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A View on Ai Weiwei's Exit

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By Geremie R. Barmé

Author's Note:

A much shorter version of this essay was originally destined for a leading newspaper outlet. Unfortunately, so much editorial "back-filling" was required to transform it into something more accessible to even a relatively sophisticated readership, I decided that it would be best to pull it. Instead, I offer it here with considerable additional material to readers of *China Beat*.



Ai Weiwei with sculpture from his "Zodiac Heads" project

This essay was written on the eve of the 2 May unveiling by New York City and the arts group AW Asia of Ai Weiwei's "Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads" at the Pulitzer Fountain, Grand Army Plaza (located at the south-east corner of Central Park). That sculptural work is the artist's over-sized comment on the controversy surrounding the auctioning of two of the twelve bronze "Zodiac Heads" plundered in 1860 from the Garden of Perfect Brightness (*Yuanming Yuan*, which is always erroneously referred to as the "Old Summer Palace"), the Qing-era garden palace to the northwest of Beijing. As Weiwei said of his reinterpretation of the originals:

My work is always dealing with real or fake, authenticity, what the value is, and how the value relates to current political and social understandings and misunderstandings. I think there's a strong humorous aspect there. The [Yves Saint-Laurent] zodiac auction [in February 2009] really complicated the issues about art, about the real, about fake, resources, looting, about the appreciation of objects—all these kinds of issues. [From [an interview with the artist](#) by Eugene Kan]

[For further background to the "Zodiac Heads" of the Garden of Perfect Brightness and the history, as well as the contemporary significance, of China's formerly ignored "national ruin," see [China Heritage Quarterly](#), No.8 (December 2006).]



Ai Weiwei's "Zodiac Heads"

In the event, as an Australian writing about Ai Weiwei and the broader context of his detention at this time, it seemed timely in another regard as our Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, was undertaking on 25-28 April her first visit to Beijing as head of government. On her arrival the PM was peremptorily cautioned by the Chinese ambassador in Canberra to be mindful of the country's "tremendous progress" in the area of human rights. While by necessity economics dominated the state visit, as it indeed dominates the bilateral relationship, issues related to minorities, Christian groups and human rights abuses could not easily be avoided. Not surprisingly, Gillard was reassured by the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, that the country was not "taking a backward step" in these areas, despite glaring evidence to the contrary widely reported in the international media.

It is also worth noting a 22 April 2011 opinion piece in *The Global Times* in which the official Chinese stance, one that is repeatedly critical of former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's stewardship of the Australia-China relationship in 2008-2010, was made quite clear:

What is especially unacceptable to the Chinese people is Australia's challenging of Chinese values. The two countries are vastly different in their national situations, especially in term [*sic*] of population. If China has no right to make light of the Australian model, Australian should not belittle the 1.3 billion Chinese people's right to choose their own political path, either.

We hope Gillard can bring some changes. The Australian government should at least show basic respect to China. This is one of the fundamental rules of this civilized world.

Moreover, Canberra should be more tolerant toward a rising China. This will also make Australia happier. [See: "[Redefining Australia-China Ties](#)"]
In the particular lexicon of the party-state, "basic respect" means support or at least tacit acceptance of even the most egregious acts of Chinese officialdom.

Fortuitously, an English-language selection of Ai Weiwei's Internet writings has recently appeared, providing the general reader, as well as easily cowed foreign government officials, a first-hand account of how a major contemporary Chinese cultural figure sees the dilemmas surrounding "basic respect" in China today. [See Lee Ambrozy, ed., *Ai Weiwei's Blog: Writings, Interviews, and Digital Rants, 2006-2009*, Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 2011.] I should also note that, in mid April, a major international petition addressed to the Chinese Minister of Culture on behalf of Ai Weiwei was launched by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation and, at the time of writing, had amassed 123,509 signatures, a number that continued to grow, despite attempts by unidentified hackers to disable the host site. [For the online petition, see [here](#).] One would observe that presumably to the Beijing authorities such international support merely confirms their view that Weiwei is a nefarious agent of the West, itself hell-bent on regime change and "peaceful evolution" in China.—*Geremie R. Barmé*

On 11 February 2010, in response to a question from a foreign journalist the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu observed: "There are no dissidents in China." This came only hours after a Beijing court had quashed an appeal by Liu Xiaobo, the democracy advocate who had been jailed for eleven-years on charges of "subverting the state." The charges related to his involvement in the [Charter 08](#) petition movement. Asked to elaborate, Ma said: "In China, you can judge yourself whether such a group exists. But I believe this term is questionable."

