following things to do this.

A Relationship with Light. A researcher who works with a camera must also work with light – how it casts shadows, contrast, highlights and halos. How it can bring attention to parts of an image but at the same time conceal others. In my own practice, I have a dependent relationship with light – I rely on whatever light is available when the photograph is taken, and very rarely add my own unless it is absolutely necessary. This also involves not switching off /on ambient lights and not turning on my flashgun. Photographs produced as a result of this kind of relationship are often *chiaroscuro* in their presentation, heavily contrasted with pools of shadow and a sense of pensiveness. This style is informed by work of photographers such as André Kertész (see *Le Square Jolivet a Montparnasse* (1927) and Chez Mondrian (1926)); O. Winston Link (see *Washing J Class* (1955)) and Willy Ronis (see *La Columne de Juliet* especially (1957))[3].

An understanding of Space and Environment. Photographs used in social research are often tightly cropped around a primary subject (see Pink 2007) and only occasionally take a subject's material environment into account (Harper, Knowles and Leonard 2005). Whilst these "tight" images are useful at times, they ignore the interactions that their primary subject is involved in. These photographs lack the contextualisation and active dwelling (Ingold 2000) that textures subject's circumstances. In my practice I often "demote" the primary subject's size to that of his, her or its surroundings. I choose to situate my subjects in their social and material spaces, thereby eschewing wordy descriptions for solid visual mappings.

Approaching the Subject from New Angles. New data can be created and re-created by approaching the subject from new angles – crouching, overhead and sideways are all potential ways to increase the aesthetic quality of a photograph. Alexander Rodchenko's *The New Moscow* (Tupitsyn et al 1998) is an excellent example of misplaced central subjects and awkward angles. It also encourages new ways of "seeing" the subject, both for the researcher

[3] At the same time, the use of artificial light in documentary photography can have equally evocative effects – Martin Parr (see *Party* (1995)) is one very good example. To see this photograph and the others mentioned above, see Golden (2008)

as well as the viewer. In my practice I have to take into account that I am taller than the average Chinese Singaporean and my photographs will reflect that difference in height. As such, many photographs are taken from a kneeling or crouching position. The result is that both my camera and my subjects are repositioned in the photograph relative to their surroundings, granting me potentially new insights and observable actions.

Bending conventional rules of photography. Technical manuals and magazines on photography often adhere to a rigid set of rules that compose a "good photograph" – these include the rule of thirds, fill-in flash, perfect and consistent exposure and the reciprocal rule. These rules are important, because they teach one how light works and how one's camera works under different conditions. However, it is up to us to bend these rules to make the photograph work for our respective studies. This involves taking into consideration the questions I posed about reading a photograph as a visual poem and then working backwards. The researcher becomes a visual poet, crafting the photograph in her head and at the same time taking the photograph. In my practice rules of composition become *guidelines.* What is more important is the message that I am composing and inscribing onto the photograph. My photographs tell a story, but also interrogate the social lives and realities of my subjects. At times this involves creating photographs that may not be conventionally "good", but still evoke a strong reaction from my viewers.

Accepting post-processing for what it is. Post-processing, the act of editing a photograph after it is taken, is not a new phenomena having been accessible through the use of chemical darkrooms, but its importance and accessibility has increased greatly with the availability of digital darkrooms – editing a photograph on a computer using software like Adobe Photoshop or Paintshop Pro. In my practice, I used to rely on a professional lab or darkroom technician to change the aesthetic quality of my photographs. With a digital darkroom, I bring control of the aesthetic back into my own hands. The digital darkroom is my way of *extending* the process of photo-taking, such that it is not just about the moment that is captured, but a refinement of that moment over a longer and more pondered period of time.

