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Adam Cathcart
Pacific Lutheran University

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Soft Power Struggle: Ai Weiwei and the Limits of Sino-German Cultural Cooperation

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By Adam Cathcart

As an attempt to drain the seemingly endless reserves of paranoia fed by China's rise, the extension of Chinese "soft power" [*ruan shi li* 软实力] into Western Europe is one of the more interesting stories of our day. How the Chinese Communist Party uses culture and cultural exchange to shape its image in Europe varies, like any good guerrilla strategy, depending on conditions.

In the performing arts, PRC-sponsored groups tour European stages, acting out a meta-drama that pits twirling autonomous-region Uighurs against the ubiquitous Falun Gong-affiliated Shen Yun ballerinas (and their army of granny pamphleteers). Embassy-sponsored photographic exhibits celebrating modernization on the Tibetan plateau contend with high-buck seminars by the Dalai Lama.

And every so often, a man with the slick hair of fifth-generation CCP leadership will turn up in Europe to remind his variously enthused and recalcitrant constituents that China's leaders indeed animate culture on the far side of the globe: Witness [Xi Jinping in Europe](#) in spring 2010, opening museum exhibitions with the Belgian king, or Wen Jiabao's evident delight in announcing "[German Culture Year in 2012](#)". These exertions of soft power in Europe are intriguing and significant. They are intertwined with Chinese ascendancy, both in perception and hard fact.

Clearly China can rise peacefully, but can it do so gracefully?

The latter claim seemed very much in doubt over the eleven weeks which lapsed between the April 3 arrest and June 22 release of Ai Weiwei. Ai's detention, and his ongoing harassment by the authorities, calls into question the very basis of China's soft power strategy in Europe.

The conventional wisdom has it that the Party was very nervous about Ai's impact within China and that the arrest was primarily about sending a message to intellectuals and dissidents at home. Plenty of evidence would appear to support such a view, buttressed further still by fears of the tremors from the democracy movements in the Middle East. In an interview with *Die Zeit*'s Angela Kockritz, one anonymous Chinese artist analyzed Ai's arrest through the prism of domestic politics, stating:

One has to look at the arrest in view of the timing. The National People's Congress had just ended, and many young politicians assumed new posts. Their predecessors had left Ai Weiwei in peace, because they treasured his father [patriotic poet Ai Qing]. The new generation wants to signal that this protection no longer exists. ["Ausserst nervoes: Ein Besuch in Ai Weiweis Kuenstlerdorf," *Die Zeit*, 7 April 2001]

But no less than a new cadre's shot across the bow, Ai's arrest was also made to function within the matrix of the CCP's cultural-political strategy toward Europe, and became a point of significant tension within Sino-German relations. The ongoing exchanges and underground tug-of-war between Germany and China, those two economic and cultural leviathans, continues, but the case of Ai Weiwei ("der Fall Ai Weiwei") brought about what can only be called a diplomatic-cultural crisis in Sino-German relations and prompted a number of calls to examine the effectiveness of soft power deployed by both sides.

Ai Weiwei and Germany

The levels of heroism and notoriety enjoyed by Ai in the West are particularly broad and deep in the German media. Before his detention and eventual charges on tax fraud, Ai had become a ubiquitous presence in Germany. His acerbic critiques of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Wenchuan earthquake, internet censorship, architectural practice, and a host of other issues, rapidly elevated him in Germany to the status of China's foremost dissident, an artist-provocateur who also happened to have a large footprint in Germany. Thus, German writers, artists and casual observers of the Chinese scene had celebrated Ai's output of exhibitions, interviews, and would-be spark-to-prairie-fire blog posts. After all, he was an artist attempting to free himself from the fetters of a totalizing state, an endeavor with historical resonance in Germany. Ai Weiwei became, in so far as the newspapers were concerned, a man of singular stature and moral weight, comparable in a sense to the limited number of incorruptible and principled intellectuals who had resisted both the blandishments and the torments of the Nazi system and then the German Democratic Republic.

Certainly Ai never held back in his German-language interviews:

Heinrich Bork, ["Chinese Artist Ai Weiwei: 'He Who Lives in a Dictatorship Must Resist'."](#) *Suddeutscher Zeitung*, 16 September 2009.

SZ: How common is it for people in China to be hit by police?

Ai: Every day, maybe every second. When they want to oppress you, they often hit you a second time. Some people resist arrest, and on that account they have their legs broken. Others are confined in "guesthouses" which function like a dangerous prison. This year the Chinese Communist Party celebrates the 60th anniversary of our state. They revel in their own radiance [*Sie sonnt sich in ihrem eigenen Glanz*]. But all fairness, all justice is sacrificed to this system.

Ai's beating in Chengdu in 2009 and his subsequent rush to Munich for surgery, the exposure to his own blood raised the level of authenticity, self-awareness, and ideas (already well established for a European audience) of the artist as a kind of martyr for self-expression and human rights in China, indicate that the artist had inherited the core of these contrarian characteristics from his father, the poet Ai Qing, in whose Resistance War poetry the notion of a bloody-browed and laughing defiance was prefigured.

His reception in Germany being so warm, Ai voiced a desire to set up a base camp in Berlin, even as, in November 2009, the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs was handling rumors of an

investigation into Ai's finances. Ai's response at the time was to deflect it all as theater and revel in the adulation from Germany, [publishing puff pieces](#) in Munich about his chef, a man for whom "cooking is like calligraphy...[or] sleeping; one doesn't need to learn how." However, in the weeks before his arrest, it seems Ai had premonitions that his grace period was up, as related to Henrik Bork of the *Sudddeutscher Zeitung* in the [last documented interview](#) before his detention.

