

Lianzhou Foto Festival, China: The Promotion of Photography Education through Diverse Intercultural Exchange Events

Yao Qiong¹ and Arkom Sa-Ngiamvibool²

Faculty of Fine Applied Arts and Cultural Sciences, Mahasarakham University, Thailand

Corresponding Author, E-mail: ¹18936049320@163.com

Received August 10, 2024; **Revised** March 17, 2025; **Accepted** June 17, 2025

Abstract

As a global photographic art event, Lianzhou Foto Festival in China brings together photographers and audiences from different cultural backgrounds, and promotes Intercultural exchanges and photographic education through diversified activities such as exhibitions, lectures and workshops. This paper aims to explore how Lianzhou Foto Festival promotes Intercultural understanding and photography education through its rich programme of activities. The study used questionnaires and in-depth interviews to analyse participants' feedback and evaluation of cultural exchange and educational activities. The results show that the diverse activities of the festival significantly enhanced participants' cultural understanding and photography skills, and improved the quality and effectiveness of photography education. The paper concludes with suggestions for further optimising the form of the festival's activities and enhancing its educational function, which provide useful references for the festival's sustainable development and the planning of other similar cultural activities.

Keywords: Lianzhou Foto Festival; Photography Education; Intercultural Exchange; Diversity Events

Introduction

From 2005 to 2019, Lianzhou, a small mountainous city in the northern part of Guangdong Province, has successfully organized the Lianzhou Foto Festival for fifteen consecutive years. As a unique cultural event, the festival plays an indispensable role in promoting Intercultural exchange and mutual

understanding. In the context of increasing globalization, photography, as a universally understandable art form, is an ideal medium to promote communication between different cultural groups.

The festival builds a platform for photographers from different countries and cultural backgrounds to showcase their work and exchange artistic ideas, encouraging the intersection and integration of different creative concepts and artistic practices. Over the years, artists from Europe, Asia and the Americas have collaborated on joint exhibitions, sharing their unique perspectives, techniques and narrative approaches. Such exchanges have enriched the content and diversity of the Festival's exhibitions and broadened the audience's understanding of intercultural and photographic art.

In addition, the educational function of the festival is reflected in its role as a learning platform, providing photographers, students and general audiences with opportunities to deepen their knowledge of photography and engage in discussions on visual culture. Seminars and lectures organized by internationally renowned photographers and scholars enhance the educational impact of the festival and promote a deeper understanding of the social culture of photography.

The continued development of the Lianzhou Foto Festival has also had a positive impact on the local community, contributing significantly to the cultural and economic vitality of the city. By continually promoting international cultural exchange and high quality educational programs, the festival has raised the cultural profile of Lianzhou as an important base for the art of photography. This sustained contribution to intercultural exchange and education has become a model for similar events around the world.

This study systematically explores the contribution of the festival to photography education and global cultural dialog, providing new perspectives on the study of photography festivals. Through a qualitative analysis of the festival's activities and their impact, the study provides valuable insights and recommendations for photography education institutions, policymakers and cultural organizations, aiming to enhance program design, policy development and practical initiatives to promote cultural understanding and integration.

Research objectives

1. Exploring the role of Lianzhou Foto Festival in promoting intercultural exchange
2. Analysing the role of Lianzhou Foto Festival in promoting photography education

Literature Review

1. Current Research Status of Lianzhou Foto Festival

The Lianzhou Foto Festival aims to create a platform to promote Chinese photography, showcasing the most dynamic and high quality international exhibitions and artists. The Local Chinese Photography section focuses on current issues in Chinese photography, aiming to provoke thought and address contemporary issues. Unlike other photography exhibitions in China, which often lack a coherent research process, the Lianzhou Foto Festival is structured with a clear academic intent, with cutting-edge and experimental works on display every year (Duan, 2014) The Lianzhou Foto Festival is different from other exhibitions in China, in that it considers more of an opportunity for all photographers to show their work, with everyone taking what they want, but lacking a collation and research process. Everyone is taking what they want, but there is a lack of organisation and research process. The Lianzhou Foto Festival is more like a "festival" of contemporary art through the medium of photography, with an annual structure. Although, as chief curator Duan Yuting says, there have been mistakes and oscillations in the middle of the festival, its organisation and planning are of academic significance anyway. Every year, it presents the latest works of the artists, or the most experimental ones. (Nanwu Mourning, 2014)

