Exploring the achievement levels of successful professional photographers in Chongqing, China

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Abstract: This study investigates the multidimensional achievement levels of professional photographers in Chongqing, China, employing a qualitative methodology grounded in case studies and grounded theory. Through purposive sampling, three accomplished photographers specializing in photography education, astrophotography, and wedding photography were selected. Data collected via semi-structured interviews, video dialogues, and telephonic follow-ups were analyzed using NVivo software, adhering to the three-stage coding process of grounded theory. Results reveal that photographers' achievements encompass five core dimensions: Industry status, professional competence, work value, influence, and professional ethos. Divergent priorities emerged: commercial photographers prioritized market competitiveness and client satisfaction, while art photographers emphasized cultural expression and creative autonomy. Regional dynamics, such as leveraging Chongqing's "mountain city" cultural symbols and navigating technological disparities, critically shaped achievement trajectories. The study proposes a region-driven achievement model, integrating Bourdieu's capital theory with localized cultural and technological ecosystems. It advocates for multidimensional evaluation frameworks balancing objective metrics and subjective values. Practical implications include curriculum reforms aligning photography education with regional industry demands and policy initiatives to foster cross-sector collaborations. This research enriches discourse on non-metropolitan creative industries, offering insights for talent development and sustainable cultural economies in transitional contexts.
Keywords: Industry status, Multi-dimensional evaluation, Professional photographer, Success level.

1. Introduction

Photography, introduced to China in 1844 by French diplomat Jules Itier Goldberg [1] initially faced resistance within artistic circles due to its perceived technical utilitarianism. It was not until the New Culture Movement (1915–1925) that the medium gained recognition as a legitimate art form, transitioning from a documentary "tool" to a vehicle for cultural expression [2]. This evolution has been particularly pronounced in Chongqing, a western Chinese municipality where photography has become deeply intertwined with regional identity. Post-reform era economic growth (post-1978) catalyzed the industry's expansion, yet regional disparities persist, creating a fragmented professional ecosystem. As the sole western municipality directly governed by China's central administration, Chongqing exemplifies this duality: its photographers leverage the city's "mountain metropolis" topography and Ba-Yu cultural heritage to forge distinctive visual narratives, transforming local symbols like Hongyadong and Chuanjiang Chant into cultural capital [3]. Such practices embody Bourdieu's theory of capital conversion, where economic and cultural capital mutually reinforce professional success [4].

The Chongqing Photography Industry Association [5] photography market, valued at 18.7 billion yuan demonstrates robust growth in sectors like wedding and cultural tourism photography, yet remains stratified. Elite practitioners secure cross-industry collaborations, while grassroots photographers face technological disruption and market homogenization [5]. Evaluating photographers' "achievement levels" here necessitates balancing artistic merit with market penetration and sociocultural influence—a complexity underexplored in existing scholarship, which predominantly addresses national trends [6, 7]. Regional mechanisms enabling success under resource constraints, particularly in western China, remain under-theorized.

Compounding these challenges, technological disparities—such as low AI tool adoption (32% proficiency rate) and reliance on traditional techniques—exacerbate market stratification [5, 6]. Simultaneously, digital democratization intensifies tensions between "technological accessibility" and "artistic originality" [7]. Furthermore, misalignment between academia and industry persists: only 12% of Chongqing Photography Industry Association [5] photography curricula incorporate regional cultural creation, perpetuating skill mismatches [8]. To address these gaps, this study interrogates the interactive framework of regional culture, technological adaptation, and educational alignment in shaping achievement dynamics. By deconstructing how Chongqing photographers negotiate localized ecosystems, this research advances a multidimensional model for talent evaluation and industry sustainability in transitional creative economies and to explore the multidimensional determinants of professional photographers' achievement levels, with a focus on regional, technological, and educational synergies.

2. Methodology

This study takes the achievement level of professional photographers in Chongqing, China, as the core topic, and adopts a qualitative research method combining case studies and grounded theory [9] to systematically explore their achievement generation mechanism and the interaction between social and environmental factors. The research design strictly adheres to the principle of qualitative research. Through purposeful sampling, three Chongqing photographers who have achieved remarkable accomplishments in the fields of photography education, astrophotography, and wedding photography were selected as cases. The case screening criteria include: industry influence, field typicality, and continuous activity, etc., to ensure the depth and breadth of the data.

