

Student Essay

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Taken in 1939, this historical photograph captures much more than the social reality in China at the time. 1939 marked a year of chaos; the War of Resistance, or the Second Sino-Japanese War as some may call it, was in full swing and the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party joined forces briefly to fight battles. Prior

to the taking of this photograph, the Chinese Communist Party had a meeting in Luochuan and Mao Zedong identified several strategies and directions for the Red Army in the War. Some of the strategies were to increase their influence and to create a base for the Party.¹ In order to achieve the goal of making the Party more influential, the general public shall be presented with a good Party image and be mobilised to join the Red Army. In June of the same year, corresponding to the strategies proposed in the Luochuan

¹ Yang Mei, "Mao Ze Dong wei he li zhu you ji zhan kang ri?" (Why did Mao Zedong insist on using guerilla tactics in the resistance against Japan?), electronic document, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2009-09/17/content_12066690_2.htm, accessed 2 May 2017.

meeting, an Army recruitment meeting was organised in Fuping, Hebei, where the photograph featured in this article was taken.

Under the lens of Sha Fei, many similar Army recruitment meetings in Fuping were captured. His pictures documented the intense atmosphere at these meetings, with the sharing of soldiers who came home and the registration of young people as new soldiers.² During this particular Army recruitment meeting, the families that had members join the Red Army were to have steamed buns distributed to them. The target of the Communist Party was to mobilise the grassroots public. So, by distributing steamed buns, they conveyed the message that supporting them would bring not only food supply, but also stability and safety from the Japanese. The steamed buns, as a desirable food source for people in a war-torn society, symbolised a sense of stability in life. In this photograph that depicts the steamed buns distribution session, we can see the historical significance behind.

When Sha Fei took this historically meaningful photograph, his own career was also taking an important turn. At this point, he had already gained some reputation as a war photojournalist. He had received a camera from Dr. Bethune, his close friend, who worked in an army hospital, and had just co-organised the first ever photo exhibition in the Red Army zone, called “Base of resistance against Japan - Jin-Cha-Ji photo exhibition (敵後抗日根據地——晉察冀攝影展覽)”.³ Having joined the Red Army two years before (December 1937),⁴ Sha Fei was patriotic and passionate about presenting the reality of the War of Resistance. He utilised his photo-taking skills to record many of the moments where Communist members

² Wang Yan, *The Collected Photography of Sha Fei* (Beijing: Chang Cheng Chu Ban She, 2005), in the album “mobilising to fight against the Japanese (參軍打鬼子)”.

³ Wang Yan, *My Father Sha Fei (Bethune: “Give the camera to Shafei.” from Ch.2 Torrents)*, electronic document, http://shafei.sysu.edu.cn/center/treatise/myfatherE/myfatherSF_E015.htm, accessed 2 May 2017.

⁴ David C. Chang, introduction to “Sha Fei—A Humanist Photographer At War (1912–1950),” HKUST, electronic document, <http://library.ust.hk/exhibitions/sha-fei/?page=intro>, accessed 2 May 2017.

interacted with the public. His choosing to capture certain interactions does have political implications; sometimes with the goal of propaganda in mind.⁵ This photograph, specifically, showcases how the Party is willing to provide steamed buns to attract more young people to join the army. It also could act as a promise to the generally poor public that the Party would care for them. Having been working with the Communists, Sha Fei was presumably under some orders to extend the Party's influence through photos.⁶ He did a great job by taking this photo - the intention of reinforcing a beneficial image for the Communist Party was achieved.

On one hand, Sha Fei was to fulfil the task of nicely promoting the work the Party did for the people; on the other hand, he also had his own pursuits in artistic photo-taking. Usually there is only one or two focal points on one photograph, and that is to make sure people are correctly guided to its main point.⁷ In this photo by Sha Fei, however, there are more than one or two focal points. According to Mr. Si's presentation at the "Sha Fei: A Humanist Photographer at War (1912-1950)" Symposium, other than the basket of steamed buns, the looks on the participants of the recruitment meeting are also focal points.⁸ Having multiple focal points is rare, but Sha Fei showed his mastery of photography - the photo does not seem unorganised, but rather catches its audience's attention to several main points.

As much as the steamed buns, people's facial expressions are worth noting. In the front of the photograph an old man looks into the camera with an unimpressed face, while the children in front of him are raising the steamed buns they got and showing their gratitude. For me, it sends the message that the old generation,

⁵ Shana Brown, *Sha Fei, the Jin-Cha-Ji Pictorial, and the documentary style in Chinese wartime photojournalism* (California: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2012), pp. 69, 72.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

⁷ Wayne Turner, "The importance of a focal point", electronic document, <http://www.picturecorrect.com/tips/focal-point-in-photo-compositions/>, accessed 4 May 2017.

⁸ Si Su-Shi, "Sha Fei and his work in the theme of the War of Resistance (沙飛和他的抗戰題材攝影作品)". Presented at the Sha Fei: A Humanist Photographer at War (1912-1950), HKUST, April 2017.

having witnessed the chaos in the country for such a long time, was tired of this war, yet the children still had hopes about it and were therefore cheerful. On the bottom left corner a boy is holding two buns and looks even more contented. Next to the basket of steamed buns a girl is also smiling. Behind her a man is handing another man a bun and they both seem delighted. It is truly incredible for Sha Fei to have captured such a spontaneous moment.

This moment, now one of Sha Fei's precious photographs, shows how successful he was as a photojournalist and as an artist. In terms of historical values, he captured a significant period when the Communist Party was mobilising the public to gain political power and was not yet the official government. In terms of aesthetic values, he demonstrated that rules were meant to be broken: a visual image can include various focal points and still looks coordinated. Personally speaking, this photograph is thus one of the best in this exhibition.