

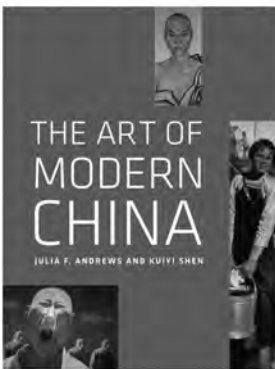
The Art of Modern China

By JULIA F. ANDREWS AND KUIYI SHEN

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Reviewed by Nancy Hope



When China first emerged on the world stage as an economic power some twenty years ago, not many Western scholars had attempted to define the trajectory of modern Chinese art, focusing instead on works created before the last dynasty ended. The reasons for this are complex but, besides a limited audience for more contemporary works, included such questions as what modern art really is in an era of globalization, what influence indigenous versus foreign stimulation played in its development in China, and how was it shaped by the political sensitivities there? Andrews and Shen were among the first scholars to address these questions in *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China*, which accompanied the pioneering exhibition of the same name at the Guggenheim Museums in SoHo and Bilbao in 1998. Their beautifully illustrated catalogue was expensive, however, and limited to coverage of art produced between 1850 and 1996.



Self portrait of Ren Xiong (1823-1857), ink and colors on paper, 177,5x78,8cm. Palace Museum, Beijing which is online at <http://tiny.cc/6obg6w>.

Now, Andrews and Shen have continued their examination of these questions in *The Art of Modern China*, which offers a comprehensive survey of painting, woodcut prints, sculpture, and even architecture from the Opium Wars through the Ninth Shanghai Biennale in 2012. Though this comprehensive survey does not break new ground, despite a nod to the arts of Hong Kong and Taiwan and the support for nonpolitical art that the free market provides, it nevertheless is an important addition to art historical literature in that it clearly connects the latest Chinese art with its historical antecedents and their respective contexts.

Though it will be assigned primarily as a college textbook for students, *The Art of Modern China* is also accessible to others willing to invest their time in reading it carefully. Those who do will discover nuggets of information scattered throughout the text that shine with a clarity that makes them memorable. The Tianamen Square massacre,

for example, is characterized as bringing Chinese art to the attention of a sympathetic West, bolstered by critics and curators who fled China after June 4, 1989, and thus were available to interpret contemporary Chinese art for Western audiences (281). This is in addition to a well-written, almost lyrical, formal analysis as, for example, “The powerful three-dimensionality of his [Ren Xiong’s self-portrait] face and upper torso are quite intentionally juxtaposed with an extremely bold but strongly abstracted depiction of his white pants, blue tunic, and soft shoes” (6).

The one shortcoming is that the readings bog down at points where the authors mention every artist of note, even though the size of the publication limits the amount of text or number of illustrations that can be devoted to each. Thus, we learn Pan Yuliang, Ni Yide, Chen Chengbo, Zhang Xuan, Fang Ganmin, Chen Shuren, and Li Zuhan were all invited to work in the Yiyuan Painting Research Institute (70). Fortunately, the reader can consult the index to find more about them. However, the listing of the trustees and board members of the Lake Society includes Wang Yiting, Fang Ruo, Shun Runyu, Wang Yongquan, Yang Baoyi, He Sui, Wang Chuantao, and Wu Zhongxiong, but none of them are referenced elsewhere in the book (96-97). This drawback, though, does not negate the quality of information the authors present overall.

Art in the twenty-first century is not just for art lovers or connoisseurs. It has become big business. According to figures compiled by Clare McAndrew in a report to the European Fine Art Fair based in the Netherlands, global sales totaled more than \$56 billion in 2012, with the Chinese art market comprising 25 percent. *The Art of Modern China* certainly would benefit those interested in learning how this all began in China and glimpsing its future development there. ■

NANCY HOPE, Associate Director of the Kansas Consortium for Teaching about Asia at the University of Kansas, has been helping K-14 educators learn more about China, Korea, and Japan since 2000.

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