Shortly after the People's Republic was declared a "dissident-free country," the artist and cultural blogger Ai Weiwei offered his analysis of Chinese-style doublethink via Twitter:

Foreign Affairs Ma's statement contains a number of layers of meaning:

1. Dissidents are criminals;
2. Only criminals have dissenting views;
3. The distinction between criminals and non-criminals is whether they have dissenting views;
4. If you think China has dissidents, you are a criminal;
5. The reason [China] has no dissidents is because they are [in fact already] criminals;
6. Does anyone have a dissenting view regarding my statement?

On 3 April this year, Ai Weiwei was detained while preparing to board a flight to Hong Kong. It is claimed that he had been taken into custody on suspicion of economic crimes. Whatever *that* case may be, there is little doubt that the Chinese party-state had finally decided to silence its most outspoken free-range dissident.

For some years observers have marveled at what for official China was extraordinary leniency towards Weiwei's increasingly provocative behavior and statements. In a sense, from 2008, he became a one-man work of dissenting performance art (although the harassed popular activists, lawyers, journalists, academics, aggrieved citizens, Christians and NGO figures subject to what has since become the worst period of repression since 1989 are never far from mind). Many have enjoyed the spectacle; others have dreaded the reckoning. In the end, there were rumors that amidst the police provocation and escalating bullying, the authorities had also essayed a softer, tried-and-true formula, one that had worked with so many other disaffected members of the élite over the years: they are said to have offered Ai Weiwei membership in the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. After all, if he wanted to seek redress for injustices or to raise his voice in protest, where better than within the capacious tent created by the party in the 1950s? The NCCPPCC was after all a broad, if impuissant, church that had become the last refuge for so many of the thinking men and women of China who had initially been lured to support the party in the 1940s only to suffer betrayal subsequently. It also offers impotent status to numerous other

cultural and business worthies today. Someone must have thought it was a perfect fit for Weiwei. When the artist rejected this final, and to the bureaucratic mind, magnanimous gesture, however, and given the atmosphere of alarm generated by events in the Middle East, conciliation necessarily gave way to confrontation.

Although known to cognoscenti of China's alternative cultural scene from the late 1970s, Weiwei shot both to local and to international prominence for his role as a design consultant to the Swiss architects of Beijing's "Bird's Nest" National Stadium, the main site of the 2008 Olympics. Although his role in that project was lauded by the authorities, at the same time, for the years around China's Olympic moment, Weiwei, in what have been described as Internet "rants", recorded his mounting outrage at the glaring clash between his country's avowed new openness and the party-state's old repressive, corrupt and mendacious ways. Like so many before him, he well knew that the price for candour would be high. In a blog-post dated 13 April 2009, for instance, he wrote: "The truth is always terrible, unfit for presentation, unspeakable, and difficult for the people to handle, just speaking the truth would be 'subversion of the state'." [From *Ai Weiwei's Blog*, p.218.]

Some commentators have remarked that the relentless appetite of the international media for China controversy in recent years served to goad Weiwei into making ever more extreme statements, ones that would lead to the same place that outspokenness has guided so many others before him: jail. All the while his words were not easily accessible in China itself, where despite often extraordinary official toleration he was regarded as being too much of a firebrand, or rather as a noxious figure who contributed to upsetting the chummy relationship between power, commerce and global capital. It is now virtually *de rigueur* for writers to hedge their remarks about prickly individuals like Weiwei and their plangent fate with the balm of happier observations to do with general overall improvements in China, its relatively flourishing intellectual scene, the lot of the common man and woman, and so on and so forth. But it is too easy to take Weiwei's splenetic rants as constituting his only message, for him to be out of kilter with the times, a distasteful (if colourful) irritant to "business as usual", or indeed to regard international readers as his predominant audience.

Rather Weiwei has been very much a Chinese critic, addressing internal concerns but speaking far beyond the borders of the party-state. In fact, he belongs to a long line of modern Chinese thinkers and cultural figures whose moral outrage in the face of tyranny has taken the form of lambast, irony or biting satire. Lu Xun (d.1936) is the most famous in this lineage, but their number also includes the early Republican journalist Huang Yuansheng (murdered in 1915), Deng Tuo (committed suicide in 1966), Yu Luo (executed in the early 1970s), the Taiwan-based writers Bo Yang and Li Ao, the Hong Kong humorists Hah Kung and Yau-ma-tei, the essayist Lung Ying-tai (recently banned in China), the journalist Dai Qing (censored since 1989), the novelist Chan Koon-chung (banned in China), the playwright Wu Zuguang, a man still celebrated although his sharp criticisms are deleted from the record, and the blogger Han Han, who still remains at large. Then, of course, there is the imprisoned Liu Xiaobo.

These are but a few of China's voices of conscience; their ideas, and their fate, have not been limited to a particular Chinese polity, rather they are part of the "Chinese commonwealth." It is a commonwealth that has finally achieved much in material terms, but one that has repeatedly failed to realise the promise of a more equitable, free and democratic society, one championed by the Xinhai Revolution that marks its centenary this year.

