

Family Portraits: The Reconstruction of “Family Time” Through Generations

Yijing Li



Figure 1. Photo taken by my father, *Parents' engagement party*, at home, in China, 1989.



Figure 2. Photo taken by photographer in China, *My parents' wedding party*, at a hotel banquet, 1992.



Figure 3. Photo taken by my father, *Moon Festival Party*, at restaurant in Tianjin China, 2002.



Figure 4. Photo taken by my mother, *Chinese New Year*, China, 2019.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of "liquid time" states that photographs are not fixed into static permanence but remain dynamic and unfixed as they acquire new meanings in new circumstances. I had not considered this concept until I began going through family photographs after my grandfather passed away. There I was, sitting on the sofa in my grandparents' house, enabled by these photographs to perceive an odd thing—dining scenarios in my family photographs all represented the same behaviour of people holding cups of soft drinks, "clinking" glasses with or toasting each other, and smiling when the photographer pressed the camera shutter. No one considered this behaviour peculiar because it had already become a habit of my family's dining culture even though my grandfather never drank soft drinks because of his diabetes. Four family photographs (figures 1-4) present dining scenarios from the 1980s to 2020. These four portraits include three print photographs and one digital photograph, and were taken at different times, by different photographers, at different locations. Within a span of forty years, these four photographs showcase a changing family performance.

Scholarship has examined how such family portraits can be shaped by state policies and consumerism. Using this scholarship as an entry point, I will examine this group of images through several lenses. Firstly, I will compare the different symbolic meanings that were associated with the act of what I will call "clinking" glasses in China between the Cold War era of the 1950s and the Economic Reform era of the 1990s. I will explore the changing dining culture within my own family during this time by interviewing my grandparents and parents, and will examine how state policies influenced how Chinese families adapted to consumerism and reflected a desire to engage in an American middle-class life. Secondly, I will examine if these family portraits reshaped my generation's understanding of "clinking" glasses or toasting. I will also examine whether general family portraits of this nature further influenced Coca-Cola's localization and marketing strategy in China. Thirdly, I will examine how Coca-Cola's advertisements to Chinese consumers reinforced the link between soft drinks, toasting with glasses, and a sense of "family harmony." As Roland Barthes observes, photography has a remarkable suitability for mythmaking through advertisement. Moreover, I will consider how the

Coca Cola's brand's co-creation practices gives consumers certain expectations about how to pose, look, and feel in front of the camera in the age of social media.

The conformity of the action of clinking glasses in these four photographs over a time span of forty years started to attract my attention after reading research studies on Chinese wine culture. To my knowledge, there are no depictions of clinking glasses in any Chinese handscroll paintings from the pre-modern era (figure 5 and 6). There also does not appear to be any trace of this custom in pre-modern Chinese books, fictional nor non-fictional. This absence indicates that the behaviour of clinking glasses may not have existed in pre-modern Chinese dining culture. The lack of any visual or textual evidence of this action may be because the action did not conform to pre-modern China's strict rank system and Confucianism's ritual system. Pre-modern Chinese drinking etiquette dictated that the host would toast elders and superiors first, followed by the other guests. When toasting elders and superiors, those in attendance would stand up and bow modestly. As a result, the act of touching glasses together across one table contradicted the table etiquette of the time. Although there is no academic scholarship in the West that records who invented the action of clinking glasses, it has appeared in various Western apocryphal stories and modern oil paintings (figure 7).



Figure 5. Hongzhong Gu,
*The Night Revels of Han
Xizai*, 980 AD, Song
Dynasty, Palace Museum,
Beijing.



Figure 6. Qiu Ying, *Spring Night Dinner Party at Plum Garden*, Ming Dynasty, Palace Museum, Beijing.