Photography, Visual Poetry and Transdiasporic Ethnicity

Photography's position in the study of race and ethnicity has been a contentious one. Photography has been used to subjugate, mobilise (Smith 2004) and celebrate individuals based on their race and ethnicity. During colonial times photography was a form of social othering and ordering of colonised people (Edwards 1992). Colonial photographs can be seen as a reflection of the ideologies and intentions of the colonial authorities, in which "power relations of the colonial situation were not only those of overt oppression, but also of insidious, unequal relationships which permeated all aspects of cultural confrontation" (Edwards 1992:4). By photographing ethnic groups and categorising them into an ordered

(subjugated) structure, colonial authorities were able to justify their role as liberators of racialised savages (Knowles 2006). But photography is also a tool of social action. It can be used to engage with racial, ethnic and other social prejudices by creating awareness of marginalised individuals. Although this has been well-documented in European and American academic literatures, less is known about photographers in Singapore, although this is now changing with the likes of photojournalist Samuel He who spent a month living with immigrant Indian labourers in Singapore and documenting their living conditions, exposing the racialised economic divides in contemporary Singaporean society[4]. Other photographers who have worked with similar individuals include Darren Soh (2001) and Jing Quek[5].

Photography is a powerful way for us to understand productions of transdiasporic ethnicity. It is able to do this through three key processes – *Immersion*, *Revelation* and *Reflection*. Immersion involves the creation of a photo-ethnographic space that acts as an additional navigable map for researcher, viewer and subject alike. Revelation exposes hidden relationships and social intimacies and distances that informants are unwilling or unable to talk about. Reflection acts as visual audit for the findings of the researcher, creating a reflexive point between researcher, reader and subject. Readers are challenged to interpret ethnic taste and productions of ethnicity for themselves. I will deal with each of these in turn.

Immersion draws upon visual poetry's ability to be aesthetically evocative and visually confrontational. Each photograph becomes a concentrated instance of ethnicity-making in transdiasporic space. If the wedding is a microcosm of transdiasporic space, the photograph is an instanced microcosm of the wedding, albeit one that is open to interpretation to whoever reads it. A photograph creates ethnographic space in three dimensions – height, width and depth. A sequence of photographs can also create space through a fourth dimension of time. The dimensionality of these photographs mean that the space created is multiply layered both in its depictions as well as its meanings. One can look *into* the photograph as well as *around* the things that surround the photographer's subjects. The result is an immersion into a field of study, powerfully contextualising the ethnographer's findings.

A visual poem does more than just immerse the reader in transdiasporic space. It reveals the social intimacies and distances of my informants, as well as the directions that they are steering their social trajectories. This occurs in two ways. The first is a study of the symbolic interactions (Goffman 1969) between individuals in photographs. How they look at, touch, react to or interact with each other can betray unspoken intimacies and distances. *Non*-interaction is equally important. For example, photographs exposing loneliness in crowded situations like weddings can betray an individual's position both within her own family as well as in a wider social context. The second is a study into the juxtapositional and complementing

[4] http://www.panpa.org.au/Public/Template5/ThreadView.aspx?tid=27086
[5] http://superhyperreal.com/test/SSgIdol.html

material practices of my informants. This is not just about *what* individuals use in weddings, it is also about *how* they are used in relation to each other. The positioning, consumption, production and display of aesthetic markers expose the different ethnic lifestyles that individuals like, and conversely the non-use of markers exposes what they do not like. Much can be garnered when using photographs to analyse contrasting aesthetic markers that interact in close physical proximity, and will be the focal point of my understanding of ethnic taste changes in chapter 7. The third way is that photography transcends language barriers through a study of action and not discourse - this is especially pertinent in my field of study, where many first or second-generation Chinese Singaporeans speak little to no English or Mandarin, limiting my interaction with them. Photography allows me to investigate individuals' ethnic tastes and ethnic lifestyles as they *live* it, as they consume aesthetic markers and interact with different individuals.

