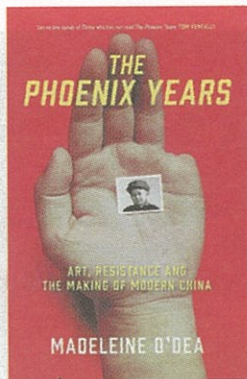


BOOKS



Madeleine O'Dea

The Phoenix Years

Allen & Unwin, 360pp, \$34.99

The cover of Madeleine O'Dea's remarkable history of contemporary Chinese art, *The Phoenix Years*, might seem at first blush to be a little underwhelming: it depicts a cupped hand cradling a black-and-white photo of a child the size of a postage stamp. On closer inspection, the image reveals that the hand is missing its little finger. Quite how the hand - which belongs to the subject of the stamp-sized photo, the prominent Chinese artist Sheng Qi - came to lose that little finger is one of the many shocking and galvanising anecdotes salted away in this, O'Dea's first book.

To call *The Phoenix Years* merely a history of Chinese art might be akin to calling *Madame Bovary* a novel about some affairs: part of the pleasure of it is to encounter the breadth of O'Dea's engagement with recent Chinese history, as well as her ability to turn what might otherwise feel like a morass of detail into a compelling narrative.

The Phoenix Years opens with O'Dea as a somewhat reluctant young Sinophile in Beijing, working as a foreign correspondent for *The Australian Financial Review*. But while she is officially in China to cover the "big story" of China's economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping, a smaller-scale, but

perhaps more compelling, story about the role of visual art and its power to foment social change begins to reveal itself - and it is this story that she traces here.

The dates of the first half of the book provide an ominous foreshadowing: it opens with O'Dea's introduction to Beijing's nascent contemporary art scene in 1986, a mere three years before the devastating crackdown on student protesters in Tiananmen Square. What is known in China as the "June Fourth Incident" proves a fulcrum for *The Phoenix Years*, and O'Dea's powers of observation are powerfully displayed in the chapter dedicated to this still-sensitive topic.

One of the key figures of O'Dea's history, Guo Jian, recently made international headlines after being arrested and deported by the Chinese authorities for his provocative artwork about the June Fourth Incident. Where the Chinese government wishes for people to forget, Guo remembers. *The Phoenix Years*, too, is a form of remembrance and commemoration: effortlessly telescoping from the personal to the political, it presents a vibrant portrait of a country's roiling modern history, as well as the art that shaped and was shaped by that history. **SZ**