Bio

Kuiyi Shen’s research focuses on modern and contemporary Chinese art and Sino-Japanese cultural exchange of the early twentieth century. Among his numerous publications are A Century in Crisis (New York, 1998); Between the Thunder and the Rain (San Francisco, 2000); The Elegant Gathering (San Francisco, 2006), Chinese Posters (Munich, 2009), and Blooming in the Shadows (New York, 2011). His recent book, Arts of Modern China (Berkeley, 2012), co-authored with Julia Andrews, won the 2103 ICAS Book Prize in Humanities. He is also the managing editor of Brill’s new book series Modern Asian Art and Visual Culture.

The early 1930s was an important period for Chinese art, when thorough exploration of the mediums available in fine and commercial art enabled urban artists to catch up with the practices of their international colleagues. However, this took place in the context of the increasingly tense relationship between Japan and China, particularly in the period between the annexation of Manchuria in 1931 and the Marco Polo Bridge incident of 1937. This paper takes as its case study the artist Shen Yiqian, who like many of his colleagues became involved in the rising resistance to Japan. Shen, a graduate of the Shanghai Art Academy, was active in the 1930s and 1940s as an artist-journalist in realms as varied as ink painting, posters, cartoons, and photography. In the face of Japanese aggression he organized the Guonan xuanquantuan (National Crisis Propaganda Team) and the Zhandi xieshengdui (Battlefield Sketching Team), which travelled to battle fronts in nationalist and communist-controlled territories and organized exhibitions in Shanghai and elsewhere to draw national and international attention to the realities of the war. His career illustrates how an artist used visual images on behalf of the national salvation effort. His disappearance and apparent assassination in 1944 would seem to indicate that the government of the time took his art journalism seriously as a potential threat to some of their policies.