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# Family Memory in a Taiwanese Context

**Ying-yu Chen**

School of Information  
University of Michigan  
4370 North Quad  
105 S. State St.  
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1285  
yyc@umich.edu

**Mark S. Ackerman**

School of Information &  
Computer Science and Engineering  
University of Michigan  
4372 North Quad  
105 S. State St.  
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1285  
ackerm@umich.edu

**Abstract**

In this paper, we explore how Taiwanese practices of family memory and memory artifacts show significant differences from those in the US, suggesting important memory practices are cultural and collective. For example, Taiwanese do not keep pictures of deceased ancestors in the same way as Americans might, they do not have family heirlooms, nor do they keep extensive childhood memorabilia. We studied this through 20 interviews and household inventories conducted in Taiwan.

**AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

Memory, memory artifacts, family memory, collective practices, photographs, intercultural, China, Taiwan.

**ACM CLASSIFICATION KEYWORDS**

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous, H.5.3 Group and Organization Interfaces: Computer-supported cooperative work, K.4.2 Social Issues

**INTRODUCTION**

Over the last 10 years, there has been a line of exceptional HCI work detailing family memory, including photographs, audio, and new potential artifacts. Research work, for example, has explored lifelogging [6] and new memory objects for households (e.g., [7]).

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All of these however examine family memory largely outside of its socio-historical context, assuming it to be a static concept and one that is generally agreed upon. Kirk and Sellen exemplary work [5] is an exception, and in many ways, that paper took previous HCI work about memory and pointed out how complex the practices actually were. They detailed how memory artifacts were the result of everyday practices, including family photography practices, how these practices are often conjoint with other kinds of family practices.

In this study, we try to take that a step further. We investigated Taiwanese practices of family memory and memory artifacts, finding them to be significantly different than American, or other Western, views. For example, Taiwanese do not keep pictures of deceased ancestors in the same way as Americans might, they do not have family heirlooms, nor do they keep extensive childhood memorabilia. These issues necessarily bring in questions of collective practice – practices that individuals follow, but which are largely collectively sanctioned, accepted, and rewarded. Below we explore a few of the more intriguing differences resulting from collective, culturally-situated practices that effect how memories are kept and stored.

## **STUDY**

The study examined Taiwanese households. Taiwan is the second-most densely populated country in the world (following only Bangladesh) with 23 million inhabitants and only 36,000 square km of land [1]. As a result, Taiwan land prices are high, and housing is expensive. It is also a relatively wealthy country, having built a strong industrial base.

Taiwan's cultural identity is traditional Chinese. In many ways, it is closer to classical Chinese culture than is mainland China after the Cultural Revolution and other upheavals. Traditional Chinese practices are often better preserved in Taiwan [2] than in urban mainland China.

### *Methodology*

The first author, who is Taiwanese, interviewed 23 people in 20 households in Taiwan. Participants were from 35 to 70 years old, with the majority in their 50s and 60s. The locations were half in Taipei, capital of Taiwan, and half in Hsinchu, a city south of Taipei. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling.

We asked the interviewees to show the public space of their house and asked permission to view the more private areas of the house like bedrooms. About half of the participants were willing to show the bedrooms to us. We asked them to show us the objects with sentimental value (following [6]), and asked to see things left from their parents. The objects and the house interior were photographed.

We systematically analyzed the objects in the houses according to the classification scheme in Petrelli et al. [6]: type of object, location, display, referent of the object, nature of any memory, and evocation of memory. We then found relevant portions of the transcript where participants described those objects, and examined whether the transcripts indicated culturally specific practices. The specifics of the practice and their context served as further points of investigation using photographs and transcripts.

## SHU-LI AND HER APARTMENT

Shu-Li's family is roughly representative of what a middle class house in Taiwan would look like (although with perhaps better taste).

Shu-Li is about 50, and she lives with her husband and a daughter. Shu-Li's house is a flat in a 16-floor apartment building.

When entering the house, one first sees the living room. The visual center of the living room is the television. The set of sofa forms a half circle facing the television, with a coffee table in the center of the circle.

On top of the television, there are souvenirs collected from family trips or trips Shu-Li took with her husband. Although she kept saying that she needed to throw some things away to keep the house more "simple" (other participants used "uncluttered"), eventually she said she likes them all because they are full of



Figure 1. Shu-Li's hallway. The 2 photographs are barely visible in the upper left corner of the figure. Figure 2. (Not from Shu-Li's house) The family shrine is in the upper left.

memories about family trips.

At the side of the television, there is a wooden cabinet with a glass door. In the hallway to the bedrooms are bookshelves. The only two photographs that can be seen in this house are placed in high up on one shelf and not in normal view (Figure 1). Instead, the family's photographs are all in two big drawers in the living room. Shu-Li puts the photos unordered into them, seldom looking at them or showing them.

At the end of the hallway are three bedrooms. There are no photos or other decoration in Shu-Li's bedroom. Only two framed pieces of Chinese antiques windows are on the wall, over her bedside. Other participants commonly had a marriage portrait over their bed.

Missing in Su-Li's apartment is a family shrine. Roughly one fifth of the households in the study had a family shrine in their house (Figure 2); other families kept them in their parents' house or in another family member's house. Taiwanese families venerate ancestors together on Chinese holidays or on the memorial death date of a family member. We will return to this below.

## MEMORY ARTIFACTS IN CULTURAL CONTEXT

We now want to describe two practices that we believe are culturally-situated.

