

## Short Social Stories 3 – Migrant Photos

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While on one level photographs are just thin pieces of paper, or digital files of zeros and ones, they can also mean much more. As Elizabeth Edward put it, “They are made to hold the fleeting, to still time, to create memory” (1999:222).

The photograph infuses almost all levels of memory, even those of which it is not directly part. It constitutes a meta-value of memory construction, its tentacles spread out, blurring and constructing memory in its own insistent image. (1999: 221)

It is not surprising then that when we asked Hong Kong return migrants about the objects they took with them when moving to another country, they often mentioned photographs. As Jason noted, photographs are something that have been important to his life no matter where he lived. He said “I think things that are precious are things that are frankly passed down from my parents. And, you know, a lot of that could be photographs of us growing up”. Photos then can remind us not only of the people captured in them, but also those behind the camera, or who gave us the photo prints. In this way, photos point to and create interpersonal networks that often continue after migration.

One example of this can be seen in the Radio Television Hong Kong documentary entitled ‘Hong Kong Connection’. This documentary follows the lives of several Hong Kong families who have migrated to Western countries. One father, Keung, is a so-called ‘astronaut’ who left his wife and children living in Canada while he returned to Hong Kong for work. In the documentary, he reflects on how he feels lonely and sometimes confused because of his decision to live apart from his beloved family. However, as soon as he begins looking at photos of his family, his face lights up and he begins telling the stories behind the photos. Photographs in this case provide him with comfort, as well as an imagined linked to his family.

Because photos are so important to us though, they can demand extra attention. Frances noted that when she moved to Canada, and later moved back to Hong Kong, she carried all of her photographs by hand. This is because her photos are “precious to [her]”, and she “just [doesn’t] trust the freight forwarder” to keep them safe.

Not everyone we spoke to felt the same way though. In fact, while our participants thought it was important to bring photographs with them, none of them could remember using or interacting with them often. So although Elizabeth Edward notes that photos are “objects [that] can be handled, framed, cut, crumpled, caressed, pinned on a wall, put under a pillow, or wept over” (Edward, 1999: 226), sometimes they just sit in a box or under a bed. Their value is not always linked to their use.

In addition, sometimes taking photographs may not mean much at all. When Jill was preparing to move to the UK for school, she did research online about what kinds of things she should take. When we asked why she took photographs, Jill replied:

I heard it was a done thing. It was listed you know on the internet, ‘bring photographs of your friends and family if you miss them.’ Okay. You know like I think some of the photos that were brought like they were so contrived, they were posed and you know it was funny. Everyone seems to have this little book of their family, of images.

Yet Jill admitted that she didn’t really look at her pictures and only eventually shared them with really close friends. In her case, having photos nearby wasn’t about a deep emotional connection to the memories they represented. It reflected the fact that she had read and followed internet advice.

Photographs can therefore mean different things to different migrants. Maybe in the future, when looking at people’s photos, it would be interesting to ask not only ‘Who is that?’ or ‘What was happening there?’ but also ‘Why did you keep this photo?’ and ‘When did you last look at it?’

#### References:

Edwards, Elizabeth. "Photographs as Objects of Memory." In *Material Memories: Design and Evocation*, edited by Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward and Jeremy Aynsley, pp. 221-36. Oxford: Berg, 1999.