Data collection was carried out through multiple forms, such as face-to-face interviews, video conversations, and telephone follow-ups. The interview Outlines were designed around four major themes: "Definition of Success", "Key Nodes of Career Development", "Strategies for Utilizing Regional Resources", and "Adaptation to Industry Trends". A semi-structured strategy was adopted in the interview process to enhance the richness of the data. The researchers guided the core issues based on the outline, dynamically adjusted the direction of the follow-up questions, and encouraged the respondents to freely share their unassumed viewpoints. This flexible design aims to capture tacit knowledge in practice and avoid the limitations of the research perspective.

Data analysis is based on the three-stage coding process of grounded theory Creswell and Poth [9] and data analysis is conducted in three stages: initial coding, principal axis coding, and selective coding. Through the three-stage coding of grounded theory, the achievement generation path of artists can be effectively deconstructed. It is particularly applicable to regional cases in non-first-tier cities [10]. The NVivo software [11] was used to systematically manage the interview texts, summarize the core concepts, and finally form theories.

To ensure the validity of the research, the triangulation validation method was adopted to cross-compare the interview texts and the industry report Chongqing Photography Industry Association [5] and the phased coding results were fed back to the respondents for significance confirmation. The research finds that the achievement level of photographers in Chongqing is not only reflected in the balance between market competitiveness and artistic innovation ability, but also relies on the creative transformation of regional cultural resources and the adaptive strategies of the industry ecosystem. This

method provides an analytical framework with both theoretical depth and practical orientation for the construction of a regional photography talent evaluation system.

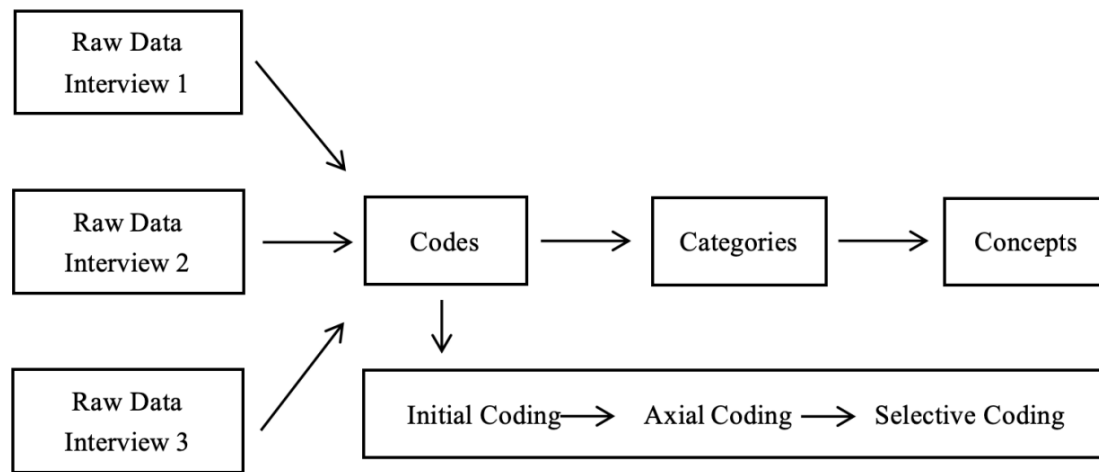The specific process is shown in the figure below.

Figure 1.
Research framework.

3. Findings and Discussion

This study deconstructs the achievement level of professional photographers in Chongqing based on grounded theory and finds that their achievements present multi-dimensional characteristics, covering five core dimensions: industry status, professional ability, work value, work influence, and important qualities. The main shaft coding content is shown in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1.
Spindle Coding.

Principal category	Themes	Explanation
The level of achievement of a successful photographer	Industrial status	A photographer's significant contributions to the industry, public peer recognition, and the accolades he or she has won, these factors together determine his or her position in the industry.
	Professional competence	Including the photographer's technical level, artistic accomplishment, creative thinking and other aspects of the ability, involving the skilled operation of photographic equipment, the use of shooting skills, and the ability to tell stories.
	Value of work	The functional value, aesthetic value, and social entertainment value of photographic works.
	Work influence	The wide impact of photography in social, cultural and artistic fields. This influence can be measured by the spread of the work, the number of audiences, and the social discussion triggered.
	Important quality	The important qualities required by the industry help photographers find breakthroughs and improve themselves in an ever-changing environment.

Among them, the total frequency of these five core latitudes is 63, accounting for 50%. The sample presentation table for determining the achievement level of successful photographers in the photography industry is shown in Table 2:

Table 2.
Pattern presentation.

