Portraits of the Deceased and Their Personalities: The Treatment of Portrait Photos in Funeral Photo Albums

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In death rites, the circumstances of the body and the way it is handled change dramatically according to changes in mode of human existence. Death poses all sorts of questions with respect to the relationship between body and personality, with the deceased, for example, being represented in non-bodily form, but materials connected with the body making repeated appearances in rites and other situations.

Along with the bones of the deceased, which are connected to his or her corporeality, the portrait of the deceased is a very important representation and an indispensable component of death rites in the present day. Funeral rites focused solely on the portrait of the deceased are common in so-called non-religious funerals. In such funerals the portrait becomes the most important representation of the deceased, serving as a means whereby the deceased is remembered and last respects paid. While the photograph used for the portrait of the deceased depicts just one moment in the person's former life, it brings to mind the entire existence of the deceased. However, it is questionable whether such photos of deceased persons performed this role when they were first used as portraits. In this paper, I look at changes in the way portraits of the deceased are viewed by examining changes in the way portrait photos have been used in funeral albums created as records of the funeral for remembrance purposes.

Portraits photographs of the deceased have been used on the opening page of funeral albums since they started to be made during the Meiji period, but in the earliest albums, the portrait photos are accompanied by captions related to the time when the photograph was taken. However from the end of the Meiji period and on into the Taisho period, such captions provided increasingly sparse information about when the photo was taken, until photos eventually came to be merely framed in a black border or some other kind of embellishment, losing all continuity with the photos of the funeral. In other words, at the start portrait photos accompanied by captions about when the photo was taken were used to express passage from life to death. They thus showed similarities with funeral procession picture scrolls, which also depicted such passage. However, by removing information on when the photo was taken, portrait photos came to represent the deceased as a whole, stripped of any temporal element. As a result, people came to perceive funeral portrait photos as the deceased themselves rather than just a depiction of a single moment in former life.
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