He Kun (2021) points out that the Lianzhou Foto Festival is recognised in the industry as one of the most professional photography festivals in China. The organisers not only arrange colourful exhibitions, but also organise activities such as high-end forums, aiming to strengthen academic exchanges between artists and viewers, and to provide an open platform for the art of photography to learn from each other and make progress. Zhou (2015) pointed out that the Lianzhou Foto Festival has become one of the most professional art photography festivals in China, and through the Lianzhou Foto Festival, it has successfully enhanced the city brand image of Lianzhou. According to Chen (2015), the "Image Experts Meeting" programme is a highlight of the Lianzhou Foto Festival, which is committed to building a first-class international image exchange platform and promoting the prosperity of the photography industry. These studies show that the Lianzhou Foto Festival has played an important role in promoting cultural exchanges, upgrading the city's brand and promoting the development of the photography industry.

2. Intercultural exchange

Larry Samwar (2010) explored in detail the core concepts and theoretical framework of Intercultural communication in his book *Intercultural Communication*. He emphasises that Intercultural communication is not only a process of transferring information, but also an interactive process of meaning construction and understanding between people from different cultural backgrounds. Maletzke (2002), on the other hand, suggests that Intercultural communication involves not only linguistic communication, but also multidimensional interactions such as cultural backgrounds, values and behavioural patterns. By understanding and respecting these differences, people can achieve more effective communication and cooperation.

Lianzhou Foto Festival can be regarded as a complex Intercultural communication system. The festival facilitates communication and interaction between photographers and audiences from different cultural backgrounds through diverse forms of activities such as exhibitions, lectures and workshops. Zhu Liangliang (2014) points out that art exhibitions and cultural exchange activities can promote multicultural communication and dissemination. As a unique cultural activity, photography festivals have the important function of promoting cultural exchange. By bringing together photographers and audiences from different cultural backgrounds, the Lianzhou Foto Festival provides a platform for display and exchange, thus promoting Intercultural understanding and interaction.

3. Functions and Impact of Photography Education

The Lianzhou Foto Festival also plays an important role in photography education, providing a wealth of educational resources and learning opportunities through a series of workshops, lectures and exhibitions. Xu (2023) points out that the ultimate goal of photography education lies not only in the results of photographic activities or artistic creation, but also in the integration of the aesthetic awareness, mastery of methodology, reflection and experience, and practical creativity of photographic activities into daily life. For more than 10 years, watching photography exhibitions has become a part of the daily life of Lianzhou citizens, such as Zhang Yan, and photography has also become a cultural symbol of Lianzhou. The Lianzhou Foto Festival has broadened the horizons of Lianzhou people and allowed them to feel the unique charm of the art of photography.

Sheng (2023) points out that the Lianzhou Foto Festival invites curators, publishers and photography critics from famous art museums, photography festivals, foundations, galleries, and publishing organisations at home and abroad who are influential experts in the photography industry to

form a strong team to provide face-to-face, one-on-one communication for the participating photographers, and to provide professional critiques and career planning on artistic creation. Chen (2015) study pointed out that photography festivals provide a centralised learning platform for photography enthusiasts and professionals, which significantly improves participants' photographic skills and theoretical level. By communicating directly with master photographers, participating in actual shoots and critiquing their works, participants can gain a great deal of professional knowledge and practical experience in a short period of time.