Core node	Frequency	Account for	Child node	Frequency	Account for
The level of achievement of a successful photographer	63	44.10%	Industry status	10	6.99%
			Professional competence	21	14.69%
			Value of work	8	5.59%
			Work influence	9	6.29%
			Important quality	15	10.49%

Photographers in different fields have significant differences in their definitions of "success". For instance, commercial photographers place more emphasis on market competitiveness, while art photographers focus on cultural expression and innovative breakthroughs. The following discussion is carried out in combination with the interview data and coding results.

Examples of industry position codes are shown in Table 3:

Table 3.
Interview Code A.

Categorization	Conceptualization	Interview
Industry status	Income reward	a: For professional photographers who earn money by photography, there is only one success, that is, how much money they earn, and how much recognition is your income. b: In fact, from the perspective of income structure, it will be found that each photographer, if he does well, is a large number of fans, and at the same time, it brings him the main cost of income.
	Industry contribution	a: Photography hasn't been around long enough, so I think. There is another definition of success, that is, whether you have promoted the progress of the industry. I think this is also relatively important. b: Because of influence, I think it is very important that he can, for example, influence some of their works and some of their thinking methods on the industry.
	Public and peer recognition	a: And I have always, for a long time, that is, a good work, you not only have to shoot well by yourself, and then you can't just say that you appreciate it, you also have to get the understanding of the public, and then their recognition of your is very important b: If photography is commercialized, it may be oriented to fit the public. c: It is recognized by the peers, which is a success
	Innovation and development	a: I think it is also an innovative thing, that is, I am now doing the kind of panoramic photography, and this is also a thing that no one in China is doing, and only a few people in the world are doing it. I think it is quite important. b: Maybe you need to work very hard, have artistic innovation and development, and even bring breakthroughs
	Personnel training	a: Actually, I mainly make photography tutorial books. This is like if I make a photography book, he can sell it well. Which means all the books I've published in the last few years can still be. It's still selling well. b: We have had a training facility for more than ten years

Industry status is one of the core indicators for measuring a photographer's achievements (frequency 10, accounting for 8%), and its connotation includes income remuneration, industry contribution and social recognition. Research has found that photographers in Chongqing generally regard economic income as the basic criterion for success. Respondent R1 pointed out: "The success of a professional photographer lies in how much money they earn, and recognition is the income level." R2 added, "The number of fans is directly related to the revenue cost, and market influence determines the business value." This phenomenon reflects the intensification of the commercialization trend in the photography industry.

However, industry contributions beyond the individual level are equally crucial (frequency 21, accounting for 17%). Respondent R3 emphasized: "Success requires driving industry progress, such as influencing peers' thinking through innovative concepts." For instance, some photographers have injected new directions into the industry by developing panoramic photography techniques or participating in the documentation of intangible cultural heritage images. This contribution not only enhances an individual's reputation but also promotes the diversified development of the regional photography ecosystem.The examples of professional ability codes are shown in the table:

Table 4.
Interview Code B.

Categorization	Conceptualization	Interview
Professional competence	Skill	a: Everyone's aesthetic is different, and then you will have a difference in the application of photography, composition, color b: The most basic skills are including your composition, your light, these are the most basic
	Professional quality	a: There is often a word called aesthetic accumulation, which is to watch a lot of movies, read magazines, look at pictures, look at other artists, and other photographers what they do because many people think that Chinese photographers do not shoot this or that well. They think Agence France-Presse is good, they think AP is good, but they don't really know that the core gap is storytelling.

Professional competence encompasses technical skills and aesthetic accumulation (frequency 21, accounting for 17%), and it is the cornerstone of achievement level. The respondents generally believe that basic techniques such as composition and lighting are the "hard thresholds" for creation. For instance, R3 mentioned in the interview: "Aesthetics can vary, but the techniques must be solid." In the field of art photography, narrative ability and cross-disciplinary aesthetic accumulation are even more crucial. R1 mentioned: "The gap between Chinese photographers and their international counterparts lies in their ability to 'tell stories', and they need to enhance their cultural vision through multiple channels such as films and art exhibitions."

The synergy between technology and art is particularly prominent in commercial photography. For instance, wedding photographers need to balance the demands of their clients. For example, they need to conform to the aesthetic standards of the general public to a certain extent, while also requiring technological innovation and being familiar with the application of AI photo editing tools. This kind of "adaptive creativity" has become the core of market competitiveness. As R2 said, "It is necessary to satisfy the clients while maintaining style recognition."
Examples of the value of works are shown in the table:

Table 5.
Interview Code C.