Finally, the photograph is a reflexive tool that acts as a visual audit on my findings. It challenges conceptions of ethnic taste and judgements made by researcher, reader and subject, exposing the "contradictory" nature of the photograph (Berger and Mohr 1982). This is possible for two reasons. The first is because photographs conceal as much as they reveal. Not only is this because a photograph is *cryptically descriptive*, in that each item in the photograph can mean something more than what it mundane depicts, but also because we must constantly question what we *do not see* that is obscured by what we *do see*. These obstructions can be literal, such as the tight crop of a photograph zoomed in onto an object at the expense of its surroundings, or they can be implicit, such as a happy posed family portrait concealing family conflicts and drama (Twine 2006). The second is because the photograph is *infinitely encoded*, and the intentions of the photographer may not necessarily be read by the reader. The result of this is that photographs have the potential to both support *and* undermine claims made in a sociological / ethnographic study. But this also means that photographs allow us to take a reflexive turn on what the researcher has observed for herself. We as readers are thus given the opportunity to develop our own unique understanding of the field of study, and the researcher's responsibility is then to ensure that that opportunity exists.

How Photographs will be used in this book

I will present photographs in two distinct ways in this book. The first is an embedding of individual photographs within textual chapters (chapters 6 to 9). The second is the use of thematic visual essays (Heng 2019) that embody my visual poetry framework. Photographs used within text will be intentionally less thick in their description and use of literary devices, as their placement in the book will involve a higher interaction with the text that they are embedded in. This does not mean that these photographs are present merely as illustrative tools. Rather, they will be arranged strategically to *extend* my textual observations and

findings, and at the same time allow readers to reflect on the subject matter (aesthetic markers, relationships, rituals) that I am analysing.

The first visual essay is a visual mapping of Singaporean Chineseness in chapter 5. The map is designed to do the following things. One, it is meant to introduce the reader to Singapore and the places where Singaporean Chineseness is made. This is a necessary and important step in this book because contemporary Chinese Singapore is a relatively understudied area in American and European sociological literature, and contemporary urban Singapore is an even less photographed location. The visual map immerses the reader and contextualises my observations of ethnic taste and ethnic lifestyles in later chapters. Two, the map creates a visual-ethnographic space that exposes the actions and interactions of my informants, and the social intimacies and distances that they are constantly making in everyday life. This is reflected in the way that they *dwell*, and the way they relate to other individuals and objects within each photograph.

The second visual essay forms the epilogue, concludes the book and extends my findings into a study of loneliness and economic exclusions experienced by first and second-generation Chinese Singaporeans. It is about the real and lived ramifications of aesthetic dissonance and connections between ethnic lifestyles and economic wealth. Differences in ethnic lifestyles and rapid economic expansion, coupled with state-led changes to language use in Singapore have meant that certain groups of individuals have found themselves excluded both socially and economically (Kong and Yeoh 2003, PuruShotam 1998). Their productions of ethnicity have, through political, historical, economic and social processes created social distances with exclusionary consequences. My visual essay analyses their isolation in a highly consociate event like the wedding, exposing the ironies of their elevation in status as ritual figureheads of the household – cared for and loved by family but forgotten by the economy. I will also show how individuals who have left one home to forge another has now found themselves alien again.

Conclusion

Photography and poetry remain underutilised in sociological research. I have in this chapter, and will for the rest of this book demonstrate the efficacy of photography, poetry *and* photography as visual poetry as tools of Sociology that allow for a deeper understanding of the way individuals make transdiasporic ethnicity. Photography delivers a deeper understanding of my chosen field of study; it has created gateways to access and a medium of interaction between me and my informants. It generates an additional layer of sociological texture and understanding of race, ethnicity and the social spaces in which ethnicity-making occurs that text alone would struggle to accomplish. Likewise, seeing a photograph as a

visual poem amplifies its efficacy, allowing me to add one more layer of self-reflexivity, emotion and autobiography to my data.

This chapter laid out the groundwork and methodological framework upon which photographs will be used in this book. It also mapped out suggestions on how to read my presented photographs, and what role they played in exposing productions of Singaporean Chineseness. In the next chapter, I will draw upon photography's ability to expose the material environments and everyday lives of Chinese Singaporeans as a way to introduce the reader to the Chinese Singaporean landscape.