Through these diverse educational activities, Lianzhou Foto Festival not only improves participants' photography skills, but also plays an important role in promoting the popularisation and enhancement of photography education. The educational functions of the festival are manifested on many levels, including the enhancement of professional photographic skills, the broadening of artistic horizons, the promotion of career development, and the enhancement of cultural literacy. These functions and impacts make Lianzhou Foto Festival an important position and value in the field of photography education.

Conceptual Framework

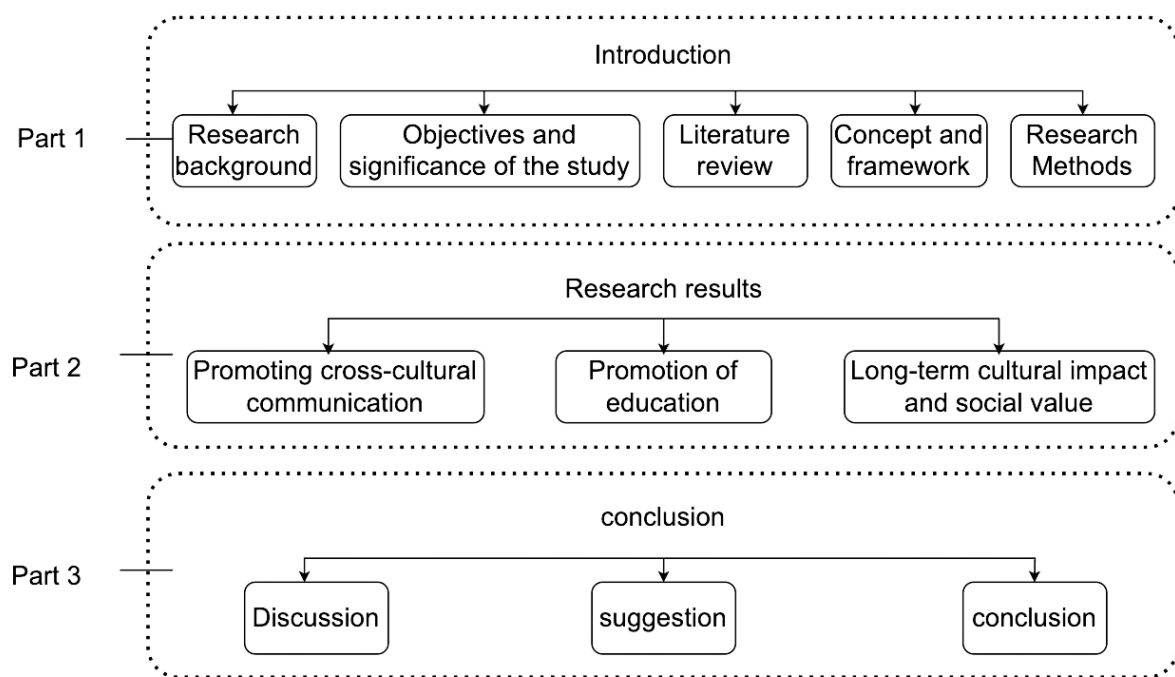


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework (source: Created by researchers, 9/2024)

Research Method

1. Population and sample

In order to ensure the representativeness of the study and the reliability of the data, a combination of random sampling and purposive sampling will be used to select a representative sample for the survey and interviews. The specific sample size is as follows:

- (1) Organisers: 10 core staff, selected through purposive sampling.
- (2) Participating artists: 50 photographers from different countries and regions, selected through a combination of random and purposive sampling to ensure sample diversity.
- (3) Audience: 200 visitors, selected through a combination of on-site random sampling and web-based questionnaires.
- (4) Photography education participants: 100 photography enthusiasts and professionals attending workshops and lectures, selected through random sampling on site.

2. Data collection methods

(1) Questionnaire survey: A detailed questionnaire was designed to cover a wide range of aspects such as cultural exchanges, photographic education and evaluation of activities, and data were collected through a combination of on-site distribution and online questionnaires.

