

# The Meaning of Chinese Ethnic Existence Before and After New Order Restrictions on Documentary Photography

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**Nico KURNIA JATI, M. Sn.**

Indonesian Institute of Arts, Yogyakarta

nicokurnia401@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *Indonesia has a long history of becoming a multi-ethnic country consisting of various tribes, races, and groups. Ethnic identity, existence, consistency, and recognition of the Chinese ethnicity from the wider community can be reflected in birth photos in various photo salons, wedding photos, family portraits, condolence advertisements in daily newspapers, to photos of historical upheaval involving the Chinese ethnicity. Through the form of the photo, the Chinese ethnicity shows its existence in the field of religious values, culture, and social stratification. Through historical studies, research on archival photographs of ethnic Chinese before and after the New Order aims to measure the extent of the existence of ethnic Chinese on the smallest scale within the family (object) and mass works as (subject). The Chinese ethnicity has a high spirit of companionship and unity with one clan and another, so the medium of photographs becomes a means of communication to explain what is being experienced by one family to another. Posting photos for the public is like finding freedom for the Chinese ethnicity to show their existence after the New Order era because at that time their freedom was quite limited by the government. This paper discusses the meaning behind the photographs of Chinese ethnicity to show their existence.*

**Key words:** *ethnicity, Chinese, history, new order, media.*

## Background

Aspects of a nation's development cannot be separated from people's lives, including ethnicity, religion, and race, which contribute to building the nation into a unity. However, the assimilation process is not easy, of course, there is upheaval behind a process of assimilation or the unification of a nation, from the process of war, economic turmoil, and violence to racial issue.

Documentary photos are by the essential nature of photography functions to record or document something (Soedjono 2005, 133). All of this becomes a record of a nation's journey, which can be seen from various aspects, including records of events that



are well archived through journalistic documentary photographs and various other aspects of documentation.

Photography is used in various aspects, whether photojournalism, expression, or commercial, but in this case, something is interesting where the combination of documentary, commercial, and documentary archive photos provides a new meaning to show the existence of an ethnicity where there is an attachment to one another. Combining portrait photography as part of commercial photography and the principles of documentary photography can become a photographic work that is used as a witness to historical civilization, such as documentation from news archives, condolence advertisements, and advertorial news in daily newspapers so that these can be seen by the public, become information and indications that can be concluded by the public. Apart from the information medium, the number of historical photos is dominated by ethnic Chinese.

In Indonesia, searching for archives of historical photos of ethnic Chinese is very easy, especially with the increasing number of people posting on social media, such as the tradition that has been attached to ethnic Chinese to publicize families who died in newspapers and look back at archives of historical photos for further research, making archival tracing a very interesting thing to study. Photos provide the space and time of how a historical story is placed. From the results of the photo analysis, we can see what events happened to that ethnic group.

Indications of what events are part of the history of the Chinese ethnic track record in Indonesia can be divided into four waves, namely during the leadership of the Old Order, New Order, Reformation, and Post-Reformation, but in this research, the focus is more on the New Order era until post-Reformation only so that conclusions can be drawn more focused. Through image analysis studies such as the use of semiotics to describe a sign, what is happening at that time can be described so that a conclusion can be drawn.

Being an ethnic minority became problematic in itself during the New Order era during President Soeharto's leadership where the space for Ethnic Chinese was narrowed because they had been identified as active in the movement of communist organizations in Indonesia. It is said to be an ethnic minority because the population of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia is only around 5 million people (less than 3% of the total population of all of Indonesia which is 202 million people) (Freedman 2000, 11).

The Tonghoa ethnic group only discovered freedom of opinion and expression during the government of President Abdurahman Wahid or Gus Dur with the full opening up of aspects of identity, politics, and artistic media such as the promotion of lion dance and Wayang Potehi (Potehi Doll) art performances as written by Forester and R.J. May. These freedoms include:

1. do not build extraordinary personal power through excessive focus on the top financial resources to make final decisions on one hand;
2. no longer carry out efforts to restrain community activities in politics;



3. can create a more democratic nuance of political life and political participation;
4. abandoning the characteristics of a centralized and patrimonialistic government system;
5. can create good and organized relations between the government and various groups in society in particular Islamic groups
6. balance of power between the state and society (Forrester and May 1998).