Figure 7. Peder Severin Krøyer, *Hip, Hip, Hurrah! Artists' Party at Skagen*, 1888, Goteborgs Konst Museum, Sweden.¹

The customs associated with pre-modern Chinese table etiquette were in place until the era of the Republic of China.² Since the Opium Wars of 1840, modernization and westernization had begun to take root in China and the action of clinking glasses started to appear in royal and upper-class families. However, westernization was limited to a privileged class who could afford to study and travel abroad, and the domestic spread of this westernized cultural trend began to decline in the 1950s. From 1950 to 1953, China was fighting a proxy war against America in Korea. Around this time, the newspaper *People's Daily* started to associate Coca-Cola and the act of clinking glasses with

¹ Imaged source: <https://www.meisterdrucke.com/kunstdrucke/Peder-Severin-Kr%C3%B8yer/72423/Hip-Hip-Hurra!-K%C3%BCnstlerpartei-in-Skagen,-1888.html>

² Mu-Chou Poo, "The Use and Abuse of Wine in Ancient China." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 42, no. 2 (1999): 138. DOI:10.1163/1568520991446820.

bourgeois society. The action was seen as a behaviour that conformed with “American civilization,” a view that reflected the Cold War ideology between communist states and capitalist countries. These products and behaviours were regarded as being “as dangerous as the American formidable military.”³ This Cold War ideology intensified during the Cultural Revolution.⁴ According to my grandmother, toasting with imported soft drinks in public during the era of the Cultural Revolution was reported by Red Guards and even led to public criticism.⁵ As a result, no one dared to engage in this behaviour at the dining table. Unfortunately, most of my family photographs taken before 1990 were taken in studios and do not depict dining scenes from this era.

The Chinese government re-established diplomatic ties with the United States and initiated its “Open Door Policy” in 1978. This policy encouraged Chinese society to modernize by “learning from the West.” Since the introduction of the policy, hundreds of publicly circulated materials and internal communications were published in China with the aim of introducing Western literature, music, art, philosophy, and economics to the Chinese public. A consumer revolution based largely upon a sampling of Western culture and lifestyle took place among common people in China, and clinking glasses when toasting one another during both formal and informal gatherings began to emerge as part of this introduction of Western customs.

The first two family portraits I consider were taken in 1989 and 1992 respectively. They show scenes of clinking glasses together while family members toast each other at my parents’ engagement party and wedding party. My father does not remember toasting in this way at a dinner party during his childhood, but this action had become a social norm after he graduated from university.⁶ Although my generation is only removed by seventeen years from all the brutal political movements of the Cold War era, clinking together glasses filled with soft drinks became a social norm and an essential aspect of

³ The People’s Daily is the official newspaper of the Centre Committee on the Chinese Communist Party. The newspaper provides direct information on the policies and viewpoints of the Chinese Communist Party.

⁴ The Cultural Revolution was a sociopolitical movement in China from 1966 until 1976. One of its goal was to preserve Chinese communism by purging both remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society.

⁵ The Red Guards were members of a mass student-led paramilitary social movement mobilized and guided by Chairman Mao Zedong during first phase of the Cultural Revolution.

⁶ My father was born in 1967.

our dining culture.⁷ The disappearance and then re-emergence of imported soft drinks on the dinner table in China can be seen as an indicator of one country's political ideology movement. Wang Guangyi's contemporary artwork, *Great Criticism* (figure 8), combines Chinese socialist subjects with the Western consumer brand Coca-Cola to showcase the abrupt societal change that took place in contemporary China. While Wang's artwork was gathering international attention on the global stage, my family portraits were quietly recording the same underlying tensions and power plays of the world within vernacular dinner scenarios. Even though family photography was being maligned by scholars' critical gaze at that time, these images document Chinese people's aspirations to live a modern and bourgeois life during the Economic Reform era. They reflect the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie and naturalize class aspirations through the rhetoric of the domestic.⁸ These aspirations signal the bourgeois aspect of the family photograph when envisioned as an instrumental technology in producing normative family integration, and reveal how images attest to life as people wish it to be, but not always as it is.⁹ As Zuromskis has argued, snapshots allowed us to record ourselves and our histories as we would have them remembered."¹⁰



Figure 8. Wang Guangyi, *Great Criticism: Coca Cola*, 1990–93, oil on canvas.

⁷ I was born in 1993.