(2) In-depth interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with organisers, exhibiting artists and some visitors to obtain in-depth qualitative data. Each interview lasted about 30–60 minutes and included overall evaluation of the festival, experience of Intercultural exchange and the effectiveness of photography education.

(3) On-site observation: On-site observation was carried out during Lianzhou Foto Festival to record the participation in different forms of activities, the interactive process and the phenomenon of cultural exchanges, and to provide support for quantitative data.

3. Data collection time

The data collection process began in 2021 and was conducted in two phases. The first phase (2021–2022) focused on gathering relevant literature and archival materials. The second phase commenced in 2023, involving field investigations, surveys, and interviews, and continued until June 2024.

Research Results

1. Promotion of Intercultural exchange and understanding

1.1 Impact of exhibition activities

The exhibition programme of Lianzhou Foto Festival showcases photographic works from all over the world, which reflect different cultural backgrounds and social issues, and demonstrate the richness and differences of multiculturalism through visual arts. By enjoying these photographic works from different countries, viewers significantly enhance their understanding and awareness of other cultures.

For example, at the 7th Lianzhou Foto Festival in 2011, Christopher Phillips and Joanna Reihan of the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York focused on the theme of "Sprawling Territories", which focuses on the social changes brought about by the rapid pace of urbanisation, population movements and migratory flows. Phillips has selected the work of 22 photographers from around the world to explore the impact of geographic expansion and the growing connections between different parts of the world. Through the photographers' unique creative approach, these works express the complex interactions between different countries and regions, bringing a refreshing experience and perception to the audience.



Figure 2 Martin Parr (UK) in the exhibition (Source: Photo by Chen, 2015)

In the 10th Lianzhou Foto Festival in 2015, Martin Parr, director of Magnum Images and a British photographer known for his social documentation of landscapes in the 1990s, presented six series

of his work, including Common Sense, Small World and The Last Resort. In addition, he curated the "China Photobook Exhibition", which presents the complexities of contemporary China through the lenses of Chinese photographers. In interviews, many viewers said that the visual impact and narrative nature of the photographs enabled them to visualise the uniqueness and complexity of different cultures, thus enhancing their respect and appreciation for other cultures.

These exhibition activities not only demonstrate the richness of multiculturalism, but also promote intercultural understanding and exchange through visual arts. Visitors not only broaden their horizons, but also deepen their understanding of and respect for different cultures around the globe as they enjoy the photography.

1.2 Interaction of lectures and seminars

Lectures and seminars are an important part of Lianzhou Foto Festival, and these events provide an opportunity for artists, scholars and audiences from different cultural backgrounds to meet face-to-face. By engaging in these interactive activities, participants can not only listen to the insights of experts, but also share their own views and experiences, thus creating a multicultural atmosphere of exchange.



Figure 3 Academic conference hosted by Jéhom Sotak and Duan Yuting in 2018

(Source: Photo by Zhang Haize, 2018)

For example, at the 14th Lianzhou Foto Festival 2018, a themed roundtable academic forum was co-hosted by the annual chief curator, Jéhom Sotak, and the director of Lianzhou Foto Festival,

Duan Yuting. During the event, the curators of the annual festival as well as photographic artists from various countries discussed in detail through PPT presentations around the theme of visual investigation and expression, ranging from the population explosion, AI's march towards reality, biodiversity, changes in the stock market, the economic crisis, and algorithmic juggernaut. Participants learnt that behind each work lies the thoughts of the photographer and the cultural differences that exist between countries.

In the 16th Lianzhou Foto Festival 2023, the symposium was held under the auspices of curators Gu Zhenqing and Zhang Haitao. Participating artists discussed and shared academic exchanges around cutting-edge hot topics such as the development of image art as the world enters the era of Artificial Intelligence, the relationship between AI technological images and photographic art, and the changes and crises brought by AI to social life. More than ten representatives of photographic artists from Ukraine, France and all over the country discussed topics of common concern to the international photographic community, exploring the future of photographic creation and the exchange of ideas under the impact of new technologies.