Categorization	Conceptualization	Interview
Value of work	Functional value	a: First of all, generally speaking, photography records the moments you see and experience. Then you press the shutter to capture it, or capture it on video. A record is a very meaningful, very valuable thing b: For example, you say advertising photography, and then we, we let's consider wedding photography, this kind of thing it has a functional, that functional means that I will contact him when I need.
	Scientific research value	a: I can give a few examples of my own experience, for example, I once went to the Himalayas to photograph the aurora fluctuations in Iceland, and then it can produce relevant scientific research value, and then there are corresponding. Scientists analyzed the event I photographed and wrote a paper about it, which was published in a journal. That is to say, from this point of view, the work I shot recorded this event, he has a lot of value; I think he is definitely successful. b: And scientific photography, which is of great record value.
	Aesthetic and entertainment value	a: Then there is another category, which is called the so-called art photography, art photography, for example, which gallery has what exhibition, that is the entire art market b: Commercial shooting is entertainment, it belongs to the entertainment industry, let the audience feel happy, fun.
	Product promotion shooting	a: The commercial photographer is, such as the studio photography studio, or with Taobao to take product photos, the Taobao above those selling clothing, to ask people to take real photos of the clothing model b: that with the travel platform, such as Ctrip, the United States Group above is not there are many hotels? Those hotels and some homestays, especially homestays, are also decorated more beautifully. He needs to take photos after taking photos on Ctrip Meituan.com. People book his hotel, they want to see his hotel, and he needs pictures of that hotel room. He needs to take a lot of photos of the more upscale hotels, the more beautifully built hotels.

The value of the work is reflected in the compound characteristics of functionality, scientificity, and aesthetics (frequency 8, accounting for 6%). Functional value dominates in commercial photography. As respondent R1 stated, "Wedding photography meets the needs of specific scenarios and is a service-oriented product." Scientific photography, on the other hand, provides data support for scientific research by documenting natural phenomena such as aurora fluctuations and geological changes. As R2 mentioned in the interview: "My works have been used in academic papers, which is the cross-border value of photography."

In the field of art, the aesthetic value of works is quantified through gallery exhibitions and market transactions. R3 pointed out: "The value of art photography lies in whether it can trigger cultural discussions, rather than merely having a visual impact." This multi-value system requires photographers to balance practicality and ideological content in their creations. For instance, a photographer from Chongqing, through the "Night View of Hongyadong" series of works, not only serves the promotion of cultural tourism but also shapes regional cultural symbols.

The coding examples of the influence of the work are shown in the table:

Table 6.
Interview Code D.

Categorization	Conceptualization	Interview
Work influence	Social media influence	a: I think social media is a very important thing, it is not just a social account, in fact, from the perspective of artistic creation, it is actually a way of communication, you think about it, a hundred years ago, a thousand years ago, the painter, he has become famous, he has been widely recognized by the society. That is to say, as a means of communication, social media is a very important part of it. b: Now this is mainly to promote through the Internet, that is, to keep pace with The Times. For example, it was Weibo at the beginning, and now it is more popular. Of course, such as video number, public number, or something like TikTok, Baidu headlines. Some are to update c: The main is the photographer, who should be actively doing network channels.
	International recognition	a: As for my personal shooting direction, there are also some differences. We are recording the world under the night sky, not only in China, but also in some representative starry sky around the world. b: Then I will actually think, for example, how can what we do be widely recognized and recognized around the world, and become an example for others. Because China's development is determined by the era we live in, we need such people and things to come out
	Professional award	a: I think awards are definitely a more quantitative aspect. b: For a photographer in China pays more attention to achievements and awards
	Hold an exhibition	a: The main purpose of art photographers is to participate in various photography exhibitions and then raise their popularity. b: There may not be as many opportunities for such exhibitions in Chongqing as there are in Beijing and Shanghai. Then he needs to go out and gradually move into the bigger world

The influence of the work is built through social media, international recognition and professional awards (frequency: 9, accounting for 7%). Research has found that photographers in Chongqing actively utilize platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu to expand their dissemination. R1 mentioned in the interview: "Social media is a survival tool for contemporary photographers." However, at the same time, through big data algorithms, social media has increased the exposure rate of local photographers by 300%, but the increase in traffic has also exacerbated the homogenization of creation (Xu, 2023), so its international influence is still insufficient. Interviewee R2 attempts to break through geographical limitations by shooting "The Global Starry Sky". In the interview, he mentioned: "Chinese photographers need to go global and become a bridge for cultural export."

Professional awards and participation in exhibitions provide industry endorsement. R3 admitted frankly, "Chongqing has limited exhibition resources and needs to 'go out' to participate in exhibitions in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and even internationally." This "regional breakthrough" strategy not only enhances personal popularity but also injects vitality into the regional photography ecosystem. Examples of important quality codes are shown in the table:

Table 7.
Interview Code E.