The division of social stratification was created during the Dutch colonial era when ethnic Chinese were included in second-class society because some sided with the native land and some sided with the Dutch. This social jealousy is memorable for native Indonesians because, during the struggle against the colonial era, many Chinese people sided with the Dutch, giving rise to social jealousy. Historically, this policy of discrimination is a legacy of the Dutch colonialists who divided citizens into three, as stated in the *Regeringsreglement Indische Staatsregeling and Nederlandse Onderdaan Schap van Nief Nederlands* (Kusuma 2002). The thing that sparked resistance and the issue of sensitivity to the Chinese ethnic group was that when the division included third-class citizens, the second class contained Far Easterners and Chinese and the first class consisted of Dutch people.

In the New Order era of President Soeharto's government, there were many restrictions, then, approximately 35 years later, in the era of President Abdurahman Wahid, the government was given the widest freedom to express oneself according to culture and beliefs because President Abdurahman Wahid implemented complete democracy. This can be identified through the photographs displayed in the media from time to time.

In the old archives of the nation's history, many photos of violence against ethnic Chinese were found because of their involvement with banned organizations, thus widening the gap in the conflict with Bumi Putra at that time. The aim was to rebuild the country's political stability, which had been in chaos due to the communist coup through the G-30-S PKI/1965. (Laode 2012, 14). If you look at the character of today's photos, people have forgotten what conflicts occurred in 1965, but historical records still leave an impression today, sometimes causing friction in vertical conflicts with the surrounding community, even if only from a political and economic perspective.

Photos have become a means of identifying social upheavals in society from time to time, as if photographic works were like living inscriptions in the present. Photos provide space for perception, information, analysis, as well as meaning in one visual form. Photos can also provide new meanings and multiple interpretations to the next generation who enjoy these visual presentations because everyone still has different perceptions even though they are equipped with captions and actual data, therefore there are various theories such as semiotics, content analysis, aesthetic analysis, and visual communication provides space for the public to be more focused in assessing a photographic work.



There are many photo studies, especially for identifying social status and identifying a person's aesthetic values, using portraits. This is supported by Edison Hatoguan Manurung, who said that portrait photography is the capture using similar photography of a person or small group of people (group portrait), with facial expressions and dominance. This type of photography aims to show the appearance, personality, and even mood of the subject (Hatoguan 2022). Facial expressions and gestures in the Mandarin portrait style and physical gestures can be powerful tools for carrying out further analysis.

To decipher the signs and interpret a photo, semiotic theory is applied this theory can be an application to find out the symbols and meaning of an event. Semiotics is not only interpreted as a subject matter but is very relevant in providing the audience with an idea of the meaning of each existing symbol so that these symbols can become a medium for identifying past events.

## **Discussion**

In this case, cultural studies relates to questions of power and politics, with the desire for change and for marginalized social groups, especially class, gender, and race groups. This is by the condition of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia after the New Order era where every activity and form of expression of ethnic Chinese was restricted by the government. Cultural studies view that the use of language in media texts is not purely aimed at conveying information or messages, but, more than that, to form, build, and lead a perception, opinion, or discourse by the interests of the media or of certain groups.

Signs in Saussure's view are the main elements in language and a sign system is composed of two parts, namely the signifier and the signified. According to Saussure, language is a system of signs. A sign is the unity of a form of signifier with an idea or signified. Signifiers are meaningful sounds and strokes so signifiers are material aspects of the language that is said or heard and what is written or read. A sign is a mental image, thought, or concept so a sign is the mental aspect of language. Even though the signifier and the signified appear to be separate entities, they are only components of the sign, and it is the sign that is the basic fact of language.

Sobur 2003, 46-47

The explanation above illustrates the main elements of signifiers and signifieds to identify material subjects in a visual presentation. The concept of the signified refers more to the concept of the main points of a photo story, including gestures and expressions of the content of a photo.

