

The legacy of China's first female war correspondent



Zhang Yulian was China's first female war correspondent.
— Ti Gong

Yao Minji

Sculptor Sun Yuli never really got to know his mother fully until he read a memoir left after her death. It turned out she was an extraordinary woman with stories to tell.

His mother, Zhang Yulian, was China's first female war correspondent. She died in 2010 at age 96.

In his memory, Sun remembers her as an intelligent and kind woman who had many friends and often made Russian snacks. Her memoir, entitled "Bai Yun Fei Du," or "White Cloud Flying Over Waters," was published in 2015. An illustrated new version, with artwork by Wang Wanbin, was recently released.

"I really got to know my mom again after she passed away, not only from her memoir, but also from material related to her reporting and dug out by



Inspired Zhang's spirit, illustrator Wang Wanbin went back to university 10 years after graduation and earned a master's degree at Xiamen University.

readers from all over China," Sun said. "I was often motivated to re-read the memoir again and again."

The book is divided into five volumes: The first four describe the author's legendary experience in chronological order; the fifth, entitled "Remembering Mom," is the author's memory of her own mother and her children's memories of her.

Sun, now based in Singapore, told Shanghai Daily via WeChat: "Many readers have also shared their own family stories about how ordinary grandparents, granduncles and other relatives answered the call to defend the country. Their paths may have crossed my mom's, and I often find myself in tears when reading their stories."

In 1937 at age 23, Zhang was studying at Yenching University when a Japanese invasion of China broke out at the Marco Polo Bridge, 15 kilometers southwest of Beijing's city center.

Zhang fled south with

crowds of people, escaping the bloodshed and later joining former Soviet Union's TASS news agency in what is now a part of the city of Wuhan. She came well prepared for the job. She was fluent in Russian and had done some studies in journalism.

Zhang was sent to cover the Battle of Xuzhou in March 1938, where she joined other reporters who had to endure daily Japanese bombing as they followed the front line.

A Chinese brigadier she sought out for her first interview was surprised to see a female reporter and gifted her a Browning pistol for self-defense. The pistol accompanied her on many fronts across China for the next five years.

The young Zhang worked alongside many veteran war correspondents, including Soviet cinematographer Roman Lazarevich Karmen, with whom she visited the Communist forces' stronghold in Yan'an in May 1939.

"We have learned about the history of the era from textbooks, history books, novels, TV and movies," said illustrator Wang. "But her non-sensationalized, rational and very detailed descriptions of the front lines really impressed me. Those words bring that history to life and reveal the simple fact that any small wave in the river of history is a tsunami for those experiencing it."

Wang said she was drawn to Zhang's insightful stories when she read the memoir in 2015, shortly after it was first published. She was so impressed that she began drawing illustrations to accompany the stories.

Zhang's unusual childhood forms the backdrop of her extraordinary life.



Zhang worked alongside Soviet director Roman Lazarevich Karmen on the front line in Hunan in November 1938.