

Student Essay

This is student work. The Library cannot guarantee the accuracy and quality of the content

Course	HUMA4000H Picturing History: Photographers and the Making of Modern China (Spring 2017)
Professor	David Chang Cheng
Student	Wu Yun Huan, Winnie
Title	Fighting on the Great Wall

<http://doi.org/10.14711/spcol/x001282>



Sha Fei (5/5/1912-4/3/1950), when he was a teenager, he already had an aspiration to participate in politics. From 1926 to 1936, Sha Fei joined the National Revolutionary Army and worked in different positions, like telegraph operator and technician in National government, in different

places. Sha Fei's interest in photography was aroused when he worked as a technician at the Shantou radio station from 1932 to 1936 having an opportunity to be exposed to journalistic photographs from foreign pictorial magazines. Therefore, he joined the Black and White Photographic Society in 1935 and enrolled in the Western Painting Department of the Shanghai Art Academy in 1936. It gave him lots of opportunity to be exposed to modern visual arts and to interact with activists in art photography and journalism.

In September 1937, Sha Fei wanted to contribute, and become a photographer in the frontline of the Anti-Japanese war. In October, he joined the Eighth Route Army led by General Nie Rongzhen,

who established the Jin-Cha-Ji base, and followed the army from battle to battle to capture the military life and create propaganda¹.

During Sha Fei's journey with the Eighth Route Army, he took a series of photos about Eighth Route Army's fighting on the Great Wall. This photograph, titled "Fighting on the Great Wall", is one of the famous war-resistance photographs of Sha Fei. It was taken in Futuyu Great Wall in Laiyuan of Hebei in Autumn 1937². This photograph depicts the scene of heroic resistance of Eight Route Army in a battle against Japanese troops.

In this photo, the Eight Route Army is the major character and the Great Wall is used as the background. The choice of background is not without considerations and the Great Wall has its practical and strategic value. Since it is well-known that Great Wall was built five centuries earlier and used for resisting foreign invasion in ancient times, it is a symbol of China in national resistance and of successful expulsion of invaders.³ Now, it had not lost its value. When faced with Japanese invasion, the Great Wall was able to play an important role in evoking Chinese people's resistant emotions and patriotism by reminding them that they had a successful experience in repelling invaders since time immemorial. It can be seen that photographs are useful in people mobilization and powerful as weapons in war resistance.

Although this is a black-and-white photo, it has artistic elements. The composition of photo is very important to achieve the desired effect or message of the photographer. In this photo, the Great Wall dominates a large proportion of the photo, and only two soldiers stand out in the bottom left corner, they represent the Eighth Route Army. In addition, this photo has strong chiaroscuro effect which

¹ 沈揆一, Fei Sha (1912 -1950), (Virtual Shanghai, 2016), pp. 1-5

² 王雁, "戰鬥在古長城," electronic document, http://shafei.sysu.edu.cn/center/treatise/myfatherC/myfatherSF_011.htm 18 April 2017.

³ William Lindesay, *The Great Wall Revisited: From the Jade Gate to Old Dragon's Head* (Harvard University Press,2008), pp. 1-3.

makes the Great Wall and the two Soldiers stand out. It is believed that that Sha Fei wanted to highlight the Great Wall and the Eighth Route Army's bravery in the battle against the Japanese in this photo.

This photograph is a propaganda photo. Some people argue that it is a staged photo. They support their idea with the following evidence. First, according to the field research of scholars, like Sha Fei's daughter, Yan Xinqiang, and Yan Gongming from Great Wall Society, when they went to Futuyu Great Wall in Laiyuan in April 2006 and compared the site of Futuyu Great Wall with the photo of Fighting on the Great Wall, they found that it was not taken Xifengshan (喜峰山) of Heibei. Instead it was taken in Futuyu Great Wall in Laiyuan.⁴ Therefore, the claim about it was taken in Xifengshan is wrong. In addition, it is found that the front of Eight Route Army was not a battlefield, so it would be weird to have battle a there. Third, with the pistol held in the hand of Eight Route Army soldier, it would be quite impossible to shoot the enemy, who are supposedly quite far away from them. Similarly, the angle of the placed gun is be upward. It would be impossible to shoot the enemy who were downhill⁵. Based on this evidence, it is argued that this is a posed and fake photo.

Personally, I think it is not important to discuss whether this photo was staged or not since no picture is totally true, in other words, no picture can tell the whole story of an event. I think more important is to discuss whether the photo can serve its' function and then meet the photographer's goal. In this case, Sha Fei wanted to use this photo to set up a collective traumatic sentiment of the war, as well as to unite Chinese people to resist the violent invasion of the Japanese. And the result is Sha Fei met his goal because this photo has reached its' effect. Therefore, I think whether a photo is staged or not, is not that important as long as it achieves its effect and function.

⁴ 王雁, “戰鬥在古長城, ” electronic document http://shafei.sysu.edu.cn/center/treatise/myfatherC/myfatherSF_011.htm accessed 18 April 2017.

⁵ Si Sushi, “Distinctives features of Aesthetic in Sha Fei's work Impact of Chinese traditional school of thought on photography” (Essay for Harvard University Colloquium, 2016), electronic document http://shafei.sysu.edu.cn/center/treatise/treatise_latest_062.htm 18 April 2017.