When conducting research, you must pay attention to its validity because valid research is research that produces reliable truth, where the research can be accounted for. Therefore, all research must have a validity function value. In semiotic research, there are nine formulas that will be used to test validity. The nine formulas are:



1. Who is the communicator? In semiotic research, the communicator must be defined as the source who directly or indirectly wants to convey a message to the recipient. This is done because the interpretation of the sign is constructed by the communicator.
2. Communicator motivation, namely how a communicator positions himself in the process of getting the target he wants and how to construct the message so that the message is optimally successful.
3. Physical and social context. What is meant by physical and social context is how the message is constructed by the communicator by considering social norms and values, myths, and beliefs as well as the place where the message will be distributed.
4. Structure of signs and other signs. Communication semiology interprets signs by looking at the structure of the sign and connecting the sign in question with other signs that are closely related to it.
5. Function of signs, history, and mythology. Communication semiology gives meaning to signs by looking at the function of the sign in society which is closely related to the intention of the source of the message transmitter. The function of the sign here has its meaning which will be known in more depth based on this research.
6. Intertextuality. Semiology strengthens its interpretation and argumentation by comparing signs with the function of signs in other texts.
7. Intersubjectivity. Communication semiology provides an interpretation of signs by obtaining support from other interpreters in signs that have a relevant relationship. In this research, intersubjectivity will be obtained from parties who understand the general meaning of the symbol as well as secondary data.
8. Common Sense. Communication semiology interprets signs by taking over the general meaning that develops in society (common sense).
9. Researcher's scientific explanation. Communication semiology is an intuitive interpretation carried out by the interpreter based on intellectual experience, subjective beliefs, and scientific development of the signs in question. In this study, only three formulas were used which were deemed sufficient to test the validity of the data. The three formulas are who the communicator is, the communicator's motivation, physical and social context, and intertextuality.



### Photo characters at the beginning of the New Order era



Caption. Students of Chinese descent were beaten by mobs after the 1965 G30S. (Getty Images to BBC.com access: <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/dunia-41738253>) data access 09-15-2023

Signature: Security is carried out by the military to avoid angering the masses

Marker: The facial expression of an ethnic Chinese person who is suspected of being involved in a movement prohibited by the government



Caption. A mob burned down the Res Publica university in Grogol in October 1965. (Getty Images to BBC.com access: <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/dunia-41738253>) data access 09-15-2023

Signature: A Chinese architectural style building surrounded by people

Marker: Facilities belonging to ethnic Chinese were burned by mobs during riots against an ideology banned by the government

(Source: Research Data Processed)



The two pictures above were taken in a location not far away, namely at the time anti-Chinese sentiment began with an attack on the PRC (People's Republic of China) Embassy, followed by an attack and even arson on the Res Publica university (which is now Trisakti University, Jakarta), founded by Siauw Giok Tjhan. According to several historical sources, Siauw Giok Tjhan himself is referred to as an integration figure in Indonesian Chinese history. Several other historical expressions of public anger emerged because they suspected that Baperki, which was founded by Siauw Giok Tjan, was a mass organization that from the start was very concerned with the issue of citizenship, that Indonesians are affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party.

Signs and markers have similarities in that the elements of the image are signs of the riot incident, while the markers are expressions of anger and sadness which are the main presentation in explaining the meaning of the photo. Photos leading up to the new order were the beginning of the journey of the Chinese ethnic group before experiencing its peak in the riots of May 1998. It is clear from the photos from that time that Indonesia was in an era of political and economic instability. Social inequality, difficulty of assimilation, and high economic inequality caused these riots to occur. Various allegations about the communist party made the social distance even more pronounced and led to riots.

### Photo characters after the May 1998 riots towards the end of the New Order era



Captions. Ethnic Chinese residents pass by destroyed houses that were looted and burned by mobs during riots, May 26, 1998. (Reuters Archives to Suaraindo.id access: <https://www.besarindo.id/2022/05/24-tahun-pemeriksaan-may-1998-volunteers-continue-to-fight-for-victims-rights-until-their-last-breath/>) data access 09-15-2023

Signature: The ruins of a shopping center owned by ethnic Chinese that burned down due to the riots in May 1998

Marker: The pensive expressions of two ethnic Chinese teenagers who are going to their house to see their belongings



Captions. Looting occurred in several places in Jakarta in mid-May 1998. (Choo Youn-Kong/AFP/Getty Images access:<https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-43940188>, data access 15-09 -2023

Signature: Cars burned during the May 1998 riots

Marker:An atmosphere of looting of electronic products in an ethnic Chinese shopping center  
(Source: Research Data Processed)

During the tense month of May 1998, the riots were caused by various triggers, including the desire of some levels of society and students to change the president and social jealousy among the ethnic Chinese community. The background of social and economic jealousy became the problem of various raids in the city, including looting shops in shopping centers where the majority of owners were ethnic Chinese.

