

Inspiring Nations

by Michael Parkes

Often, people take artistic freedom for granted. Ai Weiwei is not such a man, having been harassed by Chinese police and government for his works. As a famous contemporary Chinese artist and political activist, he is one of the many who have been punished for their art, having grown up with a family forced into reeducation labor because his father was an artist. When he grew older, Weiwei left China to study art in the United States. He became familiar with a society and government that no doubt greatly influenced the accomplished artist he is today. Years later, Weiwei returned to China to be with his dying father, reintroducing Ai to Chinese society, greatly contrasting the America he had come to know. As he integrated back into Chinese culture, he experienced governmental activities and artistic censorship as a new man. Ai Weiwei's art would soon begin to speak louder and louder, for himself and the Chinese people, of the change that is necessary in their country. While seeking to have his voice heard for the good of his country, Ai Weiwei has shown courage, compassion, and perseverance. Weiwei has shown courage by speaking out against the government's wrongs, often through art. Such action can be very dangerous in communist China, where art is often censored and/or punished for its thought-provoking nature and political variation. One such courageous act of Ai Weiwei, writes Melissa Chiu, director of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, was when he and some others began Xing Xing (Stars), China's first modern group of artists, whose first exhibit was considered criminal (175). This was a major advance for artists

in China, and must have taken a lot of nerve to start such a group. Throughout Weiwei's career, many have been stirred by his daring works, "whether it was a woman pulling up her skirt to reveal her underwear at Tiananmen Square or Ai Weiwei himself giving the finger to various important monuments" (Chiu 175). In "On Interviewing Ai Weiwei," Ethan Cohen, a well-known New York art dealer, states that Weiwei is an artist devoted to actuality and self-expressive liberty (170). In an interview, Ai Weiwei strengthens Cohen's belief when Weiwei states, "As artists we think the very essential facts or truths are the basis of our expression, and as an artist I think I can find a form to really extend that belief" (Weiwei and Cohen 157). It seems that Weiwei has had bravery engraved into who he is since he came into this world, having to deal with the circumstances he has.

While Ai Weiwei has plenty of courage, he also shows compassion through his art works, giving the Chinese people and people around the world art that can allow them to reflect on themselves, each other, and their governments. It gives people the strength to ask questions, always the first step in change. His art allows for the cultivation of complex thought that can link self to the world. One such example is Ai Weiwei encouraging "a whole younger generation of performance artists" when he returned to China after studying in America (Chiu 175). He brought with him a spirit and mind cultivated by American social and political activism and freedom (Chiu 175). Another example is in 2008 Ai Weiwei was working on the "Bird's Nest," an Olympic stadium for the Chinese hosted Olympics. He detached himself from the project to do work in the Sichuan earthquake of 2008. Many that died in the earthquake included over 5,000 children killed by improperly built school buildings. In "China's Last Communist: Ai

Weiwei,” Christian Sorace, a PhD candidate in the University of Texas Department of Government whose research focuses on Chinese politics, states that, “the real number is assumed to be much higher because local governments refuse to release a list of the names and circumstances surrounding the students’ deaths” (397). Ai Weiwei and a team of devotees took it upon themselves to collect those names. Weiwei even made a monument to the young ones out of children’s backpacks. The monument, named “She lived happily in the world for seven years,” uses backpacks colored red, yellow, green, white and blue to spell out the words of the work’s title in remembrance of the lost young souls. Author Minky Worden, director of global initiatives for Human Rights Watch, speaks of how Chinese government and disastrous Chinese actions, distorting and ending so very many lives, largely influence and inspire Ai Weiwei’s efforts (180). The compassionate foundation of much of Ai Weiwei’s works have allowed a pathway for Chinese hardship to be heard.