The lectures and seminars enhanced the participants' Intercultural communication skills. A photographer from the United States mentioned in an interview that he had learnt many new creative concepts and techniques through exchanges with photographers from other countries, and that these exchanges had given him a more comprehensive understanding of the trends of global photographic art. These interactive activities not only promoted knowledge sharing, but also bridged the cultural gap to a certain extent and enhanced mutual understanding among participants from different cultural backgrounds.

2. Enhancement of Photography Education

2.1 Enrichment of educational resources

Lianzhou Foto Festival provides a rich learning resource for photography enthusiasts of all levels by organising a series of educational events, such as photography roundtables, academic lectures and one-on-one exchanges with experts. These educational programmes cover all aspects from basic photography skills to advanced creative concepts, providing participants with systematic learning and enhancement opportunities. These programmes not only address the basics of photography, but also cover advanced creative concepts, catering for the needs of participants at different levels. For example, the Photography Roundtable and Academic Lectures invite renowned photographers and scholars from home and abroad to give lectures covering a wide range of photographic techniques, artistic creation,

visual expression and other aspects. These activities provide participants with a comprehensive body of photographic knowledge and help them gradually improve their photographic skills from beginner to advanced.



Figure 4 Citizens watch the Lianzhou Foto Festival (Source: Photo by Huang Jin, 2019)

Lianzhou Foto Festival has also had a significant effect on the improvement of local citizens' artistic literacy. Hu Qijian, a member of the public, said that initially, when the public came to see the photography exhibition, they just watched the show, they could not see what the photographs were expressing, and there was no communication. However, after more than ten years of development, Lianzhou Foto Festival has gradually cultivated the public's ability to appreciate art. Now, many citizens will bring their families to the exhibition, those who know photography will explain for those who don't, and there are exchanges and interactions after seeing the exhibition. This change shows that Lianzhou Foto Festival has gradually improved the public's art literacy and photography appreciation through continuous educational activities.

2.2 Photography Education and Civic Engagement

Since its launch in 2014, the "Affordable Photography" bazaar, located outside the Fruit Factory exhibition area, has become a highlight of the festival. This bazaar aims to encourage photographic artists to produce a series of high edition, low-priced works, so that the art of photography can enter the public's daily consumption market, thus establishing a system for the production, circulation and consumption of photography from the private sector. The core concept of the Bazaar is to bring high-quality photographic artworks to the general public at affordable prices.

Despite the relatively limited sales of high-priced photographic works, most people's attention is still focused on the more affordable photographic derivatives, such as posters, postcards, small accessories for photographic equipment and canvas bags. These derivatives are affordable and varied, with both practicality and artistic value, attracting the interest of a large number of general audiences. Through these photographic derivatives, more ordinary people are able to come into contact with and consume the art of photography, thus expanding the audience of the art of photography. This marketing strategy makes the Affordable Photography Bazaar not only a gathering place for photographers and art lovers, but also an important channel for the general public to come into contact with and learn about the art of photography.

The success of the Affordable Photography Bazaar lies not only in the flexibility of its market operation, but also in the enhancement of the public's artistic literacy. (Chen, 2015) By participating in this bazaar, the audience can not only buy their favourite photographic works and derivatives, but also gain more knowledge and insights about the art of photography through exchanges with the photographers. This face-to-face interactive format allows the public to have a more intuitive and in-depth understanding of the art of photography, and stimulates their interest and passion for photography.