Photos of journalists covering the conflict seemed to be iconic in the nation's journey, becoming a sign that people were seen carrying cardboard boxes containing electronic equipment amidst the flames, showing the tense atmosphere of May 1998. It is a sign of a visual description of the atmosphere of chaos on TV news and newspapers because, in every corner of the city, we can easily find an atmosphere of chaos which was the peak of the end of the era of President Soeharto and the new era of democracy during the Reformation of President Abdurahman Wahid.

In the signature, you can see debris showing the chaos that has almost spread throughout the city of Jakarta and it is feared that it will spread to other provinces or other islands in Indonesia. This has its trauma for the ethnic Chinese community. The marker shows that behind a commotion there is certainly an expression of sadness, fear, and anger from the victims and the perpetrators of the looting. This can be an indication to decipher the signs of the chaos that occurred at that time so that they preferred to save themselves rather than take care of saving their property.





### Photo characters after the reform period (after 1998)



Captions. Roger Danuarta and Cut Meyriska during a Chinese traditional title called Teapai <https://bogor.tribunnews.com/2019/08/26/tradisi-teapai-di-resepsi-pernikahan-roger-danuarta-dan-cut-meyriska-begini-historinya> .(Diera Bachir to Tribun News) access:<https://bogor.tribunnews.com/2019/08/26/tradisi-teapai-di-resepsi-pernikahan-roger-danuarta-dan-cut-meyriska-begini-history>, data access 09-15-2023.

Signature: The atmosphere of an ethnic Chinese wedding has been assimilated into Indonesian wedding customs

Marker : The happy expression of the bride and groom during the wedding procession  
(Source: Research Data Processed)

After the May 1998 tragedy, ethnic Chinese seemed to have found a point of enlightenment and freedom because the era of reformation under the leadership of President Abdurahman Wahid gave the Chinese people freedom and freedom to express themselves, culture and develop family businesses. President Abdurahman Wahid himself, apart from being a cultural figure, statesman, and religionist, is also a religious student who is believed to still have ethnic Chinese ancestry and bravely fought for ethnic Chinese until he earned the nickname Father of Chinese Indonesia.

Inequality occurred when the New Order government did not encourage Chinese people to enter government and limited them to the economic field. The activities of Chinese people in this field became more obvious and the separation from natives became even more striking, but everything turned around when President Abdurahman Wahid implemented the principles of true democracy and Liberal Islam. Gus Dur is a person who is consistent with his principles and these principles are rooted in his understanding of liberal Islam (Suaedy 2000, 85). This is a new way of looking at culture and Islam that is more tolerant and modern in Indonesia than it is today. President Abdurahman Wahid's policy gives ethnic Chinese freedom to carry out religious rituals, and customs and allows the expression of their culture in Indonesia. From that moment on,



the state guaranteed the security and freedom of the ethnic Chinese community to develop and assimilate with Bumi Putra or indigenous Indonesian people and there were no restrictions on developing themselves.

The photo above is the wedding of soap opera artist Roger Danuarta and Cut Meriska. Roger Danuarta is of ethnic Chinese descent and Cut Meriska is an Indonesian of Acehnese ethnicity. During the New Order era, this wedding was difficult to carry out, especially using Chinese customs, but nowadays it is commonplace to do it using acculturation, namely the identical red Chinese wedding dress, but Cut Meriska wears the hijab because they are both Muslim.

During the pre-wedding event, they held a traditional Chinese ceremony, namely the tea-drinking ritual, or what is usually called *Tea Pai*. *Tea Pai* is a tea ceremony that is a symbol of asking for prayers and asking for blessings from elders. After that, the bridal couple gave tea as a sign of respect. Next, Cut Meyriska and Roger were given red packets which indicated good fortune for the couple's new household. Wearing a red wedding dress appears as a visual marker of the happy hue of the bride and groom showing cultural freedom at that time because in the New Order era, the wedding party was quite restricted by the government.

