

## **Student Essay**

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| <b>Title</b>     | Lu Xun at the Second National Traveling Woodcut Exhibition                              |

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Sha Fei (1912-1950), who died on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1950, was buried with the negatives of Lu Xun (1881-1936) that he photographed at the Second National Traveling Woodcut Exhibition on 8<sup>th</sup> October 1936. He once aimed at becoming another Lu Xun in his golden years, to protect against injustice in society. This was 11 days before Lu Xun's death. Having taken the most prominent photo of Lu Xun in his late years, Sha Fei became an influential photographer of his generation with his published name Sha Fei – the flying sand.

On 5<sup>th</sup> May 1912, Sha Fei was born with the original name of Situ Chuan in a small pharmacist family in Guangzhou. He enrolled in the Guangzhou Radio School with the love of literature, especially the novels of Lu Xun. In 1926, Sha Fei graduated in the radio school at 14. With the prevailing patriotism and anti-imperialism, Sha Fei participated in the National Revolutionary Army for the Northern Expedition and undertook the responsibility to society. He worked as a telegraph operator in the army and followed the army to Shanghai, Ningbo, Jinan, Beijing, so on and fourth. Following the victory of Northern Expedition and the establishment of the National government in Nanjing, Sha Fei was

assigned to Wuzhou, in Guangxi province at an army telegraph station for three years. In 1932, Sha Fei was employed as a technician for the Shantou radio station with the monthly salary of 150 silver dollars. With the high income and plenty of spare time, he enjoyed reading all the literature of Lu Xun. He started to be interested in photography with the new camera bought for his honeymoon with his wife, Wang Hui. Influenced by western pictorial journals, Sha Fei started to believe that he could contribute in the field of photojournalism.

In June 1935, he became a member of Black and White Photographic Society (Heibai sheying she), which was based in Shanghai. Sha Fei quit his work as a technician at the Shantou radio station and enrolled in the Shanghai Art Academy in 1936, majoring in western painting. He started to develop his career as a photographer after he left Shantou to Shanghai. With the studying in Shanghai, Sha Fei came across other artists, including Lu Xun. On 8<sup>th</sup> October 1936, Sha Fei encountered Lu Xun at the Second National Woodcut Exhibition (第二屆全國木刻流動展覽會). Sha Fei was so delighted and photographed Lu Xun without permission. He captured Lu Xun's close up pictures and the pictures of Lu Xun chatting with other young woodcut artists including Bai Wei, Cao Bai, Chen Yanqiao, Huang Xinbo and Lin Fu. This photograph becomes the most representative portrait of Lu Xun in his late years.

Sha Fei was motivated to capture Lu Xun's picture inspired by the literature written by Lu Xun. Since 1931, Lu Xun had advocated for woodcut painting and participated in the National Woodcut Exhibition. Sha Fei understood that it was a rare opportunity to capture a photo of Lu Xun as Lu Xun was suffering from illness of tuberculosis. Sha Fei shot the portrait and close-up of Lu Xun from several angles. This picture shows Lu Xun's manners, elegance and caring towards other young artists. As Shana Brown mentioned, the unauthorized snapshots of Lu Xun at the woodcut exhibition was an

ultimate coup.<sup>1</sup> After Lu Xun's death 11 days later, those photographs became the final images of him. These pictures were adopted for the cover of collections and posthumous edition of short stories written by Lu Xun.

As a most representative figure in modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun created numerous influential stories including *Call to Arms*, *A Madman's Diary*, *Kong Yiji* and *The True Story of Ah Q*. Sha Fei was inspired by his work and influenced by his life and death. Sha Fei heard a rumor that Lu Xun was killed by his Japanese doctor. This rumor became a thorn in Sha Fei's heart. In May 1948, suffering from tuberculosis, Sha Fei was treated at the Norman Bethune Hospital in Shijiazhuang. However, he was probably also suffering from mental illness with persecutory delusions as well. With the rumor of Lu Xun's death and suffering mental illness, he believed that his Japanese doctor would kill him. In December 1949, he shot and killed the Japanese doctor with his pistol. Eventually, Sha Fei was sentenced to death and was executed by firing squad, in a move to placate Japanese doctors and nurses in China.

The life of Sha Fei, including his achievement and death, were influenced by Lu Xun. Like his the published name of Sha Fei, with his mighty contribution to photography, I believe that he was already a piece of sand flying and dancing in the sky of his country, with love and freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> Shana Brown, *Art, Documentary, and Propaganda in Wartime China: The Photography of Sha Fei* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2009), pp. 1-92.