

## CHAPTER 1



# Shao Xunmei: Publisher and Poet

*He doesn't speak good Mandarin... Ordinarily he speaks a form of Shanghainese that is a mixture of the languages of Shanghai and Suzhou, which is most pleasing to the ear... whether he's saying the most mundane, or the most forceful of things, he has the power to attract your attention.*



## *Introduction*

*By Paul Bevan*

Publisher and poet, Shao Xunmei (邵洵美; 1906–1968; see Plate 1.1) was born to a wealthy Shanghai family in the final years of the Qing dynasty. Previous generations of the family had served as officials to the Qing court, most notably Shao's paternal grandfather, Shao Youlian (邵友濂; 1841–1901), who in the later nineteenth century held the posts of governor of Taiwan and governor of Hunan, and once served as envoy to Russia. It was he who was responsible for elevating the status and prosperity of the family by arranging strategic marriages for his children to some of the most influential and wealthy families in China.<sup>1</sup> The Shao family's vast wealth would considerably diminish during the 1930s, partly due to ill-advised property speculation and partly to the profligate gambling habits of Shao Xunmei's father. Despite this, as a young man, Shao persisted in his publishing

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1. Jonathan Hutt, “Monstre Sacré: The Decadent World of Sinmay Zau 邵洵美”, *China Heritage Quarterly*, No. 22, June 2010, available at: [www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?issue=022&searchterm=022\\_monstre.inc](http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?issue=022&searchterm=022_monstre.inc), accessed on 27 December 2018. An earlier version of this essay was published as “The Sumptuous World of Shao Xunmei” in *East Asian History*, No. 21, June 2001, pp. 111–142.



**Plate 1.1:** Shao Yunlong (邵雲龍)—Shao Xunmei as a child.  
Kindly supplied by Shao Xiaohong and reproduced with her permission.

ambitions and was successful in producing some of the most influential magazines and literary journals of the Republican Era. Although these magazines were never a financial success, they were an important outlet for a number of artists and writers associated with Shao who were able to advance their careers by publishing their work within their pages.

Shao was one of many Chinese students from well-to-do families who were sent to study in the West. He chose to go to the United Kingdom and had his heart set on studying at the University of Cambridge. However, although he certainly attended Emmanuel College, Cambridge, in some capacity in the 1920s, he never became a full-time student there. The college archives show that he did not matriculate and, therefore, in the words of the current archivist, “cannot be properly regarded as a member of Emmanuel College, as he was not formally admitted”.<sup>2</sup> From the brief information concerning him that is found in the archives, it appears that Shao may have gone as far as working towards the entrance exams but was compelled at short notice to return to China before he could actually sit them.<sup>3</sup> His lack of formal university attendance notwithstanding, while in Cambridge, Shao learned much informally from his landlord, the Reverend A.C. Moule, and from Moule’s university colleagues. He also gained significant knowledge concerning Western art,

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2. As shown by Philippe Cinquini, Shao’s situation in France may have been similar, as his attendance at the École des Beaux-Arts de Paris is “not borne out by the school’s archives”. See Philippe Cinquini, “Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, attr., Seated Male Nude Seen from the Rear, first decade of the nineteenth century (?)”, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Spring 2020, specifically note 12.

3. In a register of provisional new Cambridge students (1919–1927), Shao appears as “Yuin Loong Zau” (a Romanisation based on the local Shanghai pronunciation of his original name, Shao Yunlong, 邵雲龍). My thanks to Amanda Goode, Emmanuel College Archivist, for permission to cite her unpublished memorandum concerning Shao’s time in Cambridge.

poetry, and literature through contact with like-minded students and at the literary gatherings and salons he attended. This laid the groundwork for the bohemian lifestyle he was to lead on his return to Shanghai in 1926.