In the context of this century-old lineage then Ai Weiwei was treading very familiar ground when he published blog-posts during the dizzying days of the Beijing Olympics, including the following, which appeared on the last day of the Olympics, 18 August 2008:

For a moment, forget the struggle between tyranny and civil rights; forget the extravagant dreams of referendums or citizen votes. We should struggle for and protect those most basic, miniscule bits of power that we truly cannot cast aside: freedom of speech and rule of law. Return basic rights to the people, endow society with basic dignity, and only then can we have confidence and take responsibility, and thus face our collective difficulties. Only rule of law can

make the game equal, and only when it is equal can people's participation possibly be extraordinary.[From *Ai Weiwei's Blog*, pp.181-82.]

For its part the Chinese press has been unequivocal in stating why this gadfly artist has been disappeared now, despite the nebulous talk in Beijing about his "economic malfeasance." In an article published under the name Liu Yiheng that appeared in the Hong Kong version of the official mainland daily *Wenhui Bao* on 15 April, Weiwei is denounced for "five poisons". These are his: 1. Contempt for art and public decency; 2. Allowing himself to become a tool of the West's anti-China machinations; 3. Flouting of numerous laws; 4. For being a suspected bigamist; and, 5. For insulting the nation. [See, Liu Yiheng, "[Ai Weiwei zhen mianmu: Wu wan yishujia—wu du ju quan](#)," Hong Kong *Wenhui Bao*, 15 April 2011, A2.]

The attack was written in the cloacal prose so favoured by party hacks since the early Maoist days of the 1940s—a style that combines the diction of the guttersnipe with a posture of high dudgeon. The nub of the matter, the article avers, is that for years Weiwei has been producing "art that confounds the boundary between the artistic and the political; in fact, he uses it to engage in political activities." The author then sums up Ai's crime *du jour*: "During the recent unrest in the Middle East he actively encouraged local protesters and has intimate links with those who are plotting a 'Jasmine Revolution' in China itself."

The article was accompanied by a photographic work by the artist featuring Ai Weiwei standing in front of Tiananmen Gate with the English word "FUCK" stencilled in red on his bare chest. "Not only does this reflect the hooligan nature of Ai as a person," the denunciation claims, "it reveals his contempt for our nation, evidence that he is a pawn in the anti-Chinese machinations of the West." After deliciously listing Chinese dialectical variations of the word "fuck" the author quotes Ai on why he decided to employ an English rather than a Chinese term: "I'm offering this to foreign friends who understand the word and who love China."

The attack ends with a reminder that the artist's long-dead father was the famous patriotic poet Ai Qing. The poet's son, however, "insults the Chinese nation, shows contempt for the state and is inciting rebellion." The official Chinese media can always be relied on to outstrip the irony of even the most pointed critic: One of the things that forced Weiwei into open rebellion against the government was his fury at the repression of popular protests over the death of thousands of children in the Wenchuan Earthquake of April 2008 due to shoddy school-building construction. The *faux*-official commentator ignores this and concludes that only days after the earthquake Ai Weiwei had posted a performance art piece that featured oral sex. "His brazen contempt for basic moral decency is horrifying," comes the rebuke. "If Ai Qing knew of this in the afterlife he would surely rebuke this unfilial son."

I first met Ai Qing in late 1978, shortly after the family had been brought back from decades of internal exile. I was introduced to them by a mutual friend, the translator Gladys Yang. Gladys knew of my interest in Chinese literary history and the fate suffered by dissenting Chinese writers under the Communists. In particular there was the 1942 purge in Yan'an when Mao condemned arrant writers like Ai Qing, Ding Ling and Wang Shiwei for their criticisms of party corruption and privilege. As the tough-talking army man Wang Zhen put it at the time (much to Mao's approval): "Our comrades are shedding blood and dying on the front line for the party and the People of China, while you're eating your fill and attacking the party in safety" (*qianfangde tongzhi wei dang wei quanguo renmin liuxie xisheng, nimen zai houfang chibaofan ma dang*). Accused of threatening the party's unity all three were detained. After a harrowing, often violent, re-education campaign Ai and Ding were "rescued". They had recognized the follies of their ways and were subject to the party's munificence. Wang Shiwei, however, condemned as a Trotskyite and a KMT spy was beheaded in 1947.

After his second rehabilitation in the late 1970s (he fell foul of the authorities again in 1957), Ai Qing would be lauded as a great poet, a patriot and a faithful party man. But during our first meeting in 1978 it was obvious that both he and his wife, Gao Ying, were profoundly shell-shocked. The Cultural Revolution was not long over and de-Maoification was only just starting in earnest. As Gladys and I got up to leave he gave me a copy of a new poem entitled "Living Fossils" (*Huo huashi*). With a grin he said, "This is autobiographical." It was about a

gambolling fish caught up in a sudden cataclysm. Discovered millions of years later it looked as vital as the day on which it had been buried alive. "But you are silent, breathless,/... Faced with this fossil/ any fool can see:/ We cannot live unless we can move./ To live is to struggle, /to advance/ We must expend our all/ Before the advance of death."

