

Home Movies and Private Photo Albums as a Resource for Studying

Peranakan Chinese Elite Life in Prewar Indonesia

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Since the early 1920s photography and film-making became increasingly popular in prewar Indonesia. The ethnic Chinese pioneered in this field. Numerous photo studios and movie theatres were established in the Indies archipelago owned and run by Chinese Overseas coming from Hong Kong, Singapore, and Java. Whereas this story is currently being unraveled, little is still known about the reception (and production) of private photography and film-making in the family sphere. This paper wants to fill this gap. As carriers of modernity the peranakan Chinese elites in Java and Sumatra were extremely keen to use these technical novelties to portray their family life, their economic achievements, and life in the archipelago in general, thereby creating a visual memory-lane for their offspring. During the Japanese period and the war for independence in Indonesia much of these peranakan Chinese private films and photo-albums were lost, and the ones that survived these violent regime changes have after 1949 only been shown in the comforting family sphere. It is only recently that some of these private films and photographs have reached the public sphere and are available for scientific research. The home movies and private photo albums that are available show that they really form a unique resource to study peranakan elite life from within. They give face and substance, and go beyond the often essentialist descriptions characteristic of many studies on pre-war Chinese community life in Indonesia. In addition they force us to re-address issues of power and ethnicity, social identity and social stratification, as well as modernity and technology in pre-war Indonesia.