Before he left China to study in the United Kingdom, it had been arranged that on his return he would marry Sheng Peiyu (盛佩玉; 1905–1988), daughter of one of the wealthiest families in Shanghai. Shao was clearly devoted to her, as, before his departure, he changed his name from Shao Yunlong (邵雲龍) to Shao Xunmei to “match” her name, with direct reference to China’s oldest poetry collection, the *Shijing* (《詩經》, [*The Book of Songs*]), in which the Chinese characters “洵美” (xunmei) and “佩玉” (peiyu) can be seen in the same poem together.<sup>4</sup> Shao’s marriage to Sheng Peiyu added considerably to the fortunes of his already affluent family. A lavish banquet in celebration of their marriage was a major event in the city’s social calendar and was attended by friends from numerous different factions within Shanghai’s artistic and publishing communities.<sup>5</sup> In the years following his return, Shao was often seen in the local periodical press, sometimes together

4. Shao Xiaohong (邵綉紅), *Tiansheng de shiren: Wode baba Shao Xunmei* (《天生的詩人：我的爸爸邵洵美》, [*A Poet Born: My Father, Shao Xunmei*]) (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2015), pp. 21–22. For the poem—“Younü tongche” (《有女同車》), originally from the “Zheng feng” (《鄭風》, [“Odes of Zheng”]) section of the *Guofeng* (《國風》, [*Lessons from the States*]) in the *Shijing* (《詩經》, [*The Book of Songs*])—see Zhou Zhenfu (周振甫) (ed.), *Shijing yizhu* (《詩經譯注》, [*The Book of Songs, annotated and translated*]) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003), pp. 118–119.

5. Lin Qi (林淇), *Haishang caizi — Shao Xunmei zhuan* (《海上才子—邵洵美傳》, [*A Talented Scholar from Shanghai — The Biography of Shao Xunmei*]) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2002), p. 30. Amongst the wedding guests were: the painters Liu Haisu and Wang Yachen; the poet Xu Zhimo; artists Shao had known in Paris, including Jiang Xiaojian and Sanyu; plus individuals involved in his own publishing company, such as editor and writer Zhang Kebiao, the commercial artist Ding Song, and the trio of artist brothers Zhang Guangyu, Zhang Zhengyu, and Cao Hanmei.

with Sheng Peiyu—for example, in *Shanghai huabao* (《上海畫報》, *Shanghai Pictorial*) and *Shanghai manhua* (《上海漫畫》, *Shanghai Sketch*) (see Plates 1.2, 1.3, and 1.4). It was the successors to pictorial magazines such as these that would play such a central role in his life in the decade that followed.

After a long period during the twentieth century in which Shao's writings fell out of favour, he has become increasingly recognised as an important figure in recent decades, often being remembered for his personality—as an eccentric figure and a dandy—rather than for his contributions to either poetry or publishing. His essays are little known outside China, and this book, *One Man Talking: Selected Essays of Shao Xunmei, 1929–1939*, is the first collection of Shao's prose to be published in the English language. As well as featuring his own essays, Shao's magazines showcased the work of many of the most important artists and writers in China during the 1930s and introduced a selection of inspirational foreign figures to his Chinese readership. While these were popular magazines for consumption by those who sought diversion amid the hustle and bustle of Jazz-age Shanghai, they were also important vehicles for the dissemination of the unique modern art and literature that helped shape Shanghai's modernist, pre-war cultural identity.

As war loomed, a widespread tendency prevailed among those writers and artists who were involved in the magazine publishing industry to focus on the production of anti-Japanese propaganda. When the hostilities hit Shanghai in August 1937, many fled the city to spread the word of national salvation further afield. Shao remained in Shanghai, but he too made his contribution to the war effort in the form of a pair of magazines he published in collaboration with his then girlfriend Emily Hahn and the local American-owned *Evening Post and Mercury*. These were, in fact, the same magazine in two different guises: a Chinese version, published as *Ziyoutan* (《自由譚》), and an English version that



