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Ai Weiwei and Qingming

April 6, 2011 in [Op-Ed](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)
By Lionel M. Jensen

Ai Weiwei (as most readers of this blog will know), perhaps China's best-known artist and provocateur, is missing. Like so many other people of conscience and voice in the past two years, he is gone. Swallowed by the insatiable fear of the state's authoritarian belly. It has been more than four days since his apprehension and his wife, Lu Qing, who was also detained and questioned, has not heard from him; he is unreachable by phone.

One can only speculate as to why a painter, architect, sculptor, designer, blogger, ceramic artist, photographer, and activist of his stature, who has become the public conscience of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake victims, would be "disappeared" in this way. Certainly, he is no friend of the government or its ruling party. That, of course, could be said about millions of his fellow citizens, though.

As always, there is little to report. Here is what is known: on Sunday morning, as Ai was about to board a flight in Beijing bound for Hong Kong, he was arrested. Thereafter authorities entered his studio and took possession of computers and hardware, CDs and DVDs, and his notebooks while also detaining his eight assistants. The police remained through the night interrogating Ai's staff through a vague harassment of inquiries about projects, income, the studio, travel plans. As befitting these all too frequent occasions, officials threatened them with "inciting subversion of state power." His studio remains occupied today.

Some more relevant details: For the last 20 months Ai Weiwei and Tan Zuoren, with the help of countless netizens apprised of Ai's progress on his blog, have helped to identify the names of every child killed in the collapse of the "tofu dregs schoolhouses" (shoddily constructed owing to corruption) in the Wenchuan Earthquake of May 12, 2008. This past year he completed this memorial project, *Nian* ("Missing"), a 240-minute long MP3 reading by volunteers of the thousands of names of all children killed in the collapse of the schools. Before the names are read on the recording, Ai comments that the project "represents the memory of the lives that have been lost and the anger at the covering-up of the tofu-buildings. Respect life; refuse to forget." More than 80,000 people were killed in the disaster. The government shut down his blog.

Sichuan officials resented the unwelcome inquiries and the mounting negative publicity of "Missing" so much that there have been consequences for Ai. On August 12, 2009 Ai was in Chengdu, Sichuan when police allegedly entered his hotel room and beat him, and threatened to kill him. The vicious assault caused a cerebral hemorrhage, which was repaired by surgery in Germany.

Last November he was placed under house arrest about the time that the government announced that it would destroy his new studio in Shanghai because he had not gone through the "proper application procedures." The building was "illegal." Yet, it was the Shanghai government that had asked him to build it to anchor a planned cultural district! Ai announced that he would hold a party to celebrate the studio's demolition, sending an open invitation on Twitter. Ever since, his movements have been notably restricted.

For the last year government authorities have been monitoring Ai Weiwei very closely, installing surveillance cameras around the perimeter of his studio outside Beijing. Stationary cameras were deemed insufficient to track his actions, so the Public Security Bureau has mobile surveillance units parked outside his studio. His mother's house has been canvassed by strangers.

Unbeknownst to the Public Security Bureau, the timing of Ai Weiwei's detention is momentous, just as was the death of Hu Yaobang in early April of 1989 and the unexpected national mourning of Zhou Enlai on April 5, 1976. Both events became catalysts for popular

movements, the effects of which are still felt today in the anxious *weiwēn* ("stability maintenance") policy of the CCP.

Ai Weiwei's disappearance occurred fifteen days beyond the Vernal Equinox, the day of the annual festival of Qingming, when the tombs and graves of loved ones are cleaned and restored by descendants from families all over China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. It is a bittersweet occasion of remembrance of love and legacy, loss but also gain. It is a celebration of the inevitable advance of spring, for Qingming is literally the very first day of the fifth solar term. The winter solstice is in distant retreat. Yet, this cannot be said about the dark forces of a purblind Party.

Ai Weiwei's father, Ai Qing, one of China's greatest modern poets, would have been so honored by his son on this day: cult paid to a brave inspiration, who was persecuted, put in a labor camp for twenty years, victim of the excesses of a confounded ideology. Honor and memory will have to wait, while Ai Weiwei, the artist as public man, with imagination and fearlessness unbounded, draws breath for the spring sun that awaits his family's proper respects.

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