

Rich stew of diversity feeds our imagination

By A. D. Coleman

The 2006 Lianzhou International Photography Festival (LIPF) has shown that a public celebration of creative photography, past and present, can succeed in China, just as it has succeeded all over the world.

This second edition of the LIPF continues the theme established for last year's inaugural session, "Between the Observer and the Observed." Directed by Duan Yuting, working with a small but energetic staff, the festival premiered in November 2005.

It brings together works by a mix of Chinese photographers and their counterparts from other countries: 163 participants altogether, 117 Chinese and 46 from overseas.

This results in a rich stew of imagery — 79 exhibitions with more than 3,200 pictures — that

surely enhances the cultural life of Lianzhou, a small town near Shenzhen in Guangdong Province. Lianzhou serves as a destination city for cultural tourism between a completely modern megalopolis like Shenzhen and the smaller towns and rural areas of the country.

The selection this year placed heavy emphasis on documentary and photojournalistic projects from China and elsewhere, including images from the "cultural revolution" (1966-76) by Weng Naiqiang and contemporary group portraits in the classic tradition by Li Nan.

However, more experimental presentations of "personal" documentary, such as Olivier Pin-Fat's hellish, diaristic visions of Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, Philip Blenkinsop's painful images of Thailand and Nepal, and Steven Benson's "Red, White, and Blue

in Black & White" balanced those out.

Meanwhile, such works in other forms such as Miao Xiaochun's digital reworking of Michelangelo, "The Last Judgment in Cyberspace," and extracts from Cui Xiuwen's digital "Angel" series, all reflected the diversity of contemporary photographic practice both inside and outside China.

This year's Awards Committee selected three Chinese photographers, one Chinese curator, a Chinese architect, and two foreign photographers for recognition at a public ceremony on December 10.

Among the Chinese photographers, Meng Minsheng won the first prize. Mo Yi took the second prize for his installation "The Scenery I Inhabit," a roomful of intriguing sets of typological images comparing such everyday features of the urban

Chinese environment as quilts airing outdoors, apartment-building entrances, and protective terrace grille works.

The four sites chosen for the festival's exhibitions — the city's Culture Centre plus three unused former industrial spaces (the Shoe Factory, the Granary, and the Candy Factory) — all lie within easy walking distance of each other and of the Lianzhou International Hotel where most visiting dignitaries were housed.

The festival closes today and the LIPF will publish a full catalogue of the 2006 edition in March of 2007, providing a permanent trace of the event.

For more information about the Lianzhou International Photography Festival, visit the website at www.lipf.cn

The author is a photography critic, historian, and curator based in New York and Shenzhen.



"Identities: China" by Li Nan