

## BOOK REVIEW

### ***MODERN ART FOR A MODERN CHINA: THE CHINESE INTELLECTUAL DEBATE 1900 – 1930***

LEI YANG ♦

Yiyan Wang. *Modern Art for a Modern China: The Chinese Intellectual Debate 1900 – 1930*. London & New York, Routledge, 2021. 203 pp. ISBN: 9780429316005

**Abstract:** Yiyan Wang's *Modern Art for a Modern China: The Chinese Intellectual Debate 1900–1930* offers an interdisciplinary account of how art reform became integral to China's cultural, political and educational transformation in the early twentieth century. Focusing on debates among artists, poets, writers, critics and educators, Wang shows how Chinese intellectuals integrated art reform and aesthetic movements with broader initiatives of modernization, nationalism and cosmopolitanism. The book highlights pivotal figures such as Cai Yuanpei, Lu Xun and Xu Zhimo, emphasizing their contributions to aesthetic education, art institutions, exhibitions, international cultural exchange and the relationship between modern Chinese literature and visual art. It also challenges Western historiographies that understate Chinese agency under semi-colonial conditions, foregrounding intellectual self-fashioning and cultural regeneration.

**Keywords:** *Art Reform, Cultural Diplomacy, Intellectual History, Modern China, Nationalism, Semi-Colonial Agency, Visual Culture.*

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Yiyan Wang's *Modern Art for a Modern China: The Chinese Intellectual Debate 1900–1930* situates the emergence of modern Chinese art within the national crisis of the late Qing and the cultural regeneration of the Republican era. The book highlights how art reform became inseparable from broader projects of social change, education and political imagination. Rather than treating art as a purely aesthetic domain, Wang shows how it was debated, institutionalized, exhibited, taught and circulated as a vehicle of national renewal. Across the period 1900–1930, Chinese intellectuals responded to shifting paradigms—from colonial subjugation to nationalism and, eventually, to cosmopolitan engagement—through arguments about what art should be and what it should do for society.

The book foregrounds the critical roles of intellectuals, whose contributions to art history are often overlooked because they are better known as poets, writers, or critics. Wang recovers their roles in shaping artistic institutions and discourse. Calls for an artistic revolution by Chen Duxiu and Lu Cheng in the late 1910s, Kang Youwei's dismissal of literati painting in the late Qing, the debates between Xu Beihong and Xu Zhimo at the first national art exhibition in 1929, and Lu Xun's advocacy of woodblock prints all illustrate that art reform unfolded through public argument as much as through studio practice. Wang thereby addresses two gaps in modern Chinese historiography: the underestimation of writers' roles in art-related reform and the insufficient integration of art reform into narratives of modernization.

Chapter *One* examines Cai Yuanpei's pivotal role in linking art reform to nation-building. Cai argued that aesthetic education could cultivate moral citizens and social harmony. With political authority and organizational resolve, he designed infrastructures for art education, museums, exhibitions and curricula. His founding of the Sino-French Institute in Lyon in 1921 exemplified cultural diplomacy in action, sending hundreds of students to France to encounter European art pedagogy. Wang situates Cai within a wider reformist network that included Li Shizeng and Wu Zhihui, who promoted work-study programs enabling students to sustain themselves abroad. This chapter also reveals the diversity of participants in art reform. It was common for

poets and writers to be trained artists: Ling Shuhua, Wen Yiduo, and the translator Fu Lei are among those whose visual practice was closely connected with literary activity. Wang's account further explains how gender, elite culture, and social change came at the forefront in this movement. Women artists such as Pon, Wang Jingyuan, and Pan Yuliang found opportunities in Lyon even as they faced systemic constraints at home. Through Cai's initiatives, art reform acquired both institutional structure and international reach.

Chapter *Two* explores Lu Xun's remarkable range as graphic designer, bibliophile, bureaucrat and reformer. Serving in the Ministry of Education, Lu Xun helped conceptualize modern libraries, museums, exhibitions and art curricula. He wrote prefaces for young artists, curated collections, and co-designed the twelve-chapter national emblem of the Republic of China. His advocacy of woodblock prints drew on comparative study and a desire to reach common people through accessible visual forms. Although sharply critical of Confucian orthodoxy, Lu Xun engaged deeply with European art, admired Picasso and van Gogh, and later translated Soviet Marxist theorists. Wang shows how his writings helped shape what became known as the 'critical theory of literature and art' in China.

Chapter *Three* turns to Xu Zhimo, best known as a poet, but here presented as a public intellectual crucial to art reform. Educated in Europe, Zhimo returned to China with a cosmopolitan outlook and extensive networks. As editor-in-chief of *Art Exhibition* and an organizer in PEN International and the Sino-British Cultural Foundation, he facilitated dialogue between Chinese and international art worlds. Though not a practicing painter, Zhimo's essays, translations, and institutional work shaped public discourse on art and visual culture in modern Chinese aesthetics. Wang situates Zhimo alongside figures such as Wen Yiduo, Ding Ling, Ling Shuhua and Ai Qing, highlighting the interdisciplinary engagement of poets and writers in art reforms—a tradition that, though diminished in the latter twentieth century, persists among artists like Mu Xin, Jia Pingwa, and Gao Xingjian.

Wang's discussion of art exhibitions and debates is

highlighted in Chapter *Four* to send the message that how public display became a site for negotiating modernity. The first national art exhibition and the wider context of the New Culture and May Fourth movements show how tradition was not discarded but reworked. Ink-brush painting, for instance, was revitalized through the incorporation of color theory, compositional depth and scientific perspective. Exhibitions thus functioned as laboratories for redefining both heritage and innovation.

A particularly original contribution is Chapter *Five's* focus on Lyon as a formative locus for Chinese art students. While Paris often dominates narratives of modern Chinese art, Wang shows how Lyon's institutions and welcoming environment supported students' development. The prominence of women students is especially striking, reflecting social changes in China and opportunities abroad. Despite discrimination and structural barriers, many graduates went on to shape modern art education and practice in China. By restoring Lyon to the map of modern Chinese art, Wang expands the geography of cultural exchange. In the *Afterword*, Wang challenges Western historiographies that frame Chinese modernity as reactive to imperialism. By foregrounding Chinese voices, he shows how intellectuals actively debated identity, culture and power under semi-colonial conditions. This perspective complicates simple East-West binaries and highlights how nationalism and cosmopolitanism emerged through negotiation rather than imitation. At the same time, Wang acknowledges the constraints these thinkers faced, avoiding romanticization of agency while insisting on its presence.

Wang's research makes a significant contribution by integrating art history with intellectual history and cultural studies. For readers, the book offers both historical depth and theoretical insight. Wang's careful reconstruction of debates and biographies reveals how individual agency and collective aspiration converged in the making of modern Chinese art. The book is thus an indispensable resource for scholars and students of art history, literature, and Chinese intellectual history.