⁸ Thy Phu and Elspeth H Brown, "The Culture Politics of Aspiration: Family Photography's Mixed Feelings," *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 17, no. 2, (2018): 153.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412918782352>.

⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power." *Sociological Theory*, vol. 7, no.1 (1989): 14–25.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/202060>.

¹⁰ Catherine Zuromskis, "Snapshot Photography, now and then: making, sharing, and liking photographs at the digital frontier." *After Image* Volume 44, Issue 1-2, (July-Oct 2016)

<https://doi.org/10.1525/aft.2016.44.1-2.18>

While people use snapshots to record history as they want it to be remembered, snapshots can also impact peoples' memories as time passes. Time is the best catalyst to create a new "tradition" or to add various meanings to peoples' aspirations, and the ability of time to work in this way is illustrated through family photographs. When I was a child, I always considered the clinking of glasses represented in the photograph of my parents' engagement party a celebration of two families' futurity, and I had never thought there could be an additional meaning beneath this action. Since my generation did not live through the Cultural Revolution, the clinking of glasses was rather an iconic behaviour that indexed "family union" rather than a performance that signaled a desire for the "prosperity of the American Life."¹¹ As my generation grew up, China entered a new era and started to chase the "Chinese Dream."¹² With the embodiment of China's new political ideology, the association between clinking glasses and American life started to fade from peoples' minds. Moreover, even after learning about the political background of Economic Reform and the Cold War context of the photograph of my parents' engagement party, my personal connection to this family portrait still leads me to focus on the family union within the image. This inclination is because each family portrait still carries a particular punctum that is personal to the viewer.¹³ The punctum of this photograph made me reflect on how it communicates notions of respectability, happiness, and futurity. Examined through both lenses, this family portrait breaks out of the cultural field into the personal, but also has the power to change the cultural field through time. Family portraits can create a new social norm by forming a connection between the clinking of glasses and ideas of family union in Chinese culture.

Because family portraits can carry or reconstitute new memories for new generations, they also have the capability to reconstruct a new reality in the new world. When Coca-

¹¹ Margaret Olin, "Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes's "Mistaken" identification," in *Representations*, vol. 80, no. 1, (2002). DOI 10.1. 10.1525/rep.2002.80.1.99.

¹² The Chinese Dream is a term closely associated with Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communists Party. Xi began promoting the phrase as a slogan during a high-profile tour of an exhibit at the National Museum of China in November 2012, shortly after he became leader of the CCP. Xi said that the Chinese Dream is the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation".

¹³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 1st Edition. (US New York: Hill and Wang, 1981)

Cola used the clinking of glasses in their advertisements as a traditional Chinese behaviour, Chinese audiences did not feel peculiar about this representation because our generation does not associate the clinking of glasses with a Western bourgeois lifestyle. Six years on from the Cold War era, Coca-Cola no longer saw itself as a crucial force in America's global campaign against communism.¹⁴ Instead, the company started to embrace Chinese cultural business campaigns. Ironically, when Coca-Cola was searching for traditional Chinese elements to build a connection with their consumers on a personal level, they used the action of clinking glasses in various advertisements without recognizing that this action was imported from the West. Neither Coca-Cola nor Chinese audiences realized this action was originally a Western bourgeois social custom that was once interpreted as the opposite of Chinese "tradition". Moreover, those advertisements deepened the associations of clinking glasses within Chinese culture. Coca-Cola's 2017 advertisement for the Chinese Lunar New Year campaign depicts a traditional Chinese New Year's Eve scenario and is filled with traditional Chinese setups like red lanterns, red winter grilles with the Chinese character "Fu", Chinese hotpots and other Chinese festival decorations (figure 9 and 10). In the advertisement, the whole family is clinking glasses with each other, saying "Happy New Year" and evoking the idea of "family togetherness." Coca-Cola naturally associates ideas of "Chinese harmony" through the behaviour of "clinking glass" with their product—Coke. The naturalness of this association comes from the way photography represents its objects. Roland Barthes had a theory that the nature of the modern "myth" could connect an iconic object with community identity. In his "Rhetoric of the Image," he examines photography's remarkable capacity for mythmaking through advertisement, in this case of packaged soft drinks and festival dinner scenarios.¹⁵ Although the Coca-Cola advertisement is full of "symbols," there nonetheless remains in the visual image a kind of natural "being-there" of objects. If we apply Charles Pierce's icon and index theory to our reading of the image,