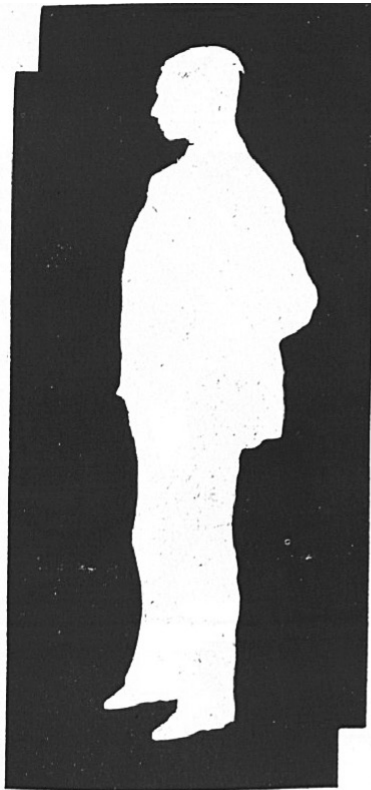


**Plate 1.2:** Wedding photograph of Shao Xunmei and Sheng Peiyu in *Shanghai huabao* (《上海畫報》, *Shanghai Pictorial*), 21 January 1927, front page (detail). Image reproduced with the kind permission of Shao Xiaohong.



**Plate 1.3:** Photograph of Shao Xunmei and Sheng Peiyu at a swimming pool, by Lang Jingshan (郎靜山), in *Shidai huabao* (《時代畫報》, *Modern Miscellany*), Vol. 1, No. 1, 20 October 1929, p. 27 (detail). Lang Jingshan was a great friend of Shao's and arguably the most important art photographer to contribute to pictorial magazines during the 1930s. A feature introducing his photography to the readers of *Modern Miscellany* appears in the same issue of the magazine. Image reproduced with the kind permission of Shao Xiaohong.





萬籟鳴君可以說，他是一位天才的藝術家，他純粹以個性及感情而表現。這二幀剪成的形像，便可以見到他的手是多靈敏。上葉淺予君右邵洵美君籟鳴作

Top: M. Chinyu Yeh.

Right: Mr. S. M. Shao

Two Silhouettes by Mr. Lea Ming Wung

**Plate 1.4:** Silhouette portraits of Shao Xunmei and Ye Qianyu (葉淺予), by Wan Laiming (萬籟鳴), in *Shanghai manhua* 《上海漫畫》, *Shanghai Sketch*, No. 101, 5 April 1930, p. 3. Wan Laiming was a prolific contributor to a number of magazines of the time and worked in many different styles and media. He went on to be one of China's most famous film animators in collaboration with his three brothers. Image reproduced with the kind permission of Shao Xiaohong.

appeared under the name *Candid Comment*. We are honoured that Shao Xiaohong, Shao Xunmei's daughter, has written a short essay for this book about her father's contribution to the war effort through the publication of this magazine.<sup>6</sup>

By this time, however, despite his best efforts to conform, Shao was looked down on by those in literary and artistic circles who spurned the earlier experiments of the Chinese Decadents and the followers of art for art's sake. According to many of his critics, Shao had still not sufficiently shaken off his persona as a Decadent poet and flamboyant dandy in the way that others in literary circles had done by this time, and thus his future demise as a literary figure, poet, and publisher was already secured. By the second half of the twentieth century, Shao and his significant contribution to both publishing and poetry had been, as one writer has put it, “all but airbrushed out of history.”<sup>7</sup>

### Shao's Essays

The timescale selected for this book—the ten-year period from 1929 to 1939—has been dictated by the publication dates of the individual essays selected for translation. This period corresponds to when Shao was the most active in the publishing industry. At one end, 1929 was the year he published his first literary magazine, *Jinwu yuekan* (《金屋月刊》, [*Golden House Monthly*]), and is represented in this volume by an essay about his close friend, the painter Sanyu. Before he published this magazine, even though Shao had published his own poetry collections in book form, his involvement with magazines had

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6. See “The Publication of *Ziyoutan* and *Candid Comment*”, by Shao Xiaohong, translated by Sun Xinqi, in Chapter 8 of this volume, pp. 359–373.

7. Hutt, 2010, op. cit.