3. Long-term cultural impacts and social values

3.1 Ongoing cultural influences

Since its inauguration and opening in 2017, Lianzhou Museum of Photography has become an important part of Lianzhou Foto Festival, providing a platform for long-term exhibition and exchange. (Duan, 2014) The museum brings together photographic works from all over the world, and through a combination of permanent and temporary exhibitions, it allows visitors to travel through different cultural contexts, experience the unique perspectives of photographers from different countries, and engage in Intercultural exploration and exchange.

Lianzhou Museum of Photography maintains the continuity of cultural exchanges through year-round exhibitions and activities, becoming a long-term Intercultural exchange platform. Visitors can visit exhibitions and participate in various activities at any time to deepen their understanding and recognition of different cultures, making the museum an important window for Lianzhou citizens and foreign tourists to learn about the world and broaden their horizons.

Overall, Lianzhou Museum of Photography provides a long-term and continuous platform for Intercultural exchange through diverse exhibitions and rich educational programmes. Visitors can not only enjoy photographic works from around the world, but also deepen their understanding of and respect for different cultures through interaction and practice, and promote mutual exchange and integration between cultures. The museum is not only academically orientated to the world, but also serves as a venue for cultural activities for the citizens of Lianzhou, enabling the culture of photography to blossom in Lianzhou, and promoting Lianzhou to become a real "City of Photography".

3.2 Embodiment of social values

Lianzhou Foto Festival provides a platform for Chinese and foreign photographers to discuss and exchange ideas with each other, and at the same time enhances the cultural taste of Lianzhou citizens and enriches their spiritual world. Through a series of public exhibitions, lectures and workshops, the festival brings the elegant art of photography to the public and greatly promotes the popularisation of culture. The festival not only attracts professional photographers and art lovers, but also attracts a large number of ordinary citizens to come to view the exhibitions and participate in the activities, which gradually improves the public's artistic literacy and photographic appreciation, and makes art truly integrated into the daily life of the public.

The "Affordable Photography" Bazaar is an important innovation of Lianzhou Foto Festival, which enables the art of photography to enter the public's daily consumption market through the introduction of high edition, low-priced photographic works. This bazaar not only provides a platform for photographers to display and sell their works, but also cultivates the public's art consumption habits.

Lianzhou Foto Festival has achieved remarkable results in promoting cultural understanding and photography education through its diverse Intercultural exchange activities and rich educational resources. The festival provides an important platform for Chinese and foreign photographers, facilitates exchanges and co-operation among artists, and also enhances the cultural taste and art appreciation of Lianzhou citizens. The success of the Photography Festival has not only raised Lianzhou Foto Festival's profile, but also promoted the development of related industries such as local tourism, transport, catering, hotels, communications and commerce, leading to the prosperity of the local economy.

As the first annual international photography exhibition in Guangdong Province approved by the Ministry of Culture of China, Lianzhou Foto Festival, with its high-calibre academic committee and unique and experimental exhibition contents, has established a brand of cultural exchanges between

Qingyuan and Lianzhou, and enhanced the image and popularity of the city. Through continuous cultural promotion and publicity, Lianzhou has gradually become an ecologically livable and culturally rich tourist destination. The photography festival has also built a number of fine tourist attractions through the excavation and development of local cultural resources, further enriching the cultural and tourism resources of Lianzhou.

Discussion

Existing studies recognize the importance of the Lianzhou Foto Festival in shaping Lianzhou's cultural identity and promoting tourism. However, these studies often lack an in-depth analysis of its educational contribution and Intercultural impact. On this basis, this study systematically examines the role of the festival in facilitating Intercultural exchange and promoting photography education.

1. Promoting Intercultural exchange

Previous studies have emphasized that the Lianzhou Foto Festival serves as a bridge connecting China with the global photography community and has increased Lianzhou's international visibility (Chen, 2015; He, 2021). Liangliang (2014) emphasized that cultural events can promote artistic dialogue, existing studies tend to overlook how the photography festival's thematic exhibitions reflect global issues. Maletzke (2002) argues that Intercultural communication is not limited to language but also includes shared artistic values. While previous studies have focused on branding and influence, this study argues that the significance of the festival goes beyond cultural branding to actively promote Intercultural dialogue through exhibitions, interactive forums and international photographer exchanges.

