

Student Essay

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Sha Fei, born in 1912, was originally named Situ-Chuan. As a wartime photographer and photojournalist, his works were renowned for expressing humanitarian ideals. He started his photographic journey in 1935 and was widely recognized after his shots of Lu Xun in the Second National Woodcut Exhibition and the

funeral were published. He then entered the Eighth Route Army and took photographs of war scenes and the army. Some of his famous works included “General Nie Rongzhen and Japanese orphan Mihoko”, “Fighting on the Great Wall” and “Distributing steamed buns to the families of new recruits (Brown, 2010).

Sha Fei once said that “staging a photo would lose its authenticity and raise doubts by the army towards their photographic abilities”. He believed that “taking snapshots was the most powerful way to retain the objectiveness of the scenes and subjects”. Thus, only by “actively searching for the great timing could one be successful to capture a photo with impact” (Liu, 2008).

One of his best-known photos, the “Anti-Mopping-Up battles in Beiyue” (northern Shanxi and Hebei) was a snapshot that captured the wartime struggle and bravery of soldiers. The photo was taken in the winter of 1940 in an anti “mopping-up” campaign against the Japanese army.

From November 1938 through the end of 1940, the Japanese launched one hundred and nine “mopping-up” campaigns in the Communist base areas (Liu, 1993).

In this photo, the soldiers are launching an attack against the enemy, but unfortunately, the soldier in the middle of the photo is being shot when they were charging to the enemy’s front line. Witnessing this incident, Sha Fei has made two consecutive shots of the scene and successfully captured the decisive moment on the battlefield. In the next shot, the soldier is gradually falling on his knees, with his arms sticking out to rest himself on the ground. Yet, it was quite surprising that Sha Fei could react and grab his camera for a shot that quick, as well as able to capture the second shot successfully with his film camera before the soldier actually fell. It was observed that Sha Fei had tilted his camera lower to capture more of the soldier’s legs once he made his first shot, thus showing his photographic and aesthetic sense. We can imagine that Sha Fei was risking his life to take this photo. With the close proximity of Sha Fei and the soldiers, he could probably have been killed as well, just as the one who was shot in the photo.

Comparing the photo with Robert Capa’s iconic image, “The Falling Soldier”, Sha Fei’s is much more authentic. In terms of the setting of the scene, Sha Fei’s photo has a richer background, such that the mountains, and the soldiers charging into the enemy’s battle line serving as the best annotations for the real battlefield. Capa’s photo, however, people have doubts about its authenticity. His photo was said to have captured a Spanish soldier being shot by a bullet to the head in Cerro Muriano. Yet, it was then discovered by scholars that the photo was actually taken in Espejo, while the real battle actually took place three weeks later (Rother, 2009). When comparing Sha Fei’s photo with Capa’s, the surroundings of the latter’s work do not appear to be in a battlefield, with only one single man in the area supposedly charging towards the enemy.

The photo has also led to another ethical dispute: should one be give a helping hand when witnessing someone who is in danger? Apparently, the first reaction that Sha Fei took was not to give assistance to the attacked soldier, but instead grabbed his camera for some powerful shots. Similarly, the photo, “Bloody Saturday” by Wang Xiaoting and the image of a girl suffering from famine in Sudan by Kevin Carter raise the same dilemma: should one document a dangerous situation, knowing that the subject is in danger; or should one provide assistance, while sacrificing the chance for capturing a powerful image?

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