Categorization	Conceptualization	Interview
Important quality	Industry enthusiasm	a: The biggest shortage in this photography course is actually students. He should have initiative, enthusiasm, enthusiasm b: I think the core is continuous love, you continue to love to do this thing, you can have a very strong subjective initiative, it will not be affected by other outside interference. Then, even if it is hard and tired, your heart is particularly passionate, but these difficult environments, more prominent the meaning of the work, I think love is the most core point
	concentration	a: I think the key quality is concentration. Because whether they are successful, well-known, some people we know, I think they focus on a certain piece or a certain genre, or a certain project on b: They will not change their personal style because of this market demand, or focus on being themselves
	Observe professional ethics	a: Photography mainly comes from your life, from the ordinary thinking and observation, it does not mean that you go to do that for inspiration, can not copy b: We may have six or seven years to shoot this kind of time, is not appreciated. There are also very painful things, because in fact, it is not very acceptable, just because it is too real
	Persistence and adherence	a: This aspect means that you need to endure loneliness b: because this is you, maybe you stick to it with your passion and your love for this thing c: Even now you are still the same sentence, you can shoot with a camera, so I think it is more important, or yourself, with your own understanding, you can stick to it this thing. I think this is the most important thing
	Meet challenges	a: The experience I mentioned at the beginning is that the set of things I insist on and like is not recognized by more people, and then there may be struggles during that period of time, but I am a kind of person who is very reasonable, anyway, I don't like other things, I will continue to shoot such things well b: long-term outdoor, and it is a lot of such places at night. This kind of difficulty you may not be able to imagine, this kind of thing a lot of c: is the biggest challenge, is how to do a good social software, you do not do well, you can only be a photographer in a photography studio, you do well, you can support yourself, and then you do a big business, you can also recruit two people to serve you

Important qualities include industry passion, concentration and the ability to cope with challenges (frequency: 15, accounting for 12%). Research has found that highly accomplished photographers generally have a "non-utilitarian passion". R2's description: "When shooting in the Himalayas, the extreme environment instead highlights the significance of the work, and one persists because of love."

Concentration is reflected in the in-depth exploration of a specific field. Star photographer R2 has been dedicated to "nighttime celestial phenomenon documentation" for ten years, forming a technical barrier. However, commercial photographer R1 adheres to the principle of "not changing personal style due to market trends". In addition, professional ethics and the ability to withstand pressure are the key guarantees for long-term career development.

This study indicates that the achievement level of photographers is the result of the interaction among individual capabilities, regional resources and the industry ecosystem. The Chongqing case reveals that regional photographers need to break through resource constraints through "transformation of cultural symbols" and "dual-track adaptation of technology and market". It is suggested that the industry evaluation system incorporate multi-dimensional indicators, such as standards for market competitiveness and cultural contribution, and promote the alignment of photography education courses with regional demands.

4. Proposal for Further Study

Future research can further expand the perspective, explore the diverse success paths of photographers in different regions and cultural environments under the background of globalization, and promote the coordinated development of theory and practice. At the same time, it is also possible to conduct in-depth research on the balance between art production and market demand in the cultural and creative industry, providing broader theoretical support for photography education, industry practice and the development of related disciplinary systems.

5. Conclusion

This study takes the achievement level of professional photographers in Chongqing, China, as the core. Through qualitative case studies and grounded theory methods, it reveals its multi-dimensional structural characteristics and regional driving mechanism. The research finds that the achievement level of photographers in Chongqing covers five dimensions: industry status, professional ability, work value, influence and professional quality, and its generation logic is deeply embedded in the regional cultural ecology: Photographers build differentiated competitiveness by creatively transforming the symbols of Ba and Yu, and at the same time rely on social media platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu to expand local visibility. However, international recognition is still constrained by the structure from the center to the periphery. For instance, although Chongqing photographers actively participate in international photography festivals, only 3% of their works are collected by mainstream galleries in Europe and America. Reflecting the power structure from the center to the periphery of the global art market [12].

At the theoretical level, this study proposes a "region-driven achievement generation model", expanding the explanatory power of Bourdieu's capital theory in non-first-tier cities and emphasizing the interaction between regional cultural capital and the embodiment of technology. At the practical level, the coordinated development of personal achievements and regional cultural economy can be promoted by establishing the "Mountain City Photography Creation Fund", optimizing photography education courses and building a diversified evaluation system.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

Copyright:

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