

Record of the International Symposium for the 20th Anniversary of the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum:  
Why Are Photography Museums Necessary?

# **Why Are Photography Museums Necessary: A Chinese Perspective**

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Like my fellow speakers, I have been given the topic “Why Are Photography Museums Necessary?” Compared with the other four, I believe that I have more reasons to make the case for photography museums, because technically there is not a single photography museum in my home country of China.

China has a long history of art collecting, but it was not until the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) that modern museums, or the idea of modern museums, was introduced into this country. In 1905, the industrialist Zhang Jian petitioned the Qing Court to establish an imperial museum; he founded the Nantong Museum in the same year. As soon as the Republic of China was established in 1912, the new government set up an office committed to establishing a national history museum and in 1925, the Imperial Palace of the Qing Dynasty was renamed the Palace Museum. In 1936, the National Art Gallery was established in Nanjing. After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the National Art Museum of China was built in 1962 in Beijing. In the four decades since Mao Zedong passed away in 1976, more and more museums have been built in China.

Counting from the Nantong Museum, the development of modern museums has been going on for more than one hundred years. However, up till this day, we do not have a single professional museum dedicated to the collection, research, and display of photography. Obviously we cannot use the excuse that there are too many artworks in China.

There are several reasons why there is not one photographic museum in China. Firstly, in the country photography has long been considered as merely a practical means for recording. Its creative value as an art form has been overlooked. Secondly, war, revolution and social turbulence ruined a great number of vintage photo works, undermining the basis on which such a photography museum can be built. Thirdly, there is a serious lack of professionals who understand photography and the management of a photography museum. Lastly, art museums in China are not natural collectors of photography, for no art museum in China has a photography department. Serious efforts are often obstructed by personnel changes. For



example, the Guangdong Museum of Art — the first Chinese art museum that took photography seriously as a visual art form — started systematically to add contemporary Chinese photographic works to its collection. From 2005, it held three Guangzhou International Photography Biennales. This encouraging momentum was lost when the director of the museum was removed from his position.

Despite this, we still can see some good efforts that could lead to a real photography museum, thanks to the spread of photos via the internet and the development of Chinese contemporary photography. Allow me to give you two examples.

The earliest prototype of a photography museum in China is the Photography Museum of Lishui, China, in Lishui City, Zhejiang Province. Opened in 2007, it covers 3,000 square meters. It houses a collection of 5,444 items including 611 photography works, 617 vintage historical photos, and some photography books and periodicals. At its current stage, it looks more like a museum of antique cameras than a professional photography museum.

The latest news came in November from Lianzhou City, Guangdong Province. At the Lianzhou International Photo Festival, it was announced that the building of the Lianzhou International Photography Museum had been completed. By this year's photo festival, it will be officially opened. Co-directed by a French and a Chinese curator, this museum is partnered with the Musée Nicéphore Niépce, a professional photography museum in France. The collecting policy of Lianzhou International Photography Museum will focus on building its collection of Chinese contemporary photography, but the Musée Nicéphore Niépce buys artworks from other countries in the global art market; the goal is to form a permanent exhibition showcasing the history of world photography. This museum is funded by the local government, although the exact sum of the grant is currently unknown. The Chinese have finally realized the importance of photography art museums. Better late than never.

In Japanese, "photography" is translated as "*shashin*" (写真), which literally means "recording the truth or fact." In Chinese, it is translated as "*sheying*" (摄影) which literally means "capturing the shadow of the fact or reality." Obviously, these two East Asian countries have a slightly different understanding of the nature of photography. The Chinese seem to be less confident in the medium: we appear to believe that photography captures not the fact itself, only its shadow. We Chinese seem more pessimistic than the Japanese about photography.

Such pessimism should not excuse China's lack of a photography museum. After all, photography has been a loyal witness to the contemporary history of China. It captures and displays in its own way the social changes we are

going through, and the Chinese people have their own creative techniques for taking photos. Many photos survived the wars, revolutions, and social turbulence, coming to form material evidence and a cultural heritage with factual, spiritual, emotional, conceptual, and artistic value. Whether it is a faithful record of history or a creative expression, a photo contains the understanding and interpretation by the Chinese photographer and artist of history, culture, and the fate of mankind. The absence of a photography museum to collect, conserve, and study these photos simply reveals our indifference towards and fear of our history. If we refuse to face history and the visual evidence provided by photography, how can we face the future with integrity?

What is more, a photography museum does more than conserve and share photography: its most important role and responsibility is to restructure the narrative of history and redefine culture.

We are in an age where people, through the internet, are inundated with images. Each individual probably has his own way of reorganizing the images he gets, according to the life he experiences and the education he receives. A photography museum, however, organizes the images with a higher mission: it re-narrates the history of photography, reinterprets the practice of photography, and redefines itself as an institution. Reading history might lead us to new aspirations and prospects for a better future, and possibilities of new action.

In conclusion, photography museums are what we particularly need now in China. Speaking from the Chinese perspective, I think that I have answered the question of “why photography museums are necessary.”

(English Editing: Alex Dudok de Wit [Art Translators Collective])