Ai Weiwei and the "Art of the Enlightenment" Exhibit

When Ai was finally detained amid the modernist arches of the Beijing Capital Airport, he was en route, eventually, to Germany, and sat but a few hundred meters away from German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle. Westerwelle, too, was on his way back to Berlin after successfully inaugurating the much-celebrated "Art of the Enlightenment" exhibition at the newly renovated National Museum. The exhibition, a *tour de force* of German humanism and the roots of European democratic thought, seemed to signal a renewed openness, even in the context of the CCP's recent crackdowns on dissent. Nearly seven years planning had gone into this Kantian *Aufschwung*, involving cultural contacts on the highest level. If there were ever a Trojan horse to stride up the steps near Tiananmen Square after 1989, this was surely it.

With Ai's disappearance, the question of German galleries pulling out of the exhibit was raised immediately in the German press. This was hardly a new debate: at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2009, spectacle and invitations had also at stake and the confrontation over cultural matters and human rights remained unresolved. Museum directors [began to muse openly](#) about bringing the Enlightenment exhibition back home to Germany, and German elites wondered how China would make its "German Culture Year in 2012" anything other than a farce. (There are only so many times, one article noted, that the Chinese axiom "the path is the goal" can rescue one from a dead-end process.) [Berlin summoned the Chinese ambassador](#) to issue a rebuke, but no contracts, or exhibitions, were cancelled as a result.

There followed in Germany the usual stable of statements by legislators, defenders of human rights, and defenders of dialogue, contrasted with conspicuous silence from economic interests. At Tacheles, a 798-like art space—itsself a monument to technology built in the 1920s, occupied by the SS, bombed in the war, and picked up again as a magnet for free-thinking and -inhaling Berlin left wingers after 1990, now threatened by wealthy developers—someone pinned up a flyer urging people to call the Chinese Embassy in Berlin, ask "Where is Weiwei?" and hang up. The Chinese government was largely silent, employing a strategy of letting adversaries vent and subsequently fragment themselves was generous to the CCP.

The CCP's press responses quickly took on a pedagogical intent. As in the case of Liu Xiaobo's Nobel Prize ceremony, where Beijing demanded that countries skip the ceremony, the CCP seemed to be using its punishment of an intellectual figure as a means of reinforcing the image of the Party-State's imperviousness to foreign critique. For the CCP, the desired result perhaps, was foreign opprobrium itself, which—a story was sufficiently spread via oral rumor, then acknowledged and redigested by such leading organs as the *Huanqiu Shibao*—could be fed into the nationalistic echo chamber of the Chinese internet, thus reminding netizens that external

criticism of China's path forward is not simply unfair, but part of the larger topos of international conspiracy meant to keep China down at any cost.

After biding its time, or after receiving permission to comment from the Propaganda Ministry, on April 16, *Huanqiu Shibao* placed its article the uproar about Ai Weiwei in a prominent position on its website. In China, a handful of government-approved Netizen comments on the story (they have since been scrubbed away completely) summed up the preferred response nicely:

Who is Ai Weiwei?

What is "Der Spiegel"?

If the West supports it, we must oppose it.

The same countries that criticize us now were part of the 8-power intervention [of 1900]...

Ever since the Opium War...

Ultimately, it appeared that Germany's economic needs would take primacy over its ability to take a principled stand against Ai's detention. [Articles](#) published in the Berlin *Tagesspiegel* raged against Germany's inability to elevate human rights over trade, describing Germany's total impotence in the case of Ai. German Chancellor Angela Merkel was put in the rather uncomfortable position of having to deny *Der Spiegel* reports that she had actually called for the release of Ai Weiwei. When Wen Jiabao arrived in Berlin in June, Merkel began their meetings at a Wannsee villa that had once belonged to an artist persecuted by the Nazis. This beautiful bit of political theater was completely lost on the Chinese audience: as the *Frankfurt Allegemeine Zeitung* ruefully noted, the Chinese media was treating Wen Jiabao's state visit to Germany—the largest CCP delegation to ever visit Berlin—as no more important than a side trip to Kazakhstan.

In the battle for public opinion over Ai Weiwei, China had may have lost in Germany, but the Chinese state was never particularly interesting in debating the case, and, apart from a few evocative banners hung at Berlin galleries, its cultural ties with German institutions did not appear to suffer. While the Chinese state's self-descriptions are so often suffused with narratives of humiliation, it appears that the slap had been inflicted mainly upon Germany, at Westerwelle's opening of the Enlightenment exhibit, without any successful retort. The German Foreign Minister must indeed have leaned back in his Lufthansa chair, looked out into the murky skies, and returned home, leaving his country's treasures, and the muzzled provocateur, behind in Beijing.

[Adam Cathcart](#) teaches Chinese history at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. In addition to his published work on Sino-Japanese and Sino-North Korean relations in the Cold War, he blogs at [Sinologicalist Violoncellist](#). Paul Manfredi [[www.chinaavantgarde.com](#)], German blogger Just Recently [[www.justrecently.wordpress.com](#)], Kuroda Chiaki, and D.W. Feldman provided comments on earlier versions of this essay.