¹⁴ Kuisel, Richard F. "Coca-Cola and the Cold War: The French Face Americanization, 1948-1953." *French Historical Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, DOI:10.2307/286280 (1991): 96–116. At a convention for international bottlers, a placard of Coca-Cola wrote, "When we think of Communists, we think of the Iron Curtain, BUT when THEY think of democracy, they think of Coca-Cola."

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image", in *Roland Barthes, The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: University of California Press, 1985)

the connotations of family union can be tied to indexicality; this idea seems to exist in the photograph along with people holding the soft drink and toasting. Moreover, through advertising, Coke is wrapped up in mythic meanings in order to “naturally” appear as an answer to consumers’ needs and desires for family harmony. The storyline of Coca-Cola’s advertisement tends to present a “problem” within the family, as in the 2017 advertisement the “Loneliness of the Snowman” and the 2019 advertisement “The Little Conflict between Brothers that Caused Family Disharmony.” At the end of these narratives, Coke becomes the “solution” to solve all family problems, and clinking glasses of Coke together with one another becomes a symbol of the family’s happy ending. Coca-Cola persuaded consumers by addressing cultural anxieties and then using the myth to smooth over these anxieties.



Figure 9 *Coca-Cola Chinese New Year Advertisement Campaign in China, 2017.*¹⁶

¹⁶ Image source: <https://www.thedailymeal.com/news/drink/coca-cola-celebrates-chinese-new-year-new-ad/122916>



Figure 10. *Coca-Cola Chinese New Year Advertisement Campaign in China, 2017.*¹⁷

The connection between clinking glasses filled with soft drinks and Chinese family harmony was reinforced in the age of social media, when Coca-Cola's marketing practices increasingly included the participation of consumers as a way of co-creating brand value. In the age of social media, brand management changed its strategy from attributing a series of product qualities in an advertisement to generating a whole relay of social effects through the participation of consumers. Coca-Cola uses the concept of "consumer discipline" proposed by John Sinclair; this concept regards consumers as "immaterial labourers" within brand co-creation practices.¹⁸ Sinclair's concept of "immaterial labour" was originally proposed by Italian sociologist and philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato, who described the affective labour of human contact and interaction during social activities as being transferred to an intangible product. Coca-Cola further develops the labour of human contact by creating the association between clinking glasses of coke and people's desire for family harmony, and applies this theory to encourage Chinese consumers to co-create brand aura.¹⁹ Even though the cultural meaning of family harmony did not

¹⁷ Image source: <https://www.thedailymeal.com/news/drink/coca-cola-celebrates-chinese-new-year-new-ad/122916>

¹⁸ Charles Sanders Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler, (New York: Dover Publications, 1955: 98–119; John Sinclair, "Globalization and the Advertising Industry in China," *Chinese Journal of Communication* Vol.1, no. 1 (2008): 82.DOI:10.1080/17544750701861947

¹⁹ Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri. *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 292; Yinuo Shi, *Glocalization in China: An Analysis of Coca-Cola's Brand Co-Creation Process with Consumers in China*. (London, Canada: The University of Western Ontario, 2019), 8.

originally reside within the consumer goods themselves, the meaning was gradually transferred to them via the behaviours and practices of consumers, who acted within the beliefs of their culture.

The fourth photograph I examine is a digital photograph posted on Instagram by my cousin to showcase the harmony of an extended family. On the social media post accompanying the image, he wrote, “Three generations dining together to celebrate Chinese New Year. I helped my aunt to cook at least three dishes. Am I a great chef or not? We will wait for the count down together while eating dumplings!” Social media platforms have fundamentally changed peoples’ roles from passive listeners to active participants, and encouraged their storytelling through symbols and actions within family photography. People have started to recreate the scenarios in advertisements and voluntarily participate in the performance in their real lives. My cousin’s Instagram post can be seen as my family’s reenactment of the original story setup of Coca-Cola’s 2019 Chinese New Year Campaign (figure 11).