The sentiment behind that poem is worth recalling now that Ai Qing's son, Weiwei, has been immobilized. Idiosyncratic and highly individualistic, influenced by a youth spent in the company of his exiled parents and long years in New York, Weiwei is also part of a unique generation. The men and women of that generation were witness to the hysterical rise and the ignominious failure of the political ideals of the Mao era; it's a generation that has been at the forefront of the inventive changes that have created China's miracle, and have laid the foundations for its future potential.

Of the artistic avant-garde that developed from the 70s but gained international recognition only from the 1990s, few like Ai Weiwei have maintained the bond between creativity and arrant opinion. Many have absorbed the lessons of the repeated political campaigns of the 1980s, and have learnt well the rules of China's "velvet prison," one which offers generous rewards to those who master the canny art of post-socialist survival. Today, a majority of the celebrated stars of the Chinese arts are complicit in the party-state enterprise that permits them a measure of artistic license as well as boundless freedom to make money. It is a formula that works well too for foreign investors, governments and cultural bodies alike. But increasingly, Ai Weiwei and a few other bold individuals confound this comfortable arrangement. They offer words of caution in an age of exuberance, theirs are voices of possibility that draw on the past, as well as the present, to speak to China's future, or at they at least pinpoint today the hazards that block the way ahead. Many—and not just the authorities—would prefer them silenced, if not merely for the sake of political expediency, then because their existence pricks the conscience of those who have learnt how to accommodate themselves to China's regnant harmony.

One of the rare few to have spoken out on Weiwei's behalf is the immensely popular Shanghai-based blogger Han Han. On 14 April, he released a blog-post entitled "Good-bye, Ai Weiwei!" Needless to say, it was soon "harmonized" from the mainland Chinese Internet. In that short essay he speaks of his sorrow at hearing the news of Weiwei's demise. Among other things he declares:

I don't want to make any more appeals; nor do I have the energy to call for anything. Starting from the founding of this dynasty in 1949: the Anti-Rightist Movement, the Cultural Revolution, the Strike Hard Campaigns, the Student Movement, the Campaign to Maintain Stability... in each and every one of these periods countless people of conscience have been jailed, and countless individuals of conscience have been executed. Why is the Five-Star Red Flag so very red? That's because it's soaked in the fresh blood of countless men and women of conscience.

Ai Weiwei spoke out on behalf of petitioners; he spoke out on behalf of those harmed by melamine in milk; he spoke out on behalf of the primary school students killed in the Wenchuan Earthquake. Ai Weiwei can speak out no more. Who among us will speak out now on behalf of Ai Weiwei? If indeed there are none either with the courage or the sense of decency to speak out today, then the old catch-cry of China's dynasties past—"Ten thousand long years of life to the Emperor!"—will finally have come true again. Let me conclude with a line from a song by Li Zhi: "The best era is one in which the people don't need freedom." [From Han Han, "[Zai jian! Ai Weiwei.](#)"]

Ai Weiwei's denouement would have been long contemplated and carefully considered by the authorities. Its potential to generate international embarrassment and opprobrium has clearly been offset by its immediate, symbolic, and practical impact. But Ai Weiwei's exit is only a short-term solution to an intractable long-term problem: whither China? Meanwhile, it confronts the West and even the very people who claim cultural fellowship with him.

For years Ai Weiwei's brazen truth-telling has been a challenge to the other prominent darlings of the international film, art and literary circuit. Will they now stand in solidarity with one of their own, even though he has repeatedly caused them discomfort? Or will they, like the hundreds of other "transgressive" (that is, "naughty but not dangerous") representatives of China's globally vaunted new culture, remain silent and continue to enjoy the rewards available to those who acquiesce in measured cultural repression while never having to take a stand?

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Note:

For more on my views on both cultural rebellion and complicity in post-Mao China, I would direct readers to the volumes [Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience](#), edited with John Minford (1986, New York: Hill & Wang, 1988, 2nd ed.), [New Ghosts, Old Dreams: Chinese Rebel Voices](#), edited with Linda Jaivin (New York: Times Books, 1992), and my [In the Red, on contemporary Chinese culture](#) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999). See also my previous essays on related subjects in China Beat: "[China's Promise](#)" (10 January 2010) and "[The Harmonious Evolution of Information in China](#)" (29 January 2010). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in the above essay are my own.—GRB

Photos via [WNYC Culture](#) and [Huffington Post](#).

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