An Act of Preservation
Photographing my grandmother’s funeral portrait in Vancouver

by Cathy Chan

Last September my grandmother asked me to take her photograph for her funeral portrait. My parents, aunt and grandmother had come for a visit to Vancouver and during one of our walks, I brought along my camera so that I could take photos of my grandmother, whose life has been full of hardships and determination, and whose stories and lessons I wanted to be able to preserve and share.

My grandmother, who is 86 years old, has always been a planner, and in asking me to do this there wasn’t any sentimental about her eventual passing. only matter-of-fact pragmatism in capturing her likeness before she was gone. I was honoured that she asked me to do this; and being aware of my responsibility as a photographer I tried to make her portrait with as much respect and equanimity as I could. During a brisk morning in Harrison B.C. we stopped in locations with a suitable backdrop of foliage, and I would photograph her looking directly into the camera. There were almost no instructions as to what her facial expression should be. I would count aloud to three and my grandmother would change her expressions just slightly each time I photographed her. Looking through the viewfinder, I saw a person whose strength and willpower helped her raise a family; survive through adversity and achieve the respect of her peers while having come from humble beginnings.

Death portraits have been made throughout the history of photography. They play an important role in memorializing the dead and in people’s grieving process. In Chinese funerary practices it is customary to have a small altar made for the person who has passed away. Offerings of food are placed on the altar with an image of the deceased person as the central focus. Photographs of my paternal grandfather and grandmother are displayed in my parents’ home above a small shelf with food and incense offerings. In China, each village has its own set of funeral customs. Many of the traditions were outlawed following the Cultural Revolution in China, but the customs are still practiced by many families in China and by families of first-generation immigrants around the world. In Chinese families, respect and care for the spirits of deceased family members, referred to as “ancestor worship” is commonly practiced because of the belief that the spirits of the deceased watch over living family members from a non-physical realm.

The use of photography to memorialize deceased ancestors has its roots in painting. Chinese commemorative paintings were used in ancestor worship because it was believed that the power of the living person resided in their portrait after death. Two of the defining characteristics of ancestor portraits are pictorial fidelity to external appearance and use of the iconic, forward-facing pose. Throughout China's history, the emphasis on realism in ancestor portraits has shifted. The exact replication of physical features was desirable during the Han Dynasty (202 BCE – 220 CE), while portraits conveying physical resemblance in addition to personality were in favor during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420 – 589 CE). In the Tang Dynasty (618 – 907 CE), advances in the mimetic representation of Buddhist deities and monks in memorial portrait sculptures encouraged a shift in ancestor portraits back toward realism. Later during the Song (960 – 1279 CE) and Yuan (1279 – 1368 CE) Dynasties the value of exact replication of physical appearance was diminished in favor of portraits that reflected a person’s mind and spirit. By the Ming (1368 – 1644 CE) and Qing (1644 – 1912 CE) Dynasties there was yet another return to realism in ancestor portraits as greater awareness of the self and individuality resulted in larger numbers of portraits being created. With the invention of photography, photographic portraits have largely replaced paintings, and the assumed ability of a photograph to represent reality appears to resolve ideals surrounding the faithful reproduction of the deceased ancestor.

My grandmother, who we call Nung Nung, is the head of her family. She is strong-willed, independent, and domi- nant. My memories of my grandmother from my youth are of a woman who yelled a lot, disciplining her grown children, her grandchildren, and now her great-grandchildren. Her love and concern for the wellbeing of her family was expressed very audibly; my mother would often reprimand me to get into the car with them. My mom said that she was very stubborn, and determined. The funeral portraits of my grandmother only include the upper half of her body directly facing the camera. As I don’t fully understand her dialect, she had to motion to me that she wanted the portrait to include only her upper body and have nice, natural scenery in the background. In the portraits of my grandmother there is directness and intimacy. Her eyes look honestly at the photographer and the viewer saying, “This is how I want to be remembered.” Only upon further research did I understand that the framing technique she requested followed the iconic pose of Chinese ancestor portraits. The “solemn majesty...created by the strict frontality, symmetry, stasis and compositional centrality of the figure” is a “strict device used in many parts of the world to depict deities and transcendent individuals.”

While I tried to photograph my grandmother with equanimity, my role as a photographer was not benign. Each photograph was made in the fraction of a second that portrayed her the way I perceive her to be: strong, stoic, determined and a leader. While looking through the negatives I decided that the dignified portrait of my grandmother with one hand placed just above her stomach characterized her the best. Instead, the photograph my grandmother chose to have as her funeral portrait was one where her personality looks softer, her eyes a little bigger, and she is “smiling from the inside.”

The medium of photography enables my grandmother to choose the legacy that she will leave behind. She has chosen this last portrait because she wants to be remembered as being ‘grandmotherly’ and content. Photography provides a fragment of the whole individual, but in the end this ‘grandmotherly’ portrait makes the accomplishments of her life more lasting because it focuses away from the adversities that have shaped her character. It will strengthen my memories of my grandmother’s care and love for her family, which is what I believe she hoped for when requesting her funeral portrait.

Works Cited

Cathy Chan is an artist based in Vancouver, BC where she is currently attending Emily Carr University of Art & Design. Working mainly in photography, her interests include environmental and social sustainability, spirituality, and the passage of time.