Figure 11. Left: Coca Cola Chinese Lunar New Year Advertisement Campaign 2019. Right: Photo taken by my mother in China, *Chinese New Year at home*, 2019.

This reenactment verges upon role-playing in its elastic appropriation of the virtual scenario in the advertisement. At the moment the camera shutter was pressed, all of my family members shared in a performance of the act of clinking glasses in front of the camera. Barthes wrote about how photography will “instantaneously make another body” for oneself before the camera and transform oneself “in advance into an image” as suggested by the time.²⁰ Indeed, everyone in that photo had attuned themselves to the event of photography, and catered to the social process that positioned them in relation to spectators and camera operations. They all posed themselves with the assurance of knowing how to present themselves, and this produced them as subjects in a dynamic performance who played with, confirmed, and at times subverted expectations about how to pose, look, and feel.²¹ The clinking of glasses was an action intended to convey a message to the potential audiences on my cousin’s social media. The message was that his family was happy and united. The photographer—my mother— and the viewer—whoever saw the photograph on Instagram—collaborated in the reproduction of family happiness and unity. This family portrait shaped its representation because viewers encountered and projected a screen made up of dominant mythologies and preconceptions. Meanwhile, this cultural mythology was further reinforced through the photograph’s distribution on social media.²² This image projected my cousin’s aspiration to this life despite the inconvenient and unpleasant facts of his daily life. Behind the virtual stage curtain of social media, the inconvenient truth was that our grandfather was fighting diabetes, so his cup was empty. This blurring of reality that the photograph accomplishes aligns with Nancy West’s corporate study of Kodak, which looks at how “through advertisement, consumers learned to use their amateur cameras to project fantasies that were distinct from real life, thereby erasing inconvenient and unpleasant facts from daily life.”²³

²⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, 1st US edition. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981)

²¹ Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, (English edition. London: Verso, 2012)

²² Jane Hirsch, *Family Photographs: Content, Meaning, and Effect*. (New York: Oxford: University Press, 1981)

²³ Nancy Martha West, *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia, Cultural Frames, Framing Culture*. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000)

West's study led me to think analytically about my family portraits and I started to understand Barthes' description of two parts of a person separated between mind and emotion, the scholarly verses the personal.²⁴ Certainly, the studium of these four family portraits denotes the field of their cultural or educational possibilities. However, this field is pierced by a second element, the punctum, which, as Barthes' theory illustrates, breaks out of the cultural field into the personal. It did "shoot out of it like an arrow", as he describes, and pierce me.²⁵ Within these family portraits are the favourite dishes cooked by my mother that I missed out on because I had to stay overseas to study. And most importantly, I saw the time I spent with my grandfather that I am not able to live again in my current reality. These moments are permanently recorded by these family photographs. Those soft drinks that were supposed to symbolize Coca-Cola's marketing strategy are transferred to nostalgic memories. By looking at these family photographs, the past and present me is connected—the past communicating with the present, and the present with the past. The notion of "family time" is once again reconstructed in my present mind through the forever absence of the past in my future.

In conclusion, through the presence of people clinking glasses in these four family photographs that span forty years, we can see how the same behaviour held different meanings throughout various generations. In the beginning, family portraits reflected different aspirations that were shaped by state policies under different political ideologies. As time passed, the memories carried by family portraits formed a new social norm and constructed a new reality for a new generation. The permeability of this new reality will be attested through consumers who engage in brand co-creation processes—in the social media era, consumers re-enact advertisement scenes in family portraits to "co-create" brand processes that will further reinforce the new reality. After examining the images through these critical lenses, the punctum of these family portraits still shoots out of the cultural field and forms a unique memory for me. The notion of "family time" finishes its final reconstruction in an enunciation of love and loss.

²⁴ Margaret Olin, "Touching Photographs"

²⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

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