### ADVERTISEMENT PHOTOGRAPHS USING CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS

#### Photo characters after the reform period (after 1998)

● PT. BIOGREEN SCIENCE ● PT. INDO JAYA OTOMOTIF

**BERITA DUKA CITA**

Telah meninggal dunia dengan tenang pada hari Sabtu,  
Tanggal 05 Agustus 2017 Pukul 19.22 WIB  
di rumah Panta Indah Kepak, asal Bnjai  
Isri, Mama, Mama Mertua, Nenek, Makka kami yang terlinta :

**TAN LO GEK (RUSNI) 陳羅玉**  
( Dalam Usia 86 Tahun )

Janazah disemayankan di Rumah Duka HEAVEN PLUIT (ATMAJAYA)  
Lantai 1 Ruang Arjumanne Beryl JI. Pulo Raya No.2, Jakarta Utara  
dan akan dikremasikan pada hari Rabu, tgl. 09 Agustus 2017.  
Berangkat dari Rumah Duka pk. 10.00 WIB ke Terminal To Heaven.

Kami yang mengasih :

Suami : **Ng Tjin Guan 黃振源**

Menantu :

<p>Anak :</p> <p>AMIN WIDJAJA ( AMIN )</p> <p>EKMAN WIDJAJA ( AEK )</p> <p>UOK WIDJAJA ( ACUT ) (†)</p> <p>DALINA ( HUI LIN )</p> <p>AMINA ( AMIE )</p> <p>RUSNA ( NG LI- CIEN )</p> <p>Cucu Dalam &amp; Cucu Menantu :</p> <p>A'andi (Ausi), YLaman (†), Larry Widjaja</p> <p>Devi Natella &amp; Rudy Setiawan Joe</p> <p>Feny Widiawati &amp; Justin Wijaya</p>	<p>JAP SIIU TJIN</p> <p>HUAN S TJUN MEI</p> <p>TAN KIAT BUN</p> <p>POPO GOZALIE</p> <p>Cucu Luar:</p> <p>Vera Nala : Kurnia, Billy Putra Kurnia</p> <p>Catherine Aldisa, Margareth</p> <p>Hidayati, Sandy Ica (AKSA), Candy Lik</p>
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Cicit : Laffabelle Quinn Joe

**BESERTA SEGENAP KELUARGA**

**HEAVEN Funeral Home Pluit (021) 668 3338**

(Source: Daily News Kompas, 7 August 2017)

Signature: Chinese characters next to the name of the deceased

Marker: Another form of written proper name in chinese characters

(Source: Research Data Processed)



Portrait photos of condolence advertisements do not directly mean “advertisement” as is the view of the advertising concept so far. Portrait photos of condolence advertisements refer more to notifying those who are narrowly mourning to other audiences because newspaper readers do not necessarily know the person in the photo, through mass media, especially print media, to broadcast news of someone’s death, express condolences, remember someone’s death, or the family’s thanks to certain parties for the services provided to the deceased during his life. Condolence advertising can be classified as a form of cultural symbolic expression. Condolence advertising is a very old transformation of human culture since the existence of advertising in newspapers, since ancient times when someone died, notifications about the death event were disseminated in various ways and through various media.

From these things, it can be understood that portrait photography is the result of the representation of recording/perpetuating “likenes” (similarity) identity of human figures in the form of dual dimensions (images). In this case, the human aspect as the “photo subject” is very dominant so that the form of implementation is strictly limited to oneself only humans.

Soedjono 2007, 110

Photo Condolence advertisements for ethnic Chinese function as a means of notification of someone’s death, moreover, condolence advertisements for ethnic Chinese have proven to be able to show their existence amidst the widespread issue of negative sentiment towards ethnic Chinese. The shift in the meaning of condolence advertisements is strengthened by the use of certain symbols to strengthen the status and ethnic cultural identity of the Chinese community, to maintain their existence. Through the sacred value of death, ethnic Chinese try to actualize their culture or show their culture.

During the New Order era, photos in condolence advertisements were very limited in distribution because condolence advertisements were also a way for ethnic Chinese to show their existence to the general public, according to the Big Indonesian Dictionary, existence is existence, a presence that contains elements of survival. Not only the economic value of advertising in a newspaper but also cultural and educational values. It is felt that these values represent how the Chinese ethnic group survived and demonstrated its presence in society after experiencing various restrictions on its movement by the New Order government.