2. Promoting photographic education

Many scholars (Xu, 2023; Sheng, 2023) have affirmed the role of photography festivals in photography education, especially skill development. Photography festivals provide participants with a structured learning pathway from basic techniques to advanced conceptual exploration (Chen, 2015). However, previous studies have tended to look at the educational contributions of photography festivals in isolation, without examining how they integrate with practical experiences and the wider academic system. This study argues that photography festivals are more than just an exhibition platform, but also an integrated learning environment that seamlessly combines academic theory with hands-on practice, thus having a profound impact on photography education.

This study has shown that the Lianzhou Foto Festival not only contributes to cultural branding and tourism economy, but also plays a pivotal role in Intercultural communication and photography education. While previous studies have acknowledged the impact of the festival, this study further emphasizes the festival's role as a global center for photographic education and artistic exchange, promoted through exhibitions, interactive discussions, and international cooperation.

Future research could further explore how Intercultural exchanges influence the creative development of photographers and how the Festival's educational activities are adapted to digital and virtual learning environments. By continuing to innovate in its approach to education and international engagement, the Lianzhou Foto Festival can further consolidate its position as a leading platform for artistic and educational exchange in the field of contemporary photography.

Suggestions

1. Strengthen cooperation with domestic and international photography education institutions, art colleges, and universities to jointly develop and promote photography education programs.
2. Invite more international photographers and artists to enrich the exhibition content and diversity, and attract international audiences through lectures and workshops hosted by renowned photographers and scholars.
3. Enhance the promotion and publicity of the event by utilizing social media, the official website, and various media platforms to expand the influence and visibility of the photography festival.
4. Introduce evaluation mechanisms and feedback systems to continuously optimize event formats and improve event quality.

Conclusion

The Lianzhou Foto Festival has made significant contributions to the development of global photographic art and cultural exchange through its multifaceted Intercultural exchange activities and its promotion of photographic education. The research in this paper not only deepens the understanding of the role of Lianzhou Foto Festival in cultural exchange and education, but also provides concrete suggestions and references for improving the quality and impact of the festival's activities in the future.

In the future, Lianzhou Foto Festival is expected to continue to play its unique role as a cultural bridge and become an important platform for global photography art exchange and education.

References

- Chen, Y. (2015). The international paradigm of Lianzhou Foto Festival. *Xiaokang*, (24), 68–69.
- Duan, Y., Bao, K., Wang, N., Nan, W., & Duan, L. (2014). Lianzhou: Ten years of rage – Dialogue with Duan Yuting, Artistic Director of Lianzhou Foto Festival. *Chinese Photographer*, (12), 24–41.
- He, K. (2021). *Characteristics of Chinese landscape photography* [Master's thesis, Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts].
- Maltz, H. (2002). *Intercultural communication: Interaction among people from different cultures*. Peking University Press.
- Samovar, L. A., Porter, R. E., & McDaniel, E. R. (2010). *Communication between cultures* (7th ed.). Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Sheng, L. (2023, December 13). 2023 Lianzhou Foto Festival renews its departure. *People's Photography*, (001). <https://doi.org/10.44353/n.cnki.nrmsy.2023.000285>
- Xu, N. (2023). *Research on the aesthetic value and teaching methods of art photography in secondary schools in the new era* [Master's thesis, Hangzhou Normal University].
- Zhou, D. (2015). Research on marketing strategy of Lianzhou Foto Festival. *Knowledge Economy*, (23), 68–69. <https://doi.org/10.15880/j.cnki.zsjj.2015.23.041>
- Zhu, L. (2014). *Exhibition and communication: A study on the characteristics of art exhibitions in the Republic of China (1911–1949)* [Doctoral dissertation, East China Normal University].