



# Craftsmanship still clicks

**Left:** A wedding photo of a young couple in the 1980s. **Center:** In the mid-50s, so many apprentices came to study photography at China Photo Studio that the course had to be moved to a warehouse. **Right:** Lady Shanqi, one of the many wives of Prince Suzhong of the First Rank, poses in an early 20th-century portrait.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Even in the digital era when photos are edited on mobile phones, people still line up to have portraits taken at a time-honored Beijing studio

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The World of Chinese

If you have never been to China Photo Studio (中国照相馆, zhōng guó zhào xiàng guǎn), you might be surprised that, in this digital era, people are still willing to line up for hours to have their photo taken.

For many, a portrait requires more than just a digital camera (数码相机, shù mǎ xiàng jī) or a smartphone (智能手机, zhì néng shǒu jī). “It’s about quality, aesthetic taste and a sense of ritual,” said Bao Chen, marketing manager of the studio.

Located on Beijing’s Wangfujing Street, one of the most prestigious commercial areas in all of China, China Photo Studio keeps an exceedingly low profile compared with the nearby fancy restaurants or luxury retailers. Its signage, hidden among the outsized facade for Louis Vuitton and Quanjude Roast Duck (全聚德烤鸭, quán jù dé kǎo yā), was designed in an age of simplicity — just five red characters, “中国照相馆”.

But anyone who reads the plaque outside may be in for a surprise, for this humble studio is described as one of “the top 10 enterprises of the national photography industry”.

When I visited, it was 10 am on a Friday, and customers already crowded the reception area.

“Today is not a busy day. It’s not

a weekend or a holiday,” Bao told me. “If you come here during Spring Festival, you will see people lining up from early morning.”

During the previous Chinese New Year, the *Beijing Morning Post* reported, the studio took an average of 300 orders per day, in person. For many old Beijingers, a studio photo of the family has become part of festival tradition.

After 60 years in the business, the studio is a household name among locals. “People trust a time-honored brand,” Bao said.

What is less well-known is that the studio actually started in Shanghai and achieved nationwide fame in the coastal city before moving to Beijing.

According to *Heavenly Lights, Cloud Shadows*, an in-house history book of the studio’s past eight decades, the studio owes its founding to a love affair. In the 1930s, Wu Jianping, a young man from East China’s Jiangsu province who was an apprentice in a Shanghai studio, fell in love with his colleague He Dingyi. But He’s father thought Wu was too poor for his daughter. Determined to prove He’s father wrong, Wu set up the first branch of China Photo Studio in 1937 on West Nanjing Road, the busiest street in Shanghai. Eventually, He’s father relented.

At the time, Shanghai had several foreign concessions, and most studios were named using characters that evoked Western products. But

the Lugou Bridge Incident (卢沟桥事变, lú gōu qiáo shì biàn) had just occurred, sparking war, so Wu decided to give his studio a patriotic title: China Photo Studio.

Despite his pride, there was not much to boast of initially: Two Triplex cameras and a four-story house that served as studio, darkroom and staff quarters for about 10 staff members, including Wu and He. In the first two years, Wu was barely able to make enough to pay the rent.

Wu’s fortunes turned when he was given the opportunity to photograph Chen Yunshang for the 1939 movie *Mulan Joins the Army*. Also known as Nancy Chan, Chen was a rising star, considered a “beauty in the south, unparalleled on Earth”. The moviemaker’s marketing plan was to use the 8-inch photos as giveaways to ticketholders and decided to cooperate with China Photo Studio. Wu printed the studio’s name on each of the photos and displayed 20 enlarged versions in the studio’s window.

The movie did extremely well, with more than 50,000 portraits sent out to Chen aficionados, and it helped establish the studio as a recognizable brand in Shanghai. “At the time,” author and collector Tong Bingxue notes in his 2015 book *A History of Photo Studios in China* (1859-1956), “many upper-class ladies, popular dancing-hall stars, and even powerful gangsters would feel proud just to have their portraits displayed in the China Photo Studio window.”

Yet, just a few decades previously, photography had been regarded as an exotic (舶来品, bó lái pǐn), foreign technology. Some even associated it with sorcery.

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French artist Louis Daguerre unveiled the first daguerreotype process in 1839, and the *Canton Press*, a Macao newspaper, announced the discovery to China just two months later. But it was not until 1842, according to Terry Bennett’s *History of Photography in China*, that the first cameras arrived in China, courtesy of two British men mapping the Yangtze River. In 1845, American photographer George West set up the first commercial photography studio in Hong Kong.

In the 1860s, when Qing diplomatic missions were sent to visit Europe and the United States to bring back technological knowledge, Chinese-owned studios began to appear. The first were mainly concentrated in Hong Kong and neighboring Guangdong province, before gradually spreading north.

In his essay *On Photography and So On*, the writer Lu Xun (鲁迅) describes the view that many Chinese took of the phenomenon: “(It) seems like witchcraft. In one province, during the reign of the Xianfeng Emperor, someone had their property destroyed by villagers just for taking photos of people.”

These superstitious beliefs (迷信, mí xìn) were even used by swindlers to perform simple cons. Tong describes one common scam in which a “magician” approaches an invalid, explains that his illness is caused by a demon, and offers to expel the intruder. The patient is brought to a photography studio, where a photo is taken — the blurry image, it is explained, is the demon, now expelled.

Cost was another barrier. “Back in those days, only rich people could afford to take photos,” said Zhao Zengqiang, deputy manager of Beijing-based Dabei Photo Studio (大北照相馆, dà běi zhào xiàng guǎn), established in Peking, as the capital was then known, in 1921. Since Dabei was famous for theatrical-costume photography, in which customers would pose in elaborate Peking Opera outfits and makeup, their main customers were actors and *piaoyou* (票友, piào yǒu, Peking Opera aficionados, often amateur performers).

It was not until the spring of 1956 that China Photo Studio landed back on the fashion radar, after an Indonesian ambassador complained to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs that he had had a suit altered 21 times at a Beijing tailor and still could not get a decent fit. Premier Zhou Enlai, himself a snappy dresser, decided that the capital’s service industry required an urgent boost, so he ordered a list to be collated of the country’s best clothing shops, barbers and photo studios, which were to move to Beijing.

Despite the prevalence of modern studios, digital cameras and mobile phones, the likes of Dabei and China Photo Studio remain popular today. Indeed, their old-fashioned approach has proved something of a draw.

Courtesy of *The World of Chinese*,  
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