Condolence advertising itself is a complexity of symbols and signs. If a condolence advertisement informs about the existence of death as its basic function, it means that it fulfills the function of a sign. Advertisements use a sign system consisting of symbols, both verbal and non-verbal. Barthes’ semiotic method is considered very relevant for analyzing how minority identities are displayed through visual condolence advertisements. Religious, ethnic, and class symbols will be easy to analyze using this semiotic



method. In Roland Barthes' concept, denotative signs are also connotative markers at the same time.

Connotative signs not only have additional meaning but also contain both parts of the denotative sign which underlies their existence. The connotative stage requires a deeper interpretative process and is interpreted with a wider scope. After that, a new sign is obtained which is related to the social, and cultural context and existing value system. At this connotative stage, the hidden meaning is explored and interpreted. At the connotative level, the resulting meaning is implicit, indirect, and uncertain, allowing for various possibilities.

### **Photo characters after the reform period (after 1998)**



Captions. Rudi Salim poses with a row of luxury cars in his showroom

<https://amp.kontan.co.id/news/rudi-salim-lirik-sentul-city-as-location-pengembangan-bisnis-terbaru>. (Muradi Harian Kontan) access:<https://lifestyle.kontan.co.id/news/rudi-salim-lirik-sentul-city-as-location-pengembangan-bisnis-terbarunya?page=1>

Signature: Many European production sports cars are parked

Marker: The use of suits, ties, and poses that show economic stability or luxury  
(Source: Research Data Processed)

The rise of news and advertorials in the mass media provides a separate space for existence for ethnic Chinese, coupled with YouTube channels and social media which can publish without a filter first. Some people argue that with the freedom and wealth of ethnic Chinese, there is no longer any difference between motivation and flexing because the environment, motivation, and need for a lifestyle do not care about the people around them who are still poor.



After the May 1998 riots in Jakarta and President Abdurahman Wahid's attainment of full freedom, several ethnic Chinese communities seemed to be overly celebrating this freedom. Now we can easily find ethnic Chinese on social media accounts or in the mass media showing their wealth unlike during the New Order because they are afraid of taxes and restrictions on the publication of their assets. It is not easy for the wider community to differentiate between flexing and motivation because of the influence of very free mass communication media.

A signature is a shape that can be seen through the subject, such as sports cars that look classy behind Rudi Salim's figure and attract more attention than the main object. Rudi Salim in the eye level photo angle poses simply, wearing a suit as clothing to show the value of economic and social stability. Meanwhile, the marker element shows a neat suit and a smile to show an expression of independence, freedom of thought, opinion, and developing a business empire so that people assume that ethnic Chinese are synonymous with an exclusive community and close to luxury, unlike the New Order era where space for movement was limited.

## **Conclusion**

Since the 1968 riots until now, journalistic photography has succeeded in recording well as a witness to events from time to time. Journalistic photography works are like living inscriptions and bear witness to recordings of historical events that have colored the nation. The sadness and happiness of everything have been successfully summarized through photo documents published through the media which have now developed into digital archives whose visual traces are easy to find and trace back.

Photographic works are like traces of life, while photographic works broadcast via online media are like digital traces that remind us of the times. Photos record after half a century of documentary photojournalism successfully recording events that show human social evolution to change from misery to symbols of luxury and prosperity that occurred in an ethnic group.

It is impossible for humans to simply ignore an event, but through signs and icons, a photo can identify everything that humans have experienced. In ancient times up to the era of the classical kingdom, to record events and create story narratives for the next generation, they wrote on cave walls, plus they developed into relief inscriptions in temples. Today humans are compared to recording history through the more concrete medium of photography, although a fact can be manipulated with digital techniques.

Photos are living artifacts that have successfully recorded the process of human cultural evolution. There are no more stories of suffering, alienation, and cultural restrictions in Chinese society at this time because photos have recorded it. The two-dimensional visual dimension provides historical reality so that there are no longer any deviant historical stories because of the oral tradition which only tells history by word



of mouth, but its validity is all tested using the visual medium from year to year and from time to time as a marker of the times.

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