### *Heirlooms and sentimental objects*

In Shu-Li's bedroom, back in the deepest spot in the closet, wrapped with a piece of paper in a paper bag, is one garment from Shu-Li's late father's clothes and some coins. Shu-Li explained:

*"When my father passed away five years ago, my mother gave those to me. It is a traditional Taiwanese custom to leave a piece of clothing and some coins to descendants. It's like giving blessings to them."*

It is a tradition to keep one of a late parent's clothing items. People get the clothing and put them in the deepest spot of their closet. That way they can see the bag or container every day, but not the actual items. Other interviewees echoed this viewpoint as well:

*"I don't have anything left from my mother, except for a dress. I have it in my closet. I rarely look at it, but I know it is there, that is enough." (Interview 6)*

Almost no other object in the house is from one's deceased parents. Most Taiwanese do not keep furniture, utility objects, or artwork by which to remember the deceased.

*"Except for the clothes, I don't have anything left from my father." (Shu-Li)*

In summary, in Taiwan, there is almost nothing on display that relates to one's parents or other ancestors, and there is little in closets or cabinets.

#### *Photographs*

As mentioned, Shu-Li has only a few family photos displayed in the hallway in an unobtrusive manner. Shu-Li explained:

*"I think family love is something considered to be reserved. Family photos don't have to be flaunted and swaggered around by putting them up in an obvious spot in a house. Photos are for private viewing. Things*

*with emotional values can just be put away in hidden places; they don't have to be shown."*

This view was not unusual; there is still a sense that displaying family photographs is "showing off". For some, having family photos on display is showing guests that they have a happy family and is unnecessary. An elderly husband in one interview said: *"We are not modern, we know where our happiness lies."*

Other participants did put photos in the living room or dining room, but they were all photos of the family. They might be of the mother with her children on a trip they took together, or from when the family went abroad. Landscapes with the family as minor figures were common. Recently, families have started going to a portrait studio to take a group family photograph. Individual photos were rarely observed. Said one participant.

*"The photographs should be of the whole family. Individual photos are not meaningful to put up. They go in the photo albums." (Interview 14)*

Our participants put their photo albums and photographs in the drawers beside the television. These were enclosed spaces hidden from view. Photos kept there are rarely viewed, and people did not remember the last time they looked at them.

There were three exceptions to the lack of individual photos displayed in either public or private spaces. The first were pictures of children or grandchildren. The second was in line with the Taiwanese custom to put up funeral pictures of late parents on the wall in the

dining room (one of which can be seen in the upper middle of Figure 4) or beside the family shrine. This custom is observed by some households, but not all.

Finally, Taiwanese put more private photos on their desk under a transparent mat, usually in the study room or in a bedroom, but occasionally on the coffee table. The photos that go under the mat are individual photos of a single family member, or group photos of people who are not family members. For example, they may be photos of a girlfriend or boyfriend; friends from school, work or a club; or simply photos of oneself:

*"I put my favorite photos of myself under my desk [pad] in my room. And also the photos of me with my best friends from school. (Interview 14-2)"*

## **DISCUSSION**

There is not sufficient room here to discuss what we think are the cultural issues that show themselves in the kinds of memory artifacts in a Taiwanese house. However, we would like to discuss several briefly that we hope to explore through further analysis.

The first is the effect of religious practice and culture on memory practices. "[T]he majority [of Taiwanese] practices a religion that is a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religion. ([1], p. 2)" Ancestor veneration (often translated ancestor worship) is common and part of everyday religious practice.

The role of the shrine was visually reinforced everyday in traditional Chinese domestic architecture. The traditional house had a courtyard entrance at the center, which included the family shrine, and extended family members lived in wings off the courtyard. It was

impossible to not see the shrine everyday, since it was visually and literally in the center of the family living arrangements. Taiwanese in flats now have the shrine in an upper story (mostly in rural areas) or on the wall in the living room. In a big family, the shrine exists in one of the houses, often the elder brother.

The shrine for deceased relatives is usually placed to the left of the Taoist god that the family worships. Relatives get together and worship the shrine on the death anniversary of the deceased and on traditional Chinese holidays.

For our Taiwanese participants, connection with the deceased is done through the family shrine; this is a major form of memory. In fact, it appears to be *the* major form for the memory of deceased ancestors. The role of religion, specifically the cultural understandings of memory and memory practices in Taiwan needs to be further explored, especially with regard to the collective and individual use of memory artifacts. Furthermore, the relationships between a seeming lack of innumerable memory artifacts about deceased family members as might be in a US home, and the cultural uses of a family altar need to be better understood; memory as a practice may be conceived of differently than in the US.

Second, we saw considerable evidence that keeping mementos of the past and especially of ancestors is much less acceptable in Taiwan. Children often sell the possessions of their parents; keeping those possessions makes little sense to them. We would like to understand how other kinds of memory artifacts or augmentations, if any, may be more appropriate.

Finally, we will need to understand the changes in Taiwanese society to fully understand what we have observed. Traditional Chinese families were patrilineal, patriarchal, prescriptively virilocal kinship groups [8]. Traditionally, "filial piety" would require children to take good care of their parents, and the filial duty, including veneration of ancestors, would pass to the sons. On the other hand, daughters were considered to have "married out," becoming part of the husband's family. As such, they had no right in their maiden family issues, including any family possessions. For example two of the interviewees in their fifties said that they are "married out" daughters so they have no right to claim anything from the late parents. A considerable amount of our data can be understood in light of traditional practices.

However, Taiwanese practices are moving. Younger Taiwanese are becoming more global in fashion and more secular. For example, the fashion in some "cosmopolitan," younger families is to display family photographs on end-tables, something that would not be done in more traditional households.

### **CONCLUSION**

In our study, we found a number of sharp differences between Taiwanese families and American families in their memory practices and artifacts. These differences appear to be rooted in cultural and religious differences, arguing that memory itself is a collective practice. Future designers of digital memory artifacts will need to take this into account.

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