As kind as Ai Weiwei is, that trait likely stems from an understanding of persevering through hard times. Cohen states that evidence of such perseverance starts as early as Weiwei’s childhood, having “spent the beginning of his life in a dirt hut with his brothers and sisters” because of his father’s influential poetry (170). Weiwei has made numerous well-known pieces of art despite the threats and punishment of his government. Like the monument of backpacks, he repurposed twisted rebar from the wrecked schools into art as well. Ai Weiwei has made films about art and political activism, taken part in interviews to tell the world what is happening with art and communism in China, and inspired people all over the world despite the

constant threat he faces from his government. Ethan Cohen interviewed Ai Weiwei about the aftermath of being unlawfully detained for 81 days in 2011; Ai Weiwei answers:

I have much less freedom but still I can work, and still my condition [gives me] a unique position and pressure, and makes my fight or my argument or my expression have a very solid reality. I [could not have created] it by myself. It took a state, a powerful state, to do it. So I am kind of amused by the condition. All I have to ask is, why me? Why not somebody else? I think because I've been through so much, like my father's generation. During the 1957 Anti-Rightist campaign, 550,000 intellectuals were vanished. And, of course, during the later Cultural Revolution and all those political movements, so many intellectuals were crushed. Almost no single one who had his own voice could avoid being punished. [I also had the] privilege of having been in the United States, New York, for 12 years, to [gain an] understanding [of] how contemporary art or contemporary culture relates to our contemporary life. So that gave me a strong influence or state of mind to become an artist today in fighting for very essential rights. Fighting for freedom of expression. I never thought that was just for me. I think that is for the condition of all artists and all human beings. This is the most precious right, to be ourselves and to announce ourselves as individuals, and that is best part of life. So I will never feel regret or feel sorry for the situation I'm in. (Weiwei and Cohen 162-163)

Ai Weiwei's words ring out with such perseverance when considering what 81 days of confinement may have done to him. Cohen writes, "I'd like to add one thing that Weiwei would want to make sure all of you who are reading this now are aware of: know you matter, and you

are important to him, and you are important to the world;" no doubt something he has had to tell himself often considering how he has been treated by his government (172). Worden believes that Ai Weiwei's "political struggles have touched on many of the challenges of artists, writers and activists in China today" (179). Weiwei has endured much with high hopes for a China he believes can change.

Courage, compassion, and perseverance are but three of the traits held and shown by Ai Weiwei through his artwork and actions. It seems history is full of never ending cycles of a few exceptional people that forever change it. Ai Weiwei is such a man that his acts may be ever-enduring in the world, giving voice to many oppressed Chinese and inspiring all those that experience them.

Works Cited

- Chiu, Melissa. "On Ai Weiwei." *Social Research*, vol. 83, no. 1, Nov. 2016, pp. 175-177. *Academic Search Premier*, web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=24e7c434-162b-451c-8f61-b685257303d3%40sessionmgr4006&vid=17&hid=4101.
- Cohen, Ethan. "On Interviewing Ai Weiwei." *Social Research*, vol. 83, no. 1, Nov 2016, pp. 169-174. *Academic Search Premier*, web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=24e7c434-162b-451c-8f61-b685257303d3%40sessionmgr4006&vid=15&hid=4101.
- Sorace, Christian. "China's Last Communist: Ai Weiwei." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 40, no. 2, Nov. 2016, pp 396-419. *Academic Search Premier*, web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=24e7c434-162b-451c-8f61-b685257303d3%40sessionmgr4006&vid=8&hid=4101.
- Weiwei, Ai, and Ethan Cohen. "A Conversation." *Social Research* vol. 83, no. 1, Nov. 2016, pp. 155-163. *Academic Search Premier*, web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=24e7c434-162b-451c-8f61-b685257303d3%40sessionmgr4006&vid=19&hid=4101.
- Worden, Minky. "Ai Weiwei, Art, and Rights in China." *Social Research*, vol. 83, no. 1, Nov. 2016, pp 179-182. *Academic Search Premier*, web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=24e7c434-162b-451c-8f61-b685257303d3%40sessionmgr4006&vid=13&hid=4101.